

The Myth of a Green Europe

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Abstract

Unlike most nation-states, the EU faces the challenge of actively creating and sustaining myths about its polity. In this article we explore if and under what conditions the story of a ‘Green Europe’ represents a successful new myth on the European project, which is appealing to present and future generations and capable of generating legitimacy for EU politics. Exploring the narratives of policy leaders (storytellers) we trace the functional role of environmental policy for the EU polity as a whole, establish the legitimating role of environmental policy for the EU and search the extent to which the environmental narrative is constructed as an identity-building story. We argue that, while the actual performance of the EU in environmental policy might raise some doubts about the credibility and hence sustainability of the Green Europe myth, ‘green’ has become a brand attribute of the EU to the European public and carries a high level of legitimacy and potential for identification.

Introduction

A series of political events in recent years suggests that the European Union (EU) faces a severe legitimacy crisis. The three ‘No’ votes – the French and Dutch rejection of the Constitutional Treaty in 2005 and the Irish dismissal of its successor, the Lisbon Treaty, in 2008 – along with the historically low voter turnout for the European Parliament elections in June 2009 shed new light on a long-standing problem of EU politics: the gap between the level of

public support for European integration and the scope of EU policy-making by the 'Brussels elite'. In fact, concerns about the EU's legitimacy and its democratic credentials have been continuously raised by both scholars and political actors since the controversial debates around the ratification of the Maastricht Treaty. It may be subject to debate whether the legitimacy problem of the EU has actually become more severe over time or has just become more visible through the negative referendum results and low turnouts. Yet, increasing voter abstention or even rejection when it comes to important steps of the integration process urges both EU and domestic policy-makers to address this problem in an unprecedented way.

While the legitimacy dilemma has many facets which call for various solutions, the ultimate goal of any problem-solving strategy is to generate public support for the European project (Easton, 1965). As this volume suggests, the challenge may rely on finding a new vision to appeal to generations for whom the compelling story of European integration as the motor of peace and stability on the continent does not resonate so strongly. What Europe needs, therefore, are some new myths that capture the essence of the European project (Della Sala, 2010). In fact, successful myths are capable of creating a sense of belonging and/or generating consensus for the use of political power. In other words, myths can help to gain support for the polity through the forging of a common identity and the creation of solidarity. As Della Sala puts it, political myths are ultimately about generating legitimacy for political rule (Della Sala, 2010).

Many political regimes have their own myths, which help create solidarity and identity. Yet, these regimes are mostly nation-states, which foster stories about the birth of a nation. Unlike nation-states, however, the EU as a system *sui generis* cannot draw on a sample of myths to the same extent as the former (Hansen and Williams, 1999). At the same time, however, in the light of the various crises mentioned above, it crucially requires tools that would generate legitimacy for its political rule. The EU therefore faces the challenge to actively find or even create and sustain myths about its polity, and it does so in a much more exacerbated way than nation-states. In other words, the EU requires effective storytellers in order to mend the legitimacy gap it is facing.

We actually find many different myths in the EU, ranging from the one of 'the EU as a normative power' (Manners, 2002) to the myth of a 'Social Europe'. In this article, we focus on analysing one particular myth: that of a 'Green Europe'. The EU frequently promotes itself as an environmental leader, both on a global level and within its Member States. This is most visible in recent debates on the EU's role in climate change policy and in the increasing relevance of renewable energy sources in the EU's new approach to energy policy. However, most of the scholarly literature focuses on

analysing and explaining the successes and failures of EU environmental policies in both its external and internal dimensions. Few attempts have been made thus far to go beyond the analysis of substantial politics and explore if and under which conditions the story of a 'Green Europe' represents a successful new myth on the European project, which is more appealing to present and future generations and more likely to generate legitimacy for EU politics.

We argue that the myth of a Green Europe is successfully established and seems to be appealing to new generations. Yet, unlike in the case of foundational myths, storytellers have to make a double effort and show that Europe is both actually acting green *and* that it is 'destined' to carry a green mission. While the sluggishness in implementing home-made environmental policies or complying with the Kyoto targets might raise some doubts about the credibility and hence sustainability of the Green Europe myth, we do detect in the European public a high level of legitimacy attributed to and identification with a Green Europe.

To illustrate our argument, the article proceeds in the following steps. Section I locates the myth of 'Green Europe' among other political myths on the EU. Drawing on various indicators, section II surveys the sources of the myth by exploring to which extent the myth of a 'Green Europe' is born in facts and how it has evolved. Section III turns to the main 'storytellers' and explores the strategies of the creation of this myth by distinguishing between its links to policy substance and to the European integration project more generally. Section IV analyses to what extent Europeans respond to the creation of the myth by perceiving and supporting a 'Green Europe'. Section V discusses the extent to which the successful myth of a Green Europe is sustainable in the long run. The final section concludes.

