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POPULIST DISCOURSE AND THE FUTURE OF EUROPE

Christine Graeff

A collective sigh of relief ripples through Europe as the election season on the Continent draws to a close without the much-hyped, ostensibly imminent insurgence of the populists who would usher in the end of the European Union. So disaster has been averted—for now.

Perhaps we have at last got a handle on how to effectively counter the populist trend. *Financial Times* columnist Simon Kuper recently suggested some essential ingredients: sound as patriotic as the populists; listen to the voters of populists; show respect for them; and do not bother to argue with facts or policies. Instead, tell an inclusive and uplifting story.

Not everyone might agree. The debate on the sources and manifestations of populism, and what to do about it, is in full swing—not just in Europe and America, but worldwide. In any case, however, the populist assault has

already claimed one casualty: the civility of our public discourse, also and especially about Europe.

Over a century ago, German statesman Otto von Bismarck laid down as a rule that one should always “be polite; [...] even in a declaration of war one observes the rules of politeness.” Fast forward to 2016: UK High Court judges were being labeled by journalists, such as James Slack of the *Daily Mail*, as “enemies of the people” because of their ruling on Brexit procedure.

The rhetoric *vis-à-vis* public institutions generally, and those of the EU in particular, seems to have plummeted to new lows. But is that really something new? And why should we care?

Discourse matters, because “moral and political aberrations almost always start with linguistic neglect,” as contemporary German philosopher

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Photo: Gulliver Image/Getty Images

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Peter Sloterdijk writes. The language used, the tone chosen, and the narratives employed all make an important difference, because they can have real consequences.

History tells us that when language changes the discourse, it may be a harbinger of darker things to come: for instance, years before the onset of the French Revolution, Anglo-Irish philosopher Edmund Burke saw the signs of the coming upheaval because he understood the powerful influence of abstract terms: words such as ‘liberty’ or ‘equality’ had the power to move people without enlightening them. He

also perceived the slippery slope of a changing political discourse, which degenerated from respectful disagreement with opponents to labeling, personal contempt, and, ultimately, to public denigration and hatred of them as enemies of society.

Are we on the brink of seeing history repeat itself? There is no point in lamenting the rough-and-tumble of public debate in open societies. After all, as George Orwell noted, “political language is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind.” That is maybe

too harsh. To succeed in public debate, politicians, journalist, and policymakers need to tell a story. And the ingredients of a good story are still the same as they have been for millennia: personalizing and polarizing, using the language of struggle, focusing on heroes, and pitting them against the dark forces personified by the opponent of the day. From Sophocles to Star Wars, this has been the recipe of success.

What is clear is that open democratic societies need to be resilient: they need to be able to cope even if the discourse slips towards the crude and uncouth. “This giant fool,” as poet Heinrich Heine describes “das Volk” (the people) in *Germany: A Winter’s Tale* does not owe gratitude to those in power. Some have even argued that it has a right to offend the powers that be.

But are there limits? If so, where are they? And why does it matter if they are breached?

Especially in the recent past, as multiple crises have beset the European project, the story about Europe seems to have got out of hand. Take

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the recent French presidential election campaign, where candidates publicly labeled the EU as an “antidemocratic monster” (Marine Le Pen); “inefficient, useless, [and] an obstacle to our development and our freedom” (François Fillon); as a “poison” (Nicolas Dupont-Aignan); and made promises to “disobey the European Treaties” because they “are destroying Europe” (Jean-Luc Mé-

lenchon). Evidently, new lows are being tested and certain boundaries transgressed.

Contempt for public authority, a populist yearning to ignore inconvenient facts, and a growing tendency to rush to judgment are on full display. What is striking here is that these accusations are not excesses from commentary on social media, where anonymity, attention, and reaction craving leads

some to lose all inhibitions. This is the language now used by people in positions of authority and responsibility. This has a huge impact: what leading public figures say gives others licence to say the same. Actress Meryl Streep made that point very prominently at the 2017 Golden Globe awards:

this instinct to humiliate, when it’s modeled by someone in the public platform, by someone powerful, it filters down into everybody’s life, because it gives permission for other people to do the same thing. Disrespect invites disrespect. Violence incites violence. When the powerful use their position to bully others, we all lose.

The motivations of those who walk the fine linguistic line between the “just-about-bearable” and the “taboo-breaking-intolerable” are clear and nothing new: they want to score easy points to please the gallery; seek short term tactical advantage; and provoke a media reaction. Some media outlets have benefited from this. CBS Chairman Les Moonves admitted as much when he said that Trump’s candidacy “may not be good for America, but it’s damn good for CBS” at a conference in San Francisco last year. With this focus on real or perceived gains, what is neglected—out of ignorance or with clear intention—are the long-term implications, the real costs.

