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Two and a Half Tales of Europe: How the European Commission Narrates Peoplehood in Migration and Citizenship Policy

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Abstract

Since 2019, the European Commission has had a vice president for ‘promoting our European way of life’, but whether a European ‘we’ exists at all is disputed. This article investigates whether and how the Commission has constructed this ‘we’ through narratives of peoplehood. Analysing official communications in migration and citizenship policy between 2007 and 2020, it traces three narrative elements: characters, plot and main theme. The article argues, first, that the Commission’s narrative of ‘realizing European citizenship’ creates a sense of peoplehood more than its narrative of ‘achieving a comprehensive migration policy’ and, second, that it has largely repeated its citizenship narrative while adapting its migration narrative. The findings suggest that the Commission is a rather subtle narrator of peoplehood and call into question whether it has a clear idea of the ‘we’ whose ‘way of life’ it seeks to promote.

Keywords: citizenship; European Commission; migration; narrative analysis; peoplehood

Introduction

In September 2019, Ursula von der Leyen, the incoming president of the European Commission (hereafter: Commission), selected Margaritis Schinas as her vice president for ‘protecting our European way of life’. Afterwards, a heated discussion erupted about whether there is a ‘European way of life’ and whether it needs protection (Herzenshorn and de la Baume 2019). Eventually, the portfolio was renamed ‘promoting our European way of life’, but the title raises similar questions. This article addresses the most fundamental one – how has the Commission imagined the ‘we’ that supposedly shares a common way of life?

The article uses the lens of European peoplehood, a notion that has fascinated scholars across the disciplines at least since the European Union (EU) became closely integrated. The mere existence of this *sui generis* polity begs the question whether its limited degree of statehood has been or should be accompanied by a sense of peoplehood. From a normative perspective, theorists and philosophers have debated whether European peoplehood is needed, realistic, or desirable to ensure the EU’s democratic legitimacy (Martí 2018).¹ From an empirical perspective, social scientists have studied whether different expressions of European peoplehood are evident in the attitudes and experiences of citizens (Bruter 2005; Hobolt and De Vries 2016; Sanders et al. 2012; Siklodi 2020), in the media (Koopmans and Statham 2010; Trenz 2010) and in the discourse of national

¹ Although many people identify as European without feeling ‘EU’ropean, ‘Europe’ has *de facto* come to mean ‘the EU’ in large parts of the public and the academic debate (Risse 2010, pp. 50, 102).

and European elites (Katzenstein and Checkel 2009; Pukallus 2016; Risse 2010). As a part of this endeavour, scholars have begun to utilize a narrative lens, in what Luis Bouza describes as the ‘narrative turn in European studies’ (Bouza García 2017; see also Della Sala 2010; Manners and Murray, 2016; McMahon and Kaiser 2021).

The article is a part of this turn, as it uses narratives both as its theoretical framework – by assuming that the Commission builds peoplehood through evolving narratives in migration and citizenship policies – and in its methodology. The article covers the Commission’s migration and citizenship communications since the Lisbon Treaty. It focusses on the narratives in which the Commission has embedded its policies rather than on the policies themselves and on the image of ‘us’ rather than visions of ‘them’.

The article shows that the Commission advanced different narratives across policy areas. In its citizenship communications, it promised to ‘realize European citizenship’, whereas in its migration communications, it called for a ‘comprehensive migration policy’. The article argues that the citizenship narrative has more potential to construct peoplehood. While the Commission maintained its citizenship narrative in core elements, it adapted character, plot and main theme of its migration narrative in the mid-2010s, when many people sought protection in the EU. However, it did not completely replace this narrative, and the aim of a comprehensive migration policy remained. The analysis leaves the overall impression that the Commission has been telling what figuratively amounts to two and a half tales of Europe – one narrative in the area of citizenship and one and a half in the area of migration.

The article first details the theoretical framework and its implications for studying European peoplehood. It then sketches its narrative analysis, presents and discusses the Commission’s two and a half tales of Europe and points to avenues for future research in the conclusion.

I. Theory: The Commission as a Narrator of Peoplehood?

Psychologists, sociologists and cultural theorists have understood humans as storytellers, *homo narrans*, who make sense of themselves and create their social world through narratives (Bruner 1991; Koschorke 2018; Somers 1994). From this perspective, political communities, as a part of the social world, are ontologically grounded in narratives. Unlike descriptions or arguments, narratives connect events and characters on a timeline into a plot (forming the story), express this story in a certain form (the text) and convey it in a communicative act from a narrator to an audience (narration) (Shenhav 2015, pp. 16–17). Rogers Smith’s concept of peoplehood lends itself well to this approach: He argues that while a people partly relies on coercion, it depends on an ‘imagined scenario of how the future will unfold, made credibly by a certain account of the past and present’ (Smith 2003, pp. 43–45).² The concept is productive for further reasons – for instance, it is not conceptually bound to any polity (as opposed to many conceptions of nationhood). In fact, while state-building in terms of ‘constructing effective institutions of governmental power’ eventually requires a sense of peoplehood, a people does not necessarily have a state (Smith 2003, pp. 51–52). Furthermore, the concept clearly captures a

²Smith uses narrative and story interchangeably (Smith 2003, p. 44). As this article uses ‘story’ as one of three narrative components, Smith’s concept is referred to as ‘narratives of peoplehood’.

collective construction rather than an individual's feeling of belonging (as opposed to identification).

