

**RE-
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Wilfried
Martens Centre
for European Studies

**IDENTITY, COMMUNICATION
AND POWER:**
European Narratives and Insights
from Recent Research

Workshop Minutes

Identity, Communication and Power: European Narratives and Insights from Recent Research

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“The science of mind has lit up a vast landscape of unconscious thought – the 98 percent of thinking your brain does that you’re not aware of. Most of it matters for politics. The mind that we cannot see plays an enormous role in how our country is governed.”

- George Lakoff

The workshop on “Identity, Communication and Power: European Narratives and Insights from Recent Research” was organised at the European Parliament and the European Economic and Social Committee on the 25th of September 2018 with the aim to bring together key stakeholders who are developing activities (research and other) around the impact of social media on our democratic systems and what this means for the European elections.

Re-Imagine Europa and the Martens Centre for European Studies were glad to organise this workshop, co-hosted by MEP Alain Lamassoure, MEP Lambert van Nistelrooij, MEP Maria João Rodrigues and MEP Nils Torvalds ahead of the upcoming European Elections to follow-up on the workshop “European Election and the Impact of Social Media” to focus on “Identity, Communication and Power: European Narratives” and what recent research in psychology, sociology, and neuroscience are revealing about how we construct and relate to narratives.

This workshop is part of a series of workshops that will be organised to address these issues. These workshops will also feed into the Re-Imagine Europa programme on “Democracy in a Digital Society”.

The workshop brought together 40 participants from the European Commission, the European Parliament, Academia and other key stakeholders ahead of the upcoming European Elections to address these issues. Please follow the hyperlinks to access the list of participants and the programme.

STARTING POINT

Erika Widegren, Re-Imagine Europa

Tomi Huhtanen, Executive Director Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies

Erika Widegren opened the discussion by giving an overview of the main issues and framing the key themes of the workshop. An increasingly influential stream of research demonstrates the integration of cognition and emotion in political decision-making. Political cognition is emotionally shaped. The role of narratives in shaping people's minds has become an important area of research and debate, in particular in recent years when entire societies have made choices that seem "rationally" counterintuitive.

As debates around migration, Brexit, climate change and vaccines become increasingly emotional policy-makers and scientists alike have had to accept that in the battle for hearts and minds of human beings, narrative will consistently outperform data in its ability to influence human thinking and motivate human action.

With a polarising society and highly-charged emotional debates on the table ahead of the upcoming European election, it is ever more important to look at what can we learn from recent research in psychology, neuroscience, economics, sociology and behavioural science about how the minds work and how they are shaped. Remembering that, as Manuel Castells mentioned "perceived reality is reality".

Tomi Huhtanen proceeded with giving an overview of European narratives within the context of the 2019 European elections. Remembering the different narratives of the founding fathers of Europe:

- Christian Democrats: Europe based on culture and values;
- Technocrats: depoliticizing the European project;
- Progressives: Europe based on bettering society through reform.

Today, the end goal of the European project feels unclear to the majority of Europeans. The original European project – the 20th century project envisaged by the founding fathers – has been one of the most daring and remarkable political projects in history and its success has been outstanding. However, with the dawn of the 21st century – globalisation and digitalisation – new challenges have emerged that require new innovative solutions. There is an urgent need to develop a European narrative for this new chapter of the European project.

In fact, at a recent YouGov poll shows that most European citizens are positive towards Europe although they are very critical towards "Brussels" indicating that there is a need to create more clarity about the direction and purpose of Europe in the 21st Century.

“LET THE STARS SHINE” - ENGAGING CITIZENS IN THE EU

Lambert van Nistelrooij, Member of the European Parliament, EPP

Lambert van Nistelrooij presented his view on the main challenges relating to the challenges of developing a European narrative and positive stories. In his experience the European narrative is often lost in details and the many great examples of positive European stories are seldom shared or discussed. Examples of the European contribution to Alzheimer research, Erasmus or the circle economy. This is the reason why he supported and developed the exhibition and publication on [“Let the Stars Shine”](#).

