

"The impact of EU regional policy on European identity: A comparative analysis of European regions¹"

Gabriela Borz, Heinz Brandenburg und Carlos Mendez (2022)
(summary, own translation)

This study examines the **influence of EU regional policy on European identity** through a representative survey of 8559 citizens in 17 regions from 12 EU member states. In contrast to previous studies, the study not only examines the influence of financial allocations within the framework of EU regional policy on the development of a European identity, but also combines subjective attitudes at the individual level with objective data on financial allocations. This is done by adding known cognitive, instrumental and communicative drivers of identity. As a result, the different stages in the transition from a national to a European identity are given more attention and it can be determined more precisely what effects EU regional policy has on the everyday lives of citizens.

It was found that

- cognitive mobilization (awareness of EU regional policy),
- instrumental calculations (perceived benefits for individuals and regions)
- communication (publicizing EU-funded projects)

have a **positive influence** on the development of a European identity. The better the structural and investment funds² the more visible and better advertised the projects are, the more likely they are to support the development of a European identity. However, it is clear that self-categorization as a European does not necessarily go hand in hand with an emotional attachment to the EU.

The results of the study point to important consequences for the design of EU policy and communication strategies in order to strengthen identification with the EU and understanding of its role in regional development:

1. EU regional policy is an effective tool to increase identification with the EU. However, citizens must first be made aware of EU co-financed projects and regional policy funding must be made more effective in terms of publicity.
2. measures such as reducing jargon and promoting more visually appealing advertising that focuses on the achievements of EU funding could improve public awareness, perceived benefits and identification with the EU.

¹ **Original text** available at: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/14651165221076444> (As of March 2024)

² **Structural and investment funds:** Collective term for various EU funds that aim to reduce economic and social disparities between the regions of the EU. The most important funds include the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), the European Social Fund (ESF), the Cohesion Fund and the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD). These funds co-finance projects in the areas of infrastructure, economic development, employment, education and environmental protection.

It is evident that the EU institutions have already paid attention to these findings in recent years and are endeavoring to increase the visibility of EU funding and improve communication with citizens. As part of this, representative citizen surveys must be carried out regularly at regional level in order to review the impact and reach of regional policy communication strategies. The Eurobarometer surveys should also be supplemented with additional questions on awareness and perception of regional policy. ³

What exactly is a European identity according to the study?

The study understands European identity as a collective identity that encompasses individual self-categorization as a member of a supranational (European) political community. This approach is based on theories of social identity and recognizes the socially constructed nature of political identities, the coexistence of different identities at different levels and its multidimensional character.

A European identity emerges gradually through a complex interaction of different factors and can be divided into two dimensions:

1. cognitive dimension (self-categorization)
2. affective dimension (emotional attachment).

The theoretical concept of European identity contains both cognitive and affective components. In reality, however, European identity is more cognitive in nature compared to the intense and profound national identities within nation states, as it is more dependent on rational calculations. In concrete terms, this means that people identify more easily as European according to self-categorization, but find it much more difficult to establish an emotional bond with the EU.

Tasks:

- 1) What is the relationship between EU regional policy and a sense of European identity?
- 2) How could the sense of European identity be strengthened? Explain your suggestions.
- 3) Discuss why the existence of a European identity could strengthen the sense of belonging within the EU.
- 4) Design an information poster on the topic of "European identity" aimed at your classmates in the lower grades. Make sure you explain the concept of European identity in a way that is appropriate for your target group.

³**Eurobarometer surveys** are regular opinion polls conducted by the European Commission in the Member States of the European Union. Their purpose is to gather citizens' opinions, attitudes and expectations on various topics relevant to the EU. The topics can range from political issues and economic matters to social and cultural issues.

⁴**"Supranational"** is a term used to describe a level of authority or decision-making beyond nation states. In political science, and particularly in relation to the European Union (EU), "supranational" refers to institutions or organizations that are above sovereign states and can make decisions that are binding on those states.