Wilfried
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One for all: A sustainable story of European democracy

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Abstract

The way citizens are represented at the level of the EU—in short, EU democracy—can be improved; and it must be improved, if the EU is to flourish or even survive as a meaningful project. Sustaining EU democracy means telling a better—more coherent, more cogent, more compelling—story to Europeans: via a single, clear recognisable voice of leadership bearing a direct mandate; by imagining into being a European *demos*; and by using simpler, more scalable language. The story of Europe, as with any polity, is of course dynamic and incomplete; ultimately, the emerging story of what the EU is and will be is a story for voters to tell.

Keywords

European story, Transnational lists, *Spitzenkandidat*, *Demos*, European English

Introduction

The European Parliament's House of European History is self-consciously historio-graphical. Visitors are invited, starting with the mythopoeia of Europa, to explore the 'reservoir' of Europe's 'essential' memory. Science, trade and development; art, politics, culture and law; Christianity, Greece and Rome; humanism and democracy; the need to connect: these and other themes serve to ground the characterisation of Europe as not just a place or a people but an idea. The story is sketched in questions as much as facts: 'In an increasingly multi-religious Europe, will Christianity remain in its dominant position? . . . Are the values of the Enlightenment under threat today—or will science and knowledge always prevail? . . . Is international capitalism the best system for Europe—or does it focus too much on simply making money? . . . Was communism a failed experiment—or could it ever make a comeback in Europe? . . . [Are] our apparent national differences

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based on actual, unique characteristics—or are they just invented stereotypes?' Memorialisation itself is rendered in everyday terms: 'How we remember the same history constantly changes'—inviting ultimately the most basic, and most dynamic, question of all: 'what parts of . . . European heritage should we preserve' (European Parliament 2016)?

'Preservation' in this sense is at the heart of the Wilfried Martens Centre's '7Ds' project: to outline systematically, in light of the June 2024 European Parliamentary elections, policy ideas for which aspects of the EU—and, indeed, for how the Union itself—might be sustained (Hefele, Welle et al. 2023). And there is no more fundamental sine qua non of EU sustainability than that democratic system itself which guides and legitimises it.

'Sustainability' can invoke an ideal: say, of flourishing. The sustainability of a given democracy in this sense entails the harnessing, even the cultivating, of civic virtue; the drawing out of civic participation and the widening of representation; certainly, it prescribes the closing of real or perceived democracy deficits. But sustainability also means just survival. Geopolitical competition, systemic rivalry—over resources and revenues but also over values: these demand a more and more agile, capable and competent European democracy; or else, from disintegration or, more likely, enervation or paralysis, the EU will cease being especially determinative in the lives of Europeans, will be felt rather as an encrustation or even a hindrance. On the small things, agency will remain with, or resort to, national and subnational levels; on the big things, it will simply lie elsewhere.

This article argues that the sustainability of European democracy depends, in at least the first sense and maybe the second, on Europe's telling a better—more coherent, more cogent, more compelling—story to Europeans. At issue, of course, is both the form and content of that story per se, but also the interlocutors themselves: starting with the first-person speaker.

One reliable narrator: unity of voice

A single, competent EU voice, in the form of a single office and person, empowered directly by voters, would not only allow more agile EU action, including vis-à-vis external actors, but would give citizens a name and a face; and behind that face and name would be a party, and party platform, for voters to either praise or blame: that is, to hold accountable, with their votes.

President Juncker floated the idea of uniting into one office the presidencies of both the European Commission and Council of the European Union, since 'Europe would be easier to understand if one captain was steering the ship' (Juncker 2017). A less sweeping step forward would be to task EU parties with consequential European Parliamentary campaigns by empowering the Commission president, as each EU party's lead candidate for the European Parliament, with both clear and legal political mandates.

Despite overall confidence among European citizens in EU democracy, citizens in roughly half of EU member states believe their voice does not count in the EU. And the first reason given for likely apathy in voting in the European Parliamentary elections is lack of confidence that voting in such elections really matters (European Parliament 2023, 26, 28, 75–76, 84).

The European Parliament (2022, 7) has stated the desire to '[shape] . . . a European public sphere . . . and improve the transparency and democratic accountability of the Parliament, by strengthening the European dimension of the elections, notably by transforming the European elections into a single European election, especially through the establishment of a Union-wide constituency'. The 'Democracy' chapter of the Martens Centre's '7 Ds' urges an improvement in 'the quality of EU democracy, the legitimacy of its institutions, and their responsiveness to the needs and preferences of EU member states and citizens' (Hefele, Welle et al. 2023, 18).

