

# Shifting Identities in European Union (EU) Immigrants

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Arguably, globalisation has caused an identity crisis in Europe. As national borders became more integrated in the last few decades, the volume of migrants into the EU and the value of ethnicity held by Europeans have also been on the rise. Particularly, the bloc has been facing an influx of immigrants from the African and Middle East continents. As for the EU leaders, their stance on a common migration policy is entrenched in the wider social, cultural, and political processes that depict an endangered European identity. This would explain the current debate on immigration in many of the European countries appears to have been securitised. This paper takes a wider look into how immigration has reshaped the EU, as well as, how EU immigrants have had to shift their identities as they struggle to fit into their new society.

*Keywords:* EU, identity, immigrants, shifting identities, society

## Introduction

Throughout Europe, especially the western part, immigration has been an overarching theme. It had been so in the United Kingdom (UK) to the point that it partly led to a referendum campaign. It has also been a constant topic in Germany, France, Italy, Hungary, and others. In 2015, Angela Merkel mentioned that migration would be a thorny issue in Europe, more than even the financial crises that the continent had endured. Five years down the line, her sentiments continue to reverberate. All of these boil down to the important concept of identity. The European identity has been around for a long time, long before the formation of the EU. But what is the “European identity”? It is imperative to explicitly understand what this identity is because the concept can be ambiguous, or better yet confusing.

This paper will proceed in the following manner. First, the concept of European identity will be deciphered taking into consideration its underlying characteristics and motives. Thereafter, the paper will seek to analyse how this identity is shifting in the wake of immigrants. The political, cultural, and social aspects of identity will be discussed.

## Theoretical and Conceptual Background

### Identity

Identity refers to the distinctive qualities about a person: the traits that set a person apart from the rest (Logemann, Gabaccia, & Kohlstedt, 2014). The identity of a person is gotten from how they perceive themselves or how the outside world views the individual. As such, there are different conceptions or types of identities (Foner, Deaux, & Donato, 2018):

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**Gender identity.** Gender identity can be constructed by the gender at birth, as well as the way one is treated by parents, relatives, friends, and neighbours. Girls and boys are introduced to different toy types and also dressing code is different. There are interactions and communications in every culture that are considered masculine, androgynous, or feminine.

**Age identity.** This is also one feature of identity. Cultures treat and view people of diverse ages in different ways. For example, in Asian cultures, growing old is viewed as positive. Children respect and take care of their aged parents. In some European cultures, however, not all aged people are given utter respect. They are separated from the young star generation in most cases (Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2012).

**Spiritual identity.** This can be more or less apparent depending on the context and culture. People might even be ready to die for their beliefs in some countries. People's spiritual identity may even cause or lead to clashes or war.

**Class identity.** This type of identity causes a difference in terms of communication and behaviour among people of the identified class. A person's class identity is not easily noticed until when he or she comes across another person from another social class.

**National identity.** It is also referred to as citizenship. A person's national identity may be stronger than his or her cultural or ethnic identity and vice versa.

**Regional identity.** People identify themselves with a certain region of their country. In some cases, regional identity is stronger than national identity in some countries. Regional identities may also transmit negative, positive, real or fake simplifications about people who live there.

**Personal identity.** This means how persons recognise themselves. This type of identity is vital for us on how we communicate and negotiate with other people.

### **Definition of European Identity**

Arguably, the concept of European identity can be vague and confusing, especially if the individual words making up the phrase are considered individually. The word "European", for instance, connotes a set of geographic, cultural, and historical factors that contribute to the European identity (Chopin, 2018). Geographically, Europe is largely surrounded by seas to the North, the South, and the West. However, it has been expanding towards the East because of the unification project. According to the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), Europe's geographical identity is made up of 57 countries. The Council of Europe, however, has lesser members—47 plus Turkey and Russia. Clearly, therefore, the geographical identity of Europe has been changing over the years and will continue to do so as member states join or disjoin the bloc. Apart from geographic factors, European identity also incorporates a set of European values. In the treaties that gave birth to the bloc, the most important and shared values include democracy, freedom, rule of law, equality, and respect for human rights (Chopin, 2018). All member states are expected to abide by these values. As such, they practise equality amongst the citizenry, solidarity, justice, tolerance, and non-discrimination.