THE REAL COSTS OF COARSENING DISCOURSE ON EUROPE

There are three main costs to consider. First, discourse that uses the language of short-sighted nationalist egoists chisels away at the very

foundations of the EU’s supranational governance. Conjecture, subtle insinuations of false causality, and the deliberate mixing of facts and half-truth, create a toxic climate. Discrediting the messenger, source of objective fact or unwanted argument is a scorched-earth tactic that leaves a lasting damage on institutions.

This is a serious concern for modern democracies generally, but especially so for independent public institutions. If their public service orientation, expertise, and impartiality are relentlessly called into question, this will not only undermine their reputation;

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it will ultimately impair their legitimacy and that of the European project as a whole.

The second cost of coarsening discourse in Europe is

the weakening of the EU, which in turn undermines the very effectiveness of common institutions and actions, thus setting in motion a vicious cycle. Eurobarometer public opinion surveys show that many Europeans want “more Europe” to solve concrete problems in their everyday lives: uncontrolled migration, security, terrorism, unemployment, tax injustice, and so on. But when the legitimacy of common institutions is publically undermined, it becomes politically

much more difficult, if not impossible, to take these necessary steps. One recent example is the endless toxic discussion on trade negotiations or refugee quotas, which seem to create little more than deadlock and fudged or unworkable solutions. This further damages the legitimacy of a common approach to problem-solving.

Ultimately, words create facts on the ground and lead to deeds: much has been written on how hate speech may incite physical violence at the level of individuals. The barbaric murder of Jo

Cox, British politician and passionate defender of the European project, is a particularly tragic case in point—though sadly only one of many. It is not just politicians who are targets of physical violence and verbal abuse; it is also journalists, bankers, and bureaucrats. Even a former Executive Board member of the European Central Bank (ECB) was injured by a letter bomb.

While these individual acts of violence—incited, at least in part, by a change in discourse—are thankfully still comparably rare, at least in EU countries, what can be observed more broadly is how changing narratives, if pursued long enough, can have dramatic collective outcomes.

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The Brexit referendum provides the most prominent real-life example of how sustained eurosceptic discourse was able to shift the acceptable range of political thought.

An idea, like exiting the EU, emerges from outside the political mainstream; once it has been stated, framed, and

argued for, it stops being seen as completely outlandish; and, suddenly, it becomes thinkable. It then gets reported upon by journalists, opinion-makers, or influential social media types, and—if left unchallenged—receives an air of respectability and enters the sphere of possible policy.

The British experience is a textbook example of how a decades-long process can turn an open and liberal European country into fertile ground not just for the Brexit proposition, but also, more generally, for an inward-looking nativism and a desired return to the ostensibly more orderly, protective, and familiar conditions of pre-EU Great Britain.

Some have argued that we are also seeing similar processes underway elsewhere, for instance in the German discourse on the euro and the ECB. *Financial Times* columnist Wolfgang Münchau has noted that:

the hostility towards the ECB is unrelenting. German readers are treated to a constant accusation that the ECB is breaking the law, that it expropriates savers [and] favors Italian banks [...] using the same verbal violence with which British eurosceptics treated the EU. [...] If it goes on for another five or ten years, watch out.

Similarly, when some Eastern European leaders, such as Hungary’s Victor Orbán, couch the controversy over immigration and refugee quotas in terms of “blackmail from Brussels,” the potential negative backlash for the effectiveness and legitimacy of EU institutions is immense.

TOWARDS A BRUTALIZATION OF PUBLIC DISCOURSE GLOBALLY

Zooming out, this negative discourse around the EU could simply be a manifestation of a broader and worrying trend of coarsening and brutalization of language in the public sphere, fueled by a number of factors.

First, there is a wider push-back against a perceived excessive political correctness that refuses to call a spade a spade.

Anecdotal evidence abounds regarding how university campuses in the West are banning the use of vast swathes of everyday language because they contain “micro-aggressions” that might cause negative emotions in supposedly vulnerable groups of

people; requesting “trigger warnings” in syllabus readings to protect students from potentially traumatic stress experiences; or disinviting allegedly “controversial” speakers from on-campus events. Bizarrely, IMF Managing Director Christine Lagarde, an active champion of women’s professional advancement, found herself in that category in 2014, because of her association with an institution accused of “strengthening imperialist and patriarchal systems that oppress and abuse women worldwide.” In response to this trend, populists have been styling themselves as the ones who “say out loud what many people think”—as victims of an Orwellian “Newspeak” decreed from the liberal moral high ground that narrows the range of acceptable thought.

