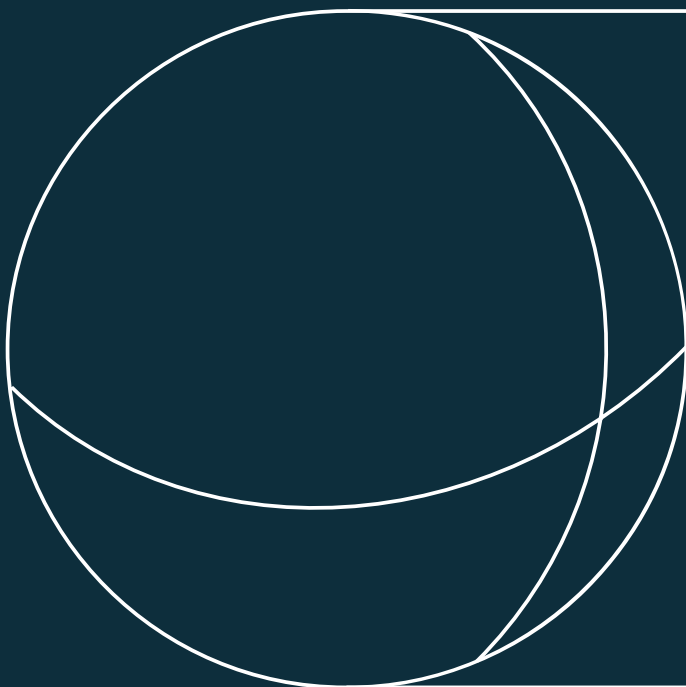


research report

The Story of Global Governance: EU Strategic Narratives in an Age of Rupture

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Abstract

Global governance is increasingly a battle over narratives as much as over rules and resources. The European Union (EU), as one of the world's most active multilateral actors, has a significant stake in this contest – but it has not always been deliberate about the stories it tells. Building on evidence from 15 case studies, this report analyses EU strategic narratives across seven key policy areas. It finds that the EU's story of itself as a champion of multilateralism is largely uniform and persuasive. Increasingly, however, this narrative is at odds with how the EU frames the state of global governance and the policy choices it makes. This report argues that acknowledging this tension and, more broadly, moving towards a 'narrative realism' offers a more durable foundation for EU storytelling.

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Introduction

“America First,” “might makes right,” “the liberal international order” – whether deployed by challengers or defenders of multilateralism, narratives shape global governance as much as treaties or institutions do. In a ruptured multilateral system (Blockmans 2026), the European Union (EU) is being forced to reconsider both its place in the world and its approach across different policy fields. At the heart of this reconsideration is the multilateral system itself: the rules, institutions, and frameworks upon which the EU has built its presence in the world. This multilateral system, however, is being actively contested. Today’s systemic rivals like Russia are dismantling multilateral security institutions and constructing alternative histories targeted at Plural South¹ audiences (Appel 2024), the United States (US) under President Donald Trump has largely abandoned its multilateral leadership role (Pasquettaz 2026), and authoritarian actors in the EU and beyond are eroding international organisations from within (Debre and Sommerer 2025). As they remake the multilateral order, each of these actors construct new stories of global governance to legitimise the worlds they are building, offering alternative visions of how global order should work.

In this shifting landscape, strategic narratives – the stories policymakers tell to influence publics (Miskimmon et al. 2024) – have a role to play both in enabling the move away from rules-based multilateralism as well as in its defence. Examining them reveals a great deal about how policymakers aim to convince audiences of their positions, as well as how they are shaped and constrained by their environments (Miskimmon et al. 2014). And while communications has traditionally been treated as the final step of the policy process, a growing body of literature shows that these strategic narratives are in fact integral to the creation of policy itself (Miskimmon et al. 2024; McGovern and Jones 2025). Examining the story the EU is telling in different areas of global governance offers insight into how the EU sees itself, the world in which it operates, and the choices it makes. This comes at a critical moment for the EU: no actor has staked more of its identity and influence on the now-contested global order, and the story the EU tells – and whether audiences find it convincing – will determine whether it helps shape what comes next or merely watches from the sidelines. In this context, this report asks: What is the current state of the EU’s strategic narratives around global governance? And under what conditions do these narratives enable – or undermine – its ability to shape multilateral outcomes? To answer these questions, this report draws on 15 ENSURED case studies² spanning trade, taxation, climate, health, human rights, migration, and digitalisation policy,

1 This report uses “Plural South” rather than “Global South,” which is increasingly criticised for treating 130+ different countries as a single bloc, obscuring the differences in their economies, political systems, and foreign policy priorities. See, e.g., Patrick and Huggins (2023).

2 The case-study reports are available on the ENSURED website (<https://www.ensured-europe.eu>). They include Boukal, Janský, Palanský, and Parízek 2025; Bursi and Greco 2025; Choi and Liese 2025; Fernández and Heinzel 2025a, 2025b, 2025c; Hoxtell 2025; King and Pousadela 2025; Kustova, Dietz, Van Hoof, and Karlas 2025; Marconi and Greco 2025; Parízek and Weinhardt 2025; Peerboom, Tsourdi, and Kenkel 2025; Petri and Karlas 2025; Petri, Srivastava, Drieskens, and Lameire 2025; Weinhardt, Parízek, and Srivastava 2025.

taking stock of the EU's strategic narratives of global governance across three levels: the system narratives it projects about the international order, identity narratives that define its role within it, and policy narratives it uses within and across different governance challenges. To contextualise these findings, this report features a narrative analysis of 64 EU documents³ across policy areas. To assess the impact of these narratives, it also draws on 12 interviews with ENSURED researchers conducted in 2026, available in the List of Interviews.

While the EU has a clear narrative about who it is, this identity is increasingly at odds with both the system it describes and the policy stories it deploys.

A central argument emerges: while the EU has a clear narrative about who it is – a multilateral champion, a leader by example, a regulatory power, and a values-based actor – this identity is increasingly at odds with both the system it describes and the policy stories it deploys. While the EU's view of its role in the world remains mostly the same across policy areas, its characterisation of the international order fluctuates between multilateral stability and geopolitical contestation, and its policy narratives shift towards competitiveness and strategic autonomy across several domains. This poses a quandary, as the EU's system and policy narratives are pulling in directions that its multilateralist identity cannot absorb without a credibility cost. The result is a set of tensions at the heart of EU strategic communications: between the identity it projects and the fragmented world it describes, between what it says and what it is seen to do, and between the story it tells in one room and the one it tells in another.

But strategic narratives can only take us so far. Improving communications cannot solve what is ultimately a policy dilemma: the EU regularly faces situations with no multilateral option, and no narrative can change that. What narratives *can* do is stop circling around these constraints and acknowledge them openly. The next step for EU policymakers, then, is to narrate these governance struggles in a way that is transparent and believable, being clear about why the EU makes the choices it does and which trade-offs are involved. Such a 'narrative realism' could give the EU the flexibility to adapt to changing circumstances while still holding strong to its core values and interests where needed.