During the past years, many stones were thrown at Europe. The success stories however remain untold. Especially in the light of Brexit we have heard many accounts of fake news and exaggerations, while Europe’s positive side remained underexposed. It is not just that Europe is used as a scapegoat for everything that goes wrong. Europe lacks a modern communication strategy that highlights its positive sides.

In the booklet ‘Let the Stars Shine: Engaging citizens in the EU’ several communication experts were invited to share their fresh perspectives on how to tackle this communication issue. Their conclusions were clear: not just communicate more but communicate in a different way. Martijn Groenleer, professor of Law and Governance at Tilburg University: “I believe it is not about better communication on the EU, but about more and better internal communication within the EU. It is expected that this will lead to a more coherent and visible EU policy with a more uniform impact throughout the Union”. Ryan Heath, senior EU correspondent at Politico, shares this opinion: “The EU flag and signs attached to EU projects are a good visual clue to the EU’s wide impact. Another way for the EU to have more of its impact felt is to focus on what only it can do well. Instead of having a finger in every pie, the EU could afford to focus more on projects that simply couldn’t happen without it”.

In this Report van Nistelrooij presents his view that “Europeans do not feel European because there is no European sphere in which to live. There is no European public opinion and European elections are mainly based on national issues. Peace in the Union since 1945? Travel without frontiers, consumer rights across borders? Europe is still not seen as a benefactor. Professor Martijn Groenleer from the University of Tilburg explains further in this book that we need to achieve that citizens have a sense of ownership of the EU and that we need stronger leadership and have to work more on common values and vision in Europe. I am of the opinion that the love of Europeans for Europe does not go through their wallet, Europe has to touch them in their hearts.”

OVERVIEW OF STATE-OF-THE-ART

Discussion led by Prof. Andrzej Nowak, University of Warsaw

Andrzej Nowak proceeded with giving a presentation of the State-of-the-Art of current research into narratives and the impact of psychology in defining the lens through which we see the world.

The work presented has been developed for the European Commission commissioned study on “mechanisms that shape social media and their impact on society – SMART 2017/0090” developed by CNR, PlusValue, the University of Warsaw, Catchy and HER.

To access the full presentation of Prof. Nowak please follow the following link:

[European Narratives – State-of-the-Art](#)

Andrzej Nowak started by underlining the paradoxes of current information flow where fake news spread much faster and have much broader reach than true information; debunking usually has the opposite effect to that desired by strengthening the belief in the news; the popularity of specific narratives and changes in public acceptance of specific ideologies is difficult to explain.

Narratives exist within a narrative community where perceived reality IS reality.

Therefore, a system approach is needed to understand the flow of information in modern societies. Narratives are crucial in this as the dynamics of social systems are based on meaning and narratives is how we communicate meaning.

A detailed overview of narratives was provided. It was also pointed out that fake news, or disinformation, spreads more quickly than the truth as was pointed out in Science earlier this year (the top 1% of false news cascades diffused to between 1000 and 100,000 people; the truth rarely diffused to more than 1000 people).



Nowak underlined that one of the most important findings of modern psychology is that the process of understanding is inherently constructive in nature; it is performed through building cognitive schemata, or mental models, which organize knowledge on important aspects of reality. Social reality is constructed in interactions between individuals and social interactions are necessary to sustain it. In contrast to physical phenomena, properties of social reality depend more on the social process of construction than on objective properties of social objects and events. Thus narratives, and in particular shared group narratives have the power to govern individuals, groups and even nations.

It is through narratives, shared interpretations of the world, that people unite. Yet, narratives also have the power to divide and polarize. Not sharing the common narratives is one of the basic factors taken into accounts when delimiting borders between nations, ethnic groups, religions or social classes. “Us” and “them” are very much narrative structures.

The recent surge in disinformation, or fake news, draws from these basic principles. Not only by attempting to influence directly our definition of “us” and “them”, but also by authenticating certain messages by entangling them into systems of commonly shared values.

