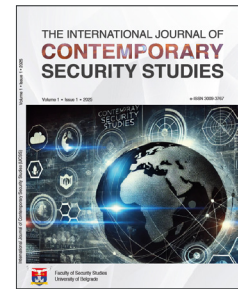


Faculty of Security Studies, University of Belgrade  
**International Journal of Contemporary  
Security Studies (IJCSS)**



## **(Re)Constructing Europe: Has a Common Identity Integrated Europe?**

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Received: 16 April 2025; Revised: 17 May 2025; Accepted: 28 May 2025; Published: 30 June 2025

### **ABSTRACT**

The paper discusses the significance and role of European identity in establishing and functioning within the European Union. It begins with an overview of the key assumptions of the constructivist approach and its contributions to the study of international relations. Furthermore, special attention is paid to the theoretical definition of identity and to the consideration of the constitutive elements of the European Union's collective identity, particularly focusing on the values encompassed within its content. The construction of European identity, particularly in terms of culture and civic-political values, is emphasised as the foundation of this identity. Additionally, the concrete significance and role of European identity in initiating regional integration in Europe, which serves as one of the prerequisites for the formation of the European Community, namely the European Union, are discussed. The paper also presents the various roles of European identity in the functioning of European integration, particularly regarding the aim of EC/EU representatives to construct this identity and to present culture and shared values as the foundation of European integration through various discourses and relevant documents. In this context, the paper examines the role of European identity in strengthening cohesion among EU citizens and enhancing the legitimacy of the EU, as well as its impact on citizens' identification with the EU. Moreover, the role of European identity in the enlargement of the European Union is also addressed, considering its fundamental values. Alongside discussing the role of identity in European integration, the paper highlights some of the obstacles to its realisation.

### **KEYWORDS**

Identity, values, constructivism, regional integration, European Union.

## **1. Introduction**

The development of regional integration during the middle of the last century attracted the attention of researchers from various fields, including international relations studies. The investigation of the motives for initiating integration, as well as the most significant factors in its development and functioning, has been approached in various ways. As a complex phenomenon, regionalism—that is, regional integrations—can be defined as “organisations with supranational features whose decisions have immediate applicability in the territories of member states, and with a direct influence on natural and legal persons – citizens of member states, without the intervention of their state” (Ajzenhamer, 2014, p. 255). The study of the European Union, particularly its degree of supranationality and the level of integration it has achieved, has garnered considerable attention.

During the 1990s, the constructivist approach gained particular significance in the study of international relations. Namely, constructivism primarily focused on studying the social construction of international rela-

tions, that is, international politics (Wendt, 1999). In this sense, the importance of identity, a concept that is both highly complex and disputed, stands out. Therefore, the role of identity in initiating and developing European integration will be discussed in this paper.

Furthermore, the European Union is making significant efforts in the construction—or rather, consolidation—of European identity, which has been assigned various roles in integration—ranging from strengthening cohesion among its citizens to presenting the value of identity as one of the foundations for the enlargement of the Union and generally for conducting foreign policy.

It is also necessary to note that various obstacles exist to the realisation of distinct European identity ideas in practice, and it is generally shown that citizens identify to a lesser extent with the collective identity of the EU.

## 2. Constructivist approach in the study of international relations

In the study of international relations, the significance of the constructivist approach to examining the identity aspect of regional integration is particularly emphasised. Considering the opposing views on what constructivism represents, as well as its adequate definition – whether as a theory (like realism or liberalism), a philosophical position, or an ontology (Acharya, 2012, p. 187) – some authors depict constructivism as a potential supplement to classical theories (Bania, 2013, p. 37). This perspective creates space for a more comprehensive approach to international relations and the role of identity.

According to Alexander Wendt, the fundamental principle of constructivism is the notion that the behaviour of actors towards other actors or objects is based on the meanings that those actors attribute to them (Wendt, 1992). Wendt also identifies two basic tenets of constructivism. First, shared ideas, rather than material factors, form the basis of human relations structures. Additionally, actors' identities and interests are explicitly constructed through shared ideas; that is, they are not inherent (Wendt, 1992). This does not imply that material factors are entirely excluded from constructivist considerations; somewhat, their relevance is diminished by the meanings that actors assign to them, making them of secondary importance (Wendt, 1999, p. 24). However, the focus on non-material factors and the neglect of material factors (Bania, 2013), namely objective and material resources, is a prominent criticism of constructivism.

