Challenges to the EU Foundational Myth: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives

## Introduction

The European Union's (EU) foundational myth, often rooted in the post-World War II vision of peace, unity, and economic cooperation, serves as a symbolic narrative that binds its member states together. Initially, this myth was constructed to forge a collective identity and prevent the recurrence of conflicts that plagued Europe in the first half of the twentieth century (Patel). However, contemporary challenges have increasingly called into question the relevance and sustainability of this myth. Issues such as economic disparity highlighted by the Eurozone crisis, the rise of euroscepticism, and identity conflicts exemplified by Brexit, all contribute to the erosion of this once unifying narrative (Schmidt). Thus, the thesis of this paper posits that the EU's foundational myth is being continuously tested by evolving socio-political dynamics, necessitating a reassessment of its core principles to maintain cohesion and legitimacy.

## History of EU Foundational Myth

The origins of the European Union's foundational myth are deeply embedded in the post-war context, where the devastation of World War II necessitated a new vision for unity and peace across Europe. Initially, the foundational myth was constructed through the establishment of the European Coal and Steel Community in 1951, which symbolized a commitment to economic cooperation as a means of preventing future conflicts (Patel). This initiative was subsequently reinforced by the formation of the European Economic Community in 1957, which sought to promote economic integration and foster a shared European identity (Ostrowski 287–304). The foundational myth, therefore, served as a narrative of reconciliation and collaboration, intended to transcend national interests and create a collective European consciousness. Over time, this myth has been continually invoked to justify the EU's expansion and integration efforts, reflecting its enduring significance in shaping the European project.

Over time, the European Union's foundational myth has evolved to accommodate changing political and economic landscapes while maintaining its role in unifying member states. Initially centered on economic cooperation to prevent conflict, the myth later expanded to incorporate broader ideals of political integration and cultural unity as demonstrated by the Maastricht Treaty of 1992, which introduced the concept of European citizenship (Ostrowski 287–304). This evolution reflects the EU's ongoing efforts to adapt its narrative to the realities of an increasingly interconnected world. Despite these adaptations, the foundational myth has been periodically challenged by events such as the Eurozone crisis and the rise of euroscepticism, which have tested the EU's ability to maintain unity among its diverse member states (Schmidt). Nevertheless, the myth continues to serve as a crucial framework for fostering solidarity and shared identity, illustrating the EU's commitment to an integrated future amidst persistent challenges.

Throughout its history, the European Union has faced several pivotal events that have both bolstered and challenged its foundational myth. The signing of the Maastricht Treaty in 1992 was a significant moment that reinforced the EU's narrative by introducing European citizenship, which aimed to deepen political and economic union among member states (Ostrowski 287–304). However, the Eurozone crisis of 2009 presented a formidable challenge, exposing economic vulnerabilities and disparities that questioned the efficacy of the EU's integrated economic model (Schmidt). Similarly, the enlargement wave of 2004, which brought in ten new member states, tested the EU's capacity to maintain cohesion and unity in its diverse membership, often leading to debates over governance and policy alignment (Patel). Each of these events has played a critical role in shaping the EU's narrative, illustrating both the resilience and the fragility of its foundational myth amidst evolving challenges.

## Theoretical Framework

Historical institutionalism offers a valuable lens through which to understand the enduring nature and challenges of the European Union's foundational myth. This theoretical approach emphasizes the importance of historical processes and institutional structures in shaping political outcomes, suggesting that the EU's founding principles were deeply rooted in the post-war context as a response to a fragmented Europe (Patel). By examining the EU's institutional evolution, historical institutionalism reveals how initial decisions and policies have created path dependencies that continue to influence integration efforts. These path dependencies can also explain why the EU struggles to adapt its foundational myth to contemporary challenges such as economic crises and political fragmentation (Ostrowski 287–304). Consequently, historical institutionalism underscores the significance of past institutional arrangements in understanding the EU's current legitimacy and cohesion issues.

Rational choice institutionalism provides an analytical framework for understanding the European Union's structural dynamics and the challenges it faces. This theoretical perspective posits that institutions are the result of rational, strategic interactions among actors who seek to maximize their preferences (Ostrowski 287–304). Within the EU, member states and institutions engage in complex negotiations to align national interests with collective European goals, highlighting the strategic considerations that underpin decision-making processes. However, the rational choice approach also illuminates the tension between national sovereignty and supranational governance, as states may resist EU initiatives that conflict with domestic agendas (Csehi and Zgut 53–68). Consequently, rational choice institutionalism underscores the ongoing struggle within the EU to balance diverse member interests while striving for cohesive policy outcomes, reflecting the inherent challenges in maintaining the EU’s foundational myth amidst evolving political landscapes.

