National and European Identities of Bulgarian and Dutch Students

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The present study explored the adoption of national and European identities and the perceptions of own nation and Europe in Bulgarian and Dutch students. A questionnaire developed by Georgas et al. (2004) was administered to 256 students in Bulgaria and 190 students in the Netherlands. The majority of participants in both countries (88% in Bulgaria and 85% in the Netherlands) endorsed both national and European identity; European identity was secondary to national identity. There were marked cross-national differences in the way own country and Europe were perceived. Bulgarian students perceived larger differences between the two identities than did Dutch students. Results are in accordance with theories regarding national and supranational identities as compatible and suggest a stronger role of instrumental elements for European identification in Bulgarian students as compared to Dutch students.

The present study aimed at exploring the national and European identification of Bulgarian and Dutch students and the way they perceive their own country and Europe, as well as their fellow countrymen and Europeans, on a number of dimensions. Interest in multiple collective identities, such as the combination of national and supranational identity, has emerged in the last decades of the 20th century. Research on the topic is influenced by the postmodernist approach (Howard, 2000).

Most research on social identity since the 1970s makes reference to social identity theory (Tajfel, 1981; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and the closely related self-categorization theory (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987). A kernel notion of this paradigm is positive distinctiveness: to maintain positive self-esteem, people identify with groups (ingroups) which they perceive as distinct from and superior to groups of others (outgroups). The focus on intergroup comparisons and on the dichotomy between ingroups and outgroups seems to imply a general incompatibility of different identities. However, more recent theorizing and research in this field tends to regard multiple identities as compatible and interconnected (e.g., Ashmore, Deaux, & McLaughlin-Volpe, 2004; Cinnirella, 1996; Medrano & Gutierrez, 2001).

Some authors are skeptical about the substance and role of an overarching European identity. Strath (2002), for instance, points out that European identity has been strongly dependent upon historical-political discourse, and concludes that it "has reached its limits" (p. 397). Others, however, argue that European identity is developing and has a substantial role to play. Jimenez, Gorniak, Kosic, Kiss, and Kandulla (2004) argue that national and European identification can be primarily based on cultural, instrumental, and civic elements. Cultural elements refer to common cultural heritage; instrumental elements refer to the degree to which people tend to view Europe as more effective than their own country, whereas the civic dimension refers to "a commitment to the shared values of the Union, (…) to the duties and rights of a civic society" (p. 4).

Other classifications of elements of European identity have been proposed as well. Most amount to a distinction between instrumental and sentimental elements (Cinnirella, 1996). For instance, Hewstone's (1986) study of attitudes toward the European Union indicated that support for unification was associated with expected utilitarian benefits (hence, instrumental elements). On the other hand, Hilton, Erb, Dermot, and Molian (1996) found that variables related to history representations improved prediction of support for unification, even after controlling for utilitarian variables.

Sousa's (1996) findings in Portugal and Cinnirella's (1997) in Great Britain suggest that national and European identity are conflicting. However, there is more empirical evidence for the position that both identities are perceived as compatible and complementary. Such evidence has been

reported by Cinnirella (1997) in Italy, Medrano and Gutierrez (2001) in Spain, Georgas, Hantzi, Gari, Mylonas, Dalla, Andreopoulou, and Panagiotopoulou (2004) in Greece, Licata (2003) in Belgium, and Florack and Piontkowski (2000) in the Netherlands and Germany. The findings of Georgas et al. (2004) are particularly worth noting: 79% of participants indicated they felt Greek and European, which is remarkable given that Greece, together with Great Britain, scored the lowest on compatibility of national and European identities in Jimenez et al.'s (2004) study.

The present study aimed at investigating the national and European identities of Bulgarian and Dutch students and their perceptions of their own country and Europe in a number of domains. The choice of countries was driven by convenience considerations. Bulgaria and the Netherlands share some features, but are also markedly different in several respects. To start with the former, both countries belong to the smaller ones in Europe. Size matters as "national identity is stronger in countries that are comparatively smaller" (Jasinska-Kania, 2006, p. 8). Secondly, both countries have at different times in their development been in the periphery or under the influence of larger powers. This historical factor might play a role in determining the extent to which people would be willing to accept a supranational identity (Breakwell, 1996). Finally, both Dutch and Bulgarians are generally not very religious (see for example, Halman & Draulans, 2004). On the other hand, there are important differences between the two countries. The Netherlands is one of the founding countries of the European Coal and Steel Community (dating back to 1951) and the European Communities (in 1957), which were to become the fundament of the European Union. Bulgaria, on the other hand, is a new member that joined the Union in 2007. The Netherlands has a tradition in democratic government and a history of successful economic development, whereas Bulgaria is currently undergoing a process of post-socialism transformation and state rebuilding. The two countries are also geographically distant from each other and do not have much common history. Against this backdrop of common points and differences, it is interesting to explore how people in the two countries view their own nation and Europe.