I. Green Europe as a Political Myth in the European Union

There is an increasing literature on the role of political myths, or, more specifically, the role that myths play in politics in recent years (Tudor, 1972; Schöpflin, 1997; Flood, 2001; Bottici and Challand, 2006; Bouchard and Andrès, 2007). While myths can generally be defined as 'a story, a narrative of events in dramatic form' (Tudor, 1972, p. 137) and do not have a specific political nature as such, the appearance of purely political myths is generally related to the separation of religion and politics and therefore considered a typically modern phenomenon (Bottici and Challand, 2006). Thus, the way in which narratives appeal to people's imagination also played a crucial role in nation-building processes on the European continent. Yet, what makes a myth

political is not necessarily the contents of the story (or stories) which underpin it but the extent to which the narrative responds to and addresses the political conditions of a given group (Bottici and Challand, 2006, p. 318). Another feature which distinguishes political myths from other myths is their purpose of generating legitimacy for political rule.¹

This discussion has two implications for political myths in and on the EU. First, regardless of whether we label it as international, supranational or transnational, the EU is clearly a political entity 'beyond the nation-state'. A myth able to generate legitimacy for the political rule of the EU must therefore suggest that we need European governance in order to either improve or maintain the domestic status quo in the national arena. To put it more simply, the myth must make Europeans believe that they are or will be worse off without the EU. Second, as Della Sala (2010) shows, it is precisely the lack of the communal basis that is often found in nation-states (such as ethnicity or national values based on a common history) which requires the EU to tell stories more according to functional lines.

One of these functional myths is that of a 'Green Europe'. Clearly, the idea of a 'Green Europe' has not been a foundational myth of European integration, but was developed incrementally in parallel – sometimes in competition – with other functional myths. Following our discussion, the myth of a 'Green Europe' would suggest that the political rule of the EU is legitimate because it is needed in order to restore or uphold the environmental status quo in European nation-states. Moreover, in order to be a successful political myth rather than a simple policy narrative, it would need to appeal to the political conditions of Europeans and be meaningful to them in a general discourse about Europe and beyond concrete policy questions. In other words, 'green' needs to be seen as a 'brand attribute' of Europe, a particular feature that distinguishes Europe from other political entities and that adds to a common identity.

But is there actually something like a myth on a 'Green Europe' and if so, what is it about? Who are the storytellers, who are the listeners? How successful is the myth in generating legitimacy for the EU? Does the story of a 'Green Europe' have the capacity to make us believe in the normative vision it is presenting?²

¹ Yet, as Bouchard (2007) points out, myths are not only and exclusively positive. Political myths can also aim at de-legitimizing a certain form of political rule, without necessarily generating support for an alternative one.

² In this article, we explicitly do *not* deal with the question of whether the myth of a 'Green Europe' might also de-legitimize the EU's political rule by, e.g., suggesting that EU environmental actions are too costly and harm domestic economies.

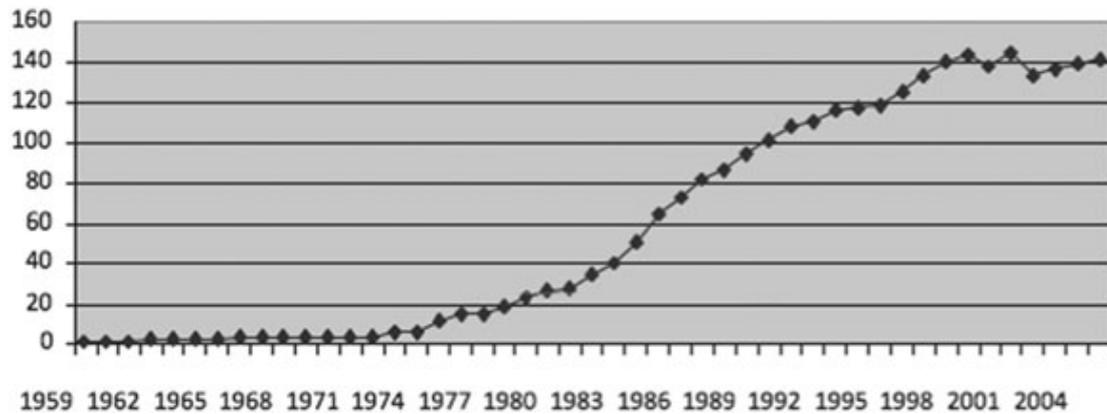
II. Facts as the Source of Myths

A first approach to explore the myth of a 'Green Europe' is to analyse its foundations. Here it is interesting to see whether there has been a 'foundational moment' lending itself as a constant reference point in narrations about Europe – or the European Union in particular. Otherwise, and more in line with the notion of 'Green Europe' being based on a functional myth, we will explore to what extent the EU can actually claim to have (had) substantial environmental policies. But note, it would be wrong to juxtapose myths and observable empirical facts, or to make statements on the accuracy of myths by measuring their claim to truth. As Bottici and Challand (2006) argue, myths are usually only an expression of a determination to act and can therefore not be falsified as a result of their empirical inaccuracy. Nevertheless, their *emergence* in the first place crucially hinges upon the existence of real empirical events in the past: 'political myths deal with people who really existed and with events that actually took place' (Tudor, 1972, p. 38). To paraphrase Della Sala, myths are *born* in facts, but then take on a life on their own in the hands of storytellers and listeners (Della Sala, 2010). This means that the myth of a 'Green Europe' would have emerged at a time in which Europe was pushing forward environmental policies.

