

Walking the Tightrope – Cultural Diversity in the Context of European Integration

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We all know that there are cultural differences between the countries, regions and ethnic groups in Europe. We are also aware, however vaguely, that these differences have a significant bearing on the political systems and the behaviour of individual actors. However, as yet, there is little practical understanding so far of how and to what extent this cultural diversity influences the overall functioning of the European Union.

The purpose of this article is to raise awareness of this issue and to illustrate approaches to addressing the cultural aspects of European institutional life in a more conscious and proactive way with the aim of improving the efficiency of European administrative and political cooperation.

Culture and the Treaty on European Union

“The Union’s citizens are bound together by common values such as freedom, tolerance, equality, solidarity and *cultural diversity*...”, states the Millennium Declaration adopted at the European Council in Helsinki in December 1999. The apparently contradictory notion of Europeans being bound together by their diversity reflects the recognition on the part of the Member States that the objective of a European identity based on a set of shared values can only be achieved if a respect for cultural diversity is firmly established as one of them. Accordingly, Article 151(4) of the EC Treaty stipulates that “the Community shall take cultural aspects into account in its action under other provisions of this Treaty, in particular in order to respect and to promote the diversity of its cultures”.

The same theme, albeit viewed from the individual Member State’s perspective, resurfaces in Article 6(3) of the Amsterdam Treaty which states that “The Union shall respect the *national identities* of its Member States”. This statement underlines the fact that the Union’s cultural diversity is a manifestation of the aggregation of the cultural identities of its Member States. To respect and promote the Union’s cultural diversity therefore equates to respecting and promoting the national identities of its Member States. In addition, Article

151(1) of the EC Treaty introduces the concept of regional diversity, stipulating that “the Community shall contribute to the flowering of the cultures of the Member States, while *respecting their national and regional diversity*”.

Although these statements are clear in their aim, which is to reconcile the existing spectrum of cultural identities, national and regional, with the notion of a common European identity, they are still confined to a very abstract level. However, European Union and Member State officials are confronted with issues of cultural diversity in practice every day, with hardly any guidance on how to deal with them in a way that lives up to the aspirations expressed in these texts.

The meaning of culture

Prompted by unprecedented global flows of information, capital, goods and people, multiculturalism became a buzzword of the 1990s. However, the underlying concept of culture is very complex and no single definition has

been agreed upon in the literature. Anthropologists have collected more than 160 different definitions of culture,¹ a discussion of which is beyond the scope of this article. A widely accepted definition which suits the purposes of this discussion is that “culture is not a ‘thing’, a substance with a physical reality of its own” but rather “made by people interacting, and at the same time

determining further action”.² “*Culture is a set of shared and enduring meanings, values and beliefs that characterise national, ethnic, or other groups and orient their behaviour*”.³ Culture is therefore something shared by (almost) all members of a social group, something one tries to pass on, which shapes (through morals, laws, customs) behaviour, or structures, one’s perception of the world.⁴

Culture and individuals

Cultures are based on different values that shape the mind-sets of individuals living in them, or put in information-age terms, they make up part of the “software of the mind”.⁵ Geert Hofstede argues that culture is “the

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collective programming of the mind, which distinguishes the members of one group or society from those of another". In his opinion, culture consists of the patterns of thinking that parents pass on to their children, teachers to their students, friends to their friends, leaders to their followers, and followers to their leaders. Consequently, the meaning people attach to various aspects of life reflects their culture. Culture determines their way of looking at the world and their role in it, their values, and what they find beautiful or consider as good or bad in their collective beliefs,⁶ a highly selective screen between Man and the outside world.⁷ It is present in people's minds and becomes apparent in tangible products of a society, most notably in its institutions, which in turn reinforce people's mind-sets. The presence of culture in an individual, both conscious and subconscious, ultimately defines his or her cultural identity.

Culture and organisations

Most research and empirical data on the impact of culture on organisations and behaviour focuses on the private sector, and, in particular, on management issues in multinational companies. In this regard, Hofstede argues that management within a society is very much constrained by its cultural context, because "it is impossible to coordinate the actions of people without a deep understanding of their values, beliefs and expressions". In the private sector, multinational companies have realised the relevance of culture and its impact on doing business and results. In response to this, promoting intercultural awareness and skills has become a standard training component in management.

There is a substantial body of empirical evidence to support the private sector's concern about the impact of cultural diversity on business. Recent studies conducted by European firms of trends in foreign trade reveal that firms in Europe are losing business, not simply because of language, but as a result of a variety of cultural barriers.⁸

To the extent that private sector management patterns are applicable to public administration, it is possible to extend these observations to the domain of public affairs. It may be argued that public organisations, namely political and administrative institutions, are still more influenced by their national cultural background than their private-sector counterparts. As a consequence, the loss in potential effectiveness sustained by the Union and its Member States in the course of their political and administrative dealings with each other because of cultural barriers are likely to even exceed those observed in the commercial sector. While it is difficult to quantify these effects in the same way, it is clear that cultural issues influence practically all of the major topics that European policies aim to address today.

