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The 'European way of life', a new narrative for the EU? Institutions' vs citizens' view

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ABSTRACT

The 'European way of life' (EWOL) has emerged as a new narrative in the communication of the European Union (EU) after the 2019 European elections. The article analyses the social relevance and meanings of this legitimizing narrative against the background of similar past communicative attempts; and compares its framing by EU institutions with its understanding by citizens. We rely on the results of a survey exploring the cultural and normative foundations of the European multi-level governance in eight countries, (France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Poland, Romania, Spain, UK). Our findings are twofold. First, the EWOL narrative does not differ much of previous narratives; and the popular perceptions of EWOL are in line with its institutional definition. Second, EWOL has a low public salience and remains an elusive topic. As a conclusion, it is unlikely to significantly alter EU legitimization.

EU politics usually comes to the fore in the media and in political discourses due to controversies related to structural crises of governance (the euro, migration, rule of law); or, more occasionally, about events with a 'human interest' dramatizing European institutions under a negative light (from the scandal leading to the resignation of the Santer Commission in 1999 to the 'Sofagate' regarding a breach of protocol during a visit of Ursula Von der Leyen in Ankara in April 2021). The debate about the European way of life (EWOL) appears as a mix between these two scenarios. It is intertwined both to feuds about long-standing bones of contention (mostly migration) and to critical junctures (the entry in function of a new college of Commissioners) and initiatives by specific actors.

In a nutshell, the story started after the announcement by the would-be president of the Commission Ursula Von der Leyen of her intention to mission a vice-president of the 'Protection of the European way of life' with competences over security, education, culture, social rights, youth, and migration. The linkage between EWOL and migration triggered the controversy that peaked on the 3rd of October 2019, during the audition of the applicant to the post Margaritis Schinas. Accused of legitimating the idea of 'Fortress Europe' under identity threat and as such to pave the way for the extreme right and populist forces, Schinas was endorsed by the European Parliament provided that his portfolio's title would be modified. On November 13, the Commission announced that the

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reference to EWOL was finally rephrased by replacing the priority to 'protect' it by the purpose to 'promote' it. The protective dimension was not abandoned but shifted from EWOL in itself to citizens and values, as stated by the Commission: *Priority 'Promoting our European way of life. Protecting our citizens and our values'* (Stroobants, 2019). The EWOL story went on, as the topic was institutionalized as a policy category encompassing some of the most salient issues on the EU agenda; and as a communicative resource used in the Commission's discourses. This hybrid status was illustrated later by the use of EWOL as an inclusive frame by Schinas on the 20th of April 2020 in an editorial calling for the necessity to rebuild the European way of life after the pandemic Schinas (2020); or by the Commission to advocate the Space Strategy for Europe and the strengthening of the EU' strategic autonomy.[1]

The purpose of this article is to assess the social relevance and meaning of EWOL as a legitimizing narrative. The approach is twofold. On the one hand, we analyse the uses of EWOL in the discourses of the protagonists (the president of the Commission and the Commissioner in charge, MEPs, to a lesser extent civil society and media actors). On the other hand, we confront the framing of EWOL by the EU institutions to its understanding by citizens. To do so, we rely on the findings of an original survey conducted in eight European countries.[2]

The article is organized as follows. The first part discusses EWOL as a policy and communicative narrative against the general background of EU legitimation and in its use by key European executive (Von der Leyen and Schinas), parliamentary (MEPs), civil society and media actors. The second part connects the institutional discourse about EWOL to the perceptions of the topic by European citizens. The conclusion highlights the findings and paves venues for future research.

Our findings show that, at least for now, EWOL remains a relatively elusive topic for citizens. Still, its popular perception appears in line with its institutional definition; and it does not create significant cleavages among Europeans. This last point may be less due to its consensual dimension than to its non-significance for most people. Overall, the EWOL narrative tends to confirm the usual features of European communication and is not likely to introduce major changes in terms of its societal outreach and effects.

EWOL in EU legitimation and politics

The debate about EWOL must be understood as the last-to-date step in the long march towards EU legitimation; and as one of the not-so-frequent battles in the European policy sphere that emerge in the media agenda, without altering significantly the usual strategic and discursive logics.

EWOL as a step in the long EU's quest for legitimization

In its search for legitimization, the EU has constantly oscillated between two discursive strategies. The first strategy frames the EU as a *sui generis* political system that is justified mostly by its outputs, the public goods (security, prosperity) offered to the citizens. It relies on utilitarian arguments and draws on market-driven communication in terms of means and resources. The second strategy duplicates the nation-state model to shape the EU as an imaginary community in the making and mobilize ethnocultural

claims. The two strategies have constantly alternated, competed and overlapped according to the period, the context and the issue at stake. Both have met the same constraints and limits (Foret, 2008).

Zooming on the discursive dimension, EWOL is a poster case of the 'narrative turn' in politics in general and EU politics in particular, refereeing to attempts by institutions to bridge the gap with citizens by putting forward stories to conveys their *raison d'être* to citizens (Bouza Garcia, 2017). At EU level, these efforts to recreate a consensus struggles with the dynamics of politicization and with the structural limits of the European public sphere. Narratives about the EU are multiple (Nobel/Economic/Social/Green/Global Europe), contradictory and varying from one sector or period to another (Manners & Murray, 2016). Narratives were developed both through the association of the EU with an issue (like international trade, Oleart, 2020), a thematic (austerity, Borriello, 2017) or a social process of Europeanization (Trenz, 2016) and circulation of transnational discourse from below (Scalise, 2015).

