# What Stories Does Europe Tell?

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'What Stories Does Europe Tell?' This is the main question guiding the Europe's Stories project led by Professor Timothy Garton Ash at St Antony's College at the University of Oxford. I vividly remember the initial team meeting in January 2019 when a group of 20 young researchers from across Europe sat around a table to debate this question and suggest a line-up for a three-day conference to be held at St Antony's College in May 2019. The discussion generated a multitude of relevant sub-questions: Can Europeans identify one specific formative moment? Do stories change depending on when the narrator was born? And finally, can we create any polyphony from the cacophony of individual stories?

While this short essay cannot offer final answers to all these questions, it will present some indicative findings based on secondary research, interviews and polling data gathered in the context of this project. The following sections will discuss trends in European public opinion the Europe's Stories project is based upon, the concept of the 'formative European moment' and how it helped to identify some polyphony in the plethora of stories gathered across Europe. Lastly, this essay will explore what Europeans want the EU to have achieved by 2030 as well as next steps for the project.

**What do Europeans think? What do they care?**

To launch this project, around 60 speakers from Oxford, Europe and beyond were invited to discuss what stories Europe does tell through public opinion polling, history, theatre, literature, schools, and foundations. Moreover, a whole day of the conference was dedicated to the question of how Europe is perceived from the outside or 'outsiders' within Europe. Two important insights emerged from the initial panel on European public opinion: a majority of Europeans care about the European project and are either positively inclined towards or hesitant supporters of the project in principle.

What do Europeans think? What do they care? Isabell Hoffmann, co-founder of the eupinions project of the Bertelsmann Foundation, summarised the answer emerging from their work as follows: Europeans do care and they know more than they used to. While European citizens have high expectations towards the EU, they are not very happy with the reality of it. But even though European citizens' attitudes are more negative concerning the current state of affairs of the EU, they are generally positive when being asking questions about the principles behind and potential of the EU.[1]

These findings are in line with the work of the Tribes of Europe project from Chatham House. On the basis of a survey with around 10,000 Europeans, six ideal types are identified. Tellingly, the dominant tribe consists of 'Hesitant Europeans' representing 36% of the respondents, followed by 'Contented Europeans' (23%), 'EU Rejecters' (14%), 'Frustrated Europeans' (9%), 'Austerity Rebels' (9%) and 'Federalists' (8%).[2] A large proportion of the European public thus appears to have ambivalent feelings towards the European project – a finding that invites further discussion and exchange. Both the input from eupinions and Chatham House revealed that there are many questions to explore through a bottom-up approach to shed more light upon citizens' attitudes towards Europe.

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[1] See e.g. De Vries C & Hoffmann I, 'Supportive but wary. How Europeans feel about the EU 60 years after the Treaty of Rome', eupinions study, 23 March 2017, web: https://eupinions.eu/de/text/supportive-but-wary.

[2] Raines T, Goodwin M & Cutts D, Europe's Political Tribes. Exploring the Diversity of Views Across the EU', Chatham House Briefing, 2017, web: https://reader.chathamhouse.org/europes-political-tribes, p. 4.

**Tell me your Europe and I tell you who you are**

When introducing the initial conference in May 2019, Professor Garton Ash acknowledged that there are potentially as many European stories as there are Europeans. Therefore, the key conceptual challenge was to phrase interview questions that would capture individual yet potentially overlapping narratives. Katie Ebner-Landy from [Dash Arts](), a London-based theatre company, gave us an important message to consider during the conference: in order not to lose the plot, a story requires unity of time, place and action. According to her, this might be the reason why many theatre productions struggle to tell 'Europe's story'. It is simply too difficult to decide what this story for Europe is, when it starts, where it takes place and what happens.

Since it is unlikely that Europeans will ever agree on a single story, our team decided to pin down at least one of the three variables – time – by formulating the lead question: 'What was your formative European moment when you were young (around 20)'?[3] This question was first presented to the participants in said Oxford conference in May 2019 during a dinner discussion, starting with the 90-year-old Professor Peter Pulzer, moving down the generational ladder and ending with views from current students in their mid-twenties. This discussion included stories about the ramifications of Nazism and World War II across the European continent, about walls being built and torn down and stories about youth exchanges between newly created European twin cities. While said exercise still covered a time span of nearly 70 years of European history, it nonetheless uncovered a recurring topic across generations: the importance of personal exchange.

