

One Narrative or Several?

Politics, Cultural Elites, and Citizens in Constructing a ‘New Narrative for Europe’

Author:

Wolfram Kaiser

University of Portsmouth, UK

Wolfram.Kaiser@port.ac.uk

ABSTRACT:

European Union institutions have cultivated narratives of European integration for a long time. For its 2013-14 ‘A New Narrative for Europe’ project, however, the European Commission for the first time explicitly used the ‘narrative’ label. Drawing on non-participant observation, semi-structured interviews and qualitative discourse analysis, this article contrasts the drafting process and the resulting declaration’s narrative structure and content with its discussion by citizens in a web-based consultation. The analysis shows that participating citizens forcefully demanded a bottom-up debate and advocated pluralistic perspectives. In these circumstances, elite-driven attempts at strengthening European identity and EU legitimacy are likely to be ineffective.

Keywords: Cultural Committee; European Commission; European identity; European Parliament; integration narratives; narrative pluralism

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When the European Commission invited comments on its ‘A New Narrative for Europe’ project and text on its website, one commentator called it a ‘campaign of hypocrites’. This author demanded that the ‘European commission has to uproot itself or be uprooted by the people of Europe, and start over. ... Talk is cheap, and yours, official Europe, is even cheaper.’¹ Even before the ‘New Narrative’ project, however, European Union (EU) institutions had developed and cultivated narratives of European integration for a long time. They craft and use them strategically, as in the case of the founding fathers narrative about the role of leading politicians in the origins of European integration and their allegedly idealistic motives, for example.

Such processes of narrative construction are geared towards strengthening feelings of cultural commonality and social community within the EU to foster a trans- and supranational collective identity – processes that are broadly reminiscent of top-down strategies for national integration and state formation in the nineteenth century (Anderson, 1991; Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983). At the very least, EU institutions hope that the construction of such narratives will help legitimize European integration and the EU and make it more popular among its citizens. Such attempts at narrative legitimation of European integration and the EU are not limited to public discourses in speeches. Thus, to give but one example, in 2007 the European Parliament initiated the House of European History project in Brussels, originally intended to enshrine a broadly federalist European integration narrative in a museum now to be opened in 2017 (Kaiser, 2016; Settele, 2015).

The pilot project ‘A New Narrative for Europe’, administered by the European Commission during 2013-14, was the first EU-run project explicitly to use the ‘narrative’ label, however. It

originated in a 2012 initiative of Morten Løkkegaard, a Member of the European Parliament (MEP) for the Danish right-liberal Venstre Party and Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe and the Vice-Chair of the Parliament's Committee for Culture and Education. The project's sole formal objective and obligation was to deliver what was then called a narrative 'manifesto' for 'Europe', which was treated as equivalent to the EU.

Having offered its support, the Commission undertook the project's implementation. It formed a 'Cultural Committee' charged with delivering the 'new narrative' text. This committee of some 20 'artists, intellectuals and scientists' was chaired by Paul Dujardin, the Artistic Director of the Centre for Fine Arts (Bozar) in Brussels. After the project launch in Brussels in April 2013, the Commission organized three 'general assemblies' with larger plenary audiences in Warsaw in June 2013, in Milan in November 2013 and in Berlin at the beginning of March 2014. At this last assembly the Cultural Committee presented its declaration 'New Narrative for Europe: The Mind and Body of Europe' (European Commission, 2014b) in the presence of Commission President José-Manuel Barroso and German Chancellor Angela Merkel.

The Commission followed up on the declaration's publication with a social media campaign in the late summer of 2014. The final project report (New Narrative, 2014) claims that the information dissemination via Facebook and LinkedIn reached seven million people and generated 75,000 visits on the project website. The Commission also created a separate space on the project website for longer comments. Some 450 citizens used the opportunity of making such comments between 13 September and 16 October 2014. This provided the basis for a short presentation on the results of the social media campaign at the final project event in Brussels, a few days before Barroso left office.

Drawing on non-participant observation at the general assemblies and some Cultural Committee meetings, which was facilitated upon the request of the author by Dujardin after

consultation with the responsible European Commission officials, as well as semi-structured interviews and qualitative discourse analysis, this article analyses the process of drafting the declaration. It argues that it was characterized by a clash of different elite cultures. This clash resulted in a chaotic process in which the declaration in the end was written by a single person, Nicola Setari, who was able to bridge the cultural divide.

