

Young European's constructions of nation, state, country and Europe¹

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Abstract

This study addresses how young Europeans (11 to 19 years of age, 29 countries, n=2000) construct identities around Europe and their country, and how they discuss nationalism and national identities in their discourse. Europe has historically been constructed around the idea of 'nation states', in parts of the west since the 16th century, and much of the rest since the mid-19th century. However, the growth of the European Union, particularly over the past 20+ years, has seen states subsume some of their sovereignty, and become increasingly diverse in terms of their ethnic composition. Has this been reflected in the way that young people construct their political identities around these terms? Based on 324 small group deliberative discussions were held in 104 different locations in the 29 states, each lasting about 45 minutes. Analysis suggests that a significant majority of young people are sceptical about their 'national' identity, and about nationalism as being significant in their futures. Most retain an affection and sense of identification with their country, and the institutions of the state, but their location in settings of diversity mean that for many of them 'national' identities have little meaning. For many of them, the 'nation state' no longer exists (if it ever did). The paper addresses possible reasons for such reactions, around changes in their lifetime in political settings, demographic changes, and the rise of the world wide web and social media.

Key words

social construction, political identities, nations, states, young people

¹ *If this paper is quoted or referenced, we ask that it be acknowledged as:*

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On September 20th 1792, the German author and statesman Johann Goethe was in the improbable position of the military observer for Duke Karl August of Saxe-Weimar-Eisenach at the battle of Vlamy. This was between various Prussian and other German states and the French revolutionary army. The French advanced to shouts of 'Vive la Nation' and singing Ça Ira, the revolutionary ballad, and unexpectedly routed the opposing armies. That evening, Goethe tried to console a group of officers in the Prussian army, and said 'From here and today begins a new epoch of world history, and you can say that you witnessed it'. Never before, in Goethe's estimation, had soldiers in an army declared that they were fighting for their nation, rather than for a leader or a monarch (1882). Unknown to Goethe, on the same day as the battle the Revolutionary Government in Paris had declared France to be an *état civil*, a civil state - an individual only existed as a citizen once his or her identity had been registered by the municipal authorities following nation-wide regulations.

Since that time the nation state has been widely seen as the ubiquitous and significant political unit in international affairs. This paper argues that today that the nation state no longer exists – if it ever did - and particularly, that many young people in Europe today deny and reject the concept of the nation.

The nation and the nation state

The term 'nation state' was often used by leading political scientists in the 1950s and 60s: Halle, for example, (1952) claimed that 'a prime fact about the world is that it largely composed of nation-states' (1952:10), and Rustow wrote of a world of '130 nations' (1967:282), including the nation-states of the USSR (sic) and the United Kingdom [sic]. But this interutilization of nation and state was problematic. Connor described the term nation as 'terminological chaos' (1993:112). He argued the nation-state barely existed, pointing out that most modern states contain significant national minorities (Connor, 1978:382). He referred to a 1971 survey of 132 'entities generally considered to be states', suggesting that 120 of them had national minorities of a tenth or more, in 70 more than a quarter of the population were minorities, and 39 had more than half the population as 'minorities', and deplored 'the careless use of terminology ... the United Nations [is] an obvious misnomer' (1978b:59-60). This article examines how young Europeans are constructing nations and nationalism. It suggests that many of the generation born after about 1993 are developing a new and different understanding of nationalism, rather as Fulbrook's (2011) analysis of twentieth century German young people showed that there are not only significant differences in the ways in which generations construct political ideas, but that these are the consequence of political fractures and dissonance in society. This

article suggests that the cohort of young Europeans born since the early 1990s will not simply turn towards their parents' views and constructions of 'the nation' as they age: they have a collective identity based on what Fulbrook defines as 'generationally defined common experiences' (2011:11).

There have been several formative experiences that have affected this generation: the technologies of the internet and social media, and the rapid increase in ethnic diversity, for example. By 2015, over 20 per cent of EU households included at least one immigrant, regardless of migration generation or migration background' (Agafitei and Ivan 2016:1), double the number in 2000. Two particular political changes in Europe are particularly salient with respect to identification with the nation and nationalism: the ending of the Cold War divisions of the continent (and the realisation that many of the states of Eastern Europe would become members of the European Union), and the creation of a European citizenship in the Treaty of Maastricht in 1992. Article 8 of the Treaty reads

1. Citizenship of the Union is hereby established. Every person holding the nationality of a Member State shall be a citizen of the Union
2. Citizens of the Union shall enjoy the rights conferred by this Treaty and shall be subject to the duties imposed thereby. (CEC 1992)

