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**Reinforcing the Case of *Pulse of Europe* to Overcome
Contemporary Challenges for the European Union**

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Dear fellow citizens of the European Union, how would you feel if, starting tomorrow, you could not drive freely without border controls from Germany to France anymore, to explore Paris for a weekend? What if tomorrow, our European Single Market would not exist anymore and consequently, there would be no common standards ensuring our health through regulations on clean drinking water, reducing air pollution or restricting the use of pesticides in agriculture? How would you tell your children that they cannot go on the semester abroad to Amsterdam or the student exchange to Barcelona that they had been excited about for so long? What if your own degree would not be accepted in Belgium anymore so you don't qualify for an internship or a job there? What would happen to our economy and labor market without a common, stable currency? How would you feel about no more pan-European warranty periods and standards for labelling provisions or food hygiene, starting tomorrow?

I guess, you would hope that tomorrow never comes. But hope alone does not preserve the European Union and all the benefits it brings to our everyone's and future generations' daily lives. To address the recent challenges the EU is facing, your active engagement is required. It starts with speaking out your support for, and belief in the European project.

Citizens' Initiative *Pulse of Europe*: Values, Activities and Strategy

To mobilize the silent majority of supporters of the European Union – that is the mission that drives the citizens' initiative *Pulse of Europe (PoE)*. The small group of initiators and the first few hundred followers held their first meeting on a Sunday afternoon in mid-January 2017 in Frankfurt, Germany. Daniel Röder, a German lawyer founded the *Pulse of Europe* not to protest and demonstrate against something, but to build and demonstrate support for a concept he believes in: the European Union. In direct response to feelings of intense dismay brought on by watching Donald Trump's victory on television, Röder started the movement¹. Since the beginning of the year, he and his friends in Germany and other European countries are bringing people all over the continent together every Sunday afternoon to set a signal for the future of Europe.

The goal of *Pulse of Europe* is to send out positive energy pro Europe to drown out current nationalist tendencies; to make the pro-EU movement more visible and literally, let the “European pulse”¹ be felt everywhere.

Through social media communication and press coverage, the initiative quickly gained a broad base of followers all over Europe who actively participate in demonstrations in various European cities. With the movement increasing, new locations have been added over the past weeks and the number of cities holding *Pulse of Europe* meetings will continue to grow. Gathering on city squares, crowds wave European flags or simply wear blue clothes as a sign of support. For one hour, the program provides live music and an open mike, giving citizens the chance to get involved and present their own thoughts. Sometimes, participants listen to or sing the European anthem together to attract attention. Using symbols of unity such as the flag or anthem also conjures up a stronger identification with the European polity². As a European currently living abroad, watching all those people on TV – children, adolescents, adults and seniors alike – engaging in the demonstrations arouses warm feelings of pride and belonging in me. I can feel the sparks of the European spirit flying over to me. I can feel my heart beating in the same rhythm as theirs. Even though I’m far away, the pulse of Europe beats in me.

Initially organized through the mobilization of personal networks and scaled up using word-of-mouth and social media platforms for communication, the *Pulse of Europe* is now vibrating with a higher rate and volume than it has been for years. From a low rate at rest it rose quickly and will soon be throbbing like crazy. In only four months, supporters of the European Union founded local *Pulse of Europe* initiatives in about 120 cities in 19 different European countries (status May 10, 2017), bringing thousands of people to the streets to demonstrate for European values. Besides, more than 100.000 Europe-enthusiasts like and follow the civil movement on Facebook, #pulseofeuropa has already been used about 8.000 times on Instagram and nearly 20.000 people follow the initiative on Twitter (status: May 10, 2017). Through all these forms of active participation and civic engagement on- and offline, the *Pulse of Europe* can now be heard and palpated everywhere, even beyond the continent’s borders: News media both within Europe and in the United States of America have been reporting on the initiative over the past weeks.

¹ Pulse of Europe (2017, May 11). Retrieved from <http://pulseofeuropa.eu/>

² De Angelis, G., & Barcelos, P. (2013). *The Long Quest for Identity : Political Identity and Fundamental Rights Protection in the European Union*. Bern: Peter Lang AG.

