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Abstract

Narratives on the goal and purpose of the integration process play a key role in the legitimisation of the European Union. This working paper critically analyses four narratives that stand out in the public debate: the peace narrative, according to which the EU primarily serves to avoid conflicts among its member states; the prosperity narrative, according to which the EU increases the economic well-being of its member states; the self-assertion narrative, which sees European integration as necessary for member states to be able to play an active role on the world stage; and the cosmopolitan-democratic narrative, according to which European integration serves the double purpose of promoting individual freedom and collective democratic self-government beyond the nation state. It is argued that this last narrative offers the most comprehensive and convincing justification for supranational integration.

Keywords: purpose of European integration, integration narratives, peace narrative, self-assertion narrative, cosmopolitan democracy

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Peace, prosperity, self-assertion, and cosmopolitan democracy: Four narratives on the purpose of European integration

Manuel Müller[1]

Introduction

Finality-oriented narratives on the goal and purpose of the unification process play a pivotal role in the legitimisation of European unity. While nation states often justify their existence through founding myths and the discursive construction of a common heritage or a common historical identity, comparable legitimisation strategies are far less common in the case of the EU.

This can partly be explained by the functionalist character of the early European Communities (EC) that continues to affect the EU's political culture to this day. On a strategic level, a political rhetoric based on common future goals rather than a presumed common past seems to have been a more effective way of legitimising the construction of a supranational polity without directly challenging established national identity narratives. Finally, with its ever-developing *sui generis* constitution, the EU polity itself is a moving target that cannot easily rely on established social expectation patterns about the exercise of its power.

Rather, European integration is usually understood as an unfinished project – a "process of creating an ever-closer union among the peoples of Europe" (art. 1 TEU) or even the completion of an "unfinished federal state", as the first Commission President of the European Economic Community famously titled his memoirs.[2] The purposes that are ascribed to this process and the political goals that can (only) be achieved by the EU and its institutions are therefore essential elements of the discursive legitimisation of the EU.

But which are these purposes? Given the complexity of the integration process, it is not surprising that a variety of discourses have been developed around them. Historian Hartmut Kaelble identifies seven central "promises" of the EU to its citizens: internal peace, prosperity,

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[2] Hallstein, W. (1969): *Der unvollendete Bundesstaat. Europäische Erfahrungen und Erkenntnisse,* Düsseldorf.

supranational democratization, a social Europe, safeguarding democracy in the member states, security against external threats and rescue from deep crises.[3] Kiran Patel mentions "peacemaking, economic growth, a value-oriented policy and a Europe that is growing together" as core elements of the EU's positive self-image, which have to be deconstructed historically.[4] The EU itself defines its goals in art. 3 TEU, which, however, is a rather unstructured mixed bag of fundamental objectives (para. 1: "The Union's aim is to promote peace, its values and the well-being of its peoples") and relatively specific goals (para. 3, sent. 2: "It shall work for the sustainable development of Europe based on balanced economic growth and price stability, a highly competitive social market economy, aiming at full employment and social progress, and a high level of protection and improvement of the quality of the environment").

Given this variety of narratives, it is unsurprising that they are also politically contested. The purposes that are ascribed to the EU strongly frame the debates about which institutional form it should take and which policies it should pursue. And while purpose narratives can be used to legitimise the EU, their absence, inconsistency, or inappropriateness can also undermine the credibility of European institutions and pro-European politicians. The idea that the EU is either unnecessary or incapable of achieving the goals attributed to it is therefore part of the standard repertoire of Eurosceptic discourses.

This working paper analyses four overarching narratives that particularly stand out in the public debate on European integration:

● the peace narrative, according to which European integration primarily serves to reconcile the participating countries and avoid new conflicts among them;

● the prosperity narrative, according to which European integration contributes significantly to the economic well-being of the participating countries and peoples;

● the self-assertion narrative, according to which European integration is necessary for the participating countries in order to resist external threats and play an active role in global politics;

● the cosmopolitan-democratic narrative, according to which European integration serves the double purpose of promoting individual freedom and collective democratic self-government at a supranational level.

The first three of these are "standard narratives" that have been shaping the discourse on European unification since its very beginning. Paradigmatically, in his Pan-European Manifesto, Richard Coudenhove-Kalergi presented his proposals of a supranational political entity as the remedy against an impending "triple disaster: a war of extermination [among European powers]; subjugation by Russia; economic ruin."[5] European integration was thus meant to foster "peace", "freedom [from Russia]" and "the economy."[6] In a similar, though

[3] Hartmut Kaelble (2019): *Der verkannte Bürger. Eine andere Geschichte der europäischen Integration seit 1950,* Frankfurt/New York, p. 23.
[4] Kiran K. Patel (2018): *Projekt Europa. Eine kritische Geschichte,* Munich, p. 9.
[5] Richard Coudenhove-Kalergi (1923): *Das Paneuropäische Manifest*, Vienna.
[6] Ibid.

less pointed manner, the European federalist Hertenstein Programme of 1946 listed the objectives of the European Union as to "settle any differences that may arise among its members" and to "ensure to all its peoples, small and great, their territorial integrity" (in other words: peace); to "be responsible for orderly reconstruction and for economic, social and cultural collaboration" (prosperity); and "[not] to be an instrument in the service of any foreign power" (self-assertion).[7]

By contrast, the cosmopolitan-democratic narrative is historically younger and has only gained importance after the foundation of the European Communities. Still, it has since become a fundamental element of federalist discourses and is at the centre of many institutional debates.

In the following, this working paper will briefly outline the historic evolution of the four narratives, their inner logic and political significance, but also their problems and contradictions.

