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NAVIGATING THE COMPLEX TAPESTRY OF IDENTITY AND COMMUNITY IN REGIONAL INTEGRATION

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Abstract: This special issue delves into the complex and dynamic processes of identity and community formation within Europe and Asia amid the intertwined forces of globalization, regionalism, and interregionalism. Through empirical research and theoretical innovation, the articles challenge established paradigms, exploring the fluid, contested nature of regional identities shaped by historical legacies, cultural narratives, and geopolitical strategies. This collection not only provides a critical examination of identity in contemporary international relations but also a dialogue on the implications for regional policy and governance, urging policymakers to consider the mutable nature of identities in their strategies. The focus on Europe and Asia highlights their unique interregional dynamics, making a compelling case for their pivotal role in global regionalism and identity politics.

Key Words: European Union, Association of Southeast Asian Nations, regional integration, identity, community

This special issue embarks on a critical exploration of the intricate and multifaceted processes of identity and community formation within the regional contexts of Europe and Asia (Hänggi, Roloff & Rüländ 2006). In an era where the forces of globalization, regionalism, and interregionalism are increasingly entangled, understanding the construction, negotiation, and (re-)production of regional identities becomes paramount. This special issue is not just an academic exercise; it is a critical inquiry into the very fabric of contemporary international relations, where identities are anchors of stability and catalysts of change (Hettne 2005).

The decision to focus on Europe and Asia, rather than other continents, is informed by the unique and historically grounded interregional dynamics that characterize their relationship. Europe and Asia have long been intertwined through complex geopolitical, economic, and cultural exchanges that have shaped and reshaped regional identities over centuries. This historical depth offers a fertile ground for examining the processes of identity formation and community building in ways that are both globally relevant and locally specific (Maull et al. 1998).

Europe and Asia are also at the forefront of contemporary interregionalism, with initiatives such as the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) and ASEAN-EU dialogue relations serving as key platforms for interregional engagement. These

interactions provide rich empirical cases that highlight how regional identities are not only constructed internally but are also influenced by external interactions and perceptions. The historical legacies of colonialism, the Cold War, and more recent geopolitical shifts add layers of complexity to these interactions, making the study of Europe-Asia relations particularly significant for understanding broader patterns of regionalism and identity formation in the global context (Müller 2018; Nadalutti, Rüländ 2024).

The special issue's articles go beyond with merely reinforcing established theories. Instead, they challenge conventional wisdom by delving into the fluid, contested, and often contradictory nature of regional identities. Through rigorous empirical research and innovative theoretical frameworks, these contributions illuminate how identities are continuously reshaped through the interplay of local, regional, and global forces. This special issue critically examines the dynamic processes through which historical legacies, cultural narratives, and geopolitical strategies intersect, revealing the complexities of regional integration in a world where identities are neither fixed nor monolithic.

The aim is to push the boundaries of scholarly discourse, offering fresh insights into the role of interregional dialogues (here Rüländ, Umezawa), cross-border cooperation (Nadalutti, Nadalutti et al.), and national identity articulation in shaping regional communities (Bekemans). The contributions here do not simply describe the mechanics of identity formation; they dissect and reconstruct them, providing a nuanced understanding that is both timely and transformative. By foregrounding the mutable nature of identities, the issue underscores the importance of viewing regional integration as a process of continuous negotiation and redefinition, rather than as a static or inevitable outcome.

Furthermore, the articles offer critical reflections on the implications of these identity dynamics for regional policy and governance. They argue that the historical and cultural underpinnings of regional identities, combined with the pressures of contemporary geopolitical shifts, demand a more sophisticated approach to governance that can accommodate the complex realities of the twenty-first century. This special issue, therefore, is not only an academic contribution but also a call to action for policymakers and practitioners to rethink their strategies in light of these evolving identities. To the extent that it challenges customary methodologies and seeks new ways for grasping the complexity of contemporary identities, the special issue is ultimately a contribution to the philosophy of political and social sciences.

As we transition into a detailed analysis of each contribution, this introduction lays the groundwork for a deeper engagement with the specific ways in which each article enriches our understanding of identity and community building in regional contexts. Each article offers a distinct perspective, together constructing a rich tapestry of insights that are essential for navigating the increasingly complex landscape of regional and global affairs. By focusing on Europe and

Asia, this special issue illuminates the critical role these regions play in shaping the future of regionalism and global identity politics, making it an indispensable resource for scholars, policymakers, and practitioners alike.

Léonce Bekemans's article, "Community-building in the EU: A Personalist Perspective," presents a nuanced and philosophically rich examination of the concept of community within the European Union. The central contribution of Bekemans's work lies in his application of personalist philosophy, particularly as it was embodied by the EU's Founding Fathers, such as Robert Schuman. Through this lens, Bekemans argues for a European integration process that is deeply rooted in values such as human dignity, solidarity, subsidiarity, and the common good. These values, he contends, are essential for the EU to navigate its role both internally, among its member states, and externally, on the global stage.

The issue at the heart of Bekemans' analysis is the complex relationship between the concept of community and the European model of integration. He explores how the foundational personalist philosophy, which emphasizes the intrinsic worth of each individual within a broader communal context, can guide the EU in fostering a sense of unity while respecting the diversity of its member states. By delving into the historical and philosophical underpinnings of the EU's community-building efforts, Bekemans provides a critical examination of how these values have shaped, developed over time, and should continue to shape, the evolution of the European Union.

Bekemans's article makes a profound and essential contribution to the broader thematic inquiry of this special issue, which examines the intricate dynamics of identity and community within regional and cross-border contexts. By incorporating a philosophical dimension, Bekemans enhances the multidisciplinary approach of the issue, urging a critical examination of how ethical values should be interwoven into the discourse on European identity and community. His work challenges the predominantly empirical and theoretical analyses by advocating for a deeper reflection on the moral and ethical underpinnings that must accompany discussions of identity in the European context. This integration of ethics not only aligns seamlessly with the overarching theme of this special issue but also provides a distinctive and necessary perspective that enriches and broadens the scope of the inquiry. By doing so, Bekemans ensures that the discourse on European identity is not merely a matter of theoretical exploration or empirical observation but is also grounded in a thoughtful consideration of the values that should guide the evolution of community and identity in Europe. This philosophical lens adds a critical depth to the issue, offering readers a more holistic understanding of the complex interplay between identity, community, and the ethical principles that underpin them.

Although Bekemans does not frame his exploration around a specific research question, the article implicitly asks how the EU can sustain and enhance its community in a way that remains true to the personalist values that have historically guided its integration. This inquiry is crucial for understanding the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead for the EU as it seeks to maintain cohesion in an increasingly fragmented world.

In a nutshell, Bekemans's article is a valuable contribution to the special issue, offering a thought-provoking exploration of the philosophical foundations of community-building in the EU. However, while the personalist perspective provides deep insights, it may also limit the exploration of alternative approaches to community and identity, particularly those that are more secular or rooted in different cultural traditions. Nonetheless, Bekemans's emphasis on values-driven integration offers a compelling vision for the future of the European Union.

Elisabetta Nadalutti, Martin Guillermo Ramirez and Eduardo Medeiros's article, "Navigating Identities and Communities: Insights from the European Borderlands," offers an exploration of the evolving dynamics of identity formation and community building within European border regions. Building on Aristotelian political theory, particularly on insights from "Politics" and "Nicomachean Ethics," the authors apply classical philosophical thinking to contemporary European border regions, presenting them as pivotal areas for fostering European solidarity and governance.

The main issue analyzed in the article revolves around how European border regions navigate the delicate balance between local identities and broader European networks, a balance that is increasingly critical in the context of European integration. The authors argue that these border regions, often sites of overlapping sovereignties, cultural intersections, and historical scars serve as laboratories for observing and understanding the complexities of identity and community within the European Union. By focusing on the concept of the 'polis' and 'koinonia' as essential elements for human flourishing, the article posits that cross-border cooperation and local autonomy are vital for preserving local identities while simultaneously contributing to broader community integration.

This article significantly contributes to the overarching theme of the special issue by linking the philosophical underpinnings of identity and community with empirical insights drawn from case studies within the European borderlands. These case studies, particularly those from the b-solutions compendium, highlight the practical challenges and solutions in cross-border interactions, underscoring the importance of harmonizing local and supranational interests. The authors connect Aristotelian philosophy with contemporary policy issues, offering an alternative analytical framework for understanding how local identity preservation can coexist with, and even enhance, European integration.

The central research question that guides the analysis is: How do European border regions balance local identities within broader networks, and what implications does this have for European integration? This question is crucial for understanding the role of border regions as microcosms of European integration, where the interplay between national and European identities is most pronounced. The article hypothesizes that local autonomy and cross-border cooperation are not only compatible but also essential for the preservation of local identities and the promotion of community integration within the European Union.

This article critically engages with other contributions in the special issue, particularly Rüländ's analysis in "Regionalism through Interregionalism Revisited" and Bekemans's examination of EU community building. Rüländ's work, which investigates the role of interregional relations in fostering regional identities, provides a macro-level perspective that this article complements by offering a micro-level analysis focused on European border regions. While Rüländ examines the potential of interregionalism to shape identity, this article nuances that discussion by emphasizing how identity formation in border regions is influenced not only by top-down interregional dynamics but also by the lived experiences, interactions and everyday practices at the local level.

Similarly, Bekemans's philosophical exploration of regional identity finds resonance here, though this article extends the discussion by applying Aristotelian political theory to the specific challenges of identity and community in European borderlands. In doing so, it not only aligns with but also critically expands upon the arguments presented by Rüländ and Bekemans, suggesting that local autonomy and cross-border cooperation are essential in the complex interplay between regional and supranational identities.

Elisabetta Nadalutti's article, "Bridging Borders: Does Cross-Border Cooperation Shape Identities and Communities in the Upper Adriatic?" presents an insightful examination of how cross-border cooperation, particularly in the Upper Adriatic region encompassing parts of Italy and Slovenia, impacts regional identities and fosters community cohesion. Nadalutti's study is grounded in the context of Europeanization and the effects of EU-funded initiatives like Interreg, revealing how top-down European approaches are interwoven with bottom-up responses to facilitate regional integration and cultivate a multi-layered citizenship that transcends traditional national boundaries through active civil society engagement.

The central issue analyzed in the article is the impact of cross-border cooperation on regional identities and community cohesion in the Upper Adriatic, a region with a complex history of shifting borders and diverse cultural influences. Nadalutti explores how these cross-border initiatives influence regional identities, examining whether they foster a shared sense of community across national boundaries or whether they reinforce divisions. The article

highlights the contradictory findings that, on the one hand, there is a general rhetoric of reduced historical animosities and increased collaboration among border communities, while on the other hand, new socio-economic barriers and cultural fragmentation may evolve and persist.

Nadalutti's article contributes to the broader discourse on European integration by offering a critical analysis of the role of cross-border cooperation in shaping identities and communities in border regions. Her use of Practice Theory to frame the analysis of cross-border interactions provides a robust framework for understanding how everyday practices and interactions contribute to the construction of regional identities and community cohesion. This approach aligns with the special issue's emphasis on the dynamics of identity and community within regional contexts, particularly in areas where national and cultural boundaries intersect.

The research question at the heart of Nadalutti's analysis is clear: To what extent do cross-border cooperation practices in the Upper Adriatic influence regional identities and community cohesion? This inquiry is crucial for understanding the complex interplay between local and European identities in regions marked by historical divisions and diverse cultural legacies. Nadalutti hypothesizes that while cross-border cooperation can enhance regional integration and community cohesion, it also faces significant challenges in overcoming deep-seated cultural and socio-economic barriers.

In conclusion, Nadalutti's article is a critical and nuanced contribution to the special issue, providing insights into the complexities of cross-border cooperation and its effects on identity formation in the Upper Adriatic. Her analysis underscores the importance of considering both the successes and limitations of cross-border initiatives, particularly in regions with a history of cultural and political divisions. The article's critical perspective challenges overly optimistic narratives of seamless integration, calling for a more nuanced understanding of the ongoing challenges in fostering a cohesive cross-border identity in Europe.

Jürgen Rüländ's article, titled "Regionalism through Interregionalism Revisited: Did Europe's Relations with Asia Strengthen Regional Identities?" provides a critical analysis of the impact of interregionalism on regional identity formation, particularly focusing on Europe's relations with Asia. The article revisits the theoretical assumption, notably advanced by Julie Gilson and Heiner Hänggi, that interregionalism could strengthen regional identities, and it scrutinizes this claim through an empirical examination of the ASEAN-EU dialogue, the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM), and the EU's hybrid interregional relationships with Asian countries like China, Japan, and India.

Rüländ's main contribution lies in his rigorous examination of whether interregional interactions have indeed fostered stronger regional identities in Europe and Asia. He challenges the optimistic view that interregionalism

necessarily leads to identity building, presenting evidence that such effects have been overstated. Specifically, the article demonstrates that while the ASEAN-EU dialogue has had some impact on shaping Southeast Asian regional identity, the ASEM has largely failed to contribute to a cohesive Asian identity. Furthermore, the EU's hybrid interregional relationships, particularly with China, have produced ambiguous effects, often exacerbating divisions within Europe rather than strengthening regional cohesion.

The issue analyzed in the article is the role of interregionalism in regional identity building. Rüländ explores how various forms of interregional interaction—whether group-to-group, transregional, or hybrid—have influenced the development of regional identities in Europe and Asia. His analysis shows that the anticipated identity-building effects are more limited than previously thought, with significant variations depending on the type of interregionalism and the specific geopolitical contexts.

Rüländ's work contributes to the overall theme of the special issue by critically assessing the actual outcomes of interregionalism in terms of regional identity formation. By providing a detailed theoretical and empirical analysis, the article highlights the complexities and limitations of interregionalism as a tool for fostering regional identities, thereby enriching the broader discussion on the dynamics of identity and community in international relations.

The research question that guides Rüländ's analysis is: To what extent has interregionalism between Europe and Asia strengthened regional identities? This question is central to understanding the broader implications of interregionalism in global governance and regional integration. Rüländ's findings suggest that while interregionalism can contribute to regional identity formation under certain conditions, its overall impact has been modest and often counterproductive, particularly when power asymmetries and divergent interests are at play.

Indeed, Rüländ's article provides a critical reassessment of the identity-building functions of interregionalism, offering valuable insights into the limits of this approach in promoting regional cohesion. His analysis is a significant contribution to the special issue, challenging prevailing assumptions and prompting a reevaluation of the role of interregionalism in global and regional governance.

Hana Umezawa's article, "Identity at the Crossroads: Japan's Role in Regional Community Building in East Asia," offers a profound exploration of Japan's complex identity and how it shapes the country's approach to regional community building in East Asia. The main contribution of Umezawa's work lies in its detailed analysis of Japan's "sui generis" identity, characterized by a unique blend of Westernism, Asianism, and Internationalism. This identity, deeply rooted in Japan's historical, geopolitical, and economic development, has influenced its strategic positioning in East Asia, particularly in its engagement with Asia's oldest

and most influential regional organization, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

The issue analyzed in the article revolves around Japan's ambiguous identity in the context of East Asia and how this identity informs its cautious yet strategic participation in regional community-building initiatives. Umezawa argues that Japan's identity crisis, stemming from its historical experiences and geopolitical realities, necessitates a nuanced approach to regionalism. Japan has consistently engaged in regional affairs but has often refrained from assuming a clear leadership role, opting instead for a strategy of "open regionalism" and leading from behind that balances its relations with both its regional partners and its Western allies, particularly the United States.

Umezawa's article contributes significantly to the overall issue by providing a comprehensive examination of how Japan's identity influences its regional policies and its potential as a (reluctant) leader in East Asia. The article's interdisciplinary approach, combining historical analysis with discourse analysis, enriches the special issue's broader exploration of identity and community dynamics in regional contexts. By highlighting Japan's role in fostering a cooperative and prosperous regional community, the article provides depth to the understanding of how national identity can shape regional integration processes.

The research question that guides Umezawa's analysis is implicit but clear: How does Japan's unique identity influence its approach to regional community building in East Asia? This question is crucial for understanding the complexities of Japan's foreign policy and its implications for regional integration. Umezawa's findings suggest that Japan's identity, shaped by a history of Westernization and a renewed focus on Asianism and Internationalism, plays a pivotal role in determining its strategies and interactions within the region.

In sum, Umezawa's article provides a nuanced and critical perspective on Japan's role in East Asian regionalism. The analysis underscores the importance of understanding national identity as a key factor in regional policy-making and community building. While Japan's approach of "open regionalism" reflects its ambiguous identity, it also demonstrates the country's commitment to fostering a balanced and inclusive regional order.

In closing, this special issue transcends mere academic discourse, positioning itself as a contribution to the understanding of how identity and community are inextricably linked to the dynamics of regionalism and global interactions. By immersing into the fluid and often contested nature of regional identities within Europe and Asia, these articles collectively provide a lens through which to view the ongoing evolution of (micro)regional, (macro-)regional and interregional relationships. The challenge now lies in translating these insights into actionable strategies, encouraging policymakers to adopt a more nuanced and adaptable

approach to regional integration—one that acknowledges the ever-shifting landscape of identity and community in an increasingly interconnected world.

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COMMUNITY-BUILDING IN THE EU: A PERSONALIST PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract: Europe should play a more forcible role on the international scene, valorising and safeguarding its model of democracy, participation, identity and community, within its internal process of integration as well as beyond its borders. The paper focuses on the relationship between 'community' and the European model, with specific consideration of the concept of 'community' with the Founding Fathers of the EU. The underlying dimension of the paper's perspective to Europe's future is the personalist approach to man and society that are translated in the values set in the EU Treaties and the Charter of Fundamental Rights. The paper is structured in three main parts. The first part draws some lessons of identity and community building taken from past and ongoing developments of the European integration process. The second part concerns an analysis of community-building from a broad multi-disciplinary and international perspective. The final part deals with the specific relation between the European model of democracy and participation and the concept of community-building.

Keywords: European integration, community-building, personalism, Founding Fathers, Robert Schuman

1. *Introduction*

Within the current dramatic and confusing international and geopolitical landscape Europe is struggling to find its purpose, position and role. The ongoing Russia-Ukraine war on its northern borders and the Israel-Palestinian conflict with much senseless and barbaric violence are shaking the world to its roots. International (humanitarian) law is being violated and the international community is desperately looking for sustainable solutions that provide security to people and protect defenceless citizens. War is always the wrong answer to conflicts and a defeat of mankind. An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth blinds reason. Therefore, Europe should play its role more forcibly on the international scene, valorising and safeguarding its model of democracy, participation, identity and community, within its internal process of integration as well as also beyond its borders (Bekemans 2024).

The underlying dimension of the paper's perspective to Europe's future is the personalist approach to man and society, very much embodied by the Founding Fathers of the European integration process, especially by Robert Schuman. This perspective is very much translated in the values set in the EU Treaties and the

Charter of Fundamental Rights (Charter 2000). These values much respond also to the founding principles and values of the social doctrine of the Catholic Church. These community-driven values can be summarised as follows:

- Human dignity: each person is unique, individually important and to be respected. Consequently, everyone is equal, regardless of race, class, religion and nationality. Furthermore, people are ends in themselves, not means and acquire their value only in relation to others, in community, implying the recognition of universal human dignity;
- The common good: this refers to values which are shared by and beneficial to all or most members of a given community (substantive conception) or to the result that is achieved through collective participation in the formation of a shared will. It is when one another respects others' dignity and rights (procedural conception);
- Freedom as a space of belonging: the aspects, human dignity and common good, also relate to the concept of freedom expressed in terms of rights and duties;
- Solidarity: this broad concept includes both internal and external solidarity, implying a respect of the other;
- Priorities: it means a priority concern for the vulnerable and the poor;
- Participation: this is conceived as a right and lever against exclusion;
- Justice: this includes distributive and contributory justice;
- Subsidiarity: this is related to the different levels in governing society: the government, the individual and civil society. In this context, liability should ideally be as low as possible. A broad civil society is therefore indispensable: society should not be reduced to the individual and the state, but people should be able to assume responsibility through associations and groups.

The paper is structured in three main parts. The first parts draw some lessons of identity and community building taken from the past and ongoing developments of the European integration process. The second part concerns an analysis of community-building from a broad disciplinary and European perspective. The final part deals with the specific relation between the European model of democracy and participation and the concept of community building. The main focus is on the role, approach and sources of inspiration of the Founding Fathers to community- building in the European integration process. Such perspective implies some research issues (Bekermans 2021).

2. Lessons of identity and community-building from the ongoing European integration

The fundamental ambiguity accompanying European identity building throughout the centuries has been a constant challenge to provide its identity with a kind of substance, referring to an alleged common geographical belonging,

ethnic origins, or to a common cultural heritage. Understanding the historical trajectory of how the idea of Europe has evolved and how its identity has been built over the years, is fundamental to interpreting today's scenarios and to making policy assessments for Europe's future.

Some of the cultural specificities of Europe, according to me, can therefore be related to: the rescue of history from memory to focus on ideas that travel irrespective of borders (e.g. EU programme on Citizens, Equality, Rights and Value); the move beyond assimilation and multiculturalism towards interculturalism to manage diversity and living with differences; (e.g. UNESCO World Report on Cultural Diversity) (Unesco World Report 2009); the acceptance of change so that dialogue and mutual listening becomes the driving social force; (e.g. Council of Europe, White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue) (Council of Europe, 2008); and the learning from humility so that Europe can draw from its religious and non-religious traditions as well as from its specific Christian roots when learning how to practice humility (Bekemans 2020). These characteristics are major components of the European spirit.

Therefore, our points of departure of such a broad understanding of Europe refer to: a visual expression of diversity in unity in a variety of areas and dimensions; a civilisation and model of society; a (changing) historical and geographical (loose) entity; and a community of values and principles. Its *raison d'être* is linked to the principles of peace, safety and security, unity and equality, fundamental freedoms, economic and social solidarity, respect of cultural diversity/identities as well as of the European cultural heritage.

2.1 How do we define the current European situation in the changing world?

Europe as a global actor in the international political and economic landscape moves prudently amid complex and interconnected transformations at all levels. The international system is nowadays more complex, more interdependent and more fragmented, with diverse actors involved. It is a hard search for a proper European setting, role and responsibility in the global world to respond to the 'global commons' (Bekemans 2013).

The EU plays a global role, mainly in trade, development, environment and social issues, more recently also in security strategy. With the Lisbon Treaty, it made an important step towards strengthening its global aspirations. Yet, although the EU is still the world's leading exporter of goods, the largest trader of services and the biggest provider of development and humanitarian aid, the second largest foreign investor and a main destination for migrants, chaos, fear and uncertainty reign. We may speak of a European malaise, a decline of its economic, political and moral power and a weakened position of the EU as a Global Actor (Telo 2009; Van Langenhove 2010).

This weakening is related to external factors, such as the increasing competition at the global level and the management of complexity as well as to

internal factors, such as demographic developments, migration issues, climate crisis, secularisation, democratic deficits and populist movements. Still the EU seems to slowly taking up concrete measures for better and more efficient governance in its policies, decision-making processes and several programmes, amid many doubts and differences. Two essential and distinctive dimensions of the EU's contribution to global community issues can be distinguished. Firstly, its model of national and supranational democracy has an influence on international democratisation processes. Since its creation in the 1950s, the European Community (now the EU) has played a key role in a gradual strengthening of democratic processes throughout its several enlargements, from the Mediterranean to central and eastern Europe. It is also applying slowly democratic practices at regional level through its own institutions and policies. Secondly, the European community has also an impact as a reference to peacebuilding. It should not be forgotten that for centuries the global implications of the European contribution towards peacebuilding have been addressed by political thinkers, from Immanuel Kant to Jürgen Habermas, Ulrich Beck and Zygmunt Bauman. European studies have become a specialisation in international studies and the EU is perceived as a unique, *sui generis* model of integration, a work in progress used as reference for other regional organisations in the world.

3. Community-building in multi-disciplinary and international perspective

3.1. Defining the hybrid concept of Community

The term 'community' is a very complex one and has evolved over time. It lacks a clear conceptual definition and is used differently in everyday language as well as in several academic disciplines, mainly in sociology, political philosophy and philosophy of law. It is useful and relevant to draw from various academic disciplines and policy practices to understand and apply the concept of 'European Community' and community-building in today's world.

1) 'Community' in sociology

Sociology distinguishes 'community' and 'society' (Tönnies 2002). They represent two kinds of social relations: the 'community' being the natural grouping in which a person is born and accepted, without pre-conditions, linked to a family and a land. In 'society', each person is a stranger to the other and relations are contractual and functional. The community is linked to stability and to the past, whereas society is linked to progress and to a conscious decision of the participants.

The relation between 'community' and 'society' is dialectic and complementary. In the literature we see a natural ideal evolution from 'communities' towards a more developed and complex 'society'. This positive normative approach is challenged as a concept that can lead to exclusive particularism opposed to universal solidarity values. This sentimental nostalgia

of the ‘community’ is still present today and is often exploited by populist and nationalistic movements.