The Treaty of Lisbon in 2008 added the explanatory clause to (1): 'Citizenship of the Union shall be additional to and not replace national citizenship' (CEC 2008). This creation of a supranational construct of citizenship can be seen as the commencement of a 'new epoch', just as momentous as that noted by Goethe exactly 200 years earlier, as the Tindemans Report (CEC 1976) on the future of the European Union had foreshadowed:

Europe can and must identify itself with the concerted and better controlled pursuit of the common good ... We will then have created a new type of society, a more democratic Europe with a greater sense of solidarity and humanity. (CEC 1976:11–12)

Methodology

How an individual constructs a concept such as nation or nationalism takes place in a social setting, and is an activity that is contingent on the particular circumstances in which the concepts are expressed. Most young people of school age are particularly difficult to questions about their understanding of a particular

term, not least because they are accustomed to many of the questions they are asked by adults as being intended to test their knowledge. The majority of questions put to young people in schools are closed: the questioner knows the 'correct' answer, and the role of the young person is to provide this as a response.

My approach was to initiate small group deliberative discussions (usually about 50 minutes long), in which usually between five and eight young people could feel they were in command of the subject matter, and would discuss terms with each other, using their own vocabulary, rather than acting in response to a questioner. Open-ended questions were asked, often in response to what had been said, in order to encourage them to talk about the way that they saw their attachment to their locality, country, nation and state, and other possible locations that might represent a form of political identities. This apparent lack of structure was designed to capture and use the narratives the young people themselves. To that end, I would (for example) always initially refer to your 'country', allowing them the opportunity, if they chose, to introduce terms such as 'state' and 'nation'. Only when and if this had been done might I enquire what they meant by such terms, through asking for examples and contexts.

Over 2010 to 2016 I spoke with 324 groups, in 104 different locations (varying in size from 13.5 million to 500) in 182 different schools. 2,000 young people between 11 and 19 were involved (see Ross 2016, 2019 for a full description).

Results

Having introduced myself – as a British researcher studying young people's sense of identity in a number of European countries – I asked them to each begin by describing their own identity. This was partly a device to ensure everyone made a contribution at an early stage, but it also resulted in many of them describing themselves by referring to a country, or two or more countries. For example, in a Danish group of 16- and 17-year olds in the small city of Odense, Agnethe (♀) and Lilli (♀) introduced themselves as Danish girls, and Cæcilie (♀) agreed, but added 'I feel – very Danish – even though my grandfather immigrated from Scotland'. At this, Julius (♂) observed by saying they were Danish, rather than European: 'so ... we are nationalists', which provoked general amusement. Evald (♂) too said he felt Danish, 'but my father, and my grandfathers, my grandmother, they emigrated from Germany, so I also feel some connection with Germany – but I feel mostly Danish'; and finally Hussein (♂) explained that his parents had come from Palestine, 'I'm born and raised in Denmark – I don't feel as quite as Danish as the others, I feel more a bit of both – I feel more European than Danish – it's like the same culture as Arabic.'

Such points provided an opportunity to ask why they felt Danish, or ‘mostly Danish’, and this provoked (in this group, and in many others) discussions of a variety of explanations, that usually appeared to being generated at the moment, rather than having been thought about before. Place of birth was suggested (though many of those who had migrated said not), the country they were living in and whose culture they had grown up in, how they had been brought up, the language they spoke – but this was often with some awareness of its transience: Lilli said ‘When I say I feel Danish it’s not like I feel that I *belong* in this country, I could easily move to another country.’ Hussein commented ‘people often mistakenly say that there is a clash of cultures, that the youngster doesn’t know where to put himself. Is he German or Danish or Palestinian or something? But I see different cultures as being an advantage- you take the best of both cultures, the best of both identities and make your own – that’s an advantage, from my point of view.’

At this point, Julius said that his sense of being Danish meant he had ‘a lot of people that you feel connected to in that way... when you’re abroad you can find Danish people and then you feel at home. I’m aware that it’s a social construction, and that until the eighteenth century you wouldn’t have had nationalities in the sense that you have it now – and I try to look away from nationalities.’ Cæcilie saw nationality as ‘a way of expressing ourselves when we’re abroad’, but she felt ‘European as well, because we have some fair rules and stuff that unites us.’

Such an opening discussion was not atypical, and often included the suggestion that citizenship and nationality were a lottery: thus, in Sevilla, Sancho (♂14) said ‘it’s a lottery ... if you are born there, you love your country, and agree with the rules ... then you are Spanish.’ But in Prilep, Lazar (♂18) thought that he had had a poor deal: ‘we are all Macedonians, but not by our choice – we are unlucky to be born here. I wish I was born in Denmark because here we are surrounded by poverty, by corruption, and the unemployment rate is high.’ Similar points have been argued by Shachar (2009) and Joppke (2010): the latter observed that, far from the Enlightenment construct of the modern state being ‘based on a contract, the state is *not* a voluntary association’ (2010:16).