A second factor that explains the trend is the rise of “post-truth politics,” where the objective or neutral value of facts, statistics, or expertise comes to be fundamentally questioned. The expert-bashing, which became particularly fashionable during the Brexit campaign—“people have had enough of experts”—seems to be a structural feature of the Trump era of “alternative facts.” It has a devastating impact: the end of the very essence of evidence-based policymaking.

One terrible casualty of this is trust: the 2017 Edelman Trust Barometer

revealed that confidence in official and expert information is on the decline; people have more trust in a person “like you and me,” regardless of any expert knowledge; and those surveyed rely on gut feeling and prefer “truthiness” over facts.

This is reflected in how people obtain their information. According to the 2016 UKPulse survey, the most trusted sources of information are friends, followed by family and personal contacts. Incidentally, the loss of trust is true for media as well. According to the Edelman Trust Barometer, in 82 percent of the countries surveyed, a majority of people mistrust the media—in 17 countries, trust in the media is at an all-time low. And public institutions do not fare better: in two thirds of the countries surveyed, a majority of people mistrust public institutions.

This is obviously problematic. But it is especially problematic for expert institutions, like many of the EU institutions, whose reputation, effectiveness, and, ultimately, legitimacy depends on objective analysis and fact-based policy decisions. Modern politics in advanced democracies is about the managerial capacity to

invent, orchestrate, and implement solutions to complex, multi-layered, long-term problems that stretch beyond electoral cycles.

Issues like global warming, immigration, terrorism, and financial crises do not stop at national borders, and this is precisely why the EU is here to help solve the problem jointly by committing and delegating responsibility.

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Independent common institutions, such as the European Commission, the European Central Bank, and the European Court of Justice, are well-suited to achieve precisely this objective, as they are staffed by experts and do not have to struggle with the side-effects of deliberative

processes. But if factual arguments do not get through to the average citizen, the field is open to a discourse based on mischaracterizations, exaggerations, or plain falsehoods.

In part, the experts have themselves to blame. They do not get through because their discourse fails to connect emotionally with the people, especially those most susceptible to populist rhetoric. Emotive slogans like “Take Back Control” or “Make America Great Again” strike a chord

with voters—they are inclusive and infinitely more tangible than facts like GDP figures or budget numbers that have lost all human dimension: what does one billion euros, let alone one trillion, really mean to the average citizen?

A recent analysis of World Bank annual reports over a 65-year period finds increasing jargon, abstraction, and a “language that is intentionally ambiguous, meant to obscure or confuse.” No wonder that many people feel more attracted to the feel-good language of emotion—which also conveniently blanks out the full implications of the chosen policy path, as the British people are discovering right now in the context of Brexit.

“The modern mass media operate not so much as a channel of information, but as a carrier of infection.”
– Peter Sloterdijk

THE NEWS REVOLUTION

A third factor contributing to the trend of coarsening and brutalization of language in public discourse in the EU is the way news is delivered to the public. There is a revolution underway in the way news is produced and consumed. As a result, traditional media organizations are struggling to compete in a cut-throat competitive environment over a declining market, while online media outlets have yet to find a sustainable business model.

In order to make themselves stick out from the crowd—and thus ensure their own survival and market share—many resort to increasingly sensationalist reporting and ever more radical editorial lines. As philosopher Sloterdijk has said:

the modern mass media operate not so much as a channel of information, but as a carrier of infection. What is touted as information is in fact often nothing more than the arousal, poisoning, and destruction of public judgment.

This goes hand in hand with big shifts on the news consumer’s side, with the onset of the smartphone age: our average attention span has fallen from

twelve seconds in 2000 to eight seconds today—less than that of a goldfish! The only way to get through in such a timeframe is to radically simplify—and more often than not to over-simplify. This evidently does not capture the complexity of the modern world.

Journalists used to learn as a basic principle of their profession “to be first, to be right, but to first be right.” This seems gone in a 24/7/365 news cycle where speed trumps accuracy. And ours is an era in which some official communication, which is supposed to be effective and meaningful, seems to rely on 140-character messages.

Two other factors also contribute to this trend—the fourth and fifth on our list. There is a psychologically understandable and well-researched confirmation bias in the way people consume news. Modern social media make it easier than ever to remain in an echo chamber of like-minded people, newsgroups, and websites, where readers preselect news and arguments to confirm and reinforce what they know and believe already, and to keep out unwanted facts.

