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# Anti-nationalist Europeans and pro-European nationalists on the streets: visions of Europe from the left to the far right

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## ABSTRACT

For many left-wing and liberal social movement activists, support for ‘Europe’ and opposition to a ‘nationalist’ turn has become a key motivation for their activism. Paradoxically, however, their opponents at the other end of the political spectrum, far-right activists, also positively identify as European. This article analyses one of the key developments in the contemporary European protest arena, i.e. the dominance of European identities, even when activists strongly criticize real-existing European integration. First, we propose a novel conceptual framework that captures these dominant European identities. We distinguish between ‘anti-nationalist Europeans’ and ‘pro-European nationalists’, underlining the existence of strong European identities across the political spectrum, deeply embedded in the mindset of activists even when they sharply criticize European integration in its current form. At the same time, these pro-European stances strongly differ in whether they are culturally inclusive or exclusive and how they relate to the question of nationalism or the nation state. Second, we apply these concepts to six key cases of movement mobilization in western Europe after the anti-austerity protests, shedding light on the anti-TTIP protests, Yanis Varoufakis’ DiEM25, the anti-Brexit movement in the UK, the Sardines in Italy (including their offshoot, the Herrings in Finland), the Identitarians and PEGIDA. Third, we further contextualize the ‘anti-nationalist Europeanism’ and ‘pro-European nativism’ of these six cases, emphasizing historical roots, the facilitation of coalition building, implications for transnational practices, and the meaning of silence. Methodologically, the article draws on online and offline publications, semi-structured interviews, and survey data.

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## Introduction

We analyze the renewed importance of European identities for social movement activists. While the wave of anti-austerity protests in the early 2010s reemphasized that the time of ‘permissive consensus’ concerning European integration is long gone (Hooghe & Marks,

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2009), they were also marked by the ‘low visibility’ (Flesher Fominaya, 2017, p. 1) or even ‘invisibility’ (Kaldor & Selchow, 2013, p. 79) of Europe. Anti-austerity activists did not regard the European Union (EU) as a polity where they could seek political alternatives (Pianta & Gerbaudo, 2015).

More recently, activists from across the political spectrum are increasingly advancing their own ‘visions of Europe’ based on strong European identities (Caiani & Weisskircher, 2020). In the second half of the 2010s, mobilization in favor of ‘Europe’ and against ‘nationalism’ became a crucial element for many left-wing and liberal activists, especially in the face of the significant increase of far-right parties’ electoral strength. Simultaneously, far-right groups organized protests in response to the intensifying ‘refugee crisis’ (Caiani & Cisař, 2019; Castelli Gattinara & Pirro, 2019). These protesters also emphasized a European identity, albeit to call for the so-called ‘defense of Europe’ against alleged threats of ‘Islamization’ and ‘decay’.

In this article, we make three contributions to the study of the Europeanization of social movements (della Porta, 2020; della Porta & Caiani, 2009; Tarrow, 1995). First, we propose a novel conceptual framework that captures the dominant European identities in the protest arena of the late 2010s and early 2020s. We distinguish between ‘anti-nationalist Europeans’ and ‘pro-European nativists’, a categorization that underlines that strong European identities exist *across* the political spectrum and are deeply embedded even in the mindset of activists who sharply criticize European integration in its current form. Second, we apply these concepts to six key cases of movement mobilization in Western Europe after the anti-austerity protests of the early 2010s: the anti-TTIP protests, Yanis Varoufakis’ DiEM25, the anti-Brexit movement in the UK, the Sardines in Italy (and their offshoot, the Herrings, in Finland), the Identitarians, and PEGIDA. Third, we contextualize the ‘anti-nationalist Europeanism’ and ‘pro-European nativism’ of these six cases, emphasizing historical roots, the facilitation of coalition building, implications for transnational practices, and the importance of omissions in their framing of Europe.

In the next section, we outline how insights from social movement studies and party politics research inform our concepts. We then explain our case selection and methodological approach before delving into our empirical cases. Finally, we contextualize the dominant European identities.

### **‘Anti-nationalist Europeans’ and ‘pro-European nativists’**

With the increasing politicization of European integration in the 1990s, political scientists began to study how its critics, especially parties, framed the process. The concept of ‘Euroscepticism’, i.e. ‘contingent or qualified opposition as well as incorporating outright and unqualified opposition to the process of European integration’ (Taggart, 1998, p. 366), came to define the subfield. Further distinctions have been proposed such as the classical one between ‘soft’ (‘contingent or qualified opposition to European integration’) and ‘hard’ (‘outright rejection of the entire project of European political and economic integration’) Euroscepticism (Taggart & Szczerbiak, 2002, pp. 27–28).

Later, Kopecky and Mudde (2002) distinguished more precisely between general approval of the idea of European integration and specific support for the EU in its current form. For them, ‘Euroenthusiasts’ support European integration both in theory and in practice, while ‘Eurorejects’ disapprove of both the European idea and its reality.