The article goes on to analyze the ‘New Narrative’ structure and content and to contrast it with the citizens’ web comments. These were overwhelmingly focused on the EU, not the ‘New Narrative’ text. While more extreme views were likely overrepresented, these comments nonetheless provide a kaleidoscope of opinions on the EU and desirable key objectives for the future. The article shows that the participating citizens demanded more open bottom-up debate. Their contributions also reflected much greater narrative pluralism between more federalist and strongly Eurosceptic positions than the Commission in particular favours. Finally, those citizens who commented on this aspect of the declaration very predominantly demanded that the EU focus more on Europe’s own socio-economic problems than its global role in spreading norms and values, which the declaration forcefully demanded. The analysis shows that the Commission preferred, and the Cultural Committee was complicit in, defining the ‘New Narrative’ in an elite-driven process. This process at times became almost surreal in ignoring critical debates about the EU outside of the Brussels bubble and when a single person ended up drafting the text in what was very much an ad hoc manner. Citizen participation, when it was finally enabled, would suggest, however, that popular attitudes to European integration embrace pluralist debate and multiple narratives of Europe – something that could actually be a much greater source of legitimacy for the EU than the Commission’s continued attempts at top-down social engineering (Shore, 2000).

Clash of Cultures

Cultural elites have contributed to promoting the idea of European integration. Their varied narratives have drawn on the idea of an allegedly unified medieval Occidental Europe or the Renaissance as the breakthrough of European values. They have sometimes presented the time between 1914 and 1945 as a European ‘civil war’, which was followed by the golden age of European integration inspired by the ‘founding fathers’ (Kaiser, 2011). The EU regularly draws on the ‘founding fathers’ trope in its own self-representation (Kølvraa, 2010; Joly, 2007). The European Commission has also sought to foster more aligned narratives of European history through various funding mechanisms, including support during the 1980s and 1990s for research into the history of European integration (Varsori, 2010; Calligaro, 2013, pp. 38-78).

When Løkkegaard initiated the ‘New Narrative’ project, however, he sought greater public support for the EU by cultural elites. His objective was to mobilize cultural elites to come out much more strongly in support of the EU during its severe socio-economic and political legitimacy crisis (Løkkegaard 2013). It is not entirely clear how the project acquired the ‘narrative’ terminology, however. As Richard McMahon highlights in his article in this special issue, European commissioners, officials and MEPs can have a general notion of academic fashions, even when they do not have a related academic background or strong links to academia. Thus, Commission deliberation and policies clearly interacted with academic discourses about the ‘democratic deficit’ and the EU as a ‘normative power’ in the 1990s and 2000s, even if this interaction may sometimes have amounted to a dialogue of the deaf.

In this case, however, with Løkkegaard having no close connections with academia, the use of the term ‘narrative’ is unlikely to have been inspired by incipient academic debates. Rather, the Danish journalist was preoccupied with his own professional experience of analyzing and telling stories about political issues, and with the pronounced weakness and lack of resilience

and salience of positive stories about European integration and the EU in Denmark in particular, especially in view of the then upcoming 2014 European Parliament elections. In fact, Løkkegaard also used the project to tell a narrative about himself as MEP to the Danish electorate, in the (vain) hope of accumulating enough personal votes to become reelected to the European Parliament.

Løkkegaard may have been broadly aware of the project on European ‘narratives’ run by the European Cultural Foundation (ECF) in Amsterdam during 2010-12, however. In this project the ECF had organized a variety of events with artists from across Europe. Towards its end, the project produced a publication on its website and in book form (Chenal & Snelders, 2012), which brought together nineteen shorter stories about ‘Europe’ including two (Kaiser, 2012; Sassatelli, 2012) with a strong focus on the role of narratives in European political integration and the EU. The Commission definitely followed this project, and most likely took its cue from there. Although the Commission never formally consulted with the ECF over its project (Chenal 2013), it invited ECF representatives and several of the ECF authors to the ‘New Narrative’ launch in Brussels in April 2013. The Commission appropriated the ‘narrative’ terminology, but it never collaborated with the ECF during the implementation of its own ‘New Narrative’ project. Whereas the ECF project had a primarily cultural focus and bottom-up orientation, the Commission’s approach was top-down and geared towards culture as a support mechanism for European integration and the EU.

When the Commission took control of the project’s implementation it drew on existing contacts between Barroso and his staff with Dujardin and his team. In ‘bureaucratic and complex’ negotiations (Dujardin 2013) the Commission and the Bozar director agreed the Cultural Committee’s composition. In line with its general practice, the Commission sought a balanced representation by gender, age and nationality. In the end however, the committee was biased in favour of the (performing) arts, reflecting Barroso’s and Dujardin’s interests

and networks. Of the 17 full members only György Konrád, the Hungarian writer, qualified as an ‘intellectual’; Michał Kleiber, the President of the Polish Academy of Sciences, was the only scientist; Tomáš Sedláček, a Czech economist, the only academic with a social science background; and the Danish journalist Per Nyholm did not fall into any of the categories mentioned in the project’s typology of cultural elites. None of the members had a background in European and EU history, and the project deliberately made no attempt at drawing on academic expertise.

During the project it became clear that the Commission and the Cultural Committee members had different agendas and incompatible operational modes. The resulting clash of two cultures severely endangered the project success, measured in terms of the drafting and timely delivery of the declaration (Kaiser, 2015). Three competing and very different texts written by Konrad, Sedláček and Nyholm were circulated in November 2013. Not even a first draft existed by the end of January 2014, one month before the planned event in Berlin. In these circumstances, the Bozar team charged Nicola Setari, a multilingual Italian curator with broad European experience and close connections with the Commission, who had worked for the Bozar before, with writing the declaration. He then circulated several drafts to committee members before the final version was sent out on 26 February 2014.

