The Role of Conceptions of European and National Identity in Explaining Public Support for the European Union

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1. Introduction

Since the early 1990s, public support for the political system of the EU has come to the center of scholarly attention. Especially since the treaty of Maastricht 1992 the “permissive consensus” – which secured some kind of passive support by a rather inattentive public for European integration and European politics – began to erode (Lindberg and Scheingold 1970, Dalton and Eichenberg 2007). The European Union and European integration were no longer regarded as a matter of course but where open to public debate and contestation. The rejection of the constitutional treaty in France and the Netherlands 2005 or the rejection of the revised treaty in Ireland 2008 shows that the role of the public in European integration has become all the more important and can no longer be treated as a side show to an elite driven integration process.

Following the erosion of the “permissive consensus” and the increasing interest in public support for the European Union the question European identity came to the forefront. Identity, as to David Easton (1965, 1979) can serve as a source of diffuse support for the political system. Especially in times of crisis and specific dissatisfaction with what the political system is doing, diffuse support creates a “buffer” against such discontent and thereby helps to stabilize the system. In line with Easton, European Identity has been identified as one of the core explanatory factors for support of the European Union (Carey 2002, Citrin and Sides 2004, Weßels 2007, Fuchs 2011). On the other hand, national identity has been identified as a hindrance to support for the EU and as a source of Euroscepticism. This, however, should be especially the case if citizens identify with the nation exclusively, meaning that they only identify with their nation (McLaren 2002, McLaren 2007, Hooghe and Marks 2005, Fuchs 2011). As to McLaren (2002: 555) citizens in Europe are “socialized to accept the power and sovereignty of the nation-state”. Accordingly, the transfer of sovereignty and/or loyalty is supposed as a political and cultural threat.

However, most studies, do not take the individual conception of European identity into account. National and European identity are reduced to the intensity of identification regardless of what content is related to them. But collective identities – studied at an individual level – mean different things to different people. Bruter (2005) for example differentiates between civic and cultural European Identity and Abdelal et al (2009) provide an extensive framework of how to measure the content dimension of identities. One frequently used way to measure the content dimension of identity is to measure the characteristics which are used to demarcate the in-group from the out-group. These characteristics can be differentiated into an inclusive conception if identity and an exclusive conception of identity depending on how permeable the group boundaries are constructed.
In this paper, I focus on the question of how different conceptions of national and European identity relate to support of the European Union in Germany. It can be expected that, since the EU is generally regarded in “civic” terms, as a political liberal, democratic and multicultural entity, only the inclusive conceptions of national and European identity should lead to an increase of support of the European Union. In order to test the hypothesis, a theoretical framework is presented drawing on Easton’s Theory of the political system and Social Identity Theory which aims to incorporate different conceptions of identities. The effects of inclusive and exclusive conceptions of German national and European identity on support for the European Union are then analyzed empirically using data from an online-survey carried out at the University of Mainz in January 2013. Finally, the results are discussed.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1 Collective identity and support for the political system

Before talking about collective identities it is important to conceptualize the concept of political support. As to David Easton (1965, 1979) political support can be differentiated into specific support and diffuse support and three object levels which are “authorities”, “regime” and “community”, which are conceptualized hierarchically. Specific support is based on short-term calculations about perceived rewards of current outputs. Diffuse support is free of such calculations. However, as to Easton (1979: 273) diffuse support „forms a reservoir of favorable attitudes or good will that helps members to accept or tolerate outputs to which they are opposed or which they see as damaging to their wants“: Hence even in times of crisis or lack of specific support, diffuse supports serves as a basis for the stability of the systems and secures its ongoing support by the citizens. Fuchs (2011: 32-33) points out that Easton further distinguishes diffuses support in legitimacy and trust as far as the authorities and the Regime are concerned.

The theory suggests that positive experience on a more concrete level can “spill over” on more abstract levels. Hence, positive experiences with the current authorities of apolitical system leads to specific support of these authorities and can – over some time – generate diffuse support for the authorities and later for the regime itself (Weßels 2007: 289, Easton 1975: 446).

Table 1: Orientations towards political objects

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Modes of orientation</th>
<th>Authorities</th>
<th>Political object</th>
<th>Community</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Specific</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diffuse</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In that line, Wessels (2007: 290) argues that especially diffuse support at more abstract levels should serve as a “buffer” against the erosion of support at more concrete levels. Hence the strongest “buffer” should be diffuse support at the community level, which Easton (1965: 177) defines as the collection of persons “bound together by a political division of labor”. Diffuse support at the community level is further described by Easton as “sense of community “ or “we-feeling” directly making the connection to collective identities. Hence identification with the collective at stake should be the strongest buffer against discontent with the system and a strong predictor of positive attitudes towards the system on all different levels.