The archetypal vision of ‘community’ is associated with common ways of life, strong ties and frequent interaction, small number of peoples and familiarity, while ‘society’ is associated with diverse ways of life, looser ties and infrequent interaction, bigger number of people and mistrust. However, the distinction between both becomes blurred. Behaviours and structures usually associated with communal relations have some positive features (i.e. fraternalism and mutual support; low levels of stratification and power; and informal settlement of disputes) as well as some negative ones (mainly illiberalism and enforced conformity).

However, research in Contemporary Community Studies argues that the apparent cohesiveness in small traditional groups can hide social stratification, as well as self-interested and self-sustaining power structures. In other words, some communities could be rather considered to be social networks or social capital according to Bourdieu’s theory of sociology (Asquith 2019), because the final aim is pursuing valuable connections or instrumental benefits rather than long-term solidarity bonds.

2) ‘Community’ in political philosophy: Communitarians vs. Liberals

In Political Philosophy a distinction is made between a liberal and a communitarian understanding of community. Political liberalism, as exposed in John Rawl’s book ‘A Theory of Justice’ (Rawl 1972), is a normative theory that proposes a model to build a fair political community based on natural law. It presents an individualistic and self-sufficient image of man/woman. Communitarianism, on the other hand, is not a comprehensive political theory, but rather a reaction to John Rawl’s liberalism. Communitarians highlight the importance of beliefs and emotions, as well as the social nature of the person (Rawl 1972). Individuals are embedded in society, implying that social conditions shape their moral views (Sandel 1981). These views are bound by given moral ties, such as solidarity, loyalty, historic memory and religion. In sum, Communitarians argue that the conception of justice is shaped by culture and tradition, and therefore it varies from place to place. This tension between universalism and particularism is at the core of the opposition between Liberalism and Communitarianism.

The liberal and communitarian political philosophies have been translated into different models of collective identity-building: a Liberal-Republican model is based on the social contract of citizens, whereas a Communitarian model is based on a shared history and culture follows much more a gradual constructivist approach.

Liberalism and Communitarianism have also shaped the policy options to manage diversity with models going from assimilation to multiculturalism: the former, highlighting citizenship and the Liberal-Republican social contract in a

political community and the latter, allowing for smaller communities to maintain their particularities within the State.

In the 1990s there was a second wave of authors who criticised liberalism and the progressive atomisation of Western societies, particularly in the Anglo-Saxon countries. Amitai Etzioni and William A. Galston founded a group under the name of ‘responsive communitarians’ (Etzioni 1996; Galston 1995). They claimed that preserving social bonds is crucial for the flourishing of both individuals and societies. Responsive communitarians argue that communities should be built based on dialogue, participation and shared values. So, it is argued that, whenever power elites take control of communities and undermine participation, communities are being distorted (Gibbons 2015).

However, responsive communitarianism is different from Jürgen Habermas’ discourse theory of democracy (Habermas 1998) because it does not take for granted that individuals engage in a rational and logical discussion over controversial issues. Responsive communitarians consider that there are non-rational but still valid elements that contribute to shaping the common values, such as ethical and religious considerations.

In recent years the debate between Liberals and Communitarians has been tempered by more nuanced positions on both sides. Liberals state that Rawls always took into consideration the social nature of man and the need for social relations, while responsive communitarians advocate the dialogical process to define the common good and are ready to leave behind certain traditions and closed groups.

Despite their differences dialogue is crucial in both visions: overlapping consensus in Rawls’ approach; moral dialogue in responsive communitarianism and permanent dialogue in Habermas’ discursive democracy. This shared understanding of the need of dialogue, participation and a vibrant public sphere has been also reflected in current research on cultural diversity, with a stronger emphasis on intercultural dialogue as a tool to manage diversity, overcoming initial models based on assimilation or multiculturalism.

3) ‘Community’ in philosophy of law: human Community vs. international Community

Philosophy of law addresses the concept of community mainly in the context of international and human rights law. In the context of international law, the concept of the ‘community of nations’ or ‘international community’, refers to relations between States, implying an institutional community-building of nation states. In the context of human rights, the concept of ‘human community’ refers to a universal community to which all men and women belong as individuals, regardless of their citizenship or bestowed rights, implying a community-building based on people. Some questions remain: How to implement a legal order at the international level and what is the source of such international law? In other

words, what constitutes the basis for community-building: states, people or a mix between the two?

With the peace of Westphalia (1648) the modern state is defined and states are the only subjects of rights and duties in the international community. The French Revolution introduced the concept of citizenship and nationality. However, the state remained the only subject of rights in the international sphere. In 1795 Immanuel Kant published 'Towards Perpetual Peace' (Reiss 1991): he breaks with the traditional concept of human unity based on natural law, but advocates a universal community of states, based on reason. He proposed a republican cosmopolitan order, a sort of global government to guarantee a global citizenship.

In the 20th century with the creation of the United Nations (1945) and the setting up of international tribunals there has been an attempt to ensure compliance with the Human Rights Declaration (1948). A discrepancy still exists between the rights stated in the Universal Declaration and the capacity of the current international organisations to implement them as long as physical persons are not subjects of international law (Venturini 2005; Bentivoglio 2005). Arguments are put forward for a radical transformation of the current community of states into a universal human community, or just an inter-human instead of inter-state international community, stressing a human-centric openness of the international relations system (Papisca 2011).

New human challenges oblige to reconsider international law, such as the realisation of the 'universal common good' (Venturini 2005). Reference can be made to the Papal Encyclical *Pacem in Terris*, by Pope John XXIII. The Pope called for a world public authority to promote this universal common good which was identified with the "*recognition, respect, safeguarding, and promotion of the rights of the human person*". The question of how to ensure the respect of human rights has become pressing in a world in which war crimes are recurrent. The UN coined the term 'responsibility to protect' (Andreopoulos 2010). It embodies "*a political commitment to end the worst forms of violence and persecution. It seeks to narrow the gap between Member States' pre-existing obligations under international humanitarian and human rights law and the reality faced by populations at risk of genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity.*"

This brief analytical overview of the concept of 'community' in various disciplines illustrates different interpretations and understandings of community-building in national and international contexts. This, of course, has an impact on the particular interpretation and application of community-building in the specific European and EU context, as explored in the next section.

4. Community and the European model

4.1. The origin of the European Communities: the Community method

Within the EU context community-building can be interpreted, analysed and applied according to different perspectives, more institution-driven or more human-based. In its development the European integration has merely focused through the so-called Community method on institutional community-building between the member states; only recently more attention has been given in its policies and programmes to community-building of citizens. This focused institutional consideration is rather clear when we look at the origin of the European integration process.

On 7-10 May 1948, immediately after World War II, European federalists and associations advocating Europe's unity met in The Hague for a three-day conference. During the debate two different models of integration became clear; they resulted in the creation of different European organisations. The model of cooperation between states based on international law gave birth to the Council of Europe in 1948, being an intergovernmental cooperation; whereas the model based on sharing sovereignty and establishing common institutions and common laws that would prevail over national law gave birth to the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) in 1951, implying a supranational cooperation between the Member States on the economic sectors coal and steel.

The integration process based on the 'Community method' implies the delegation of competences by Member States to Higher Authorities to execute certain common policies. It introduced a completely new form of politics between states based on equality and long-term trust rather than the traditional balance-of-power. The process was launched on 9 May 1950, with the so-called 'Schuman Declaration'. The theory of functionalism acted as a catalyst to start the European integration process with the pooling of coal and steel resources of the 6 ECSC member states. But the Schuman Declaration already stated the will to start a process to build a de facto solidarity, and keep political integration as the final aim.

In 1954, a project to create a European Defence Community failed due to the rejection of the French Assembly to ratify the establishing treaty. However, with the Treaty of Rome in 1957 two new Communities were successfully established: the European Economic Community (EEC) and the European Atomic Energy Community (Euratom). These three Communities - ECSC, EEC and Euratom - shared the same institutions and were brought under the same umbrella with the name of European Union in Maastricht in 1992.

The European Community was integrated into the EU only in 2009, when the European Community legally ceased to exist with the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty. However, the term 'Community' continues to be used in certain areas, such as 'Community law'. It is still used to differentiate between the 'Community decision-making method' and the 'intergovernmental method' which consists in the cooperation between national Member States without any transfer of sovereignty to a common authority. This sui generis integration

process reflects a specific vision of a politically united Europe and evokes the original vision of the EU founding fathers that is going to be analysed in the next section

4.2 Importance of the Founding Fathers of the European Union

The founding fathers of the European Union are politicians who built the first European Communities. The main names are Robert Schuman, Jean Monnet (both from France), Konrad Adenauer (Germany), Alcide De Gasperi (Italy), Paul-Henri Spaak (Belgium), Joseph Bech (Luxembourg), and Johan Willem Beyen (Netherlands) (Bekemans 2018).

This was not the first attempt to unite Europe, but it was the first successful project to create a democratic unity based on the free decision of its constituent members, unlike previous experiences based on empires (from Charlemagne to Napoleon). Their vision of Europe was shaped by their life experiences: they saw the end of the 19th century empires when they were young, they lived the First World War as young men, then the financial crisis of 1929, the rise of totalitarian regimes and the destruction of World War II. To gain a deeper understanding of their concept of ‘community’ it is essential to identify certain shared characteristics among these political leaders to help understand their approach to ‘community-building’.

4.3 The concept of ‘Community’ at the time of the Founding Fathers

The concept of ‘community’ was very much in vogue in 1930s and 1940s France, although it was an ambiguous notion that inspired both a revival of the ‘national community’ and the European federalist movement.

The non-conformist and personalist thinkers advocated a ‘communitarian revolution’ against the individualisation of capitalism and the collectivisation of socialism. These personalist thinkers understood the concept of community as the social context that would allow for personal fulfilment, open to transcendence and to diversity. However, they did not idealise rural communities or even the past. They wanted a new ‘Renaissance’ to launch a spiritual renewal and create a ‘new order’.

On the contrary, Marshall Petain promoted a revival of the French State around traditional values of family and duty to the community, what he also called a ‘communitarian revolution’ with a strong emphasis on social links. The movements who adhered to Petain’s call gathered near Vichy in 1943. However, this vision of ‘community’ was far from the inclusive vision of the personalist philosophers and activists, because it fostered xenophobia, anti-Semitism and nationalism. The essential values of Petain’s movement were taken from Action Française, a conservative Catholic, nationalistic and monarchist movement founded in France in 1898.

4.4 Sources of inspiration

The main intellectual and spiritual sources which influenced the generation of the Founding Fathers are the Catholic Social Teaching and the philosophy of Communitarian Personalism. It is clear that the values on which the European integration process is based much respond to the founding principles of the social doctrine of the Catholic Church and the values of community-driven personalism. Both sources also inspired the formation of Christian Democratic parties (Robert Schuman, Alcide De Gasperi, Konrad Adenauer, Paul Van Zeeland, Joseph Bech were all Catholic and Christian Democrats). Christian democrats played an important role in the creation of the European Communities in the 1950s, even if there were other secular sources.

4.4.1 Catholic Social Teaching and Papal Magisterium

The founding fathers of the European integration process were much influenced by the Catholic Social Teaching, embodied in several papal teachings as:

(1) The youth of the founding fathers was deeply influenced by the teachings of Pope Leo XIII, in particular by the encyclicals ‘*Aeterni Patris*’ (1879) and ‘*Rerum Novarum*’ or ‘*Rights and Duties of Capital and Labour*’ (1891) (Bekemans 2018). In ‘*Aeterni Patris*’ Pope Leo XIII asked Catholics to go back to the “golden wisdom” of St. Thomas Aquinas to actualise the relation between faith and reason in the context of liberal democracies. This led to a new wave of Neo-Scholasticism in the Catholic Church. All the Christian Democrat politicians were familiar with this philosophy as they were growing up. Moreover, the Catholic founding fathers Robert Schuman, Konrad Adenauer and Alcide De Gasperi were also active in Catholic youth associations to implement and put in practice the social teachings of encyclical *Rerum Novarum*.

(2) The social teachings of the Catholic Church became even more explicit in Pius XI’s encyclical ‘*Quadragesimo Anno*’ (1931), where seven principles were exposed: the dignity of the human being; the common good; subsidiarity; participation; solidarity; the right to private property and the universal destination of goods. Of course, the teachings of Pope Pius XI and Pope Leo XIII need to be contextualised and qualified within their overall political views, beyond the mere positive characteristics of Catholic Social Teaching.

This focus by the Catholic Church on social issues was translated in the political field. In Germany, Catholics founded the political party ‘*Zentrum*’ in 1871 which much focused on the social teaching of the Church. *Zentrum* not only developed a vision for social justice but also called for religious freedom, subsidiarity and decentralisation of power. It called for the preservation of regional ‘particularism’ and the right for communities to have some degree of autonomy from a

centralising State. The works of the bishop of Mainz, von Ketteler ('Foundations of a Christian conception of the State' and 'The social question and Christianity') influenced Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum*.

(3) A third important Church teaching that influenced the vision of the Founding Fathers was the concept of 'supranationality'. Already Pope Pius XI in his encyclical on St. Thomas Aquinas '*Studiorum Ducem*' (1923) suggested that St. Thomas could inspire a new system of hierarchical relations between states. This should be understood within the specific context of that time. During the inter-war period one of the main concerns of the Popes was ensuring a long-lasting peace. Pope Pius XII in his encyclical '*Summus Pontificatus*' (1939) spoke about the unity of the human family, the need of a supranational order and rejected the idea that one race or one culture can be superior to another one.

4.4.2 Personalism

The personalist approach to community-building very much originates from the conception of the individual conceived as a person within society. It is generally accepted that Personalism cannot be considered a philosophical school, but rather a loose group of thinkers who tried to give answers to the deep spiritual, social and economic crisis of the 1930s and 1940s addressing the concept of the 'person' from different approaches. Various aspects must be considered in the evolution of Personalism, mainly in its relation to the European integration process.

The first generation of philosophers of Personalism reacted against the positivism, technicism and individualism that arose at the end of the 19th century. They were inspired by Kant's human dignity, Kierkegaard's existentialism, Husserl's phenomenology and St. Thomas Aquinas' concept of the person. Personalism is based on a concept of the human being as a whole, building on previous philosophers such as Saint Thomas Aquinas who much related in his works to Aristoteles. They differentiate between the 'individual' and the 'person'. Furthermore, the philosophy of Personalism was also at the basis of European federalism. The Dutch thinker and convinced European federalist Hendrik Brugmans in his book '*The European idea -1920-1970*', criticised the liberal individualism and strongly affirmed that man is not just 'an individual', but 'a person', responsible and free, committed and autonomous, bonded to the other persons through a common responsibility. In Germany, Max Scheler and Romano Guardini were also reflecting on the person, intersubjectivity and responsibility.

In the 1930s and 1940s, the personalist thinkers reacted against anti-semitism and reflected on the acceptance of 'otherness', with a strong emphasis on dialogue and relations. However, the approaches were different and implied a different European community-thinking. Jacques Maritain (1882-1973) was one of the main thinkers of Neo-Scholasticism. He renewed, interpreted and actualised the philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1259). He addressed the person from a

metaphysical, social and political perspective. In 1936 he proposed a whole project for a new theocentric and yet profane humanism ‘Humanisme Intégrale’ (Maritain 1936). In ‘Christianity and Democracy’ (1943) (Bekermans 2018) Maritain fully supported democracy and the Republican values. He evolved from a reactionary and anti-modernist position to being one of the most ardent advocates of parliamentary democracy. He also contributed to the drafting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948). Emmanuel Mounier, on the other hand, was the most visible and active philosopher for a ‘communitarian’ Personalism, and unlike Maritain he also felt a responsibility to actively promote the building of ‘communitarian’ relations in the society (Mounier 1989). In his ‘Manifeste au service du Personnalisme’ (1936) he criticises both individualism and collectivism as dehumanising materialisms, lacking the transcendent dimension of any person’s fulfilment. In this context, personalism is strongly linked to communitarianism. as a driving force in the European integration process.

In short, the philosophy of Personalism had a broad influence on the intellectual, social and political trends in Europe after the 1930s and during WW II, also through the Resistance Movements. The founding fathers were therefore also influenced by these developments at different levels, directly and indirectly (Campanini 1981). Explicit Personalism and its direct influence on the European federalist movement, was publicly displayed at the Congress of The Hague (1948). Three leading communitarian and federalist thinkers were present in that conference that marked the starting point of European integration: Denis de Rougemont, Hendrik Brugmans and Alexandre Marc. Implicit Personalism influenced the Schuman Declaration, the ECSC Treaty, the European Convention on Human Rights and some post-War Constitutions.

*5. Robert Schuman’s thinking and writing*¹

Schuman’s thinking was deeply influenced both by St. Thomas Aquinas’ concept of community and the Catholic Social Doctrine.

5.1 The influence of Jacques Maritain

The writings of Maritain much influenced Schuman’s thinking and action on community-building. We discern three key concepts that are different from other Neo-Scholastic thinkers and which Maritain shared with Schuman: the Christian roots of democracy, pluralism and the limits of the nation state.

¹ Bekermans, L. & V. Martín de la Torre, *op.cit.*

5.1.1 *Christian roots of Democracy*

Unlike other Christian Neo-Scholastic thinkers, Maritain followed the Pope's recommendation and reconciled democracy and Christianity, moving away from traditionalist and authoritarian stands. In fact, following Henri Bergson, both Maritain and Schuman believe that the root of democracy is evangelical, as it is embedded in the absolute dignity of each man/woman, made in God's image, and in the equality of all men/women. "*That is the deepest principle of the democratic ideal, which is the secular name for the ideal of Christendom*" (Maritain 1936).

5.1.2 *Pluralism*

This view on democracy implies the acceptance of a non-confessional State, because a confessional state would be unrealistic in a plural society with a big percentage of non-believers. Maritain concedes that non-Christians can share the ideal of democracy, but transcendence and a moral foundation is needed in any democracy as the only way to respect the absolute dignity of each human being. The role of the State is to provide the means for every person to fulfil his/her divine vocation to enter in relation with the Absolute. Therefore, the spiritual input is one of the elements of democracy (Chenau 2006).

Many writings of Maritain underline the pluralist perspective of Schuman's understanding of community-building in the European context. In 1936 Maritain published 'Integral Humanism', a book in which he proposed a new political model to implement the personalist and communitarian vision for society proposes, a new Renaissance that would move away from an anthropocentric humanism, but also from any confessional political empire. He proposed a 'Profane Christendom' and a new humanism. This new and true humanism would consider the wholeness of each person, both material and spiritual. In his book 'True Humanism' (1938) Maritain explained the role of Christianity in a pluralistic society, thus bringing inspiration to the fledging Christian Democratic parties. However, in both Maritain's and Schuman's view, pluralism as a methodology for human relations should not be confused with a pluralist philosophical stand, which would fall into relativism and undermine the foundations of democracy. In 'Human Rights and Natural Law' (1942) Maritain stated that pluralism is a structural feature of the democratic society. In 'Christianity and Democracy' (1943) he said that democracy is "*the fruit beard of the Evangelical inspiration in the profane conscience.*" In 'Man and the State' (1951) he further elaborated his political philosophy, arguing that freedom of conscience is the foundation of the democratic state in order to respect the identity of diverse ideological groups.

5.1.3 *Limits of the nation state*

For Robert Schuman, the Nation-State is not an absolute entity. Both Maritain and Schuman shared Pius XII's concerns for peace and his call for a fraternity beyond national borders. After two World Wars, the Pontiff's plea was reflected in the 'supranational question', that is to say, the unity of the human family beyond national borders. This is why Pius XII backed a federal Europe, mainly in his Christmas radio speeches. Of course, this support has to be understood within the specific wartime frame, much before the openings of the Vatican II.

Following the Pope's teaching, Maritain looked for the theological roots of charity, which goes beyond philanthropy. It poses a moral obligation to overcome natural social groups in order to reconcile all men and women and to integrate them in a 'human community of nations and peoples': "*[I]t is the urge of a love infinitely stronger than the philanthropy commended by the philosophers which causes human devotion to surmount the closed borders of the natural social groups - family groups and national groups—and extend it to the entire human race, because this love is the life in us of the very love which has created being and because it truly makes of each human being our neighbour. Without breaking the links of flesh and blood, of self-interest, tradition and pride which are needed by the body politic, and without destroying the rigorous laws of existence and conservation of this body politic, such a love extended to all men transcends, and at the same time transforms from within, the very life of the group and tends to integrate all of humanity into a community of nations and peoples in which men will be reconciled.*" (Maritain 1936)

However, Schuman did not go as far as Maritain in his criticism of the nation state. Schuman makes a difference between the concept of "supranational" and the specific aim of a federation. Even though the 'Schuman Declaration' states the goal of a European federation, in Schuman's view, the supranational should not undermine the nation state, but create a new layer of power at a higher level. He said that one of the tasks of the ECSC High Authority was to make sure that no interest, including the national interest, would be neglected.

5.2 *Assessment*

The main elements of Schuman's concept of a European community can be summarised as follows (Bekermans 2018):

- (1) The person is at the centre of human progress. The Community must therefore look both at the material and the spiritual dimension of the person. In sum, Unity in Diversity reflects the unity of the parts in a whole. The same way that persons are unique and still dependent of a human community, States can be unique and still part of a bigger whole, a bigger community, as advocated by personalist philosophers and the Papal Magisterium.

- (2) Culture is the basis for political integration. Europe is an ‘état d’esprit’, a mindset that can be acquired over time through personal contacts and encounters and that cannot simply be imposed by the institutions. It is therefore necessary not only to soften or largely erase actual and imaginary boundaries and transform them into points of contact and bridgeheads, but also to actively organise these personal exchanges. In this perspective, the very successful Erasmus+ programme and the more recent Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values programme (CERV) of the EU do contribute to a strengthening of the European dimension of education, identity and citizenship and to promote the participation of European citizens in the European decision-making process. Such a change in mindset and focus aims at building trust and mutual understanding, increasing awareness of shared commonalities, but also learning to appreciate and respect the richness of differences and particularities in the diverse European cultures. As such, they favour community-building of European citizens and beyond, next to institutional EU community-building.
- (3) The ‘Community’ as a political project must be democratic and non-confessional, pluralistic and based on the absolute dignity of every person. Because it is supranational, it transcends the nation state without erasing it by reinventing the concept of sovereignty. The Community is open to the world for the common good, in solidarity with the one human family (following St. Thomas’ teachings but also the Pontifical Magisterium). The participation of persons and groups should be encouraged in civil society beyond the institutions and the state in order to make the Community alive and active. Along with participation, the principles of subsidiarity and responsibility are to be promoted and strengthened.

From our analysis the concept of ‘community’ has deep philosophical and spiritual roots for Robert Schuman and the EU founding fathers. Even though the legal personality of the Community/Communities disappeared over time, the concept of ‘community’ still recalls a certain quality of relations between the members of the EU, both the nation states and the persons living in them. Undoubtedly, Schuman and the founding fathers put ‘culture’ and a certain ‘mindset’ at the core of the Community, rather than any geographical or political definition. They showed that it is possible both to keep particularities and traditions but also to adhere to a common project.

Diversity in Europe today is very different from diversity at the time of the founding fathers, but some important principles remain valid: foremost the respect of personal freedom, human dignity, pluralism and also the need to increase personal contacts to strengthen social bonds. In this perspective, also the principle of subsidiarity should be mentioned, being an important policy aspect and instrument in the level of EU decision-making close to the citizen.

The approach of Schuman and the founding fathers responds to several academic controversies and oppositions. On one hand, the traditional opposition between ‘community’ and ‘society’ in sociology by proposing the goal of bringing community-quality relations to the broader society and even to relations between states and people. On the other hand, it overcomes the opposition between federalists and intergovernmentalists or realists in the field of European integration studies (Hooghe and Marks 2019): a new concept of supranationality is proposed, equally distant from the traditional inter-state relations and from the idea of a super-state. Subsidiarity and participation are the principles to overcome this opposition (Bekemans 2013).

The model of the European Community is an open-ending and unique process whose main goal is the transformation of the participants to merge their interests towards the common good without losing their specific identity, but enriching it as an added value (Bekemans 2013). It moves from the either/or frame to the and/and frame. In line with Schuman and the founding fathers it presents a way to ‘transcend’ the nation state without erasing it and to approach differently the more complex reality of today’s identities and sense of belonging.

Schuman’s concept of community lies in the recognition of Europe’s values-based Community which is legally embedded in Art. 2 of the Lisbon Treaty (TEU): *“The Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. These values are common to the Member States in a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail”*.

In a rapidly changing world, continuous political courage, inspiration and human-centric practices are needed to shape and strengthen the values, which relate to Europe. The promotion of these values should be conceived as a task that goes beyond the European territory and is recognised worldwide as a model of society. We must foster our Europe as a space of unity in diversity, based on relations of reciprocity and fraternity. Europe’s mission today is to redefine its post-war concept of peace and social order in the context of a globalising world. That consists of a system of global relations based on the principles of an eco-social market economy where free exchange is balanced with strong institutions of social welfare, ecological commitment and distributive justice. To realise this mission, we are convinced that Europe should strengthen its resources in relational identity-building to further a common sense of belonging, to respond jointly to global challenges and to strengthen both EU institution-based and people’s-driven community-building. This should be done in the spirit of the European personalist tradition, respecting the significance, uniqueness and inviolability of the person, as well as the person’s essentially relational or social dimension.

