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***Why Europe? Narratives and Counter-Narratives of European Integration***, by Alina Bârgăoanu, Raluca Buturoiu and Loredana Radu (eds.), Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2017, 296 pages., ISBN-13: 978-3631679296

**Book Review by Georgiana Udrea<sup>1</sup>**

**Abstract:** *The current volume promotes a critical yet constructive approach to European integration by placing current communication practices (including the visibility and media coverage of European issues, public discourse, elites and ordinary citizens' perceptions of the EU, civic participation, etc.) at the heart of this process. Blending theoretical discussions with empirical research on the hottest EU-topics at the moment, the book draws attention to the constituent role of communication in bridging the widening gap between the EU and its citizens. Although EU communication practices might seem of minor importance at a time when the European project is confronted with what many people call an existential crisis, the editors of this book convincingly argue that there is no other viable way towards a legitimized, functional European project that enjoys the support of its people. In the absence of a European communication arena, the EU's efforts to institutionalize collective policy solutions, procedures or commitments will remain without echo.*

**Keywords:** *EU communication, crisis, media frames and narratives, European integration*

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Over the course of a decade, the EU has been faced with an entire set of economic, political and social crises that have occasioned deep questions regarding the future directions and, to some extent, the very existence of the European project. Being still far from a satisfactory resolution, all these dramatic events, from the euro and the Greek debt crisis, until the most recent refugee crisis and Brexit, overlap and fuel each other, exerting an overwhelming pressure over an increasingly weakened Union. They create a persistent feeling of uncertainty and powerlessness in as far as both European leaders and common citizens are concerned, while constantly feeding the negative discourse that frames the EU as suffering from a chronic incapacity to deal with its everlasting dramas and their challenging consequences. In a very short amount of time, instead of paving its way towards “an ever closer union”, the EU seems to have rather stepped in “an ever bigger crisis”, a situation that many perceive as a make-or-break issue for the European structure.

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The idea that the European Union is subject to a survival test has also started to emerge in some of the most prominent European leaders' public statements (Angela Merkel and Jean-Claude Juncker make no exception). Their once optimistic or, at least, more cautious EU-related discourse began to reflect current preoccupations regarding "the critical point" the Union has reached and "the existential crisis" it is confronted with nowadays. Indeed, the disintegrating tendencies, the populism and the anti-European views on the rise in several states in Europe or the Euroscepticism (an increasingly familiar story which is often invoked in the defence of the national interest) cannot be disregarded or superficially treated anymore, as they have the ability to seriously hamper the functioning of the Union and its future standing.

In this turbulent and unstable context, the collective volume *Why Europe? Narratives and counter-narratives of European integration*, coordinated by Alina Bârgăoanu, Raluca Buturoiu and Loredana Radu, and published last year by the prestigious Peter Lang Publishing House adds a valuable contribution to a fervent debate on the most recent EU-related topics. The title of the book, timely and suggestively chosen, indicates in the current debate a slight shift from the old question "What kind of Europe/ European Union are we dealing with?" to a new dilemma – "Why Europe?" that, although rarely uttered loudly, sounds even more alarming than the previous one. If the answer to the first question was often outlined in different and circumstantial overtones depending on the crisis at stake (*real* Europe pointing either to the *Eurozone* during the Greek and Euro crisis or to the *Schengen* area during the refugee crisis; and, more recently, to the *export-oriented European countries* led by Germany in the context of the export crisis), the second question almost automatically sends to another neuralgic point: "What unites us as Europeans?," "What do we (still) have in common after all?"

In order to reiterate some already acknowledged answers to the latter query, we could, first and foremost, refer to the peace period that has been established seven decades ago as the most valuable asset that all the Europeans share in. But it has become quite obvious that this peace is increasingly threatened by both the internal rifts and the external challenges that the European Union is confronted with on a daily basis. We can also talk about the economic prosperity, and the various political and social benefits resulting from the EU's membership as important elements in fostering a common European sense of belonging. Still, these advantages have always been unevenly distributed and they continue to create both "winners" and "losers" in integration and Europeanisation processes. Equally, the security (not least economic security) umbrella provided by the EU for a continent-wide trading block is, for sure, essential when it comes to what keeps the Europeans united. However, in times of Brexit and recent migratory waves, is the new Europe that is being shaped by all these sensitive events able to feel at shelter anymore?

Therefore, under these difficult circumstances, another pertinent question to ask is related to the very foundation that helps the Europeans build memories and common representations of what is bridging the gap between Europe and themselves. Put differently, what precisely brings the Europeans together despite all the problems that seem to divide and tear them apart? A possible answer lies, as the editors suggest from the beginning, in the role that communication and the European public sphere could play as viable

solutions for reducing the cleavages between institutions and citizens, for legitimizing and strengthening the Union, and for promoting its policies in order to gain popular support. And, although the issue of EU communication and its shortcomings might appear of a minor importance given the growing feelings of injustice and inequality in the intra-European context, this book offers reliable evidence for the contrary. Hence, one of the broad objectives set forth is the exploration of new theoretical and empirical frameworks that could explain how current communication practices, including the visibility and media coverage of European issues, public discourse, citizens' perception of the EU and civic participation impact upon the development of a European communication arena. In this respect, using interdisciplinary perspectives and angles, the present volume brings together several contributions from leading professionals and researchers (from both Romania and abroad) with high expertise in the field of political science, sociology, communication and European integration. Its general aim is to promote a critical yet constructive approach to European integration by placing communication at the heart of this process.

The book brings together three main sections. The first one, titled "*Media Coverage of the European Union in Turmoil Contexts. Prevailing frames and competing narratives*" investigates the media coverage of the current EU-related topics. The chapters in this section are built around the main trends used by the media system to cover the complex European issues, focusing on media frames and narratives associated with the Europeanisation process, media representations of Europe in times of crisis, EU communication practices, and the communication deficit at the EU level, a concept that has long been debated in the dedicated literature.

The second section of the volume, titled "*Perceptions of Europe. Are We Blaming the „Victim”?*" focuses on people's understandings and attitudes towards the European Union. The contributions in this section aim at providing a comprehensive perspective on both ordinary citizens and elites' stances regarding the EU and its future in the context of the severe and multi-layered crises it has been shaken by in the recent past. European identity, public perceptions of the EU and the European integration process, the refugee crisis with its long-term consequences, and the future directions of Europe and the EU are just some of the topics that are thoroughly discussed along the six chapters underpinning this section.

The last part of the present book, suggestively titled "*Counter-narratives of European Integration: Populism, Extremism and Euro-denial*" brings to the centre of attention new perspectives on populism, a concept that seems to have found its utmost expression in Euroscepticism. The opposing views towards the EU seem to have become more and more rapidly the "space" of expression preferred by extremist actors, a space that expands and enlarges its surface once with every failure of the European institutions in terms of public communication and action. The authors that sign the chapters in this final section raise signals on the traps associated with extremism and populism in the political discourse. Among them, the fact that in order to respond to the increasingly Eurosceptic public opinion many political leaders artificially oppose the national interest to the EU interests might be the most dangerous move.

Overall, the contributions in this volume provide a realistic and well-grounded perspective on the dynamics of EU communication and European integration processes and practices. Beyond the specific research results, the book invites us to reflect on the most suitable strategies for bridging the widening gap between the European Union and its citizens in the current times of tension and vulnerabilities, when the Brexit vote and the immigration crisis are only the most recent challenges that the European community is faced with.

**About the coordinators of the book:**

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