Taking Europe Personally

Young Narratives of Europe

# Content

The report participants and the Understanding Europe Network

This report is the result of 13 interviews that were conducted in May 2022 in Armenia and in September 2022 in Germany at Understanding Europe events. The project is funded by the Alfred Herrhausen Gesellschaft, the collaborative partner for this publication. Understanding Europe is an educational network by and for young people committed to civic participation and to a democratic and open-minded Europe. Understanding Europe is part of the Schwarzkopf Foundation, which strives to strengthen young people from all backgrounds to be active European citizens who, through engagement and the sharing of opinions, contribute to a pluralistic, democratic society of mutual understanding, solidarity and peaceful collaboration in Europe. This report is an expression of this aspiration. In our understanding of Europe, we follow the definition of the Council of Europe, which includes 46 countries that have all signed the European Convention on Human Rights.

Understanding Europe is a European network active in 14 European countries, both inside and outside of the EU, with local roots and impact. Local trainers give school workshops on Europe, media competency, participation, and social justice. Peer Educators learn and implement pedagogical skills and Team Coordinators take up responsibility in administrative and organisational matters.[1] Fellows[2] develop new educational material from which the whole network profits. All volunteers work closely together within their country team but also across Europe, taking part in transnational trainings and exchanging of best practices.
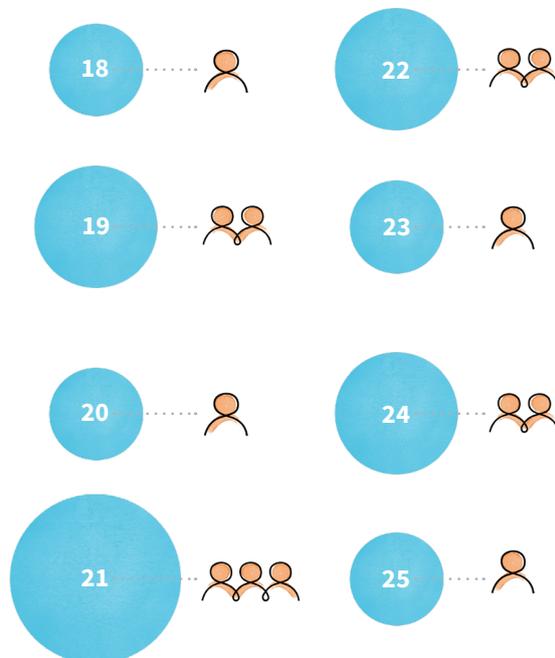
The number of interview participants by age groups.

Thirteen volunteers who occupy different positions within the network (Trainer, Peer-Educator, Coordinator or Fellow) have participated in 30-minute interviews about their perceptions of Europe as well as their visions and hopes for the continent. Their names have been anonymised and they chose their own pseudonyms. The interview partners come from eight different European countries: Armenia, Austria, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Portugal, and Romania.

They are between 18 and 25 years old. The statements are not necessarily representative of European youth in general. All interview partners are active in European citizenship education and therefore represent a group of young Europeans who are well-informed about European politics and engaged in strengthening civil society.[3] They are taking Europe personally and their stories contain concerns, suggestions, and visions for Europe.

13 INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS
FROM **8** COUNTRIES

Ireland

Germany

Austria

France

Romania

Armenia

Portugal

Italy

The number of interview participants by countries.

1 Narratives of Europe

1.1 What is a narrative?

The report seeks to give access to narratives young Europeans believe in and base their actions on. It explores what it means to be young and European today. But what do we understand when we speak of narratives? In recent years, narrative has become a trendy buzzword, often used in a broad and hazy manner. Being a transdisciplinary concept, which is equally used in academia, journalism, politics, and marketing, it is important to briefly sketch out our basic theoretical and methodological approach. For the humanities, particularly literature and cultural studies[4], one of the defining characteristics of a narrative is the intrinsic negotiation between the particular (the individual story) and the general, namely the underlying schema of essential storylines. In this understanding, the formation of a narrative requires many stories to be narrated repeatedly in the same or in a similar manner. Gradually, a particular kind of story becomes apparent. It is this kind of story that we call a 'narrative'. A narrative is never simply there but can only be extrapolated and abstracted from a variety of existing stories. In this report, individual stories have been collected through interviews that roughly followed a pre-developed questionnaire but were primarily open to what the interview partner considered to be important to talk about. The storytelling in this report is not representative of a homogenous "Young Europe" but exemplary of an engaged and eager group of young people trying to contribute to an active European civil society. Yael Ohana, an expert in the field of non-formal education and international youth work, stresses the responsibility of European youth work to actively seek out alternative narratives about European identity and make them accessible to the broader public.[5]

Popular narratives about Europe are for instance the peace narrative, Europe as a community of values, and more recently, the narrative of European self-assertion in the world.[6] Such narratives are characterised by the fact that they create, confirm or question group identities and can trigger (political) action. Therefore, they are called collective or social narratives. Storytelling gains a collective dimension when it invokes common narrative patterns, activates cultural reservoirs of myths and stereotypes,

4 The author of the report particularly draws on the research direction of cultural narratology. See for instance Erll, Astrid, and Roy Sommer, ed. 2019. Narrative in Culture. Berlin and Boston: Walter de Gruyter GmbH;
Nünning, Ansgar. 2013. "Wie Erzählungen Kulturen erzeugen: Prämissen, Konzepte und Perspektiven für eine kulturwissenschaftliche Narratologie." In *Kultur – Wissen – Narration. Perspektiven transdisziplinärer Erzählforschung für die Kulturwissenschaften*, edited by Alexandra Strohmaier, 15-54. Bielefeld: transcript Verlag.

5 Ohana, Yael. 2019. "*What's politics got to do with it European Youth work programmes and the development of critical youth citizenship*", JUGEND für Europa, November 2019.

6 See for instance Müller, Manuel. 2023. "*Peace, prosperity, self-assertion, and cosmopolitan democracy: Four narratives on the purpose of European integration*", re:constitution Working Paper, Forum Transregionale Studien 11/2023.

and affirms respective 'we-groups'. Throughout the report we will encounter essential functions of social narratives such as sense-making or the channelling of emotions by means of concrete interview quotations. A crucial prerequisite for the emergence of collective storylines is its impetus to reproduce; In a constant process of repetition and variation, stories are retold, re-mediated, and circulated. Successful narratives are those that can be transferred to other social contexts or from a historical context to the present because stories in isolation are meant to disappear. To summarise, in order to gain a collective dimension, narratives have to allow further storytelling.
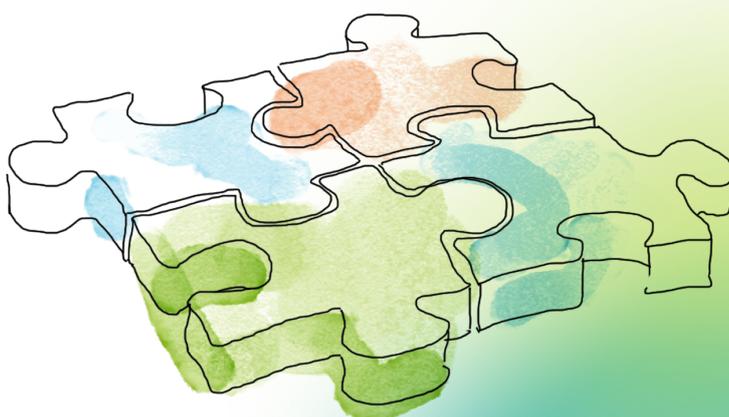
1.2   Narratives and Imaginaries of Europe: what actually is Europe?