As narratives are omnipresent 'like life itself' (Barthes, cited in Koschorke 2018, p. 1), it is helpful to differentiate between narratives of peoplehood and other narratives in the political sphere, such as policy narratives. Peoplehood and policy narratives operate at different levels: The former operate as deeply held convictions, 'public philosophies' (Schmidt 2011, pp. 111–112) or political myths (Della Sala 2016, pp. 524–525), the latter as less entrenched 'strategic constructions of a policy reality promoted by policy actors' (Jones et al. 2014, p. 9; Schmidt 2011, pp. 108–109; see, for a similar differentiation in International Relations, Roselle et al. 2014, p. 76). While conceptually distinct, they can empirically overlap: Documents justifying a certain policy may at the same time convey a narrative about the people for whom it is implemented. The quest to create a community is what this article sees as the decisive feature of narratives of peoplehood (Smith 2003, pp. 44–45). To this end, the people in some form must arguably feature as a relatable character in such narratives. Smith differentiates between narratives of peoplehood with economic themes of material advantages, political themes of individual or collective political power and ethically constitutive themes of what supposedly inherently defines the respective people – be it culture, values, race, ethnicity or something else. These are often combined, but at different times, different themes may dominate (Smith 2003, pp. 59–71). In either of these themes, narratives of peoplehood can be expected to forecast some kind of progress to give the audience a reason to identify as part of the people (Smith 2003, pp. 44–45).

While everyone can narrate peoplehood, political leaders have to do so. They strategically portray themselves as heroes in order to 'achieve and maintain power' (Smith 2003, pp. 32–37). European leaders, too, tell stories to secure their legitimacy and ontological security (Biegoń 2013; Della Sala 2018). But in contrast to policy narratives, narratives of peoplehood cannot be reduced to strategic instruments as they 'do not merely serve interests, they also help to constitute them' (Smith 2003, p. 45). This article focusses on the Commission for several reasons. First, in contrast to the European Parliament and the Council, which represent the interests of their electorate and the Member States (MS), the Commission has a mandate to 'promote the general interest of the Union' (Article 17, Treaty on European Union), which may include creating a sense of community. Second, as a supranational agenda setter without direct democratic legitimacy, it arguably depends especially on narratives to portray it as the hero. Third, the Commission is engaged in policies – like the former 'Europe for Citizens' programme – that promote a European community. In other words, the Commission's narratives can inform its policies (see also Maricut 2017).

Since political leaders also narrate who the people are not (Smith 2003, p. 56), they tend to offer narratives of peoplehood in policy areas that define who belongs. Paradigmatic examples are migration and citizenship policy: While citizenship remains the ultimate instrument of 'social closure' (Brubaker 1992, pp. 21–34), migration policies are 'gatekeepers', regulating access to territory, labour market and welfare systems (Orgad 2015, p. 84). Therefore, the Commission's migration and citizenship narratives are the focus of the article. Its powers are limited in both of these areas. The Amsterdam Treaty of 1999 increased the EU's competences to harmonize migration and asylum policies, excluding volumes of admission. Ever since, the Commission has proposed legislation on many aspects of migration, but has found more support among

divided MS for measures curbing irregular migration than opening legal pathways, so that the ‘framework remains incomplete’ (Geddes et al. 2020, p. 169). The Commission, in particular the Directorate General for Migration and Home Affairs, put forward a new set of proposals in the ‘New Pact on Asylum and Migration’ in 2020, hoping to give new impetus to the difficult negotiations. European citizenship policy has its roots in the freedom of movement of workers established in the 1950s. It was constitutionalized as a status derived from MS’ nationality in the Maastricht Treaty in 1993. The Court of Justice has increased its ‘personal and material scope’ through case law, claiming that it is ‘destined to become the fundamental status of the nationals of the Member States’ (Menéndez and Olsen 2020, pp. 94–104). MS have to design their citizenship policies with due regard to EU law. Nevertheless, the Commission and its responsible Directorate General for Justice and Consumers may not propose legislation on access to EU citizenship and mainly enforce EU citizens’ rights.

