



Jean Monnet Chair Blog on Europe Competition 2017

## European identity in theory and practice

*By Victoria Papeskov*

What is the first association that comes to mind when someone mentions Europe? Ever since the age of Enlightenment this is most probably the belief in progress and freedom of thought and expression, democracy, or maybe, since more recently, it is the common economic and political goals of the EU or the EEC. Fair enough. However, there is something else which is more “European” than any of these things and it is what sets us apart from so many other people.

For so long now Europe has been home to many different peoples – both local and coming from far away. Gradually through the ages Europe became a place where, on a relatively small territory, lived people of many different races, cultures and religions. That is to say, both through migration and native minorities, as well as national identities, internal diversity became the main distinctive feature of European identity. Or, in other words, what Europe represents is the existence of multiple national identities, coexisting with national minorities without imposing one above the other. They coexist peacefully, take pride in our own nation, religion and way of life while at the same time respecting that of others – in other words, multiculturalism.

All of that sounds fantastic, right? “In varietate concordia”. What every person calling themselves European takes pride in... not only being part of a nation, a region with great history, art and literature... but also celebrating Europe’s long tradition of diversity, being so open-minded, accepting and tolerant towards the ones who are different and so on, and so on...yes! But only in theory.

If we look at the situation realistically we would see how this exact European value is not as widely implemented as the average Europeans prides themselves in thinking. Even if we completely ignore the committed genocides and hate crimes of the past and only look at how things are nowadays... unfortunately we wouldn’t see a big difference. To start with, there are the far-right parties gaining support all over Europe. What about the anti-immigrant moods caused by the most recent migration crisis resulting in islamophobia and the ever growing hate-crimes based on religion? And not only that, but even migration within the borders of Europe is being less and less tolerated. There are moods against people from Central and Eastern Europe, who are being treated as second-class citizens. Not to mention anti-Semitism and the never-ending discrimination against minorities such as Roma, north Africans, Pakistani, Sami, etc... Of course this is just a brief and incomplete list but it can go on and on.

Is this to say that all Europeans are bigoted and xenophobic? Definitely not. But it is a fact that racism and ideas of ethnic superiority are strong historical elements that have in the past constituted European identity and even nowadays the “unity in diversity” perspective is put to the test. A test failed if we are not to be what we, as Europeans, are supposed to be – tolerant and accepting. In other words, we can do better!