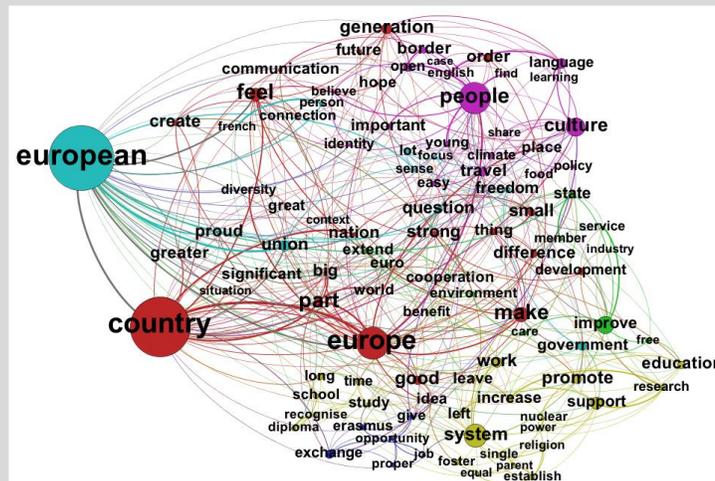
Two very interesting points were highlighted that are very relevant to the current discussions around the need for a new narrative in Europe:

- 1- Research shows that whilst narratives can be very persistent, when conditions change narratives change. Narratives need to be adapted to understanding new realities and are then pivotal in shaping the understanding of the changes occurring. This past decade, following the financial, economic, social and political crisis that have ravaged Europe, the call for a paradigm shift has become mainstream. At the same time, the old narrative, shaped by neoliberal economic theory, with its tenets that globalisation and unrestrained capitalism will be good for everyone has been proven wrong. With the vacuum that has been left in the wake of this change, numerous new (and less new) narratives have sprung up across the world trying to redefine our understanding of reality and the framework that should guide our future development.
- 2- The persistence of narrative schemas seems also challenged by the rapid change of media. The introduction of writing, printing press, radio and television challenged not only the repertoire of dominant narratives, but first and foremost the very form in which they were stored and transmitted. Scholars have demonstrated how new media facilitated narrative transformations that resulted in remarkable changes in politics, culture and society. Ancient empires were built not only on slave labour and military triumphs but first and foremost on the new possibilities of knowledge transmission enabled by writing (Assmann, 2011); modern nation states are deeply rooted in the culture of print (Anderson, 2006) and the triumphs of the 20th century propaganda would have not been possible without the narratives transmitted in the mass media. Nowadays, in the dawn of the new, digital era we face another great change in the form and content of the dominant narratives fuelled by the new media, especially social media.

INITIAL RESULTS FROM PILOT RESEARCH ON SHADOW NARRATIVES

Andrzej Nowak finished his presentation by showing some initial results of pilot research done on “Europeanness” in Europe. Initial results included:

What does it mean for you to be European?



What are the most important values that Europe should nurture?



THE URGENCY FOR NEW EUROPEAN NARRATIVES

Maria João Rodrigues, Member of the European Parliament, S&D, Member of the Board of Re-Imagine Europa

Narratives have the power to define era, bring together people and ensure the accomplishment of complex and arduous goals. The European project has been defined as the most remarkable political project in history and narratives have played a significant role in making this possible. Maria João Rodrigues set out to give an overview of why narratives are so important and how they provide meaning and a sense of direction. Narratives are both cognitive and emotional. Based on her experience with the construction of the EU she gave an overview of the seven key stages of European narratives:

- 1- **Peace:** The original narrative of the European project was the “never again” argument following the devastation and horror that the two world wars of the first half of the twentieth century had brought upon the continent.
- 2- **EU vs USA and Japan:** In the 1980’s the narrative shifted to one based on the competitive challenge versus the United States and Japan
- 3- **Internal Cohesion and Solidarity (Delors):** With the fall of the Berlin wall and the ramifications of this the focus shifted to internal cohesion and solidarity
- 4- **Globalisation/Digital:** At the dawn of the new century, the narrative shifted again to addressing globalisation and the digital transformation
- 5- **China/ BRICS:** With the arrival of new super-sized countries (by 2050 the three most populated countries in the world will be in South-East Asia: China, India and Indonesia) challenging the world view and the role of Europe in the world the European narrative shifted towards one of Europe’s role in this new world. Harmonious society and adaptation of narratives to other cultures became topics of discussion.
- 6- **Crisis:** Then came the crisis and with this austerity and increasing focus on sovereignty. In this milieu the purpose of Europe in protecting citizens was challenged. There was a wide-spread sense of loss of control.
- 7- **Today:** What will the post-crisis narrative be? How do we regain control? What are the biggest challenges that will define the coming ten years? Climate change? Who is in control of the interest and the information ecosystem? Trade agreements? Migration?

This is the purpose of workshops like this to carefully consider how the environment pushes emotions and narratives to develop. Who is the author/defining the narrative? In the past this has been done by a small group of key players but today this seems to be much more defined within the public domain. How will this affect the narrative of the coming 10 years?

Today's system of communication is more complex. It sometimes seems as if we are living in an age of collective schizophrenia. However there seem to be some fundamental values that all human being share. These values should be the basis of the future narrative of Europe as a European identity/narrative based on values seem the only positive pathway forward. These vales seem to be:

- Protection
- Freedom
- Fairness
- Order (from chaos)
- Identity
- Spiritual dimension/meaning.

EUROPEAN NARRATIVES FOR THE 21ST CENTURY – A PRACTITIONER'S PERSPECTIVE

Charles de Marcilly, Policy Analyst at European Political Strategy Centre

The lunch debate was introduced by Charles de Marcilly who proceeded to share his experience with European Narratives and how these develop within and without Brussels.

This sparked the lunch key discussions for the lunch debates where participants were divided into four tables to be able to digest the mornings discussions as well as to debate whether, based on the perspectives outlined and the current political climate, it would be possible for the traditional voices to come-up with narratives that are as impactful as the more extreme visions? Based on the evidence from research on how misinformation spreads, how narratives are the key to communicating meaning, the emotional nature of narrative schemas and the effectiveness of simple and intuitive structures (like the hero/scapegoat narrative), can a European narrative that appeals to citizens be developed in time?

Challenges facing this developed that were highlighted included:

- a. Europe feels abstract and far removed from the everyday concerns of citizens;
- b. The complexity of the European project is difficult to digest into one-liners;
- c. With a mostly national media environment, there is no real advocate for a European perspective in most European countries where national politicians usually prefer taking the honour when something is successful whilst blaming the EU for all that is unpopular;
- d. Different national sensibilities and priorities;
- e. Fighting emotion with facts.

Opportunities facing this development that were highlighted included:

- a. The fact that most European citizens do feel European and positive towards the European project although critical towards Brussels;
- b. The most pressing challenges for Europeans today cannot be dealt with at a national level but require cooperation (migration, trade deals, climate change, etc.)
- c. People are looking for a new narrative in this confusing time

UNDERSTANDING THE RISE OF ILLIBERAL POLITICS IN EUROPE

Matthew C. MacWilliams, The University of Massachusetts Amherst and European Society Research Project

Matthew MacWilliams kicked-off the afternoon session by presenting his research into the rise of illiberal politics in Europe. From survey data from the Netherlands, France, Germany, Austria, Italy, Poland, Hungary, and the United States, MacWilliams set-out to diagnosing which factors drive illiberal politics.

To access the full presentation of MacWilliams please follow the following link:

[Understanding the Rise of Illiberal Politics in Europe](#)

The explanations for the rise of illiberal politics abound: Islamophobia; Traditionalism; Nativism (anti-immigration and integration); Nationalism versus EU integration; Protectionism (anti-Globalization); Protestism (anti-elite/anti-establishment); Racial Resentment/Resentment of Refugees; Economic Malaise; Democratic Deconsolidation; And, of course, POPULISM.