1. Peace

Making peace between the European countries is probably the oldest argument in favour of European unification. The concept of sovereign nation states had only just taken root in early modern Europe when political thinkers already began to criticize it for being incapable of guaranteeing peace. The main reason of war was seen in the lack of an effective legal system that could contain and resolve power struggles between sovereigns. Thus, supranational institutions were needed in order to adopt and enforce common rules for all states.

However, the exact form of these institutions and rules was very much disputed. On the one hand, there was the proposal of a purely legal order in which states would guarantee each other's freedoms, avoid political interference and thus live together in peace – an idea presented by the German philosopher Immanuel Kant in his essay *On Perpetual Peace*.[8] On the other hand, there were more agency-centred proposals. For example, in his *Essay on the Present and Future Peace of Europe,* the American politician William Penn proposed a kind of permanent conference in which delegates of the European princes would jointly decide on cases of conflict.[9] Unlike Kant, Penn argued for only few substantial rules, but placed much emphasis on the conference's procedures for deliberation and voting, effectively creating a new, supranational level of government.

In the 19th century, the international peace movement took up the basic idea that war could only be avoided through a supranational order that restricted national sovereignty. While its main focus was on the codification of international law and the creation of a supranational judiciary in the form of arbitration mechanisms, the idea of a supranational government or

[7] Hertenstein Congress (1946): *Hertenstein Programme*, paras. 2, 11, 8, 9.
[8] Immanuel Kant (1795): *Zum ewigen Frieden. Ein philosophischer Entwurf,* Königsberg.
[9] William Penn (1693): *Essay on the Present and Future Peace of Europe,* London.

parliament did not entirely disappear. Victor Hugo's famous opening speech of the 1849 World Peace Congress in Paris is a prominent example for this.[10]

After World War I, the League of Nations, founded in 1919, was the first real attempt to create an international peace organisation, but quickly proved to be ineffective due to the unanimity principle and the lack of enforcement instruments. As a consequence, the need to go beyond the League of Nations in order to secure lasting peace became a leitmotif for the emerging pro-European associations. In his 1935 lecture *Pacifism is not enough,*[11] the British federalist Philip Kerr (Lord Lothian) argued that a democratic federal world state was the only way to ensure lasting peace without resorting to the use of force – an idea that the Italian anti-fascist Altiero Spinelli took up in his *Ventotene Manifesto* of 1941.[12] In his 1946 Zurich speech, the former British prime minister Winston Churchill advocated "a kind of United States of Europe" in order to reconcile two major enemies in Europe: Germany and France.[13] Similarly, the Hague Congress of the European Movement declared in 1948 that "the integration of Germany in a United or Federated Europe alone provides a solution to […] the German problem."[14]

In the meantime, however, a new line of thinking about peace and integration emerged during and shortly after World War II. While earlier approaches had centred mostly on the political causes of war – unfettered national sovereignty –, the emphasis was now on economic and societal questions. As a consequence, the focus shifted from supranational legal institutions to transnational social interdependence as the primary safeguard against war. In his paper on *A Working Peace System,* the political scientist David Mitrany proposed a system in which a multitude of specialised supranational agencies would solve concrete cross-border problems. In this way, over time, "the interests and life of all the nations would be gradually integrated" and an "international society" would emerge.[15]

After the war, this "functionalist" approach to peaceful integration became a crucial inspiration for the proposal to establish a European High Authority for Coal and Steel, which later developed into today's European Commission. In his declaration of 9 May 1950, French Foreign Minister Robert Schuman famously called for "creative efforts" to "safeguard world peace".[16] Common European rules for the coal and steel production (a key area of the defence industry) should lead to new cross-border production chains – a "de facto solidarity" which would make a new war between Germany and France "not merely unthinkable, but materially impossible."[17]

During the following decades, functionalist and federalist approaches competed and complemented each other in the shaping of the European institutions. On the one hand, the economic and social entanglement between member states continued by the creation of the

[10] Victor Hugo (1849): *Un jour viendra, Speech at the World Peace Congress,* Paris.
[11] Lord Lothian (1935): *Pacifism is not enough, nor patriotism either*, Burge Memorial Lecture, Oxford.
[12] Altiero Spinelli, Ernesto Rossi (1941): *Per un'Europa libera e unita. Progetto d'un manifesto.*
[13] Winston Churchill (1946): *The tragedy of Europe,* Speech at the University of Zurich.
[14] European Movement (1948): *Political Resolution of the Hague Congress,* The Hague, para. 6.
[15] David Mitrany (1943): *A Working Peace System,* London, p. 6.
[16] Robert Schuman (1950): *Declaration of 9 May 1950,* Paris.
[17] Ibid.

single market and the growing intra-European migration. On the other hand, the EU also developed a strong supranational constitutional order with a dense legal system, an independent Court of Justice, and even a directly elected European Parliament.

Thus, regardless of whether the prerequisites for lasting peace are seen in terms of Kant (a common legal order of democratic states), Penn (a supranational legislature, judiciary, and executive) or Mitrany (transnational social interdependence managed by supranational agencies), the EU satisfies all these criteria. And indeed, its peacekeeping achievements are remarkable. The permanent absence of war among EU members has become an everyday reality and a matter of course. This is also appreciated by the European citizens: in the Eurobarometer surveys, the interviewees regularly rank peace among the top achievements of the EU.

However, this success also had consequences for the discourse about integration purposes. Since new military conflicts between Western European countries were no longer viewed as an acute danger, the peace narrative lost its central importance as early as the 1950s. While politicians would continue to mention Europe's peacebuilding effect at ceremonial occasions, this argument hardly led to any specific political demands any more. Among the few exceptions to this are the years after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, when concerns of a new German dominance were counteracted by the Maastricht Treaty and the creation of the monetary union. Also, in the context on the EU enlargement debate joint EU membership has been seen as an important antidote to resurgent border and nationality conflicts in Central and Eastern Europe as well as the Western Balkans.

