

## Articles

# Understanding the process of creation of European identity – the role of Cohesion Policy

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Received: 15 February 2019

Accepted: 28 June 2019

## ABSTRACT:

This paper reviews the theoretical arguments provided by the extant literature for understanding the process of creation of a European identity. We discuss the grounds of mechanisms and determinants driving citizens' identification with Europe, stressing the role of the territorial dimension on European identity formation. More precisely, our focus is on the literature that have considered the link between European identity and EU policies that influence the citizens' socio-economic conditions, in general, and Cohesion Policy in particular. This is a major policy within the EU that accounted for some 350 billion euros in the 2007-2013 programming period, about a third of total EU budget. Consequently, it is expected to determine the way citizens identify with the European project, both in the regions more and less benefited by the policy. The study also considers arguments supporting a sort of urban-rural divide in European identity, which could interact with the influence of the Cohesion Policy. Initial descriptive evidence on these links is provided based on results from a comprehensive survey for 15 EU member states.

**KEYWORDS:** Identification with the EU; Cohesion Policy; Public Attitudes; Urban-Rural divide.

**JEL CLASSIFICATION:** R1; R58.

## El proceso de creación de identidad europea: el papel de la Política de Cohesión

### RESUMEN:

Este artículo revisa los argumentos teóricos proporcionados por la literatura existente para comprender el proceso de creación de una identidad europea. Discutimos los fundamentos de los mecanismos y determinantes que impulsan la identificación de los ciudadanos con Europa, destacando el papel de la dimensión territorial en la formación de la identidad europea. En concreto, nos centramos en la literatura que ha considerado el vínculo entre la identidad europea y las políticas de la UE que influyen en las condiciones socioeconómicas de los ciudadanos en general, y en la Política de Cohesión en particular. Ésta es una política importante dentro de la UE, que representó unos 350 mil millones de euros en el período de programación 2007-2013, aproximadamente un tercio del presupuesto total de la UE. En consecuencia, es de esperar que determine la forma en que los ciudadanos se identifican con el proyecto europeo, tanto en las regiones más y menos beneficiadas por la política. El estudio también considera argumentos que respaldan una división rural-urbana en la identidad europea, que podría interactuar con la influencia de la Política de Cohesión. La evidencia descriptiva inicial de estas conexiones se proporciona en base a los resultados de una encuesta exhaustiva para 15 estados miembros de la UE.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Identificación con la UE; Política de Cohesión; Actitudes Públicas; División Urbano-Rural.

**CLASIFICACIÓN JEL:** R1; R58.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Why do people identify with Europe? In the absence of direct personal experiences with the EU and with people from other member states, how can the identification with the European project be developed? Despite the great number of EU competences, legislation and policy programmes, they are mostly implemented by member states. Are these EU policies amplifying citizens' exposure to the idea of the EU? And in particular, are citizens aware of the aims and perceive the benefits of the EU Cohesion Policy? If so, does it contribute to strengthening shared political values under the European Social Model and, consequently, is it a driver of identification with Europe? This work tries to shed some light on these questions by proposing the following research objectives. First, we aim at reporting a review of the main theoretical arguments on the construction of European identity. Second, we confront the concept of spatial identities with the one linked with the European project, looking at the influence of a major policy tool, the Cohesion Policy. And third, we intend to inspect the role of the European institutions, and in particular the capacity of the Cohesion Policy, to influence in individuals' European identity.

In order to achieve these aims we start reviewing the literature on European identity formation. We examine the existing theoretical framework to provide an understanding of European identity and the grounds of mechanisms and determinants driving citizens' identification with Europe. We link such exploration with Cohesion Policy, a major policy within the EU that accounted for some 350 billion euros in the 2007-2013 programming period, about a third of total EU budget. The Cohesion Policy<sup>1</sup> is basically a regional development policy, accounting for the fact that most imbalances in economic and social terms take place within every country and even within every region. Consequently, it has an indisputable territorial impact, affecting with varying intensity the daily life of citizens in different regions and spaces; e.g. in rural vis-à-vis urban areas. As a result, under the economic utilitarian argument, citizens' awareness and perception of the policy is likely to vary across regions depending on the extent to which they benefit from it. And through this mechanism, it could well condition the process of creation of a European identity. To be clear, we hypothesize that awareness and perception of the Cohesion Policy, as the major instrument of the regional policy in the EU, is higher among citizens in regions and spaces that receive more funds and, as a result, it contributes to the formation of a European identity in the less developed areas. In turn, we argue that the mechanisms and determinants of the European identity vary across locations of different size. In a nutshell, this may cause a sort of urban-rural divide both in the perception of the effect of the Cohesion Policy and in the formation of the European identity.

In any case, we do not neglect that for most people in Europe, their experience with the EU takes place in the national political arena. In fact, Cohesion Policy is managed mostly regionally and/or locally. When individuals think on Europe they usually do it from a local point of view, meaning that the consequences of European integration depend not only on EU policies but also on how national, regional and local bodies manage them. Therefore, this is an aspect that can also shape the citizens' perception of the EU policy and its impact on the identification with the EU project.

Building on the arguments in the revised literature, this study provides some initial evidence on territorial disparities in awareness and perception of the EU regional policy and on European identification. Descriptive evidence is obtained by exploiting data from an extensive survey produced within the PERCEIVE project<sup>2</sup> in 15 member states. The results distinguish between regions depending on the intensity of the EU policy and between rural areas and mid-sized and large cities.

The rest of the paper is organised as follows. In section 2, we revise the historical path of studies devoted to analyse European identity and describe the modern approaches in the topic. Section 3 uses the model of mass opinion creation based on Zaller (1992), and applied to the EU and European identity by Bergbauer (2018), to review the mechanisms and determinants of collective identity formation. The

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<sup>1</sup> The regional and urban development policy of the European Union is abbreviated here as EU Cohesion Policy.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.perceiveproject.eu>

territorial dimension of European identity, with a specific view of the role of Cohesion Policy and the urban-rural divide, is discussed in section 4. This section also includes a descriptive empirical analysis of the territorial variability in the citizens' perception of the Cohesion Policy and their identification with the European project. Finally, section 5 summarises the main findings and derives some policy implications.

