Introduction

Initially, only six states decided to integrate, but after successive waves of enlargement the present day European Union (EU) has twenty-eight states covering much of Europe’s space. Each enlargement represented an import not only of new states but also of new institutional structures, political and economic preoccupations, as well as political cultures. Each enlargement has also implied new neighbours and these neighbours have again presented the EC/EU with new opportunities and challenges. In this sense, the history of European integration can be described as a continuous process of identity formation prompted by successive waves of enlargement (Piedrafita and Torreblanca 2005; Sedelmeier 2003).

Territorial enlargement went hand in hand with functional enlargement. Integration has progressively moved to new functional fields – from trade and agriculture to industrial competition, justice and home affairs, monetary and social matters and even defence and foreign policy (Blockmans and Prechal 2008). Neither the widening of the Union nor its deepening had a clear point of arrival. No one knows where Europe ends and functional integration may bring about different outcomes ranging from a European super-state to a hybrid institutional maze.

Widening and deepening have never been smooth but they progressed nevertheless for five decades, despite occasional pauses and contestations. However, the process of widening and deepening has been stalled, if not reversed, over recent years with serious implications for the EU identity formation. The ENP, designed as a ‘softer’ version of widening than enlargement, has failed to meet its prime objectives. In fact, the EU is now facing movement in the opposite direction as exemplified by the results of the Brexit referendum. Deepening is also under threat; a possible collapse of the integrated institutional frameworks of the single currency and Schengen is now being publicly contemplated. Public support for integration is relatively low and Eurosceptic parties have won elections to the European Parliament in such crucial states as France and the United Kingdom.¹ Formally, nation states are still the key decision-making actors within the EU, but they seem to be less and less in control of economic flows, communication and migration. All these developments have a profound impact on EU borders and by extension its identity.
In this chapter, I will examine three basic issues. First, I will explore the relationship of boundary-making and identity construction. Second, I will analyse the EU’s discourse and policy towards its vast and ever changing neighbourhood. Third, I will examine how recent external shocks – the global financial crisis, violent conflicts in the neighbourhood and migration flows – have influenced the EU’s borders and identity.

In conclusion, I will argue that the EU’s strength rested not only on material or institutional capabilities but also on the set of norms and values it proposed: the rule of law, democracy, solidarity and open borders most prominent among them. The EU envisaged Europe as an growing integrated space, where people can move freely and enjoy a similar set of economic, social and political rights. This vision of common European norms is now in tatters because of external shocks, for which the EU was unable to find adequate answers. The failure of the ENP is an illustrative example of how the predicament of Europe’s identity formation impacted on the EU’s foreign policy.

### Borders and identity

The term ‘identity’, like all terms in social sciences, is imprecise and subject to different interpretations. Psychologists, sociologists, lawyers and political analysts talk differently about identity (Guild 2004). In European studies, identity is not only about shared values but also about a certain kind of community that lives on a certain territory (Kastoryano 2008). However, the relationship between community, values and territory has always been somewhat ambiguous. External borders of the EU define this territory and community, but these borders are not fixed and hard. Values can be shared across EU borders, but only EU citizens enjoy the rights granted by EU treaties. In an open-ended, multi-layered and multi-cultural polity such as the EU, identity cannot be simple and straightforward. Yet identity requires some common sense of political belonging, which is often related to territory.

As Pierre Manent argued:

> Instituting a political order, prior to consulting the will of any individuals, requires first the staking out of a common territory. A common territory is the barest requirement of a political community, to be sure, but it is also in a sense the most necessary . . . . While I readily admit that one can renounce the nation as a political form, I do not believe that people can live long within civilization alone without some sense of political belonging (which is necessarily exclusive), and thus without some definition of what is held in common.

(Manent 1996: 7–8)

When identity is constructed in relation to space, we cannot but focus on borders. Borders delimit individual spaces, but they are not just lines on a map. They represent complex institutions determining the link between the territory, authority and rights. Borders define arrangements for market transactions, coercion powers, politico-administrative entitlements and communication clusters. These arrangements can be formal or informal to various degrees, but they are not given or stable; they are subject to historical change driven by technological, economic, social, cultural, political and military developments.

