Forschung

The European Armed Forces: a means to strengthen European identity

JACOPO SCACCHI

Abstract Negli anni gli accademici hanno avanzato ipotesi varie e talvolta contrastanti su quanto le istituzioni UE fossero legittimate dal punto di vista democratico e su quanto esse poggiassero su un senso identitario percepito dai cittadini europei. In questo articolo si indagherà un framework teorico in grado di aumentare il senso identitario percepito dalla popolazione dell'Unione Europea. Inizialmente, si citeranno brevemente le posizioni di alcuni accademici sullo stato della democrazia europea. In seguito, si analizzerà un processo radicato nella teoria accademica in grado di rafforzare l'identità europea e di conseguenza portare alla legittimazione democratica del processo decisionale. Dopo aver schematizzato brevemente la storia del progetto europeo di difesa comune, si vedrà quanto l'opinione pubblica europea lo sostenga.

Schlüsselbegriffe Europäische Union; europäische Streitkräfte; NATO; europäische Identität; demos
Keywords European Union, European Armed Forces, NATO, European Identity, demos

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Abstract

Im Laufe der Jahre wurden in der Wissenschaft verschiedene und manchmal auch widersprüchliche Hypothesen darüber aufgestellt, inwieweit die Institutionen der Europäischen Union (EU) demokratisch legitimiert sind und inwieweit sie auf einem wahrgenommenen Identitätsgefühl der europäischen Bürgerinnen und Bürger beruhen. In diesem Artikel wird ein theoretischer Rahmen untersucht, der das wahrgenommene Identitätsgefühl der EU-Bevölkerung stärken kann.

Zunächst wird kurz auf die Positionen einiger Wissenschaftlerinnen und Wissenschaftler zum Zustand der europäischen Demokratie eingegangen. Anschliessend wird ein in der wissenschaftlichen Theorie verwurzelter Prozess analysiert, der die europäische Identität stärken und folglich zu einer demokratischen Legitimierung der Entscheidungsfindung führen kann. Nach einem kurzen Abriss der Geschichte des gemeinsamen europäischen Verteidigungsprojekts wird untersucht, inwieweit die öffentliche Meinung in Europa dieses Projekt unterstützt.

The lively debate around the no-*demos* thesis

At the end of the 1970s, the European integration process had just undergone further development with the entry of the United Kingdom, Ireland and Denmark into the European Economic Community (EEC), formed in 1957 in accordance with the Treaties of Rome. The nine European states that united economically by forming the EEC and promoting the free movement of goods, services, labour and capital were the forerunners of the 27 states that today, following the Lisbon Treaty of 2009, form the European Union (EU).

Even back then, questions were being asked about the normative value of European democracy. In 1977, references to a possible democratic deficit within the EEC appeared for the first time in the Young European Federalist Manifesto (Martí, 2018). A few years later, the academic David Marquand also expressed his concerns about the extent to which the EEC might have a deficit of political legitimacy (Marquand, 1979).

In the meantime, there have been several attempts to improve the democratic representation and political legitimacy of European institutions. One thinks of the increase in the European Parliament's legislative and supervisory powers through the introduction of the co-decision procedure and the extension of the co-operation procedure suggested in the 1992 Maastricht Treaty (Official Journal of the European Union, 2012). The Lisbon Treaty of 2009 also brought with it improvements in European representative democracy: it officially established the role of the European Parliament as co-legislator and endowed it with more budgetary powers. It has also been given the task of electing the President of the European Commission (Direktion für europäische Angelegenheiten DEA, 2021). In this sense, the will to control the appointment of the central figure of the European institutions by a body directly elected by the people is clear.

