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- Turkey: prospects of membership
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- Security threats and responses
- The EU and Latin America
- The EU as a model and reference in the world
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These topics form part of the pressing agenda of the EU and represent the multifaceted and complex nature of the European integration process. These short papers also seek to highlight the internal and external dynamics which influence the workings of the EU and its relationship with the rest the world.

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Constraints on the Development of a European Identity: Territorial and demographic Challenges for EU Public Support

Markus Thiel[♦]

Territorial and demographic challenges for EU public support

European integration has transformed in the past few years from an elitist process into an elite-driven mechanism with substantial public oversight and pressure by the citizen and the media, as examples such as the constitutional impasse have shown. The development of public support and identification with the EU is dependent upon a multitude of economic, political and social factors resulting in affective and utilitarian attitudes¹ which are contingent upon member states' as well as overarching Union policies. In addition, there exist a number of related factors such as immigration, demographic changes and the enlargement process, that are consistently under-analyzed in the field of EU studies, yet potentially exert significant influence over public opinion and a common identification and hence, the integration process more generally. I will adhere to this conceptual distinction by using the term identification when referring to the gradual processes of civic identification with the EU resulting in affective support, as compared to the mainly utilitarian components of public support – both of which moved to the forefront in the post-Maastricht integration period.

The demographic changes occurring in the current EU member states exert an important yet underestimated influence on the development of public support within the EU. In particular the factors ageing and immigration have profound implications for the future development of public opinion about the Union. Because these societal shifts are long-term processes, they are not easily detected or sufficiently theorized but could potentially undermine the augmentation of transnational identification and lead to increased re-nationalization of public opinion in the member states.

The demographic replacement rate in most EU countries is below the necessary level and the number of elderly persons in the EU in 2050 will be double that of today, in effect the over-80 population will triple.² This trend exists in almost every member state, but is particularly pronounced in Italy and Germany, where the population is more rapidly ageing as, for example, in France or the UK which have a comparatively young population base.³

There are several models trying to explain the phenomenon of decreasing support for the EU, either based on the life experiences gained by elderly, called the life-cycle effect,⁴ or the

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¹ Hix, Simon. *The political system of the European Union*. New York: Palgrave, 2005, pp. 147-150.

² Delegation of the European Commission in the USA, <http://www.eurunion.org/partner/SocSecForumSumm.htm>, June 18, 2005

³ Report of the European Commission: "Demographic Change: the regional dimension", http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/soc-prot/ageing/news/people_in_europe_en.pdf, May 15, 2007.

⁴ Document of the European Commission, "How Europeans see themselves", Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, 2000.

insufficient information available to this population segment.⁵ This future demographic change towards a graying population will make it harder for consistent support and transnational identifications to develop, independent of the actual policies pursued in the integration process. On the other hand, Eurobarometer trends show a consistent overwhelming majority of young citizens between the ages of 16-25, which leads me to predict that there could be a slowly evolving net gain in public support between the older age cohorts and the younger ones that show a more pro-European stance. However, a decreasing young cohort coinciding with the increase of an older population could likely diminish or set off any gain in public support for the Union.

Another side effect of the maturation of Europe's population will be a possible economic stagnation resulting from a dwindling labor force in EU member states, which in turn might increase tensions surrounding issues of productivity and redistribution within the EU. A Union in which member states will compete more assertively for any kind of redistributive social and structural funds might well lead to an increased re-nationalization of public opinion. It is predicted that the demographic change will also impact EU policy making directly in that Eurozone countries could, for example, be forced to abandon the Growth and Stability pact as a result of increased budget deficits resulting from inflated pension funds.⁶

While a few scholars perceive of the graying of Europe's citizens as a positive trend under consideration of the enlarged potential of an older, healthy and more experienced labor force⁷, most analysts, myself included, view the accelerated aging process in member states as a ticking demographic time-bomb, if not adequately tackled through improved labor-, public expenditures- and immigration- policies.

