Does the European Union need a collective identity?

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Abstract:
During the recent years there has been a surge of publications on ‘European identity’. Nevertheless, our knowledge about collective identity building at the supranational level is still quite limited. This unsatisfying state of affairs is mainly caused by two problems. On the one hand, research on European collective identity grapples with inconsistent evidence, contradictory conclusions and controversial diagnoses. On the other hand, scholars widely disagree whether the European Union does even need a collective identity to successfully sustain the European unification process. Against this background, our paper analyses the need for a European collective identity. The paper comprises two main parts. First, we will discuss several conceptual challenges, in particular, the two-level-problem in analyzing collective identities. Taking up the insights of these considerations, the second part will discuss various functions of collective identities including the function of legitimating political rule. In this part, we also will shed some light on the challenges the EU is facing concerning its internal identity making, that is, the goal to construct and revitalize a resilient ‘imagined community’. Summing up, we will give an answer to the paper’s main question.
Does the European Union need a collective identity?

1. The changing nature of the European Union – a polity in between

During the recent years there has been a surge of publications on ‘European identity’. Nevertheless, our knowledge about collective identity building at the supranational level is still quite limited. This unsatisfying state of affairs is mainly caused by two problems. On the one hand, research on European collective identity grapples with inconsistent evidence, contradictory conclusions and controversial diagnoses. On the other hand, scholars disagree whether the European Union does even need a collective identity to successfully sustain the European unification process.

Our paper focuses on the latter problem by looking for an answer to the question of whether the EU does really need a supranational collective identity. We believe, discussing this issue has to take two important points into account. The first aspect refers to the functions of collective identities for social groups in general and political collectivities in particular. We will deal with functions of collective identities in section 3 of this paper after discussing several conceptual challenges in analyzing European collective identity (section 2). The second point highlights the changing nature of the European Union which has gone a long way in its successful history.

Research literature which deals with the landmarks of European unification (Laffan 1998; Thomas 2006) agrees that today’s European Union is quite different from the functional agency (Mitrany 1966: 145) and the economic Zweckverband (Ipsen 1972) of preceding integration years. Intensified by the Maastricht Treaty of 1993, the European unification path has developed a power structure of supranational authority (Bach 1999, 2000). Scholars on European integration widely agree, therefore, that the European Union has taken roots as a new type of governance (e.g. Marks et al. 1996; Stone Sweet/Sandholtz 1997; Kohler-Koch 1999; Jachtenfuchs 2000; Stone Sweet et al. 2001; Jachtenfuchs/Kohler-Koch 2004). For our purposes, it does not matter if we describe the EU as a multi-level system of governance or a political system. It is sufficient to say that today’s European Union shows some features of a full-fledged national polity (Hix 2005: 2ff; Lepsius 2006: 112) while it lacks other characteristics of a modern polity. In particular, the EU is not a state (Böröcz/Sarkar 2005: 155). Moreover, the so called input dimension of a political system is still underdeveloped at the European level (Kaina 2009). Thus, we may describe the current nature of the European
Union as a ‘polity in between’ which governs citizens of a certain territory within ‘a stable and clearly defined set of institutions for collective decision-making and a set of rules governing relations between and within these institutions’ (Hix 2005: 2). As a result, the European Union can be analysed as a political collectivity inasmuch as a supranational authority, a Weberian *Herrschaftsverband*, has been established at the European level. Realizing a sort of (multi-level) governance, the EU is facing the challenge of justifying political rule since every sort of governance limits the self-determination and individual freedom of people. However, legitimizing European governance becomes harder the more the European integration process succeeds. This ‘paradox of success’ arises from three developments revealing the transforming character of the European Union as a ‘polity in between’.

The *first* development describes the erosion of the so called permissive consensus (Lindberg/Scheingold 1970). For a long time, this specific mix of common citizen support for European integration and widespread indifference of the European publics has been conceded a generous room of manoeuvre to national and European elites to push the integration process on. By now, research on public opinion suggests the end of the permissive consensus. A wealth of empirical examinations provide evidence that citizens’ support for European integration has been decreasing since the early 1990s (e.g. McLaren 2002, 2004, 2006, 2007; Deutsch 2006; Eichenberg/Dalton 2007; Hooghe 2007; Hooghe/Marks 2006, 2007, 2009; Taylor 2008: 24-31; Hix 2008: 51ff; Kaina 2009). The very literature on the euroscepticism phenomenon fortifies the fact that Europe suffers from the ‘Post-Maastricht Blues’ (Eichenberg/Dalton 2007) and the permissive consensus has been displaced by a ‘constraining dissensus’ (Hooghe/Marks 2006: 248).