## 2. STUDIES ON EUROPEAN IDENTITY

Since its inception in 1957, European integration has been parallel to a general conception of Europe. According to Fligstein et al. (2012) the architects of the EU designed an initial economic integration to be followed by a political integration through a spillover mechanism (Haas, 1961), resulting in more co-operation and more supranational rule-making and even in a convergence of beliefs, values and aspirations, generating a new nationalism (Haas, 1968): a European identity.

Bergbauer (2018) points at 1973 as the first stage of the recognition of the European identity at the governmental level, when the European Communities adopted a declaration of European identity to strengthen cohesion between member states.<sup>3</sup>

Recently, new episodes fostered the debate on European identity: the enlargement to Central and Eastern Europe; the financial crisis; the Brexit; the ambiguous link between terrorist attacks and immigration episodes; the growth of populism; and the growth of regional identities that pursue independence of some EU regions from their corresponding national states, questioning the nested nature of territorial identities within Europe. As a result, the growth of the identification with the idea of Europe is far from being sustained. In fact, the perceived loss of legitimacy of the EU is also seen as a lack of support to the political system, which might be easier if it is perceived as an effective problem-solving system (Braun and Tausendpfund, 2014; Hartevelde et al., 2013).

The rest of this section presents the main arguments suggested in the literature regarding the concepts of individual and collective identification with Europe. They are summarised in Box 1.

Mendez and Batchler (2017) and Bergbauer (2018) use social psychology to build the concept of *individual* identification with Europe, defined as citizens' self-categorisation as European. According to Tajfel (1981), individuals have a subjective social identity, which he defines as "that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership in a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership" (Tajfel, 1981, p. 255). This subjective perception implies three dimensions. The *cognitive* dimension refers to the self-categorisation as member of a group, which is to say whether people categorise themselves as European. The *evaluative* dimension is associated with value connotations, comparing people from the group with people out of the group. According to Mendez and Batchler (2017), this dimension relates to the defining content that braces this classification –the civic and cultural/ethnic distinctions of EU identity research. In turn, the *affective* dimension implies emotional attachment, developing feelings of care, love and concern for the members of the collective, relating to the emotional significance, the 'we-feeling'. This triple distinction does not imply that all identity dimensions need to be simultaneously present. Based on these arguments, Bergbauer (2018) defines individual identification with Europe as "citizens' self-categorisation as European together with their evaluations of their membership in the European collective and their affective attachment to Europe and other Europeans" (Bergbauer, 2018, p. 18).

Along with the idea of individual identification with Europe, there is the concept of the *collective* European identity. Bergbauer (2018) lists two approaches to analyse it. The collective identity approach, based on social psychology, suggests that the collective identity is "a situation in which individuals in a society identify with the collective and are aware that other members identify with this collective as well"

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<sup>3</sup> See Barberio et al. (2017) for a review of the historical phases of the study of European integration.

(David and Bar-Tal, 2009, p. 361). This implies that individuals are aware that other group members identify with the group, what is necessary, for instance, for collective mobilisation, what associates some sort of functionalism to collective identities at the group level. The sociological approach to collective identity is based on the idea of “sense of community” or “we-feeling” (Easton, 1965), the affective ties and degree of political cohesion and solidarity between members of a community.

Agirdag et al. (2012) list two main theories to explain *collective* European identity. The social identity theory (Tajfel, 1981; Tajfel and Turner, 1986) assumes that any *collective* identity is part of an *individual* social identity, understanding that an individual is a member of a social group; while the self-categorization theory (Oakes et al., 1994) develops the idea of the former and affirms that *social contexts* provide the conditions for individuals’ identities becoming relevant.

A collective identity is linked with the idea that a collection of individuals (a group) accepts a central similarity, leading to a feeling of solidarity within the group. This concept assumes that there are other individuals, with which there are social interactions. There is a wide list of fundamentals acting as drivers of similarities: religion, ethnicity, language, social class, gender, and of course, nations. Fligstein et al. (2012) quote Anderson (1983, p. 5) to establish a definition of a nation: “it is an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. (...) Regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. Ultimately it is this fraternity that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings”. This definition declares nations as communities, capable of creating social rules and even limits and boundaries when they become states. In fact, nation-states actually create rules for reproducing the national side of the social construct.

Hooghe and Verhaegen (2017) distinguish two streams in the academic literature on European identity, which are linked with the ideas on collective identities. On the one hand, the society based-approach assumes that individuals have to identify themselves with other European citizens in order to establish a European community. Trusting other Europeans, feeling that one is part of a democratic community of citizens is key to determine the legitimacy of the process of European integration (Habermas, 2011; Risse, 2014). On the other hand, the functionalist institutional approach proposes that the European identity is based on trust on the way European institutions are promising and effective in promoting economic growth and prosperity. In fact, it is easier to understand European citizenship linked with rights granted by European laws, than a European identity associated with a feeling of belonging to the European Union, which is an integral part of an individual’s social identity (Risse, 2010). This feeling of belonging can be separated into two components. The first one is cultural: Europeans share a common cultural background, including the right wing sentiment that Europeans are Christians sharing common history (Holmes, 2009). This component, therefore, includes common history, traditions and moral norms and values (Bruter, 2003). The other one is civic, built on rights and duties derived from European treaties and laws (Reeskens and Hooghe, 2010).

#### BOX 1.

##### Individual and collective European Identity. Summary

**Individual** identification with Europe: “that part of an individual’s self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership in a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership” Tajfel’s (1981).

This definition implies three dimensions: i) cognitive, ii) evaluative and iii) affective. (Mendez and Batchler, 2017, and Bergbauer, 2018)

**Collective** European identity. It derives from the individuals’ social identity. Studied from:

- social psychology: implies that individuals are aware that other group members identify with the group (David and Bar-Tal, 2009). According to the self-categorization theory social contexts provide the conditions for individuals’ identities becoming relevant (Oakes et al., 1994).
- sociology: based on the idea of “sense of community” or “we-feeling” (Easton, 1965). The feeling of belonging can be associated to trust in other Europeans, sharing the same values and culture, or trust in European institutions, when rights and duties become prevailing (Hooghe and Verhaegen, 2017).