Finally, during the European "polycrisis" of the last decade, pro-Europeans have started to use the peace narrative as a standard argument to warn of a possible collapse of the EU in the face of various integration setbacks. For example, a few days after a majority of referendum voters in France and the Netherlands had rejected the ratification of the EU Constitutional Treaty in early June 2005, the then Luxembourg Prime Minister Jean-Claude Juncker argued in a speech that "those who doubt Europe, […] should visit military cemeteries. Here you can see what non-Europe, the antagonism between the peoples, must lead to."[18] In 2012, the Nobel Committee awarded its Peace Prize to the EU at the height of the euro crisis, clearly implying in its stated reasons that this was meant to support European integration against growing criticism and fears of disintegration.[19] In 2016, UK Prime Minister David Cameron tried without success to use the peace narrative for the Remain campaign ahead of the 2016 Brexit referendum, arguing that leaving the EU could increase the risk of war in Europe.

This defensive and sometimes apologetic use of the peace narrative is indicative of its creeping loss of political importance. With internal peace in the EU taken for granted, such a narrative does not seem to provide many answers to the most pressing questions with which the European Union is confronted today. It has thus turned into a conservative, status-quo oriented argument with an often ritualistic character.

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[18] Jean-Claude Juncker (2005): *Speech at the German war cemetery of Sandweiler*.

[19] Norwegian Nobel Committee (2012): *The Nobel Peace Prize for 2012,* Press Release, <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/2012/press-release/> (last accessed 9 January 2023).

In the future, the ongoing European integration process could further increase this sense of obsolescence towards the peace narrative. While the emergence of a more and more transnational European society slowly leads to the hybridisation of national identities, the gradual parliamentarisation of the EU's political system offers a projection surface for supranational political identifications that transcend national perspectives. These tendencies could be seen as the logical continuation of the traditional European peace agenda: a culmination of both the functionalist approach of fostering a transnational society and the federalist approach of creating supranational democratic institutions. But they also make the peace narrative itself appear more and more anachronistic. Striving for "good neighbourliness" or "friendship" among European nations ceases to make sense if these nations themselves lose their importance for individual citizens. The emergence of a transnational society with supranational political identities might therefore be the vanishing point of the European project of peace through integration.

2. Prosperity

The prosperity narrative – the idea that economic integration leads to more wealth for all EU member states and peoples – has been another standard argument since the early beginnings of European integration. Still, for a long time, it has been more salient in experts' discourses than in high-profile political speeches. From an economic point of view, there are several related factors by which a larger market may increase prosperity. Firstly, larger markets lead to a more specialised division of labour and a more efficient factor allocation. Mobile goods and services are produced where their (relative) marginal costs are lowest; mobile resources like capital or human workforce are employed where their marginal productivity is highest. Secondly, market size also positively impacts economic growth through innovation. A larger sales market means that investments in research and development (R&D) become more profitable, more investment in R&D leads to higher overall growth.

Crucially, according to basic trade theory, these efficiency gains of a larger market are not only beneficial for 'competitive' countries (i.e. countries with a high absolute productivity), but for *all* market participants – this is the core argument of David Ricardo's theory of comparative advantages of 1817, which laid the foundation for the political debate on free transnational trade.[20] As a consequence, economic integration has traditionally been seen as a case of Pareto-optimization, i.e. the transition to an objectively better situation, from which all member states' economies would benefit.

For a long time, the creation of a European single market has therefore been considered a purely 'regulatory' issue rather than a question requiring political value judgments. Thus, the prosperity narrative has been closely linked to a technocratic concept of the European institutions, relying on output legitimacy (i.e., economic growth) rather than on input legitimacy (i.e., democratic procedures). In fact, the idea of keeping supranational institutions outside of any democratic control in order to allow them to make unpopular but effective

[20] David Ricardo (1817): *On the Principles of Political Economy and Taxation,* London.

policy decisions runs like a thread through many decisions on the institutional set-up of European economic policy, starting from the early plans for a Common Agricultural Policy in the 1950s to the European Central Bank in the 1991 Maastricht Treaty.

Historically, the debate on the global free trade of goods and services as a driver of wealth goes back to the early 19th century and was most prominent in the Anglo-Saxon sphere. At the same time, the creation of larger domestic markets also played a role in national unification processes on the European continent. Most prominently, the German Customs Association *(Zollverein)* of 1833 was a precursor of the subsequent political union of Germany. Similarly, various concepts of a common Central European market gained support in Germany and Austria-Hungary's successor states after World War I for political as much as economic reasons.

After 1950, the virtues of economic integration were generally accepted among decision-makers, but there was no consensus as to its scope: While proponents of a traditional liberal agenda (especially in the UK, but also in Germany) favoured a large free-trade area in the framework of the Organisation for European Economic Cooperation (OEEC, later OECD), the German and French governments opted for developing the geographically smaller, but politically more ambitious project of the European Economic Community (EEC). This decision was mostly politically motivated, as the EEC continued the Franco-German rapprochement started with the European Coal and Steel Community. However, it also allowed the member states to go beyond a mere free-trade area and aim for a customs union with harmonised external tariffs and, ultimately, a single market that would abolish all internal economic borders.

During the following decades, the development of this single market turned into the most important driver of European integration. The increasing interconnection of national markets created a need for common policies and institutions in more and more areas. The demand for a level playing field led to the *Cassis de Dijon* judgment of 1979, in which the European Court of Justice banned non-tariff trade barriers such as national regulations that favoured domestic industry.[21] In response, in 1985, the European Commission initiated the single market project to unify regulatory standards, ultimately shifting many policy areas – from worker protection to environmental policy – to the European level. The wish to simplify transnational trade (as well as complaints that the national monetary policy of all member states was effectively dominated by the German Bundesbank) led to the creation of the Economic and Monetary Union in the Maastricht Treaty. Simultaneously, opening the capital markets brought even more national de-regulation and European re-regulation. Finally, freedom of movement and labour migration have required an increasing interconnection of national social security systems.

