

*Reimagining Europe and its (dis)integration (De)legitimising the EU's project in times of crisis*

*Franco Zappettini, University of Liverpool & Samuel Bennett, Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań*

**Abstract**

In this article we introduce our special issue of the Journal of Language & Politics on the (de)legitimation of Europe. We start by outlining the rationale and research that led us to the special issue. In Section 2 we set out the contextual framing of the contributions, i.e., the crisis of legitimacy that European institutions and indeed the entire European project, have faced for the last decade and a half; crises that have been brought about by different events and actors and have resulted in centrifugal and centripetal processes. Next, we outline our theoretical approach to legitimation, which combines politico-sociological perspectives with discursive and communicative ones. This is followed by Section 4, which introduces and weaves together the contributions to the special issue. Finally, in Section 5 we briefly discuss the findings with regard to the aims and goals of the issue and also suggest potential next research steps.

**Keywords:** Europe; legitimation; legitimacy; European Union; discourse analysis; crisis; COVID; politicisation; mediatisation; language.

**1. Introduction**

The origins of the idea for this special issue were at the 'Europe in Discourse' conference held in Athens in 2018, where by coincidence we both presented research on a crisis of European values and legitimacy. Our subsequent conversations led to a successful panel at the 23rd DiscourseNet Conference in Bergamo a year later, entitled *Legitimation Processes in Discourse: New Theoretical and Empirical Insights*, where four of the papers in this special issue started their development. Though, 'just' four years ago the European socio-political scene was then still dominated by the impact of a major financial crisis and Brexit was now a reality for politicians and citizens on both sides of the channel. The public arena was rife with speculations on a potential Brexit 'domino effect' and the resurgence of populism in major democracies was rapidly grabbing the interest of many social, political and research agendas, a situation that convinced us of the need to interrogate the potential impact of such events on the European project from a discourse analytical perspective. Since the beginning of the work on our special issue we have also witnessed other changes and challenges at the European, and indeed global level, including of course a major pandemic, the continued roll-back of the rule of law in European Union (EU) member states and, most recently, the potential for a new migration 'crisis' on the bloc's eastern borders. Likewise, whilst right-wing populism has maybe yet to make the major inroads that many feared and predicted, the spectre of it is still present, if not in the corridors of power, then at the very least in public sphere discourse and policy. We thus believe in the value of analysing the 'European question' through the lens of legitimacy even some years after the trigger(s) that spurred our enquiry as our quest in fact feeds into a more general and long-established body of academic work that has often regarded the question of legitimacy at the core of the European

project (Beck and Grande 2007; Habermas 1997, 1999, 2009, 2012, 2015; Wodak and Weiss 2005).

That said, we have of course adapted our thinking on the leitmotif of the issue in light of new data, such as the fact there is no immediate evidence of the EU institutions reducing their formal power and, indeed, that the ‘Brexit effect’ appears somehow to have boosted positive public views of the EU (European Parliament 2018). Indeed, many of the papers in this special issue point to a more ambiguous, strategic positioning of EU institutions within national-level discourses of Europe. While this has led us to cautiously consider the implications of reifying the very narrative of crisis we intend to investigate, close scrutiny of the way in which EU-ropes is now being (re)imagined by some politicians and sections of the public alike is, in our view, still a necessary endeavour. As is often the case with research, our investigation has resulted in a partial snapshot rather than a full picture of the current status of European affairs. Hopefully this will generate further discussion and nurture vital dialogue among the European society. In what follows we articulate the key features and contribution of this special issue. An overview of the European crises is provided in section 2 as a way of contextualising the issue; a framework of legitimation as a discursive processes is discussed in section 3; contributions to the special issue are outlined in section 4; and concluding remarks are given in section 5.

## **2. Framing EU-rope’s current *malaise***

While the history of European integration is one of cyclical crises and transformations (Wiener, Borzel & Risse, 2018) the current protracted and compounded articulation of the European Union’s economic, social and political challenges arguably constitutes a unique juncture. The significance of this is reflected in the recent surge of academic interest and public debates around the causes, manifestations of the current ‘malaise’ afflicting the EU-ropean society (Duina & Merand 2020; Lueg & Carlson 2020; Schünemann & Barbehön 2019; Nanopoulos & Vergis 2019) and even the risk of a possible demise of the European project (Webber 2018).

