The political geography of Europe has always been at the center of vivid debates among intellectuals and politicians. The major discussions usually concerned the definition and scope of the European territory. Since the seventeenth century, the geographical frontiers of the continent and especially the place of Russia and the Ottoman Empire in the “Concert of Europe” have been extensively interrogated. No definitive answer – of course – has ever been given to these questions which continue to frequently occupy the newspaper tribunes, as the debate about the accession of Turkey in the EU or, more recently, the Ukrainian crisis, have showed.

Does it explain why the geographical challenge is missing to such a point in the European Union discourse? Few words have been said, since the beginning of the Community in the 1950’s, to the crucial question of the common territory. At the core of this ambiguity remains the famous article 237 of the Treaty of Rome, declaring that “any European State may apply to become a member of the Community” – a line that survived all the following treaties until today. No definition was ever given to what exactly is this “European” area, what it comprises, and who should decide it. Furthermore the subject was constantly avoided by the authorities – national governments as well as the EU Commission – even in the different periods of enlargement. This topic remains a taboo in the EU political agenda.

This taboo is amplified by the internal policies of the EU. The progressive disappearance of interstate borders and the development of multi-scale territories inside the EU (the Schengen area and the Eurozone for example) have created new paradigms for the Europeans. At the contrary of the “external borders” debate, this dimension has direct implications on the role of the Nation-State in Europe and the everyday life of the European inhabitants. It embodies the
ambition of the EU to create functional spaces inside Europe beyond the States, and to forge ultimately a new, “continental” citizen.

However, borders are coming back in the popular field. There are many signs in that direction. The success of nationalist and Europhobic parties is interrogating the European Integration process. In economic difficulties, with a crescent deficit of political legitimacy, a growing number of European citizens are considering that the “old Nation State” is the protector they need. If they recognize themselves in national symbols like flag, anthems or football teams, they also want a stronger role for national borders. Nationalist on the far right and protectionist on the far left are indeed asking for a better border control, and refer more and more to the national territory as a “sanctuary”.

This gap between the lack of territorial representation in Europe and the expectations of the citizens for a return of borders should be better studied. The fundamental question here is the link between geography and identity. And we assume that this link is only possible with a constructed narrative about the European territory, like those created along times by the Nation-State. In fact, if an important amount of research has been done these last years about the political geography of Europe, few studies have concentrated on the discourse about the European geography and the signification of this topic in the EU’s political agenda. The questions should be the followings: How does one speak about the territory of Europe? What geographical representation proposes the EU authorities? And what does it say about our common self-identification?

This paper aims to approach these questions by studying the importance of the representation of the common territory in the process of political self-identification, and the ways to achieve it. First, we will examine the question of the European (non-)representation of the territory, and then suggest some reasons which explain why the geographical question was generally avoided in the EU edification process. Second, it will try to explain why the link between territory and identity is important in order to create popular identification. Third, it will

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1 See on this topic Vivien Schmidt, Democracy in Europe. The EU and the national polities, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2006

2 This discourse is visible not only in parties like the Front national in France or UKIP in Great Britain, but also Syriza in Greece or Podemos in Spain. As example of many articles on this topic see “Libération”, January 26, 2015.

3 Few publications have focused indeed on this subject. There is a gap between the numerous and often brilliant studies on European identity and citizenship (for example the works of Lucarelli, Cerutti or Moro) and the research on the geographical dimension of the European Construction (for example Anderson, Bort or Moisio).
describe three theoretical propositions that could be used to better understand the challenges and options that faces the EU in creating its territorial narrative.

In search of a narrative

A distinctive characteristic of the European Union as a political entity is that it has no real “territorial narrative” proposed by its authorities. For many years and still today, the Union was only conceived – in terms of geography – as the assemblage of Nation States with their particular features, or as functional areas dedicated to specific policies like the Eurozone or the Schengen agreement. In these conditions, no discourse could really emerge about the definition and, in a sense, the “ontology” of the EU territorial destiny. As a demonstration of this reality, one might invoke the difficulty for the EU to represent itself in a simple map⁴.