A *second* development refers to impending effectiveness shortfalls in the European multi-level system. In the wake of broadening the EU’s scope of governance, Simon Hix (2008:32) recently diagnosed a ‘policy shift’ at the European level. After the successful creation of the internal market, the EU policy agenda is now focused on the question of ‘what economic and social policies should be pursued in the new European-scale polity’ (Hix 2008: 89). The change of the European policy agenda is accompanied by an increasing conflict potential inasmuch as European decision-making involves re-distributive consequences. As a result, coalition-building between European Commission, Council and European Parliament becomes more difficult and makes policy-gridlock at the European level more likely (Hix 2008: 44ff).
The diagnosis of Hix is tightly related to a third development, namely growing distribution conflicts at the supranational level. The success of the European integration process has led to a stage where supranational decision-making increasingly affect the general living conditions of EU citizens (Bach et al. 2006: 7; Vobruba 2007: 10). The aforementioned ‘policy change’ and the resulting growth of re-distributive European decision-making comes with the risk of increasing distribution conflicts at the European level which were formerly resolved within EU member states (Lepsius 1999: 210; Vobruba 2003: 41, 48; Bach 2006: 25). As a consequence of the European policy change and the increased heterogeneity of EU members, European integration creates winners and losers and cannot always guarantee Pareto-rational results anymore (Joerges 1999; Føllesdal/Hix 2006: 11; Hix 2008: 48). The more EU citizens become aware of this consequence, the more success and legitimacy of integration process depend on the EU’s social cohesion and the union’s capability for societal integration.

Against this background, a vivid scholarly debate on group cohesion in the European Union has been developed. An increasing number of researchers seeks to answer two key questions: How much pressure can the community tolerate in order to persist and what does the European Union hold together in times of scarcity, conflict, danger and threat? Accordingly, the changing nature of the European Union as a ‘polity in between’ makes it quite plausible to assume that a European collective identity entrenched in the Europeans’ consciousness of sharing a common fate may protect the EU from breaking apart when it comes under pressure. However, we will probe this assumption more thoroughly by discussing various functions of collective identities. Prior to this, we will offer our idea of conceptualizing European identity research in the following section.

2. Conceptualizing European identity research

Despite a multitude of publications on ‘European identity’, research in this area still suffers from great theoretical and methodological challenges (Kaina/Karolewsk 2009; Kaina 2009). Regarding the content of the term ‘identity’, ambiguity is not only a typical trait of this notion but also its greatest impairment when it comes to its usefulness of an analytical category. Ten years ago, Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper (2000) even recommended giving up the identity concept since it is far too extensile to be of use for systematic inquiry. Other scholars agree that there is not only a lack of a theoretically substantial notion of both ‘identity’ and ‘collective identity’ but also a problem of applying approved methods of measuring (Fuchs,
2010; Abdelal et al. 2009: 17ff; Herrmann/Brewer 2004: 4; Huntington 2004: 41; Mayer/Palmowski 2004: 578). However, most students do not concur with the appeal of banishing the identity concept from the social sciences because identity is too important for social life. They acknowledge that, in the long run, both individuals and human groups cannot live without identity. Having an identity, so the argument goes, is a ‘psychological imperative’ as well as a ‘sociological constant’ (Greenfeld 1999: 38). Against this background, we unfold our proposal of conceptualizing European identity research by focusing on two issues: first, the two-level nature of collective identities and, second, the need to distinguish between ‘belonging to’ and ‘belonging together.

(1) The two-level-problem in analyzing European identity

In his recent book, Thomas Risse (2010: 19) almost casually notes that studying collective identity needs a clear distinction between the subjects and objects of identification. Put differently, inquiry on collective identity has to make clear who identifies with whom or what – and why or for which reason, we would like to add. Risse’s helpful proposal benefits from being straightforward and simple (in the good sense). Its capacity to avoid confusion in research on European collective identity is nonetheless constricted. This limitation is mainly caused by the two-level nature of collective identities. Accordingly, collective identities relate to two subjects at different analytical levels, namely individual(s) and/or a group of people. Therefore, Risse’s analytical distinction may easily lose its clarity since a group of people may be both subject and object of identification. Thus, in the case of research on collective identities the distinction between subjects and objects of and reasons for identification should be supplemented by distinguishing an individual level and a group or collective level (Table One) (see also Duchesne 2008: 402, 403; Duchesne/Frognier 2008: 144, 145; Kaina 2009: 41).

Table One: An analytical framework for research on European collective identity

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<tr>
<th>Components of collective identity</th>
<th>Levels of collective identity</th>
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<td></td>
<td>Collective or group level</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Individual level</td>
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<tr>
<td>Subject</td>
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<td>Reason</td>
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This perspective offers two important advantages. First, a framework based on the aforementioned analytical distinctions and displayed in Table One may serve structuring the research agenda as well as systemizing different perspectives and several approaches in previous research on European collective identity. It might furthermore urge students of European collective identity to disclose their notion of ‘collective identity’, justify their research focus and clarify their research puzzles. Second, this framework is compatible with different perspectives in previous research on European collective identity by avoiding a scholarly schism between the collective and individual level of analyzing (European) collective identity. We will explain this argument in greater detail.

Researchers coming from a socio-psychological or sociological tradition consider collective identity equivalent to the ‘emotional sub-dimension’ of social identity which, in turn, is part of the individual’s self-concept (Esser 2001: 342, 345; Grundy/Jamieson 2007; Rutland et al. 2008). Those scholars consistently analyze collective identities at an individual analytical level since the subject of collective identity is a person who is related to a group of people in a certain way. However, not only individuals but also a group of people can be studied as the subject of a collective identity – and several scholars do so (e.g., Delany 1995; Habermas 2003; Habermas/Derrida 2003; Huntington 2004; Eder 2009).