All these developments were legitimised by the premises that, firstly, all states would ultimately benefit from economic integration and, secondly, key decisions regarding the social redistribution of wealth would be coordinated but ultimately remain a national competence.

[21]European Court of Justice, *Judgment of 20 February 1979, Rewe-Zentral AG v Bundesmonopolverwaltung für Branntwein (Case 120/78),* ECLI:EU:C:1979:42.

Thus, for a long time, Pareto-optimisation could serve as a sufficient argument for European economic integration. In recent decades, however, this prosperity narrative has been increasingly called into question.

The first prominent political challenge to the idea that integration would create more wealth for all participating countries was the so-called net-payer debate initiated by British prime minister Margaret Thatcher during the 1980s. Until today, this controversy about the national net contributions to the EU budget plays a central role in many EU-related discussions, especially in rich member states like Germany. The so-called *Brexit bus,* claiming that the United Kingdom sent "the EU £350 million a week" during the 2016 referendum campaign, might be the most salient recent example.[22] Still, despite its populist appeal, the net-payer debate misses the core of the prosperity narrative, given that any fiscal transfers from the EU budget remain far behind the positive economic effects of European integration for all member states. Thus, the EU institutions have sought to emphasise the "cost of non-Europe,"[23] and in the Brexit debate, supporters of remaining in the EU often pointed at the economic pitfalls of leaving the European single market.

A more noteworthy challenge to the prosperity narrative arises from the issue of common regulation in the single market. From an economic point of view, having a free-trade area with many different national regulations would not only lead to market distortions (advantaging companies from member states with lower standards), but would also make sales markets smaller and, as such, be an obstacle to innovation. Thus, a single market requires a common regulatory approach, for example regarding environmental, consumer-protection, or even social standards. However, any specific regulation in these areas implies political value judgments for which there are no 'objective' Pareto-optimising solutions, given that its benefits and downsides are often incommensurable. This in itself already contradicts the prosperity narrative's promise that 'everybody wins' from European integration.

Also on a purely economic level, it is essentially true that more transnational division of labour benefits all member countries, but these benefits have unequal effects on different groups within the countries, leading to an internal redistribution from sectors with a comparative disadvantage to sectors with a comparative advantage. Therefore, even if national markets will eventually adapt to this, the creation of the single market has adjustment costs, which, in the short run, may exceed its benefits. The EU tries to compensate for this through its structural funds, but once again, it shows that the prosperity narrative is less straightforward than it seems to be at first sight.

Finally, in the public debate, it was mostly the economic shock of the Euro crisis which severely strained the notion that integration always leads to more prosperity, especially in the most affected countries. Certainly, the Euro crisis was not the result of monetary integration as

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[22]Cf. Jon Henley (2016), Why Vote Leave's £350m weekly EU cost claim is wrong, *The Guardian,* <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/reality-check/2016/may/23/does-the-eu-really-cost-the-uk-350m-a-week> (last accessed 9 January 2023).

[23]The concept of the "cost of non-Europe" was first used in the 1980s. For a recent example, see e.g. Anthony Teasdale (ed., 2019), *Europe's two trillion euro dividend. Mapping the Cost of Non-Europe, 2019-24,* European Parliamentary Research Service, Brussels.

such, but of a flawed design in which monetary policy was unified at the European level while economic and fiscal policy remained mostly a national competence, making the Euro area vulnerable to asymmetric shocks. This suggests that further economic and fiscal integration can make the monetary union fit for purpose again, but it also implies the need of further qualitative leaps in European regulation and redistribution policies. The post-pandemic recovery instrument *NextGenerationEU,* which enabled the EU to issue public debt to finance joint investments, is an example of this strengthened European economic governance.

In short, while the basic notion of the prosperity narrative remains intact – economic integration of the EU member countries does lead to more wealth –, today it is clear that this is not possible without common macroeconomic and social policies and a certain level of transnational fiscal transfers. As a consequence, the EU has to deal with policy decisions for which there are no simple Pareto-optimising solutions. The economic argument for European integration has therefore become more and more nuanced over time. Even if it is economically beneficial, the EU's legitimacy cannot be based on economic output alone. Rather, a fair distribution of the economic gains and burdens requires democratic input legitimacy – a challenge that has not been part of the traditional prosperity narrative.

3. Self-assertion

The third traditional narrative of European integration is that of self-assertion. According to it, the European states are too weak to be successful in world politics on their own and, as such, must join their forces. In contrast to other narratives, the self-assertion argument does not primarily focus on the relations between the member states, but on their common relationship towards the rest of the world.

Historically, the self-assertion narrative is somewhat younger than the peace and prosperity narrative. During the age of imperialism, Europe was characterised by a sense of superiority over the rest of the world. It was not until the early 20th century, when the global position of the European states came under pressure because of the devastations of World War I, the crises of colonialism, the economic rise of the USA and the Russian Revolution, that the self-assertion narrative gained momentum. As mentioned above, the need to stand together against a possible "subjugation by Russia" already was a central argument in Coudenhove-Kalergi's *Pan-European Manifesto.*[24] After World War II, the self-assertion narrative was less salient than the peace and prosperity narratives, but it always remained part of the political discourse in Europe, especially in times of foreign policy tensions and crises.

The need to stand together against the Soviet threat was a recurring argument during the Cold War, not only in the context of the European Defence Community, which failed in 1954. In the catholic-conservative *Abendland* movement, which influenced German debates on Europe during the 1950s, the notion of a common European defensive struggle against both Soviet communism and US liberalism played an important role. In the 1960s, French President

[24]Richard Coudenhove-Kalergi (1923): *Das Paneuropäische Manifest*, Vienna.