The final, and perhaps scariest factor, is what one can call the “rise of the machines”—the bots and trolls that populate, or inundate, discussions on social media. A research firm recently reported that for as little as \$2.60, one can buy 100 comments for a YouTube video; for \$800, one gets a press release distributed to news outlets. Distributing fake news, campaigns to manipulate public opinion, silencing and removing content, manipulating online voting and petitioning services—all of this is on the menu of services offered, if the customer so wishes. This makes it increasingly difficult to decipher who is communicating with whom. More fundamentally, it calls into doubt

whether the supposedly “public” discourse on these platforms is real at all.

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GET USED TO IT

Ultimately, we may just have to get used to a more strident public discourse. It may become the ‘new normal’—a sign that the EU has grown up. After all, European policies are entering into the sphere of traditional national sovereignty with topics such as immigration, borders, and public

spending. There is probably no going back; the EU stands alongside its Member States in dealing with the bread-and-butter issues of real politics with distributional impact: who gets what and when, who wins, and who loses. As decisions made in Brussels enter the realm of domestic politics, there will be greater contestation and controversy. And naturally, here, the gloves of international diplomatic discourse come off. It is time to get used to it.

It is therefore time for responsible Europeans to take back the reigns of effective communication. In the age of the rise of alternative facts and expert bashing, we need to create our very own narrative that counters the widespread corrosive discourse on the European Union.

Thankfully, the core ingredients are there: the positive message about Europe still resonates—as public manifestations like the “Pulse of Europe” show. Whatever one thinks of its institutions, processes, and representatives, the Union has delivered peace and prosperity. It is a crucial insurance policy against the destructive effects of inward-looking nationalism. It is a supranational influence that makes sure European nations keep talking to each other, respectfully, to bridge inevitable differences and settle numerous disagreements.

Such arguments continue to be able to convince, as shown in the recent revival of pro-EU sentiment mirrored in recent election results. The question is now how to sustain and transform this momentum to make the European Union “cool” again.

MAKING THE EU “COOL” AGAIN

So how can we do this concretely? Firstly, public institutions need to speak a language that people can understand. Applying some of Orwell’s rules would surely be helpful. For instance, “never use a long word where a short one will do” and “never use the passive where you can use the active” or “never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word,

or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.”

In the age of the rise of alternative facts and expert bashing, we need to create our very own narrative that counters the widespread corrosive discourse on the European Union.

The World Bank’s chief economist recently tried to follow this path: he publicly vented his criticism of the growing tendency to obscure economics through increasing ‘mathiness,’ which makes effective scrutiny and debate more difficult. If economics is supposed to be understood by the general public, then it needs to be accessible. This goes for every area of public policy.

Secondly, EU institutions need to stackle populist myths head-on and make a case for their own, fact-based discourse against post-truth politics. EU officials need to engage with critics, present convincing arguments, and actively counter falsehoods, “truthiness,” and outright lies.

Such forms of outreach, which fall beyond the usual comfort zone of specialists and experts, need to connect emotionally with people, picking up those who are vulnerable to “easy answers”—and this needs to be done in novel ways. Facts are increasingly generated and spread outside the realms of traditional journalism and information channels via social media, which is why

EU institutions need to be more present in spaces in which people receive their primary information, exchange views, and form opinions.

Lastly, authenticity still sticks. Presenting precise, accurate, and useful information is crucial to effectively navigating a world where our attention span has dropped by a third in less than two decades, while we are experiencing a simultaneous overload of available information. Indeed, this wider trend of disintermediating media could also be an opportunity for public institutions to extend a direct line to the people, without detours via the media, which may have its own agendas and objectives—like market share and the bottom line. But none of this is straightforward and involves

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new risks—especially for independent EU institutions.

But if future generations—who either do not have a voice right now or do not bother to vote—are to continue enjoying the benefits of the EU, those who define the discourse about Europe need to take more care of how they frame topics and the language they use. Politicians, journalists, bloggers, and activists may need reminding of what the fictional Peter Parker was told in the *Spiderman* comics: “with great power comes great responsibility.”

Public institutions have to uphold, with more effort than ever, the civility of discourse, as they engage with critics and the people generally. Their motto must be, as Michelle Obama put it so brilliantly, “when they go low, we go high.” ●

HORIZONS

Editorial Internship Program

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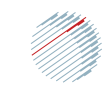
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Prospective applicants should contact *Horizons* Deputy Editor Stefan Antic at stefan.antic@cirsd.org for general queries, additional information, and to submit their applications.

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