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## **Narrating Europe: (re-)constructed and contested visions of the European project in citizens' discourse**

Changes in public opinion and civil society over the last decade have shown that citizens, particularly in old EU Member States, have developed more complex attitudes towards European integration. While the European project was previously generally described as a teleological depoliticized project, aiming at building peace and comforting growth, different competing visions of the European project are nowadays acknowledged, and surface among the public on occasions, like referendums or treaty negotiations. While EU official narratives are documented by studies on the European institutions or the visions of leaders and parties, their empirical analysis at the citizens' level is still fragmented. Using focus groups data in four countries (France, Portugal, Italy and Belgium) and three social groups (21 group interviews), we provide a comparative qualitative answer to how citizens envision European integration. Our results show that, first, official narratives do not fail to reach citizens, but they are also loosened, contested, and do not systematically produce a sense of common belonging. Second, they highlight the importance of socio-economic contexts, as well as national and personal experience in the re-appropriation of these narratives.

Keywords: attitudes; European integration; narratives; freedom of movement; peace

## **Introduction**

“What is the DNA of the European Union today, what is it? Yesterday's, as we know, coal, steel, it was mainly that. And free movement of goods and services. But then...”

This statement was made by Jean-Paul, a white-collar worker in his thirties, in a focus group discussion held in Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium, in Spring 2019. Jean-Paul belongs to a socio-economic group considered to be the winners of European integration (McLaren, 2006), in a notoriously pro-European member state, his support for the European Union (EU) is thus not a surprise. His expressed difficulty to clearly identify the purpose of the EU is however puzzling. This seemingly limited knowledge about the “DNA” of the EU raises questions on the evolution of citizens’ support over the past decades and the meaning given to the project (De Vries, 2018; Hooghe and Marks, 2009). In other words, it questions the EU’s ability to form a political community, based on shared narratives about values, principles and purposes (Eder, 2012). Put differently, it questions the existence of stories shared by citizens “to make sense of their reality” (Andrews et al., 2015: 1).

This challenge has not escaped the attention of European officials. Since the 1950s, EU elites and institutions have produced several official European narratives (Bouza García, 2013; Gilbert, 2008; Manners and Murray, 2016; Schrag Sternberg, 2013; Cloet, 2017), and scholars have studied their role in the construction of identity and political legitimacy (Eder, 2012; Hepp et al., 2016). The debates surrounding the adoption of various controversial European treaties or policies in times of crisis confirmed the importance of shared narratives to give a common meaning to European integration. Official narratives became more contested over time, and after the referenda in France and the Netherlands,

discourses on the need to build an alternative project for the EU became ubiquitous within member states (Schrag Sternberg, 2013 ; McMahon & Kaiser, 2022). We know that, in the integration process, political actors' intents, how official narratives and other elites' counter- narratives surface and thrive, are central (Manners and Murray, 2016). However, the equally crucial dimension of how citizens relate to these official narratives, remains understudied (McMahon & Kaiser, 2022).

Which project and purpose do citizens assign to European integration? Little is known about how official narratives are understood, refined and (re)constructed at the individual level and through citizens' discussions (De Vries, 2020). In the field of EU studies, a limited scope of research has focused on what citizens have to say and few researchers have used qualitative data to study citizens' discourses on European integration (for notable exceptions, see Belot, 2000; White, 2011; Duchesne et al., 2013; Van Ingelgom, 2014; Dimitrova and Kortenska, 2017; Mercenier, 2019). Albeit not focused on narratives per se (see White, 2010 for an exception), this scholarship laid the foundations for further research on the reception and reinterpretation of EU official narratives by European citizens.

In this article, we study EU narratives for their centrality in constituting political collective identities and political discourses. They are used by political actors to frame political processes to their advantage (Groth, 2019: 2), but more broadly to make sense of shared reality, by simplifying and ordering it, “with the political logic of trying to shape the present in light of lessons learned from the past.” (Shenhav, 2006: 246). As such, narratives help us understand the meaning citizens attribute to the European project.

We explore whether official EU narratives – narratives expressed by EU institutions – make sense for European citizens and, if so, when and how. We do so by analysing 21 focus groups held in 2019 in four EU member states – Belgium, France, Italy and Portugal. Looking at two important official narratives on which the EU has long relied to make sense of its existence – the peace narrative and the free movement narrative – our findings confirm existing theoretical intuitions that citizens do use narratives to make sense of the European Union. Furthermore, they show that citizens not only use but also reclaim existing narratives, loosening, contesting them sometimes, and using personal or national experience to do so. Before presenting these conclusions in more detail, we first review the existing literature, and introduce our methodology, data, and conceptualisation of narratives at the micro-level. We then present the results of our empirical analysis, followed by a discussion of the main takeaways and their implications for future research.