Foreign policy specialists feel comfortable with the notion of borders. After all, without borders it would be difficult to distinguish what is foreign and what is domestic. Foreign policy is principally geared to implementing a set of interests defined territorially, even though it is increasingly difficult to provide a ‘territorial defence’ or enhance economic interests of a certain territory only, national or European.
Foreign policy specialists feel less comfortable with the notion of identity, despite the growing popularity of such terms as soft power or cultural diplomacy (Nye 2004; Melissen 2005). The way foreign policy specialists handle identity issues is chiefly through the demarcation and enforcement of legal, administrative and military boundaries. Boundary construction helps to identify those on behalf of whom foreign policy is being conducted and those who are on its receiving end, friends and enemies alike.

Of course, anthropologists or sociologists use a different notion of borders. For them, borders are also about binary distinctions – us/them, inside/outside, here/there – but their focus is more on people rather than states (Newman 2006: 147–148). Anthropologists argue that personal borders determine our daily practices more than legal or institutional ones. Sociologists emphasize cultural borders such as language (Barbour and Carmichael 2000; Carsten 2000). In fact, the linguistic border is difficult to trespass for many people, with implications for mutual communication. The EU has twenty-four official languages, which explains why so many trans-border agreements are being ‘lost in translation’. DG Translation within the European Commission has translated 2.30 million pages in 2014 at a cost of EUR330 million. German may well be the most widely used mother tongue, but only 18 per cent of Europeans speak German; 51 per cent of Europeans speak English of some sort but this has not led to a genuine pan-European press, for instance.

For political theorists, borders reflect, first of all, power relationships. Boundary making is thus about creating hierarchies and dependencies. It is also about creating rules and order. Max Weber and different generations of his disciples – Charles Tilly, Stein Rokkan or Stefano Bartolini – argued that the whole history of human organizations could largely be read as a series of continuing efforts to bring territorial borders to correspond to and coincide with systemic functional boundaries and to be in line with the consolidated socio-political hierarchies of corresponding populations (Tilly 1975; Rokkan et al. 1987; Bartolini 2005).

This process of boundary making has a profound, but not mechanical, impact on identity formation. The history of states, for instance, shows two distinct patterns. Sometimes state borders have been set to reflect prevalent cultural patterns related to language, ethnicity or cultural myths. At other times, it was the other way around. As Massimo d’Azeglio famously observed, during the nineteenth century: ‘We have made Italy. Now we must make Italians’ (‘L’Italia è fatta. Restano da fare gli italiani’).

The interplay between border making and identity formation is particularly complex in the case of the EU. This is because the scope and nature of EU borders were always highly ambiguous and subject to contestation and change. There is no rational or ‘natural’ way to draw boundaries of the EU. The scope of borders depends on the degree of diversity the EU can ‘digest’ in political, legal and economic terms. External pressures also define the scope of EU borders. The EU’s enlargement to Southern Europe and then to Central and Eastern Europe was driven by a mixture of geopolitical and economic considerations, which were not always widely shared among European electorates. Cultural factors were important, but not decisive, in the EU’s border formation. Otherwise, a country of Tolstoy, Tchaikovsky and Dostoyevsky would be seriously considered as a potential EU member.

The nature of EU borders has not been straightforward either. There was always a heated discussion on whether these borders ought to be relatively open or closed, soft or hard. Economists argued that it is disadvantageous and impractical to hamper cross-border movement of capital, goods, services and labour. Security specialists, on the other hand, contested the notion of open or porous borders (Caparini and Otwin 2006). Political leaders shifted between these two extreme positions depending on circumstances and audiences. Each terrorist attack reinforced the notion of sealed borders, but successive political upheavals in neighbouring countries demanded more open borders for either humanitarian or political reasons.
The EU's boundary policy had numerous practical and symbolic implications. Each new territorial acquisition has been studied by neighbouring states and people, sometimes evoking hope and sometimes suspicion. Each EU enlargement represented an import of diverse political, legal and economic cultures creating new challenges and opportunities. Hardening of EU borders pleased anti-immigration campaigners, but angered human right campaigners. The Schengen regime was viewed by some as a symbol of free travel and by some as a symbol of exclusion (Grabbe 2000).