Three research questions were addressed in the current study. To what extent do students in Bulgaria and the Netherlands identify with their own nation and with Europe? How do students in the two countries rate their national group and Europe on dimensions referring to people's and country's characteristics? To what extent do Bulgarian and Dutch students differ with respect to the difference they perceive between their nation and Europe?

Method

Participants

Participants in this study were 256 students at Sofia University in Bulgaria and 190 students at Tilburg University in the Netherlands. The Bulgarian sample comprised 65% females and 35% males; their mean age was 20.15 years (*SD* = 2.57). In the Dutch sample, 72% of participants were female and 28% male; mean age was 20.92 years (*SD* = 2.4). Preliminary analyses indicated that age was faintly related to any variable of interest in the study in either country; therefore, age was not considered in the analyses reported hereon.

Inventory and Procedure

The Georgas et al. (2004) questionnaire on European and National Identity was used. The instructions and the items were translated from Greek into Bulgarian, English, and Dutch. The adequacy of the Bulgarian and the Dutch versions was checked by linguists who were skilled in both languages. Minor changes were introduced to achieve semantic correspondence.

Participants were encouraged to think of Europeans and Europe at a general level and not of any particular person they know or any particular country. The questionnaire consisted of one categorical item and several rating scales scored on a 5-point Likert scale with the following anchor points: 1 = *Not at all,* 3 = *More or less*, and 5 = *Extremely*. The categorical item, assessing self-identification, read: "To what extent do you feel [national] (i.e., Dutch, Bulgarian), and to what extent, European?" Response options ranged from "[national] and not at all European" to "European

and not at all [national]", including three intermediate options as well as the option "neither [national] nor European."

Exploratory factor analyses resulted in the identification of 12 factors which were used as scales in subsequent analyses. Eleven of these scales involved ratings of both own national group and Europe on each of the items: 1) *People Positive* (11 items, e.g., "Good-hearted" and "Friendly"), 2) *People Negative* (7 items, e.g., "Gossiper" and "Distrustful") and 3) *People Modern* (6 items, e.g., "Organized" and "Has an intensive rhythm of work") all referred to characteristics of persons; participants were asked to indicate to what extent in their opinion these characteristics apply to "the [national]" and to what extent, to "the European." 4) *Country Positive* (7 items, e.g., "High level of technology" and "Respect of human rights") and 5) *Country Negative* (7 items, e.g., "Economic problems" and "Political struggles") represented characteristics that may apply to a lesser or greater extent to own country and to Europe. 6) *Situations Positive* (5 items, e.g., "When I choose what to eat" and "When I enjoy myself") and 7) *Situations Negative* (4 items, e.g., "When I see garbage on the street" and "When criminality increases") measured to what extent participants feel members of their national group, and Europeans, in different situations. 8) *Family Positive* represented positive characteristics of family (5 items, e.g., "There are warm relations" and "Parents and children communicate"). 9) *Religiousness* consisted of 8 items asking to what extent people (co-nationals and Europeans) are characterized by religiousness (e.g., "Pray" and "Go to church"). 10) *Educational values: Personal development* (8 items, e.g., "Efficacy" and "Developing creative thinking of pupils") and 11) *Educational values: Moral* (5 items, e.g., "Shaping worthy citizens" and "Spreading cultural values") referred to the values of the educational systems. Participants rated each item of the above 11 scales twice: once with regard to own country/co-nationals, and once with regard to Europe/Europeans. Thus, there were a national and a European version of each of these scales. Finally, 12) *Public regard* comprised 7 items referring to the participants' perception of how Europeans view their fellow countrymen (e.g., "They like us" and "They trust us"; the label was borrowed from Ashmore et al., 2004). A higher score on this scale indicated a more positive perceived regard.