We may explore this thought by referring to the two main ideas of identity which are prominent in studies on collective identities: First, identity as something a person or a group is; second, identity as something individuals or collectives have (Kaina/Karolewski 2006: 12). The first idea is tantamount to a statement of ‘who I am’ or ‘who we are’. Accordingly, it basically relates to a definition in terms of describing a self-image or self-concept, a meaning of ‘me’ and ‘us’, respectively. The second idea intrinsically refers to a justification since ‘having an identity’ always implies more or less unexpressed reasons for a subject’s identification with somewhat. This distinction is strictly different from Kantner’s (2006: 507f) proposal to distinguish between ‘numerical identification (or categorization)’ and ‘qualitative identity’. According to Kantner (2006: 508), ‘numerical identification’ means that all objects of the material, social and subjective world can be identified in space and time by a neutral observer. Our proposition takes this already for granted and relates the different ideas of identity as ‘being’ and ‘having’ to self-reflections of people or a group of people.

Due to the two-level nature of collective identities, it makes certainly sense to study both of these two ideas at an individual and collective level. We just have to be precise about what we talk about and what we are interested in whenever we speak of the emergence of a ‘European identity’ (see also Table Two). On the one hand, we may study the individuals’ self-concept
related to a group in that we ask, for instance, how far the Europeans consider themselves as Europeans which pertains to ‘who I am’ (see cell A) (e.g., Westle 2003a; McLaren 2006; Bruter 2005; Green 2007; Grundy/Jamieson 2007; Scheuer/Schmitt 2007, 2009; Duchesne/Frognier 2008; Caporaso/Kim 2009; Fligstein 2009; Kaina 2009; Thomassen/Bäck 2009; Risse 2010). But we also may deal with group definition and the image of the European collective self in that we ask, for instance, which contents give a meaning to ‘who we Europeans are’ (see cell B) (e.g., Delanty/Rumford 2005; Checkel/Katzenstein 2009; Kaelble 2009).

Table Two: Configuring research foci in studying European collective identity

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<tr>
<th>Ideas of identity</th>
<th>Levels of collective identity</th>
<th>Individual level</th>
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<tr>
<td>Identity as 'being'</td>
<td><strong>B</strong> collective self-image; group definition (Who are we?)</td>
<td><strong>A</strong> individual's self-concept; attribution to a group (Who am I?)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity as 'having'</td>
<td><strong>D</strong> reasons for self-representation as a ‘we’</td>
<td><strong>C</strong> reasons for individual's identification with a group and its members</td>
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**On the other hand**, we may empirically scrutinize for which reasons the EU citizens do identify with the collectivity of EU citizens (see cell C) (e.g., Bruter 2005; Green 2007; Grundy/Jamieson 2007; Kaina 2009, 2010). Furthermore, we may also try to find out, first, what the reasons are which is why ‘we as Europeans’ can be considered a collectivity or a ‘we’ (e.g., Caporaso/Kim 2009; Schönberger 2009; Thomassen/Bäck 2009); and second, how this collective sense of ‘we-ness’ is to be constructed (see cell D) (e.g., Cerutti/Lucarelli 2008; Kraus 2008; Eder 2009; Karolewski 2009). In other words, the individual level of collective identity describes the identification of a person with a collectivity or a group (definition) that is regarded as significant and precious for the individual’s self (justification).
In contrast, the group level of collective identity refers to the self-image of a group (definition) and the reasons for seeing ‘us’ as a collectivity (justification). As to the group level, justification is primarily necessary to act inwardly and outwardly as a collectivity; group definition is mainly used to present the group both internally and externally as a community. This way, the group gives their members certain reasons to identify with it and enables others from outside the group to recognize it as a collective. That is, collective identities are both internally and externally defined (Schlesinger 2000: 1875; Herrmann/Brewer 2004: 6) and need the presence of a ‘significant other’ (of many: Tajfel 1982: 104; Wendt 1994: 389; Eisenstadt/Giesen 1995: 47; Delanty 2000: 115; Schlesinger 2000: 1873; Rumelili 2004: 32; Lepsius 2006: 114).

We believe the structure of Table Two is suitable to comprise not only different approaches of political scientists but also various positions from other disciplines in research on European collective identity, such as diverse perspectives of sociologists, socio-psychologists, historians and philosophers. Furthermore, it will guide our discussion of various functions of collective identities in the next section. Before we turn to this part of the paper, however, we will offer some arguments on the second issue of analyzing European collective identity.

