

# TODAY'S EU: „SEXY“ OR „DULL“?

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## **Abstract**

*To increase the number of EU „fans“, the EU institutions must use and re-use all the means at their disposal. Everybody is lacking that breath of fresh air given by interesting and charming politicians or nice scandals with a twist where the EU is always the main character. The EU could continue promoting famous educational programmes like Erasmus, to bring back the glamour to European identity and culture. But the Europeans, starting with the youth, need more accessible language, attractive but unsuccessful campaigns like „Europe is sexy“, real communication through the social media platforms of the European institutions. „Sexy“ is associated with generally attractive or interesting, as opposed to „dull“, which refers to not interesting or exciting in any way. Which side does today's EU belong to?*

**Keywords:** *EU narrative, European identity, dull, sexy.*

The main idea of the article is to introduce the reader with a new perspective over the power of EU „narratives“. As members of the European Union, we share a common identity, values, dreams and a list of priorities. Nevertheless, the EU has a major problem in developing citizen-oriented and barrier-free information and communication.

In his article dedicated to the narrative turn of European Studies, Bouza Garcia (2017) reminds us that the EU needs ‘something else’ to gain the hearts and minds of Europeans for the project. In the present times, the so-called „something else“ is still missing.

EU narratives are the best way of reaching the public since they „are made of people's memories of the past, experience of the present, and above all imagination of the future. Narratives underpin and bind communities; they make them move“ (Chenal, 2012, 23, footnote 1, as cited in Bouza Garcia, 2017, p. 288).

Are we prepared for more complex narratives and ready to forget the EU motto: united in diversity? The pilot project „New Narrative for Europe“ (NNfE) from 2013, with participants from the scientific, academic, political and artistic environment, questioned what a new narrative could look like and the need for a „new renaissance“ or a shift in thinking about the direction of Europe (NNfE, 2017).

The idea of a new narrative created a series of controversies online, especially between two contributors to *Social Europe*, a famous leading European digital media publisher. Massimiliano Santini (2018) mentions that „we need a new, rigorous, and pragmatic narrative that uses metaphors and myths to make people feel at home again in a globalised Europe“. He underlines this idea by using a stronger language: „the solution may be in elaborating and putting forward a new narrative. It's the narrative, stupid!“

Peter Scherrer (2018) offers a series of counter-arguments, using the same strong language. „Please, not a new narrative! That would be stupid! To cut it short: what Europe needs is credibility, not a new narrative. [...]. Europe has to deliver more quickly and in a comprehensible way what people need in a globalised Europe. When Europe stands for solutions and action, it will have created its best possible narrative. When the action creates these narratives, they will be convincing and sustainable. Europe certainly does not need a new narrative – it needs credibility“.

That is just an example that we do not have a single narrative pro or against European integration in today's European public spheres. According to de Wilde (2021), this is a bad perspective for the European Commission and other EU actors wondering how to best present themselves and the cause of European integration in the public sphere.

Themes like peace, prosperity, or protection seem unlikely to be viable options for legitimating European integration, since they are already taken for granted by the EU citizens.

No single narrative theme, or frame, lends itself clearly to build a pro-European narrative on since they are all contested and thus associated with different political agendas (de Wilde, 2021, p.24).

The new narrative for Europe is a work in progress. It is advancing towards *humanizing the institutions*, offering a mind and body of Europe. The EU is starting to lose its boredom or dullness and to advance towards the so-called sexiness, searched by the younger generations through subjects of greater importance than the internal market, like youth unemployment, climate change, blue business immigration, data security.

This article is mainly based on exploratory research. The exploratory research proves that the terms associated with the European Union: sexy and dull can be the focus for future research, but the problem is at a preliminary stage since the lack of qualitative primary and secondary sources cannot offer conclusive results.

Due to the approached subject, the information provided by the secondary sources (online sources, EU official publications and speeches, etc.) cannot be considered outdated.

According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary (n.d.), the term *dull* is defined as „tedious, uninteresting“, while *sexy* stands for „generally attractive or interesting (appealing)“.

Online articles attract the attention on the EU and its status of dullness. A. Mullerleile (2011), a political analyst, shares his tips for future EU journalists: „facts are overrated [...]. If you have an idea for a good EU story, don't let facts ruin it. Plus, nobody will check if a EU story is true. Everyone knows that the EU is boring and evil. Moreover, the single aim of the EU is to produce unnecessary regulation (generally known as 'red tape')“.

The European Union has always been considered the land of the dull. According to Brookins (2021), „it is the boring men and women of European finance ministries who hold the continent's fate in their hands [...]. The future of the EU will be the biography of the boring. Fixing the EU internal economic problems, whether through green spending or the diplomatic struggle, will do more for the EU of world power than of its geopolitical schemes. In the EU, dullness is fate – and it is the Dull Men who shape it“.

In the EU, dullness or boredom cannot be considered a flaw. „With relation to politics, however, although it too is prone to accusations of boredom inducement, such charges seem to be essentially irrelevant since it is assumed that politics' purpose is not to amuse or entertain; politics is a serious business“ (Rot, 2011, p. 2).

„The EU is not an all-powerful superstate dictating every aspect of public policy to helpless politicians. It is a rules-based club, which can exert sufficient political pressure on members to make responsible policy choices within a pre-agreed framework. But that doesn't sound very sexy, does it? It's not. But it is working“ (Taylor, 2006).