Reflecting on the many existing challenges in the international and European scene, overall priority should be given to consolidating a values-oriented European project that can protect, guarantee and inspire not only European citizens, but, hopefully also the future world organisation with peace, human rights and the basics of a state of law. Therefore, focus on values that are common to all European nations/states, though recognising the varied expressions of cultural traditions, should remain a precious goal, certainly when human security issues and respect for human rights are constantly pressured.

Within the current confusing geopolitical context, we clearly affirm the value premises of Europe as a community in dealing with the welfare and wellbeing of its current and future citizens, although acknowledging negative reactions, frustrations and criticisms to its (non-) application and implementation.

- Europe as a Community of Destiny: The process of European integration has led to an increasing interdependence and complexity of the interactions and relations that shape our common destiny in a globalising world. The maintenance of peace, the conservation of the environment, and the means of enabling people to live their lives with dignity all demand common policies, respecting diversities. All Europeans are called upon to work responsibly together to build a peaceful European order in dialogue.
- Europe as a Community of Values: The aim of European integration and inclusion is to carry out, develop and safeguard the community of shared values. These are rooted in common legal principles, acknowledging the freedom of individuals and social responsibility. Fundamental European values are based on human dignity, tolerance, humanity and fraternity. These principles have opened the way to a free and peaceful future in international relations, although today they are under great pressure in the current world system.
- Europe as a Community of Life: For the European Union to become a citizens' Europe, it must develop into a tangible and living community. To that end, citizens must be given the opportunity to participate more fully in the process of European integration. A unified Europe implies further developing European citizenship to the point at which all citizens in all member states have the same rights and duties.
- Europe as an Economic and Social Community: The first steps were taken when six countries founded the European Coal and Steel Community, in which basic industries important for the conduct of war were placed under a common authority. This neo-functional approach resulted in the European Economic Community, and eventually developed into the European Union, in a process that led to peace between the member states and a higher standard of living.

- Europe as a Community of Purpose and Responsibility: In today's globalising and individualising world, the European Union carries a particular responsibility. The European continent has close economic, political and cultural ties with many regions of the world, set in various cooperation agreements. Conflicts and crises, whether within or beyond Europe, threaten European states and citizens alike. Only through cooperation, solidarity and unity can Europe effectively help to solve world problems. Discord in European policies would be irresponsible and can only lead to chaos.
- Europe as a Community and Meeting Place of Multiple Identities: Freedom, peace, human dignity, equality and social justice are Europe's greatest common goods. To protect and further develop these aims, Europe needs a morally acceptable political structure and policies which strengthen the sense of common purpose while establishing the credibility of the European Union. The citizens should proud to be European. The building of meeting places, exchanges and dialogue will certainly strengthen the recognition of the wealth of its multiple identities.
- Europe as a Community of Multicultural Learning: To build up a common European identity as an added value, a common background and future of the citizens' dialogue is needed. It should therefore consider the specific multi-layered and diversified institutional and cultural European environment in education and learning (Bekermans 2018).

6. Conclusion

I am convinced that, despite failures and imperfections in the integration process, the European project remains a valid working place to define the European common good and to develop a unique institutional and operational framework in which citizens are important actors of true participatory governance. I distinguish four fundamental tasks:

Europe faces a profound moral responsibility, one that demands both internal and external cooperation as a model for the world. The well-being of individuals and communities increasingly hinges on our ability to interpret the signs of our time and act accordingly to achieve economic and social prosperity in a globally competitive environment. A radical shift in both vision and methodology is essential for the survival of European civilization (Anteri and Pera 2024).

Moreover, Europeans bear the moral duty to demonstrate that peaceful coexistence is possible in today's diverse world, despite differences in language, culture, religion, and origin. It remains crucial for EU citizens to prove that they can create an international public space where a cultural diaspora can thrive in an atmosphere of mutual respect, tolerance, and dialogue. In this context, clear

messages, examples, and testimonies become vital tools to inspire citizens, even in the face of contradictions within EU policymaking and promises.

Additionally, European countries and regions must continue to seek ways to enhance the efficiency and environmental sustainability of their social and economic systems. This approach allows the strengths of some to compensate for the weaknesses of others, fostering solidarity. Central to this effort is the encouragement and support of individual initiative through active citizen participation. The goal is to ensure a broad and equitable distribution of economic prosperity while reasserting the importance of values-driven education that emphasizes responsibility and multiple citizenship within a European framework.

Lastly, Europeans must adopt a more courageous and dynamic role on the international political stage. This involves defending the model of peace and transnational cooperation and further strengthening the methods of cooperation and dialogue with other macro-regions. Given the current context, where wars and serious conflicts rage on Europe's borders, this task is especially challenging. The future of the European Union should therefore focus on a gradual shift from traditional approaches to managing geopolitical and global economic conflicts towards a new, transversal policy that addresses the global political and economic landscape.

There is again a need for an enlarging and mobilising vision which can raise a new élan and a regained connection with the citizen (Bekemans 2012). Furthermore, we must dare to recall the enthusiasm and faith in the European project, as it was embodied by the Founding Fathers of Europe. They wanted to guarantee a sustainable peace within the European borders and combined a long-term vision with a pragmatic policy approach. Economic arguments supported political goodwill. Therefore, Europe needs bridge builders who can concretely complete the rhetoric of the European story, underscore the European ideals of peace, unity in diversity, freedom and solidarity and mobilise the young people for the European model of society. However, this rhetoric still needs to be translated into a workable and forward-looking reality amidst a radically changing world to inspire the European citizens.

The role of education is fundamental in this (Bekemans 2017). Only through integral human development in education and learning processes true citizens' dialogue can develop and link EU citizenship to democracy. Indeed, learning to live together with differences and diversity is becoming the central dimension of active citizenship education (Bekemans 2016). Also, new forms and places of dialogue, active citizenship and cooperation emerge outside the existing institutionalised structures of representation. Formal and non-formal civil society plays herein a bigger and more active role

A values-based EU will only survive if citizen participation and participatory democracy at all levels and sectors are based both on respect for the multiple identities of its citizens and on an actual European citizenship. Only then can

Europe also play its role in the international forum with a values-driven conviction. The Conference on the Future of Europe (2021-2022) was a modest indication in the direction of more citizens-driven community-building.

The conclusions of the Conference clearly indicated the citizens' desire for greater systemic involvement in the development and implementation of European public policies. The final report was presented at a closing plenary session in April 2022. It contains proposals based on recommendations from citizens who gathered in European and national Citizens' Panels and contributed their ideas on the multilingual digital platform. The recommendations cover 49 proposals and more than 300 measures covering a wide range of issues where EU citizens call for major reforms that can provide concrete answers to the many challenges they face. In particular, the proposed establishment of a Permanent Citizens' Conference can be a tool for more community-building and genuine involvement of European citizens in European affairs. It could lead to a European drive for more democracy, more participation and more community-building, to which identity-building and citizenship-building are closely connected in the EU context (Bekermans 2014).

The actual follow-up to the proposals has been structured around nine topics: climate change and the environment; health; a stronger economy, social justice and jobs; EU in the world; values and rights, the rule of law, security; digital transformation; European democracy; migration; education, culture, youth and sport. In short, there is cautious hope that the proposals to make the EU more democratic, citizen-driven and efficient will be a catalyst to evolve "*from the current participation patchwork to a real participation infrastructure,*" and thus also to give impetus to concrete participatory democracy in the EU at both institutional and human-based community-building.

Also, Enrico Letta's courageous Report on the future of the European Single Market is much in line with the European model of democracy, participation, and community-building, argued in this article (Letta 2024). The Report was presented to the European Council in mid-April 2024. It suggests a renewal of supranationalism in the EU to combat economic nationalism in Europe. It contains a genuine call to concrete actions and proposes several policy recommendations. Moreover, it clarifies the urgency and importance of the proposed recommendations, while emphasising the need for broad engagement, involving the EU institutions (especially the European Parliament), Member States, social partners and citizens.

The European elections of June 2024 produced an ambiguous outcome, better than expected for the European community dimension of the integration process, but also worrying because of the growing support for the principle of national sovereignty in several Member States. The forthcoming EU policies will not only set and shape the strategic direction of future EU developments, but also influence citizens' vision of the future of Europe. Much will depend, however, on how the

new European Commission led by Ursula von der Leyen will tackle the internal and external challenges and to what extent it can deliver on the proposed political guidelines for her second term of office 2024-2029 in a changing political landscape, both European and international.

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NAVIGATING IDENTITIES AND COMMUNITIES: INSIGHTS FROM THE EUROPEAN BORDERLANDS

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Abstract: As Europe contends with globalisation and regionalism, the evolving dynamics of identity and community within European integration are increasingly critical. This paper explores identity formation and community building at the EU's internal borders, grounded in Aristotelian political theory, particularly insights from "Politics" and "Nicomachean Ethics." It examines the 'polis' as essential for human flourishing and applies this classical framework to modern European border regions. The central research question is: How do European border regions balance local identities within broader networks, and what does this mean for European integration? Using case studies from the *b-solutions* compendium, the paper hypothesizes that local autonomy and cross-border cooperation enhance both identity preservation and community integration. These case studies highlight practical challenges and solutions in cross-border interactions, emphasizing the importance of harmonizing local and supranational interests. The article outlines Aristotelian philosophical foundations, analyses empirical data, and offers policy recommendations, linking theory with practical insights into Europe's borderlands.¹

Key words: b-solutions, cross-border cooperation, integration, Aristotle, identity

¹ The *b-solutions* initiative, implemented by the Association of European Border Regions (AEBR) on behalf of the European Commission's Directorate General for Regional and Urban Policy since 2018, has analysed so far 165 legal and administrative obstacles to cross-border cooperation in the internal borders of the EU and those with the Pre-accession countries in a variety of fields. An expert in legal and cross-border aspects with knowledge of the respective languages is allocated to every selected case to elaborate a report describing the obstacle and its root causes and proposing possible solutions. The summaries of these reports are compiled in compendiums, three of which are already published, and the fourth is planned for September 2024. All *b-solutions* publications can be found in the project's online library: <https://www.b-solutionsproject.com/library>.

1. Introduction

The European Union (EU) has long been committed to fostering integration as a path toward creating a unified, cohesive, and collaborative community among its member states. In this regard, the EU Cohesion Policy has served as an instrumental tool to foster European territorial cohesion and integration processes, for instance, by supporting European territorial cooperation (cross-border, transnational, and interregional) processes (EC 2024; Nadalutti, Rüländ 2024). Advocated as a model of community-building by Kleiner and Bückler (2024), the EU integration process entails the development of both a political and a socio-economic community. On the political front, EU citizens are endowed with rights including the freedom of movement and residence, non-discrimination, and eligibility to vote and stand in European Parliament and municipal elections. Socio-economically, the Union aspires to address ethical and social concerns through a governance model steeped in liberal norms and values (Wiener 2004; Schimmelfenning 2002).

These ideals underpin the creation of significant “superstructures” such as the Single Market, the Schengen Area, and the Euro, which collectively hold profound implications for the economic, political, and social life of EU citizens. Also, the Union is built on a community of values codified in the treaties. These principles include respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, and equality, as well as adherence to the rule of law and human rights. These values are commonly upheld by the Member States within a society characterised by pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity, and gender equality (Chopin 2018).

Building on this foundation, the concept of European identity emerges as linked to the community one. As the EU weaves together the diverse cultural, political, and economic threads of its member states, the idea of a collective identity begins to form, rooted in the shared values and rights that define the community (Bergbauer et al. 2018). This evolving identity is crucial for fostering a sense of belonging and participation among EU citizens, reinforcing cooperation and, therefore, territorial integration via the reduction of all sorts of cross-border obstacles (Medeiros et al. 2022a).

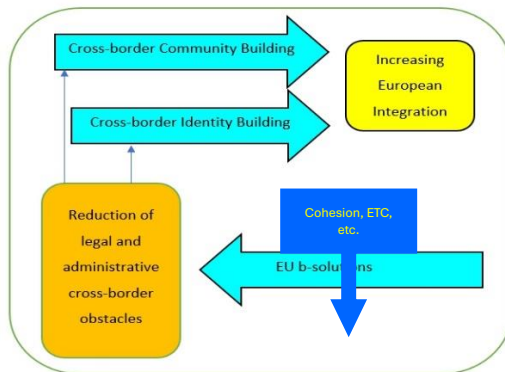
Indeed, while collective identity and community of values are pivotal to the EU’s foundation for a greater integration that transcends the traditional boundaries of nation-states, it is still unclear how to conceptualise “identity”, “community” and “integration” in the EU. How and to what extent are these three elements interlinked? How far are we in achieving “greater integration” objectives within the EU?

Conceptually, the analysis emphasises the contribution of EU *b-solutions* as a policy tool aiming at reducing legal-administrative cross-border obstacles,

leading to increasing cross-border community building by facilitating cross-border commuting, institutional collaboration, and access to public services like healthcare, sports, and transportation, etc. (EC, 2022). Moreover, *b-solutions* can contribute to reinforcing cross-border identity building via its contribution to reducing cultural (mostly language) barriers and by reducing legal and administrative obstacles in the domain of education.

As such, increasing cross-border community and identity building will contribute to increasing European integration (Figure 1).

Figure 1. The conceptual scheme of the research



Source: Own elaboration.

EU policies, then, such as Cohesion, make possible specific interventions like *b-solutions*, deepening knowledge for policymakers to make better and more informed decisions.

To address the proposed research concept, it is vital to try to conceptualize “identity”, “community” and “integration”. Theories of International Relations (IR) provide a variety of lenses through which to examine how and why they interlink or stay apart from one another and how they interact and shape the broader integration process.

Realism, focused on state sovereignty and national interest, views European integration as an instrumental tool to increase the power of member states in a competitive international context (Maher 2021). European identity, in this view, is fragile and conditioned by the alignment of national interests. Conversely, liberalism argues that European integration is a transformative process that fosters a shared identity and a deeper community (Risse 2010; Moravcsik 1995). European institutions, according to liberals, play a crucial role in shaping this identity, encouraging cooperation and promoting democratic values. Constructivism, finally, emphasizes the social and dynamic nature of European

identity, which is constructed through interactions, discourses, and institutional practices (Katzensteing 2006). In summary, while realism sees European identity as a contingent and instrumental product, liberalism and constructivism consider it a dynamic and multidimensional process, shaped by institutional, cultural, and social factors.

Pointing out these features, show that these theoretical perspectives collectively underscore the complexity of the EU's integration process. While realists caution against overestimating the strength of the EU's community and collective identity, liberalists and constructivists provide compelling arguments for how integration can foster a sense of belonging that transcends national boundaries.

The debates within these theories are not merely academic; they reflect the ongoing struggles within the EU itself. As the EU continues to evolve and face several economic, social, and health crises, it is evident whether the EU can sustain its integration project may well depend on its ability to cultivate a sense of shared identity and community that can withstand the centrifugal forces of nationalism, state sovereignty and crises (Schmidt 2009).

Hence, the European Union's efforts to cultivate a common European identity are fraught with challenges rooted in the complex and diverse historical experiences of its member states. This diversity is not merely cultural or linguistic but is deeply intertwined with national histories, memories, and identities that resist subsumption under a unified European narrative (Fossum 2003).

Indeed, the challenges of fostering a common European identity are further exacerbated when viewed through the lens of territorial integration, particularly in EU's cross-border regions through the lens of cross-border cooperation, which has been supported by EU funding since the early 1990s via the Interreg programmes (Medeiros, 2018). The EU's territorial integration policies aim to reduce disparities and promote cohesion among regions, yet the local realities within cross-border areas offer a distinct vantage point for analysing the complexities of European integration (Nadalutti 2015a). Cross-border zones, where different national identities and legal systems intersect, serve as laboratories for observing the practical implications of the EU's identity-building project (Guillermo-Ramirez 2018).

In these cross-border regions, the everyday interactions between citizens of different national backgrounds highlight the persistent cross-border barriers to a cohesive European identity. These are mostly of a legal-administrative nature but also take the form of accessibility, economic, sociocultural, environmental and institutional-related obstacles. While cross-border cooperation initiatives strive to enhance connectivity and mutual understanding, they often reveal the deep-seated attachments to national identities that challenge the EU's broader integrative ambitions (Nadalutti 2014; Guillermo-Ramirez 2018). These cross-border regions, therefore, become critical testing beds for examining how local actors

negotiate and reconcile their national identities with the supranational identity promoted by the EU.

Based on this, the research question at the heart of this analysis is: How do border regions in Europe negotiate their local identities within larger community networks, and what implications does this have for European integration? This study hypothesizes that greater local autonomy and cross-border cooperation enhance both identity preservation and community integration. It is suggested here that cross-border areas could theoretically serve as a microcosmos of European integration, where the dialectic between national and European identities is most pronounced and where the possibility of a transnational public sphere could be realized (Nadalutti 2015b). “Territorial integration” involves efforts to harmonize policy and governance across diverse territorial entities within the EU to ensure coherent development and seamless application of EU policies. However, the persistence of national public spheres and the uneven engagement of citizens in these border regions underscore the difficulties of transcending national identities in favour of a broader European consciousness and common good (Palermo 2012).

This study aims to dissect the interplay between local and European identities within the EU’s border regions, focusing on how these areas negotiate their identities within broader community networks through enhanced local autonomy and cross-border cooperation. This examination of cross-border cooperation typically employs traditional analytical frameworks, such as multi-level governance (Hooghe and Marks 2003; Nadalutti 2015) and network approaches (Svensson 2015), focusing on structural and procedural aspects. This paper introduces an alternative interpretative model based on Aristotelian political philosophy, as outlined in his seminal works, *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Politics*. Aristotle’s perspectives are especially relevant to exploring themes of integration, cooperation, identity, and community formation within cross-border regions—envisioned here as contemporary ‘laboratories’ for governance and social interaction.

This analytical framework focuses on individuals as inherently social and not isolated entities, a notion that stands in contrast to modern individualistic paradigms. Aristotle asserts that personal identity is intricately linked to and shaped by communal ties, encapsulated in his assertion that “man is by nature a political animal” whose fullest potential is realised within a political community (*Politics* 1253a3). This concept suggests that personal and collective identities in cross-border regions are interdependent.

Moreover, Aristotle’s idea of the ‘common good’ is pivotal for re-envisioning cross-border cooperation. In *Nicomachean Ethics*, he posits that the ultimate human good, or eudaimonia—commonly interpreted as ‘happiness’ or ‘flourishing’—is achieved through virtuous living in accordance with reason (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1097a30-1098a20). This pursuit of eudaimonia is not just

an individual endeavour but a communal one, requiring a societal framework that encourages ethical conduct and mutual respect. Hence, cross-border cooperation should aim not only at economic or security outcomes but also at fostering a collective sense of well-being and ethical community. This underscores the potential of cross-border regions as sites for nurturing new forms of community and shared identity, transcending established political and cultural divisions. At the same time it is important to keep in mind that cross-border cooperation may foster local transnational communities that emphasise historical ties rather than a broader European identity. These collaborations can reawaken older, pre-nation-state identities, which could challenge the EU's efforts to cultivate a unified European community.

The methodological framework of this analysis is underpinned by a comprehensive examination of the European Union's *b-solutions* initiative, specifically focusing on mapping case studies pertinent to enhancing cross-border commuting (Medeiros et al 2022b) and fostering the development of a shared regional identity. This detailed review is augmented by an extensive engagement with associated scholarly and practical resources, including the EU *b-solutions* compendium reports and academic research related to cross-border cooperation (CBC) and transnational commuting dynamics. Additionally, the study incorporates first-hand insights from experts and stakeholders directly engaged in the management of the *b-solutions* initiative, enriching the analysis with their specialised knowledge and practical experience.

In detail, this study investigates the practical challenges highlighted in the first *b-solutions*' compendium (AEBR & EC 2020) and looks into the second and third ones (AEBR & EC 2021, 2024) to confirm these challenges, exploring how cross-border interactions, from labour mobility to healthcare, navigate administrative and legal barriers, thereby contributing to community integration and identity preservation. Through this philosophical and empirical investigation, the study seeks to offer insights into the role of cross-border regions as pivotal spaces for fostering European solidarity and effective governance, aligning local particularities with supranational objectives and, thus, consolidating European integration from the bottom.

The article is organised as follows. First, it conceptualises "identity" and "community" linked to territorial integration. Then a state-of-the-art overview of "territorial integration" linked to cross-border activities is considered. After establishing a nuanced understanding of EU territorial integration in relation to identity and community, the relevance of Aristotelian politics is discussed. The analysis then examines various cases from the first compendium, noting that while many analyses focus on enhancing territorial integration, few delve into issues of 'identity' and 'community', and this is confirmed by the following

compendiums (2, 3, 4)². In the conclusion, the main findings of this analysis will be summarised.

2. *Conceptualising “identity” and “community” within the “territorial integration”: a journey through philosophical thinking*

Aristotle’s exploration of “identity” and “community” in both the *Politics* and the *Nicomachean Ethics* provides a foundational understanding of how individuals relate to the larger social and political structures in which they live. These concepts are central to his philosophy and are interwoven with his ideas on the nature of the state, the role of the individual within the community, and the pursuit of the good life.

In his foundational work *Politics*, Aristotle articulates the core purpose and structure of the state, positing that “every state is a community of some kind, and every community is established with a view to some good” (*Politics*, Book I, 1252a1-2). This notion of the “state” serves as a cornerstone in understanding political communities. If we briefly analyse Aristotle’s definition, it emerges that according to him the state *is* a community that forms with the aim of achieving some collective good. Aristotle suggests that the state exists not merely for living but for achieving a good life, emphasising the ethical and normative dimensions of political life. Hence, this classical definition underscores the “state’s” role in facilitating the well-being and moral development of its citizens (Lokwood 2006).

Expanding Aristotle’s conceptual framework to the realm of cross-border cooperation illuminates its relevance in modern contexts. Cross-border zones, characterised by overlapping sovereignties and shared governance, echo Aristotle’s vision by transcending traditional boundaries of statehood defined by physical and territorial limits (Perkmann and Sum 2002; Nadalutti 2024). In these areas, cooperation across borders is not just a matter of necessity. Still, it becomes a strategic endeavour to address shared challenges and leverage common opportunities, thereby fostering a collective pursuit of the “good life” across national boundaries (Nadalutti 2024) and then, in the Union as a whole.

Cross-border regions can be theorised as new forms of political communities that embody the Aristotelian pursuit of the common good beyond the confines of a singular, sovereign state. They are consolidated in many cross-border areas of the European Union, a supranational construction beyond the Westphalian governance model growingly trying to facilitate different forms of territorial

² In the second and third b-solutions compendiums, which analyze 47 and 41 cases respectively, the term “identity” is not explicitly mentioned except when it pertains to identification systems such as e-cards. The concept of “community” as discussed in this paper appears in a very superficial, informal way, primarily in relation to “energy communities.” While the intention to foster a “community” is implicit in many instances, the explicit treatment of “community” as conceptualized in the broader discussion of European integration is superficial.

cooperation (cross-border, transnational and interregional) to boost the cohesion of all territories.

In other continents, cross-border cooperation occurs in markedly different contexts, often relying on bilateral agreements between the involved nation-states rather than multilateral frameworks. These arrangements can be both stable and dynamic, frequently aligning with traditional cross-border communities or areas previously in dispute. Notably, there are genuine instances of cooperation in cross-border regions characterised by grassroots solid engagement and a mutual willingness to collaborate with neighbouring communities. This cooperation is often rooted in the “artificial boundaries” imposed by colonial powers, such as those established in Africa following the Berlin West African Conference of 1884-1885 (Asiwaju 1990).

Understanding the unique characteristics of each cross-border area is essential, as they require tailored approaches. However, certain aspects are common to all, whether the area in question is a cross-border metropolitan region with thousands of daily commuters or a peripheral or outermost territory grappling with demographic and other significant challenges. In any cross-border area where there is a basic commitment to community building, a “hybrid” governance structure can be implemented. This structure allows multiple states to share resources, policies, and responsibilities, thereby improving the welfare of the broader community. Euroregions, European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation, Eurocities, and many others, are concrete examples of ongoing cross-border governance structures (Medeiros 2018), some of them working for more than half a century for the benefit of border citizens. The theoretical framework for cross-border communities deconstructs the Westphalian conception of national boundaries and collides with the also Westphalian concept of national sovereignty. But it aligns with Aristotle’s vision of the “state” as an entity focused on achieving the highest moral and practical good for its people, though adapted to the complexities and interdependencies of the globalised world (Vaughan-Williams 2009).

Aristotle’s philosophy provides a foundational ethos for understanding and developing cross-border cooperation, suggesting that such cooperation could lead to realising a good life in a multi-state context, where the traditional notions of statehood are expanded and redefined. This approach not only revisits but also revitalises Aristotle’s ideas, placing them at the heart of contemporary debates about governance, sovereignty, and community in an increasingly interconnected world. It is particularly valuable today since it highlights the inherent goal of any community: to achieve a collective benefit.

