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The European Union in Search of Its Own Mythology

Policy Recommendations

1. Enhance myth-making efforts: Prioritise unifying pan-European myths and narratives that resonate with member states and European citizens.
2. Promote pan-European identity: Reduce the sole emphasis on national myths in favour of a common European identity and highlight shared European values.
3. Strengthen communication strategies: Disseminate positive European narratives and counter external influence.

Abstract

The importance of myth and myth-design in shaping ideological and identity agendas has been largely underestimated. Myths serve as socio-psychological constructs that project a worldview for simplifying or systematising cultural phenomena, driving state behaviour, and political planning. The European Union (EU), as a supranational entity, struggles with creating a cohesive common narrative due to its diverse member states, each with its own national ideas and historical backgrounds. Despite its bureaucratic nature and challenges in crisis response, the EU has attempted to construct mythologised narratives reflecting a post-Westphalian model, balancing national sovereignty with cooperative governance.

Events of the post-Potsdam and post-Berlin Wall eras have influenced the EU's ideological unity. The EU's model is grounded in myth-making centred on social and human values, aiming to uphold legally codified values and human rights. Nonetheless, critics argue that the EU has not effectively promoted a cohesive pan-European myth. The rise of far-right parties and internal dissatisfaction highlight the need for a stronger, unified myth to address contemporary challenges. To maintain its identity and unity amidst global instability and evolving political landscapes, the EU must develop new, meaningful myths of solidarity in crisis, a common cultural renaissance, and commemorate common founding stories of pivotal moments in European history.



The European Union in Search of Its Own Mythology

Self-identity Zugzwang:

The Lack of a Basic, Unified Myth-design of the European Union

For an extended period, the concept of myth and myth-design has been underestimated in its influence on the formation of a sustainable ideological and identity agenda. Most countries have operated in this direction rather instinctively, guided by deeply rooted national ideas or historical background. In one way or another, myth dictate certain patterns of behaviour both in the domestic socio-political arena and on the international stage. It can be confidently stated that myth serves as a driving force or motive in any functioning state model, whether it utilises myths for strategic planning of current external and internal political tasks with long-term or short-term perspectives or exists due to entrenched and immutable myth-sources. In the case where a civilisation has reached the ceiling of its own development, the established concepts do not change for decades, as has happened with the current worldviews of contemporary Europe. In particular, the European Union (EU) as a supranational formation, consisting of heterogeneous members with their own national ideas. What then is the core idea of the EU? The so-called characteristic of the myth-design of the Union, literally tailored from various not always compatible constructs of states? After the Amsterdam Treaty and then the Lisbon Treaty came into force, the legal status of the EU was established as 'founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law, and respect for human rights, including the right of persons belonging to minorities' (TEU, Article 2). Thus, the coalition of European countries, which went through two destructive world wars, nurtured and strengthened the myth of its own creation under the officially unannounced slogan "never again". (Bouchard, 2013, p. 15). Peace, harmony, and cooperation became the main driving motives of the mythological design of the entire Union.

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Despite the fact that the EU resembles more a bureaucratic space for unanimous decisions than a unified front-state capable of quickly responding to large-scale challenges such as pandemics and wars (Pitty, 2022), attempts to construct or define mythologised narratives and meanings for this political entity have not ceased. For instance, as it has been characterised by Della Salla (2010), the EU represents a '(...) different form of political rule (...) in the shape of 'post-Westphalian, postmodern, post-national, multi-level (...) entity of unconventional governing organisation. Although Europe indeed lives within the myth-design pattern of the post-Westphalian world – namely, non-interference in state sovereignty and strengthening the role of state sovereignty on the international stage – it has also been significantly influenced by the spectrum of events of the post-Potsdam world and the post-Berlin Wall era. These historical combinations have created a platform for layering the principles of ideological unity. While, in retrospect, the post-Potsdam world involved some current



EU member states being within the Soviet Union's sphere of influence, it ultimately led to the emergence of the Union as we know it today.