### 3. MECHANISMS AND DETERMINANTS OF EUROPEAN IDENTITY

Having defined the concept of European identity, next we describe how different theoretical approaches explain the creation and inflection of such identification. In order to do that, we follow the model of mass opinion towards the EU and European identity (Zaller, 1992; Fuchs, 2011; Bergbauer, 2018) based on how individuals form political preferences on issues beyond their immediate experience and full personal understanding, this is, where citizens have little first-hand experience. The basic of this approach is that political attitudes are a function of information in the discourse and the attention paid by individuals. Next, following Bergbauer (2018), we review the mechanisms through which citizens develop a collective identification, and the determinants that promote or hinder the European identity.

#### 3.1. MECHANISMS OF EUROPEAN IDENTITY

According to Bergbauer (2018), the *mechanisms* of individual identification with Europe refer to how citizens develop such a collective identification. Two main types can be described: information-based and experience-based.

The *information-based mechanism* rests on the idea of convincing messages as a source of group identification, and if and how individuals are *exposed* to such messages. From the supply side, messages are provided by political elites and mass communication as sources of public opinion, and also by other people transmitting such messages in personal communication. From the demand side, exposure to Europe-related information depends on the level of *awareness* of citizens about EU issues and to citizens' attentiveness and interest to such type of messages, what includes their cognitive resources, such as their level of education. Consequently, both the provision and the processing of information will affect individuals' identification with Europe.

The *experience-based mechanism* is built on the idea of personal contacts and direct experiences as a source of identification with Europe: increased contacts and personal connections change group members' perceptions. There are several types of contacts, such as personal contacts with other Europeans (e.g. the Erasmus exchange program); personal experience with the repercussions of EU integration in national contexts such as free movements of goods and labour, and also citizens' exposure to EU policies (e.g. the Cohesion Policy); and historical experiences within the collective memory of every context, as national identities filter how the EU is perceived (e.g. Europe is seen as a reconciliation mechanism for Germans after World War II and a way to democratisation in Spain after Franco's dictatorship).

#### 3.2. DETERMINANTS OF EUROPEAN IDENTITY

The *determinants* of individual identification with Europe listed in Bergbauer (2018) are differentiated at two levels. At the individual level, she lists three determinants: political awareness, attitudes towards the European and national bodies, and personal transnational experiences. At the system (country) level, she proposes party messages related to European and national community, the economic position and the degree of international integration, and the ethnocultural identification.

##### *Determinants at the level of individual*

*Political awareness.* Interest in politics and political knowledge, both in general and in EU matters, are two aspects that are associated with European identity. Both interest and knowledge will positively (negatively) affect identification with Europe the higher the information on the benefits (risks and downsides) of European integration.

*Attitudes towards the European and national bodies.* There is widespread consensus that one can distinguish between civic (inclusive) and ethnic (exclusive) identities, an oversimplification but still useful and influencing binary division (Kohn, 1944). As for the idea of Europe, two linked conceptions of the civic side include an emphasis on the values of human rights, civil liberties, and democracy, and the cultural

thought, rooted in the ideas of the Enlightenment, Greco-Roman legacy, humanism and roots in Christianity.

The strength of national identification can also affect the European identity. One can accept the possibility of multiple or nested identities, and consequently realize that both feelings are complementary. On the contrary, concerns on integrity and sovereignty can drive to conflicting identities. The type of nation is important in fact. Bergbauer (2018) quotes Anderson (1991) and Brubaker (1992, 2004) by distinguishing two types of nations: the cultural type, based on ethnic, language, religion grounds, with a sharp differentiation from outsiders; and the universalistic type, based on common beliefs in democratic values, civil rights, etc. A strong national identity can have a positive or negative association with a European identity depending on the type of national grounds. The question whether European identity is more civic oriented than cultural or ethnic in character is of course an empirical matter. Fligstein et al. (2012) review the empirical literature (Green, 2007; Kufer, 2009; Risse, 2010) and argue that both aspects are linked. People with a European identity are in favour of tolerance, peace, democracy, rule of law, etc., what they label as Enlightenment values. As such values are also shared within nations, it is possible, consistent, and actually a reality, holding dual identities, what Díez Medrano and Gutiérrez (2001) describe as nested identities, from European to national, regional and even local identities, which may or may not be in conflict or be complementary.

According to Hooghe and Verhaegen (2017), sharing these values is not enough to developing a collective identity, as some form of trusting relationship is needed. Using the words of Scheuer and Schmitt (2009, p. 559) “trust is a fundamental condition for the development of a sense of community”, as it facilitates co-operation and pursuing collective action. Such trust can take place with other individuals, what can be promoted at the European level through physical interaction, such as the Interrail Global Pass and Erasmus educational program, and trust with political institutions, the European Union as a whole in this case. Political trust evaluates the political structure, which would include the legislative, the executive and the judicial divisions of administration, and also the running and effectiveness of political bodies.

One issue here is whether individuals perceive the EU as a common effort and endeavour, with a shared political destiny, or as a means to improve individual material benefits, such as freedom to travel or to do business.

*Personal transnational experiences.* Frequent personal contacts with other EU citizens are expected to improve the identification with Europe. This includes cross border trips, and living together with intra-European immigrants, and even with people born beyond the EU.

*Personal characteristics and perceptions.* Together with the external determinants affecting at the individual level, there are personal characteristics, which have a clear influence in the shape of European identity. In this line, the literature has considered a wide list of individual features, both demographic and related with the individual's predisposing characteristics. Age, gender, ethnicity, religion, education, occupation, the perceived situation of the economy and/or the society (e.g. perceived financial situation of the household), and even psychological traits, such as life satisfaction, partly (or even mostly) driven by external circumstances. Many of these personal characteristics are linked with political awareness and attitudes as well as with experiences. Younger Europeans are expected to have more different transnational experiences. Similarly, more educated people are expected to have higher levels of awareness and different political perspective in many matters kindred with European affairs.