A few caveats deserve mention from the outset. For one, speaking of 'EU narratives' is itself something of a misnomer: the EU is not a singular actor and, depending on the policy area, EU narratives can come from the European Commission, Council, Parliament, institutions, high-level individuals, and member states. These actors are by no means a monolith and thus bring their own institutional viewpoints to their communications. Additionally, this report only briefly engages with the question of audiences, which matters immensely for narratives: policymakers address different publics differently, and speeches do not serve the same purpose as strategy documents. However, analysing audience reception would require a different methodological approach than

3 These EU documents span 2019–2026 and include those cited across ENSURED's 15 case studies as well as additional primary sources identified through the interviews. They include EU Commission, Council, Parliament, and European External Action Service (EEAS) strategy documents and action plans, press releases, speeches by key figures, and EU statements in multilateral forums, covering all seven policy domains addressed in this report.

the one adopted here. At the heart of all this lies a more sweeping limitation: understanding the EU's narratives of global governance is a truly massive endeavour, and this report only offers a snapshot of the EU's global story at a given moment. Still, there is value in piecing together these narrative fragments: from them, it becomes possible to start understanding where the EU's multilateral story may be hitting a wall – and, most importantly, why.

The report proceeds as follows: The next section outlines what strategic narratives are and why they matter for policymaking. From there, the report sketches the EU's narratives around the international system, its role within it, and its framing of policy preferences across seven multilateral domains. It then takes stock of the strengths and weaknesses of these narratives, drawing through-lines between ENSURED's core findings and the challenge of improving EU communications. It concludes with a reflection on how to craft more convincing narratives at a moment of global governance transformation.

Strategic Narratives and Why They Matter

Multilateral institutions tend to conjure images of rules: treaties negotiated, resolutions passed, standards set. However, they are also arenas where states compete to define what the world looks like and what should be done about key challenges – and this competition is won through storytelling as much as through negotiation (Miskimmon et al. 2017, 5). In this context, a *strategic narrative* is a “story told by political actors to construct a shared meaning of the past, present, and future of international politics, with the aim

A story is a narrative in that it
infuses a decision with meaning,
and it is strategic in that it attempts
to convince someone of something.

of shaping the behaviour of domestic and international audiences” (Miskimmon et al. 2014, 2). Put another way, a story is a narrative in that it infuses a decision with meaning, and it is strategic in that it attempts to convince someone of something. These narratives are typically composed of three elements: the narrative material, or the medium through which stories are told; the narrator, usually states or political elites; and the receiver, the audiences who interpret what they hear (Wojcikiewicz et al. 2025). In this report, the narrative material takes

the form of speeches, strategy documents, Council conclusions, and press releases; the narrator is the EU in its various forms; and the receiver is both domestic and international publics, depending on the forum. Narratives are a distinct communication tool: unlike *frames* – short-term facets of events or issues used to make connections (Entman 2004) – strategic narratives unfold over time and connect what has already happened with what is to come. And unlike *discourses*, which provide long-term bodies of knowledge that create actor roles (Epstein 2011), narratives are directional and deployed by specific players towards specific ends. This combination of temporal structure, strategic intent, and audience orientation makes them a useful lens for dissecting the EU’s position in international politics.

Why do narratives matter for understanding global governance? For one, narratives tell us about which policy futures are possible. Once entrenched, they make some courses of action appear legitimate and realistic, while others become unthinkable (Hagström and Gustafsson 2019, 395). At the same time, narratives do not live in a bubble: numerous narratives and counter-narratives exist simultaneously and compete for audiences’ buy-in (Miskimmon et al. 2024). In this sense, narratives both describe political reality and constitute it, shaping what form policy takes, and competing with the narratives of others to determine whose version of events prevails.

Further, narratives matter because audiences matter. Research shows that public opinion shapes global institutions: it helps determine whether they remain relevant as arenas for international cooperation, whether governments equip them with the mandates and resources they need, and whether the policies they develop gain traction (Dellmuth and Tallberg 2026). Strategic narratives are key to building this public legitimacy, as they give the audience a state’s justification and ask for their trust in return. An actor that tells convincing stories about who it is and what it stands for is better placed to

build the political will for pushing through a particular policy; an actor whose narratives ring hollow risks undermining it.

How Do Narratives Operate?

Following Miskimmon et al. (2014), strategic narratives operate at three distinct but interrelated levels: system, identity, and policy. *System narratives* describe how the actor perceives the international order: what type of order it is, what rules govern it, and which forces pose a challenge to its stability. *Identity narratives* explain how an actor views its role in the system and define its values, character, and aspirations. *Policy narratives* outline how an actor views the appropriate response to a specific political challenge or crisis, articulating a position using narrative frames that match its values or interests. Each of these levels influences and is influenced by the others. When the three levels are in harmony (i.e., ‘narrative alignment’), an actor’s narrative is more likely to be seen as credible, which underpins its opportunities for influence, persuasion, and cooperation (Miskimmon et al. 2014, 2). When they clearly diverge, the overall narrative is weaker (Subotić 2016, 611).

Strategic narratives do not only exist in the policy sphere: they are created, communicated, and interpreted in a continuous cycle of *formation* (who crafts the narrative and why), *projection* (how the narrative is communicated and to whom), and *reception* (how other actors interpret and respond to what they have heard). To understand the EU’s role in a changing global order, this report focuses on the formation and projection stages by analysing the narratives the EU puts out into the world. To gain a window into how these narratives land with audiences, it draws on interviews with ENSURED researchers.

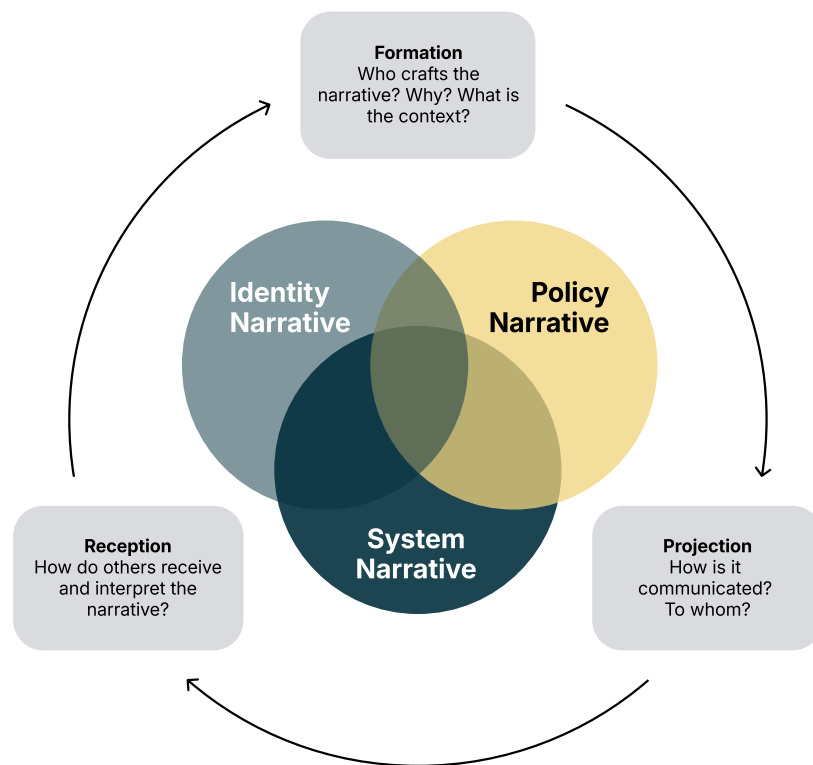


Figure 1: Strategic narratives’ levels and lifecycle. Source: Author’s depiction.

What Makes a Narrative Successful?

The literature broadly agrees that effective strategic narratives share a few core qualities (e.g., Miskimmon et al. 2017; Schmitt 2018; Arceneaux 2024).

