German Identity Changing with the European Union: More European, Less German, More Local

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ANNA LISA OHM

German Identity Changing
With the European Union:
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More Local

For most soccer fans during the summer 2006 World Cup Championship games, flag-waving was a routine, sometimes boisterous, activity. For Germans who grew up after 1945 in a defeated and disgraced nation, however, seeing their black, red, and gold flag boldly displayed by cheering fans set off waves of uneasiness, even shock and angst.

*Pas de panique!* Within the context of the European Union (EU), Germany's new identity is becoming more European, less German, and more local, and fear of nationalistic ghosts is receding accordingly. The new European partnership has allowed Germans the joy of looking forward with hopeful anticipation instead of backward in enervating despair.

An EU member from its founding in 1951 as the European Coal and Steel Community, Germany has willingly sacrificed some sovereignty in exchange for the benefits of cooperating with her European neighbors. While relative peace on the continent tops the list of pluses, the significance of Germany's historic movement from opposition to consultation and compromise vis-à-vis France, and the post-war economic “miracle,” the *Wirtschaftswunder*, are promising achievements as well.

The EU is now on course to challenge the U.S. for international leadership. With the U.S. distracted by a war in Iraq, the EU is making slow but steady progress toward becoming what U.S. author and journalist T. R. Reid calls a “counterweight” to American power in his 2004 book, *The United States of Europe: The New Superpower and the End of American Supremacy*.

Indeed, the unilateral policies of the Bush administration are working to Europe's advantage, turning “Old Europe” into the “New Europe.” And, as the current formula states, *c'est l'Europe qui gagne* [it’s Europe that wins]. The EU strategy includes constant goal-setting, negotiation, temporary agreements, and re-negotiation on two axes: EU deepening and EU enlargement. Ulrich Weins, a historian with the EU in Brussels, states flatly: “The most important foreign policy tool the EU has is enlargement.”
The euro is an example of how EU deepening and enlargement work. Currently, the euro is the common currency in a “eurozone” that consists of 12 of the 27 EU members, forming a “key zone” within the EU. The eurozone will continue to enlarge as member countries declare themselves ready to surrender their national currency and meet strict EU economic guidelines. The euro has deepened the bond between members by easing trade and travel on the continent and is already the de facto currency in a few non-EU countries, such as Bosnia.

Since its introduction in 2000, the euro has been considered a “success story,” despite some concerns that it caused or contributed to inflation in Europe. Worry about higher prices led some humorists to dub the new currency the “teuro,” teuer meaning expensive in German. Nonetheless, the ever-stronger euro is challenging the hegemony of the U.S. dollar in international financial circles and may well become the preferred medium of exchange in coming years. A recent report from Brussels touts the low rate of inflation (under 2%) and a drop in the unemployment rate in the eurozone (7.8%) as reasons that “economic confidence in the 12 nations that use the euro reached the highest levels in more than five years in July [2006]” (White).

Hanns-D. Jacobsen, a German political scientist specializing in European integration, who was born near the German-Danish border during World War II, considers the recent displays of the German flag during the 2006 World Cup Soccer Championship a sea change in postwar German national identity, which was eroded by guilt and self-questioning. Like others of his generation, Jacobsen rejected German nationalism for Europeanism and internationalism, making his world Italian film, French culture, and world politics. He interprets German pride at the World Cup as a new sense of self-confidence in harmony with its new European identity.

A sense of disbelief lingers in Jacobsen’s voice as he marvels, “The border has been dismantled. Now it’s gone! There is no border control. You can use one currency! My niece is a teacher in a Danish school!”

Because currency integration is an essential step toward a united Europe, Jacobsen, a resident of Berlin since his student days, regards the 12 member states in the eurozone as the leading edge of European integration efforts. He cautions, however, that these states not solidify into a “Little Europe,” but act rather as the locomotive driving the change: “Ein avantgardistisches Kerneuropa dürfe sich aber nicht zu einem Kleineuropa verfestigen; es müsse die Lokomotive sein” (Denkpause 50).

