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The Role of External Perceptions in the European Identity Formation.

Irina Khayrizamanova

Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona

Contact: irina.ort@gmail.com

Abstract

The question if the European Union is an actor and if it has developed its own identity has been an object of numerous theoretical and empirical investigations within the International Relations and European Studies. While the overwhelming number of scholars has come to the conclusion that the EU is an actor, the EU's identity defies easy classification. One of the few points that researchers seem to agree on is that the EU is definitely a distinctive actor. However, the research has tended to be self-reflexive and the EU-centered because the Other's perspective has been widely neglected despite the fact that the outsiders' role in the European identity formation has been acknowledged. So it is crucial to take notice of the fact that the alleged distinctiveness of the EU acquires meaning only if it is recognized by its relevant outsiders. In this sense, the EU leaders, who are the active creators of the European nascent identity, in their aspirations for a more active role for the EU in the world as a disseminator of such values as multilateralism, democracy, liberty, rule of law and respect for human rights, should take into account how other actors respond to such claims. This made the academia aware of the necessity of a new approach that would illuminate the way the external perceptions contribute to the formation of the EU's identity and consequently, to the adoption by the EU of foreign policy roles. This paper attempts to reverse the Self/Other theorising with the aim to develop a theoretical explanation of the linkages between the external images and the EU's identity formation, which in turn has a direct bearing on the EU's foreign policy roles.

Keywords: European identity, Self/ Other nexus, external perceptions, discourse.

Introduction

Identity is one of the most contested concepts in social sciences and in the International Relations in particular. The matter becomes even more complicated when it comes to the identity of the European Union that is an object fiery scholarly debates which led to a consensus that the European[i] identity is definitely a distinctive one. This distinctiveness thesis has its roots in the EU's own self-representations as a civilian superpower and its aspiration for a leadership status in such matters as promotion of democracy, human rights, climate change, humanitarian aid and peaceful conflict resolution. These self-definitional images abound in various public declarations of the EU leaders, documents and treaties[ii]. During the last decade the EU has undertaken a more ambitious role as an international power that is able to project its influence on international affairs and that has a moral obligation to take on responsibilities towards other countries[iii].

The EU's ever growing assertiveness on the international scene coincided with the rise of reflectivist approaches that unveiled new perspectives for the EU studies and international relations and called attention to the identity and the role of the EU in the world (Bretherton and Vogler 2008; Hill 1993; Marsh and Mackenstein 2005; Hermann et al. 2004). In their analysis of the European identity scholars drew on the *sui generis* premise that viewed the EU as constructed differently from traditional states and international organisations. According to Manners and Whitman (2003, 384) the distinctiveness of the EU lies in combination of its hybrid polity and its international roles. It is those role representations as a "normative" power (Manners, 2002), "civilian" power (Orbie, 2006), "norm-maker" (Björkdahl 2005), "ethical" power (Aggestam, 2008) that are seen as an integral part of the European distinctive identity.

However, these assumptions about the EU identity need further theoretical elaborations and meticulous empirical researches. Sjursen (2006, 171) points out that the "normative/civilian power" concept seems to be based on the belief that "the EU is doing good". In fact, she calls for developing a rigid theoretical framework that could detail the criteria of such a distinctive power and account for its existence. This paper makes an attempt to demonstrate that discussion on the alleged distinctiveness of the EU is not sufficient is it concentrates only on the question if "the EU is doing good", rather, it would be interesting to explore if the world thinks so. However, the debate on the European identity

has tended to be self-reflexive and has not taken into account if the image that the EU has shaped of itself converges with its external image, despite the fact that this perspective could be a valuable contribution to the literature as it could help to answer the question if the EU is an international actor in its own right or just an organization of 27 member states and if it has been successful in constructing its own distinctive international identity, that is to say if other countries perceive it as an altruistic power and guarantor of stability and justice. This paper will attempt to highlight the necessity and importance of a new theoretical angle on studying such a disputable concept as the European identity.

