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Designating heritage as European: between the European Union's heritage initiatives and the nation-state

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ABSTRACT

In an attempt to foster its citizens' identification with Europe, the European Union has made a great effort to identify what can be called 'common European heritage'. Many heritage initiatives, centred around the idea that heritage should be designated as European by the member states' heritage sectors, have proven counterproductive – instead of reaching their goal to construct a more stable European identity, they served as repositories of national pride and tools in the negotiation of nationalist claims of the member states. Through the empirical case of the EU's own Maastricht Treaty and the peculiar ways it became 'common European heritage' within the Dutch state heritage sector, in this paper we analyze the discursive tactics of national policy makers and the power dynamics between national and EU heritage regimes in the process of designating heritage as European. We demonstrate that even EU states with more constitutional traditions like the Netherlands maintain a powerful role in the construction of heritage as an unchangeable set of traditions and values strictly defined within the national boundaries, lacking the mechanisms to change their state-sanctioned and firmly established ways of defining heritage as 'national' and to legitimatize EU heritage narratives.
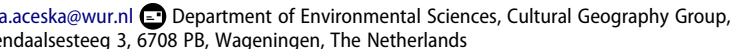
Introduction

> It is significant that all candidate sites and EHL sites want to be European. Whether or not, they analyzed their European dimension in depth, they are driven by the wish to communicate the common values and principles that underpin the European project and identity. To put it in their own words, they are "meeting the past and walking to the future". (European Commission 2017, 26)

There is a certain poetic tone in the policy rhetoric of the European Union (EU) about common European heritage. The above quote from a panel report on the European Heritage Label (EHL), one of the leading and most recent EU initiatives on common European heritage, conveys the feeling that heritage is fundamental for Europe, it is its 'walk to the future', it represents the shared good intentions of the responsible stakeholders. In other EU statements, this rhetoric is even more explicit. According to a report assigned by the European Commission in 2015 titled *Getting cultural heritage to work for Europe*, heritage is 'at the heart of what it means to be European', making an enormous contribution to the European economy, the quality of life, and wellbeing of Europe's citizens (European Commission 2015, 5). This has been the tone and the wording of the EU's initiatives on common European heritage since the 1980s, when the European institutions started using prizes and labels as political means to legitimize their activities (Foret and Calligaro 2019).

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However, the reality about the ways in which heritage is designated as European in EU heritage initiatives is far less poetic and deserves thorough scholarly attention. Stemming from the belief in the role of culture as a political resource for integration (Vos 2017), the EU institutions are devoting much effort to identifying what can be called a common European identity, making common European heritage an important part of this process (Calligaro 2013; Delanty 2018). Multiple projects, funding schemes, labels and prizes have been initiated with the aim to facilitate engagement with wider notions of culture and identity. The European Heritage Days, the European Union Prize for Cultural Heritage and the European Heritage Label have grown into the most important/influential EU initiatives in the field of heritage and have taken centre stage in many academic debates in the last decade (Lähdesmäki 2014a, 2014b, 2017; Niklasson 2017, 2019; Sassatelli 2002, 2009; Whitehead et al. 2019). In particular, scholars have warned that these seemingly symbolic heritage initiatives on common European Heritage have the potential to produce effects that are at odds with their intentions – rather than contributing to more inclusive ideas of European identity, culture and heritage, they may serve as tools in the negotiation of the member states' nationalist claims.

Therefore, it is crucial to address the ways in which these heritage initiatives at the interplay between EU regulations and the logic of nation-states enable the construction of 'European identity' as an EU category. The working of the EU is based on constant negotiations about which kind of power should be divided in what particular ways between the national and the EU level. In the field of culture and heritage, the EU's competence is subject to subsidiarity rules which restrict any EU action to a supporting or supplementary function (European Union 2012). The ways in which any EU culture or heritage initiative is implemented depend on the actions of the participating member states. Thus, understanding how some things come to count as 'heritage' requires much attention to the processes involved in the making of heritage (Macdonald 2009, 2013) and to the power dynamic between the EU and the nation-states' heritage sectors.