The concepts of the nation and the state thus constitute a field, in Bourdieu’s sense as a setting in which different social positions are held and interact: these concepts are not unitary or fixed, but differentiated and possibly competitive stances that interact to determine legitimacy over the capital of citizenship (Bourdieu 1984; Brubaker, 1996:61). This section now examines the empirical evidence for the various positions and constructions of ‘the nation’ and ‘the state’ taken by these young people. I first consider the broad range of positions taken; then the points that were largely held in common by the majority of young people,

before concluding with the significant contextual variations thrown up in particular states.

Competing constructions

These were brought to the fore in responses to my asking if there were things that they liked or disliked about what they had described as ‘their’ country. In a Swedish group of sixteen-year olds in Stockholm, Saga (♀) said she was ‘thankful for being Swedish, well, being born in Sweden – because we have great health care, living in Sweden is pretty good, the basic stuff, the basic human rights.’ But she qualified this: the definition of who was Swedish or not had become politicised by ‘what the nationalist – and pretty racist – movement is doing now – defining who’s Swedish and who’s not Swedish.’ Christin (♀) said she ‘won’t be proud of Sweden as a whole – I’ll be proud of where I grew up, and my family, and the areas that I lived in ... and feel affection towards that – but ... [not] Sweden as a whole. ... it is weird to talk about Sweden as “your country”’. Margreta (♀) said that ‘this nationalistic movement [Sverigedemokratern] ... [has] become very serious - I don’t want to be whatsoever identified with them ... it’s become important to not identify myself with where I live, or where other people are from.’

Others, generally a minority, and often some of those from particular states, had a more essentialist view of the nation and their nationality. For example, some young people of Serbian origin spoke of ‘their blood’. In Slagelse, in Denmark, Kanko (♂15) put it ‘I’m not Danish – if you want to, you can feel Danish if you’re not born Danish – but I feel more like Serbian, because it’s in my blood – I’m connected with Denmark because I live here.’ Similar sentiments were expressed by some young Turks. In Çanakkale, Bugra (♂14) said that to be Turkish depended on his ‘ideological view, on the person’s racial [iksâl: blood lineage] background,’ and in the same group Kaan (♂13) defined ‘the Turkish man is the person who can sacrifice their life for their country, and the woman is the supporter of her man.’ Similar essentialist views were expressed by a minority of those of migrant origin: in Brussels, Hassan (♂15) said ‘I think I’m Belgian because I was born here, and I grew up here – but in blood, I’m always Moroccan – I’ll never forget that and I’m proud of it.’ And in Estonia, some characterised and othered the Russkiye (Russian-speaking/origin minority) in similar terms: Merilin (♀12) said ‘they have this kind of temperament. It’s in their blood. They are brave and courageous, and they can’t do anything about it’. The essentialist stance was also sometimes expressed in terms of cultural nationalism: in Poland Wojuech (♂12) said ‘we are all the Polish nation, so we should all be taught the same, and we all should feel the same as Poles.’ In the Slovakian town of Banská Bystrica, there was an

extended discussion: 'Every nation has its characteristics, some specific character traits in common,' said Dominika Silke (♀16); 'we are similar in appearance, in our body language,' added Lenka. In Croatia, an Albanian-origin young woman, Agata (Silke (♀17), was critical of the Croats: 'so national, protective, and we have to show our flags, our identity, we have to say we're Croats, we have to say we're from Rijeka, or from Dubrovnik or something. I don't do that, because I'm *both* Croatian *and* Albanian.'

More common among young people were constructivist views of the nation (as Julius exemplified in Odense, and the Stockholm group, above). In Berlin, Silke Silke (♀16) said she 'I wouldn't define someone by his or her nationality – in my opinion it isn't that what makes that person, that gives them an identity - it changes with the places you go to, and the places you like.' In Zagreb, Smiljana (♀15) said nationality 'just means to be born in a certain country, in this instance in Croatia, but I don't think that the nationality is that important to your definition of who you are – to me what really matters is what kind of person you are inside. I don't want anyone to think that I don't love my country – I do, in a certain way - but it doesn't represent to me something *really* important.' And in the Hungarian town of Szeged, Rudolf (♂14) described 'the era of nation states is declining.'