The ‘New Narrative’ project saw the EU’s political-bureaucratic milieu mainly interested in enhancing the legitimacy of European integration and increasing the public visibility of the 2014 European Parliament elections. It turned out that Barroso’s personal interest and full participation in all major ‘New Narrative’ events, combined with the bureaucratic culture of the Commission Directorate-General for Communication (DG COM), resulted in an initially extremely rigid organization of public events to make sure that they would be reported positively by the media. Thus, the opening event in Brussels supposedly included a long ‘open debate’. However, Nyholm, who moderated the event attended by three commissioners,

only called upon pre-selected members of the Cultural Committee and the audience to make pre-prepared statements (Nyholm 2014; Sassatelli 2013). While the Commission relaxed its control over the ‘general assemblies’ somewhat in the course of 2013 due to the widespread discontent with the format, the forum was only for invited guests from diverse cultural elites.

In contrast, the two officials who represented the Commission in the private Cultural Committee meetings limited themselves to commenting on administrative issues and reminding the committee members of the looming deadline for the compulsory declaration. Chaired by Dujardin, the committee meetings were only very loosely organized. Several members only turned up occasionally, and those who did often refused to follow a clear agenda for the discussion. In Milan in November 2013, for example, some members spontaneously organized a message of support for the Ukrainian Maidan movement during the committee meeting, which made a meaningful discussion of the drafting process of the declaration impossible.

The Commission’s bureaucratic culture was goal-oriented and driven by the need to deliver a declaration of reasonable quality on time so as not to embarrass the institution and Barroso in the member-states, especially in Germany, where the Commission President was keen to get Merkel to attend its public presentation. The Commission had limited interest in the actual process of developing the required narrative document. As the project was managed by DG COM, its primary concern was to influence the media reporting of the project events. The Commission allowed Dujardin so much space for managing the Cultural Committee itself because they were interested in what they saw as the cultural elites’ legitimacy resources. The committee was a mixed group, however, not only in terms of their professional background, but also their political views on European integration and the EU. The committee members were also not very interested in delivering the declaration, but in using the forums created by the project as a platform for networking among themselves and with representatives of EU

institutions – in some cases to enhance their possibilities of obtaining support for their initiatives and projects through other funding lines. Only certain committee members, who worked as lobbyists for European cultural organizations, to some extent succeeded in bridging the divide between the political-bureaucratic and cultural milieus that clashed in the ‘New Narrative’ project (Kaiser, 2015).

On Message? The ‘New Narrative’

The ‘New Narrative’ declaration raises questions about the text’s objectives, structure and content. When it took charge of the project, the European Commission adopted Løkkegaard’s phrase ‘a new narrative for Europe’. Actually, the first version of the Commission-hosted website (European Commission, 2014a) then stipulated that the project would develop ‘a new all-encompassing narrative [that] should take into account the evolving reality of the European continent and highlight that the EU is not solely about the economy and growth, but also about cultural unity and common values in a globalized world’. Far from envisaging any narrative ‘unity in diversity’, a slogan habitually used by the Commission, DG COM thus started on a hegemonic quest to replace existing narratives of European integration with *one* new narrative. It was clear from the project’s origins and the composition of the Cultural Committee that such a narrative would not primarily emphasise the strengthening of a European identity over time, but rather the EU’s alleged contemporary ‘cultural unity and common values’.

Two points quickly became clear as the project progressed, however. First, members of the Cultural Committee and other participants in key project events rejected the Commission’s hyperbolic objective as either unrealistic or undesirable in a pluralistic EU. Responding to these objections, the Commission, first, changed its informal terminology from ‘a new

narrative’ to just ‘new narrative for Europe’ in the declaration. This choice left the option open that the committee had only produced one among several possible narratives. Second, neither DG COM nor the Cultural Committee were clear about what existing narrative or narratives they wished to revise or replace. In fact, the project website and several speakers at the general assemblies, including Barroso himself, frequently referred to key elements of traditional narratives. They included integration as ‘peace through a common market’ (European Commission, 2014a) or the protection of human rights invoked by Barroso in his speech in Warsaw on 11 July 2013, a trope that also features prominently in visions of the EU as a ‘normative power’ (Manners, 2002) and the ‘progressive’ Promethean narrative analyzed by Nikola Petrović in his contribution to this special issue.

Not surprisingly, therefore, the declaration’s eclectic structure to some extent already reflects existing historical and contemporary justifications of European integration. In the first section the declaration talks about numerous challenges to Europe as ‘a state of mind’. It goes on to discuss lessons of past experience, starting with the First World War. In the section ‘The Renaissance meets Cosmopolitanism’, the declaration then demands that the arts and sciences make a major contribution to tackling shared problems, which in turn can help ‘Europe’ shape global politics based on its own values and vision for the future.

