



EUROPE in a  
CHANGING WORLD



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# Look Who's Talking!

Telling Europe's Story in the EU Capital

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*Europe is facing a battle of the narratives that will shape our future. In this brave new world, a compelling narrative will be paramount for the survival of the European project.*

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## INTRODUCTION

The European Union's founding narrative, to promote peace, has never been more relevant. Roiled by two years of a deadly pandemic that has cost millions of lives around the world, wreaked havoc with economies, and deepened political and social fissures, the Union today confronts what for seven decades had seemed unthinkable: a major land war on the European continent. With his brutal and unprovoked attack on Ukraine, Russia's president, Vladimir Putin, not only violates the sovereignty of a neighbouring state, he also challenges the European security order.

In the wake of Putin's aggression, the European Union and the wider West have shown remarkable resolve and unity. Policies that had stoked fierce arguments were suddenly adopted almost overnight. EU member states, together with their closest allies, quickly aligned to impose a package of crippling economic sanctions on Russia and to purchase and deliver arms to Ukraine. Many countries, above all Ukraine's neighbours, opened their borders to refugees, who have been given the right to live and work in the Union.

Inspired by the bravery of the Ukrainian people and the leadership of their impassioned president, Volodymyr Zelensky, the European Union has been roused from its geostrategic slumber. It has emerged re-energised, unified, and emboldened to defend the principles it has enshrined in its treaties: respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law, and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities (Article 2, Treaty on European Union). The day that Russian troops invaded Ukraine, 24 February 2022, is already deemed a major historical turning point. What we are witnessing is neither the end of history nor the end of liberalism, but the beginning of an age of disruption, disorder, and dissent that may stretch on for decades.

In addition to the battlefield, today's confrontation of alternative ideologies is increasingly playing out in the realm of words. States and non-state actors alike routinely use disinformation and 'alternative facts' to sow confusion, breed fear, and undermine trust. During the Covid-19 pandemic both China and Russia stepped up their disinformation campaigns, intending to expose Europe as too weak, too slow, and too divided to conquer the virus. Vladimir Putin, in turn, has resorted to peddling false truths about 'denazification' as a central justification for his war in Ukraine. According to Josep Borrell, the European Union's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Europe is facing a 'battle of narratives' that will shape our future. In this brave new world, a compelling narrative will be paramount for the survival of the European project.

This policy brief explores how the European Union can best tell its story in these difficult times. Taking its cue from one of the masters of rhetoric in ancient Greece, Aristotle, it lays out three fundamental principles that are at the core of good rhetoric: *logos* (reason), *pathos* (emotion), and *ethos* (credibility and competence). The paper begins with the question of *what* story Europe should tell; its *logos*. It then looks at *how* to tell the story; the *pathos*. Finally, it explores *who* is competent and credible enough to tell the story; the *ethos*. The conclusion sets out policy recommendations for a European narrative that can resonate both at home and abroad.

The policy brief draws on numerous interviews with the policymakers, spokespeople, speech-writers, and journalists that shape the stories told in Europe's capital, Brussels, and its member states. It also draws on opinion polls and in-depth interviews conducted over the past three years as part of the [Europe's Stories Project](#) of the Dahrendorf Programme at the University of Oxford, which the paper is published in collaboration with.

# What to say?

Since time immemorial, we have told stories to make sense of our world and ourselves. Our stories make us who we are – this is as true in the political realm as it is in the personal. The European Union is no exception. From ‘ever closer union’ to ‘unity in diversity’, the history of European integration is also the history of the Union’s quest for a narrative that captures the spirit of its age. The identity-shaping potential of storytelling is particularly relevant in times of crisis, when a convincing overarching narrative can give meaning to the upheaval we are experiencing.

For the European Union, this is such a moment. Today, the Union is challenged on two fronts: populists question the foundations of liberal democracy and European cooperation, while hostile external powers seek to divide member states and their allies and challenge the international order. The Covid-19 pandemic has deepened political and social divisions, which plays into the hands of populists and authoritarians.

It has become a commonplace to suggest that the European Union’s *raison d’être* – strength in unity – is premised upon past crises. Once again, this appears to be borne out by recent events. After a stumbling start in the first months of the pandemic, the European Union agreed on a formidable rescue package of €750 billion, called NextGenerationEU. In the wake of President Putin’s invasion of Ukraine, member states which for decades have been divided over their policy on Russia and were reluctant to increase defence budgets, acted with speed and resolve to counter Russian aggression. And on climate change, which especially [young Europeans see as an existential threat](#), the European Union combined its trailblazing climate policy with measures to secure more sustainable economic growth and a greener energy supply under the Green Deal.