Within a few months, a grassroots initiative that started with a small group of individuals but quickly grew into a strong pan-European movement reanimated and breathed new life into the European Union. If the pulse wave will continue to spread as fast, the European Union will soon be bustling with life.

The recent results of the Dutch and French elections are a first success and show that most Europeans believe in a common future. Indeed, in 2016, more than 80% supported the four basic freedoms of the EU and more than two thirds of Europeans saw the EU as a place of stability⁵. The next occasion to make the high pressure and support for the pulse of Europe audible will be at the German elections this summer.

One of the main reasons why *Pulse of Europe* is finding such broad approval throughout various countries and parts of society is because the initiative has no political direction. Per self-definition, the movement aims to preserve Europe “beyond party or religion”¹. Another aspect of how the initiative is striving to show backing for the EU is by bringing more emotion to the European project. Rather than solely seeing it rationally as a legislative construct or an entity of bureaucracy, citizens should perceive the European Union as a vivid bond between people from different nations and cultures that affects every single one of them personally, in every-day life. *Pulse of Europe*’s strategy mainly is to create a pro EU spirit and strengthen the belief in the fundamental idea of the European Union¹.

The fundamental values shared amongst Europeans that *Pulse of Europe* represents are peace and individual freedom. The initiative drafted an exposition listing ten points, including achievements that are at stake if the European Union does not stay united, and concrete calls to action to support the EU. Summed up, *PoE* calls upon everyone who supports or at least benefits from the EU to actively engage civically and vote in elections, to ensure the survival of the EU (1). A failure of the EU means a “threat to peace”. To preserve the peace that has been secured for 70 years on the European continent, the European Union needs to stay strong (2). Every section in society is responsible and even has the duty to oppose “destructive and backward looking tendencies” and to shape the future. To assume that things will continue to be well without active engagement is dangerous and “anyone who remains passive just strengthens anti-European forces” (3). *PoE* specifies a way of supporting the EU, namely through voting for Europe-friendly parties (4). For instance, the recent final election between Macron and Le Pen in France was framed and seen as a choice of either a united Europe, or France exiting the EU. Just

as *PoE* describes in its listing, in France, the number of people who are positively disposed towards the European idea proved to be much greater than that of the Anti-Europeans. *PoE* further emphasizes the importance of promoting basic rights and rule of law as inviolable. The initiative confirms the importance of independent courts to continue to carry out monitoring tasks so that individual freedom, justice and limitations to freedom of press may be combatted (5). Similarly, “European fundamental freedoms are not negotiable”¹ (6). It is historic achievements like free movement of persons, goods, provision of services and money-transfers that made a community out of national states and that ensure individual freedom and prosperity. Nevertheless, the founders of *PoE* admit and openly state that Europe needs to be further improved and reformed (7). However, it cannot be improved if it won’t be preserved. “Any state that exists cannot help to shape Europe”¹. The initiative stresses that Europe “should be fun again”¹ and that the idea should be carried bottom-up and made understandable for everyone. To increase support for the EU amongst its citizens, mistrust and doubts regarding the EU must be taken seriously and studied so they can be addressed and turned into confidence (8). Respectively, an important message to transmit is that the EU is not self-serving, but aims to find solutions to problems that are important to everybody. Finally, in point (9), one of the core characteristics of the EU is stated and evaluated as follows: “diversity within Europe is fantastic”¹. More importantly, *PoE* takes a clear stand on the issue of European integration, writing that diversity and joint qualities are not a contradiction. As common core values and democratic achievements are what undeniably unite Europeans, regional and national identities and cultures should be preserved. The initiative claims that “no one needs to decide between a regional, national and European identity”¹. Lastly, as mentioned already, *Pulse of Europe* strives to mobilize everyone to preserve the EU, regardless of party or religion (10).