Regarding more specifically the attempts to anchor the European project in the hearts and minds of the citizens by dramatizing a congruence between culture and politics (Gellner, 1987), the advocacy for EWOL is part and parcel of the 'identity turn' in the legitimization of the EU. Speculations about the effects of interactions with and between Europeans on community-building are not new (Deutsch et al., 1957; Fligstein, 2008; Kuhn, 2015). The impossibility to ignore identity politics (Börzel & Risse, 2018) and the usual limits of the EU in this domain (Checkel & Katzenstein, 2009; Risse, 2014) have been highlighted. The EU's 'political identity' is best defined through its policies but this involves a significant risk of conflict as the result is different from one policy to another and does not imply a convergence of positions on European integration itself (Saurugger & Thatcher, 2019). EWOL may be considered as a proxy of this EU's political identity likely to vary and to be invested by divergent meanings according to the issue at stake and to the context.

For any European narrative, the main probability is to meet neither support nor rejection but indifference (Van Ingelgom, 2014). As a level of governance, the EU is most frequently ignored; or alternatively merged into a global perception of globalization. It constitutes a blurred object that does not create an imaginary powerful enough to impact directly political and social individual attitudes of citizens (Duchesne, 2010, p. 14). Nevertheless, the reference to the EU has become part of the political routine. It is a floating signifier that can be invested by various meanings, allowing everyone to project into it its own visions of the world and political ends. As such, EWOL may work like other existing European symbols, endowed with a weak cognitive and affective load in themselves but likely to take a specific meaning in some circumstances, especially when confronted to cultural differences (Bruter, 2005; Cram et al., 2011).

EWOL as a proxy for European identity and values

Successive narratives advocated a common cultural heritage, a European citizenship, a European identity, a Christian heritage, and common European values (Calligaro, 2021). 'European values' (EV) have been the master narrative since the end of the 1990s. They appeared for a while as a flexible, polysemic and market friendly repertoire, fully compatible with the legal and technocratic repertoires of action favoured by European institutions. However, EV have progressively shown their elitist bias, their limits to enlarge

the social constituency of the EU and their propensity to create conflicts of interpretation and backlash (Foret & Calligaro, 2019; Foret & Vargovčíková, 2021). EWOL is not a new notion but was little discussed in the recent literature in European studies. In management studies, it was used as a label to identify a specific European style in human resources practices relying on the 'transnationalization' of business in Europe and challenging the dominant American and Japanese models (Van Dijck, 1990); or to celebrate European environmental leadership through 'smart cities' (Rüttgers, 2020) and sustainable development (Perez & Murray Leach, 2018). In external affairs, the advocacy for EWOL is seen as a temptation for the EU to become a 'civilizational state' to counter systemic rivals like Russia or China (Glencross, 2021). Some policy reflections push further this reading by claiming that EWOL is a resource to embrace the language of particularism and let universalist value narratives go to do so (Dams & Ho, 2021). For political theorists, the promotion of EWOL is the outcome of the ambivalent liberal identity of the EU that requests to be defined in universal terms but prevents the polity to assert its uniqueness (Deleixhe, 2019).

Looking at the broader picture of the intellectual debate, EWOL relates to more long-standing discussions about European identity. The notion of way of life is associated by Gerard Delanty (Delanty, 2002) with the model termed as 'European pragmatism', looking for specificities referring less to cultural than to economic and social aspects of life under European integration: internal mobility, suppression of border controls, stronger links between national societies. As such, 'European pragmatism' does not address the problems of universalism or the commitment to a normative sense of identity but suggests a thicker sense of belonging rooted in actual practices than a mere compliance based on interests. A symbol of this 'European pragmatism' is the Euro as one 'example of something that can be gradually accommodated on the basis of partial continuity of ways of life and in the absence of complete disruption to established practices' (Delanty, 2002, p. 351).

Habermas himself, in his advocacy for its best-known device 'constitutional patriotism', mobilizes the 'common European way of life' or 'shared European experiences' to give more flesh and substance to the incoming political community. These notions tend to be restricted to the legacy of the World War II, the post-war welfare state and the legal culture centred on procedural rationality (Turner, 2004). In this perspective,

> the cultural resources upon which the framers of any European constitution might have to rely in order that it have roots are those embodied in a way of life which is stable and reliable, but stable and reliable not in opposition to rapid social and economic change, not as a compensatory traditionalism, but as a rationalized lifeworld inhabited by reflexively aware citizens, a post-traditional Sittlichkeit. (Turner, 2004, p. 301)

Here again, the reference to EWOL falls short to make Europe appear as a 'community of fate' (Schicksalsgemeinschaft) and is instrument to foster a rational political model.

How EWOL came to the fore of the EU agenda

The controversy about EWOL emerged about the label of a Commissioner portfolio in summer 2019. It was however influenced by past conflicts over migratory issues as well as by party competition and interinstitutional power games between member states,

the EP and the Commission. Besides, some differences may be observed between the debate about EWOL in the policy and the public spheres.

A controversy from scratch … that faded away?