The founding moment of the European Union was the post-World War II settlement between the winning allied powers culminating in the Marshall Plan on the one hand (the root of the OECD) and the Schuman Plan for the European Coal and Steel Community on the other. There was no specific historical event or moment in the history of the EU that created the myth of 'Green Europe' in the sense that storytellers can refer to it inevitably when the story of an environmental Europe is told. However, there were and are ecological turning points such as the Seveso incident, acid rain and the consequent *Waldsterben* in Germany and Scandinavia or incidences related to ozone depletion or to climate change, which triggered the development of a European environmental policy and led to a general understanding that collective action was needed to resolve such problems.

At first sight, the 'constitutional' set-up of the European Community has not been hospitable for the creation of an environmental myth. Since there was initially no legal basis for environmental policy in the treaties, 'green' policies could only be adopted as long as policy-makers could demonstrate that they were essential for the creation of a common market (for an overview, see Knill and Liefferink, 2007; McCormick, 2001), which arguably was the primary policy core of the European project (Sbragia, 2000). The fact that European environmental legal acts began to regulate issues in the area of chemicals, water, air and waste and often established high standards of

Figure 1: EU Environmental Legislation in Force 1959–2005 (directives only)



Source: Own elaboration based on Eur-Lex.

protection suggests that at the *national* level green notions were emerging and forcing themselves into market relations. Close analysis of national narratives is likely to reveal different images of environmental protection – for example, as ‘responsible behaviour for the common good’, as an innovative aspect of ‘post-industrial modernization’, or, in contrast, as ‘risk avoidance’ – yet so-called environmental pioneers (Anderson and Liefferink, 1997) pushed an environmental rhetoric to the European agenda, which was readily absorbed by the European institutions – Commission and European Parliament – to expand the mission of European integration. This interplay between the national and the European level has certainly been critical for the ‘birth’ of the green myth and the tradition of some ‘green’ Member States remains an important anchor for ‘Green Europe’.³

The gradual emergence of a *sui generis* environmental policy and the notion that this was a European responsibility following distinct normative principles crystallized in the adoption of the Single European Act, which explicitly codified EC competence and principles in this area. Earlier and arguably more convincingly than in the field of social policy, environmental policy became a central element in the evolution of the EC/EU into something ‘more than a market’.⁴ In this, sense it played a critical role in the transformation of the European *Economic* Community to the European (*political*) Union.

During the following years the EC witnessed a steep rise in activities in this field, as depicted in Figure 1. The figure shows the steady rise in envi-

³ This is notwithstanding the critical role the European Commission has played in establishing this policy field (e.g. Weale, 1999, who emphasizes the organizational interests of the Commission in this particular area of policy expansion). Following Weale, we will focus heavily on the Commission as one of the ‘storytellers’ of the myth of a ‘Green Europe’.

⁴ On the evolution of the market–environment linkage see Lenschow and Zito (1998).

ronmental legal output since the beginning of the 1980s. This is also true for the areas covered by environmental legislation, which expanded to issues such as biodiversity or the regulation of genetically modified organisms (GMOs). Through various rounds of enlargement this *acquis* became applicable to a rising number of states, and hence pulled along countries not traditionally considered environmental pioneers. While the quantitative policy output in the environmental area has slowed down and stagnated since 2000, this is related to a change in paradigm of EU environmental policy, which started to focus on improving the implementation of the existing *acquis* and on reforming regulatory approaches in the mid-1990s (Grant *et al.*, 2000; Knill and Liefferink, 2007; McCormick, 2001; Weale *et al.*, 2000). In this sense, the evident slowdown seems to be a sign of consolidation rather than deterioration. The so-called new regulatory approaches cover areas such as water quality, chemicals control or climate change (Lenschow, forthcoming).

As indicated, the myth of a Green Europe stems from the 'greenness' of individual Member States as much as from collective efforts at the European level to create capacities in this field, to spread environmental norms among all members and to resolve common problems. Increasingly, we also witness an international dimension of the myth of Green Europe, implying the idea of leading and (environmentally) improving the world we live in. The EU has increasingly played a proactive role in negotiating multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs) (Bretherton and Vogler, 2005; Sbragia, 2005). The European Community is signatory to more than 40 MEAs, and has recently become a prominent player in the international climate change policy negotiations (Oberthür and Roche Kelly, 2008; Kelemen, forthcoming).

To sum up, the findings show that there is some evidence for substantial 'green' politics in Europe – at national and EU levels as well as in international politics – upon which myths can potentially build. Unlike other political myths, the facts upon which 'Green Europe' can draw do not refer to a distant past but to recent and empirically traceable activities. Two aspects follow from this. First, in the absence of vague historical notions that are no longer questioned, it is likely we can still witness the process through which the green myth is 'taking on a life of its own in the hands of storytellers and listeners' in the ongoing policy process and the related discourse. This discourse, secondly, cannot be detached from concrete observations; it needs to prove itself based on substantial evidence in order to be sustained. The following sections will trace the process of myth creation 'in the hands of storyteller and listeners' before turning to the question of sustainability.

