

How Foundational Narratives Shape European Union Politics

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Abstract

In this article, I distinguish between four foundational narratives about the EU and outline how they continue to shape EU politics of the present day. The foundational narratives are (1) the EU as a peace project, (2) the notion that the EU is forged in crisis, (3) the sense that deeper economic interdependence fosters political change and (4) the idea that law can replace power politics in the EU. In order for the European project to address current challenges, such as climate change, economic instability, political polarization or the rule of law crisis, I argue that Europeans need to confront their past. History is not only the recollection of events; it represents the connections that the public and elites wish to make. So, in order to develop policy solutions to cross-border issues, European contemporaries need to critically revisit past connections and to uncover blind spots. If Europeans revisit the EU's foundational narratives, they might also figure out what should change in the EU today.

Keywords: European Integration Theory; European Union; History; Narratives

Introduction

You who live safe in your warm houses, you who find, returning in the evening, hot food and friendly faces: Consider if this is a man, who works in the mud, who does not know peace, who fights for a scrap of bread, who dies because of a yes or no. Consider if this is a woman, without hair and without name, with no more strength to remember, her eyes empty and her womb cold, like a frog in winter. Meditate that this came about: I commend these words to you. Carve them in your hearts, at home and in the streets, going to bed and rising; repeat them to your children, or may your house fall apart. Levi (1979: 18)

These words stem from the moving autobiographical account of the Italian writer Primo Levi's survival of the Nazi concentration camp Auschwitz, *Se Questo è un Uomo – If This is a Man*. *If This is a Man* stresses the importance of creating a culture of remembrance: of evoking the memories of war, recalling that they happened and pondering about why they did. Because if not, Levi warned, humans would lose their humanity, their house will fall. With the rise of far-right forces, the mainstreaming of their ideas and the accompanied backsliding of democracy, we might wonder if our European house is falling apart. In recent decades, the European house has shown serious cracks. The question is if these cracks are beyond repair. The founding fathers and mothers of the European house viewed the promise of 'no more war' as the key purpose of what we now call the European Union (EU). To them, this was self-evident because they witnessed the horrors of war, but for Europe's younger generations, it is far less so. For some, the war still

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lives through them because of the war memories of their parents or grandparents, but for many others, war is something from the history books. Now history has reared its ugly head. Many realized that we live in a world of war and conflict after all.

The brazen attack by Russian military forces on the people of Ukraine in February 2022 violated an order based on international law, human rights and self-determination. Whilst the widely expected Russian quick victory failed to materialize as the Ukrainian forces repeatedly fended off attacks and the Russian military proved vastly less powerful and organized than previously thought, the cost of life and livelihood has been enormous. The brutal war in Ukraine also had far-reaching consequences for the EU. After years of complacency, it brutally reminded Europeans of the added value of cooperation, of the EU's *raison d'être*. Whilst EU citizens experienced wars on their doorstep before, most notably the decade-long (1991–2001) Yugoslavian wars, this war somehow felt different. Vladimir Putin's brutal attack on Ukraine shook Europeans to the core. In an eupinions survey conducted a few weeks after the war began, a clear majority of Europeans favoured accepting Ukraine as an EU member, accepting Ukrainian refugees and supplying Ukrainians with weapons. The war in Ukraine also revived public support to enhance Europe's defence capabilities: nine out of 10 EU citizens thought that the EU needed a stronger common defence policy (eupinions 2022). This widespread popular support at the onset of the war is further corroborated by the fact that Danish voters voted to upend the Danish opt-out in the EU's common foreign and defence policy on the 1st of June 2022. Ukraine's war could be seen as Europe's war. It was a watershed moment because many Europeans felt that the Ukrainians are not only defending their own country against Russian aggression but also fighting for democracy, freedom and human rights, some of the very principles that underpin the EU. The post-war order is, in the words of the former civil rights activist and US Congressman John Lewis (2020), 'not a state. It is an act, and each generation must do its part'. Younger generations are the inheritors of a post-war order that they now have to defend.