Populism is constantly brought-up as the root cause of the changing political environment we are witnessing. Yet, evidence seem to suggest that what we are currently witnessing is not a rise in populism as the standard measures of populism were not statistically meaningful predictors of support for illiberal candidates and parties.

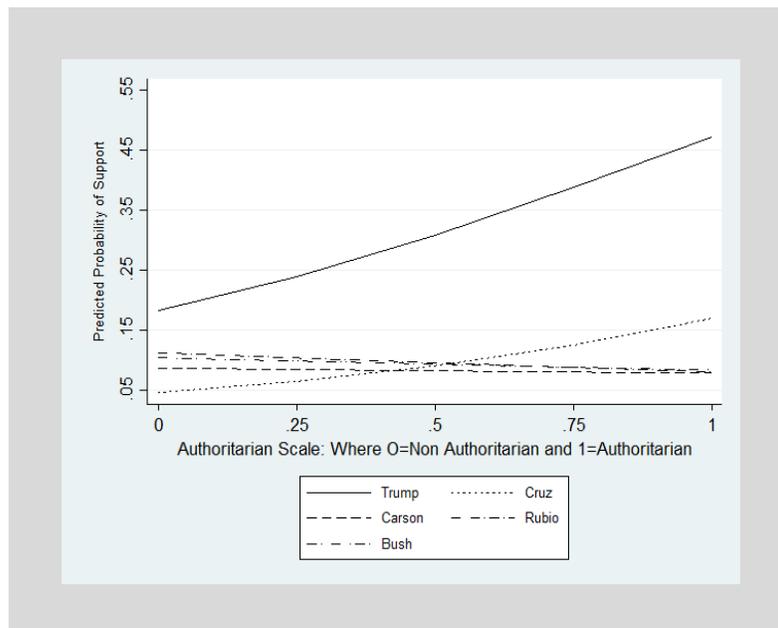
MacWilliams research shows that the answer to the questions “what predicts support for illiberalism?” and “who supports illiberal parties and candidates?” is not standard populism but authoritarianism.

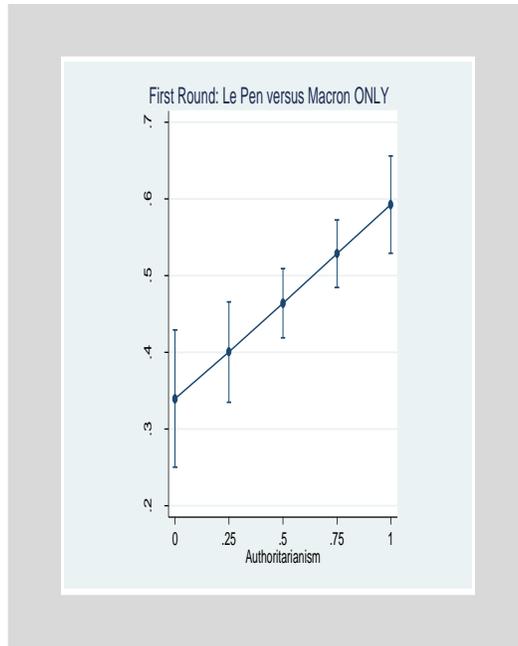
“Can freedom become a burden too heavy for man to bear, something he tries to escape from?”

- Erich Fromm, *Escape from Freedom*, 1941

What can be seen is that the biggest indicator whether someone will vote for an illiberal candidate is the individuals world view. By answering questions such as “is it more important for a child to be independent or respectful?” MacWilliams has developed an Authoritarian Populism Propensity Score (APPS) useful to measure support for authoritarian values.