In Bulgaria, data from 63 students were collected in May 2005; further data from 193 students were collected in December 2005 over January 2006. In the Netherlands, questionnaires were filled in by 66 students in May 2005 and by 124 students in March over April 2006. Students in both samples participated voluntarily.

Results

Structural Equivalence and Scale Properties

Exploratory factor analysis followed by target rotation was performed on all scales. The national and European versions of each of the 11 double-version scales were analyzed separately and factors were rotated using Procrustean methods. For each scale, there were six target rotations to consider: two assessing agreement between national and European within each of the two countries, two assessing agreement of, respectively, national and European between the two countries, and two comparing national in the one country with European in the other, and vice versa. The Public regard scale was rotated between countries. This adds up to a set of 67 coefficients. Tucker's φ value of .90 was set as criterion for agreement (Van de Vijver & Leung, 1997). Coefficients ranged from .90 to 1, with a single exception of .88. Fifty Tucker's φ coefficients (75%) were at or over .95. These findings supported the structural equivalence of the scales.

Cronbach's α coefficients, averaged across scale version and country, ranged from .58 to .83. Following Cicchetti's (1994) rule of thumb of .70, most scales demonstrated highly satisfactory reliability levels. Three scales had lower coefficients: Country Positive (.65), People Modern (.60), and Country Negative (.58). All three scales consisted of small numbers of items, and coefficients were low only in some of the versions of the scales. Since we were interested in the overall patterns and not in individual scores on any single scale, all scales showed good structural equivalence (which implies that the underlying constructs are identical across cultures, even when measured via a modest reliability estimate) and in order to have an adequate construct representation, we employed all

scales in subsequent analyses. Composite scores were computed and each participant was assigned a score on each of the 12 scales.

Self-Categorization

The proportions of responses to the question of self-categorization in Bulgaria and the Netherlands are presented in Figure 1. Analysis of the overall frequency distribution of responses yielded Pearson's $\chi^2(5) = 17.16$, $p < .01$. However, the differences did not seem to be substantial; the overall pattern in terms of simultaneous endorsement of national and European identity seemed to be the same in the two samples. In order to identify the dual-identity holders, we combined the response categories "first [national], then European," "first European, then [national]" and "to the same extent [national] and European." Using this method, we identified 88% dual-identity holders in Bulgaria and 85% in the Netherlands. The group of exclusive national or European identity holders formed a minority in both samples. Clearly, national and European identity were experienced as compatible by the majority in both countries, whereby the national identity occupied a more central place.
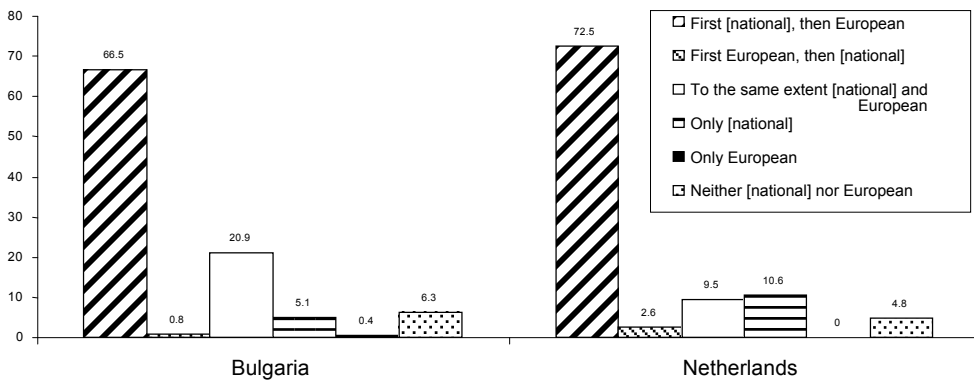