A narrative is more likely to be convincing if it is (1) *coherent*: broadly aligned across the three levels of system, identity, and policy, and consistent across

different policy areas and forums, (2) *credible*: believable to its intended audiences and aligned with the actions of the actor projecting them, and (3) *context-sensitive*: attuned to the geopolitical realities and the backgrounds of the specific audiences they are addressing.

A narrative needs internal logic to be believable, yet no amount of internal logic can rescue a story that audiences can see does not match reality.

In practice, however, these three qualities can be in tension. The common assumption is that coherence, context, and credibility go hand in hand: tell a good story to the right people and they will believe you. But in a crowded narrative environment, this relationship is often more complicated. An actor that prioritises coherence above

all else may risk projecting a narrative that is internally consistent but disconnected from reality, papering over geopolitical constraints to the detriment of its credibility. Conversely, an actor that is fully transparent about its internal disagreements or limited influence may seem honest, but risks appearing directionless. This is to say, coherence and credibility are not one and the same but they are deeply intertwined: a narrative needs internal logic to be believable, yet no amount of internal logic can rescue a story that audiences can see does not match reality. Context shapes where the balance lies, since what reads as consistency in one setting may read as disconnected from reality in another.

The EU's Narratives of Global Governance

Examining the EU's narratives on the international system, its role within it, and the policies it prioritises offers up a striking picture: the EU is an actor who projects a clear and consistent sense of self, but whose characterisation of the world in which it operates and what to do within it are increasingly fragmented. The analysis that follows traces this tension across three levels – system, identity, and policy narratives – using EU communications from seven policy domains – trade, taxation, climate, health, human rights, migration, and digitalisation – before drawing out the patterns that emerge across them. The three narrative levels are deeply interrelated: when system, identity, and policy narratives point in the same direction, the EU's communications tend to be at their most coherent and credible, and when they diverge, the gaps become more visible.

EU System Narratives

Across the 15 case studies, the EU maintains a fundamentally multilateral orientation towards the international order, presenting international frameworks as legitimate and necessary for world order. However, how well the EU believes that order is functioning varies considerably across domains, producing three distinct system narratives: (1) *committed multilateralism* in human rights and the digital spheres of cyberspace and AI, where existing frameworks are treated as legitimate and worth protecting, (2) *constrained multilateralism* in climate, health, and migration, where the system is narrated as under strain and requiring significant reform, and (3) *instrumental multilateralism* in trade, taxation, and on cryptocurrency, where multilateralism becomes conditional on the institutional setting and interests at stake.

System Narrative 1: Committed Multilateralism

NARRATIVE

The multilateral system works, and it must be defended against spoilers.

Domains like human rights, cyberspace, and AI governance show the clearest expression of a committed multilateralism. The EU's system narrative in these areas is one of an international system in crisis. However, the EU frames the problem as specific actors pushing back against existing norms, not rooted in the system itself. Thus, the EU's solution within this narrative is to double-down on multilateral action and invest more in global fora as a means of furthering its values-based agenda

(EU 2026b). In its human rights policy, the EU's account of the international order has hardened considerably since 2020. Where it once described a “mixed” picture of progress and setbacks in the realisation of human rights globally (EU 2020), by 2026 it characterises the order as facing “a broad assault” – with states actively attempting to undermine existing human rights commitments, norms, and the institutions designed to uphold them (Council of the EU 2026a). The EU's response to this deterioration is not to step back but to invest further in multilateral cooperation, affirming its “unwavering

commitment to the universal respect, protection and fulfilment of human rights for everyone, everywhere” (Council of the EU 2026a). Similarly, the EU continues to argue that the United Nations (UN) and its Human Rights Council are the legitimate arenas for human rights action; the problem is “the pushback against human rights and democracy” (EU 2020), not the framework as such.

Similarly, for cyberspace and AI, the EU argues for multilateral fora as the best arena for addressing their governance. For regulating state behaviour in cyberspace, the EU champions frameworks such as the UN Charter and international human rights law as both sufficient and legitimate (Barrinha and Turner 2024), and argues that governance should be pursued through multilateral and inclusive mechanisms (EU 2024b). Concerning AI governance, the EU emphasises people’s right to a “safe” online environment, anchoring its innovation narrative to existing human rights, democratic principles, and the rule of law (DG CONNECT 2025b). While EU actors do touch on geopolitical factors and system competition, the international order in AI governance is described as grounded in existing legal frameworks – human rights obligations, democratic principles, and the rule of law – that should extend to new technologies. To this end, the Council of Europe (CoE)’s AI Framework Convention explicitly “focuses on applying existing human rights, democracy, and rule-of-law obligations to AI activities” and “aims to fill any legal gaps that may result from rapid technological advances” (Council of Europe 2024). Thus, in this account, the international system needs defending and extending, not replacing.

System Narrative 2: Constrained Multilateralism

” NARRATIVE

The multilateral system still stands, but it is deeply flawed and needs urgent reform.

In its climate, health, and migration policies, the EU’s system narrative is more qualified. In climate, the EU’s commitment to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the Paris Agreement is firm, as Commission President Ursula von der Leyen affirmed at Davos in 2025: “the Paris Agreement continues to be the best hope of all humanity” (von der Leyen 2025a). However, the EU communicates reservations about the system’s ability to deliver. At COP29 and COP30, EU

Commissioner Wopke Hoekstra portrays multilateralism as fragile: a world of hard bargains, and backsliding on prior commitments (Hoekstra 2024; Hoekstra 2025a). In early 2026, this sharpens into a structural critique that “solidarity and reciprocity do not always go hand in hand” (Hoekstra 2026a). The EU still claims that there is “no other tool than multilateralism” for climate action (Hoekstra 2025b), but its system narrative has shifted from defending a multilateral order from a few bad actors towards reforming a flawed system.

The EU’s system narrative in health governance follows a similar trajectory. In 2020 and 2021, EU documents concerning health policy frame the international order as multilateral and functioning, if also in need of strengthening (Michel 2020; Michel et al. 2021); by 2025, the EU describes the World Health Organization (WHO) as operating in a “politically and financially highly volatile environment,” requiring “structural reforms,” savings, and cost-effectiveness (EU 2025a). The EU still believes in the WHO as the “indispensable cornerstone” of global health governance and makes the case that “collective

solutions are the only sustainable path” (EU 2025b), but it is increasingly narrating the system through the language of constraint, security concerns, and limited resources rather than collective ambition. In migration⁴, the EU formally endorses the UN Global Compacts as the legitimate framework for global migration governance, but operational reality tells a different story: as Peerboom, Tsourdi, and Kenkel (2025) note, the Compacts receive little attention within EU institutions or legislation.

System Narrative 3: Instrumental Multilateralism

” NARRATIVE

The multilateral system has been undermined by great power politics, and it can no longer be relied on alone.