The narrative’s content evolves around common values, ‘lessons of history’, a need to reinvent the EU in times of crisis through a European ‘cosmopolitanism’ building on the Renaissance experience, and a resulting shared commitment to improving ‘humanity’s well-being’. The declaration claims, to begin with, that Europe’s ‘spiritual, philosophical, artistic and scientific inheritance’ has largely shaped Europe as ‘a state of mind’. These shared traditions could help Europe address contemporary challenges ‘from youth unemployment to climate change, from immigration to data security’. Tackling such challenges requires ‘a genuine and effective political body’, however. The declaration goes on to emphasize the

importance for addressing these challenges of ‘shared values of peace, freedom, democracy and the rule of law’ which have to be ‘re-activated and made relevant for the European citizens of today and tomorrow and defended against internal and external pressures’.

Despite the project’s original emphasis on the importance of historical experience for a common narrative of European integration, the subsequent section is quite short. This clearly reflects the absence of historians from the Cultural Committee and, with one exception in Rome, from all major project forums. It is probably also due to the author’s own professional background in art and art history. The section recapitulates in just two sentences the experience of the two world wars, only to claim in quasi-religious language that European integration after 1945 ‘has brought redemption’. The ‘fall of the iron curtain’ then led to the pan-European breakthrough of democracy and the market economy inaugurating ‘a new era of interconnectedness and interaction amongst people and countries’, with the EU providing ‘the visionary framework and the sense of purpose that was necessary in responding to the tremendous challenge of reunifying Europe’. The economic and financial crisis since 2008, the section concludes, demonstrated the flaws of an insufficiently regulated financial system. Supposedly, the EU stepped in in order to improve the ‘political governance of the financial systems’ and address the resulting problems.

The next section of the declaration draws on the experience of the Renaissance as a European breakthrough to modernity to argue that the arts and sciences are once more needed to play a key role in developing what is called a cosmopolitan approach to contemporary issues. Why not, the section asks rhetorically, ‘imagine Europe as a great mega-city interconnected by means of transportation and communication?’ This reinvigorated Europe would then ‘deploy its “soft power” ... also beyond its borders ..., promoting a new global model of society based on ethical, aesthetic and sustainable values’. References to these values are scattered

throughout the declaration, but with particular emphasis on the quite recent notion of sustainability.

Three key aspects of the declaration are especially notable. First, European history receives short shrift. Even the twentieth century experience is treated only very briefly, with more space devoted to the ongoing crisis than the two world wars. Crucially, the declaration avoids all potentially controversial references that have featured in more recent debates about European remembrance and the EU. These include, for example, the notion of an allegedly unified (Christian-Catholic) medieval Europe; the importance of the Holocaust (Litzo-Monnet, 2013); the idea of the founding fathers (Kaiser 2011), which the author may have regarded as too closely associated with the continental Western European post-war foundation myth; and demands by East-Central European memory entrepreneurs to prioritize remembrance of Stalinist and communist crimes (Neumeyer, 2015; see also Radonic in this issue). Moreover, in line with a recent trend in European memory politics and museum practice (Kaiser et al., 2014) the declaration studiously avoids any reference to perpetrators and their nationality. Hitler and the Germans are not mentioned explicitly nor are Stalin and the Soviet occupation of Eastern Europe. In the First World War, Europe ‘lost its soul in the battle fields and the trenches’ and then ‘it damned itself within [sic!] the concentration camps and the totalitarian systems’. Possibly inadvertently, then, the declaration heavily contributes to de-historicizing European integration narratives.

The marginal role of historical experience goes hand in hand with the heavy emphasis on contemporary European values. This focus is reflective of and entirely in line with established Commission rhetoric. It also chimes with more recent attempts by supporters of European integration and the EU during the economic and financial crisis to reactivate post-war emotive appeals to European unity in supporting common values that allegedly also mark the EU and its domestic and external policies (Wellings & Parker, 2016). The declaration strongly

emphasizes what might be called ‘progressive’ notions of the inherent limits of capitalism (requiring EU regulation) and ‘participatory democracy and sustainability, which point to a new horizon of hope, solidarity and responsibility for all Europeans’. These values and the associated quasi-religious-messianic language arguably befit the predominantly left-wing and left-liberal cultural elite milieu. As such, it was acceptable to all Cultural Committee members except for the Danish journalist Nyholm. He distanced himself from the final version of the text mainly because he wanted a stronger commitment to the further deepening of the EU, including in defence matters (Nyholm 2014).