While political leaders may more flexibly adapt policy narratives to new circumstances, people do not easily accept changes to narratives about who they are (Smith 2003, pp. 54–55, 121–125; Risse 2010, p. 31; Dixon 2018, p. 11). Nevertheless, some change always occurs when (re)telling a narrative (Shenhav 2015, pp. 56–67; Hase 2021). When and why political leaders intentionally change what aspects of narratives of peoplehood remains undertheorized. However, there are a couple of points of departure: First, a narrator may be replaced or develop new visions. Second, the narrator may react to a changed audience (Dixon 2018). Third, they might react to crises at ‘critical junctures’ or, even if rarely, undeniable facts (Risse 2010, pp. 32–33; Koschorke 2018, p. 202). Furthermore, political leaders narrate peoplehood under certain constraints. First and foremost, their narrative needs to be acceptable to the audience who should identify as the people (Smith 2003, p. 34). Additionally, a powerful narrator may be freer to change their narrative (Schmidt 2011, pp. 119–121), but then be bound to it once it is institutionalized (Koschorke 2018, p. 267). From this perspective, the Commission deals with different legal competences of boundary-drawing. In any case, some narrative change is to be expected, resulting from new Commissioners, new audiences among MS and their populations or new circumstances.

The article adds to a wealth of interdisciplinary studies on European peoplehood and narratives. The long-standing debate on European identity has departed from the dichotomy of a political and cultural version of Europe (Risse 2010), showing that these ideas differ across time, policy areas and actors (Carta and Wodak 2015; Oshri and Shenhav 2018; Saurugger and Thatcher 2019). Previous studies on migration and citizenship policies often contrasted the Commission’s version of free movement and the attraction of high-skilled migrants with the Council’s version of statist cooperation on security and the Parliament’s version of common values and fundamental rights (Maricut 2017; Lavenex 2019). Other studies focussed on the Commission, arguing that it shifted from a theme of a functional single market with common values in the 1970s to a theme of a cultural community in the 1980s and arriving at an image of Europe as a participatory democracy in the late 1990s and 2000s (Bee 2008; Biegon 2013). Gilbert finds unity in this diversity and cautions against the common portrayal of European integration as desirable and inevitable in both political and scholarly narratives (Gilbert 2008).

While some of these works use the term narrative, studies in recent years rely on it centrally in theory and empirics when studying political discourse (Manners and

Murray 2016; Cloet 2017; Kaiser and McMahon 2017) and citizens' perceptions (Beaudonnet et al. 2022). Within this 'narrative turn in European studies' (Bouza García 2017), the question of whether and how the Commission (re)narrates European peoplehood in its migration and citizenship policies has received less attention. Therefore, this article contributes with its narrative approach to debates about European peoplehood and with its use of the peoplehood concept to narrative scholarship within European studies.

II. Methods: Tracing the Commission's Narratives

The analysis encompassed three steps. First, official communications were derived from the Commission's online registry,³ filtered for the keywords 'migration', 'third country national', 'integration', 'citizen', 'citizenship', document type COM, which denotes the Commission's political strategies and legislative proposals, and the Commission departments responsible for migration and citizenship policy.⁴ The time frame was set between the signing of the Lisbon Treaty in 2007 – the last treaty change – and the end of 2020, after von der Leyen's mandate started with the New Pact on Migration and Asylum and the Citizenship Report 2020. In a first screening, documents not touching core aspects of migration or citizenship policy were omitted for reasons of scope, while additional communications discussed in the secondary literature were included. Together, the corpus enlisted in the appendix consists of 137 documents. While not all-encompassing, it captures many of the Commission's strategic outputs over thirteen years. Official communications are the bread and butter of the Commission. They undergo a complex drafting process involving different departments until the college of Commissioners ultimately adopts them. The communications convey the Commission's proposals to Member States, media and the wider public and thus contain policy narratives. At the same time, they are an opportunity for the Commission to intertwine them with narratives of peoplehood. The article investigates whether and how the Commission makes use of this opportunity.

In a second step, the corpus was analysed with respect to elements of story, text and narration, largely following Shenhav's guidelines on studying social narratives (Shenhav 2015). In order to make an analysis of the large number of documents feasible, it focusses only on those sections that embed the communications in a larger context – typically those entitled 'introduction', 'context of the proposal', 'conclusions' or 'next steps' (Shenhav 2015, p. 86). While this is a limitation, these parts are arguably most relevant to narratives of peoplehood. Especially those segments that Shenhav calls concise narratives, which connect the events furthest in the past and in the future and that contain its 'temporal and thematic identity' (Shenhav 2015, pp. 62–63), can be reasonably expected within the framing sections of the documents rather than in a detailed subsection. The article furthermore employs a historical-structural approach and focusses on the elements that it considers to be central features of narratives of peoplehood in line with the theoretical framework – the (relatable) characters, the plot towards a bright future and the main theme, as summarized in table 1 (Shenhav 2015, p. 65).