Beyond such individual traits and characteristics, the literature has considered several variables to put under empirical scrutiny one or several theoretical arguments. Some refer to the political capital, including cognitive mobilization (e.g. higher education increases the ability to process political information and thus reach their own political decisions, depending less on party and media cue), satisfaction with domestic democracy, perceived benefits from EU membership, and trust in institutions (although this variable is also considered as a proxy to identification with such institutions). Ideological stances are also usually considered, such as left-right placement and democratic satisfaction at the EU and country level.

***Determinants at the country level***

*Party messages related to European and national community.* This includes national party messages related with EU matters. These messages can have an economic or a political-cultural dimension. Parties can be more liberal or more regulatory oriented. Similarly, parties can favour national sovereignty of EU governance. The more parties are pro-EU in a country, the higher will be the exposure of citizens to messages signalling the benefits of the European integration. The opposite is also true. Recently, Gross and Debus (2018) show that regional parties have also varying and leeway positions in different matters, including economic, societal and also European issues.

*National economic position and degree of international integration.* Since its inception, the European project has had an economic dimension, and consequently most debates on the EU have had a strong economic accent. Aspects such as membership to the EU or using the Euro are positively associated with European identity. Besides, the net balance on the EU budget is also an important determinant of identification with Europe and with the EU project. The way EU policies in general, and the Cohesion Policy in particular, are implemented is, then, an important aspect to account for. Besides explicit EU policies, membership to the EU implies economic benefits, such as a positive trade balance for some countries. Consequently, trade openness in general and intra-EU trade in particular, and the trade balance of an economy are expected to be two important determinants of the identification of individuals with Europe, as far as they drive to a positive or negative perception of the benefits and costs of integration. In this sense, Verhaegen et al. (2014) review the work of Cram (2012), Gabel and Palmer (1995) and McLaren (2004) and argue that the support to European integration depends on the economic benefits that individuals can get from the EU. Similarly, Jiménez et al. (2004) conclude that such support can be primarily instrumental.

*Ethnocultural identification.* This dimension captures the opportunities of citizens to interact with non-nationals. This can include the share of EU nationals in another member state, and also the overall share of immigrants. Both positive and negative effects of these interactions can be expected, as far as one can gain experiences that influence their identification with Europe by contacting with other Europeans, but at the same time one can experience the costs associated with migration, such as domestic labour market competition or loss of national identity and traditions.

Individual identification with citizens of your country or from other parts of the EU links to the idea of trust in others and, subsequently, trust in political institutions at each level. There is a clear link between political trust at different levels: trust in regional, national and European institutions are connected, and actually there is a positive correlation between trust on national and European institutions (Arnold et al. 2012). As indicated in Hooghe and Verhaegen (2017, p. 166) “if citizens have a trusting attitude toward their own national institutions, apparently this is also extended toward the European Union”.

*Socio-economic context.* Most recent works consider the role played by the socio-economic context in the European identity formation. Some as mere control variables in empirical models, such as GDP growth, inflation and unemployment (Verhaegen et al., 2014), others considering the duality between rural-urban environments (Luhman, 2017), and others the EU membership from a temporal perspective (old versus new EU member states or years since the accession). Still, many works use country level variables to analyse the influence of the social context on different dimensions of European identification, such as the corruption index, the scope of the welfare state, and some related with the economic benefits of belonging to the EU, such as the net contribution to the EU budget, the amount of structural funds received, spread on sovereign bonds, and intra EU exports. However, almost no attention has been paid to within country variations or, in other words inter-regional disparities, in European identification that can result from differences across territories in the mechanisms and determinants discussed so far. This exercise is crucial to frame the discussion in the next section about the spatial differences in the degree of

identification with Europe, and how it is shaped by the EU Cohesion Policy and the perception that citizens have of this policy.<sup>4</sup>

#### **4. THE REGIONAL DIMENSION OF EUROPEAN IDENTITY. THE ROLE OF COHESION POLICY AND THE URBAN-RURAL DIVIDE**

##### **4.1. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

There is a spatial component of the European identity. Paasi (2001) called for understanding place as a cumulative archive of personal spatial experience with common spaces such as Europe, “experiencing a dramatic change in its institutionalization: territorial shapes are being sought, symbols are under construction and institutions are in the making at all spatial scales” Paasi (2001, p.25). Thus, spaces are always social constructions that have the capacity to feed the political processes of identification (Barberio et al., 2017). In this line, Antonsich and Holland (2014) study if economic and political de-/re-territorialization processes transform the associated identities, although they find no signs of a re-scaling of territorial identities. In any case, they declare that both personal and regional-contextual factors should be taken into account in order to disentangle the complexity of the formation of identities.

Among the factors and determinants influencing individuals’ identification with Europe, previous contributions to the literature have pinpointed a list of EU policies and institutions with a clear impact on the everyday life of citizens, such as the adoption of a common currency, having a common flag, the Erasmus program, etc. Still, as stressed by Capello and Perucca (2018, 2019), the evidence verifying the role of Cohesion Policy on the construction of European identity is surprisingly scarce. These authors list up to four reasons for expecting a positive impact of Cohesion Policy on the citizens’ identification with Europe: i) the Cohesion Policy is designed to solve specific regional needs and, consequently it is a “tangible manifestation” of the EU in citizens’ everyday lives; ii) it is a relevant investment tool as it represents about a third of the total EU budget (some 350 billion € over the 2007-2013 programming period); iii) the request and management of the Cohesion Policy interventions is developed mostly at the regional level, with an important participation of local actors; and iv) over 80% of the Cohesion Policy budget is allocated to less developed regions, what implies a strong redistribution effect of the policy over the EU, strengthening the idea of solidarity and care for others within Europe, a pillar of the civic dimension of the European identity.

The incentive of governments to strategically allocate regional transfers in order to influence the public opinion has been the focus of the extant literature. But, as indicated by Osterloh (2011), the empirical literature has not analysed in detail the reaction of citizens. The Osterloh’s study assumes a sizeable effect of the EU Structural Funds on the attitudes of citizens in regions that benefited most from these funds. This is so because of the amount of funds allocated and due to their wide visibility. His results confirm that the EU regional policy affects the awareness of citizens and, through this mechanism, it impacts their support for the EU. The study also finds that awareness and support is conditioned by some socio-economic characteristics, such as education.