A second major demographic challenge, in part stemming from the graying of the population, is the issue of immigration. Immediately after WW II, the nations of Europe asked for labor immigrants or 'guest workers' to help rebuild their destroyed countries. Many immigrants from inside as well as from outside Europe, in particular from former colonies, moved to their host countries in pursuit of employment and better quality of life. Today, the non-European foreign population of the EU countries is about 4 per cent of the total and rising.⁸ In addition to these residing third-country nationals, illegal immigration into the EU has increased in the last decade as well. Furthermore, in many EU member states, integration of these foreign nationals has not been successful when measured by public opinion polls and employment rates; the lack of tolerance for foreigners and recent inter-cultural conflicts all over Europe attest to this issue, be it the xenophobic attacks in East Germany or the murders of anti-Muslim Dutch citizen. Public opinion polls consistently favor a more restrictive immigration policy under the added impact of intra-EU migration, and special citizen's consultations have attested to the call of Europeans for a common immigration response.⁹ In addition, the immigration policies of most EU member states – with the exception of Spain - are relatively restrictive even in view of the looming economic and social problems resulting from a dwindling native population. The Union itself has taken on the issue of its external border control with the recent establishment of the Frontex external border agency in 2005, but not much has changed in terms of a common EU immigration policy.

Yet, the demographic situation of the EU today actually calls for more migration to the member states. It would go beyond the scope of this article to delve into the national immigration policies, particularly as the Union has gained the competence to deal with these issues in the post-Amsterdam period. Even if this should not occur in the near future, the issues of inclusion and

⁵ Taggart, Paul & Szczeriak, Aleks, „Supporting the Union? Euroscepticism and the Politics of Integration”, in: Green Cowles, Maria & Dinan, Desmond. *Developments in the European Union 2*, New York: Palgrave, 2004, p. 78.

⁶ European Commission, *Demographic Challenges and Beyond in Europe*, <http://www.eurunion.org/partner/costello%20pension.ppt#256.1>, Washington, July 2001,

⁷ Eberstadt, Nicholas & Groth, Hans. “Healthy Old Europe”, *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2007, pp. 55-68.

⁸ Green Cowles, Maria & Dinan, Desmond. *Developments in the European Union 2*. New York: Palgrave, 2004, p. 160.

⁹ European Citizens' Consultations Report, <http://www.european-citizens-consultations.eu>, May 15, 2007

exclusion of foreign and non-EU nationals in the member states are likely to become tenser and thus, the notion of transnational identification and support will remain constricted, as shown in my analyses exploring the universalist potential of a transnational European identification.¹⁰ Moreover, the high percentage of Muslim immigrants from Northern Africa, Turkey and the Balkan countries presents a problem in itself: with the emergence of Jihadist terrorist cells in Europe, in particular in Spain, France, Germany and the UK, the European public is questioning multicultural models of liberal coexistence within the EU. Terrorist threats, particularly if they originate from native-born citizens in Europe, only increase these tensions and the pressure for a stronger nationalization of collective identities.¹¹

Newer research has detected additional migratory pressure through environmental degradation. The changing climate will further accelerate migratory streams from poor and environmentally affected countries to the more temperate and richer countries such as the EU member states. It is projected that in the next few decades, between 50 million and 1 billion (!) environmental 'refugees' will be displaced domestically or internationally.¹² Even a small fraction of these populations ending up in the EU member states would severely impact on the social fabric of the already preoccupied European societies.

EU-related integration experiences of the EU member states

Debates about immigration and the related demographic change raise questions about the potential of changes in granting citizenship in order to foster public support and develop a more inclusive collective identity.¹³ However, the introduction of a European citizenship has not (yet) proven to contribute to stronger support for the European project, since it is based on the previous possession of a citizenship of one of the member states. The problem with citizenship is that only a comprehensive EU citizenship that entails social rights as well as other important entitlements such as free movement would be effective in fostering a European identity. Such a wide-ranging concept of citizenship is perceived as an intrusion into the welfare policies of the member states and therefore contentiously debated within the EU, particularly in the UK and the Scandinavian member states, and therefore will not be a likely instrument for attaining support and develop a common identification in the near future.

Connected to the previous element, enlargement as a function of European integration is delimiting efforts to strengthen a common identification among EU citizens and public support for the integration process. The construction of identities is contingent upon the delineation of in-group members against outsiders. With the ongoing enlargement processes, this stabilizing element cannot persist because the borders of the community are constantly redrawn and former outsiders have to be integrated to become insiders and accepted as such. In practice, the last enlargements in 2004 and 2007, while still consisting of culturally European countries, have been received with hesitancy by many member state citizens of the EU-15. Following this enlargement activism, support for future enlargements has significantly decreased from the previous decade with currently almost as many Europeans for as against a further widening (45 per cent and 42 per cent respectively).¹⁴

¹⁰ Thiel, Markus. "The EU after Maastricht – Politics of Integration and their impact on national attitudes and a civic European identity", Doctoral Dissertation, University of Miami, December 2005.

¹¹ Leiken, Robert. "Europe's Angry Muslims", *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2005, www.cfr.org, July 19, 2005.

