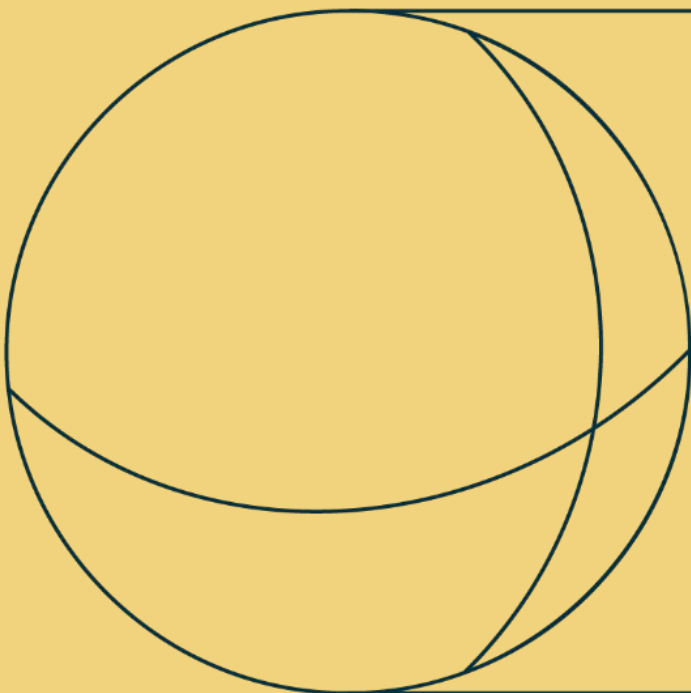


policy brief

Playing the Narrative Game: A Roadmap to Better European Policy Stories

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Abstract

Global governance is increasingly a contest of competing stories, and the European Union (EU) is already a player, whether it means to be or not. The EU tells a remarkably consistent story about who it is – a multilateral leader, driven by its values – even as that identity drifts from how it describes the world and the choices it makes. At first glance, this looks like a messaging problem. In reality, however, these gaps stem from policy constraints and a changing global order – a gap no communications strategy, no matter how good, could fill on its own. But leaving this mismatch unaddressed only fuels counter-narratives among sceptical audiences, including key partners in the Plural South, who read the gap between EU words and deeds as evidence of double standards. The better move is a strategy of narrative realism: acknowledging constraints, explaining trade-offs, and naming losses. This brief sets out four practical steps for playing the narrative game better.

Citation Recommendation

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Introduction

In her March 2026 address to EU ambassadors in Brussels, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen did not open with her usual affirmations of multilateral faith. Instead, she began by discussing the gravity of the war in the Middle East and argued that Europe's first task was to see the world "as it actually is." What followed was striking, coming from a sitting Commission President: Europe, she said, can no longer be a "custodian for the old-world order," arguing that the moment demanded "a more realistic and interest-driven foreign policy."

Read as policy doctrine, the speech is one more example of the EU's turn towards security and strategic autonomy. As a narrative, however, its implications are more far-reaching. The EU's most senior figure set aside the standard script of multilateral values and cooperation and, instead, did something EU communications rarely do: she named the EU's constraints, conceding that Europe cannot always reconcile its values with its interests. Whether you agree with her policy direction or not, this is an instinct – namely, to 'tell it straight' – that has been sorely missing from the EU's stories about global governance.

Still, one speech does not a new narrative strategy make. The very next day, European Council President António Costa recommitted the European Union to the rules-based order, returning to familiar language of multilateralism as the EU's highest priority. The realism von der Leyen gestured at has not yet become a standard way of narrating what the EU does, and why.

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This brief argues that it should. Global governance is increasingly a contest over whose account of the world prevails. Told well, the EU's story can help shape what comes next; told as though the case for multilateralism speaks for itself, it cedes the ground to rivals with counter-narratives of their own. Drawing on the ENSURED research report, *The Story of Global Governance*, that covers EU narratives across its trade, taxation, climate, health, human rights, migration, and digitalisation policies, I outline why the EU's storytelling has become strained and offer four steps for EU officials looking to tell a better story of global governance.

The EU's Narrative Dilemma

Strategic narratives – the stories political actors tell to shape how audiences see the past, present, and future of international politics – can be examined at three levels: how an actor describes 1) the international system, 2) its own role or identity within it, and 3) why it makes the policy choices it makes. When those three point in the same direction, a narrative is more consistent and often more recognisable. Alternatively, when they pull in different directions, audiences notice the inconsistency.

In today's environment, the EU's narratives often do not align across levels or even, at times, between its different policy areas. Overall, the EU tells a consistent story about its identity – arguably, too consistent. As shown in [Pridmore \(2026\)](#), across key policy domains, the EU returns to the same four claims: it consistently describes itself as a 1) multilateral champion, 2) leader by example, 3) regulatory power, and 4) values-based actor. That consistency can be an asset, as it gives Brussels a recognisable role in a chaotic global environment and provides the EU 'brand' with a degree of resilience when individual officials or member states act out of turn, as publics know what the EU stands for. However, while the EU uniformly projects this multilateral identity, its actions are anything but uniform – the EU is often seen saying one thing, but its actions tell a different story.