Despite such measures, many scholars continue to argue that the European Union suffers from a democratic deficit (see Weiler, 1995; Weiler et al., 1995; Follesdal and Hix, 2006; Habermas, 2012). Since the 1990s, the concept of *demos* has developed and begun to be used in relation to debates on the state of European democracy. This concept is similar to Anderson's (1991: 6) definition of the term "nation", namely "an imagined

political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign". The *demos* is thus an "imagined community", a community that recognises itself as "a group of people the vast majority of which feels sufficiently attached to each other to be willing to engage in democratic discourse and binding decision-making" (Cedermann, 2001: 144). With the presence of a *demos*, one can expect policy coherence, shared goals and solidarity, all essential values for democratic coexistence. In the absence of a *demos*, one generally experiences division and an inability to build something in common (Innerarity, 2014: 1–2). A society that wants to constitute itself as a political unit necessarily envisages a collective identity that enables it to accept majority decisions and overcome conflicts in a non-violent manner (Grimm, 1995). Weiler (1995) and Weiler et al. (1995) state that in the absence of the *demos*, there can be no government of the *demos*, i. e. democracy. This is why academics claim that the European Union suffers from a democratic deficit: in the absence of an "imagined community", of a European *demos*, of "a strong sense of community" (Risse, 2014: 1207), redistributive policies can never be sufficiently legitimate (Risse, 2014). It must therefore be made clear that the EU's democratic deficit does not exclusively stem from institutional structures, but from certain social, historical and cultural conditions conducive to the emergence of a strong sense of European citizenship, next to existing respective national equivalents (Innerarity, 2014: 2).

More recently, the no-*demos* thesis has been supported by Kaina and Karolewski (2013), who argue that European *demos* could not exist since a community sharing the same collective memories and experiences capable of creating and stabilising identities is lacking at the continental level. They are echoed by Bellamy and Castiglione (2013: 215) stating that: "no European demos with the requisite solidarist qualities of strong mutual identification, agreement on principles and shared collective interests exists".

Other scholars, including Moravcsik (2004), on the other hand, are convinced of the democratic legitimacy of European supranational institutions. According to Moravcsik, constitutional balances, indirect democratic control through national governments and the increasing powers of the European Parliament are sufficient to ensure that EU decision-making is transparent, effective, and legitimate.

Thomas Risse (2014), however, distances himself from the no-*demos* thesis by empirically demonstrating that the argument does not hold. Risse, in fact, argues that the majority of European citizens have over time developed a kind of dual identity in which both the nation-state identity and an increasingly felt European identity coexist. The strong sense of national identity, according to Risse, is therefore not incompatible with a sense of identity, community and loyalty felt towards Europe. This conclusion leads to the confirmation of the existence of European *demos* and the consequent conclusion that the Union's redistributive policies are sufficiently democratically legitimised because they take place in an identity context with common goals.

This last aspect is also essential for Sciarini, Hug and Dupont (1997). If the institutional framework of the European Union is to meet future challenges and be democratically legitimised, it must rest firmly on the European *demos* and rely on the collective sense of belonging. Scholars from the European University Institute analysed the formation of the Swiss national identity to provide solutions for the construction of the European identity and *demos*. They identified Switzerland as a potential model for Europe based on three important commonalities. Firstly, in both the Swiss and the European case, national identity cannot be based on a single culture, but different cultures coexist to create an overarching identity. Secondly, the higher-level identity has to be capable of dealing with numerous lower-level identities – i. e. the member states of the EU and the cantons within Switzerland. Finally, it is noticeable that in both cases the creation of common political structures and institutions preceded the emergence of a common identity. Given the common starting points between the Swiss and the European cases, Sciarini, Hug and Dupont (1997) hypothesise that if the EU followed the same identitarian path as the Swiss did over the centuries, the European *demos* would be strengthened. What path did the Swiss follow? In this respect, Swiss institutions have played a key role, becoming the reference point of Swiss identity. Common political structures and institutions shaped Swiss identity, an identity that was strengthened over the centuries by the existence of common enemies, such as the Habsburg Empire, Napoleon and the Soviet Empire. The emergence of an identity therefore also passes through a process of demarcation (Kriesi, 1995), from the recognition of belonging to a unique community

versus an out-group identified as different. This process led to the strengthening of the Swiss identity, and, according to Sciarini, Hug and Dupont (1997), could be transposed to the European case.