From this perspective, ‘Eurosceptics’ exist between these two poles and favor the idea of European integration but reject its current form. Recently, other scholars have analyzed various elements of Euroscepticism, disentangling cultural, legitimacy, socioeconomic, and sovereignty frames (Pirro & van Kessel, 2018).

While scholars of party politics focused predominantly on far-right Euroscepticism, social movement scholars devoted more attention to the left. These movement-oriented scholars highlight the constructive dimension of EU criticism and problematize concepts like ‘scepticism’ and ‘rejectionism’. For instance, ‘Euroalternativism’ allows for ‘pro-systemic opposition’ that supports deepening EU integration in a more social-democratic way (e.g., della Porta & Caiani, 2007; FitzGibbon, 2013). Della Porta and Caiani (2009) highlight ‘critical Europeanists’, or movements that approve of European integration in principle but reject specific EU policies. Unsurprisingly, left-wing activists’ perceptions of the EU became more critical during the wave of anti-austerity protests, which scholars try to understand through concepts such as ‘radical Eurocritical attitudes’ (Milan, 2020) and ‘Euro-disenchantment’ (Zamponi, 2020).

However, some scholars have noted positive identification with Europe in social movements on both the left and the far right. For example, Caiani and Weisskircher (2020) describe that activists’ ‘visions of Europe’ imply:

some form of cooperation between European states that do not necessarily support the current trajectory of EU development, and typically include significant criticism. Still, these visions imply a positive identification with a European identity, or even integration, and therefore go beyond mere rejection.

This perspective mirrors recent scholarship on far-right parties: the *Rassemblement National* (*National Rally*), it is argued, uses European integration as an ‘ideological resource’ to draw legitimacy in public discourse, linking Europe to values such as sovereignty, self-rule, and autonomy (Lorimer, 2020, see also, Lorimer, 2021). Similarly, Pytlas (2021) argues that the *Rassemblement National*, *Alternative für Deutschland* (Alternative for Germany), and Fidesz should not be regarded merely as Eurorejectionists, but notes that these parties draw on counter-European claims as a ‘tactical resource’ which links their nativist ideology with positive references to Europe. In sum, a number of scholars have coined terms or identified concepts defined by simultaneous criticism of the EU and positive identification with Europe (see Table 1).

Building on these scholars’ insights, we suggest that a distinction between ‘anti-nationalist Europeans’ and ‘pro-European nativists’ captures contemporary activists’ relationships to Europe most precisely. We argue that groups in the two categories both identify with and criticize ‘Europe’, but they differ in terms of their acceptance of non-European cultures and attitudes toward nationalism or the nation state (see Table 2).

**Table 1.** The complexity of ‘Euroscepticism’: conceptual alternatives in the literature.

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‘Critical Europeanism’ (della Porta & Caiani, 2009)
Cultural, legitimacy, socioeconomic, and sovereignty frames (Pirro & van Kessel, 2018)
‘Euroalternativism’ (della Porta & Caiani, 2007, FitzGibbon, 2013)
‘Euro-disenchantment’ (Zamponi, 2020)
Europe as ‘ideological resource’ (Lorimer, 2020)
Europe as ‘tactical resource’ (Pytlas, 2021)
‘Radical Eurocriticism’ (Milan, 2020)
‘Visions of Europe’ (Caiani & Weisskircher 2020)

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**Table 2.** Key elements of European identities.

	'Anti-nationalist Europeans'	'Pro-European nativists'
Identification with Europe	Strong	Strong
Criticism of current EU integration	Strong	Strong
Identification of Europe with culturally inclusive stances	Strong	Weak
Identification of Europe with culturally exclusive stances	Absent	Strong
Attitude toward nationalism or the nation state	Negative	Positive

The strength of this conceptualization is that it acknowledges the existence of strong European identities *across* the political spectrum. Therefore, positive orientations toward Europe are not merely opportunistic or strategic, as literature on far-right actors often assumes, but deeply embedded in activists' mindsets. Both left-wing and liberal movements as well as far-right groups share the desire to defend 'Europe' from what (or whom) they regard as threats. But even though this defensiveness may be some groups' *raison d'être*, it still allows for sharp criticism of the current state of European integration.

These concepts also highlight key differences between European identities among left-wing and liberal movements and those of the far right, the former's inclusionary and the latter's exclusionary visions of Europe. This division corresponds to the distinction between inclusionary and exclusionary populism, which differs according to the inclusion or exclusion of cultural 'others' (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2013).

