

## Book Reviews

**François FORET, *The European Union in search of narratives. Disenchanted Europe?*, London & New York: Routledge, 2025**

Reviewed by:

**Dr. Anemona CONSTANTIN**



Institute of European Studies – Centre for the study of political life (IEE-CEVIPOL), Free University of Brussels

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Widely criticized for its lack of democratic charisma and its inability to generate genuine support among citizens, the European Union (EU) is rarely viewed today as a living political body seeking to win “hearts and minds.” More than once, it appears as a self-centred, rigid, and soulless bureaucracy that governs through outputs – aiming to deliver prosperity, security, and peace more as preconditions for a functional common market than as outcomes of a successful community-building process.

Breaking with functionalist and institutionalist approaches that conceptualize the EU as a regulatory governance apparatus or a market technocracy, François Foret’s book, *The European Union in Search of Narratives: Disenchanted Europe?* offers a critical corrective to these interpretations. By focusing on the study of narratives, it seeks to restore the political dimension of the organisation, interrogating its modes of legitimization in the context of the post-2009 “polycrisis” (2009) (Zeitlin, Nicoli & Laffan, 2019), particularly in moments where the EU fails to deliver, and output-based justifications reach their limits.

The book adopts a relational perspective on legitimization, conceiving it as the outcome of negotiated transactions between European institutions, political actors, stakeholders, and citizens – thus distancing itself from top-down models of authority (Chapter 1. *Narratives and (European) politics*). Drawing on a tradition of thought

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### Corresponding author:

**Dr. Anemona CONSTANTIN**, Institute of European Studies-Centre for the study of political life (IEE-CEVIPOL), Free University of Brussels

E-mail: [anemona.constantin@hotmail.fr](mailto:anemona.constantin@hotmail.fr)

that goes back to Max Weber – who complemented the ideal type of “rational-legal legitimacy” with the concept of “charisma of function” (Weber, 2003) to reintroduce beliefs and recognition into the economy of domination (Heurтин, 2014) – the study underscores that no disembodied or remote bureaucracy can justify its authority solely through the fulfilment of rationally defined objectives. Obedience is therefore grounded in shared values and practices – and at times in belief or faith – prompting an exploration of the symbolic dimensions of the EU’s construction as a polity, as well as the modalities of its self-justification and self-glorification as part of a wider attempt to resacralize politics.

But identifying the symbolic array of meanings, representations, and principles – namely, the framework capable of granting the EU with an enduring “brand of magic” in the eyes of increasingly indifferent citizens (p. 206) – proves to be a difficult task, writes Foret. First, because as political and politicized constructs, EU narratives are often volatile and inconsistent, which makes them difficult to distinguish from circumstantial statements, speeches, policy discourses, or media communications, which in turn contribute to shaping them. Second, in the current context of uncertainty, war, and multiple transitions – threatening the very foundations of the organisation, originally conceived as a “peace project” – it becomes hard to discern what distinguishes the EU from other forms of organisation and what makes its added value in face of the growing contestation coming from Eurosceptic and conservative actors.

The accelerated rotation of narratives and their gradual loss of charismatic appeal illustrate, according to François Foret, their increasing politicization – as evidenced by the unsuccessful attempts to launch the “New Narrative for Europe” (Kaiser, 2017) or to establish the tale of a “European way of life” (Chapter 5. *The “European Way of life narrative”: legitimization through shared everyday experiences?*). Ultimately, the Second World War and the collapse of the communist regimes marked the decline of “grand narratives” (Chapoutot, 2021) and “thick ideologies” (Freeden, 1996), paving the way for a post-truth era characterized

by fragmented, ephemeral, and often contradictory discourses – symptomatic of a broader disenchantment with politics.

How, under these conditions, can one make sense of the EU's legitimizing narratives and identify the most enduring among them? On which values, principles, and resources do these narratives rely to justify the Union's past and present *raison d'être*? What do they reveal about the EU as a polity, and how do they relate to the "longing for the sacred" among citizens?

A dense yet stimulating reflection on the "battle of narratives" surrounding European institutions and actors in their efforts to give meaning to the EU, Foret's work engages with three main strands of literature: the "narrative turn" in European studies (Trenz, 2016; Manners & Murray, 2016; McMahon & Kaiser, 2022); scholarship on nationalism and community-building (Anderson, 1983; Smith, 2003); and research on political legitimization, religion, and the sacralization of politics (Gentile, 2005; Agamben, 2011; Delanty, 2019). Reversing the sociological perspective on the production, circulation, and reception of ideas – which typically focuses on actors and how their resources and relationships shape discourse (Matonti, 2012) – Foret approaches narratives from a different angle. Seen as endowed with agency and relative autonomy, EU narratives circulate across a variety of domains, from migration and Human Rights (HR) to financial regulations and memory politics. In this sense, they operate as coercive frameworks constraining and orientating actors' practices, strategies, and initiatives in line with specific meanings and ends. Navigating diverse geographical and historical contexts, the narratives are examined through a longitudinal and cross-sectional analysis that accounts for both their long genealogies and their immediate temporal dynamics.