In this paper, we focus on the EU initiative 'the European Heritage Label (EHL)' and how it has been implemented in the national context of the Netherlands in order to disentangle the intricacies of European identity construction and heritage-making. Using the context of the Netherlands, we attempt to understand the kinds of meanings and practices that the EHL facilitates on a national level. Our particular focus is on the discursive tactics of national policy makers and on the ways in which the Dutch state heritage sector, acted when given the chance to build common European heritage and challenge the established ways of dealing with heritage. Our attention centres on one illustrative case: the Maastricht Treaty, formally known as the Treaty of the European Union, which was signed in 1992 and is one of the milestones in the EU's history. As the last of the three heritage sites awarded the EHL in the Netherlands, the Treaty had a very peculiar way of becoming European heritage within the EHL initiative and the Dutch national heritage sector in 2017.

We base our arguments on analyses of official EU and national policy documents, material commissioned during the preparation, launch or evaluation of the EHL initiative, and interviews with actors of interest to the EHL initiative. In this study, the relevant EU policy documents included official decisions of the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union, official panel reports, application handbooks/guides, and application forms. At the national level, we consulted the official pre-selection reports of the Dutch Council for Culture, letters and speeches from the ministers and/or other politicians involved in the administration and organization of the Label, as well as the EHL application dossiers, where made available by site representatives. Concomitantly to the collection of data from official policy documents, interviews were conducted with the stakeholders involved in the administration and coordination of the EHL at local, national and European levels. These included EHL site managers, national and European administrators, coordinators and evaluators.

The rationale: heritage regimes

The idea of 'common European heritage' as developed and promoted by the EU heritage initiatives is deeply intertwined with the logics of the member states. Calligaro (2013) argues

that with its cultural policies, the EU actors wanted to challenge the monopoly of the nation-state over heritage and culture, while at the same time attempting to construct another imagined community, Europe, represented by a common heritage. Yet, this push entailed a paradox in the recurrent role of the state – the EU initiatives on common European heritage discursively produce and operationalize the idea that European identity derives from the national identities of its member states (Lähdesmäki 2014a, 2012). Thus, in the rhetoric of the 'common European heritage' initiatives, it is in the hands of the heritage sectors of the member states and the institutions that act in their name to make the preliminary choice on which heritage sites should be selected to become common European heritage' and to construct the narratives about the European significance of those sites. According to these heritage initiatives, common European heritage should therefore have 'layers' – a national layer and a European layer – which do not erase, but rather complement, each other and thus contribute to a more stable understanding of European identity and culture.

Even though the theoretical bases of this premise can be justified, its empirical foundation is hard to defend. The logic of social constructivism on which the general idea of identity is based allows for different layers within one single identity (Kohli 2000) – for example, part of the imagined Dutch national identity can be its Europeanness, i.e. these two layers can coexist within what can be called Dutch identity. However, adding the European supranational layer of heritage can still be very challenging for the state heritage sector for one main reason: the EU member states and their heritage sectors have a very powerful role in the construction of heritage as an unchangeable set of traditions and values strictly defined within the national boundaries. Heritage is inherently political: it is an instrument of power that states use to build a coherent national identity (Graham, Ashworth, and Tunbridge 2000; Smith 2006; Silva and Santos 2012). Thus, in the endeavour of making 'common European heritage', EU member states and their national heritage sectors are prompted to choose sites already recognized as national heritage sites. These circumstances reinforce the idea that the state's discourses on heritage as a national domain are dominant and superior to any other (international) heritage discourse (Graham, Ashworth, and Tunbridge 2000) and that, given that they are fundamentally ideological, state institutions produce and reproduce the state's authority (Meyer et al. 2009).

In view of this, the making of common European heritage can only be understood as a power dynamic between the EU and the nation-states that are its members. The concept of 'heritage regime' (Bendix et al. 2013) captures this dynamic best – it emphasizes the processes and the power relations involved in the making of heritage and puts the focus on the interplay between policy, practice and ideology in its national and international contexts. Heritage as a political realm connects with the wider notion of 'government', particularly with the Foucauldian understanding of 'governmentality' (Foucault 1991). Thus, thinking of heritage in terms of 'regime' makes the tension between the state heritage sectors and the international heritage initiatives more visible and tangible (Geismar 2015; see also 2013). This understanding of heritage regimes enables us to critically reflect on both the key role of the nation-state in producing heritage, and the views and policies on the recognition and designation of heritage promoted by the European Union.