Both citizens and member states are crucial. And indeed, no change to the EU Electoral Law can go forward without Council consent, consent which seems again, and still, to be off the table ahead of the June 2024 elections, with the June 2023 General Affairs Council's decision not to approve the European Parliament's proposals for transnational lists (Council of the European Union, General Affairs Council 2023). But 'no' need not mean 'never'—nor, certainly, that EU parties might not hope to appeal to such ideas in their respective 2024 platforms. Given the legal, not to say political, complexities, from the Council's point of view, narrowing the scope of the proposals may, for the Parliament[1] and for EU parties, prove both more effective and more efficient: namely, by settling not on a transnational list of 28, as the Parliament has put forward, but on a *transnational list of one*, with putative candidates being at once their national member party's head of list as well as their respective EU party's candidate for president of the European Commission.

Such a 'list of one' would satisfy the pan-European dimension of the Parliament's demand; it would also clarify—without binding the Council or even privileging per se the Parliament's secondary role vis-à-vis the Council—the process for choosing the next president of the European Commission. First, as the Parliament's position indicates, transnational lists of *Spitzenkandidaten* (SK) would make it easier for national as well as EU parties (and for the Parliament itself) to campaign—that is, easier to sell to voters not just the importance of the final tally but the importance of their own unique vote, since that vote would be cast directly for an EU candidate campaigning ostensibly on EU issues. 'Down-ballot races'[2] would become a meaningful concept across the EU, as national parties become tied to EU-level candidates requiring from them, too, clear positions on EU policies. The greater politicisation of the process would, as the Parliament has also underscored, incentivise media coverage and public interest (Kotanidis 2023, 40–1).

Why a transnational list of just one? This solution moves forward the Parliament's principle aims while avoiding the problem of the current SK system's legal uncertainty; it avoids, too, the complexity, and greater perceived political risk, associated with a

28-person list. Perhaps most importantly of all, a list of one would be more likely to pass legal muster, since it would fall strictly speaking within the legal purview of the Parliament's transnational list proposals already considered by the Council's legal services. The Council would still retain its own prerogative, since no winning SK could claim a governing mandate via automaticity (Tusk 2018), but simply the political mandate to try to form a winning coalition—already standard practice in member states' parliamentary democracies. It would not even bar the Council from proposing, or even from finally settling on, 'outside' candidates—that is, candidates not having run as SKs—if no SKs were able, in the end, to win to their cause the needed Council and Parliamentary majorities. And yet any SK with a plurality of citizens' votes would, crucially, be able to claim the legitimacy of a direct, pan-EU popular endorsement on the basis of a political, pan-EU campaign.[3]

A transnational list of one would render both the symbolism and power of the EU clearer, and more clearly united. It would unite the symbol of the EU within one office, held by one person claiming a direct political mandate.

One audience: towards a European *demos*

SKs with a direct political mandate would also reinforce not just the idealisation but the reality of a real EU constituency: that is, a real European *demos* (Kotanidis 2023, 17).

Faith itself in any political project is necessary and formative. One often hears the argument in Brussels that Europeans simply do not care about 'Europe', in either an abstract or concrete political sense: that their concerns are local and national, and that only media in their local or national languages matter. But this misses the crucial dynamic of the indirect or mediated spreading of content. It also seems to presume a kind of fatalism: trees may indeed be falling in the forest, but no one is listening anyway—so why bother?

Established and emerging new tech platforms present new opportunities for the EU institutions to get their message out. Why not provide a 24-hour channel for live (and then repeated) European Parliamentary debates and votes? Chyrons showing speakers' names, countries and both EU and national party affiliations would help make such programming accessible not just to journalists, teachers and students, but to bureaucrats and even EU policymakers themselves, who sometimes struggle to learn and retain the pertinent details of even their own many committee or dossier assignments.

Each September's State of the European Union (SOTEU) address, given by the president of the European Commission, offers a unique opportunity to tell a clear European story to the EU's nearly 450 million citizens and residents. Especially as interpretation technologies improve, why not deliver this speech live during prime time, directly addressing all Europeans as the primary audience—not just the lawmakers and journalists present on a Wednesday morning in the Strasbourg hemicycle? If public broadcasters

in member states decline the programming—and even if they do not—the Parliament and Commission should have other streaming options.