The regional dimension of Cohesion Policy is out of doubt. In fact, we hypothesize that there are regional particularities in the process of building a European identity that can have to do with the impact of the EU regional policy, which may even differ between rural and urban areas within a region. As for the mechanisms of individual identification with Europe, the levels of awareness of individuals may well vary dramatically within countries. For instance, differences between regions and, more importantly, between urban and rural areas in terms of education are quite significant (Rodríguez-Pose and Tselios, 2009, 2011).

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<sup>4</sup> In a parallel literature, Mols et al. (2009) demonstrates that European identification is context-dependent by looking at the role of regional identity.



Overall, educational inequality is fundamentally a within-region phenomenon, as 90 percent of the educational inequality in Europe occurs between citizens living in the same region.

Regional variations in the experience-based mechanism could also be sizeable. Clearly, contact with other European citizens is easier in urban than in rural areas, what favours the growth of a European identity in cities compared to smaller villages. The perception of the impact of EU policies with a territorial dimension can dramatically differ as well. For example, the European Agricultural Policy is, by definition, mostly rural. As for the Cohesion Policy, one can expect that a spatially differentiated implementation will matter as well to produce a more positive impact on citizens of particular areas.

As for the determinants of European identity, the existence of important regional identities within each country can mediate the way in which territorial identities, either civic or ethnic, are built. If a strong regional identity grounded on ethnic aspects is present, it can hinder the growth of identification with Europe. Still, a European orientation can arise if it is associated with the possibility to overcome the national identity by the regional identity, being the former substituted by the European one. As for the rural-urban dimension, there are no clear arguments to support that the ethnic or civic dimensions of local identities are stronger in one type of area vis-à-vis the other. It can be argued, for instance, that this is linked with the ethnocultural identification of every territory. The opportunities to interact with EU non-nationals can be different in cities than in rural areas. In addition, the areas can largely differ in terms of the type of EU immigrant residents, as more educated and wealthier EU15 citizens residing in other Member States are expected to live in a greater proportion in larger cities, while citizens from EU13 living in other EU countries may be distributed more homogeneously over the territory. In any case, it may well exist a sort of rural-urban divide in the building of European identification due to differences in the civic/ethnic aspects. Therefore, empirical scrutiny could shed light in this interesting aspect.

Finally, in our view there are two additional elements that could originate spatial disparities in the European identity process. On the one hand, the particular structure of the political system in general and of the system of parties in each country in particular. A system with strong regional parties, as opposed to a structure of predominant national parties, is an important feature that can affect the determinants of European identity throughout the territory. Among other ways, by creating a differentiation in the messages transmitted to citizens in different regions/areas. On the other hand, the economic performance of the country and its regions, in absolute terms and in relation to other EU countries and territories, is a crucial aspect that, as previously discussed, have been shown to affect the building of the European identity. To be clear, the Cohesion Policy is regionally defined, and consequently there are net beneficiary regions and net paying regions. Under the economic utilitarian arguments, this should result in differences between citizens across territories in the degree of their European identification. In addition to this type of economic effect, there is another one in connection with the territorial incidence of the on-going process of economic integration. This is so if citizens from the poorest regions see themselves, and their regions, as losers in the free-trade open market competition that is under the EU building. In contrast, those in the economic core areas can value to more extent the benefits of such a process. This disparity in perceptions can clearly hinder the identification with Europe, and in particular with the EU, in some areas and strengthen it in others.

#### **4.2. SOME DESCRIPTIVE EVIDENCE**

After reviewing the arguments supporting our hypothesis on the territorial variation in the degree of citizens' identification with Europe and the European project, this section shows and discusses preliminary evidence based on a simple descriptive analysis, using information from a comprehensive survey carried out under the umbrella of the PERCEIVE project. 17,147 individuals from 15 selected EU member states were interviewed during the summer of 2017. The set of surveyed countries were selected on the basis of variation in terms of geography, size and institutional quality, representing over 85% of the EU

population.<sup>5</sup> The survey asks about the identification with Europe in two separate questions, which are similar to questions included in the Eurobarometer.<sup>6</sup> The PERCEIVE survey also includes questions about the citizens' awareness, perception of benefits, and support to the EU Cohesion Policy. This results in a rich dataset on identification with Europe and the citizens' assessment of the Cohesion Policy for a representative sample of individuals in a group of countries covering most of the EU population. The survey, then, is the most convenient data source for our analysis.

As discussed in section 3, the formation of collective identification with Europe depends on the European discourse and the commitment paid by individuals. In that regard, the awareness and perception of the policies designed and developed by the EU in general, and the Cohesion Policy in particular, are expected to play a crucial role on the formation of a European identity. For the Cohesion Policy to contribute to the identification with the EU project, citizens must be aware of it (information based mechanism), and they should evaluate that such policy interventions benefit them in a way or another. Besides, and even if they are not directly benefited by the policy, they should agree with a territorial redistribution of opportunities and wealth. Consequently, the analysis in this section exploits the information contained in the PERCEIVE survey about awareness, perception and support for the EU Cohesion Policy, and about identification with Europe. To be clear, we have analysed the responses to the following questions:

- Citizens' identification with the EU Project:
  - *In general, do you think that (YOUR COUNTRY'S) EU membership is: a good thing, a bad thing, neither good nor bad, not sure. (UK not included).*
  - *On a 0-10 scale, with '0' being 'I don't identify at all, and '10' being 'I identify very strongly', how strongly you identify yourself with Europe?*
- Citizens' awareness of the EU Cohesion Policy:
 

*In general, have you ever heard about*

  - *the EU Cohesion Policy? (Yes, No)*    - *the Structural Funds? (Yes, No)*
  - *the EU Regional Policy? (Yes, No)*    - *any EU funded project in your region or area? (Yes, No)*
- Citizens' perception of benefits and support for the Cohesion Policy:
  - *To your knowledge, have you ever benefited in your daily life from any project funded by the EU? Yes; No; Don't know*
  - *In your opinion, the EU should continue Cohesion Policy, where wealthier countries contribute more, and poorer EU regions receive more funding." **Strongly agree; Agree; Disagree, Strongly disagree***

As a crucial aspect for our analysis, the survey includes the size of the place of residence of respondents. This allows us to distinguish three categories to capture the rural-urban dimension: i) large towns, as those places with more than 100,000 inhabitants, ii) middle-sized towns, whose number of

<sup>5</sup> Countries included are Austria, Bulgaria, Estonia, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Netherlands, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Spain, Sweden, and UK. See Charron and Bauhr (2017) for further details. It is important to stress that the PERCEIVE survey includes comprehensive information on both the citizens' identification with the EU project and their awareness and perception of the EU Cohesion Policy. This feature makes it more appropriate than the information available in the Eurobarometer for the type of analysis we are interested in.