In the immediate aftermath of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, many commentators hailed Europe’s unity and determination. European leaders, who had shown a talent for burying their heads in the sand when it came to security and defence, were shocked out of complacency by the return of war to their continent. Inspired by the defiance of the Ukrainian people and the leadership and rhetorical gifts of their president, they acted swiftly to impose unprecedented sanctions to cripple the Russian war effort; sent aid and arms to Ukraine; and welcomed millions of refugees. To achieve this, they activated previously unused mechanisms such as the European Peace Facility and the Temporary Protection Directive, which allowed them to procure arms for the war effort in Ukraine and provide housing, work, and healthcare for refugees.

Germany's new Chancellor, Olaf Scholz, in a speech that is already deemed to be historically significant, reversed the decades-long foreign policy trajectory of military restraint to boost defence spending and deliver arms to Ukraine. At the same time, countries such as Sweden and Finland are openly debating the possibility of joining NATO. Poland, meanwhile, has shelved its past hostility to migrants to receive millions of refugees.

It is heartening to see the European Union so energised, determined, and united in their support of the brave Ukrainians that defend with their lives the very principles upon which the Union was founded. And yet, this should not blind us to the fact that however relevant Europe's founding narrative may be today, it is unfolding in a radically changed world. While the fight for democracy, freedom, and a nation's right to choose its own destiny is as relevant as ever, these values are also increasingly under threat.

In the current geopolitical context, the idea that growing interdependence will necessarily lead to greater peace and prosperity – a pillar of the 'ever closer Union' narrative that sustained integration in the founding days of the Union and the years that followed – no longer holds. For decades, the received wisdom was that integration in one policy field of the European Union would necessarily spill over into other areas, thereby sustaining a semi-automatic dynamic of deeper and deeper integration until, eventually, the Union would resemble a supranational European state. Europe, we were told, was like a bicycle. It needed to move forward, or it would crash.

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### *The European Union needs to tell a story that speaks to the need for reassurance that is felt by many Europeans.*

History has since proved that such a purely benign vision of interdependence is unfounded. The 2008 financial turmoil, the Euro crisis that flowed from it, and more recently the Covid-19 pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine have alerted us all to the vulnerabilities that come with interdependence. In Europe, the rapid succession of financial strife, political controversies caused by large-scale migration, and the pandemic have pierced the core of people's concerns: their money, their identity, and their lives. With war once more a reality on their continent, Europeans now have a keen awareness of their fragile place in the world. To address these anxieties, the European Union needs to tell a story that speaks to the need for reassurance that is felt by many Europeans.

Contrary to the unquestioned belief in the advance of liberal democracy in the aftermath of the Cold War, preserving peace, freedom, and democracy on the European continent and across the wider world will be a heavily contested fight. Putin's aggression in Ukraine is just the most recent and the most violent example of the pushback against the current

order. Rhetoric has played a central role in this confrontation. Both China and Russia have weaponised narratives to their advantage in increasingly sophisticated disinformation campaigns. Just weeks before the invasion of Ukraine, China and Russia published a joint communiqué declaring mutual support for an alternative order based on new spheres of influence. Short of a military alliance, this mere statement of intent was sufficient to send ripples of disquiet around the world.

Their vision of an alternative world order exposes the fragility of the current one.

According to Freedom House, democratic regimes have been backsliding for the past 16 years, a trend that has only been accelerated by the Covid-19 pandemic. In Europe too, anti-democratic and illiberal ideas have gained ground. What is more, Europe's rekindled enthusiasm for defending democratic liberties and self-determination does not resonate equally in other parts of the world. China's reluctance to condemn the Russian invasion of Ukraine is a crucial factor. Other powers such as India, South Africa, and Vietnam with whom the European Union has long sought to deepen its ties have also refrained from condemning Russia's war. Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and even Israel have sought to appear even-handed. All this shows that, beyond Europe's immediate allies, support in defending the current order will be hard to come by. Convincing countries beyond the immediate West will be crucial if Europe's current geopolitical awakening is to translate into a more prominent geopolitical posture. Mistaking unity in its own ranks for a wider global consensus, however, could do more to alienate other powers rather than rally them to Europe's cause.

As it has become clear that interdependence also bears considerable risks, the European Union has discovered the narrative of 'strategic autonomy', as part of an attempt to be less reliant on others in the fields of defence, energy, infrastructure, medicines, or food production, to name just a few of the Union's sectoral vulnerabilities that recent crises have exposed. The war in Ukraine has given new impetus to Europe's quest for strategic autonomy, but also highlighted the need for strong alliances, not least NATO and the transatlantic partnership. The pursuit of both greater self-sufficiency and deeper ties with strategic allies, especially the United States, may not necessarily be mutually exclusive, but will continue to present a tightrope walk for Europe as it enters a more uncertain future.

The European Union will also need to rethink its narrative on enlargement, which has long been out of touch with the political reality, as progress on accession has de facto stalled. Looming policy decisions include whether to grant Ukraine's bid for European Union membership – a powerful symbol in support of freedom and democracy. Another is how to confront countries such as Serbia that are candidates for EU membership despite heavily criticising the European Union and cultivating close ties with China and Russia. The outcomes of these debates will reveal much about how the European Union chooses to approach enlargement in the future, and whether it stands firmly by principles that will also affect its geostrategic posture.