When the design of the future Commissioners 'portfolios was publicized in summer 2019, the label of Schinas' one was immediately criticized by MEPs regarding the association between 'Protection of the European way of life' and 'legitimate fears and concerns about the impact of irregular migration' (Liberal Dutch MEP Sophie in 't Veld); or 'a contradiction between supporting refugees and European values' (German Green MEP Ska Keller). NGOs rejected the formula as a 'worrying message'. On the other side, Marine Le Pen claimed that the very existence of such a portfolio was 'a political victory on the European Union', as evidence that her ideas were prevailing Berretta (2019). Many laudatory or critical references were done to the 2015 discourse by Viktor Orbán where he was stating that, in the so-called migration crisis, '(…) what is at stake today is Europe and the European way of life, the survival or extinction of European values and nations – or, to be more precise, their transformation beyond all recognition' Sullivan (2015).

The meaning of and the controversy about EWOL did not evolve in a similar way the political sphere – respectively in the discourse of the Commission, in the EP and in inter-institutional power games – and in the public sphere.

The political and institutional sphere

EWOL in the discourse of the commission. President U. Von der Leyen gave a relatively conservative meaning to EWOL in the mission letter granted to Schinas in December 2019. The document highlighted six main points of competences: culture and sport; education; skills; integration of migrants and refugees; dialogue with churches and religious associations or communities, and with philosophical and non-confessional organizations; fight against antisemitism. It established Schinas as Vice-President and chair the Commissioners' Group on Promoting our European Way of Life. Beyond these functional features, the substantial definition of EWOL is as follow:

> The European way of life is built around solidarity, peace of mind and security. We must address and allay legitimate fears and concerns about the impact of irregular migration on our economy and society. (…) We must also work more closely together on security, notably on new and emerging threats that cut across borders and policies. (…) The European way of life is built on the principle of human dignity and respect for different beliefs, religions and cultures. (von der Leyen, 2019)

The topic is thus formulated as a search for a balance between a protective discourse against social, economic, security and identity risks and/or fears and respect of European values.

In a media contribution, Von der Leyen tried to circumscribe EWOL to the values institutionalized in the treaties and to frame it both as a natural routine that is still evolving and as a deliberative setting:

> For most of us, the notion of European way of life does not require any explanation: it is simply an everyday reality. This concept and its connotations have however created a debate last week. This is a good thing. And this is a debate that we should have in public. (von der Leyen, 2019)

She defended EWOL as a heritage shaped by sacrifices and challenged by external powers.

By contrast, in his answers to MEPs, Schinas emphasized more the cultural and historical dimension of the European way of life along his different policy competences: He stated:

> For me, being European is about respecting our diversity and promoting a way of life that champions those values of inclusion and solidarity. At its core, being European also means protecting the most vulnerable in society, at home and abroad. The diversity of cultures in Member States and their regions is our common heritage and is what makes us European. European culture is admired throughout the world. We should celebrate this, but we also need to protect it. Our European way of life entails respecting and promoting our diversity and pluralism, upholding our common cultural legacy and stimulating the continued dynamism and creativity of cross-border cooperation. (Schinas, 2019)

The protective dimension was well present, but the self-assertion of European history and culture ('admired throughout the world') and its advocacy worldwide was also salient.

During his two first years in function, Schinas made regular direct or indirect references to the notion of EWOL regarding his competences as shows the list of public interventions on his website. EWOL is equivalent to cybersecurity, 'putting forward our rule, the European values, the European way of doing things (…) essential for protecting our European way of life (…)' Schinas (2021). Frequently, it refers to move and absence of borders. 'Travel and movement restrictions have altered many aspects of our European Way of Life, such as the right to live, work and move freely across the continent' Schinas (2020). Schengen is a proxy for EWOL: 'Schengen has become part of our European way of life, and is an important element for making us feel not only Greeks or Swedes or Germans or Poles, but Europeans' Schinas (2020). Overall, Schinas did not give much cultural content to EWOL and remained rather in a legal-policy framing of the notion, cultural activities being simply hailed 'as essential aspect of the European way of life' Schinas (2020).

In Spring 2020, Schinas asserted its rhetoric use of EWOL by expressing the shift of its status from a bone of contention to an asset, or in his own words 'from Achilles' heel, to Achilles' shield' Schinas (2020). One year later in June 2021, he reiterated the advocacy for EWOL as a buffer for Europeans and as a common model of society and values Lamer and Declercq (2021). He spoke of a 'sweet revenge against those who contested the title of this vice-presidency (…) All those who framed EWOL as a binary choice: us against the rest of the world' have had to acknowledge that EWOL is our best buffer against drifts. Promotion or protection, it is not the label that matters, but the content. Regarding the content, he stated that 'There may not be a 'homo europeus' that thinks in a single way, but there is a 'corpus europeum' of values that are shared, a certain kind of model of society'. He confirmed that for him, 'way of life and values are synonymous' Lamer and Declercq (2021). This discursive trajectory confirmed EWOL as a durable master narrative for the Commission but also as one that was still an outgrowth of the European values narrative.

EWOL in the EP and in interinstitutional power games. To assess the salience of EWOL in EP politics, we rely on the analysis of parliamentary questions. We draw on content and discourse analysis of the MEPs' oral and written questions since the beginning of the 2019–2024 term, with a look at the earlier term to have a longer background. Questioning the Commission constitutes for MEPs the primary individual oversight mechanism of the European 'executive' (Proksch & Slapin, 2011, pp. 54–55). It is a resource to send messages

to social constituencies and interest groups and to attract media attention (Rozenberg & Martin, 2011, p. 394). Parliamentary questions are also excellent tools to understand dynamics of politicization within the EP (Guinaudeau & Costa, 2021).