2.2 Conceptualization collective identities

Now that it is clear where collective identities are located on the framework of the analysis of support for the political system we can turn to the conceptualization collective identities. Identities can be studied from two different perspectives. The “top-down” perspective on the one hand analyzes identities on an aggregate level. As to this approach identities are analyzed from an ‘objective’ perspective with a focus on normative arguments and the ‘nature’ of collective identities (Bruter 2004: 23). On the other hand, a “bottom-up” perspective (Bruter 2004: 23-24) can be adopted according to which identities are analyzed on an individual level and are treated as individual characteristics. Hence, they are basically a psychological conception. This reasoning is in line with Andersons (1991) famous definition of the nation as “imagined community”.

In general both perspectives can provide valuable insight into the study of collective identities. In this paper a combination will be used, connecting what people think about the meaning of national and European identity with what is generally perceived to be the abstract – or objective – meaning of a specific identity.

First of all, from a “bottom-up” perspective, collective identities such as national and European identity can be defined as an individual’s knowledge about the belonging to social groups (cognitive dimension) and the evaluation and emotional significance which is assigned to these belongings (affective and evaluative dimensions) (Westle 2003: 119, see also Fuchs, Guinaudeau and Schubert 2009: 96). The concept of collective identities at an individual level is most famously studied in social psychology. Social identity and self-categorization theory (Tajfel 1982, Tajfel and Turner 1986, Turner et al. 1987) provide a comprehensive framework about the individual self-concept including aspects of membership in collective groups. Moreover, Social Identity Theory

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1 In contrast a “top-down” perspective analyzes identities on an aggregate level. As to this approach identities are analyzed from an ‘objective’ perspective with a focus on normative arguments and the ‘nature’ of collective identities (Bruter 2004: 23).

2 As to Anderson (1991: 6) a nation “is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion”.

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provides insights into the effects of the psychological and social processes concerning group affiliations (Lilli 1998: 140).

The key concept, however, to social identity theory is social comparison. Individuals use relevant dimensions to demarcate the in-group from the out-group in order to detect similarities between the members of the collective and differences to people that are not part of the collective. In other words: the question, “Who Am I?” is automatically related to the question: “Who am I not?” The idea of who we are (in-group) is framed as a response to other groups (out-group). However, it is important to note that these comparisons take place on “relevant dimensions” meaning dimensions which are perceived as important for the conception of the in-group (Reicher and Hopkins 2001: 33). In this sense, Fuchs (2011) distinguishes two dimension of collective identity. The first dimension is the subjective assignment to a collective as well as the affective attachment and the evaluation of attachment. The second dimension is the subjective assumption of shared similarities within a collective, plus the positive evaluation of the assumed similarities (Fuchs 2011: 37). It is the assumed similarities which are the “relevant dimension” used for comparison and positive differentiation from relevant out-groups. Hence, only by taking the individually perceived contents of an identity into account it is possible to get an insight into the construction of group boundaries which are key to the concept of social identity. As to Risse (2010: 21): “In studying social identities, however, we have to take the self-understandings of group members seriously and make them an inherent part of the explanatory story.”

These perceived dimensions, on the other hand, do not need to be the dimensions which are shared by a majority of in-group members or which are the defining dimensions of a collective in political or historical debate. Especially in terms of national and European collective identity the meaning of identity is not just constructed at the individual level but is open to contestation in the public sphere and discussed and promoted by political and societal actors (Herrmann and Brewer 2004). The intensity of attachment to a collective should therefore depend on a match between the conceptions on the individual and on the societal level.

In sum, national and European identity can best be understood as collective identities. As to social identity theory they are part of the individual self-concept. Individuals identify with groups by knowing about their group membership and evaluate their attachment to groups in a positive way. For this purpose they make comparisons between the in-group and the out-group on relevant dimensions, which brings the meaning of identities to attention.

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3 For example, when distinguishing between the social groups “male” and “female” comparisons in terms of eye- or hair-color are unlikely to be regarded as “relevant dimensions” to differentiate between both categories.
2.3 Conceptions of the meaning of national and European identities

In research about national identity Smith (1991) has coined the famous distinction between civic and ethnic identities. As for the civic type of collective identity, attachment to a certain territory – the homeland -, a shared respect for laws and institution, a common political will the acceptance of common duties which everyone has to perform are presented as defining elements (Smith 1991: 9-10). Bruter (2004) defines the civic type of identity as the “identification of citizens with a political structure, the state, which can be summarized as the set of institutions, rights and rules that preside over the political life of a community.” As to Shulman (2002: 559) the characteristics which make up a civic identity are: attachment to territory, ownership of citizenship, the feeling of being part of a nation, approval to a certain political ideology and respect for the political institutions are classified as contents which make a civic identity.