Many commentators were flabbergasted by how fast the initial response was and how quickly the EU got its act together. In the first response to the war, the EU showed remarkable unity (with the exception of Hungary). National government leaders stepped back to allow Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and her team to take the floor. Just like during the establishment of the European Recovery Fund, the economic response to the COVID pandemic, the Commission proved to be extremely effective in shaping a European response. Within a few days, the European Peace Facility, which was part of the European budget only since 2021, was in its entirety redirected to financing Ukrainian weapons purchases, and these arms were delivered by member states. Harsh economic sanctions were imposed, Russian TV channels were banned, and a partial embargo on Russian oil was agreed. Times of great danger unleashed unexpected forces. This raises the question if the EU was at the beginning of a period of 'integration by stealth', to borrow a term from Giandomenico Majone (2005)? In line with theories of state-building and federalism (Riker 1987; Tilly 1994), one would expect an external military threat to provide a real impetus for further integration. Yet, the reality often turns out to be messier. Within the EU, we quickly saw signs of a return to navel-gazing and older divides over who is going to foot the bill. Kelemen and McNamara (2021) remind us that the path towards state-building is almost always difficult and politically contentious because raising taxes and armies requires the centralization of power. Because of their

redistributive impact, such actions also raise questions about democratic power ('no taxation without representation').

Now that an external threat has raised the stakes of cooperation beyond the state, the question becomes how the EU will move forward and shape its future. In this article, I wish to highlight that in order to answer this question, contemporaries of European integration should revisit the key foundational narratives about the EU and how they continue to shape EU politics. Now that history is back, Europeans need to confront their past. History is not only the recollection of events. As Snyder (2018: 9) puts it, 'There is a difference between memory, the impressions we were given; and history, the connections that we work to make – if we wish'. To think through possible paths of integration, European contemporaries need to critically revisit past connections and to uncover blind spots. Only then can they find constructive answers to the challenges ahead. If Europeans revisit the EU's foundational narratives, they might also figure out what should change in the EU today.

1. The Four Foundational Narratives about the European Union

Following Snyder (2018), I define foundational narratives as the collection of connections that citizens and elites make about the nature of a political order. Foundational narratives provide an important basis for any political order because they provide an anchoring for collective imagination and collective intentions about how political societies should be organized that cannot be simply reduced to individual wants and needs. They are also hugely consequential for politics. Scholars have pointed out the potency of foundational narratives for European and international cooperation more broadly (see, e.g. Khong 1992; Diez Medrano 2003; Nicolaidis and Pelabay 2008; Miskimmon et al. 2014; Hofmann and Mérand 2020). Foundational narratives co-determine politics and institutional structures by framing actor's strategic choices. They provide justifications for past actions and limit the range of future ones. As such, understanding the content, context and structure of foundational narratives is crucial. But the plurality of possible narratives should also be assessed (Nicolaidis and Pelabay 2008). Are the narratives shared? If not, what does this tell us about power relations? Finally, scholars need to critically reflect on how narratives are strategically manipulated by elites in order to foster support for their actions (Jabko 2006). In this article, I will discuss four dominant foundational narratives about the EU in further depth:

1. The EU as a peace project in which nation-states learned from the atrocities of the World War II and bound themselves together in peaceful cooperation in its aftermath;
2. The notion that the EU is forged in crisis and that crises lead to more integration;
3. The sense that deeper economic interdependence fosters political change in the EU's internal and external relationships;
4. And finally, the idea that law can replace power politics in the EU.

These are by no means the only narratives characterizing the EU (e.g. Diez Medrano 2003; McNamara 2015), but they are some of the most important constitutive ones in my view. These four foundational narratives capture the essence of the European project for many decades, namely, that it was largely an elite-led project, far removed from public contestation and therefore highly depoliticized (e.g. Haas 1958; Lindberg

and Scheingold 1970). It was characterized by a permissive consensus, by the idea that elites could pursue European integration with little to no regard to public opinion. Put in the words of Haas (1958: 17), ‘It is as impracticable as it is unnecessary to have recourse to general public opinion surveys ... It suffices to single out and define the political elites in the participating countries, to study the reactions to integration and assess changes in attitude on their part’. Yet, with the proliferation of referendums on EU matters, the rise of Eurosceptic parties and growing conflict over the EU in national and European elections, there has been a move away towards a more ‘constraining dissensus’ (Hooghe and Marks 2009; Hobolt and De Vries 2016; De Vries 2018). My argument is that the foundational narratives associated with the early period of European integration still shape EU politics to this day. They have not sufficiently been updated or replaced; rather, they continue to be used and invoked, even though reality often contradicts them. This leads to blind spots that hamper the development of a more inclusive Union rooted in public contestation. These blind spots make the development of a Union that is truly united in its diversity more difficult.