All this has shaped the EU's identity, although in a rather messy manner. Ever changing EU borders, in terms of scope and nature, complicated if not frustrated the identity formation process. The opening of EU internal borders has not necessarily resulted in a fusion of cultural identities. Most EU citizens retain strong national affiliations and loyalties. But the policy of closing EU external borders has not necessarily resulted in greater security, while antagonizing the EU's neighbours.

A series of external shocks in the early twenty-first century – financial, security and migratory – have exposed the weakness of the EU border policies and caused a profound identity crisis. The EU's borders proved unable to protect Europe's citizens from either 'pre-modern' or 'post-modern' pressures. On the one hand, we see a resurgence of national power politics benefiting strong states such as Germany, Russia or Turkey and, on the other, a cascading globalization benefiting such transnational actors as financial speculators or human traffickers. Many European citizens found themselves without effective means of protection and they began to lose a sense of common destiny. With no clear answer as to who 'we' are within the EU, it is hard to design foreign policies in any meaningful way (Guéhenno 1998). In other words, the EU's fuzzy borders generated a fuzzy European identity with serious foreign policy implications.

Imperial foreign policies and the fuzziness of identities

These EU foreign policies also contributed to the fuzziness of borders and identity. The EU has tried to embrace neighbouring states, rather than insulating itself from them through a policy of deterrence and containment. This has been done for a variety of reasons. The war in Yugoslavia demonstrated that the EU can scarcely insulate itself from major conflicts on its doorsteps and it lacks the military means that would allow it to practice an effective policy of deterrence and containment. In addition and probably more crucially, sealing borders was impractical in the age of economic globalization and internet communication. Democracy and good governance have been the best means of preventing the spread of violence in neighbouring countries. A meaningful promotion of democracy and good governance required various forms of trans-border cooperation, if not integration (Dimitrova and Pridham 2007; Freyburg et al. 2015). Last, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, citizens of Central and Eastern Europe embraced the notions of democracy and the free market as part of their 'return' to Europe strategy. It was difficult to leave this quest unanswered despite the initial scepticism (Vachudova 2005).

Enlargement of the EU has therefore become the official EU policy, and when it became domestically unpopular it was replaced by the ENP, with the same rhetoric and rationale. 'Everything but institutions' was the famous term coined by the President of the European Commission, Romano Prodi, to distinguish between the enlargement and neighbourhood policy (that is, the ENP). Although neighbours were no longer guaranteed EU membership, they were still offered EU help on similar conditions as was the case with the enlargement policy. The more neighbours embraced EU laws and regulations, the more barriers to trans-border cooperation were promised to be lifted.
The EU’s expectations of states participating in the ENP framework have not necessarily been more modest than in the case of prospective EU members. For instance, after the Arab ‘Spring’, the prime EU objective in the region has become so-called ‘deep democracy’, which demanded from Arab partners not just free elections but also profound political reforms, institution building, fighting against corruption, an independent judiciary and support to civil society. 9

The ENP framework, like the enlargement one, represented an unusual way of carrying out foreign policies; the instruments applied towards neighbours were largely ‘domestic’ and the policy blurred the distinction between internal and external matters.

