



# Liquid Narrative of European Cultural Identity in the Time of Uncertainty (2008–2020)<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract.** As Leonidas Donskis (2016: 9) once wrote, “Europe has been saved many times by its narrative powers”. In this time of uncertainty and disasters, our public narratives are filled with gossips, conspiracies, intolerance, and hate speech that strengthen divisions in society. During pandemic lockdowns, when physical closeness is exchanged with social interactions online and when global identities and culture are uploaded on digital platforms, we ask: what does it mean to be European in a time of uncertainty and what binds our collective identities and helps us to overcome our fears and anxieties? Considering the past and present (2008–2020) global and European economic, political, healthcare, and cultural as well as personal crises, this auto-ethnographic essay raises these questions: How can personal narratives help to strengthen European cultural identity in these times of uncertainty? Do personal narratives weaken collective identities? By using an auto-ethnographic approach, this paper is an attempt to determine whether a holistic research approach can be used in the analysis of “liquid” European cultural identity and personal narratives. Therefore, this paper is not just for finding the right answers or right stories but is meant to act rather as a stepping stone for further discussion on how to communicate European cultural identity and how to raise self-identification, cultural solidarity, and unity during these times of uncertainty.

**Keywords:** European cultural identity, time of uncertainty, auto-ethnographic narrative

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1 The present article is a revised version of the paper presented on 17 April 2021 at the *Crisis, Change and Perspectives – Online Conference* organized by The Intercultural Confluences Research Centre of the Department of Human Sciences, Faculty of Economics, Socio-Human Sciences and Engineering, Miercurea Ciuc, Sapientia Hungarian University of Transylvania.

## Introduction

### Conceptualizing European Cultural Identity from the Auto-Ethnographic Perspective

“We are waves of the same sea, leaves of the  
same tree, flowers of the same garden.”  
(Seneca)

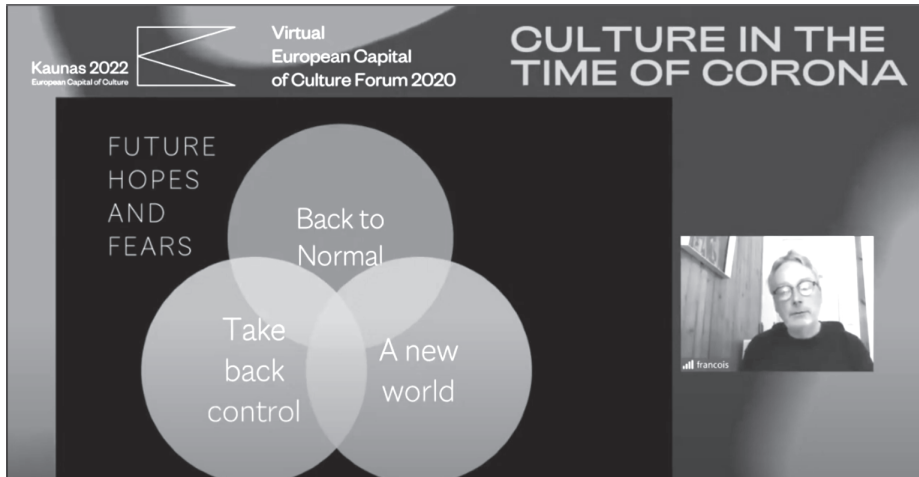
This quote from Seneca was written on boxes of medical supplies delivered to Italy by the Chinese company Xiaomi during the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. This philosophy, or narrative of unity, in the time of uncertainty is essential as, physically distant from each other, we try to keep our socio-cultural solidarity. However, what we see in our societies during this time of crisis is that people tend to focus more on their individual liberties, myths rather than on the culture of solidarity, science, and common fight against the virus. In his works on collective conscience, Durkheim (1893) wrote about anomie, loss of attachment to society, and the division of labour in society. This concept can be traced back to Classical Antiquity:

In Classical Antiquity, Thucydides referred to anomie, impiety and absence of law, of humanity without law or rule to characterize the “plague” of Athens (430 and 427/426 BC): It was not only a health crisis, it was also a major moral crisis. Nosos, that is, “disease”, infection does not destroy just the body; nosos, that is, “dementia”, also destroys, even if momentarily, a society, institutions, traditions. An epidemic is not only the devastation and suffering caused by the spread of infection; it is also the brutal chaos that follows the weakening of the State, the disintegration of authorities, social structures and mentalities. (Serpa-Ferreira 2018: 689)

In the time of health or moral crisis, individual interest overshadows collective conscience and strengthens the feeling of detachment. Just like “disaster fosters people’s ability to narrate” (Donskis 2016), a crisis also strengthens our fictional forces or fears.