(2) Why we need to distinguish between ‘belonging to’ and ‘belonging together’

Aside from the two-level nature of collective identities, Bettina Westle (2003b) argued some time ago that collective identities are based on two distinct kinds of individual-group-relationships (see also Magnette 2007: 66). First, a person’s self-attribution to a collective in terms of someone’s sense of belonging to a group does admittedly need the group’s acknowledgement (Meyer 2004: 22). Therefore, collective identity is based on a vertical relationship between individual and group (Westle 2003b: 120) resulting from the individual’s experience of belonging by collective recognition. We relate this vertical type of individual-group-relationships to the individual analytical level of collective identity (see also Table Two).

Second, the process of collective identity additionally depends on two crucial preconditions. It presupposes not only the common will of belonging together (Kocka 1995: 29) but also the group members’ mutual acceptance as associates of one and the same collective (Gellner 1983: 7) and, in this special sense, the mutual acknowledgment as equals (Eisenstadt/Giesen 1995: 74). Consequently, collective identity is also based on horizontal relationships between the group members (Westle 2003b: 129) in terms of a sense of belonging together. In contrast
to the vertical kind of individual-group-relationships, I apply horizontal relations between group members both at the collective and the individual level of collective identity (see Table Two). This is caused again by the two-level-nature of collective identity since a sense of belonging together cannot only be seen as a feature of a collectivity but also as one part of an individual’s psychology.

These two different modes of individual-group-relationships do not only serve an analytical purpose but also pose a theoretical challenge. In European identity research, the materialization of a European collective identity is said to be equivalent to a gradual emergence of a sense of community among EU citizens. The theoretical challenge at hand refers to the question of whether people’s sense of belonging to a group – in terms of a vertical relationship between an individual and a group – is really a fair indicator to measure their sense of community – in terms of horizontal relations between group members.

In fact, most empirical studies on a mass European identity start from the theoretical premise that an individual’s collective identity can be considered as a feeling of belonging to a group. This theoretical commitment is caused by the fact that political science literature at the individual level of European collective identity is strongly influenced by socio-psychological or sociological concepts which are interested in the individuals’ relationship with their social environment. In this tradition, collective identity describes one’s identification with a group one feels attached to. Consequently, students of this branch of research on collective identity in general and European collective identity in particular mainly consider any kind of collective identity as feelings of belonging to social groups (e.g., Diez Medranao/Gutiérrez 2001: 754; Westle 2003a: 455; Croucher 2004: 40; Bruter 2005: 1). A lot of research on European collective identity therefore provides empirical analyses on how Europeans’ feelings of attachment to the European Union have been developed over time.

The conceptualization of collective identity in terms of an emotional component of an individual’s self-concept has both pros and cons. The most important benefit is seen in the possibility to study collective identities at the micro level of societies – i.e. the level of individuals (Westle 2003a: 455; Bruter 2005: 8). This advantage, however, is weakened by three conceptual shortcomings: first, putting the focus on individuals; second, the overemphasis of feelings; third, equalizing a sense of ‘belonging to’ and a sense of ‘belonging together’.

We discussed the first conceptual issue in the previous sub-section. As for the second problem, the overemphasis of the affective component of attitudes entails a conceptual truncation. Along with other scholars, we assume that feelings of belonging to a group cannot
emerge before the individual is aware of his/her group membership and – more important – before the group has become relevant for the person’s self-concept. Social psychologists therefore argue that collective identity is built up on the psychological existence of the community (Castano 2004). More than thirty years ago, Henri Tajfel (1974, 1982) already defined a person’s knowledge of belonging to a group as one component of group identification (Tajfel 1982: 70, 102). According to his work, collective identities of individuals contain at least three attitudinal elements: cognitive, affective and evaluative orientations. With regard to cognitive orientations, social categorization and attribution serve as benchmarks which display commonalities between ‘me’ and ‘others’ and designate dissimilarities between ‘me’ and ‘other others’.

Some sociologists who support a social constructionist view on collective identity challenge this outlook which leads us to the issue of equating ‘belonging to’ with ‘belonging together’. These scholars (Jamieson 2002; Fuss/Grosser 2006) highlight the distinction between processes of categorizing self and others versus processes of coming to feel a sense of common identity or belonging with others (Fuss/Grosser 2006: 213). ‘Being categorized’, so their argument goes, ‘does not automatically mean to take on this label as an aspect of self-identity or to see oneself as sharing something with others so categorized. If and only if the category has profound consequences in terms of changed patterns of social interactions (does) the assignment to a certain category become (...) relevant for self-identity’ (Fuss/Grosser 2006: 213f – emphasis added; likewise: Kantner 2006: 507). This argument allows for two important insights: First, cognitive perceptions in terms of categorization and attribution are obviously not sufficient in order to conceptualize collective identity. This general detection, however, does not preclude that cognitive orientations are a necessary element of the collective identity concept at the individual level. Second, the argument nonetheless highlights that we should make an analytical distinction between individuals’ sense of ‘belonging to’ and their sense of ‘belonging together’ since individuals’ attribution to a group is different from their belief in sharing something with other group members (see also Table Two).