The last decade has seen the emergence and intensification of the immigration/refugee debate (Bennett 2018; Krzyżanowski, Triandafyllidou and Wodak 2018; Chouliaraki, Orwicz & Greeley 2019); the upsurge of populism and far-right ideologies (Bevelander & Wodak 2019; Bennett 2019c; Wodak and Krzyżanowski 2017) while neoliberalism and austerity have remained central to the EU’s economic policy (see Krzyżanowski 2015), with the former being blamed by some for the financial crisis (Palley 2013), and the latter a dominant policy reaction to it. Significantly, while the EU integration was for many years an institutionally-driven process which was passively consented to by the public (Hooghe & Marks 2009), lately such a process appears to have been increasingly politicised and challenged by a mass mobilisation of anti-EU sentiment contesting the very legitimacy of the European project. This sentiment has been articulated across a spectrum of positions ranging from Eurosceptic and populist discourses (Caiani and Guerra 2017; Pirro et al. 2018), to an overt delegitimation of the European project by radical parties calling for a reversal of integration and the ‘repatriation’ of national powers to member states (Bennett 2019c; Zappettini 2019a; Zappettini & Maccaferri 2021). Governments in a number of member states (including once traditionally ‘Euro-positive’ countries such as, for example, Italy) are now rejecting the EU social and political projects in favour of either new nativist/sovereignist

ideologies – which instead advocate an ethno-culturally defined ‘Europe of nations’ as a way forward for the EU (if at all) - or a redefinition of Europe conceived as a union of merely economic interests. The case of Brexit has been exemplary of the conflation of such discourses and the traction they have had on public imagination. As discussed by much work (Bennett 2019a,b,c; Zappettini 2019b,c; Krzyżanowski & Zappettini 2019; Koller et al 2019; Barnett 2017) the unprecedented decision of the United Kingdom (UK) to leave the EU can be read more as the culmination of a historical trajectory of Euroscepticism than an accident. Brexit has been an example of the escalation and institutionalisation of fringe hitherto anti-EU discourses and shown how the traditionally ‘Euro- disengaged’/Eurosceptic British political class, public and media pandered to such extreme views in the name of a new mercantilism and nationalism claimed to be incompatible with the EU project.

Adding to the complexity of the above centrifugal forces which are potentially moving countries apart from each other, renewed nationalist thrusts – that of course have always existed – are also intensifying at the regional level (e.g. Scotland, Catalonia etc) and capitalising opportunistically on on-going domestic debates of Europe (Bennett 2019c; Brusenbauch Meislova and Buckledee 2021). We can see the effects of these challenges to the EU’s legitimacy in the results of the recent European parliamentary elections, in which right-wing populist actors gained seats (161 in 2019, vs. 118 in 2014) (Ivaldi 2019).<sup>1</sup> This trend can also be seen well in the formation of a new hard Euro-sceptic group, the European alliance of Peoples and Nations, led by Italy’s Lega, a sign that Europe is becoming a space for anti-EU cooperation (Bennett et al., 2020). However, since the last European elections there have also been signals (such as for example a socialist government in Portugal, and Salvini’s Lega abandoning Italy’s government coalition) that would counter these trends or at least suggest a much more nuanced and fragmented picture of Europe’s direction of travel. And yet, some scholars have suggested how the public arena has seen dramatic shifts towards a normalization of extreme right-wing discourses (Krzyżanowski 2020 a;b) and of what is now ‘sayable’ (Wodak 2019) which would indicate some of the causes of the European malaise are still deeply rooted in society.

Furthermore, and partly related to the populist challenge, the problematic coordination of responses to the Covid pandemics has further shown the political and operational frailty of the European Union raising new questions around the limits of ‘solidarity among strangers’ (Habermas 2015) and the ‘imagined’ borders of European identity (Carta & Wodak’s 2015 special issue of JLP, Krzyżanowski 2010; Zappettini 2019d). Indeed, the return of (temporary) hard borders between European states was a reality for some time at the height of the pandemic and the question of a ‘hard’ border in Ireland (following Brexit) is still moot.

Since all these issues seem to be challenging more than just the EU’s authority - as in fact they undermine the legitimacy of the European project and the rationale for its very existence - there is a need to critically interrogate the different facets of Europe’s current malaise. We chose to do this by looking at different crises as sustained historical paths rather than individual events. Are we looking at Europe going through another phase of its troubled existence while the EU project

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted however, that right-wing populist gains were not evenly spread across the bloc, and that left-wing populist parties lost seats during the same period (43 in 2014 vs. 37 in 2019) (Ivaldi 2019, 72-73).

is still firmly set on the same overarching direction of travel? Or has EUtopia reached its own limits? Does the European public sphere now plausibly provide more affordances for dismantling than it does for constructive EU discourses? And, in this case, should we make sense of the above dynamics in a framework of a possible reversal of the EU's integration process (Webber 2018)? While similar questions have been asked by recent scholarship (Duina & Merand 2020; Winiarska-Brodowska 2020) they have been answered primarily from the perspective of Political Sociology.