In fact, the only geographical narrative that seems to exist in the European Union is related to the notion of “continent”. From the beginning, the common ambition was to unify the countries from Portugal to the East. This vision is obvious in the declarations of the early leaders of the Community like Walter Hallstein, as he stated;

“Now, these communities have six members only. This is a historical accident which is due to the fact that only these six states were prepared to embark upon the adventure involved in this first attempt at unification (...) It has again been evident – and this has always been part of our political design – that Community policy is not just a policy for six states but that it is the campaign of a unit which deems itself to be the vanguard of a greater Europe (...) The success of failure of the communities is therefore a matter that concerns the whole of Europe.”⁵

This vision took more weight after 1989, in the effort to unify the former East bloc to the European Community. In that period, the European Union could become – theoretically – the European continent and vice-versa. But the Commission saw the problem coming and declared quite frankly that there was no “geographical clue” for the Enlargement:

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⁴ A specific example of this situation is that there is no common representation of the European map in the official documents of the EU (including the coins and banknotes of the Euro). Some represent the EU in the broader context – with Russia, Turkey, North Africa and the Caucasus. Some represent “just” the European countries, as an island in the ocean. Finally some fewer represents only the EU countries, without Norway and with Switzerland as a “black hole” in the middle of the continent.

⁵ Speech delivered by the Prof. Walter Hallstein to the Federal Council of the European Movement on the occasion of his election as President of the European Movement, Rome, January 20th, 1968. Retrieved in the Archives of the European Integration, Pittsburgh University, Fund 420.7
“Article 237 of the Rome Treaty, and article O of the Maastricht Treaty, say that ‘any European State may apply to become a member’. The term ‘European’ has not been officially defined. It combines geographical, historical and cultural elements which all contribute to the European identity. The shared experience of proximity, ideas, values, and historical interaction cannot be condensed into a simple formula, and is subject to review by each succeeding generation. The Commission believes that it is neither possible nor opportune to establish now the frontiers of the European Union, whose contours will be shaped over many years to come.”

As we see, the Commission (and after it the Council) considered that this was a too “hot potato” to have a clear statement about Turkey and other interested countries. In fact, the EU officials began to use terms like “Wider Europe” to identify the possible new members, or to create Neighbourhood policies toward the East and the South, an indirect way to determine who should be “in the club” or not.

It is then obvious that the EU has difficulties to identify its own territory. To be more precise, it is not an institutional problem – the EU territory is the sum of the territories of its Members, easily identified – but a symbolic one. A true narrative about what defines the European territory and who it encompasses remains absent of the official discourse. In short the conceptualization of the external borders remain a taboo in the European Union. The most interesting thing is the fact that the leaders are becoming aware of this problem and the risks it carries, but cannot face it convincingly.

A deterritorialized ambition

What does explain this situation? Of course, there are conjectural aspects, like geopolitical agenda or economic challenges that create good reasons not to reject any potential members, and to let the door open. But there are also signs that suggest that the problem goes deeper.

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7 A clear line with Africa was drawn however by the rejection of the Moroccan candidacy to the CE in 1987.
8 Even this point is not so evident, considering that many European overseas territories (foremost British and French) remain outside the Community or have a special status in it.
9 In a Weekly Newsletter about the Enlargement, Romano Prodi, President of the commission, “recognised that the EU must be able to answer people in the present member states who are already starting to ask ‘Where does Europe stop?’”. Weekly Newsletter, 10 December 2002: Ensuring links with new neighbours. Retrieved in the Archives of the European Integration, Pittsburgh University, Fund 441.215A
We propose here five cumulative hypotheses for explaining this taboo about external and internal borders in the EU.

The first one is linked to the opposition between the European integration and the Nation-State. Committed to impose peace in the continent after the Second World War, the founding fathers targeted the old State model as the nest of nationalism and thus of irreducible rivalries between countries. As François Mitterrand later declared: « Le nationalism, c’est la guerre! »10 In this context, the borders embody the very expression of this harmfulness of the Nation State. The deconstruction of these separations inside Europe thus appeared as a legitimate and noble mission for the beginning Community. As symbols of military threat, of separated families, of the geographical closing of the citizen’s liberty, the concept of borders was to be overthrown and, in a sense, abandoned.