The second type of collective identity according to Smith (1991) is ethnic identity. In this case identity is defined as “community of birth” or “community of common descent”. The nation is perceived as family with common heritage and ancestry (Smith 1991: 11). Therefore, individuals who regard ethnicity, common ancestry or the place of birth as important characteristics for in-group membership identify with an ethnic conception of collective identity. Bruter (2004: 26), however, differentiates between civic identity on the one hand and cultural identity on the other hand. Whereas civic identity corresponds to the concept outlined above, cultural identity includes identification a certain ethnic, however with a focus on culture, and social similarities as well. This is in line with Shulmans (2002: 559) definition of cultural identity along characteristics such as the ability to speak the national language, sharing of religious values and common traditions.

In terms of inclusiveness and exclusiveness of the identity construction, an ethnic conception is at the exclusive end of the continuum whereas a civic conception is at the inclusive end. The cultural conception, however, can be placed in the middle between them. This classification builds on the porosity of group boundaries. While the inclusive characteristics can easily be adopted by outsiders, that thereby gain access to the in-group, exclusive characteristics are naturalized and therefore only receivable by fate of birth. In this paper the differentiation between inclusive and exclusive characteristics will be adopted since it provides a clear distinctive criterion.

2.4 The meaning of identity and support of the political system

As mentioned in Chapter 2.1, identification with the community or the collective forms a buffer against discontent with the political system and a basis for support for the system. In several studies the positive impact of identification with the collective of European on support for the political system of the European Union could be shown (see Carey 2002, Citrin and Sides 2004,
Weßels 2007, Fuchs 2011). On the other hand it could also be shown that identification with other collectives such as the national level can have a negative effect on support for the EU especially if national identity is exclusive to European identity (McLaren 2002, McLaren 2007, Hooghe and Marks 2005, Fuchs 2011).

However these identities have only been analyzed using the intensity of attachment with the collective as an indicator for national and European identity. However, in the previous chapters, it could be shown that the content of collective identities should also be taken into account when talking about collective identities. Identities can be built upon different criteria and mean different things to different people. This is to say, that the community with which individuals identify themselves is perceived in different ways.

As for the European Union, it can be expected that only the inclusive conception should lead to an increase in support for the EU. The EU is generally perceived in civic terms as a political, liberal and multicultural community (see Habermas 2011) and the Article 2 of the Treaty of Lisbon explicitly names democracy, freedom, equality, the rule of law and respect for its cultural and linguistic diversity as the core values of the EU (Lisbon Treaty 2007: Art. 2), so that only an inclusive conception of European identity should fit the political system of the EU and lead to an increase in support of the EU. The same can be expected for the inclusive and exclusive conception of national identity.

**H1:** The inclusive conception of European or national identity has a positive effect on support for the EU.

**H2:** The exclusive conception of European or national identity has a negative effect on support for the EU.

However, the intensity of both identities should also influence support for the EU. Since European identity is supposed to function as a buffer for support, a positive effect can be expected. The effect of national identity on the other hand should be negative.

**H3:** The intensity of European identity has a positive effect on support for the EU, the intensity of national identity has a negative effect on support for the EU.

In that sense, the inclusive conception of European identity should have a stronger effect on the intensity of European identity than the exclusive conception.

**H4:** The inclusive conception of European identity has a stronger positive effect on the intensity of European Identity than the exclusive conception.
As for the effect of inclusive and exclusive conceptions of German national identity the expectations are quite differentially. Whereas the EU and European Identity are generally constructed in inclusive, liberal and democratic terms, German national identity is more about traditions and heritage (Brubaker 1992, Schlenker-Fischer 2011).

**H5:** The exclusive conception of German national identity has a stronger positive effect on the intensity of German national identity than the inclusive conception.

As for support for the European Union another explanatory factor is taken into consideration. Since support for the community is regarded as support at the most abstract level, it should also have a positive effect on support on the level of authorities. Moreover support for the authorities should be connected with a positive evaluation of the regime. Therefore the “responsiveness of authorities” is included in the analysis.

**H6:** A positive evaluation of the responsiveness of the EU should have a positive effect on support for the political system.