Identity formation: the missing link

The vision of the EU as an elite-driven project is frequently taken an a starting point for exploration of its identity, so scholars take the discourse theoretical path to uncover self-representations as they appear in public declarations, documents and founding treaties. Although these works provide valuable insights into the European feelings of "Selfhood", this self-referentiality is definitely not sufficient to give us a complete picture of identity. Brubaker and Cooper (2000, 18) admit the limits of self-understanding as being "s subjective and auto-referential term" that is unable to reflect others' perceptions. It is crucial to capture understandings of other states as internal and external dimensions of identity are flip sides of the same coin. While the internal aspect of identity encompasses self-conceptions as a unifying force, the external dimension rests on the assumption that identities are constructed against the difference. Taking into account the necessity to incorporate the external perceptions, this paper accepts the Jepperson's et al (1996, 59) definition of identity as "the images of individuality and distinctiveness ('selfhood') held and projected by an actor and formed (and modified over time) through relations with significant 'others'". Thus the identity implies "mutually constructed and evolving images of Self and the Other". Identity literature seeks to theorise the presence of the Others, which is quite a logical move, given that international relations is all about interaction between the states. Neither the EU nor any other state functions in a vacuum, every actor needs "audience" to display its identity. So the external dimension is ontologically important because as (Jepperson, Wendt and Katzenstein 1996, 41) put it, the external environment influences the behaviors, properties of their actors as well as their existence. It is quite a ubiquitous point of view that the actors are mutually constituted and changed during this interaction, so the Self/Other theorising is frequently taken as a justifiable starting point to analyse identity formation[iv]. There are various approaches to studying the Self/Other conceptual pair which embrace premises of psychological traditions such as symbolic interactionism, social identity theory and cognitive approaches and that are united by the assumptions that identities are relational, and not fixed and as such are subject to contestation both by insiders and outsiders.

The main debate in the literature is not the presence or the absence of the other, but rather if this Other has to be radically different and threatening. The postructuralist thinking views the mere existence of the Other as threatening to the Selfhood, but at the same time the Other is also a constitutive part of the identity building. The Other in the postructuralist tradition is frequently a negative antagonistic force against which identity is mobilised. As Torfing (1999, 15) argues "identity is intrinsically linked to the construction of *social antagonism* which involves the exclusion of a threatening Otherness". Campbell (1992) follows this line of thinking depicting the Other as radically different and dangerous.

However, recently there are more voices calling for more nuanced representations of the Self/Other relationship because that identity does not have to be necessarily radical and threatening. Connolly (1991, 64) who while agreeing with Campbell that "identity is dependent on its ability to define difference", points out that there are various degrees of difference such as complementary identities, contending identities, negative identities and non-identities. This turn from the enemy image to the less radical perceptions of the others was noticeable not only in the postructuralist literature but also in constructivist and cognitive strand of foreign policy analysis literature. Hopf (2002) confirms that while identities are indeed relational, they do not necessarily have to be oppositional. The enemy image has been discarded as lacking sufficient analytical and explanatory power to describe the wider range of relations. Copeland (1997) offers a more elaborated categorization of Others, which can be a strong ally and ingroup, ally but outgroup, neutral but situationally driven and adversary with innately aggressive motives. As he shows the state's reputation can be upgraded or downgraded along the positive-negative evaluation scale, though the process is slow and the meticulous research is needed to study the conditions under which the change of perceptions occurs. Wendt goes even further arguing that the former enemy state can not only be seen in a more positive light, but even "as an extension of the Self". (Wendt 1994, 386).

Taking into consideration the ultimate importance of the other in identity construction, it is surprising, that the Other's perceptions have not been adequately approached. Discourse analysts tended to concentrate their attention on theoretical aspects of the Self/ Other concepts or on the discourse of the West neglecting the discourse of the Others (Campbell, 1992; Neumann 1999). This neglect resulted in the lack of analysis that is conducted "from inside of the

Other" despite that fact that knowledge, generated by such researches can be of utmost use because they can offer valuable hints for the Self's policy making (Hansen, 2006: 76) and can bring into light the other side of the story of the identity making.

European Identity construction: the Self/ Other link reversed

The EU identity is not exception as has been and is being constructed as different to its others, be it its own past (Waever 1998, 90) or physical others. Bretherton and Vogler (2006, 46) single out two types of identities: inclusive and exclusive. Inclusive identities embrace the perceptions of the EU values as superior to that of traditional states, however, they are not linked to negative stereotyping of the outsiders and the EU acquires the status of a civilian or normative power whose mission is to disseminate those values. Exclusive identities involve, according to Bretherton and Vogler, the ideational representation of the EU as a fortress. So the others are involved in construction of both facets of the European identity. The EU is a novel and unprecedented creation that can not draw upon its history and culture, as traditional states do, consequently, its others acquire even greater constitutive force. As Manners and Whitman (2003, 382) point out the EU is more dependent on the outsiders as its identity is clearly "intersubjective" and that's why "its 'visibility to other actors is a part of co-constituting itself" And as such, the EU is forced to grope for its way, and its relevant Others can be invaluable beacons.