<sup>6</sup> Mendez and Bachtler (2017) identify up to 14 different survey questions on European identity, grouped in five categories: geographical belonging, thinking of self as European, attachment to Europe/EU, national versus European and proud to be European. Still, no measure is free of critique, as all suffer from limitations.

inhabitants range from 10,000 to 100,000, and iii) rural areas when inhabitants are less than 10,000. Finally, the survey also includes the region in which the respondent lives. This has allowed us to merge the individual information in the survey with the data on the regional breakdown of the total Structural Funds expenditures per inhabitant (SFpc) in the programming period 2007-2013. Based on the corresponding figures, four groups of regions in the 15 surveyed countries were defined based on the quartiles of the SFpc distribution. The group based on the first quartile is the one with the least SFpc, whereas the one based on the fourth quartile corresponds to the set of regions that receive the highest amounts. Additionally, we have considered the distinction between the group of regions eligible as *Less Developed* in the current programming period 2014-2020 and those that are not in this group of EU regions.<sup>7</sup>

Tables 1 and 2 summarise the descriptive evidence on citizens' identification with the European project resulting from the PERCEIVE survey, and how it varies between regions depending on the intensity of the Cohesion Policy. They include the distinction between urban and rural areas to facilitate the assessment of variations in identification in this territorial dimension. As discussed above, the tables also include results for the four awareness-of-policy questions and for the degree of positive perception and support for the Cohesion Policy. In all cases, we report the percentage of positive responses to the corresponding question (marked in bold in the description of the questions above). The only exception is the information provided for the *Identification with Europe*; in that case, the median is reported.<sup>8</sup> In the computation of the descriptive measures we used the corresponding sampling weights provided in the PERCEIVE's survey database in order to derive estimates for the represented populations.

As a first stage, Table 1 shows results for the total sample and distinguishing by the rural-urban dimension, but neglecting regional differences due to the incidence of the EU policy under analysis. It can be observed that about half of respondents were aware of the EU policies with a regional impact. Interestingly, the percentage of respondents who were aware of the Structural Funds is almost six points higher than that of the Cohesion Policy, while the figure is even higher when the question refers to any fund in the region or area where the individual lives. As for the urban-rural dimension, figures suggest that awareness is somewhat higher in large cities than in rural areas. This is particularly true in the case of the Structural Funds, with fewer differences for the Cohesion Policy and the Regional Policy, and no differences at all when the question refers to any EU funded project in the region or area. Interestingly, there seems to be a non-monotonic relationship between awareness and size of the place of living. The percentage of positive responses in middle-sized towns is lower than in large cities but also than in rural areas. A similar picture can be deduced from responses on the positive perception of the Cohesion Policy, which is more widespread among respondents from large cities than from rural areas, with the lowest percentage in middle-sized towns when referred to perceived benefits from EU projects. Interestingly, the same is not observed in the case of support for the Cohesion Policy, as the percentage of respondents supporting this EU policy increases with urban size, although differences are moderate. Whatever the case, these figures reveal that support for the Cohesion Policy is far more prevalent than the citizens' perception of having direct benefits of the EU policy interventions on their everyday life.

The final two rows in Table 1 show the results of the measures of identification with the EU project. About two thirds of respondents declared that their country's membership to the EU is a good thing, whereas the median value for the degree of identification with Europe is 7, in a scale that goes from 0 to 10. The two indicators provide quite similar values regardless of the size of the place of living, the only exception being a higher percentage in large towns for the first indicator, which is also observed in the mean values of the degree of identification with Europe (see Table A.1 in the Appendix). Overall, our

<sup>7</sup> Although figures on the amount of SFpc allocated to each region in the current programming period can also be computed, we have preferred to use in this analysis the (almost) final amount of expenditures in the previous programming period as, in our opinion, this is a closer measure of the actual impact of the EU policy in each region. In contrast, eligibility as a *Less Developed* region in the current programming period is, in our opinion, a more appropriate proxy on the relative socio-economic situation of the region when the survey was carried out and, therefore, on the current intensity of the Cohesion Policy in the set of regions under analysis. In any case, the results in this section are qualitatively similar when using the previous programming period.

<sup>8</sup> We also computed the mean values of this magnitude. Table A.1 of the Appendix reports the corresponding results.

reading of these results is that a moderate rural-urban divide could exist as for awareness, perception, and support for the EU Cohesion Policy. However, it may not necessarily translate into large differences in identification with the EU project.

**TABLE 1.**  
**Awareness, perception and support to the Cohesion Policy and identification with the EU project by type of area**

	Rural	Middle town	Large town	Total
Awareness of EU Cohesion Policy				
Heard Cohesion Policy	44.6	42.8	47.9	45.0
Heard Regional Policy	49.6	46.8	51.3	49.1
Heard Structural Funds	49.1	48.9	55.2	50.9
Heard any EU fund	54.8	52.7	54.5	53.9
Perception of the EU Cohesion Policy				
Benefit from EU funds	34.6	30.4	39.5	34.6
Support EU Cohesion Policy	78.8	79.7	81.4	79.9
Support for the EU & Identification with Europe				
EU membership a good thing	60	60	65.6	61.7
Identification with Europe	7	7	7	7

**Notes:** Figures correspond to the percentage of positive responses to the questions on hearing about each particular policy, having benefited from EU funds, supporting the EU Cohesion Policy, and thinking that the membership of the individual's country to the EU is a good thing. Median values are reported for the degree of identification with Europe. Rural is defined as less than 10,000 inhabitants, Middle-sized town as between 10,000 and 100,000, and Large town as greater than 100,000.