Post-functionalism offers a critical perspective on the European Union's integration process by emphasizing the role of politicization and public contestation in shaping the EU's foundational myth. Unlike the earlier functionalist approach, which focused on incremental integration through elite-driven processes, post-functionalism highlights how increasing public awareness and opposition can disrupt these integration efforts (Patel). This theoretical framework suggests that the EU's foundational myth, once a cohesive narrative, is increasingly challenged by nationalistic sentiments and public discontent, which can lead to political fragmentation and hinder further unification (Ostrowski 287–304). As the EU faces issues such as economic inequality and cultural diversity, post-functionalism underscores the necessity for the EU to re-evaluate its foundational myth in light of growing public scrutiny and the demand for greater democratic accountability (Csehi and Zgut 53–68). Ultimately, understanding these dynamics is essential for addressing the challenges to the EU's integration and cohesion.

## Security Challenges

The prolonged period of peace that followed World War II, central to the European Union's (EU) foundational myth, has increasingly been perceived as obsolete in addressing contemporary security challenges. Initially, the EU was conceptualized as a peace project aimed at preventing intra-European conflicts; however, the focus has shifted due to emerging threats such as cyberattacks and terrorism (Leith et al. 559–64). These modern security concerns necessitate a more dynamic and responsive framework, challenging the EU's foundational narrative that largely rests on past achievements. Furthermore, the EU's capacity to effectively counter external military threats has been scrutinized, raising questions about its ability to safeguard member states in the current geopolitical climate (Ostrowski 287–304). As such, the original myth that once unified Europe under a banner of peace is now being tested, requiring a reevaluation of the EU’s role in maintaining regional security amidst these evolving threats.

The rise of cyberthreats represents a significant challenge to the European Union's (EU) security landscape, fundamentally questioning its foundational myth centered on peace and stability. As digital infrastructure becomes increasingly vital to national security, the EU faces unprecedented vulnerabilities that transcend traditional military threats (Leith et al. 559–64). These cyberthreats not only endanger critical systems but also undermine the EU's claim to provide comprehensive security to its member states. The persistent nature of these threats necessitates a reevaluation of the EU's narrative, which historically emphasized peace through economic and political integration rather than addressing contemporary digital security challenges (Ostrowski 287–304). Consequently, the EU must adapt its foundational myth to incorporate robust cybersecurity measures, ensuring that it can effectively protect its member states in an era where digital threats are as pertinent as conventional ones.

The threat of terrorism poses a substantial challenge to the European Union's (EU) ability to maintain security, thereby questioning the validity of its foundational myth. Traditionally, the EU's narrative of peace and unity was predicated on overcoming intra-European conflicts, yet terrorism introduces a complex external threat that transcends national boundaries (Ostrowski 287–304). This menace necessitates a collective response, but varying national policies and priorities often hinder unified action, exacerbating security vulnerabilities within the EU. Additionally, the rise of terrorism has intensified public fear and skepticism towards the EU's capacity to safeguard its citizens, prompting demands for more robust and coordinated security measures (Schmidt). Consequently, the EU must reconsider its security strategies to effectively address terrorism, thereby adapting its foundational myth to contemporary realities and reinforcing its commitment to the protection of member states.

External military threats pose a distinct challenge to the European Union's (EU) foundational myth, which was historically anchored in the assurance of peace and security. As geopolitical tensions rise, particularly with actors like Russia, the EU's capacity to effectively respond to such threats is increasingly scrutinized. The EU's reliance on NATO for collective defense underscores a dependency that questions its ability to independently ensure member state security, thus challenging the myth of a self-sufficient, unified Europe (Ostrowski 287–304). Moreover, this dependency highlights ongoing debates about the EU's strategic autonomy, which is often hindered by divergent national interests and insufficient military integration among member states. Consequently, the EU must navigate these external threats while re-evaluating its foundational narrative, striving to maintain cohesion and legitimacy in a rapidly changing global landscape (Patel).

