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## Conflicting and reinforcing identities in expanding Europe from 1995 to 2019. Findings revisited in an even larger Europe

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In 2012 we published an article on how attachment to social groups might extend from local communities to the nation and to a transnational entity in the context of the expanding European Union. Since then, the EU has expanded further to formally include a number of post-communist countries and began to face some significant backlash both in Western and Eastern Europe. Using extended International Social Survey Programme data covering 28 countries and 3 time-points between 1995 and 2015, we revisit the findings and conclusions of our original article. In addition, we complement our analysis with results from the Eurobarometer surveys between 2004 and 2019. Our updated analyses show that 1) the overall level of national identification did not increase substantially in the Western countries despite the rise in nationalist movements in Europe, 2) the length of membership in the EU does not necessarily increase European identification in the long run, notwithstanding a recent uptick in European identification, and 3) ethnic minorities, particularly in post-communist countries, have turned away from Europe.

**Keywords:** European identity; national identity; ISSP; Eurobarometer

### Introduction

In 2012 we published an article on how attachment to social groups extends from local communities to the nation and to a transnational entity in the context of the expanding European Union, using survey data collected in 1995 and 2003 (Hadler, Tsutsui, and Chin 2012). Since then, the EU has expanded further to formally include a number of post-communist countries and began to face some significant backlash both in Western and Eastern Europe. The most visible political manifestations of this backlash are in the rise of populist leaders who openly flaunt their anti-EU platform to cultivate xenophobic, anti-immigrant sentiments in many European countries. In light of these recent trends, how has the relationship between national and European attachment changed? Have overall levels of identification with one's nation and Europe increased or decreased, and have the patterns of identification continued to differ among minority groups as interethnic tensions have become increasingly heightened across Europe? Given that many post-communist countries formally joined the EU recently, do they exhibit different trajectories of

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political identification compared to their Western European counterparts with long-term membership in the EU? Using more recent data on geopolitical attachments, collected between 1995 and 2015 by the International Social Survey Program ([www.issp.org](http://www.issp.org)) and presenting descriptive results from the Eurobarometer surveys (2004–2019), we offer answers to these questions about the trends in national and transnational identification in European countries.

The theoretical focus of our 2012 article was on identifying micro- and macro-level forces that shape national and European identities and whether these two identities are conflicting or reinforcing. Overall, our findings were in line with other research showing that national identity is stronger than European identity. We also found a strong correlation between the different levels of identification, supporting the idea of nested geopolitical attachments that expand from local to national to transnational (Bloom 1990; Opp 2005; Putnam 2000; Bruter 2005).

Focusing on the magnitude of European identity, we originally observed a rather stable picture from 1995 to 2003 in Western European countries, while the respondents in the post-communist countries held a strong pro-European stance in 1995, which dropped significantly by 2003, on the eve of the EU-accession for many of these countries. One of our explanations for this surprising decline was that the expectations of many respondents in post-communist countries were not met when the negotiations with the EU came to a close. In line with an instrumentalist approach – the idea that perceiving benefits of membership increases attachment to a social group while a lack thereof decreases attachment (Gabel 1998; Antonsich 2009) – we concluded that early excitement in post-communist nations about the benefits of EU membership was followed by disappointment due to a lack of tangible benefits. This was right before their EU membership was official, and it is an open question whether formally joining the EU in 2004 has changed their perception. Our updated data will address this question.

On national identity, our previous analysis found that respondents have stronger national identification than European identification in all countries. Further, residents of post-communist countries expressed stronger identification with their nations than Western Europeans in 1995. This gap, however, diminished by 2003. Since then, right-wing parties and nationalist policies have gained momentum in Europe, as integration of the European Union has continued to proceed. In our 2012 article, we noted that there is some evidence that ‘the rise of the European Union has brought about a resurgence of nationalism’ (Hadler, Tsutsui, and Chin 2012, 393). Following that logic, we anticipate that the more recent data might show an increase in national identification as a reaction to deepening Europeanization.