Our research[3] shows that there was a total of 16 questions since the beginning of the ongoing term in 2019; against two in the last term 2014–2019, suggesting that EWOL was put forward on the parliamentary agenda by the creation of a dedicated portfolio and not really an issue before. It did not become a prominent subject. Among the 16 questions, it was only four times the core subject. The remaining questions used it mostly as a discursive resource on other issues. In the vast majority of the cases, it was referred to as the official title of Schinas' portfolio without discussing the legitimacy of the formula. In the four occurrences where EWOL is discussed as such, it three times to celebrate the initiative to foster European identity; and one time to reject it as a violation of human rights that it pretends to consolidate.

Regarding parliamentary procedures, all 16 questions were asked on the basis of rule 138 (Rules of Procedure of the European Parliament), as written questions with a request for a written answer. This is the less publicized category of questions compared to 'Questions for oral answer' dealt with during plenary sittings and that may be followed by a resolution (Rule 136) and 'Questions for Question Time' asked during the period set aside for questions during plenary sittings (Rule 137). This is an indication that EWOL was not considered important enough to be dealt with during the plenaries when the time is strictly controlled.

Regarding the *timeline* of the questions on EWOL, only two questions were asked during the term 2014–2019, suggesting that the topic and even the notion were virtually inexistent before the 2019 controversy. Five occurrences were found between September 2019 and February 2020, during and in the wake of the conflict on Mr Schinas' portfolio, only two of them involving the portfolio itself. Eleven followed at relatively regular intervals between June 2020 and September 2021. The topic seemed to become part of a certain discursive routine, mostly in formal reference to the title of Schinas' portfolio.

Considering to *which political groups* belonged the MEPs that referred to EWOL from 2019 onwards, 7 were ID-Identity and Democracy Group, 4 S&D-Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats in the European Parliament, 2 NI-Non-Attached members (actually leaning on the extreme right), 1 GUE/NGL-The Left group in the European Parliament, 1 Renew-Renew Europe Group. Representatives from the extreme-right were clearly owning the topic, especially in its use as resource for identity-politics.

A significant point was the absence of any mention by Christian Democrats. This silence may be a sign of embarrassment as the EPP was placed between a rock and a hard place as the protagonists of the concept, Von der Leyen and Schinas, came from its ranks but the topic was clearly captured by competitors from the extreme right and complicated the search for compromises with partners from the centre and the left. During the hearing of Schinas by the EP, the EPP's representatives defended with energy the skills of the candidate Commissioner but without taking a strong profile on the dividing title of his portfolio Gotev (2019). The president of the EPP group Manfred Weber in September 2019 made a plea for a balanced understanding of the notion as a celebration of the 'European opening' both to the world and to its citizens, to make people feel involved, to take up the big challenges of the time and to defend European freedom and unity (Weber, 2019). As far as the nationality is concerned, countries where extreme-right parties performed well provided the most users of EWOL with five French, four Italians, two Hungarians and two Austrians.

The topics EWOL was most associated to were terrorism, migration and asylum. Most frequently, the purpose of MEPs was to call for the defence of EWOL under attack. Other policy domains were the regulation of the markets in tension with culture (EWOL being said to be in need to be protected by a 'Smart protectionism' against GAFAM and by 'promotion of wine in third countries' to diffuse European traditions); or social policy (to combat poverty). Many questions investigated the meaning of the fifth priority – 'Promoting our European Way of Life' – of the Commission's new work programme, for example regarding the 'EU-wide ban on the sale of child sex dolls' for the protection of children against pornography or rituals at odds with the 'European Way of Life incompatible with slitting animals' throats'. EWOL repeatedly served for calls to fight against Muslim influence and/or threat; or for the protection of the Christian identity of Europe. In less frequent cases, EWOL was mobilized in a negative way to challenge the pretentions of the EU or the Commission, for example clashing the notion with the deaths of children in refugee camps in Europe or with the self-claimed title of 'World Champions of Human Rights'. EWOL was therefore a flexible discursive resource to support or attack EU politics and policies, in a positive or negative tune, endorsing or discrediting the formula. Both these uses and counter-uses were roughly similar to the ones expressed from scratch in the 2019 debate, suggesting little evolution of the debate.

To compare the frequency and meanings of the occurrences of EWOL in parliamentary questions with *other usual narratives of EU legitimation*, 'European identity' had eight occurrences over the same period since the beginning of the 2019–2024 term, half of the EWOL score. Meanwhile, many references to EWOL were linked directly to the title of Schinas' portfolio so as an institutional label, while 'European identity' is no policy category. Regarding who referred to European identity, the same predominance of extreme-right MEPs was observed, with the difference that some Christian democrats were keener to use it, especially to relate it to Christianity, rather than EWOL. By contrast, 'European values' were much more evoked (41 occurrences) than both EWOL and European identity, and on a wider range of topics. It then still appeared as the mainstream narrative in this exercise.

EWOL as a communicative 'COUP' without social impact?

In 2019, EWOL emerged as a bone of contention that stirred a political and media controversy. Beyond this original clash, has it been institutionalized as a political narrative likely to impact the representations of citizens about the EU? Our findings are at best inconclusive on this point. According to our survey, EWOL has neither much salience nor content in the definition that Europeans give of their relationship to the EU. Popular views are however in relative congruence with the issues that European institution associate with the notion. A glance at the contrasted perception of EWOL gives little evidence of major social cleavages that would diverge from the usual structure of the support to the EU and would open new frontlines for its legitimization.