The reliance on the four foundational narratives characterizing the permissive consensus period clouds our current ability to answer two fundamental questions guiding the EU (and virtually every democratic political order) today: how to manage ethnic, cultural, economic and political diversity whilst at the same time reaping the benefits of scale and how to achieve this on a voluntary, democratic and cooperative basis, without resorting to empire or spheres of influence that have exploitive, coercive centres. These questions are also pertinent to international cooperation more broadly. Hooghe et al. (2019: 1) remind us that ‘[w]here the externalities of human interaction extend beyond national borders, it is efficient to organize governance at the international level’. However, the question is this: For whom is it efficient? Who decides about how it should be achieved? Who holds those who achieve it accountable, and in which time intervals? These are fundamental questions about how to organize and legitimize political power. Whilst existing work has hinted towards the development and usage of these foundational narratives, there have not yet been many attempts to consider them jointly or to outline their potency for facilitating or hampering coordinated European action. This, I hope, will be my contribution. In doing so, I also invite others to examine other important narratives and their importance for shaping EU politics.

Narrative 1: The EU as a Peace Project

The first dominant foundational narrative about European integration is that the EU is essentially a peace project. Historians view the legacy of the World War II (WWII) as key to shaping an adherence to a European ideal and a collective understanding of what it means to be European (see Dinan 2004, 2006). According to Judt (2006), ‘post-war’ was the essence of Europe. The EU was borne out of devastations of WWII, based on the idea that war within the heart of Europe was no longer possible because swords were turned into ploughs. National and European elites often invoke references to the devastations of the WWII in order to convey the added value of European cooperation among the public to remind them of a shared identity and past. Hofmann and Mérand (2020) highlight that this is especially the case for German and to a slightly lesser extent French political elites, less so for others. Think, for example, of former German Chancellor Helmut Kohl, who

famously said that ‘the most important rule of the new Europe is: there must never again be violence in Europe’. War analogies not only allow elites to garner public support for the European project (De Vries 2020) but also act as justifications for past decisions and limits on decision options for the future (see Khong 1992; Miskimmon et al. 2014 for non-EU contexts). The EU was ultimately crowned for its achievements to peace when it was awarded one of the important international recognitions, the Nobel Peace Prize in 2012. The Nobel Peace Prize committee awarded the EU because of its contribution to ‘the advancement of peace and reconciliation, democracy and human rights in Europe’¹ for over six decades.

Whilst there is no doubt that increased state cooperation together with economic and political interdependence has greatly contributed to peace and security on the European continent, the narrative of Europe as a peace project is problematic for two reasons. First, it fails to properly recognize the diverse historical meanings of the purpose of the EU in different member states (Diez Medrano 2003). As the EU widened its membership, the narratives about its purpose grew more pluriform. Within different member states, at different times and for different people, different narratives about ‘why Europe’ may co-exist, and they change in importance over time. There is not one single story about Europe’s founding; there are numerous narratives nested in space and time (e.g. De Vries 2018). Whilst for Germany and Italy it was the hope of redemption, for Belgium the glue to national unity, for Portugal and Spain the return of democracy, and for Estonia and Latvia a shield against Russian aggression. Remembrance of WWII is also less of a backbone of EU support for younger generations as the memories have become distant (Lauterbach and De Vries 2020). Political elites have to try to navigate the many and possibly contradictory stories about why the EU exists (Nicolaidis and Pelabay 2008). The plurality of narratives and the disagreements between them characterize every democratic political order. According to Rawls (1993: xvi), they are ‘the normal result of exercise of human reason within the framework of the free institutions of a constitutional democratic regime’.