In areas like trade, taxation, and cryptocurrency governance, the international order is described as one of unilateral action, power politics, and security threats that have undermined the multilateral system. The EU solution is to take a more autonomous stance to protect its interests. EU Commission President von der Leyen characterised the international economic order as “transactionalism and zero-sum games” in which “the cooperative world order... is being replaced by a confrontational global economy” (von der Leyen 2025f). In trade, the EU describes the

World Trade Organization (WTO) as “at a critical and, in fact, an existential juncture” that, should the current geopolitical blockages continue, will “slide into irrelevance” (EU 2026a). In taxation, the EU’s system narrative has traditionally been forum-dependent, oscillating between cooperative and contested depending on where the EU is speaking. As part of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)/G20 Pillar II process – institutions the EU helped design – the EU has portrayed the international tax system as functioning and capable of “landmark agreements” (Council of the EU 2022). In the UN tax forum, however, the EU describes the system as more uncertain and one where the EU is forced to prioritise its interests (EU 2024e; EU 2025c). Recently, the EU has brought its taxation narrative more explicitly into its geopolitical framing: “rifts have grown wider,” “the rupture has deepened,” and “global alliances have been reshaped” (Hoekstra 2026b). This shift points to a broader system narrative in which the EU sees tax governance as “linked closely to sovereign national competences” (EU 2024e), which are threatened by a geopolitically contested world.

System narratives in cryptocurrency governance reveal a similar focus on geopolitical threats: to manage the system risks posed by the “Wild West” of crypto-finance (Panetta 2022), the Commission emphasises multilateral coordination and like-minded partnerships. Meanwhile, the European Central Bank increasingly warns that the international finance system is entering “uncharted territory” where “external dependencies can quickly turn into major fragilities” (Lagarde 2025). The multilateral financial system, in this telling, is under attack and the EU must respond accordingly to protect European interests – which takes priority over multilateral action.

4 Given the focus within ENSURED’s migration research on the UN Compacts on Migration and Refugees and the inability to conduct interviews, this report does not consider the EU’s migration narratives beyond this framework and the Peerboom, Tsourdi, and Kenkel (2025) report. For a look at the EU’s broader migration narratives, see, e.g., Ceccorulli and Lucarelli (2017) as well as Seiger et al. (2025).

EU Identity Narratives

While the EU's narrative of the global order is fragmented, its story of who it is has stayed largely the same. Across all seven policy areas, the EU returns to a core identity: it presents itself as a multilateral actor that leads by example, shapes global rules, and grounds its engagement in values and institutional commitment. This identity expresses itself through four recurring claims: (1) *multilateral champion*, (2) *leader by example*, (3) *regulatory power*, and (4) *values-based actor*. The first two are near-universal; the latter two are more area-specific. Interestingly, there is also movement towards an interest-based actor identity in some policy areas but, at least as of now, this is not as prevalent as the other four identity claims.

Identity Claim 1: The Multilateral Champion

" NARRATIVE

The EU is a multilateral champion and a reliable partner.

The most cross-cutting identity claim is that of a multilateral champion and trustworthy partner⁵: the EU as the actor that shows up, defends institutions, and builds bridges even when others withdraw. In climate, the EU positions itself as the anchor of the Paris Agreement following successive US withdrawals, with Commission President von der Leyen affirming that “Europe will stay the course” and “keep working with all nations that want

to protect nature” (von der Leyen 2025a). In human rights, the EU highlights its role as the largest voluntary donor to the UN human rights system following the US withdrawal from the Human Rights Council in 2025, and vows to “take a strong stance and ... foster cross-regional partnerships that strengthen global norms and peace” (Council of the EU 2026a). In health, the EU committed to “play its part” against pandemics – which it emphasises “knows no borders” – and reiterated that a “common set of universal values that must guide our actions” (Michel 2020). Further, in its 2022 Global Health Strategy, the EU grounded its work in “fundamental values, such as solidarity and equity,” (European Commission 2022) and later pledged to work “hand in hand with the WHO” to leave “no region of the world behind” (EU 2024a).

In trade, the EU projects itself as the defender of “open, rules-based” commerce even in bilateral settings – as with its Free Trade Agreement with India, where it argued: “we both stand to lose from a world of spheres of influence and isolationism. And we both stand to gain from a world of cooperation and working together” (von der Leyen 2025c). In cryptocurrency and AI governance, it champions multilateral frameworks through the Basel Committee on Banking Supervision, the Financial Stability Board, the Financial Action Task Force, and the CoE Framework Convention respectively, with the latter described as a “historic milestone as the first legally binding international agreement on AI” (EU 2024d). In comparison to other AI state actors, Commission President von der Leyen notes that “European AI is cooperative” and a “force for good” (von der Leyen 2025b).

5 Interestingly, this multilateral champion identity at times sits alongside an interest-based claim: in trade, for example, the EU has embraced its “geoeconomic weight” as a tool for “pursuing its own interests” (von der Leyen 2025f). While not yet a dominant narrative, this could hold significance for the future of the EU's multilateral identity.

Identity Claim 2: The Leader by Example

NARRATIVE

The EU is a demonstrated leader that others should follow.

The second core identity claim is that of the EU as a front-runner who invites – or, at times, pressures – others to follow.⁶ In climate, the EU describes itself as having “been leading the way on international climate action” (European Commission 2024, IP/24/588), including as the largest public climate financier, and repeatedly “invite[s] others who have the means to do so to join us” (Hoekstra 2025b). In taxation, the EU presents itself as a “front-runner” (Council of the EU 2022), moving first on the global minimum tax in the OECD/G20 process and encouraging others to follow.

For health governance, the Commission’s 2022 Global Health Strategy (European Commission 2022) argues the EU will “play a leading role to ensure that global health remains at the top of the international agenda,” and the Council highlights the EU’s leadership in funding WHO operations (Council of the EU 2024; Council of the EU 2025b). To this end, the EU often deploys its ‘Team Europe’ concept – an umbrella term coined during the 2020 COVID-19 response for the combined external action of the EU institutions, member states, and finance institutions (Jones and Teevan 2021) – to present itself as a coherent, unified bloc. The EU also emphasises its Team Europe approach on human rights policy,⁷ with an emphasis on the EU as a “Union of Equality” that leads the charge to create a “gender-equal world” (Council of the EU 2025a; Council of the EU 2026a). In AI governance, the EU promotes the AI Act and the CoE Framework Convention as a governance model worth exporting globally, framing trustworthy regulation as the foundation for innovation and the area “where Europe can truly lead the race” (von der Leyen 2025b).

Identity Claim 3: The EU as a Regulatory Power

NARRATIVE

The EU is a regulatory force for good that others should follow.

Directly related to its leadership and multilateral role is the EU’s projected identity as an actor that shapes and improves global rules through the force of its regulatory model – the so-called ‘Brussels Effect’ (Bradford 2019). This identity is most visible in those domains where its main political currency takes the form of rulemaking. In cryptocurrency governance, for example, the European Parliament and Council present the Markets in Crypto-

Assets Regulation (MiCA) as a first-mover regulatory framework grounded in the principle of “same activities, same risks, same rules” (EP and Council of the EU 2023), with the EU leading the charge towards more “globally aligned regulations for stablecoins” and other “risky” crypto-assets (Lagarde 2025). In terms of AI governance, Commissioner Michael McGrath made the EU’s selling point clear: “the EU has the framework and the tools to ensure AI becomes the ‘best thing’ to ever happen to humanity” (McGrath 2026).

6 Of course, this is not to say that the EU always acts as a leader in the way that it claims: in climate governance, for example, it is falling behind on its 2030 targets and often does not prioritise climate commitments in other policy areas (Petri and Karlas 2026).

7 However, interviewees were sceptical about how much genuine coordination this Team Europe motto reflects in practice – particularly at the Human Rights Council, where only states hold formal voting rights (Interviews 2, 4, 5).