Charles de Gaulle in particular became the advocate of an *"Europe européenne"* that would be emancipated from the superpowers USA and USSR and independent in world politics.[25]

However, the self-assertion narrative is not limited to foreign and security policy issues. It can also be found in other variants – for example, in the sense of economic competition with non-European countries. In her 1988 Bruges Speech (which was otherwise strongly sceptical of supranational integration), Margaret Thatcher combined the prosperity and self-assertion narratives to legitimise the European single market project: "By getting rid of barriers, by making it possible for companies to operate on a European scale, we can best compete with the United States, Japan and other new economic powers emerging in Asia and elsewhere."[26]

With the end of the Cold War, the self-assertion narrative temporarily lost salience. During the Iraq crisis of 2002/03, it enjoyed a certain popularity especially in Germany and France, with a focus on dissociating Europe from the aggressive approach of the US government. In general, however, self-assertion was less invoked as a rationale for European integration than peace or prosperity.

This changed from around 2015 onwards, when the self-assertion narrative developed a salience never seen before. Several reasons can be identified for this: Firstly, as described above, the peace and prosperity narratives had lost traction in the years before, so that EU institutions and politicians were openly looking for a "new narrative for Europe."[27] Secondly, events such as climate change or growing migration made global issues more visible and forced the EU to adopt a more outward-looking agenda. And finally, the liberal world order itself came under pressure, by Russia and China developing an increasingly authoritarian and aggressive line, and the USA becoming more unreliable under the presidency of Donald Trump.

As a result, the idea that EU countries needed to defend their interests together on the world stage gained significant momentum. In a very condensed form, the narrative is reflected in the famous quip that in Europe there are only "small states, and small states that have not yet realised that they are small". During the 2010s, this bon mot (usually attributed to Paul-Henri Spaak) found considerable currency in political commentaries[28] and speeches.[29] In 2018,

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[25] E.g. Charles de Gaulle (1959): *Mémoires de Guerre – Le Salut: 1944-46,* Paris, p. 179-180.

[26] Margaret Thatcher (1988): *Speech to the College of Europe,* Bruges.

[27] Cf. Alvaro Oleart, Astrid Van Weyenberg (2019): Introduction to the Special Issue, *Politique européenne* 66, p. 6-14.

[28] E.g. Radosław Sikorski (2011): Stop Talking Decline. Start Talking Solutions, *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace,* <https://carnegieendowment.org/2011/11/28/stop-talking-decline.-start-talking-solutions-pub-46055> (last accessed 9 January 2023); Thomas Renard (2015): Brexit: How Europe is becoming ever smaller…, *Egmont Royal Institute for International Relations,* <https://www.egmontinstitute.be/brexit-how-europe-is-becoming-ever-smaller/> (last accessed 9 January 2023); Wolfgang Ischinger (2015): What is Germany's role within the EU?, *World Economic Forum,* <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2015/09/what-is-germanys-role-within-the-eu/> (last accessed 9 January 2023); Caroline de Gruyter (2019): Time for deputy prime ministers for European affairs, *European Council on Foreign Relations: View from the Council*, <https://ecfr.eu/article/commentary_time_for_deputy_prime_ministers_for_european_affairs/> (last accessed 9 January 2023).

[29] E.g. Heiko Maas (2018): *Courage to Stand Up for Europe – #EuropeUnited,* Speech to Pulse of Europe and the Schwarzkopf Foundation Young Europe; Frank-Walter Steinmeier (2020): *Speech at a ceremony to mark 100*

Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker described the "belief that 'united we stand taller'" as "the very essence of what it means to be part of the European Union."[30] Similarly, the website presenting the final report of the German 2020 EU Presidency justified the pooling of resources at the EU level because "[d]ue to competition between world powers, nation-states can no longer influence the global order by themselves."[31]

The self-assertion narrative is particularly common in the context of foreign and security policy cooperation between EU member states, where it has been accompanied since 2015 by buzzwords such as "strategic autonomy" or "European sovereignty." However, variations of it can also be found in discourses on the protection of external borders, the fight against terrorism or other security issues. For example, the European People's Party manifesto for the 2019 European elections promised: "Europe will become a safer place and will protect our citizens against external threats and against the excesses of globalisation. Together, Europe can preserve our unique way of life and our European values, so people will not lose their common feeling of belonging."[32] After the election, Commission President Ursula von der Leyen took up this slogan and declared "promoting our European way of life" to be one of her political priorities.[33]

Regarding its argumentative structure, the self-assertion narrative has some peculiarities compared to the peace and prosperity narrative. In particular, it presupposes a common European 'we' identity – and its demarcation from a non-European 'other' – as a premise. While the peace and prosperity narratives justify the creation of a supranational community from a multitude of member states, the self-assertion narrative postulates a pre-existing commonality (of some kind) between European countries. From this point of view, the construction of common political institutions primarily serves to give this pre-existing European identity an institutional structure in order to better protect it against external threats.

Consequently, while the peace and prosperity narratives were primarily about overcoming internal borders, in the self-assertion narrative external demarcation plays a central role. In a paradigmatic way, Emmanuel Macron declared in his essay *For European renewal* of 2019 that "no community can create a sense of belonging if it does not have bounds that it protects."[34] While the peace and prosperity narratives could in principle also be applied to supranational integration on a worldwide scale, the self-assertion narrative only works through the othering of non-European powers that are perceived as a threat.

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years of the Estonian Embassy in Berlin; Charles Michel (2020): *Strategic autonomy for Europe – the aim of our generation,* Speech to the Bruegel think tank, Brussels.

[30] Jean-Claude Juncker (2018): *State of the European Union Address,* Strasbourg.