A collective narrative tells us many things about how the group that ascribes to it sees itself and how the group members imagine the world. Common societal perceptions operate on two intertwined levels. The first is one of personal perception: what is familiar, known, and imaginable for a person. Such personal imagination closely interacts with socio-cultural imaginaries. While it is difficult to know what specific people imagine, imaginaries as culturally shared, and socially transmitted meaning-making devices are more accessible to research. Imaginaries are basically the pool of perceptions and semantic resources from which people derive meaning and make sense of events. The report will therefore focus on underlying imaginaries of Europe, their sources and how they become apparent in individual interviews. The process of imagining is not unbound, it relies on an available stock of knowledge, figures of speech, popular culture, and intuitive limits of the possible and thinkable. We will see that Europe is much too big, complex, and vague of a structure for Europeans to imagine themselves as one homogenous group. It is therefore indispensable to always think of narratives and European imaginaries in the plural. At the beginning of every interview stood the big question 'what actually is Europe?'. To access immediate associations, the author asked, 'what is the first thing that comes

to your mind when you think of Europe?' – and the answers were varied.

> *It is very easy to think of Europe as just a geographical notion, as it was for a lot of its history. For me, the continent is too basic a notion. It's very easy to think of Europe as the European Union, which is a more popular use right now. The EU is maybe too complex a notion. So, the first thing that comes to my mind is the peoples of Europe, it is not an empty continent. The European Union is not an organisation devoid of pillars of support. At the centre of it are the very different peoples of Europe (João, 21, Portugal).*

As João points out, Europe is a complex and multifaceted entity that changes its face depending on which side you look at. Most interview partners associate Europe first with a political union and an economic project, consolidated by the institutions of the European Union. This perception is in line with the founding narratives that they brought forward about the European Union. For João, the EU was created "to make the European peoples so dependent on each other that they would not choose conflict as a way to resolve their disputes because that would clash with such dependence" (João, 21, Portugal). By its very nature, the European

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7 Wiesner, Claudia. 2017. Was ist europäische Identität? Theoretische Zugänge, empirische Befunde, Forschungsperspektiven und Arbeitsdefinition", in *Europäische Identität in der Krise?: Europäische Identitätsforschung und Rechtspopulismusforschung im Dialog,* edited by Gudrun Hentges, Christina Nottbohm and Hans-Wolfgang Platzer, 21-56. Wiesbaden: Springer.

Union is first defined politically, not culturally, religiously, or even ethnically.[7] An economic and political conglomerate does not have good prerequisites for bundling and binding emotions – necessary processes for collective identification. To accommodate the various (and much stronger) national and regional narratives, the European Union coined the motto 'United in Diversity' in the year 2000. The official website states: "it signifies how Europeans have come together, in the form of the EU, to work for peace and prosperity, while at the same time being enriched by the continent's many different cultures, traditions and languages."[8] After all, diversity seems to work as a buzzword for the younger generation, several interview partners brought it forward as a key European value.[9] However, Maja's following statement reveals both the strength and weakness of the European diversity narrative: "I think Europe is very diverse. Many different kinds of people and cultures. We are really different. And I think that Europe is the best place to open your mind" (Maja, Romania). On the one hand, it evades clear definition, making it open to interpretation. On the other hand, difference as a guiding category can hardly have an identity-building effect. The participants were conscious of that fact. They frequently positioned themselves, either with their nationality or within a recognised block identity (e.g., Southern European, Post-communist country etc.), to mark the perspective from which they were speaking.

The other popular narrative of Europe, which was explicitly named during the interviews, is the peace narrative. For instance, Louise, a French participant, sees her parents' generation as people who, due to their experience of the immediate post-war period, highly value international cooperation and see it as a guarantee for democracy and peace. Millennials by contrast are, in her opinion, rather ignorant towards the achievements of the European Union: "they didn't live this. Ok, there is the ERASMUS experience, but they don't really know the richness of the other things you can get, or they don't really realise the importance of European regulations regarding the quality of life and food. It's not visible to them" (Louise, 22, France). Ruben, a German interview partner, thinks the dominance of a simplified peace narrative[10] is problematic because it obscures other meanings and origins of the European project:

> *I think of Europe and the European idea as something that was first thought or proclaimed in the 19th century as an idea to oppose the chauvinist nationalist movements. It was the antithesis to a nationalist understanding of homogeneous ethnicity and a homogeneous perception of reality in general - of religion, love and how family should be understood - which was the case in the nation states. And the second interesting thing is that people who were not belonging and did not feel like a part of this nationalist idea were the ones who were advocating for the European idea. It was always members of minorities, for instance Jews, and creative people like poets and writers[11] who were saying 'we need a European Association, we need a brotherhood'. […] So, Europe is not just a peace project. In the very beginning, when it was proclaimed, it was a freedom project. It was a project that had nothing to do with peace, but rather something to do with nationalism and all its concepts and ideas* (Ruben, 25, Germany).

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8 Cf. European Union. n.d. "EU motto". Accessed February 17, 2023.
https://european-union.europa.eu/principles-countries-history/symbols/eu-motto_en#:~:text=%22United%20in%20diversity%22%2C%20the,differ-ent%20cultures%2C%20traditions%20and%20languages

9 Compared to the rather passive term "interviewee" the term "interview partner" emphasises that both the interviewer and the interview participant are on the same level. They are hence conversation partners.

10 Author Robert Menasse analyses the incomplete understanding of the peace narrative as follows: The "peace project Europe" is regularly mentioned in Sunday speeches and has now been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. But it has been forgotten how it was conceived: if it was nationalism, then, that has repeatedly led to wars and crimes, then sustainable peace in Europe cannot be established by peace treaties between nations (which, as is well known, have been broken again and again), but only by overcoming nationalism, i.e. by pushing back the power of the nation states […]" (Own translation from German). Menasse, Robert. 2014. *Heimat ist die schönste Utopie. Reden (wir) über Europa.* 74-75. Edition Suhrkamp: Berlin.

11 Ruben names Victor Hugo and Stefan Zweig as examples.

We will return to this tension between the nation states and the European Union later. Not surprisingly, many participants took the equation of Europe and the EU for granted. While this limitation often happened unconsciously, some interview partners also reflected on it: "I feel like Europe equals the EU. This is my mindset even though of course Europe is bigger than just the EU" (Abigail, Austria). The interview partners from Armenia, a state that is a member of the European Council but not part of the European Union, were acutely aware of the consequences of being perceived as on the 'outside':

I think Europe is the safest and one of the most prosperous continents in general. So, there is a lot of aspiration to be like Europe. But I think that a problem that the EU has, and Europe in general, is that people understand by saying Europe only the EU. And I have also increasingly experienced that the world is very EU-centric. The amount of attention that in general things get are directly proportionate to their proximity to Europe (Tigran, Armenia).