Similarly, the European Union needs to ensure that it cannot be accused of hypocrisy in advocating a free world and universal human rights. People around the globe, including in Europe, were quick to call out the double standards applied by countries such as Poland and Hungary by welcoming white Christian refugees from Ukraine while often turning back Muslims and people of colour, including refugees from Syria, who have also been victims of brutal Russian shelling. The way that African, Asian, and Middle Eastern residents of Ukraine were hindered from leaving the country has drawn sharp criticism around the globe. If Europe wants to make its narrative of universal freedoms and rights a bridge that connects it to other corners of the world, it will need to demonstrate that the universal values it purports to defend are just that: universal.

To do that effectively, Europeans – individually and collectively – need to own up to their colonial past. Echoes of colonialism still impede the resonance of Europe's narrative on freedom and democracy, and often stand in the way of more effective cooperation with partners in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. A failure to openly acknowledge its dark past risks playing into the narrative of Western civilisational exceptionalism and arrogance that is propagated by Europe's adversaries, who seek to portray liberal democracy as Western white hypocrisy.

At the same time, Europe should be bolder in calling out the neo-imperial posture of Russia and China when it comes to challenging the independence of their neighbouring countries or China's exploitation of raw materials on much of the African continent. In his speech to the UN Security Council condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine as "stoking the embers of past empires", the Kenyan ambassador to the United Nations, Martin Kimani, has demonstrated how this can be done to great effect.

It will be equally important for the European Union to continue to stand up to those who challenge liberal democracy from within its borders. According to the [Eurobarometer poll of February 2022](#), the defence of democracy remains a top priority for Europeans. Now that it has the legal means to do so, it must remain a priority to defend the rule of law, an independent judiciary, media, and free civil society; address the misuse of European funds; and stand up for the human rights of all people, including ethnic minorities and the LGBTQ+ community. How committed Europeans are to democracy and human rights within their Union will determine how credible they are in standing up for these ideals beyond their borders.

By openly confronting and addressing its own shortcomings on democracy and rule of law, the European Union would give itself the best chance of forging alliances with other countries around the globe that are battling similar problems. If it coins the fight for freedom and democracy in a discourse of humility and frames it as a common challenge that Europe shares with other countries, then Europe's narrative as defender of democracy is more likely to resonate than its previous attempts to cast itself as a model to others.

Humility and honesty will also serve the Union well when it comes to two more of the central pillars of Europe's narrative: recovery from the pandemic and the fight against climate change. Both policy fields are among the priorities for Europe's citizens, who want to see a concerted and unified European response. According to the [Eurobarometer poll of February 2022](#), improving public health systems and reducing poverty and social exclusion are now the top [priorities for Europeans](#). Polling by the Europe's Stories project at the University of Oxford also shows that, for [young people](#), [access to education and jobs](#) is particularly pressing. [One in six Europeans](#) now believe that more decisions regarding employment should be taken at European level. One particularly striking result of the pandemic is the burgeoning popularity of a minimum wage, and even a universal basic income, with [84% of Europeans supporting a mandatory minimum wage and 71% of Europeans](#) in favour of a universal basic income provided by the state. In the midst of the pandemic, the European Union managed to agree on a powerful recovery package. Such concrete initiatives to support people in different corners of the Union should be widely publicised, as they will play an important role in reassuring Europeans confronting massive global transformations.

The European Union's Green Deal is another central piece of Europe's narrative, and rightly so. For several years, opinion polls have consistently ranked the fight against climate change as a top priority for Europeans, especially younger generations. Through the Green Deal, which combines ambitious climate targets with an agenda for transitioning towards a cleaner, more energy-efficient economy, the European Union has incorporated many climate goals into its economic agenda. Following the war in Ukraine, the drive towards renewable energies has also taken on a geopolitical dimension, as Europe seeks to accelerate the diversification of its energy sources to become less dependent on Russian oil and gas. Still, according to polling of the Europe's Stories project, many Europeans would like to see the European Union adopt even [more ambitious aims](#) for slowing climate change.

The pandemic recovery package and the Green Deal demonstrated that by cooperating within the European Union, member states can 'make interdependence safe again'. That means defining higher standards for sustainable jobs and social welfare, the environment, food safety, and public health, rather than joining a global race to the bottom. The European Union's focus on green and sustainable growth in its Covid-19 stimulus package enables the Union to shift its narrative from working to overcome past problems towards empowering a new generation to jointly confront the future.

The focus on the positive dimensions of investing in security, stimulating recovery, and fostering green growth and climate neutrality is crucial in motivating Europeans to support changes in public policy. But it will be just as necessary to prepare them for the fact that advances towards these goals will come at a cost. The price will come from restructuring economies from a dependence on fossil fuels to a more green and

sustainable model, along with increased spending on social welfare, public health, and defence; the better integration of refugees into society; and the forceful economic sanctions against Russia. These will all create both winners and losers, at least in the short term. It is crucial that the European Union prepares its citizens with honest, heartfelt, and clear language for the costs and compromises that lie ahead. Europe is confronting a generational transformation of its societies and economies, and this needs to be part of both a European narrative and an effective policy agenda.