“These are dark times, there is no denying. Our world has perhaps faced no greater threat than it does today. But I say this to our citizenry: We, ever your servants, will continue to defend your liberty and repel the forces that seek to take it from you! Your Ministry remains, strong” – writes J. K. Rowling (2010) in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*. This speech of Rufus Scrimgeour, the Minister for Magic in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows, Part I*, represents both institutional and fictional narratives during the dark times as he talks about liberties that are being taken from us.

The same narrative can be seen in protests against COVID-19 restrictions. As we are in the second year of this pandemic, the philosophy of solidarity seems to be shifting: “Anti-lockdown protests erupt across Europe as tempers fray over tightening restrictions.”<sup>2</sup> Writer and community artist François Matarasso, during the session *The Role of Culture Defeating the Crisis* (The European Capital of Culture Forum 2020: Culture in the Time of Corona), also presented three possible scenarios, or approaches, for dealing with the crisis (*Graph 1*).



Source: Kaunas 2022: The Role of Culture Defeating the Crisis.  
Presentation by François Matarasso (<https://youtu.be/NtprjODt140>)

**Graph 1.** *Future hopes and fears*

Some of us are hoping that things will go back to normal, while others, like in the 2016 Brexit narrative, want to take back control. But there is also hope for a new world and visions for the future and culture of solidarity. During the same session,<sup>3</sup> Rytis Zemkauskas, journalist, TV producer, and curator of the Kaunas 2022 programmes, said that “culture, as recent events have shown, can help save lives”. Zemkauskas is referring here to the culture of solidarity during the COVID-19 pandemic, as people from different countries of Europe were dancing and singing in their balconies. Can the same unity in diversity of European cultural identity save lives both physically and mentally? What was it like during the 2008 global economic crisis and what about identity and unity

2 *France 24*: Anti-Lockdown Protests Erupt across Europe as Tempers Fray over Tightening Restrictions (<https://www.france24.com/en/europe/20210321-anti-lockdown-protests-erupt-across-europe-as-tempers-fray-over-tightening-restrictions>).

3 *Kaunas 2022: The Role of Culture Defeating the Crisis*. Presentation by Rytis Zemkauskas (<https://youtu.be/NtprjODt140>).

during the Brexit referendum and the migrant crisis in 2015-2016? Can we deal with this uncertainty by looking at the world through disruptive lenses? Gaviria and Bluemelhuber (2010) mention that perception of the current world

through disruptive lenses leads to recognizing it as a place in which change and innovation rates are increasing tremendously, leaving behind obsolete, but familiar patterns. The acceleration of the world is very conspicuous in contemporary societies in which traditional reference points – such as the classic family model, the life-long working community or one's own country – are evolving into less stable and more fluid structures. (p. 127)

Therefore, to understand the shifts and liquidity of cultural narratives or future scenarios, we have to open up the “disruptive vocabularies” of post-modern and post-truth society, a phenomenon which in Cambridge dictionary is described as “Relating to a situation in which people are more likely to accept an argument based on their emotions and beliefs, rather than one based on facts”.<sup>4</sup> We have to go back to the definition of culture and cultural identity in the time of uncertainty. However, in this modern, liquid world, we tend to focus more on the speculative world identity and less on what it actually encompasses, what the story behind it is.