European Identity: What it Means to Be European

Thinking about European identity arises the question: What does it mean to be European? Naturally, the answer will vary from individual to individual. To be European means different things for different people. European identity is a social construction³. Still, there are some core

³ Huffington Post (n.d.). Retrieved from http://www.huffingtonpost.com/european-horizons/european-identity-a-crisis-of-construction-in-the-21st-century_b_7463922.html

values that set the basic rhythm for the European pulse, defining its identity. On a more rational level, Europeans can all identify with a common sense of humanity and desire to live in a just and peaceful society⁴. As the European Commission recently formulated more emotionally:

“The EU is now the place where Europeans can enjoy a unique diversity of culture, ideas and traditions in a Union covering four million square kilometres. It is where they have forged life-long bonds with other Europeans and can travel, study and work across national borders without changing currency. It is where the rule of law has replaced the rule of the iron fist. It is where equality is not just spoken about but continues to be fought for.”⁵

These are important aspects of a sense of European identity, all contributing to a certain stroke unique to the pulse of Europe. Whereas this idea of living harmoniously together in great diversity is surely tempting to believe in, it needs to be discussed both whether there is a limit to the spectrum of diversity and if so, where the boundaries of that spectrum lie. What is the tipping point of diversity? Where does the diversity of cultures become so great that they are not compatible anymore? I argue, that cultures are only compatible as long as they evolve around the same fundamental values. In 2012, the European Commission found that peace, democracy, human rights and the rule of law are the four values that best represent the European Union, according to survey respondents in Europe⁶. These values are followed by respect for other cultures, solidarity and support for others, respect for human life, individual freedom, equality, tolerance, and at the very end of the list, self-fulfillment and religion⁶. The study report further states that a relative majority of Europeans, unchanged since 2006, feel that EU Member States are close in terms of values. Against the background of the current migration of peoples from non-European, Muslim countries to Europe, it is important to consider whether this is creating a tension of incompatible cultures. Superficial aspects of culture are mutable, but I think core values at the heart of a culture are steeled against transformation. While traditional music, clothing and rituals may evolve and change with time, democratic values remain unaffected. Therefore, it is to be perceived critically to what extent European understandings of equality and

⁴ Europe's World (2016, December 12). Retrieved from <http://europesworld.org/2016/12/21/what-does-it-mean-to-be-european/#.WRCQIYnyuV4>

⁵ European Commission (2017, March 1). Retrieved from https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/white_paper_on_the_future_of_europe_en.pdf

⁶ European Commission (2012, Spring). Retrieved from http://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/archives/eb/eb77/eb77_value_en.pdf

justice will be compatible with non-European ones. Is it a utopian and naive vision to think that despite all cultural differences, people still have a common sense of humanity that will secure harmony in a context of diversity? In fact, a public opinion survey conducted by the European Commission in fall 2016 identified migration from outside the EU as one of the current areas of concern for Europeans. The survey found that across the whole of the EU, 56% claimed that immigration from outside the EU evokes a negative opinion. Meanwhile, immigration from inside the EU is not perceived so negatively, as it evokes a positive feeling for 61% of respondents across the EU⁷.

In 2012, the European Commission further published a policy review document defining two models of European identity formation: a Culturalist and a Structuralist model⁸. The former states that “orientation to Europe derives fundamentally from core, established European values and their expression in public practices, most notably in governance and the operation of the legal system”⁶. In this model, identification with Europe takes place top-down, identity is internalized through the exposure to influential discourses and symbols, the primary mechanisms behind it are socialization in childhood and persuasion or indoctrination during adulthood. In the latter model, “orientation to Europe derives fundamentally from association with other Europeans”⁸. Interacting with others, identity arises and one comes to the realization that they have much in common. Hence, in the Structuralist model identification with Europe takes place from the bottom up, which is exactly what *PoE* aims to effect. It is most persuasive if the person is at least an adolescent old enough to conceive themselves as placed within “a social nexus with other like-situated persons”⁶. The difficulty of European identity development in general lies in the recognition that identity of oneself explicitly as ‘European’ is likely to be rare, except for those who have travelled and lived outside of Europe. In practice, I think that both models contribute to the formation of our European identity to a certain extent. *Pulse of Europe* can yet primarily influence and foster identity formation through intensifying the bottom-up process and activities should therefore focus on creating opportunities and spaces for Europeans to interact with each other.