## Socio-economic Challenges

The Eurozone crisis profoundly impacted the European Union's (EU) foundational myth by highlighting significant economic disparities among member states. During the crisis, the fiscal instability of several countries, notably Greece, exposed the weaknesses in the EU’s economic framework, challenging the narrative of economic unity and prosperity (Jabko 493–509). This period of economic turmoil led to stringent austerity measures, disproportionately affecting the economically weaker nations and exacerbating public discontent with the EU's governance model. Such measures fueled perceptions of inequality and disillusionment, questioning the EU's ability to provide equitable economic benefits to all member states (Schmidt). Consequently, the Eurozone crisis necessitated a critical reassessment of the EU's foundational myth, as the promise of economic cohesion became increasingly difficult to sustain amidst evident disparities and growing socio-economic tensions.

Austerity measures implemented during the Eurozone crisis significantly influenced public perception of the European Union's (EU) foundational myth. These measures, aimed at stabilizing economies through fiscal discipline, often led to widespread social unrest and disillusionment among citizens, particularly in economically weaker member states (Schmidt). The harsh economic policies were perceived as undermining the EU's promise of prosperity and unity, as they disproportionately affected vulnerable populations and exacerbated economic inequalities (Jabko 493–509). Consequently, the narrative of the EU as a guarantor of equitable growth was severely challenged, leading to increased skepticism about its ability to uphold its foundational principles. This shift in public sentiment underscores the need for the EU to reassess its approach to economic governance, ensuring that its policies align with the original ideals of solidarity and cohesion that underpin its foundational myth.

Economic recovery efforts following the Eurozone crisis have played a pivotal role in reshaping the European Union's (EU) foundational narrative. The implementation of recovery strategies, such as the European Stability Mechanism and the Banking Union, aimed to bolster financial stability and restore confidence in the EU's economic governance (Jabko 493–509). These initiatives have sought to mitigate the crisis's impact by promoting fiscal solidarity and enhancing the resilience of member states' economies, thereby attempting to realign the EU's narrative with its foundational principles of unity and prosperity. However, the varied success of these measures has highlighted ongoing disparities and has prompted debates over the effectiveness of centralized economic interventions (Schmidt). As a result, the EU's foundational myth has been recalibrated to emphasize economic resilience and cooperation, although challenges remain in achieving equitable growth across its diverse membership.

## Political Challenges

The rise of euroscepticism and right-wing populism poses a significant challenge to the European Union's (EU) foundational myth, particularly exemplified by the political climate in Hungary. Under Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, Hungary has increasingly embraced a narrative of national sovereignty that directly conflicts with the EU's ideals of integration and cooperation (Csehi and Zgut 53–68). This shift reflects a broader trend across Europe, where right-wing populist parties have gained traction by exploiting public dissatisfaction with the EU's perceived overreach and lack of responsiveness to local concerns. Eurosceptic rhetoric often frames the EU as an external body imposing unwanted regulations, thus undermining the narrative of a unified Europe working towards common goals (Ostrowski 287–304). As such, the Hungarian case illustrates how the EU's foundational myth is being tested by internal political dynamics that prioritize national identity over collective European identity.

Populist rhetoric has increasingly influenced the political cohesion of the European Union (EU), challenging its foundational myth of unity and integration. This rhetoric often capitalizes on public dissatisfaction with perceived bureaucratic overreach by the EU, framing it as an unwelcome imposition on national sovereignty (Csehi and Zgut 53–68). By amplifying concerns over loss of national identity and cultural uniqueness, populist movements undermine the EU's narrative of a harmonious and unified Europe. Such movements have gained traction in several member states, exploiting economic and social grievances to foster euroscepticism and political fragmentation (Ostrowski 287–304). Consequently, the rise of populism necessitates a critical reassessment of the EU's foundational myth, as it seeks to maintain cohesion and legitimacy in an increasingly polarized political landscape.

National sovereignty debates have increasingly impacted the political challenges facing the European Union (EU), directly contesting its foundational myth of unity and integration. These debates often arise from member states' concerns over the perceived loss of autonomy and decision-making power, which are central tenets in the EU's supranational governance structure (Csehi and Zgut 53–68). As countries grapple with balancing national interests against collective European goals, tensions emerge that threaten the cohesion envisioned by the EU's architects. For instance, policies perceived as infringing upon national sovereignty fuel eurosceptic sentiments, as seen in Hungary and Poland, where populist rhetoric emphasizes national identity over EU integration (Ostrowski 287–304). Consequently, these sovereignty debates necessitate a reevaluation of the EU's approach to integration, as it seeks to reconcile the diverse political landscapes of its member states with its overarching narrative of unity and cooperation.