There is also a political identity that marks the European identity. The political identity brings together all the national and political cultures in individual countries. For instance, there is the promotion of both religious freedom and secularity. However, this will vary from one state to another. The UK, for instance, has an official religion (Anglican Church) while France is on the other end having included the concept of secularity in the country's constitution (Chopin, 2018). Historically, Europe emanated from the collapse of the Roman Empire. Elements such as universities, towns, courts, and religious orders did provide a collective sense of European

culture. Yet, at the same time, the common culture went hand-in-hand with a political fragmentation. Therefore, there is a duality when it comes to examining the European identity (Chopin, 2018). This is how vague the European identity could get because of the individual differences.

According to Tekiner (2020), nonetheless, a more pronounced European identity seems to rely on the confines of and goes in line with European integration. As such, it has three outstanding features all of which confirm its official character around the unification of the continent. Overall, there are four characteristics that are important to national identity: mastery of the nation's language, citizenship, according respect to all institutions, and most importantly, the feeling of being a member of that nation. European elites have played the role of constructing and shaping the European identity for some time now (Aichholzer, Kritzing, & Plescia, 2021). They have always given priority to core objectives in European integration, thereby playing a role in forging European identity. Also, it has been designated as a problem-solving instrument. There once existed a deep crisis in the 1970s that plagued the integration which birthed the idea of European identity.

More so, European elites sought to find a place for this new supranational actor as the European community in the bipolar Cold War that was setting through the European identity. This is what motivated the existence of European identity. As a result, a document was drafted that put forward the following main motives of the European identity, namely: a review of the common heritage; identification of interests and special obligations of the member states; evaluation of the level of unity achieved so far; and a reappraisal of the dynamic nature of European unification (Tekiner, 2020). There was a need to cope with the recent global threats hence the importance of a pan-European collaboration among the initial member states. Core European values such as rule of law, social justice, respect for human rights, and commitment to economic progress were some of values used to combat the threats. The European identity was used in resolving the long-running democratic legitimacy problem in Europe.

### **Theories/Terms Association with Identity**

**Identity formation.** According to Algan, Bisin, Manning, and Verdier (2012), there are two overall dimensions that determine identity formation. From the first dimension, an individual will learn prescriptions and categorizations, as well as acquire them through identification and internalisation with respect to persons that belong to the same cultural group. In the second dimension, the process of identity formation gets to be affected by incentives, for instance, the economic gains or size of the group. This is where frictions can emanate between the dominant and the minority groups. Often, the dominant group will have all the trappings of power and economic gain while the minority groups remain marginalized. If there is no solution between such two sides, then there is bound to be conflict as groups wrestle for resources. At the international stage, however, migrants often have to adopt the host country's identity so as to access incentives (Sam & Berry, 2010). There is also international integration which is a process by which nations eliminate the blocks to allow free movement of people across the border and also ease movement of people with the aim of tension reduction that may cause an international clash.

**Acculturation.** Acculturation theory is a theory that investigates cultural change process that takes place when people from various cultural backgrounds come into lengthy, non-stop and direct contact with one other (Sam & Berry, 2010). This personal interaction leads to variations at individual level (i.e., attitudes and identities). Acculturation situations are personal- and group-level factors with different characteristics, the characteristics of the receiving society (e.g., objective, or perceived discrimination), characteristics of the origin

of the society (e.g., political background), characteristics of the refugee group (e.g., cultural life), and personal characteristics (e.g., norms, expectations and personality). These characteristics outline the situation that interrupts on the process of acculturation. Acculturation also can be the process of psychological and cultural change that happens as a result of contact between individual members and cultural groups (Phinney, Horenczyk, Liebkind, & Vedder, 2001). It follows rearrangement and proceeds in culturally plural societies among ethnocultural societies. Adaptation to existing in culture contact locations happens over time.