[31] German Federal Government (2020): *Taking stock of Germany's Presidency of the Council of the EU: "Together for Europe's recovery",* <https://www.eu2020.de/eu2020-en/news/article/taking-stock-german-presidency/2430358> (last accessed 9 January 2023).

[32] European People's Party (2019): *EPP Manifesto: Let's open the next chapter for Europe together,* <https://www.epp.eu/files/uploads/2019/04/EPP-MANIFESTO-2019.pdf> (last accessed 9 January 2023).

[33] Cf. European Commission, *Promoting our European way of life* <https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/promoting-our-european-way-life_en> (last accessed 9 January 2023).

[34] Emmanuel Macron (2019): *For European renewal,* <https://www.elysee.fr/en/emmanuel-macron/2019/03/04/for-european-renewal> (last accessed 9 January 2023).

Depending on how the pre-existing commonality of EU states is imagined, different variants of the self-assertion narrative can be identified: a culturalist, an interest-based, and a value-based version.

Especially in its culturalist form, which assumes the existence of a distinct, historically shaped European cultural community, the narrative of self-assertion shows striking parallels to nation-building processes of the 19th century. In this sense, phrases like the 'European way of life' can be understood as a modern version of the common 'ethnic' identity to which traditional nation states referred. However, this kind of Euro-nationalism hardly stands up to closer historical and sociological scrutiny. The European cultural community is just as much a discursively constructed "imagined community"[35] as ethnic nations and hardly offers a rational legitimisation of European integration. This is particularly striking with regard to enlargement policy, as it is impossible to draw a clear boundary between "European" and "non-European" cultural spaces.

This problem of demarcation is even more problematic in the interest-based version of the self-assertion narrative, which sees the EU mainly as a community of convenience to better promote common economic or political interests on the world stage. Neither do the member states have consistently coinciding interests in all EU policy areas, nor do these interests necessarily differ from those of other countries. It is therefore difficult to give a conclusive answer from this perspective as to why specifically the EU member states should bundle their interests within the framework of a supranational union.

The intellectually most coherent version of the self-assertion narrative is therefore the idea of a European 'community of values.' According to this variant, what unites the EU member states are above all the values defined in Art. 2 TEU ("respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights […]"), which are not shared or even threatened by many states outside the EU and must therefore be protected through a close cooperation between the EU member states.

This variant of the self-assertion narrative offers a stronger normative justification and a more rational benchmark for membership than the other two. Ukraine's EU membership application in response to the Russian invasion in 2022 demonstrates the political plausibility of this narrative. Still, even in its value-based version, legitimising European integration primarily as a protection against external threats entails considerable political risks. For example, it may deflect attention from internal threats like the democratic backsliding in various member states.

Moreover, as outlined above with regard to the prosperity narrative, the EU has by now reached a depth of integration in which the decisions of the supranational institutions themselves restrict the democratic freedom of its member states. In order to function as a democratic 'community of values,' the EU cannot focus solely on defending democracy at the

[35] Benedict Anderson (1983): *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism,* London/New York.

national level, but must also become a democratic polity itself. This is the main focus of the fourth integration narrative: cosmopolitan democracy.

4. Cosmopolitan democracy

Among the four narratives considered here, that of cosmopolitan democracy is both the most recent and the most ambitious. According to it, European integration serves a dual purpose. First, it promotes individual freedom and equal rights by removing restrictions that arise from national borders. The EU allows its citizens to travel, do business, choose their place of residence freely, and generally lead a cross-border life. Second, European integration enables democratic self-government at the supranational level by creating common elected institutions such as the European Parliament to resolve transnational regulatory needs. These two purposes are logically related, since many transnational regulatory needs arise precisely because citizens make use of their personal transnational freedom, increasing the transnational social entanglement. In short, European integration serves both the individual and the collective self-determination of the European citizens beyond the borders of the nation state.

As has been suggested in the previous sections, supranational democracy can be understood as a continuation or culmination of the other three narratives' goals. A transnational society with supranational democracy is the best guarantee for lasting peace among the member states. The European prosperity agenda demands a common economic governance, which would lack legitimacy without supranational democracy. The idea of a European 'community of values', which is the basis of the most plausible variant of the self-assertion narrative, remains incomplete if constitutional principles such as freedom and democracy are not also applied to the European level itself.

At the same time, however, the idea of cosmopolitan democracy also transcends the three other narratives. While peace, prosperity and self-assertion are mere policy goals, transnational freedom and democracy concern the constitution of the European polity. Moreover, peace, prosperity and self-assertion are each for the common benefit of all states involved, so that all three narratives can be justified on the basis of national interests (reflected in Alan Milward's thesis of the "European rescue of the nation state"[36]). The goal of transnational individual and collective self-determination, on the other hand, does not address member states, but the citizens themselves.

In doing so, the cosmopolitan-democratic narrative also presents a stronger justification for the supranational character of the EU. As the examples of the OSCE, the World Trade Organisation or NATO show, the policy goals of peace, prosperity and self-assertion might all be advanced in the form of intergovernmental cooperation too, albeit possibly in a less effective manner. Cosmopolitan democracy, on the other hand, can only be realised through

[36] Alan Milward (1992): *The European Rescue of the Nation State,* London.

supranational institutions. It therefore offers an inherent (and not merely instrumental) justification for this distinguishing feature of European integration.