There is also some empirical evidence corroborating this line of thought since people obviously may have a sense of belonging to a group without having a sense of belonging together with other group members. In their study on European collective identity among young adults, Daniel Fuss and Marita Grosser (2006: 228) found that some young people considered their sense of belonging to Europe as a consequence of their national citizenship-status and origin: Being a German is accordingly tantamount to belonging to the EU and,
consequently, being a European, since Germany is a member state of the European Union. Hence, Fuss and Grosser (2006: 229, 236) call this kind of European collective identity ‘status identity’ since it is only a technical and unemotional statement of ‘belonging to’ without having any idea of ‘belonging together’.

Against this background, another crucial question arises: How do cognitive perceptions of belonging mutate into emotional bonds? In other words, what does turn people of a group, who are members of the same social category into a community? This is a very important question because community membership has a ‘higher’ quality than the merely belonging to a social category does. The specific value of communities results from feelings of mutual commitment between the group members (Citrin/Sides 2004: 165; likewise: Eder 2009: 430; Risse 2010: 22). Due to these feelings of commitment, the awareness of ‘belonging to’ becomes tantamount to the awareness of ‘belonging together’ which, in turn, provides the background for one’s willingness to show solidarity as well as readiness to make a personal sacrifice for the well-being of the collective and fellow group members.

Taking the research literature into account, there are several answers to the aforementioned question. Some scholars stress that (horizontal) feelings of togetherness develop inasmuch as people believe that the group is a significant collective whose state affects the fate of its members and which is valuable enough to give the group a specific worth (Estel 1997: 79). This argument is based on the plausible supposition that individuals only aspire to such memberships which give some kind of gratification in order to strengthen the individuals’ self-esteem (see also Abdelal et al. 2009: 4). Collectives or groups become valuable if their insiders share ‘precious’ commonalities that make a difference to outsiders (Estel 1997: 79f).

Other researchers regard human interrelationships and social interactions as the fundamental driving force for an emerging sense of belonging together in that they convert cognitive perceptions into affective bonds (of many: Eisenstadt/Giesen 1995: 74; Delanty 1999: 269; Schlesinger 2000: 1874; Jamieson 2002; Mayer/Palmowski 2004: 577; Fuss/Grosser 2006: 212, 215). The group members’ relationships and social interactions transform assumed or real commonalities into emotionally justified commitments. Taking recourse to these emotive certitudes, the collective self can experience continuity and develop the collective belief in a common fate (Smith 1992: 58). But this process depends on two essential conditions: people’s mutual acknowledgement as group members (Gellner 1983: 7; Magnette 2007) as well as the modeling and stereotyping of common characteristics that make a difference to others (Hettlage 1999: 246). Based on certain ‘codes of distinction’ (Eisenstadt/Giesen 1995: 74), strategies of delimitation are used in order to define a border between inside and outside, in-
group and out-group, ‘us’ and ‘them’. Thus, delimitation and the group’s recognition of individual membership are different sides of the same coin. It is accordingly likely that vertical relationships between individual and group generally precede the emergence of a horizontal sense of togetherness and are a necessary piece of a sense of community. However, when something predates another thing or is a part of this, both things cannot be equal and should be analytically distinguished.

The concept of ‘belonging to’ raises another theoretical problem in empirical, individual-centered research on European collective identity. That issue is basically caused by scholars’ uncertainty what the object of people’s sense of ‘belonging to’ is: Europe, the European Union or the collective of Europeans? We agree with Sonia Lucarelli (2008: 23) that the very idea of collective identities refers to (a group of) people. Even when we speak about the ‘identity’ of interest groups, social movements, political parties, business companies or international organizations, we actually mean a group of people.

Summing up our arguments, we build the following discussion of functions of collective identities upon three conceptual props. First, we apply the notion of ‘collective identity’ to (a group of) people. Second, collective identity can be studied at two different analytical levels by differentiating an individual level and a collective or group level. Third, we change the notion of collective identity at the individual level of research in that we speak of one’s identification with a group and its members rather than of feelings of belonging. The identification term includes several parts of individuals’ orientation towards groups and underlines that identities are process-like and context-dependent (e.g., Wendt 1994: 386; Neumann 2001: 144; Rumelili 2004: 32f; Duchesne/Frognier 2008: 163; Lucarelli 2008: 26; Eder 2009: 442). Furthermore, the identification term avoids the common confusion of ‘belonging to’ with ‘belonging together’. Since ‘belonging to’ and ‘belonging together’ conveys a different mode of individual-group-relationship, we should not confound it with one another anymore. As a result, a sense of community among EU citizens should be operationalized by Europeans’ (horizontal) sense of ‘belonging together’ rather than their (vertical) sense of ‘belonging to’.

The clarification of the concept of collective identity leads us to the question of functions of collective identities. We argue that a promising way to explore European collective identity is to analyze the functions of collective identities for social groups in general and political collectivities in particular.
3. Functions of collective identities and the European Union

In this section we will discuss main functions of collective identities and apply them in the context of the European Union. We can differentiate two general functions of a collective identity: (1) the increase in the legitimacy of a polity and (2) the enhancement of its stability (for instance, through the solution of cooperation dilemmas).