Second, the narrative that the European project was based on the lessons of nation-states from the atrocities of the WWII leaves out important other facts. Whilst this narrative tells a story of learning and progress, it is not that simple. ‘By 1945, European powers had not learned that war is bad. They kept fighting colonial wars until they lost them or were exhausted by them. Remember Indochina, Indonesia, Algeria and Egypt; Malaya, Kenya, Angola, Guinea, Mozambique and the Spanish Sahara. The modern European state was conceived as the core of an empire. It was not nation-states that kicked off the process of European integration, it was fading empires, exhausted by their colonial efforts’ (Snyder 2019: 1). As colonial empires became too costly to maintain, other markets had to be found and exploited. As European nation-states withdrew from their colonies from the 1940s through the 1980s, they created a ‘soft landing after empire’ that allowed them to reinvent themselves (Marks 2012). Borrowing the words of Nicolaidis et al. (2014), the EU was built on the ‘echos of empires’. European integration allowed imperial nations to paint themselves in a more positive light. At the same time, it proved a useful distraction that allowed European countries, with the exception of West Germany, not to fully come to terms with the dark periods in their past and the legacy of empire.

¹The Nobel Peace Prize committee published its press release ‘The Nobel Peace Prize for 2012’ on its website on the 12th of October 2012: http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/2012/press.html.

Discussions about the ‘normative whiteness’ of the EU’s institutions, structures, politics and policies become crucial in this context (Benson and Lewis 2019; Kantola et al. 2022). Or how Goldberg (2006: 254) put it provocatively, ‘Europe has long nurtured the civic drive to identify foreign, to uphold the possibility of keeping the ‘foreign’ foreign, of permanently foreignizing the “(racially) non-European”. The reproductive logic of Euro-racism ensures that those ‘racially non-European’ are never nor can ever be European’. The structural exclusion of the narratives of people of colour within the EU is just one illustration of this institutionalized racism, the Von der Leyen’s Commission project to ‘promote our European Way of Life’ through ‘strong borders’ and third-country cooperation ‘to achieve a fresh start on migration’ another² and the complicity of the EU border agency in Greek pushbacks as uncovered by an investigation from the EU’s anti-fraud office OLAF yet another.³ In order for the EU to be a truly diverse Union, Europeans will have to come to terms with blind spots in the foundational narrative of ‘no more war’, the wars that were waged by EU member states, and be more open to the variety of narratives that exist within member states.

Narrative 2: Europe Is Forged in Crisis

A second important foundational narrative about European integration is that the EU is forged in crisis. The notion is attributed to one of Europe’s founding fathers Jean Monnet (1978: 417), who wrote in his memoirs that ‘Europe will be forged in crises and will be the sum of the solutions adopted for those crises’. This idea is also at the core of classic integration theories, such as neofunctionalism and liberal intergovernmentalism. Crises generate political momentum, because they require national governments and EU institutions to act (Schimmelfennig 2017). A recent incarnation of this argument is found in the notion of ‘failing forward’ by Jones et al. (2016). They suggest that European integration reflects a ‘sequential cycle of piecemeal reform, followed by policy failure, followed by further reform’, which managed to sustain the process of European integration (Jones et al. 2016: 1010). Legal scholars Joerges and Kreuder-Sonnen (2017) have pointed out some key problems of this current in EU studies that is based on the notion that crisis ultimately provides an impetus for reform and sustains the European project. According to them, it displays ‘too much optimism’ about how ‘crisis politics [can be] deployed as a solution’ and pays too little attention to the ‘essential challenges exposed [...] by crisis’ (Joerges and Kreuder-Sonnen 2017: 118). The narrative of the ‘EU being forged in crisis’ shows affinity with what Snyder (2018: 7) has coined the ‘politics of inevitability’, which led to the idea that we are on a path of progress, the success of the ‘liberal world order’ or ‘European integration’. Crises are not viewed as challenges to that order, but temporary distractions from it. Analytically, we need to harder think about potential outcomes and how to integrate them in theories about the EU (see special issue; Jones et al. 2021). A handful of scholars have started to fill the gap in our understanding with fruitful attempts focusing on integration–disintegration (e.g. Jones 2012; Zielonka 2012; Vollaard 2014) or differentiation dynamics (e.g. Schimmelfennig et al. 2015). Both theoretically and empirically, European integration cannot become irrefutable.