Similarly, in trade, the EU uses key measures like its Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) to distinguish itself as a standard-setter with which others will need to align (Weinhardt et al. 2025). This also appears in taxation governance, where the EU touts its front-runner implementation of OECD agreements as creating regulatory facts that incentivise others to follow.

Identity Claim 4: The EU as a Values-Based Actor

NARRATIVE

The EU is an actor that makes decisions based on its values and principles.

Also related to the EU's leadership and multilateral identity is the EU's claim to be a values-based actor who frames its commitments as obligations to international law and fundamental rights. In human rights governance, the EU positions gender equality as a binding commitment under Article 21, and “firmly oppose[s] any attempt to undermine the obligations of States under international law or weaken the universality of human rights” (Council of the EU 2026a). Further, the EU frames its engagement

at the Human Rights Council as a principled defence of universal rights “under all circumstances” – not just in response to geopolitical developments (Council of the EU 2026a). This stance also extends to digital areas like AI, where the EU foregrounds freedom of expression and protection against surveillance as the non-negotiable foundation of any governance framework (DG CONNECT 2025a). For cyberspace governance, the EU emphasises privacy protections while also promoting multi-stakeholder governance based on “a set of fundamental principles and rules of international law” as a core feature of its digital governance (EU 2024b). This values-based identity is reinforced by its support for the new UN global cybersecurity mechanism as well as institutions like the Internet Governance Forum, which embody principles of openness and participation (Marconi and Greco 2025, 7-9).

The EU also draws on a values-oriented identity in health,⁸ with the EU vowing to leave “no region of the world behind” (EU 2024a) and relaying its commitment to “human rights, solidarity, equity, gender equality, resilience, and health for all” (EU 2025b). Similarly, in its climate communications, the EU has advocated that “all countries, worldwide, should reap [the climate transition's] benefits, especially the most vulnerable,” arguing that its climate policy is “about basic human dignity” (von der Leyen 2025e).

8 Here, too, the EU's values-based identity is increasingly intertwined with a more interest-based actor claim. For example, Commissioner Hoekstra argued for a greater “link [between] climate, competitiveness and independence”, saying that the “business case ... is at the heart of climate and economic policy” (Hoekstra 2026a). For more, see the *EU Narratives: Findings and Patterns* section of this report.

EU Policy Narratives

Comparing the EU's system and identity narratives reveals a tension between its fragmented accounts of the world and consistent account of itself – and the policy level is where this tension is most visible. The focus here remains on what the EU says, how it justifies its policy choices, and how these justifications sit alongside its story of itself. Whether its words also match its actions is a question for the evaluation that follows. Further, because policy narratives are all about the justification for certain policies, this section analyses them through their dominant frames – the recurring language through which the EU signals

While transformative arguments are still present, policy narratives have shifted towards framings centred on competitiveness and conditionality.

its priorities and justifies its choices. Across domains, the EU's policy narratives vary considerably, reflecting different institutional histories, audience pressures, and geopolitical contexts. Still, zooming out reveals a pattern: while transformative or solidarity arguments are still present, policy narratives have largely shifted towards framings centred on competitiveness, feasibility, strategic autonomy, and conditionality. This development is most visible in areas like trade, climate, health, and taxation, and least visible in human rights. This leads to a set of policy narratives that are often coherent within each

area⁹ but fragmented across them – with competitiveness frames sitting uneasily alongside solidarity ones. A second, related pattern compounds this: forum-dependency, with the EU shifting how it defends policies depending on where it is speaking, produces narratives that can appear contradictory when placed alongside one another.

Arguably, the competitiveness narrative framings and interest-based justifications are most noticeable in the EU's trade policy. The EU frames its trade policy as a tool for de-risking dependencies, securing supply chains, and competing in a power-driven system: "Europe must use its geoeconomic weight to its advantage and for pursuing its own interests," as Commission President von der Leyen stated at the Berlin Dialogue in 2025 (von der Leyen 2025f). The language of openness and fairness persists, but the centre of gravity has shifted markedly, with an increased focus on sovereignty and unilateral measures. WTO reform is presented as a top EU priority and increasingly framed as an "existential" quandary; other policy priorities centre around the three pillars of "predictability, fairness, and flexibility" (EU 2026a). Meanwhile, an increased focus on bilateral and plurilateral partnerships – including the Mercosur agreement, celebrated as creating "the largest free trade zone in the world" (von der Leyen 2025a) – are presented as pragmatic solutions to a stalled multilateral system. For the controversial US-EU Turnberry agreement – a bilateral deal concluded in July 2025 under the threat of sweeping US tariffs, in which the EU accepted a 15 percent tariff on most of its exports and granted preferential access to US goods in return – von der Leyen justified the move by saying "Europe got the best possible deal out there. We have put our companies at a relative advantage" (von der Leyen 2025d). This leads to an internally incoherent narrative, where the EU simultaneously promotes

9 An exception can be seen in trade policy, where EU narratives simultaneously offer support for the WTO at the same time as defending bilateral deals like the controversial Turnberry agreement, which violates the Most-Favoured-Nation principle. For more on this incoherence, see the paragraph below.

the rules-based trading system as the backbone of its trade policy while also celebrating the bilateral agreements it increasingly relies upon – even if they, as the case with the Turnberry agreement, challenge core WTO principles of non-discrimination.

In taxation, the policy narrative is largely focused on OECD-aligned contexts: its goals are for the EU's tax policies to be more competitive (i.e., increased simplification) and fairer – understood as companies having to “pay what is rightly due,” as former Commissioner Paolo Gentiloni put it (European Commission 2023). As a step in this direction, the OECD/G20 Pillar II ensures companies pay a global minimum tax of 15 percent based on the logic that rules create fairness and simplification creates growth (Council of the EU 2022). This narrative shifts substantially at the UN, where the framing becomes one of process legitimacy in the form of consensus-based voting and procedural design (EU 2024e; EU 2025c). As an interviewee noted, this distinction is difficult to explain to external partners, who perceive it as prioritising EU procedural control over transformative tax policy (Interview 11). A foundational tension runs throughout: despite the EU's efforts at a uniform tax policy, EU member states consistently invoke national sovereignty¹⁰ over taxation (Boukal et al. 2025). Where the EU has succeeded in building a common position, as with the global minimum tax, it can speak with one voice; where it has not, such as in the UN tax process, it struggles to project a coherent story, exposing a gap between the EU's identity narrative as a multilateral actor and a policy narrative still shaped by member-state sovereignty.

In climate, the EU policy narrative has also undergone a visible transformation in recent years. The 2019 European Green Deal frames climate action as a broad social transformation about quality of life, solidarity, biodiversity, and collective mobilisation: it is the EU's “new growth strategy” and the “centrepiece” of the new Commission (von der Leyen 2019). By 2024, the narrative focus had moved to predictability, industrial decarbonisation, and energy independence, with the argument that climate change's “economic losses far outweigh the cost of climate action” (European Commission 2024). By late 2025 and 2026, the EU's climate story was even more tightly linked to competitiveness, resilience, and strategic autonomy: as Commissioner Hoekstra notes, “the trick is to make sure it is a bridge with competitiveness, that we are making a business case out of it, and that we are enhancing our independence” (Hoekstra 2026a). It is worth noting that competitiveness arguments are not entirely new. As interviewees noted, the EU has a history of deploying green growth and decoupling arguments to make the economic case for climate action (Interview 1). However, under the second von der Leyen Commission, these framings grew in their centrality: the April 2026 Council Conclusions on EU Energy and Climate Diplomacy are a telling illustration, opening with a standalone section on “strengthening EU sovereignty” that frames the clean transition as a driver of “innovation, economic growth and competitiveness” and a source of “energy and economic sovereignty,” and only then as a response to climate change itself (Council of the EU 2026c).