Besides differences between Western and post-communist countries, we also found a decisive influence of minority status on national and European identification. Overall, ethnic minorities identified more strongly with Europe than with their nation. We explained this finding using Social Identity Theory, Self-Categorization Theory (Tajfel and Turner 1986; Turner 1985; Ellemers and Haslam 2012; Hogg 2016) as well as Rational Choice Theory (Hechter 1994; Riker 1995; Hardin 1998, 2000). Frequently denied recognition as a legitimate member of the nation, minorities find more of a sense of belonging and recognition as well as protection of their rights in the EU, leading to greater identification with Europe. European identity and attachment seem to satisfy a fundamental psychological need for people to be associated with positive identity (Baumeister and Leary 1995), especially in times of uncertainty. We examine with updated data whether this tendency has continued since 2003.

## **Data**

Our empirical analysis here uses, first, public opinion data on ‘National Identity’ – the 1995, 2003, and 2013 modules of the International Social Survey Program (ISSP). The data for these three surveys were collected in 1995/96, 2003/04 and 2013/14/15. The surveys are random samples and representative of the adult population of each country with a sample size of at least 1,000 respondents in each country and wave. Since ISSP does not use a panel design, respondents differ over time, and therefore we are only able to analyze how cross-sectional trends change across the three time points, not how the same individuals changed their views. We include all 28 European countries that fielded any of the three ISSP national identity modules. National identity and European identity are measured in the same way as in the original paper, using the item ‘How close do you feel to ...’ a) your country and b) Europe respectively. The response categories were ‘very close’, ‘close’, ‘not very close’, ‘not close at all’, and ‘can’t choose’. We present descriptive findings and results from a multilevel regression using an unbalanced three-level design that considers differences between countries, changes over time, and differences between individuals (see Deeming and Jones 2015; Fairbrother 2014 for this set-up).

In addition, we also present results from the Eurobarometer (EB) surveys from 2004 to 2019 (<https://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/index.cfm>) that include all current EU member countries. We limited this part of our analysis to 2004 onwards as the earlier Standard-Eurobarometer surveys did not include all current member countries. The EB wording differs slightly from the ISSP questions with the main question asking ‘People may feel different degrees of attachment to their town or village, to their region, to their country or to Europe. Please tell me how attached you feel to ...’ and offering the answer possibilities ‘Very attached’, ‘Fairly attached’, ‘Not very attached’, and ‘Not at all attached’. Yet, the results correlate significantly at the country level. Further, we present only country-level results, as the EB demographic data is less comprehensive than the ISSP variables. As such, we are unable to replicate our analyses on minority differences in attachment using the EB data.

## **Results based on ISSP data**

**Table 1** provides an overview of the average levels of national and European identification for each country and time point, the year of accession to the European Union and whether a country is a post-communist nation. These descriptive findings suggest that respondents identify more strongly with their nation than with Europe, which is in line with our previous findings. Differences within countries and between countries as well as changes over time are discussed in the subsequent paragraphs as we report the results of our multi-level regressions.

**Table 2** reports the effects of individual level predictors from a three-level regression considering country, time-, and individual-level variables. We aimed to include all variables used in our previous article, but had to exclude ‘closeness to ethnic group’ and ‘perceived EU benefits’ as these variables were no longer included in the latest ISSP survey. However, models using the remaining variables re-confirm the findings of our previous article: The different levels of geopolitical identification support each other (except for the town to Europe effect, which was also not significant in our original paper); minorities feel more distant from the nation-state, and ethnic minorities and migrants identify more strongly with Europe. Increasing income fosters both national and European identification,

Table 1. National and European identification by country (1995, 2003, and 2013)\*.