The central feature of any heritage regime is the role of heritage bureaucracy, policies and practices, such as listing schemes and the privileging of expert knowledge, in maintaining the logic of heritage as a hegemonic discourse about identity (Smith 2006; Bendix et al. 2013; Geismar 2015). As Smith argued, the discourse about heritage is 'reliant on the power/knowledge claims of technical and aesthetic experts and institutionalized in state cultural agencies and amenity societies' (Smith 2006, 11). Thus, instead of claiming that state heritage sectors are not able to change their firmly established ways of defining heritage mainly as national, we need to acknowledge that it is the bureaucratic elements of heritage regimes that are reluctant to change the mechanism of sorting the past into national categories, both in the state and on the EU level.

The European Heritage Label: a state-centred approach

The European Heritage Label is the EU's most recent and most illustrative initiative on common European heritage. Its explicit aim is to foster the EU's citizens and notably its youth's identification with Europe by promoting the European dimension of heritage and a sense of common identity among Europeans. Designed as such, the Label is not simply a celebration of common European culture but subscribes to a series of political attempts to save the European Project by uniting people in their diversity (Lahdesmaki 2017).

Officially launched in 2013 and following the logic of the majority of the EU's culture and heritage initiatives, the EHL relies on the capacity and expertise of individual states and their heritage sectors in the making of common European heritage. Being awarded the EHL status depends, first and foremost, on the national selection process the participating member state may determine at its own discretion. The member state, through its chosen EHL officials, is responsible for the dissemination and communication of the information provided by the European Commission to the state heritage sector. Subsequently, the national heritage sector submits applications to the national EHL officials, who then decide which candidature dossiers to forward to the European level for selection. Only after completion of this national selection process, a 13-member European Panel of independent experts assesses the proposed sites and, if the evaluation is positive, awards the EHL on behalf of the European Commission. Once a site has received the Label, the protection of the EU-selected site is still primarily the responsibility of the member state. It is also the member state's task, in conjunction with the European Expert Panel, to monitor the appropriate application of the Label's criteria, (European Parliament and Council of the European Union 2011).

To be successful in the candidature for the EHL, any site needs to meet a series of common selection criteria. It is these criteria that set the initiative apart from other labelling schemes, such as the UNESCO's World Heritage List and the Council of Europe's Cultural Routes. In difference to these schemes, the candidate sites are evaluated on the basis of their contribution to the EU's identity narrative or its symbolic European dimension, and on their ability to elaborate a project including actions and activities conveying this narrative to the European public (European Parliament and Council of the European Union 2011, 3–4; European Commission 2017, 5). Thus, as Konopka (2015) argues, the EHL remains a chiefly symbolic action.

The European dimension of heritage is at the heart of the EHL (European Commission 2017, 5). According to the decisions adopted by the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union, this dimension may derive from either European history and culture, or more specifically from European integration (European Parliament and Council of the European Union 2011, 4). In the initiative's rhetoric, it is the state heritage sector and the institutions that act in its name that should articulate or highlight the European dimension of heritage in order to qualify for the EHL (European Parliament and Council of the European Union 2011, 4). Yet, the European dimension needs to be articulated according to particular guidelines: it should be clear, straightforward and convincing. This view of the European dimension of heritage becomes the most explicit in the European Expert Panel's explanation of the reasons why certain sites failed to receive the Label. The European Expert Panel considers the lack of a 'clear narrative' a main reason for not recommending sites for the Label, in addition to oversimplification and reference to the European dimension in generic terms (European Commission 2017, 19; see also Kaiser 2014).