The section on conflict (3.1) shows what economy of attention means for media coverage and thus for the formation of general knowledge about countries like Armenia. Abigail looks at more global dimensions of such Eurocentrism: "there is this superiority complex many Europeans have when speaking about themselves without realizing that it is problematic" (Abigail, 21, Austria). She mentions insufficient education when it comes to European colonialism and the wilful ignorance among many Europeans when it comes to the ongoing economic exploitation of countries in the Global South.

Brussels

Strasbourg
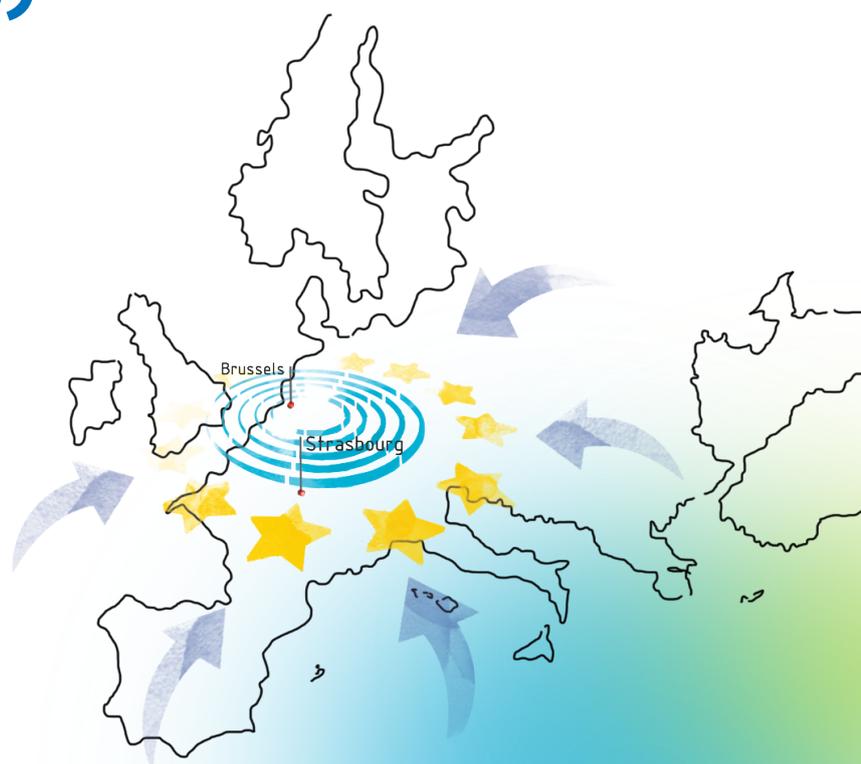
1.3 (Non-)Belonging in Europe: privileges and discrimination

Both implicit and explicit, this report addresses feelings of (non-)belonging in Europe. Identity as a concept contains the danger of being understood as possessive property of individuals. Belonging, in comparison, highlights the influence of social relations.[12] It seems to be quite an intuitive concept at first glance, but at a closer look it is a multidimensional cluster of emotional attachment, legal and political regulations, and geographical linkage.[13] The interview partners were quite aware of the complexity of the issue and it appeared to be one of the reasons why they found the interview question "in which instances do you feel like you do (not) belong in Europe?" to be intriguing. Liam stated the following:

When it comes to Europe we often think 'that's just the way it is'. But we don't necessarily realise that it is not like that for everyone. Being with something that is bigger than your national context, like the European Youth Parliament or Understanding Europe, helps you understand that. I see for instance that there is no visa freedom for my counterparts from Serbia (Liam, 19, Ireland).

Many participants used the question of belonging primarily to reflect on their privileges. They reacted to the feeling of why they feel quasi-naturally a part of Europe while other young Europeans are denied this feeling. Privileges that came up included private school education, which provides numerous opportunities, citizenship from a wealthy West European country and the perks of living in an EU-member state versus a non-EU member state. On the other side of the coin are experiences of discrimination. All three Romanian participants described incidents of discrimination and stereotyping they were subjected to when travelling in Western Europe:

> *One of the most pressing issues is how countries are seen, globally speaking or on a European level. I agree that we have some issues in Romania as a country, but I think we are a bit underestimated and discriminated actually. When me and my family went abroad my mum once told me in France that maybe we should start speaking in English, not in Romanian. […] And I was like 'But why, it is our language?'. When I grew up, she explained that she didn't feel comfortable because she assumed that we would be automatically judged by other people* (Amdrada, 22, Romania).

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12 Cf. Becker, Anja Katharina. 2015. "Introduction: Ethnicity as a political resource viewed by scholars from different academic disciplines." In Ethnicity as a political resource. Conceptualizations across disciplines, regions, and periods, edited by University of Cologne Forum "Ethnicity as a Political Resource", 11-24. Here: 18. Bielefeld: transcript Verlag.

13 Ibid., 18-19.

Belonging can be felt, performed, or imposed. The same applies for non-belonging. On a personal level, Tigran feels deeply connected with Europe:

> *Armenia geographically is at the crossroad of Europe and Asia. So, we uphold the culture of both continents in a way. What we usually say is that Armenia is geographically in Asia but culturally and worldview wise it is in Europe. Mostly, I associate myself with Europe and I consider myself a young European citizen* (Tigran, 24, Armenia).

On an institutional and political level, however, he often feels like non-belonging is imposed on him and his fellow citizens. Besides the feeling felt when Europe "left Armenia alone" during the war in 2020 (see conflict section 3.1), he also mentioned a travel grant programme that was recently announced for non-EU countries. Potential beneficiaries included the Balkan countries, Ukraine and Belarus but excluded Armenia and Georgia. His disappointment was palpable: "if we are saying that we are in a European network, then I don't think it's right to have some countries of Eastern partnership in it while others are excluded" (Tigran, 24, Armenia). Abigail regularly feels excluded from the cultural concept of nationality, despite her Austrian citizenship:[14] "when I was in school, I identified as Austrian, but people would always tell me 'no, you are not Austrian'. I said, 'I was born in Austria, I have citizenship'. But they said, 'no, you are black, you don't look like an Austrian, your name is foreign'" (Abigail, 21, Austria). Such racist exclusions are based on the implicit understanding that 'Austrian-ness' – and in many instances also 'Europeanness' – are based on whiteness.[15] Today, Abigail sees her belonging in a larger framework that transcends restrictive national imaginaries: "I would define myself as Afro-European […] because I feel like both identities play a huge part in my life" (Abigail, 21, Austria).