Table 2 introduces the regional dimension in terms of the incidence of the EU regional policy. The first panel reports the results by groups of regions based on the distribution of the SFpc (quartiles). As expected, awareness of the EU policy interventions is more frequent in regions that receive more funds per inhabitant (i.e. in the third and fourth quartiles). This is so for all responses to these four questions, although the percentage varies markedly among them, as it does the gap for the different quartiles. Regarding the urban-rural divide, an unambiguous pattern cannot be derived. Whereas awareness seems to be more frequent in large towns of regions receiving more EU funds in the case of the Cohesion Policy and the Structural Funds, a less clear pattern is observed for the Regional Policy and for the knowledge about any EU fund in the region or area of the respondent.

As also expected, the percentage of individuals that declared having benefited in their daily life from any EU funded project increases along the SFpc distribution. Using this indicator, we can conclude that citizens' perception of the EU policy is more than three times higher in regions that received the largest amount of SFpc in comparison to those that received the lowest. Interestingly, despite some peculiarities, this increasing trend in perception along the SFpc distribution is observed both in rural areas and in cities of middle and large size. However, this common pattern does not prevent a marked urban-rural divide in

perception all over the SFpc distribution. Therefore, combining both dimensions, we can conclude that there are substantial disparities in perception across the territory. As a matter of example, the difference between rural areas in regions at the bottom of the SFpc distribution (16.2%) and large towns in regions of the upper quartile (59.3%) is as large as 43 percentage points. As regard support for the Cohesion Policy, figures indicate that it is higher in regions that receive more funds, particularly when the comparison is made with respect to the group of regions in the first quartile (receiving the lowest amount of SFpc). It is also observed that support is somewhat higher in mid-sized and large towns than in rural areas, although only from the second quartile onwards. However, overall we can conclude that territorial differences in support for the Cohesion Policy are far less intense than the ones observed for the perception of the direct benefits of EU interventions.

Territorial differences in awareness and, particularly, in the perceived benefits of projects financed with EU funds suggest that the level of identification with the European project may vary depending on the amount of received funds and on the degree of urbanization. This could well be despite citizens from different territories tend to similarly support the aim of the EU's Cohesion Policy. The results for the two questions capturing identification with the European project in Table 2 confirm the existence of differences across groups of regions and between urban and rural areas. On the one hand, and somewhat surprisingly, results reveal that the percentage of respondents that assess positively their country's EU membership is lower in regions receiving less EU funds and also in those in which the policy intervention is more intense (at least in term of funds per inhabitant expended in the region). However, the fact that these regions are the largest recipients of funds because they have the lowest level of development could be confounding the estimation of the effect of the policy on the degree of citizens' identification in this simple bivariate analysis. In any case, this pattern is consistent in areas of different urban intensity. Besides, results confirm that positive assessments are more frequent in large than in middle-sized towns and rural areas. It is interesting to remark that the lowest support for EU membership is found in rural areas of regions that received the highest amounts of SFpc and, therefore, being among the less developed EU regions. The median value of responses on the degree of identification with Europe is as high as eight (in a 0-10 scale) in large towns of the group of regions receiving the largest amounts of SFpc, while it equals six for rural areas and middle-sized town in the groups of regions receiving less funds. Similar disparities are observed in terms of the mean values (Table A.1 in the Appendix).

Results that differentiate between the regions eligible as *Less Developed* and those that do not, are reported in Panel B of Table 2. The general pattern regarding awareness, perception, and support for the EU policy in this case is similar to that discussed above for the groups of regions based on the amount of SFpc. If something, the differences between the regions most and least benefited by the EU regional policy are now more evident. Awareness and perception of the benefits are far more frequent in the *Less Developed* group, regardless of urbanisation. Support for the Cohesion Policy is also higher in that group, although the gap is narrower than for awareness. However, this is not reflected in greater identification with the EU project in regions eligible as *Less Developed*. This result is in line with those commented above for the lower level of identification in the group of regions receiving the largest amount of SFpc. Therefore, when interpreting this result we should not neglect that these regions are those with the lowest level of economic development. As long as citizens in poor regions perceive greater economic integration as a threat, they may be less prone to identify with the EU project.

TABLE 2.  
Territorial variation in awareness, support and identification with the EU project

Panel A. Structural Funds in the region

	Heard Cohesion Policy			Heard Regional Policy			Heard Structural Funds			Heard any EU fund			
	Rural	Mid. town	Large town	Rural	Mid. town	Large town	Rural	Mid. town	Large town	Rural	Mid. town	Large town	Total
1st quartile	45.1	40.2	39.5	46.1	43.9	47.5	40.6	41.6	45.5	33.4	36.6	34.3	34.9
2nd quartile	45.5	45.1	51.3	44.2	43.7	47.1	44.1	47.7	57.4	51.7	55.7	61.9	56.9
3rd quartile	46.8	48.9	58.4	50.4	47.4	60.1	64.6	61.4	71.2	63.0	60.9	65.6	63.0
4th quartile	47.3	48.6	55.3	61.2	61.1	63.6	52.8	60.0	63.6	77.3	79.5	77.7	78.2
	Benefit from EU funds			Support to EU Cohesion Policy			EU membership a good thing			Identification with Europe			
	Rural	Mid. town	Large town	Rural	Mid. town	Large town	Rural	Mid. town	Large town	Rural	Mid. town	Large town	Total
1st quartile	16.2	14.5	20.4	74.0	72.0	74.6	58.3	56.1	61.4	6	6	7	7
2nd quartile	23.6	25.7	38.0	78.6	81.7	84.0	59.6	57.7	69.1	6	6	7	7
3rd quartile	50.1	33.5	55.9	83.5	85.4	86.3	65.7	67.0	69.1	7	7	7	7
4th quartile	49.9	57.1	59.3	81.3	84.6	83.2	55.9	60.2	61.8	7	7	8	7

Panel B. Less developed regions.