²https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/promoting-our-european-way-life_en

³https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/greece0422_web.pdf

A second problem with the notion that the EU is forged in crisis is that it might mask how the process of European integration qualitatively changed as a result of crisis. Take the role of Germany in recent crises, for example. A key characteristic of Chancellor Angela Merkel's approach to the EU was to offer the smallest possible concessions at the last possible moment. Matthijs and Keleman (2021) summarize her EU crisis management as follows: 'In approaching Europe's political crises, Merkel's main political stratagem has been to procrastinate and dither'. Whilst this crisis management may be understandable from a domestic viewpoint, in light of regional elections or internal party dissent, such crisis management has provided detrimental to the communal fabric of the European integration process. Muddling through from crisis to crisis without a European script or ideational mooring about where the EU is heading has the unintended consequence of putting the spotlight on government of the biggest, richest and most important member state, Germany, during every crisis. The Eurozone crisis was an important case in point. Germany's domination of institutional and agenda-setting power within the EU comes from its voting powers within the European Parliament and European Council, and the fact that it is by far the largest net contributor to the EU budget in terms of overall size (Matthijs 2016). During the Eurozone crisis, when the German government shielded away from collective guarantees for important European banks or member states, this not only deepened the Eurozone's economic woes (Stiglitz 2016) but also created an important political problem plaguing the EU to this day. Whilst the EU should be a Union of equal states that its members can voluntarily join or leave, the Eurozone crisis transformed the Union into a set of relationships between creditor and debtor states, between 'Northern Saints and Southern Sinners' (Matthijs and McNamara 2015). The problem was that creditors dictate the terms of debtors when times get tough and that the creditor-debtor terminology reflects more imperial than geographic language.

The origins of the Eurozone crisis were also viewed predominantly in national terms. They were caused by a lack of discipline in deficit countries rather than interactions between Eurozone countries in a poorly constructed currency Union. Creditor countries like Germany or the Netherlands did not want to recognize that surpluses were part of the problem of macroeconomic imbalances (Stiglitz 2016). The Eurozone crisis fuelled feelings of victimization in the South that were mobilized by Eurosceptic parties and fed an 'we always have to pay' narrative in the North, which in turn created a sense of victimization that Eurosceptic political entrepreneurs exploited. It also crucially framed the set of possible policy options that were available. Eurobonds could never work because of the risk of 'moral hazard'. This was the lasting effect of the Eurozone crisis and damages member state relationships to this day (De Vries 2018; see also Matthijs and McNamara 2015).

Viewed in this light, the pandemic response of Chancellor Merkel's final government seemed an important break from muddling through based on smallest concessions at the last moment. It was a 'Zeitenwende', in that it showed willingness to sacrifice, to act collectively and pro-actively in a crisis to help the EU as a whole. However, how long will this sea change last? The initial reluctant response of the Scholz government to act decisively and jointly lead in the EU to face the Russian attack on and atrocities in Ukraine seems to fit the old reflex of doing the least possible at the latest time. The understanding that Ukraine's war is Europe's war and that if Russia can claim victory or achieve major concessions in negotiations, this will unlikely bring economic stability or security to the EU its member states, quite rather the contrary, has sunken in only slowly. There seems to

be an internal contradiction in the German government's position. On the one hand, it is deeply committed to the European project, and it values peace and prosperity, yet on the other, there seems an equal strong determination to take as few sacrifices as possible to protect the EU's key values (Kundnani 2014).

This applies not only to the EU's biggest member state but also to others. During crisis periods, Europe is often a Union only by name with member states drawn to the default option: acting like a group of competing countries. 'Europe is stable only so long as the 'parts' agree to play along' (Jones and Menon 2019: 162). A Union is not a Union when member states continuously measure each other alongside a yardstick of 'their' national interest. During the Brexit negotiations, the British government was accused of too much transactionalism, but in crisis periods, many member states want to have their cake and eat it too. Cooperation within the EU should protect states from external pressures during crisis; it should enable their policy choices. In the words of Milward (1999), it should come to the rescue of the nation-state. But more often than not, it contributes to a climate of uncertainty making crises deeper, or making them even more likely to occur in the first place. There is nothing automatic or inevitable about crises fostering European integration, and EU scholarship should reflect that.