When speaking about culture worldviews, emotions come into play. The key question is: what is Europe to young Europeans beyond a political or economic union? Narrative research shows that narratives that are emotionally loaded are more persistent, more likely to trigger action and are harder to invalidate than narratives with no feelings attached.[16] Some participants of the report were keenly aware of that fact. Maja wishes there was civil education with a focus on what it means to be European in Romanian schools: "they could teach us more about these feelings, these feelings of being European" (Maja, 19, Romania). Ruben finds motivation for his work by giving the task of volunteering its very own meaning. He inserts himself into the tradition of minorities who stood up for the antithesis of an exclusive nation state: "I see myself in a room next to all these people who fought for this vision, who couldn't make it come true. I want to continue their legacy, adapt it to today and finish it" (Ruben, 25, Germany). To Ruben, 'Europe as a community of values' is not just an empty phrase.

14 Although nationality and citizenship are closely intertwined and often jointly mentioned in the idea of "a socio-political community of equal citizens unified by a shared nationhood" (Becker 2015, 19), the two concepts are not to be conflated here. In Becker's words, nationality is in essence a cultural concept while citizenship is a political concept which derives from people's relationship with the state (Becker 2015, 18). A person who obtains citizenship through naturalisation or even through birth might still not be recognised as part of the nation by fellow citizens. Such denial of belonging is rooted in othering mechanisms which are linked to certain national imaginaries mapping out who 'truly' belongs and who does not.

15 See for instance El-Tayeb, Fatima. 2011. *European Others. Queering ethnicity in postnational Europe*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

16 Koschorke, Albrecht. 2018. *Fact and fiction: elements of a general theory of narrative.* Berlin: De Gruyter, p. 203.

1.4 Europe in everyday life: connections and knowledge

As we have seen, Europe is highly complex and difficult to pinpoint. Nevertheless, most interview partners spoke freely when the author asked them to share how they 'live Europe' in their daily lives. Stories about the everyday are often ephemeral and form momentary insights into real-life problems, hopes and anxieties. Daily personal experiences, hearsay and contemporary commentary are consolidated into stories worth telling. When compatible with common storylines, they can be easily transmitted and, in accordance with the respective occasion, be retold in all kinds of variations. As the literature scholar Albrecht Koschorke notes, "a culture's decisive negotiations are conducted in everyday language".[17]

To understand what Europe means in a concrete sense for young people today, the interviewer asked the following guided question 'where do you encounter Europe in your everyday life?' Leo gave a paradigmatic answer, which captures the close personal connection with Europe that nearly all interview partners focused on:

I am taking Europe a bit personally. […] Europe was kind of my first major travel destination as a continent as a whole. Whenever I hear of Europe, I think of the trips that I took, the places I have visited, the memories I made and the people I've met there (Leo, 24, Armenia).

In more than half of the interviews, the Schengen space was one of the first associations people had. To travel freely across state borders seems to be the most tangible European achievement for young people. Personal exchange, be it through European flatmates, friendships or at university, is crucial. Interestingly, structured, institutionalised programmes like ERASMUS, city partnerships, civic education projects and travel programmes such as DiscoverEU were frequently used and considered valuable and even defining of one's life path. Despite the enthusiasm, some contributors voiced concerns that these opportunities are not accessible to every young person equally, as they are often more or even exclusively promoted in privileged environments such as private schools and universities. Apart from travelling, a sense of belonging to something bigger also develops when young people speak multiple European languages. Moreover, Europe-wide events such as the UEFA European Championship, the Eurovision Song Contest or the recent multi-sport European Championships in Munich were named as moments in which such togetherness is felt.

In some interviews, people recognised that they live in some sort of bubble when it comes to their heightened ties with Europe as a political topic but also as an identity resource. For Maja, it was challenging to enter this bubble when she joined Understanding Europe, because the complexities and technicalities of EU politics make her feel insecure:

17 Ibid., p. 23.

I know that I lack some information about the European Commission. That's why I didn't even want to deliver the introductory course about Europe […].[18] And I think that this is the only moment when I don't quite feel European, when I don't have as much information as the other ones around me have about this institution (Maja, 19, Romania).

For the participants, courage is a prerequisite for being able to experience Europe. Here, courage is framed as leaving one's comfort zone: for instance, speaking a foreign language, travelling to another country, and meeting people who seem to act strangely at first. Abigail phrases it poetically: "to learn cultural understanding and cultural sensitivity, you have to move your feet in front of your door" (Abigail, 21, Austria). For Maja, it was important to stress that people do not lose their sense of identity when they open up, but that all previous experience is beneficial to start something new.

As concluded from these statements, factual knowledge about life in Europe and the functioning of the EU is indispensable. However, for this knowledge to have an empowering effect, spaces are needed where young people feel like they belong and can openly discuss insecurities and political issues. Therefore, the network is based on the pedagogical principle of peer education. Peers are people who move in common social spaces and share similar interests and experiences.[19] Anna found this sense of community also in her university programme, where French and German students study political sciences together:

> *I feel very related to Europe when I take part in seminars. Especially when there is a truly transnational exchange that elaborates on ideas about politics, how to change politics through education, because I feel like I am surrounded by people who think similarly and that gives me strength* (Anna, 23, Germany).

Lack of knowledge, however, can have an excluding effect. This is not just the case for less privileged EU citizens who do not have access to certain resources but also true for information that has not permeated European common sense. This is the case in the European Outermost Regions, such as Martinique, which are part of the EU, and the Overseas countries and territories, for example French Polynesia, which are associated with the EU.[20] Abigail was the only one who mentioned these examples of "Forgotten Europes"[21], and she struggled to make sense of it: "some countries are still part of EU nations, but they do not have the same rights, they cannot really live an independent life. They are basically colonies, the ABC islands[22], they are Dutch, aren't they?" (Abigail, 21, Austria). The sociologist Manuela Boatcă calls these places an "integral but invisibilized part of an otherwise highly visible Europe".[23] They are neither integrated into a shared cultural memory, nor are they part of everyday knowledge. Boatcă states that these multiple Europes are "actively forgotten through the coloniality of memory at work in the dominant EU discourses".[24]

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18 Trainers in the Understanding Europe project regularly give workshops in schools. The so-called *European Crash Course* has been the first course implemented in the network and still remains the most conducted one.

19 Cf. The *educational approach* of the Understanding Europe network.

20 European Parliament. n.d. "Outermost regions (ORs)". Accessed February 27, 2023.
https://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/en/sheet/100/outermost-regions-ors.
https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/countries/overseas-countries-and-territories_en.

21 Boatcă, Manuela. 2019. "Forgotten Europes. Rethinking Regional Entanglements from the Caribbean". In *Critical Geopolitics and Regional (Re)Configurations: interregionalism and transnationalism between Latin America and Europe*, edited by Breno Bringel, Heriberto Cairo, 96-116. Routledge.

22 The ABC islands consist of Aruba, Bonaire and Curação in the Caribbean Sea.

23 Boatcă, Manuela. 2021. Thinking Europe Otherwise. Lessons from the Caribbean. *Current Sociology Volume 69, Issue 3: Special Issue: Theorizing Society across Borders: Globality, Transnationality, Postcoloniality*: 389-414, here: p. 400.