Likewise, left- and right-leaning groups ascribe different roles to the nation: left-wing and liberal protestors envision a cosmopolitan, post-national Europe (Beck & Grande, 2007), while far-right groups envision a state-based 'nativist' (Mudde, 2007) Europe that is superior to other regions. Thus, anti-nationalist Europeans identify with a culturally inclusive and 'open' Europe that stands against nationalism, racism, and intolerance – and the political actors who promote such exclusionary stances. They regard Europe as a 'progressive project', in which the 'ancient' nation state, often seen as either inefficient or source of exclusionary nationalism, needs to be curtailed if not overcome. Conversely, pro-European nativists identify with a culturally exclusive Europe and celebrate the nation-state. While far-right activists highlight a European identity, including their appreciation for Europe's diversity of nation-states, they exclude non-European immigrants, especially Muslims.<sup>1</sup> They regard 'Europe' as 'bulwark' against Islam and immigrants from other continents.

### Case selection and methodological approach

We analyze six diverse instances of mobilization after the anti-austerity protest wave to see to what extent the proposed concepts help us to better understand how activists identify with Europe. Our empirical focus reflects the selection of most-different cases, where the identification of common trends is unexpected: These cases differ in terms of political orientations, grievances, the focus on European integration, and transnational practices (see Table 3). Our broad case selection allows us to assess common trends concerning one specific dimension: how these diverse political players relate to Europe. None of the cases are 'technical campaigns' that lobby EU institutions (Parks, 2015); rather, they are examples of broader mobilization. Moreover, all of our cases have received widespread international media attention, which underlines their empirical relevance.

**Table 3.** Differences between cases.

Actor	Political leaning	Main grievance	Focus on European integration	Transnational practice
Stop TTIP	Left-wing/liberal	TTIP treaty	Medium	Strong
DiEM25	Left-wing/liberal	EU polity	Strong	Strong
Anti-Brexit movement	Left-wing/liberal	Brexit	Strong	None
The Sardines	Left-wing/liberal	Rise of the far right	Weak	Weak
The Identitarians	Far-right	Immigration	Medium	Medium
PEGIDA	Far-right	Immigration, mainstream media, direct democracy	Weak	Weak

Four cases involve left-wing and liberal actors. First, anti-TTIP protesters (Rone, 2020) opposed the TTIP treaty (a single proposed EU policy) and focused on fundamental questions of European integration only when criticizing a lack of transparency. Stop TTIP was active both in Brussels and in several EU member states. Second, DiEM25 (Blokker, 2022), a group with a local presence in a number of European countries, articulates a fundamental critique of the EU polity and its policies. Third, the anti-Brexit movement (Brändle et al., 2018) has focused on a fundamental issue of European integration based in the United Kingdom. Fourth, the Sardines (Hamdaoui, 2021) opposed the rise of the far right in Italy and did not address European integration in detail. Nevertheless, their protest diffused to Finland (where protestors mobilized as the Herrings).

Two of our cases are groups on the far right. PEGIDA (Weisskircher & Berntzen, 2019), a group largely active in Dresden, opposes non-European immigration and the mainstream media and demands more direct democracy – although without making strong references to European integration. The Identitarians (Zúquete, 2018), active in several European countries, oppose non-European immigration.

Methodologically, in addition to surveying the literature about our cases, we also rely on primary data. First, we analyze organizations' online and offline publications (such as mission statements, blogs, manifestos, and books) that articulate how activists relate to Europe. Second, we rely on semi-structured interviews with five DiEM25 activists and seven from the Sardines and the Herrings – data collected as part of projects which also provide information on how activists perceive Europe. Third, we use data from two surveys (one, which one of the authors conducted in another collaborative project, generated original data about participants in the Stop TTIP movement; the other, conducted by Brändle et al., 2018, collected information about anti-Brexit advocates' views). The appendix provides additional information, including a detailed list of activists' publications cited in this article, interviewees, and survey data.

We focus on 'collective action' (Snow & Benford, 1992) or 'organizational' (Evans, 1997) frames. We assume that the manifestos, mission statements, and other publications produced by the groups represent, by and large, the broader memberships' views. Nevertheless, we have sought out the views of individual activists when possible. More generally, our approach reflects the long-term interest of social movement studies in collective identity (Flesher Fominaya, 2010; Polletta & Jasper, 2001).

## Anti-nationalist Europeans on the streets

### Stop TTIP

Stop TTIP, a network of several hundred organizations across Europe, demanded an end of the negotiations between the EU and the United States (US) about the Transatlantic Trade Investment Partnership (TTIP). Its activists criticized several aspects of the planned treaty, including its impact on democracy and the rule of law, consumer rights, and environmental and health standards. From 2014 to 2016, associated organizations were especially visible in Germany, Austria, and Italy, but also in Bulgaria and Poland (Caiani & Graziano, 2018, Rone, 2018). TTIP was among the most controversial EU policies ever proposed, reflecting how free trade had become a contentious issue across Europe (Rone, 2020). However, Donald Trump's election as US president in 2016 brought TTIP negotiations to an end.