Cultural barriers

Cultural differences, which can become barriers to intercultural exchange, become apparent in the nature of political systems, institutions, administrations, businesses and in the mind-sets and behaviour of politicians, officials, employers and employees, and citizens. Different political and administrative systems, as well as the behaviour of individual actors and the way they interact with each other, are mere reflections of different cultural systems which might be similar or different in respect to the sets of core values they embody. The areas at the European level where such cultural differences can have a substantial influence are numerous: on policy and decision-making processes, the quality of policy implementation, negotiations, communications, the sharing of information, and the relationship with the citizen. It is also possible to examine how these cultural differences are reflected in the structure of the EU institutions and their interaction with the Member States and whether they ultimately influence the pace of integration. Another important aspect but one which

reaches beyond the scope of this article is the role of media in this context.

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The interaction of individuals from national and European administrations plays a vital role in the progress of European integration. Hence, one key

element for a functioning European Union is to ensure smooth communication at all levels of European affairs. The various actors involved in European affairs encounter difficulties in communicating their needs and/or positions to their European counterparts and in understanding their European counterparts' positions, needs, behaviour and reactions, and thus in finding solutions which all parties involved can accept. It is essential to understand the intercultural framework within which the European venture operates, and to recognise the cultural differences (i.e. different values and mind-sets) which ultimately affect cooperation and performance, and to manage situations effectively in which such differences can affect results. Awareness of these cultural differences and their consequences will promote mutual understanding and contribute to finding common interests and solutions, by bridging and even harnessing cultural diversity.

Cultural Diversity and Cultural Identity

I briefly alluded to the interaction between national and European cultural identity at the beginning of this article with the example of the European Council's Millennium Declaration of December 1999. I argued at that point that this statement expresses a desire on the part of the Union and the Member States to define a European cultural identity as a set of values shared by all citizens of the Union. Is there any empirical evidence at all to suggest that a cultural identity shared by all

Europeans exists?

Eurobarometer, in its 1998 survey,⁹ measured for the first time whether people agree or disagree that there is a European cultural identity shared by all Europeans. A definition of “European identity” was not given. It was found that the majority of EU citizens feel European to some extent, although one can still not speak of the existence of a truly European identity. However, since this is an issue where opinions differ greatly between countries, generalisations can be deceiving. Luxembourg for example contains a high proportion of citizens from other EU countries; therefore people in this country are most likely to feel primarily European. In all other countries, less than 10% of the population feel primarily European. Nonetheless, people who feel European to a certain extent are in the majority in seven countries of the 15. In seven countries, people who identify primarily with their own nationality are in the majority, although in Austria, Denmark, Ireland and Finland, this majority is very small. The only three countries where the national identity is clearly prevalent are the UK, Sweden and Portugal. Even though age, education and occupation all play a role in determining this attitude, it is nonetheless striking that, in a 1998 Eurobarometer survey, 74% of people who regard their country’s membership as a bad thing identified solely with their own nationality, compared to only 27% of people who regard their country’s membership as a good thing.¹⁰ At the EU level, nearly nine out of ten people feel attached to their country, their town or village and their region. However, more than half of EU citizens feel attached to Europe.¹¹

Whether people feel European or not is also strongly influenced by a number of socio-demographic factors. It is, first of all, clearly a generation issue, with people who came into adulthood prior to the 1950s significantly less likely to feel to some extent European than people who grew up after the first European Treaty was signed. At the moment, it also still appears that as people become older they tend to identify more strongly with their own country. Education is another important factor, although education is interrelated with age. People who left school at the age of 15 or younger – many of whom belong to the older generation – are more likely to have a strong sense of national identity, while this is less likely among people who continue studying. There are also clear differences between people who left school at the age of 19 and those who stayed in education longer. As to the economic activity scale, managers are most likely to feel European.¹²

There is an obvious connection between a negative attitude towards EU membership and adherence to the national identity. Considering that the purpose of the European Union is, in the first place, to prevent national

interest becoming so inflamed that it destabilises Europe, the notion of the defence of national interest appears to be a tricky one.¹³ What seems worrying is that at the moment, in every country in the European Union and also outside, “the engines of mistrust are turning over”. We see “Germans worry about the authority of their regional governments; the Danish worry that they will be sucked south, dissolving the barrier with Germany which they have spent so long constructing; the French worry about their farming practices and the national destiny; the Belgians worry about their place in Brussels as it is over-run with European institutions”. And we hear that “the Dutch do not take kindly to being told to toughen up their drugs laws by a French President of very different political persuasion from their own.” We are alarmed that “Austrians do not want to share their country with anyone unless they are tourists.... Such fears go beyond logic and convenience....”¹⁴ Is the spectre of xenophobia and racism haunting Europe once again?