	Heard Cohesion Policy			Heard Regional Policy			Heard Structural Funds			Heard any EU fund									
	Rural	Mid. town	Large town	Total	Rural	Mid. town	Large town	Total	Rural	Mid. town	Large town	Total							
Other type	42.0	38.9	44.3	41.6	42.5	41.5	46.1	43.3	42.4	42.8	50.5	45.3	40.5	42.1	45.7	42.9			
<i>Less Developed</i>	48.3	51.0	57.0	51.5	59.4	57.5	64.3	60.0	58.2	61.4	67.1	61.7	74.4	74.7	76.4	75.0			
<b>Benefit from EU funds</b>																			
<b>Support to EU Cohesion Policy</b>																			
<b>EU membership a good thing</b>																			
<b>Identification with Europe</b>																			
Rural	Mid. town	Large town	Total	Rural	Mid. town	Large town	Total	Rural	Mid. town	Large town	Total	Rural	Mid. town	Large town	Total	Rural	Mid. town	Large town	Total
Other type	21.2	20.3	29.0	23.5	76.1	78.1	80.7	78.4	61.3	59.6	66.1	62.3	6	6	7	7	6	6	7
<i>Less developed</i>	53.1	50.9	65.8	55.6	82.4	82.8	83.2	82.8	58.4	60.8	64.5	60.8	7	7	8	7	7	7	8

**Notes:** Figures are the percentage of positive responses to the corresponding questions, except in the case of Identification with Europe, where median values are reported. The quartiles refer to the distribution of the yearly average of the Structural Funds per inhabitant in each region in the programming period 2007-2013. *Less Developed* indicates if the region falls under the “Less Developed” status in the 2014-2020 programming period parlance. Total refers to the entire sample of individuals in the PERCEIVE’s Survey. Rural is defined as less than 10,000 inhabitants, Middle-sized town as between 10,000 and 100,000, and Large town as greater than 100,000 inhabitants.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

The modern study of *European identity* is strongly grounded on social constructivism, assuming that social processes are based on the construction of ideas: the legitimacy of the EU is assumed to depend on the existence of a European identity. These studies strongly emerged in the post-Maastricht period, and have been even fostered by the expansion of the EU to Central and Eastern European countries, the financial crisis, the Brexit, the ambiguous link between terrorist attacks and immigration episodes, the growth of populism, and the growth of regional identities aiming at becoming independent states. The revision of the extant literature allows us to state that both individual and collective definitions of a European identity imply an evaluative episode balancing the costs and benefits of being part of the EU project. In that regard, an evaluation of the impact of EU policies in general, and of the Cohesion Policy in particular, on the formation of a European identity seems to be crucial.

The literature agrees that citizens develop a collective identification through two main mechanisms: information and experience. They depend on the exposure to messages and awareness of citizens to EU issues, on personal contacts with other Europeans, experience with the repercussions of EU integration, and historical experiences within the collective memory of every context. In turn, the determinants that promote or hinder the European identity can be individual or system based. At the individual level, studies have pinpointed the role of political awareness, attitudes towards the European and national bodies, and personal transnational experiences. At the system (country) level, party messages related to European and national community, the economic position and degree of international integration, and the ethnocultural identification would be among the most important determinants.

In addition to these mechanisms and determinants of identity formation, we can conclude that individuals' identification with Europe is likely to be conditioned by a list of EU policies and institutions with a clear impact on the everyday life of citizens. In particular, in this study we have stressed the role played by the Cohesion Policy. Its focus, design, management, and the amount of funds allocated makes this EU policy a clear candidate to influence the citizens' identification with the EU project. Its regionally differentiated impact can even explain a big deal of variations across territories in identification. Together with this policy-source of territorial disparities, the rural-urban divide could be strongly influencing the experience-based mechanism, and in particular how the Cohesion Policy is perceived. There may be rural-urban differences, among others, in terms of the ethnocultural identification of every territory, the party system, the economic position within Europe and within every country, and in the degree of international integration. Preliminary evidence from the PERCEIVE survey confirms that awareness and perception of the Cohesion Policy vary depending on the intensity of the EU regional policy in the respondents territory. It also supports a sort of urban-rural divide in awareness and perception. However, the evidence is less supportive as regard differences in identification with the EU project associated to the incidence of the Cohesion Policy. A plausible explanation is that the positive effect on identification of the policy is counterbalanced by the lower propensity of citizens in poorer regions to identify with the European project, as they could see themselves, and their territories, as net losers in the process of increasing economic integration. This argument is linked with the new debate on the geographies of discontent and the rise of a sort populism with stronger territorial than social foundations (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018). Further analysis, in a multivariate context, is therefore in order to validate or refute this argument.

In any case, since social processes are strongly grounded on the construction of ideas, the legitimacy of the EU nowadays is viewed to depend on the existence of a European identity. Both individual and collective definitions of a European identity imply an evaluative episode balancing the costs and benefits of being part of the EU project. In this respect, it is not only important if and how Cohesion Policy is applied, but also how citizens are aware of it and whether and how they experience the benefits and costs of being part of the EU project. This is supportive of the social constructivism approach, stressing the need for a discourse to allow citizens to evaluate the EU project. Therefore, we can conclude that further efforts should be devoted to improve the way in which citizens perceive the Cohesion Policy, as it may be an



effective way to counterbalance the negative effect on European identification of low levels of economic development. In this respect, further evidence about the way in which the territorial dimension (both across countries and regions, and the urban-rural divide) influences the mechanisms for identity formation would be very informative to guide actions aiming at improving communication of the benefits of the policy. That is to say, we advocate for explicit spatial analyses of the formation of a European identity and their mechanisms and determinants.

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## APPENDIX

TABLE A.1.  
Results based on the mean values of Identification with the EU project

Panel A. *Structural Funds in the region*

	Identification with Europe (mean)			
	Rural	Mid. town	Large town	Total
1st quartile	6.0	6.1	6.5	6.2
2nd quartile	6.0	5.9	6.8	6.3
3rd quartile	6.8	6.5	7.0	6.7
4th quartile	6.5	6.9	6.9	6.8
<b>Total</b>	6.3	6.3	6.8	6.5

Panel B. *Less developed regions*

	Identification with Europe (mean)			
	Rural	Mid. town	Large town	Total
Other type	6.0	6.0	6.6	6.2
<i>Less developed</i>	6.7	6.9	7.1	6.9
<b>Total</b>	6.3	6.3	6.8	6.5