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Thus, the basic model of the EU is still grounded in the globally-central concept of myth-making, which means the dominance of social and human values (Zelenin, 2017). Nonetheless, is this the foundation of the EU's own myth-making, or is it merely adopting the experience of member states, many years of European history, and creating a compilation of the aforementioned conditions under the rather vague and subjective term of human rights? There is no doubt that the EU is human-centric, despite criticism of its excessive synarchy and bureaucratisation (Popescu, 2011, p. 423). Nonetheless, the EU, while being highly effective in certain economic and political manifestations, still has weaknesses. It lacks efforts in working with the ideological platform for further narrative construction, thus, making it vulnerable to external influence from more ideologically active players, such as the Russian Federation and China. Against this backdrop, a number of specific questions arise: Does the EU, as an organisation, have a strong mythological foundation? And is it capable of competing with the hybrid-central value systems of potentially influential opponents in the context of the intensifying struggle against disinformation?

The existence of any myth is not determined by its mere presence in space but by the collective perception of people. Myths in the human mind are necessary socio-psychological constructs, a so-called projection of the worldview for its conscious or unconscious simplification or, conversely, for the systematisation of already existing cultural or social phenomena (Bondarenko, 2023, p. 2). Myths are not just a set of conceptualised narratives or sacralised systems and rituals that have been deeply integrated into everyday human life due to the lack of alternative sources of doctrinal frameworks (Bondarenko, 2023, p. 3). They are a comprehensive semantic bundle that enables the creation of entire cultural layers (Bondarenko, 2023, p. 3). These layers include issues of self-identification, which are entirely based on myths. The multi-facade nature of the EU constantly gives rise to discourses about a single self-identification, distinct from the national one. There is a fundamental myth about the existence of an *a priori* united European self-identification, '(...) such as the idea that Europe is founded on the principle of peace, that it is connected to the values of Enlightenment, or that it needs to be opposed to China and the US' (Wiesner, 2016, p. 16). Therefore, two main European myths are actualised: the unification of previously divided territorial units in the face of potential danger (the legacy of Charles Martel at the Battle of Poitiers) and the foundations of the Enlightenment, which ideologically inspired the American Declaration of Independence.

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From all the above, it can be concluded that the mythological pattern of Europe has allowed it to enter the post-Cold War era as a cohesive project called the EU, with its own symbolism, values, and strategic visions of its geopolitical position in the world. It is also interesting that the total bureaucratisation of the entire organ-



ism of the EU is used as a myth by legalists, who consider that the essence of the EU's self-identity is this very bureaucracy as part of a clearly defined normative and political agenda under the common name rule of law. In other words, one of the driving myths of Europe, and the EU in particular, is considered to be the adherence to legally codified values: '(...) Magna Carta, the Bill of Rights, the French Revolution and the fall of the Berlin Wall; the continent of liberty, solidarity, and above all diversity, meaning respect for other's languages, culture and traditions' (Centre for International & European Law, 2020, p. 1). The motto of the EU, "United in Diversity", underscores the importance of the cultivated myth of uniting many member countries with their own cultural and religious contexts under the single narrative about the universality of human rights. This, in turn, reaffirms the importance of individualism and human-centrism. Noteworthy, the United States inculcates similar globally human-centric narratives but with an emphasis on freedom as a universal paradigm for the functioning of social and political institutions. The flag of the EU with its stars is said to signify the identity and unity of Europe in the broadest sense of the term (EU). Thus, through visualised myths, the idea of a global Europe project is promoted, extending beyond the existing treaties of the Union (Manners, 2010, p. 68).