A study of the political conflict over TTIP shows that, 'while the TTIP project is heavily contested, the European project [was] never under threat, nor even questioned' (Oleart, 2020, p. 231) by activists. Additional research underscores the importance of pro-European frames in the Stop TTIP campaign: TTIP was portrayed as a threat to current European standards (for example, in the area of health or consumer rights), and activists also emphasized the need for European solidarity and cooperation (Siles-Brügge & Strange, 2020). Unsurprisingly, most organizations involved in the Stop TTIP network were generally in favor of the European integration project. According to survey data, 60% of the respondents were in favor of European integration (with 23% 'strongly in favor') (see appendix). Also many left-wing British TTIP opponents remained loyal to the EU: A trade campaigner from Friends of the Earth referred to calls for Brexit as 'bewilderingly myopic,' arguing that 'if we want to truly put an end to TTIP, we can only do it as part of the EU in a Europe-wide movement' (Lowe, 2016).

Even the European Commission's formal rejection of a European Citizens' Initiative (ECI) failed to dent the transnational efforts of opponents of TTIP: Stop TTIP-affiliated groups collected more than three million signatures in a 'self-organized ECI' and called for 'an alternative trade and investment policy *in* the EU' (STOP TTIP undated; our emphasis). Their criticism of the EU centered on institutional features, such as the lack of transparency surrounding the negotiation process (Caiani & Graziano, 2018).

Crucially, Stop TTIP protestors refrained from far-right opposition to TTIP and avoided cooperating with far-right forces (Rone, 2018). For example, one German network emphasized the rejection of nationalism as a key condition for activists, underlining their approval of solidarity within Europe and beyond:

It is also clear that a nationalist policy based on isolation, racism and authoritarian solutions, instead of democratic participation, has nothing in common with the fair world trade that we advocate. Whether Trump, Le Pen or Petry: When right-wing populists in the USA, in Europe, in Germany try to co-ordinate the protest against free trade agreements, we show them a clear edge and oppose their blunt slogans. (Trägerkreis CETA & TTIP STOPPEN! undated)

Despite their criticism of the EU, Stop TTIP activists generally identified positively with Europe and rejected cooperation with far-right opponents of the treaty.



### ***Democracy in Europe movement 2025 (DiEM25)***

DiEM25, founded by former Greek finance minister Yannis Varoufakis in 2016, is a key example of left-wing activism aiming for transnationalism. The goal is drastic EU reform, mainly regarding its democratic credentials and socioeconomic policies (De Cleen et al., 2020). Local groups have been especially active in Germany and Greece, and several national branches ran in the 2019 European Parliament elections.

DiEM25's manifesto emphasizes a strong European identity: 'We, the peoples of Europe,' it states, will bring about desired changes for 'our Europe' (DiEM25, 2016, p. 7). It calls for 'fellow Europeans' to mobilize and warns against 'a dangerous anti-European backlash' (DiEM25 2016: 2). Another key DiEM25 document, the 'European New Deal' (DiEM25, 2017), also frequently refers to 'Europeans' as beneficiaries of the proposed projects. At the same time, the movement also goes beyond Europe and demands '[a]n Internationalist Europe that treats non-Europeans as ends-in-themselves' (DiEM25, 2016, p. 9).

Activists affiliated with DiEM25 usually understand themselves as 'Europeans' rather than as members of their respective nations (Cisař & Weisskircher, 2022). One activist highlighted how the transnational aspiration of DiEM25 embodies such an identity: 'There is an alternative and one exemplifies this on a small-scale, one organizes transnationally, one overcomes the national state individually' (Int. 5). Often, support for Europe is justified by references to 'peace' (Int. 5). Despite their calls for radical change, activists do not support exiting the EU, but rather are loyal to the polity. In the words of one interviewee, 'The idea of European cooperation, of strong European cooperation beyond the interests of national states, is very good. But it's not done well' (Int. 5). Furthermore, despite Varoufakis's experiences during the Eurozone crisis, he does not support abandoning the Euro and, during the Brexit campaign, openly endorsed the Remain camp (Varoufakis, 2016). The same holds true for other activists. Despite the group's origins and its sharp criticism of EU economic policies, activists generally support the common currency (Int. 3, 4, 6, and 7).

Opposition to the rise of the far right is central to DiEM25. Some activists even refer to the rise of far-right political parties and their anti-Europeanism as the main motivation for their political engagement. To them, improving Europe is a chance to curb 'nationalism and the far right' (Int. 4, 5). At the same time, they identify poor EU policies as fodder for far-right forces: 'Proud peoples are being turned against each other. Nationalism, extremism and racism are being re-awakened' (DiEM25: 2).

DiEM25 combines a strong, culturally inclusive European identity with the desire to radically alter the current trajectory of European integration to save the EU from far-right opposition.