Since the Label functions primarily as an information and communication instrument for the EU (European Commission 2017, 23), the capacity of a site to develop a project that promotes the European dimension is of central importance in the selection process. This project must, thus, include a series of aspects that the European Commission deems as the most effective means to cultivate the European identity: information at the site, educational activities, multilingualism, participation in the EHL network events, the use of new technologies, and optionally the organization of artistic and cultural activities (European Parliament and Council of the European Union 2011, 4). This highlights the instrumentality of each of the heritage sites selected to bear the EHL

title. What is more, it emphasizes the 'circular reasoning' and internal tensions by which the EHL functions: it is peculiar that sites are expected to prove their European dimension to their audience, but at the same time they need to provide that same audience with the opportunity to learn about European values in order for it to come to understand itself as European (Zito and Eckersley 2018).

In addition, in their candidature dossiers, sites must provide evidence that they possess 'a stable, professional and viable structure, ensuring the functionality of the site and [are] capable of managing the proposed project' (European Commission 2017, 24). However, this 'work plan' assumes a particular involvement of the state. For instance, sites must demonstrate that they benefit from appropriate preservation and protection regimes (European Commission 2018a, 7), yet these regimes are generally developed at national and, less often, regional or local, level. What is more, the 'work plan' also builds a relationship of pragmatic dependency between state institutions and the heritage sites. Given that the European Commission does not grant any financial aid other than supporting the design and management of capacity building activities of the Label (European Commission 2018b), each site needs to secure additional funds to organize the activities proposed in its project. This generally entails fund-raising activities, or engagement with institutions at the national level, which further confine EHL sites within their national environments.

In this setting, the Netherlands has managed to secure the EHL for three sites by the time we concluded this research: The Peace Palace in the Hague, Camp Westerbork in Hooghalen and the Maastricht Treaty situated in the buildings of the Province of Limburg. The European dimension of these three sites is produced by the state in relation to national interests and to dominant national discourses about what constitutes 'typical Dutch culture and heritage'. In this way, in practice, the EHL does not appear to favour the addition of a new, European, layer of meaning to heritage sites, as the initiative's rhetoric suggests. Instead, it seems to allow the display of dominant national heritage values and stories at a European level, becoming an EU-established, but state-centred heritage initiative.

The designation of heritage as European: the Dutch way

The participation of the Netherlands in the EHL happened in a complex social, cultural and political context. In the past, the Dutch government has demonstrated concern with the presumed deterioration of its national identity as a consequence of further EU integration (see e.g. Binzer Hobolt and Brouard 2011 on attitudes of the Dutch towards the 2005 referendum for a European Constitution). At the same time, the Dutch state sees itself as one of the forefathers of the European project and a crucial member of the EU. Therefore, the heritage sector decided that the Netherlands should take part in the making of common European heritage and that it should ensure the completeness of any European heritage repertoire through the addition of Dutch heritage sites (Council for Culture 2012a). However, they insisted that the participation of the Netherlands in any common European heritage initiative would be voluntary (Van Bijsterveldt-Vliegenthart 2010; Verhagen 2010) in order to allow the re-articulation of Dutch identity and the country's contribution to the European project.

Against this background, the Dutch government established particular practical arrangements to ensure that national identity is addressed and displayed together with the common European identity. A group of national stakeholders was therefore assembled to administrate the proper application and functioning of the EHL in the Netherlands. These stakeholders, each with different formal functions but all related to or under the influence of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, include DutchCulture, the Dutch Cultural Heritage Agency, the Council for Culture as well as the Minister of Education, Culture and Science. DutchCulture and the Dutch Cultural Heritage Agency are responsible, respectively, for the dissemination of the information about the Label and the assistance of the potential applicants in the formal process of selection. The Council for Culture fulfils an evaluative and advisory role. However, it is the Minister, assisted by the Dutch House of Representatives, who holds the executive decision-making power as to which sites are endorsed as the final candidates to be presented to the European Commission.