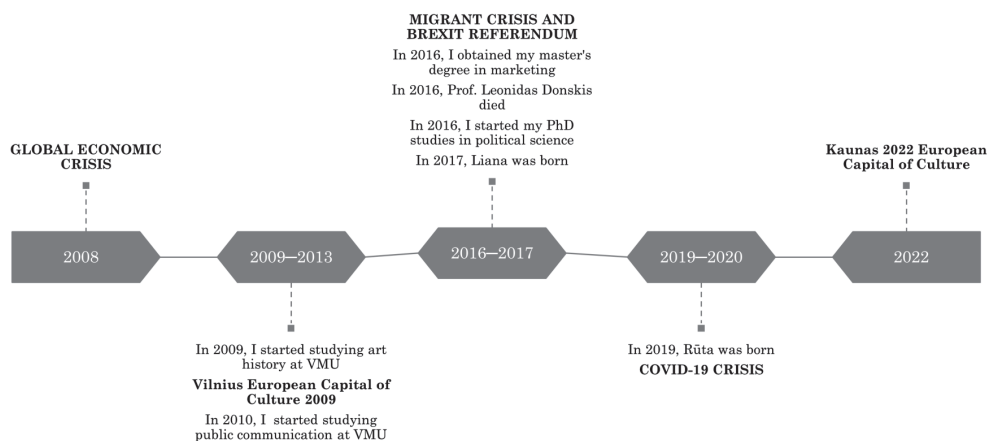
Donskis (2011: 5) wrote about identity as an imaginary solidarity, a political and moral examination or a mask that conceals our uncertainties and worries. Therefore, it is essential to question ourselves: is identity a contemporary password, a trend? Is it a mask that we can take off whenever we like? Is it a well-structured PR campaign or a weapon of soft power? Today, we see different approaches towards the same philosophical problem: who are we, what is our story? One way, the far-right identity movement way, is trying to keep a fixed or localized identity homogeneous from the so-called threat of multiculturalism and diversity, while the other side is trying to fight this opposition with ethnopluralist identity rhetoric. Both sides are in echo chambers, wherefore there is no time for a dialogue in this fight. Would looking from a holistic perspective but writing an auto-ethnographic narrative help to start this dialogue?

## **Auto-Ethnographic Approach towards European Cultural Identity Research**

According to Katz Rothman (2007: 12), sociologists have moved closer to their own societies, brought their own values, and turned their gaze on their own lives. Of course, such an approach has its limitations, but with auto-ethnographic or autobiographic approaches even such uncertain concepts as European cultural

<sup>4</sup> <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/post-truth>.

identity become more personal and hit closer to home, but this does not mean that it becomes more biased. Self-reflecting narrative actually helps the “researcher to deal with his/her own biases prior to interpreting and representing the perspectives of other participants” (Taylor–Settlemaier 2003: 233). In the timeline of personal and global uncertainties, these perspectives overlap (*Graph 2*).



Source: created by the author based on personal narrative and netnographic<sup>5</sup> observations of recent socio-political changes in the EU.

**Graph 2.** The timeline of personal and global uncertainties (2008–2022)

In a number of academic disciplines, auto/biography and auto/ethnography have become the central means of critiquing the ways in which research represents individuals and their cultures. Auto/biography and auto/ethnography are genres that blend ethnographic interests with life writing and they tell about a culture at the same time they tell about an individual life. (Roth 2005)

As I was scrolling TikTok, as an escape and comfort approach during the lockdown, I came across one video that said: When you are overthinking, write. When you are underthinking, read.<sup>6</sup> This says to me that a way of dealing with uncertainties is through narratives, either writing or reading them. While I was preparing for the *Crisis, Change and Perspectives Online Conference, 2021* in my café of isolation, I flipped through the pages of my naïve, adolescent notebooks

5 “Netnography is a specific approach to conducting ethnography on the Internet. It is a qualitative, interpretive research methodology that adapts traditional ethnographic techniques to the study of social media” (Kozinets 2015).

6 Phillippa Horror “overthinking write underthinking read” (<https://phillippahorrorunicorn.com/2021/05/28/overthinking-write-underthinking-read/>).

from 2008, where once I wrote poetry and reflected on my future scientific path. At the same time, I reflected how European cultural identity has shifted since 2008. This is why, during these times of uncertainty, European cultural identity research is also personal – reminiscing about the times before I graduated high school and looking at my old journals where I tried to evaluate the attractiveness of university study programmes (Graph 3).