Our special issue aims to extend current research from a critically discursive perspective by looking at the politicisation and mediatisation of debates over EU crises and legitimacy in the public sphere occurring through multifarious communicative channels and performed by different political actors. The purpose of this special issue is thus to take stock of the challenges Europe faces in many forms and from different ideological perspectives (including the aforementioned forms of sovereigntism/nationalism, illiberalism, and dynamics related to backlash to neoliberal policies and financial austerity, identity/diversity, etc.) vis-a-vis the process of European (dis)integration. Adopting a CDA-oriented approach based on diagnostic critique (Reisigl & Wodak 2001), the focus of this special issue is specifically on the language of (de)legitimation in/of the EU as, collectively and individually, we aim to show how certain discursive trajectories can constitute potential forms of public pre-legitimation (Krzyżanowski 2014) instrumental to the disintegration process but also functional to generating new (legitimizing) discourses.

### **3. Legitimation as a discursive process**

This special issue's theoretical departing point for analysing legitimacy is the view that mediated language and social processes – such as legitimation - are mutually constitutive. At least since the seminal work of Weber (Weber et al 1997), the study of legitimacy has long been the concern of a range of academic disciplines striving to account for the key drivers (or indeed the inhibitors insofar as they legitimise the status quo) of social transformation. From political studies to organisational studies a large body of academic research exists that has dealt with legitimacy from a plethora of theoretical and analytical perspectives and has differently emphasised how different dimensions of legitimacy - for example legality, power, authority, reputation - affect human activities and social interaction. In particular, much work has focused on legitimation - the process through which legitimacy is socially reified from social constructivist perspectives in the wake of Berger and Luckman's (1966) influential work. De/legitimation processes have been seen since as established through social interaction and meaning-making practices in which language and other semiotic resources are pivotal in constructing (or challenging) intersubjective consensus around a common doxa. Specific work in linguistics and related disciplines has thus primarily delved in communicative aspects of legitimation processes highlighting the interplay between language and social dynamics from pragmatic, cognitive, semiotic rhetorical and discursive standpoints (see for example van Leeuwen 2008; van Leeuwen & Wodak 1999; Reyes 2011; Cap 2008; Hart 2014; Vaara 2014).

The mediatisation of communication has also been scrutinised as another fundamental aspect of contemporary legitimation processes in the public arena (e.g Vaara 2014; Lundby 2009;

Mazzoleni & Schultz 1999; Zappettini et al. 2021). The legitimacy of a political system such as the EU (and national ones too) is largely dependent on public opinion which, in turn, is shaped by and reflected in the media. While increasing politicisation of the mass communication process can be seen as healthily boosting legitimacy through the involvement of different societal stakeholders (Statham & Trenz 2013; Schrag Sternberg 2013) the mediatisation of such debates – which has inextricably become part and parcel of the politicisation of discourse – can often result in a polarisation of views. In the specific context of Europe, the significance of mediatised communication and its relationship with key societal changes has long been recognised, whether it be through traditional or ‘new’ media or, increasingly, social media (Michailidou & Trenz 2013; de Wilde and Zürn 2012; Barisione & Michailidou, 2017; Hutter & Grande 2014; Wendler 2014; Bennett 2018, 2019b).

As we adopt legitimacy as the best theoretical and analytical proxy to account for several discursive dynamics, we recognise that legitimation is a wide-ranging concept and, as the contributions to this issue show, can manifest itself through different semiotic forms and different communicative styles, and can involve different actors tapping into different logics of legitimacy (for example populist vs. technocratic discourses see Foster, Grzymiski & Brusenbauch Meislová 2021). When preparing the special issue, we therefore did not set out an *a priori* prescriptive interpretation of the language of legitimation. This is reflected in the fact that the contributors all draw on the wealth of theorisation on the grammar of legitimacy (van Leeuwen and Wodak 1999;; Vaara & Monin 2010) that largely refer to, and offer evidence of, four macro meta-arguments through which the language of legitimation can operate: providing specific rational justifications (*rationalisation*); making use of moral arguments (*moralisation*); appealing to certain sources of authority (*authorisation*); and constructing the social acceptability of specific (orders of) discourse (*naturalisation*). As our contributions show, such four meta-arguments or discursive orientations rely on specific contexts and social actors to be activated and to function as legitimation tools. The meaning-making process of ‘legitimacy of EU-rope’ (or any other entity) is therefore ultimately articulated through the discursive encoding and decoding of historical, geographical and contingent meanings as we explain in the next session.