III. Telling the Story of a Green Europe: The Storytellers

In order to distinguish a myth from a mere policy that has evolved over time and developed some distinct characteristics we need to turn to the narratives that are told, which are detached from concrete policy issues and problems. As this article has primarily an explorative function in tracing the green myth, we chose the pragmatic path of searching speeches made by top policy-makers in the EU, who due to their institutional position are also in a position to build the polity of the European Union. Accordingly, we hope to trace in these speeches both evidence of the policy substance of a green myth and the link that is constructed to the European integration project more generally. We will therefore proceed in three steps and, first, trace the functional role of environmental policy for the EU polity as a whole, second, establish the legitimating role of environmental policy for the EU and, third, explore the extent to which the environmental narrative is constructed as an identity-building story.

Remodelling the 'Functional Core' of the EU: Sustainable Progress

As indicated in the brief history of EU environmental policy above, the evolution of this policy field was shaped by modelling and remodelling a relationship to the European market project. Arguably, the policy emerged as a 'niche product' responding to emerging demand in specific segments of society and among some 'pioneering' states. It then developed into a 'flanking' policy intended to reduce externalities of a single European market, which were felt to be normatively undesirable.

The Community shall have as its task, by establishing a common market and an economic and monetary union and by implementing common policies or activities referred to in Articles 3 and 4, to promote throughout the Community a harmonious, balanced and sustainable development of economic activities, a high level of employment and of social protection, equality between men and women, sustainable and non-inflationary growth, a high degree of competitiveness and convergence of economic performance, *a high level of protection and improvement of the quality of the environment*, the raising of the standard of living and quality of life, and economic and social cohesion and solidarity among Member States. (TEU, Art. 2, emphasis added)

We might classify this notion of environmental policy as a derivative myth (Bouchard and Andrès, 2007; see also Della Sala, 2010) – i.e. that of a 'green market' – which tries to give meaning to the environmental action taken.

For the past decade, or so, storytellers in the European Union have continued the construction of a myth in establishing ‘green’ as the *core* feature of a modern and competitive market, which furthermore is an element of the distinctiveness of Europe – and European world leadership. The Lisbon Council meeting on Jobs and Growth in early March 2008 formed an occasion for Commission President José Manuel Barroso (2008a) to formulate this succinctly:

Let’s finally lay to rest the idea that there is a *trade-off* between high standards of environmental protection and competitiveness. *There isn’t*. Just look at some of the Nordic countries. We can do well by doing good. *Europe must lead the world* in the shift to a hi-tech, low carbon economy. (Barroso, 2008a, emphasis added)

A year earlier, Margot Wallström (Commissioner for Institutional Affairs and Communication Strategy; formerly Commissioner for the Environment) placed ‘Green Europe’ on a time horizon conveying that Europe has reached the point of reflection and re-innovation based on environmental premises (Wallström, 2007).

In 50 years’ time I want Europeans to be able to look back on this decade as the *start of a new era* for Europe and the world. I want people to say:

- Those were the years when we began to put into practice the concept of *smart growth*.
- That was the time when we decided to become the most energy-efficient region in the world.
- That was the decade when we began in earnest to shift our social systems towards sustainable development, combining economic growth with social responsibility and environmental protection. (Wallström, 2007, emphasis added)

In short, the environmental narrative in the European Union has gone through some stages of evolution, moving environmental protection from a marginal to a flanking to an essential feature of modern life and economic progress. Rather than an afterthought, it is framed as a precondition for the continued success of a long-standing myth of the European Union, the common and competitive market.

Constructing Legitimacy for the European Union

In the absence of a ‘big bang’ moment in history which could have surfaced the myth of Green Europe and established this myth also in the people’s minds, we witness in the EU continuous efforts of myth construction by

policy elites who operate not only with the concept of progress and modernity (see above) but also with notions of responsiveness: Green Europe is what the European people want and expect from EU policy-makers. This is visible in the numerous booklets and documentation promoting the myth of a Green Europe. For instance, the information booklet ‘Europe in 12 lessons’ claims that ‘Europe’s mission in the 21st century is to: [. . .] uphold the *values that Europeans share*, such as sustainable development and a sound environment, respect for human rights and the social market economy’ (Fontaine, 2006, p. 5, emphasis added).

In order to confirm what the values of Europeans are the Commission is regularly producing opinion surveys. These show a high concern for environmental questions in the European public as well as the expectation that the EU contributes with its policy to finding solutions for environmental problems (see below). EU policy-makers use this invited ‘feedback’ to legitimate further activity and to underscore the validity of the Green Europe myth. For instance, the results of a recent special Eurobarometer (No. 313) on the issue of climate change were subsequently used to legitimize European action in this field and to build pressure on decision-makers in passing the climate change package in preparation for the Copenhagen conference at the end of 2009 (Commission, 2008b). Apart from any strategic motives guiding Commission officials in this instance in order to ensure a critical policy decision, the example shows how a functional myth requires public hopes and expectations as a reference point – a reference point that needs to be kept alive by constructing a discourse.

Although to sustain a European myth it is important to ensure sufficient resonance among the European public, in order to ‘take on a life of its own’ the story needs to carry beyond cycles of policy-making and public acceptance and become a true signifier for the European Union as a whole. While born in facts and supported through public expectations, the functional dimension of a myth like Green Europe needs to ‘blur’ in people’s minds and identification with a general image of Europe needs to emerge for the myth to be sustainable.