	Filosofia	Filosofia	Antropologia	Etnologia	Metodologia
Atlyginimo tyrimai	5	4	1	2	3
Patraukiamumas / padoamumas	2	5	1	3	4
Konkrečių jėgų tyrimai	5	4	1	3	2
Menas	2	3	1	4	5
Bendradarbiai	4	1	2	5	3
Organizavimas	2	3	1	5	4
Tyrimai	2	1	3	4	5
Priežiūra	3	5	1	2	4
Kėlonai	1	3	2	5	4
Viduriniojo amžiaus	2	5	1	3	4
Apokrifas	2	5	1	3	4
Kūno tyrimai	2	5	1	3	4
<b>Vėžio</b>					
1 - mairasai	32	44	16	42	46
5 - daugiakusiai					
uturys					
sk. mairasai					

Source: picture taken by the author

**Graph 3.** Picture of my 2008 study journal

Now I ask myself how naive my perception and evaluation were then; such an incomplete vision. Today, I would evaluate them differently, openly, but the most interesting thing is that all those study programmes still overlap within my fields of scientific interest. Even then, I felt a craving for socio-humanities. I was not interested in the popular study programmes at that time, I was not just looking for financial benefit (even though 2009 was still within the years of the Great Recession (2007–2009)). I was not looking for something tangible and easily measurable. I was looking for something liquid and fluid. Maybe that is why

I have been stuck in this vortex of feminine, cinematic, political, and cultural identities since my bachelor's degree. My openness, listening to the narratives of others gave me a lot, but I still have not yet learned to stop and prioritize and, when necessary, give up something along the way. I am like Amélie Poulain,<sup>7</sup> trying to help everyone around me, and therefore my own bones are sometimes shabby, and my narrative is disruptive. I do not rebel in the streets, but sometimes I scream quietly in the dark.

As for my European identity research path, it started back in 2016, the year of the Brexit referendum, migration crisis, and reoccurring terrorism attacks. It was the year I got married and the year our great academic intellectual, liberal thought guardian, Leonidas Donskis passed away. It seems that as we almost crossed research paths, while not meeting in person, my head was filled with thoughts about European identity. Five years and two kids later, I am still "bearing" my thesis with a constantly changing narrative or approach. How did the pandemic change my academic life or prolong my thesis gestation? Well, we all got lost in digital translation or digital transformations. I was teaching both my daughters and my students, or rather learning from them how to cope with isolation and find happiness in the little things. My husband was locked in his home office, working with his students and projects, while I was balancing life, work, and academic ideas.

This is when I began to understand that, as a researcher, I am somewhere in the middle of conflicts. 2019–2020 was a dark year both mentally and academically, at a micro-level and an even greater challenge on a global scale. And this is not just my personal struggle. Those who had to save lives, those who had to balance distance teaching and close interaction with toddlers, teenagers, or even dementia-suffering seniors might have lost their minds. Lockdown also had its aftermaths on the mental health of both children and adolescents: "COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown has brought about a sense of fear and anxiety around the globe. This phenomenon has led to short term as well as long term psychosocial and mental health implications for children and adolescents" (Singh et al. 2020).

However, in the midst of this chaos, there might have been a small light of hope. As I found a babysitter for my daughters, I had an opportunity to close the doors of my cold home office and continue "growing" my PhD thesis and research on European identity politics and culture in the time of transformations. I fed my thesis with ideas, books, and narratives of Europeanness. It gave me comfort and peace, as if I were in my own George Steiner Café.<sup>8</sup>

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7 Amélie is an innocent and naive girl in Paris with her own sense of justice. She decides to help those around her and, along the way, discovers love (<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0211915/>).

8 Steiner (2015): *The Idea of Europe: An Essay* (<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/can-europe-make-it/idea-of-europe/>).



## Culture and Cultural Identity in the Time of Uncertainty

Europe is made up of coffee houses, of cafés. These extend from Pessoa's favourite coffee house in Lisbon to the Odessa cafés haunted by Isaac Babel's gangsters. They stretch from the Copenhagen cafés which Kierkegaard passed on his concentrated walks to the counters of Palermo. No early or defining cafés in Moscow which is already a suburb of Asia. Very few in England after a brief fashion in the eighteenth century. (Steiner 2015)

I spent a lot of time in Kaunas's coffee houses, writing my bachelor and master's theses. This is where I tried to find my own narratives as well as read research stories of other scholars.