Thus, although the cosmopolitan-democratic narrative allows for a particularly strong and comprehensive legitimisation of European integration, it has historically been less visible in public debates than the other three narratives. In fact, until the 1950s, it was almost absent from the discussion about a united Europe. Although 19th century Marxist internationalism had already argued that transnational economic and social policy issues could not be solved at the national level alone, even left-wing federalists like Altiero Spinelli initially justified European integration primarily with the peace narrative, not with the need to find democratic solutions to transnational problems. In *Pacifism is not enough,* Lord Lothian implied that the world federation should be democratic – but not as a goal in itself, but because it would increase public acceptance of the supranational peace order he was striving for.[37]

Only after the foundation of the European Communities, European democracy started to gain some salience in the political debate. On the one hand, the federalist movement – discontent with the functionalist, policy-oriented approach of the early Communities – now took up the idea of a democratic European constitution as its core demand. On the other hand, the institutional self-interest of the newly founded European Parliament also played an important role. Especially after the first direct election of the Parliament in 1979, the notion of a European "democratic deficit", initially coined by the federalist movement, became a key catchword with which MEPs called for an increase of their own competences.

The second aspect of the cosmopolitan-democratic narrative, the transnational self-determination of individuals, took even longer to move into the focus of the European debate. With its landmark *Van Gend & Loos* judgment of 1963, the European Court of Justice early on established the idea that Community law addressed the individual citizen.[38] But it was not until the 1980s that the European institutions explicitly put the facilitation of cross-border lifestyles on their agenda, adopting measures such as the Schengen Agreement, the Erasmus programme or the EU-wide right to vote in local elections.

In the 1990s and 2000s, the cosmopolitan-democratic narrative reached a broader public for the first time. This was partly due to the "finality debate" and the European Convention of 2002/03, which gave new visibility to federalist positions. Even more importantly, the broad public debate about globalisation led to a greater awareness of cross-border governance issues. Intellectuals such as Jürgen Habermas ("the post-national constellation")[39] or Dani Rodrik ("the globalisation trilemma")[40] took up the cosmopolitan-democratic narrative and

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[37]Lord Lothian (1935): *Pacifism is not enough, nor patriotism either*, Burge Memorial Lecture, Oxford, para. XVII.
[38]European Court of Justice, *Judgment of 5 February 1963, NV Algemene Transport- en Expeditie Onderneming van Gend & Loos v Netherlands Inland Revenue Administration (Case 26-62),* ECLI:EU:C:1963:1.
[39] Cf. Jürgen Habermas (1996): Der europäische Nationalstaat – Zu Vergangenheit und Zukunft von Souveränität und Staatsbürgerschaft, in Jürgen Habermas (ed.): *Die Einbeziehung des Anderen. Studien zur politischen Theorie,* Frankfurt am Main, p. 128-153; Jürgen Habermas (1998): Die postnationale Konstellation und die Zukunft der Demokratie, in: Jürgen Habermas (ed.): *Die postnationale Konstellation. Politische Essays,* Frankfurt am Main, p. 91-169; Jürgen Habermas (2011): *Zur Verfassung Europas. Ein Essay,* Berlin.
[40] Cf. Dani Rodrik (2007): The Inescapable Trilemma of the World Economy, *Dani Rodrik's weblog,* <https://rodrik.typepad.com/dani_rodriks_weblog/2007/06/the-inescapable.html> (last accessed 9 January

argued that transnational economic and social interdependence made democratic self-determination on a purely national level impossible.

However, this growing public visibility of the cosmopolitan-democratic narrative coincided with increasing political controversies. Unlike the self-assertion narrative, which was taken up by politicians of very different parties, the cosmopolitan-democratic narrative became the object of political polarisation. By the late 2010s, the idea of a 'United States of Europe' or a 'European Republic' based on civic equality enjoyed considerable support in the left-liberal spectrum, while right-wing parties stoked fears of a European "superstate".

Beyond political polemics, it is possible to identify two main objections against the cosmopolitan-democratic narrative. The first criticism is based on the idea that the EU lacks the social preconditions for democracy because it does not have a common public sphere and political identity. A supranational democracy is therefore fundamentally impossible to achieve, especially not through institutional reforms such as strengthening the European Parliament. This idea that democracy can only exist at the national level was put forward early on by anti-federalist politicians such as Charles de Gaulle or Margaret Thatcher. In the 1990s, it was taken up especially by German legal and political scholars and became known as the 'no-demos' thesis.[41]

In the long lasting academic debate that followed, however, this criticism was answered on several levels. On the one hand, the critics' exaggerated demands for the cultural homogeneity of a European demos were called into question and it was argued that a more pluralistic and procedural concept of democracy was necessary to adequately assess the particularities of the EU.[42] On the other hand, it was pointed out that a common public sphere and identity were not a precondition for a functioning democracy, but could, in fact, emerge precisely through institutional democratisation.[43] This was underpinned by empirical evidence showing that the increasing politicisation of the EU was accompanied by a progressive

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2023); Dani Rodrik (2012): *The Globalization Paradox. Why Global Markets, States, and Democracy can't coexist,* Oxford.

[41] E.g. Dieter Grimm (1995): Does Europe Need a Constitution?, *European Law Journal 3/95,* p. 282-302; Peter Graf Kielmansegg (1996): Integration und Demokratie, in Markus Jachtenfuchs, Beate Kohler-Koch (eds.): *Europäische Integration,* Opladen, p. 49-76; Fritz W. Scharpf (1999): *Regieren in Europa: effektiv und demokratisch,* Frankfurt am Main/New York. Some elements of the no-demos thesis were later taken up by the German Constitutional Court in its Lisbon Judgment of 2009 (Bundesverfassungsgericht, *Judgment of the Second Senate of 30 June 2009 (2 BvE 2/08),* e.g. paras. 250-251.