A low-profile and weakly loaded topic

Our survey investigates the salience of EWOL for citizens compared to other indicators usually mobilized to assess how they relate to the EU. Interviewees were asked 'What is more important for you to define your European belonging?' and invited to select the

three more important answers among the following options: a collective identity; shared values; a citizenship; a common memory and heritage; a territory and borders; a common religion; a way of life; a common project for the future.

Overall, 41.8 per cent of the sample identify a 'way of life' among the three most crucial elements constituting their European identity. This is a significant score regarding the short history of EWOL in EU discourse, an element that may be interpreted in two ways. On the one hand, it is not anchored in tradition, but the way to relate to the EU is little framed by routine as it is little or non-existent. On the other hand, EWOL may benefit of an effect of novelty and (for those who were aware of it) of the salience given by the 2019 controversy.

EWOL is preceded by 'shared values' (57.9 per cent), 'a common project for the future' (56.2 per cent), and 'a collective identity' (42.6 per cent); and followed by 'a territory and borders' (37.6 per cent). The two first indicators 'shared values' and 'a common project for the future' (plus 'a citizenship' with 30.9 per cent) may be primarily related to a civic/contractualist/post-national model. The two last ('a collective identity' and 'a territory and borders') plus two even more ethno-cultural features that score modestly ('a common memory and heritage' with 23.3 per cent and 'a common religion' with 9.9 per cent) refer more to a nation-state-like community. No clear pattern emerges as gaps are small and some indicators may be interpreted in divergent ways. For example, a common project for the future may relate both to a contractualist value-based projection or to a community of destiny anchored in a community of being as theorized by scholars of nationalism. Still, the findings converge to confirm than the EU can claim only a thin belonging from its citizens rather than a thick one, something well established by the existing scholarship. The emergence of EWOL as a new intermediate narrative between the civic/contractualist/post-national and ethno-cultural/nation-state models does not change this asset (Table 1).

Regarding its limited social salience, what is the meaning granted by citizens to EWOL? A question of the survey asked to interviewees: 'According to you, what can best define the European way of life (please rank the following items from not very important = 1 to very important = 5)?'. Several topics were proposed in order to reflect the policy issues put by the Commission under the label EWOL European Commission (2019). For example, 'Leaving in peace and security' stands for 'Fight against terrorism and crime' and 'Judicial cooperation'; 'Law-abidance' for 'Rule of law'; 'Toleration' and 'Freedom of speech' for 'Protection of fundamental rights'; 'Cultural diversity' for 'Regulation of migration and asylum'. There is no strict correlation between the answers offered to the interviewees

Table 1. What is more important for you to define your European belonging? Please rank the three most important in order.

A collective identity	42.6%
Shared values	57.9%
A citizenship	30.9%
A common memory and heritage	23.3%
A territory and borders	37.6%
A common religion	9.9%
A way of life	41.8%
A common project for the future	56.2%

Notes: Hierarchy of answers relying on aggregated scores of each item in first, second or third positions as 'most important'.

to define EWOL and its institutional tailoring as sociological realities and political attitudes constitutive of a way of life cannot be phrased in the same terms than policies. Other indicators were added that are not included in the institutional design of EWOL. 'Secularism' aims to assess the way to relate to religion as a touchstone of Europeanness. It is worth noting that even if religion is not officially listed in the EWOL portfolio, Commissioner Schinas is in charge of 'leading the Commission's dialogue with churches and religious associations or communities, and with philosophical and non-confessional organisations'.[4] The item 'A certain qualify of life (sociability, gastronomy, enjoyment …)' suggests a cultural dimension transcending the strictly political interpretation of EWOL.

Addressing first the hierarchy of topics sketched by respondents, 'Leaving in Peace and security' and 'Freedom of Speech' are considered as 'important' or 'very important' by respectively 84.7 per cent and 82.6 per cent of European citizens. The long-lasting slogan of European communication justifying European integration by the absence of war and the protection of fundamental rights is still a successful argument. 79.8 per cent of citizens identify 'Law abidance' as a fundamental issue, corroborating the EU emphasis on a rational-legal state and rule of law. 'Toleration' (72.6 per cent) that may be associated with 'Cultural diversity' (65.8 per cent) follows at a distance. 'A certain Quality of Life' (72.1 per cent) lies in-between with a meaning that may be both ideational (a balance between different spheres of life, etc.) or material (consumption and income). Secularism is well behind (43.1 per cent).

Overall, our sample sketches the picture of a way of life that would characterize a polity prioritizing slightly security and order over cultural liberalism, and not bothered much by religion and the way to relate to it. As such the meaning conferred to EWOL by citizens seems congruent with the priorities they assign to EU institutions (Table 2).

An alignment of popular and institutional framings of EWOL

Another question of the survey investigates the congruence between the meaning given by citizens to EWOL and their expectations towards EU institutions according to how they hierarchize the policy issues included in the Priority 'Promoting our European way of life. Protecting our citizens and our values' by the European Commission.

The majority of respondents vouched as most important equally the 'Fight against terrorism and crime' (86.1 per cent) and the 'Protection of fundamental rights' (86 per cent). 'Rule of law' is considered key by 81.1 per cent, followed closely by 'Judicial cooperation'

Table 2. According to you, what can best define the European way of life? (Percentage of citizens answering 'very important' or 'important').