Constructivism is not a singular approach; instead, a distinction is most often made between classical and critical constructivism. These approaches differ particularly in their concept of otherness, which, for critical constructivists, represents an indispensable element in identity construction (Arkan, 2014) or the construction of the Self.

The constructivist approach to the study of international relations gained particular importance during the 1990s (Arkan, 2014). Specifically, the value of this approach is reflected in the emphasis placed on studying ideas, values, norms, and identities to achieve a more complete understanding of processes in international relations (Bania, 2013, p. 37). In other words, constructivists focused on aspects of international politics that were not the subject of analysis in the most prominent theories at that time (Arkan, 2014). According to constructivists, the study of ideas, identities, and interests is essential for understanding the behaviour of actors (Lipovac, 2013). Therefore, constructivists primarily examine idealistic factors in international relations analysis, emphasising the subjective dimension of social reality (Zlatanović & Lipovac, 2014). They pay special attention to the processes by which actors construct identities, develop new value orientations, and direct behaviour in response to new ideas (Lipovac, 2013). Thus, the constructivist approach is particularly important for considering identity, its construction, and its role in European integration.

## 3. European identity

When it comes to theoretical definitions of identity, authors across various disciplines often begin their discussions by referencing identity as a disputed, ambivalent, or fluid concept, thereby highlighting the challenges inherent in defining it. Viewed from a constructivist perspective, Wendt argues that defining identity philosophically as “whatever makes a thing what it is” (Wendt, 1999, p. 224) is too broad for examining the influence of identity and interests on state behaviour (Wendt, 1999). Consequently, Wendt defines identity as “a

property of intentional actors that generates motivational and behavioural dispositions” (Wendt, 1999, p. 224). Furthermore, identity is shaped by subjective meanings and is closely linked to the (self)understandings of actors (Wendt, 1999). While Wendt primarily focuses on the influence of identity and interests on state behaviour within the international system, his understanding of identity is also pertinent for analysing the significance and role of the European Union’s collective identity.

In addition to this theoretical definition, Wendt offers a typology of four types of identities, notably highlighting multiplicity as a characteristic of identity. Essentially, actors can possess more than one identity (excluding personal identity), to which they ascribe varying levels of importance hierarchically (1999). In the context of the European Union, the multiplicity of identities among its members has significant implications for the development and functioning of the integration process. Specifically, EU citizens primarily identify with their national and regional identities, while their identification with Europe holds secondary importance (Risse, 2004). Additionally, findings from the Eurobarometer and related research indicate that citizens’ identification with a European identity is generally low (Bania, 2013).

To comprehend the collective identity of the EU, it is crucial to examine its content. In this context, Zeynep Arkan emphasises that the constitutive elements of the collective identity of the European Community, and subsequently the European Union, are based on the concept of Europe, which is used interchangeably with the term European Union in European foreign policy discourses. From a spatial or territorial viewpoint, Europe encompasses the territories of the member states, with the caveat that its borders are flexible and open to new members. Conversely, the concept of Europe also incorporates cultural and social elements. In this regard, the presentation of common European characteristics about their historical context is particularly emphasised. Specifically, civilisation founded on shared religious and civic values is highlighted. Furthermore, the collective heritage from which the fundamental values, norms, and principles of the EU arise—including democracy, the rule of law, respect for human rights, and fundamental freedoms—is underscored. Culture is also regarded as a key element of the concept of Europe (2014). In light of the significance of the concept of Europe, the use of the term ‘European identity’ in official European documents and discourses can be understood as a collective identity for the European Community (EC) and the European Union (EU). Simultaneously, these considerations are particularly relevant for a potential systematisation and, consequently, the understanding of the interconnectedness of the elements of European identity. Additionally, although the author focuses on foreign policy, the conclusions presented are also applicable to understanding the role of identity at the internal level, thus showcasing its comprehensive importance for integration.