When scholars narrate European cultural identity, they talk about collective identities and the construction of collective identity stories. According to Scalise (2013: 52), "public debate and civic participation are also fundamental elements of a narrative construction of European society because the narratives of Europe that circulate in the public sphere make EU citizens 'feel united', linking them to events in the past and allowing for reciprocal recognition".

In these times of fluid uncertainty, we are experiencing not just economic and political crises, but also a cultural-existential crisis. In times of uncertainty, we are asking "who we are", "who we were", and "what binds us together". However, as has been said before, this narrative is not just for finding the right answers but acts as rather a stepping stone for further discussion on how to strengthen and narrate European cultural identity during the time of uncertainty as well as how to raise self-identification, cultural solidarity, and the unity of European citizens. One way is by looking at the current situation through "disruptive" lenses that leads to recognizing it as a place in which change and innovation rates are increasing tremendously, leaving behind obsolete, but familiar patterns" (Gaviria-Bluemelhuber 2010). This idea complements the concept of "liquid modernity", i.e. Zygmunt Bauman's (2013) term for the present condition of the world as contrasted with the "solid" modernity that preceded it.

Culture in such a society only finds a sense if it abandons its traditional, fixed understanding and adopts the liquid approach. If we go back to the Middle Ages or to historic chapters of plagues, there was a different philosophy of life and death present. When we listen to old lullabies or children's stories, they all have an uncertainty and fragility in their narratives.

"There is a special physical bond between mother and child in the first year of life, in which mothers feel they can sing to their child about their own fears and anxieties, but in the safety and comfort of physical togetherness."<sup>9</sup>

9 Why are so many lullabies also murder ballads? *PBS News Hours* (<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/science/many-lullabies-murder-ballads>).



As I myself sang lullabies to my daughters in the postpartum period of anxieties, I felt closer, just like I narrated the uncertainties of the current pandemic. Therefore, to understand culture and identity in constantly changing times of uncertainty, we must abandon traditional definitions and fixed cultural identity models. Instead of fixed models, we can try out and understand cultural narratives and the power of narrative through the saddest melodies and most melancholy texts as when, in 1920s, the poet Federico García Lorca heard a woman in Granada sing a lullaby to her child, as it was also a year of global pandemic.

As we “read” narratives and stories, we must understand who the main narrators are. In the case of European cultural identity, is it institutions, the culture sector, or maybe small stories from the civic society perspective, i.e. European citizen’s stories? Is the narrative a top-down or bottom-up model of culture or is it maybe a circle where the beginning is the end and the end is the beginning, a cultural ecosystem, a culture of sustainability, but not a cultural ecosystem?

## **The Power of Narratives and Culture in the Time of Crisis**

“We argue that the ‘traditional paradigm’, with three dimensions or pillars of sustainable development (environmental balance, economic growth, and social inclusion) is in crisis today because it is incomplete and fails to integrate a key component: the cultural aspects of society” (Duxbury et al. 2012).

In 2013, at the UN General Assembly, one of the thematic debates was on *Culture and Development*. Director-General of UNESCO Irina Bokova emphasized: “We need to fully acknowledge the power of culture, as we shape a new global agenda to follow 2015. No society can flourish without culture and there can be no sustainable development without it.”<sup>10</sup>

In the time of crisis, we tend to forget culture, and, usually, the culture sector is the one where funding gets cut. We might have heard an urban legend, a contemporary myth, that during World War II, when Churchill was asked to cut funding to the arts in order to support the war effort, he responded, “Then what would we be fighting for?”<sup>11</sup> Sadly, it is just a romantic story, a fake narrative circulating on the Internet. However, such stories, and culture itself, have power. Once we face times of uncertainty, we start creating stories, possibly false but romantic narratives. In fact, culture, or what Claude Levi-Strauss terms cultural identity, becomes a weapon against political domination.

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10 <http://www.lacult.unesco.org/noticias/showitem.php?lg=2&pais=&id=4267>.

11 No, Winston Churchill Didn’t Say “What Are We Fighting For?” about the Arts. *Politifact* (<https://www.politifact.com/factchecks/2019/apr/02/viral-image/no-winston-churchill-didnt-say-what-are-we-fightin/>).