Narrative 3: Deeper Economic Interdependence Fosters Political Change

The third dominant foundational narrative is that the essence of the European project is to pursue political integration under the disguise of economic integration. It is also referred to as Monnet's method (Majone 2005). Monnet's method is analytically perhaps closest to the theory of 'neofunctionalism', which views European integration as an incremental process in which cooperation between states in a particular sector creates strong incentives for cooperation in other sectors; this is called spillover. Whilst it recognizes the central role played by national governments in EU decision-making, it emphasizes that they are not the only consequential actors. Technocratic elites at the European level play a crucial role in facilitating spillover. Monnet hoped and expected that this would foster public legitimacy; in reality, it created public contestation (De Vries 2018). Moreover, the Monnet method has two key flaws. First, it never solved what Majone (2005: xxi) coined the EU's 'crucial dilemma: whether European policies should be initiated to solve specific problems in the best way possible, or whether they are to serve, first and foremost, integration objectives'. The EU's supranational institutions, like the Commission, for example, focus often on integration-enhancing objectives. This plays in the hands of Eurosceptic political elites and citizens that often legitimately question if European solutions are the best solutions. These questions about subsidiarity are important and should be taken more seriously, not only within public debate but also within scholarly debate.

The second problem with Monnet's method is that it might successfully push European integration forward but also makes the EU unnecessarily vulnerable. Relying on outputs as a source of legitimacy might jeopardize public support for EU in the long term because when outcomes turn sour, the regime itself might be questioned (Scharpf 1999). One should not equate outcomes with process. The process of European integration needs to also rely on input legitimacy in order to be perceived as legitimate (Scharpf 1999). Easton (1975) reminds us that what separates democratic from autocratic regimes is not output legitimacy; 'good' outcomes can be achieved in autocracies. What

separates democratic from non-democratic political regimes is input legitimacy, the ability to democratically delegate and hold one's rulers accountable. A political order is perceived as legitimate if the process underlying it is supported, 'because it has institutionalized the values that [people] find important' regardless of the specific outputs (Easton 1975: 451). For half a century, European elites presented European integration as a 'positive-sum game', but it is not. European integration has distributional effects and thus requires democratically legitimation (Hix 2013). It requires the aggregation of people's preferences through elections and the pledges of political elites that compete for office. Ever since the direct election of the European Parliament and the extension of its powers, the EU has made great strides to foster political debate and contestation, but democratic politics should not only be about means; it should also be about ends. Developing a legitimate and stable political order at the European level can come only through the hard work of allowing democratic politics to unfold, with responsible leaders providing citizens with real choices. By informing citizens about the political bargains and compromises necessary or not and explaining at which level of government solutions to specific problems should be taken, and why.

What is more, the narrative that deeper economic interdependence fosters political change did not only characterize how many viewed the European project; it was also the key prism about how the EU and its member states would view external relations. After the collapse of communism, Europeans, like many others in the West, viewed 'their liberal order' as victorious. The notion that there were no alternatives left and that history ended (Fukuyama 1992). Within the EU, it led in the words of Van Middelaar (2019: 116) to 'a perpetuity of thinking', a naive belief about the predictability of events that would ultimately lead to progress, to more capitalist and therefore more democratic states. In this perpetuity mindset, trade with third countries would ultimately bring about political change. It became the EU's soft power, the ability to shape external relations through reputation and values, rather than hard power relying on military force.

The idea that economic interdependence fosters political change is perfectly summarized in the German notion of 'Wandel durch Handel', translated as change through trade (Kundnani 2014) – the idea that the EU and its member states could combine 'doing good', transforming the lives of citizens that experienced war and grew up behind the veil of authoritarianism, and as such changing the politics itself, and 'doing well', making countries grow and companies grow more prosperous through trade. But history has not ended; more trade did not destroy the attraction of alternative models. Events that challenged the 'change through trade' narrative, like Srebrenica, the annexation of Crimea or the democratic backsliding in Hungary, were largely seen as necessary events on the long road to progress. Alternatives had already emerged, not only in Russia or China, but within the EU itself, in Hungary. Yet, the money kept flowing and the trade continued. This, Kelemen (2020) argues, not only funded but ultimately strengthened Viktor Orbán's reign and tightened his grip on Hungary. Although some EU institutions, especially within the EP, are increasingly challenging its 'authoritarian equilibrium', this is a slow process.

The complacency about the need to protect the EU's core values were brutally disrupted by the Ukrainian war. But European elites have continuously underestimated the resonance and power of other political models, especially in member states like Hungary. It is easy to assume that the EU's political landscape is a blissful mosaic of

peaceful liberal democracies, but it is simply not the case. For the EU to live up to its promise of being a democratic, law-based and inclusive Union, Europeans will have to come to terms with blind spots in the foundational narrative of ‘change through trade’, break with the politics of inevitability and stand up against the alternative models that already exist both within the EU and outside.

