



EuroPCom session report

Power and perils of narratives

Friday, 8 November, 09h15 – 10h45

Speakers: Sarah Chander, Policy Officer, European Network Against Racism, Belgium; Maeve Patterson, Communications and Advocacy Officer at UNHCR, Belgium; Daniel Fazekas, Social Media Analyst, Bakamo Social, Belgium; Laura Shields, Founder and Managing Director of Red Thread, Belgium

Moderator: Prof Benjamin De Cleen

When replying to populists, we are in danger of following their patterns of debate. Adopting populist narratives and accepting how they frame issues, however, is harmful to an open and inclusive public debate. Is it possible to develop narratives to counter extremist populism without falling into this trap? What would those narratives look like? What data do we have to base those narratives on? Start talking with our panellists!

The moderator **Prof De Cleen** opened the session by commenting on the potential breadth of the theme and noted that the session would aim to cover narratives about migration, refugees and diversity. As current narratives were often not about peace and love, but instead focused on negatives such as security, border control and returns, he hoped that some of the dos and don'ts in communication about migration, refugees and diversity would be addressed.

He put forward four main questions for the speakers to address. First, as populists were often associated with the extreme right, did they truly represent and speak for 'ordinary people'? In this context, it was also important to consider who 'ordinary people' were. Second, when discussing race and racism, was the focus often placed on extreme racism, whilst potentially ignoring structural forms of racism occurring across the political spectrum? Third, the panellists were asked whether it would be better to build a positive new narrative instead of responding to racists and often using their language. And finally, speakers were asked to give examples of best practices for tackling racism and to say whether they thought the EU provided good anti-racist methods.

Daniel Fazekas began his talk by presenting findings from his research on online discourses surrounding the topic. Five categories of narratives are found across all EU member states: the economy, demography, humanitarianism, identity and security. However, in recent years, identity and security had taken centre stage, and the other narratives had to a certain extent become sub-narratives within these areas, i.e. demography now fell under security, for example with the 'great replacement theory'. Many anxieties were aroused by migration, particularly surrounding personal, economic and socio-cultural safety. **Mr Fazekas** concluded his introduction with five points to remember: First, Europe as a whole was the best

place to live in the world. Second, people's fears were legitimate and thus national security and citizens' safety needed to be actively addressed. Third, local issues were often at the root of fear, e.g. the weakening welfare state in Finland, worsening economic inequality in Spain, or corruption in Hungary. Fourth, the EU needs to talk about such issues and demonstrate clearly how it is equipped to protect citizens. Finally, Mr Fazekas reminded the audience that there was always a 'good' and a 'bad', and that even though it seems clear what was 'bad', this must be proven. Whoever was behind the negative narratives must be exposed, whether such narratives took the form of theft (e.g. corruption), betrayal (e.g. Cambridge Analytica) or manipulation (e.g. Russian influence).

Sarah Chander focused on the narratives of race and racism in the European Union, conceptualising three main frames for discussing the issue. First, a frame in which 'they' are a problem. The focus here was on criminality, immigration control and draining of resources. This narrative was present across Europe and had been trickling down into centrist narratives, with the language of the far right being adopted even in institutional language. The second frame implied that racism occurred at an interpersonal level between two individuals, neglecting structural forms of racism. The third frame viewed race as non-existent or as a topic that it was not important to talk about. This frame was potentially the most powerful. Even though not a very dominant frame, **Ms Chander** saw the frame of integration as somewhat problematic, as it implied the existence of a 'we' and a 'them' and placed responsibility primarily on newcomers. She returned to the topic of structural racism, which was engrained historically and economically in various forms of inequality, and emphasised how that needed to be addressed very specifically. She concluded by noting that diversity within the EU institutions would not solve structural racism, but that it would make stories more genuine.

Maeve Patterson started by defining 'narratives' essentially as stories that all have a narrator, a subject and an audience. She wanted to focus on the audience of a narrative and asked the audience in the room whether they would like a drink named 'female horse fastened with wax' or 'wax-flattened mare' – which the audience was not keen on. She then proceeded to tell a story about a soft drinks company which translated its name into Mandarin resulting in a name that meant one of the above. Her example demonstrated the importance of knowing one's audience when constructing a narrative. Ms Patterson emphasised that we need to go beyond preaching to the converted and reach out to the 'conflicted middle' – the 50% of the EU population that is not sure how it feels about migration.

Laura Shields went a step further and defined narratives as dominant social and cultural ways of communication. The current negative narratives were nothing new: Romans had talked about 'barbarians' as the 'other'. However, nowadays the 'dark side' was a lot more evident as a result of online and social media. Social media was also a key vector in building such narratives, as it was easy to share content when you wished to persuade someone. Ms Shields also underlined the importance of framing narratives. She used an example from workshops with Roma people in which they were asked to describe themselves as a group, and often they would start with 'many people think we are...', and only then give their own views. When using the same frame and language as opponents of migration (or in this case Roma), the emphasis remained on the negatives and reinforced that narrative. Ms Shields believed that there had been a strong emphasis on rights at the expense of culture, and criticised the EU for being 'spectacularly bad' at sharing local topics, as it was 'set up to suppress them'. She was not surprised by **Mr Fazekas'** findings that identity and security prevail in online discourses, as these were themes that speak to people. That was why the far right successfully used narratives and slogans such as 'take back control' and 'make America great again'. Finally, **Ms Shields** proposed some ways forward. She emphasised the need to embrace values traditionally thought of as conservative, such as authority and law and order. She used the recent campaign success of the German Greens as a good example of combining a pro-migration agenda with a strong stance on law and order. She also suggested that the EU should give more financial support to local

groups, play with positive emotion and take more risks. Lastly, she encouraged the audience to be curious: to have open conversations and to challenge arguments while also not assuming malice where none was there.

The Q&A part of the session raised further important issues. As a populist message could cut through in just a few words, one member of the audience asked the speakers for similar short narratives to tackle racism. **Laura Shields** and **Sarah Chander** both reminded the room of the importance of not only rebutting or replying to racists or populists, but also formulating new narratives that showed how the EU institutions can protect citizens. **Daniel Fazekas** added that the key was to consider the audience and why the topic mattered to them.

Another audience member raised the issue of racism of western Europeans against eastern Europeans, thinking of the 'Polish plumber' stereotype, particularly in the context of Brexit, and his own experience working in the EU institutions. **Sarah Chander** responded by agreeing that racialisation of eastern Europeans had happened in the UK, giving rise to racial tension. **Daniel Fazekas** pointed out that racism was often rooted in local issues and lack of own identity.

A discussion followed about using humour as a tool and narrative to tackle populism. The panel agreed that humour could be an effective tool, but knowing your audience was again key. **Mr Fazekas** said that it could be hurtful if fears of the audience were not taken into account and **Ms Patterson** noted that humour was highly culture-specific and could therefore be ineffective across borders. Some of the best humour was now in the UK, **Laura Shields** noted, but that did not mean that Brexit humour addressed the issues. Often it simply turned into satire against people. She also mentioned the example of president Trump: his supporters had not and would not stop supporting him as a result of him being widely mocked.

Successful anti-racism and pro-immigration campaigns were discussed broadly, as a specific campaign mentioned by an audience member was not familiar to the panellists. The speakers emphasised that successful campaigns were not overtly anti-racist, but instead focused on the similarities between people, offering viewers something to feel empathetic about.

Finally, someone asked for tips on how to make minority voices better heard in EU communications. **Maeve Patterson** suggested putting refugees at the forefront, allowing them to be the ones telling their own stories and not just being talked about. **Sarah Chander** took a step further and urged: 'employ them – it's simple'.