### **Narratives as a conceptual tool to understand how European citizens make sense of European integration**

For over a decade, narratives have received increased attention in various disciplines, from literacy to political science<sup>1</sup>. According to Shenhav (2005:76), “the concept’s wide currency can be attributed to the assumption that human beings have a natural tendency to think in narratives”. Because they help individuals to make sense of the world and their experiences, narratives are also crucial in understanding how individuals make sense of politics (McLaughlin et al., 2019). Despite its wide use and the broad

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<sup>1</sup> For a rapid overview, see Shenhav (2006). Note that the term “narrative” is used both as a concept, and as a method (i.e. Koehler Riessman, 2008). We use it here exclusively as a concept.

academic consensus that narratives matter, definition remains somewhat fuzzy. Borrowing Hinchman and Hinchman's (1997: xvi) definition, we refer to narratives as "discourses with a clear sequential order that connects events in a meaningful way for a definite audience and thus offers insights about the world and/or people's experiences of it". We thus consider narratives to be a particular form of discourse that is characterised by three elements: a time sequence, a meaning, and an audience.

### ***Political narratives in a European context***

Political narratives are used by actors to promote a certain vision of the world and are generally translated into a sequence of events (Bouza Garcia, 2017; Manners and Murray, 2016; Patterson and Monroe, 1998; Sassatelli, 2015), frequently limited in time (McLaughlin et al., 2019: 3). Events are considered together and provide an understanding of what happened, what is present and what is to come (Polkinghorne, 1988). Actors – the characters of the story – often take on specific roles as heroes, villains, and victims, and act to change the course of events or react to them, (Patterson and Monroe, 1998). Building on these elements, we conceptualise narratives as stories in which *actors* act out a series of *events* within a defined *time frame* and whose central element is a *purpose*, a direction, sometimes translated into a *label*.

Narratives about European integration more specifically have gained attention in recent years, leading to a "narrative turn" in European studies (Bouza Garcia, 2017). The decline of the "ever closer Union" narrative over recent decades as well as the growing contestation of official narratives, the EU's politicisation and series of crises (Trenz, 2016), have called for new narratives to arise (Gilbert, 2008) as acknowledged by Barroso himself in 2013 when he claimed for "a new narrative for Europe" (Kaiser, 2017). The growing

discontent (Dijkstra et al., 2020; Hooghe and Marks, 2009) and the indifference shown by citizens towards the EU (Van Ingelgom, 2014) have raised further questions about the purpose and the direction of the European project and the reception of official narratives.

### ***Peace through Economic Integration: The Double EU Founding Narrative***

Peace and prosperity are consensually considered within the literature on EU narratives as “the oldest central legitimising story about European integration” (Kaiser and MacMahon 2017: 153). Using this “primary myth” (Della Sala 2010:6), the EU “has tried to construct narratives that give meaning to political action taken in its name” (Della Sala 2010:2). The “progressive Whig narrative” was mobilised by the founding fathers, economic elites and scholars who presented themselves as those building Europe (Gilbert, 2008). The EU’s ability to bring economic benefits as well as peace in Western Europe has also been, for many years, an important enabler of the permissive consensus (Hooghe and Marks, 2005). Like any narrative, however, the peace narrative is far from homogenous and consensual, as even the European “founding fathers” had different visions of the goals behind it (Cloet, 2017). Despite its primary goal – peace – having been achieved within the EU, the peace narrative remains meaningful today as it “can be either backwards-looking (an ex-post rationalisation of ‘what Europe was’) or future-oriented (a description of ‘what Europe should be’)” (Rosoux, 2017:326). If the peace narrative was the first official one, it soon went hand-in-hand with a second narrative, likely to be contested: the economic one. EU officials and institutions have relied on this narrative to ground freedom of movement and economic integration as a means towards prosperity (Jones, 2010). We thus investigate this second narrative in our analysis as well. This story is coherent with our definition of narratives, including the label. Like the peace narrative, the free movement narrative

evolved with different settings and competing views across time and EU institutions, and thus is likely to be found in citizens' discussions (Maricut, 2017).

Although the primary myth has been less efficient in the last decade or two in fueling citizens' support of European integration (Bouza Garcia, 2017), peace and prosperity are still considered the oldest and most symbolic EU official narratives, hence the focus of this article on these specific stories. This is not to deny the importance of coexisting, competing, or counter-narratives. Yet, because we aim at comparing how individuals of different generations, socio-economic backgrounds, and national contexts, interpret EU official narratives at the micro-level, studying the most common narratives is a sensible avenue.