### ***The anti-Brexit movement***

The anti-Brexit movement is our only case that focuses on the question of EU membership (for a comprehensive analysis see Fagan & van Kessel, 2022). The movement refers to the frequent protests held *after* the 2016 Brexit referendum and consisted of many new activists who had not engaged in the Remain campaign ahead of the vote. Several ideologically diverse groups, mostly center-left and liberal, coalesced around the core



objective of avoiding Brexit (i.e., reversing the outcome of the referendum). In April 2018, People's Vote formed as an umbrella campaign demanding a second referendum. Ultimately, the movement could not prevent Brexit, which went into effect on 1 February 2020.

The anti-Brexit movement represents an interesting case because of its national context of traditionally limited identification with Europe and high levels of Euroscepticism. Although the Remain campaign emphasized economic arguments before the referendum, later activists expressed identification with a culturally inclusive Europe. On an organizational level, the European Movement, formed in 1949 and eventually part of the People's Vote, articulated that it wanted 'to maintain European values in the U.K.' and that it 'reflects and upholds the fundamental values of the EU,' which it interprets as a broad range of issues from 'peace,' 'democracy,' and 'the freedom of movement' to 'safety' and 'environmental protection' (European Movement undated). A new campaign group that formed after the referendum, Britain for Europe (undated), advocated for continued EU membership and opposed '[a]ll forms of hate, racism and xenophobia that have been exacerbated by the referendum campaign' as well as '[n]ationalist protectionism, imperialism and isolationism.' Grassroots for Europe (undated), a network that emerged out of dissatisfaction with the People's Vote campaign, emphasized 'our European identity and the values of the European Union, including the promotion of peace, prosperity, equality, solidarity, democracy, human rights, the environment and the rule of law.'

Dissatisfaction with the central People's Vote campaign was partly borne out of its downplaying of 'European values,' and its 'pragmatic' stance. The People's Vote (undated) website itself emphasized instrumental factors instead of a European identity when it argued that 'the UK would lose all its rights as an EU member – with less trade, fewer opportunities and lower living standards – while suffering the biggest loss of sovereignty and control in British history.' The affiliated youth organization For our Future's Sake presented itself as a neutral campaign for a second referendum. Others changed their approach over time. After Brexit, the organization Best for Britain started to accept the decision, now bridging a British, as indicated by its name, and internationalist identity. Ultimately, Best for Britain (undated) 'advocate[d] for a Brexit that secures our future as a prosperous and outward looking nation' and 'retaining [British] internationalist values, ensuring protections and opportunities that mirror those of the EU'.

Looking at the individual level, Brändle et al. (2018) surveyed participants in the March for Europe, a major protest event of the anti-Brexit movement that took place in London on 25 March 2017. Many respondents articulated a British and European double identity – the European one under threat due to Brexit: 'anti-Brexit protesters strongly identify as British and want to hold a British identity but see this as a fundamentally European or cosmopolitan identity' (ibid.: 822). Participants ranked 'identity and values' as their sixth most often mentioned concern, and 'intolerance, racism and xenophobia' was their top concern, once again suggesting that left and liberal activists equate pro-Europeanism with cultural liberalism and an antidote to nationalism.

Members of the anti-Brexit movement linked a pro-European identity to culturally liberal values, which they regarded as endangered by Brexit. Many anti-Brexit protesters were vocal about the importance of European identity and values, but other groups emphasized the economic dangers of Brexit and strategically avoided full-throated pro-Europeanism.

## **Sardines**

A group called the Sardines aimed to challenge national far-right parties in Italy, where the Lega party governed with the Five Star Movement from 2018 to 2019. Founded in November 2019, Sardines mobilized against the threat of a Lega victory in the January 2020 regional elections in Emilia Romagna, traditionally a stronghold of the Italian left. Protests quickly spread across Italy, sometimes attracting tens of thousands of participants. The movement's rapid diffusion enabled it to reach beyond Emilia Romagna to the national level and, to a very limited extent, even outside of Italy.

In their 'manifesto of values,' the Sardines (Sardine, 2020b) reject both populism and 'sovereignism.' They articulate a goal beyond a culturally inclusive objective for Europe and adopt what they call a 'no borders vision' that does not 'stop at the concept of "Europe" but imagines the world as common house, as a common big sea.' They described the Srebrenica massacre as a 'consequence of extreme nationalism' and argued that 'cultivating historical memory must be the first task of a good citizen, of every European. And every pro-European' (Sardine, 2020a). Likewise, activists published a 'Letter from Europe to the world' at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, which called for global unity (Sardine, 2020c).

Founders and members of the Sardines point to the centrality of Europe for their identities, proclaiming themselves to be 'children of Europe' (Int. 1). Speakers at protest events use phrases such as 'our Europe' and interpret the 'drift toward populism' as 'an international movement' (Int. 12). They see Lega's position in government as a warning because 'the Italian situation, precisely because we are in Europe, can make other countries think' (Int. 10).

Despite their identification with Europe and rejection of nationalism, many Sardines also criticize the current state of the EU. As one activist phrased it (Int. 2):

It is about time to reform the political organization of Europe, where there is a fundamental problem of the EU: The decision-making mechanism is too cumbersome, because the European Parliament voted by the citizens in fact has little power, while individual governments and nations count for much more.

