TA Tomorrow's Affairs
Analysis of today
Assessment of tomorrow

By: Catriona M. Munro, TA Editor in Chief

The European Union: some myths - perpetuated and debunked

Has any institution since the Roman Republic triggered - unwillingly or otherwise, depending on your point of view - such a series of misapprehensions, misinterpretation, hostility, approval, over-enthusiasm, self-serving propaganda, secrets and lies, as the European Union? An unwieldy bureaucracy gone far beyond its original remit? Or a dynamic community turned union which has kept the peace in parts of Europe since World War 2 and created a vital buffer zone between former Warsaw Pact countries and Russia? It has become something of an industry to examine EU "myths", circulated by "eurosceptics" and a similar industry to debunk them from "euro enthusiasts", particularly in the UK, which voted to leave the EU in 2016. Here are a few examples:

Enthusiasts wants a super state

This is a particular bugbear of eurosceptics. Of course you people want a super state. it is a super state! It has an anthem! And a passport! Not to mention a Central Bank, a flag, a currency, and a raft of common policies on vital issues! Welcome to the United States of Europe. You are working tirelessly to erode all national identities and threaten member states' sovereignty. You support a dystopian nightmare of uniformity and slavery to Brussels.

Nobody wants a super state

A euro enthusiast would counter that the only people who want a super state are currently Vladimir Putin and Kim Jong Un. Are you saying there is no longer any difference between France and Germany, Italy and Romania, Estonia and Slovakia, ad nauseum? You can tell when you cross a border you are in a different country regardless of a lack of border checks; not only through language but as simply by the smell of the local coffee. Europe remains richly diverse. It is stronger with common values via legislation. And yes, every member state retains its own sovereign democratic parliament.

The EU jointly make 70% of member states' laws

This originated in a statement in 2014 by the EU Commission's vice president to drive home how powerful and effective the European parliament is.

This statement is false

Although it is difficult to evaluate precisely what per cent of EU legislation becomes law in member states - those that actually do enforce EU directives; there are some who do not - in 2010, the House of Commons Library set the figure at between 15-50%. Bear in mind that the EU directives rarely affect member states' health, criminal, and education laws.

Implementation of EU laws costs the UK £600 million (688 million euros) per week

That is a very significant amount of money. Let's put it on a sign on the side of a bus travelling through the UK and say we should use the money to fund the National Health Service instead. The UK prime minister, Boris Johnson, supported this campaign.

"There are lies, damned lies and statistics..."

This figure is spurious at the least. It is simply a weekly division of a forecast of implementing EU legislation, which is estimated at an annual cost of £33.4 billion. It neglects to include the significant benefits of EU directives to the UK specifically, which are assessed by the respected think tank Open Europe to amount to £53.8 billion.

The EU has made us go bananas!

This innocent fruit has been the source of many sceptics' conviction - egged on by the eurosceptic British main stream media and mischief makers in the UK parliament - that time-wasting, humourless eurocrats had banned curvy bananas.

The godfather of all EU myths

Known as "the myth to end all myths", regulation 565/2013 simply states that bananas should simply be "free from malformation or abnormal curvature". This means unripe, or comparable to other misshapen other fruits and vegetables which are also sorted by appearance and conform with national food standards.

The EU wanted to ban firemen's poles

In 2002, press reports appeared that Brussels had ordered firefighters to use stairs rather sliding down poles, for "health and safety" reasons and to cut down on injured firemen's compensation claims.

No, it has not banned firemen's poles

This is a simple one. The EU has never tried to ban "essential apparatus", which includes firefighters' poles.

Other rumours, speculations and myths

Here is a list of some of the more outlandish claims about the EU's interference in member states' lives:

- 1992: Fishing boats to carry condoms says EU
- 1995: EU to ban mushy peas (a British delicacy that accompanies fish and chips)
- 2001: Eurocrats say Santa Claus must be a woman
- 2008: EU says bagpipes must be played more quietly
- 2011: EU says all sportspeople from member states must wear the EU flag on their shirts
- EU responsible for hay fever

Let's end on a report from The Guardian, published shortly basesd on a before the UK referendum about whether to exit the EU: "The Lord's Prayer is 66 words long. The 10 Commandments: 79 words. The Gettysburg address: 272 words. EU regulations on the sale of cabbage? 26,911 words." This is incorrect. In fact, EU legislation on quality standards for cabbage runs to a mere c.1,800 words. "C'est magnifique, mais ce n'est pas la guerre".