	Countries								
	UK	Germany	France	Hungary	Italy	Poland	Romania	Spain	Total
Secularism	32.8%	32.9%	65.5%	34.8%	43.1%	44.3%	45.9%	45.5%	43.1%
Law abidance	73.0%	79.9%	78.2%	78.4%	83.6%	80.1%	86.5%	78.9%	79.8%
Leaving in peace and security	77.8%	89.0%	81.0%	85.9%	85.0%	86.7%	88.4%	83.6%	84.7%
Toleration	59.0%	78.1%	70.2%	72.1%	73.0%	80.6%	72.3%	75.7%	72.6%
Freedom of speech	74.9%	88.0%	79.3%	78.5%	83.5%	86.8%	88.1%	81.8%	82.6%
Cultural diversity	56.9%	65.7%	62.5%	61.0%	62.6%	66.7%	75.2%	75.6%	65.8%
A certain qualify of life (sociability, gastronomy, enjoyment …)	66.5%	70.6%	72.8%	69.4%	66.9%	74.0%	77.1%	79.8%	72.1%

(79.7 per cent) and 'Consumer protection' (79.2 per cent). 'Regulation of migration and asylum' comes last although still high at 72.3 per cent. Again, gaps are relatively small and vary across countries. Overall, the order of issues given by citizens reflects the primacy given to security and freedoms by the EU. It is almost point by point in compliance with the presentation of priorities on the Commission's website:

> A Europe that protects must also stand up for justice and for the EU's core values. Threats to the rule of law challenge the legal, political and economic basis of our Union. President von der Leyen's vision for a Union of equality, tolerance and social fairness is built upon the rule of law. The Commission will launch a comprehensive European Rule of Law Mechanism under which it is to report every year, objectively, on the condition of the rule of law across the Union. Strong borders, modernisation of the EU's asylum system and cooperation with partner countries are important to achieve a fresh start on migration. (European Commission, 2019)

The hierarchy of priorities given by interviewees to European institutions to promote the European way of life is similar with the hierarchy of policy issues inscribed under this label by EU institutions. Still, to assess its potential communicative effects, it is necessary to measure the perception of EWOL according to major political and socio-economic attributes (nationality, gender, age, level of trust in EU institutions), and in comparison, with other expressions of the way to relate to the EU (Table 3).

A non-discriminating topic

The impact of a communicative resource is determined according to the consensus it creates or the divisions it is able to activate. Overall, the perceptions of EWOL are not very discriminating along usual political, sociological and economic indicators. National belonging is confirmed as the major difference, although limited to some symbolic stakes.

National nuances as resilient main differences

National specificities are visible regarding the relevance of EWOL to characterize the way to relate to the EU. The distribution by country to the question 'What is more important for you to define your European belonging?' demarcates different clusters of member states. Two poles emerge. On the one hand, 'shared values' are identified as a priority feature by the majority of British, German and Hungarian respondents; on the other one, the most important item is 'a common project for the future', in France, Italy and

Table 3. Which policy should be prioritized by the EU to promote the European way of life (please rank the following items (from very important = 1 to not very important = 5)? To simplify the reading, the answers 'very important' and 'important' are aggregated into a single score).

	Countries								
	UK	Germany	France	Hungary	Italy	Poland	Romania	Spain	Total
Fight against terrorism and crime	79.1%	89.0%	86.8%	83.1%	85.6%	87.4%	88.5%	89.0%	86.1%
Judicial cooperation	64.8%	82.7%	80.1%	82.8%	79.0%	80.1%	83.9%	84.0%	79.7%
Protection of fundamental rights	74.5%	90.7%	83.7%	85.4%	87.2%	88.3%	89.8%	88.3%	86.0%
Consumer protection	69.7%	76.6%	78.0%	73.9%	79.3%	85.0%	86.0%	85.4%	79.2%
Regulation of migration and asylum	68.0%	71.5%	73.2%	70.1%	74.2%	72.3%	71.6%	77.7%	72.3%
Rule of law	72.8%	84.8%	75.8%	79.5%	79.7%	83.0%	85.9%	87.0%	81.1%

Spain. Romania and Poland 'bowl alone', picking respectively 'a collective identity' and 'a territory and borders' as first answers. Looking at the choice for the second answer, France, Italy and Spain agree again on 'shared values'. UK and Hungary go for 'a way of life', while Germany, Romania and Poland opt for 'a common project for the future'. Same items come back on the third step of the podium, with 'a way of life' selected by German, French and Romanian respondents, 'a collective identity' for UK, Italy and Spain, 'shared values' for Poland and 'a common project for the future' for Hungary. Figure 1 tabulates the replies in a comparative perspective (Figure 1).

Overall, the data suggest that there is no encompassing logic distributing national answers for example according to the type of nation-state, the ancestry of EU belonging, the more or less controversial relationships with EU institutions and norms or any other indicator. There are some elective affinities between some countries (for instance France, Italy and Spain) but it is difficult to interpret too much these convergences or divergences regarding the relatively small gaps.

Shifting to the *content given to EWOL*, the most striking national feature is the importance given by the French to secularism (65.5 per cent), much more than the average (43.1 per cent) and twice as much as the Brits (32.8 per cent), the Germans (32.9 per cent) or the Hungarians (34.8 per cent). The long-standing tradition of French 'laïcité' is still showing its effects. Gaps are much less significant on other items. Still, two elements are worth noticing. First, the Germans are regularly the strongest supporters of the features proposed to define EWOL, with a special mention for 'Leaving in peace and security'. This turns them into a kind of 'poster Europeans'. Conversely, the Brits are almost always the less enthusiastic regarding the same features. This may reflect a general lack of interest or faith in EWOL after Brexit.