**Assimilation.** Assimilation is the process through which a small group, in a large population, is gradually sucked into the culture of a predominantly larger group within the same population (Algan et al., 2012). Historically, assimilation was practised by the European colonialists between the 18th and 20th century as they colonised their way through Australia, Asia, Africa, North and South America. Assimilation can assume various forms. Forced assimilation is one form that involves the smaller group being forced, against their will, to completely change their way of life for instance their gender roles. Voluntary assimilation on the other hand occurs when the smaller group appears to be under pressure from the larger group and willingly succumbs to their culture (Algan et al., 2012). Immigrants, for instance, get into contact with new cultures and eventually become part of the society's culture. However, it is not entirely possible for a people to be fully assimilated such that there is no trace of their culture. Some practices like food and religion are difficult to change.

**Marginalisation.** Marginalisation refers to the downgrading treatment of a person or a group of people (Sam & Berry, 2010). It includes leaving the said group of people out of social benefits enjoyed by everyone else. The people affected by marginalisation are considered powerless and the underdogs of the society. Marginalisation occurs due to factors such as: gender, religious beliefs, ethnicity, disability, or status in the society. Effects of marginalisation are only well understood by the affected group. These effects include poor self-esteem, poverty which is caused by unequal distribution of resources, poor psychological and physical health, feelings of anger and detachment from the outside society (Sam & Berry, 2010). Enlightening the more privileged members of the society about their privilege and the younger generation as well would help in stopping marginalisation.

### **The Shifting Identities in the EU Immigrants**

The space and interaction between immigration and identity is intricate. On the one hand, any modern and democratic nation or region such as the EU is expected to uphold democratic principles and inclusivity by integrating immigrants into their societies as full citizens (Sardinha, 2009). Anything short of this will be contradictory. On the other hand, immigrants have a role to play regarding assimilation. As a show of good gesture and in line with assimilation politics, they should leave their cultural identities and adopt those of their hosts because it will determine their level of integration into mainstream society. As human beings, however, no identity is fixed. They can change in reaction to self-construction or construction by others. This part of the paper looks at how the identities of EU immigrants have changed. First, it is a review of the EU's immigration policy.

### **EU's Immigration Policy**

The EU's immigration policy comprises of sets of principles and measures used by member countries to regulate migration in and out of their borders. A look at the official documents shows that the EU adopts a balanced approach to immigration. It aims at setting up a balanced approach to managing regular immigration while combating the illegal flow of immigrants (Algan et al., 2012). It also aims at establishing a uniform level

of rights and obligations for regular immigrants. To this end, the EU embodies a set of rules and frameworks to manage legal migration flows for asylum seekers, workers, academicians, as well families that are reuniting. In regard to other migration flows, the EU has adopted common rules for processing asylum requests and agreements for returning illegal migrants. The bloc also considers resettlement to allow refugees in need of protection to enter legally without endangering their lives making perilous journeys. As for workers, the aim is to make it easy for countries experiencing a shortage of highly skilled workers to attract and retain them without a lot of restrictions. The academic community, mostly students, researchers, and educators, can also traverse across the continent for research, studying, training, voluntary service, and educational projects.

Of late, the EU has been embarking on facilitating intra-EU mobility, adopting more inclusive admission criteria, and easing family reunification. However, it is imperative to point out that EU citizens are guaranteed freedom of movement and residence within the bloc. Therefore, the term immigrant refers to non-EU citizens only. Another significant observation is that the EU's policy encourages legal immigration while shunning illegal ones. With such a robust migration policy, the continent understands that migration is important to boost the working-age population and contribute to technological progress in its member states (Algan et al., 2012). However, there is also the understanding that unregulated immigration may pressurise public services such as hospitals and schools, increase language and cultural barriers, increase levels of pollution, and encourage racial discrimination from a wary populace.

Despite having a well-established policy, the continent has faced a significant threat from illegal immigration, which has threatened to tear its fabric apart. Migrants from Africa and the Middle East, particularly, have been showing up at the shores and borders of EU member states on the periphery in large droves (Makarychev, 2018). This has created a rift between member states bearing the brunt of the influx of immigrants and policy-making organs of the EU. The situation has been compounded by the fact that there is a growing negative sentiment against illegal immigrants. Yet as a democratic entity that signed up to international treaties on human rights, the EU has often been forced to open up safe routes to sanctuaries for refugees, facilitating documentation, and resetting all those that need protection.