## Identity and Cultural Challenges

Brexit serves as a profound challenge to the European Union's (EU) identity and cultural cohesion, symbolizing a shift away from the EU's narrative of unity and integration. The 2016 referendum, which resulted in the United Kingdom's decision to leave the EU, highlighted underlying tensions and dissatisfaction with the EU's overarching policies and identity (Leith et al. 559–64). This event not only questioned the EU's ability to maintain cohesion among its member states but also underscored the growing importance of national identity over a collective European identity. The cultural and political implications of Brexit have reverberated throughout the EU, prompting other member states to reassess their positions and the benefits of EU membership (Ostrowski 287–304). As a result, Brexit has become a catalyst for broader discussions on the EU’s foundational myth, compelling the union to address these identity and cultural challenges to preserve its narrative of unity.

Brexit has profoundly influenced other European Union (EU) member states' perspectives on EU membership and identity, serving as a catalyst for introspection and debate. The United Kingdom's departure in 2016 highlighted the possibility of disentangling national interests from the broader EU framework, prompting nations like Italy and Poland to reassess their positions within the union (Leith et al. 559–64). This shift has spurred discussions on the balance between sovereignty and integration, as countries contemplate the implications of prioritizing national identity over collective European identity. Furthermore, Brexit has intensified scrutiny of the EU's policies and governance structures, with some member states questioning the benefits of continued membership in light of perceived bureaucratic overreach (Ostrowski 287–304). As a result, Brexit has challenged the EU's foundational myth, urging a reevaluation of how member states perceive their role and identity within the union's evolving narrative.

Cultural diversity within the European Union (EU) presents a complex challenge to its foundational myth, which traditionally emphasizes unity and integration. This diversity, while enriching the EU with a multitude of cultural perspectives, also complicates the narrative of a cohesive European identity (Leith et al. 559–64). The varying historical, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds of member states often lead to differing interpretations of what constitutes a shared European identity, thereby testing the myth's unifying power. Furthermore, national cultural policies sometimes conflict with EU-wide initiatives, creating tensions that undermine efforts to present a united cultural front (Ostrowski 287–304). As the EU continues to expand and embrace further cultural plurality, it must navigate these complexities to sustain a coherent narrative that accommodates diversity while reinforcing its foundational ideals.

Efforts to promote a unified European identity amidst cultural and identity challenges have become increasingly crucial for the European Union (EU). Initiatives such as the Erasmus+ program aim to foster cultural exchange and understanding among young Europeans, thereby nurturing a sense of shared identity beyond national borders (Leith et al. 559–64). Moreover, the EU has sought to enhance its visibility and resonance by celebrating cultural diversity through events like the European Capitals of Culture, which emphasize the richness of Europe's cultural tapestry while promoting unity (Ostrowski 287–304). These efforts are complemented by policies that encourage linguistic diversity, recognizing multiple languages as official EU languages to underscore inclusivity and mutual respect (Patel). However, despite these initiatives, the challenge remains to balance the celebration of national identities with the overarching goal of fostering a cohesive European identity that supports the EU's foundational myth.

European Union (EU) cultural policies play a crucial role in addressing identity challenges by fostering a sense of shared European identity while respecting cultural diversity. These policies aim to promote cultural exchange and mutual understanding, crucial components in maintaining cohesion among member states. Initiatives such as the Creative Europe program and the European Capitals of Culture have been instrumental in highlighting the EU’s cultural richness, thereby reinforcing a collective identity amidst diversity (Leith et al. 559–64). However, these efforts face challenges due to varying national priorities and cultural interpretations, which sometimes conflict with the EU's broader objectives (Ostrowski 287–304). As the EU continues to navigate complex identity dynamics, it must ensure that cultural policies effectively balance the celebration of national identities with the promotion of a unified European narrative, thereby sustaining the foundational myth of unity and integration.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the European Union's (EU) foundational myth, once a robust narrative of peace and unity, faces persistent challenges that necessitate a critical reassessment. Historical events such as the Eurozone crisis and Brexit have highlighted significant economic and cultural tensions, questioning the sustainability of the EU's integrative ideals (Schmidt). Furthermore, theoretical frameworks suggest that the EU's ability to adapt its foundational myth is hampered by entrenched institutional structures and rising populism, which exacerbate political fragmentation (Csehi and Zgut 53–68). Security concerns, including cyberthreats and terrorism, further test the EU's capacity to maintain regional stability, demanding a more comprehensive approach to contemporary challenges (Leith et al. 559–64). Thus, the EU must address these multifaceted issues to sustain its narrative and ensure cohesion among its member states, reaffirming its commitment to the foundational principles of unity and cooperation.