### *Citizens' reception of official narratives*

Citizens make sense of political processes and structures, interpret, modify, and reproduce formal political narratives (Groth, 2019). They construct political narratives of their own in a co-construction process, interpreting and re-arranging pieces of official stories through their own filter and experiences (Sutter, 2019; Seabrooke and Thomsen, 2016).<sup>2</sup> Anecdotes and references to personal experiences are important in the process because “the exchange of anecdotes in mini-publics helps people identify their personal interests and views, clarify wider points or bring new aspects of an issue into consideration” (Boswell, 2013: 625). It is therefore surprising that citizens, albeit being crucial recipients of EU narratives, are usually overlooked in this literature, and academic

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<sup>2</sup> While official narratives are used as a starting point to investigate citizens' stories on Europe, as explained above, this article does not investigate the transmission mechanism. This research was designed to investigate how citizens make sense of Europe and the narratives they use, not to study how EU official narratives are conveyed to citizens.



research more generally. Because of their utmost importance in both the reception and production of narratives, scholars have recently been calling for a more bottom-up perspective in political narrative studies (McMahon & Kaiser, 2022).

Few studies have focused on which EU narratives make sense for European citizens. Interviewing students at the beginning of the 1980s in France, Italy, West Germany and the United Kingdom, Hewstone (1986) observed that only British students mentioned peace as one of the main goals for European integration. In contrast, in the mid-1990s Belot (2000) found traces of the European peace narrative amongst both British and French young people.

Years later, White (2010: 1024) analysed focus group discussions with taxi drivers in Britain, Germany, Czech Republic, and noticed that participants generally considered “contemporary ‘Europe’ and the West [as] places of peace”, but without drawing connections with the process of European integration. In the context of terrorist acts in the mid-2000s, threats were seen as coming from within, confirming the importance of context not only in the production of official narratives but also in their reception and use by citizens.

Similarly, the “economic prosperity” narrative, which seems largely shared from the 1950’s to the 1990’s (Schrag Sternberg, 2013), appears to have been replaced by a representation of the EU as “the extension of a pattern” leading to economic globalisation (White, 2010: 1032). Taxi drivers from White’s study described changes associated with EU integration as indicators of this phenomenon. Using group discussions as well, Damay and Mercenier (2016) explored how the narrative around free movement was understood by young people, admittedly the group that benefits from mobility the most. While people

from middle- and upper-class backgrounds considered free movement as a benefit of integration – although this was nuanced by a strong feeling of estrangement towards institutions–, young people from lower-class backgrounds rather saw it as an extension of competition between Europeans. This is exemplary of the free movement narrative’s resonance with citizens, but also of its limitations as it was ‘not enough to justify the EU project’ (Damay and Mercenier, 2016:1153). Following this path, this article contributes to a better and more nuanced understanding of how citizens not only respond to European integration and its narratives, but how they contest and re-construct them, as well as how socioeconomic and national contexts shape these uses of official narratives.

### **Data, methodology and operationalisation: analysing narratives through focus groups**

#### ***Focus groups in Belgium, France, Italy, and Portugal***

This study relies on a discourse analysis of focus group discussions. Narratives are not individual statements but rather stories that make sense of the world and are hence considered as “crucial mechanisms in helping people make sense and communicate about complex and contested issues” (Boswell, 2013:623). Focus groups are thus ideal to collect data on discourse developed in a collective conversation where ideas and arguments expressed by various individuals are likely to be subjective. This method informs the researcher on what makes sense for the participants, their individual and collective experiences. This setting (semi-structured discussion with 5 to 8 participants) allows studying how citizens talk and think about political issues *in their own words* through

interaction with their peers, as well as investigating the co-construction of meanings and narratives, and how they appear in discussions (Morgan, 1996: 139; Van Ingelgom, 2020: 1193).

Our analysis relies on an original corpus of 21 citizen discussions on the European project held during the 2019 European electoral campaign.<sup>3</sup> Data collection was established through qualitative sampling: the corpus does not aim at being representative, but at reflecting the diversity of possible cases (Leuffen, 2007: 146). Groups were therefore selected on sociological characteristics established in the literature as explaining variation in attitudes to European integration. National context (Hooghe and Marks, 2004; Kritzinger, 2003; Kuhn and Stoeckel, 2014); individuals' economic situations (Hobolt and Wrtil, 2005; Foster and Palmer, 2021), and education (Hakhverdian et al, 2013) have been established as the most determinant factors of support for Europe. Therefore, groups vary according to location, employment status (unemployed, employed, retired) and levels of education (no university degree / undergraduate degree / graduate degree / undergraduate students). We also consider different generations (baby-boomers, millennials, Generation Z) as studies show that European cognitions are anchored in the context of an individual's first European socialisation (Belot, 2000). Individual narratives may thus evolve but can be