24 Ibid., p. 402.

2 What preoccupies young Europe?

2.1 Conflicts: what do we care about?

Influential narratives play an essential role in times of conflict and crisis.[25] In moments of upheaval and change, extra orientation is needed. Influential social narratives take up essential functions in society because they promise predictability and a better future in a volatile and crisis-ridden environment. This is especially relevant when certainties are shaken, as was the case for Anna in 2016: "I was in 11th grade and Brexit – a country leaving the European Union – was the very first big political moment where the European Union didn't seem as strong as I thought it was. And I think this event shaped how I think about Europe" (Anna, 23, Germany). As the cultural scholar Albrecht Koschorke writes, "in situations stamped with such tension, narratives have the task of forming imaginary communities understanding themselves as collective agents […]".[26] The following statements confirm the need for internal cohesion and heightened loyalties, as felt by Ruben and Liam when confronted with the shock of Brexit:

As far as I understood, back in 2016 Europe was something very vulnerable, very fragile, that needed to be enthusiastically promoted not to get lost in the shouts and voices of nationalism (Ruben, 25, Germany).

We might think that the European Union is there and will always be there. But you just have to look at Brexit. It is something that we need to preserve. People have to be involved, in tune and aware (Liam, 19, Ireland).

The Russian invasion of Ukraine was much talked about in the interviews. It became clear that the war is an emotional topic with an unsettling effect - even on general perceptions of politics:

> *Before this war I wanted to be an optimist and I always wanted to believe in international relations and this idea of constructivism. That there is a system between states that is formed on norms and on living together. And now I feel we are back in realism and it's all about power and armament and military conflict. And this changed the way I perceive politics on a transnational level. There are moments where I feel very hopeless and powerless* (Anna, 23, Germany).

However, conflicts also cause competition because they tie up resources, be they material or attention resources. Maja, for instance, emphasised that while helping Ukrainian refugees is very important to her, the official effort of the Romanian government also reveals

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25 Koschorke 2018, 190.

26 Ibid.

how much the Romanian people have been let down by their own government over the past few decades. Within the concept of attention economy, attention is regarded as a rare good and therefore becomes competitive. Affected areas are news consumption and production as well as social media in general. In conversation with the two Armenian participants, competition over narratives in the European sphere of influence became even more apparent:

Relevance allocations in a geo-political, economic and emotional sense – hence, the question 'What do I care about and why?' – arise from stories told about a certain place or conflict. In times of crisis, especially in armed conflicts, storytelling has immediate political consequences. The stories we hear in the media, the knowledge we gain about the reasons for war, and the way we feel emotionally concerned, influence government decisions on resources and strategies.

We had the war in Armenia in 2020, which was not very well covered by the European countries. And the EU was concerned on paper, but no serious action took place from their side. I don't want to take it to the negative but, for example, there is now a conflict in Ukraine , which is much closer to Europe and is booming in the news, with all international attention on that. […] I would also like to mention the…I wouldn't like to call it racism, maybe it is a discrimination. Some of the media coverage the Ukrainian conflict was getting was about 'Oh you know, these people are not from these developing countries, they are civilised people. They are blond and they have blue eyes. And I think if Europe is truly standing up for its values, then human life is an absolute value, that it shouldn't depend on how a person looks like or identifies itself. This is what I really feel (Tigran, 24, Armenia).[28]

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27 Cf. Pedersen, Morten Axel, Kristoffer Albris, and Nick Seaver. 2021. „The Political Economy of attention". In *Annual Review of Anthropology* 2021. 50:309–325.

28 Tigran's statement leads back to the above-mentioned imaginary of Europe as being a white (and Christian) continent. The imaginary feeds different discourses of exclusion - especially in term of media coverage and also in terms of political action and human rights violations.

2.2   European values: between solidarity and hypocrisy

Given the crisis mode Europe currently finds itself in, solidarity has strongly emerged as a central value of our times:

The divisions of the European people, between the peoples of the South and the North, and between every block that Europe consists of, were made after centuries of us looking at our own bellies instead of the bigger picture: that we cannot coexist whilst at war with each other. […] The European peoples are living in this relatively small continent, very close to each other. They should help each other. There are not just rivalries, there are so many common traditions that are even more important than the common values that can and should be built democratically. And solidarity is, I think, the most important one (João, 21, Portugal).

In general, most participants affirmed the existence of European values and named examples such as freedom of speech and diversity. Interestingly, the lived reality of the participants often shined through the answers. Tigran for instance, who lives in a country threatened by war, said the following: "I think security. That is the first word when I think about Europe. But security in its many meanings: security like human rights, physical security in terms of war and social security" (Tigran, 24, Armenia). He advocates for a value-based foreign policy, which would not allow economic deals with dictatorships.[29] For Amdrada, democracy is the most practical value. Her parents raised her with a safe space to speak her mind and she applies these skills enthusiastically in her volunteer groups: "we discuss a lot because sometimes we have so many different opinions and elements that contradict each other. If we are not reaching a compromise, then we are voting. And I think it's very important because it encourages us day-by-day to speak up our mind and do better (Amdrada, 22, Romania). Human rights are the most controversially discussed values that the European Union commits itself to.[30] Ruben sees a big discrepancy between what is officially promoted and what the reality on the ground looks like:

29 He refers specifically to the energy deal between the EU and Azerbaijan that was agreed in 2022. See for instance European Commission. 2022. "EU and Azerbaijan enhance bilateral relations, including energy cooperation." Accessed February 17, 2023. *https://european-union.europa.eu/principles-countries-history/principles-and-values/aims-and-values_en: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/press-corner/detail/en/IP_22_4550.*

30 See for instance European Union. n.d. "Aims and Values." Accessed February 17, 2023. *https://european-union.europa.eu/principles-countries-history/principles-and-values/aims-and-values_en:* "Human rights are protected by the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights. These cover the right to be free from discrimination on the basis of sex, racial or ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation, the right to the protection of your personal data, and the right to get access to justice."

*When I see that Europe does not uphold what it
is promising when it comes to human rights at its
borders, then I am ashamed, and I ask myself 'how
can this be possible?'. How can Europe on the one
side say with huge self-confidence 'this is the place
where human rights count'. And then without a
single thought, contradict the past sentence on
the European borders. It makes me sad and angry
because these people could be my parents.*
(Ruben, 25, Germany).

Several participants insisted that migrant rights, racism, and social justice require improvement, and they often perceive official pronouncements as hypocritical.

2.3   The Economy: addressing inequalities

The participants barely talked about hard economic facts. However, this does not mean that they do not recognise the economy as an essential factor of the construct of Europe. They discussed how economic decisions on an EU level influence individual lives, the consequences of economic inequality and how economic and cultural reflections are intertwined. João's perception of austerity policies imposed on Southern EU states in the wake of the financial crisis of 2008 is a paradigmatic example of economic storytelling:

*We take a lot from Europe, not just in a monetary
sense but also in terms of counselling and
technological aspects. We are enriched by the
EU, but we are also shackled by it. We feel like
the impositions of the Northern countries do
not reflect our own needs but reflect their own
derogatory thinking about us. They do not know
our context and our history; they do not know
the deep difficulties that the Southern European*

*peoples are living. Southern Europeans have
recently gotten out of impoverishing dictatorships,
and they cannot get out of this situation
alone. But Northern European peoples see our
weaknesses as part of our national character and
not as part of our long and often times pressing
history. So, they think of us as being less than
them. And I think that's a scar that is very far from
healing* (João, 21, Portugal).