The second reason is closely linked to the first. It refers to the next ambition of the new Europe after peace: the creation of prosperity. For the liberal makers of the Community, the borders where the symbol of economic protectionism and restriction to free-trade. On the opposite, the European integration had from the beginning the objective to create a vast open market, soon called “internal”. This clearly indicates than the interstates borders, with their tariffs barriers and other obstacles, had no role to play in the Community, and therefore should be overtaken. This was a second reason to discredit the concept of border in the eve of the European construction.

The third explanation has to do with the universalistic values of the EU. The founding texts of the Community and almost all that was written and said since then refer to the European integration as an expression of democracy, liberal values and human rights. Those values are by definition not related to a specific territory, although they are seen as typical of the historical development of Europe. In particular, they are hardly distinguishable from those of the US11 and the rest of the Western world. In this sense, it would be contradictory for the EU to present itself as the incarnation of universalistic values, and to claim at the same time a (de)finite territory. Geography and borders appear here one more time as obsolete and counterproductive concepts.

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10 Discourse in Luxembourg, January 17, 1995
The fourth hypothesis is directly related to the Enlargement policy. Since the beginning, the Community invited other “European” countries to join, and indeed it succeeded by integrating nowadays 28 Members. In fact, the Enlargement process appears as the most successful policy in foreign affairs for the EU, permitting a peaceful expansion. In these conditions, it would be counterproductive for the EU to indicate where the external borders are, because it would diminish it appeal toward the neighboring countries.

The fifth and final hypothesis concerns the internal dynamics of the EU. It has to do with the inherent complexity of the European sectorial and thematic geography. Several policies developed in the Community created specific spaces, including some of the countries but not all (for example the Eurozone). Meanwhile, non-member States could join some of these “internal territories” (for example the Schengen area). In these conditions, it is difficult or even impossible to offer a “legibility” to the UE territory. At the difference of the old Nation-State, the link between territory and policy is no more easily definite and understandable. Several European maps are thus legitimate, considering what dimension is represented. The collective geographical representation of “Europe” as an acting polity is blurred.

In our view, these five hypotheses could explain why the geographical issue is so complicated for the EU. Having identified borders as the enemy of its own “raison d’être”, the EU couldn’t be at ease with a definite and predictable territory. As a consequence, a coherent narrative about the situation and role of the European geography is hardly manageable. Indeed, the utilization of this concept in the internal and external fields could only be interpreted as a renouncement to either the ideals lying beneath the Union, or some of its most successful policies. Any discourse or narrative in that direction would therefore be seen as counterproductive by the EU authorities, or at least difficult to create. As Moisio stated, “a number of differentiated and overlapping geopolitical imaginations have been, and currently are, at play in Europe”. There is few tentative to merge these imaginations in a coherent vision.

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12 As Jan Zielonka recalls: “Next to a central government, citizenship and the legitimacy to collect taxes and use violence, borders are the pre-requisites of any state-like organization”. In Jan Zielonka, „How New Enlarged Borders will Reshape the European Union”, in Journal of Common Market Studies, vol. 39, no.3, September 2001, pp. 508

On the importance of geography in identity processes

But is this “territorial discourse” really important? In particular, does it have a role to play in the building of a European identity? One way to answer is to interrogate the general link between territory and identity. In the EU, for the reasons tentatively described above, this articulation is thin, as Vivien Schmidt summarized it: “The EU has political, economic and social boundaries rather than the usual geographical ones; it lacks the strong identity found at national level since it is a community created by fate meaning a community that emerges from the experience of the interdependence of people—it is a created identity, not a given one”\(^\text{14}\).

The problem is that this “created identity” is therefore merely intellectual and thus makes sense for a part of the European population – let’s say in a simple way the educated and internationalized citizens – but not all the people. Boundaries seem indeed necessary for the self-recognition of political groups. As Zielonka is stating, « identity is basically about belonging to a certain kind of community that lives on a certain territory and cherishes certain types of norms »\(^\text{15}\).

Let’s examine three relevant positions on this topic. The political analyst Stein Rokkan, who worked intensively on nation-building processes, insisted on this link between territory and identity. As he remarked, “the history of the structuring of human societies can be fruitfully analyzed in terms of the interaction between geographical spaces and membership spaces”\(^\text{16}\).