It is argued here that cross-border cooperation can be codified as a modern political mechanism that echoes Aristotle’s vision by striving to create a supranational community focused on achieving greater collective good beyond the confines of national self-interest. This responds to the liberal vision of

integration according to the EU: European nations seek to collectively enhance economic stability, social cohesion, and political cooperation, elements that correspond to the ‘highest good’. Following this philosophical approach, it follows that within this “community”, the individual identity extends beyond personal characteristics, encompassing the roles and responsibilities held within a broader societal context.

Specifically, Aristotle emphasises the dynamic role of a citizen within the state, highlighting that participation in political life fundamentally shapes one’s identity. This participation is characterised by a cyclical power dynamic where individuals govern and are governed in turn, underscoring the notion that identity is forged through engagement with the community’s political and social structures (*Politics*, Book III, 1277b14-15).

Indeed, EU’s cross-border regions exemplify Aristotle’s principle that the individual’s identity is significantly shaped by their societal roles. Thus, in the context of European integration, Aristotle’s insights into the formation of identity through communal roles provide a valuable lens through which to view the transformative impact of cross-border cooperation. As individuals participate in and contribute to the collective endeavours of their communities, they not only shape but are also shaped by the evolving European identity, reinforcing the interconnectedness of personal involvement and regional well-being.

Aristotle delves deeper into the notion of identity in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, where he connects it intimately with the concept of virtue. He posits that virtues are not inherent traits but are dispositions developed through consistent practice, enabling individuals to perform their roles within the community effectively. In *Ethics* Book II, Aristotle elucidates that virtues are cultivated habits, integral to achieving eudaimonia, or true human flourishing, which he defines as a high form of happiness achieved through virtuous activity (*Ethics*, Book II, 1103a15-25). This flourishing, according to Aristotle, is not an isolated pursuit but one deeply embedded within the societal framework. It necessitates a contribution to the communal good, which in turn allows individuals to realise their fullest potential.

Applied to cross-border cooperation, integration efforts aim to transcend traditional national boundaries and foster a shared sense of purpose among diverse European populations. Cross-border regions serve as vital platforms where citizens from different nations collaborate on common projects—from economic initiatives to environmental conservation and cultural exchanges, or the provision of public services.

In this context, the virtues that Aristotle discusses—such as justice, prudence, and fortitude—become crucial for individuals participating in these cross-border activities. These virtues enable individuals to navigate the complexities of multi-national cooperation effectively. As people engage in and contribute to the collective endeavours of their cross-border communities, they not only advance their personal development but also contribute to the overarching goal of

European integration: a harmoniously integrated continent where collective well-being is enhanced by each individual's growth and virtue.

Finally, Aristotle's philosophy offers a nuanced understanding of how different forms of governance shape identities within a community. In *Politics*, Aristotle distinguishes between different kinds of rule and the corresponding identities they produce. For example, within the household, Aristotle contrasts the despotic rule of the master over the slave with the more cooperative and shared roles between husband and wife. This distinction is not merely about power dynamics but also about how these roles shape the identities of those involved. The master-slave relationship creates a hierarchical identity where the master embodies authority and control, while the slave's identity is shaped by subordination and utility (*Politics*, Book I, 1255b16-20).

In contrast, when Aristotle discusses the relationship between citizens within a state, he shifts to a model of constitutional rule, where individuals take on roles that involve both ruling and being ruled. This form of governance emphasises equality and shared responsibility, where the individual's identity is closely linked to their participation in the political process (*Politics*, Book III, 1279a20-25). This is particularly significant in the context of the European Union, where integration efforts aim to balance the diverse identities of member states within a unified political and socio-economic framework.

In our view, in cross-border regions, the balance between local autonomy and participation in the broader EU governance structure should mirror Aristotle's concept of constitutional rule, where citizens are both rulers and subjects. The EU's efforts to promote cross-border cooperation and reduce disparities through territorial integration can be seen as a modern application of Aristotle's ideas, where the goal is to create a cohesive community that supports both individual and collective identities.

To conclude this part, by applying Aristotle's distinction between different kinds of rule to the EU context, we can better understand the challenges and opportunities of fostering a European identity that complements, rather than overrides, local and national identities. This perspective highlights the importance of governance structures that promote participation, equality, and shared responsibility, all of which are essential for the successful integration and cohesion of the EU as a political community.

Empirically, this study will focus on a few practical implications of cross-border cooperation as exemplified by the numerous cases analysed within the *b-solutions* initiative and the compendiums published so far. These cases, such as those submitted by the cross-border hospital in Cerdanya, at the Spanish-French border, and the "Ambulances without Borders" initiative between Belgium and the Netherlands, provide concrete examples of how cross-border regions navigate complex identity and community dynamics within the broader EU framework. By analysing these cases, this study explores how local identities are preserved and

enhanced through cross-border collaboration, and how these initiatives contribute to the broader goal of European integration. This approach will provide a realistic assessment of the potential and limitations of cross-border cooperation in fostering both community integration and the preservation of local identities, without overpromising what can be achieved.

3. Navigating European Integration: Empirical Insights from b-solutions on Identity and Community Dynamics in Border Regions

This section focuses on the EU *b-solutions* initiative to explore whether these activities contribute to identity and community building as envisaged by the EU. As we have seen in the previous section, it is highly problematic to speak about a determined, fixed “EU identity” (Bee 2008; Mayer et al. 2004). It is argued that European identity is profoundly shaped by the European Union’s institutional frameworks and integration strategies. Mayer et al. (2004) emphasise that European identity is complex and multifaceted, emerging significantly through the EU’s legal and institutional frameworks rather than from a shared historical or cultural past. This understanding of EU identity can of course be debated, contested or agreed (Lähdesmäki 2019).

What’s crucial to note here is that this identity is primarily defined by common citizenship rights and the reinforcement of supranational structures, underscoring the institutional construction of identity within the EU context. This approach is vital in understanding the practical implications of the EU’s efforts to foster regional cooperation and address cross-border challenges, which are key aspects of the *b-solutions* initiative.

Bee (2008) further explores this by examining the deliberate construction of European identity by the European Commission, particularly through policies that enhance education, culture, and public communication. This strategic construction is aimed at reinforcing political participation within a multi-level governance framework, illustrating the EU’s intent to integrate diverse populations effectively. Bee’s insights are particularly relevant to the EU’s *b-solutions* initiative, which aims to resolve administrative and legal obstacles to cooperation across EU internal borders. By promoting a sense of belonging and shared identity, this initiative not only addresses practical cross-border issues but also reinforces a collective European identity that supports broader integration and cohesion goals.

In order to show this, the present section focuses on two specific cases from the *b-solutions* first compendium (2020): the cross-border Cerdanya Hospital between Spain and France, and the “Ambulances without Borders” project between Belgium and the Netherlands. These cases were chosen for their practical significance and their capacity to provide insights into the complex interplay between local identities and broader European integration efforts (Berzi 2017; Buiskool et al. 2021).

On one side, the Cerdanya Hospital project represents quite a unique and successful cross-border collaboration in the healthcare sector. In this area, the intersection of different national systems poses significant challenges to integration. This case is particularly relevant for examining how administrative, legal, and cultural barriers can be navigated to create a shared identity and community that transcends national borders. The hospital serves as a microcosm of broader European integration, demonstrating how cooperative efforts can preserve and enhance local and national identities.

On the other hand, the “Ambulances without Borders” initiative provides a compelling example of how cross-border cooperation can directly impact community cohesion in emergency situations. The ability of this initiative to overcome jurisdictional and procedural differences between Belgium and the Netherlands highlights the potential for cross-border efforts to foster a stronger, more resilient sense of community in regions where borders might otherwise impede cooperation.

These case studies are not selected merely for their success in overcoming technical or administrative obstacles but for their ability to reveal cross-border cooperation’s deeper social and cultural impacts. By focusing on these examples, this empirical section aims to provide a nuanced understanding of how cross-border initiatives contribute to identity preservation and community building, offering valuable lessons for other regions within the EU facing similar challenges. Finally, these case studies are selected because they allow us to explore how the b-solutions initiative may intersect with community and identity issues within the context of European integration. This study is pioneering in its approach, as previous analyses of the b-solutions initiative have not delved into these social and cultural dimensions. The challenges of integrating local identities within broader European frameworks are complex, and these cases offer unique insights into how cross-border cooperation can both shape and reflect these dynamics. Due to space constraints, we only begin this exploration here, intending to provide a foundation for more detailed and comparative studies in the future.

4. Insights from the cross-border Cerdanya Hospital

The Cerdanya Valley, with its unique geographical positioning straddling the border between France and Spain, serves as a significant case study for cross-border cooperation. The valley itself, about 200 km² in size, is surrounded by mountains and has historically been a single region, despite its bifurcation into two national entities due to political boundaries established by the Treaty of the Pyrenees in 1659. The demographic distribution in the valley is uneven, with a greater population density on the Spanish side compared to the French one.

Berzi’s analysis points out that the Cerdanya Hospital is a core element of the health cooperation initiative, underpinning much of the cross-border interaction in the region (2013, 2017). This hospital was specifically designed to serve the

cross-border population and is the first in Europe directly conceived for a transboundary context to look after patients and hire staff from both sides of the border. European Union funding mechanisms facilitated this project, and after trying several legal instruments, the legal framework provided by the European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC) was revealed as the most suitable option, allowing for smoother cooperation and governance across the border (Sanjuan 2013).

The hospital itself is not only a health facility but also a symbol of integration and cooperation. It addresses numerous usual challenges for cross-border cooperation, such as legal discrepancies, administrative overlapping, language barriers, and the lack of coordination for operational protocols in case of emergency. By providing shared services, the hospital helps reduce the ‘mental and physical borders’ between populations separated by national boundaries. The operational success of the hospital has been significant, providing an essential service to a population that would otherwise face considerable challenges in accessing healthcare. The facility operates under a binational management system, with staff and administrative protocols designed to seamlessly accommodate the needs of French and Spanish patients.

Berzi (2017) highlights that the success of the Cerdanya Hospital reflects broader cross-border cooperation themes, where local specifics—such as the homogeneity of the region in terms of culture and historical ties—play a crucial role in the success of these initiatives. The project leverages both the EU’s structural support and the unique local characteristics to foster a more integrated European identity at the regional level, making it an exemplary case of how territorial cooperation can effectively bridge the divides created by national borders³.

Through Berzi’s comprehensive examination, the Cerdanya case reveals the potential of cross-border projects to enhance regional development and integration, demonstrating the tangible benefits of cooperative approaches in the European Union’s framework for regional policy and cohesion. The detailed analysis of this case study not only provides insights into the complexities of implementing cross-border public services but also illustrates the broader implications for regional policy and cooperation in the EU.

Building upon the detailed description of the Cerdanya Hospital as presented in Berzi’s analysis, we now turn to its broader implications within the European integration context, particularly through the theoretical lens provided by the Aristotelian concept of ‘polis’—a community aimed at achieving the common good. This theoretical perspective enriches our understanding of how cross-

³ European founding fathers and AEBR pioneers frequently used the term “scars of History” to refer to the borders but also the divides created between the populations in both sides after centuries of war.

border cooperation, exemplified by the Cerdanya Hospital, not only serves immediate healthcare needs but also fosters broader social and political integration.

Aristotle's notion of the 'polis' is premised on the idea that the highest form of community is one that enables its members to achieve their fullest potential and live a good life. In the context of the Cerdanya Hospital, this translates into a cooperative endeavour that transcends traditional sovereign boundaries to create a unified health service area that serves both Spanish and French populations equally. The hospital acts as a microcosm of the larger EU ethos of integration, where diverse communities find common ground in shared services and mutual benefits, thus embodying Aristotle's concept of achieving common good.

Furthermore, Aristotle's idea of 'koinonia' or partnership is vividly reflected in the operational structure of the Cerdanya Hospital. The hospital is a result of collaborative efforts between two different national health systems, aimed at optimising resources and expertise across borders to provide high-quality medical care. This partnership extends beyond mere administrative cooperation; it fosters a sense of community among the residents of the Cerdanya Valley, who see the hospital not just as a medical facility but as a symbol of unity and shared identity.

Traditional planning would have led to a small regional hospital on the Spanish side in Catalonia and no hospital at all in a very wide but sparsely populated territory on the French side due to the lack of critical mass (the minimum population needed to build a hospital, a very expensive and complex facility). However, considering this territory and its population in its cross-border dimension, just one critical mass analysis was necessary to plan a single (cross-border) hospital. The theoretical design was impeccable, but the practical implementation was very difficult. To give an example, the hospital is included in the Spanish healthcare system, which is decentralised, and in this case, the competent authority is *CatSalut*, the Catalan Health Service, under the *Generalitat de Catalunya*. In France the provision of healthcare is a national responsibility with regional representations. This asymmetry made it very difficult to navigate a complex set of institutions and regulations. However, finally, mutual interest and trust, lots of actions by local stakeholders and partners, great doses of political will and an appropriate European framework bore fruit (Martín Guillermo Ramirez, secretary of the AEBR).

This process and the integration achieved at a community level also address the research question of this article regarding how border regions in Europe negotiate their local identities within larger community networks and the implications of these negotiations for European integration. The Cerdanya Hospital demonstrates that local autonomy and cross-border cooperation can coexist harmoniously, with each enhancing the other. This cross-border service, celebrating ten years of operation in 2024, allows for the preservation of local identities—where communities maintain their unique cultural and linguistic

characteristics—while also integrating these identities into a broader European framework. This dual approach enhances community integration by building trust and interdependence among border populations also between public authorities), thus strengthening the overall process of European integration.

In conclusion, the various cases submitted by the Cerdanya Hospital to the *b-solutions* initiative have highlighted major gaps within the EU integration vision that we can summarise as follows: lack of recognition of professional qualifications and the difficulties of hiring across the border, but also some challenges related to the exchange of personal data and the need to share medical records in cross-border contexts. The research conducted by Berci (2017), and the analysis by Peyrony (2020), along with various other studies on cross-border healthcare, collectively illustrate how theoretical concepts of community and cooperation can be effectively applied to modern challenges. These studies show that cross-border healthcare cooperation not only addresses specific local needs but also promotes broader goals such as social cohesion and political integration within the EU. Projects like the Cerdanya Hospital exemplify how fostering a shared European identity and highlighting the tangible benefits of integration contribute to a deeper understanding of European unity, aligning with Aristotelian principles of community life and the pursuit of the common good.

5. An insight from the “Ambulances without Borders”

The case study “Ambulances without Borders” offers a compelling examination of how cross-border cooperation can fundamentally improve emergency medical services (EMS) in border regions, specifically between Belgium and the Netherlands. This initiative responds to the unique challenges that arise in areas where national boundaries can impede timely and efficient emergency responses. At its core, the problem this initiative addresses is the operational inefficiency in EMS caused by discrepancies in administrative, legal, and language protocols across borders (AEBR & EC 2020).

The initiative was conceptualised to ensure that when emergencies occur near or at the border, response times and patient care are not compromised by the jurisdictional boundaries. Normally, differences in EMS protocols can lead to significant delays in dispatching ambulances, sharing critical patient information and (again) in the recognition of medical qualifications of personnel who may cross the border while providing care (physicians, nurses, ambulance drivers) or the authorisation of the vehicle and its content (medical equipment, including drugs). By harmonizing these protocols through extensive negotiations and legal agreements, “Ambulances without Borders” has made significant strides in reducing cross-border barriers, particularly at the Belgian-Dutch border. However, challenges remain for ambulances and healthcare personnel attempting to cross many other internal EU borders. This is evident from other cases documented by the AEBR and EC, such as those at the Belgian-French border

(AEBR & EC 2020) and the Croatian-Romanian and Croatian-Serbian borders (AEBR & EC 2024). These examples highlight that while progress has been made, there are still considerable obstacles to overcome in ensuring seamless cross-border healthcare within the EU.

A key component of this initiative was the integration of communication technologies to enable real-time coordination between various Emergency Medical Services (EMS) teams operating across the border. This need for integration is underscored by the well-documented incident of a large industrial fire in Enschede, the Netherlands, which occurred prior to the widespread adoption of mobile phones and the Internet. During that event, a German fire brigade was delayed in responding because they were unaware of the radio frequencies used by their Dutch counterparts. This situation highlights the critical importance of technological interoperability, which ensures that EMS units on both sides of the border are familiar with each other's protocols, can effortlessly share essential information—including patient data—and coordinate more effectively during emergencies. Furthermore, a significant accomplishment of this initiative is the mutual recognition of medical qualifications and EMS protocols between the two countries, a recurring challenge in cross-border collaborations. This achievement facilitates smoother operations and enhances the mobility of medical personnel, thereby improving the overall efficiency of emergency response efforts.

The collaboration brought together a diverse group of stakeholders, including health authorities, emergency service professionals, legal experts, and policymakers from both Belgium and the Netherlands and at different levels of governance. Their efforts were crucial in overcoming the legal and logistical challenges that previously hampered effective cross-border cooperation in emergency medical services.

From a theoretical standpoint, this initiative serves as a tangible embodiment of Aristotle's conception of the 'polis'—understood not merely as a city-state but as a political community oriented toward the common good. As we have investigated in the theoretical section, in Aristotle's philosophy, the 'political' extends beyond the realm of governance and law to encompass the collective well-being of the people, or the *polis*. Here, the initiative exemplifies this broader notion of the political by fostering cooperation between communities across national borders, thereby transcending geographic and administrative limitations. This cooperation, aimed at enhancing public health and safety, reflects the Aristotelian ideal that the true purpose of a political community is to cultivate the conditions for the common good. In this context, the common good is realized through improved cross-border emergency response, ensuring that health and security are safeguarded not just within, but between, nations. This philosophical framework underscores the importance of intercommunal collaboration as essential to achieving the greater collective goods that benefit all members of the

polis. In modern terms, the “Ambulances without Borders” initiative can be seen as a manifestation of this Aristotelian ideal, where the health and well-being of individuals in border regions are prioritised over the constraints imposed by national boundaries. This case study also aligns with broader European Union strategies aimed at fostering greater integration and cooperation among member states, particularly in terms of public health and emergency services.

This practical application of cross-border cooperation not only provides immediate benefits in terms of patient outcomes but also fosters a sense of shared identity and mutual reliance among the communities and professionals involved. It creates a blueprint for similar initiatives that could enhance regional stability and unity, showcasing how deep integration can be achieved in critical areas like emergency medical services within the EU framework. Overall, “Ambulances without Borders” serves as a vital case study in understanding how theoretical principles of community and common good can be practically applied to modern challenges, particularly in densely interconnected regions like the EU. This initiative exemplifies how collaborative efforts and strategic integration can overcome substantial barriers, ultimately enhancing both the immediate and long-term well-being of border communities.

To conclude, these collaborations, including health services and emergency responses across borders, directly contribute to the well-being of the citizens by ensuring that essential services are accessible and effective across national boundaries. Moreover, this interaction not only aids in the immediate improvement of services but also in the building of a communal identity that transcends traditional national divides, encouraging a broader, more inclusive understanding of community that aligns with Aristotle’s vision of a polis aimed at achieving the common good. This kind of engagement demands that individuals and institutions embody virtues such as cooperation and fairness, crucial for the sustained well-being and ethical development of societies living in border regions

6. Conclusion

This study offers a comprehensive examination of how local and European identities intersect and evolve within the EU’s border regions, with a particular focus on the role of cross-border cooperation and local autonomy in this process. Grounded in Aristotelian political philosophy, the study provides a theoretical framework that enriches the empirical analysis of the “b-solutions Compendium of 43 Cases.”

The empirical evidence from case studies such as the Cerdanya Hospital and “Ambulances without Borders” underscores the tangible benefits of cross-border cooperation in fostering community integration and identity preservation. The Cerdanya Hospital, for example, exemplifies how cross-border health services can overcome national barriers, providing not just critical medical care but also

serving as a symbol of shared identity and community. This project demonstrates how local specificities—such as cultural homogeneity and historical ties—can be leveraged to enhance regional integration within the broader European framework.

Similarly, the “Ambulances without Borders” initiative highlights the practical benefits of harmonising emergency services across national borders, reducing response times and improving patient outcomes. This initiative illustrates how cross-border cooperation can address real-life challenges in border regions, effectively reducing the administrative and legal hurdles that often fragment these communities. The application of Aristotelian concepts such as ‘polis’ (political community) and ‘koinonia’ (partnership) in these case studies reveals how border regions can function not as peripheries but as central actors in the practice of European governance and solidarity. The study argues that these regions, through increased local autonomy and collaborative cross-border efforts, can play a pivotal role in advancing the EU’s broader integration goals.

Aristotle’s exploration of identity and community illuminates a deeply interdependent relationship, where community acts as both the setting and the catalyst for individual development. He posits that humans, as “political animals,” are inherently inclined to form communities, which not only ensure survival but also enhance the quality of life by providing opportunities for living well (*Politics*, Book I, 1253a1-2). This community framework allows individuals to cultivate and exercise virtues, essential for their role in contributing to the collective goals of the community. Thus, individual identity is significantly shaped by one’s engagement and function within the community, reinforcing the idea that personal and communal flourishing are inextricably linked.

In the framework of the European Union, cross-border cooperation is pivotal, not only in trying to harmonise economic and regulatory policies but also in fostering a shared European identity among citizens from diverse national backgrounds. This cooperation occurs in regions where borders historically separated communities, but now serve as links that connect people, facilitating shared initiatives in areas like trade, environmental protection, and public health. Policy-wise, the findings suggest that the EU should focus on developing border policies that are both flexible and responsive to the unique needs of border communities. Harmonizing regulations and administrative procedures across borders is crucial to reducing the friction that impedes cross-border interactions, thereby fostering a more cohesive European identity that respects both local particularities and supranational aspirations.

In conclusion, this study aimed to contribute to the understanding of European integration by illustrating how cross-border regions, through localised governance and cross-border cooperation, can enhance both local identity preservation and broader community integration. However, the enhancement of specific regional alliances may also lead to the exclusion of other identities,

reinforcing old divides and rekindling historical tensions, particularly in areas with complex pasts. These findings provide actionable insights for policymakers seeking to strengthen the fabric of European unity, demonstrating that effective governance in border regions is essential to the success of the EU's integrative efforts. By focusing on the alignment of local and supranational objectives, the EU can ensure that its border regions remain vital spaces for cultural exchange, cooperation, and the broader project of European solidarity.

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BRIDGING BORDERS: DOES CROSS-BORDER COOPERATION SHAPE IDENTITIES AND COMMUNITIES IN THE UPPER ADRIATIC?

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Abstract: Does cross-border cooperation in the Upper Adriatic, which includes parts of Italy and Slovenia, significantly impact regional identities and foster community cohesion? This study explores Europeanization and the effects of EU-funded initiatives like Interreg, highlighting how top-down approaches combined with bottom-up responses promote regional integration and foster a multi-layered citizenship that transcends national boundaries. Through a practice analytical framework, the collaborative dynamics among local, regional, and supra-national actors are examined, particularly in the context of cross-border projects that offer socio-economic and cultural benefits. The analysis focuses on communities of practice, such as minority groups, stakeholders, and institutional bodies, and their role in fostering cultural and socio-political connections.

Key Words: EU integration, cross-border cooperation, cross-border regions, ethnic minorities, Practice Theory

1. Framework of Analysis: Cross-Border Cooperation and European Integration in the Upper Adriatic

Borders studies, cross-border cooperation, identity, and communities within the context of the Upper Adriatic Region offers a rich terrain for understanding how spatial boundaries influence social dynamics. The concept of borders has evolved significantly, transcending their traditional function as mere demarcators of state sovereignty. Borders are now seen as dynamic and porous entities that not only separate but also connect different regions, allowing for the emergence of unique cross-border interactions and identities (Prokkola et al. 2015).

Cross-border cooperation, as facilitated by European Union initiatives such as the INTERREG programs, plays a critical role in transforming these border regions. These programs aim to promote regional cohesion and competitiveness, often leading to the development of new social and economic centers that straddle national boundaries (Prokkola et al. 2015). This cooperation is not merely institutional but deeply intertwined with the lived experiences and identities of the people inhabiting these regions.

Identity in this context is not a static attribute but an active performance shaped by ongoing social practices and interactions. The concept of regional identity, as discussed by Paasi (1986), suggests that identity is constructed

through collective narratives that distinguish “our region” from others. This process is especially pronounced in border regions, where identities often reflect a blend of national, local, and transnational influences. Hence identity is defined as a concept that is not fixed but is instead socially constructed and constantly evolving. It is shaped and reshaped through interactions and experiences within various contexts. This means that identity is something that individuals or groups continuously negotiate and redefine based on their social environments, practices, and relationships. It is not a static characteristic but a dynamic process that reflects how individuals or groups see themselves and how they are perceived by others (Paasi 1996; Paasi et al. 2018).

Communities within these borderlands are similarly complex, often defined by shared cultural, economic, and historical ties that transcend national borders. These communities are not homogenous but are characterized by a multiplicity of identities and affiliations, shaped by both historical legacies and contemporary cross-border interactions (Prokkola et al. 2015).

Community is conceptualised as a social unit that is characterized by a sense of solidarity among its members. This solidarity is often rooted in shared attributes such as geographic location, common interests, or shared values. Unlike identity, which is more about self-perception and social negotiation, community focuses on the collective aspect—how a group of people come together based on shared characteristics or goals. It is more about the bonds that connect individuals within a group and the sense of belonging that arises from these connections (Paasi 1996; Anderson and O’Dowd 1999).