⁷ European Commission (2016, Autumn). Retrieved from https://ec.europa.eu/malta/sites/malta/files/national_report_-_standard_eurobarometer_survey_eb86.pdf

⁸ European Commission (2012). Retrieved from https://ec.europa.eu/research/social-sciences/pdf/policy_reviews/development-of-european-identity-identities_en.pdf

I can personally confirm that I did not explicitly perceive myself as European until I migrated to the US for my graduate studies. Only when I started socializing here, I realized that I am both German and European and that my sense of belonging to Europe is in fact much more vigorous now than it was before. By now, I can truly appreciate the benefits of living in the European Union and I do consciously identify with fundamental values of the EU, and strongly relate to other Europeans I meet in America. It wasn't until I had lived in the US for a few months and experienced the election of Donald Trump as the new President until I sincerely felt that Europe is a place of freedom and democracy, possibly much more than the US is. Even though Europe is far from perfect and currently struggling with rising nationalist tendencies, both the Dutch and the French election proved anyone wrong who claimed that populism was about to take over Europe. This realization raised satisfaction and pride in of me; today, I feel honored to be a citizen of the EU and identify myself as being European. After talking to some of my European friends, we concluded that to us, the EU is not about rational aspects such as decentralization but much more importantly about a feeling of commonality within difference – as the *Pulse of Europe* adequately describes in point (9). As Europeans, this common feeling of belonging within a great range of diversity is what unites us. Other than the United States of America, we appreciate the differences between our member states and want to sustain these unique cultural traits, at the same time feeling like our hearts beat at an equal pace.

To paint a more colorful picture of contemporary European identity, I am referring to a group of European students in Boston and Cambridge who recently officially declared in a manifesto to Europe that their identity as European citizens builds on the following common values: Awareness of their common past, plurality, diversity, openness and civic engagement⁹. With plurality, the students refer to their “belief in democratic values, a shared mission and vision, so all may benefit”⁹. In terms of diversity, they understand the member states of the EU as a “family of countries, each with its own original identity and culture, that are united to build better societies”⁹. Important to state is further that openness does not just assign open borders to the European identity, the students also feel that open societies and “minds open to new ideas”⁹ are characteristic of their sense of being European.

I argue that this generation of students is the first generation of Europeans. Sometimes, they are called the ‘Erasmus generation’, referring to the opportunity to participate in student exchanges

⁹ European students in Boston and Cambridge (2017, May). Retrieved from <http://spain.scripts.mit.edu/9may/>

within the European Union through the EU exchange program Erasmus, established in 1987 to foster intercultural experiences and enable young citizens to build pan-European relationships. This generation grew up with the freedoms of the EU and therefore has the strongest sense of European identity¹⁰, formed through socialization in childhood, as described in the Culturalist model above. Many of my friends spent time studying abroad during an Erasmus semester and I personally was able to meet many students from other European countries studying for one semester in Germany. Through experiences like these, I can confirm that my generation undoubtedly does have a vigorous and vital sense of European identity, formed to a huge part by the Erasmus program. Experiencing other cultures so closely and intensively through Erasmus is a privilege that enriches not just those students going abroad, but also those staying at home, which makes this exchange program so influential to my generation of Europeans.