³<https://ec.europa.eu/transparency/documents-register/>.

⁴Directorates-General COMM, DEV, EAC, EEAS, EMPL, HOME, JLS, JUST and SG.

Table 1: Core Elements of Narratives of Peoplehood

Element	Definition	Types
Character	People, animals, institutions, concepts, etc. that seem to have intentions and to take actions (Shenhav 2015, pp. 25–27)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Heroes who fix problems • Villains who cause problems • Victims who are saved (Jones et al. 2014, p. 6)
Plot	The way in which events are connected into a whole (Shenhav 2015, p. 32)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Romance • Comedy • Tragedy • Irony (for instance, Forchtner et al. 2020)
Main Theme	The type of story and events that can create a community and raise allegiance (Smith 2003, pp. 59–71)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Economic • Political power • Ethically constitutive (Smith 2003, pp. 59–71)

A narrative's characters may be people, animals, machines, institutions or concepts, as long as they seem to have human-like intentions, thoughts or feelings (Shenhav 2015, pp. 25–27). The analysis asked who the characters in each document were and how often they appeared, but most importantly what their role in the action was and whether there was a relatable character among them. While narratology offers several typologies of characters, the succinct differentiation between heroes (who fix problems), villains (who cause problems) and victims (who suffer from problems) was borrowed from the narrative policy framework (Jones et al. 2014, p. 6). It further asked whether the wording suggested a common perspective between character, narrator and audience through the use of 'we' or 'our' – a move to make social narratives relatable (Shenhav 2015, p. 50). Narratives of European peoplehood could feature relatable characters such as 'we', 'citizens', or 'Europeans'.

A plot connects events and characters on a timeline (Shenhav 2015, p. 32). There are several plot typologies. The one originally developed for Western literature, which differentiates between tragedy, irony, romance, and comedy can be applied to other fields. Tragedy is a story of the hero's failure. Irony fluctuates between regress and progress and has no predefined resolution nor a strong hero. Romances are not necessarily love stories, but they tell how the pure hero achieves their end, usually overcoming a challenge or villain. In comedies, an initial equilibrium is disturbed, and the heroine faces potential failure before eventually achieving a new equilibrium (Forchtner et al. 2020, pp. 208–213). As romantic and comic plots lead towards a bright future, they are arguably more useful in narratives of peoplehood. The plot has implications for the communities narrated by them: Romances can create solidarity, but lack self-reflection (Jacobs and Smith 1997, pp. 67–70). Forchtner and colleagues argue that comedy and romance convey certainty of a better future and a faultless heroine at the cost of collective learning processes (Forchtner et al. 2020, p. 212). Building on this, Özvatan argues that 'tragic and ironic stories facilitate spanning social boundaries, while comic and romantic stories draw rigid and conclusive social boundaries' (Özvatan 2020, pp. 287–288). Between romances and comedies, the difference is one of degree, but significant: Due to their disturbance of the

equilibrium and the hero's moment of self-doubt, comedies are more open to learning processes and inclusivity than romances.

Lastly, to identify the main theme of the narrative as economic, political or ethically constitutive in line with Smith (2003, pp. 59–71), the substance of the events was interpreted. For instance, a narrative that forecasted how citizens would become wealthy as a result of the common market was taken to indicate an economic theme; one that aimed for a more democratic or powerful EU was understood as a political theme and one that spoke about inherently European values was classified as an ethically constitutive theme. These themes were frequently intertwined, so particular attention was paid to concise narratives.

In a third step, the core elements of each communication were compared over time and across policy areas to shed light on whether the Commission put forward narratives of peoplehood, and when and how it changed them. As some degree of fluctuation is expected between documents, only clusters of new elements were interpreted as change.

This qualitative approach to narrative analysis required interpretation when selecting the documents and their relevant sections, when assigning a character, plot and theme type to each document and when identifying changes over time. To make these interpretations as clear as possible, this section lay open the questions asked, while the following substantiates interpretations with quotes from the original documents.

III. Results: The Commission's Narratives in Migration and Citizenship

This section presents the Commission's citizenship and migration narratives – their characters, plots and themes and their potential to create a sense of European peoplehood. Figuratively speaking, the Commission presented two and a half tales of Europe: one narrative of 'realizing European citizenship', which was repeated over time, and a narrative of 'achieving a comprehensive migration policy'. As the latter was neither repeated nor replaced, but changed in some elements at certain moments, it seems like one and a half rather than two separate narratives.