The distinction between the two lies in their focus: identity is more about individual or group self-perception and its continuous construction, while community centers on the shared bonds and sense of togetherness within a group (Paasi 1989).

In the Upper Adriatic Region, these theoretical concepts take on practical significance. The region’s history of shifting borders and diverse cultural influences provides a fertile ground for examining how cross-border cooperation shapes identities and communities. The overall question addressed in this article is the following one: To what extent do cross-border cooperation practices in the Upper Adriatic, formally initiated by the EU but also driven by local stakeholders and ethnic minorities, influence regional identities and community cohesion?

Addressing this question requires an exploration of socio-economic and political dynamics within the specific socio-political and historical context of the region. This exploration will reveal the extent to which such cooperation fosters a sense of shared identity and community across national boundaries, or whether it reinforces divisions.

To address the overall question of the impact of cross-border cooperation on regional identities and community cohesion, this article employs Practice Theory, with a specific focus on cross-border practice communities (Gadiner 2017).

Practice Theory provides a robust framework for examining the everyday practices and interactions that underpin social phenomena, offering insights into the processes that sustain or transform the social order within the Upper Adriatic Region. According to Gadinger, practice communities can be defined as a collective group of individuals who engage in a shared practice, where the knowledge, actions, and norms of that practice are collectively understood, developed, and maintained through repeated interactions. These communities are characterized by a shared repertoire of practices, norms, and understandings that enable members to coordinate their activities effectively. The concept emphasizes the collective and social dimensions of knowledge, focusing on how practices are performed and sustained within the group, leading to the formation of a social order grounded in these shared activities.

The choice of Practice Theory is particularly pertinent in order to address the question posed in this research for several reasons. First, it allows for an analysis of how cross-border interactions at the micro-level reflect and shape broader socio-political dynamics. This theory emphasizes the role of human agency in the continuous creation and re-creation of social life, challenging more static, structuralist approaches (Schatzki 2012). Furthermore, focusing on cross-border practice communities helps highlight the role of shared practices in developing a sense of community across national boundaries. These communities are not just defined by geographical proximity but by the shared practices and narratives that emerge from regular interactions across borders (Adler-Nissen 2016).

By exploring how everyday practices contribute to the construction of regional identities and the fostering of community cohesion, we can offer a nuanced analysis of the interplay between institutional initiatives and local realities. This approach not only aligns with contemporary shifts towards more practice-oriented research in European integration studies but also responds to calls for integrating more localized, people-centered perspectives into the analysis of cross-border cooperation (Adler-Nissen 2016; Gadinger 2017) as will be better explained in the following sections.

2. Case study approach, data and methods

The methodology adopted for this study employs a qualitative research approach (Yin 2009). Empirical data used for this research has been collected through popular accounts of border and cross-border regional activities (newspaper articles, Youtube videos), an extensive analysis of official EU, national and regional planning reports and policy documents have been analyzed. A total of twenty-two semi-structured interviews have been conducted with institutional actors as politicians, cross-border cities socio-economic representatives, private actors, cross-border agencies and representatives of regional development agencies in cross-border areas. The interviews have been analysed through a

critical discourse analysis that aimed to single out social practices that influence ideas, values, and norms (Caldas-Coulthard et al. 2003).

The selection of actors to be interviewed has been based on a two steps procedure. First, actors have been identified for the role they play within cross-border cities and in EU institutional bodies that deal with CBC issues. For this step I relied both on official documentation and my previous research network. A second set of interviews was conducted following a snowball sampling technique. At the end of each interview, actors have been asked to nominate a few prominent stakeholders in the field of CBC, and if it was possible to establish contact with them. During the interviews actors were asked to elaborate on the conceptualization of «cross-border cities», “border community”, “border identity”, “community” and practices. I invited my interviewees to discuss joint activities developed in cross-border cities, the planning vision of the cross-border zone, the long-run vision of the socio-economic, political and territorial development of these zones, the obstacles encountered, and the understanding of the European and national integration values.

3. Cross-Border Practices and Regional Identity Transformation in the Upper Adriatic

In this section, I will focus on the main features of practice theories in order to then operationalise it to cross-border cooperation. Practice theory emphasizes the importance of routinized behaviors, known as practices, which are composed of interconnected elements: materials, competences, and meaning (Adler and Pouliot 2011). “Materials” refer to the physical objects and technologies involved in practices, such as the infrastructures and economic tools used in cross-border cooperation in Europe, like bridges and communication networks that facilitate integration. “Competence” involves the skills and knowledge necessary to carry out these practices, exemplified by the expertise needed to effectively navigate and implement cross-border policies and initiatives. “Meaning” pertains to the shared understanding and significance attributed to these practices, which, in the context of European cooperation, includes the collective identity and values that support and motivate collaborative efforts beyond national borders.

Practice Theory is particularly useful for understanding EU cohesion policy and cross-border cooperation (CBC). By focusing on practices, we can analyze the ways in which shared knowledge, cultural codes, and symbolic systems are enacted, sustained, and transformed through the routinized activities and interactions of cross-border communities. These practices shape communities actions and constitute their cross-border social life (Reckwitz 2002). Practices, as actions and social relations, produce and shape spaces (Soja 1985). The dynamic interaction between individual agency and broader structural contexts is central to practice theory (Adler and Pouliot 2011; Paasi 1986), especially in the process of “institutionalizing a region.”

As defined by Paasi, this institutionalization occurs in four stages: the emergence of regional consciousness, the formation of a regional identity through socio-spatial processes, the creation of institutional frameworks to support this identity, and the subsequent transformation of the region into a recognized and functional administrative entity (Paasi 1986).

As this identity solidifies, institutional frameworks are established to support and formalize cross-border collaboration, ensuring that administrative policies and practices reflect the unique binational character of the region. As put from one interviewee who participated to this research:

The role of the Slovenian and Italian communities is to promote joint activities that foster the exchange and understanding of each other's culture and language. These activities range from contemporary practices, through Interreg projects, to efforts that aim to leave a lasting impact. Additionally, there is a focus on establishing landmarks within the region that highlight and celebrate the our single cultures (interview with a representative of the Italian minority in Slovenia, August 2023).

In the interview, the establishment of a solidified cross-border identity between Slovenian and Italian communities is the first crucial step. As this identity strengthens, it prompts the creation of institutional frameworks designed specifically to support and formalize the collaboration between these communities. These frameworks play a vital role in organizing and sustaining joint initiatives, ensuring they are not ephemeral but part of a lasting strategy.

Further solidifying this relationship, these frameworks influence the administrative policies and practices within the region. They ensure that the unique binational character of the region is acknowledged and integrated into local governance, promoting a harmonious and integrated coexistence that benefits both communities. This systematic approach not only fosters cultural exchange but also embeds the diverse identity of the region into its administrative DNA.

Another example is the EGTC-GO, established between Gorizia, Nova Gorica, and Sempeter along the Italian-Slovenian border in 2011.

The European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC) is a legal instrument established by the European Union (EU) under Regulation 1082/2006. It allows regional and local authorities from different EU member states to form cooperation groupings as legal entities. The EGTC's primary purpose is to facilitate and promote cross-border, transnational, and interregional cooperation, thus supporting territorial cohesion across the EU. By providing a stable legal framework, the EGTC enables public actors at different levels to collaborate on joint projects and initiatives, often bypassing traditional state-controlled channels, thereby fostering multi-level governance within the EU (Nadalutti 2013).

The EGTC-GO, in particular, aims at simplifying collaboration and unifying urban planning to address the unique challenges faced by this cross-border region (Nadalutti 2020). A local politician states: “Certainly, before the establishment of the EGTC, Gorizia and Nova Gorica were quite marginal compared to their national centers. However, these cities have successfully capitalized on their cooperation” (interview with the author 2022). The EGTC-GO functions more like a laboratory: being composed of local municipalities, it facilitates simpler interactions. Cross-border actors meet regularly on a daily basis” (interview with a regional-level executive 2022). Another actor shares the same view: “We, as the EGTC, have a single administration made up of people from both sides of the border, we talk daily with people from the three municipalities, and this produces new ideas, new projects. From here, our vision of the area as a unique entity: for us, it is ‘the territory.’ The interview clearly shows that ‘ideas’ and ‘projects’ emerge from and because of the practice of meeting regularly and not vice versa. The same interviewee continues:

And while mayors used to meet two or three times a year, now they talk even three times a day. But, of course, it would not have been possible without the regulatory foundation provided by the 2006 European Regulation (EGTC) that established cross-border territorial cooperation groups (Thomas Konrad, interview by Rosà 2023).

Local and regional administrative actors, when interviewed, always highlight that this constant interaction leads to the transformation of the area into a recognized, functional, and social administrative entity that transcends mere geographic union, embodying a model of integrated European urban development. An administrative official of the EGTC-GO stated in an interview with the Osservatorio Balcani (2023):

With Slovenia’s entry into the Euro area, every barrier dissolved and there was no longer any tangible sign of the border, except in the memory of those who had lived through more complicated times. But young people no longer say ‘I’m going there,’ but rather I’m going to that specific place, I’m going to that certain store: they say the name of the place, not ‘in Italy’ or ‘in Slovenia.’

Surely, this interview aligns with practice theory as it highlights how daily activities and interactions, fundamental elements of practice theory, are redefined and shaped by broader economic and political changes, incorporating new social practices within the community.

However, it must also be considered that this is the official perspective, which could undergo significant revision as local communities and ethnic minorities

present alternative viewpoints. Fieldwork led for this research clearly shows that there are still cultural fragmentation and the pressing need for stronger mechanisms to preserve distinct identities within the framework of cross-border cooperation, thereby complicating the current narrative of smooth integration and highlighting the delicate balance required to maintain cultural diversity in these regions (interviews with the author between 2020 and 2023 that generally lead to this conclusion).

Building on this, the integration of practice theory with the concept of “intercultural citizenship” as articulated by Kymlicka (2017) further enriches our understanding of cross-border cooperation. By viewing “intercultural citizenship” through the lens of practice theory, we can appreciate how multicultural states must navigate daily practices and routines to promote successful cross-border cooperation that considers the diverse cultural practices, identities, and values of all involved, thereby fostering an inclusive environment that goes beyond mere tolerance to active engagement and mutual respect.

This perspective highlights that cross-border initiatives are not only institutional but also deeply embedded in the lived experiences and intercultural interactions of the individuals involved. This synergy between practice theory and intercultural citizenship underscores the importance of fostering shared civic values and active participation across cultural lines, ensuring that collaborative efforts transcend mere structural agreements to become meaningful, community-driven processes.

Kymlicka conceptualises “intercultural citizenship” as a framework that seeks to harmonize the recognition and accommodation of cultural diversity with the promotion of shared civic values and active participation within a democratic society. This concept emphasizes that while individuals and groups maintain their distinct cultural identities, they also engage in meaningful interactions and dialogues across cultural lines, fostering mutual understanding and respect.

However, while Kymlicka’s framework is notably forward-looking, it has been critiqued for potentially oversimplifying the complexities of intercultural citizenship. The belief that fostering shared civic values and mutual respect across cultural lines can effortlessly bridge deep-seated historical injustices and structural inequalities is ambitious but may be overly idealistic. Critics argue that Kymlicka’s model may not fully address the persistent power asymmetries and the challenging negotiations necessary for genuine intercultural dialogue and cooperation. These concerns raise critical questions about the extent to which Kymlicka’s vision of intercultural citizenship can be achieved without more robust mechanisms to tackle these underlying issues (Levrau 2019).

In this article, as mentioned above, I read “intercultural citizenship” through the lens of Practice Theory. Hence, intercultural citizenship can be understood as a set of practices that individuals and communities engage in to navigate the coexistence of cultural diversity with shared civic values. For example, in a

democratic society, intercultural citizenship is practiced through everyday interactions that involve recognizing and accommodating cultural differences while simultaneously participating in civic activities that promote common democratic principles. This might include routine practices such as voting, participating in community meetings, or engaging in public discourse, where individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds bring their unique perspectives to the table while working together toward shared goals.

Operationalised this to cross-border cooperation, it is apparent that intercultural citizenship is important for the development of cross-border communities. These communities, shaped by sustained interactions and shared initiatives across national borders, embody the practical realization of intercultural citizenship. By participating in EU CBC programs, local actors and minority groups engage in transnational practices that not only reinforce their distinct cultural identities but also contribute to a broader sense of European citizenship that transcends national boundaries. The continuous engagement of these communities in cross-border projects has led to the emergence of new forms of citizenship that are characterized by mutual understanding, shared interests, and the redefinition of traditional national loyalties (Nadalutti 2014). This development highlights the potential of cross-border cooperation to transform and integrate border regions into cohesive and cooperative spaces, where the rigidities of national borders are softened, allowing for the flourishing of multicultural and multilingual societies (Nadalutti 2012).

The promotion of shared civic values and active participation is operationalized through the habitual engagement in democratic processes and public life. Practice theory helps us see that these are not merely abstract ideals but are grounded in the everyday actions of citizens. For instance, the “PRIMIS” project, part of the Interreg V-A Italy-Slovenia 2014-2020 Programme, demonstrates the practice of dialogue across cultural lines. This project involved the restoration of the Gravisi-Buttorai Palace in Koper, transforming it into a Multimedia Center that fosters intercultural exchange between Italian and Slovenian communities. The ongoing interaction and negotiation required for such collaborative efforts significantly contribute to the development of intercultural citizenship by promoting mutual understanding and respect. This illustrates how community forums and collaborative projects can serve as practical examples of operationalizing civic engagement through cross-cultural practices (Interreg V 2014-2020).

This commitment to fostering intercultural understanding through practical engagement lays the foundation for a broader advocacy of inclusive policies. For example, regular consultation with minority groups that live these territories in policy-making processes, or the inclusion of diverse cultural narratives in public education, are practices that embody intercultural citizenship. Through these practices, the balance between diversity and unity is maintained, as individuals

routinely engage in actions that reinforce both their cultural identities and their commitment to a cohesive, democratic society. The EDUKA project (2012-2015) under the Italy-Slovenia Cross-border Cooperation Programme is a clear example of promoting intercultural understanding. It involved the Italian minority in Slovenia and the Slovenian minority in Italy in developing educational materials and organizing cultural exchanges. This project fostered intercultural dialogue by integrating diverse cultural narratives into public education, thereby enhancing cultural identity while promoting unity across the border (Vidau 2015).

Moreover, building on the conceptualization of intercultural citizenship and its practical implications, the routines and interactions observed in the EGTC-GO illustrate how these practices are deeply intertwined with and shape the institutional frameworks that facilitate cross-border initiatives.

These practices are carried out by “communities of practice,” such as those formed within the EGTC-GO, where regular interactions among cross-border actors, including local politicians, administrators, and ethnic national minority groups, foster the development of shared projects and ideas that drive cross-border cooperation.

They are united by a mutual commitment and shared knowledge that guides action (Wenger 1998; Adler & Pouliot 2011). Following Wenger’s (1998) concept of “communities of practice,” it is evident that such communities are not just theoretical constructs but have real-world applications that can be observed in the European Union’s approach to regional integration. Moreover, as elaborated by Gadinger (2021), these communities not only shape but are also shaped by the socio-political contexts in which they operate, highlighting the recursive nature of practice in cross-border cooperation.

This aligns with Kymlicka’s (2017) notion of intercultural citizenship, where such communities contribute to the development of shared values and norms across diverse cultural contexts, reinforcing the interdependence between identity and practice.

In a nutshell, practice theory provides a robust framework for analyzing and understanding the complexities of EU integration and cross-border cooperation. It highlights the interaction between individual agency and structural contexts, the importance of routinized practices, and the role of collective knowledge in shaping and transforming cross-border spaces. This perspective is crucial for developing sustainable and effective cross-border policies and practices within the EU (CEI 2023; EC 2023). In the next section, the historical background of the case study is going to be introduced in order to then be analysed through the lens of the analytical framework.

4. Upper Adriatic History and Cross-Border Cooperation

The Upper Adriatic region, particularly the borderlands between Italy and Slovenia, is steeped in a complex history marked by the continuous redrawing of

national borders, cultural interweaving, and the evolving identities of its inhabitants. Historically, this area was an integral part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, a multi-ethnic domain that fostered a rich tapestry of cultures, languages, and traditions. However, the end of World War I and the subsequent disintegration of the empire triggered significant geopolitical upheavals. The resulting treaties, particularly the Treaty of Rapallo in 1920, dramatically reshaped the region's political map by transferring substantial Slovene territories to the Kingdom of Italy. This abrupt change in sovereignty brought approximately 300,000 Slovenes under Italian rule, disrupting established cultural norms and sparking tensions that would have long-lasting repercussions (Nadalutti 2015; Sluga 2001).

Similarly, the Italian National minority, primarily residing along the Slovene littoral, experienced significant shifts in their socio-political environment following the reconfiguration of borders. The Treaty of Osimo in 1975 further formalized minority protections for both Slovenes in Italy and Italians in Yugoslavia, including rights to language, press, and cultural autonomy. However, while these protections existed on paper, their implementation was inconsistent, leading to varied experiences among the Italian communities in Slovenia. Despite constitutional guarantees, many of these rights were often underutilized or remained symbolic rather than practical, reflecting the broader challenges of minority integration and recognition within national frameworks (Rigo and Rahola 2005).

The border delineated by the Treaty of Osimo in 1975, initially functioning as a symbol of division, progressively evolved into a zone of economic opportunity, particularly from the late 1970s through the 1990s. This transformation was marked by significant cross-border employment and economic exchanges, particularly involving Slovenians and Italians residing near the border. This Treaty not only formalized the border but also incorporated provisions for the protection of Slovenians in Italy and Italians in Yugoslavia, which played a crucial role in fostering cross-border cooperation. These protections were integral in creating an environment conducive to economic collaboration by ensuring the socio-economic development of minority communities, thus enabling their active participation in the local economy and cross-border initiatives (Bufon 2003).

However, it is important to critically assess the challenges and limitations of these integration efforts. The historical tensions and deeply rooted mistrust between these communities often hindered true integration, despite the legal frameworks in place. For instance, the practical implementation of minority rights, particularly for the Slovenians in Italy, was fraught with challenges, as local and national authorities often prioritized national interests over genuine minority protection. This resulted in a situation where cross-border cooperation, while beneficial, did not fully address the underlying social and cultural divides (Sluga 2001; Bufon et al. 2014).

In Slovenia, the situation for the ethnic Italian minority was also challenging, despite formal protections (Rigo and Rahola 2007). While the rights of the Italian minority were guaranteed in Slovenia soon after World War II, effective protection was only implemented by the mid-1980s. The inconsistency between the envisaged and actual conditions for ethnic minorities persisted, revealing a gap between formal rights and their practical application (interviews with the author 2022). Moreover, after Slovenia's independence in 1991, the Italian minority experienced an economic turning point rather than a political one, as they neither sought additional rights nor received further protections. The disparity between the formal legal frameworks and their implementation resulted in significant challenges for the Italian minority, highlighting the broader issues of integration and minority rights within the region (Šabec 2005; Rigo and Rahola 2005)

Cross-border economic cooperation, already started in the 1960s and 1970s. One notable example is the Gorizia-Nova Gorica Trade Fair. This fair was a vital platform for economic exchange, bringing together traders, businesses, and local authorities from both sides of the border. The event not only facilitated commerce but also served as a cultural bridge, encouraging interaction and cooperation between the communities. This initiative was particularly important during a period when the border between Italy and Slovenia (then part of Yugoslavia) was still heavily controlled, making such cross-border interaction rare and valuable. It was then significantly accelerated by the European integration process (Bufon 2006). Another well-documented case is the environmental management of the Soca/Isonzo River. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Italian and Slovenian authorities tried to work together on issues related to water management, pollution control, and flood prevention in the shared river basin. This cooperation was one of the first environmental initiatives between the two countries, setting the groundwork for future cross-border environmental policies (Vizintin et al. 2018).

Hence, while various forms of cross-border cooperation existed earlier, the establishment of the Interreg program in 1990 marked a pivotal moment. Interreg, an EU-funded initiative, was specifically designed to promote cross-border, transnational, and interregional cooperation. It provided a structured framework and funding to foster socio-economic linkages across borders, addressing common challenges and unlocking regional growth potential. Through Interreg, regions that were previously isolated began collaborating more closely, thereby enhancing European cohesion and integration.

These initiatives fostered a synergistic relationship between Slovenian and Italian entrepreneurs, contributing to a more integrated and economically dynamic border region (Panteia 2009). However, it is essential to recognize that this process was not without its obstacles. The integration of two distinct economic systems, with differing levels of development and institutional frameworks, posed significant challenges (Nadalutti 2015; Vizintin et al. 2018).

Moreover, the administrative and bureaucratic hurdles, particularly on the Slovenian side, where the regional level was less developed, often impeded the smooth execution of cross-border projects (Faro 2005).

According to Bufon (2002), Slovenians from areas such as Nova Gorica, Koper, and other towns close to the Italian border frequently crossed into Italy for work. Many of these Slovenians were bilingual, speaking both Slovenian and Italian, which facilitated their integration into the Italian labor market. This linguistic ability was particularly important, as it allowed them to navigate the Italian workplace and communicate effectively with their employers and colleagues. Similarly, the Italian national minority in Slovenia, particularly concentrated in towns like Koper and Piran, benefited from their bilingualism in Italian and Slovenian. This community, officially recognized as an autochthonous minority, had their rights guaranteed by the Constitution of the Socialist Republic of Slovenia as early as the 1960s, with further protections enshrined in the Yugoslav federal constitution of 1974 (Šabec 2007). Despite these formal guarantees, practical implementation only took place in the mid-1980s.

The Italian minority has played a pivotal role in advancing cross-border cooperation between Slovenia and Italy, particularly after Slovenia's independence in 1991. This cooperation has extended far beyond cultural exchanges, deeply influencing economic and institutional relationships and significantly shaping the bilateral ties between these two neighboring countries.

A concrete example of this is the "SiT" (Smart Tourist Information System: Interreg V-A Italy-Slovenia 2014-2020) project in the municipalities of Koper and Piran, where the Italian minority is concentrated. Supported by Interreg funds, this project aimed to create a network of smart tourist information points that enhance the tourist experience by providing multilingual services, including Italian. This initiative not only boosted local tourism but also facilitated closer economic ties between Slovenia and Italy by making the region more accessible and attractive to Italian tourists.

In addition to tourism, the Italian minority has been instrumental in the economic integration of the border regions through projects like the "CROSSMOBY" project. This project, also supported by Interreg, focused on improving cross-border mobility between Slovenia and Italy, enhancing public transport links in regions with significant Italian populations such as the coastal area of Koper. The project aimed to reduce traffic congestion and promote sustainable transport options, directly benefiting cross-border commuters, many of whom are part of the Italian minority.

Furthermore, the Italian minority has actively contributed to educational and cultural institutions that foster bilingualism and biculturalism. For example, in the coastal town of Izola, bilingual schools supported by the Italian minority provide education in both Slovenian and Italian, promoting a shared cultural identity and

strengthening cross-border ties through educational exchanges and collaborative programs with Italian schools (Moroz 2020; Šabec 2005; Bufon 2003).

This cultural diplomacy has helped to break down historical barriers and build trust between the communities on either side of the border. The extent of this impact can be seen in the increased cultural affinity and cooperation between Slovenian and Italian communities, which has led to a more integrated cross-border region (Moroz 2020).

On the basis of the fieldwork conducted for this research between 2021 and 2023, while cultural diplomacy has indeed facilitated a deeper understanding and cooperation between Slovenian and Italian communities, it is essential to acknowledge the challenges that persist, particularly regarding the minorities that live these territories. Interviews with local Italian representatives (interviews with the author 2023) reveal, for instance, significant concerns about the erosion of Italian language and cultural presence in Slovenia. Despite the positive strides made through joint cultural initiatives, there is a noticeable decline in the knowledge and use of Italian, especially among younger generations. This regression is evident in educational settings, where Italian is increasingly marginalized, and in the public sphere, where bilingual signage and media access are limited. Moreover, the enforcement of language laws, such as the requirement to translate historical Italian toponyms into Slovenian, reflects a broader trend of diminishing bilingualism, which some argue undermines the very essence of cross-border cultural integration (interview with the author 2023).

These challenges raise critical questions about the long-term viability of creating a cohesive cross-border community and identity. The struggle of the Italian minority to maintain its cultural and linguistic heritage suggests that the focus may need to shift from building a shared identity to ensuring the survival of individual identities first. The concept of “unity in diversity” is central to this cross-border cooperation, yet it must be balanced with the imperative to preserve the distinctiveness of each culture. Without this balance, the drive for unity risks overshadowing the very diversity that it seeks to celebrate, ultimately putting at stake the willingness and ability of minority communities to fully participate in and contribute to a shared regional identity.

A more detail analysis of these practices linked to identities and communities is going to be led in the next section by zooming to the case study of Gorizia-Nova Gorica, that have been named for the European Capital of Culture 2025. A brief historical background will be provided before analysing the case study under the analytical lens of Practice theory.