However, the studies on the EU from Others' point of view are scarce[v] despite the fact that the East played a crucial role in the EU identity formation. As Laffan (2004) notes in his analysis the east/west divide was one of the impetus for the EU deeper integration so the East has been taken as the other from the very inception of the European Community. Actually, the East can be called the Europe's eternal Other as Neumann (1999) shows in his exploration of role of the Eastern neighbours in European identity formation[vi].

So why should we bother by reversing the Self/Other link to research the Other's perspective? The international relations literature on perceptions suggests that self perceptions and images of the other states are biased. While the self-perceptions are imbued with affection and actors tend to perceive themselves as inherently good and benevolent, they suppose that others also view them as such (Jervis 1976). However, the external perceptions can turn out to be different. It is crucial for an actor to be aware of its external images because of the subjectivity of self-perceptions and that's why Others' perspective is necessary and can help us understand our identity better and avoid narcissist behaviour. Certainly, negative perceptions of the EU can undermine the EU's self-confidence making it feel as an 'invisible giant' hampering its policies and even disrupting the process of internal integration (Chaban and Holland 2008, 4) but on the other hand, this can prevent the dangers of the famous expectations-capability gap (Hill 1993). In their turn, positive perceptions and high-expectations of the actor exert positive influence on its self-perceptions as they satisfy it's strive for recognition. For the EU external images can be a valuable contribution to debates on it's the actorness and the alleged distinctiveness. First, this sort of investigations could reveal if the EU is seen by its counterparts as a consolidated international actor worth listening to. One of the possible aspects to explore would be if the EU has been successful in building its own identity, separate from that of the member states in the eyes of the others. Outsiders' perspective on the EU could throw light on the extent to which it is seen as a 'distinctive' power and legitimate promoter of its self-declared values and principles. Their recognition of the EU's distinctiveness is likely to enhance the EU's self-esteem.

Self-images, external perceptions, roles and identity.

Images that other actors hold of the EU function as a "second mirror" (Lucarelli and Fioramonti 2011, 4) as they help to shape European identities. However, outsiders do not judge the European identity directly as identity is elusive and refers more to the feeling of "Selfhood", but rather concrete roles that the EU adopts. For the purposes of the paper the concept of a foreign policy role needs clarification. In fact, some scholars frequently do not differentiate between EU's role and identity using them as synonyms. Opposite point of view assumes that the role is a too narrow concept for identities. As Hopf (2002) argues it is not analytically possible to reduce identity to roles because a limited number of behavioural positions can not reflect such a wide notion as identity.

This paper assumes that identities and roles are closely interlinked, as Lucarelli (2007, 257) suggests a role is a behavioral consequence of identity. So the way the state behaves on the international stage is defined by its identity. According to Bretherton and Vogler (2006, 41-59) this linkages result in the association of the two facets of the EU identity negative/ exclusive and positive/ inclusive with respective roles: the former is reflected in the EU's role as a protector of its citizens and member states from some kind of threat, while the latter suggests three roles – as a model, as a promoter of its proclaimed values; and as a counterweight to the USA. Hill (1998) suggests a different categorization of the EU's roles: a balancer of power, a bridge between rich and poor countries, a joint supervisor of the world economy, a regional pacifier, a global intervener, a mediator of conflicts. There are various approaches to

the systematization of the EU roles; the majority of them is based on the assumption that the European role reflects its identity, or more specifically, its own self-conceptions.

It should be kept in mind that the role the EU accepts is by no means automatic, it is the result of interaction with other actors (Aggestam 2006, 16). The EU needs the others to define its role through foreign policy interaction and negotiation. Elgström and Smith (2006, 5) define roles as "patterns of expected or appropriate behaviour determined by both an actor's own conceptions about appropriate behaviour and by the expectations of other actors". Wendt (1999: 227-8) echoes this point of view by asserting that "the role-constructing side of the equation is ultimately shaped by an actor's identity and the others' expectations". As it follows, others' perceptions and expectations influence the EU's role taking. The role theory underlines that the role is defined in interaction between national role conceptions and the role prescriptions emanating from the external environment, thus a complete analysis should contain both the perceptions of the alter and ego (Holsti 1970). External perceptions of course, play a significant role, however, they are not equal to the self-perceptions. As Holsti (1970) further argues sometimes external behaviour may be seen as an interference with the sovereignty of the state, and when the national self conceptions are incompatible with external expectations, the former are prioritized. While the national self conceptions are dependent on such factors as geography, economical and military capabilities (domestic factors) the external expectations include not only opinion of other states but also according to Holsti (1970, 245) "system structure, system-wide values, general legal principles, informal understandings and treaty commitments". This assumption is quite consonant with the constructivist position that external expectations contribute to intersubjective structure that enables or limits the action of the state. So we can not say that the external perceptions are equally responsible for the role assumption as the self-perceptions are, but they do have quite a significant part to play. In the case of the EU which is not a well established entity external perceptions matter to a greater extent.