In the light of enlargement, the European Union is increasingly faced with the challenge of both accommodating and, at the same time, taking advantage of cultural diversity. In this regard, the President of the European Commission, Romano Prodi, in his address to the Parliament prior to the vote of investiture of the new Commission in September 1999 suggested for example,

with a special focus on the Mediterranean region, that enlargement “should include a ‘Partnership of Cultures’ “ as the term for a more ambitious commitment towards the Mediterranean, where “we Europeans are dedicated to promoting a new, exemplary harmony between peoples of the three religions of Jerusalem.

A resounding ‘No’ to the clash of civilisations”. And he emphasised “what we now need to build is a union of hearts and minds, underpinned by a strong shared sentiment of a common destiny – a sense of common European citizenship. We come from different countries. We speak different languages. We have different historical and cultural traditions. And we must preserve them. But we are seeking a shared identity – a new European soul.”

Cultural Synergies

“Culture remains generally invisible and, when visible, we usually think it causes problems. People rarely think that cultural diversity benefits organisations.”¹⁵ Revealingly, both Mr Prodi’s statement and the Millennium Declaration assert the view that Europe’s cultural diversity is an asset with enormous creative potential rather than a liability which needs to be borne for a time and can some day be disposed of.

Following economic integration in Europe, political integration will only become a reality when political

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leaders and citizens both come to realise that we share common values which are entrusted to shared policies and institutions. Our task seems less to reassure ourselves of our common origins than to develop a new self-confidence that will allow Europe to play its role in the twenty-first century. Apart from the fear that the promise of a better life in the Union cannot be kept, the European Union is facing another threat, i.e. people's fear that it will "take away peoples' sense of belonging, the elements of their culture that define themselves and give them identity in a world where unemployment, mass communication and distant government are all doing their best to make identity undervalued and insecure".¹⁶

It ultimately boils down to a cultural problem that requires a cultural solution. If Trompenaars¹⁷ is right to argue that "every culture distinguishes itself from others by the specific solution it chooses to certain problems which reveal themselves as dilemmas" and that "culture is the way in which a group of people solves problems and reconciles dilemmas", what could that imply in terms of European integration? An approach which harnesses and encompasses this diversity and a way of thinking which helps to free us from outdated patterns and can break the shell of indifference and ignorance. This requires going beyond awareness of our own cultural heritage and producing something greater through cooperation and collaboration. The very diversity of people can be utilised to enhance problem solving by combined action. Cultural synergy builds on similarities and fuses differences resulting in more effective human activities and systems. This approach recognises both the similarities and the differences between the cultures and suggests that we neither ignore nor seek to minimise cultural diversity, but rather that we view it as a resource in designing and developing organisational systems.¹⁸

Can the reform of the European Commission, as a multicultural, supranational institution, be regarded as one more step in this direction? One would assume that Commission President Prodi's attempt to make the Cabinets of Commissioners more multicultural was based on this assumption.¹⁹ And one welcomes that the recent reform proposal calls for a "change in the culture of the Commission",²⁰ by "modernising working methods, creating new systems and setting new standards that new habits will develop, new attitudes will be formed and a new culture will emerge".

Concluding remarks

To bridge and harness cultural diversity, i.e. to respect cultural identities and promote different cultures, is a stated goal of the European Union. Many cultural barriers are due to ignorance of cultural differences rather than a rejection of those differences. Recent developments

within the European Union show that we have a lot to learn about ourselves and each other, our culture, our history, our fears and our visions in order to give a deeper meaning to statements of principles such as "the European Union as a community of values is part of the concept of the future development of European integration",²¹ and "our European model shows that an ever closer union between peoples is possible where it is based on shared values and common objectives".²² To meet these challenges, the European Union must firstly respond to the concerns of the citizens. Aside from their worries about jobs and the economy, people are increasingly looking to Europe when it comes to improving their environment, their safety and their quality of life. And people want "agents" in effective,

accountable institutions that involve them in European governance and which take their rich and diverse cultures and traditions into account.²³

It is the failure to understand the impact of cultural diversity at every level of society, and particularly its political and administrative institutions, which leads to national,

regional and ethnic stereotyping, and ultimately feeds nationalist and xenophobic tendencies in Europe. Conscious and disciplined research and educational effort is required if we are to develop the necessary intercultural competence and reach a common understanding between all actors involved in European integration: politicians, civil servants, and ultimately the citizens of Europe. Only a Europe of politicians, peoples and individuals, who share fundamental values and political objectives, and at the same time understand and respect the wide range of cultural identities within the Union, will be able to meet the challenges of the new millennium.²⁴ It seems worth remembering that "world history has accorded the empires that have come and gone only one appearance on the stage. It now appears as if Europe as a whole is being given a second chance. It will not be able to make use of this in terms of the power politics of yesteryear, but only under changed premises, namely a non-imperial process of reaching understanding with, and learning from, other cultures...".²⁵