We can see how two narratives of the same event – the European debt crisis - are clashing because the reasons and origins for the crisis are narrated differently, both in emotionally loaded storylines. The Northern European narrative is based on harmful national stereotypes of Southern European people, accusing them of laziness and carelessness.[31] By contrast, the Southern European narrative refers to a tormented history as the root course of unsubstantial national economic structures. These rather simple

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31 See for a first overview Mahony, Honor. 2012. "National stereotyping - the eurozone's other story." Euobserver, February 27, 2021. https://euobserver.com/eu-political/115340.

storylines are an excellent example of how complexity is reduced to be easily transmittable in everyday culture.

Historic realities and their origin narratives shape our understanding of transnational relations today. A second example helps us to solidify this thesis. From Maja's point of view, Western European countries are very privileged and are therefore not able to understand the realities of a country like Romania: "they don't know what it means to be a post-communist country. It is very hard but somehow, we are still there, we are still on the map" (Maja, 19, Romania). From this statement, one can feel pride stemming from a feeling of resilience. The persistent economic inequality between Western and Eastern Europe leads to migratory movements, which can shape generations, as Amdrada's story illustrates:

My father has been working abroad in Europe since I was four years old. For 18 years now! Right now, he is working in Norway, but he has also worked in many other places in Europe. […] When I was a kid, I was very judgy. I was like, 'oh, my father is working abroad, so he wasn't there for me in many important moments'. But then I grew up and realised that it was important for him to support our family. The reason why I am here volunteering and why I am doing all this amazing stuff is because he's working abroad to ensure a good education for me (Amdrada, 22, Romania).

As we have seen, the economy as an abstract concept becomes tangible in its effects on individual lives. Inequality, one of Europe's major challenges, generates countless stories for which young Europeans demand more visibility.

2.4   Politics:
The European Union and the nation state

In this sub-section, we are looking at the relations and the potential for conflict between nation states and the EU as an institution. Is belonging to Europe put in competition with belonging to a nation state or are they seen as compatible? What degree of sovereignty and cooperation is desirable? Where should decisions be taken and how much energy should be invested in EU politics? Despite sounding rather abstract, such questions are part of everyday discourses around Europe, as Louise elaborates:

Some French people are unhappy with President Macron's internal politics, especially social justice. Regarding the EU, I think he is a good diplomat. […] I think that most people in France who are interested in the EU and Europe think he's doing a good job in the EU. But they also want the president to prioritise their needs internally […] because there are so many social problems in France. People don't really know – except for ERASMUS, which is really visible – what the EU can bring to their country. So, they just see someone who is speaking outside of the country and not doing anything in it (Louise, 22, France).

For Louise, the idea that EU politics and national politics could be mutually exclusive is hindering a clear understanding of the benefits EU membership brings. Politics is thereby closely tied to identity resources. To Giovanni, things are clear, he feels completely balanced between his national and European identity when he says: "I feel European as much as I feel Italian" (Giovanni, 18, Italy). However, national pride and national calculus might also stand in the way of seeing one's nation as part of something bigger:

> *I think it's really important to know as French people we are not alone because sometimes we have a very positive vision of ourselves (chuckles). […] I think all countries use foreign policy as a way to show internally that they have power. Also, France is one of the founding countries of the EU. I think sometimes we have a big head, thinking that we are more important than other countries in the EU* (Louise, 22, France).

National narratives are much more accessible, simpler and more emotionally anchored than narratives about Europe, but why is that? We will explore three reasons. Firstly, the EU is an entity that is in constant need of explanation. For Louise, it is a like a big machine: "it's working but it's impressive. So, you really have to understand all sorts of things in it. To tackle this right, it is crucial to start speaking about it to school children" (Louise, 22, France). Established narratives, on the other hand, are self-explanatory. They are based on common sense and certainties.

Secondly, the construct of states had a head start on the European Union. Nation states were established in the 19th century, promoted as cohesive wholes, and charged with symbolism. Up until today, the state is the category necessary for any form of recognition in the international context. One can certainly question the role of nation states in contemporary Europe, as João demonstrates, but it takes a lot of energy to argue against such an institutionally anchored concept.

I think it is hypocritical of the European Union to support national governments and not independent governments, because why should the nation of the French people have such a say in Europe when there's not a nation for the Catalan people or the Basque people or even the Corsican people. And although it is a very strong pillar of the European Union, the non-infringement and the sovereignty of the states, I think the European Union should think not of the states as its principal pillar, but of the peoples as it principal pillar (João, 21, Portugal).

The third reason for the dominance of national narratives is that in a European context the semantic material for the creation of collective identities - hence sources such as everyday sayings, literature, myths and cultural norms -

are highly diverse, scattered and often mutually inaccessible. This is the case because many emotionally binding identity resources are tied up in distinct national memories and myths. For instance the French commemoration of World War I as La Grande Guerre and a vital element of contemporary national cohesion will never be compatible with the German cultural memory of this event.[32] Put simply, memory politics thereby uses narratives from national cultural memory to achieve political goals in the present. We can call this the cultural organisation of time through narratives. Louise offers us a poignant example about the French remembrance of the Second World War:

> *I know it's cultural to have a good opinion of ourselves as French people. I think this might be because of the Second War, since we won. We had a really important resisting network against Nazism. To me, the first thing that comes to my mind is, 'oh, we won the war'. It's funny because in France there were a lot of people who supported the Vichy movement. But today in schools they will just say, 'oh, we were perfect, we were supporting the good people and we won the war'* (Louise, 22, France).

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32 See for instance Spiegel. 2014. "Remembering 'La Grande Guerre'". January 17, 2014.
https://www.spiegel.de/fotostrecke/photo-gallery-remembering-la-grande-guerre-fotostrecke-105806.html.

From a storytelling perspective it is hence comprehensible why many stories about Europe are characterised by conflicts, exclusions, and fracture lines. The quest for 'the one (new) European narrative', which again and again is proclaimed, demanded, and desperately sought is illusory against this background.[33]

Nationalism, a worldview that exalts one's own nation and devalues other nations, is on the rise in Europe. Nationalist movements of the far-right follow the maxim that one's own country and one's own citizens 'naturally' come first.[34] Louise recalls many emotional debates with fellow students from other European countries in the run-up to the presidential elections in 2022. With the far-right candidate, Marine Le Pen, in a promising position, they were scared that they might have to leave France after the election. Besides the extreme right, Ruben is also worried about other anti-democratic movements. He observes

more and more people who stop believing in democracy and instead turn towards conspiracy theories about migration, the Covid-19 pandemic and politics in general:

> *They live in a world where they think everything is perfectly scripted and we are all just chess figures who have no influence. And when you talk to them about voting and so on and so forth, of course to them it's nonsense. For them, believing in these things is a total waste of time* (Ruben, 25, Germany).