The Narrative of 'Realizing European Citizenship'

The distribution of roles in the Commission's citizenship communications was usually the following: The heroes were the Commission and the EU, which adopted policies, wrote reports and implemented programmes to bolster EU citizenship. Often, these documents themselves appeared as characters, which seemed act on their own ['The Report [...] puts forward concrete proposals' (European Commission 2017, p. 4)]. However, they were place holders for the real actors (in the example above, the Commission that published the report). The role of the victim was typically held by EU citizens, a relatable character, who suffered from the deficiencies of EU citizenship. The story went that once the EU's respective policies would have made EU citizenship a tangible reality, citizens would embrace their EU citizenship. In contrast to heroes and victims, there were no unambiguous villains. Sometimes selected MS played this role when they implemented unpopular policies, such as measures to 'attract investment by granting investors citizenship or residence rights' (European Commission 2019a, p. 1). But the MS' characters could likewise be victims, for instance, when other MS' investor citizenship schemes affected them

negatively (European Commission 2019a). Most often, however, the Commission portrayed MS as supporters to whom it intended ‘to provide guidance [...] with the objective of bringing a real improvement for all EU citizens’ (European Commission 2009, p. 2). It is also worth mentioning the characters that did not take centre stage: Third country nationals seldomly appeared, and if so, they typically appeared as family members of EU citizens.⁵ They were not explicitly villainous ‘others’ against whom a community of European citizens was constructed.

With regard to the second element, the plot, the Commission’s communications most close resemble a romance. For instance, some started with the Maastricht Treaty and ended – after progress had been made due to European policies – with European citizenship becoming an everyday reality. While not without obstacles, there was rarely a moment in the story where the hero might have failed. At times, however, the Commission presented a comedy including such a moment. For instance, in its report on investor citizenship, some villainous MS introduced citizenship-for-sale schemes that undermined European citizenship (disturbance of the equilibrium), and the Commission would ‘take necessary action’ so that the MS would in the future mitigate the concerns (re-establishment of the equilibrium) (European Commission 2019a, p. 24). However, these comic plots did not cluster enough to indicate a fundamental change.⁶

As for the element of the main theme, the Commission put most emphasis on a political one of empowering citizens, as European citizenship would be lived through ‘the full enjoyment of citizens’ rights’ (European Commission 2020a, p. 27), especially political participation, freedom of movement and consular protection. This suggests that the Commission has partly continued the depiction of a democratically engaged Europe of the early 1990s and 2000s (Bee 2008; Biegoń 2013) and supports Pukallus’ finding of the post-Lisbon focus on rights (Pukallus 2016). Interestingly, there seems to be a gap between this political theme and Menéndez and Olsen’s analysis that in fact, ‘the political value of European citizenship has become progressively devalued’ (Menéndez and Olsen 2020, p. 135). Furthermore, the Commission portrayed EU citizenship not only as an empowerment of its citizens but to some degree as descriptive of who they are: ‘EU citizenship embodies shared rights and values as well as the rich diversity of a Union of different nationalities and languages’ (European Commission 2017, p. 3). In this way, the Commission intertwined a political theme with an ethically constitutive one. It also narrated the realization of EU citizenship in an economic theme of how freedom of movement benefits citizens and the European common market. However, these do not dominate at a particular moment in time.⁷

The EU Citizenship Report 2017 illustrates the typical citizenship narrative well:

Since EU citizenship was first enshrined in the Maastricht Treaty twenty-five years ago, significant progress has been made to ensure the effectiveness of EU citizens’ rights in practice. Today, two-thirds of Europeans feel they are citizens of the EU, and even more among the younger generations.

However, continuous efforts are needed to make sure that all EU citizens know their

⁵As in COM(2009)313 and COM(2018)212.

⁶Citizenship communications interpreted as comedies include COM(2011)881, COM(2011)884, COM(2012)99, COM(2014)33, COM(2014)177, COM(2016)206, COM(2017)32 and COM(2019)12.

⁷Communications that have an economic theme include COM(2008)840, COM(2010)747, COM(2011)149, COM(2013)228, COM(2013)269, COM(2014)6, COM(2016)206, COM(2016)320 and COM(2020)730.

rights and can fully participate in the European democratic process. This is a political priority for the Commission, which has called for a Union of democratic change. It is also a joint effort, in which MS, national parliaments and the EU institutions work together to strengthen the trust of Europe's citizens in our common project, for a stronger and better Europe. (European Commission 2017, p. 3)

The hero in this example is the Commission that seeks to enable citizens – who suffer from the ineffectiveness of their rights – to ‘fully participate’. There is no clear villain; instead, the Commission introduced MS, national parliaments and other EU institutions as supporters. While the phrase ‘our common project’ presupposes that some European ‘we’ exists, this ‘we’ takes no part in the events. Instead, the EU citizens are the most relatable character for the potential people. The Commission connected the events in a romantic plot that begins with the Maastricht Treaty and ends with a ‘stronger and better Europe’. The promise of citizens’ participation is indicative of the political theme.