The concept of collective identity is often associated with sharing the same values. Values are defined as what is explicitly or implicitly desirable for an individual or a group of individuals and consequently can modify their behaviour. In other words, if such values are shared, similar attitudes and views emerge regarding issues such as national identity and perspectives on the socio-economic system (Nicholson and Stepina, 1998).

But are common values (such as the values of the Christian religion or the principles of the French Revolution) sufficient to create an identity? No, and this is demonstrated by the crumbling of the Holy Roman Empire (spreader of Christian values) as well as the Napoleonic Empire (spreader of the values of the French Revolution) (Smith, 1993). Values alone do not create identities. This is also the opinion of Maria Montserrat Guibernau (2007), who clarifies why values alone are not able to strengthen a collective identity. As anticipated by Kriesi (1995) and Sciarini, Hug and Dupont (1997), Montserrat Guibernau (2007) states that common values are not useful for strengthening an identity if they are not threatened by an external entity perceived as different. This is followed by a willingness to unite to defend common values under the control of a single authority. This process increases a community's sense of identity (Smith, 1993).

Let me reformulate the discourse in a more concrete manner that is referable to current geopolitical events. As I see it, the framework that Montserrat Guibernau (2007) identified applies to the current geopolitical situation in which Russia has militarily invaded Ukraine, i. e. a sovereign and nominally democratic state on the eastern border of the Union. The massive military and humanitarian aid sent to Ukraine by member states[1], the economic sanctions aimed at Russia, and the statements of the President of the European Commission – namely: Ukraine is "one of us and we want them in the European Union" (Von Der Leyen, 2022) – leave no room for interpretation. The European Union supports Ukraine as the repository of the same values and condemns without exception Russia, which is identified as a common enemy to be desisted (Mc Mahon, 2022). In order for the European collective identity to be strengthened from the contingent geopolitical reality, a common institution is needed (see Smith, 1993 and Sciarini, Hug and Dupont, 1997) that is able to defend the values of the European Union against a common enemy perceived as such following a demarcation process (see Kriesi, 1995 and Montserrat Guibernau, 2007). Among the many possible ways to strengthen European identity, the creation of a unified armed forces could have a significant influence. Using the Swiss case again as a historical confirmation of the influence that united armed forces could have on collective identity, Professor Rudolf Jaun (2019) confirms how important the Helvetic militia military was in the process of demarcation (see Kriesi, 1995) and self-identification as an "imagined community" (see Anderson, 1991) in Switzerland.

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The European Armed Forces

On 27 May 1952, the representatives of France, Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg and Italy signed the Treaty establishing the European Defence Community (EDC). The Treaty, besides being a first attempt to unify the armed forces of Western Europe, accepted the principle of equality among all EDC member states, emphasised the defensive and supranational nature of the Community and specified that any attack against one member state was considered an attack on all signatory states (Filippi, 2014: 62).

In 1992, at the Franco-German summit in La Rochelle, the multinational military unit Eurocorps was created from the French and German armed forces. Over the years, Belgium, Spain, Luxembourg and Italy have also joined. The Eurocorps provides forces for EU and NATO missions, e. g. in Kosovo and Afghanistan (Jonas, 2021).

The Helsinki Headline Goal of 1999 then sought to extend the project of creating an armed intervention force to all EU member states and thus provide the Eu-

ropean Union with 60,000 soldiers deployable within 60 days and sustainable for one year (Quille, 2006). This single armed forces was supposed to be operational by 2003, but the attempt failed. However, the attempt to create European Rapid Reaction Forces was successful: the EU Battlegroups became operational in 2007 (Quille, 2006). Attempts to form the single European Armed Forces have always failed despite the support of numerous earlier high-level political personalities, such as Merkel and Sarkozy (Quatremer, 2007), as well as current figures such as Macron, Mattarella and Von der Leyen (Tedaldi, 2021).