5. The History of Gorizia and Nova Gorica

Gorizia and Nova Gorica offer a microcosmic view of the broader Upper Adriatic history. Originally part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Gorizia became a border town following World War I, when the territory was divided between Italy and

what would become Yugoslavia. After World War II, the city of Gorizia was split, with Nova Gorica being established on the Yugoslav side of the border. This division, symbolized by the so-called “Gorizia Wall,” mirrored the broader division of Europe during the Cold War (Porcelli 2022).

The fall of the Berlin Wall and the subsequent collapse of communism in Eastern Europe paved the way for new forms of cross-border interaction. The physical and ideological barriers that had divided Gorizia and Nova Gorica began to erode, especially after Slovenia’s independence and its accession to the EU. In 2004, the symbolic removal of the border at the Transalpina Square between Gorizia and Nova Gorica became a powerful symbol of European integration and the re-emergence of a shared regional identity (Porcelli 2022).

The candidacy of Gorizia and Nova Gorica as the European Capital of Culture for 2025 under the slogan “Go Borderless” epitomizes this new era of cross-border cooperation. The initiative aims to further integrate the two cities, fostering a shared cultural and economic space that transcends the historical divisions of the past. This project is seen as a culmination of decades of efforts to build a transborder identity and a testament to the resilience of cross-border communities in the face of geopolitical challenges (Porcelli 2022).

In general terms the cities of Gorizia in Italy and Nova Gorica in Slovenia have often been lauded at the EU level by the Directorate General of the Commission that focus on integration and cooperation as prime examples of the positive impact of European integration on cross-border cooperation. However, while European integration, particularly through frameworks like the European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation (EGTCs), has undoubtedly facilitated cooperation between these cities, it is essential to critically assess the depth and nature of this so-called “inclusive and interconnected regional identity.”

The notion of a “shared identity” emerging from European integration efforts, as often celebrated, raises important questions. What does it truly mean for a region to possess an “inclusive and interconnected regional identity,” especially in a cross-border context where historical, socio-political, and economic disparities are deeply entrenched? The narrative of a seamless transformation from divided cities into a cohesive cross-border region may oversimplify the complex realities on the ground.

The fieldwork lead for this research has shown that the formation and maintenance of cross-border regions like Gorizia-Nova Gorica are deeply influenced by everyday practices and the collaborative efforts of local communities (fieldwork conducted between 2021-2023). These practices, which are crucial for genuine integration, are not merely the result of top-down EU policies but emerge from the organic, often contested, interactions among local actors. The idea of an “inclusive and interconnected regional identity” must, therefore, be understood not as a monolithic or uniform outcome but as a dynamic

process shaped by ongoing negotiations, power struggles, and the lived experiences of the communities involved.

In examining the role of “communities of practice” within the context of Gorizia and Nova Gorica, it becomes evident that these communities are not merely natural byproducts of European integration policies. Rather, they are actively constructed and maintained through the routine interactions and shared practices of local actors, as indicated by fieldwork conducted from 2021 to 2023. These interactions form the foundation upon which collective identities are built and sustained, deeply embedded in the daily lives of those inhabiting these cross-border regions.

These communities of practice, comprising local leaders, civil servants, and community members, are heavily involved in ongoing collaborative efforts that extend beyond mere policy implementation. They participate in initiatives such as the EGTC-GO, which facilitates joint urban planning and cultural activities. This highlights how local actors play a crucial role in shaping cross-border cooperation through shared endeavors reflecting their collective aspirations and challenges (Wenger 1998; Adler & Pouliot 2011).

A crucial aspect of these cross-border interactions involves the active participation of ethnic minorities, notably the Slovenian minority in Italy and the Italian minority in Slovenia. As mentioned in the previous part, these communities have historically been key actors in cross-border cooperation, especially given their unique position straddling national boundaries. Their involvement is not only symbolic but also practical, as they navigate and negotiate their cultural and linguistic identities in a space that has historically been marked by division and conflict.

However, while these communities foster cooperation and contribute to the emergence of a shared regional identity, they also possess the potential to reinforce divisions (Paasi 1986). For instance, while the EGTC projects facilitated economic collaboration, they also highlighted disparities in development priorities—Italian Gorizia focused on preserving historical sites, while Slovenian Nova Gorica emphasized modern infrastructure and entertainment, like casinos. This divergence in focus reinforced existing economic and social divides between the two communities, demonstrating how cross-border initiatives can unintentionally solidify the very boundaries they seek to dissolve (interviews with the author 2021).

In this light, the transformation of Gorizia and Nova Gorica is not just a straightforward success story of Europeanization. It reflects the intricate and often conflicting processes through which cross-border cooperation is negotiated and enacted. The emerging regional identity is, therefore, less about an idyllic sense of belonging and more about the ongoing, pragmatic negotiations of coexistence within a space that remains marked by its history of division and its current socio-economic challenges.

This more nuanced understanding underscores the need to critically evaluate claims of “inclusive and interconnected” identities in cross-border regions. It suggests that true integration requires not just policy frameworks like the EGTC but also a deep engagement with the social and cultural practices that define everyday life in these regions. Only through such an approach can the complexities of cross-border integration be fully appreciated, moving beyond the overly optimistic narratives to address the real challenges and opportunities of creating cohesive regional spaces.

6. Conclusion

This research highlights that cross-border cooperation in the Upper Adriatic, while fostering significant socio-economic ties and reducing some historical animosities, has not fully achieved a seamless merging of regional identities. The region’s complex history, marked by shifting borders and diverse cultural influences, continues to influence the identities and interactions of its inhabitants. The cross-border initiatives, particularly those supported by EU programs like Interreg, have facilitated a more integrated landscape. However, the creation of a cohesive cross-border identity remains an ongoing and multifaceted process.

The findings suggest that rather than a unified regional identity, what has emerged is a hybrid identity where regional, national, and local affiliations coexist, sometimes harmoniously, but often with underlying tensions. This hybrid identity reflects both the successes and limitations of cross-border cooperation. While there is a growing sense of shared community, especially in institutional frameworks like the European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC), the persistence of socio-economic and cultural barriers indicates that the process of integration is far from complete.

The case of Gorizia-Nova Gorica exemplifies how intercultural citizenship can be operationalized in a cross-border context. The regular meetings and shared administration described in the EGTC-GO case study demonstrate how intercultural practices can transcend national borders, creating a unified region that, while politically divided, operates as a cohesive social and cultural entity. This case study illustrates Kymlicka’s (2017) argument that intercultural citizenship is essential for the success of cross-border regions, as it ensures that collaboration is not just a matter of policy but is rooted in the daily practices and identities of the people involved.

Moreover, the study underscores that the role of ethnic minorities and local communities is crucial in driving cross-border initiatives. These groups, through their daily practices and engagements, both shape and are shaped by the broader processes of European integration. However, their experiences also reveal the challenges of maintaining distinct cultural identities within a framework that seeks to promote a shared regional identity.

The article ultimately argues that the development of a cohesive and harmonious cross-border region in the Upper Adriatic is not just about overcoming physical borders, but also about addressing the deeper socio-cultural divides that continue to exist. The creation of a truly integrated region requires more than just policy frameworks; it necessitates a sustained effort to engage with and understand the lived experiences and identities of the people in these borderlands. This conclusion calls for a more critical and nuanced approach to European integration, one that recognizes the complexities and contradictions inherent in cross-border cooperation and identity formation.

To conclude, in answering the research question, the article concludes that while cross-border cooperation has indeed influenced regional identities and fostered community cohesion to some extent, it has also reinforced certain divisions and challenges. The path to a fully integrated cross-border identity in the Upper Adriatic is therefore one of gradual progress, requiring ongoing negotiation, adaptation, and commitment from all stakeholders involved.

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«REGIONALISM THROUGH INTERREGIONALISM» REVISITED: DID EUROPE'S RELATIONS WITH ASIA STRENGTHEN REGIONAL IDENTITIES?

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Abstract: The 1990s have seen a tremendous upsurge of regionalism in all parts of the world. In the process, the unfolding institutional global governance architecture became increasingly vertically and horizontally differentiated. The new interregional fora, which proliferated in the 1990s as a new layer of global governance, attracted a lot of scholarly attention. Taking Asia-Europe relations as an example, scholars sought to make sense of interregionalism and attached to it functions of which they believed they would promote global governance. One of the functions attributed to interregionalism was regional identity building. The regular interaction of regional fora, scholars argued, would strengthen regional identity. “Regionalism through interregionalism” was Heiner Hänggi’s much quoted formula for this anticipated effect. Yet, viewed from hindsight, there are few indications that interregionalism has strengthened European and Asian regional identities. The greatest impact on regional identities emanated from the group-to-group ASEAN-EU dialogue relations, while the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) as a transregional forum has developed into a typical institution of what has been categorized as “diminished multilateralism.” Hybrid interregionalism, that is, region-to-group relations, have even less impacted regional identities. Only in the EU-China relationship, they ambiguously affected European regional identity.

Keywords: Asia-Europe Meeting, interregionalism, identity, diminished multilateralism

1. *Introduction*

Interregional interactions are not a completely new phenomenon of international relations (Hänggi, Roloff & Rüland 2006). Its origins can be traced back to the 1970s, when the then European Community (EC) began to build up group-to-group relations with other regional organizations (ROs). Examples include, *inter alia*, the relations with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the Central American Contadora Group, the Arab League and the European Free Trade Area (EFTA) (Regelsberger 1988: 252). However, two decades later, in the 1990s, the number of interregional fora suddenly surged. In a so far unique stock-taking, Heiner Hänggi (2006: 35-37) identified no less than 112 interregional relationships across the globe. Scholars studying interregionalism distinguish three types: First, group-to-group dialogues, bilateral or “pure” interregionalism (Hänggi 2006) such as the relationships of the EU with ASEAN, the Mercado Comun del Sur (Mercosur), the Southern African Development Community

(SADC) and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Second, transregional fora which may only partly overlap with the membership of ROs and may also include member states from more than two regions. Examples are the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM), the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) and the Forum of East Asia and Latin American Countries (FEALAC). And, third, hybrid interregionalism, that is, relationships between a RO and a single (great) power. Cases in point are the dialogue meetings between the EU and the U.S., Russia, China, India, Japan, South Africa and others or the relations of ASEAN with ten of its eleven dialogue partners (Rüländ 2006, 2022).¹

Early research also attributed functions to interregionalism: (soft) balancing, institution-building, rationalizing, agenda-setting and identity-building (Rüländ 2001, 2006; Doidge 2011; Lammich 2020). Realists highlighted the fact that states or groups of states used interregionalism as a means of institutional balancing in response to global power shifts. Liberals entertained the optimistic belief that interregional fora will serve as “multilateral utilities” (Dent 2004), facilitating international institution-building, rationalizing the negotiations in global fora and acting as agenda setters for new themes in international relations. Adding a new layer with many subsidiary fora to a vertically and horizontally differentiating global governance system (Rüländ 2001, 2006, 2010; 2022; Hettne, 2003, 2005), institution-building is thereby seen as a mechanism of mitigating the anarchical character of international relations by peacefully addressing the rapidly intensifying cross-border pathologies of globalization. The latter include irregular migration, climate change, environmental degradation, pandemics, international terrorism, piracy, and transnationally organized crime, to name a few. The idea behind rationalizing is that interregional fora become clearing houses for unwieldy global institutions such as the United Nations (UN) or the World Trade Organization (WTO). States and non-state stakeholders first seek to create regional and interregional consensus for the solution of complex and technically demanding global problems, before these issues enter the negotiating table of global fora. As this is expected to markedly reduce the proposals under discussion, interregionalism is seen as providing a chance to overcome the often observed paralysis of global governance fora. In the case of ASEM, European and Asian partners have occasionally met to coordinate for meetings of the UN General Assembly or the WTO. Agenda-setting refers to the fact that interregional fora may be suitable platforms for building coalitions large enough to tangibly lobby for solutions of urgent global issues. Such initiatives include trade and financial themes, environmental issues, conventional and non-conventional security problems. Finally, identity-building relates to the belief that meetings between regions would strengthen their identity and, as a corollary,

¹ ASEAN's other dialogue partners apart from the EU are Australia, Canada, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, South Korea, Russia, the United Kingdom and the United States.

cohesion (Gilson 1998, 2002; Hänggi 2003), facilitating a trend that Hettne (2005) has called “regional multilateralism,” that is, a global governance system, where regions play a decisive role.

Revisiting the identity-building functions of interregionalism, this article focuses on the last of these five functions. The test case is Euro-Asian interregionalism as it emerged under the aegis of ASEAN-EU dialogue relations, the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) and the EU’s hybrid relationships with China, India and Japan. Asia-Europe relations are the most intense and at the same time best studied interregional relationships² and may therefore provide empirical insights to the research question underlying this article, that is, whether and, if, the extent to which interregional relations strengthen the identity and cohesion of their main protagonists, the EU and ASEAN.

In the remainder of the article, I begin with some theoretical reflections related to the research question, before I turn to the empirical evidence. The empirical section is subdivided into three parts, assessing the impact of the three types of interregionalism on the ROs involved in the dialogue. The final section concludes the article and summarizes the main findings.

2. Interregionalism and regional identity

The rise of constructivist scholarship in the 1990s also impacted research on interregionalism. While realists and liberals, as mentioned above, explained the phenomenon of interregional relations with the help of material factors such as (global) power shifts or as a response to globalization and growing interdependence, constructivists added ideational and cognitive dimensions to the research on interregionalism (Gilson 2002: 10). Hänggi’s formula of “regionalism through interregionalism” felicitously portrays interregionalism as a relational and reflexive process. It regards interregionalism as an external factor of regional integration (Hänggi 2003) in which pertinent regions become reflexive agents that constitute and that are constituted by interregional interaction (Gilson 2002: 12). Constructivist research on interregionalism thus focuses on collective identities, assuming that not only individuals but also corporate actors such as regions, states, churches, political parties or firms may have identities (Fearon 1999: 33). Regional identities refer to distinguishing features of a region that form the basis for a region’s self-respect and pride (ibid.: 34). It constitutes “we-ness” and distinguishes it from “them,” that is, regional “others” (Gilson 2002: 23). Such distinguishing properties of “regionness” can be rules about membership in a RO, specific norms it champions and/or “role-specific understandings about self” (Wendt 1992: 397). Discourse and narratives produce and reproduce these

² See, *inter alia*, Rüländ (1996), Gilson (2002, 2020); Reiterer (2002); Yeo (2003); Bersick (2004); Dent (2004); Robles (2008); Gaens (2008); Manca (2008); Doidge (2011); Fitriani (2014); Allison (2015).

identity-building properties (Gilson 2002), while everyday practices reify them. Regional identities are context-sensitive: they may be stable and path-dependent, but also prone to abrupt change due to external shocks (Legro 2000) or incremental change as global and/or regional power equations gradually alter.

The identity building effects of interregionalism can be intended or unintended (Rüland 2001). They are intended when an RO seeks to project its model of integration on other regions. This can be done through the propagation of political norms or (institutional) capacity building measures to support regional integration. A case in point is the EU's projection of liberal norms through conditionalities after the end of the Cold War and, later faced with ASEAN's resistance, its more pragmatic technical support for the ASEAN Secretariat through the APRIS I and II, ARISE and ARISE Plus programs (Jetschke 2013). Capacity building may be a largely technocratic exercise, but still provides opportunities for value promotion through the backdoor (Maier-Knapp 2014: 227). The projection of liberal norms such as democracy, respect for human rights, rule of law and good governance and seemingly technocratic capacity building has a two-fold effect: First, value propagation may increase the EU's own self-respect and, hence, cohesion. Second, acting as an "external federator" (Zimmerling 1991) or "external integrator" (Hänggi 2003) through capacity building reinforces the EU's self-image as the globally most advanced RO, while at the same time strengthening the cohesion of the regional other and thereby creating a more effective policy environment for EU policies. Dealing with groups of countries championing similar values, standards, rules and regulations³ and relying on similar effective decision-making procedures entails lower transaction costs than dealing with individual countries and their often widely varying normative and procedural idiosyncrasies. In other words: the EU expects better results in negotiations with "others" influenced by the EU model of regional integration.

Yet identity building and greater regional cohesion may also be unintentional. ROs engaged in interregional relations must coordinate internally to prepare the interaction with the regional other. This may lead to a better understanding of one own region's strengths, its distinguishing features and may ultimately facilitate greater cohesion through enhanced effectiveness in the search for common positions and strategies. Maull, Segal and Wanandi (1998: xi, cited in Hänggi 2003) thus regard interregional interaction as a mechanism to make ROs function as a coherent group.

Unintentional identity building may also take place, if there are major capacity asymmetries between ROs. If the weaker side regards interaction as a strategy to consolidate the regional other's superiority and denounces the behavior of the superior organization as paternalistic or even neo-colonial attitude, it may

³ *East Asia Forum*, 24 December 2009.

provoke the weaker organization to develop its own set of norms and collective symbols in explicit opposition to the other side. While this may markedly contribute to shaping regional identity of the weaker RO, a conflictive relationship emerges which minimizes the expected benefits arising from interregional cooperation as temporarily between the EU and ASEAN.

3. Asia-Euro relations and regional identity building

This section seeks to assess whether and, if, to what extent interregional interactions between Asia and Europe have shaped the EU's and ASEAN's regional identities. Indicators for identity building effects emanating from interregional interactions correspond to the previous section's definition of regional identity, namely, normative properties, membership rules, operational practices and role conceptions distinguishing a RO from others. The section is divided into three parts, examining the identity building effects of different interregional dialogue formats. It first centers on group-to-group interactions under the aegis of ASEAN-EU dialogue relations, before moving on to the Asia-Europe Meeting's (ASEM) as a case of transregionalism and finally examining hybrid interregional relationships in the form of the EU's ties with China, India and Japan.

3.1 The ASEAN-EU dialogue relations and regional identities

ASEAN-EU dialogue relations started in 1978. With the imminent accession of the United Kingdom to the then EC in the early 1970s, British Commonwealth members Singapore and Malaysia threatened to lose trade preferences and therefore sought closer contact to the EC. The EC was seen as source of development aid, export market and, even more importantly, foreign direct investment (FDI), on which ASEAN member countries were strongly dependent (Rüland 1996: 15). Under ASEAN-EU dialogue relations, the EC participated in ASEAN's Postministerial Conferences, that is, meetings with its dialogue partners which took place back-to-back to ASEAN's annual foreign ministers meetings. The EC's and ASEAN's foreign ministers also convened for consultations every 18 months alternately in Southeast Asia and in Europe.

ASEAN-EU relations were unspectacular until the end of the Cold War. It was basically an asymmetrical donor-recipient relationship between advanced industrialized countries and developing countries. The EC valued ASEAN member countries' anti-communism, thereby largely ignoring the fact that the latter were predominantly authoritarian regimes. While EC external relations focused on adjacent regions including the North Atlantic, Eastern Europe and the Mediterranean, ASEAN, and Asia in general, did not figure high on its agenda and thus did not contribute much to shape European identity. For ASEAN, however, relations with the EU added recognition to the grouping, strengthened

the region's self-confidence as a relevant international actor and in the process helped to construct a Southeast Asian regional identity.

This state of affairs changed abruptly after the end of the Cold War, which was celebrated in the West as the ultimate triumph of liberalism in the systemic rivalry with the communist bloc led by the Soviet Union (Fukuyama 1992). EC states subsequently began to link development aid with conditionalities, elevating liberal norms such as democracy, respect for human rights, good governance, rule of law and development orientation to benchmarks in their relations with ASEAN and its member states. While the conditionality policies helped to popularize the EU's self-image as a "normative power" (Manners 2002), a power not relying on military might but impacting international politics from a position of moral high ground, ASEAN countries increasingly opposed the EC's and the West's normative offensive. Clashes on human rights thus characterized the Luxembourg and Manila 1991 and 1992 meetings between ASEAN and EC foreign ministers (Rüländ 1996: 25).

Emboldened by their own phenomenal economic growth paralleled by a sluggish economy in Europe, ASEAN governments began to counter-project a model of regional cooperation, which markedly differed from European integration and which they framed as an Asian approach to regionalism. Center stage in ASEAN rhetoric took the ASEAN Way, a repository of cooperation norms laid down in the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC), which ASEAN concluded at its first regional summit in 1976 (Haacke 2003). The ASEAN Way stressed sovereignty norms including non-interference into the internal affairs of member countries and conceptualized regionalism in strictly intergovernmentalist terms. It thus differed diametrically from the (selectively) supranational design of the EC and its vocal promotion of liberal norms. In fact, ASEAN completely renounced liberal norms including a democracy clause as a precondition of membership such as in the EC. ASEAN also clearly distanced its regionalism from European legalism and "deep" institutionalization, highlighting instead "lean" institutionalization, "soft" law and the flexible, informal, pragmatic, non-binding and consensual nature of decision-making as characteristic and, hence, identity building secondary norms.

It is probably no exaggeration to consider the ASEAN Way as the regional embodiment of the Asian value thesis, which several ASEAN countries such as Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia fervently propagated in the 1990s to reject what they considered as neo-colonial Western normative lecturing (Robison 1996). Asian history and culture markedly differ from Western development, they argued, paving alternative avenues to statehood and development. The fact that power, authority, hierarchy and collectivism have a greater meaning in Asia than in the individualist and liberal West forbids the universalization of Western liberal norms (Rüländ 1998: 13). In the view of ASEAN governments, norms are context-bound, dependent not only on history and culture but also the

developmental status of countries. In developing countries, like all ASEAN countries were except Singapore, with rapid late development as the overriding state objective, the process of socio-economic development necessarily precedes and supersedes individual rights.

ASEAN's identity construction as an illiberal, but economically extremely successful grouping, its own stagnating economy and the concomitant discourse of an dawning "Pacific century," eventually persuaded the EU to backtrack and pursue a more pragmatic course. From the mid-1990s onward, the EU toned down its self-acclaimed normative superiority and subjected its policy towards ASEAN to the overriding objective of benefiting from Asia's economic miracle through expanded trade and stepped up investments in the region in response to the competition from other actors (Müller 2016: 287).

Yet this change of track was short-lived. When the Asian Financial Crisis (AFC) of 1997/1998 severely struck ASEAN members Thailand, Indonesia and Malaysia, the EU returned to its moral high ground and joined the voices that attributed the AFC to Asian countries' crony capitalism (Rüland 2000; Gilson 2002). At the same time, many European observers discredited the ASEAN Way as a fallacy, unable to respond to the crisis's contagious effects. Another stumbling block became the accession of Myanmar's pariah regime with its flagrant human rights violations to ASEAN. The demand of the EU to exclude Myanmar's military junta from Asia-Europe dialogue relations met with ASEAN's staunch opposition and eventually caused an interruption of the ASEAN-EU foreign ministers meetings from 1997 to 2000.

Yet, the AFC, the external and internal critique of the ASEAN Way and the concomitant re-routing of FDI from ASEAN countries to China (Jetschke 2013), triggered reforms of ASEAN's cooperation model. The process culminated in the ASEAN Charter (2008) and the ASEAN Human Rights Declaration (AHRD) (2012), complementing ASEAN's sovereignty-based ASEAN Way with liberal norms such as democracy, respect for human rights, good governance and rule of law.

However, the years thereafter showed that the adoption of liberal norms and procedural reforms of ASEAN cooperation inspired by the EU were in the first place tactical maneuvers with the objective of restoring ASEAN's international respectability and the attraction of FDI. Despite the reforms, the sovereignty norms of the ASEAN Way prevail over the new liberal norms. A telling case in point is the grouping's human rights regime which adopted the Asian value thesis's contextual understanding of human rights.⁴ ASEAN still practices its illiberal cooperation format, only thinly camouflaged by liberal normative language. The latter is primarily used to re-purpose liberal ideas for illiberal elitism and state-centered practices largely excluding stakeholder participation by

⁴ See AHDR, para. 7.

a narrowly defined category of “entities associated to ASEAN” (Collins 2008; Gerard 2014; Rüländ 2014, 2023). A striking case in point is the fact that since 2015, no leader-CSO meetings have taken place during summits (Rüländ 2021, 2023)

In recent years, the EU tends to tolerate ASEAN's continued and only thinly veiled illiberal identity. In 2012, it acceded to the TAC and thus also explicitly acknowledged ASEAN's illiberal regional identity. In the ASEAN-EU dialogue relations, the EU pursues its normative agenda only in a tooth-less pro-forma mode, sufficient to acquiesce a critical home audience in the European Parliament and civil society. When the EU and ASEAN meet, more technical issues are at the forefront of deliberations: connectivity issues, infrastructure development, environmental problems and climate change, pandemics and non-conventional security threats such as international terrorism.

3.2 The Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) and regional identities

The Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) was inaugurated with the Bangkok Summit in March 1996. Since then, thirteen summits took place, the last one in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, in 2021. Founding members were the then fifteen member states of the EU, the European Commission, the then seven member countries of ASEAN plus China, Japan and South Korea. With its formation, ASEM relegated the functionally overlapping ASEAN-EU dialogue relations to a subordinate priority. For the EU the ASEM dialogue was attractive as it included the East Asian economic power houses and thus promised more intensive economic relations with Asia than ASEAN-EU dialogue relations alone would promise. At the same time, it served as a counterweight to the Asia-Pacific Economic Community (APEC), which formed in 1989, the Clinton administration used as its institutional vehicle to promote U.S. economic interests in Pacific Asia. For ASEAN member states, the presence of the three East Asian countries added political weight, strengthened its bargaining power vis-à-vis the Europeans and increased their international reputation.