It is also essential to recognise that, across different periods, situations, and discourses, European identity has been constructed in varied ways. In this context, Lluís Català Oltra elucidates that starting from the 1990s, civic-political elements have gained precedence over cultural elements in the relevant documents of European institutions. However, cultural elements remain significant (2021).

Depending on the definition and specific context, elements of European identity have frequently been presented as values of the European Union. Value can be defined as “conception, explicit or implicit, distinctive of an individual or characteristic of a group, of the desirable which influences the selection from available modes, means, and ends of action” (Thome, 2015, p. 47). According to Helmut Thome, values play a pivotal role as motivating and guiding factors of human behaviour. They can thus serve as a source of both integration and division, as well as conflict (2015). Regarding European integration, civic and political values are particularly significant for understanding the role of European identity in the functioning of the EU.

#### **4. The role of European identity at the beginning of European integration**

Regarding the role of identity as one of the prerequisites for initiating regional integration, Radosław Bania pays attention to the analysis of the motives for the beginning and the development of European integration – starting from internal and external political motives, all the way up to strategic-military, economic and finally ideological motives, while particularly emphasising the importance of the last motive. In particular, the ideological motivation for initiating integration is connected to the establishment of a federation as the embodiment of the “European style of life” and the “Western European heritage,” and at the same time, as a means of preserving them. Bania points out that, about the ideological motive, the need for establishing a common or collective identity as a prerequisite for European unification is emphasised (2013).

Similarly, Tanja A. Börzel and Thomas Risse find that identity politics, that is, the mobilisation of collective identities for political purposes, as well as the degree of acceptance of such politics by citizens, are crucial for the commencement and further development of regional integration (2020). According to them, in addition to the presence of functional needs for integration (such as the security context of the 1950s, as well as the need for developing economic cooperation), achieving a certain degree of supranational, successful collective action and at the same time gaining public support requires the existence of a collective identity that is primarily constructed through different narratives and discourses (Börzel & Risse, 2020).

What all of the aforementioned authors have in common is that, about the role and significance of identity in regionalism, they emphasise the necessity of constructing a collective identity as a distinctive binding element and as one of the prerequisites for regional integration. At the same time, the existence of other factors or needs for initiating integration is also noted; however, collective identity is at the forefront.

The aforementioned material factors, on the other hand, represent key elements for initiating European integration from realist and neoliberal institutionalist perspectives. In this context, T. V. Paul points out that, for example, realists do not consider institutions – whether global or regional – to be particularly significant in their analyses. However, this does not mean that realists are unconcerned with institutions altogether. In particular, for realists, institutions are related to the power politics of great powers and may emerge as a consequence or product of such politics. Consequently, following realist reasoning, Paul considers that the European Union emerged as a result of the Cold War context, the presence of the USA and the security implications associated with it. According to Paul, the European Union would not have been formed without this background structural condition (Paul, 2012). On the other hand, from the perspective of neoliberal institutionalism, the EU emerged as a result of the common economic interests of (Western) European states (Hofmann & Mérand, 2012).

Considering the above-mentioned, it can be concluded that from a constructivist perspective, collective identity is one of the most important factors that contributed to the launch of European integration. However, taking into account that besides identity, presented analyses also mention other factors and conditions that led to the formation of the European Union and which are crucial in realism and liberalism, this highlights the necessity of considering the constructivist direction as a supplement to classical theories, that is, the necessity of a more comprehensive approach that would include the influence of both material and objective factors, as well as social and subjective dimensions in the formation of the European Union.

Therefore, criticisms of constructivism have significant value in developing an analytical framework that encompasses the study of both idealistic and material aspects of social reality, thereby creating space for new studies within existing and emerging theoretical frameworks (Zlatanović & Lipovac, 2014).

## **5. The roles of European identity in the functioning of the European Community/European Union**

In this part of the paper, the special focus will be on the consideration of the role and significance of European identity and its fundamental values for the functioning of the EU, especially regarding the role of European identity in maintaining and strengthening integration, its role in foreign policy, and enlargement of the European Union.

