

Imagining Europe

Conceptualizations of Europe in a cross-national comparison across social groups and networks

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The central assumption of this project is that ‘Europe’ can mean something completely different to various individuals not only in different contexts and circumstances, but also according to individual characteristics and experiences. To give some examples: for some people, in certain contexts, ‘Europe’ may represent an image of modernity. For others in other contexts, it is an expression of cosmopolitan ideals. For others still, it symbolizes all that is wrong with globalisation. Additionally, in some cases, ‘Europe’ may feel practically synonymous with the EU while in other instances these may be perceived to be two radically different concepts (Eder, 2009, p.435). The question that remains is *who* conceptualizes Europe *in which way*? If we argue that a transnational public sphere is emerging in Europe (Risse, 2010), then how has this changed the way ideas spread within this sphere? More importantly, perhaps, *which* ideas are spread rather than others, and *among whom*? What is the ‘Europeanized Europe’ all about, and what does it look like for different groups within different European societies? How are these discourses embedded in processes of identification with (the) nation-state(s) and with Europe (cf. Díez Medrano, 2003; Risse, 2010)? And what difference do individuals’ (transnational) social networks make with regard to their conceptualizations of ‘Europe’? The current project will go into all of these questions, comparing three strongly differing countries in Europe: Estonia, the Netherlands, and Italy.

1. Research questions

On a general level, the central question that I will answer in this project can be formulated as follows:

Which meanings are attributed to ‘Europe’, and according to which patterns of individual, contextual, and social network characteristics do these meanings occur?

Dividing this question further into sub-questions, this assumes the logic that a person’s particular imagination of ‘Europe’ (Q1) can be explained through an analysis of her individual characteristics (Q2), the composition and nature of her social network (Q3), and the specific context in which she finds herself (Q4). More explicitly put, this implies the following four sub-questions:

Q1: Which framings of Europe can be analytically discerned based on individual conceptualizations?

Q2a: Which individual characteristics and experiences determine which meanings are attributed to Europe?

Q2b: How do individuals attribute meanings to Europe?

Q3: Which aspects of the composition and nature of one's social network determine which meanings are attributed to Europe?

Q4: Which contextual characteristics determine the way in which 'Europe' is given meaning?

2. Methods, approaches, data

Methodologically, this work will employ a 'mixed mode' approach in which qualitative and quantitative strategies are combined to form a 3-step mixed methodology that takes the individual perspective as a point of departure. The empirical design consists of one preliminary quantitative analysis of the EU27 based on existing (probability sample) data, and two major consecutive qualitative steps (in-depth and social networks) that will subsequently be conducted in Estonia, Italy, and the Netherlands.