

Editorial

Risks and Opportunities for EU Narratives in the Turbulent World

The question about a ‘compelling narrative’ for the evolving project of European integration continues to attract attention of scholars and practitioners of the EU.¹ The interest sharpened when the polycrisis hit European societies. It has become even more pertinent in an increasingly geopolitical world marked by an intensifying ‘battle of narratives’.² Does this ‘battle’ present opportunity or risk to the EU’s grand-narratives? Does our turbulent world require revision and/or re-narration of the EU to its citizens and external partners? Does the reframing of the narrative mean new creative spaces – or threats – to how internal and external audience make sense of the EU as an actor at times of global uncertainty? These questions guide the editorial.

Almost a decade ago, Manners and Murray³ argued the importance of narratives for understanding European integration. They defined narratives as devices that ‘constitute the sense-making (stories people tell to make sense of their reality) activities of European integration’.⁴ Positioning their inquiry within the ‘narrative turn’ in social sciences and an emerging field in EU studies, Manners and Murray evaluated critically a complex trajectory of the ‘noble narrative of the EU as a peace project’.⁵ They offered insights into what inputs may create a compelling narrative. Among those is the number of story lines (one *v.* many), as well as the narrative’s coherence, persuasion, evolution, credibility, and relative weight *vis-à-vis* other narratives. We may add to this list a potential for positive reception and support by publics internal and external to the EU. This potential may reside with the structural, rhetorical, and/or persuasive elements of a narrative: it ‘can either be understood as structuring the range of thoughts and actions of actors, or as a tool that actors use to persuade each other’.⁶ The internal and external directions of the EU’s narrative flow are also important for understanding its success. Leading experts

¹ I. Manners & P. Murray, *The End of a Noble Narrative? European Integration Narratives After the Nobel Peace Prize*, 54 J. Common Mkt. Stud. 185–202 (2016), doi: 10.1111/jcms.12324.

² S. Lehne, *The EU and the Global Battle of Narratives* (21 Mar. 2024, Carnegie Europe), <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/03/the-eu-and-the-global-battle-of-narratives?lang=en> (accessed 1 Oct. 2025).

³ Manners & Murray, *supra* n. 1, at 186.

⁴ *Ibid.*, at 186.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ A. Miskimmon, B. O’Loughlin & L. Roselle, *Strategic Narratives: Communication Power and the New World Order* (Taylor & Francis 2013).

define narrative as a ‘dynamic and ever-negotiated social product based on states’ interactions both in their societies and with external significant others’.⁷

Relevant literature is clear that narratives are different from other forms of discourse. Narratives are marked by ‘sequence and consequence: events are selected, organized, connected, and evaluated as meaningful for a particular audience’.⁸ For Miskimmon, O’Loughlin and Rosselle, narratives are ‘frameworks that allow humans to connect apparently unconnected phenomena around some causal transformation’ performing sensemaking function.⁹ These qualities are critical to understand the role of narratives in political discourses where they aim to provide a ‘legitimation of the past and for the present where narratives act as a justification for a polity or political project’.¹⁰ Miskimmon et al. add future to the past and present temporal dimensions in shaping meaning, and specifically in their theorization of strategic narratives. Strategic narratives for them are instruments ‘for political actors to extend their influence, manage expectations and change the discursive environment in which they operate’.¹¹ Importantly, strategic narrative ‘does not seek to predict events but to convince others to act in such a way that the story will follow its desired course’.¹²

Manners and Murray captured a potential for evolution of the EU’s dominant narrative and the evolution of the narrative environment in the EU, where several stories may compete, reinforce, or cancel each other. Such an ‘unsettled narrative situation’¹³ is nothing new either in the world, or in the EU. In the 1980s, scholars already proposed to conceptualize the change impacting global interdependencies in terms of volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity.¹⁴ In the last decade, the intensity and frequency of multiple and often simultaneous crises besieging the world have led the literature to add to this list brittleness/fragility, anxiety, non-linearity, and incomprehensibility.¹⁵

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ C. Riessman & J. Speedy, *Narrative Inquiry in the Psychotherapy Professions*, in *Handbook of Narrative Inquiry* 430 (D. J. Clandinin ed., Sage 2007).

⁹ Miskimmon, O’Loughlin & Roselle, *supra* n. 6, at 6.

¹⁰ H. Mayer, *The Long Legacy of Dorian Gray: Why the European Union Needs to Redefine its Role in Global Affairs*, 30 J. Eur. Integ. 7–25 (2008), doi: 10.1080/07036330801959440, as cited by Manners & Murray, *supra* n. 1.