EDUCATION AND EUROCRATS

Tongue in cheek, Peter van der Hijden, deputy head of the EU unit on education, describes how this locomotive works when he explains the general approach of the
30,000 “Eurocrats” working in Brussels. “We cannot tell member states what to do,” he said. “All we can do is bring people together, give them a lunch, and get them to talk.” The result, he added, is that formerly “proud, arrogant and underperforming higher education” has learned to be more self-critical internally and to recognize quality externally.

This is the EU’s “soft law” in evidence everywhere, promoting “quality through exchange.” And it’s working.

“We always work in a subversive manner,” said Hijden, who favors persuasion over force to achieve little successes that eventually lead to bigger successes. The pièce de résistance in such an approach is the proffered EU-carrot: monetary assistance and financial benefits.

The EU’s attempt to harmonize university education among the member states is a good example of what “soft law” can achieve. Hijden is quick to point out that harmonization does not mean “uniformization,” but rather convergence, mostly to benefit students. Intra-European student exchange programs, such as Erasmus, encourage young Europeans to spend a semester or more studying in another member state. Since its inception in 1987, more than a million “Erasmus-happy” students have spent a semester or more on a campus outside their home country. Initially, because there was no uniform credit system as in the U.S. and no quality assurance, students were not so happy when they encountered problems in transferring their coursework back to the home campus. Negotiation — carrots, not sticks — solved the problems.

The process began when the EU directorate for education invited member countries to Bologna in 1999, gave them a nice lunch, and got them to talk. Initially, there was resistance to reform because, according to Hijden, “European universities insisted that they had quality,” but “they just couldn’t define it.” He said, “All we were doing was asking them to describe what they teach, but they literally went through culture shock, shouting, ‘Our curriculum is indescribable!’ and ‘Brussels wants to take over!’”

The soft-law process resulted in a menu of reforms from which member countries could choose and to which they could add. As more and more countries signed on to the Bologna Process, the bandwagon effect gradually took over. Now, nearly 112,000 students each year spend an Erasmus term on another campus and successfully transfer their credits home.

TURKEY

With the “big bang” — the inclusion in May 2004 of eight Eastern European countries, Malta, and Cyprus — there were 25 members in the EU. Two more countries, Romania and Bulgaria, became members in January 2007, and there are three new applicants for membership, Croatia, Macedonia, and Turkey. While each new applicant brings a plethora of potential problems, including the question of proper balance
between the EU’s enlargement and deepening axes, Turkey’s application is of particular interest, especially to Germany.

Although only the fourth largest EU member in size after France, the United Kingdom, and Sweden, Germany is the most populous member state, and its location in the middle of Central Europe has translated into EU leadership — some say domination. Turkey’s inclusion in the EU would change the size equation as it is larger than Germany and its population is growing faster. Furthermore, the fact that 97% of Turkey’s land is located outside of the geographical area defined as Europe, gives further reason for pause. There are more important political and economic issues, however, and since the urban district of Kreuzberg, located in the heart of Berlin, is the largest Turkish population center in the world after Istanbul, should such geographical issues be brought to the table at all?

In Copenhagen in 1993, three requirements were stipulated for EU membership: a democratic government that respects civil rights and the rule of law, a competitive market economy that can contribute to the European budget in a positive way, and “European values.” Since 1993, an unspoken fourth criterion, the “absorption capacity” of the EU, has been added. The major debate swirls around the definition of European values. Does that mean Christian values? Individual human rights? If the latter, how can the EU insist on individual human rights without further alienating immigrant communities in which some are treated as less equal than others? This question remains the über-dilemma in EU member states.

A great deal of negotiating must take place before all the issues are resolved. One proposal insists on taking a broader view, another challenges member states to stand up for the constitutional rights of all persons living within their borders, a third sees resolution resulting from a well-managed negotiation process, and a fourth position insists on a revised EU constitution, lamenting the recent rejection of the EU Constitution with its “bill of rights.”

Taking the broader view, Christoph Meran, editor-in-chief of a government newsletter, Austrian Information, reminds readers in an editorial in the May/June 2006 issue that “Europe’s 30 million Muslims come from forty different countries, and they are ethnically as diverse as is their social background, economic situation and religious beliefs.” Meran admonishes his readers not to see Muslim societies as “homogeneous entities,” because the majority represents “secular or so-called cultural Muslims” (2).