#### **4. Crises, contexts and contestations**

While offering a well-balanced geographical cross-section of country-specific case studies we also focus on how different analyses reflect the communicative and mediatic variety of discourses at play into the question of legitimacy of the European project and how different crises intersect.

The first three articles offer insights into the (de)legitimation of the EU against the backdrop of the Covid (and environmental) crisis in three specific national public spheres: Germany, Spain and Hungary. Forchtner and Özvatan analyse discourses of the German far-right party AfD in relation to the topical issues of climate change and the Covid-19 pandemics. Investigating two corpora of discourses produced by the party in the contexts of these two crises, this article claims that AfD legitimises itself and delegitimise national or European ‘others’ in both performances

of the two crises relying primarily on similar topoi (topos of economic harm, of righteous resistance, of national sovereignty and of incompetent elites). While these topoi confirm the general loci used by other populist parties (see Newth and Maccaferri; Serafis et al. in this issue) Forchtner and Özvatan lucidly point to how these discourses and (de)legitimising stances must be read in the larger narrative of hero/villain that AfD has constructed for themselves and ‘others’ respectively. The authors suggest that AfD’s (implicit) narrative structure of a comic plot combined with romantic elements provide the implicit rationale for the articulation of specific delegitimation discourses. Forchtner and Özvatan thus add an interesting methodological extra layer to Wodak’s established DHA framework they adopt in their study suggesting a distinction between what they call primary and secondary delegitimization of EUrope. While the former relies on explicit evaluative enunciations portraying the ‘other’ (e.g. the national elite) as ‘villains’, the latter delegitimises the EU through silencing and backgrounding, i.e., through ‘the other’s’ linguistic absence.

From the standpoint of media representations of political actors, the Covid crisis also provides the context for Filardo-Llamas and Perales’ article which focuses on how a sample of the Spanish media portrayed EU institutions and member states dealing with the pandemics. The overall picture that emerges from Filardo-Llamas and Perales’ study is of prevalent ‘ethical’ frames of Europe adopted by the media which are based - if only ideally - on cooperation and solidarity at supranational level, moral responsibility and economic consequences of policy decisions. Fitting these three frames, the discourses of the media (which are key to public perceptions) seem to legitimise a European transnational ‘self’ and delegitimise several national ‘others’. As Filardo-Llamas and Perales point out, this interpretation must be read in the specificity of the Spanish context. Appealing to shared supranational values and representations of the EU institutions mismanaging an already critical North/South divide is functional to calls for Spanish interests to be better accommodated. Reversely, when focusing on regional independentist demands of Catalonia, the local press tends to legitimise the Catalan government and the European institutions and delegitimise the national government.

Szabó and Szabó also provide insights into debates around the Covid crisis in the Hungarian context. Through an analysis of the metaphorical expressions used by Viktor Orbán to validate his own government’s management of the crisis and to discredit that of the EU, the authors highlight the PM’s ambivalent discourse. While supranational institutions appear legitimised as authority figures at a supranational level (resonating with Beciu and Lazar’s and Filardo-Llamas and Perales’ findings), they are also delegitimised in their coordination of the response to the pandemic. In addition, the ambivalence of Orbán’s discourse on Europe is also conveyed by his portrayal of Western European member states as Hungary’s opponents and the other Visegrad countries (Czechia, Poland, and Slovakia) as Hungary’s allies and friends. In many respects this narrative chimes with the antagonistic script of ‘us and them’ adopted by other European right-wing parties and discussed in this issue (Forchtner and Özvatan; Newth and Maccaferri). The article concludes with the interesting question of whether and the extent to which such strategy of ‘calculated ambivalence’ (Wodak 2015) might be specific to Orbán and the Hungarian context or indeed whether it might represent a normalised discourse about Europe.

