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The virtual frontiers of Europe

Bulgaria and Romania's Christian Orthodox tradition highlights the difficulty in creating a single Christian identity for Europe. A broader Enlightenment tradition of human rights and democracy needs to form the backbone of a European culture. This leads to the inevitable question of whether countries that adhere to such values and institutional norms, but are not geographically part of Europe, are also to be considered European.

The former Czech president Václav Havel once remarked that one of his biggest current problems was that he did not know where Russia began or ended. Today, we could say the same of Europe. This lack of clarity not only concerns Europe's geographical composition, but also its cultural, religious and even civilizational makeup.

While other continents are framed between oceans or mountains, Europe and Asia share the same continent. Despite this, they are often perceived to be entirely separate: a reflection of cultural rather than geographical territory. In other words, in the case of Europe and Asia, geography becomes culture.

When Britain and Ireland joined the EU in 1973, this perception of Europe moved in another direction. French objections to British membership were ultimately revealed to be far more geo-political than cultural. Britain could (and still does) lean on both its history and island status in seeking to resist efforts for full European integration. Concerns were also raised by several European nations (particularly France) that Britain would effectively be a US Trojan horse within Europe, allowing America's unwelcome influence on the continent.

Neither East nor West

With the membership applications of Spain and Portugal (both joined in 1986), concerns were raised about the countries' ability to subscribe to the kind of democracy envisaged by the European project, primarily because both had recently been governed by Fascist dictatorships. However, with regards to both Spain and Portugal's cultural affiliations, it was always clear that they firmly belonged in the Western camp. Similar issues were also raised during the eastern European accession process in 2004.

The first true conflicts over European identity arose during the acceptance of Greece into the Union in 1981. Greece was the first Orthodox Christian country to enter into the European fold. Indeed, the country was different in several other respects: on the one hand, Greece was a country whose ancient civilisation was at the very core of the European identity, whilst on the other, it

had spent many centuries under both Byzantine and Turkish influence.

Ultimately, history offered ammunition to both sceptics and proponents of Greek accession. The country became neither a highly problematic, nor a highly prosperous member of the EU. While Greece entered the Union relatively smoothly, even today Greeks say, "we're going to Europe" when they prepare to visit other European countries. The long-term effects of Byzantine thinking¹ have clearly weakened the resolve of the political establishment to utilise the assistance afforded by the wealthier EU countries more effectively. For a long time, Greece was the only EU country to find itself in such a situation. In 2004, Cyprus entered the EU, and Bulgaria and Romania are also set to join in 2007, adding to the number of countries with a similar outlook.

Not just religion

It becomes apparent that any specific definition of Europeanism is problematic, and that attempts to create a cultural definition are equally futile. Though there are many pan-European historical foundations, a truly unifying narrative is notably absent. Furthermore, the European territories have seen many conflicts, displacements, exoduses, and immigration flows. The end result is that today's Europe boasts a multi-ethnic society, which includes members from a wide variety of racial and religious backgrounds.

Thus, creating a European identity based on Christianity would only really be possible in a very broad historical-civilisational sense. However, both the Enlightenment and western European rationalism, which stood at the birth of modern democracy, as well as the notion of human rights and the theory of the state under rule of law, are part of the European identity. They remain so, despite the fact that many of these notions grew up in resistance to the dominance of religious orthodoxy. Whilst on an intellectual level, this modernity stemmed from Western Christianity, it nonetheless offers a different picture of Europe.

A key component of this is the respect for minorities, and the value of individual human rights and freedoms. Europe's modern political identity, which flowed from the west of the continent towards the east (and to the rest of the world) is at the very least as important as collective cultural and religious notions. Equally important are the cultural identities of individual European societies.

European or imperial

We are thus presented with the question of whether we wish to frame our European identity on rational notions of human rights and democracy, or on a cultural and religious heritage. This decision is crucially important when addressing today's European dilemma. If we view European identity primarily as a form of shared culture, in which a common dominant religion is a key component, then acceptance of "non-European" cultures within the framework of further integration will be highly problematic. Despite this, we continue to expose ourselves to the risks associated with endless soul-searching about what our Europeanism actually means.

If we are to understand European identity institutionally and in terms of values, then all those who adhere to and accept these values will be welcomed and accepted. This leads to the inevitable question of whether countries that adhere to such values and institutional norms, but are not geographically part of

Europe, are also to be considered as European.

But this is primarily a political decision. In the future, one could theoretically see not only Turkey becoming a member of the EU, but also several northern African countries. Indeed, several commentators have noted that increased Euro–Atlantic co–operation may even lead to the creation of some sort of Euro–American union. And even today we have European institutions such as the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co–operation and Development) of which both the US and Canada are members.

There is another strong argument for cultural neutrality when seeking to define the borders of the European project. It is the example of Turkey. When entry negotiations between the EU and Turkey began, the EU's borders were effectively extending towards Asia. In practice, this meant two things: that the "European" tag of the EU would slowly be eliminated, and that in reality Europe was a new form of empire that could and would stretch far beyond its historical borders.

European backgammon

Ultimately, it appears likely that it will become increasingly difficult to reject membership for those countries that at least partly lie on the European continent, such as Russia, as well as countries like Morocco and Tunisia, which have also expressed an interest in joining.

In spite of this, it is clear that any further EU expansion cannot simply be a horizontal absorption, but must also be accompanied by deeper vertical integration based on unified institutions, criteria and political values. In this context, the issue of accepting an EU constitution becomes a key problem. As long as the EU is unable to decide on the level of further integration before further expansion, there exists the genuine threat that the Eurosceptic's greatest wish will come true — the dilution and ultimate collapse of the European integration project.

Thus, not only is it necessary to agree on where Europe begins and ends (or conversely, admit that EU expansion is not confined to geographical boundaries at all) but also to discuss the collective institutional and value–based criteria on which a united Europe is to stand. As long as these are not clear or inclusive enough, the cultural tenets that divide Europeans will shine far more brightly, and make further European integration appear unrealistic.

¹ During much of its history, the Greek–speaking Roman "Byzantine" Empire was known to many of its Western contemporaries as "The Empire of the Greeks" due to the increasing dominance of its Greek population — ed.