Finally, the declaration never actually mentions the EU. Firstly, this is because EU elites now tend to equate it with ‘Europe’. Secondly, however, the Commission was keen in the run-up to the 2014 European Parliament elections to avoid antagonizing Eurosceptic sections of national publics with an overtly federalist statement – something that would also not have gone down well with some members of the Cultural Committee from countries like the United Kingdom where all EU issues were and, after the Brexit vote in the 2016 referendum, remain extremely divisive. Nevertheless, the declaration’s demands and language effectively adopt the Commission’s preferences and rhetoric, especially concerning the role of ‘Europe’ as a role model for the rest of the world. This narrative may well exaggerate the EU’s capacity to solve national and transnational issues within Europe, such as ‘unemployment levels unimaginable in European countries’, or its ability to make the world a better and safer place, only to exacerbate the EU’s legitimacy crisis. In any case, as the next section demonstrates, the claim that the EU can and should play a leading role in addressing global issues based on its norms and values turned out to be unpopular with the public. It was a focal point of criticism from citizens who contributed to the project’s website in the wake of the social media campaign that the Commission launched to publicise the declaration.

A European World? Citizens' Narratives

The 'New Narrative' project never sought to involve EU citizens in any systematic manner until the publication of the declaration in the presence of Merkel and Barroso in Berlin. For the project launch in April 2013, the Commission invited some 70 selected academics, artists and intellectuals. The following three general assemblies were attended by somewhat larger, but similarly selected elite audiences. Their taking place in conjunction with 'Dialogue with Citizens' events merely created organizational synergies for the DG COM. They did not allow for any actual input by citizens into the discussion of elements of the planned declaration, however. Until the declaration's publication, moreover, the project only had a rudimentary website with limited information about its objectives and the general assemblies.

At the concluding public event in Berlin in March 2014 the German chancellor actually declared her allegiance to established narratives of European integration with their emphasis on the EU as a project that has ensured peace, enhanced the welfare of citizens, and secured a voice for Europe in a globalizing world. Merkel also asked whether citizens in the EU really needed a 'new' narrative, as the Commission and the Cultural Committee suggested; or whether it would not be a better idea to invite them to contribute their own stories about European experiences in a pluralistic dialogue. Merkel's direct public criticism of the project's objectives and structure visibly came as something of a shock to Barroso and the Commission officials. It encouraged them to come up with the idea of combining a web-based consultation with the planned dissemination strategy for the declaration. This web-based consultation was eventually scheduled to take place prior to the final project event – the publication of a traditional book with multiple narratives by project participants and some other members of cultural elites. This was presented to Barroso on 28 October 2014 as a gift on leaving office a few days later (Battista and Setari 2014).

Responding to promptings by the Commission, between 13 September and 16 October 2014 some 450 individuals eventually contributed to the ‘New Narrative’ website. These contributions resulted from some 75,000 clicks on the project website after the Commission had disseminated the declaration and additional information via Facebook and LinkedIn prior to starting the web-based consultation. Even when compared to prevalent degrees of virtual mobilization on EU-related topics, as opposed to highly topical general political issues, the 450 comments hardly constitute a great communicative success. In comparison, for example, nearly ten years earlier a Commission e-democracy consultation on the revision of the EU’s animal welfare legislation generated some 45,000 email inputs from citizens (Weller, 2012). The relatively low number of comments was probably due to the short time span of one month for the consultation and the low political salience of the topic of narratives of European integration compared to ‘hard’ issues of politics and policy-making.

Some of the email comments were composed in languages like French, German, Spanish and Slovak. However, most were in English, written by both native and non-native speakers. The prevalence of English on the website may have discouraged non-native speakers from contributing. In any case, British citizens were heavily over-represented, and among them, supporters of Brexit with political affiliations with the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) or the right of the Conservative Party were especially active. However, the responses do not allow their clear categorization by nationality or residence. Moreover, for data protection reasons, the website collected no personal information on gender, age etc., thus making a systematic statistical analysis of the comments impossible.

Analyzing the website comments, three points need to be kept in mind. First, enthusiasm in the 1990s for the potential of all forms of e-democracy to facilitate democratic participation and to rejuvenate democratic procedures and processes has become much more muted (Loader & Mercea, 2011). Hopes that the internet would create virtual Habermasian forums

and public spheres free of social power relations and lead to open discursive exchanges (cf. Eriksen & Fossum 2000; Hague & Loader, 1999) have often been disappointed even within Western-style democracies. This holds especially for directive, goal-oriented, consultations, which are initiated and controlled by a state actor like the Commission. While it is clear that internet forums of all kinds have strong disruptive potential in undermining established forms of discussion and the hegemonic narratives transmitted by more traditional media, it is less clear whether they actually change prevailing social power relations in any significant way (Margetts et al. 2016; Loader & Mercea, 2011). Certainly, 450 email comments can neither overcome the EU's alleged democratic deficit nor put the last nail in its coffin.