The next set of articles are focused on how legitimacy is constructed in electoral messages during the 2019 European general elections. Newth and Maccaferri cast a light on the Italian context by explaining the role of far-right Lega's leader Matteo Salvini in driving and harnessing substantial Eurosceptic views in Italian public opinion. This case study is emblematic of a swing of sentiment over the EU in Italian public opinion as Salvini's highly mediated communication has been instrumental in the country's turn to increasingly Euronegative views also on the back of the various financial and migration crises that have deeply involved and affected Italy. Analysing the Lega leader social media campaign as well as more traditional communication (speeches), Newth and Maccaferri draw from the concept of discursive recontextualization (Krzyżanowski 2016) and methodologically combine conceptual history and Discourse-Historical Analysis (DHA). Newth and Maccaferri argue that Salvini's delegitimation of the EU project has been performed through a recontextualisation of old Lega's arguments in a new European context and via a combination of Eurosceptic, populist and sovereigntist ideologies, aimed at reclaiming political, cultural and economic distinctiveness of Italy and relying on mythos and pathos-oriented arguments. The paper also highlights how, short of being a *tout court* call for the EU disintegration, Lega's ideal 'Europe of peoples' was ambiguously and conveniently invoked by Salvini through the campaign within a hero/villain narrative (see Forchtner & Özvatan) in which the victimisation of Italy by Europe simply scales up that of Padania by the Italian state. Referring to the same context of the 2019 European elections, Beciu and Lazăr offer a different picture of legitimacy from Newth and Maccaferri by investigating how Romanian politicians position themselves in a corpus of Facebook messages.

Theoretically informed by legitimization as a socio-communicative process aimed at creating subject positions within a field of power, Beciu and Lazăr's analysis convincingly concludes that leaders and candidates of the main Romanian parties constructed their own legitimacy in the eyes of their electorate relying on the self-attribution of a 'European authority'. In other words, the symbolic power of the European project appears positively mobilised by Romanian politicians in as much as it legitimises specific electoral agendas and programmes. This is not necessarily in contrast with Newth and Maccaferri's findings when one considers that Lega has often opportunistically used Europe to construct itself as a legitimate actor on the Italian political scene (Zappettini & Maccaferri 2021) and that in European elections issues tend to be recontextualised into a national dimension. It is however telling how both in the Romanian and Italian case de/legitimation occurs around similar logics of perceived (un)equal relationships of symbolic power between member states and domestic benefits deriving from Europe.

Balancing and complementing some of the studies in this issue that focus on right wing stances on Europe (Forchtner & Özvatan; Newth & Maccaferri) both Zappettini and Serafis et al. take a look at the (de)legitimation of the EU from the other end of the political spectrum in two distinct crisis contexts: Brexit and the Greek financial crisis. Zappettini suggests that while Brexit has often been seen as a right-wing project, the role of the British Labour party in the UK rescinding its membership of the EU cannot be dismissed. Taking an often-underestimated intra-party perspective Zappettini's article investigates ideological meanings of Brexit and the EU that were de/legitimised by different Labour actors. While Zappettini's semantic analysis focuses on the discursive productions of Labour's party members soon after the referendum and during the

negotiation and implementation phases of Brexit, his article is grounded in Labour's division over the notorious 'European question' which was now revisited and debated within the Brexit crisis. Zappettini suggests that, within Labour, Brexit was (de)legitimised as it was filled with specific meanings harking back to distinct semantic fields related to a historical ideological polysemy of socialism, in particular around the national/international nexus. While Brexit was delegitimised (and EU-rope legitimised) by supporters of 'international socialism' advocates of 'socialism in one country' adopted reverse stances to claim the incompatibility of national and European projects. Zappettini sees such polarising conceptualisations of the EU causing an impasse over the Labour's Brexit strategy and resulting in an ambivalent de/legitimation of Brexit as a deliberate political strategy adopted by the leadership in response to the wider Euroceptic/Europhile cleavage within the party.

Similar ambivalent de/legitimising discourses are discussed by Serafis et al in the context of the Greek crisis. Differently to the Labour party and his leader ability to take a clear stance on the EU, the authors suggest that Syriza position shifted from one of delegitimation to one of support for the EU. Serafis et al offer an analysis of how this occurred by delving into a linguistic deconstruction of Tsipras's arguments which were partly reliant on a typically populist representation of us (Greece) and 'Other' EU elites, partly appealing to rational arguments as well as to the mythological allegory of the Odyssey to represent the Greek people navigating the crisis. In pointing out how different repertoires were discursively mobilised to de/legitimised specific actions policies in different contexts of the Greek crisis the authors also corroborate key points raised by other works in this issue: e.g. the antagonistic representation of the EU and nation states; the semantic bending of general 'European values' to fit specific agendas and a general crisis faced by most European left-wing parties.