Since identification with the community is supposed to serve as a “buffer”, we should expect a positive effect of European identity on “responsiveness”. Same should be the case for the inclusive conception of European and national identity. The exclusive conception, however, should have a negative effect, since the exclusive conception is not represented by EU authorities and institutions.

**H7:** European Identity has a positive effect on responsiveness. The effect of national identity should be lower.

**H8** The inclusive conception of European or national identity has a positive effect on responsiveness.

**H9:** The exclusive conception of European or national identity has a negative effect on responsiveness.

The complete model which will be analyzed empirically in the following chapter can be seen in Figure 1.
Figure 1: Path-Model of EU Support
3. Empirical Analysis

3.1 Data and Method

The data presented in this paper have been collected in an online-survey carried out between January 15th and January 29th 2013. The link to the survey was send via E-Mail to all students of the University of Mainz. The survey included questions about national and European identity as well as questions about party identification and the German pension system. Of all 36,000 students 3,400 completed the survey. However, a split variable has been integrated into the survey, discriminating between a version of the survey about national and European identity a version about political party affiliations. Hence the number of cases per survey is reduced to 1513.

The data is analyzed using structural equation modeling with Mplus7. Thereby all hypothesis can be tested in one model. The measurement model of the latent variables is included in the structural path-model. However, it is not shown in the graphs (Figure 1 and 2) to make them more comprehensible. Since some variables are somewhat skewed towards higher or lower values, the MLR estimator is chosen which is robust to non-normality.

3.2 Operationalisation

In a first step of analysis the latent variables measuring the inclusive and exclusive conception of German and European identity as well as the intensity of both identities are constructed using confirmatory factor analysis. The model fit for the entire analysis is at least satisfactory. The goodness of fit indicators are shown below. According to the theoretical framework and the distinction made between exclusive and inclusive based on the characteristics used for demarcation of in-group boundaries. For the exclusive conception, the manifest variables shown in Table 1 are used.

Table 1: Exclusive components of German and European identity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Estimate (Std)</th>
<th>Estimates (Std)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Exclusive German</td>
<td>Exclusive EU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to be born in Germany/Europe</td>
<td>.780</td>
<td>.802</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to have German/European ancestry</td>
<td>.798</td>
<td>.831</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to have been living in Germany/Europe for a long time</td>
<td>.543</td>
<td>.564</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The inclusive conception of both identities also consists of three items. The used items and their respective factor loadings are shown in Table 2.
Table 2: Inclusive components of German and European identity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Estimate (Std)</th>
<th>Estimates (Std)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Inclusive German.</td>
<td>Inclusive EU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to have respect for democracy</td>
<td>.818</td>
<td>.810</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to be tolerant and open open-minded</td>
<td>.598</td>
<td>.614</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to participate in political life</td>
<td>.543</td>
<td>.565</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The intensity of German and European identity is measured using the following items:

- To have respect for democracy
- To be tolerant and open-minded
- To participate in political life

Table 3: Intensity of German and European identity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Estimate (Std)</th>
<th>Estimates (Std)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Intensity German.</td>
<td>Intensity EU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel attached to Germany/Europe.</td>
<td>.761</td>
<td>.795</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have many similarities with Germans/Europeans.</td>
<td>.701</td>
<td>.734</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is important to be considered a German/European</td>
<td>.573</td>
<td>.724</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Responsiveness of authorities is measured using following manifest variables. A similar operationalisation can be found in Weßels (2007).

Table 4: Responsiveness

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Estimate (Std)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I generally have trust in the Institutions of the EU</td>
<td>.343</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have a say at the European levels.</td>
<td>.608</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The depended variable – support for the European Union – is measured with the item: “Do you think that membership of Germany in the EU is a good thing or a bad thing?” This item has been used in many studies as measure of political support of the EU and taps into the dimension of diffuse support for the regime (Fuchs 2011).

In the second step the complete model has been estimated. The model consists of a measurement model for the latent variable and a structural path-model dealing with the relationships between the latent variables and the depended variable.

### 3.3. Discussion of results

The model-fit statistics for the estimated model suggest a rather satisfactory model fit. The RMSEA (0.047) and the SRMR (0.060) both signal a good fit whereas the CFI/TLI (0.947/0.930) only indicates a satisfactory fit. In total, however, the model seems to fit the data so that it does not need to be rejected. The results of the analysis can be seen in Figure 2. Significant effects are marked with asterisks and with bold arrows.
Figure 2: Results path model Support for the EU

N=1475 (listwise deletion) RMSEA (0.047) SRMR (0.060), CFI/CFI (0.947/0.930).
R² of “Political Support of the EU = 0.338. Significance: * < 0.05; ** < 0.01; *** < 0.001.
The data, in Figure 2 above, show that not all hypotheses can be confirmed. First of all, the classical “buffer hypothesis” seems to hold. The intensity of European Identity has a strong and positive effect on support for the EU, indicating that it can serve as some kind of basis for support (H3). Moreover it has a positive effect on “responsiveness” which cumulates to support for the EU and has a strongly positive effect on support for the EU itself (H6, H7). As for the intensity of German identity, no significant effect on support can be detected. However, also German identity leads to a more positive evaluation of the responsiveness of the EU.