To those who believe in conspiracy theories, they make a 'good story'. Everything seems causally linked and highly appeals to emotions – often fear. Moreover, in simply attributing actions and motivations to individual characters, it creates a clear distinction between good and evil.[35] Due to these narrative characteristics and the sheer unconditional belief of conspiracy followers, it is very difficult to invalidate a conspiracy theory with facts.

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33 See as one example: European Economic and Social Committee. 2021. "A New Narrative for Europe - The EESC resolution on the Conference on the Future of Europe." Accessed February 17, 2023.
https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/our-work/publications-other-work/publications/new-narrative-europe-eesc-resolution-conference-future-europe.

34 Cf. The slogan "America First" by the former US president Donald Trump during the presidential election and his presidency (2017-2021-9.

35 See for instance Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung. 2022. „Verschwörungstheorien". Accessed February 17, 2023.
https://www.bpb.de/kurz-knapp/lexika/lexikon-in-einfacher-sprache/312781/verschwoerungstheorien/.

3 Visions for a young Europe

3.1 What it means to be political: the role of democratic citizenship education

Here we explore what being political means to the young Europeans who were interviewed. To Anna, it is crucial that we widen our understanding of the political:

Citizenship education means that students are able to frame their own idea of democracy. They get ideas of how to frame their way of the political. To see that there are numerous ways to engage in political life. This can be that you are a volunteer at your local sports club or a student representative at your school. Because I think politics is also society. […] I think there is always something political in each aspect of life. To see this and to appreciate it is what I truly think democracy is. To lose the perception that democracy and politics is just to take part in elections. (Anna, 23, Germany).

The interview partners agree that education should teach us how to engage in society and how to be active European citizens. However, they found that citizenship education in schools has major deficits and structural challenges, with some variance in each country. In France, for instance, the subject of education civique exists but is mostly taught by history and geography teachers who use the available time to fulfil their own curriculum. In Romania, it is not even taught as a subject. In many European contexts,

citizenship education, particularly about Europe and the European Union, seems to be a resource only privileged young people have access to, either because they go to private schools or because they have the opportunity to join EU funded programmes.

To break such exclusionary practices, the volunteers joined Understanding Europe, which allows them to first get training and then to reach more young people through the workshops they give at schools. Especially in the field of (social) media literacy, they see a great need for education that is not adequately covered by regular school activities. For their own motivation, it is essential that the young educators feel part of a community: "as a citizen, of course you can read the news and stuff like that. But being in a community with the same values, promoting the European Union, it was easier for me to learn" (Maria, 20, Romania). Those who have been involved for several years expressed that their volunteer work has really shaped their personality: "the European Youth Parliament and Understanding Europe have changed my life drastically in so many ways. It has become an inseparable part of my life for years now and has also shaped my skills and me as a person due to the interactions with different types of people" (Tigran, 24, Armenia). Enabling critical

thinking is one of the major goals of citizenship education. Ruben describes the specific skill that he was able to acquire through the project:

I would say Understanding Europe, from the very beginning, allowed me to open up this ambivalence or this ambiguity that I have in myself towards Europe. Discussing it with other people, talking about it and channelling it to have some have some sort of valve or gateway to express my concerns and my willingness to still fight for Europe. So, the ambiguity that I have is something that I can cure with Understanding Europe (Ruben, 25, Germany).

Dealing with contradictions and understanding plurality – so-called tolerance for ambiguity[36] – is an indispensable skill that today's young Europeans need to tackle present crises and challenges.
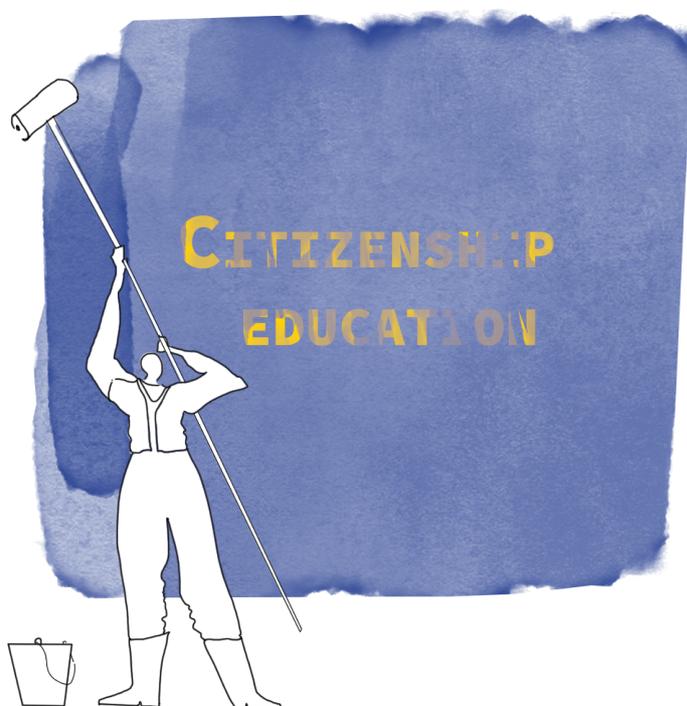
36 Cf. Foroutan, Naika. 2019. *Die postmigrantische Gesellschaft – Ein Versprechen der pluralen Demokratie.* Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, p. 128; see also Understanding Europe Educational Briefing 2020. Accessed February 17, 2023. *https://understanding-europe.org/content/uploads/2021/03/educational_briefing_2020_de-1.pdf?x17653.*

3.2   Young visions for Europe

As we have seen, remembrance is structured through influential narratives. As the interview partners are between 18 and 25, not much of Europe's past is yet intertwined with their own life experience. In Europe's future, however, they see themselves as central protagonists who have a responsibility to shape their own continent. Tigran, for instance, demands that European citizens should not be content with the status quo but press for necessary changes:

I think the European Union, the project in itself is a very good one. And the foundations on which it was built were very right, especially after the Second World War with the vision of no war and good integration. However, I think with time the circumstances changed, and the vision needs to keep up with that. And I think in many areas Europe is not developing fast enough, changing its infrastructure and its approaches to many things (Tigran, 24, Armenia).

In general, the interview participants reject a Europe that is only 'good on paper' but does not stand up to its values. Well-informed citizens and an active European civil society should hold national governments, the European Union and other institutions accountable when it comes to the implementation of much promoted European values. In terms of concrete wishes, they advocate for younger members of parliament with which young people can identify, more visibility and equality for marginalised countries such as Portugal or Romania and more coherent EU foreign policy. Moreover, they wish that older people finally start to tackle the climate crisis in a serious manner and recognise what climate anxiety is doing to the younger generation in Europe. Maja concludes this report with memorable final words: "The Europe that I want to see in the future is one Europe with more empathy. […] And courage to exit our comfort zones" (Maja, 19, Romania).