Finally, when it comes to *state which policy should be prioritized by the EU to promote the European way of life*, differences are also limited. The feuds between Hungary and European institutions over rule of law, migratory issues and judicial cooperation do not seem to impact the importance given by Hungarians to these issues on the European agenda. The same can be said of Poles.
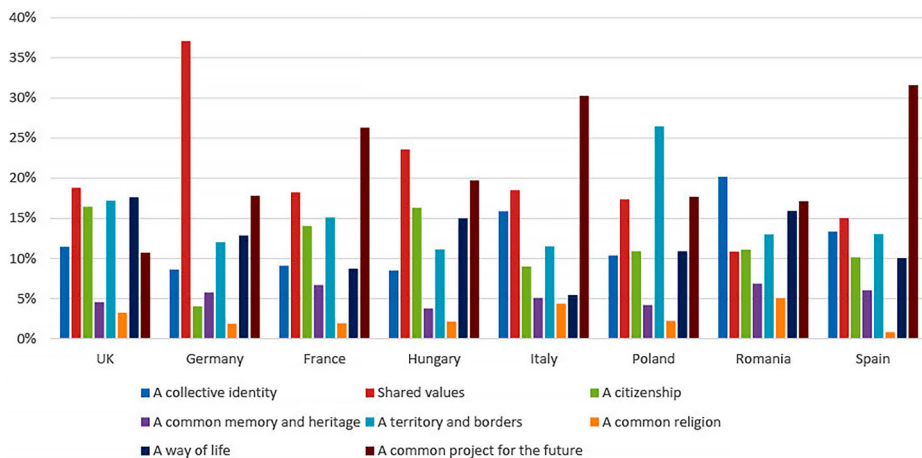

Figure 1. What is more important for you to define your European belonging? Most important item, per country (*n* = 8000).

EWOL through gender, socio-economic and political trust lenses

None of the usual variables used to segment political support is very relevant to establish cleavages in the perception of EWOL as a prominent expression of European belonging.

As for gender, men (11.2 per cent) and women (12.5 per cent) do not diverge much to prioritize EWOL in their top three items to define 'What is more important for you to define your European belonging?'. Age is not much more discriminating as a 'way of life' has slightly higher percentages among young people rather than aged people (18–34 years at 12.8 per cent; 35–54 years at 12.3 per cent; 55 & more at 10.9 per cent). The educational level matters no more (Primary or secondary education 12.2 per cent; Higher education 11.2 per cent). The level of interest for politics is barely more significant (High interest 10.7 per cent; No interest 13.2 per cent; Some interest 11.7 per cent), those with the lowest interest being just a bit more likely to prioritize EWOL as a more tangible way to relate to Europe.

As a matter of trust in European institutions, it does not impact the propensity to consider the way of life as a salient expression of European belonging as the most trustful citizens do not diverge much from the least (11.4 per cent against 12.4 per cent).

Conclusion

The purpose of this article was to assess the social relevance and meaning of EWOL as a legitimizing narrative. We confronted the framing of the notion by EU institutions with its understanding by citizens, in comparison with other expressions of the way to relate to European integration and according to usual socioeconomic and cultural variables segmenting political attitudes.

Our findings are not very optimistic regarding the capacity of EWOL to redefine the conditions of EU legitimization. First, in the political and institutional sphere, we showed that EWOL displays the same features as previous master narratives of European communication (be it in terms of European identity or European values). In the discourse of the Commission's leaders and bureaucracy, EWOL was an outgrowth of the European value narrative. In parliamentary debates, it settled down as a minor policy category but remained owned by the extreme right and still rejected or ignored by other forces.

Regarding the reception of EWOL by the citizens, our survey suggests that their understanding of the notion is relatively similar to the definition given by the Commission, especially regarding the centrality of peace, law-abidance and fundamental rights. Still, as a feature to express European belonging, a way of life is less salient than older topics of EU communication such as a common project, a collective identity or shared values. EWOL does not create significant cleavages among Europeans according to the usual socio-economic and cultural factors likely to discriminate political attitudes (nationality, gender, age, level of trust in EU institutions). As usual, nationality remains the predominant boundary. This relative non-discriminating dimension neutrality of EWOL may express less its consensual aspect than its low significance for most people, due to its novelty as an axis of European legitimization and its vagueness. Subsequently, in communicative terms, EWOL is likely to be neither a rallying flag nor a bone of contention.

Overall, our conclusion is that EWOL risks to be 'more of the same' in the long litany of EU legitimating narratives. In its structure, content and social outreach, there is no evidence that it will produce very different effects than discourses in terms of European

identity or values. Venues for future research could be to verify these findings later in time, for example around the 2024 European elections, to measure whether EWOL has disseminated as a political slogan beyond the policy sphere. Another option would be to test the reception of the topic by citizens in a greater number of countries (even if no striking difference was observed between our eight country cases, beyond some nuances in the UK, and despite the tensions between Hungary and European institutions over identity politics). Still, our bet is that the prominent future research topic will be yet another mantra of EU legitimization emerging as a fresh hope … and as a new risk of disappointment.