With the Bangkok summit, a three-pillared ASEM structure emerged: a political pillar, an economic pillar and a civil society pillar. At the apex of the forum is the biennial summit, which brings together the heads of state and government of the ASEM member countries and takes place alternately in Asia and in Europe. Summits are prepared by biennial foreign minister meetings and more frequent senior officials consultations. Over time, ministerial rounds with meetings of economic ministers, finance ministers, labor and employment ministers, transport ministers, cultural ministers, educational ministers, science and technology ministers and environmental ministers proliferated. Ministerial conferences also targeted migratory flows between Asia and Europe and energy

security.⁵ Annual, later biennial, meetings of business representatives in the Asia-Europe Business Forum (AEBF) constituted the economic pillar (Yeo, Gaens & Islam 2016: 11), while the Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF) was created to facilitate civil society interactions and people-to-people contacts. The Asia-Europe Parliamentary Partnership (ASEP) biennially convened parliamentarians (Rüland & Carrapatoso 2015) and, outside the ASEM forum, (critical) civil society organized meetings under the aegis of the Asia-Europe People's Forum (AEPF) parallel to ASEM summits (Bersick 2008; Freistein 2008).

Gilson (2002) and Hänggi (2003) argued that the formation of ASEM was decisive in shaping an Asian regional identity based on the East Asian Economic Caucus (EAEC). The precursor of the EAEC, the East Asian Economic Grouping (EAEG), was a brainchild of Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, first broached in 1991. The EAEC formed a region consisting of ASEAN plus China, Japan and South Korea. Mahathir conceptualized it as an Asian defense against Washington's dominant neoliberal agenda in the Asia-Pacific promoted by APEC. The EAEC also explicitly excluded Australia and New Zealand from ASEM, two Anglo-Pacific countries which Mahathir refused to regard as part of Asia.

For the EU, ASEM represented an opportunity to assert its independence from the influence of the U.S. Since the latter were not a member of ASEM, the EU regarded this forum as a chance to establish itself as a significant global player, distinct from its usual association with the U.S.-led Western bloc. With the exception of the period when ASEAN countries and South Korea were affected by the AFC, the EU decided to downgrade its normative goals and, instead, focus on practical issues of mutual interest with Asian members in ASEM, setting aside contentious themes.

Under the Asia-Europe Cooperation Framework (AECF) agreed in 2000 (Yeo, Gaens & Islam 2016: 5), a dialogue format emerged that exhibited strong traits of the ASEAN Way. Like the latter, ASEM cherished "lean" institutionalization, non-binding "soft" law, flexibility, informality, pragmatism, multi-dimensionality and equality. A case in point is the aversion of many ASEM members to the formation of an ASEM Secretariat. ASEM thus contributed more to ASEAN's identity as an institution and norm-building organization in regional and global politics than to a wider East Asian identity. It is thus unsurprising that as an extremely loosely institutionalized forum ASEM summits consisted of inconsequentially monitored laundry-lists of "low politics" projects. Its focus was on sharing of information and best practices (Yeo 2019: 4), but not the negotiation on global or regional issues.

⁵ See Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan, "The Asia-Europe Meeting. The framework." Available at: <https://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/economy/asem/framework.html>, (accessed 20 August 2024).

The East Asian identity that Gilson saw forged by ASEM was quite short-lived. In the 2004, 2008, 2010, 2012 and 2014 enlargements, ASEM more than doubled its membership from twenty-six to fifty-three. Although both sides, the European as well the Asian grew, the enlargement had a particularly diluting effect on Asian identity-building. Non-Asian countries such as Australia and New Zealand became members on the Asian side and also Russia's identity was more European than Asian. The great diversity of the Asian side, with countries competing among each other for power and influence like China, India and Japan, with quite different interests and normative orientations left little space for shaping a common Asian identity. These differences are reflected in policy fields that in the last decade have been at the forefront of ASEM such as infrastructure development and connectivity (Prakash 2016; 2021). With the Chinese Belt-and-Road Initiative (BRI) and the Japanese Quality Infrastructure program two very different approaches compete with each other. For both powers infrastructure development is a vehicle to increase their geopolitical influence in Asia and other parts of the Global South. The BRI even goes so far as claiming to establish a new international order with Chinese characteristics. But also on the European side, eastern enlargement has negatively affected the EU's identity and cohesion as accession countries nurture an uneasy attitude towards the EU's supranationalism norm (Nadalutti & Rüländ 2024). The growing EU skepticism in these countries spilled over to tight-wing populist movement in EU core members and culminated in the Brexit.

ASEM's enlargement not only diluted regional identities, it even undermined the forum's interregional nature. With fifty-three members, more than ever ASEM has become an inconsequential talk shop. With the re-emergence of competitive geopolitics since the early 2000s, ASEM has also given up any ambitions it initially cultivated as a "multilateral utility" in an emerging global governance architecture. It increasingly approximates the type of international organizations as it has emerged under the auspices of what can be classified as "diminished multilateralism" (Rüländ 2012). Members increasingly use it for institutional balancing purposes. Its shallow institutions are characterized by contingency, "soft law," informality, flexibility and pragmatism. As ASEM functionally and territorially overlaps with institutions such as the ASEAN-EU dialogue relations and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), it contributes to institutional redundancy. A plethora of bilateral meetings in the sidelines of ASEM add to the rise of a "new bilateralism" (Kiatpongsan 2010) and its state-centrism leaves little space for non-state stakeholders. Its current impact on regional identity building is thus marginal. The most it achieves is national identity building as it strengthens the self-respect of member states for whom ASEM membership signals that they are important and constructive members of the international community.

3.3 Hybrid interregionalism and regional identities

The EU entertains hybrid interregional relations with China, Japan, India and since the collapse of free trade negotiations with ASEAN as a group in 2009 also with Singapore, Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and the Philippines. While bilateral free trade agreements with Singapore and Vietnam are meanwhile in force, the others are still at different stages of negotiation. As in these group-to-country relations only one side is a RO, they have the potential of directly impacting the regional identity of only the RO involved. In the case of the EU's hybrid interregional relations with Asian partners, the one that ambiguously affects its regional identity and cohesion is the interaction with China.

EC relations with China started in 1975 (Zhou 2017: 3). Summit relations began in 1998 at the sidelines of ASEM2 in London (ibid.: 4). Since then twenty-four summits between the EU and China have taken place. In 2003, Brussels and Beijing elevated their relationship to a comprehensive strategic partnership (ibid.: 5). After a “honeymoon” phase in the 2000s (ibid.: 8), relations have become increasingly tense and contentious since Xi Jinping became secretary general of the Chinese Communist Party in 2012 and Chinese president in 2013.

Due to China's rise to the world's second largest economy and its increasing military strength, a power shift in the relationship occurred. Beijing used its growing clout to initiate a “divide-and-conquer” policy towards the EU. Starting in 2012, with its 16+1 forum (which after Greece's accession in 2019 became a 17+1, and the withdrawal of the three Baltic states in 2021 and 2022 decreased to the current 14+1 format),⁶ China seeks to establish special relations with Eastern European members and accession candidates to the EU. As the forum bypasses EU institutions, critics regard it as China's “Trojan horse in Europe.”⁷ Although Eastern European countries were reluctant to mutate into a forum endorsing China's international political agenda (Jakobowski 2018: 668), 16+1 had divisive effects for the EU as it gave Euro-skeptical right-wing populist governments such as previously in Poland under the PiS party or in Hungary Orbán's Fidesz party the opportunity to play the China card when their conflicts with Brussels escalated. These regimes shared with China a strong adherence to national sovereignty as embodied in their thinly veiled aversion to the EU's post-sovereign supranationalism. Promising lavish infrastructure modernization projects, China sought to integrate these countries into its Belt-and-Road Initiative (BRI); in the case of the Budapest-Belgrade railway project even allegedly violating EU bidding regulations.⁸ However, in the meantime, due to increasing disillusionment with Chinese promises⁹ and in the light of China's support of

⁶ *Politico*, 11 August 2022; *South China Morning Post*, 12 August 2022.

⁷ *The Diplomat*, 11 May 2024.

⁸ *The Financial Times*, 20 February 2017.

⁹ *East Asia Forum*, 20 June 2020; *Eurasia Review*, 9 March 2021.

Russia's war in Ukraine, East Europeans' relations with China cooled down, a process climaxing with the withdrawal of the Baltic states from 17+1 and Italy's end of active BRI endorsement in December 2023.¹⁰ Currently, it is only Orban's Hungary on which Beijing can count as an ally in the EU.¹¹

While 14+1 undoubtedly has the potential to dilute the EU's regional identity and to weaken the grouping's cohesion, the Ukraine conflict, unfair Chinese trade practices, an undervalued exchange rate, overproduction, hidden subsidies such as currently in the Chinese export of electric vehicles, hostile takeovers of firms in strategic economic sectors, restricted access for European investors to the Chinese market and forced technology transfers have in recent years closed EU ranks against China. In a 2019 document, the European Commission characterized China as "partner for cooperation," "economic competitor" and "systemic rival" (European Commission 2019: 1). The EU also retaliated with restrictions on Chinese firms in procurement and the establishment of an investment screening mechanism.¹² With the 2018 Asia-Europe Connectivity Strategy and the 2021 Global Gateway program, it launched infrastructure development schemes seeking to (so far unsuccessfully) compete with the Chinese BRI. While for many years, economic and geopolitical issues had been separated from normative issues – the latter relegated to an inconsequential human rights dialogue in 1996 (Zhou 2017: 4)¹³ – more recently the EU also resumed its normative power identity in its relations with China. EU critique focused on systematic human rights violations in Xinjiang and Tibet, the imposition of a national security law in Hong Kong and increasingly repressive domestic conditions.¹⁴

EU interregional interactions with Japan and India are more institutional balancing exercises than identity building relationships. Both countries are apprehensive about the Chinese rise of power and Beijing's increasingly assertive policies in their neighborhood. Tokyo rejects Chinese claims on the Senkaku (in Chinese: Diaoyu) islands and on much of the South China Sea, an important sea route for Japanese trade. Concern also causes China's repeated aggressive actions in the Taiwan Strait. India is worried about Chinese naval activities in the Indian Ocean, which New Delhi considers as Indian defense perimeter, and massive Chinese BRI projects in Myanmar and Pakistan. The EU, which is ideationally closer to these two democracies than to autocratic China has in recent years particularly stepped up relations with Japan, culminating in a free trade agreement concluded in 2019. All in all, the activation of hybrid interregional relations with

¹⁰ *The Diplomat*, 13 January 2024.

¹¹ *East Asia Forum*, 22 June 2024; *The Japan News*, 5 August 2024.

¹² *The Diplomat*, 11 December 2020.

¹³ *The Diplomat*, 1 September 2021, 11 December 2020.

¹⁴ *East Asia Forum*, 20 June 2020; *The Diplomat*, 1 September 2021, 23 December 2023.

Japan and India thus must be seen as an EU attempt of containing China and a major dimension of its “de-risking” strategy versus Beijing.

The EU’s hybrid interregional relationships to these countries as well as various ASEAN countries have had little impact on the EU’s regional identity, except affirming the EU’s presence in international politics as a major criterion of actorness (Allen & Smith 1990; Doidge 2011). For Asian countries the effect is even less and largely indirect. In the ASEAN case, bilateral free trade agreements and negotiations with individual member countries only suggest that the confidence and trust of the EU in the grouping has limits. It signals that – at least currently - Brussels does not see promising prospects to conclude a trade agreement with the entire grouping, something that many others actors have achieved.

4. *Conclusion*

Returning to this article’s research question, it can be concluded that the identity-building function, which constructivist scholars highlighted in the heydays of interregionalism in the early 2000s (Gilson 1998, 2002; Hänggi 2003; Müller 2016), has been overrated. Identity building effects triggered by interregional relations exist, although they are difficult to measure. The case of Asia-Europe interregionalism suggests that among the three formats of interregional interactions, only group-to-group relations seem to have a tangible effect. This at least can be concluded from ASEAN-EU dialogue relations. Yet these identity building functions do not necessarily strengthen cooperation between the two ROs. They have thrown the differences between the EU and ASEAN into sharp relief and temporarily even paralyzed interregional cooperation. ASEAN-EU dialogue relations thus also contribute little to the “multilateral utility” functions that optimistic liberal scholars of global governance have attributed to interregionalism (Dent 2004). Initial identity building that the transregional ASEM forum facilitated has quickly dissipated with continuous enlargement rounds. The latter have transformed the dialogue to a very loose and contingent international forum as they have been shaped by an intensifying “diminished multilateralism,” which diluted multilateralism’s cooperative ethos and eroded interregionalism’s building block functions for an emerging, increasingly nested global governance architecture. Identity building functions have been virtually non-existent in the EU’s many hybrid interregional relationships. Only the dialogue with China has some ambiguous effects on the EU itself, with China’s rise to a formidable great power weakening European identity and cohesion though Beijing’s *divide-et-impera* strategies and intra-European disagreements, but lately – as interests with China diverge and problems in the mutual relations mount – closing ranks and a more critical attitude toward China.

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IDENTITY AT THE CROSSROADS: JAPAN'S ROLE IN REGIONAL COMMUNITY BUILDING IN EAST ASIA

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Abstract: The objective of this paper is to analyse the 'sui generis' identity of Japan in the context of the East Asian Region and to demonstrate how it contributed to shape the country's role in East Asia's region-building. Japan's position in the region has been complex due to its unique identity generated by historical background, geopolitical factors, economic development and relations with its Western allies. This identity facilitated Japan's objective to build a cohesive regional community through the promotion of 'open regionalism' and the country's active participation in regional and interregional fora including ASEAN. Following the introduction, the article provides an overview of Japan's multifaceted identity in its diplomacy and how the country has utilised different elements of its identity in varying historical and political circumstances. By looking into official discourse from the vantage point of its identity, it then examines Japan's cooperation with regional actors, highlighting its active involvement without assuming a leading role. The last section concludes the article, summarizes the findings and provides a short outlook.

Keywords: East Asia; Japan; socio-cultural identity; geopolitics; history

1. Introduction

The paper examines Japan's perception of the East and Southeast Asian region and its attempts to engage with it. It views the role of Japan in its regional cooperation in Asia through the lens of identity. It reconceptualises Japanese foreign policy as a set of discursive practices that attempt to produce renewed images of Japan's national self in Asia through the analysis of the official discourse. When seen in its historical context, the fact that Japan has long suffered from an identity crisis in the region is unsurprising. The paper argues that Japan's ambiguous identity necessitated cautious approaches in its support of community building in Asia without claiming the leadership role. The use of language is relevant, since concepts of identity and region are intersubjective processes rather than a given objective fact. The analysis will focus on Japan's engagement in Asia by highlighting how the country's identity based on the historical and geopolitical background has formed its evolving policy towards the region throughout the post World War II period. Special attention is paid to its cooperation with ASEAN, as the central organisation in regional community building. As ASEAN-Japan cooperation celebrated its Golden Jubilee in 2023. However, it is timely to take stock of the current circumstances as well as the path it has come so far. The post-

war Japan has been a key player in supporting Southeast Asia economically and institutionally over the past few decades. By substantially investing in Southeast Asia and strongly supporting “ASEAN centrality” (hub of East Asian multilateralism), Japan has empowered the ASEAN states to diversify economically and diplomatically, and safeguard their autonomy as a regional community. The role played by Japan was not that of an active leader in the region. Instead, it called for building equal partnerships with Southeast Asia.

Firstly, the paper seeks to conceptualize Japan’s identity in its diplomacy based on its historical background. Secondly, the article analyses Japan’s cooperation with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). In doing so, it examines how Japan has cautiously supported regional community building without claiming the leadership role, attributing it to Japan’s identity. Finally, the concluding remarks summarize the findings and provide a cursory outlook.

2. Japan’s identity: Westernism, Asianism, and Internationalism

Identity is conceptualised here as an intersubjective category that defines ‘who you are’ (the self) in relation to “who you are not” (the ‘other’) in a given context. Put it differently, the relational and reflexive nature of identity embraces the logic of difference and creates social space between self and other. It highlights properties of the ‘self’ that generate self-respect and pride and distinguish it from the ‘other’. For example, a nationalist identity denotes specific political, economic, historical, social, cultural, normative, religious, ethnic or linguistic properties that the citizens of a nation reclaim for themselves and that at the same time distinguish them from the members of another nation.

Moreover, identity is of a subjective nature. This means that the process of identity construction does not rely on objective facts. Instead, it is the process of how individual actors define the reality. Identity is determined by how each actor defines the relationship between self and others. The nature of identity as a subjective and intersubjective process makes it difficult to analyse it in an objective manner (Campbell 2007). This is the main reason why the analysis of the official discourse seems to be the most suitable method for analysing identity.

Lastly, identity is a process rather than an outcome. This means that a given identity does not persist universally and permanently for a particular group. Identity is highly contingent, constantly being defined and redefined and thus prone to change.

A brief overview of Japanese diplomacy since the Meiji Restoration (1868) allows us to identify three identity discourses. They can be derived from the official narrative in different historical periods (Oga, 2003; Hosoya, 2023) and include Westernism, Asianism, and Internationalism. Yet all three discourses cannot be clearly periodized because they are multiple discourses which have been intricately intertwined.

‘Westernism’ corresponds to the discourses of the Meiji era (1868-1912) as well as the early post-World War II period, when Japanese elites pursued an identity that characterized Japan as part of the Western world. The widely spread slogan of “*datsu-a nyu-o*” (“de-Asianisation and Westernisation” or “getting out of Asia and enter Europe”) in the early Meiji era reflected the prevailing sentiment of distancing itself from colonised rest of Asia in order to secure Japan’s survival, and strengthening the nation by promoting a Western-style nation state and emulate Western policies (Tankha, 2021). Similarly, Japanese foreign policies in the immediate aftermath of World War II were built around relations with the United States for the sake of its survival and reconstruction and remained so during much of the Cold War era (Inoue, 1998). Moreover, the discourse of Westernism, highlighting the significance of sharing Western values and norms, has been the very basis of Japan’s cooperation with Western powers and international organizations dominated by the West. With its emphasis on the significance of the US-Japan alliance as well as the cooperation with the liberal democracies in the context of the Cold War, the pro-American and pacifist 1951 ‘Yoshida Doctrine’ can be regarded as an example for an identity guided by ‘Westernism’.

‘Asianism’ dominated the discourse from the post-World War I period to the pre-World War II period, in the post-World War II period during the premiership of Takeo Fukuda as expressed in his Fukuda Doctrine, and more recently in the aftermath of the Asian Financial Crisis (AFC) of 1997 and 1998. This discourse reflects a discontent with Westernisation. It represents the idea of promoting modernisation through the introduction of Western science and technology while at the same time maintaining the spiritual culture of Asia. The discourse emphasises a self-imposed leadership role as an obligation of Japan that due to its economic prowess must promote the region’s development (Yamamuro, 1998). The discourse of Asianism is clearly expressed in an “Asian diplomacy” (Iokibe 1999, Hatano, 1997). Some of the foreign policies of the 1980s with a stronger emphasis on Southeast Asia also fall into this category (Hatano 1997, Fuabashi 1993). Yet it was the Asian Financial Crisis that led Japan to place a higher priority on its Asian regional identity. Japan’s proposal to set up an Asian Monetary Fund during the Asian Financial Crisis is a case in point for this shift towards an Asianist identity.

‘Internationalism’ seeks to reconcile the discourses of ‘Westernism’ and ‘Asianism’. It emphasises Japan’s role as an intermediary between Europe, the US and Asia. This discourse figured prominently in the official narratives since the latter half of Meiji era (1868-1912) to the early period of the post-World War I era, as well as in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War. The discourse of internationalism emphasises the significance of Japan’s contribution to the international community rather than specifying regions as identity building. Japanese diplomatic documents during the 1990s frequently regarded the

international community as a reference object, rather than Asia or the West. Also the concept of 'open regionalism' promoted by the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) in the 1990s can be seen as an expression of 'internationalism'. In the next section, it will be examined how the three identities and their underlying narratives that can be identified in modern Japan's diplomacy have been applied to changing historical and geopolitical contexts.

3. Japan's identity: historical context

The quest of identity becomes vigorous when a country is faced with fundamental challenges. Indeed, Japan's continuous pursuit of its identity was initiated by its encounter with the West in the mid-nineteenth century since Commodore Matthew Perry's small American fleet of '*kurofune* (black ships)' sailed into Tokyo harbour demanding that Japan open up to western trade and diplomatic presence. Japan was forced to end its closed-door policy and accept unequal treaties with the US and European countries (Suzuki, 2005). The lengthy period of isolationist policy of *Sakoku* (1636-1853) had enabled Japan to maintain a certain distance from China as the regional cultural hub, but more importantly from the West, which helped Japan to maintain its independence while developing and preserving a unique culture. Although much medical knowledge had already been gained from a Dutch outpost in Nagasaki during the *Sakoku* period, the very sight of the gigantic 'black ships' served as a powerful reminder of the technological advances of the West. Japan thus set out to rapidly modernise itself without being coerced by the West (Hopkins, 2022).

The nineteenth century international order that Japan encountered was one characterised by European colonialism and the racial and cultural superiority of Europe. The then Japanese leaders thus regarded any attempt of resistance to the West to be too risky. As the most persuasive option was to modernise and to westernise Japan by emulating Western technologies, political and military institutions, and thoughts, Japanese leaders were receptive to Westernisation to a significant degree (Sam-Sang, 2011). In other words, Japan's fierce attempt to seek its identity as a member of the West at the time was driven by a desire not to be regarded as part of an inferior Asia by the then imperial Western powers (Kitaoka, 1999).

Following this rationale, Japanese elites believed that overseas military bases and an increasing sphere of influence would be necessary to defend Japan's territorial integrity in the midst of expansionist Western powers. It was this ideology that by and large characterised Japan's foreign policy during the imperial years. As Japan's power consolidated in the early twentieth century, it began to shed its identity shaped by Westernism and increasingly adopted an Asian identity. In the process, Japan saw itself as the country at the forefront of Asian modernity, rivalling the West and leading its neighbours in a greater Asia co-prosperity sphere of pan-Asianism. However, Japan's imperialistic ventures in the first half

of the twentieth century left a complex legacy. The atrocities committed by its military during this period have significantly influenced its post-war identity, characterised by pacifist policies and the priority of economic development over military strength.

After the largely Westernist outlook of the Yoshida Doctrine in the early 1950s, Japan's very first Diplomatic Bluebook, published in 1957, identified three guiding principles of post-war Japanese foreign policy: (1) UN-centred diplomacy; (2) policy based on the membership in the Asian community; and (3) maintenance of cooperation with the free world (MOFA 1957). It was based on an internationalist identity that subsumed Asianism and Westernism. The first principle implied a commitment to the international norms upheld by the United Nations, including those enshrined in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The second principle called for the building of strong regional ties, transcending animosities rooted in the policies of the Imperial Japan. The third principle meant solidarity with the United States, as well as the rest of the Western Bloc in the context of the Cold War.

The apparent willingness of Japan to act as a bridge between the West and Asia had already become evident in the address of then Foreign Minister Shigemitsu at the United Nations General Assembly on the occasion of Japan's Admission to the UN in 1956: "The people of Japan today desire peace for all time and are deeply conscious of the high ideals controlling human relationships. We have determined to preserve our security and existence, trusting in the justice and faith of the peace-loving peoples of the world [...]. The substance of Japan's political, economic and cultural life is the product of the fusion within the last century of the civilizations of the Orient and the Occident. In a way, Japan may well be regarded as a bridge between the East and the West. She is fully conscious of the great responsibilities of such a position" (MOFA, 1956).

The above narrative is the reflection of Japan's attempt to address the dilemma of its identity discussed in the previous section. Moreover, Shigemitsu, as an advocate of Asianism, was acutely aware of the need to reconcile Japan's past and the future status in Asia: a nation striving to be seen as a partner for development, contrasting with the painful memories of its past. And, indeed, Japan's massive trade and investment in Southeast Asia and, to a lesser degree in other parts of Asia, have made the country the driving force for regional economic growth and integration in Pacific Asia, hence increasing its political leverage and influence in the region (Hatch and Yamamura 1996).

After the predominance of an identity shaped by Westernism in the 1960s and 1970s, Japan returned to an internationalist identity after the end of the Cold War. As the erstwhile frontlines of the Cold War increasingly blurred, a diplomacy based only on a Westernist identity was no longer practical. The Gulf War of 1990 represented a "rude awakening" to the realities of the post-Cold War world. Such narratives have become even more dominant after the Gulf War of 1990, due to

Japan's "failure" to make a more substantial "international contribution (kokusai koken)" to the UN-mandated multilateral forces (Oyama 2015; Nakayama 1992). This holds particularly true for the post-Cold War attempts to build a new international order based on institutions. The proliferation of new regional and interregional fora and the deepening of existing ones such as ASEAN, was a global trend of which East and Southeast Asia were a prominent part. The revived internationalist identity thus became a major element in Japan's promotion of regionalism in the Asia-Pacific region.