Ever since Claude Levi-Strauss changed the concept of culture to that of cultural identity, the word “identity” itself has come to be used in very different contexts and has caused many misunderstandings. Identity was a necessary weapon in the struggle against the domination of strangers. In the countries of Central and Eastern Europe that fought against imperialism, national identity was mostly used, and in the Third World countries that fought against colonialism, it was more often referred to as cultural. (Czyżewski 2021)

Can cultural narratives and a common identity be used to fight off this pandemic and its psychological aftermaths? Who should the main narrators be? Krzysztof Czyżewski, a Polish philosopher and a friend of Leonidas Donskis, somehow took over the role as the main narrator and extended Donkis’s thought:

“The death of a friend is an event that frees a book stuck in his mind” is one of Leonid’s most sensitive aphorisms. He often returned to the attitude of changing the perception of loss in creation, trying to say that the death of our closest people – so as not to leave us with the absurdity of emptiness – is a peculiar sacrifice for the construction of our future. When a friend died, he extended my life, extended and tore the mind map, “which became the impetus for a new book”. Loyalty to friendship, as I guess Leonid would say, is not a commemoration of remembrance, but a sequel.<sup>12</sup>

Czyżewski in his book *Little Centre of the World/Mali Centar Sveta* – in a way a book that was freed after Donkis’s death – writes about the culture of coexistence and dialogue:

The little centre of the world does not want to be the only one, it thinks of itself a quantum that coexists with other quanta. Their strength is its strength; it does not feed on the weakness of others; it does not need to dominate the environment to develop. It makes no claims to exclusivity, uniqueness, or championship in anything except dialogue, empathy, and responsibility. (Czyżewski 2021)

During the COVID-19 lockdown, I rediscovered the writings of Leonidas Donskis and also found the connection within writings of his “European, liberal thought brothers and sisters”: Krzysztof Czyżewski and Irena Veisaitė,<sup>13</sup> who helped me in asking the question: do we feel more European in times of uncertainty?

12 In English: Leonidas Donskis, or The New Book to Be Written (In original: *Leonidas Donskis, arba Nauja knyga, kurią reikia parašyti*; Bernardinai.lt) (<https://www.bernardinai.lt/2017-10-05-leonidas-donskis-arba-nauja-knyga-kuria-reikia-parasyti/>).

13 Theatre and literary critic Irena Veisaitė (1928–2020).

## Do We Feel More European in Times of Uncertainty?

“Realizing the dangers of nationalism, after World War II (1945) Europeans sought to weaken the dimension of nation-states and gradually replace it with the European Union (EU), a community of supra-nationalist institutions that would eventually create a supranational European identity” (Manurung 2015).

Europe as a continent has changed its geographical, geopolitical, and ideological boundaries during major transformations centuries ago, but how did Europeans go through the transformations, and how did they perceive themselves at that time? Did they feel as citizens of ethnically created nation-states or as representatives of the culture of a united “Great Europe”?

How can we strengthen the sense of Europeanness during the time of uncertainty, or is the question that should we keep replacing or hiding nation-state narratives for the sake of a united Europe? If, during the crisis, we tend to ask ourselves who we are, should we also ask with whom we are close and what binds us together? As the European Commission Eurobarometer (2013)<sup>14</sup> survey shows, culture, history, and economy are the elements that really unite Europeans and create a feeling of community among EU citizens.

Following the major political and economic metamorphosis faced by Europe during the last sixty years, it can be said that the very identity of Europeans has changed. The social and cultural life of EU citizens is no longer necessarily linked to a specific place[,] and the removal of borders, thanks to the processes of Europeanisation and globalisation, is giving way to an institutionalised “post-national condition” on a political, economic and social level. (Scalise 2013: 52)

How can personal narratives help in the times of uncertainty? Do Eurobarometer surveys represent the real narratives of EU citizens? What is behind this abstract feeling of EU citizenship? By asking different questions and trying out different approaches, can we open up further discussion or narrate European cultural identity out of small stories without one dominant storyline?