At the same time, the EU's account of the international order has fragmented. The report finds the EU running three different system stories at once. In human rights, cyberspace, and AI governance, it defends the existing order against what it describes as a few 'bad actors' trying to undermine a system that works (i.e., a narrative of 'committed multilateralism'). In its climate, health, and migration policies, on the other hand, it describes the overall system as under strain and in need of serious reform to function ('constrained multilateralism'). And in its trade, taxation, and cryptocurrency domains, it treats multilateralism as conditional on the forum and the interests at stake, often describing the international order as a series of geopolitical power plays dominated by great powers ('instrumental multilateralism'). While each story may sound reasonable on its own, the cumulative effect makes the EU look reactive: its description of the world seeming to shift to suit each room rather than expressing a clear vision of the global order.

This combines with drifting EU policy narratives. Beneath the domain-specific justifications runs a directional shift away from solidarity and collective ambition and towards competitiveness, conditionality, and strategic autonomy. Concerning the EU's climate policy, the 2019 Green Deal's language of social transformation has given way to climate as a "[business case](#)" and a "[bridge with competitiveness](#)."

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Health has moved from COVID-19-style solidarity to structural reform and cost-effectiveness in a "[new financial reality](#)." And while the EU's trade policy keeps the vocabulary of openness, its focus has moved towards de-risking, bilateral deals, and unilateral tools.

Of course, none of this is without cause: the EU is having to make difficult trade-offs across its policy areas as global power politics ramp up and resources are increasingly in short demand. Still, this leaves the EU implying two things at once – both 'we lead on global solidarity' and 'we put European competitiveness first' – without fully explaining how these two seemingly conflictual positions match up.

Taken together, this presents the EU with a difficult dilemma: its perceived '[say-do gap](#)' is widening. EU leaders should not underestimate this challenge, as narratives derive their power not only from their reach but from whether audiences believe they are true. Several cases illustrate this

point: the EU championed equitable vaccine access while [opposing](#) the waiver for the Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) Agreement and routing donations around the COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access (COVAX) initiative; it vocally defends the rules-based trading system while striking bilateral deals that strain its core principles, such as the EU-US [Turnberry Agreement](#), which violates the Most-Favoured-Nation Principle; and it endorses the Global Compacts on migration while its [operational reality](#) on migration is driven by control and conditionality. Even in the EU's human rights policy, where narratives are the most coherent, its story [rings hollow](#) to many observers in the Plural South due to the EU's conduct elsewhere, such as on Gaza. This brings us to the most important takeaway from the research: a communications strategy alone cannot close a gap that originates as a policy problem.

Why Better Messaging Is Not Enough

The tempting fix would be to simply tell a more coherent multilateral story. But, in reality, the EU regularly finds itself in situations where there is no multilateral option: consensus rules let spoilers dilute outcomes, partners withdraw or change their policies, member-state divisions stop the EU speaking with one voice – the list goes on. What is left is a laundry list of second-best options: bilateral arrangements, plurilateral coalitions, and unilateral measures made from necessity, not preference. Insisting on a continuous multilateral story in those moments can have the opposite effect, highlighting the gap between rhetoric and practice and strengthening counter-narratives centred on the EU's double standards.

A better way would be to adopt a stance of [narrative realism](#): a communications strategy that tells policy stories based in the complicated reality, while also communicating a future vision of who the EU wants to be. Creating these kinds of narratives requires putting an emphasis on honesty and context rather than on the EU itself. For example, such narratives treat audiences as participants in a shared world by adjusting to the local context and de-centring European perspectives. What is more, a strategy of narrative realism would allow for contradictions by owning up to gaps and naming the trade-offs the EU is forced to make. Where the EU currently tends towards [“sloganifying without narrative”](#) – asserting multilateral commitment where reality is more conditional – narrative realism means explaining the underlying why.

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Of course, this is a tall order in a context rife with institutional voices, divided member states, and competing priorities. And, more fundamentally, improving its storytelling will not solve the dilemmas pushing the EU to act against its values in the first place. What narratives can do, however, is acknowledge these constraints openly, offering a more durable foundation for credibility than a consistent story alone – which, in a moment of geopolitical rupture and systemic counter-narratives, is something the EU desperately needs.

Towards a Better Narrative Strategy

What could such a narrative realism look like in practice? The following four recommendations are addressed to EU policymakers and communications practitioners alike. While putting these steps into place may not resolve the underlying policy dilemmas, a strategy of honest communication could help the EU sustain – and even improve – its credibility as the global order shifts around it and its policy choices become more contentious. This move is sorely needed: as [Blockmans \(2026\)](#) argues, the EU must “reframe and own the narrative to defend values” if it hopes to demonstrate the utility of multilateral governance.