Many of these immigrants flee persecutions/wars from their home countries, and therefore must be accepted by the EU. It is in view of this that the bloc has taken several initiatives such as thoroughly investigating and prosecuting trafficking gangs that exploit refugees and migrants, as well as, putting an end to racial discrimination to minimize violence and fear. In the latest resettlement efforts, member countries have been encouraged to provide the necessary social amenities (such as medical, educational, and livelihood resources) that reach rural areas and small towns, thereby reducing the pressure on big towns (Algan et al., 2012). Refugees, under the official EU immigration policy, are provided with three durable solutions—voluntary repatriation, local integration, and resettlement.

### **How EU Immigrants Construct Their Identities**

All identity categories are significant because they often carry meaning, content, and evaluative connotations. More so, they connect individuals to specific social groups, determine their interactions in or with these groups, and also link them to the past and the future. Previously, scholars believed that identity was objectively determined. However, it is evident that identities can shift via reflection, construction, and substantiation of certain beliefs about the world (Foner et al., 2018). In a place such as Europe, the most predominant identity has been that of race. Governments have often constructed a racial identity for political

decisions and because of political pressures. When an immigrant wants to select an identity to use, the decisions will be determined by factors such as his/her physical features and the immediate environment. A black person, for instance, will assign himself/herself to the black ethnic/racial category, which will then determine his/her desired goals and personal motives. Immigrants from China, Vietnam, or the Philippines will more likely take up the general racial label of Asian because it has strategic value.

The political, social, and cultural activities of EU immigrants have also been tied to the concept of diaspora. While there are those who migrated to Europe out of their own volition, many more migrated involuntarily (Foner et al., 2018). The Kurds in Iraq, for instance, migrated to Europe to flee the persecution by Iraqi authorities in their home countries. Syrian refugees did also the same—fleeing maltreatment and war happening in their home countries. Therefore, there are a sizable number of immigrants in the EU that can be considered refugees. When immigrants integrated into the host society, they anticipate benefits such as building a positive relationship between them and the host communities. Integration also guarantees them better economic and health opportunities. However, this does not mean that their identity will be lost or negated. On the contrary, immigrants have all the reasons to continue keeping their ethnic identity alive, more so if they are minority communities in their home countries (Foner et al., 2018). For instance, Kurds are minorities in Iraq, therefore, assimilation of their identity into the European identity will diminish theirs.

Luckily, many EU member states have adopted multicultural policies that promote ethnic identities, although it can reduce integration. For those who choose to integrate, they get to learn European culture, language, and habits. This way, they will be accepted into the larger European society with time. But as many have found out, identity shifting is not an easy process. For those who arrived in Europe recently, they cannot immediately dump their identities in favour of the European one. There are those who would consider themselves to be a composition of both identities, while there are those who would be considered themselves to be fully attached to their homeland's identity. This is where some immigrants develop what is referred to as a multi-faceted sense of belonging (Rubin, Watt, & Ramelli, 2012). The reason for having such a construct is that immigrants must interact with different sets of cultures in a typical day. At work, for instance, one will interact mostly with Europeans; therefore, immigrants must switch to the European identity to manage such. When they go back to their homes, they meet their native identities. Immigrants that identify the more with the European culture are those that are familiar with it to a greater extent. They have stayed here for a longer period, perhaps coming as a child or being born here. They have enough knowledge of European politicians, history, and literature. Hence, they are comfortable adjusting to the European identity.

Therefore, different immigrants identify their identity belonging in different ways depending on many factors. What brings them together, nonetheless, is the fact that they have to integrate into the European culture given that it is the surrounding predominant culture and identity. In doing this, they are forced to create a third space and cultural hybridity while constructing their identities. The third space, coined by Homi K. Bhabha, describes a transitional space where cultural transformations and hybrid identifications are possible (Rubin et al., 2011). It is impossible to achieve this in the first and second spaces because they are too different. In the case of immigrants, for instance, the first (home) and second (school) spaces are different from each other and can cause conflict. In the third space, however, there is room for both to mingle. On its part, cultural hybridity is basically a mixture of two cultures. Instead of immigrants seeing themselves as “us” versus “them”, which can be antagonizing, they espouse both cultures and choose to use “in-between”.