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<sup>3</sup> This research was conducted within RESTEP (*RÉSeau Transatlantique sur l'Europe Politique*), an international research network bringing together researchers from ten European and Canadian universities, led by Laurie Beaudonnet and Frédéric Mérand (Université de Montréal) and funded by the 'Jean Monnet activities' component of the European Commission's Erasmus + Programme (project 587460-EPP-1-2017-1-CA-EPPJMO-NETWORK). In addition to funding from the Jean Monnet activities framework, this research has benefited from the support of the *Fonds de Recherche Société et Culture du Québec* via the Research Support for New Academics Program (grand agreement 2016-NP-191505 awarded to Laurie Beaudonnet, *Autre(s) Europe(s)* project), and the European Research Council under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement 716208 awarded to Virginie Van Ingelgom, Qualidem project).

traced back to how they were first expressed. We study different generations as our older cohorts grew up after WWII in the context of war rejection and European community building, while our younger cohorts have been socialised to Europe in the context of the Great recession. Groups were built based on sociological homogeneity and gender balance while maximising political diversity.

To strengthen the comparative design, discussions were held in four different European cities: Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium; Grenoble, France; Florence, Italy; Lisbon, Portugal. This selection was not intended to account for the vast heterogeneity of national contexts in the EU-28, but at providing a manageable set of local and national characteristics to account for in the analysis (Leuffen, 2007). All four are university cities, in rather economically wealthy environments. They differ however in other criteria, Lisbon being a capital with a population of around 500,000 inhabitants, Louvain-la-Neuve having only 10,000 inhabitants. All belong to old Western member states, with relatively constant high levels of support for integration, and facing more doubts these last years without leading to an alteration of party-voter alignments about European integration (Lisi, 2020)<sup>4</sup>. The economic situation and evolution during the Great recession differ between the four cases: while Italy and Portugal faced major difficulties during the Euro-debt crisis, Belgium and France remained afloat. The comparison is first and foremost focused on sociological profile (education and generation) and in-group dynamics, but the transmission and use of

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<sup>4</sup> A successful recruitment for focus-group design requires a heavy logistics and very good knowledge of local context. The choice of the four cities was thus also determined by the presence of Third-Age University programs (used to reach senior groups) and local ties of the research team.

narratives are context-dependent, hence the consideration of these elements in the analysis.

Table 1 below summarises the group composition and fieldwork period<sup>5</sup>.

Table 1. Presentation of focus group data

	<b>Grenoble (France)</b>	<b>Louvain-la-Neuve (Belgium)</b>	<b>Lisbon (Portugal)</b>	<b>Florence (Italy)</b>
<b>March 2019</b>	Seniors - 1st sequential	Seniors - 1st sequential	Seniors - 1st sequential	
	Students	Students		
<b>May 2019</b>	Seniors - 2nd sequential	Seniors - 2nd sequential	Seniors - 2nd sequential	
	Young unemployed	Young unemployed	Seniors - 3rd sequential	
<b>June 2019</b>	Seniors - 3rd sequential	Seniors - 3rd sequential		Young unemployed
	Young without diploma	Young without diploma		Young without diploma
	White-collar workers	White-collar workers		Students
				White-collar workers

### *Operationalising narratives in citizens' discourses*

We used abduction to code our qualitative data. Following the steps highlighted and formalised by Deterding and Waters (2021) and Vila-Henninger et al. (2022), we first built a theoretically based codebook, to identify narratives. A narrative is a story with a meaning (purpose) in which actors act out a series of events within a defined time frame. The purpose of European integration is the central element of the story and can be summarised with a specific label (e.g., “Europe of peace”) or not. Thus, we first coded all segments

<sup>5</sup> To find additional information on the method used and the data (including list and details of interviews, see Beaudonnet et al. 2022).

related to the European project in general as it constitutes the purpose of integration. In this first round of coding, several narratives emerged with different purposes. While all are legitimate to study, it was outside the scope of this article to examine them all extensively. Moreover, not all exhibited the same level of structure and presence in the different groups and contexts. For this reason, and the theoretical arguments presented above, we focused our analysis on the main and oldest EU official narratives of peace, and free movement.

The codebook was refined for the second round of coding to account specifically for these two narratives, using keywords relating to the “Europe of peace” (using “peace”, “peaceful”, “war” and “conflict”) and “free movement Europe” (using “circulation”, “freedom of movement”, “travel”, “mobility”, “exchange”). We then identified segments that constituted a narrative amongst those containing one or more of these keywords. Put differently, we coded as narratives the excerpts in which we found these keywords and participants expressed a view in which we could identify a plot, a purpose, some characters (political actors), and a temporality. Citizens’ discourses being relatively unstructured, we did not expect participants to explicitly identify the different elements by themselves, let alone express them all at the same time. Following the abductive approach, the present analysis is the result of several rounds of back-and-forth between the theoretical framework and the data, to refine the conceptualisation of narratives for citizens and analyse their logics of use, appropriation, and contestation.