Nationalism was occasionally perceived in highly symbolic terms. In Turkey, the national flag is ubiquitous, and Ege (♂13), on a school trip to Italy from his home town of Tokat, in central Anatolia, was struck by the fact that 'in Italy, there was only one flag in the garden of the school – and nothing on the streets, in the parks, like we have here – this shows that their nationality is weaker than ours.'

Some saw the nation in cultural terms, particularly in Italy. For example, in Frascati – a small town just outside Roma – Eusebio (♂18) said that 'culture is the elements that characterise a nation,' and Adalio (♂18) spoke of 'all the cultural traditions that each nation has'. In the southern town of Matera, culture was taken to the regional level: Lando (♂17) described Italy as 'a nation in which lived a lot of cultures- the Italian person ... can't be identified as a prototype.' Maud (♀16) linked 'Italian culture and Italian history', and historical issues were particularly employed in several Balkan states to differentiate particular nations from each other and the Turks (in city of Iași, Dumitru (♂14) said 'I'm a nationalist, because in history [the Turks] conquered several parts of Romania, [they] brought bad things to this country.' Sport could also be an element in national rivalry: Agata (♀17) in Rijeka (Croatia) said that 'in football, or handball, we *have* to show that we are better. It's meaningless, sport, but when it's Croatia against Serbia, it's more than sport, it's a political issue,' and Tvrtko (♂15) added 'we are nationalist ... it has a special charm when we play against Serbia and we win!'

Converging constructions

The predominance of the view that a sense of national identity was not personally important was striking. In the Stockholm group, Jenny's (♀16) comment exemplifies this: 'I identify myself as a girl, but my national identity is not that important to me – it's not something I usually think of when I think of myself.' But this does not mean that fellow countrymen and women who did identify themselves as nationalists were ignored. They were characterised generally as older people, and people from rural areas.

There were different aspects to the perceptions of a generational divide. In the Nordic countries, older people's feelings of nationalism were explained in terms of changing traditions and new technologies. In the Norwegian city of Bergen, Kjetil's (♂19) rationalisation of this 'major difference' was that 'young people have experienced the internet, social media, this huge internet era – and because of globalisation, we are much more close to each other than before - we get news from everywhere, and I think people are becoming less and less like nationalistic – nationalism has decreased.' In Finland, the conflicts in 1939 – 1944, with the USSR and Nazi Germany, were part of Altti's (♂16, Jyvaskyla) explanation: 'Seventy years ago, people fought for this country – we haven't seen that – of course they feel differently about this country when they have seen people die for it. 'In some other states, other specific historical reasons were advanced, which are examined in more detail for some states in the following sub-section.

Nationalistic feelings were also associated with rural areas in many countries. Leia (♀16, Malmö) described 'villages in Sweden where it's very conservative – "you're not allowed to be homosexual, we don't like immigrants" - in cities like Stockholm and Malmö it's easier to be open-minded, more people who live here are immigrants.' In Stockholm, Isak (♂16) felt parts of Sweden were moving away from attitudes of tolerance: 'we are on our way from that, to a more nationalist and egocentric way In the Swedish countryside [where] many people think it was much better before, when we had no immigrants ... they want to be really conservative ... they've created this nationalist wave'.

The association made between nationalism, older people and racism was also frequently made. In the Danish town of Haslev, Nis (♂17) said older people may 'be more nationalistic ... because they have lived in Denmark longer than us, and have lived in an era when there had not been much interaction with the world in general. They feel more nationalistic, that they are being invaded by these immigrants.' In Malmö, Tore (♂15) described the Swedish Democrat party: 'they are nationalists and very often called racists... they want to divide Swedes who are born here from other people. ... For me, being Swedish is not about which culture you have, or where you come from, or actually which language you talk –

actually, it's about how you want to identify yourself. Nationalism has become a kind of a bad word here in Sweden right now.'

The great majority of young people spoken to in these discussions were dismissive of nationalism. In Haslev (Denmark), Nis (♂17) could say 'I don't look at myself as Danish – I know I'm from Denmark, and ... have a Danish passport – but I'm not very into nationalism.' Troels (♂18) added 'I don't really care about concepts of nations – I care more about the people around me than the nation I'm from.' Ilta (♀19) in Helsinki was 'quite anti-nationalist. I hate it when people emphasized the fact that they're from one specific country - it doesn't necessarily describe who you are at all.'