EU- Accession Year	Country	National Identification			European Identification		
		1995	2003	2013	1995	2003	2013
1957	Germany-West	3.01	3.07	3.20	2.61	2.69	2.81
1957	Italy	3.26	NA	NA	2.84	NA	NA
1957	Netherlands	3.13	NA	NA	2.54	NA	NA
1957	France	NA	3.46	3.49	NA	2.60	2.63
1957	Belgium	NA	NA	3.01	NA	NA	2.56
1973	Great Britain	2.86	3.08	2.96	1.90	1.97	1.96
1973	Ireland	3.45	3.45	3.14	2.37	2.41	2.26
1973	Denmark	NA	3.47	3.44	NA	2.61	2.68
1986	Spain	3.29	3.33	3.26	2.72	2.90	2.76
1986	Portugal	NA	3.43	3.33	NA	2.85	2.69
1991	Germany-East <sup>PC</sup>	3.07	3.02	3.10	2.62	2.61	2.70
1995	Austria	3.46	3.52	NA	2.91	2.95	NA
1995	Sweden	3.14	3.26	3.26	2.31	2.54	2.56
1995	Finland	NA	3.39	3.39	NA	2.35	2.48
2004	Estonia <sup>PC</sup>	NA	NA	3.34	NA	NA	2.31
2004	Hungary <sup>PC</sup>	3.75	3.72	3.38	3.68	3.58	3.19
2004	Czech Republic <sup>PC</sup>	3.38	3.27	3.34	3.06	2.87	3.03
2004	Slovenia <sup>PC</sup>	3.41	3.40	3.11	2.87	2.78	2.49
2004	Poland <sup>PC</sup>	3.48	3.37	NA	2.94	2.79	NA
2004	Latvia <sup>PC</sup>	3.25	3.04	3.10	2.18	1.84	2.04
2004	Slovak Republic <sup>PC</sup>	3.28	3.28	3.20	3.00	2.81	2.69
2004	Lithuania <sup>PC</sup>	NA	NA	3	NA	NA	2.40
2007	Bulgaria <sup>PC</sup>	3.62	3.59	NA	3.41	2.95	NA
2013	Croatia <sup>PC</sup>	NA	NA	3.17	NA	NA	2.26
None	Norway	3.45	3.32	3.47	2.71	2.72	2.94
None	Switzerland	NA	3.32	3.37	NA	2.98	2.81
None	Georgia <sup>PC</sup>	NA	NA	3.54	NA	NA	1.80
None	Iceland	NA	NA	3.40	NA	NA	2.55

\*Average mean values of scale (1 = not close at all, 2 = not very close, 3 = close, and 4 = very close). NA: Not available as country did not take part. PC indicates post-communist countries. Source: ISSP 1995, 2003, and 2013.

whereas education has a positive effect on European identification and a negative effect on the national identification. As for controls, national identification is stronger among older respondents, and rural dwellers and weaker among respondents who feel close to left-wing parties. As for European identity, it is stronger among women, younger respondents, urban dwellers, and respondents who see themselves in the political middle.

Table 2 also includes a variable on the change over time. Here, it is visually apparent that there is declining identification with the nation and declining attachment to Europe from 1995 to 2013. Models considering interactions, however, show that this trend is mostly true for post-communist countries. Table 3 tests the effects of various macro-level predictors when included in addition<sup>1</sup> to the predictors presented in Table 2. The comparison of the different models shows that national identification declines significantly in post-communist countries, in countries that experienced an economic growth, and in countries that are EU members or joined the EU during the period under investigation. These three factors all point in the same direction: Post-communist countries are also the countries that have experienced large economic growth and joined the EU recently. Similarly, for European identification, the decline over time is significant only in post-communist countries. Finally, the consideration of IGOs did not yield any significant results.

Table 2. Individual-level determinants of national and European identification\*.

	National Id.			European Id.		
	B	Sig	SE	B	Sig	SE
Time (wave 0,1, 2)	-.042	**	.012	-.050	*	.024
<i>Geopolitical identification</i>						
Town	.128	**	.004	-.012	*	.005
Local	.265	**	.004	.150	**	.005
National				.365	**	.005
European	.208	**	.003			
<i>Minority status</i>						
Ethnic	-.175	**	.009	.054	**	.012
Religious	-.055	**	.006	.001		.008
Migrant	-.039	**	.009	.186	**	.012
<i>Elite characteristics</i>						
Education	-.002	*	.001	.022	**	.001
Income	.017	**	.004	.054	**	.005
<i>Controls</i>						
Female	.007		.005	.027	**	.006
Age	.004	**	.001	-.002	*	.001
Age <sup>2</sup> (*1000)	-.000		.000	-.028	**	.010
Large city (Ref = rural)	.033	**	.007	.071	**	.010
Small city (Ref = rural)	.015		.008	.010		.010
Pol. Orientation	.029	**	.003	-.008	*	.004
Left (Ref = center)	-.100	**	.014	-.101	**	.018
Right (Ref = center)	.033		.018	-.178	**	.024
<i>Variances</i>						
Country	.021	**	.006	.104	**	.030
Time	.003	**	.001	.015	**	.004
Individual	.339	**	.002	.587	**	.003

\*B values, significance (\* = .05, \*\* = .01), and standard errors based on multilevel regression with three levels: country (n = 28), wave (country\*time, n = 60), and individuals (n = 65805). IGLS estimation. Also included but not displayed: constant, embedded variables for missing answers. Full models available upon request from corresponding author.