The SOTEU (at least, amongst other fora) could also further the collective imagination of a real European *demos* by telling the stories of real Europeans—nurses, workers, entrepreneurs, farmers, policemen and -women; even soldiers, with 'the army' enjoying generally high regard among citizens, despite sometimes more doubtful views of NATO (European Commission, DG COMM 2023, 57, 59, 61, 63, 75)—personifying the best of who Europeans are and want to be and expanding the electorate by including more voices in the collective imagination. Such storytelling not only portrays but cultivates the kind of empathy vital to solidarity in such a pluralistic society and still-confederal polity. The converse—not to tell individual, or at least individualised (while still anonymised), European stories, for fear of sounding maudlin, pandering or 'American'—suggests an insidious fear that Europeans may not care, or may not be able to relate: in other words, that they may not in the end feel they have so much in common after all.

One voice: the right register

Images are universal, and perhaps the most enduring political icons: a crumbling Berlin Wall; a student braving tanks in Tiananmen Square; the Twin Towers black and burning; a drowned Syrian boy; the president of the European Parliament extending to the president of Ukraine the firm grip of Europe's support.

But words, too, cut both to the chase and to the heart. '[The] very politics of language bring an agenda to fruition' (Eckert and Kovalevska 2021, 1). Which language? Which words? And how?

The wit and lay theologian G. K. Chesterton observed: 'Long words go rattling by us like long railway trains. . . . [It] is the short words that are hard' (Chesterton 1908, 130). Two recent academic papers have looked, respectively, at the European Commission's rhetoric in promoting the European Green Deal and as employed in several decades' worth of press releases. Neither study lets the Commission off lightly, with both highlighting a language useful for, even designed for, marginalising and ultimately disempowering voters (Eckert and Kovalevska 2023; Rauh 2022).

Is there good reason to wall off from the public, using big words, the big decisions made at EU level? *The Economist's* Charlemagne column, in November 2022, pushed back against Rauh's paper: 'Not only is [Euro-gibberish] an inevitable corollary of a multilingual union, it is a welcome one . . . This is thankless but necessary work, best done out of the public gaze. . . . Eurocrats are not communicating with the public, they are chattering among themselves' (Charlemagne 2022). Seven months later, though, the same column bemoaned: 'European politics has become like quantum physics: anyone who claims to understand it doesn't. . . . But politics cannot be suspended for ever. If Europe is to feel like a single polity, as its proponents advocate, citizens must grasp what they are signing up for. Right now they do not' (Charlemagne 2023). The two quite

different takes ultimately beg the central question: do citizens want accountable governance or not? It is hard to argue, on democratic grounds, that they do not.

Sustaining the story of European democracy means using not just simple words but words that scale. *World War*, *Cold War*, *Marshall Plan*, *superpower*; *American Dream*; *serial killer*; *google, tweet, cancel culture* and *woke*; *friendshoring*; any scandal ending in *–gate*: English has served increasingly as the crucible for the paradigmatic phrases—sometimes simply adopted without translation—of post-war politics as well as culture.

This is partly of course about negotiating power in the traditional sense. The US, through NATO, is Europe's (and many countries', especially in the Middle East and Indo-Pacific) main security guarantor. And in a two-party US system, in particular—and in particular at such times as the Republicans are in power and led by a TV-watcher in the White House—it makes good sense to get one's message across via a *Fox News* network commanding the biggest media share of right-wing voters, as President Macron did in April 2018 ahead of 'the first state visit of the Trump presidency' (Wallace 2018). It made sense again for Macron, following his equivocal April 2023 comments on Europe's triangulation of growing US–China rivalry, to set the record straight, in June on *CNN*, by telling Americans in clear idiomatic English he was 'dead against any aggression' against Taiwan (Zakaria 2023).

But English is not just the indigenous language of contemporary hard power; it is the main medium for political as well as technological neologism: as evidenced at transnational Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) events or in national parodies of Trump's 'Make America Great Again' mantra, or via the enduring legacy of British conservatism in '[forming] the base of [the EU's New Right, or hard right] parties' (Lloyd 2023).

