

Personal interests pivotal for identification with Europe

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What is the decisive factor for identification with Europe? Contact with people from European countries plays a more minor role, as a study conducted by the Institute of Sociology at the University of Zurich reveals. Personal interests are far more important: EU citizens living in Switzerland feel more closely linked to Europe than their Swiss counterparts because they benefit from EU citizenship.

People identify with different groups: They feel like a man, a woman, a Grasshopper fan, a teacher or Swiss. A team of sociologists at the University of Zurich studied the extent to which [people](#) identify with Europe. They wanted to find out whether people who have strong social contacts with people from other European countries feel a stronger affinity to Europe - not the EU. The scientists primarily concentrated on binational couples, where one partner came from another European country. Furthermore, they analyzed the impact of longer sojourns in other European countries. The survey, which polled 2,800 residents of the City of Zurich, revealed that social contacts with people from other European countries and sojourns abroad slightly increased the extent of their affinity to Europe. Swiss people identify marginally more with Europe if they are married to an EU citizen than those with a Swiss partner.

EU citizens identify with Europe more strongly than the Swiss

EU citizenship is far more important than social contacts for identification with Europe. Even taking sociodemographic variables such as education, age, gender, stints abroad, social contacts and language skills into account, gaping differences were apparent between the Swiss and EU citizens: "On average, EU citizens who live in binational relationships identify much more strongly with Europe than the Swiss, irrespective of the nature of their relationship," says Jörg Rössel, a professor of sociology at the University of Zurich. The polled EU citizens residing in Switzerland also feel more closely connected to the EU than their homeland. Moreover, they see a lot less conflict between national and European identity and rate political cooperation at European level as more important than the Swiss nationals polled.

EU citizenship carries individual advantages

"This might have something to do with the fact that the EU [citizens](#) in Switzerland tend to be mobile people who have benefited - and still do - from the rights that go hand in hand with EU citizenship, including freedom of movement or voting rights," says Rössel, interpreting the results of the survey. "European identity seems to be linked more to individual interests than to social contacts and experiences."

According to Rössel, the fact that the study was conducted in an urban center in Switzerland had an impact on the degree of identification with Europe detected, but not on the correlations researched. "There's nothing to suggest that social contacts abroad or longer stays in another country affect people from rural areas any differently to inhabitants of urban areas."

More information: Julia H. Schroedter, Jörg Rössel und Georg Datler, 2015: European Identity in Switzerland: The Role of Intermarriage, and Transnational Social Relations and Experiences. *Annals of the Academy of Political and Social Sciences* 662: 148-168

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