Remodelling the ‘Foundational Myth’: From the European Peace Project to Saving the World

A more general image – beyond a narrow policy narrative – that is enriched with the notion of Green Europe might be that of Europe being a normative power (Manners, 2002). Not the least because of its specific founding history – the EC/EU being the result of and the carrier of a unique peace project – the European polity is cast as a ‘saving power’ protecting its people from –

however defined – danger. The former President of the European Parliament, Hans-Gert Pöttering, established this link in a speech to the new students of the College of Europe in Natolin on 1 October 2008: ‘On the European continent, we have managed to create lasting peace between our countries, now we have to tackle the huge task of creating peace with the planet we live on’ (Pöttering, 2008, p. 7).⁵ Environmental protection, with the threats of finite energy resources and climate change in particular, pose today’s challenges to a peaceful existence. As Europe has proven itself capable of creating peace internally after World War II and spread peace through several rounds of enlargement on the continent, it is particularly suitable – so the narrative goes – to take the lead in this wider ‘peace project’. Commission President José Manuel Barroso (2008b) follows the same storyline:

We can help to create a more just globalization if we *spread our norms and rules* to regulate global interactions. Europe is already one of the leading international norm-setters, in human rights and good governance, in fair trade, in development and aid, in labour and social standards, *in environmental protection*, and in many other areas. It is not difficult to understand why the European Union is the best prepared to promote a multilateral way of international and transnational governance. *Europe has the unique historical experience of successful integration and co-operation among sovereign states.* (Barroso (2008b, emphasis added)

In short, this part of the discourse argues that it is not only the transnational nature of the problem (i.e. the functional dimension) that legitimizes EU action in the field of environmental policy, but it is the historical experience in Europe of creating co-operative governance structures that justify confidence in a Green Europe and sustain the myth.

IV. Listening to the Story of a Green Europe: Myth Reception

In order to establish whether a narrative is a political myth or not, we must not only look at its production, but equally at its reception. The ultimate success of a political myth crucially depends on whether the stories which are told are actually listened to and subsequently affect the beliefs of listeners. As Bottici and Challand (2006) put it, what makes a political myth out of a simple narrative is the fact that it coagulates and reproduces significance, that it is shared by a given group and that it can address the specifically political conditions in which this group lives. For our case, this would imply that the story of a Green Europe would have to produce significance for the process of

⁵ The same passage can be found in a number of other speeches by Pöttering – typically speeches addressed to younger people.

European integration, that it is shared by 'Europeans', i.e. by the peoples of all EU-27 Member States and potentially the candidate countries, and that it addresses the environmental conditions in which Europeans live. As mentioned above, the latter might imply a story that Europe is needed to either uphold good environmental standards or to further improve them (functional dimension) or, detached from actual performance, that Europe is destined to be 'green' due to historical experience and set-up.

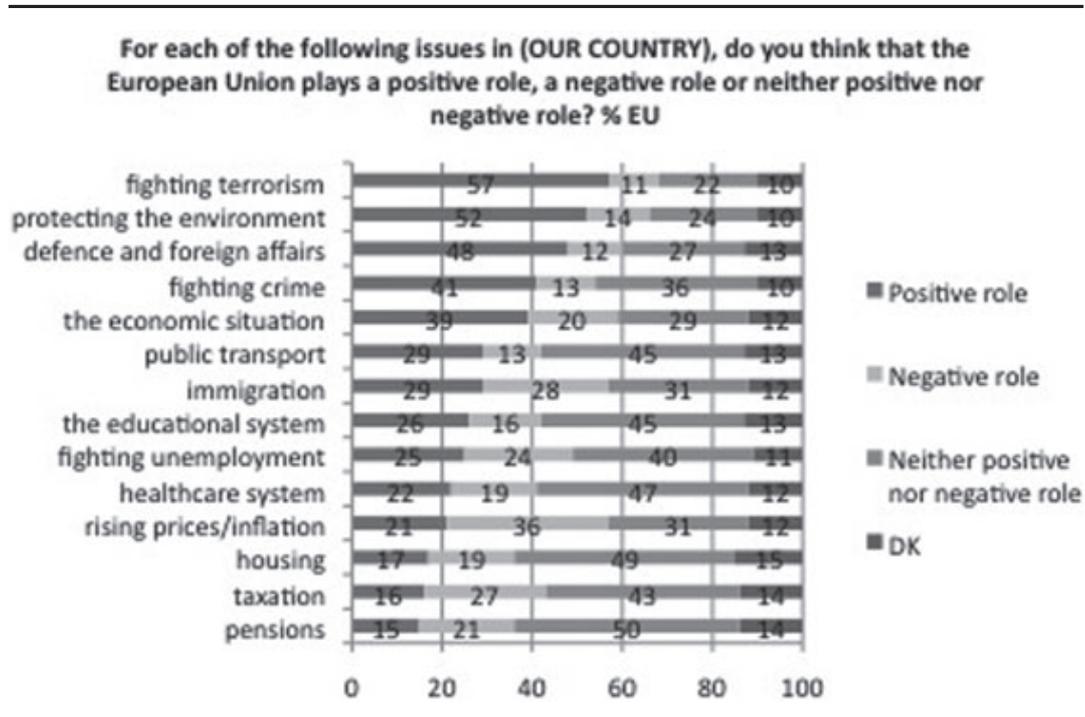
In this part we ask the question to what extent Europeans share the myth of a Green Europe and try to answer it by relying on Eurobarometer data. We realize that the link from the storytellers cited above, who typically address rather selective publics, and the European population at large, which is represented in the opinion polls, is not straightforward. Rather than tracing the narrative from the European policy elites to the general public, we need to *assume* that the stories told may have resonated with societal opinion leaders and may have entered national political discourses (for example, via the mass media). Evidence that the general public has adopted the myth of a Green Europe will lead us to conclude that the stories have spread somehow. We will attempt to trace the three dimensions in the construction of the myth – function, legitimacy and identity – that were introduced in the previous section.