This criticism implies strong general support for further political integration that would strengthen supranational institutions.

Another activist criticized the EU polity while simultaneously expressing support for the concept: 'Europe is like the left, it is a very complicated project, very beautiful, very complex, and therefore like all complex objectives and messages it has many weak points and it is attackable in many respects' (Int. 2). These activists see the EU as 'the victim of populists, sovereigntists, anti-Europeanists, of many people who take advantage of Europe's weakness to discredit it' (Int. 11).

The pro-European Sardines inspired the Finnish Herrings, a group that defines itself as a 'grassroots protest against racism, populism and hate politics' (Koski, 2019) and organizes street protests against the Finns Party. Like their Italian counterparts, Herrings stress the importance of building a cross-national force 'based in fact [and] on the appreciation of basic human rights' with the common objective of counteracting the spread of populism in Europe (Int. 8, see also Int. 9).

Both Sardines and the Herrings identify as culturally inclusive Europeans who reject nationalism as a threat to European ideals and simultaneously criticize the EU's shortcomings.

## Pro-European nativists on the streets

### *The Identitarians*

Since the end of the wave of anti-austerity protests, Western Europe has experienced a surge of far-right activism. While these protests usually remain a 'small-scale reality' (Caiani et al., 2012, p. 212), some groups have gained significant public attention. Because of its media-savviness (Castelli Gattinara & Froio, 2019), a group known as the Identitarians became a key case of far-right activism (Zúquete, 2018) and spread from France to other countries, such as Germany and Austria. The Identitarians have staged high-profile protest events, such as the climbing of the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin and chartering a ship to disturb the rescue of migrants in the Mediterranean. Its leading activist in the German-speaking area, Martin Sellner, is an Austrian who has regularly attended protest events in Germany. In both Germany and Austria, the Identitarians have been at the center of criminal investigations. Internationally, 'social' media companies such as Facebook and Instagram banned their accounts.

As the name of the group indicates, identity is a crucial and multidimensional concept for them. The Identitarians highlight three levels of identity: regional, national, and European. They equate European with 'civilizational' identity (Identitäre Bewegung undated a):

On the third level follows civilizational identity, which in our view manifests itself particularly in a European identity. Through origin, history and culture, we Europeans all share a common heritage and a common fate, which to emphasize and to be aware of is all the more necessary today as current developments concern our all continent and the history of Europe always also shaped by internal cultural exchange and supplementation.

The group's so-called 'Future Europe' campaign stresses the 'role of extra-parliamentary youth opposition to defend Europe,' which it defines as a 'continent made up of an impressive and respectable family of peoples and expression of a common Western value cannon' (Identitäre Bewegung undated b). The group emphasizes that it 'solved the old conflicts between us and our brother [i.e. European] peoples' because 'change can only be carried out for all of Europe' (Identitäre Bewegung undated b). The Identitarians are culturally exclusive and propagate the 'Great Replacement' conspiracy, 'a step-by-step process by which the native population is displaced [by] and exchanged [for] non-European immigrants,' largely Muslims (Identitäre Bewegung undated a).

Compared to PEGIDA, the Identitarians focus more on ideological work, with key activists regularly publishing books, articles, and pamphlets. An early example is Markus Willinger's book *Europe of Nations* (2014), which stresses the importance of the group's common European tradition. However, Willinger also rejects the trajectory of European integration, criticizing various dimensions such as 'centralism' and TTIP. The book starts with the following claim (Ibid.: 7):

The European Union is dead. [...] And still, we do not mourn about its death, because even if it claimed to take up the causes of “freedom” and “democracy”, this Union never stood for anything besides the rape of the peoples through an abstract idea.

The Identitarians construct an exclusive European identity around the need to ‘defend’ European civilization, including its nation-states, against Islam (Nissen, 2019) and strongly reject the EU.

## **PEGIDA**

The German far-right group PEGIDA rose to prominence by attracting a large number of people (up to 20,000 participants on several occasions in 2014 and 2015) to its protests. PEGIDA opposes immigration by Muslims, rejects established media outlets, and calls for more direct democracy (Weisskircher & Berntzen, 2019). It is built on a ‘people’-centric anti-elitism (Volk, 2020). PEGIDA’s efforts to create a viable European movement ended with unsuccessful spin-offs in countries including Austria, Norway, and the United Kingdom (Berntzen & Weisskircher, 2016).