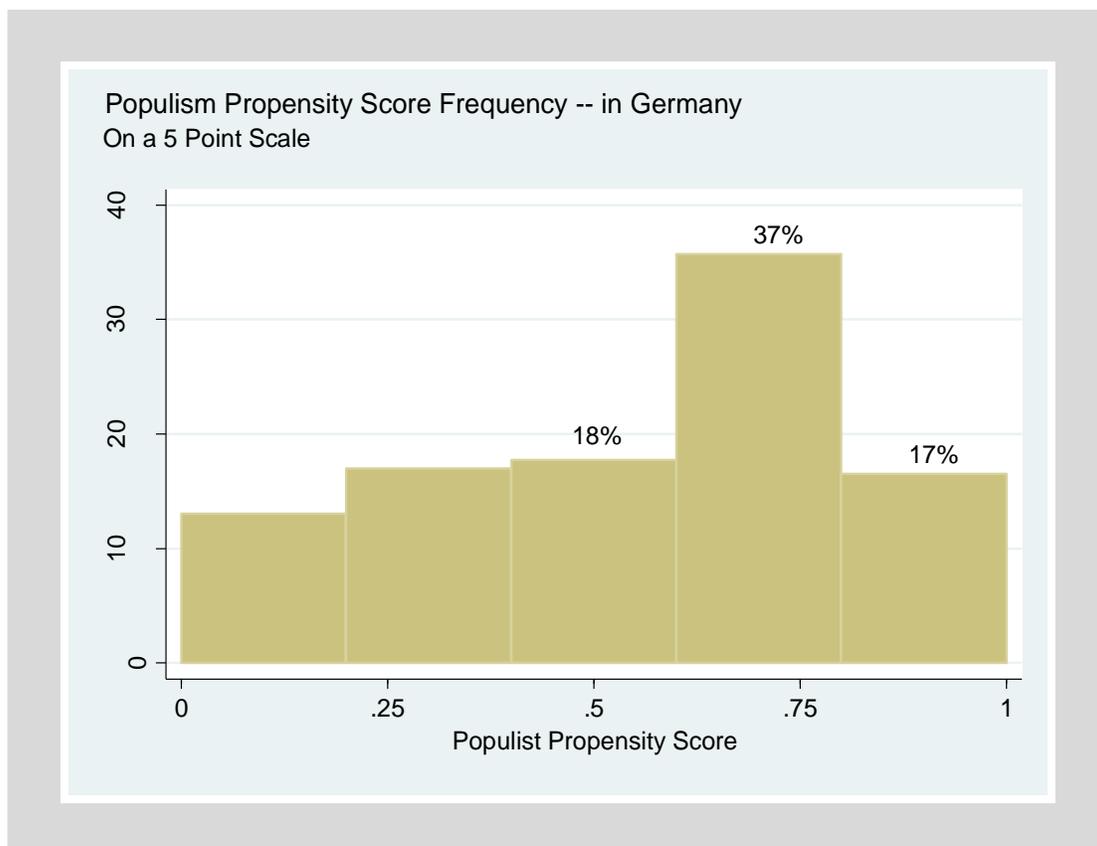
For candidates trying to reach this segment of the population being more authoritarian in their dialogue will increase their support as can be seen in the graph below relating to the US primaries and the French elections





This same pattern can be seen across Europe from Italy to Austria.

These facts are important when thinking about elections and what the communication target should be. In Germany, the APPS distribution would seem to suggest that a winning strategy would be to target the segment of the population that has .5-.75 as APP Score.



This has a big effect on communication strategies and positioning as political parties try to maximise their election results. Thus, as support for authoritarian values increases, so the narratives and messages from political parties more to the right reinforcing these same values. These leads to some troubling questions for the future. Below you can find the current distribution of authoritarianism in 6 EU countries.

ESTIMATED APPS BY COUNTRY				
		1	0.75	TOTAL
		Highest	2nd Highest	High APPS
		%	%	%
Austria		12	31	43
France		32	31	63
Germany		17	37	54
Hungary		21	22	43
Netherlands		29	28	57
Poland		24	27	51

LESSONS FROM THE EUROPEAN CITIZENS' CONSULTATIONS PROCESS

Ms. Sixtine Bouygues, Deputy Director-General of Communication, European Commission

Sixtine Bouygues concluded the day of presentations by giving an overview of the lessons learned from the European Citizen's Consultation Process.