Despite all of this, Europeans currently find themselves in an identity crisis³. The peace and prosperity that underlay what it means to be European for so long are “mutually deteriorating before our eyes”³. Many European countries are still suffering from the consequences of the global financial and economic crisis that began in 2008 in the United States. Longtime unemployment, notably amongst young citizens, and private and public indebtedness pose major issues in some regions of the EU. Additionally, European cities – from Paris to Berlin and Stockholm – have in the recent past been shaken by terrorist attacks, threatening Europe’s peace and security, and destabilizing the European pulse. This uncertainty is being aggravated and the oscillation weakened by fragmentation through Brexit last year, undermining the “narrative of continental solidarity that held European identity strong through the 1990’s”³. With parts of Europe’s neighboring regions being destabilized, the largest refugee crisis since World War II evolved and brought about 1.2 million people to Europe since 2015⁵. The refugee crisis triggered a controversial debate on solidarity and responsibility between member states, questioning the future of how to manage borders and free movement in Europe. These changes in the European reality led to many Europeans having feelings of insecurity, a growing discontentment and distrust towards governments⁵.

¹⁰ Europe’s World (2016, November 22). Retrieved from: <http://europesworld.org/2016/11/22/time-erasmus-generation-speak/#.WRH4MI5FeRs>

Put provocatively, as Europeans we must ask ourselves: Is the idea of belonging only appealing in times of success and prosperity and not in times of struggle? It is in these tense periods that a sense of community is needed more than ever³. It is in these periods of flickering pulse that Europe needs its citizens to be its pacemaker and stimulate the heartbeat. Growing insecurity and distrust in the EU only gives room for a vacuum to be filled with the nationalist rhetoric of populists.

To sustain peace and prosperity into the future, a European identity in the contemporary context is necessary now. What does it mean to be European “amid the predicaments of the present”³? It is time to move away from the idealistic rhetoric of the 1990’s and create a sense of belonging that is relevant and significant in the context of recent right-wing nationalist trends and social disintegration emerging across Europe. Today, more than 90% of Europeans have no direct experience of the Second World War and barely 50% have clear memories of the Cold War⁸. For the young generation of Europeans, living in a peaceful continent is now taken for granted. Some might be aware that these are achievements that can never be taken for granted, but that does not change the fact that the generation has no personal memory of a state of war emotionally driving them to sustain peace. Their motivation is primarily rational. Even though the victims of previous generations must never be forgotten and we may never give up on realizations they fought for – human dignity, freedom and democracy – striving for peace today means something different for Europeans than it did for their grandparents⁵. What continues to connect Europeans is the commitment to sustain these achievements. However, to appeal to today’s Europeans, the EU needs new arguments¹⁰, refashioning the European narrative. For instance, in the current situation of refugee integration in Germany, sustaining peace means to combat crime against refugees and to contribute to successful integration of refugee families into our society. Sustaining democracy means to combat the rise of populist parties by participating in elections. Sustaining freedom means to even expand current opportunities for the young generation to travel within Europe. To me, being European means being able to speak several languages and having the chance to put these skills into practice on a regular basis. Being European means entering an entirely different culture within an hour of flight time, just a heartbeat away. As we grew up with many freedoms they seem natural to us. Hence, we don’t only seek to sustain them, but we want to achieve more for our own and our children’s’ future.

Strengthening the Pulse of Europe: How the European Narrative Can Be Improved

As *Pulse of Europe* has evolved to be the main initiative throughout Europe to mobilize Europe-enthusiasts, how can pressure be increased so more Europeans can feel the pulse, specifically the young generation? What European narrative can ignite a fire in Europeans' hearts and, like a wildfire, compel everyone to become a part of the story?

While claiming to protest for and not against something, *Pulse of Europe* might not realize that the frame created in its communication indicates that they are not only protesting for the idea of a united Europe, but at the same time against anti-EU movements. Far-right nationalist parties as well as initiatives such as PEGIDA form the concept of the enemy in the story that *PoE* is telling. Through mobilizing pro-EU citizens, anti-EU movements shall be combatted and drowned out.