### *Discussion settings*

Discussions were induced with wide questions on support for integration, exiting the EU, pros and cons of integration, and specific visions and statements from political parties about

Europe.<sup>6</sup> For the last three questions, we prompted the participants with, respectively, cartoons about the EU, polarised statements on Europe from national political parties, in relation to the economy (first question) and to migration (second one), and with campaign ads of different framings. Those prompts were likely to have an impact on the participants' responses due to their controversial nature. However, although they did encourage further contestation in some participants, they also stimulated others to defend the EU and challenge the contestation itself, or to reformulate it in their own words. Moreover, the cartoons and statements were not shown one by one but all at the same time, leaving the participants to discuss whichever sparked the strongest reaction. Thus, while the prompts elicited responses, they did not necessarily lead to the same type of contestation they suggested, rendering the results of analytical value. Many mentions of narratives, as analysed in the next section, even appeared before these prompts.

### **Citizens Narrating the EU**

Since the creation of the ECSC (European Coal and Steel Community), following WWII, the peace narrative has been prominent in the institutional discourse in establishing the EU, the Single Market, and free movement as the instrument for peace on the continent. While the narratives about peace and free movement are rather consistent at the official level, they are not understood as evenly at the citizen level. The next sections analyse citizens' discourse on the European project and investigate how these narratives are challenged and anchored in personal and national experiences.

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<sup>6</sup> See online Appendix for wordings and material

## *Europe of peace*

When uncontested, the peace narrative remains, for citizens, similar to the official one. It tells the tale of a community created to prevent future conflicts between members after the continent was devastated by two world wars. Peace is often considered the primary goal of the European project and in many ways, the narrative appears in (almost) all focus groups, and more often than the free movement narrative (76 coded segments over 19 groups, except the young unemployed in Florence, versus 44 references in 16 focus groups for free movement). Table 2 in the Appendix displays the coding references for all groups. However, participants discuss it with different degrees of complexity and levels of agreement. The temporal dimension was salient throughout the discussions, as participants mentioned in turn the birth of integration, the original project, its initial goal, and anchored the narrative in references to the past, notably the two world wars and their aftermath. The level of complexity and structure also varies. For some participants “Europe of peace” is only a label whereas for others it includes, beyond temporality, a plot and some characters. For instance, students from Belgium discussed a basic peace narrative summarised by the translation of integration into a state of peace in Europe: “Eudes: Just thinking about peace, [...] ... well since we created the European Union, there has been simply no war between Europeans. I think it is not a bad thing” (Students, Louvain-la-Neuve). In other groups the peace narrative is more structured and encompasses a specific temporality, mentions of actors and of events, and the acknowledgement of a purpose.

Joana: [...] Despite seeing that not everything was possible to build, I believe in the kindness of this project, that brought sixty... we're in the 60 and something years, after CEAS, in peace, and in fact it wasn't, it hasn't been easy, we had two great wars [...].”  
(Senior citizens, Lisbon)



Thus, citizens do share, to some extent, the institutional narrative on the peace project, and it is worth noting that peace is mentioned by participants before being prompted on the issue with the cartoon. Questions about remaining or leaving the EU and the losers and winners of integration led participants to mention the peace narrative (either as a goal of integration or as a gain) before being shown cartoons or political stances.

### *Lines of contestation*

Some elements of the official peace narrative are present in most of the groups, but different aspects are challenged. Amongst older French citizens, a conflicting vision of the European peace project arises from a disagreement over actors and temporality. As one participant claims peace to be one of the achievements of Europe, the statement is immediately contested by another participant who underlines the responsibility of the EU during the Balkans war.

Marilyn: ...But since 49, we still gained peace, we have to say it [...]

Jean-Michel: [ironically] Do you really think it is true, Madame? [...] Do you know when we bombed Belgrade? Do you know there was a war [...] There was a war at the heart of Europe, it happened. Yes... yes, it's the truth. [...] we did not gain peace, no. We did not gain peace.

Jean-Louis: | Ah well, we will not make political fiction.

Sophie: | Yugoslavia, that was Eastern Europe!

Nadine: | We have the economic war, we have the economic war.

Pierre: | Of course.

Roger: Well, we got peace because Europe was under the power of the Americans.  
(Senior citizens, Grenoble)

This narrative contains elements referring to the past (the 1990s war in the Balkans), to actors (Europe, the United States) and to a plot, which is contested as Jean-Michel

underlines more recent conflicts that the EU has not been able to prevent, and Roger discusses the respective roles of the actors. Furthermore, Nadine also contests the very notion of peace by talking about “economic war”. This contestation also focuses on whether the instabilities and conflicts happening outside Europe – for which it is held responsible – raise questions about integration being a peace project. European diplomacy and external action are criticised by participants as potentially producing conflicts outside the EU, notably in France and Portugal, fuelling the contestation over the purpose of the peace narrative.