Most importantly, a national thematic framework was strategically instituted in order to bring forward key elements of Dutch identity into the construction of heritage as European. In her request for advice to the Council for Culture, the 2012 Dutch State Secretary for Education, Culture and Science, Halbe Zijlstra argued that strategically chosen themes related to 'Dutch identity' would prevent the random selection of sites, reduce the number of candidates, ensure cohesion and cooperation between site holders, and, most importantly, articulate the significance of the Netherlands in Europe and the EU (Zijlstra 2012). Responding to the State Secretary's inquiry, the Council for Culture compiled a list of nine items which epitomize the Netherlands abroad: water, the Golden Age, tolerance, design, international law, agriculture, mobility, sport and youth culture. Yet, in the Council's view, understandability at the EU level necessitates a higher level of abstraction than these separate items provide. It was therefore decided to amass them into four overarching themes, each with two different sub-aspects, and with different levels of visibility and importance, namely Tolerance and Justice, Mobility and 'Makeability', Culture and Sport, and Money and Business Sense (Council for Culture 2012a), all meaning to represent different Dutch values that should be part of the European heritage in the Netherlands.

Each of the three Dutch heritage sites nominated and awarded the EHL is connected, either by the site in its application, or by the Council for Culture through inference, to one of the national themes. For example, the Peace Palace, a nationally recognized heritage site ('*rijksmonumen*t') prior to its candidacy for and award of the EHL, was actively encouraged by the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science to apply for the EHL title in view of its representative character for the Tolerance and Justice theme, and not because of its supposedly important role in the common European identity. No explicit reference to the national thematic framework or to the role of the Netherlands in fostering the European peace movement at the beginning of the 20th century and supporting the international justice system can be found either in the site's application (Municipality of the Hague and Carnegie Foundation 2012), or in the European Expert Panel's advice (European Commission 2013). Nonetheless, the Dutch Council for Culture proposed the candidature of the Peace Palace as it was seen to represent the values of openness, tolerance and neutrality, all viewed as characteristics of the Netherlands as a member state of the EU (Council for Culture 2012b, 9). The values of peace and justice that the Palace embodies are then not seen as 'European' as such, but rather as the exceptional contribution of the Netherlands to European principles. In other words, the Palace is the means through which the Dutch state can showcase itself as a country of law and peace to the wider European audience, as domestic heritage officials stated.

Camp Westerbork, one of the four commemoration centres in the Netherlands, similarly filed its candidacy for the EHL after the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Education Culture and Science actively advised the centre to do so. The award was extended to the Camp because of its layered history, spanning across several episodes including the period prior to the Second World War, its course and immediate aftermath, and the period of decolonization (European Commission 2016). This history also links Camp Westerbork to more current events unfolding elsewhere in Europe, such as the refugee crisis. Despite these discursive techniques employed by both the site and the European Expert Panel to situate the Camp in a broader European narrative, the Dutch Council for Culture evaluated Camp Westerbork as the antithetical representation of the national Tolerance and Justice theme (Council for Culture 2012b, 5). In the Council's view, the Camp symbolizes the so-called '*raison d'être* of the European Union' through its Second World War narrative (Council for Culture 2012b, 6). At the same time the non-Second World War and non-Holocaust stories are considered 'Dutch aspects of the Camp's history' (Council for Culture 2012b, 6). This positioning of the site's history satisfies the wish for a distinctive national narrative, while reproducing symbolic narratives about Camp Westerbork as a carrier of Dutch identity and values. The candidacy of the Maastricht Treaty as an EHL site had a rather different path to the nominations of Camp Westerbork and the Peace Palace – it is an example of what we call European heritage in reverse.

The Maastricht Treaty: European heritage in reverse

The Maastricht Treaty, the third heritage site in the Netherlands to be assigned the EHL title, is a powerful example of how important it is to the Dutch heritage sector to underline national identity in the processes of designating heritage as European. Formally known as the Treaty on European Union, the Maastricht Treaty is a turning point in the process of European integration. It was signed in 1992 by the then twelve member states of the European Economic Community in the States Chamber of the administrative buildings of the Limburg Province, one of the twelve Dutch provinces. Although it resulted from the common efforts of all member states, and has no specific national or territorial ties, the Treaty did not earn the Label easily, but had to comply to the Dutch state's heritage narratives, and in some ways, become Dutch national heritage before being officially designated as European. Paradoxically, it was the Maastricht Treaty that emphasised the importance of common European heritage by promising that the EU should 'contribute to the flowering of the cultures of the Member States, while respecting their national and regional diversity and at the same time bringing the common cultural heritage to the fore' (European Union 2012, 121).