10 Notably, one interviewee noted that the sovereignty argument in taxation cuts both ways: it is invoked by member states resisting EU harmonisation, including Ireland and Estonia, and also implicitly by the EU itself when defending the OECD/G20 framework against the UN process, where it fears losing control (Interview 11).

In health, the policy narrative reflects a similar turn. EU documents between 2020 and 2022 frame COVID-19 as requiring urgent multilateral action in the form of an international pandemic agreement, financing reforms, and a stronger WHO, as “health has no borders: it is a global common good” (European Commission 2022). However, a shift becomes visible with the launch of the 2022 Global Health Strategy, in which High Representative Borrell framed health as “a geopolitical issue” and tied it to the EU’s open strategic autonomy (Borrell 2022). By 2025, the EU foregrounded structural reforms, efficiency, cost-effectiveness, and adaptation to a “new financial reality” (EU

Where the EU has succeeded in building a common position, it can speak with one voice; where it has not, it struggles to project a coherent story.

2025b). Key policy priorities like pandemic prevention, One Health, and equitable access to health services remained throughout, but were increasingly mediated through feasibility, sovereignty, security concerns, and financing constraints. Here, the TRIPS waiver debate is a revealing case: the EU affirmed equitable access as an objective while arguing that voluntary, incentive-compatible arrangements were the appropriate mechanism, and bilateral vaccine donations bypassed the multilateral initiative COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access (COVAX) for

reasons of political visibility (Fernández and Heinzl 2025a). These tensions persisted into the WHO Pandemic Agreement negotiations, where the EU’s emphasis on internal uniformity produced positions that Plural South delegates perceived as inflexible (Fernández and Dijkstra 2026).

In human rights, the EU’s policy narrative appears the most resistant to interest-based framings, remaining steadfast in its priorities of gender mainstreaming, sanctions, dialogue, and civil society support. However, its tone has grown increasingly defensive: by 2026, the EU commits to “counter false narratives, disinformation and foreign information manipulation” that “threaten the foundations of democratic societies,” saying it will use whatever tool necessary to protect these rights (Council of the EU 2026a). Gender and LGBTIQ+ rights are framed as sites of active contestation and an EU priority, with the “growing spread of anti-gender and anti-LGBTIQ+ narratives” (European Commission 2025) threatening the progress from the last decades – a progress that is “fragile and not irreversible” (European Commission 2020; European Commission 2025). In migration, the decoupling between narrative and practice is acute: the EU formally aligns with the language of the Global Compacts while, in practice, prioritising control and externalisation through bilateral arrangements that link migration management to development aid and visa facilitation (Peerboom, Tsourdi, and Kenkel 2025).

In its digitalisation policy, the EU’s narratives are a mixed bag. In cryptocurrency governance, the policy narrative frames crypto-assets as a source of “systemic risk,” justifying strong regulation, while promoting the Digital Euro as a sovereignty tool (Lagarde 2025). This dual approach has become isolated since Trump’s re-election shifted the US to a more pro-crypto stance, leaving the EU as the main remaining champion of multilateral crypto regulation (Schaaf 2025). In cyberspace, the EU advances voluntary norms, confidence-building measures, and multi-stakeholder participation rather than new binding treaties (Marconi and Greco 2025; EU 2024c). As interviews confirmed, keeping the conversation at the level of high-level principles has so far made EU-member-state coordination easier and has helped avoid the harder implementation questions (Interview 6). In AI governance, the EU

frames trustworthy regulation as the foundation of both innovation and competitiveness, using this to push for international regulation to accompany an “AI-first” approach to European business, Europe-based AI (Giga-)factories, and greater private-public partnership (von der Leyen 2025b). Interviewees warned that these framings risk appearing hollow if Europe continues to struggle economically and competitively in the AI space, where the gap between regulatory ambition and industrial capacity is growing (Interview 8).

EU Narratives: Findings and Patterns

Looking across all three levels of analysis, the EU’s communication is clearly in tension. At the identity level, the EU consistently projects its role as a multilateral champion, a leader by example, a regulatory power, and a values-based actor. At the system level, however, this stable identity uncomfortably sits alongside an increasingly fragmented account of the international order that oscillates between committed, constrained, and instrumental multilateralism. At the policy level, narratives shift towards competitiveness and conditionality, in contrast to the predominantly multilateralism-oriented framing that the EU’s identity narrative still projects. The outcome is an EU whose sense of self has remained largely stable even as the stories it tells about the world and the policies it narrates and pursues move in different directions, producing a widening gap between identity, policy, and practice.

Table 1 summarises the key narratives across all three levels and seven EU policy areas. The final column assesses each area’s narrative alignment, i.e., the degree to which the EU’s system, identity, and policy narratives tell a compatible story. Areas are coded as *aligned* where all three levels broadly reinforce one another, *strained* where inconsistencies are isolated between individual levels or within particular forums, and *fragmented* where the narrative levels actively pull in different directions. Where the alignment varies across sub-domains within a policy area, it is labelled as mixed. The bottom row applies the same logic horizontally, summarising how consistent each narrative level is across the seven policy areas.

A few findings immediately stand out. First, the EU’s identity narratives are the most stable, even as the system and policy narratives shift around them. Second, at both the system and policy level, there is a clear tension between sovereignty and interests-based framings on one hand and cooperation and values-based ones on the other; however, this tension has not (yet) surfaced at the identity level. Third, while the EU’s policy narratives are distinct in each area, they share a broad direction: across trade, taxation, cryptocurrencies, climate, and health, policy narratives have moved towards greater competitiveness, strategic autonomy, and conditionality. Finally, the alignment between the three narrative levels is strongest in the domains where the EU argues based on its values – human rights, cyberspace, and AI – and slightly less strong in more economically-framed domains – trade, taxation, and cryptocurrency – in which the system and policy narratives are broadly strategic, but the identity narrative has not caught up. By contrast, the EU’s narratives are the most fragmented in climate, health, and migration, where both its system and policy narratives are in flux. These patterns are the starting point for the evaluation that follows.

