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Language of the article	Polish

NO IDENTITY

In Poland: Rajchert. In Germany: Rajsier. In France: Reszer. In Spain: Rejcier. After completing three Erasmus programmes, I don't really know what my name is any more. I often wonder who I am. Do I have no identity at all? I don't feel bad about it.

Adam's parents come from Poland. They immigrated to Germany around ten years ago. They found jobs there and bought a flat; their children went to school there and then to university. Adam spoke Polish at home and German elsewhere. When we first met, we spoke German, and only later switched to Polish. When Adam speaks Polish he uses the characteristic German 'ch' sound. He's getting married soon. To an Italian girl.

Eva is a Spanish blonde. And a French blonde, too. She was brought up in Madrid. Her father is Spanish and her mother is French. I was told she sometimes uses French grammar when speaking Spanish. Her boyfriend is German.

Jesús loves Granada in Spain. But he also loves Poznań in Poland. He came to Poland for a year, and went to a secondary school in Poznań. That was four years ago. Now he not only speaks Polish, he also thinks in Polish, or so he claims. He started learning Polish because his girlfriend was Polish. Although his girlfriend is long gone, his love for Poland remains.

These examples may still seem quite exotic but they reveal a certain trend: there are more and more people in Europe who struggle to be defined by just one identity. When I asked them who they really are, they couldn't tell me. After a moment they said, 'perhaps European?' I wasn't satisfied with this reply. I wanted to bombard them with questions. But how come? If a war broke out, who would you fight for? Whose national anthem do you find the most moving? Which language will your children be brought up in? Where do you want to live? What things are the most precious to you? What language do you think in? What does 'European' really mean?

The way they answered 'I don't know' to the question of identity has been bothering me ever since. Before I asked them, I hadn't spent much time thinking about identity, I simply accepted what I was taught, namely that you need to have an identity with a long history, one which is strong and distinctive. You can achieve this by belonging to a group, identifying with its ideals and being active within it. One group that immensely affects how you see yourself is a nation. Having met these people with complicated ideas of nationality, I began to ask myself the following questions, but this time from a different point of view, raising doubts about the national identity that we take for granted. Why do we have to define ourselves by our nationality in the first place? Why are we forced to keep talking about patriotism (national patriotism, obviously)? Why is it that everything you feel for your own country should always be positive? What do state borders indicate and why have they been put in place?



Although I haven't found the answers to these questions yet, they have made me think of the basic issue: what is identity? And it was in the lack of identity, a concept that is constantly criticised, that I have found hope: having no identity is an identity. Yes, I want to say that out loud: having no identity is an identity! And it is a positive identity. Every time you define yourself you confine yourself within certain structures and shut yourself off from anything that is not your identity, whereas having no identity provides you with unlimited opportunities for development. Defining my identity as not only what has already shaped me but also as what is shaping me now and what might shape me in the future is immensely liberating.

When we say 'the European Union', we shouldn't just think about the institution which we sometimes praise and which even more often we complain about. A basic factor which motivates me, especially in the face of this lack of enthusiasm for Europe, is an idea. The idea of a United Europe. The idea of creating a new kind of thinking on our continent, the idea of forging a European identity, demolishing the construct of national states and building a society which doesn't use the question 'Which country are you from?' as a greeting. It's an idea which is about what was precious, what is precious and what might be precious. It's an idea that can spread and set an example to the entire world.

It's hard to define the 'European Union', or even to define 'Europe'. It's hard to talk about a 'European identity'. These ideas have not been shaped yet. As a representative of the Erasmus generation (and there are a lot of us!), I (we) look at the expanding Union with hope and optimism. I look at what we used to have, what we have now, and most of all, what we might have if we let it happen. Lennon's ideal – 'Imagine there's no countries' – is a realistic one.