Why have these attempts always failed? Apart from the lack of certainty in obtaining unanimous ratification by all EU member states required for the creation of the single European Armed Forces, I believe that the answer lies in the institutions already in place. In my view, political elites are aware that the creation of the single European Armed Forces would duplicate an existing common defence institution, namely NATO. Where there is one institution that has the same function as another, for reasons of efficiency, one will be dropped. A case in point is the dissolution of the Western European Union in 2011 following the official creation of the European Union in Maastricht in 1993. Indeed "[...] the EU has taken over all activities of the former Western European Union, which ceased to exist on 30 June 2011" (Simma et al., 2013: 1935).

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European defence policy is enshrined in the Lisbon Treaty (Article 42). The Treaty affirms the primacy of national defence, including the possibility for member states to remain neutral or create multilateral alliances outside European institutions, such as being a member of NATO (European Parliament, 2023).

In recent years, the European Union has started to implement ambitious initiatives to provide more resources, stimulate greater efficiency, facilitate cooperation and support the development of new capabilities. With this in mind, as of December 2017, 25 member states now participate in the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), which enshrines binding commitments including a European medical command, a maritime surveillance system, mutual assistance in cyber security, rapid response teams and a joint intelligence school (European Parliament, 2023).

The first big step towards the creation of the European Armed Forces was taken in June 2017, when the European Defence Fund (EDF) was established. Thus, for the first time, the EU budget is being used to co-finance defence cooperation projects. The EDF serves as a complement to individual national investments and offers practical and financial incentives for military collaboration (European Parliament, 2023).

"However, the creation of a unified European defence system is not only a question of expenditure and budget but also of efficiency."

However, the creation of a unified European defence system is not only a question of expenditure and budget but also of efficiency. The combined military budgets of the united member states are second only to the United States, but an estimated EUR 26.4 billion is wasted each year due to duplication, overcapacities and procurement bottlenecks. Beyond providing a framework for cooperation and an incentive for collaboration, the creation of a single European Armed Forces leaves plenty of room for more efficient, carefully coordinated and prudent defence investments (European Parliament, 2023).

The European Armed Forces and public opinion

Although academics such as Moravscik (2003) are convinced that the European population would never be in favour of the creation of a single European Armed Forces, not least because of the need to double military expenditure to 4 % of EU

GDP, things seem to have changed. As of today, the positions of European public opinion confirm that the necessary steps to strengthen the European collective identity, i. e. the identification of a common enemy and the willingness to defend the values threatened by this enemy through a single authority (see Smith, 1993; Kriesi, 1995; Sciarini, Hug and Dupont, 1997; Montserrat Guibernau, 2007) are taking place.

In fact, according to the latest Eurobarometer, 80 % of European citizens agree with the necessity of imposing sanctions on Moscow and are satisfied with the European response to the invasion of Ukraine (European Commission, 2022). The vast majority of European citizens identified Russia as the enemy capable of threatening the Union's values and support Brussels' effort to safeguard them (Follis, 2022). Regarding the will to defend themselves, 81 % of Europeans are in favour of a common EU security and defence policy, with at least two-thirds support in each member state (European Parliament, 2023) and more than half of European citizens (55 %) are in favour of the creation of a single European army (EU Monitor, 2021).

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The time seems ripe for the creation of a continental European military. With this article, I wanted to demonstrate empirically that the creation of a European army in this historical period would not only be supported by the population but would also contribute to strengthening the common European identity and *demos*. ◆

Endnotes

1 These are mainly countries that have joined NATO. Not all EU member states provide military aid to Ukraine, since they are not part of the Atlantic Alliance. Here one can see the different nature of the two supranational institutions providing aid to Ukraine: NATO mostly provides military support, the EU supports Ukraine politically and at the level of economic sanctions.

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