Figure 1. Percentage of responses to the question: "To what extent do you feel [national] and to what extent European?"
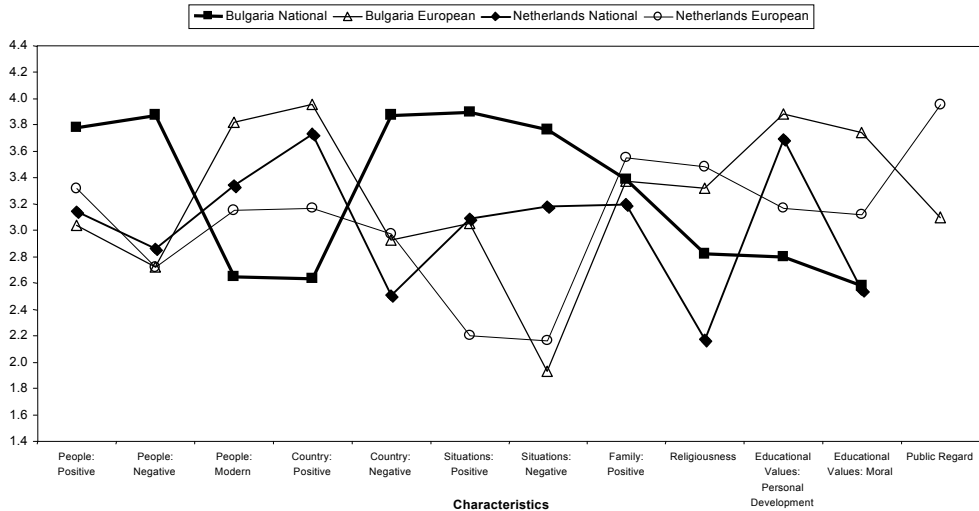
National and European Scores in Both Countries

The mean scores assigned to own national group and Europe on each of the 12 dimensions in the two countries are presented in Figure 2. Visual inspection of the mean values for [national] vs. "European" suggests there are some marked differences within as well as between countries. The first step of the analysis was to look in detail into the differences between national and European scores in each of the two countries. Repeated-measures analyses of variance with [national] *vs.* European as within-subjects factor were performed on each of the two samples separately. In Bulgaria, differences between own national group and Europe were significant ($p < .01$) in all scales except for Family Positive. Bulgaria scored higher than Europe on Positive and Negative People's characteristics, Positive and Negative Situations, and on Negative Country's characteristics. The pattern of scores on the two Country's dimensions, People's Modern dimension, and Educational values: Personal development was suggestive of underlying instrumental elements. Many of the items of these dimensions make an implicit reference to modern values and characteristics such as respect for human rights, efficacy, discipline and being organized, on which Bulgaria is perceived as lagging behind Europe.

In the Netherlands, all differences between national and European were significant ($p<.01$). Similarly to Bulgaria, the Netherlands scored higher than Europe on both Positive and Negative Sit-

uations and on Negative People's characteristics. The scales with a presumably instrumental distinction (both Country's dimensions, People Modern and Educational values: Personal development) showed lower scores for Europe than for own country, which was the reverse pattern of the one found in Bulgaria. Dutch students rated Europe higher than own nation on dimensions where more sentimental elements may be supposed to be involved: People Positive and Family characteristics.

For Public Regard, a one-way ANOVA with country as group variable was performed. Dutch participants (*Mn*=3.95, *SD*=.45) appeared to perceive a more strongly positive regard of Europeans for their co-nationals than did Bulgarians (*Mn*=3.10, *SD*=.64; $F_{1, 444}$=246.17, η^2= .36).

Note. Scores are expressed on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 ("Not at all") to 5 ("Extremely").

Figure 2. Characteristics Attributed to Own Country and Europe in Bulgaria and the Netherlands.

The next analysis addressed the question, how similar or dissimilar participants in both samples are with respect to the differentiation they make between national and European elements. Difference scores were computed in both samples by subtracting the score for European from the score for national for each of the 11 scales with national and European versions. A multivariate analysis of variance with country as independent variable was performed on all difference scores. Results indicated that there were significant differences (*p*<.01) between the countries in mean difference scores on all scales except for Situations Positive (*ns*). There was a large multivariate effect of country (Wilks' Λ=.165, $F_{11, 429}$=196.72, η_p^2 = .84). Cohen's *d* (Cohen, 1988) was used as the effect size measure for the separate scales. This was computed by subtracting Dutch difference scores from Bulgarian difference scores. Absolute values of Cohen's *d* of .80 and above are usually taken as indicating large effects, values of .50 medium effects, and values of .20 small effects.

Differences between the two countries in national–European differentiation were large in all scales except for Situations Negative (.69), Family Positive (.53), and Situations Positive (–.03). Differentiation between national and European was markedly larger in Bulgaria than in the Netherlands for all scales except for Family Positive and Religiousness (1.13) (larger differentiation in the Netherlands), and Situations Positive (no sizable effect; see Figure 2).