Overall, many of the Commission's citizenship communications contained not only policy narratives justifying the particular measures they proposed but also narratives of peoplehood: They offered a relatable character in the form of EU citizens and promised them a better future. However, this people-building was rather subtle. The Commission did not introduce a strong ‘we’ in the narratives,⁸ and it refrained from explicitly depreciating ‘others’, such as third country nationals. This may be a result of the Commission's lack of competence on access to EU citizenship, but it may also reflect an effort to avoid discussing migrating third country nationals at the same time as mobile EU citizens. The legal distinction between them may not easily resonate in local contexts – so excluding third country nationals altogether might be an attempt to safeguard the narrative's credibility. The romantic plot of most documents is theoretically prone to create solidarity (Jacobs and Smith 1997, pp. 67–70). However, in the absence of strong characters of ‘we’ and the ‘other’, these narratives of incremental improvement were less explicit about creating social boundaries than romances can be (Özvatan 2020). Previous work has identified the lack of tension in European stories more generally as a weakness (Della Sala 2016, p. 538; Gilbert 2008). Also, in terms of the narrative's text, the Commission used dry language. Finally, the Commission repeated the core narrative elements over most of the time – and repetition of the same narrative in changing contexts is not always persuasive (Hase 2021, p. 699).

The Narrative of ‘Achieving a Comprehensive Migration Policy’

The EU or the Commission's role – again at times proxied through documents – was rather unambiguous in its migration communications, as well: They were the heroes.⁹ However, they were not the only ones: A ‘we’ character re-appeared prominently in 2014 after being mentioned explicitly in an early communication (European Commission 2008, pp. 2, 4) and otherwise cloaked behind words like ‘us’ and ‘our’. When prominently reintroduced, this ‘we’ had the power to turn everything around, explicit in sentences like: ‘There is action that we can and should take now’ (European Commission 2018, p. 2). The Commission has used it in most communications since. However, as this character's actions often

⁸With the exception of COM(2011)884.

⁹There are exceptions where the Commission/EU is not a prominent character [COM(2018)456, COM(2018)303].

entail policy-making, it seems to relate to MS rather than citizens. The roles of villains and victims were ambiguously filled: Among others, MS, third countries and third country nationals appeared in both of them. MS could be read as villains, for instance, when they reintroduced border controls (European Commission 2016a, p. 2), third countries when they hesitated to cooperate (European Commission 2016b, p. 2) and third country nationals when they were portrayed as guilty of ‘misusing the protection provided by the asylum system’ (European Commission 2020b, p. 2). Additionally, third country nationals often appeared as events. Terms like ‘flows’, ‘arrivals’, ‘secondary movements’ or ‘applications’ avoided narrating them as characters yet indirectly portrayed the people as the problem. Mostly, however, all filled the role of victims of unmanaged migration that would profit from ‘a robust and effective system for sustainable migration management for the future that is fair for host societies and EU citizens as well as for the third country nationals concerned and countries of origin and transit’ (European Commission 2016c, p. 5). As in this quote, EU citizens were usually marginal. They did not act themselves, but the EU would ultimately deliver a comprehensive migration policy for them: ‘This is what EU citizens expect from the European Union’ (European Commission 2019b, p. 18). While the Commission referred to EU citizens and an implicit image of a European people, it did not explicitly tell its story. Instead, the Commission primarily justified its policy proposals in its migration communications.

The Commission also introduced changes to the plot in the mid-2010s. In most early communications, the events were bound in a romance. Similar to the citizenship narratives, they tended to connect the Amsterdam Treaty to a better future with ‘a more coherent and forthcoming framework’ (European Commission 2008, p. 3). Comic plots appeared less often, but they nevertheless appeared regularly, for instance when the insufficient progress on policies by MS was interpreted as a serious destabilizer rather than mere stagnation (for instance, in European Commission 2011a). However, after 2014, comedies became dominant, and the objective was reached only after an equilibrium was broken, which was usually connected to people seeking protection in 2015. This turning point revealed the insufficiency of the migration policies and let the hero reinvent themselves in order to overcome the challenges. This is revealed in passages like ‘It is time we switched from being reactive to being proactive’ (European Commission 2018, p. 2). In most communications in 2015–16, the Commission repeated a comic version of ‘constructing a comprehensive migration policy’ but then started to use romantic plots again, which tended to describe progress starting from 2015. However, comic plots did not disappear completely.