Peace as a purpose is further challenged by some participants arguing that it is only a front for a hidden agenda. This narrative also frequently includes a temporal dimension with participants insisting on the denaturation of the project that started off as a peace enterprise and wound up as an economic and technocratic model. This shows important discrepancies between the double EU founding narrative as promoted by European officials and how it is perceived by citizens, as for them, the meaning and accuracy of a Europe of peace have evolved over time.

The peace narrative is also contested through its anchoring in a more recent time in history with the migration crisis. Many participants assert that guaranteeing peace on the continent is not sufficient: to be a Europe of peace, the EU must welcome the victims of wars happening abroad. Participants plea for Europe to face up to its responsibilities and undertake means to guarantee satisfying living conditions for all. Many feel that the EU failed to do so during the migration crisis. While “the crisis” was framed by political actors for political reasons (Jeandesboz and Pallister-Wilkins, 2016), citizens do not straightforwardly acknowledge this narrative. In sum, many elements of the official peace

narrative can be found in citizens' discourse, but most of them are contested by participants. Note, however, that most references are directly linked to conflicts outside Europe and how the EU is dealing with such armed and economic conflicts. The Europe of peace narrative itself is thus sometimes challenged, but most of the time, the line of contestation can also be interpreted as a development of the narrative famously driven by officials at the beginning of European integration.

### *Experiencing the peace narrative*

When discussing peace and European integration, there is a visible generational cleavage between older participants (over 60 years old) and younger ones (early twenties to mid-thirties), based on mobilised experiences. Although they admit not having lived through WWII directly, many older participants seem to have internalised the experience of parents or grandparents, which strongly influences their vision of Europe.

Sophie: I remember, my family is from Alsace and my grandparents were moved around... They were born in 1900, so they have been German, French, German, both of them lived over a hundred years and they rang our bells<sup>7</sup> every time we complained about Europe... (Senior citizens, Grenoble)

References to WWII are also a lot more salient than references to events directly experienced by the participants, like decolonial wars in Portugal and France, the Cold war, which might be a sign that the myth of the construction of a post-WWII Europe of peace remains central in citizens' discourse too. Throughout the discussions, it is also implied that

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<sup>7</sup> French expression that means to scold someone severely.

this experience of the war bestows them with a better understanding of the European project than that of younger generations.

Rita: [...] the generational issue is really, so the big difference is important, because only a young person can... didn't suffer the effects of the war and therefore doesn't... to him he doesn't value the peace we have. Because only someone who didn't go through that can then not value the peace we have. (Senior citizens, Lisbon)

They confirm this position when commenting on one of the cartoons they were asked to assess, which represents an old man and a young man sitting together next to an EU institution, the older citizen rejoicing in the fact that Europe has not known war for 50 years, to which the young man simply replies with “how boring!”. Older participants seemingly agreed with this cartoon and deplored the lack of attachment to Europe displayed by the younger generation.

Evelyne: [...] there is a doubt that emerges about the need to still have Europe. And young people... Some of them were discussing with me last night, they don't even remember that thanks to Europe we don't have wars. They don't know what it is. (Senior citizens, Louvain-la-Neuve)

Strikingly, many young participants agree, to some extent, that the younger generation forgets about this founding idea of peace. Yet, the peace issue is quite salient in most groups, and not exclusive in the older ones<sup>8</sup>. Furthermore, participants mentioning peace the least are the Belgian seniors. Thus, while older participants anchor their vision in

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<sup>8</sup> Amongst younger groups, Belgian and French (undergraduate) students mobilise the peace narrative the most, possibly due to learning about it recently in secondary school or at university.

the experience of their parents and grandparents, younger participants also associate the EU with peace, but they rely on family experience less.

In sum, the official peace narrative, while being prevalent in discussions, is not consistent. It is contested as, in turn, its purpose, its plot, its actors, and its temporality, are challenged. The different visions are strongly embedded in the invocation of experience, especially for older citizens, but our data do not validate that the younger generation disregards peace as an important purpose because of their lack of experience with war. Still, many contestation lines remain trans-generational, notably on the role of the economy in the peace-building process or the responsibility of the EU in more recent conflicts. Moreover, without necessarily reconsidering the validity of the peace narrative, a new story is emerging that insists not only on the need for peace within Europe but also outside its borders. While the idea of cooperation remains dear to most participants, its spread to the rest of the world to reduce inequalities and tensions might eventually arise as a new alternative narrative.