In the past, social boundaries were dominant in human groups. But “the nation-state gradually merged the concept of citizenship with that of territorial identity”\(^\text{17}\). Therefore, following Rokkan, the notion of identity cannot be separated from geography in modern western societies. This is likely a message also for the contemporary EU. Even if one believe in “post-national” behavior in the twenty-first century Europe, there is a need to accept that “national” concepts like territory are still at stake and that we have therefore to integrate them in the definition of EU policies.

Sonia Lucarelli offers another interesting insight. Questioning the EU’s identity process, she insists on the image of the “Other” in defining the self-representation of the community. Foreign relations are essential in this context because they offer a “mirror in which the group can view itself and its values”\(^\text{18}\). She concludes that “relationship between foreign policy and

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\(^{14}\) Schmidt (2006), op.cit., p.18  
\(^{15}\) Zielonka (2001), op.cit., p. 527  
\(^{17}\) Ibid., p.106  
\(^{18}\) Lucarelli (2008), op.cit., p.36
self-awareness is particularly important in cases of less consolidated political identities, such as the one developing among Europeans.\textsuperscript{19} The external borders appear therefore as an essential tool for communities like the EU to distinguish themselves from “other” societies – a constitutive act of existence.

Finally Benedict Anderson, in his masterpiece “Imagined Communities”, recognized the importance of geographical representation for human societies. He insisted on the fact that the map is not merely the “flat” representation of a territory, but the expression of a collective project. In some cases, it precedes and not follows the reality of the territory it should represent. The map, as an expression of the territorial representation of the community, becomes therefore a logo and, “instantly recognizable, everywhere visible, (it penetrates) deep into the popular imagination”\textsuperscript{20}.

This selected overview of the literature demonstrates the importance of the territory in the creation and self-representation of any community, and thus the necessity of a common imagination of this territory. Does the EU makes exception? One might argue that its post-national/post-modern profile exempt it of this contingency. However one might also consider that EU citizens are still shaped by standards of the Nation-State and thus give a bigger importance to that dimension rather than the “universalistic” one. If its appreciation is true, it appears therefore that the European Union should include a strategy giving a definition and a role, in one word a narrative, to its territory. But how could it do that? In order to define a coherent strategy, we should better understand the different conceptual views at stake about the European territory. In our view three main approaches are recognizable.

\textbf{Three approaches of the European territory}

In his major book\textsuperscript{21}, Luuk Van Middelaar describes the three strategies of the EU: the “German”, “Roman” and “Greek” ones. The first one refers to the ambition to create a popular identification to the EU. The European flag, the European Anthem, the Euro money – these are tools inspired by the Nation-State, designed to establish a sentiment of common identity between European citizens. The Community was conscious of the importance of this “popular” approach when giving birth to the European identity process in the 1970’s. As we suggested

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid.
above, it should also be recognized that a coherent narrative about the territory and external borders of the EU is an important tool in that direction. As Middelaar, we distinguish here three conceptual approaches which could help to shape a territorial discourse in Europe: the French, American and Imperial ones.

The French approach lies on the narrative of a “strong and stable” geography, established in the long term of history. It is founded on typical concepts of the Nation-State. The first one is the reference to the “natural borders”, which assertively closes every French borders with the help of the sea, the Pyrrenean, the Alps, Jura, Rhine and Bulge – the Flemish plains being the only “non natural border”. Presented as geographical evidence, independent of social choices, these frontiers embody the idea of security and long-term stability. The second one is the code of nationality, leaned back against the “droit du sol”: the territory appears here as the main determinant for designating who is and who is not in the community. Finally, it embodies a clear narrative of self-representation and collective “mind-mapping” with the frequent use of the word “hexagon” as well as its graphical representation (for example in commercial labels). In few words, this strategy refers to the classical nation-state representation, which uses “hard borders” and distinctive symbols when speaking about the national territory. It creates a clear delimitation between “us” and “the others”. As such, it is an integral part of the national imagination.

Of course, one may object that the French imagination of the territory is far more complex than that. That France conceives itself – like the US as we’ll see just below – as a “shining Nation”, a civizational lighthouse whose influence goes largely farther from its frontiers. It is surely true, but it doesn’t contradict the fact that France has a strong feeling of its own territory, and thus a clear intelligibility of it.