(1) Collective identity, legitimacy and the European public space

One school of thought in particular attempts to connect collective identity with legitimacy in the EU; it does this through a notion of integrated public sphere allowing for community-wide communication. Inspired by the writings of Jürgen Habermas, it posits that the EU as a polity relies on the emergence of a European communicative space that fulfils functions of a public sphere (Habermas 1974: 49–55; Habermas 1995: 109–131; Trenz and Eder 2004: 9; Eder 2007: 33–50). The public sphere is expected to connect civil society to the power structure of the polity both by enabling citizens’ opinion formation and by giving the citizens the power to influence the decision-making. In this sense, the public sphere is essential for citizens to realize their claims to democratic self-government. However, it is expected to be an integrated public space, pervading the entire community, rather than a number of disconnected functional public spaces in which citizens debate only narrow and specific issues. The corresponding collective identity which develops in the process of citizens’ participation in the public sphere does not rest on origin-based or heritage-orientated identification, but rather on the practice of constructing commonality through communication processes which are expected to generate a collective self-understanding (Baumeister 2003: 740–758).

In the context of the EU, the public sphere perspective regards European citizens primarily as community members. In this sense, public space promotes collective identity by anchoring citizens in a community. However, belonging to a community does not have to be underpinned by pre-political bonds, since the public sphere is capable of generating collective identity through participation, communicative opinion formation and autonomous lawmaking. Public spheres created as such rest on a reflexive identity, i.e. a shared understanding of commonality coupled with recognition of difference among the community members (Schmalz-Bruns 1999: 185–224). A number of authors argue that a new public space is actually emerging in the European Union. This new public space is associated with the institutions of the EU and their supranational development that transcends the boundaries of
the nation-state. Philip Schlesinger argues that the multi-level political system of the EU also generates multilevel forms of political communication that include lobbying, information campaigns and news reporting (Schlesinger 1999: 263–279). However, this complex communicative activity occurs not in an integrated European public arena network, but rather in fragmented and even contradictory sub-arenas. As a result, Schlesinger suggests that the EU is equipped with a system of interrelated, rather than integrated spheres of European publics. What is more, we can see an asymmetry in the structure of the European publics. The growth of transnational media such as newspapers, magazines and television news sustains a rather restricted elite space rather than encouraging generalized access to communication by European publics, which reflects an elite-citizenry divide (Schlesinger 1999: 276). Under such circumstances, we could only point to a (communicative) collective identity of European elites, if any.

In contrast to the elite-citizenry divide in the European communication space, Eriksen and Fossum apply the differentiation between ‘strong’ and ‘general’ publics to examine European public space (Eriksen and Fossum 2002: 401–424). The concept of ‘strong publics’ refers to institutionalized deliberations, which occur in a condensed and more routinized form, and are close to the core of the polity. This proximity vis-à-vis the core of the polity denotes the decision-making power of strong publics which reaches beyond the opinion or will-formation (‘general’ publics) outside the formal political system. Strong publics relate to parliamentary assemblies and other deliberative institutions with formally organized structures which possess a codified stake in the decision-making process, whereas general or weak publics have merely moral influence (Brunkhorst 2002: 677). For Eriksen and Fossum (2002: 411) and many other scholars, the EU it is the European Parliament (EP) that fulfils the function of a strong public. In contrast to the Council, the EP is more strongly consensus-orientated and likely to be open for deliberation, as majorities can be more easily formed in the absence of the traditional division between government and opposition. In this sense, the EP can claim to be an expression of the will of the people, and thus to embody a European collective identity (cf. Rittberger 2006: 1211-122; Rittberger 2003: 203–225).

However, we argue that despite the EP’s promising potential not all EU institutions establish a communication mode of interaction with the public. Since information about political processes is a prerequisite for debates in the public sphere, it is relevant to know how, for instance, the Commission communicates with the public. The study conducted by Bijsmans and Altides (2007: 323–340; also van de Steeg 2002: 499–519) suggests that the Commission and the national media emphasize different aspects of the EU political process which, instead
of integrating the communication structures in Europe, does the opposite. It does not result even in a superficial integration of the European communication sphere, which would be a precondition for European citizens to view themselves as members of a shared community. Although Eriksen and Fossum believe that strong publics institutionalize communicative interaction beyond a mere aggregation of individual preferences, Eriksen (2005: 358) comes to a similar conclusion as Schlesinger: even though there are signs of an integrated public sphere with easy and general access for citizens, dominating are segmented publics which show problems of fragmentation and communication distortions. Under these circumstances, collective will formation is difficult, and a collective identity cannot be presumed. Even the strong publics specialized in collective will formation cannot fulfill the integrative function and cannot induce a feeling of belonging and thus collective identity.

In addition, we argue that even within an integrated public space, communication might not be sufficient to generate collective identity as a sense of belonging together. It cannot be concluded that every society developing communicative features is a community. The communication among citizens is highly relevant but that intensification of communication flows do not necessarily spawn a feeling of belonging together. This position clearly overlooks that more communication does not necessarily raise the consciousness for commonality, as it can equally foster the perception of cultural differences. In other words, in making communication structures central categories of the analysis, we examine more a European society than a European community. In this case, the EU’s strategies to improve democratic legitimacy by strengthening its publicity might fail. This ‘thin’ understanding of public sphere and democracy may cause inappropriate institutional measures to be chosen in order to generate public attention. In this sense, the EU would confound public space with public relations and transparency with publicity. Therefore, improving democratic legitimacy of the EU would require more than just publishing decisions and seeking attention.