We turn first to the issue of *legitimate* European action in the field of environmental protection before dealing with the substance of the narrative. As hinted above, the majority of Europeans perceive EU activity in this field – alone or jointly with the Member States – as legitimate. The most recent Eurobarometer data (No. 70) show that in virtually every Member State respondents prefer decisions about protecting the environment to be made jointly within the EU (67 per cent), rather than by national governments individually. Although this number has been decreasing since 2007, when it was 73 per cent, the environment remains one of the top three policy fields in which a majority of respondents support EU activity.

Legitimacy needs to be distinguished from *functional approval*. This is illustrated in Table 1, which shows that 52 per cent of the respondents assign a positive role to the EU in protecting the environment. This is a significantly lower percentage than the legitimacy rate. However, it is the second best score for a policy area right after terrorism (57 per cent) and before defence and foreign affairs (48 per cent).⁶ Similarly, in the same survey from 2008

⁶ Considering the true competence of the EU in this latter policy field these numbers might cause surprise. From the perspective of 'myth reception' we might hypothesize that these numbers are linked to the foundational myth of the EC/EU as a peace project. This however cannot be investigated here.

Table 1: The Role of the EU in Protecting the Environment as Compared to Other Policy Areas



Source: Eurobarometer 68 (2008, p. 115).

Europeans place environmental issues second (after the fight against crime) when asked about the aspects which should be emphasized to strengthen the EU in the future. In other words, the European Union is perceived as *responsible* for environmental protection.

Our discussion above on the evolution of the environmental myth suggested a transformation in the environment–economy nexus towards a synergistic relationship where economic progress cannot be achieved without environmental protection. In a special Eurobarometer survey on environmental policy in 2008, respondents express strong beliefs that the EU should extend assistance to non-EU countries to help them improve their environmental standards (80 per cent) and high acceptance of increased EU funding for environmental protection even at the expense of other areas (78 per cent) (Commission, 2008a, p. 48). In an earlier survey (Commission, 2007, p. 53) 73 per cent of all respondents believed that protecting the environment should be a priority for their country even if it affects economic growth. Asked in another way, only 40 per cent of EU citizens felt that economic growth should

Table 2: Perception of the EU and US Situation in Old and New Member States

% 'European Union is ahead of the United States regarding . . .'	Perception of the European situation compared to the US situation		
	EU-25	EU-15	NMS
Protection of the environment	59%	62%	42%
Fighting social disparities	51%	55%	32%
The health care system	49%	54%	24%
Fighting discrimination	44%	48%	28%
Education	41%	41%	41%
Fighting unemployment	33%	35%	22%
Innovation technology	18%	19%	15%
Medical research	17%	18%	15%
The creation of companies	16%	16%	16%
Scientific research	14%	14%	13%

Source: Eurobarometer No. 66 (Commission, 2007, p. 69).

be a priority for their country even if it affects the environment.⁷ Hence, a majority of Europeans attributed more than a flanking role to environmental protection, suggesting support for or belief in a deeper notion of environmental protection.

Eurobarometer data do not easily lend themselves to distinguish support, which might be very volatile, from belief or identity linked to a common myth. In support of a myth-building process we might point to the fact that respondents associate the EU positively with environmental protection consistently for numerous years. Furthermore, the Eurobarometer survey from 2007 (No. 66) is tapping the identity dimension when asking to compare the EU with the United States on a number of issues, as shown in Table 2. Environmental protection is identified as the field where Europe is most ahead of the US; this statement is agreed upon by 59 per cent of all respondents (19 per cent responded 'at same level'; 14 per cent see the US ahead and 9 per cent did not know). The environment remains on top even when considering the old EU-15 respondents and the new Member States separately. Hence, in opposition to 'the other' (in this case the US), Green Europe fulfils the crucial purpose of a (sustainable) political myth of creating or supporting a common identity.

In sum, the analysis of opinion poll data suggests that Europeans are not only listening to but sharing the story of a Green Europe. This story may even contribute to the creation of a common European identity and to generate

⁷ These data were collected through a 'split ballot' methodology (dividing the sample in halves) in order to increase the validity of the result.

legitimacy for the political rule of the EU in that area. It can therefore be considered as a successful political myth. But how sustainable is the myth of a Green Europe in the long run?