### *The Declaration on European Identity*

Regarding European elites, it was emphasised that the collective identity of the European Community represented a means for addressing various problems. Therefore, the construction of a European identity became one of the priorities, especially during periods of crisis, such as the existential crisis of integration in the 1970s (Tekiner, 2020). In this sense, the Declaration on European Identity, also known as the Copenhagen Declaration, was adopted in 1973 as the first official document of the Community, presenting European identity as a concept (Jiaqi, 2024). This declaration, therefore, reflects the EC's efforts to strengthen integration by encouraging citizens' identification with European identity.

Considering the historical context of the Declaration's adoption, particularly with the first enlargements of the EC (Català Oltra, 2021), the role of European identity in fostering internal cohesion assumes particular sig-

nificance. During this period, the Community presented its citizens as the foundation of its legitimacy, which was directly reflected in the Declaration. In this regard, it was proposed that the European identity should contribute to strengthening cohesion among citizens of the European Community by emphasising their common heritage and political values (Català Oltra, 2021). The Declaration also envisioned the role of the European Community as a protector of democratic values – from the principles of representative democracy to the rule of law and respect for human rights (Oshri, Sheaffer, & Shenhav, 2016).

On the other hand, during this period, the European Community was also focused on determining its role in the world (Schou Therkildsen, 2022). So, member states needed to achieve a certain degree of consensus in terms of foreign policy (Schou Therkildsen, 2022). Therefore, strengthening cohesion between citizens and member states was also a prerequisite for constructing the identity of the EC as a unified actor in foreign policy.

### *The Maastricht Treaty*

The Maastricht Treaty, or the Treaty on European Union of 1992, established that the strengthening or consolidation of European identity and the enhancement of the legitimacy of EU institutions depend on culture—specifically, on shared values and common heritage (Akaliyski, Welzel & Hien, 2022). Furthermore, the Maastricht Treaty introduced the concept of European citizenship, which is envisioned as an expression of European identity (Jiaqi, 2024). It is important to note that, in addition to defining the content of European identity and the concept of European citizenship, respect for the diversity of member states and regions, particularly the national identities of the member states, was also emphasised (Jiaqi, 2024).

In this context, the roles of European identity and European citizenship primarily aim to strengthen the sense of belonging to the Union, founded on shared democratic or civic-political values (Català Oltra, 2021). Additionally, regarding values, both the Maastricht Treaty and, later, the Treaty of Lisbon articulated the EU as a “community of values”. These values, which the EU identified as ahistorical and universal, characterise liberal democracies. The EU’s narrative of shared values is particularly significant for integration, as it assumes that shared values can become part of the national identities of member states (Kleiner & Bücken, 2024), given that they primarily represent civic and political values. Specifically, these include values such as respect for human rights, equality and democracy, which are regarded as key elements in the construction of a European identity, partly due to their general desirability (Kleiner & Bücken, 2024). In this context, various studies have indicated a positive correlation between the subjective perception of value similarity and identification with the EU’s collective identity (Kleiner & Bücken, 2024).

Conversely, if these values are deemed “universal”, one might question whether a common identity is essential for the effective functioning of integration. In this regard, Theresa Kuhn and Francesco Nicoli argue that the absence of a common identity would not hinder European integration in terms of democracy; however, it would restrict the methods by which decisions are made and implemented at the supranational level. Simultaneously, such perspectives also suggest that democracy requires a certain degree of identification (2020), which helps clarify the significance of the role that European identity can assume in the workings of the Union.

As the fundamental values of the European Union are embedded in the contents of its legal acts and treaties, they are legally binding and take precedence over the national legislation of member states (Akaliyski et al., 2022). The integration of EU values into legal regulations is particularly crucial for the specific powers and activities of the EU, particularly in terms of respecting these values. Concerning the values outlined in the Treaty on European Union, Plamen Akaliyski et al. highlight that the Treaty also establishes sanctions mechanisms, which were, for instance, applied during the rule of law crisis in Poland in 2007. Moreover, the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights was established to monitor adherence to these values within member states. The fundamental values of the EU also form the foundation for the Common Foreign and Security Policy, serving as a basis for the EU’s implementation of foreign policy sanctions (European Union, 2022). In terms of foreign policy, it is relevant to mention that political values, which are presented as the normative underpinnings of Europe, play a significant role in guiding EU activities and also underpin the current EU foreign policy (Arkan, 2014).