(2) Collective identity, cooperation dilemmas and European citizenship

A further type of collective identity function relates to what is well-known in social sciences as dilemmas of collective action. These dilemmas delineate types of social situations in which individual rationality of interdependent actors leads to collectively irrational outcomes (Axelrod 1980: 3–25; Howard 1988: 203-213). Collective dilemmas can primarily be solved by using two methods. First, there is a third party with enough power to change the sub-optimal outcome of the strategic constellation between actors. Second, there is a social structure allowing for and stimulating repeated interactions between the same actors, thus
stabilizing expectations about each other, and even developing social resources such as trustworthiness and credibility (Axelrod 1984, 1997). These social resources pertain to the reciprocity which is expected to be promoted in the EU as a stable institution organizing actors’ interactions. Under the circumstances of reciprocity, conflict potential is likely to be reduced and the chances for cooperation increase.

In this perspective, the EU is an example of a complex international organization which not only links different policy fields but also generates social norms and knowledge, thus giving rise to a social order (Gehring 2002). Even though interests of the actors are still the major motivation for political action, they become modulated by norms of appropriate behavior. Both social norms and reciprocity can ‘thicken’ into collective identity, increasing the chances of cooperation even further. The socialization (whose congealed form is collective identity) is expected to modify actors’ preference formation from idiosyncratic to more collective-orientated. This bridge-building socialization stresses the relevance of norms of appropriate behavior within a collectivity (Zürn and Checkel 2005: 1045–1079).

However, some authors argue that certain types of norms are more central than others for the social and political order of the EU and consequently for the development of a collective identity. Fundamental norms keep a community together, as they are linked with the polity level. For Antje Wiener, one of the fundamental norms is citizenship pertaining to the rule of law, fundamental freedoms and human rights, and democracy (Wiener 2006: 1308–1313; 2007: 1–7). In this sense, the EU is an example not only of a complex organization, but also one that encompasses diverse European societies. Therefore, the socializing function of citizenship appears to be particularly relevant. In other words, citizenship constitutes actors and their interests, as it provides individuals with an understanding as citizens, thus shaping interests and identities. The issue of citizenship mirrors to a certain extent the debate on how cohesive a collective identity based on fundamental freedom and human rights can be. Human rights promises to bridge differences and particular identities, but they also lack a thicker communitarian component, as they are universalistic in their appeal. We could argue that bridging differences is solely a precondition for a collective identity that entails attachment and reciprocity.

In this context, Andreas Føllesdal (2001: 313–343, esp. 315) regards European citizenship as a central measure for increasing reciprocity and trust among the citizens of Europe. Here, European citizenship is expected to act as an agent of collective identity. Citizenship as a special institution is likely to habituate individuals into citizens by redirecting their interests and perceptions (at least partially) towards the collective, whereby the individual inclination
to free ride is reduced and their confidence in the behavior of others increases. Therefore, institutions such as citizenship (with a built-in reference to collectivity) socialize individuals to abide by norms that generate cooperation (see Table Two).

Furthermore, we go beyond the solution to the collective action dilemmas (Karolewski/Kaina 2006; Karolewski 2009). European citizenship can be regarded as a moderate integrative device, since shared citizenship identity does not eliminate differences, but can be expected instead to supersede rival identities. As citizenship can assume different forms, its variance finds its reflection in the thickness and strength of citizenship identity. Even though many different political identities can exist, such as party identities or ideological identities, citizenship identity represents a ‘master identity’ which underpins citizens’ behavior in the public space. However, the extent to which citizenship becomes consequential for collective identity depends on the type of citizenship and the type of identity technologies involved. Rights-orientated citizenship leads to the model of ‘liberal citizenship’; obligation-accentuated citizenship spawns the ‘republican model of citizenship’ and compliance-focused citizenship produces the ‘caesarean model of citizenship’. These models of citizenship are coupled with differently strong and resilient collective identities, and are thus associated with specific collective identities. However, only the republican model of citizenship is endowed with a strong and thick collective identity, as it propagates a cult of commonness in the public space and focuses on the duties of the citizens in a democratic community. In comparison to the strong collective identity of republican citizenship, the liberal model of citizenship is associated with a notion of weak or thin collective identity. This rights-based citizenship focuses primarily on the legal status of citizens. In this sense, it highlights the rights-component of citizenship and underplays obligations and compliance. In contrast, the caesarean model of citizenship shows features of strong collective identity in the cognitive sense, but it barely represents collective identity in the political sense. Therefore, caesarean citizenship is associated with collectivism as an ‘identity-signifier’ that is a response to insecurity and that provokes attempts at reaffirmation of self-identity, decreasing insecurity and existential anxiety (Karolewski 2009).