PEGIDA stands for *Patriotische Europäer gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes*, which translates to Patriotic Europeans against the Islamicization of the Occident, and the name is significant: it is not a group of ‘patriotic’ citizens of Germany or ‘patriotic’ residents of Dresden (the location of the group’s epicenter), but ‘patriotic Europeans’ who oppose alleged Islamic influences. In its few official position papers, PEGIDA links Europe to religious heritage (despite its base in overwhelmingly non-religious Saxony): ‘PEGIDA is FOR the preservation and protection of our Christian-Jewish Occidental culture’ (PEGIDA, 2014) and uses the slogan ‘No Sharia in Europe.’ At its five-year anniversary in October 2019, the group described itself as striving ‘for a European future of the fatherlands, together with friends, peaceful and without violence, connected to native traditions and Christian-occidental values’ (PEGIDA, 2019).

Guest speakers at PEGIDA events regularly discuss alleged threats to Europe. For example, the group hosted Thorsten Schulte, who argued that the survival of Europe and its nation states was at risk (1 June 2020). Its cooperation with groups such as *Bürgerbewegung Pax Europa* (Citizen Movement Pax Europe) further highlights that German nativism and an identification with Europe may go together. Positive references to a ‘Fortress Europe’ (Volk, 2019) underscore PEGIDA’s highly exclusionary pro-Europeanism.

Nevertheless, the group is highly critical of the EU – and not only in the context of immigration. In February 2020, PEGIDA celebrated its 200th ‘Monday evening walk,’ one of the group’s biggest mobilization successes after its initial peak in 2014 and 2015, during which its founder, Lutz Bachmann, repeated the group’s ‘ten theses.’ The final thesis articulates PEGIDA’s European identity, which approves of national sovereignty and rejects the EU: ‘There should be a European federation [...] of strong, sovereign national states and fatherlands. [They are] amicably linked in freedom, political and economic self-determination and political respect and obliged to assist [each other]. Regulation from Brussels is not necessary’ (PEGIDA, 2020b). Speakers at PEGIDA protests often criticize the EU, for example, with reference to Brexit, the Eurozone, and environmental policies.

PEGIDA's interpretation of European identity reveres nation-states, excludes Muslims and other 'outsiders,' and denounces the current state of the EU.

## How contemporary social movements envision Europe

Four elements spanning the political spectrum help us understand how contemporary social movements relate to Europe: historical antecedents, coalition-building potential, limited transnational practices, and omissions in how activists envision Europe.

Importantly, for both anti-nationalist Europeans and pro-European nativists, their support of 'Europe' has deep historical roots. As Jonathan White (2020, p. 1301) recently argued:

[i]deological politics was European in scale from the moment the French Revolution became a wider example. These events gave expression to a European imaginary – a Europe-wide frame of reference for principled struggles – that encouraged cross-border mobilisations and interventions. The EU is a legacy of these long-standing dynamics, whilst also inspired by dissatisfaction with them.

Solidarity beyond national borders has long been a core feature of left-wing political ideologies, closely linked to equality and internationalism (March & Mudde, 2005). Even before neoliberal hegemony, left-wing forces (such as proponents of social democracy) possessed a strong tradition of articulating alternative visions of Europe, which competed with those proposed by the European Community (Wolkenstein, 2020). Left-leaning European identities have often coincided with criticism of European integration. On the far right, 'pan-European' ideas also have long legacies, most visibly in France immediately following the Second World War (Bar-On, 2008). Dominique Venner's essay 'What is Nationalism?', written in the 1960s, still remains influential in far-right intellectual circles, and Alain de Benoist has long advocated the need for European unity – and unity between Germany and France in particular. Even the name of his think tank, GRECE (*Groupement de recherche et d'études pour la civilisation européenne*, Research and Study Group for European Civilization), indicates a positive association with Europe. It is no surprise, then, that Griffin (2000, p. 166) refers to the 'Europeanization of fascism' as 'a striking feature of the post-1945 fascist radical right' (see also Macklin, 2013). Similar to their left-wing and liberal counterparts, the pro-Europeanism of current far-right groups also reflects the heritage of previous activism.

Similarly, pro-Europeanism across the political spectrum facilitates coalition-building (Van Dyke & McCammon, 2010) within (but not across) each camp. These groups' general orientations toward a European project function as frames that can facilitate large-scale coalition-building by overcoming internal conflicts over more specific issues. For the left, focusing on a common identity (understood as combination of internationalism and cultural liberalism) helps to mitigate important differences: DiEM25 and Stop TTIP activists used different aspects of European integration to build connections within and across countries, while Sardines united to oppose the far right. Ironically, the anti-Brexit movement, the only one of our cases that explicitly dealt with the most fundamental issue of EU integration – membership – included key players who refrained from emphasizing a European identity in order to achieve broader support in a national context characterized by high Euroscepticism. For far-

right activists, pro-Europeanism and opposition to the alleged threat of Islam facilitated the creation of transnational alliances, attenuating competing national identities and historical conflicts. These activists have found a common enemy in non-European immigrants.