Table 1: EU Strategic Narratives and Their Alignment

POLICY AREA	SYSTEM NARRATIVE	IDENTITY NARRATIVE	POLICY NARRATIVE	NARRATIVE ALIGNMENT
Trade	Instrumental multilateralism Existential crisis framing, open strategic autonomy	Multilateral champion + leader by example Identity under pressure from geopolitical framing	Competitiveness, de-risking, bilateral partnerships; WTO reform	Strained Instrumental system narrative + policy narrative align with growing geopolitical actor claim; internal incoherence at the policy level; still multilateral champion and leader by example identity
Taxation	Instrumental multilateralism Forum-dependent; OECD cooperative, UN contested	Multilateral champion + regulatory power Front-runner identity	Fairness + simplification (OECD); process legitimacy (UN); sovereignty tensions	Strained Largely consistent within forums but inconsistent across them
Climate	Constrained multilateralism Committed to Paris, but system increasingly questioned	Multilateral champion + leader by example + values-based Strategic framing growing	Shift from social transformation to competitiveness and industrial advantage	Fragmented Identity remains values-based while system and policy narratives move towards strategic framings
Health	Constrained multilateralism WHO as cornerstone, but managerial turn	Multilateral champion + values-based Tension between values champion and managerial power	From multilateral solidarity to efficiency, cost-effectiveness, strategic autonomy	Fragmented Identity remains values-based while system and policy narratives move towards strategic framings
Human Rights	Committed multilateralism System under assault but institutions remain legitimate	Multilateral champion + values-based actor Defender of norms	Principled defence; increasingly defensive framing	Aligned Narrative is coherent; pressure comes from outside and from a perceived inconsistency between words and practice
Migration	Constrained multilateralism Compacts endorsed but operationally sidelined	Multilateral champion externally Fragmented and pragmatic internally	Multilateral framing decoupled from practice; control and conditionality dominate	Fragmented Identity and system claims decoupled from policy narratives on the UN Compacts
Digitalisation	Committed multilateralism (cyberspace / AI) + Instrumental multilateralism (crypto) Rights-based order vs sovereignty	Multilateral champion + regulatory power Rights-based in cyber/AI, defensive in crypto	Rights-based voluntary norms (cyber); risk framing + Digital Euro sovereignty (crypto); trustworthy innovation (AI)	Mixed Aligned where rights-based framing dominates (cyberspace, AI); strained where sovereignty and geopolitical concerns dominate (crypto)
NARRATIVE ALIGNMENT	Fragmented	Aligned	Fragmented via a directional shift	

Evaluating EU Narratives

The three-level analysis above maps what the EU says about the world, about itself, and about its policies; this section evaluates how well it does that job. Drawing on the three qualities identified in the strategic-narratives literature – *coherence, credibility, and context-sensitivity* – as well as the findings above and interviews with ENSURED researchers, it reflects on where EU narratives work, where they fall short, and why. What emerges is an actor who has distinct narrative assets, but whose narratives are being undermined by structural problems that run deeper than messaging alone. Each of the four reflections below traces one dimension of this problem.

1 The EU's consistent identity is an asset but masks fragmentation across the narrative levels.

Arguably, the EU's stable and consistent identity is both a major plus point and a hindrance. Across seven very different policy domains, the EU returns to the same core claims about who it is – a multilateral champion, a leader by example, a regulatory power, and a values-based actor. For an actor as large and diverse as the EU, this degree of institutional coherence is no

What emerges is an actor who has distinct assets, but whose narratives are being undermined by structural problems that run deeper than messaging alone.

small feat. A recognisable narrative provides audiences with a baseline for understanding what the EU stands for, making EU communications distinct even across varied policy contexts. It also gives the EU a degree of narrative resilience: when EU officials or member states shift in response to geopolitical pressures, the underlying identity claim of the EU as a principled multilateral actor continues to provide a frame of reference. Plus, in a geopolitical environment where many actors' communications are reactive and unpredictable – where the

US has oscillated between multilateral engagement and withdrawal, and where Russia and China project systemic counter-narratives (Custer et al. 2022) – the EU's stable sense of self gives audiences something they can orient themselves around.

But this stability is increasingly also a liability. While the EU's identity narrative holds steady, its account of the world does not. The EU has no single, overarching narrative of global governance. Instead, its system narrative is fragmented across domains, oscillating between committed multilateralism in human rights and digitalisation, constrained multilateralism in climate, health, and migration, and a more instrumental multilateralism in trade and taxation. These three narratives follow a discernible pattern that is closely related to how directly geopolitical disruption has challenged the frameworks in question, but the EU has not developed an overarching account that integrates these different stories. As a result, the EU may appear reactive rather than agenda-setting at the global level, with a story of the world shifting to serve the needs of each context rather than expressing an underlying vision of where the

international system is headed. Where the three levels *do* align – at times in human rights, cyberspace, and AI – the EU’s narrative is at its most coherent and, according to some, its most credible (Interview 8). But this coherence is increasingly the exception, not the rule.

② EU policy narratives are progressively drifting away from its system and identity narratives.

At the policy level, meanwhile, the picture is less one of fragmentation than of directional drift. Across several domains, policy narratives have moved away from solidarity, transformation, and collective ambition towards competitiveness, feasibility, and strategic autonomy. The 2019 Green Deal, framed as a broad social transformation, has given way to a climate story tightly linked to competitiveness, industrial advantage, and climate’s “business case” (Hoekstra 2026a). In health, early documents framing COVID-19 as requiring urgent multilateral solidarity have been replaced by language foregrounding structural reforms, efficiency, and adaptation to a “new financial reality” (Michel 2020; EU 2025b). In trade, the language of openness and fairness persists, but the focus has shifted towards bilateral partnerships, de-risking, and unilateral measures. This leaves the EU implying multiple things at once: that it is committed to solidarity and equity *and* that it must prioritise its interests in the face of financial and geopolitical realities; that it is a good partner that leads by example *and* that it puts European competitiveness above all else. These are not contradictory per se – the EU is navigating exactly these tensions in real time – but they are difficult to hold together convincingly without being honest about the tension, and the EU has not yet found a way to do that well.

③ The EU adapts its communications to specific contexts, but lacks a meta-narrative to explain it.

It is worth noting that the EU’s system narratives reflect an awareness of the contexts it is navigating. Rather than applying a single multilateral script to every governance arena, the EU adjusts its account of the system to reflect what is happening. It defends existing frameworks in human rights and digitalisation where they remain effective, pushes for systemic reform in climate and health where the regime is seen as insufficiently delivering, and adapts its approach in trade and taxation where geopolitics has made multilateral action difficult. This contextual sensitivity mirrors what Miskimmon and O’Loughlin (2020) call “going with the grain of international affairs,” and it is, in principle, important for reaching audiences and influencing policy. The problem is thus not with the differentiation itself, but rather the absence of an overarching account that explains it. When the EU adjusts its narrative across policy areas without explanation, what could be seen as principled flexibility

reads instead as fragmentation. This is compounded by the EU's tendency to tell different stories about the same issue depending on which institutional setting it is in (as is the case with taxation). The distinction lies in adapting the narrative to different policy arenas and audiences – a communicative strength – and telling contradictory stories about the same issue, which is a credibility problem. The EU currently does both, and without a meta-narrative to explain the former, audiences cannot easily distinguish it from the latter.

④ The perceived 'say-do' gap threatens EU narrative credibility and cannot be solved by comms alone.

Cutting across all of these points is perhaps the EU's most acute narrative challenge: the distance between what it says it stands for and what it is perceived to do. Strategic narratives derive their persuasive power not only from the consistency with which something is said but from whether it is seen to be true (Schmitt 2018). When EU communications and perceived actions diverge, the narrative is less believable and invites counter-narratives that are hard to rebut as they contain a kernel of truth. Several cases in this analysis hint at this problem: in global health, the EU emphasised equitable vaccine

access while simultaneously opposing the TRIPS waiver and routing bilateral vaccine donations outside COVAX (Fernández and Heinzel 2025a). In trade, the EU presents itself as a defender of the rules-based multilateral system while at times pursuing unilateral instruments justified through 'WTO compatibility' arguments (Weinhardt et al. 2025). In migration, the EU's endorsement of the Global Compacts coexists with an operational reality driven by conditionality (Peerboom, Tsourdi, and Kenkel 2025). Even in human rights, an area with a more coherent EU narrative, interviewees pointed to a significant 'say-do'

gap: the EU's principled identity is undermined by its actions and rhetoric in other policy areas – particularly its border management policy, divided positions on Gaza and Palestinian rights, and ongoing legacies of colonialism (Interviews 4, 5, 9, 10) – which are raised consistently by Plural South states as evidence of double standards (Darnal 2024; Naduvath 2025). No matter how good, no communications strategy can solve these tensions, as they stem from policy choices and a changing global order.