Margot Wallstrom, former vice-president of the European Commission, wrote for *The Independent* on 8 May 2009, that „EU doesn't really do passion. If you try to market the EU as an aphrodisiac, it would rate up there with a nice pair of socks. If anything, the EU flag stands for boring reasons over passion [...]. And yet, the EU does stuff that is highly relevant to us. So, this is my Happy Europe Day card. No need to wave a flag. But when you think about the positive and useful everyday work that European countries now do together, maybe it's a nice idea to remember the day in 1950 when one man, looking out over a continent that had been the world's greatest battlefield only five years ago, suggested that he might have a way of making sure it never happened again“.

Before the Covid pandemic, this very boredom was celebrated as a virtue rather than condemned as a manipulating mechanism. Historian Timothy

Garton Ash, for instance, claimed in an outdated article, entitled „Europe must decide if it wants to be more than Greater Switzerland“ that, to a large extent, Europe being „nice, boring and irrelevant“ is „a great achievement“ (Ash, 2009, as cited in Rot, 2011, p. 4).

Associating a common term like *sexy* with the European Union can be considered a rookie mistake by a media specialist. Using words like „EU is (still) sexy“ in official speeches, publications, campaigns produced an insufficient veil of reactions among the targeted audiences: the youth. Andreas Kaplan (2018) published an article in *Prospect Magazine* asking whether it is time to sex up the EU? He offers a series of relevant but unsuccessful methods for transforming the image of the EU into sexy, fun and exciting (e.g. *The Young Europeans of Isure* and the campaign „Europe is sexy“; the German TV channel *Tele5* and the campaign „Europe ist geil“; the *Party of European Socialists* and the election spot „Let’s make Europe vibrate“).

Still two elements draw my personal interest: the famous speech of Herman von Rompuy, President of the European Council at the State of the European Union, at the First Annual Forum, *Revitalising the European Dream* (2011) and the project *12 Ideas for the Future of Europe. New Narrative for Europe Communications Campaign* (2017), where the word *sexy* is associated with power, desirability, closeness to its citizens.

As mentioned above, Herman von Rompuy declared in his speech (2011) that „as long as a club attracts new members, it is in good shape. Europe is still sexy“. We should mention here that the former president of the European Council sees the EU as an attractive actor in the sense that it functions as a model for external actors.

The EU is attractive and a „good example – concerning democracy, human rights protection, violent conflict prevention, environmental responsibility, global consciousness (etc.) – and thus the EU functions as an important actor for global agenda setting. Also, the European socio-economic model and good relations with the EU are a source of material advantages“ (Rohrbacher & Јеннукoвб, 2011, p. 195).

The *12 Ideas for the Future of Europe. New Narrative for Europe Communications Campaign* (2017) did not manage to attract the desired attention. The participation was low due to the lack of good promotion and the obtained ideas remained lost in translation. One memorable quote, related to civic engagement, managed to raise the attention over the importance of bringing the EU closer to its citizens. „The problem is always the same: there’s a need to reach out [to] more European citizens, make them feel like the EU is ‘sexy’ and not something old and boring. Promote what the EU is doing for them, what affects them directly in their daily lives!“

Kaplan (2018) also draws the attention over the problems of content and some success stories that can remind the EU citizens of their appealing qualities. Topics and subjects can be sexy if the right channels and language

are used. The EU needs more colour and glamour. Success stories like Eurovision, the removal of mobile phone roaming tariffs, the simplicity of studying abroad via ERASMUS+ are a good basis for the increase in Europe's sex-appeal.

The major problem remains communication. The information must be clear and accessible to all interested parties. These ideas have not changed during the years. Numerous EU documents mention the importance of communication, still with no relevant outcomes.

In 2007, Dutch politician, Ivo Opstelten, proposed the Committee of Regions to „make Europe sexy: ditch the jargon and make communication a priority“. „Is it any wonder that so many people find the EU a turn-off? There's far too much institutional language and it's getting in the way of building a bridge with our citizens. We shouldn't be communicating about the institutions or how decisions are made; we should be explaining to the public how decisions will affect them and what opportunities Europe can create for them“ (CoR, 2007).

After 2020, the EU communication strategy improved, using to the higher limit the current social media platforms. The narrative „Make your voice heard!“ of the European Year of Youth 2022 brings a sexy look to the European identity. Unfortunately, past research shows that EU citizens do not relate to the current social media usage of European institutions. The content of the latter appears again as too technocratic and distant and therefore has little to no appeal, particularly for the younger generation (Kaplan, 2018). This applies to the present times.

Sexy or dull no longer matters for EU citizens, if communication is not used in the appropriate manner. Any particular single narrative is unlikely to be successful or able to penetrate the public sphere sufficiently. Values are contested, meaning various actors have an opportunity to challenge openly whether certain policies actually pursue the aims they claim to pursue. They have that opportunity and make active use of it (de Wilde, 2021, p. 23).

The bridge between the EU and its citizens must be done in partnership. The EU would do well to adopt an opportunistic and versatile approach. The methods must be appealing and sexy for the younger generations and nice and boring for the older generations. As Jacques Delors said, no one will fall in love with Europe if we cannot communicate. To paraphrase M. Wallstrom, European Union is not dull or sexy, it remains a challenge and „a mission irresistible“ (2009).

A European narrative cannot remain detached, independent, from the actual visions and sentiments in European society. Therefore, a novel, open and pluralistic narrative is needed, which can address the great challenges of current times. The spine of a new narrative should lie in the core values of the EU like human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, solidarity, the rule of law and respect for human and minority rights (Blokker, 2022), which is appealing, attractive and seeks to ground firmly in European society itself.

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