Nonetheless, it has been questioned whether the idea of European identity articulated in the Treaty of European Union has been realised in practice. According to Julian Grimm, simultaneous with the efforts of EU representatives to consolidate European identity in terms of culture and the introduction of a common currency, Euroscepticism has grown, leading to a weaker identification of citizens with the European identity (2021). Thus, Akaliyski et al., similar to Grimm, ponder whether a true European identity has been achieved, with the

distinction that these authors focus on the “community of values” and the inquiry of whether this proclaimed community or union of values even exists or is attainable (Akaliyski et al., 2022). They note that the 2008 financial crisis, the refugee crisis, and the rule of law crisis in Poland and Hungary brought to light varying stances among member states, divisions between the European elite and citizens, the rise of Euroscepticism and populism, as well as the diverse approaches and commitments of member states to EU values (Akaliyski et al., 2022). The mobilisation of exclusive national identities in connection with Eurosceptic populism during periods of crisis serves as a particularly intriguing example, as it illustrates identity politics directed in an opposing manner (Börzel & Risse, 2020), thereby highlighting the role of identity in processes of (dis)integration.

### *The Treaty of Lisbon*

When it comes to the Treaty of Lisbon, the preamble emphasises that the cultural, religious, and humanistic heritage forms the foundation of the universal and democratic values of the European Union (Català Oltra, 2021). Similarly to the Treaty of the European Union, the Treaty of Lisbon presents the cultural and civic-political elements of European identity (Català Oltra, 2021). Although civic-political values have gained support from the citizens of the Union over time, the crisis of EU legitimacy—understood as a result of the democratic deficit and the fact that EU citizens participate to a lesser extent in decision-making within the Union—has emerged as a significant obstacle to achieving the concept of a European identity in reality (Català Oltra, 2021). Akaliyski et al. emphasise that in the Treaty of Lisbon, the promotion of the values of the Treaty on European Union or “EU values” is connected to the strengthening of the union among peoples (2022), which continues the trend of placing values, or European identity, in the role of enhancing cohesion and deepening integration. In this regard, the European Union’s construction of a European identity through a narrative of a common culture and respect for shared values forms a distinct framework within which the economic and political dimensions of integration are developed (Akaliyski, 2022). Within the Treaty of Lisbon, as well as the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights and Freedoms, principles such as democracy and respect for human rights are institutionalised as elements of the European or collective identity of the EU. They are also conceptualised as conditions for membership in the European Union (Yilmaz, 2014), thus giving European identity a significant role in the enlargement of the integration.

### *“New Narrative for Europe“*

As shown in the paper, the construction of a collective identity for the European Union was, in some cases, presented as a crucial means of overcoming specific challenges within the EU. In this context, the project “New Narrative for Europe” was launched in 2014 in response to the lack of interest in the EU, particularly among younger generations, which was partly influenced by the rise of nationalism and populism in the member states (Schou Therkildsen, 2022). The goal of this project was not only to strengthen identification with the European Union but also to enhance cohesion among its citizens (Schou Therkildsen, 2022); however, the New Narrative emphasised a common culture (Schou Therkildsen, 2022).

Similarly to the Declaration on European Identity, the New Narrative highlights a comparable tendency regarding the depiction of the two functions of collective identity construction. On one hand, identity plays a significant role in bolstering cohesion. On the other hand, the construction of a collective identity serves an external function, presenting the EU as a cohesive and integrated entity to the world (Schou Therkildsen, 2022).

Therefore, in comparison to previous documents, it can be concluded that, concerning the New Narrative, the trend of diminished identification or interest in the EU continued during this period. Conversely, within the framework of the aforementioned project, European identity is also conceptualised as a means of addressing problems and, more broadly, reinforcing integration.

### *The Enlargement of the European Union*

Since the initial launch of European integration, it has been emphasised that the borders of the European Community are open to new members. In this context, specific conditions and criteria for EU accession were determined, including the Copenhagen criteria.