The European Union must avoid the trap it has fallen into before: overpromising and underdelivering. From a more decisive stance on defence to innovative growth, much has already been promised to Europeans without ever being fulfilled. One need only think of the now infamous European battle groups – military battalions composed of member state troops that have been part of the Union's Common Security and Defence Policy for decades, but were never deployed. Or the long forgotten Lisbon Agenda that was supposed to turn the Union into 'the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world' by 2010. The transformations that leaders are currently discussing will take years if not decades to come to fruition. Greater investment in defence, the fight against social exclusion, and the creation of sustainable jobs, all while transitioning to a greener future, will be costly and require difficult political compromises and trade-offs. To keep the political momentum needed to take the difficult decisions that can make these aims a reality, a powerful narrative that speaks directly to people's concerns cannot be substituted by slogans and soundbites, especially if they contradict the reality on the ground.

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*What Europe needs is a narrative that not only **aspires** to a Union that can withstand the pressures of an ever more dangerous world, but also **inspires** the political will to make this a reality.*

The Union overcame long-held resistance to communal lending by adopting the pandemic rescue package, NextGenerationEU. It also rallied to swiftly adopt sanctions on Russia and enable arms deliveries to Ukraine. This shows that when the situation demands it, Europeans can achieve difficult goals. However, a successful policy narrative, not to say a successful European Union, cannot merely be triggered by one crisis after another. Europe cannot afford to wait for Climate Armageddon or digital irrelevance to take the transformative steps necessary, to cite just two policy areas, where united action is urgent. What Europe needs is a narrative that not only **aspires** to a Union that can withstand the pressures of an ever more dangerous world, but also **inspires** the political will to make this a reality.

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## II. PATHOS:

# How to say it?

For Aristotle, a crucial ingredient of a story that can inspire action is *pathos*, the ability to show empathy with the audience's concerns. In the eyes of the ancient Greek master of rhetoric, a powerful narrative is not just about stating the facts, it is about convincing your audience.

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*Too often communication remains an afterthought rather than an essential pillar of the political process.*

For many of the European institutions, however, the main purpose of communication is still to inform rather than to convince. While the Union has transformed itself from a purely bureaucratic institution into a political actor in its own right, communication is not yet treated as a powerful political tool to sway audiences and build public support. Too often, communication remains an afterthought rather than an essential pillar of the political process. This is a grave shortcoming and explains many of the obstacles that stand in the way of a European narrative that resounds more widely.

Three considerations are particularly crucial in order to present a story that touches hearts as well as minds. First, it must demonstrate empathy for the audience and their concerns by creating a link between their world and that of the speaker. Second, the story must be told with words that capture the mood of the moment and rise to the magnitude of the occasion. And third, an institutional culture must be created in which creative and innovative communication can prosper.

Today, information warfare, identity politics, and new technologies rely heavily on emotive forms of political communication. With his disinformation campaigns, Putin has been a master at stirring public discontent through effectively crafted narratives on migration, denazification, and the decadence of the West. Within Europe, many populist politicians are equally apt in channelling public anxieties about rapid geopolitical and social change into fear, hatred, and exclusion, leading to what Pierre Hassner called the 'Revenge of the Passions'. As a result, these political figures dominate the political discourse, even in places where they have only modest success at the ballot box.

In contrast, the European Union's institutions for the most part rely on a fact-based, dispassionate style of communication. What is more, according to research by Christian Rauh at the Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin, even national politicians tend to adopt more complex and rational language when speaking about the European Union than when they discuss national politics. When it comes to European Union membership, migration, the Euro, or Brexit, Europe's narrative has largely focused on rationality and economic benefits, even though these issues all relate directly to questions of identity and community and therefore also have a strong affective dimension.

The limits of this approach were driven home most pervasively in the wake of the double shocks of 2016: the UK referendum in favour of leaving the European Union and the election of Donald Trump as president of the United States. Both demonstrated the importance of identity and a widely felt anxiety about rapid social and geopolitical changes in determining electoral behaviour. At a time when emotions play a central role in identity formation and political choice, the dryly rational and fact-based way in which the European Union communicates stands in the way of a better and broader connection to its citizens. Today, many of the Union's policy priorities – from fighting climate change to recovery from the pandemic – lend themselves to a more emotive and compassionate style of communication. Framing these issues in a more relatable, personal, and emotive way would be an important asset in mobilising public opinion.