Notes

1. https://ec.europa.eu/defence-industry-space/promoting-our-european-way-life_en.
2. The purpose of the survey funded by the Belgian FNRS was to explore the cultural and normative foundations of the European multi-level governance. A representative sample of the population was interviewed in eight countries, including the largest (France, Germany, Italy, Poland, Romania, Spain, UK) and most controversial (Hungary) ones in December 2020. This choice of countries includes founding and more recent member states; reflects possible differences between Northern/Southern or Western/Eastern Europe; and societies with different economic, historical, cultural and religious backgrounds. The inclusion of the UK, that had formally left the EU on the 1rst of February 2020 but was still under the rules of the Single Market and the Customs Union at the time of the fieldwork in December 2020, is justified as the contrasted national perceptions of EWOL have an history that dates back well before Brexit. The views of the British citizens are highly interesting regarding the usual ambivalent positioning of the UK expressed by the famous Churchill' statement 'with Europe, but not of it'. In the same way, the presence of Hungary is explained as its prime minister Viktor Orbán is a protagonist of the debate on the ethno-cultural dimension of European identity.
3. The research carried out on the 12th of October 2021 was done through the database of the EP (https://www.europarl.europa.eu/plenary/en/parliamentary-questions.html?tabType=all#sidesForm). It used the keyword 'European way of life' to search its occurrence in all capacities in all the questions.
4. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/commissioners/2019-2024/schinas_en.

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Appendix. Data and methods

As stated in the article, for the purpose of our work we rely on the original results from a survey aimed at exploring the cultural and normative foundations of the European multi-level governance.

A representative sample of the population was interviewed in eight countries, namely France, Germany, Italy, Poland, Romania, Spain, UK and Hungary. The total dataset includes 8000 respondents, all interviewed in the months of December 2020. Table 1 shows the aggregate descriptive statistics of the sample.

Table A1. Descriptives based on GoodGod 2020 Survey data.

Variable	N. observations	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
EU Belonging	7017	4.535414	2.549774	1	8
EU way of life	8000	4.008625	.9745098	1	5
National Belonging	7499	4.036272	2.117454	1	
Trust in national Parliament	8000	2.69375	1.328978	1	5
Trust in national government	8000	2.702375	1.254588	1	5
Trust in EU	8000	3.095375	1.23601	1	5
Political Interest	8000	2.180125	.8616976	1	4
Age	8000	2.0815	.7848151	1	3
Gender	8000	1.5255	.4993805	1	2

Table A2. Meaning of European Belonging, per gender. Cross-tabulation.

	Man	Woman	Total
A collective identity	12.7%	11.7%	12.2%
Shared values	19.3%	20.5%	19.9%
A citizenship	11.1%	11.6%	11.4%
A common memory and heritage	5.3%	5.4%	5.3%
A territory and borders	14.8%	15.1%	15%
A common religion	3.1%	2.3%	2.7%
A way of life	11.2%	12.5%	11.9%
A common project for the future	22.5%	20.9%	21.7%

Table A3. Meaning of European Belonging, per age. Cross-tabulation.

	18–34	35–54	55 & more	Total
A collective identity	11.8%	12.9%	11.9%	12.2%
Shared values	19.2%	20%	20.2%	19.9%
A citizenship	13.6%	10.5%	10.7%	11.4%
A common memory and heritage	5.9%	4.6%	5.7%	5.3%
A territory and borders	13.7%	15.9%	14.9%	15%
A common religion	3.7%	3.3%	1.4%	2.7%
A way of life	12.8%	12.3%	10.9%	11.9%
A common project for the future	19.3%	20.6%	24.2%	21.7%

Table A4. Meaning of European Belonging, per educational level. Cross-tabulation.

	Primary or secondary education	Higher education (College, university …)	Total
A collective identity	12.1%	12.5%	12.2%
Shared values	18.8%	23.1%	19.9%
A citizenship	11.8%	10%	11.4%
A common memory and heritage	5.4%	5.2%	5.3%
A territory and borders	15.1%	14.6%	15%
A common religion	2.7%	2.5%	2.7%
A way of life	12.2%	11.2%	11.9%
A common project for the future	21.9%	20.9%	21.7%

Table A5. Meaning of European Belonging, per political interest. Cross-tabulation.

	High interest	No interest	Some interest	Total
A collective identity	11.7%	11.9%	12.5%	12.2%
Shared values	20.8%	19.3%	19.9%	19.9%
A citizenship	10.5%	12.6%	11%	11.4%
A common memory and heritage	5.3%	4.7%	5.7%	5.3%
A territory and borders	14.3%	15.4%	15%	15%
A common religion	2.9%	2.4%	2.7%	2.7%
A way of life	10.7%	13.2%	11.7%	11.9%
A common project for the future	23.8%	20.4%	21.5%	21.7%

Table A6. Meaning of European Belonging, per political interest. Cross-tabulation.

	High/somewhat interested	Low/No interested	Total
A collective identity	12.3%	11.9%	12.2%
Shared values	20.1%	19.3%	19.9%
A citizenship	10.9%	12.6%	11.4%
A common memory and heritage	5.6%	4.7%	5.3%
A territory and borders	14.8%	15.4%	15.0%
A common religion	2.8%	2.4%	2.7%
A way of life	11.4%	13.2%	11.9%
A common project for the future	22.1%	20.4%	21.6%

Table A7. Meaning of European Belonging, per trust in European Institutions. Cross-tabulation.

	Trust	High trust	No trust	Total
A collective identity	11.8%	13.4%	10.7%	12.2%
Shared values	21.0%	20.9%	16.9%	19.9%
A citizenship	10.3%	11.5%	12.6%	11.4%
A common memory and heritage	5.4%	4.9%	6.1%	5.3%
A territory and borders	14.0%	12.3%	20.6%	15.0%
A common religion	2.7%	2.2%	3.3%	2.7%
A way of life	12.1%	11.4%	12.4%	11.9%
A common project for the future	22.7%	23.5%	17.4%	21.6%