Finally, the degree of association between the national and European frames of reference within each country was estimated by computing the correlation between the mean scores assigned to own country and to Europe (all scales were used, except for Public Regard which involved questions only about own nation). In Bulgaria, a very strong, negative correlation was found [*r*(256) =

–.81] while in the Netherlands both frames of reference appeared to be unrelated [r(190) = –.08]. This finding indicates that perceptions of own national group and of Europe, with respect to the domains under study, are mutually exclusive in Bulgaria (the higher the Bulgarian scores, the lower the European) whereas the two dimensions are independent in the Netherlands.

Discussion

The aim of the present study was to assess the endorsement of national and European identities in Bulgaria and the Netherlands and to explore the connotative meaning of own nation and Europe in both countries. A sense of European identity was found both in the Netherlands and in Bulgaria, alongside a sense of national identity, which is in line with theoretical approaches (see, e.g., Medrano & Gutierrez, 2001) and empirical findings in various European countries (e.g., Georgas et al., 2004). More specifically, the findings for the Netherlands were in line with Florack and Piontkowski (2000) who found that the Dutch identified both with their own country and with Europe (though more strongly with their own country, whereas no such difference was present in their German sample) and these two identifications were positively correlated. The Bulgarian pattern of self-categorization in the present study is consistent with findings from the International Social Survey Programme's 2005 issue on national identity. There, a total of 94% of Bulgarian respondents indicated to feel close or very close to their country, and a total of 72% to Europe.

The recent *Eurobarometer* No. 64 (2006) also addressed national and European identity. The following two questions were the most relevant for the current study: "Do you ever think of yourself as not only (nationality), but also European? Does this happen often, sometimes or never?" and "In the near future, do you see yourself as…?" In line with our findings, "near future" dual-identity holders outnumbered exclusive national-identity holders, both in the Netherlands and in Bulgaria. However, responses to these two questions overall suggested a weaker endorsement of European identity and a smaller proportion of dual-identity holders compared to the present study. There might be different explanations for this. Firstly, and perhaps most importantly, the two *Eurobarometer* questions address different, although related, concepts from the one in the present study. The first *Eurobarometer* item seems to assess the implicit importance (Ashmore et al., 2004) of particular social identities and not their endorsement per se. The second one refers to what can be labeled "possible selves" (Cinnirella, 1996). It is likely that this item triggers associations of perceived differences between own nation and Europe, and this effect might be especially pronounced in Bulgaria in view of its efforts to comply with European standards. Although the two concepts assessed by the *Eurobarometer* questions are relevant for understanding national and European identity, we argue that self-categorization, as assessed in the current study, is the most fundamental element of social identification (Ashmore et al., 2004). A second explanation would be that the sample of the present study is comprised solely of students, while the *Eurobarometer* employs nation-representative samples. On the other hand, a similar divergence can be observed between *Eurobarometer* figures and the findings of Georgas et al. (2004), whose sample included not only university students, but also high school students and teachers.

Given this basic similarity between the Netherlands and Bulgaria in endorsement of national and European identities as compatible, the question became relevant, to what extent these two frames of reference also represent similar things to the people in both countries. The analysis of characteristics attributed to own country and Europe in different domains allowed addressing this question. On most dimensions, national–European differentiation was more pronounced in Bulgaria than in the Netherlands. National and European scale scores showed a strong negative correlation only in the Bulgarian sample. For Bulgarian students, Europe generally represents the opposite of their home country. This interpretation might seem to contradict the endorsement by Bulgarians of national and European identities as complementary and non-exclusive. Why would individuals identify simultaneously with reference groups that are perceived as so distinct from each other? To get a better understanding of the process that might be underlying this, one should look at the concrete pattern of differences. Participants tended to assign higher scores to Europe on domains where Bulgaria is lag-

ging behind, or where improvements should come in the country's development. Instrumental elements may thus play an important role in the observed endorsement of European identity. People may associate Europe with a hope for improvement and a better future, which in turn enhances their identification with it. This interpretation is particularly supported by our finding that the respondents explicitly denied feeling European in negative situations (e.g., "when public services do not function well"). It is noteworthy that in *Eurobarometer* No. 64, the percentage of Bulgarians who stated that EU gives them the feeling of hope (52%) was higher than the average for the EU (42%) and than the percentage in the Netherlands (38%). Such an account emphasizing the instrumental elements of European identification would be in line with the observation of Cinnirella (1996) that "European identity is more likely when a positive, future European possible self is perceived, and, crucially, *desired*" (p. 269; emphasis in original).