Compounding this, the EU has historically designed its external communications around its own norms and values, producing persistent gaps between how the EU itself perceives its role and how it is received abroad (Song and Fanoulis 2023). An EU that does not systematically study what its global audiences take away from its messages cannot know which of its narrative choices are landing – and which may be reinforcing the very perceptions of hypocrisy and double standards it seeks to overcome. In an environment where actors also seek to win over these audiences with counter-narratives about a different (non-multilateral) global order, the EU cannot afford to leave this gap open.

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Towards Narrative Realism

These strengths and weaknesses point to a core tension at the heart of EU strategic communications: the EU's story was written for a more cooperative world. What should the EU's strategic narrative be at a moment when multilateral governance is increasingly contested? The tempting answer – that the EU should just tell a more coherent multilateral story – is not always possible. The EU regularly faces situations in which there is no multilateral option available, and in which it must make the best policy choice from a limited menu. This constraint takes several forms: consensus-based decision-making allows authoritarian states to dilute outcomes in forums the EU depends on; US withdrawal or obstruction removes a partner whose weight made multilateral solutions viable; member-state divisions prevent the EU from speaking with one voice in forums in which doing so is crucial. In each case, what often remains is a set of less-than-ideal options like bilateral arrangements, plurilateral coalitions, and unilateral tools that the EU pursues out of necessity rather than preference.

This quagmire requires more than an improved communications strategy: better strategic narratives alone cannot solve what is ultimately a policy problem. What narratives *can* do (but what the EU's current approach often fails to do) is acknowledge these constraints openly. The EU's tendency to project a multilateral identity in contexts where its choices are more conditional does not make those choices less visible: it may well have the opposite

effect, making the gap between claim and practice rife for counter-narratives.

Better strategic narratives alone cannot solve what is ultimately a policy problem.

To square this circle requires a kind of 'narrative realism.' Proposed by Nasralla and Poghosyan (2026), narrative realism describes a policy story that can survive contact with reality. It is a narrative that treats audiences as participants in a shared world, allows for contradiction because political life is contradictory, and names losses because trade-offs that cannot be spoken cannot be made legitimate. Where the EU's current narrative architecture tends towards what Nasralla and Poghosyan call "sloganifying without narrative" (i.e., asserting multilateral commitment where reality is more conditional), narrative realism would mean explaining, rather than evading, the gap.

That being said, certain elements of this thinking are already visible within the EU's communications. Addressing the EU Ambassadors Conference in March 2026, President von der Leyen called for a "more realistic and interest-driven foreign policy" and openly questioned whether institutions designed for a post-war multilateralism still serve the EU's credibility as a geopolitical actor (von der Leyen 2026). However, a single speech does not constitute a new meta-narrative, and von der Leyen's realism is primarily directed at policy doctrine rather than at how the EU narrates its choices. Nor is it uncontested: Council President Costa responded the following day by recommitting to the rules-based order (Costa 2026) – an apt illustration of the divided voice this report describes. But this new Commission vocabulary demonstrates that the honest acknowledgement of constraints narrative realism requires is no longer unspeakable at the most senior political level.

Applied to the EU's strategic communications, narrative realism would offer a more durable foundation than consistency alone in two ways. First, it would

reduce the credibility costs generated by the say-do gap. An EU that narrates its choices transparently – explaining the trade-offs, why it made the choice it did, and what or who is to blame – gives critics less fodder to work with than one that projects an image audiences know is incomplete. Second, it would provide a more flexible framework for a world in geopolitical rupture. A narrative built on the claim that the EU always acts multilaterally is fragile since every departure from that claim is a failure; a narrative built on honest acknowledgement of constraints is much harder to destabilise. As Miskimmon and O’Loughlin (2026) argue, effective narratives require “dialogue and reflexivity,” and this applies to how the EU narrates itself as much as to how it engages with others.

Conclusion: The Path to Rupture-Proof Narratives

This report set out to map the EU's strategic narratives across seven policy domains and ask a practical question: What is the current state of the EU's global governance story, and where is it hitting a wall? The analysis reveals that while the EU has a recognisable narrative about who it is – a multilateral champion, a leader by example, a regulatory power, and a values-based actor – this identity is increasingly decoupled from the international order it projects and the policy framings it deploys. The result is a set of tensions at the heart of EU strategic communications: between the stable identity it projects and the fragmented world it describes, between what it says and what it is seen to do, and between the story it tells in one room and the one it tells in another. This misalignment is not evenly distributed. In human rights, cyberspace, and AI, the EU's narrative is broadly coherent, if under strain. In climate, health, and migration, values-based identity claims sit alongside geopolitical policy narratives without addressing why. Finally, in trade and taxation, the EU's story changes depending on where it is at.

But improving the EU's storytelling cannot solve what is ultimately a policy dilemma: the EU increasingly faces geopolitical standoffs with no multilateral solution, something no narrative can change. What narratives can do is acknowledge these constraints openly – offering a more durable foundation for credibility than a consistent story alone. In practice, this report's findings point to what this might require: narrating the tensions documented here rather than smoothing them over; a meta-narrative that situates the EU's differentiated stances on global governance within a broader story of principled flexibility; treating the say-do gap as a narrative risk at early stages of the policy design process; and grounding narrative design in audiences, since what resonates in Brussels does not necessarily travel to Brasília, Pretoria, or Jakarta. As Blockmans (2026, 13) argues, the EU must “reframe and own the narrative to defend values and demonstrate the utility of multilateral governance.” This report starts the work of specifying what that reframing requires: a more honest account of the policy choices the EU makes.

Global governance is increasingly a contest over narratives as much as over rules and resources. The EU has long acted as if its multilateral story would speak for itself: this report has tried to show why it will not. It finds that the EU's narrative architecture was built for a more cooperative world, and it has not yet found a way to honestly narrate the one it actually inhabits. A core identity projected uniformly across domains where practice is anything but uniform does not hold up under scrutiny – and scrutiny is exactly what the EU can expect. The good news is that the EU has a lot to work with: a clear sense of its values and where it comes from, its policy achievements, and a track record of showing up for multilateral institutions when others have walked away. That story is worth telling, but it needs to be told honestly by acknowledging constraints, explaining choices, and being willing to name the pain points. That task may be harder than drafting a more compelling strategic communications strategy, but it is also the best hope for building credible EU narratives that can hold water in today's disordered world.

List of Interviews

Number	Date	Interviewee	Location
1	03/25/2026	ENSURED Researcher	Online
2	03/26/2026	ENSURED Researcher	Online
3	03/26/2026	ENSURED Researcher	Online
4	03/26/2026	ENSURED Researcher	Online
5	03/26/2026	ENSURED Researcher	Online
6	03/31/2026	ENSURED Researcher	Online
7	03/31/2026	ENSURED Researcher	Online
8	04/01/2026	ENSURED Researcher	Online
9	04/02/2026	ENSURED Researcher	Online
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11	04/02/2026	ENSURED Researcher	Online
12	04/08/2026	ENSURED Researcher	Online

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