The Others' perceptions are revealed through foreign policy acts. So the second reason to engage in this type of research is that the external images are one of the variables in foreign policy formulation and implementation. As Lucarelli and Fioramonti (2010, 2) argue what the world thinks is a crucial factor to predict if the EU-sponsored policies will be accepted or opposed and the perceptions can function as " 'an early warning system' for an actor such as the EU, which is still in the process of establishing itself as a credible international focal point". The EU in its aspiration towards leadership will find it easier to obtain support of other international player if its actions are considered legitimate and altruistic. It is much easier for the EU to 'get what is wants' if its values and principles are shared by its partners. In this sense the perceptions are important since they are one of the factors that exert influence on the effectiveness of the European policies. On the other hand, EU perceptions can also affect the formulation of the foreign policy of its partners not only at the international but also domestic level. So if the EU is successful or not in promoting its policies has to be seen partially in the light of its legitimacy in the eyes of other actors (Barbé et al. 2010). In their turn, the outcomes of these policies and their reception or rejection and evaluation of the EU's performance by other actors will influence EU's self-conception. Lucarelli (2007, 9) explains this process as "the way we conceive our international role is functional to the way in which we conceive ourselves; at the same time the way we 'perform' our role feeds back into our political identity". And the "performance" depends on if the EU policies are accepted or rejected by its counterparts.

Discourse analysis: methodological notes

The reversed Other/Self conceptual pair provides a fruitful avenue for research and can be studied at various levels as it is possible to study the interaction between two actors in the international fora, in regional settings, in bilateral relations and at the state level. The next challenge to face would be to choose whose perceptions we should study. Do we have to focus on the images held by major international players or smaller states? Certainly, the recognition of global actors is crucial as it can be seen as admission to "the international leaders club". However, the rejection of the EU as a leader by weaker countries in conditions of asymmetry of power can exert more resonance on the EU actorness and identity (Van Criekinge 2009). So both perspectives have a potential of adding theoretical and empirical value to the European identity. The next question to be answered is if the objects of the study are states or people. Although numerous analysis of Self/Other nexus are pitched at the systemic level and see states as participants in interactions, this paper argues that while following several premises of the systemic level explanations, we should combine the research with the principles of foreign policy analysis. After all, states consist of people, and it is their perceptions that should be studied. That forces a researcher to make another choice: should we concentrate on decision makers or on common people's perceptions? That of course depends on the research design and questions that it aims to answer. In case of the EU, as the European project is an elite driven process, it seems logical to study the counter discourse of the Other's politicians who are liable for the foreign policy formulation. However, the research can also embrace wider "audience" to reveal how the European images are reverberated in the common public's minds.

The next question revolves around how to choose appropriate tools is to elicit these perceptions. As various disciplines contribute to theorising of identity and images as its constitutive parts, methodological eclecticism seems to be

inevitable. One of the most commonly used methods by identity scholars is discourse analysis that is itself qualified as "triangulated approach" (Wodak 2004) that combines methodological and theoretical presuppositions from various disciplines, especially from linguistics and social psychology. Numerous scholars within constructivist, poststructuralist and foreign policy analysis applied discourse and contents analysis that presuppose qualitative and quantitative analysis of surveys, interviews, statements. Various discourse approaches are united by the the assumption language possesses the constitutive force. Reality is seen as discursively articulated and as such it "can not be known outside human language" (Adler 1997, 323). Identities tend to be seen as mobilized through discourse and the language not only reflects the reality, but has an active role in its construction. The possible objection to this method could be that we do not really know what the EU's Others really think. However, discourse is not interested in what is happening in heads of politicians, rather, it deals with what is on the surface, what is publicly announced. (Hopf 2002, 23) for example, takes sides with these presuppositions and in his analysis of the social construction of identity he applies interpretative epistemology that draws on phenomenology. that is "letting the subjects speak".

But do decision-makers really mean what they say? Hopf (2002, 20) points out is not necessary to "make an effort to discern the intended meaning of the authors, because authors do not control the meaning of their own words when they are uttered in public" So it is possible to take at discursive articulations their face value. Speaking has some kind of a binding and normative force per se, public speeches may not reflect the real thoughts of leaders, but they create intersubjective meanings that contribute to identity and foreign policy construction.