Second, internet forums easily develop into echo chambers (Sunstein 2009) where anonymity facilitates the radicalized expression of political views. They tend to replicate views that can also be found in more traditional media. However, they often amplify the more extreme views of individuals who do not feel that their preferences are sufficiently well represented and supported by mainstream political parties and more traditional media. Thus, UKIP has actively and very effectively, to judge by the outcome of the 2016 referendum (Jensen & Snaith, 2016), used social media to communicate its ideas, including its demand for a British exit from the EU (Southern, 2015). These citizens holding more radical views will be especially motivated to advertise them via social media. Due to the internet's anonymity, moreover, they frequently do so using harsh aggressive language, in order to discredit opposed views and their proponents.

Third, linked to this issue is the question of authenticity. In other words, those writing the comments may use a pseudonym to disguise their true identity. It appears in particular that Russian services under the control of President Putin have recently sought to influence or even hijack virtual debates within the EU, for example about the war in Eastern Ukraine and Western sanction policy and the future of the EU, trying to undermine the EU's cohesion

as much as possible (AFP, 2015, Walker, 2015). Due to language challenges, however, most of this Russian activity for the moment seems targeted at Russian language websites. In any case, there is no evidence that state-controlled Russian ‘trolls’ sought to influence the Commission’s online consultation for the New Narrative project.

A qualitative discourse analysis of the 450 comments reveals several influential tropes. The identification of these tropes, moreover, allows some general conclusions to be drawn about popular attitudes to the EU and to some extent, the elite-driven ‘New Narrative’ discourse. The most striking is how few comments support the ‘New Narrative’ text explicitly. In fact, a large number of them reflect attitudes diametrically opposed to the EU and the desirability of further integration.

Hostility towards the EU and elites at national and EU level informs Eurosceptic attitudes to a large degree and is also an influential trope found in many comments. Few citizens make concrete comments about the EU’s political organization or individual institutions. Not one citizen among the 450 actually notes the fact, or comments on it, that the ‘New Narrative’ was (apparently) prepared by a group of individuals from the cultural sphere, not ‘official Europe’ – something that demonstrates how difficult it is for EU institutions to create the impression of independence and impartiality for groups like the Cultural Committee, especially when the European Parliament actually initiated the project, and the Commission put it together, secured the actual declaration and conducted the consultation on its website.

The main target of severe criticism is European elites, however, who apparently seem to be the only social group to profit from integration in the EU. Roughly one half of the EU-skeptic website comments are clearly associated with values of the nationalistic Right and the other half with those of the radical Left. Nationalistic right-wing perspectives on the EU are very predominantly advanced by British citizens who openly identify with UKIP or with right-wing Conservatism. Both political groups advocated ‘Brexit’ in the campaign leading up to

the 2016 referendum on British membership. The criticism in these comments focuses on two points in particular. One is the claim that ‘they’ never chose European integration in the form that it has now taken, that is, highly institutionalized with common policies including monetary integration and closer foreign policy coordination. One citizen claims, for example (erroneously, as the European Communities were already much more than that in 1973, when the United Kingdom joined), ‘We only signed up for a trade community’.² The bottom line of many similar comments is that ‘we’ may like Europe as a continent, but we don’t want to partake in its political integration.

The second nationalistic right-wing trope, which has antecedents in 1960s Gaullist narratives, is the notion that the EU has destroyed democracy and erected a kind of dictatorship of unelected Brussels bureaucrats. One contributor talks about an ‘oppressive, undemocratic mess’ in the shape of a ‘wasteful organization’.³ Another complains about the waste of taxpayers’ money on ‘insane wages, benefits and diets’.⁴ Yet another contributor actually calls for a popular and violent uprising against the EU, ‘an undemocratic, unelected and unaccountable organization that is setting up a dictatorship to rule... It is time we took [this monster] on, and begin to take back control of our countries. If this means violent uprising, then so be it.’⁵

In contrast to this focus on preserving national independence and democracy against an overbearing EU, mostly radical Left supporters from Mediterranean member states criticize the EU (in one extreme case of a Spanish commentator) as a ‘dictadura fascista / capitalista’.⁶ Or, as a Greek citizen puts it, ‘Europe was our dream and is our nightmare here in Greece’.⁷ The main claim here is that the EU is entirely dominated by powerful business elites who make common cause with political elites to secure their own interests. Thus, one citizen claims that ‘The Europe that the corporations are building right now is one of very rich lords and very poor serfs, of rich and powerful nations of owners and poor and weak nations of

servants.’⁸ Another contributor laments that ‘the big business owners and their corrupt allies in politics are enjoying peace, freedom and the rule of (their) law while the rest of us, the 99%, get to “enjoy” unemployment, forced emigration, endless austerity, bank and bondholder bailouts. The EU is a disaster for all but the most wealthy within it.’⁹ Similarly, one citizen writes that ‘Europe has become a state of “money” where financial war is raging, oppressing people’s lives by making them live in grinding poverty and insecurity.’¹⁰

These predominantly radical Left perspectives on the EU of course reflect dominant political fault-lines in national and EU politics over the most appropriate response to the economic and financial crisis in Europe since 2008. Very often the EU as such is not the main target of criticism or derogatory comments. Economic and political elites are instead accused of creating or at least usurping the EU to advance their own self-interest at the expense of the rest of the population. It is in this criticism of European elites that nationalistic right-wing and radical Left views of the EU overlap in the comments on the ‘New Narrative’ website, as they also do in election campaigns, referendums and in the EP. Where they usually differ radically is in their diametrically opposed demands (Usherwood et al. 2013). The Right crave withdrawal into the nation-state while the Left want to expand the EU into a European welfare state to improve the lot of the disadvantaged, unemployed and poor. They demand policies of redistribution, geographically from the North to the South and vertically within European society, from the rich to the poor.