It was in this context that Japan advocated the term 'open regionalism' in the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), referring to the inclusive, flexible, informal and pragmatic form of regional cooperation in the Asia-Pacific region that differs markedly from the highly institutionalized and legalistic European type of integration. Open regionalism is a concept that has played a vital role in Japan's regional and foreign policy to date. The concept is inclusive and comprehensive by nature, both in terms of the membership and issue areas to be dealt with. In other words, Asian regionalism and global principles complement with each other in the concept of open regionalism. It highlights the willingness to play a bridging role between the West and Asia, rather than attempting to play a proactive leadership role in regional community building. There are several factors underlining Tokyo's cautious approach towards the region.

Firstly, there is some ambiguity regarding Japan's regional identity both domestically and internationally. While Japan is an Asian country in a geographical sense, it is at the same time an industrial democracy that worships universal values. Its position in the region is therefore ambiguous in its own view and neighbouring countries (Huntington 1993). It could be argued that such policy mirrors Japan's confusion regarding its identity, thus portraying its relationship with other Asian nations in the context of 'Japan and Asia', rather than 'Japan in Asia'.

Secondly, the concept of Asian regionalism can be controversial for many countries in the region and the Japanese citizens alike. It reminds of Japan's futile attempt to establish a 'Greater East Asia Co-Prosperty Sphere' (GEACPS) during World War II that still stirs unpleasant memories. The latter called for an autarkic bloc of East Asian nations under the leadership of Japan for the collective cause of regional defence against the West (Mimura 2011). Although the alleged goal of the GEACPS was to free Asia from colonising Western powers and Japanese regional leadership was claimed to be temporary, Japan's militarist government utilised it as a way to gain access to resources through exploitation to maintain its position in the region as a modern great power. While there is no longer a consistent or unified Asian stance against Japan, the historical legacy has prevented Japan from actively seeking an exclusive Asian regionalism.

Thirdly, Japan's close relationship with the US inevitably means that an exclusive form of Asian regionalism would not fit its foreign policy. For Japan,

the US-Japan alliance was more a political rather than a strategic choice. The end of the Cold War therefore did not lead to the termination of the security treaty concluded in 1960, despite that its prime objective was to defend Japan from the communist threat had largely vanished. The National Defence Programme Outline in 1995 reaffirmed the centrality of the US-Japan Security Treaty to Japan's security policy (Sakanaka 1997; Muroyama 1997). Moreover, the Japanese economy also heavily depends on the US market. The bilateral relationship with the US has thus been the centrepiece of Japan's foreign and trade policies and remained a constraint for an exclusive East Asian regionalism. Vice versa, Japan would also not proactively promote a region-wide project including the US as an active participant, when it is likely to be met by resistance from countries in the region due to their concern over China's reaction. For instance, the broadening of the US-Japan alliance from narrowly defined Japanese security to cover the security in Asia-Pacific region was only possible with a prior assurance that such a redefinition would be acceptable to most regional countries (Sato 2003). Such balancing efforts have been required for Japan when it comes to its foreign policy in the region, which will be examined in the following section.

4. Japan and ASEAN

The 50th Anniversary of the ASEAN-Japan Friendship and the Cooperation Commemorative Summit held in Tokyo in December 2023 included a session on the topic of "Partners in Co-Creating the Future Economy and Society". Prime Minister Kishida stated that "the keyword for future ASEAN-Japan cooperation in the economic and social fields is "co-creation (kyo-so)" and emphasised that "it is important for ASEAN and Japan to work together to find solutions to the challenges our economies and societies face, based on the mutual trust" established through "the history we have walked together" (MOFA 2023).

The following sections will trace the evolution of the Japan-ASEAN relationship. It began with Japan's offer in the 1950s to provide "a helping hand" as part of post-war reconstruction measures to "partners co-creating the economy and society of the future". The analysis draws from speeches of Japanese government representatives and official documents issued at high-level ASEAN-Japan meetings from the early days of the relation up to the 50th anniversary Commemorative Summit. The analysis demonstrates that Japan's identity in its East Asian policy has gradually shifted from that of Westernism to Asianism, and more recently to include narratives of internationalism, while upholding ASEAN's autonomy and centrality in the regional community building.

4.1. Japan's post-war identity

Japan's early twentieth century imperialism, climaxing in the attempt to establish a 'Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere' (GEACPS), greatly impacted the country's identity and had far-reaching consequences for its relations to other

Asian countries in the post-World War II period. The atrocities and war crimes committed during the imperialist period and the shocks caused by the disastrous nuclear attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki ending the Pacific War led to a complete identity change. The militarism of the pre-war period gave way to pacifist policies and a focus on economic development in an attempt to acquiesce the countries it had colonized before. Japan's rapid economic recovery combined with the post-war international environment facilitated a shift from an identity shaped by Asianism to an identity with strong traits of Westernism.

Yet, in the second half of the 1950s, this Westernism was increasingly substituted by an internationalist identity as the Foreign Minister Shigemitsu's speech at the United Nations General Assembly in 1956 showed, in which he characterised Japan as "a bridge" between the West and Asia. This change of identity toward "Internationalism" was corroborated by Japan's very first Diplomatic Bluebook which, published in 1957, sought to reconcile Internationalism, Asianism, and Westernism.

Balancing the above mentioned three principles was not always easy for Japan, not only as an ally of the West in the Cold War but also as a former aggressor from within the region. Nevertheless, the need to reconcile Japan's past and the future status in Asia was firmly recognised in the official narratives. Japan has therefore consolidated its identity as a bridge between the West and Asia by introducing a more 'open' (i.e. international) approach to its regional policies. The establishment of the Asian Development Bank (ADB) under Japanese stewardship in December 1966 was a case in point. Leaning towards an internationalist identity was regarded as desirable for Japan in order to prevent the escalation of the Cold War in Asia when a large part of the region was under communist rule. In this regard, the diplomatic discourse during this period did not regard Asia as an object of Japan's identity, but rather as an object for interest formation by strengthening ties with the region under its identity as a member of 'the free world'.

5. The gradual rise of Asianism

Following the establishment of the ADB, Japan initiated the Southeast Asian Development Ministerial Conference in April 1966 with the aim of promoting regional cooperation for the economic development of Southeast Asian countries. This conference became one of the catalysts for the establishment of ASEAN in the following year (Araki 2014).

As Japan provided development aid to Southeast Asian countries since the early 1950s, economic relations with the region flourished. For example, in 1972, the trade dependency of all ASEAN countries on Japan was 21.8 percent, making Japan the largest trading partner for all ASEAN countries except for Singapore. Furthermore, not only dominated Japanese products in ASEAN member states, but Japanese investment and the entry of Japanese companies into ASEAN

countries also increased rapidly from the 1970s onward. However, ASEAN countries perceived this expansion of Japanese influence as asymmetric and as an over-presence, which evoked images of Japan's successful realisation of its pre-war project of the East Asian Coprosperity Sphere without utilising military means (Hook 2000).

In light of this situation, in January 1974, Prime Minister Tanaka visited the five ASEAN founding members in an attempt to ease anti-Japanese sentiment and economic friction (Atarashi 1994). During his visit Tanaka outlined five principles on which ASEAN-Japan relations should rest: 1) promoting good neighbourly relations with the countries of Southeast Asia in which both sides share peace and prosperity; 2) respecting the autonomy of these countries; 3) promoting mutual understanding; 4) contributing to ASEAN's development while refraining from threatening their economic independence; and 5) respecting the regional cooperation that these countries independently practice (MOFA 1974).

The first turning point came during the Fukuda administration, when Prime Minister Fukuda toured Southeast Asia to strengthen ties with ASEAN, a response to the profound geopolitical changes in the region after the Vietnamese victory in the second Vietnam War and the withdrawal of US ground troops from mainland Southeast Asia (Tanaka 1999). At the first Japan-ASEAN summit held in August 1977, the prime minister acknowledged that ASEAN had established itself as a regional organisation and declared that “[t]he Japanese government and the people of Japan will never be skeptical bystanders of ASEAN's efforts to strengthen solidarity and resilience, but will instead be good partners walking alongside ASEAN”. He delivered a speech entitled “Japan's Policy towards Southeast Asia” in which he enunciated three principles later referred as Fukuda Doctrine: (1) Japan is committed to peace, and rejects the role of a military power; (2) Japan will do its best to consolidate the relationship of mutual confidence and trust based on ‘heart-to-heart’ understanding with the nations of Southeast Asia; and (3) Japan will cooperate positively with ASEAN while aiming at fostering a relationship based on mutual understanding and equal partnership (MOFA 1978). He further stated in the same speech that: “[i]t is not enough for our relationship to be based solely on mutual material and economic benefit. Our material and economic relations should be animated by heartfelt commitments to assisting and complementing each other as fellow Asians. This is the message I have carried everywhere on this tour, speaking repeatedly of the need to communicate with each other with our hearts as well as our heads, the need in other words for what I call “heart-to-heart” understanding among the peoples of Japan and Southeast Asia. You, fellow Asians, will understand what I mean. For it is in our Asian tradition, and it is in our Asian hearts, always to seek beyond mere physical satisfaction for the richness of spiritual fulfillment (MOFA 1978)”. The discourse to be highlighted in this context is where Fukuda recognised both Japan and Southeast Asian nations as “fellow Asians” which signifies his desire to promote

an equal relationship with ASEAN nations based on the sense of solidarity. His emphasis on the “the richness of spiritual fulfillment” as Asian tradition that is “our Asian hearts” can be understood as an attempt to differentiate Japan’s approach from that of the West. This narrative was a significant shift from the previous discourse of Japan’s identity as a liberal and anti-communist member of the Western bloc, indicating the rise of Asianism in its foreign policy. The Japan-ASEAN summit meeting was launched in the same year, making Japan ASEAN’s the first dialogue partner. In the Diplomatic Bluebook, the Fukuda Doctrine was described as “the first proactive diplomatic stance Japan has taken since the end of the World War II” (MOFA 1978). Fukuda Doctrine has become the basic principle of Japan’s ASEAN diplomacy, as well as Prime Minister Ohira’s concept on Pacific Rim cooperation (Kikuchi 2007) discussed below.

5.1 Promotion of internationalism in Asia: open regionalism

In December 1987, Prime Minister Takeshita attended the Japan-ASEAN Summit. In his opening speech at the conference entitled “Japan and ASEAN”, he emphasised that Japan-ASEAN relations should not be exclusive in the time of globalisation, by stating: “...our goal is to maintain and develop a relationship between Japan and ASEAN that is open to the world and contributes to the world. We are closely linked geographically and historically, and can be considered ‘natural allies’. However, in today’s world, where interdependence is growing not only in the Asia-Pacific region but on a global scale, I believe that our relationship should never be exclusive, and that we should work together to contribute to world peace and prosperity.” (MOFA 1987).

This is the beginning of the rise of Internationalism in Japan’s policy towards Asia. Internationalism is embodied in the concept of ‘open regionalism’ that was advocated by the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), an economic forum established in 1989 on the initiative of Japan and Australia. Open regionalism is inclusive, flexible, informal and pragmatic. It is open to the participants from within and beyond the region and, in particular, does not exclude the US as a key player in the region (Das 2001). Its origin dates back as far as 1979, when the then Prime Minister Ohira presented a report on Pacific Rim cooperation, stating that “a regionalism that is open to the world, not one that is exclusive and closed is the first characteristic of our concept. We are fully aware that a regional community without a perspective for a global community, a regionalism that excludes globalism, has no possibility of development and prosperity. Nonetheless, not a few problems that confront us today could be most suitably handled by first attempting regional co-operation and the developing this into global co-operation (Pacific Basin Cooperation Study Group 1981: 184, cited in Ravenhill 2001: 54)”. Although Ohira’s proposal of a Pacific Rim Solidarity Initiative was not further promoted, the concept of “open regionalism” was carried over to APEC. In terms of the participating countries, all the countries envisaged to participate in the Pacific Rim Solidarity Initiative (12 countries

including Japan, Korea, ASEAN, Australia, New Zealand, and the United States) became APEC founding members.

Open regionalism is a concept that has played a vital role in Japan's regional and foreign policy to date. The government statements quoted above seek to reconcile the concept open regionalism, on the one hand, and exclusive Asian regionalism and full-fledged globalism, on the other. Asian regionalism and global principles have been considered to complement with each other in Japan's concept of open regionalism, and more recently, that of the Free and Open Indo Pacific (FOIP) based on its "open" approach to the region (Tan 2020). Establishing an identity based on "open regionalism" was one of the major goals of Japanese diplomacy throughout the 1990s.

Japan's APEC initiative based on "open regionalism" was the reflection of its special attention to ASEAN countries' interests, as indicated by Takeshita's statement quoted above. In the 1990s, Japan-ASEAN relations became more comprehensive, due to the rapid expansion of Japan's investment in the region and the participation of Japan's Self-Defence Forces (SDF) in the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) in September 1992 which was fully supported by ASEAN countries (Shoji, 2009). On the political front, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the very first region-wide security forum was launched in 1994, following the proposal of Japan's Foreign Minister Mr. Nakayama at the 1991 ASEAN Post-Ministerial Conference (Ashizawa 2013). It was against this background of increased regional confidence and cooperation that Japan viewed with special interest the idea proposed by Singapore in 1994 to hold a summit meeting between Asia and Europe. The Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) was launched in March 1996 to promote cooperation in trade and investment between Asia and Europe, which has given a unique opportunity to further promote its bridging approach more proactively (Togo 2015).

6. The Asian Financial Crisis and Japan's identity building in East Asia: placing Asia in the international contexts

Starting in July 1997, Thailand and other Asian countries fell victim to a rapid currency depreciation and subsequent profound financial crisis. Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia were the most affected countries, all experiencing a massive contraction of their economies. In response to this crisis, Prime Minister Hashimoto announced his intention to strengthen economic cooperation at the Japan-ASEAN Summit in December 1997. Moreover, in the following year, Finance Minister Miyazawa announced the New Miyazawa Initiative, which included financial assistance totalling US\$30 billion. Countries hit by the crisis greatly appreciated the initiative, which paved the way to Japan's Chiang Mai Initiative, a mechanism for mutual lending of foreign currency in times of financial turbulence (Shimizu 2023). The Asian Financial Crisis compelled Japan to become deeper involved in East Asian regionalism, despite its initial

ambiguous attitude (Gilpin 2000). The 1997 crisis has thus been regarded as the beginning of Japan's participation in East Asian regionalism.

In January 2002, Prime Minister Koizumi delivered a speech entitled "Japan and ASEAN in East Asia", later referred to as the "Koizumi Doctrine". The prime minister pointed out that "a quarter century has passed since the Fukuda Speech, and the international environment has changed dramatically". In response, he highlighted the need to build a "community that walks together and advances together" through "expanding East Asian regional cooperation based on Japan-ASEAN relations". He also emphasised the need to move beyond economic and developmental cooperation and address "transnational issues such as terrorism, piracy, energy security, infectious diseases, the environment, drugs, and human smuggling". Moreover, he asserted that "Japan-ASEAN cooperation should be expanded to a greater global scale" (Kantei 2002). Japan and ASEAN leaders thus further enhanced their relationship and declared in 2003 at their Special Summit in Tokyo that they would seek to build an 'East Asian Community' (ASEAN 2003).

While the AFC has marked the rise of more Asianism approach in Japanese foreign policies, it should be noted that Japan has always sought to balance its new East Asian policies with Westernist and Internationalist ideas. Key in this respect was the country's alliance with the US as "the cornerstone" of Japanese diplomacy, including that in Asia (MOFA 2009). This has necessitated Japan to ascertain the US's support regarding its participation in various regional fora established throughout this period of time. Japan has pursued a multilateral approach in its effort to address the common challenges, through its participation in East Asian frameworks, such as the East Asia Summit (EAS) and ASEAN+3, as well as more "open" fora such as Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), and the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM), while ensuring the US's support towards these regional and interregional initiatives. This was also due to the fact that Japan was acutely aware that the success of its regional initiatives depended on the acquiescence of the US due to its strong bilateral relationship with Washington as a centrepiece of its regional policy. Thus Japan's approach toward East Asian regionalism is largely subordinate to the management of alliance relations with the US (Zhang 2014). For instance, Japan's lack of support towards Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir's proposal of the establishment of the East Asia Economic Group (EAEG) (later the East Asia Economic Council (EAEC)) was due to US concerns to be excluded. Moreover, Japan's attempt to include the US in the East Asia Summit established in 2005 by claiming the significance of "open regionalism" is another reflection of such an approach (Hoshino, 2011).

Prime Minister Hatoyama's proposal in 2009 for the creation of an "East Asian Community" has, too, provoked considerable concerns in the US as to whether it meant a shift of Japanese foreign policy to focus on East Asia rather than the US

(Takahata 2009). Subsequently Hatoyama, indirectly responding to Singapore's concern about its seemingly exclusive nature, emphasised in his speech that the vision of East Asian Community would be based on the principle of "open regionalism", thus indicating that the US does have a role to play in it (Kantei 2009).

7. Strengthening Internationalism: bridging the region and beyond

Given the changes of the strategic environment in the region combined with ASEAN's rapid economic growth, ASEAN's presence and role in the region have increased markedly. China's growth and its demonstrated assertiveness in the South China Sea have caused concerns throughout ASEAN and beyond. Japan had also been locked in a tense standoff with China over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands in the East China Sea. This has led ASEAN and Japan to reorient their foreign policy priorities and redefine their relationship with each other. On the one hand, China's economic ties with most of the ASEAN member states have surged over the years to match or even overtake Japan's. Chinese influence throughout the region has increased dramatically on various fronts, which have been perceived as potential threats by ASEAN states not only to their economic integration process but also to the region's stability.

Having chosen three Southeast Asian countries (Vietnam, Thailand, and Indonesia) for his first overseas visit of his premiership, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's speech entitled as "The Bounty of the Open Seas: Five New Principles for Japanese Diplomacy", that sought to strengthen Tokyo's ties with "maritime Asia", is one of the most vital objectives for Japan as a country that "depends on the seas for its safety and prosperity". It was further recognised in this context that "Japan's relationship that goes side by side with ASEAN is a supremely vital linchpin in terms of its importance to our diplomatic strategy" (MOFA 2013). This statement was the response to the changes of strategic environment in the region and ASEAN's economic growth, which has further increased ASEAN's actorness in the region. This was the further confirmation of Japan's awareness of the need to strengthen cooperation with ASEAN in a comprehensive manner, that had been signified in Koizumi Doctrine in 2002. The cooperative efforts to be made would include non-economic issues, such as security and political affairs. This was also in line with the shared interest with the US as well, whose focus gradually shifting towards Southeast Asia from the Middle East.

Japan's ASEAN Diplomacy under Abe found its expression in the following "Five Principles": 1) protection of freedom of thought, expression, and speech in Southeast Asia; 2) ensuring free and open ocean governed by laws and rules, not by might, welcoming the US rebalancing to Asia; 3) pursuing free, open, interconnected economies between Japan and ASEAN through enhanced flows of trade and investment, people, and goods; 4) enhancement of intercultural ties among the peoples of Japan and ASEAN; and 5) promotion of exchange among

the younger generations who will carry our nations into the future (MOFA 2013). The emphasis on the universal values as the first item highlighted a stark contrast with the Fukuda doctrine, in which Japan avoided taking an ideological or interventionist approach in Southeast Asia. This was the reflection of his “value-oriented diplomacy” announced earlier this year, that focused on “strengthening cooperation with countries that share the fundamental values of freedom, democracy, basic human rights, and the rule of law; building an open and innovative Asia; and contributing to world peace and stability” (Usami et al. 2007).

The “Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP)” introduced as a diplomatic initiative for the Indo-Pacific region in 2016 was also part of a “value-based diplomacy”, with its emphasis on “universal values” (MOFA 2017). The essence of the idea of FOIP is to build a rules-based international order in the Indo-Pacific region and to establish principles such as free trade, freedom of navigation, and the rule of law. Regarding ASEAN’s response to FOIP, the Chairman’s Statement of the Japan-ASEAN Summit in November 2017 stated that: “We noted that Japan’s ‘Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy’ reinforces the ASEAN-centered regional architecture”, while encouraging Japan to explore synergies with its various support programs for ASEAN to “build a well-connected, competitive and resilient ASEAN and Indo-Pacific region” (ASEAN 2017). Nevertheless, concerns regarding FOIP’s potentially negative effects upon ASEAN’s neutrality and centrality remained unresolved, especially due to the exclusion of China. In response to this, the Japanese government opted to use terms such as “concept” and “vision” since 2018 onwards, rather than “strategies” in the official documents regarding FOIP (Kamiya 2019), while ensured ASEAN’s centrality in FOIP. Consequently, the joint statement of the Japan-ASEAN Summit in November 2018 indicated ASEAN’s support to FOIP: “ASEAN leaders note with appreciation Japan’s intention to further contribute more proactively to securing regional and international peace, stability and prosperity, as well as Japan’s continued support for ASEAN connectivity, including through its policy of “Proactive Contribution to Peace” and its policy on a free and open Indo-Pacific, which reaffirms ASEAN’s vital role as the bridge connecting the Indian and Pacific Oceans in the Indo-Pacific (ASEAN 2018).

ASEAN adopted its Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) in June 2019, as its own Indo-Pacific policy framework. In addition to strengthening ASEAN centrality, the AOIP is based on the principles of openness, transparency, inclusiveness, rules-based frameworks, respect for sovereignty, non-interference, equality, mutual respect, mutual trust, and respect for international law, including the UN Charter and the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, and aims to promote cooperation in areas such as maritime cooperation, connectivity, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and the economy. The AOIP, which upholds the principle of “inclusiveness,” is an Indo-Pacific concept that does not

exclude China (Ishikawa 2020). At the Japan-ASEAN Summit in November 2019, Prime Minister Abe expressed Japan's full support for the AOIP and his intention to pursue synergies between Japan's FOIP and the AOIP. In addition, the joint statement on the AOIP issued at the Japan-ASEAN Summit in November 2020 stated that AOIP and FOIP share essential principles related to promotion of peace and cooperation, and that the Japan-ASEAN strategic partnership will be further strengthened through cooperation in the AOIP's policy areas.

In December 2023, the 50th Anniversary of the ASEAN-Japan Friendship and Cooperation Commemorative Summit was held in Tokyo. Prime Minister Kishida emphasised in his speech that “[t]he core of Japan-ASEAN relations is, above all, mutual trust. And what underpins that trust is the weight of our history of consistently walking together, even in times of hardship” (MOFA 2023). Regarding the future of Japan-ASEAN relations, he stated his view that “[i]n an era of complex crises that are difficult for any single country alone to solve, Japan and ASEAN will bring together their respective strengths and find solutions based on a strong relationship of trust [...]. I hope that we will grow together as partners who ‘co-create’ society and the economy” (MOFA 2023).

The “Joint Vision Statement on ASEAN-Japan Friendship and Cooperation” was adopted to outline concrete actions to develop Japan-ASEAN relations to a new stage for the next 50 years, building on the relationship of the past 50 years. The Vision Statement reaffirmed the shared vision of Japan and ASEAN, which is to “strengthen a meaningful, substantive and mutually beneficial comprehensive strategic partnership, respecting the unity and centrality of ASEAN” (ASEAN 2023). Following the Summit, Kishida stated at the parliament that “Japan will continue to respect the regional cooperation initiatives led by ASEAN, and will pursue proactive diplomacy toward promoting regional peace and stability through the enhancement of FOIP in cooperation with ASEAN countries”, highlighting the “open” and thus internationalist identity underlying Japan's cooperation with ASEAN.

8. Conclusion

Japan has had difficulties in establishing itself as an authentic and effective member of an emerging Asian regional community for several reasons. While Japan has played a considerable role in supporting regional community building as a democracy and a leading economy in the region, this has not driven it to aim for a decisive leadership in the region. This has involved skilful diplomacy with the several major partners in the region, namely ASEAN, China, and the US.

Moreover, Japan has maintained a cooperative approach with ASEAN based on equal partnership and mutual trust built through the past 50 years of relationship.

Over half a century, Japan and ASEAN have overcome various challenges together and built a relationship of trust. They have come to a partnership through regional fora characterised by Japan's "open" approach to the region, sharing essential principles such as transparency and respect for international law. As the statements of high-ranking Japanese government representatives have shown, Japan's East Asian policy has gradually but steadily been developed to become more engaged based on its identity shift towards internationalism. For ASEAN countries, which have consistently placed importance on neutrality and its centrality in the region, the intensification of their relationship with Japan must be pursued in a way that it does not undermine their relationship to China. The analysis of the official narratives demonstrated that this was clearly recognised by Japanese officials.

There is a remaining concern regarding the application of the "value-based diplomacy" that former Prime Minister Abe promoted in Japan's relations to Southeast Asia. While the ASEAN Charter attaches significance to the fundamental values such as democracy and human rights, the diversity of the Association's member states regarding these values is not likely to change anytime soon. Although Japan is not willing to impose these values on ASEAN countries, focusing too much on "universal" values might provoke suspicions from many ASEAN member states as well as China. In this regard, Japan's evolving Internationalist identity with its "open" approach to the region and beyond, which recognises ASEAN's centrality in the community building in the region, seems to be appropriate for Tokyo in the years to come.

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