Resistance remains, however. In Austria, for example, opinion runs from “pretty hesitant” to “most opposed,” to the prospect of Turkey’s accession to the EU even though Austria itself benefited greatly from its own membership.
Human Rights

The issue of human rights is raised by Necla Kelek, who was born in Turkey and came to Germany with her parents forty years ago. Kelek holds a German Ph.D. in economics and sociology and has written a best-selling book, Die fremde Braut: Ein Bericht aus dem Inneren des türkischen Lebens in Deutschland [The Foreign Bride: A Report from Inside Turkish Life in Germany]. She argues in that work that German tolerance for multiculturalism has gone too far, permitting the abuse and oppression of Turkish women within its borders. She challenges both the Germans and the Turks, the former to set aside their guilt and fear and live up to the promise of their constitution, and the latter to meet the Germans halfway on the road to integration.

In her book, Kelek describes how some of the two and a half million Turkish immigrants in Germany have established a parallel society, known as the “Kaza,” alongside the German one. Brides 16–22 years old imported from Turkey are expected to serve the family, bear children, and be good Muslims. In numerous interviews, the imported brides told Kelek that they live completely within the Kaza and therefore need neither the Germans nor their language.

While some believe that Islam is not compatible with democracy, Ulrich Weins, who works in the EU Directorate-General for Enlargement, observed that, although some Europeans greatly cherish the continent’s Christian values, being Christian was never a criterion for EU membership. Commenting on Turkey’s application for membership, he noted that Muslims are already living in the EU.

“Islam is not an obstacle” for Turkish membership, said Weins, “but Turkey must guarantee freedom of religion.” Although there are many challenges to Turkish membership, he believes that the “benefits would outweigh the costs if the process were well-managed.” Moreover, he says, the negotiation process leading up to membership is an opportunity “to encourage and influence the process of reform in Turkey.” He believes that “Islam is compatible with democracy, and Turkey’s economic, social, and political interests lie in Europe.”

Orhan Pamuk

The challenges to Turkey of EU membership remain on several dimensions: geopolitical, economic, internal markets, agriculture, regional and structural policies, justice, and home affairs. Another challenge is the question of freedom of expression, perhaps best demonstrated by the case of Orhan Pamuk. Pamuk, one of Turkey’s most celebrated writers whose novels, such as My Name is Red and Snow, have been translated into several languages and are international best-sellers, was awarded the 2006 Nobel Prize in Literature.
After an interview in Europe with a Swiss journalist, Pamuk was questioned by two Turkish public prosecutors. One dismissed a case against him, but the other charged Pamuk under Article 301 of the penal code with “publicly denigrating Turkish identity” (Freely, 111). In a 2006 article in *Granta*, Maureen Freely, one of Pamuk’s main translators, in turn accused the right-wing nationalist press in Turkey of trying to present Pamuk “as an anomaly and a lone voice” by poorly translating his interviews that appeared in the Western press, by misquoting him, and by taking quotes out of context (110).

“[W]e Turks are very proud that we are the only ‘secular’ Islamic state,” says Pamuk. “It’s part of our identity. It’s part of our nationalism, too, unfortunately” (126).

The case against Pamuk was dropped in January 2006, but Article 301 remains in force and others accused of “insulting Turkishness” are awaiting trial.

The EU Constitution

Would a constitution resolve the dilemma that has arisen in the EU over rights and culture? Brussels said Yes, and 18 states readily accepted it. But not this constitution, said France and the Netherlands, rejecting it in national referendums in 2005. Explanations for the No votes include the effects of 9/11, local politics, the weighty 90,000 pages of the document itself, and a lack of marketing.

The pragmatic Eurocrats simply say the constitution will have to be changed, meaning more lunches and more talk. A member of the EU directorate for information technology, Athanassios Chrissafis, underscored this sentiment: “I’m happy that the constitution did not go through, because we will now get a stronger one.”