Our 2012 article also pointed to the importance of ethnic minorities. We thus tested for interactions between minority status and changes over time. Figures 1 and 2 report the effects of a model considering all variables of Table 2 plus the variables of ‘post-communist history’, ‘ethnic minority’, ‘time’, and interactions between the former two and the time variable. These interactions show that between 1995 and 2013, overall levels of national and European identification have declined particularly in post-communist countries, whereas the level of identification remained rather stable in Western countries. As for European identification, we observe substantial differences between the general population and ethnic minorities. The European identification used to be the strongest among minorities in post-communist countries in 1995, but by 2013 became the lowest in these countries. In Western countries, minorities still hold a stronger European identification than the general population, but their level of identification has also dropped from 2003 to 2013.

### Results based on Eurobarometer data

Figures 3 and 4 report the attachment of Europeans to their country and to Europe respectively. Similar to ISSP, Eurobarometer (EB) data shows that the attachment to the nation is

Table 3. Macro-level determinants of national and European identification\*.

	National identification			European identification		
	B	Sig.	SE	B	Sig.	SE
Model 1						
Time	-.042	**	.012	-.050	*	.024
Model 2						
Time			.015	.015		.029
Post-communism	.038		.062	.179		.132
PC*Time	-.051	*	.020	-.137	**	.041
Model 3						
Time	-.021	+	.012	-.030		.026
EU	-.117	**	.029	-.106		.068
Model 4						
Time	.025		.032	-.085		.69
GDP <i>p. capita</i> (country)	-.034		.053	.022		.124
GDP <i>p. capita</i> (growth)	-.164	*	.074	.083		.159
Model 5						
Time	-.036		.022	-.038		.044
IGO (country)	.054		.037	-.087		.085
IGO (growth)	-.007		.013	-.006		.026

\*each model also includes the individual-level predictors of Table 2. Post-communism, GDP *p. capita* (country), and IGO (country) are level 3 variables. GDP and IGO equal the mean value across all available waves. GDP growth and IGO growth represent the value of a given wave minus the country average. EU membership represents if a country is a member of the EU at the time of the survey. It thus can change between waves. B values, significance (\* = .05, \*\* = .01), and standard errors based on multilevel regression with three levels: country ( $n = 28$ ), wave (country\*time,  $n = 60$ ), and individuals ( $n = 65805$ ). IGLS estimation. Also included but not displayed: constant, embedded variables for missing answers. Full models available upon request from corresponding author.

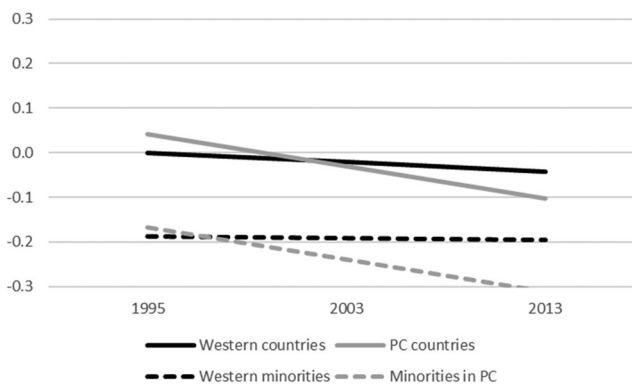


Figure 1. The effects of post-communism and ethnic minority on national identification over time (ISSP data)\*. \*Estimates from a ML regression that includes all individual-level variables shown in Table 2 plus post-communism, time, and the interactions post-communism\*time and ethnic\_minority\*time.

much stronger than that to Europe. The percentage of respondents, who are very attached to their country, lies between 51% and 57% during 2004 and 2019, whereas the corresponding figure for the European attachment is only between 13% and 22%.