Recommendations:

1

Narrate the tension. A main pain point in EU communications is the growing distance between the EU’s values and the policy narratives it projects. The EU is navigating many of these tensions in real time: between solidarity and competitiveness, between multilateral commitment and interest-based protections, and between what specific forums require it to say and what its governance priorities really are. What is often missing is an honest account of *why* these tensions exist. At moments when the EU cannot act multilaterally – e.g., because consensus is blocked or great-power politics forces its hand – it should openly explain why the EU is making the choice it is making, who or what is to blame, what values it is still trying to serve, and how (or if) this relates to its larger mission of multilateral transformation. This matters not just when external factors shut the door on multilateral options, but also when the EU has chosen a non-multilateral path for its own strategic reasons. In both cases, the honest account is more credible than either the retrofitted multilateral justification or total silence.

2

Develop a meta-narrative that frames choices as principled flexibility. The EU has no overarching narrative of global governance: its description of the international arena is fragmented across domains without an explanation of how they connect. Rectifying this requires a meta-narrative that fills the gap. Across its policy domains, the EU should develop an explicit account of why its approach varies that situates the shift from committed to constrained to instrumental multilateralism within a broader story of what it means to defend multilateral values in an era of geopolitical rupture. This is the kind of “[building-block narrative](#)” that communications scholars have called for: one that goes along with the grain of international affairs rather than projecting an idealised order that audiences no longer recognise. Making this story explicit and applying it consistently would convert what currently reads as fragmentation into something closer to principled flexibility. It would also help address the EU’s

forum-dependency problem, where the EU tells different stories about the same issue in different institutional settings. A meta-narrative would give audiences a framework for interpreting those differences rather than reading them as inconsistency.

3

Close the say-do gap – or at least stop pretending it is not there.

One of the most powerful counter-narratives available to the EU's critics is the mismatch between the EU's stated commitments and its observed behaviour. Particularly in trade, migration, health, and even human rights, this gap is well documented and increasingly difficult to rebut through communications alone. For policymakers, this means holding themselves accountable to commitments and, crucially, admitting when those commitments cannot be met, and explain why rather than papering over the obvious gap. For communications practitioners, it means treating the say-do gap as a narrative risk to be flagged early in the policy-design stage, avoiding an after-the-fact scramble. When the EU develops a new instrument, the question of whether it can be narrated consistently with existing positions should be part of the decision-making process. An EU that treats narrative credibility as a policy input, rather than a communications output, is better placed to build the trust that multilateral governance requires – and less vulnerable to the counter-narratives that the gap currently encourages.

4

Differentiate by audience and invest in knowing what works where.

The recommendations above assume that the EU knows which narrative approach is credible to which audience. In practice, it often does not: as discussed, EU external communications have historically been designed around the [EU's own norms and values](#), producing persistent gaps between how the EU perceives its role and how it is received abroad. An EU that crafts narratives for Brussels insiders and then exports them globally will likely find that what resonates in Geneva or New York does not travel to Brasília, Pretoria, or Jakarta. This is especially true in the Plural South, where the EU is sometimes characterised as [hypocritical and neocolonial](#) rather than as the multilateral champion it presents itself as, and where concerns about equity, representation, colonial legacies, and double standards consistently [shape](#) how EU communications land. Meaningful engagement with these audiences starts with understanding what they really hear when the EU speaks. To this end, EU communicators should treat audience research as a precondition for narrative design and avoid making it the final (and sometimes neglected) stage of their communications strategies. As [Miskimmon and O'Loughlin \(2026\)](#) observe, narrative alignment is negotiated rather than top-down, which requires listening as well as projecting.

Conclusion: EU Narratives for the Future of Global Governance

In a world in which global governance is increasingly understood through stories, the EU has a major stake in getting the narrative game right. Brussels' long-standing instinct has been to stand above the fray, acting as though the case for multilateralism will be believed on its own merits.

But refusing to play the narrative game is not the same as winning it. When

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the EU asserts a multilateral identity while making policy choices that undermine it, it does not rise above the contest so much as cede the telling to others: to systemic rivals building alternative orders, and to the sceptical partners who already see the distance between Europe's words and deeds as proof of double standards.

The four steps laid out here form an argument for playing that game well rather than pretending not to be in it. To improve its communications on global governance, the EU should see a strategy of narrative realism not as a retreat from its values, but as a roadmap for better defending them under scrutiny. This will not resolve the policy dilemmas underneath, nor is it meant to. But a story built on honest acknowledgement is far sturdier than one resting on a claim that collapses with every departure from multilateralism. In the present age of hard choices and great-power politics, proactively narrating its policies may make all the difference for the EU's road ahead.

About ENSURED

In an era marked by global challenges, international cooperation is more essential than ever. Yet multilateral initiatives too often end in gridlock, as dominant states seek to bend the global order to their own interests. Enter ENSURED, a Horizon Europe-funded research consortium studying how the EU and its member states can better defend multilateralism and make global governance more robust, effective, and democratic.

ENSURED focuses on key policy domains that by their very nature pose complex transnational challenges. Our research assesses the state of play in these different areas and investigates the EU's strengths and weaknesses as an actor working to defend and transform multilateralism. Embracing the ethos of multilateral cooperation, the ENSURED consortium comprises universities, think tanks, and civil society groups from across Europe, Brazil, India, South Africa, China, and the United States. We aim to equip policymakers in the EU with evidence-based insights, actionable recommendations, and practical tools to promote better global governance for a world in transition.

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