This fluid and changing narrative of European identity and Europeanness is as debatable as EU politics and policies. Current conflicts between EU and its Member States Poland and Hungary on the Union’s next seven-year budget or law against LGBTQ content in schools or kids’ TV<sup>15</sup> put core EU values at

14 European Commission. 2013. *40 Years Eurobarometer* ([https://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/topics/eb40years\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/topics/eb40years_en.pdf)).

15 Hungary Passes Law Banning LGBT Content in Schools or Kids’ TV. *The Guardian* (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jun/15/hungary-passes-law-banning-lgbt-content-in-schools> – last visited on: 25 June 2021).

risk (Dempsey 2020).<sup>16</sup> In order to understand the process of EU policy making and implementation of policies in various ways, we need to analyse the core EU values. Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union lays out the collective vision, tying internal values such as “‘economic and social progress’, ‘sustainable development’ and ‘an area of freedom, security, and justice’ to the exterior, where the Union must not merely defend its interests but ‘assert its identity’” (European Union, 2002: Article 2). Different EU cultural policies and articles communicate internal values of Europeanness. However, this is usually an institutional, top-down strategy of European (cultural) identity. What if we try to tell this European cultural identity story from another perspective, one that is less institutional and more personal? Is there an identity formation model that fits this liquid concept, this constantly changing narrative?

## Models of European Identity Formation

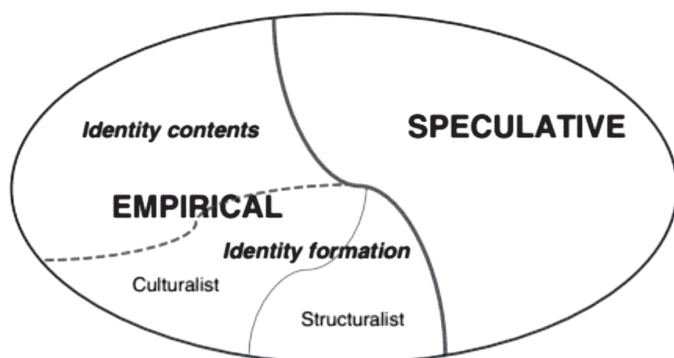
Solidity and liquidity are the distinctive features of two eras: modernity and postmodernity, which becomes liquid modernity as it relates to contemporary existence. It is an existence where the need gives way to the desire that dismays men in the constant changes and transformations that affect their lives and that turn identity from fact into a task: each of us runs into the self-building, which replaces the project itself. (Palese 2013)

In his paper, Recchi (2014) drew a map of research on European identity (*Graph 4*), where he connected “European identity to a ‘psycho-sociological or socio-political process of citizens’ attachment to the European space or to the political community designed by integration” (Duchesne 2010: 7 – transl. by Recchi 2014: 119). Identity stories are political, institutional, but at the same time private and psycho-sociological. What is interesting in this narrative of cultural identities is – with apologies to Raymond Carver – *What We Talk about When We Talk about Europe*.<sup>17</sup>

If I am a narrator, but at the same time treating myself as a research subject, I have to raise these questions: Do I naturally think of myself as European? Who are my European thought brothers and sisters? Do I feel European? (*Table 1*). Of course, self-reflection is always critical and has its limitations. It will not reflect the entire European cultural identity. It will be just one small narrative of the bigger European story.

16 Judy Asks: Can the EU Solve the Budget and Rule-of-Law Crisis? *Carnegie Europe* (<https://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/83324> – last visited on: 25 June 2021).

17 Reference to *What We Talk about When We Talk about Love*, a 1981 collection of short stories by American writer Raymond Carver, as well as the title of one of the stories in the collection.



Source: Recchi (2014)

**Graph 4.** A map of research on European identity

**Table 1.** Conceptual definition and operationalization of European identity

Variable	General identity	Civic identity	Cultural identity
<b>Conceptual summary</b>	Do respondents naturally think of themselves as Europeans?	Do respondents identify with European Union as a political institution?	Do respondents identify with Europe as a cultural community?
<b>Target elements</b>	Do I feel European? How strong do I identify with Europe?	Does it mean anything for me to be a “citizen” of the European super-state? Do I identify with the symbols of European political integration? Do I identify with the civic aspects of European integration?	Do I identify with Europe as a shared heritage? Do I think of Europe as a concentric identity level, finding Europeans less close than fellow nationals but closer to me than non-Europeans?