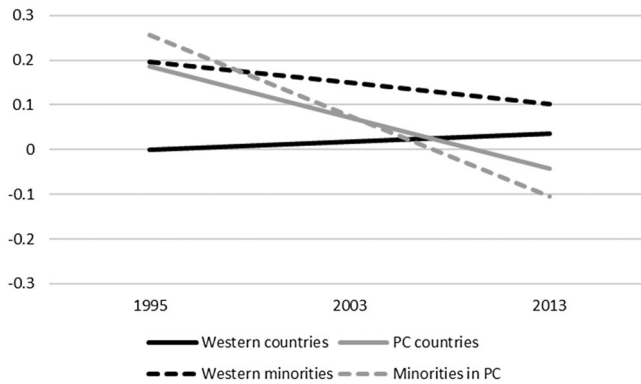


Figure 2. The effects of post-communism and ethnic minority on European identification over time (ISSP data)\*. \* Estimates from a ML regression that includes all individual-level variables shown in Table 2 plus post-communism, time, and the interactions post-communism\*time and ethnic\_minority\*time.

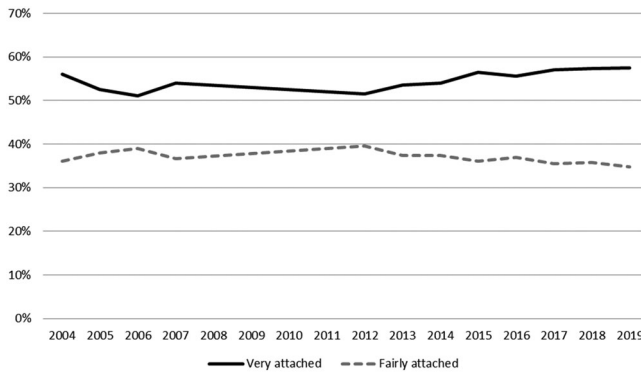


Figure 3. Attachment to the country (Eurobarometer data)\*. \*Very attached (dark line) and fairly attached (dotted line). Source: Eurobarometer data, <https://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/Chart/index>

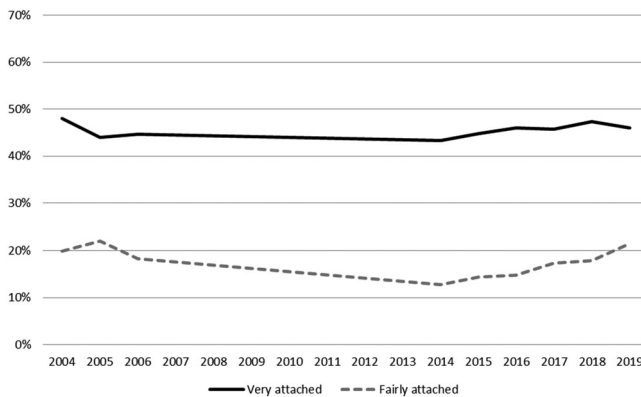


Figure 4. Attachment to Europe (Eurobarometer data)\*. \*Very attached (dark line) and fairly attached (dotted line). Source: Eurobarometer data, <https://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/Chart/index>



As for changes over time, EB data confirm our initial trend – a decline in European attachment following the East-European accession period of 2004. Interestingly, EB shows an uptick in European attachment since 2014 – the period after the ISSP data collection. However, a closer look at the East-European countries (not shown in [Figures 3 and 4](#)) reveals that all of them except for the Baltic countries and Slovakia are still below the 2004 level in European attachment. Indeed, this is corroborated by the latest Pew Research data ([2019](#)) on Eastern European attitudes towards the EU, which show that long-term attitudes of the EU have not changed much over the past 12 years. Similarly, and possibly even more surprising, we only see a rather modest increase in national attachment in the period after the migration crises of 2015. Thus, whereas nationalist movements and sentiments have gained momentum, we cannot observe a pronounced spike in attachment to the country during this period. The level of attachment to the country is not any higher than in 2004.

### **Discussion and conclusions**

Overall, our updated analyses of the most recent data corroborate our original findings in the 2012 article, lending further support for most of our theoretical arguments. The new analyses, however, highlighted three surprising findings.