V. Green Europe – A Sustainable Myth?

Since the myth of a Green Europe emerged as a functional myth rather than a foundational myth about the process of European integration, it is more strongly rooted in functional ‘performance’ in this area. This is true although, as we saw, the storytellers are not merely narrating EU ‘competence’ in a narrow sense but also establish a link to the foundational period of the EU and its very essence as a polity distinguished from other polities. Nevertheless, storytellers have to illustrate that the EU is actually (acting) ‘green’ in order to keep the myth plausible. We could therefore argue that in the case of functional myths, the existence of real world facts is not only crucial for their *emergence* but also for their *survival*. This is not to say that the story cannot deviate from or go beyond reality, but that functional myths require a closer and ongoing link to real world events. As Hansen and Williams (1999) argue, a polity that bases its legitimacy on myths of rationality faces a different kind of test for those narratives to survive. Since the appeal of these myths is precisely functional efficiency rather than a reference to a distant historical event that may have founded a nation, it requires the occasional demonstration of this efficiency.⁸ Thus, the myth of a Green Europe needs to be occasionally ‘refreshed’ by referring to an actual good environmental performance of the EU and/or by referring to events illustrating the need for a common EU response such as ecological disasters. The myth of a Green Europe is therefore only likely to survive if the fiction it entails continues to find some resonance in facts, i.e. if we (still) find some evidence for pro-environmental policies or even environmental leadership *vis-à-vis* the ‘other’, be it third countries, other regional bodies or international organizations (IOs).

As shown above, the EU did not only start developing environmental policies some 35 years ago, it also has an international leadership role in environmental issues, and the state of the environment of most European countries is excellent. In fact, when drawing on the actual state of the environment in Europe as compared to other parts of the world as an indicator, we find 12 EU Member States and four European but non-EU countries figure among the top 20 countries in the Global Environmental Performance Index

⁸ We thank Vincent Della Sala for pointing out to us this important distinction.

(EPI) (2008).⁹ Thus, only four non-European countries (Costa Rica, New Zealand, Colombia and Canada) are part of that upper category. While the ranking slightly deviates from the 2006 EPI, the overall good performance of EU countries compared to other countries in the world gives a sound empirical basis to the development of a Green Europe myth. Yet, there is no global leadership of Europe for *all* environmental issues. On the two main indicators the EPI draws on – environmental health and ecosystem vitality – European countries perform far more poorly on the latter factor (EPI, 2008).

With regard to the EU, we saw the growth and consolidation of an environmental *acquis*. To the extent to which the actual existence of a Green Europe also requires that EU Member States effectively implement the environmental policies they have adopted some doubts emerge. When drawing on the infringement proceedings against Member States between 1978 and 1999 (see Börzel *et al.*, forthcoming), we find that the environmental policy sector belongs to the most infringed sectors – particularly if we control for the actual legislation in force. The same holds true when looking at more recent developments as outlined in the Commission's Annual Reports on the Application of Community Law, in which infringements in the environmental policy sector regularly outweigh other sectors, including the Internal Market (Commission, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005). The Annual Surveys on the implementation and enforcement of Community environmental law even report that environmental infringements make up one-third of all infringements (Commission, 2006). There has been an abundant literature on the fact that EU environmental policies are not fully and effectively put into practice (Knill and Lenschow, 1998; Knill, 2001; Börzel, 2003; McCormick, 2001; Knill and Liefferink, 2007).

Coupled with the EPI index cited above, the true relevance of these implementation records may be less the poor performance of European states in environmental policy matters than the uncertain role played by the EU in contributing to this generally good performance. In other words, the legitimacy of the Green EU (as opposed to Green Europe) may be in question. Is the EU capable of compelling its members to conform to the green image? And is the EU capable of living up to its adopted leadership role in international environmental policy? In the former case, compliance problems in the EU-15 seem to receive little attention in the general public. In part this may be because this is a rather dull matter; in part it may be because the diffusion of the myth has been successful so that people continue to believe in a Green Europe despite poor policy implementation records – which, furthermore, might be attributed to the high environmental awareness among Europeans,

⁹ See «<http://epi.yale.edu/CountryScores>».

who help detect mal-compliance. The mission statement of the European Environmental Bureau (EEB), an umbrella organization of European environmental NGOs, is instructive in this context (EEB, 2004) as the EEB frames its mission as being part of the ‘machinery’ realizing a Green Europe/EU.

The mission of the EEB is to become an effective *instrument* in visibly improving EU’s environmental policies and realizing sustainable development by effectively integrating environmental objectives in horizontal and sectoral policies of the EU as well as ensuring compliance with effective strategies to realize these objectives. (EEB, 2004, emphasis added)

The EEB as well as most other ENGOs acting at the Brussels level are instrumental to closing the gaps within a Green Europe without contradicting this very claim. Furthermore, they see it as their concern that the EU extends its greening influence beyond its borders and to the global context (EEB, 2004).¹⁰

The continuing legitimacy of the environmental leadership role of the EU internationally of course depends on the EU’s capacity to fulfil its own commitments. The ongoing climate change negotiations may be a test case in this context. Here, the EU promotes itself as a leader in global climate change policy and as a fierce proponent of the Kyoto Protocol (Bretherton and Vogler, 2005; Kelemen, forthcoming; Sbragia, 2005). Table 3 shows that in 2006 only three out of the EU-15 Member States – France, the UK and Finland – had reached the emission allowances according to the EU burden-sharing agreement for 2012 and that there is still some way to go.

But the data for the EU as a whole show a trend in a positive direction and when comparing the data for 2005 and 2006 only three countries, Denmark, France and Luxembourg reported an increase in GHG emissions (EEB, 2004). The fact that the EU has recently – in the midst of the financial crisis – adopted a climate change package designed to operationalize the Kyoto commitment and to indicate ways beyond that, demonstrates that the EU is trying hard to let facts support an image that has been built over the years.