Despite these examples of coalition-building, pro-European identities did not necessarily lead to strong transnational practices. With the exception of the anti-Brexit movement, all of our cases did possess some transnational reach, but the extent of cross-border activity was rather limited, even in cases of *relatively* strong transnational activism. Even DiEM25, which mainly targeted EU institutions, experienced difficulty gaining traction transnationally; activists noted steep obstacles to transnational cooperation within the group (Císař & Weisskircher, 2022). Likewise, Stop TTIP, which opposed a potential EU treaty, was affected by national contexts: campaigners used different frames in different countries (Oleart, 2020; Rone, 2020). While activists in different countries used the PEGIDA label, the group has remained a Dresden-based phenomenon, and transnational mobilization quickly fizzled (Berntzen & Weisskircher, 2016). Literature on transnational activism frequently reports the challenges of reaching beyond national borders, both offline (Císař & Vráblíková, 2013; Tarrow, 2005; Weisskircher, 2020) and online (Froio & Ganesh, 2019). Whether strong European identities contribute to enhanced transnational practices in the long run remains to be seen, but it should not be taken for granted, especially in the face of limited political opportunities for social movement mobilization at the EU level (della Porta, 2020).

Finally, we draw on Medrano's (2003, p. 53 f) concept of the 'meaning of silence,' which states that 'omissions tell us as much about the factors shaping people's cognitive frames' about Europe as explicit frames. Specifically, left-wing activists have not advocated for the dissolution of the EU; indeed, their fundamental loyalty to the EU polity is striking. Despite the negative experiences of previous movements that called for EU reforms (such as the Global Justice Movement and anti-austerity protests), contemporary left-wingers have not called for dissolving the EU. Even DiEM25 activists, who support fundamental changes to current European integration, do not want to break away from the EU or even the Eurozone. Among the contemporary left, hope for EU reform trumps calls for democratic and social renationalization. Far-right activists hardly focus on leaving the EU, either. Even though some of their harsh criticism can be understood as implicit or explicit calls to exit, groups such as PEGIDA and the Identitarians deemphasize these positions in their campaigns. This behavior mimics the arena of party politics, in which far-right forces stopped advocating for leaving the EU after Brexit showed itself to be challenging (van Kessel et al., 2020). Not only Europe as a concept, but also the EU as a polity, seems to increasingly be a 'natural' state of affairs for contemporary activists.

## Conclusion

Scholars have long emphasized the importance of shared identities for the democratization of the European polity, arguing that the 'correct' institutional setting alone is insufficient (e.g., Decker, 2002). Social movement activists, a very specific segment of the European population, have developed strong European identities. We argue that contemporary left-wing and liberal movements can be best characterized as inclusionary 'anti-nationalist Europeans,' while far-right groups are exclusionary 'pro-European



nativists.’ Both perspectives are deeply embedded in activists’ mindsets. Protesters’ European identities coexist with sharp criticism of the EU, focused among left-wing activists on the democratic quality and the socioeconomic consequences of EU politics and among far-right groups on questions of immigration (Caiani & Weisskircher, 2020).

Given how scholars have identified social movements as key source of ‘Europeanization from below’ (della Porta, 2020), understanding how activists identify themselves as Europeans and frame Europe and the EU has potentially broad implications. However, scholars should refrain assuming that Europeanization from below will necessarily be a ‘progressive’ endeavor. For example, far-right activists’ European identities can also be highly hostile toward non-Europeans. Specific visions of or identifications with Europe are not inextricably linked to any particular ideology and are not necessarily indicative of a progressive political ‘project’. As Streeck (2017) warned, we must still ‘handle [the European narrative] with care.’ Future movements may not expose conflicts between pro- and anti-Europeanism, but rather center on what kind of Europe anti-nationalist Europeans or pro-European nativists envision in comparison to the current state of European integration. At the same time, however, so far social movement activists have only been modestly involved in public debates on the future of European integration (Dolezal et al., 2016), which have been dominated by established political actors, with many of them preferring the current model.

Future research should go beyond qualitative case studies. We suggest conducting protest or organizational surveys to collect data that is as representative as possible. These approaches would also allow for a more fine-grained analysis of activists’ identities, core values, and demographics (such as nationality, gender, or age). Such large-N studies would further augment our understanding of how protestors relate to the polities they affect and the (imagined) communities they comprise.

Importantly, future studies should also inquire to what extent our conceptual framework travels beyond the study of social movements. We suspect that an increasing number of political parties can be understood as ‘anti-nationalist Europeans’ and that most radical left and Green parties have adopted such stances in recent decades. At the other end of the political spectrum, an increasing number of far-right parties may be described as ‘pro-European nativists’, in line with the arguments put forward in this article. Like the protest arena, also electoral arenas in many parts of Western Europe, at least, are increasingly shaped by strong European identities across the political spectrum.

## Note

1. Sometimes, pro-European nativists may even refer to the protection of culturally inclusive stances as justification for their exclusive European identities – for example, by arguing that non-European immigration poses a threat to gender equality (Brubacker, 2017; Berntzen, 2020).

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