The string of actions and procedures preceding the site's EHL award provides an intriguing account of the reasons why the Dutch national stakeholders could not acknowledge the Maastricht Treaty as European heritage before it was included in the national heritage discourses. It is important to observe that prior to its EHL award, the Treaty was not an object of national heritage, although it was already displayed in Limburg's provincial buildings, themselves an object of municipal heritage. In this context, the Limburg Province – as owner of the building in which the Maastricht Treaty was signed – needed to submit two candidacy dossiers at the national level in order to ensure that the story it presented matched the Dutch national interests. The Council for Culture deemed the first candidacy dossier to be insufficiently qualified to be a Dutch submission to the EHL (Council for Culture 2016, 7). The narrative presented by the site was, in the Council's perspective, a 'safe story' which only pinpointed the relevance and successes of the Maastricht Treaty for the European Union, but did not reflect on the role of the Netherlands at all (Council for Culture 2016, 6). Furthermore, the Council argued that the application placed too much focus on the European standing of the Limburg Province instead of the Dutch state as a whole (Council for Culture 2016, 6) and that endorsing such a candidacy would mean playing into the Province's regional agenda.

Upon Limburg Province's insistence that the year 2017 coincided with the 25-year jubilee of the signing of the Treaty, the domestic EHL officials agreed to allow an updated application for the same selection round. The second and definitive candidacy dossier included repeated references to the Dutch position and role in the EU prior to signing the Maastricht Treaty in 1992 (Limburg Province 2017, 6). It also clearly expressed the ways in which the site-holders proposed to stimulate young people to discuss the meaning of the EU and to have similar debates with places of comparable significance elsewhere in Europe (Limburg Province 2017, 24). The Council for Culture then gave a positive assessment of the updated application. Thus, only when the Province framed its narrative within the national themes of Tolerance and Justice, and Money and Business Sense, and complied to the desired discourse about the EU at a national level, was it eventually allowed to put the Maastricht Treaty forward for the EHL title. However, while the Council insisted in its assessment of the first EHL application submitted by the Limburg Province that the Dutch role in the elaboration and negotiation of the Maastricht Treaty would be highlighted, this insistence is no longer visible in the evaluation of the final, updated application. Here, the Council for Culture simply remarks that the second application succeeds in observing the failure of the Netherlands – as 1991–1992 president of the European Council and leader of the Maastricht Treaty negotiations – to have a far-reaching social and political agenda included in order to provide legitimacy for an otherwise generally economic Treaty (Council for Culture 2017, 2). This remark, however, impacts the EU narrative conveyed by the site and implicitly rearticulates a set of Dutch social values in opposition to the EU's overall economic character.

Considering the very nature of the Treaty, the Dutch state heritage sector's insistence on highlighting the role of the Netherlands in the negotiation of the Maastricht Treaty is peculiar. The site is a product of recent history, jointly drafted and signed by the European Union's member states. Therefore, it does not have the same connection to one location in ways similar to many other examples of EHL sites. This was not a reason for the Dutch national stakeholders to miss the chance to reassert its position as a member of importance in the Union, transforming the Treaty into a receptacle of supposedly typically Dutch values and identities, instead of a heritage that most EU citizens can relate to. It is in this context that the Maastricht Treaty received the EHL award in 2018. According to Province representatives, in light of the previous tensions the Limburg Province wanted to show that it was aware of the fact that it was the Dutch state, not the Province, who had the authority to provide relevant input at the European level. Consequently, the Province insisted that the Minister of Education, Culture and Science, Ingrid van Engelshoven, deliver a speech during the EHL plaque reveal ceremony on 9 May 2018, in addition to the one given by the representative of the Province. In other words, the Province, the Maastricht Treaty's coordinating and administrating body, self-regulated its behaviour in order to satisfy the nationally authorized heritage discourse, thus situating the nation-state once again as the legitimate source of power and promoting its values and interests in the European arena.