To be sure, information based on facts and scientific evidence should be the cornerstone of good policy, as well as good communication. At a time when information warfare pervades public debate and when individual opinions are often accorded equal worth as scientific evidence, even in the mainstream media, the truth has never been more essential. But a narrative based on science and facts need not appeal to rationality alone. Good communication is not merely the unbiased dissemination of facts; it is about constructing an argument that appeals to both reason *and* emotion. After all, leaders such as former US President Barack Obama, French President Emmanuel Macron and, most recently, Ukraine's President Zelensky have shown that positive themes such as hope, change, and courage can drive powerful positive narratives.

*In fact*, scientific research has demonstrated for decades the limits of rational choice in determining decision-making. As early as 1975, a now famous experiment at Stanford University showed that facts and scientific evidence has shockingly little effect in swaying people's minds once they have formed an opinion. More recently, in their book *Denying to the Grave: Why We Ignore the Facts That Save Us*, Sarah and Jack Gordon show how individuals resist evidence that contradicts their personal views, even when their own survival is at stake. Even the facts are telling us that facts alone are not enough.

Apart from the 'emotional deficit' of its narrative, Europe is also limited by the language it uses to tell its story. Orwell's seminal essay on *Politics and the English Language* is as

pertinent a guide to good political writing as it was when it was first published. His critique of the institutional use of complicated and vague political language to evade accountability for difficult political decisions speaks directly to some of the challenges the European Union encounters in forging a compelling narrative. Now as then, clear and simple language is essential to express political direction and leadership at a time of competing worldviews. Finding the right words, however, seems to be a particular challenge for Brussels, and not just because so many of its politicians are not native speakers.

During the interviews I conducted with speechwriters and advisers to EU and national leaders, many told me how constricted they found themselves by the vocabulary they were asked to employ when writing about the European Union. ‘The EU speeches were always the most difficult ones, there are so many taboos around the language, the words you can and cannot use’, recalls one speechwriter to a head of state of a large member country. This sentiment is echoed by Luuk van Middelaar, former speechwriter and adviser to European Council President Herman van Rompuy, when recounting in his book *Alarums and Excursions: Improvising Politics on the European Stage* that, ‘in Brussels entirely normal words such as power, national interest or cultural difference, are beyond the boundaries of what can be said.’

One senior official in charge of European communication campaigns in a national ministry told me: ‘the material we receive from Brussels is mostly unusable. They (the EU institutions) rely on abstract concepts and bureaucratic language that fails to capture the concerns of our audiences at home’. In the same vein, in an ECFR paper from 2020, Ivan Krastev and Mark Leonard argue that: ‘European leaders in Brussels and national capitals ... need to speak to European voters in a new language that recognises the extent to which the world may have permanently changed ... a narrative grounded in an understanding of the way citizens feel, not in a promise of values and abstract projects’. Like any good writing, the language with which Europe speaks to its citizens and to the world should be clear, convincing, and compassionate.

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*“The limits of my language are the limits of my world” Ludwig Wittgenstein, Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*

In his book, Van Middelaar traces the evolution of the European Union from a bureaucratic enterprise to a political animal driven by the course of world events. But whereas Brussels as a political project has changed, its political vocabulary has not. The self-censorship it employs in its announcements severely limits the Union’s ability to project itself as a powerful geopolitical force. As the German philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein reminds us, ‘the limits of my language are the limits of my world.’

What is more, language matters not just in order to adequately reflect public opinion, it is crucial to build the public support for wide-ranging economic and societal changes that will be necessary if the European Union wants to adapt to a rapidly changing world. The power of language to shape political reality, not just mirror it, seems to be largely lost on Brussels.

In modern politics, a persuasive message needs not just the right emotional resonance and language; the institutional framework in which the message is developed is also crucial. As Peggy Noonan recounts in her seminal account of her speechwriting days for Ronald Reagan, *What I saw at the Revolution*, being a wordsmith among bureaucrats is particularly challenging because the logic of good administration does not always coincide with the logic of good messaging. To craft a good speech, it is often necessary to be 'a pain in the neck'. You need to tactfully turn down requests to include favoured phrases or political pet projects by colleagues or superiors. At the same time you must badger bureaucrats for boundless details of a certain policy area, only to then to discard most of the information received.

Access is another crucial issue. Some speechwriters in the European institutions are sufficiently close to their political bosses and have the liberty and authority to draft with a degree of independence. But others sit in communications units that are far removed from their principals and have to answer to a long hierarchy of intermediaries, most of whom are not communications experts. As a frequent speaker in training seminars teaching the core principles of speechwriting and political communication, I was often confronted by the frustrations of skilled colleagues who encountered the so-called 'track changes problem'. While they had been specifically recruited as specialist communicators, they were time and again overruled by superiors who were policy experts but with no background in communication. As one participant told me: 'However much I try and apply your advice, by the time my speech reaches the Commissioner, the text has gone through so many amendments by people who are not trained communicators, but are higher up in the institutional hierarchy, that I cannot ignore them. So the text my boss receives is often quite different from the text I wrote'. A senior official in charge of communication also told me that their efforts to draft more emotional and personal speeches for their boss, were frequently met with resistance from colleagues and superiors even when the Commissioner was happy to use such language. Within the EU institutions, it seems that message control still trumps message resonance.

