

Contribution to the Round Table:

**Does Europe have a shared identity?  
The cornerstones of a European consciousness.**

A European identity based on  
shared values in cultural diversity

Ladies and gentlemen,

At this round table we are discussing an important - if not **the** key - issue for Europe's future. And we do not have enough time for an exhaustive discussion.

I would therefore like to set out as briefly as possible the points that I feel are most important, and I hope that we will then still be able to discuss them.

Let me begin with the question of what exactly we mean by Europe: I think it is essential to clarify that when we refer here to a "European identity", we are only talking about the current EU 25.

The next question is: what do we understand by identity?

We should, indeed we must, begin by establishing that identity in the context we are about to discuss is neither a defining criterion nor a condition, but rather a question of "**staying true to oneself even during change**".

For me, European identity embraces different criteria, which in some cases may also diverge. These are not mutually exclusive, but may even complement each other. And: **European identity is a process**. Because this is the only way it can reflect the European idea, which is after all a project to achieve a better political community and therefore a better society in every sense.

And the next question is: what identity exactly are we talking about? Since there is a political, a social, and a cultural identity; and individual and collective identity.

Since our discussion is concerned with the identity of the European Union and the question of whether the European Union is able to awaken a feeling of identity, of European civil awareness, among Europeans; since identity is thus to be formed above all in a framework of political action, "European identity" must surely be above all a **political identity**.

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The discussions I am aware of have so far almost only addressed the issue of political identity. But I believe that in the context of the Europe debate the boundaries between political and cultural identity have always been blurred.

If we define culture as a code of values that apply to the members of a society, or – even more simply – as an acknowledgement of shared values, then it becomes clear that the concept of "culture" always has an implication of "unity", whether it is unity of language, heritage, education systems or interests. Thus culture creates a collective identity in these areas and itself produces social realities; culture determines the situation of a social community. And a political system that fails to be incorporated into the values of its members necessarily remains fragile.

I believe that cultural identity must inevitably be included in the concept of European identity; this identity by no means conflicts with Europe's cultural diversity, but on the contrary draws certain key characteristics from it.

An individual's ethnic, national, religious or cultural affiliation is irrelevant to being a European; but his or her attitude to a given allegiance is not irrelevant.

Thus European identity is also, and perhaps even mainly, a political culture of attitudes towards individual allegiances.

Ladies and gentlemen, my personal answer to the question of whether a European identity exists would be a tentative "yes", or "not yet". In my view "European identity" is still a mental construct, a vision that for various reasons is not yet an experienced reality and which is still advancing only very slowly as a process. A European identity still exists for only a small circle of convinced Europeans, but that circle is far too limited; the objective can only be realised if as many of Europe's citizens as possible are involved, and even then only under certain conditions.

I therefore believe we face a dual problem:

1. a problem of communication
2. a problem of motivation

As far as the **communication problem** is concerned: if we do not manage to engage in an ongoing dialogue with Europe's citizens about everything that concerns us in and regarding Europe, all further efforts to create a European identity will be on shaky ground.

Surely communication is nothing else but an interactive discussion, a mutual exchange of information that aims to achieve an identity of meanings. This identity of meanings is for me the crux: only when all those involved are convinced that they mean the same thing when they speak about a European identity, is there a chance of bringing the communication process forward and making it accepted.

The second step is **motivation**: as long as individuals are not convinced that there is a point in them feeling and acting like Europeans, they will not be interested in a "European identity". For the Europe of tomorrow must exist not only in the minds of its citizens; it must also be carried in their hearts.

Ladies and gentlemen, what factors are already contributing to the creation of a European identity? Certainly the common currency, the euro, the similar format of our passports or the European logo on our car number plates, as well as the European flag and the European anthem, are clear indicators of identity.

It is less obvious that for instance the **Lisbon strategy** would be an excellent tool for establishing a European identity. The fact that the strategy refers to a knowledge-based society and sustainability could make it a key instrument for forming a European identity. After all, the Lisbon strategy is essentially a vision of European society. Unfortunately it has not yet been possible to connect citizens to this concept and involve them in the process.

But creating a feeling of belonging to Europe, a European identity, a European consciousness, depends crucially on forming a **European citizenry**, which in my view should not be supranational but transnational. Rather than speaking about a "European citizenry", we should therefore think of a political **citizenry for Europe** which is called upon at every level and in many areas, and whose members are fully engaged. The role of professional communicators, defined in the widest sense as the media and politicians, is crucially complemented by that of civil society, or civil society organisations. These players, who mediate between citizens and the state, derive their *raison d'être* from being in touch with the grassroots; they represent grassroots interests, but still feel committed to the common good. Their internal opinion-forming process is characterised by pluralism, diversity and tension. Civil society organisations are essential as channels of communication that help to shape a European identity.

Ladies and gentlemen, allow me to end on a personal note.

Since October last year I have been the President of the European Economic and Social Committee, elected for a two-year term. The Committee was set up back in 1957 by the Rome Treaties as the institution representing the key social and economic interest groups of organised civil society. Over the past few years the EESC has undergone a notable transformation, from a purely advisory body into a significant proponent of civic participation. The European Commission recognises our mediating role and has asked us to support its communication strategy by holding a civil society stakeholder forum. At this forum we will – just as required by the open-space method where there is no fixed agenda – listen by asking participants to tell us what subjects they want to discuss, i.e. what type of Europe they want or do not want, and to say what they themselves wish to contribute to such a Europe. This event is an experiment that no doubt also entails a certain risk. But I have high hopes of the initiative. Because if we cannot immediately win the sceptics over to Europe, to the Union, then we can at least arouse their interest, but only if we give them the feeling that they are being listened to, that they can be part of the political opinion-forming and decision-making process. Our event in

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November is intended as a first public step in this direction, and I would like us also to be able to hold similar events in the Member States.

I would have liked to say many more things on this subject that is so dear to my heart, but I am aware how short the time is and above all how important the discussion that will follow may be.

Thank you for your attention.

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