First, our updated analyses of ISSP data show that the overall level of national identification did not increase in Western countries since 2003 and even dropped slightly in post-communist countries. Similarly, the more recent EB data does not indicate a substantial increase of attachment to the country even after the rise of anti-immigrant sentiment during the aftermath of the 2015 migration crises. The growing trend for ethnocentric and xenophobic political discourse, thus is not accompanied by an increasing attachment to one's nation according to those surveys. We thus have to look for alternative explanations when explaining the success of the far-right rhetoric. Here, [Hadler and Flesken \(2018\)](#) showed a link between ethnocentric party rhetoric and the respondents' preference for different traits of nationhood – characteristics that are considered important for being truly a Hungarian, German, Dane, etc. Using the constructivist view that symbolic boundaries are constantly renegotiated (e.g. [Chandra 2012](#)), the distinction between the 'We' and the 'Them' thus seems to be influenced more by rhetoric than by changes in the degree of identification with the nation or Europe.

The second surprising finding is that minorities in post-communist countries have turned away from Europe. Their growing detachment from their nations is now also accompanied by a detachment from Europe. A possible explanation for this distancing process is the political circumstances in Eastern Europe. The rise in nationalism in post-communist (PC) countries often came with the cost of creating more 'Ethnic Democracies' ([Duvold and Berglund 2014](#)), where elites create a state that is explicitly for a specific ethnic majority to the detriment of 'minorities'. Thus, even though many PC countries adopted EU and NATO rules to allow minority rights (arguably to enhance their case for accession to the EU), these efforts were often not financially or institutionally supported and did not lead to improvement of minority rights ([Jourek 1999](#); [Kymlicka 2000, 2002, 2005](#); [Vachudova 2009](#); [Duvold and Berglund 2014](#)). Indeed, Pew Research Center ([2017](#)) found that in some Eastern European nations the majority of the population prefer ethnic homogeneity over a multicultural society. This environment coupled with the fact that there has been an increase in nationalist and ultranationalist political parties across PC nations ([Bochsler 2007](#)) has likely heralded heightened ethnic tensions ([Vojtech 2010](#)). Minorities in post-communist countries thus are now distant to their nations and to

Europe, which qualifies our initial finding that ‘minorities are more likely to identify with Europe’. This finding applies only to Western Europe, where minorities are (still) more attached to Europe than their national majorities.

Another potential explanation for the drop in European identification in post-communist nations may stem from the rise in Orthodox Christianity across most PC nations (Borowik 2006; Sarkissian 2009; Pew Research Center 2017). There has been an increasing affiliation between Eastern European churches and growing nationalism (Sarkissian 2009), such that large majorities of people believe that being ‘Orthodox’ or being ‘Catholic’ is an inherent part of being ‘truly’ one’s nationality (Pew Research Center 2017). According to Pew Research Center (2017), Orthodox majority nations tend to have both nationalistic sentiments and a sense of cultural superiority over others. This increase in religious affiliation and its association with national pride may work to actually decrease attachment to the EU.

The third surprising finding is that the updated data show that the length of membership in the EU does not necessarily increase European identification in the long run, suggesting that institutionalized policies and symbols do not automatically translate into greater attachments to the EU (Kaelberer 2004; Bruter 2005; Beck and Grande 2007; Jenson and Merand 2010). This result is in line with recent findings of Claasen (2020) on support for democracy, which seems to decrease when democracy works well and to increase when democratic institutions are under threat (Claasen 2020). European identification, however, can change in reaction to external shocks, threats, and similar incidents. Minkus, Deutschmann, and Delhey (2019), for example, identified a jump in pro-European attitudes after the election of Donald Trump as US president and interpreted this as a ‘rallying around the European flag’ effect. Similarly, the slight increase in European identification from 2015 onwards could be related to the in-migration to Europe, the Brexit debate, and the discussion of their detrimental effects on the European idea. Following Claasen’s (2020) thermostatic logic, we could conclude that people want more of something when there is less of it.

## Note

1. Each set of macro-level variables is included separately in addition to the model presented in Table 2 due to the limited statistical power of 28 country level observations.

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