The concept of the formative moment evolved into the central pillar of a Europe-wide qualitative interview series starting in May 2019, which is still ongoing. In addition, interviewees were asked about best and worst moments in recent EU history, as well as their hopes and aspirations for Europe in 2030. The resulting videos and mapping exercise can be viewed here on [www.europeanmoments.com](). Three of the main takeaways based on 121 interviews gathered between May 2019 and May 2020 can be summarised as follows: studying abroad and personal travel experiences are often more formative than memorable historic events such as the fall of the Berlin Wall 1989; Brexit is most often chosen as worst moment not only in the UK but across European countries; and the most popular best moment is European Eastern Enlargement in 2004, especially according to Eastern Europeans.

The dominance of personal travel and studying experiences as formative moments suggests that many of the interviewees belong to what Neil Fligstein calls the 'European society': a relatively small privileged elite of roughly 13% of the European population that speaks foreign languages, travels regularly and consequently feels attached to the European project.[4] While aiming for diversity regarding gender, age and occupation of interviewees, a selection bias is likely to have occurred since interviews were conducted in English. With increasing interview numbers and by providing an online [self-submission feature]() we hope to mitigate this effect to a certain extend going forward.

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[3] The idea for the format 'Europe when I was 20' stems from a supposed quote by Napoleon Bonaparte who is said to have said, 'To understand the man you must know what was happening in the world when he was twenty.' We were unable to identify the exact source of this quote which thus needs to be taken with a grain of salt.

[4] Fligstein N, *Euroclash: The EU, European Identity and the Future of Europe*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 4.

**Where do we go from here? Europe in 2030**

When asking about policy preferences for the EU today and in the future, some fascinating generational differences appeared throughout various project activities. We used a multitude of formats to ask Europeans about their wishes for Europe in 2030: the aforementioned qualitative interview series, a two-day conference with 'post-89ers' (those born between 1980 and 2000) from the Dahrendorf Programme and the Mercator Foundation in Berlin in November 2019, workshops with high school students in Brandenburg, Germany in February 2020 and a Europe-wide representative poll carried out by the eupinions project of the Bertelsmann Foundation in March 2020.

Strikingly, climate topics took centre stage in every single activity.[5] 'Addressing climate change' was the most popular answer to the interview question 'What do you want the EU to have achieved by 2030'. High school students in rural Brandenburg provided anecdotal evidence about the generational conflict emerging between themselves and their parents around the topics of climate change and immigration (the young advocating for progressive climate policies and inclusive immigration policies). In the Europe-wide poll from March 2020, younger Europeans revealed a higher acceptance for radical measures to tackle climate change. While most respondents across age groups wanted the EU to become carbon neutral by 2030, 53% of young Europeans (aged 16 – 29) agreed that authoritarian states were more effective than democracies to tackle the climate crisis. In contrast, only 42% of those aged 30 – 49 and 35% of those older than 50 agreed with that statement.[6]

While bearing in mind that generational divides are highly context dependent and that specific events tend to shape EU support[7], it will be fascinating to explore why a majority of young Europeans believe authoritarian states might be more effective in tackling climate change, whether they think bans imposed by democratic regimes could reach similar effects and what they are willing to sacrifice individually in order to reach carbon neutrality. These and other questions are being addressed in follow-up polls with eupinions over the coming year.

The Dahrendorf Programme will continue to gather European stories and search for polyphony. While it will not be possible to agree on a story uniting place, time, and action, the interview series revealed that personal experiences of cross-border exchange were formative European moments for many across generations. Travel and exchange require freedom of movement, an essential European privilege lost during the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic in Europe in March 2020. Unsurprisingly, the Covid-19 pandemic immediately entered the grid of moments once the self-interviewing feature was set up in April 2020. Despite being clearly categorised as 'worst moment', the interpretation of its significance for the European project remains ambivalent. Some respondents concede that even though this experience will surely be remembered as one of the worst catastrophes in recent European history, some cautious optimism might be justified. The coronavirus pandemic could still be reinterpreted as a turning point heralding enhanced cooperation and solidarity among EU members. It will thus be crucial to listen closely to the stories being told in the coming months.

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[5] For an article on this topic from members of the research team see Judt D, Wyss R & Zimmermann A, 'To save the EU, its leaders must first focus on saving the planet', The Guardian, 27.07.2020, web: https://www.theguardian.com/world/commentisfree/2020/jul/27/europe-coronavirus-planet-climate.

[6] Garton Ash T & Zimmermann A, 'In Crisis, Europeans Support Radical Positions', eupinions brief, 6 May 2020, web: https://eupinions.eu/de/text/in-crisis-europeans-support-radical-positions.

[7] Lauterbach F & De Vries C, 'Europe belongs to the young? Generational differences in public opinion towards the European Union during the Eurozone crisis', *Journal of Euorpean Public Policy*, 2020, pp. 168 – 187.