Narrative 4: Law Can Replace Power Politics

The fourth and final foundational narrative that I will discuss here is the notion that the law could replace power politics in the EU. Treaties, rules and regulations are the EU’s greatest achievement. Regulation not only became a key tool to advance European integration (Majone 1994) but also made the EU a global regulatory power (Bradford 2020), something that Bradford (2020) has coined the ‘Brussels effect’, the largely unintended by-product of primarily single market regulation largely driven by the internal motivation to push European integration forward. The EU as a regulatory powerhouse also had another important consequence, namely, that political responsibility and authority is defined in terms of what EU scholars and civil servants call ‘competences’. ‘Why does an institution act? Because it has competence to do so’ (Van Middelaar 2019: 30). But the competences of EU institutions are not simply regulatory; they are deeply political. Regulation creates winners and losers, or at least some winning more than others (Hix 2013), and this raises important questions of fairness, solidarity and deservingness. The EU, like any other democratic order, thus relies on losers’ consent, which can only be obtained through a process of democratic political contestation. Whilst the EU has made great strides to deal with its democratic deficiencies, and these also plague national states, within the EU growing contestation is viewed by some with scepticism. ‘One paradoxical consequence of the latest manifestations of popular discontent has been to reinforce the elitist nature of the integration project, to the point that a number of EU leaders increasingly perceive popular voting as the main obstacle to the progress of European integration’ (Majone 2005: vii). Yet, European elites should welcome conflicting voices, because not doing has potentially dire consequences. As Mair (2007: 7) once famously noted, if ‘we cannot organize opposition in the EU, we are then almost forced to organize opposition to the EU’.

A second problem with the notion that law replaces power politics in the EU is that it clouds the fact that the EU engages in first order power politics. Regulatory power is one of the EU’s greatest achievements, but it does ‘not offer an adequate basis for joint action in all foreseen circumstances’ (Van Middelaar 2019: 4). In a crisis situation, where the EU needs to act and respond to events, the European Council engages in power politics (as I already previously discussed in the context of the Eurozone crisis). Giddens (2013) dubbed this ‘EU1’ and ‘EU2’, whilst Van Middelaar (2019) calls the process whereby the ‘politics of rules’ is replaced by the ‘politics of events’. Whilst in the realm of the politics of rules, member states should be equal before the law, in the sphere of the politics of events larger member states are in the driver seat. It predominantly takes place in the European Council, where a member state’s power and personal characteristics are of decisive importance, not very transparent and largely outside the sphere of democratic contestation. The inability of the EU to transparently and democratically shape the politics of events quickly turns into a liability. It fails to shield member states through an umbrella of shared responsibility. It has also put EU institutions like the European Central Bank on the

spot and forced it to push its mandate to the maximum repeatedly. It puts detached agencies, like Frontex, on the spot, agencies that are not properly checked and democratically controlled. A power shift to the Council has been a result of a series of quick moving crises that put the politics of events at the centre of the Union. In the words of Sartori (1962: 864), ‘politics cannot be taken out of politics’.

2. Towards a more Inclusive Union

This raises the question of what kind of political space we need for different narratives about the EU to emerge, co-exist, conflict or even compete with each other. First, European leaders need to do the hard work of allowing democratic politics to unfold: allowing debate, channeling opposition within EU institutions, informing national publics and increasing transparency and accountability in the European Council. When it comes to the long-term direction of the EU, the European Council is key. Yet, EU issues do not feature prominently in national election campaigns, with some recent exceptions like France under President Emmanuel Macron. Former President of the European Commission Jacques Delors once argued that the key ‘problem with democracy in the European Union is not the insufficient incorporation of national governments into the Union’s political system, but the inadequate incorporation of the Union into the domestic politics of member societies’ (cited in Beetham and Lord 1998: 70).

The Dutch context under the 10-year reign of Dutch prime minister Mark Rutte is a case in point. It is characterized by a depoliticization of everything European. Prime Minister Rutte once said that he refused to provide any ‘vision’ about how the EU should evolve, mocking European leaders who do. To paraphrase, those who have a vision for Europe should see an optometrist. Meanwhile, though, the Dutch prime minister also engaged in a two-level game: playing the Eurosceptic at home while agreeing to further integrative steps in Brussels. Prime Minister Rutte’s depoliticization has had detrimental effects. Ordinary citizens know that big decisions are made in Brussels but find it hard to figure out how and why this is happening. This lack of debate about the EU in national politics is not just a Dutch phenomenon. Whilst key policies are decided at the EU level, many national leaders fail to clearly acknowledge this in domestic political debates.