Apart from its own institutional obstacles, the Union also faces a radically changed context in which political communication takes place today. Disinformation does not just populate the public sphere with competing narratives. The scale and force with which countries like China and Russia flood media outlets and social media platforms, spending billions on public and overt communication campaigns, remains unmatched by their democratic counterparts. Since the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the

massive disinformation campaigns that targeted, above all, its neighbouring countries, the European Union has radically expanded its resources. It has created several strategic communications task forces for Europe's Eastern Neighbourhood, the Balkans and Europe's Southern Neighbourhood.

In response to the war in Ukraine, the European Union's East StratCom Task Force has further increased its activities. European Union disinformation experts have been employed to advise member state governments on their efforts to dispel disinformation attacks during national election campaigns. They have also worked closely with the United States, Canada, and other G7 partners in drawing up common standards and guidelines to counter disinformation. The success story of its StratCom Task Force should encourage European institutions to invest in communications more broadly, by hiring skilled professionals and giving them the freedom and authority to work creatively. This could include giving more senior management responsibility for communication, not as part of a larger portfolio, but as their main responsibility. Unless communicators can fully exercise their craft, the logic of bureaucracy will continue to stand in the way of clear political messaging.

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### III. ETHOS:

# Who gets to speak?

The purpose of a compelling narrative is not only to adequately reflect public opinion and 'sell' political plans, it is crucial to build public support for difficult decisions. This is especially relevant now, as Europe confronts a number of transformative changes. Successful political leadership, therefore, depends on the ability to combine effective policymaking with a narrative that is both authentic and compassionate.

This brings us to the third pillar of good rhetoric, what Aristotle called *ethos*, the credibility and integrity of the speaker. For Aristotle, the ability of the speaker to relate their personal story to that of the audience plays a critical role in their ability to convince people to change their minds, their behaviour, and to motivate them to act.

Europe's leaders have powerful personal stories to tell of their experiences confronting war, disease, and dictatorship, which resonate with some of the most pressing challenges of today. Former President of the European Council Donald Tusk, a man who was much ridiculed at the beginning of his tenure for his weak command of English, only to become one of the Union's most gifted communicators in recent years, is a good example of a European leader who told Europe's story in an engaging way. Tusk powerfully evoked his past in the Polish Solidarnosc movement to advocate for political change and the defence of democracy.

One of today's most inspiring personifications of *ethos* is perhaps Ukraine's president Zelensky. He effectively used his role as political leader to not only draw attention to the terrible plight of his country, but also to connect it to the future of the European Union his country is hoping to join. The courage of the embattled leader to stand by his people, famously telling the United States, 'I need ammunition, not a ride', makes him all the more credible. As one senior EU official told me, his evocative speeches and direct appeal to Europeans to help his country defend itself were a decisive factor in persuading European leaders to adopt far more extensive sanctions on Russia and move more swiftly to supply arms to Ukraine than they had initially envisaged. Alas, so far, Zelensky's inspiring speeches have not been matched by equally heightened rhetoric at European Union level. In his reply to the Ukrainian president's plea for EU membership, Council President Charles Michel retreated to the familiar obfuscation of EU jargon, promising to 'assess', 'analyse', and 'work towards'.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the European Union missed many important opportunities to project empathy and trust. Border closures, wrangles over medical equipment, and

bungled vaccine procurement overshadowed successful cooperation regarding the evacuation of its nationals from abroad, burden-sharing to treat the most vulnerable patients, and a generous programme to donate vaccinations to third countries via the Covax scheme. In the early days of the pandemic, a majority of Italians regarded China not the European Union as the more trustworthy partner, as a result of successful Chinese propaganda. In Serbia, President Aleksandar Vučić played geopolitical games as he welcomed China's pandemic support with much public fanfare, all the while accepting aid from the European Union worth multiple times the help he received from Beijing. In this context, the repeated efforts of EU leaders to invoke the spirit of 'Team Europe' rang hollow in many ears.

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*While Brussels as a political project has changed, the political vocabulary has not kept up.*

The State of the Union address by European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 is another case in point. The speech came at a pivotal moment, as Europe's recovery hung in the balance, with rapidly rising Covid-19 cases and a transatlantic partner that looked likely to be mired in domestic turmoil for some time. Even though it addressed the public's top priorities, from a greener, more social Europe to one that is willing to stand its ground on the world stage, like many a State of the Union before it, the speech found little resonance beyond expert circles. What it lacked was a personal dimension. This is a real missed opportunity. As a trained medical doctor, a mother, and a citizen well versed in several European languages, she had the opportunity to reach her audience in a much more immediate way by showing glimpses of the person behind the president.

Having been on the receiving end of the blame game, not just from Eurosceptics, but also national leaders keen to blame any fallout on 'Brussels', it is perhaps unsurprising that EU leaders are loath to bare their souls in personal speeches and prefer to stick to 'hard facts'. And yet, it is precisely this reluctance to reveal more of themselves, take risks, and make themselves vulnerable which is proving to be the Union's real weakness.