The American approach is completely different. It could refer to the “Frontier thesis” promoted by Frederick Jackson Turner in 1893, or the “manifest destiny” theory. The main idea here is that the territory has a dynamic character and that its expansion serves the ideals and objectives of the community. There are no natural borders to consider: mountains and river have to be crossed, only the ocean is perhaps the limit. In this model the national territory is not an inheritance of the past, but an expression of the values and ambitions of the community. The national imagination thus consider the territory as a “work in progress”, always in construction. The links between citizens, communities and territories are not dictated by the soil or the blood, but by the willingness to build a (better) place together.
Of course, once again, one may object that the US territory is now finite. It is true that the “Frontier” is more a historical leg than a contemporary reality. However it is also true that it remains firmly anchored in the American psyche. In one sense, Americans haven’t given up their ambition to convert the rest of the word to their model, as they did with the “wild West” – although not perhaps with the same methods.

I call the third strategy the “Imperial” one, because it refers to the typical empire model which is proposed mainly by Jan Zielonka in the EU context. In this model, there is no fixed external borders for delimitating the territory. The community is composed by several autonomous entities which can join or leave, and therefore its geographical scope can evolve along times. Inside the community, many different spaces can coexist, because there is no strong link between policies and territories. In this model, the identities itself are more connected with communities than with geographical spaces. In opposition to the French strategy, it is the “droit du sang” that predominates. These multi-scale territories are oriented toward functional efficiency and mutual prosperity rather than political objectives. Concerning the external borders, the geographical changes are neither irreversible nor dictated by values only, as in the American strategy: the “Empire” has an ambition to extent, but this movement is political or economic rather than inspired by “destiny”.

In our view, the politics of the European Union in term of territory narrative is in tension between these three different models. In very short, on could affirm that the Enlargement policy is inspired by the American model, the multi-scale internal space by the Carolingian one, and the External borders securitization policies by the French one. Of course it is too simple to present the reality in this way; but these concepts offers an interesting base for a better understating of the tensions at stake. The Turkish debate is a good example. The promoters of the accession defend the fact that it should be natural for the EU to extend to Turkey, because of the values of openness and inclusion of the Union – a typical “American” conception. Others consider that the entry of Turkey is an economic as well as geopolitical opportunity, and should be secured as such – a “Carolingian” conception. Opponents are mostly stating that Turkey doesn’t share the same cultural background than the other European countries, or that the internal borders shouldn’t include a country so close to the middle East – a “French” vision. A coherent discourse about the European territory could certainly be elaborated through these stereotypical standards, in order to reach popular attention and, we should say, “emotion”.

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22 See Zielonka (2001), op.cit.
Conclusion

The European Union is still in search of its territorial narrative. This challenge is not trivial if we consider the importance of this topic for the building of a European identity. Without saying that this is the most important issue in that matter, it should be taken into account by leaders of both the Member states and the EU organs.

At least three European contemporary crisis are, indirectly at least, linked to this challenge. The first exemple is Ukraine. The very ambivalent discourse of the EU about the “Europeanness” of Ukraine and its capacity to join “one day” the Union created a large amount of expectancies that are today disputed in a deadly war. The second one is the tragedy of the migrants in the Mediterranean. The strengthening of the external borders is a challenge not only in a practical way (how to do things), but also in a moral way (how to explain this closing of the borders). It reinforces the “us” versus “Others” dynamics and thus challenges the universalistic ambition of the EU. The third one is the strengthening of nationalisms inside Europe. The (perceived) weakness of internal and external borders is participating to the distrust of growing part of the EU inhabitants toward the European integration. In need of protection and control, they feel that the Nation-State is more capable to offer these aspects than the EU. The fact that the latter didn’t really define its territorial ambition and scope doesn’t help to create a strong feeling of “being part of it in my skin”.

Of course, there is no intention to explain all these situations by the lack of a territorial narrative. But it surely participates to the general embarrassment nowadays about the EU. Studying the three approaches described above could help the authorities and opinion leaders to distinguish a scope and finality of the External borders, as well as an understandable one for the internal territories. The Enlargements since 1989 were certainly miss opportunities in that direction, but the difficulties of the current situation might oblige the Commission and Member States to clarify their view pretty soon.

Bibliography