Debates in most member states often do not reflect the fact that national governments together with EU institutions shape key issues that voters care about, from monetary to migration policy. The EU is the elephant in the room, and this is hugely problematic for four reasons. First, it leads to a hollowing out of the domestic political debate. Many national politicians often discuss challenges like climate change or migration largely as if the EU did not exist. Second, this silence weakens democratic representation. National elections provide an important channel through which European voters can express their opinion about political decisions made in Brussels. Third, failing to address the EU’s role in policy-making leads to a weakening of democratic accountability, allowing national politicians to claim responsibility for good outcomes and dodge responsibility for bad ones. Sorting out how to evaluate joint decision-making in Europe is difficult, and politicians should facilitate the debate about it, not hamper it. Whilst several core state powers moved to the EU, public contestation remained embedded at the national level. ‘The EU’s so-called democratic deficit is rooted more in Europe’s capitals than in Brussels’ (De Vries 2021). Deepening and widening democratic practices at the

European level are also a key part of the creation of a political identity (e.g. Kuhn 2015; McNamara and Musgrave 2020). To embed the EU into lived experience and garner some basic support, the EU will need to develop a much more on the ground set of democratic practices. There are historical cases, most notably the United States to show that this shift is not impossible, it happened before, albeit very fraught (McNamara and Musgrave 2020).

What is more, one can consider institutional reforms. For example, the direct election of a Commission president could simplify political responsibility, raise executive accountability and make policy options more transparent (Hix 2013), or finding a more successful way to integrate national parliaments to introduce a real political review based on a test on subsidiarity. Although all these reforms require treaty change, which may prove difficult, they could increase the representation of different views at the EU level, aid in decreasing the informational asymmetries between national and EU institutions and help the development of a European public sphere where also non-institutional actors could be heard. Not only elite behaviour or institutional reform might help, but also the content of the debate is crucial. Public debate is intended to find common ground after fiercely discussing our differences and to negotiate the rules of living together. In the EU and its member states, we have moved to a clearer articulation of our differences, but without much common resolution. There has not been much imagination of what the European house should look and feel like. Gessen (2020) in their insightful book *Surviving Autocracy* argues that democratic politics dies without substantive discussions. We only save democratic politics when we revitalize the language of politics, next to protecting the politics of rules. Europeans will need to articulate who they are, what future they are building and what hopes and dreams unite them. Political leaders, journalists, pundits, community organizers, etc. are the gatekeepers of a blossoming political debate. This is what they owe to future generations. Europe's leaders cannot convince people with technical arguments or depoliticized discussions but have to develop a story about the 'why Europe'. Then they should claim political authority for these stories and campaign on the public acceptance for them. The EU, like any other political order, consist of a multitude of stories and storytellers (Arendt 1951), and as many as them as possible should find a place in the European house.

After Brexit, the Covid pandemic and the fact that war has reached its borders once more, Europeans are faced with the opportunity to revisit what the European house is about. Which narrative will ultimately develop about the Ukraine war is not clear. It may prove to be a unifying moment for younger generations; it may accelerate the cracks in the European house, or something in between. What is clear, however, is that narratives are about the connections we wish to make. It is up to voters and their representatives, to the officials and civil servants to shape the future of EU politics. In doing so, European contemporaries need to learn from the past and deconstruct the foundational narratives that shape EU politics to this day. These foundational narratives are selective and exclusive, have fuelled depoliticization and reflect power imbalances within the EU. It is important to learn from them whilst thinking about the future, in order not to repeat past mistakes. Ivan Krastev rightly observed that sometimes Europeans 'are so obsessed with what will happen, that they forget what has happened'.⁴ The ideal of a Union that promotes

⁴Taken from an interview with Ezra Klein: <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/26/podcasts/transcript-ezra-klein-interviews-ivan-krastev.html>

peace through regulation, rule of law, trade and negotiations on an equal footing is often violated and accompanied by a lot of hypocrisy. This needs to be pointed out and discussed, not hidden away or condemned. If this is a Union and should remain one, the diversity of Europe's past and present should be reflected in its future.

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