EU leaders should invest more in building an identifiable public profile that combines their political priorities with authentic personal attributes. In addition to key speeches, such as the State of the Union, strategic use of social media to reach people beyond the Brussels bubble can play an important role in this. While the visibility of politicians who represent the European Union's institutions has increased over recent years, key events such as the State of the Union are not widely followed. According to a poll by the European Stories project at Oxford, just 20% of Europeans know who delivers it.

Since national politicians play an important role in shaping European politics, they too have a responsibility to shape the Union's narrative. This is especially true given their relative prominence in the minds of the public, compared with leaders of the European Union. [As an opinion poll by the Europe's Stories project has shown](#), when asked who represents a 'European leader', 36% of Europeans think firstly of national politicians, compared to 32% that associate the term with leaders of European Union institutions.

Beyond capitals, local governments and community organisers also play a crucial role in telling Europe's story, especially when it comes to the aims of social inclusion, job creation, and fighting climate change, where local communities have a central role to play in meeting European targets. However, more can be done to include the local dimension in the bigger European picture to make it more tangible and relatable. While Brussels can seem remote, both geographically and politically, local initiatives often remain unseen and their stories go untold.

As one local politician told me: 'The way people experience Europe in my city is mostly through their everyday concerns. This is why I try to tie local initiatives on climate change to the broader objectives we are striving for in Europe. It would be nice if these efforts would get more resonance in Brussels, which for many of my voters can seem very far away.' Climate change is one area in which cities have become a more important focus of European policymaking. Involving national and local politicians more systematically in communication campaigns could make a big difference in carrying Europe's story beyond the confines of the Brussels bubble. After all, according to the latest Eurobarometer poll, while a majority (58%) of Europeans currently follow European affairs, they also say that they would [like to be better informed](#) about the details of policy decisions debated in Brussels.

To reach a wider audience, it will also be necessary to increase the diversity of those who speak on behalf of the Union. The face of the European Union on the whole is still predominantly white, middle-aged, and male. Apart from the spokesperson's service, the European Union communicates mostly through its senior management. Although several occasions such as official government-to-government meetings require adhering to diplomatic protocol, many other public occasions do not, and offer an opportunity to present a more diverse face of the European Union. This could involve a wider section of EU staff, as well as more effectively leveraging the profiles of relevant influencers and national, regional, or local public figures to make the case for Europe.

With its hugely popular Erasmus programme for student exchanges, the European Union has a large resource of highly motivated young ambassadors. Much more could be done to include Erasmus alumni in efforts to tell their stories of Europe. Artists and public intellectuals, as well as well-known figures in sports and entertainment, play a key role

in reaching publics that do not usually follow political debates. Some of this is already happening in isolated cases, but should be done on a much broader scale.

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*Europe's battle of the narratives will play out in national public spheres as much as in the international realm.*

A narrative that fails to include the full range of people it seeks to address will by nature be limited in its reach and also fail to resonate in those parts of the world that have suffered at the hands of Europe's white paternalism. By including a more diverse cross-section of society, people of colour, LGBTQ+ people, women, and young people, and by reckoning with its colonial past rather than paying lip service to it, the European Union's story can resonate beyond its current audience. After all, Europe's battle of the narratives will play out in national public spheres as much as in the international realm.

As the research of the [Europe's Stories](#) project has shown, an important dimension of the effort to craft a compelling narrative for the European Union will depend on improved channels of *listening*. Listening in this instance does not refer to occasional stakeholder consultations or citizen fora, such as the recent Conference on the Future of Europe. More often than not, these initiatives turn into large bureaucratic exercises rather than instances of broad public mobilisation. Instead, the European Union should invest in a continuous effort to read and analyse public opinion and national political discourses. At the European level, this would require greater investment in adequate technical tools for social media monitoring and focus groups. At the national and local levels, town hall meetings and exchanges with national parliamentarians could be relied on more regularly to read the public mood beyond institutional channels. These exchanges in turn can help EU leaders to build more recognisable public profiles beyond the Brussels bubble.

Listening is also an important dimension of the European Union's efforts to project itself geopolitically. Often, the stories the Union tells itself to foster internal coherence do not necessarily ring true with countries outside of Europe. Insistence on European unity or strategic autonomy for example can bypass or even alienate audiences whose primary concern is not how the European Union organises its internal policy priorities, but rather what the Union can do to help them achieve theirs.

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## CONCLUSION

As history has shown and we are once again witnessing today, words matter. A good story has the power to touch hearts and minds, rouse action, and change history. To tell a story that can keep Europe together and at the same time connect it to the rest of the world, Europe does not need to reinvent the wheel. It does, however, need to more consistently follow some basic rules of good rhetoric and make communication a more central part of its political strategy.