Essentially, the Copenhagen Criteria are conceptualised as conditions that a potential member state must meet in preparation for EU accession, relating to political and economic criteria, as well as the acceptance of the EU *acquis* (Yilmaz, 2014). Moreover, within the Copenhagen criteria, the values of the EU are presented as

“principles” (Akaliyski, 2022). When considering the role of values and European identity in European integration, political criteria are particularly emphasised; that is, the stability of the institutions of the member states, which guarantees democracy, the rule of law, human rights, as well as respect for and protection of minorities (Oshri, Shefer, & Shenhav, 2016). Regarding the articulation of the aforementioned principles or universal values of the EU as criteria for membership, the role of European identity pertains to the development of cohesion and a sense of belonging between new member states and the EU (Yilmaz, 2014).

For the consideration of the identity aspect of EU enlargement, the analysis of different conceptualisations of identity by Neil Fligstein, Alina Polyakova, and Wayne Sandholtz is particularly significant. According to them, a cultural or ethnic definition of identity can be problematic, given that there is a greater possibility for othering about the ethnic dimension of European identity and thus for the exclusion of various groups from specific visions of Europeanness (2012). On the other hand, if European identity is founded on political or civic elements, othering is less relevant since, according to these authors, through the acceptance of European values and rules, almost anyone can become European (Fligstein et al., 2012). However, this does not mean that specific “universal” political values cannot potentially be presented as a basis for exclusion, taking into account the illustrated considerations that also present culture as a basis for political values.

Nevertheless, European identity, as one of the foundations of the Union’s enlargement, can generally be problematic for actors whose, for example, material interests do not align with the enlargement. According to this understanding, such actors believe that their opposition to enlargement would be negatively reflected in others’ perceptions of their commitment to enlargement, as well as to European norms and identity (Sedelmeier, 2003).

Regarding the enlargement of the European Union and the accession of countries from Central and Eastern Europe as well as the Baltic states, various discourses have emphasised the perceptions of these countries as “the other Europe” about Western Europe as the core of European integration, thereby emphasising an almost hierarchical division (Arkan, 2014). Western Europe was presented as the embodiment of European civilisation, while Eastern Europe represented “backwardness” (Tekiner, 2020), that is, otherness, viewed from the perspective of critical constructivism. However, European discourses have also highlighted various means for overcoming divisions in Europe, such as common heritage and culture (Arkan, 2014). The above underscores the role of European identity as a means for overcoming differences, as well as its importance for the harmonious functioning and maintenance of integration, particularly in the context of admitting new members, with an emphasis on culture.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Studying the identity aspect of regional integration can significantly enhance our understanding of the formation and overall functioning of regional organisations. As demonstrated in this paper, identity is a complex concept that can be constructed in various ways and relation to different contexts. European identity—or the collective identity of the European Union—relies on the concept of Europe, specifically on its culture and various values, as its foundation. It is also emphasised that civic and political values, as universal and fundamental tenets of the EU, are increasingly important for the construction of European identity.

European identity has played various roles in the European integration process. Firstly, it was highlighted that the construction of a collective identity was one of the prerequisites for establishing the European Community/European Union, alongside various functional needs for initiating integration. At the same time, it was noted that opposing views exist which downplay the role of identity in initiating European integration. Therefore, this paper underscores the importance and necessity of a more comprehensive approach to the study of regionalism, taking into account both social and material factors, as well as their subjective and objective dimensions.

Conversely, the paper also examines the roles of European identity in the construction of collective identity by institutions through various narratives, declarations, treaties, and projects. In this context, European identity is constructed around culture, grounded primarily in civic and political values. This way, European identity gains significance in achieving or strengthening cohesion at the internal level through citizens’ identification with EU values while also emphasising such constructs during periods of crisis within the EU. Simultaneously, the values of European identity are presented as one of the foundations of the EU’s foreign policy and its en-

largement. It was also noted that significant obstacles impede the realisation of European identity; specifically, the conclusions regarding citizens' weak identification with European identity and the gap between the key roles attributed to European identity and its practical realisation are emphasised.

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