¹² Radio Free Europe, "UN: Experts Say Natural Disasters May Create Up To 50 Million Refugees", <http://www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2005/10/87748d40-9a81-44d0-8bf4-384ff410d6d3.html>, May 14, 2007; Christian Aid, "The human tide: the real migration crisis", [http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/RWB.NSF/db900SID/LRON-737DHE/\\$File/Full_Report.pdf](http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/RWB.NSF/db900SID/LRON-737DHE/$File/Full_Report.pdf), May 14, 2007.

¹³ Karolewski, Pawel & Kaina, Viktoria (eds). *European identity. Theoretical perspectives and empirical insights*. New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2006.

¹⁴ European Commission, Special Eurobarometer 255 "Attitudes towards Enlargement", July 2006, http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs_255_en.pdf, May 15, 2007.

Prospects for an EU enlargement to culturally dissimilar countries of the Balkan or Turkey are met by many current EU citizens with outright opposition because it becomes increasingly difficult to find culturally fixed identity references. The election victory of the French center-right president Sarkozy is in part attributed to his skeptical stance towards the looming membership of Turkey. Future enlargements will most probably loosen the degree of territorial and cultural boundedness and homogeneity and therefore make the development of a transnational EU identity much harder to achieve. With each widening, the EU as a territorial and cultural identity space loses the cohesiveness necessary for a common identification.

In addition to the obvious consequences for public support and identification with the EU, problems of social cohesion and regional economic disparity increase with the accession of ever more member states,¹⁵ not to forget the strain on the decision-making procedures within the Union's institutions. The widening wealth gap, combined with the pressure to keep the Union's budget in control and differences in the political rights afforded to the new member states citizens (e.g. the restrictions in the freedom of movement or the visa-obligations versus third countries such as the U.S.A.) will have a detrimental effect on the homogeneity of the European public and thus, on the development of public support.

One of the implications of the above mentioned processes as they relate to public support and the development of a transnational pan-European identification is that the EU needs to clarify what is in the literature called the 'finality issue'. Many politicians still portray EU integration as an open book in which the ongoing process of integration is the main goal or they avoid the discussion about a future constellation of the Union at all. The finality of integration as an open process with respect to deepening, but particularly widening, can cause insecurity among the population and with EU policies advancing in many aspects of the domestic life of the citizens, the question of where the EU is headed as a transnational organization becomes more pressing. At times this discussion has been started by politicians debating the necessity of variable forms of integration, be it in form of a core Europe, variable geometry or the establishment of a federation, though any debate was never developed to really search for a future model of the EU, let alone present a viable model to the citizenry. The EU Constitution's aid in this search for finality is very limited since it concentrates on the means rather than the undefined goal. As we have seen throughout the history of European integration, the finality issue existed from the beginning, accompanied the Union's development throughout and has only recently been brought to the forefront in the conflict over the EU budget, the constitutional draft and reforms in Europe more generally.

Conclusion

Part of the problem of the increasing scrutiny with which Europeans regard the Union lies in the augmented complexity and political role of the Union for the member states. Aside from this, the problems such as ageing, immigration and the integration capacity are issues that are not centrally related to the processes of integration and may be more obvious such in the case of immigration or less so in the case of the ageing process, but they all represent a significant challenge for public support of the EU. Together, they act as dramatic catalysts for change: "When these substantial flows and stocks of (im)migrants are set in the context of weak job creation and slow growth, dramatic demographic shifts, and increasing worldwide tensions with the largest immigrant religious group, Europe's contemporary challenges of immigration and integration begin to look relatively unique in historical and comparative perspective"¹⁶. At the EU's 50th 'birthday' – the anniversary of the signing of the Rome Treaties – many analysts still tend to look primarily at the

¹⁵ Wood, David & Yesilada, Birol. *The Emerging European Union*. New York: Pearson Longman, 2007, p. 120/1.

¹⁶ Parsons, Craig & Smeeding, Timothy. *Immigration and the transformation of Europe*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 20.

economic or institutional challenges of an ever more complex organization,¹⁷ but they don't realize that less noticeable medium-term processes such as demographic change, the influx of large numbers of (illegal and legal) immigrants and the continuous enlargement process will cause citizens to question the ability of the Union to provide sustainable economic success and national security and identity. To provide for a sustainable integration process accompanied by a favorable public support for it, the issues detailed above need to be treated with the same kind of attention and urgency that similarly 'removed' processes such as, for example, global climate change, receives.

¹⁷ The Economist. *Fit at 50? A special report on the European Union*. March 17, 2007.