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*A good story has the power to touch hearts and minds, rouse action, and change history.*

The European Union, for all its faults, still has a good story to tell. It should do so with confidence, compassion, and candour. Today the Union's efforts to project a story that resonates widely with Europeans and people around the world are hamstrung by an approach to communication that follows a bureaucratic rather than a political mindset. Centralised control, risk aversion, and hierarchical processes do not generally lead to powerful communication. As Europeans are discovering once more, to speak and act with conviction, we must be prepared to take risks, call out wrongdoing, and be clear about the shared burden that the defence of principles imposes. Muddling through, a strategy that the Union pursued for decades, is no longer an option now that Europe confronts a series of existential challenges.

A narrative built around a collective effort to fight for peace, freedom, and democracy resonates today as strongly as it ever has done. By mobilising support for a core set of beliefs, the European Union can deliver on the unity and decisiveness it will need to overcome the enormous geopolitical, economic, ecological, and domestic challenges it confronts. In order to connect its own plight to those of partners around the world, the Union also needs to take the time to listen and absorb how others around the world regard it.

In the fog of war, Europe has found a new clarity about what it stands for. As the world is growing ever more confrontational, European leaders, above all the Union's High Representative Josep Borrell, have called on Europe to 'learn to speak the language of power'. However, only if the European Union learns to use the power of language, can it hope to mobilise the public and international support needed to tackle the multiple crises confronting our world today.

*Only if the European Union learns to use the power of language, can it hope to mobilise the public and international support needed to tackle the multiple crises confronting our world today.*

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## SUMMARY OF POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

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### **1. Make communication an integral part of the policymaking process, not an afterthought.**

This requires that the appropriate political narrative necessary to deliver major policy initiatives is planned from the outset, involving communications experts in the policymaking process and using speeches and publications as vehicles to build political support, not just to 'sell' a *fait accompli*.

### **2. Adopt a language that is clear, convincing, and compassionate.**

Political leaders who speak on behalf of the European Union should be encouraged and emboldened to depart from the agreed canon of permissible language in order to tell personal stories and use simple and direct language. Hiding behind bureaucratic terms and statistics may appear to be the safer option to avoid political controversy and public criticism, but carries much larger costs of indifference and disillusionment that can undercut the Union's room for political manoeuvre.

### **3. Walk the talk. Don't overpromise and underdeliver.**

A convincing narrative will require the European Union to stay true to its principles and apply them universally rather than selectively. Snazzy soundbites or slogans cannot substitute for deep engagement with actual political needs and a clear strategy towards meeting them. A narrative that is aspirational only, without the power to inspire real political change on the ground, risks antagonising rather than convincing the public.

### **4. Hire professional communicators and give them the freedom and authority to formulate clear, unbureaucratic messages.**

In order to shape a narrative that resonates, communications professionals need access to their political bosses and to be at the table when important political decisions are taken. Communication needs to be a core responsibility of senior management.

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## **5. Diversify. Give people of different ages, genders, races, and sexual orientations the opportunity to speak on behalf of the Union.**

With a few notable exceptions, the European Union's public face is predominantly white, middle-aged and often male. By hiring and providing a platform for a more diverse public-facing staff, the Union could better reflect the societies it represents and enable a larger group of Europeans to identify themselves with the various faces of the European Union.

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## **6. Listen.**

A convincing European narrative should be built around the concerns and priorities that Europeans feel most strongly about. To achieve this, exchanges at local and national level will be at least as important as institutional channels for listening at the supranational level. An equally important dimension of the European Union's efforts to listen is to be more receptive and responsive to the perceptions and demands of its international partners.



### **Note on the author**

Dr. Julia De Clerck-Sachsse is a [Visiting Senior Fellow](#) at the German Marshall Fund of the United States. She was previously a Senior Advisor in the Strategic Planning Staff of the European External Action Service and Speechwriter and Communications Adviser to EU High Representatives Lady Catherine Ashton and Federica Mogherini. Dr. De Clerck-Sachsse has also held positions at the European Commission, the German Federal Foreign Office, Sciences Po Paris and the Centre for European Policy Studies. She is an ECFR Council Member and a Member of the International Advisory Committee of the Dahrendorf Programme at Oxford University. From 2020-2021 she was a Europe's Futures Fellow at the Institute for Human Sciences in Vienna.

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## EUROPE in a CHANGING WORLD

The Dahrendorf Programme at the European Studies Centre commemorates the College's third Warden, Ralf Dahrendorf, one of the leading social and political thinkers of his time, and is dedicated to a subject central to his work and life. It has three main components: a Research Agenda which includes the Europe's Stories project, the Free Speech Debate project, an annual Ralf Dahrendorf Memorial Lecture, and an annual group of competitively selected Dahrendorf Scholars. The Dahrendorf Programme is co-directed by Professor Timothy Garton Ash and Professor Paul Betts. The programme is generously funded by the Friedrich Naumann Stiftung für die Freiheit, the ZEIT-Stiftung Ebelin und Gerd Bucerius and Stiftung Mercator.

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