The impact of European cultural encounters on the immigrants' identities cannot be understated. For some of them, being in Europe makes them somewhat "two-faced". While in their homeland countries, immigrants basically have little idea about outside cultures. Arriving in diaspora, however, changes them because they now must experience two cultures at one go. Those that develop the two-faced identity will most likely develop a positive sense of being in Europe (Rubin et al., 2011). For the older generation immigrants, however, the homeland has a greater identity pull because this is where they encountered their first life experiences and childhood memories. However, they will still try as much as possible to become European because it has several benefits, for instance, getting a job and social welfare benefits. For the younger generation, who have little experience or memories of their country of origin, Europe is their real environment. They have grown up mostly in Europe and have European friends with little thought about their origin. For many of these types of immigrants, homeland is imaginary. As such, they can create this imaginary homeland according to their needs and wishes. At the same time, it is also important to consider immigrants that do not want to integrate or acculturate. These will most likely be the older generation. Most of them have already made the decision that no matter their attempts to integrate, they will not be treated as Europeans. Therefore, they decide to reject the European identity for different reasons. For instance, they might not have fully learned the European ways or want to pursue a higher self-worth by remaining true to their roots. They will continue wearing their traditional clothes, practising their indigenous religion, and basically creating some distance with the larger European culture.

Perhaps, a very significant block in the formation of identities for EU immigrants is citizenship. It is one of the ways through which they can fully enjoy being part of the host's society. The rationale behind giving citizenship rights to immigrants is that they are mostly considered as residents in host countries with rights, obligations, demands, and needs (Sardinha, 2009). They contribute to the host countries in a variety of ways, including labour, taxes, culture, and services. When it comes to politics, however, immigrants are often absent. They cannot engage in political decision-making, fully access the labour market, attain social welfare, or satisfy their religious and cultural needs fully (Pinto et al., 2020). Therefore, in as much as European member states have implemented several initiatives and policies to make the immigrant population comfortable, they often have minimal say when it comes to making public decisions, sharing resources, or making policies that affect them. This limitation comes from the fact that not many of them have attained the legal status of being EU citizens (Anthias, 2002). Of course, there are many other political and social factors that may inhibit their full participation. Yet, for Europe to treat its citizens equally, it should extend citizenship rights to immigrants and minorities as well. In literature, a citizen is the individual that is capable of shaping the direction of his/her society at all levels, including politics and policy.

### **Conclusions**

In summary, this paper has shown how individuals' identity can be constructed and reconstructed when interacting with a dominant culture such as that of Europe. Though many immigrants try to assimilate or integrate into the European culture, they do not forget their indigenous identity or the homeland. The reason for this is that in as much as they will want to be proud of their indigenous culture and background, the European culture will have a greater influence as the host. The level of assimilation or integration will determine how they interact with the rest of the society and most importantly, how they will access economic opportunities, social welfare services, and/or political power as citizens. To have a balance between the two cultures and

identities, immigrants must create a third space that is different from the first two. It is a space where they will construct their own identity thus avoid clashes between the first two. However, the level of attachment to the motherland will vary depending on how long one has stayed in Europe, the environment of interaction, and the attitude that one has towards the European culture. For most of them, however, they do not consider their interaction as “us/them” but rather “both/and”.

All in all, this paper has shown that identity is not fixed but rather fluid and changeable depending on how cultures interact with one another. It is a worthy discussion that calls into question the meaning of European identity. Given that identity can be reconstructed, should the society reconstruct the European identity to incorporate immigrants, especially given that they are willing to assimilate and integrate into the European culture? The EU prides itself as an advocate for the values of democracy, freedom, rule of law, equality, and respect for human rights. Yet, many refugees do not feel welcome in the continent because of the negative sentiments and attitudes that European populations have towards immigrants. They see them as threats to their culture, identity, and economic prosperity, yet it is not a fault of their own that they came to Europe. Most of the immigrants are fleeing persecution, famine, and war from their respective countries of origin.

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