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NOTES

- ¹ Faure, Guy (ed.), *Culture and Negotiation* (London: Sage Publications, 1993)
- ² Trompenaars, Fons; Hampden-Turner, Charles, *Riding the Waves of Culture. Understanding Cultural Diversity in Business* (London: Nicholas Brealey Publishing, Second Edition, 1997)

- ³ *ibid.*
- ⁴ Adler, J. Nancy, *International Dimension of Organizational Behavior* (Cincinnati: South Western College Publishing, 1997)
- ⁵ Hofstede, Geert, *Cultures and Organisations, Intercultural Cooperation and its Importance for Survival, Software of the Mind* (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 1994);
- ⁶ Hofstede, Geert, *Culture's consequences international differences in work-related values: Cross-cultural research and methodology series*. (London: Sage, 1984); Hofstede, Geert, Cultural Dimensions in Management and Planning, in: *Asia Pacific Journal of Management*, January 1984.
- ⁷ Hall, Edward.T, *Beyond Culture* (New York: Anchor Books, Doubleday, 1989)
- ⁸ Findings from a Business Environment Report, delivered as part of the Language in Business Campaign Feasibility Study carried out under the MLIS programme. Some startling revelations have emerged, such as for example the inability to communicate in foreign languages accounts for 20% of lost business. It was also concluded that firms in Europe lose business as the result of both language and cultural barriers.
- ⁹ Source: Standard Eurobarometer 50, *Fieldwork*, Oct.-Nov. 1998 (Release: March 1999)
- ¹⁰ Source: Standard Eurobarometer 50, *Fieldwork*, Oct.-Nov. 1998 (Release: March 1999)
- ¹¹ Source: Standard Eurobarometer 51, *Fieldwork*, March-April 1999 (Release: July 1999)
- ¹² Source: Standard Eurobarometer 50, *Fieldwork*, Oct.-Nov. 1998 (Release: March 1999)
- ¹³ Mundy, Simon, *Making it Home, Europe and the Politics of Culture* (Amsterdam: European Cultural Foundation, 1997)
- ¹⁴ Mundy, Simon, *Making it Home, Europe and the Politics of Culture* (Amsterdam: European Cultural Foundation, 1997)
- ¹⁵ Adler, J. Nancy, *International Dimension of Organizational Behavior* (Cincinnati: South Western College Publishing, 1997)
- ¹⁶ Mundy, Simon, *Making it Home, Europe and the Politics of Culture* (Amsterdam: European Cultural Foundation, 1997)
- ¹⁷ Trompenaars, Fons; Hampden-Turner, Charles, *Riding the Waves of Culture. Understanding Cultural Diversity in Business* (London: Nicholas Brealey Publishing, Second Edition, 1997)
- ¹⁸ Nancy Adler argues that to a large extent, cultural diversity becomes a key resource in the global learning organisation.
- ¹⁹ Each Cabinet (reduced to maximum of 6 members) should have at least three nationalities. Either the Head or the Deputy Head of Cabinet could be a non-national. These targets appear to have been accomplished. Although this goes beyond the topic of this article, it seems noteworthy that there should also be a strong emphasis on gender balance.
- ²⁰ Reforming the Commission. Consultative document. Communication from Mr Kinnock in agreement with the President and Ms Schreyer, 18 January 2000.
- ²¹ Preamble of the declaration of the Austrian Government, Feb 3, 2000.
- ²² "Sharing the New Europe", Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council the Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the regions, Strategic objectives 2000-2005, COM (2000) 154 final.
- ²³ "Sharing the New Europe", Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council the Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the regions, Strategic objectives 2000-2005, COM (2000) 154 final.
- ²⁴ In response to this, EIPA launched a training programme in cooperation with ITIM (Institute for Training in Cultural Management, The Netherlands) on Intercultural Management and Cooperation within the European Union in December 1999. The programme is designed to provide an insight into areas of politics and public administration where these differences can have an impact and thus affect results, i.e. on policy and decision making, quality of policy implementation, negotiations (including styles and techniques), coordination and communication. Apart from developing sensitivity to cultural differences, this seminar aims to explore this area, to understand the way these differences influence the behaviour of individual actors and groups and how to deal with them. The next seminar will take place in May 2000 (see flyer in this EIPASCOPE edition).
- ²⁵ J.Habermas, in M. Heffernan, *the Meaning of Europe*, (London: Arnold, 1998). □