



Jean Monnet Chair Blog on Europe Competition 2017

The development of European identity

By James Whiteman

The outcome of World War Two saw a change in global politics. Born were two superpowers: 1) The communist Soviet Union, which consisted of what now has become some 15 states, and 2) the United States of America. Fears of being left behind politically and economically and further threats of war on the horizon, forced Germany, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Belgium and Luxembourg into cooperation to make global impact. This (among others) kept the Soviet Union from expanding further. The idea behind integration was not only economic, but was also motivated by the desire to share political power, agendas and beliefs, thus creating a European community. Europe was creating a political identity.

Moving on from the period of autocratic rule in Europe during the interwar era, a shared view of the European Community's founding fathers was expanding and strengthening democracy. It seemed that Western Europe was moving forward whilst the Soviet Union was moving back, crushing attempts at democratic reform (e.g. the Hungarian uprising). The 1970's saw the EEC expand by three countries: Britain, Denmark and Ireland. Europe's economy was stronger than ever, growing into more than just an economic community. The community forged agreements in pollution, immigration, and saw the last right-wing dictatorships to its end.

The end of the Soviet Union started in 1989, with revolutions against the communist regime. The same year saw the fall of the Berlin wall which had divided not just the city but some could argue Europe. The following years saw the Soviet communist party banned and the remaining countries split, and a Russian government take office. What that meant was the countries that escaped the yield of the communist ideology needed a new political system. With the European community offering economic security and democracy to the newly free citizens, this was yet another chance for European identity to grow.

The European Economic Community changed to a union in the early 1990s, and in that decade the integrated states agreed on creating a common currency, the Euro, although this was not universally adopted by all members. The currency soared to new heights within the first three years and helped all participating countries grow stronger. A shared currency ultimately removed currency risk from European trade. With more than half of the continent now part of the union it wouldn't be wrong to imply that the European Union is a driving force of European identity.

Europe before the war was a very different place. Depending on how far back you look in history, there arguably wasn't a European identity. There was always a single predominate force that ruled the others. For me Europe's identity being more than just a continent started with the European Union. Not excluding countries outside of the union, however genuinely speaking these are referred to as a one state identity. European patriotism is founded and continued thanks to the shared set of values by citizens and member states within the community. Going forward from Britain's Brexit referendum result, does identity now weaken, or indeed strengthen in the European Union? What will Britain's European identity look like after the divorce is completed?