As for the conception of European and German national identity, only the exclusive conception of German identity has a significant effect on support. Respondents who define their German identity in exclusive terms show lower support for the European Union (H2). It seems that support for the EU does not resonate with such a conception. All other conceptions, however, do not show any significant effect (H1). It seems that the intensity of collective attachment is the more important factor in explain support for the political system, regardless of the specific individual conception of the identity. However, it can be shown that the evaluation of responsiveness of EU authorities highly depends on the conception of European identity. Whereas an exclusive conception leads to a less positive evaluation, the inclusive conception has a significantly positive effect (H8, H9). This is not surprising, given that the inclusive conception consists of mostly political aspects of identity construction such as “respect for democracy” and “participation in political life”. The strongly negative effect of the exclusive conception, however, indicates, that characteristics of the exclusive conception such as “ancestry” are not met by the European Union. The exclusive conception does just not match the official self-understanding of the EU.

Moreover, the data suggests that European and German national identity are generally perceived differently. Whereas, in the case of European Identity, the inclusive conception shows a stronger effect than the exclusive conception, the opposite is the case with German national identity (H4, H5). This finding suggest that, although the conceptions of European and German National identity do not influence support directly, they might do it indirectly by influencing the intensity of European and national identity. As for European Identity it seems that the stronger the inclusive conception of European identity, the more intensive is the respondents European identity and the stronger the support for the EU. The opposite can be said about national identity. However, in this case, both the exclusive as well as the inclusive identity conception show rather strong effects on the intensity of national identity. Hence, both conceptions lead to a significant increase in the intensity of German national identity.
The results of the analysis are summarized in Table 5 below. Except for H1, which postulated an effect on support of the EU by the inclusive conceptions of national and European identity, all hypothesis can at least be partly confirmed for now.

Table 5: Results for Hypothesis 1-9

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Confirmed</th>
<th>Partly confirmed</th>
<th>Rejected</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>H1</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H2</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H3</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H4</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H5</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H6</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H7</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H8</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H9</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

H1: The inclusive conception of European or national identity has a positive effect on support for the EU. H2: The exclusive conception of European or national identity has a negative effect on support for the EU. H3: The intensity of European identity has a positive effect on support for the EU, the intensity of national identity has a negative effect on support for the EU. H4: The inclusive conception of European identity has a stronger positive effect on the intensity of European Identity than the exclusive conception. H5: The exclusive conception of German national identity has a stronger positive effect on the intensity of German national Identity than the inclusive conception. H6: A positive evaluation of the responsiveness of the EU should have a positive effect on support for the political system. H7: European Identity has a positive effect on responsiveness. The effect of national identity should be lower. H8: The inclusive conception of European or national identity has a positive effect on responsiveness. H9: The exclusive conception of European or national identity has a negative effect on responsiveness.

4. Conclusion

This paper tried to analyze the ways conceptions of German national identity and European identity can influence support for the EU. Using structural equation modeling with data from a student survey carried out at the University of Mainz, it can be shown that only the exclusive conception of German national identity shows a directly negative effect on support. However, both exclusive and inclusive conceptions of European identity strongly influence the evaluation of the responsiveness of EU authorities, which itself shows a strongly positive effect on support. Especially the negative effect of the exclusive dimension indicates that an exclusive idea of Europe does not resonate with the work of authorities and institutions on the EU level.

In general, the positive “buffer” effect of European identity on support for the EU can – again – be confirmed. European identity leads to a significantly stronger support for the EU and a significantly more positive evaluation of the responsiveness of EU authorities. However, it can be argued that the intensity of European identity strongly depends on an inclusive conception of that identity.
The model only account for 33 per cent of the variance of support for the EU. Previous studies have highlighted the importance of instrumental calculations and macro-level factors in explaining support for the EU. Also, the concept of political support could only partly be operationalized due to the data at hand. It would be useful to integrate more explanatory factors into the model and see if the effects also hold in different country contexts. Nevertheless, the study provides as useful starting-point for further analysis and could show that conception of European and national identity do matter in explaining support for the EU.
Literature