Contrary to Bulgarians, Dutch students seem to perceive Europe as lagging behind on country's characteristics and on modern, development-oriented characteristics. They attribute "sentimental" and tradition-related characteristics like religiousness and positive family features more strongly to Europe than to the Netherlands. This pattern intuitively makes sense given that the Netherlands is a modern, largely secularized country and one of the founding states of the European Union. An idealized view of Europe as a model to strive toward would be less effective for the Dutch than for Bulgarians. Overall, the adoption of European identity in the Netherlands apparently takes place against the background of smaller perceived differences between own nation and Europe than in Bulgaria. It is important to observe that perceived differences between own country and Europe in various domains does not seem to preclude the development of a European identity. An argument in line with this observation is made by Licata: "Super-ordinate identification depends on perception of subgroups' similarity only when similarity is presented as a desirable feature of the super-ordinate group" (2003, p. 518).

In addition to cross-national differences between Bulgaria and the Netherlands, we also found important similarities. First of all, there is no clear pattern of either ingroup favoritism or derogation in any of the samples. In different domains, either positive, negative characteristics, or both were attributed to own country more than to Europe. Ingroup favoritism would imply that positive characteristics should be primarily assigned to own group and negative ones to outgroup, while ingroup derogation would imply the opposite pattern. Ingroup favoritism would be predicted by social identity theory if Europe was conceived as an outgroup. However, we do not find support for a view that Europe is seen as an outgroup, because people identify with it. Moreover, a positive attitude toward ingroup does not necessarily imply a negative attitude toward an outgroup, as has been shown, e.g., by Duckitt, Callaghan, and Wagner (2005). Ingroup derogation, on the other hand, would have been predicted by identity models based on cultural and instrumental elements (Jimenez et al., 2004) according to which the emergence of a supranational identity engenders subjective derogation of the carrier of national identity (of own country). It seems rather to be the case that evaluations of the narrower and broader reference groups of social identification vary across different domains.

A second and related point of similarity is that Dutch as well as Bulgarian students feel more strongly members of their own national group than Europeans both in positive and negative situations. This finding, in accord with the responses to the self-categorization question, can be interpreted as an indication that people have a stronger feeling of their national identity than of the broader European identity. This effect is stronger in Bulgarians, whose national scores are remarkably high on the two situational dimensions. Furthermore, Bulgarians rated their compatriots higher on both positive and negative characteristics, which may be taken as evidence of a more clearly delineated picture of their own national group as compared to Europeans (cf. Georgas et al., 2004).

The third common point is that participants in both samples perceived a nonnegative regard of Europeans for their compatriots. This is relevant with respect to the higher scores of own national group as compared to Europe on some negative dimensions such as People Negative. A possible interpretation of these negative ratings could be that people perceive a negative attitude of "others" (viz., Europeans) toward their national group and have internalized such a negative attitude. This is a

process which, Strath (2002) suggests, should be considered in the analysis of historical formation of national identity. However, in our view, the findings of the public-regard measure limit the support for such an account.

A limitation of the present study is the use of student populations. It may well be the case that non-students would endorse European identity to a different extent or would view their co-citizens and own country, as well as Europeans and Europe, along different dimensions. If European identity would be related to level of education, our results may not be generalizable to the larger population. While acknowledging this limitation, we would like to add that students have an important role to play in shaping public opinion and, in a longer perspective, a country's policies.

Another limitation refers to a conflation between Europe and European Union that is inherent in the present study and supposedly in many other studies of European identity. The concepts are confounded on empirical level in the present study: in the instructions of the first scale, participants are asked to think of a general picture of "the European" by which "we mean a citizen of the European Union." In subsequent scales, participants respond to items about Europe and the Europeans. This is a conflation worth revising, since especially in candidate-members of the EU people are likely to be sensitive to the fact that the EU and Europe as a common geographical and, most of all, cultural-historical space do not coincide.

Finally, the present study only addressed two dimensions of collective identity, self-categorization and the perception (evaluation) of the identity groups. However, there is more to identity. A fruitful path for future research can be found in Ashmore et al.'s (2004) "organizing framework for collective identity." It would be especially relevant, for instance, to assess the relative importance of different identities. By applying the distinct dimensions proposed by Ashmore and colleagues to the simultaneous study of national and supranational identities, one could arrive at an even more global and accurate assessment of their interrelation, relative strength and meaning in different nations.

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