Even many comments from the pro-EU end of a continuum of political preferences for membership in the EU and its future constitutional development diverge from the ‘New Narrative’ project’s message. These comments offer the kind of federalist and patriotic sentiments that was still more common especially among elites in ‘core Europe’ – the six founding member states of what is now the EU – until well into the 1990s. However these sentiments are no longer forcefully advocated by mainstream political parties or the very

much weakened federalist movement, let alone the Commission, which tries to navigate carefully between different preferences of member state governments.

Some comments explicitly propose the creation of a federal Europe. Thus, one citizen demands that ‘Europe should develop into a federal state to [sic] a brighter future. Unity leads to progress.’¹¹ Another contributor exclaims that ‘I hope in my lifetime, we can celebrate a European Federation.’¹² Pro-federalist citizens frequently associate such a federal order with values such as ‘democracy’, ‘freedom’, and ‘tolerance’. Other contributors vent their commitment to a united Europe in much more emotive ‘patriotic’ than political or constitutional language. Thus, one of them talks about Europe as his ‘Heimat’, or homeland,¹³ and another simply states ‘I love Europa’.¹⁴ One British citizen, who grew up in Australia until 1969, recounts at length his childhood experiences in continental Europe including a primary school excursion to French Normandy. He concludes that ‘I never once felt as “foreign” as I did as a young boy Down Under. Why? And why do I love Europe so much? Because, ultimately, we’re the same, you and I, ultimately the same people ... - which is why we’re so much better “together” within the EEC, as brothers in arms, rather than apart. And why I, for one, will be moving to live in France if the UK should ever leave our European brothers.’¹⁵

There is, finally, one more influential trope that can be identified in the comments on the project website. This is fairly wide-spread criticism of the EU’s apparent desire – also strongly reflected in the ‘New Narrative’ declaration – to export ‘European’ values like democracy and human rights to other countries and continents to make the world a better and safer place. Whether the EU actually behaves like a ‘normative power’ or not, has been subjected to intense academic debate. In fact, in prevalent external perceptions the EU features mainly as a powerful economic actor (Larsen, 2014). Interestingly however, many citizens who contributed to the project website at least think that the EU *should not* act as a

normative power. Only one contributor demands that ‘Europe must use its influence in the world to help promote a global society based on shared, ethical and sustainable humanitarian values’.¹⁶ Others are highly skeptical and advocate an isolationist cause on the question of the export of values. One advocates, for example, that ‘we would gain a lot more to stand to our values and our standards and let other countries decide whether they want to follow the example or not... Let’s first care about Europe, improve it and then we’ll think about the rest of the world.’¹⁷ Another citizens says that ‘we cannot help [other countries] if we don’t even have money and resources to solve our own problems (unemployment, poverty).’¹⁸ A Polish contributor claims that values are not universal: ‘Let’s stop exporting values please. Most of the world lives in a very different way ... and is governed by totally different values. ... Imposing democracy on people who are not used to it ends in disaster. Mentalities evolve over long time, we cannot speed this process up by our intervention.’¹⁹

Taken together, the comments on the website reflect the diversity of views among those European citizens who chose to participate. Most likely those who held stronger views were more motivated to submit their comments. These range from leaving the EU to advocating a federal union. Similarly, they show that citizens have very different ideas about how to overcome Europe’s and the EU’s problems with democracy or welfare policies. Interestingly, even contributors who severely criticize the EU often embed their criticism in positive language about Europe as a continent, which probably reflects the prevalence of a more widespread and deeper civilizational identity than political identity as EU citizens (Risse, 2010).

The analysis of the comments also shows that no-one actually understood or commented on the ‘New Narrative’ declaration on the project website hosted by the Commission as anything other than an official EU project. Apart from the limited dissemination of the declaration among national publics, this point highlights how difficult it is for EU institutions to support and fund such initiatives in the hope of strengthening a collective European identity and

generating political legitimacy. Their interlocutors – here the Cultural Committee – effectively appear as little more than agents of EU institutions, even if they behaved quite autonomously during the course of the project.