Source: Bruter (2004: 196)

In his last two books, *Didžioji Europa: esė apie Europos sielą* (*The Great Europe: An Essay on the Soul of Europe*) and *Mažoji Europa: esteto žemėlapis* (*The Little Europe: A Map of an Aesthete*), Leonidas Donskis combines political-historical narratives. In his books, civic and cultural identities, or political and cultural identities, intertwine. In one of these books' annotations, it is written: “where scholarly language fails, fiction comes as a way out of the predicament with an interpretation of the world around us. The funny thing is that politics does not work without our stories. Without travel accounts, humor, laughter, warning and moralizing, political concepts tend to become empty.”<sup>18</sup> Even if this

18 The Great Europe. An Essay on the Soul of Europe. *Leonidas Donskis Foundation* (<http://www.donskis.lt/en/11/2418/the-great-europe-an-essay-on-the-soul-of-europe>).

is not a paper about Donskis's narratives and ideas of Europe, it is an inspiration for further research on how to combine the politics of European cultural identity and cultural narratives, how, out of small, personal narratives, we can build up a greater Europe.

## Conclusions and Future Narratives

How do we analyse these small stories of Europeanness and how should we be looking for them? One way is by looking at the digital public sphere and comparing how EU institutions communicate their core values in comparison to EU citizens? Is it possible to install a European consciousness and an idea of Europe?

The public sphere and civil society are dynamic elements of the bottom-up construction of European society; they are driving forces of the process of Europeanisation, driven forward by those who themselves feel in some way involved at a supranational government level. Public debate and civil participation are also fundamental elements of a narrative construction of European society because the narratives of Europe that circulate in the public sphere make EU citizens “feel united”, linking them to events in the past and allowing for reciprocal recognition. (Scalise 2013)

But how does it work? Does narrative have the power of uniting people in the time of crisis? Piasecki and Woroniecki (2016) wrote about the human dimension of European integration. “Isn't it high time at last to examine this issue in-depth and in a novel way, and to launch practical measures in order to deepen a human dimension of the European integration: bringing together EU citizens and instilling European consciousness and pride in being a European – something that various European institutions <...> have been fighting for?” (Piasecki–Woroniecki 2016: 58).

Can personal stories, or narratives created by citizens, strengthen the idea of united in diversity in Europe? – like *The Mythical Beast of Kaunas*, part of the artistic programme Kaunas – European Capital of Culture 2022, an interdisciplinary project aimed at creating a unifying narrative for the city. “The creation of the Beast and its story involves citizens of all ages and of all walks of life and creates participatory experience for people from near and far away. The Mythical Beast of Kaunas will become an avatar or allegory for the City, where the Beast = Kaunas”.<sup>19</sup>

19 Mythical beast of Kaunas, *Kaunas 2022* (<https://kaunolegenda.lt/en/> – last visited on: 25 June 2021).

Should the narrative approach towards EU identity be technocratic, institutional, participatory, or maybe it should be a holistic ecosystem? It might be speculation, but coexistence and sustainability during the time of uncertainty is essential, just as essential as leaving behind hierarchy and top-down models of culture and cultural identities. It is also about switching from “take back control”, i.e. fighting for the individual liberties narrative, to the narrative of unity and solidarity in a cultural ecosystem. If we do so, culture might help save lives or at least help to deal with these liquid times, just like narratives help to raise self-identification. Of course, auto-ethnographic research might have its limitations, but it can also help:

- navigate times of uncertainty and researchers understand their own biases and to be open for dialogue;
- understand cultural identity narratives in the time of uncertainty as coexistence and the ecosystem of cultural identities, or, in other words, to hear other stories and perspectives;
- understand the cultural impact on individual and collective regeneration after the crisis.

Therefore, my future narratives/research of European cultural identity will switch from the personal to collective stories of Europeanness on a public sphere. As T. S. Eliot once wrote: “The end is the beginning: What we call the beginning is often the end. And to make an end is to make a beginning. The end is where we start from” (T. S. Eliot).<sup>20</sup>

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20 [https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/t\\_s\\_eliot\\_101421](https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/t_s_eliot_101421).



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