Lastly, turning to the main themes, the Commission initially combined economic, political and ethically constitutive accounts but then focussed on a political theme around 2014. In contrast to the citizenship communications, this political theme was expressed in collective power through migration control, apparent in phrases like ‘it is urgent to do whatever is necessary to restore order into the migration system’ (European Commission 2016a, p. 22). Often, the Commission combined it with an ethically constitutive theme, which envisions how MS should engage with each other: ‘The development of a forward-looking and comprehensive European migration policy, based on solidarity and responsibility, is a fundamental policy objective for the European Union’ (European Commission 2011b, p. 1). An ethically constitutive theme appeared yet in another form, namely as Europe with ‘humanitarian traditions’, which helps third country nationals in distress because of its values (European Commission 2008, p. 4). Economic themes about

the benefits of integration or skilled migrants were evident in earlier communications but later marginalized by the political theme.

The concise narrative of the 2008 communication on an immigration agenda exemplifies the dominant version of the late 2000s and early 2010s:

The EU has been working to build a common policy since 1999, when for the first time competence in this domain was clearly recognized by the EC Treaty. A number of Common [*sic*] instruments and policies are in place, which address immigration both in its internal and external dimensions. These achievements are not sufficient. A common policy vision is needed which builds on past achievements and aims at providing a more coherent and forthcoming framework for future action by the MS and the EU itself. The added value of the EU will be in providing European instruments where they are needed and providing the right framework for achieving coherence where MS act on the basis of their competences. Transparency and mutual trust are now more than necessary for this common vision to be effective and deliver results. (European Commission 2008, pp. 2–3)

This quote shows that the heroic EU has been working towards a common policy and can provide added value. MS seem to be victims, suffering (even if unconsciously) under their insufficient achievements. At the same time, they can be read as villains with lacking trust for a common policy. There is no relatable character for ordinary citizens in this concise narrative. The romantic plot connects Amsterdam 1999 to a future coherent framework. While the communication in other places mentions increasing prosperity through migration (economic theme) and the pursuit of European and universal values (ethically constitutive theme), this concise narrative promotes a political theme about efficiency in migration management. The following quote from a report on the 2015 European Agenda on Migration illustrates how these elements have later been partly adapted:

There are over 60 million refugees or internally displaced people across the globe – the most severe refugee crisis since the Second World War. Conflict and crisis in Syria and elsewhere have acted as an immediate trigger, but underlying trends in demographics, climate change, poverty, globalisation in transport and communications all played a part in the record numbers of migrants and refugees arriving in the EU in 2015. This combination of factors is unlikely to be reversed in the foreseeable future. In 2016 we therefore need a radical strengthening of the EU migration system. We must move beyond dealing with the consequences of unmanaged and irregular flows of persons, to real preparedness to manage such flows and towards managed and legal means of entry for those in need of protection, while at the same time quickly and effectively identifying and returning those who have no right to be in the EU. (European Commission 2016a, p. 2)

The hero in this quote is not the Commission or the EU, but ‘we’. With it, the Commission creates a bond between narrator and audience. The role of the victim is assigned to third country nationals in need of protection. They are also the problem in the event of ‘flows of persons’, but the Commission assigned the main cause to global trends rather than portraying them as villains. The quote contains a comic plot, suggesting that a long period of stability was broken in 2015 and that ‘we’ will restore it. Lastly, the main theme remains very similar: It is a political one of collective power through an efficient common migration policy.

Overall, especially the Commission’s adapted narratives on migration contrast with those on citizenship: They were more engaging narratives through the explicit ‘we’

character that overcomes the disequilibrium of 2015–16 in a comic plot. Even though the narratives' characters and plot are theoretically suited to construct a community, they have arguably less potential to create a European people than the citizenship narratives, as the 'we' character seems relatable to MS and their administrations rather than to citizens. Consequently, the narratives in the Commission's migration policy remained closer to policy narratives, rather than intertwining them with explicit narratives of peoplehood. Additionally, the Commission's migration narratives were more flexible: In each of the core elements, it undertook some important changes in the mid-2010s. Since these were neither absolute nor permanent, and given that the objective of a comprehensive migration policy remained constant, the Commission did not completely replace its original narrative. Instead, it seems like it was telling one and a half narratives.