Conclusion

The ‘New Narrative’ project is only one of several initiatives recently developed by EU institutions to align collective memory (see e.g. Littoz-Monnet, 2012) and strengthen European identity. These initiatives seek to shape shared stories about Europe’s past, present and future, in the hope that this will re-legitimize European integration and the EU. The ‘New Narrative’ project tried to contribute to the quest for greater cultural cohesion and political legitimacy at a time when the EU’s ‘input’ and ‘output’ legitimacy seem to be in decline and its future is unclear. It explicitly attempted to mobilize cultural elites for the EU. It fostered networking among some members of these elites, a process that was dominated by representatives of European cultural organizations in Brussels who could mediate between the political-bureaucratic and the cultural milieus. Resulting from the cultural milieu’s inability to organize itself properly and produce a coherent text, however, the declaration as the project’s main output was largely drafted by one person with close ties to both the Commission and the Bozar.

The general assemblies and the declaration were only reported in European media to a limited extent and mostly in the countries where the events took place. To have long-term impact on processes of identity formation, narratives have to be communicated far more consistently across time and space. Moreover, as the Hungarian writer Konrad pointed out (Konrad 2014), ‘it is perfectly impossible to write a narrative on three or four pages’. The format of the manifesto or declaration from the beginning narrowly circumscribed what the Cultural

Committee could do to contribute to converging story-telling about European integration. Crucially, the EU not only funded the project, but the text drafted by Setari was also far too closely aligned with the Commission's political preferences and habitual rhetoric to stand alone as an independent statement by cultural elites.

The declaration's narrative is strongly normative and in places uses quasi-religious messianic language. It lacks a *longue durée* perspective, except for the strong reference to the Renaissance. It treats the twentieth century until 1989 in only two sentences, avoiding any potentially controversial explicit references to occupation, perpetrators, collaboration or even the Holocaust, which others have advocated as a suitable foundation myth for the EU (e.g. Leggewie 2011). The references to European norms and values strongly resemble Commission rhetoric, as does the emphasis on Europe's crucial contribution to fostering democracy, human rights, and sustainable development globally.

Citizens' web-based comments on the declaration's content vary widely. Demands extend from leaving the EU to further European integration in a federalist direction. Interestingly, many online comments reflect wide-spread skepticism about the declaration's ambition of shaping the world in Europe's image. These comments highlight the need to tackle domestic European problems first or point to cultural heterogeneity that may make it difficult or impossible to spread 'European' values like democracy and human rights.

The comments reveal pronounced irritation – not just among British UKIP supporters – with the Commission's top-down approach to writing a 'new narrative'. The contributors do not engage with the actual text. Instead, their comments focus more generally on the EU and specifically, its alleged control by self-interested elites at the expense of ordinary citizens, a trope that unites radical Left and right-wing commentators. The fact that cultural elites apparently collaborated with political and administrative elites in producing the 'New Narrative' text only aggravated the complaints about European integration as an elite-driven

process. Thus, in the prevailing political climate of aggressively populist radical Left and nationalist right-wing discourses about national and European elites, top-down attempts at shaping European identity and legitimizing the EU can perhaps only be shambolic and ineffective. In contrast, fostering transnational inter-cultural experiences may have much greater potential to foster feelings of cultural commonality and social community (Kuhn, 2015; Logemann, 2013).

The citizens' comments on the declaration reveal the pluralistic nature of conceiving of and narrating European integration in contemporary Europe. Elites in the contemporary EU with its very pluralistic media landscape and social media communication find it extremely difficult to develop consistent discourses about European identity and integration and to marginalize alternative voices. The Commission's original idea of drafting a 'new all-encompassing narrative', which reflected its own institutional obsession with speaking 'with one voice' in its external communication (Altides 2008, p. 207), appears outright absurd in these circumstances, as many Cultural Committee members and other participants at the general assemblies were also quick to point out. Thus, the Commission's conduct of the project invites further research into its institutional nature and the character of its communication strategy. To judge by the 'New Narrative' project, in some ways the Commission's attitude almost resembles desperate bureaucratic and ineffective attempts by authoritarian regimes to shore up public support. Instead, EU institutions and actors should perhaps consider whether Europe's ability to tolerate the pluralism of narratives as a mark of any developed modern democratic polity could not actually help sustain the EU's legitimacy in times of crisis.

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¹Endnotes

¹ 13 September 2014, 1:31pm.

² 16 September 2014, 9:46pm.

³ 16 September 2014, 9:46pm.

⁴ 16 September 2014, 9:50pm.

⁵ 23 September 2014, 9:36pm.

⁶ 18 September 2014, 9:51pm.

⁷ 18 September 2014, 10:13pm.

⁸ 19 September 2014, 7:17am.

⁹ 20 September 2014, 6:19pm.

¹⁰ 30 September 2014, 12:58.

¹¹ 17 September 2014, 3:24pm.

¹² 5 October 2014, 2:25am.

¹³ 17 September, 7:55am.

¹⁴ 23 September 2014, 5:39pm.

¹⁵ 6 October 2014, 9:20pm.

¹⁶ 30 September 2014, 1:08am.

¹⁷ 17 September 2014, 2:54pm.

¹⁸ 21 September 2014, 8:31pm.

¹⁹ 9 October 2014, 11:09am.