### ***Europe of the free movement***

Free movement seems to be understood quite broadly by most citizens as, from the outset, participants discussed issues like workers and students' mobility – notably through the Erasmus programme – and the absence of visas to travel within Europe. In general, this narrative is seen positively by participants, mostly by younger Belgian and French groups, and elderly Portuguese individuals, but to a lesser extent by Italians. Yet, some different visions emerge across groups. In groups with older citizens, young people are an important character in the narrative as they are often portrayed as the “winners” of free movement due

to their ability to travel and study in different member states. This idea is particularly salient for Portuguese citizens who link those opportunities to economic issues and how not only the free movement of people but also of capital helped the country. In that sense, references to a temporality, conspicuous to Portugal joining the EU, are present. The Europe of free movement is therefore understood slightly differently in various groups, and different lines of contestation and references to personal experience guide the visions citizens have of the narrative. Like the peace narrative, free movement narratives are mentioned in relation to questions on remaining/leaving the EU, winners and losers of integration, and participants tended to focus on the East/West perceived divide and the principle of equality amongst member states rather than work mobility.

#### *Lines of contestation*

Despite the general positive vision of free movement, this narrative is also contested. First, many participants challenge it in relation to its purpose. While the free movement is meant to benefit all Europeans, some claim that the narrative's purpose is not achieved as individuals have unequal mobility opportunities. The cost of free movement and the different economic conditions between countries drive competition and social dumping, while the idea of travelling, albeit positive in itself, also implies a discrepancy in opportunities due to its cost.

Aurélien: Yeah, well from a sociological point of view it's the same, actually. The Schengen area is great, when you have money to visit other European countries.  
(White-collar workers, Grenoble)

This idea, or at the very least the questioning of the economic project, is recurrent in every group. Even the Erasmus programme, generally viewed as a positive outcome, was criticised for being available only to richer students. Thus, the free movement narrative's purpose is reconsidered because it is not available to all. This narrative is also seen from the perspective of individuals outside the EU's borders. While the free movement and the mobility for European citizens has been mostly celebrated, it is also put in contrast with its inaccessibility for non-EU citizens.

Selene: No but, I mean [...] Europeans, we have the right to go anywhere we want to... and everyone else who is not European has no right to immigrate, to come and go as they please. I mean, do you realise how paradoxical that is? (Students, Florence).

The purpose of the free movement is therefore once again contested in terms of its success. Mobility might be an achievement, but the fact it is not accessible to all participants challenges the narrative and the EU's role in it. Discussing the principles of European integration and how they should drive its development in light of the Schengen and migration crises, some participants stress the importance of a community of security and address issues such as borders and the protection of the territory, whereas others lay emphasis on common values of solidarity and a welcoming community. The degree of free movement of people is not questioned within EU borders, but the permeability of external borders is contested.

Despite the scepticism surrounding the success of free movement in relation to the inequalities it creates, an alternative narrative highlights the emergence of a European sense of belonging stemming from it. The increasing opportunities and frequency of exchanges between European citizens are often mentioned as important elements for the development

of a European identity, especially in Florence and Lisbon, and amongst French white-collar workers. Citizens' own individual experiences are often linked to free movement and European identity.

### *Experiencing the free movement*

Participants see a connection between the possibility to travel across Europe and the construction of common values.

Luis: There you can also... the mobility of people, which is important, and even Erasmus, for the young people, it gives another dimension and professional perspective, ethics, all. And this will create...

Nuno: Personal ties.

Luis: And it will create... we already feel it, the people who did Erasmus, have another view of life, they don't stay in the hometown, they're global. We're not. We had to run away.

Luis: We had inter-rail, right?

Joana: Yes.

(Senior citizens, Lisbon)

In the previous quote, Luis (senior, Lisbon) mentions inter-rail and Erasmus, the latter being narrated through many focus groups as one of the biggest benefits of European integration. Sabrina (student, Grenoble) agrees that the programme had an influence on her feeling European: "well, in my personal experience, I was lucky to have done Erasmus once. And then I told myself: ah yeah, I understand what it is to be European." Therefore, citizens re-construct the narrative of free movement not only by criticising the accessibility of its purpose of offering mobility to individuals but also by grounding it in their own experience and expanding it to the shaping of a European community with a shared



identity. The relative novelty of Erasmus made it more relatable for young people, as many, like Sabrina, used their experience with the programme to shape and justify their vision of the European project and assess its success.