Citizen engagement and dialogue has been a key priority for this European Commission with several efforts having been launched these past years. In 2015, Luc Van den Brande was nominated by President Juncker as his Special Adviser on outreach towards citizens publishing a report in 2017 on the findings that the informal Committee he set-up for this purpose:

Reaching out to EU citizens: A new opportunity

Sixtine underlined that when it comes to Europe there is a clear opposition between perception and reality: perception of a Europe which is often accused of being blind and deaf to citizens' concerns, and reality of EU institutions which actually listen to citizens.

Two projects were set in motion by the European Commission to address these issues and better explain Europe to citizens. For the first time, the Commission convened a Citizens' Panel on 5-6 May 2018, with a group of 96 Europeans coming to Brussels to work together and draft a 12-question online survey on the future of Europe. This unique exercise in participatory democracy, hosted by the European Economic and Social Committee, meant that citizens were placed at the heart of the conversation on the Future of Europe.

The consultation was part of the ongoing debate on the future of the EU at 27, launched with the Commission's White Paper of 1 March 2017.

The results of this experiment were ground-breaking. Over 85% of citizens who participated in the initiative experienced it as “excellent” to “good” and would recommend it to others.

A key lesson from this experience was the importance of sincerity and having a real conversation with citizens about the challenges and short-comings of the European process. Understanding the importance of compromise in the European decision-making process engaging twenty-eight different countries, perspectives and priorities, was a key benefit of the experience. The complexity of the work done and the importance for institutions to adapt was also highlighted.

The online consultations ran in parallel to the Citizens' Dialogues being organised by the European Commission and by Member States. 317 of these interactive public debates were organised in 2017; 515 between Jan 1st 2018 and the SOTEU in Strasbourg earlier this month. The Commission will continue increasing their frequency between now and the European elections in May 2019.

In addition to the Commission's work, Citizens' Dialogues / Consultations are now being organised by national governments in all Member States, following an initiative from France which received the support of the Heads of State or Government of the future EU27. The Commission is sharing the benefits of its experience with Member States. The online consultation will run until the Sibiu summit on 9 May 2019. The Commission will produce ahead of the December European Council a report based on the Citizens' Dialogues, the online consultation and a special Eurobarometer which will be conducted in November. A final report will then be presented at the first EU27 Summit in Sibiu, Romania, on 9 May 2019, just a few weeks ahead of the European elections.

The citizens dialogue showed that the key point in creating a better understanding of the reality of European policy-making was not so much to better explain the process but to listen to the concerns of citizens and open up a real conversation about their concerns speaking sincerely about this and creating bonds of trust.

The most important lesson was not to fear opening to dialogue and scrutiny from citizens. Transparency and sincerity can come a long way.

CONCLUSIONS

Research from as diverse areas as psychology, sociology, behavioural science and neuroscience have underlined the importance of narratives in framing reality. The brain understands the world through metaphors and images and builds-up an understanding of the world through shared narratives.

Narratives thus have the capacity to govern individuals, groups and nations and pave the path for the development of society. Narratives evolve as societies and conditions change.

All evidence from recent years points to the fact that we are currently living through a period of change that will affect the narratives of the future and the shared understanding of reality that will shape the current decades based on two key characteristics:

- 1- The changing media environment
- 2- The changing conditions of society

The workshop brought discussed the theoretical basis of the role of narratives, the past European narratives that shaped the development of the European project up to today, the current conditions that are seeing a rise on new narratives being expressed, the rise of illiberal narratives in Europe, the role of communication and dialogue in forming new narratives and the main values that should guide us in developing a new narrative.

With the European elections in 2019, the timeline for developing a bold new pro-European narrative was brought to the fore as well as the possible strategies needed to ensure that an alternative narrative can take root. This is about defining who we want to be as Europeans.

But a key concern still remains: will we be able to develop and get the support for a pro-European narrative that encompasses those values that we see as fundamentally European or is it too late to block the wave of illiberal narratives that have taken over many areas of the public debate and that is already changing the public discourse on many issues and seeing traditional political parties playing catch-up and moving towards or using these narratives to explain their positions?



European Economic and Social Committee



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