At issue is not just the accessibility but the scalability of ideas. European policymakers have had success coining, or re-coining, English-language phrases such as the 'European Way of Life' and 'NextGeneration' (and indeed 'European Green Deal'). Draghi's 'whatever it takes' and the G7's 'as long as it takes' have become paradigmatic shorthand. A strategy of 'de-risking' vis-à-vis China—a European contribution to an emerging, American-led response to China's growing global role (Sullivan 2023)—may prove another example as a defining norm spanning the Western alliance and beyond.

Neological and political virality in this sense depends not just on the proverbial backing of any particular army but on how attractive or easy a word or phrase is to use. Connotation as much as mere denotation; nuance; double-entendre—in short, the word play which marks the movement of meaning: this is as much the prerogative of European policymakers, as users and co-creators of English vernacular, as of anyone else. Today's lingua franca is not just a necessary evil or lowest common denominator; European leaders can and should—proactively, confidently, self-consciously—embrace, own and tout their potent role as first-language conversationalists, and co-forgers of a potentially viral

politics. This, too, is part of a right-sized scope in imagining into being a single, sovereign European *demos*.

Conclusion: one script—a sustainable European story

Tony Judt's 2005 book *Postwar* offers a hopeful story of European integration. The cycle of new, twenty-first-century crises had not yet begun in Europe (though the Iraq War would prove indeed a grim harbinger). And yet with Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine—precursor to Bucha, mass deportations and renewed threats of nuclear war: in short, the return not just of war but of terror—*Postwar's* epilogue, 'From the House of the Dead: An Essay on Modern European Memory', has seemed again as poignant, and as prescient, as ever: 'If in years to come we are to remember why it seemed so important to build a certain sort of Europe out of the crematoria of Auschwitz, only history can help us' (Judt 2005, 830–1). It is this basic sentiment, for the democratic world writ large, which Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff Mark Milley invoked in a speech in Washington, DC in late June: 'And the world collectively said in 1945, never again' (Garamone 2023).

A more holistic version of this story—of the contemporary 'West's' very *raison d'être*—would encompass the preservation of the post-war order per se. And yet even this is retrospective, framed essentially by looking backwards, to a specific moment, or vision, of the past. Has that moment gone? Is such a vision—such a negative vision, in a technical sense, despite its resonance—enough still to legitimise the European project and to animate Europeans forward, still, towards a sustainable European democracy?

Klaus Welle has written about a European centre–right defined essentially by—perhaps defined essentially as—paradox: 'Traditional Christian Democratic concepts of balance in a plural society, such as social market economy, personalism, federalism, subsidiarity and sustainability, harmonize with the conservative impulse to preserve as well as the liberal idea of freedom' (Welle 2023[4]). Is a paradigm of paradox enough to capture Europeans' imagination? Or enough to deliver a strong enough, united enough, Europe '[to] survive and prosper in a world of battling giants' (Sikorski 2023)?

Whatever the answers to these fundamental questions—to the questions asked of visitors to the House of European History—the ongoing story of what the EU is and means is a story Europeans themselves should decide: not just in an abstract sense, from the perspective of future historians, but as self-conscious co-owners of their own collective, and dynamic, history. This means first asking, in addition to local and national debates, what kind of Europe they want. It means then politicising the available options—and finally making a concrete democratic choice. The answers will no doubt change with the times. But a real European constituency—self-aware, self-critical and self-empowered— must, by listening to the past and looking to the future, find the voice to tell its story.

Notes

1. In this article, 'Parliament' refers only to the 'European Parliament'; 'Europe' is used synonymously with 'EU'.
2. In the US, for instance, candidates running for local, regional or state-level offices often experience special headwinds or tailwinds in presidential election cycles, since the choices for president appear at the top of the ballot; 'down-ballot' races are thus often affected by voters' perceptions of those running for the top job.
3. Further discussion would, of course, need to follow as to whether such a 'list of one' could still be administered by member states and not directly by an EU electoral authority. I would argue member states should remain in charge of administering their own elections, per their own somewhat divergent rules (even perhaps regarding voting age, for instance)—provided that SK votes per member state were either then weighted by population or else candidates winning the plurality in a given member state were then given all that member state's 'points', so to speak, in a first-past-the-post system. This would thereby balance, for this sole pan-EU elected office, the interests of both citizens and member states and ensure that winning candidates achieve significant representativeness across the whole of the Union.
4. Bold-faced type has been removed from the original quotation.

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