EU policies towards neighbours were more about creating a ‘borderless’ Europe than a ‘fortress’ Europe as envisaged by the paradigm of deterrence and containment. True, borders were blurred rather than totally open for countries taking part in the ENP framework, but the intention was to gradually get rid of borders, not to reinforce them (Del Sarto 2015; Armstrong and Anderson 2007). The official ENP rhetoric talked about an ‘undivided’, ‘wider’ Europe, ‘a ring of friends’, ‘trans-European networks’ and pan-European ‘zones of prosperity’. This rhetoric emphasized that EU borders are anything but sealed. The policy was to promote trans-border ‘connectivity’ and ‘mobility’. 10 This trans-border connectivity and mobility was the way to make neighbours secure, prosperous and stable. It was seen to be the answer to a range of social and economic problems confronting neighbours: exclusion, peripherality and lack of competitiveness (Jensen and Richardson 2004). It was a means to make EU foreign policy effective and in tune with the requirements of modernity and globalization.

This EU policy obviously blurred not only the notion of borders but also the meaning of EU membership. In an ‘undivided’ Europe, composed of numerous cross-border networks, the difference between ENP partners, candidates for EU membership and full-fledged EU members could not be sharp. This EU policy has also blurred the notion of the EU’s identity. In an undivided Europe composed of numerous cross-border networks, identity was perceived as multi-level, open-ended and variable. Outsiders were would-be insiders, norms were universal and borders were zones of interaction (Delanty and Rumford 2005).

It is often suggested that the process of European integration resembles a state building process, but the evidence presented so far suggests that integration resembles an empire building process. In other words, to understand the EU policy of borders and its subsequent implications for the EU’s identity, we need to apply an imperial rather than statist paradigm (Zielonka 2006). While states usually have hard and fixed external borders, empires have soft borders undergoing regular enlargements. The EU is obviously a prototype of the latter. The distinction between ‘foreign’ and ‘domestic’ affairs is clear in typical states, but this is not the case in empires where the distinction between the centre and the periphery is more pronounced. Again, the latter situation could be observed in the case of the EU, especially within the ENP framework. Various types of state borders – cultural, legal, economic and military – usually overlap. The central government of a classical state is fully in charge of these borders and the territory within them. In the case of empires (and the EU) we observe disassociation between authoritative allocations, functional competencies and territorial constituencies. Instead of a clear hierarchical structure, in empires we have the interpenetration of various types of political units and loyalties. The EU shares this imperial feature too. The multiple, open-ended and variable identities observed in the EU are also more common in empires than states.

Moreover, the EU justifies or rationalizes its policies towards neighbours in a way characteristic of empires (Del Sarto 2016). Put differently, the EU official discourse resembles the ideology of empire and its civilizing mission (Zielonka 2013). The neighbourhood is being portrayed as an unstable and underdeveloped periphery that needs to be taken care of lest it become a source of political or economic turmoil. The EU, by contrast, is being portrayed as a benevolent and
rational actor congruent with the deeper forces of modernization and cross-border integration. As such, it is well equipped to act as an agent of peace, democracy, sustainable growth and good governance in the vast area falling under the ENP. As was often claimed, the EU represents a normative power ‘civilizing’ the external environment. It installs order, promotes development, constructs viable institutional structures and spreads rules of legitimate behaviour. The fact that this noble self-vision was not always shared by EU neighbours does not undermine the importance of the EU civilizing mission.

Civilizing missions are not merely rhetorical exercises: they try to convince the peripheries that imperial policies are beneficial for them, not merely for the imperial centre. They make the peripheries comply rather than rebel. They create normative bonds between the peripheries and the metropolis.

Civilizing missions are also important for the formation of the imperial identity. They help empires to define their vision of the world and their own role in it. They also help to identify and explain the purpose of imperial policies. As Thomas Diez put it in the contemporary European context:

the discourse of the EU as a normative power constructs a particular self of the EU (and it is indeed perhaps the only form of identity that most of the diverse set of actors within the EU can agree on), while it attempts to change others through the spread of particular norms.

(Diez 2005: 614)

**Failure of the imperial ‘dream’**

The ENP has clearly failed to live up to its promise. As a 2015 study of the German Marshall Fund put it:

The European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) is in tatters. When launching this regional framework for its neighbours in 2004, the EU stated that its ambition was to surround itself with a ‘ring of friends’, a zone of well-governed, stable and prosperous states, with whom the EU has close and cooperative ties. Little over a decade later, instead, realities in the European neighbourhood resemble a veritable ring of fire, with regional challenges and pressures on Europe greater than ever before.