Contextual constructions

Although there was a dominating sense that nationalism was seen as outdated, for older people, and often racist, there were many diverse constructions, including variants on this. Contingent factors, at the level of an individual country or a group of countries were significant in contributing to how some young people shaped their sense of the nation. In countries that could narrate a substantial and long historical account, such as Poland, Iceland and Turkey young people sometimes would identify key moments with some sense of national pride. In some countries with a less consistent independent history, young people often expressed less strong identification with the country, as in say Slovakia and Slovenia: and where there was a tradition of independence, as in Iceland and Poland, then this was often foregrounded as a characteristic of national identity. Where there was a narrative of oppression and external dominance, the persistence of a sense of national identity, or survival, was sometimes celebrated and used as a marker to differentiate from a neighbour who became the other (as in the case of Bulgaria and the Ottomans, for example; or Poland and Hungary and the USSR). Where there was a checkerboard of ethnic or national settlements, national identities sometimes became expressed in irredentist terms (such as 'reclaiming' a greater Serbia, or of the *Magyarkodo* [Greater Hungary] groups): but these were more often described as characteristic of older generations. Where the struggle to establish current independence had been both violent and recent, then there was often a greater sense of specific national identity.

In the Baltic states and in the western Balkans there were particular conditions where families had been caught in boundary changes, so that they found themselves no longer living in their state of origin: those of Russian nationality

living in the Baltic states, and those who were formerly Yugoslavians now living in a new Balkan state.

Brubaker (1996) has characterised these Baltic Russians, and similarly placed internal migrants in Yugoslavia, as 'reframed': finding themselves potentially reclassified as non-nationals in a state that had just come into existence. The animosities in the Balkans were longstanding, reflecting both Bosnian-Serbian differences in World War 11 and the subsequent Serbian hegemony in Tito's Yugoslavia and in the wars of the 1990s. One school in Ljubljana, Slovenia, had many young people of Serbia, Croatian and Bosnian origins, some of whom felt ostracised because of these histories. Ana (♀12, of Serbian heritage) said some young Slovenes 'still are very much focussed on the past, and according to this they are blaming people.' They particularly emphasised how it was their grandparents, and sometimes their parents, who were nationalistic,: Nika (♂12), Montenegrin origin) said 'the older they are, the more religious they are, and the more nationalist,' and Ema (♀12, Slovene/Croat) said 'my grandfather is Croatian, and he feel this stronger than being Slovenian, though he lives in Slovenia.'

Discussion

In general, young Europeans in this age cohort, at this time, were critical of the concept of having a 'national identity', which they associated with far-right wing political parties and (often) older people. They did, however, show some identification with their country, and often with the socio-political structures of their state, such as health and welfare provision, which was sometimes contrasted favourably with the situation in United States. Citizenship identity was not infrequently seen as a matter of chance, rather than as an essentialised construction of national characteristics.

Their identities were seen as with a wide spectrum of political locations, from the institutions of the local area, sometimes the province, the state and with Europe, and sometimes global. Europe was constructed as an identity by many young people, initially in the discussions as an instrumental identity (giving freedom of travel, perhaps for work, but more often for education); but as discussions continued Europe was seen as a location for valued and rights that they considered important. These tended to be rights that were still sometimes matters for dispute, in Europe and in other states in the world – concerning, for example, women's rights., LGBT issues, refugee and migrant rights, and anti-racism. 'Nationalism' was seen as explicitly constructed, as a mythic story that was no longer needed as a social narrative.

There were contextual exceptions to this generalisation. In some western Balkan states, and in Turkey, there was often an essentialised construct of nationality, with references to lineage and blood lines. Some of this arose from memories of recent conflicts, especially in the western Balkans, and some from more distant recollections of combat. This was sometimes linked to symbols such as the national flag, for example in Turkey.

But there were particular local turns to all of these understandings of nationalism as a construct. In the Visegrad states, for example, there was a real awareness of why previous generations had developed and tenaciously clung to the myth of the unitary and homogeneous nation: it was such beliefs that held their grandparents' generation together in the face of the Nazi invasions and incursions of the 1940s, and their parents' cohort united when the USSR dominated the region during the Cold War. But the young people of this study largely appeared to feel that this sense of a nation was now outmoded, and unnecessary now their state was firmly within the European Union and NATO.

And a construct of Europe – hazily defined, taking in aspects of both the European Union and the Council of Europe – appears to be emerging in the minds of many young people of a community defined by some shared political and social values, rights-based, fluid and at times fractious. This is not another form of the nation, nor of a state, but it has elements of the imagined community of Benedict Anderson: Olesia's (a 12-year-old Polish young woman in Kraków) description of feeling European was that:

everywhere you go you are surrounded by your friends, people from the same group – I can go anywhere, to any country and they would know ... you are from Europe. They don't know you, but they know you – you are like a distant relative. Being European means that everywhere you have neighbours ... In Europe, everyone has awareness, they know about each other, where each country is.

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