In sum, we argue that collective identity can be expected to fulfill two main functions regarding polities. First, it has a potential to decrease legitimacy deficits of complex and heterogeneous polities. Second, it can increase the stability of such polities by solving the collective action dilemmas and defusing conflict. However, so far the EU has not been successful enough at strengthening collective European identity, which would allow for the fulfillment of both functions. Even though the communicative perspective can point to some
promising tendencies in the development of the common communicative space in the EU, the EU is still far from an integrated public space that is a precondition for a European collective identity. Moreover, European citizenship has hitherto shown some promising development regarding new transnational rights for Europeans. However, the question remains whether solely rights can strengthen the sense of belonging together. It can be argued that European citizenship should be underpinned by obligations promoting shared solidarity without which a ‘resilient’ collective identity is impossible.

4. Why the European Union does need a collective identity

Against the background of our ideas developed in parts 1, 2 and 3 we argue that the EU does need a collective identity. There are three main arguments in favor of the collective identity in the EU.

First, the changing nature of the EU requires a resilient collective identity more than ever. The European ‘polity in between’ necessitates a justification of political rule beyond the technocratic successes such as the common market. This requirement becomes even more relevant in view of the recent political developments in the EU, including the erosion of permissive consensus, the increasing conflict potential due to growing heterogeneity and asymmetry between winners and losers as well as more redistributive policies at the European level. The current financial crisis involving Greece, Portugal and Spain shows the extent of contradictory reactions to the EU’s redistributive activity and thus the limitations of EU’s legitimacy. The EU as a polity is probably unable of providing durable legitimacy to its political rule. Therefore, collective European identity could underpin the EU’s weakness in sustaining stress and crisis. The ‘political shift’ argument suggests that the current crisis is not a singularity and the EU will experience increasingly more conflicts and tensions in the future. This points to an ongoing ‘structural change’ in the EU, which cannot be solved through new institutional arrangements such as, for example, the ‘European economic support mechanism’. Since collective identity can increase legitimacy of troubled polities, it appears to be the only long-term solution for the EU.

Second, we argue that the sense of belonging together rather than the sense of belonging is decisive for a collective identity to fulfill its functions concerning a polity (see Table Two). This has implications regarding the strength and durability of a collective identity, as a European collective identity goes beyond the support for the idea of European integration and
the support for the EU’s institutions. A collective identity can assume different forms, develop varying strengths, and shift between stronger individualism and stronger collectivism. The question remains, however, how ‘thick’, ‘sticky’ or resilient a European collective identity should be to cement the EU in times of crisis and trouble and if the EU is able to generate such collective identity at all. It leads us to the notion of identity technologies that the EU has been using to stimulate collective identity of Europeans (Table two, cell D). These identity technologies aim in a top-down manner at collective identity, as citizens become ‘receivers’ of a collective identity whose orientation is constructed by the political authorities. In order to generate collective identity, the EU reverts to various identity technologies including the manipulation of political symbols (establishment of common currency, flag, anthem etc.) and the promotion of positive self-images (‘green Europe’, ‘Europe as normative power’, ‘Europe as civilizing power’ etc) in the public. However, stronger and more invasive identity technologies based on manipulation, propaganda or threat scenarios can worsen the legitimacy deficit of the EU in the eyes of the citizens and thus become counterproductive in terms of democratic legitimacy. Paradoxically, the very identity technologies designed and applied to increase the acceptance of and support for the EU could turn out to be one of the EU’s greatest challenges. In this sense, it is uncertain whether the top-down approach to identity generation in the EU promises success.

Third, we argue that instead of invasive identity technologies the EU should aim at a ‘citizenship identity’. There is no certainty that similar semantic structures of communication or shared discursive nods will generate a community or a sense of belonging together in the EU. We believe that communicative similarities are not sufficient to establish durable and thick collective identity. This is particularly relevant in the context of the EU, where fragmentation of political contexts and segmentation of publics foster fragmented citizenship, rather than encourage an integrated citizenship identity. However, the very notion of citizenship as a membership in a political community implies a claim of collective identity as pointed out in the notion of ‘citizenship identity’. In this sense, collective identity pertains to the core of citizenship as delineating a community, of which individuals define themselves as members, in which they participate and in which they feel a sense of obligation towards each other (Table Two, cell A). Therefore, citizenship identity assumes special ties binding citizens in a community. At the same time, the citizenship identity as implicating special ties is associated with an exclusion of non-citizens and relates to the issue of access to the political community and assimilation of the new citizens. As an integrative device, shared citizenship identity does not annihilate differences, but is instead capable of superseding rival identities.
It implies that despite many social roles, political preferences, national identities and specific territorial attachments, there can be overarching citizenship identity in the EU relating to the shared political community that individuals live in. From the perspective of the EU, we deal here with a common citizenship strategy, which is expected to bridge cultural and national differences and thus becomes a source of unity and collective identity in a heterogeneous and diverse society. Such citizenship identity would be capable of integrating societies characterized by ‘deep diversity’, a notion Charles Taylor (1993) uses to describe the existence of cultural, national and ethnic structures of a society, entailing different collective goals.

References