What is more, the actions following the EHL ceremony also show the same adherence to the national heritage discourses. In light of the EHL's focus on communication, the European Commission designed a travelling exhibition consisting of 38 information panels containing photographs of each EHL site, briefly explaining why these sites had been awarded the Label. Site holders had the opportunity to request hosting this exhibition, an opportunity which the Limburg Province did not miss in early 2019. Notably, the Limburg Province decided to place panels representing EHL sites from the same country side by side, with the three Dutch sites – The Peace Palace, Camp Westerbork and the Maastricht Treaty – displayed next to each other. However, in its evaluation of candidate sites, the European Expert Panel reports chronologically, with the intention to create a sense of historical continuity that goes beyond the national boundaries and to underline that national boundaries are in fact a recent creation. However, it appears that the coordinators of the Maastricht Treaty site in Limburg did not follow these intentions. The action of categorizing the panels per country, thus, serves here to symbolically reinforce national boundaries around the three Dutch EHL sites and provides yet another piece of evidence to the self-regulating behaviour of the Province in view of the tensions raised during the national pre-selection process.

Conclusion

With the EHL initiative on common European heritage and its poetic motto 'meeting the past and walking to the future', the EU aimed to repair the fragility and complexity of what is often named 'European identity'. Instead, it created something seemingly counterproductive – it handed the member states an opportunity to highlight their individual importance in the creation of the EU rather than to build inclusive and open European heritage and values. The context of the Netherlands effectively illustrates the failure of the EHL's state-centred approach to produce European heritage that transcends national boundaries, as well as the inability of the state's heritage regimes to validate other ways of defining heritage so as to legitimize European identity narratives. Aided by the Label's practical arrangements and by its reference to already extant heritage narratives at the national level (e.g. tolerance, human rights), Dutch state heritage institutions steered the EHL to represent a nationalist agenda and to promote and emphasize Dutch cultural values in the construction of European heritage. In these circumstances, only sites that present an image of the Netherlands and the EU that corresponds to the nationally authorized heritage discourse are nominated to become European through the EHL scheme. Even the Maastricht Treaty, one of the EU's milestones and a product of the joint efforts of several EU member states with no particular territorial ties, first had to comply to the Dutch state's heritage narratives and, in some ways, become

Dutch national heritage before being officially designated as European heritage through the EHL scheme. The Treaty, as the most illustrative example alongside the other two Dutch EHL sites of the Peace Palace in the Hague and Camp Westerbork in Hooghalen, ultimately became a political element that reproduces Dutch identity on an EU level instead of representing a unifying narrative, thus solidifying the national boundaries it is supposed to transcend.

Our research has demonstrated how, at least in the Netherlands, the making of a common European heritage is a complex political process that challenges the current way of decision-making within the EU. The state heritage sectors and the institutions that act in their name do not have mechanisms to escape the agency of the state heritage regime they are part of – a regime that creates and validates the powerful and dominant view that heritage is an unchangeable set of traditions and values strictly defined within national boundaries. It is doubtful if this outcome is different in any other EU member state. Risse claims that in the making of a common European identity, the states with constitutional traditions are more likely to change their collective understandings and include Europe in their national narratives than unitary and centralized states (Risse 2005). And yet, as our research has demonstrated, even in the Netherlands, with its constitutional tradition, the stable and structured ways of defining heritage only through the prism of the national identity sneak in through the back door.

The questions we raised in this paper are important not only because of the seeming ineffectiveness of EU heritage initiatives in creating more transnational notions of heritage, but also because the kind of heritage they produce lies at the heart of nationalist claims (Stolcke 1995). In the paper '(Why) do Eurosceptics believe in a common European heritage?' De Cesari, Bosilkov, and Piacentini (2020) claim that in today's Europe, embracing Europeanism goes hand in hand with embracing vicious nationalism and cultural racism. The paradox is that this kind of understanding of European heritage is produced directly by EU heritage initiatives (Calligaro 2013; Niklasson 2017). And that is why the discussion about how, where and by whom heritage is designated as European is crucial – because seemingly symbolic and poetic initiatives like the EHL are not only initiatives with ambiguous formulations and vague language, but also roads to lasting nationalism.

Disclosure statement

Notes on contributors

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