¹¹ Miskimmon, O’Loughlin & Roselle, *supra* n. 6, at 2.

¹² L. Freedman, *Networks, Culture and Narratives*, 45 Adelphi Papers 11–26 at 23 (2006), <https://doi.org/10.1080/05679320600661640>.

¹³ R. R. Krebs, *Narrative and the Making of US National Security* (Cambridge University Press 2015).

¹⁴ W. Bennis & B. Nanus, *Leaders: The Strategies for Taking Charge* (Harper & Row 1985); O. Mack, A. Khare, A. Krämer & T. Burgartz, *Managing in a VUCA World* (Springer 2016).

¹⁵ J. Cascio, *Facing the Age of Chaos*, Medium (2020), <https://medium.com/@cascio/facing-the-age-of-chaos-b00687b1f51d> (accessed 1 Oct. 2025), as cited by A. Pipere & K. Martinsone, *Metamodernism and Social Sciences: Scoping the Future*, 11 Soc. Sci. 457 (2022), doi: 10.3390/socsci11100457.

The turbulence created by these multiple dimensions accompanying crises and change is now in the core of EU politics, policies, and perceptions about the self and others. The EU's self-narratives about its place and role in the world, about its norms and values, and its specific policy areas¹⁶ (including foreign policy) are challenged and tested. Among the latest impacts are Russia's ongoing war against Ukraine, the intensifying hybrid warfare with the European NATO states, and the EU's deepening divide with the US under President Trump's second administration. These exist in the context of increasing global competition and contestation, problematic globalization, harshening geoeconomics, securitization of energy, climate, migration policy areas (to name few), and declining international rule-based order. For some, the EU underperforms in tackling these challenges and in communicating its successes. As a result, 'the global battle of narratives does not look good for the EU and its member states'.¹⁷

However, the unsettled narrative situation may offer an opportunity for a critical revision and powerful re-narration. Focusing on EU foreign policy, Lehne¹⁸ offers three potential policy pathways on the basis of which narratives can be built. The first spells a somewhat paradoxical approach of being 'more humble and more ambitious' at the same time. It comes with a call to 'do a great deal more to have an impact in the new global constellation' while aiming at 'strong and well-managed partnerships with countries in other regions that are now essential for Europe to promote its interests and objectives'.¹⁹ The second direction invites the EU to 'avoid the trap of binary worldviews' and engage with international partners 'on the basis of interests and values, not in terms of belonging to different camps'.²⁰ The last direction prescribes the EU to 'position itself as a genuine force for reform of the international order' and reinvent itself as a 'hub for a broad coalition of countries interested in preserving an orderly world'.²¹ These directions, echoing the 2016 EU Global Strategy's positions of principled pragmatism, resilience, and commitment to the multilateral world order, may be instrumental for the EU to revisit its strategic narrative at the age of global uncertainty. A revised narrative may tell a compelling story of the EU as a humble yet ambitious global actor, an engaged and respectful partner, and a principled genuine reformer. Such re-narration may fine-tune the original narratives in EUGS 2016 which risk getting outdated in the changed world. The main benefit may come with embracing humility, respect and sincerity in action and communication. These

¹⁶ For the structure of the strategic narrative in terms of systemic, identity and issue-specific levels see Miskimmon, O'Loughlin & Roselle, *supra* n. 6.

¹⁷ Lehne, *supra* n.2.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, online.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, online.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, online.

²¹ *Ibid.*, online.

may serve one of the safeguards against perpetuating the Eurocentrism in EU foreign policy.²² But do the benefits of re-narration outweigh the risks?

Here we stumble across the first potential risk for the EU's strategic re-narration. A discrepancy between expectations ramped up by a revised narrative and a perceived poor performance of the EU may lead to the gaps between the EU as a sender of such narratives and its receivers.²³ In conjunction, the hope-performance gap may appear, when hopes to attain desired goals that would benefit the perceivers are perceived not to be fulfilled by EU activities.²⁴ If unaddressed, such discrepancies may morph into the critical perception gaps 'when an entrenched image (and thus expectation) of the EU encounters a perception of performance that indicates a severe, or absolute, contradiction and shaken or even abandoned hope'.²⁵ Relevant literature argues that persisting perceived gaps may lead to disappointment and discontent, and cause frustration, with a risk of deteriorating the climate between the EU and its global partners, as well as with its own citizens.²⁶

As a strategic communication exercise, 'the narratives are designed to shape the behaviour of domestic and international actors'.²⁷ Yet, the re-narration at times of a complex change has the chance you lose (or weaken) control over your narrative and let others tell your story. For the EU, this is already a threat, with disinformation being a part of the rapidly escalating hybrid warfare against the EU and its Member States.²⁸ Disinformation should not be equated with 'fake news' only, but also be considered as a tool to deliver convincing misleading storylines

²² For the literature review of the 'decentring' agenda in EU foreign policy studies see S. Keukeleire & S. Lecocq, *Decentring European Foreign Policy Analysis: Towards a Paradigmatic Shift*, 63 J. Common Mkt. Stud. 1481–1508 (2025), doi: 10.1111/jcms.13766.