About the author

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Narratives of change:
Perspectives from the Alfred Herrhausen Gesellschaft

We at the Alfred Herrhausen Gesellschaft advocate for social and economic progress, and consider the processes of social, political, and technological transformation that shape our day-to-day lives. Our mission is to contribute to change in a responsible manner. We ask ourselves: How can Europe in strengthen the development of a liberal democracy and social market economy, so that sustainable progress can be made? How can we shape change and respond in a responsible manner to questions of our time? This ambitious priority is at the heart of our mission: **'We think change'.**

How do we experience change today?

There is a sense of crisis and uncertainty impacting all European citizens. The war in Ukraine, the subsequent energy shortage, the Covid Pandemic, inflation and economic recession, and the impending climate crisis all contribute to an unprecedented, game-changing phenomena. They trigger social unrest, political polarization, discussions about the role and significance of states, and debates about the (re)scaling of governance mechanisms. At the same time there is increasing awareness that the way we currently live and act will not sustain prosperity and economic growth, let alone the global climate conditions we have come to take for granted, especially in countries with a high standard of living.

These multiple external shocks, their foreseeable consequences and the resulting awareness require fundamental changes. This extent of change, which we now coin `transformation´, calls for reflection and reevaluation of the very principles, paradigms and narratives that shape our current collective and individual action. Strong and universally framed narratives of change support this transition process by bringing new perspectives onto our radar that support a confident vision of the future and trigger change processes in the way we think and act.

What are narratives of change?

Fundamentally all narratives of change consist of a rationale, a problem description, and a projected or desired outcome. Narratives of change reveal why the world needs to adjust, what it needs to adjust to, who has the power to do so and ideally what actions need to be taken to achieve this. Narratives of change create a shared sense of belonging, community, and identity that structure actions and meaning based on a common outlook on social reality and the desired future.[37]

When we talk about change, we must keep in mind that humans are creatures of habit, preferring the status quo and the way things are. They are generally content and satisfied and it is in their nature not to actively embrace change and the unknown - even if it is ultimately for the better.[38] Only through reiteration and gradual strengthening of a narrative of change and can a change of habit be permanently manifested. Today, multiple, parallel existing narratives seek to build a common European mindset, e.g., Green Europe, Europe as a trade partnership, a union of common cultural values, a mutual belief in human rights, freedom to travel and a generally more livable Europe for its citizens.

The sustainable and digital transition of Europe

Framing the "twin transition" - the sustainable and digital transition of Europe - is an example of a positive narrative of change highlighting the benefits of creating a green and sustainable Europe, becoming a pioneer of climate neutrality as a business opportunity and catching up on digitalization. It comes across as a truly future oriented narrative, which was strategically positioned in communication and planning. The EU commission´s highest priority is developing 'a Europe for the digital age' as a strategy for economic growth and was addressed in several speeches. In September 2020, Ursula von der Leyen, upon her appointment as President of the Commission said, "the next decade should be Europe's ´digital decade´". As narratives of change also require a meaningful plan of action to be successful, this vision has been accompanied by funding totaling 750 billion Euros.

But what do these narratives of change, established by the European Commission and its acting democratic supporters, have in common? They provide a positive vision of the future: to overcome doubts, to identify challenges, to collaborate in achieving goals, to overcome

37 Pfotenhauer, Sebastian und Sheila Jasanoff. 2017. „Panacea or diagnosis? Imaginaries of innovation and the 'MIT model' in three political cultures." *Social Studies of Science*, 47 (6): 783-810.

38 Mendelsohn, Alana. 2019. "Creatures of Habit: The Neuroscience of Habit and Purposeful Behavior." *Biological Psychiatry, 85*(11). Wood, Wendy, and Dennis Rünger. 2016. "Psychology of habit." Annual Review of Psychology Vol. 67:289-314.

What are the challenges of narratives?

injustice, and to secure the future of the next generation. In particular, times of insecurity provide a breeding ground for negative or pessimistic narratives that lower the faith in democratic values and institutions. Furthermore, the complexity of diverging information dissemination, via social media for example blurs the "mutual sense" of understanding. To break these downward spirals, positive orientation is key.

Visual ideas, symbols, or pictures about "The European Union" reinforce positive narratives through constant and repeated reporting and communication in the media. For example, the latest proposal to create a "made in Europe" brand is a reaction to the United States' Inflation Reduction Act initiative and devised to support the vision of Europe pioneering sustainability and digitalization solutions. A narrative that might strengthen European identity, but still creates a divide. How far we can create broader, even global acceptance for our ideas, depends on finding the framing that affects everyone in the same manner.

During the COVID-19 crisis, disinformation such as divided perspectives on healthcare information and how to handle the pandemic and resulting conspiracies endangered our democratic values. This divide within European society has been successfully exploited by populists to give voice to their beliefs and attract supporters. These negative and conflict inducing narratives are passed on via the filter of a "reality" constructed by the media and streamlined to target audiences through social media– a classic example of self-affirmation bias. This has led to the support of anti-democratic parties, as well as other social groups with harsh beliefs on issues we thought we had overcome in the past.

Most recently, aggressive pro-Kremlin disinformation and war propaganda built on Putin´s imperialistic narrative has accompanied Russia´s military aggression against Ukraine, and shortly before, narratives regarding the Covid pandemic were framed in China through division rather than overcoming it collectively. We need to realize that a fundamental feature of these narratives is to separate between "us" and "them" and that creating solely positive narratives, and breaking down these walls, is most challenging.

What is important for the road ahead?

The Alfred Herrhausen Gesellschaft believes that specific parameters have an important and constructive role to play in helping us navigate change and creating beneficial narratives:

→ **Forward-facing ideas:** build an image of a future that we want to become a part of, evoke imagination and, ideally, provide a **guide for action. Only if we can imagine the future, can we help shape the course it will take.**

→ **Self-efficacy:** help us experience success in achieving change, if only in small steps – provide a roadmap, make us realize that our contribution counts – no matter how big or small.

→ **Open dialogue:** talk, listen and discuss with others to get a feel for opposing positions. Integrating ideas and experiences into storytelling is a powerful tool to foster commitment and engagement in practice (practitioner recruitment[39]).

→ **Switching perspectives:** evaluate daily news/information and put yourself in the position of 'others' to understand their opinion and increase the legitimacy of ideas of change.

Inspiring narratives come in different forms and formats, ranging from scientific literature and political discourse to arts and entertainment. Good narratives need to be easily adaptable in a pluralist media landscape and translate well into the "languages" of different societal groups. In the world of social change, the stories that we tell can be an extremely powerful tool in shaping public opinion and influencing policy. Narratives, if framed in the right way, should be used to communicate with all audiences, spark change in their thinking and influence difficult conversations in a positive way to create more resilient and inclusive societies. Small shifts in mindset can trigger a cascade of changes so profound that they test the limits of what seems possible.

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39 Wittmayer, Julia, Julia Backhaus, Flor Avelino et al. 2019. "Narratives of change: How social innovation initiatives construct societal transformation." Futures, Volume 112.

About the author

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