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However, due to the lack of a broad context for understanding myth-design and the false associative premise that myth-making involves creating subjective illusions affecting the irrational and intuitive spheres of the collective unconscious, several specific difficulties arise in working with myths (Kalinichenko & Kwesko, 2009, p. 85). As Bouchard (2013, p. 82) states, more attention should be dedicated to the creation of a unified myth, and, first of all, more effort should be made to develop a new narrative that would '(...) rouse the imagination of Europeans, bringing together reason and emotion to rally public opinion behind the project of European unification'. Moreover, the author (Bouchard, 2013, p. 83) insists on the devaluation and reduction of the role of national myths in favour of a common unifying pattern to overcome clear cultural and historical contradictions. This serves as a logical prerequisite for maintaining the myths of the EU's integrity amidst the current rise in dissatisfaction among member countries with the actions of supranational bureaucracy (Mischke, 2017). The situation is particularly complicated by the rapid expansion of the EU's geography with the rather vague Copenhagen criteria on respecting the rule of law with the '(...) void of powerful symbolic leverage to feed its projected identity, to weather the present multifaceted crisis, and to support its future development' (Bouchard, 2016, p. 21).

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Despite the significant symbolic successes of the EU in the diplomatic field, such as receiving the "Nobel Peace Prize" in 2012 for 'over six decades contributed to the advancement of peace and reconciliation, democracy, and human rights in Europe' (TNP, 2012), the organisation's overall achievements in crafting a unified socio-political narrative shared by all member states remain at the level of sporadic demonstrative actions and protocols. Until 2024, in the context of the largest continental European war between Russia and Ukraine, this issue arose acutely only in scientific research and during the celebration of Europe Day on 9 May, which is also the most significant



myth-symbolic date for the entire post-war region (EU). Again, emphasising peace and the unification of Europe are two dominant themes in the value system of the European post-war myth. As Della Salla (2010, p. 4) defines, 'Empirically, we can affirm that there has been a period of almost unprecedented stability in post-war Europe and that this coincided with the creation of the EU'.

Back in 2010, the author (Della Salla, 2010, p. 11) questioned the effectiveness of exploiting the myth of peace as part of the myth-making of the European project, since not everyone shares the view that the ongoing peace on the continent is the primary reason for further deepening of European integration processes. Nowadays, in the context of the evidently shattered myth of prosperity and peace on the continent due to the Russian Federation's implementation of its own expansive narratives, concerns arise that the previous worldview construct of European unity and security has undergone significant changes. Thus, the EU, as a multifaceted space, faces a new post-Cold War reality-challenge: to construct a different, stronger, and more broadly oriented myth capable of uniting member states in the face of threats from the so-called Axis of Evil. Moreover, the future European symbolic foundation will need a common idea or ideas that are competitive with '(...) well-entrenched national cultures that have enjoyed a quasi-monopoly in the sphere of myths, memory, identity and traditions' (Bouchard, 2016, p. 20).

The task of crisis-driven construction of an integrating unitary myth does not seem a priority for the Union's supranational structures. The current situation, with electoral victories of many far-right parties in the European Parliament elections (DW, 2024), will make it even more difficult. With far-right parties advancing national agenda and further weakening the attention given to centralised European myth-building.

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Conclusion

Throughout the post-Cold War period, the EU, as a supranational entity, has not actively promoted pan-European myths within the Union. Its attractiveness is based on its economic and social model as well as its individual national cultural heritage. For example, when streams of tourists visit the Colosseum or the Roman Forum, they primarily immerse themselves in the sources and myths of ancient Rome (and Italy in particular, due to the modern setting) but do not consider this an integral, integrated cultural part of the EU. Undoubtedly, the dynamic myths of the EU about unity in diversity exist and will continue to be a driving force. Nevertheless, the lack of proper socio-political development of this construct allows people to quickly lose sight with this history and categorise it as folklore or mere symbolism. At this stage, the EU is experiencing a crisis of self-identification, or, put positively, a search for new meaningful myths against the backdrop of the escalating global South-West confrontation and an overall era of political and military instability.



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The Austrian Society for European Politics (Österreichische Gesellschaft für Europapolitik, ÖGfE) is a non-governmental and non-partisan platform mainly constituted by the Austrian Social Partners. We inform about European integration and stand for open dialogue about topical issues of European politics and policies and their relevance for Austria. ÖGfE has a long-standing experience in promoting European debate and acts as a catalyst for disseminating information on European affairs.

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