²³ N. Chaban & O. Elgström, *Theorizing External Perceptions of the EU*, in *Studying the EU's External Action: Concepts, Approaches, Theories* 265–277 (S. Gstöhl & S. Schunz eds, Macmillan/Red Globe Press 2021); N. Chaban & O. Elgström, *EU Normative Positions, Resilience and Contestation: A Perceptual Approach*, 62 J. Common Mkt. Stud. (2024), doi: 10.1111/jcms.13665.

²⁴ N. Chaban & O. Elgström, *The Ukraine Crisis and EU Foreign Policy Roles: Images of the EU in the Context of EU–Ukraine Relations* (Edward Elgar 2021).

²⁵ N. Chaban & O. Elgström, *Critical Expectation Gaps: Advancing Theorization of the Perceptual Approach in EU Foreign Policy Studies*, 61 J. Common Mkt. Stud. 1047–1064 (2022), doi: 10.1111/jcms.13445; N. Chaban & O. Elgström, *The Threat of Abandonment. Images of the EU's Crises in Post-Maidan Ukraine*, Eur. J. Int'l Sec. (2024), doi: 10.1017/eis.2024.49.

²⁶ N. Chaban & O. Elgström, *A Perceptual Approach to EU Public Diplomacy: Investigating Collaborative Diplomacy in EU–Ukraine Relations*, 15 Hag. J. Dipl. 488–516 (2020), doi: 10.1163/1871191x-bja10029.

²⁷ B. O'Loughlin, A. Miskimmon & L. Roselle, *Forging the World: Strategic Narratives and International Relations 2* (University of Michigan Press 2017).

²⁸ European Commission, *Strategic Communication and Countering Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference*, https://commission.europa.eu/topics/countering-information-manipulation_en (accessed 1 Oct. 2025); EU v. Disinfo, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/> (accessed 1 Oct. 2025); Transparency Center, <https://disinfo.eu/> (accessed 1 Oct. 2025); European Digital Media Observatory, <https://edmo.eu/> (accessed 1 Oct. 2025).

that mischannel expectations and hopes of the EU inside and outside its borders, deepening and widening the gaps discussed above.

In a new media ecology, characterized by blurred boundaries between the ‘sender and receiver roles’, listening is conceptualized by Rikkonen et al. as a ‘communicative process of sense-making, relationship maintenance, and overt behavior’.²⁹ For these authors, ‘listening skills related to relational awareness and responsiveness’³⁰ determine successful impacts and are central to meaning making and the performance on international stage. However, in an unsettled narrative situation,³¹ an institutionalized authority (typically resourced and skilled in storytelling and rhetoric) may prioritize narrative formulation/projection and overlook ‘how narratives are received, interpreted, and become meaningful to audiences – elites or publics’.³² Arguably, this constitutes the next risk to the process of re-narration and highlights the importance of listening before, during, and after the revision of the grand-narrative.

Scholars warn that ‘good listening has been almost completely ignored in that form of political conversation we know as democracy’, yet ‘listening could both improve political processes (particularly democratic ones) and enhance our understanding of them – including where they do not always work as well as we might want them to’.³³ Scholars conceptualize listening as a comprehensive effort differentiating between ethical and tactical listening categories.³⁴ Putting forward an analytical model of the ‘spectrum of listening’, Di Martino positions on the one end of the conceptual continuum *apophatic* and *active* types of listening. The former is characterized by ‘hypersensitivity and self-negation’, the latter by ‘dialogic and relationship-building engagement’ that ‘creates space for listening’ and ‘promotes trust and understanding’. The ‘spectrum of listening’ then moves to the *tactical* type featuring ‘instrumental and reactive engagement’ to correct misconceptions and pursue short-term goals and a *listening-in* type defined in terms of ‘unidirectional engagement’ assessing the reach of a message. On the other end of the analytical continuum, he puts a *background/casual* type typical for ‘casual engagement’ with a goal to gather information; and a *surreptitious* type which shows no intention to engage, while undertaken to pursue spying and surveillance.