(Inayeh and Forbrig 2015: 1; see also Juncos and Whitman 2015)

The 2015 Policy Memo by the European Council on Foreign Relations was equally critical about the ENP’s legacy. The ENP’s aim was to ‘encircle the EU by a ring of prosperous, stable and friendly countries’, but the paper concludes that after a decade since the ENP was launched, the EU ‘finds itself in a neighbourhood characterized by conflict, counter-revolution and resurgent extremism’ (Witney and Dennison 2015: 1).

The question is, what went wrong and what are the implications for the EU’s identity? Explanations of the ENP’s failure range from technical to institutional, cultural to existential. Technical explanations focus on an incorrect policy blueprint of the ENP. EU policies towards neighbours were too rigid and technocratic, it is argued. Sixteen different neighbours have all too often been subjected to the same policy framework with little space for differentiation and flexibility (Koenig 2016; Lehne 2014).

Institutional explanations point to inadequate procedures for responding to foreign policy emergency situations and to the lack of military instruments for coping with local violence in
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the neighbourhood. EU institutional priorities also seemed misguided. For instance, it has been pointed out that the EU’s major preoccupation was migration rather than democracy, good governance, economic development and social justice (Noutcheva 2015; Lavenex 2011).

Cultural explanations point to the EU’s difficulty in exporting norms for which there was little demand in the neighbourhood. For instance, it is difficult to promote democracy in countries where liberal and secular values are not widely shared. As Olivier Roy has argued:

> The democratization movement in the Arab world came precisely after thirty years of what has been called the ‘return of the sacred’, an obvious process of re-Islamization of everyday life, coupled with the rise of Islamist parties . . . There was no flowering of ‘liberal Islam’ preceding the spread of democratic ideas in the Middle East. There are a few reformist religious thinkers who are lauded here and there in the West, but none has ever had much popular appeal in any Arab country.

(Roy 2012: 6)

Existential explanations point to a profound crisis of European integration which undermined the EU’s ability to shape its external environment. Some analysts argue that the EU is already in the process of disintegration, but even less dramatic assessments agree that the EU became inward looking, lost its ‘sex appeal’ and betrayed the values it was preaching to neighbours (Gstöhl 2016; Bosse 2007). No wonder the EU is having problems in getting its foreign policies off the ground, let alone forging its civilizing mission.

An introverted, conflicted and paralysed EU does not match the vision of an open, if not borderless, Union actively promoting democracy, stability and a friendly neighbourhood. Today ‘unity in diversity’ seems to be an empty slogan and the EU lacks a recognizable ‘self’ that would make people stick to the Union in difficult times. The crisis has also undermined, if not discredited, the EU’s modernist notion of administrative competence and social progress. It showed that traditional notions of loyalty, trust and affection are still important, but found chiefly in nation states and not in cross-border regions and networks. The assertion of power politics within the EU at the expense of the power of laws and moral norms has also had serious identity implications. Let’s examine how developments on the ground began to question the proclaimed common values and community spirit of the EU.

Over the last decade or so, the EU has experienced a series of external shocks. The most crucial were geopolitical (in Eastern Europe, the Middle East and North Africa), financial and migratory. The origins and scenarios of these shocks were complex, but they all have pulled EU Member States apart, complicating a process of joint European interest and identity formation. A major cleavage has emerged between the creditor and the debtor states within the EU, between states welcoming refugees and those resisting them, between those concerned with Eastern Europe and those concerned with the Southern Mediterranean. What is more, all these groups are split still further into many sub-groups, each fiercely arguing their partisan case. At stake is equal access to EU decision-making and resources. At stake is also the mutual trust needed for any meaningful cooperation, especially in difficult times. The EU can hardly forge an effective foreign policy if Member States are suspicious of each other’s intentions and have little confidence that their differences can be bridged by accommodation and compromise. The result is a general paralysis of decision-making, a concentration on EU internal matters and a neglect of the external environment. It is not surprising therefore that the EU is increasingly introverted and passive towards its neighbourhood.