IV. Discussion: What to Make of the Commission's Narratives?

This section discusses two central take-aways: first, that the Commission told narratives of European peoplehood to different degrees across the policy areas; and second, that these narratives changed differently. First, most communications in both areas conveyed policy narratives about how the proposed measures would achieve their goal and contribute to European integration more generally. These can be seen as variants of what Gilbert calls 'the orthodox story' of inevitable and desirable European integration (Gilbert 2008, p. 643). However, the analysis yielded some notable differences with regard to characters, plots and themes. It is not surprising that the Commission told different narratives, as earlier studies have described various visions of Europe (Manners and Murray 2016; Siklodi 2018, pp. 28–32; Saurugger and Thatcher 2019). Still, the finding has important implications: First, rather than treating European institutions as uniform narrators, it is essential to unpack them to uncover various takes on European peoplehood within a single institution. Second, the Commission intertwined its citizenship policies more with narratives of peoplehood than its migration policies. This may be because Commission officials genuinely hold different ideas about European peoplehood across departments. But it may also be that the Commission considers citizenship policy more useful for people-building at the European level, telling citizens that they belong to European governing institutions, and migration policy for state-building, urging MS to build such institutions (see Smith 2003, pp. 51–52). Third, the stronger EU competence to legislate on boundary-drawing in migration did not prompt the Commission to tell more forceful narratives of peoplehood in this policy area. On the contrary, it might have made it more careful in dealing with an audience of MS that may listen with more scrutiny to the Commission's narratives where they can be institutionalized in EU law. Fourth, the differences across policy areas raise theoretical questions: Given that the Commission did not expose an explicit narrative of peoplehood in its migration communications, does there really need to be such a narrative underpinning every policy of boundary-drawing? Can political leaders tell different narratives of peoplehood – and not only different policy narratives – at the same time? And lastly, does the relation between policies of boundary-drawing and narratives of peoplehood differ between European, national and local level?

The article's second insight is that the Commission changed its narratives more easily on migration than on citizenship. One could speculate that changes to the migration narrative were a reaction to the politics around people seeking protection in the EU around

2015. Arguably, the situation amounted to the kind of ‘crisis’ that would allow for, or indeed require, an adaptation of the narrative to new circumstances. The shift from a romantic to a comic plot resulted from the arrival of people seeking protection as a destabilizing event in the story, making an achievement of the objective uncertain. Combining this with the relatable ‘we’ character, the Commission called on the divided MS audience to identify with it and to act accordingly to remedy the situation. In contrast, the inertia of the citizenship narrative cannot be due to a lack of events that could have triggered such changes. Examples of events that could be narrated as destabilizing to the attainment of European citizenship include the reintroduction of some border controls within the Schengen area in 2015 or European citizens losing their citizenship following Brexit (but see Maas 2021). The abstention of the Commission to assign these events this meaning, even if it mentions them, could have been intentional. But it could also result from the citizenship narrative’s nature as a subtle narrative of peoplehood, which is theoretically more resistant to change. Beyond these speculations, explaining the causes and consequences of the observed narrative changes remains up to future research.

Conclusion

Taking the debate about the Commission’s vice president for ‘promoting our European way of life’ as its starting point, this article focuses on the narratives about Europe in its migration and citizenship communications in recent years. It argues that the documents on citizenship have more potential to construct a sense of European peoplehood, as they not only contain policy narratives but convey a narrative about the relatable character of EU citizens. Furthermore, it discusses how the Commission repeated its citizenship narrative over time but adapted its migration narrative by at least temporarily transforming the dominant plot from romances to comedies, introducing a ‘we’ character and focussing on a political theme of order, control and efficiency.

The article itself tells a story with open ends and invites future research. First, it would be worthwhile studying narrative changes in other policy areas, European institutions, and sources to achieve a more complete picture of whether and where the Commission puts forward narratives of peoplehood. Further studies could use the same sources to study whether and how the Commission’s policy narratives justifying for instance its integration, external migration or return policies changed. Second, its interpretative approach cannot explain narrative change. Further research should therefore trace why the Commission introduced a ‘we’ character and consider potential explanatory factors like events, changes in the narrator and/or changes in the audience. Finally, due to its focus on narrative change, this article cannot dive more deeply into the relation between the narratives and the impact they had on policies or citizens’ attitudes.

Nevertheless, the article contributes to the ‘narrative turn in European studies’ (Bouza García 2017) in several ways. First, it points once more to the importance of unpacking the Commission instead of treating it as a uniform narrator, showing how within a single European institution, narratives differ even in related policy areas. Second, it contributes to narratologically inspired social sciences by offering an approach that pinpoints changes in core elements of narratives of peoplehood – the characters, plot and main theme. Finally, the findings add to the broader conversation on ideational change, raising the question of why the Commission changed its policy narrative on migration more easily than its

citizenship narrative and suggesting that this could be connected to the nature of the latter as a narrative of peoplehood. To conclude, given the two and a half tales the article identifies in two policy areas and the changes within them, it seems justified to be sceptical about ‘promoting our European way of life’ when the European ‘we’ is vague to the Commission itself.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of the article.

APPENDIX S1. Corpus of Commission Communications.