A similarly vaguely positive picture emerges when drawing on another indicator for the EU’s global environmental performance: the swiftness with which the European Community (EC) ratifies the more than 40 MEAs it is a signatory to. Here, we find that the promptness varies largely between the issues regulated by the international treaties, with a period ranging from eight months for the *International Tropical Timber Agreement* or the *Convention*

¹⁰ Although the ENGOs acting in Brussels pursue slightly different strategies in influencing EU policy, most frame their role as a co-operative one, acting together with EU environmental policy-makers (see for instance the presentation of the Europe office of the WWF on ‘who we are’. See <http://www.panda.org/what_we_do/how_we_work/policy/wwf_europe_environment/about_us/>).

Table 3: EU-15 Member States' Compliance with Kyoto Targets in 2006

	<i>GHG emissions 1990–2006 in %</i>	<i>Kyoto target under EU burden-sharing agreement in %</i>	<i>Difference in %</i>
Sweden	110.6	4.0	+96.6
Spain	53.5	15.0	+38.5
Luxembourg	1.1	–28.0	+29.1
Austria	12.5	–13.0	+25.5
Denmark	–1.1	–21.0	+19.9
Ireland	24.3	13.0	+11.3
Italy	4.1	–6.5	+10.6
Netherlands	–2.0	–6.0	+4.0
Portugal	29.6	27.0	+2.6
Belgium	–5.0	–7.5	+2.5
Germany	–19.3	–21.0	+1.7
Greece	26.2	25.0	+1.2
UK	–15.6	–12.5	–3.1
France	–9.4	0.0	–9.4
Finland	–10.8	0.0	–10.8
EU-15	–4.6	–8.0	+3.4

Source: UNFCCC GHG data for Annex I-parties and EU burden-sharing agreement numbers (FCCC/SBI/2008/12: 17; available at: <http://unfccc.int/resource/docs/2008/sbi/eng/12.pdf>).

on the Conservation of the Marine Fauna and Flora of the Antarctic *Camberra* to more than 11 years for the *Convention for the Protection of Vertebrate Animals used for Experimental and other Scientific Purpose*.¹¹ Compared to other countries, the EC is usually in the mid- to upper range of duration of ratification. Drawing on two major agreements, the *Convention on Biological Diversity* from 1992¹² and the *Basel Convention on the Control of Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes and their Disposal* from 1989,¹³ the EU ratified the agreements in a speedier fashion than the United States, but much slower than another 'leader' in environmental matters, Canada. Both the Greenhouse Gas Emissions data and the swiftness of ratifying MEAs therefore show that when drawing on facts, the EU claim to international environmental leadership is ambiguous. However, the EU does show some capacity to bundle a whole group of countries, commit them to joint action and draw even weaker performing states into a maelstrom of environmental leadership.

¹¹ See http://ec.europa.eu/environment/international_issues/agreements_en.htm.

¹² See <http://www.cbd.int/convention/parties/list/>.

¹³ See <http://www.basel.int/ratif/convention.htm>.

Conclusion

This article set out to trace the myth of a Green Europe in both the narratives of main policy-makers in the EU (the storytellers) and in the perceptions and beliefs of the European public. We started with the notion that – in the absence of a founding historical moment – the green myth will be a functional myth, rooted in the policy activities of the European Union and its Member States; in other words, a myth which is born in and sustained by facts. Not least due to the historical contribution of some green pioneering states in Europe, the emergence and evolution of European environmental policy has been – by and large – a success story: the *acquis* has reached a status of consolidation and the EU enjoys a green reputation both among a majority of European citizens and internationally. Such a reputation provides the kind of legitimacy the EU polity requires as a whole.

However, regular ‘reality checks’ in Europe may undermine the myth of Green Europe and the legitimacy that follows. For instance, if the implementation of EU environmental policy fails on the ground or the EU proves incapable of fulfilling its global environmental commitments, if therefore the EU’s image as an effective and internationally leading environmental actor falters, the myth of Green Europe may crumble. Present evidence is ambiguous in this regard. No doubt there are implementation problems; also policy-makers’ references to ‘smart growth’ and ‘no trade-off’ between the economy and environmental protection seem to be incantations rather than backed by much policy evidence. However, the EU’s climate change policy points in the announced direction and it is no coincidence that the storytellers of Green Europe are using this as the focal point for their general story.

The construction of the Green Europe myth, as we saw, relies on more than mere functional claims, however. Storytellers construct a discourse with the general public in order to gain – and claim – public legitimacy. Furthermore, they construct a vision for Europe, which transforms the old notion of the EC/EU as a ‘motor of peace and stability’ into a modern image of protection. This new image may have a higher appeal to the younger generation of European citizens than the post-war foundational myth of European integration. Yet, both, the old ‘peace’ and the new ‘environment’ stories have the same essential message, namely ‘security through solidarity’. As such the green myth may facilitate some identification with the European polity as a whole, which can be sustained even in the light of doubtful factual evidence. The Eurobarometer data cited in this article suggest that such identification with a Green Europe is already taking place in larger parts of the European public.

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