The domestic situation in numerous EU Member States has also deteriorated. Excessive debt, low or even negative growth and mounting social problems have elevated to prominence
anti-establishment parties on the left and right of the political spectrum. Liberal norms have been questioned and even compromised in some cases. In short, the EU has lost its power of example and legitimacy to promote liberal values abroad. The EU can hardly ‘preach’ liberal democracy to neighbours if neo-fascist parties are winning ever more parliamentary seats in some of the Member States, if EU governments constrain the freedom of the media or if they undermine the judicial independence.

Also, the EU cannot promote a vision of an open Europe if its external borders are being sealed by hastily erected walls and barbed wire fences. Even internal EU borders are being reinstated between individual Member States in response to terrorism and refugee flows.

The handling of the Euro has also questioned if not contradicted basic values of solidarity and social justice within the EU. Eurozone policies towards Greece and other insolvent Eurozone members have been found rigid and stingy, if not dictatorial, by many independent observers. They exacerbated social problems without necessarily providing a solution for debt problems. Can neighbours still believe that integration is beneficial for weak and strong states alike? If EU Member States do not treat each other as friends, will neighbours receive any better treatment? If the solidarity principle does not apply to EU Member States, can it apply to non-members?

Moreover, it is not easy to maintain that the EU represents a community based on law. Today, crucial decisions within the EU are being made in an informal mode in Berlin, with little input from formal institutions from Brussels. New treaties are written with only some states in mind and they envisage numerous forms of punishment and external forms of interference that are widely seen as arbitrary. Institutions not properly grounded in EU law, such as the Eurogroup, are playing a major role with no written rules of conduct, let alone public scrutiny. If rule of law does not prevail within the EU, can it prevail in a wider European framework? Can neighbours believe that the import of EU laws will help them in eradicating shady informal deals and power politics?

In sum, a series of external shocks have not only undermined the EU’s ability to act in the neighbourhood; they also questioned the normative rationale of the EU’s Neighbourhood Policy. The EU’s civilizing mission has begun to look increasingly utopian and less legitimate or sincere.

**Conclusions: empire without a purpose**

The EU’s current problems emerge more from ideational than material factors. The EU is still a very wealthy actor despite all the problems related to the common currency. It has not been destroyed by any war or invasion. The problems emerge crucially from the failure of norms and visions that kept the EU together. This is the reason why the EU found it difficult to identify viable collective responses to a series of external shocks. The EU prided itself on being based on law, democracy, social justice and solidarity. It stood for open borders and regional integration. Trans-border trade, mobility and communication were the means to overcome historic fears and cultural prejudices. These common European values have inspired ever greater numbers of European nations. Even more of them decided to give up traditional sovereignty by joining European institutional structures, the EEC and then the EU and the Euro. Others were looking at these structures with admiration, if not jealousy. They either aspired to join these structures or to imitate them.

The failure of this inspiring common European identity has been a blow to the integrative system. Some will argue that the EU’s peculiar identity was always artificial because it was imposed on Europeans from the top with little grassroots authentic engagement. Others will argue that the EU’s normative vision was not supported by adequate institutions and material
resources. Yet others will point to global trends which undermined European identity formation. In their view, a civilian power such as the EU could probably not survive the rise of terrorism, religious fundamentalism and political despotism in its environment.

However, it is hard to deny that European integration, understood as both deepening and widening, has been a success for several decades. The ENP has been the last and probably the least successful chapter of the otherwise plausible agenda. EU leaders and civil servants can hardly be blamed for everything that went wrong in Europe over recent years. However, we should point to cases of the compromising if not violating of norms and values that were the pillars of European integration. A divided, conflicted, inward-looking and selfish Europe has something to do with their political choices. It didn’t have to be that way.

Notes

7 See also EUobserver, ‘Terrorists gain “advantage” from EU open borders’, https://euobserver.com/migration/133123.

References

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