[42] E.g. Edgar Grande (1997): Post-nationale Demokratie: Ein Ausweg aus der Globalisierungsfalle?, *Comparativ* 2/97, p. 17-33; Michael Zürn (2000): Democratic Governance Beyond the Nation-State: The EU and Other International Institutions, *European Journal of International Relations* 2/00, p. 183-221; Ulrich K. Preuß (2005): Europa als politische Gemeinschaft, in Gunnar F. Schuppert, Ingolf Pernice, Ulrich Haltern (eds.): *Europawissenschaft,* Baden-Baden, p. 489-539; Daniel Innerarity (2014): Does Europe Need a Demos to Be Truly Democratic?, *The London School of Economic and Political Science: LSE 'Europe in Question' Discussion Paper 77,* <https://www.lse.ac.uk/european-institute/Assets/Documents/LEQS-Discussion-Papers/LEQSPaper77.pdf> (last accessed 9 January 2023).

[43] E.g. Lars-Erik Cederman (2001): Nationalism and Bounded Integration: What it Would Take to Construct a European Demos, *European Journal of International Relations* 2/01, p. 139-174; Bettina Thalmaier (2006): Möglichkeiten und Grenzen einer europäischen Identitätspolitik, *Centrum für angewandte Politikforschung: CAP Analyse* 6/06; Manuel Müller (2021): *Ein verpasster Verfassungsmoment. Der Vertrag von Maastricht und die europäische Öffentlichkeit (1988-1991),* Baden-Baden, S. 124-129.

Europeanisation of political identities and public spheres.[44] In the light of these, the idea that a supranational European democracy is fundamentally impossible seems hardly plausible today.

More relevant today is the second line of criticism, according to which the cosmopolitan-democratic agenda is a mere elite project. This argument is set against the background of the "transnational cleavage,"[45] i.e. the increasing social and political opposition between (perceived) winners and losers of globalisation and Europeanisation processes. In contrast to the 'no-demos' thesis, it does not necessarily question the feasibility, but the desirability of an EU based on cosmopolitan-democratic ideas.

This argument has been made in a particularly pointed form by David Goodhart, who postulates a profound social division between liberal, educated, often wealthy, and transnationally mobile "anywheres" on the one hand and less educated, less well-paid, locally rooted "somewheres" on the other.[46] From this perspective – which has found most political resonance in the right-wing spectrum –, the freedom to lead a transnational lifestyle can be interpreted as a mere particular interest of the already privileged "anywheres". The cosmopolitan-democratic narrative would thus lose much of its normative validity.

However, this accusation of elitism has also been rejected on several levels. On the one hand, the very premise that the freedom to a transnational life only or primarily benefits a liberal elite is dubious. In fact, the transnationalisation of everyday culture such as popular music, literature, and cinema is a widespread phenomenon also (and especially) among less educated people, and also personal migration experiences are more common among the working classes than in more privileged social strata.[47] On the other hand, defenders of the cosmopolitan-democratic narrative point to the already existing transnational interdependence, which states can escape only at a very high cost. Given this interdependence, the expansion of supranational democracy in order to regain collective self-determination is therefore ultimately in the interest of all citizens, not just those who lead a transnational lifestyle.[48]

Conclusion

This working paper has analysed the four main purpose narratives to justify European integration: peace, prosperity, self-assertion, and cosmopolitan democracy. As has been shown, the first two of narratives have become less important as integration has progressed.

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[44] E.g. Thomas Risse (2010): *A Community of Europeans? Transnational Identities and Public Spheres,* Ithaca; Thomas Risse (2014): No Demos? Identities and Public Spheres in the Euro Crisis, *Journal of Common Market Studies* 6/14, p. 1207-1215.

[45] Liesbet Hooghe, Gary Marks (2018): Cleavage theory meets Europe's crises. Lipset, Rokkan, and the transnational cleavage, *Journal of European Public Policy* 1/18, p. 109-135.

[46] David Goodhart (2017): *The Road to Somewhere. The Populist Revolt and the Future of Politics,* London.

[47] Bodo Mrozek (2019): Von Anywheres und Somewheres. Das „Heimatbedürfnis der einfachen Menschen" ist ein ahistorisches Konstrukt, *Merkur* 08/19, p. 32-47.

[48] E.g. Lorenzo Marsili, Niccolò Milanese (2018): *Citizens of Nowhere. How Europe Can Be Saved From Itself,* London, p. 4.

According to the peace narrative, European integration serves to reconcile the member states and make new wars among them impossible. But this goal has long been achieved and hardly offers any orientation for the further development of European integration today. The prosperity narrative, on the other hand, underlines that uniting in a common market leads to more growth and thus promotes the economic well-being of the member states and their peoples. But as the euro crisis has shown, integration does not automatically produce economic winners only. With the increasing depth of integration, European economic governance requires more and more decisions with redistributive effects, for which there are no simple Pareto-optimising solutions.

With the crisis of the two traditional narratives, the self-assertion narrative has gained much salience in recent years. According to it, member states must join forces in order to protect themselves against external threats and play an active role on the world stage. This argument is based on the premise of a pre-existing common European 'we' and its demarcation from a non-European 'other'. In the different variants of the narrative, this demarcation can be justified on the basis of culture, interests, or values. However, the first two variants in particular are neither empirically nor normatively convincing. And even the strongest version of the narrative, based on the idea of a European 'community of values', remains incomplete as long as these democratic values are not applied on the European polity itself.

The most convincing justification for European integration is therefore offered by the cosmopolitan-democratic narrative, according to which the primary purpose of the EU is to enable individual freedom and collective self-determination of its citizens at the supranational level. This argument can be understood as a logical continuation of the peace, prosperity, and self-assertion narratives, but transcends them by focusing not only on the shared national interests of member states, but on the individual citizens. It is not only about the implementation of certain policy goals, but about the constitution of the polity in which Europeans live together and decide on their common affairs. Cosmopolitan democracy thus offers a stronger rationale for supranational integration, but it also sets an ambitious standard for the further development of the EU in order to meet the goal of transnational individual and collective self-determination.

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