Veronica: [...] the first thing I associate with Europe is Erasmus. Because it is an experience I had and, in my opinion, it is at the end of the day the best project of the European Union. It is an experience in which [...] you realise you really have a community. [...] I felt European for the first time in this situation. (White-collar workers, Florence)

Conversely to the peace narrative, for which experience was mainly brought up by participants from older generations, with the free movement narrative, it is the young people who draw on their own experience with mobility, especially in Grenoble (50% of the coded segments come from young French participants). Generally, they understand it as a benefit of integration, of which the older citizens are perhaps less aware. In some groups, especially in Portuguese ones, participants referred to the national experience rather than the personal one: the temporal dimension, notably mentions of Portugal's accession to the EU, was salient. In contrast to the other countries, Portugal entered the community in 1986, the accession was experienced first-hand by all of our participants, hence their inclination to anchor their vision of free movement in this recent past. Moreover, at least one of them experienced increased professional mobility when Portugal became a member state, thus combining the national experience and her own professional experience of mobility. The national context also explains why mobility was more salient for elderly Portuguese participants than for their counterparts in the other countries: free movement is mentioned in relation to younger generations, economic migration, and the opportunity the EU represents for their children. While older Belgian and French participants treat mobility as a

side note in relation to tourism and sometimes university exchange, Portuguese citizens articulate it extensively with professional mobility and anxiety about the younger generations.

## **Conclusion**

To sum up, citizens do not only use official narratives when discussing the European project, but they contest, challenge, re-construct, and alter them. It empirically proves that these narratives reach citizens, even those less well endowed with cultural capital, and despite the established low level of interest for European integration. Citizens make sense of official discourse on Europe and a shared reality by anchoring these stories in their own personal and/or national experiences, sometimes contesting actors, events, and goals.

Looking first at the peace narrative, references to the World Wars were especially salient for older generations who experienced it, albeit vicariously, and the hope that stemmed from integration. For younger generations, an emphasis was rather put on the responsibility of Europe to help refugees and victims of wars happening abroad. Beyond these variations, the narrative is articulated across groups in a similar way. When citizens discuss the European project, the peace narrative is very present and they relate to experiences passed on from generation to generation through official history and within families, but the purpose, the plot, the actors, and the temporality of the narrative, are challenged. Moreover, citizens insert the peace narrative into larger considerations about the world and what should be done to ensure safety both within and outside Europe, a responsibility given to European and global levels of governance, giving the EU a de facto important role on the international scene.

These two elements (experience and a broadening of the narrative) are present in the free movement narrative as well. Most younger participants draw on their time with the Erasmus programme, an experience unknown to most elderly citizens. Experience of other forms of mobility (touristic or professional) is the common anchor of the narratives for all groups, as well as the trigger for contestation as mobility is linked to inequalities of opportunities and means. Like in the peace narrative, citizens connect intra-mobility to the world outside, leading to a contestation of the narrative by the migration issue. In this context, ‘Fortress Europe’, seen as the corollary of a free movement Europe, is either challenged, or deemed necessary. This line of contestation was particularly salient in Portugal, where participants had rather different personal and national experiences of mobility.

By highlighting how official and well-established narratives are dealt with, understood, debated, contested, and rebuilt by citizens, our results unveil mechanisms that explain the failure of the spill-over from elites to the masses as expected by the neo-functionalists in the 1960s. Observing current contestations and alterations of institutional narratives contributes to the recent debates brought up by post-functionalist theories and their focus on citizens’ constraining attitudes. Some limitations have, however, to be acknowledged. Individual experience is influenced by national context, and while we account for it, the research design did not allow for a wide range comparison. Similarly, it would be worth expanding the design to explore further the variety of social groups and generations.

Citizens’ discourse on the European project is the product of institutional framings and European and national political narratives, mediated by personal experience. This (re-)

construction of institutional narratives at the citizens' level highlights that citizens are able to relate to the European project on an everyday basis, and even reflect on its goals and meanings in a broader manner, linking the internal effects of integration to what happens outside the EU, anchoring Europe in the world. This might mean that citizens are finally taking a hold of the European narratives and making them their own, bearing importance for the future of the EU political system, and stressing the importance, for European and national institutional and political actors to account for, adapt and react to these reinterpreted and potentially root-based narratives.

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## Appendix

Table 2: Coded references for narratives

	Europe of Peace		Free Movement Europe	
	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Share</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Share</u>
LLN_students	7	8%	3	5%
LLN_seniors3	1	1%	1	4%
LLN_seniors2	1	2%	0	0%
LLN_seniors1	1	1%	0	0%
LLN_whitecoll	6	2%	7	9%
LLN_professionals	1	2%	2	2%
LLN_unemployed	1	1%	2	1%
GR_students	3	7%	5	28%
GR_seniors1	11	17%	1	1%
GR_seniors2	5	4%	1	1%
GR_seniors3	3	7%	0	0%
GR_whitecoll	3	4%	3	10%
GR_professionals	5	6%	3	4%
GR_unemployed	3	7%	3	14%
LIS_seniors1	8	7%	5	8%
LIS_seniors2	12	16%	3	2%
LIS_seniors3	0	0%	2	4%
FI_students	1	2%	1	3%
FI_whitecoll	3	5%	2	4%
FI_professionals	1	0%	0	0%
FI_unemployed	0	0%	0	0%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>76</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>100%</b>