In conclusion, it should be noted that a profound analysis of the Other's perspective is a challenging enterprise that demands a thorough knowledge of the culture, history, the political system of the actor under scrutiny, as well as perfect command of the language, as the research often involves reading original sources that have not been translated into English.

Conclusion

While a lot of scholarly debates have been devoted to the EU's international actorness and performance, Lucarelli (2007) points out that attempts to "evaluate if this image that the EU has shaped of itself within the Union has produced a similar representation with external actors" are very scarce. Little has been done to explore if other countries around the world perceive the European Union in the same way as it perceives itself and if not, to reveal what external images and perceptions prevail in the Others' political discourse. The absence of academic attention to this topic is surprising, taking into account the importance of this knowledge for the EU. Certainly, identity construction is not all about the perceptions of the Other, but still, it is indispensable because the EU creates its identity not for its own consumption, but rather aims to expose it to international audience. The viability of the constructed identity depends to a great extent on the acceptation or rejection by the others. The EU is even more susceptible to vagaries of perceptions and misperceptions because as Marsh and Mackenstein (2005, 247) suggest the Union is an evolving entity that is stripped of the traditional advantages that traditional states possess such as popular support based around national identity and membership in international organisations.

The aspiration of this paper is to contribute to the literature on the EU's identity formation by illuminating the role of the external perceptions and the necessity to listen to the Other's part of the story.

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Endnotes

[i] When I talk about the European identity I mean the EU identity, following Risse. (2004, 255) that the adjective "European" has been appropriated by the EU.

[ii] Having analysed painstakingly the available data, Manners (2006) singles out nine EU values and principles (constitutive self-images): sustainable peace, social liberty, consensual democracy, human rights, supranational rule of law, equality, solidarity, sustainable development and good governance.

[iii] *A Secure Europe in a Better World. European Security Strategy,* European Council Meeting in Brussels, 12 December 2003. The Treaty of Lisbon reaffirms the EU's commitment "to develop a special relationship with neighbouring countries, in order to establish an area of prosperity and good neighbourliness, founded on the values of the Union and characterised by close and peaceful relations based on cooperation"(Art 7a).

[iv] However, there are dissenting voices that view the identities as exogenous to interactions. Lebow (2008: emphasis in the original) for example, in his analysis of Greco-Roman literary heritage claims that identities "generally form *prior* to construction of 'others'". Wendt (1994) partially agrees with this point. Drawing on the symbolic interactionism he develops the concepts of corporate and social identities. While social identities indeed are developed through interaction with other states, the corporate identity, being intrinsic quality of the state, does not need the other. However, Wendt, in its definition of the corporate identity contradicts himself. As he (1994:385) puts it, the corporate identity includes such basic interests as physical security, ontological security, and recognition as an actor by others. These interests presuppose the presence of the others as the feeling of security or insecurity are generated by the images of the other actors and the state usually strives for others' recognition. Another way to exclude the role of the others in identity formation is to differentiate between relational and categorical ways of identification. (Brubaker and Cooper, 2000). As they point out while relational mode of differentiation demands the positioning of a person in relation to the other, categorical way of differentiation includes belonging to a definite category, such as race, gender, language etc. Here again, the affiliation to a certain category does not exclude the presence of the other which does not necessarily has to be opposite. Let's say the being a woman presupposes that there is a man, or belonging to an English community suggests that there are not English languages as well.

[v] Recently, several attempts have been made to rectify this deficiency. Valuable insights into the perception of the EU are offered by the research project *Public, Elite and Media Perceptions of the EU in the Asia Pacific Region* (Chaban and Holland 2008). One

of the first attempts to link the images and the EU identity about the way the EU is perceived by elite, the media and broad public level as well as in a wide range of countries and international organisations is presented in the book edited by Lucarelli and Fioramonti (2010). Various aspects of the Chinese Perspectives of the EU are studied within the project funded by the European Commission (Chinese Policy Institute. 2012)

[vi] Neumann (1999) presents several historic discourses on Russia and argues that European discourse on Russia that dominated in the 16th century still can have influence on the contemporary discourse and European identity formation.

Irina Khayrizamanova holds an M.A. in Linguistics from the Nizhny Novgorod State Linguistic University,Russia and M.A. in International Relations from the Warsaw University. She is a PhD student at the Institut Universitari d´Estudis Europeus – Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona. She currently working on her PhD thesis that explores the EU's external images that prevail in Russian political discourse.