**GERMAN IDENTITY IN THE EU**

While many Europeans remain critical of, frustrated by, disappointed with, or at least hesitant toward the EU, the organization still represents progress on the continent. Few want to go back to the pre-EU period, and most are aware that the Europeans are creating a New Europe, “a new species of united state” (Reid 227). Despite some reservations, the general German attitude is that Germany should not be a stumbling block to a united Europe, according to Ben Möbius, a policy analyst for the German Trade Union Association.

Möbius notes, however, that while Germans have become more European, less nationalist, and more regional, their identity as Europeans is still not “a terribly advanced one.” A Eurobarometer survey taken by the EU in 2002 found that support in Germany for the EU, and pride in being European, was almost exactly the same as the overall average for all member states: 52% (*Key* 66–67). The strongest support came from the oldest members with the highest standards of living (Luxembourg) or the
newest members (like Ireland), which have prospered significantly from EU membership. Relatively wealthy countries (like Austria) that joined the EU later as well as Euro-skeptic nations (like the United Kingdom) pulled the average down. Reid, however, writes with admiration about the “largely borderless young people know as Generation E — people who consider themselves not Spaniards or Czechs but rather Europeans…” (3).

Zidane’s Head Butt

I watched the July 2006 World Cup Finals in Brussels in an Irish pub filled with Gen-E’ers, along with a scattering of Americans and a sizable contingent of Italians. When their favored team scored or approached the goal, one section of the pub roared in approval while the other sat in polite silence, and vice-versa. Despite soccer loyalties bordering on the fanatical, the crowd was peaceful and respectful. But when French soccer star Zinedine “Zizou” Zidane knocked the wind out of the Italian Marco Matarazzi with a head butt, the Gen-E viewers gasped in unison.

That one moment, soon televised repeatedly to a disbelieving world, pinpoints some of the underlying fissures in the European tectonic plate: immigration, assimilation, social division, growing right-wing extremism, xenophobia, and residual anti-EU sentiment. According to a former French soccer team manager, Zidane “in various ways, reflects the state of the nation” (Aime Jacquet, quoted by Parry). Roland Parry sees the deep social divide in France reflected in soccer fans as well:

As with the job protests, the football mania has been especially intense in poor, largely immigrant suburbs like Seine-Saint-Denis. Football is still a working-class game in France, and the success of Zidane and the other non-white players in the national team, means more to these areas’ inhabitants — famously described as “scum” by interior minister Nicholas [sic] Sarkozy — than to most Frenchmen. (Parry)

The deep social division in France has political repercussions in the ballot box as well as on the football field. In the July/August 2006 issue of Foreign Affairs, Steven Philip Kramer suggests that the current political situation in France gives undue power to the right wing and led to riots and protests as well as the non vote on the EU constitution, thereby destroying “France’s ability to lead the EU, an institution France did so much to create” (126).

For Zidane himself, the political was singularly personal. In an interview on French television, he asked for pardon, in particular from his young fans, but stated that he did not regret his action. He had punished the person who verbally abused his mother and sister. “Je suis un homme avant tous” [I’m a man above all else], said Zidane, asking the public to focus less on his reaction and more on the provocation.
The Über-Dilemma

For Germany, in particular, as well as other EU member states, EU membership has presented an opportunity to gain confidence in a national identity within a European partnership, despite the challenge of social integration. When the Turkish-German sociologist Kelek calls German tolerance for cultural difference “misunderstood” (253), she could just as well be referring to several other European nations with a similar dilemma on their hands. Since supporting human rights and religious freedom are a vital part of Europe’s identity, Kelek insists that cultural tolerance should not be a cover-up for the loss of human rights of thousands of persons living within a country’s borders.

Brussels is countering with its own increased self-confidence, certain that this or any other über-dilemma — including a new constitution — can be effectively resolved through the process of negotiation.

So, what time is lunch?

Anna Lisa Ohm is Professor of German. In July 2006, she attended a faculty development seminar in Brussels and Berlin on the “Challenges to German Identity in the European Context” organized by Studiumforum Berlin. She directed the German Studies study abroad program in Salzburg, Austria, fall 2006.

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