²⁹ L. Rikkonen, P. Isotalus & H. Haukkala, *Listening in a Masspersonal Context: Examining Professional Diplomats’ Interaction Involvement on Twitter*, 37 Int’l J. Listen 185–198 at 186 (2023), doi: 10.1080/10904018.2022.2065276.

³⁰ Rikkonen et al., *supra* n. 29, at 185.

³¹ Krebs, *supra* n. 13.

³² N. Chaban, A. Miskimmon & B. O’Loughlin, *The EU’s Peace and Security Narrative: Views from EU Strategic Partners in Asia*, 55 JCMS 1274 (2017), doi: 10.1111/jcms.12569.

³³ A. Dobson, *Listening: The New Democratic Deficit*, 60 Pol. Stud. 729–952 (2012), doi: 10.1111/j.1467-9248.2012.00944.x.

³⁴ L. Di Martino, *The Spectrum of Listening*, in *Routledge Handbook of Public Diplomacy* 22 (N. Snow & N. J. Cull eds, Routledge 2020).

Literature argues several pathways in which good listening can help an actor who values democratic principles: ‘enhancing legitimacy, helping to deal with deep disagreements, improving understanding and increasing empowerment’.³⁵ Should the EU engage with the ‘spectrum of listening’ in the process of re-narration, the last four categories may be associated with a more Eurocentric approach to EU foreign policy. In contrast, the first two ethical types may be helpful to overcome the Eurocentric predispositions, allowing the EU to factor its interlocutors’ priorities, outlooks, interpretations, and philosophies in a genuine and authentic manner. As such, the concept of differentiated listening could be helpful for theorizing the *learning* phase argued by the ‘decentring’ agenda in EU foreign policy studies.³⁶ This stage prescribes ‘looking for complexity, nuances, variations, gradations and neglected and under-exposed dimensions’³⁷ of the EU’s external partners. It also defines its starting point in ‘the perspective(s), assumption(s) and context(s) of third countries, regions or societies’.³⁸

Regular and systematic listening is also important to identify if the receivers of the narratives, internal or external to the EU, are ready – or willing – to change their pre-existing perceptions/images/narratives of the EU. Cognitive and psychology studies have warned that categorization afresh trumps re-categorization. IR scholars also noted how political actors may subvert, sabotage and ignore changes and/or strengthen existing constructs: rejecting the validity of new information, discrediting the source, and bolstering and undermining.³⁹ However, literature tells us that change in the mindset and outlooks is possible. For that, the situation must feature strong and persistent contradictions to existing images; appear as a ‘watershed’/‘history making’; induce the feeling of uncertainty around it; and involve strong emotions.⁴⁰

So, do risks outweigh benefits? Importantly, re-narration at times of crisis, uncertainty and complexity carries not only risks, but many creative opportunities. It may provide a ‘productive framework and promises an optimistic future scenario’.⁴¹ Pipere and Martinson detail the conditions for such opportunity: ‘if only brittleness is overcome by capacity and resilience, anxiety is dealt with empathy and mindfulness, nonlinearity is embedded in context and met with adaptivity, while incomprehensiveness is surmounted by transparency

³⁵ Dobson, *supra* n. 33.

³⁶ Keukeleire & Lecocq, *supra* n. 22.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, at 1492.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, at 1491.

³⁹ R. Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* 291–296 (Princeton University Press 1976).

⁴⁰ N. Chaban, O. Elgström & O. Gulyaeva, *Russian Images of the European Union: Before and After Maidan*, 13 *Foreign Pol. Analysis* 480–499 (2017), doi: 10.1093/fpa/orw055.

⁴¹ Pipere & Martinson, *supra* n. 15.

and intuition'.⁴² This scenario outlines another set of qualities for the EU as a protagonist in the revised story of the changing world – an actor who is capable, realistic, empathetic, caring, as well as adaptive, transparent, and intuitive. However, in a turbulent and fragile environment, this creative opportunity for a revisited compelling narrative may be missed. The price for that may be the bifurcation of the grand narrative among different levels of EU actors leading to competition and even clashes, and potentially the weakening of narratives. This is a dangerous tendency in the world of overt contestation and geopolitical uncertainty.

Natalia Chaban

Professor, University of Canterbury, New Zealand.

Member of the Editorial Board of the European Foreign Affairs Review

Email: natalia.chaban@canterbury.ac.nz.

⁴² *Ibid.*, citing Cascio, *supra* n. 15; S. Grabmeier, *BANI Versus VUCA: A New Acronym to Describe the World, Inspiring to Empower 2* (2020), <https://stephangrabmeier.de/bani-versus-vuca/> (accessed 1 Oct. 2025).