The book situates narratives "in between the broad collective imaginary which pre-existed its formulation and discourses by specific actors in a given time" (p. 3), thereby emphasizing not only their negotiated but also their contested nature. It draws on an extensive body of empirical material – including documents issued by European institutions, governments, and judicial courts; political discourses, statements,

and communications; press releases and media content; interviews with key actors; and an *ad hoc* survey (N=8000) conducted in eight Member States – to identify the most salient EU narratives and examine how their various versions are articulated.

Three narratives emerge – the “Europe of rights,” the “Europe of values,” and the “European way of life” – and make the object of several case studies situated by the author within both routine legitimization and crisis mobilization contexts. With few exceptions, primarily linked to emergency situations (e.g., the COVID-19 pandemic, the Eurozone crisis), their contribution to the EU’s legitimization remains limited, for a number of reasons the study seeks to document.

Given the decline of “traditional” sources of legitimacy – such as the nation and religion – and the lack of EU competence in certain policy areas – such as morality politics or higher education – on which these narratives often touch, the EU typically relies on Member States and national governments to disseminate and leverage them among European citizens. However, these narratives – which often overlap, compete and hybridize – are frequently subject to selective appropriation and instrumentalization according to national, political, or personal interests, as well as local traditions and histories. In this regard, the competition between the memories of the Holocaust and the Gulag within the European arena (Neumayer, 2015) highlights the challenges of building a consensual and unifying EU narrative.

As a result, narratives become “diffracted,” detached from their original source and ultimately prone to failure. Under the strain of increasingly fragmented European institutions – which, particularly since 2010, have staged a lively dissensus (Coman, 2022) and national variation in interpreting and promoting shared values – EU narratives reveal their limits in fostering popular support and legitimacy.

Gaining prominence in 2010, after the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU (2000) became legally binding through the Treaty of Lisbon (2009), the “Europe of Rights” narrative (Chapter 3) is grounded in the promotion of HR as master frames for community-building. However, the inconsistent action to

address HR violations, along with persistent double standards in their advocacy both inside and outside the Union, have contributed, according to Foret, to the perception that the EU adopts an ambivalent stance toward HR despite their strong symbolism as elements of the “re-sacralization” of politics. In this respect, the case study proposed by the author on the implementation of freedom of religion and belief (FoRB), particularly during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, shows significant differences between orthodox and laicist interpretations in Central and Western European countries. While HR can indeed contribute to community-building – whether at the national, European, or broader societal level –, the disappointments associated with the “transnational rights” linked to European citizenship, many actors had hoped to see at least initiated, as well as the tensions between their legal institutionalization in the treaties and their uneven observance across national contexts, ultimately limit their capacity to enhance the EU’s legitimacy.

Arguably more suited to the task, the “Europe of values” narrative (Chapter 4) has, according to Foret, become a “mantra of communication” since the early 2000s (p. 88). Serving as a palliative to the “Europe of rights” – since, unlike HR, values are more polysemic, legally non-binding, and therefore easily appropriated by various actors – this narrative draws on a presumed common civilizational and European cultural background. However, the study of its appropriation in (sub)narratives such as “Market Europe” and “Christian Europe” reveals a weak diffusion beyond EU circles of experts, politicians, journalists or intellectuals. Mobilized in crucial moments – from the Eurozone crisis and terrorist attacks in France, Belgium, and Denmark in the mid-2010s, to the debates around abortion, surrogacy, and prostitution – this narrative appears resilient when connected to political decisions concerning market regulation, such as those made during the 2009 economic crisis, but highly controversial and politicized when invoked in cultural or moral domains. Often elite-driven, values – like rights – ultimately demonstrate their limitations as consensual vectors of EU legitimacy and confirm the general conclusion that EU narratives

are functioning better in situations of crisis, as the reception of the exceptional measures taken during COVID 19 or the financial crisis have proved.

A compact volume that synthesizes over a decade of research in EU studies, European integration, and the political legitimization of the Union through narratives and religion, François Foret's book nonetheless leaves several questions open. While it effectively highlights the symbolic and cultural dimensions of EU legitimization, it engages less with how these narratives intersect with the tangible social and economic effects of European integration on citizens and political actors from different socioeconomic and educational backgrounds. To what extent, for instance, do phenomena such as a "two-speed Europe" or the unequal impact of EU policies across Member States shape and reflect the reception of its symbolic dimension, as explored through the study of EU narratives?

A second, more complex question concerns the production of domination – not only through explicit attachment to and measurable support for EU narratives, but also through latent, routinized social practices, in relation to which legitimacy may appear as a residual product.

## ORCID iD

Anemona CONSTANTIN  <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-1600-0563>

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### Author biography

**Anemona CONSTANTIN** is a postdoctoral research fellow in political science at the Institute of European Studies, Center for the study of politics (IEE-CEVIPOL), Free University of Brussels, and associate researcher at the French Center in Humanities and Social sciences, Prague. Her research focus on the debates around the fascist and the communist pasts in Central Eastern Europe, the sociology of political and intellectual elites and the social history of conservative organizations in transnational perspective.