In the face of these and other challenges, the EU must itself attempt to legitimise its actions and it is this institutional-level discourse that is taken up and analysed in special issue's final paper by Bennett. Using the example of the European Union's foundational myth – that post-war cooperation led to peace – the author proposes both a novel theory of mythopoetic legitimation and an analytical framework for subsequent analysis. In the paper, Bennett combines Berger and Luckmann's social constructivism, and in particular their idea of sedimentation, to show that the EU's 'origins story' is a deeply sedimented myth within EU elites and is a story that is told time and again to legitimise EU-level action and indeed justify its continued existence. In doing so, he argues that the EU has become a prisoner of the past it continues to mythologise and that the affective impact of such a story may be on the wane.

## **5. A (de)legitimised Europe?**

The EU continues to be lightning rod for national-level discussions on a number of topics. This is especially the case for right-wing populist actors, who tend to frame the EU as the reason for a host of ills. Yet despite this, it is (still) the case that European elections are second-order elections and that there is likely only a weak level Europeanisation of both the blocs citizens and their representatives, in the sense that they think and act as Europeans. Collectively and individually,



the papers in this issue appear to support this claim; finding that the EU is a relatively peripheral actor in national-level discourses of climate change and COVID, despite having a sizable influence on some policy areas. If we add to this the overtly anti-European or Euro-critical calls from some quarters (Lega in Italy, Vox in Spain, Fidesz in Hungary, PiS in Poland) then a picture emerges of an institution suffering a long-term crisis of legitimacy; one that started post-Maastricht, intensified during the financial crisis and become ever more acute during the refugee crisis and, now the pandemic. In the face of this, the EU seems somewhat devoid of a response or *cris de cœur* that does not in some way rely upon the bloc's foundational myth to provide the scaffold of its legitimacy. As the remain campaign during the Brexit referendum showed though, there is a real danger in pinning one's hopes to a 'better the devil you know' standpoint and as Bennett argues in this issue, the affective potential for the EU's story is in decline.

However, a more engaged reading of the articles in this special issue – and one that we as editors feel compelled to foreground – is that the EU as a discursive signifier is employed in a much more nuanced way than just 'negatively' and 'positively', often by the same actors and in the same contexts. Instead, this would suggest a *strategic ambivalence* to the thematising of Europe in national-level public discourses. That is, the EU as an actor – but indeed the very idea of Europe(anness) - is often mobilised and instrumentally appropriated for specific agendas. 'Europe' seems therefore needed by a large variety of actors whether to legitimise themselves or to delegitimise others. While in a sense this mobilisation fits the rhetorical script of political discourse, our contributions have shown that ambivalent and competing narratives are also intrinsically part of the discursive narration of Europe and nation-states. In fact, the legitimacy of the EU project is (de)constructed in a reiterative fashion process as different crises emerge and are navigated through. From a theoretical perspective, then, this issue has clearly shown that (de)legitimation is a powerful and flexible discursive strategy for political actors. In light of this consideration we are therefore cautiously answering the question of future (dis)integration with ambivalence ourselves. As researchers (albeit interested parties as citizens of Europe) this is not the space, nor is it our role, to make grand pronouncements of whether and how Europe should be (re)imagined or engage in a round of Cassandra's prophecies. What can be said with certainty is that the EU will continue to loom large in the lives and politics of member-states (and those wishing to enter). Moreover, as with all power relations, there is a dialectic involved; one that involves acts and counter-acts to (de)legitimise the bloc and one that will continue for a while yet. Indeed, to focus solely on the rise of populism and the delegitimation of Europe risks the reification of their predominance and, by extension, their value as subjects of research in the social sciences.

As such, we would like to encourage more research into how, why and in what contexts the EU is discursively (de)legitimised. For example, in this issue we have not been able to do justice to de/legitimation dynamics and counter discourses voiced by 'alternative' actors, for example transnational grassroots-level organisations such DiEM25 or VOLT, or institutional actors who have responded to the recent EU crises from more positive stances, such as *En Marche* in France and even the EU's own attempts to foster legitimacy. As such, this special issue does not aspire to paint the 'full' picture of the EU's legitimacy and research on the abovementioned topics is needed so that alternative narratives can be investigated. Likewise, a focus on bottom-up, citizen-

level discourses of Europe would also counteract the risk of future investigations reifying the elite nature of much of European communication and, thus, research into it. These limitations notwithstanding we believe that this special issue offers a considerable addition to the existing academic exchange on European legitimacy and we would encourage readers to engage with the papers and their authors, in the hope that in doing so, new conversations can be had and new research avenues can be developed.

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