From a storytelling perspective, it is in fact important to stress this enemy more clearly as it poses a subject around which followers can combatively unite. Defining the enemy is as important for a story as setting a clear vision of the future the protagonists are striving for. *PoE* should actively manage the frame it is building through communication creating a narrative that gives meaning to the initiative's activities. For instance, integral roles of a story need to be identified and included. So far, *PoE* is following the typical frame of the hero's journey: The EU is in crisis facing major challenges. In order to overcome barriers such as the refugee and the financial crisis and to preserve the union, a group of courageous citizens starts a movement against threatening forces of terrorist groups and right-wing nationalist parties or initiatives. The founders of *PoE* are the heroes of the story, with every citizen joining the movement becoming not just a supporter, but also a hero themselves. As trailblazers, the media and pro-EU politicians speaking out their support for *PoE* in public enable the initiative to find broader support and mobilize more people throughout Europe. The call to action resulting from this story is easy to grasp: Get engaged in the pro-EU movement!

The initiative could catch even more attention incorporating narrative factors in communicating with the public and with followers. *PoE* is already successfully creating closeness and providing points of identification through stating that everyone is affected by the EU and responsible for our future. Putting attention to politicians who spoke positively about the initiative on TV equals

using the factor of celebrity to increase attention. *PoE* can further exploit the factor of showcasing success by putting emphasis on the fast growth of the movement, stating the number of participants at demonstrations, for example. Moreover, stressing the significance of the French election results and interpreting them as a success for the pro-EU movement in general will support the storyline. Emotionalizing the narrative is already being implemented through persuasion that puts focus on creating a feeling of belonging rather than transmitting complex and abstract points of argumentation. However, youth needs to be mobilized emotionally through messages that they can personally relate to. As suggested earlier, a link to the benefits of Erasmus can be one way to reach the generation that has no direct memory of war. Within the context of emotionalizing, another promising motive for communication are transnational intimate relationships. Many Europeans can personally relate to being in an intimate relationship with someone from another European country or being a child from a transnational couple. Indeed, the European Commission found that this is strongly associated with having a sense of European identity⁸.

The image created by the name *Pulse of Europe* is a strong metaphor and personification indicating the significance of the movement for Europe: It will give life to the union, animate it. In my opinion, this image has great potential to mobilize people; it only needs to be used more strategically as demonstrated in this essay. The imagery offers a wide range of wordings that arouse feelings of affection, romance, and excitement in us. Within this frame, every follower of the movement contributes to increasing EU blood pressure, breathing life into Europe. Without them, Europe may not survive. With Europeans being divided, Europe may be heartbroken. But with full support, the pulse of Europe may skip a beat. United, the heart of Europe will be dancing with joy.

Another important narrative factor raising attention is personalization. *Pulse of Europe* needs to be less anonymous and more transparent, the faces and personalities behind it should be communicated more openly. Either founder Daniel Röder could become the face of the movement, or the initiative could introduce individual followers to the public, giving the movement many faces. This would then offer prospective followers many points of identification.

Ultimately, *Pulse of Europe* needs to define and manage its identity strategically. Every form of communication addressed at the public should be used to place core messages transmitting the

initiative's self-image, values and vision for the future, its reputation and success, competencies and local bond to Europe. Behind this background, the list of ten points on *PoE*'s website introduced at the beginning of this essay should be reorganized and structured more clearly: Currently, it is rather unclear to the reader whether the founders list values or calls to action, or other aspects. Categorized, the ten points can be sorted into values (*PoE* stands for the European idea beyond party and religion, diversity and joint qualities, basic rights and rule of law, European fundamental freedoms), a vision (preserve peace, implement necessary reforms to the EU, take mistrust seriously, and ultimately ensure the survival of the EU), and calls to action (take responsibility, vote for pro-European parties). What *Pulse of Europe* stands for needs to be more obvious, explicit and easy to memorize for everyone. The initiative should find key words for these elements and continuously repeat them throughout communication activities to evoke mental structures and frames in our minds¹¹, ensuring that they will not be forgotten.

On May 9, 2017, the European Union celebrated sixty years of unity, with this special day marking a recommitment to staying together. I personally believe that unity gives member states of the European Union the strength to face the challenges of migration, terrorism and rising far-right movements and to emerge with a stronger pulse from this crisis.

4.859 words

¹¹ Lakoff, G. (2008): *The Political Mind. A cognitive scientist's guide to your brain and its politics*. Penguin Books: New York.