“Immigration, that’s what everyone’s thinking about …”
The 2016 British EU referendum seen in the eyes of the beholder

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This article examines the 2016 British EU referendum and the domestic debates through the citizens’ voices in the media, specifically on the emotions and narratives, on The Guardian, The Daily Telegraph and The Daily Express, the week before the referendum. British citizens felt, in their words, “bullied because of [their] political correctness” and pointed their anger and dissatisfaction against the EU (and Merkel’s) “obsession for open borders”. The analysis underlines that these emotions and narratives, combining immigration and sovereignty, have remained embedded in the post-Brexit days, and go back not just to Billig’s banal nationalism (1995), but show that voting Leave represented respect towards true British values, the “core country” as conceptualised by Taggart (2000). Powellism (Hampshire 2018) and Wright’s “encroachment” of Englishness (2017), and the analysis on the immigration narrative explain how anti-immigration and sovereignty discourse is persisting and is influencing, more broadly, the social and political relation of Britain with Europe.

Keywords: Britain; Content analysis; Eurosceptic narrative; Immigration; Sovereignty

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Introduction

The 2016 British referendum daily brought the EU (European Union) to the centre of the UK domestic debates. Political parties, public opinion, civil society and the media have regularly engaged with the EU and arguments in favour of EU integration and opposition to it since the day the Prime Minister David Cameron announced the date of the referendum (20 February 2016). It is critical to examine these debates and the days of the campaign together with the discourse around the EU and how Britain and the EU were represented in the main components of the national public sphere. This can also tell us where the EU is in the current British narrative, and indicate how persistent an underlying traditional discourse is embedded (Daddow 2013).

The harshly contested referendum campaign, following years of general contentious and negative coverage across the EU, due to the financial and economic crisis, and the previous Greek referendum (July 2015), had already further shifted Euroscepticism towards the mainstream of the party system across Europe (Brack and Startin 2015). In the UK, the ‘awkward partner’ (George 1998) of the EU, the social and political debates finally reached well beyond the tipping point examined just four years ago by Nick Startin (2015) with the 2016 referendum days.

This analysis seeks to study how the threat of immigration in the referendum narrative hijacked the idea of EU integration and changed Euroscepticism, in its different dimensions, beyond its party based studies (Taggart 1998; Szczerbiak and Taggart 2002), assuming opposition and contrasting views on some policies, supporting the withdrawal of the country from the EU, and adopting a focus on the rejection of the EU or the use of the immigration-fear narrative, as the Other.

This study firstly provides an overview on the British domestic politics of EU integration. Secondly, it theoretically examines how the Eurosceptic narrative captured immigration and
the threat towards identity and shaped it against the EU. Thirdly, after presenting the research design, through media analysis, it explains how collective identities can represent a refuge able to resolve individual fears (Schöpflin 2010). In order to unpack the embedded campaign narrative, this study provides a homogenous picture of the media environment. The analysis selects traditional media, which generally are expected to provide less polemic messages, and three newspapers, reflecting three different attitudes towards the EU, *The Guardian* (as the most positive), *The Daily Telegraph* (as the most pragmatic) and *The Daily Express* (as the tabloid press, which can offer one of the most polemic information, and closer to UKIP), the week before the referendum (16-23 June 2016). The (hand-coded) content analysis focuses on actors and policies, but also underlines how citizens engaged in the campaign with their own voices, and the discourses and predominant themes, in order to explain how identity strengthened its exclusive dimension and gained momentum in the Leave campaign. By identifying three main themes (with sub-themes) across different policies or themes relevant to the British - EU relations, the study examined 343 news (175 in the *Guardian*, 78 in the *Daily Express*, and 90 in the *Daily Express*) items. Across the three newspapers, the majority was relevant to the position of Britain vis-à-vis the EU, with reference to independence, democracy, and democratic values, more on domestic political leaders in the *Guardian* and *Daily Telegraph*. This could sometimes be linked to immigration and free movement of citizens, adding pictures and references to threats and challenges of managing uncontrolled integration. Further, the economic dimension was presented through Osborne’s emergency budget, often discussed with the already high costs of austerity or the possible dividend for the NHS.

The analysis underlines that the referendum strengthened emotions and narratives, embedded in the traditional domestic context, and combining immigration and sovereignty (Billig 1995), have remained in the post-Brexit days. Powellism, with a focus on numbers
(Hampshire 2018), Wright’s “encroachment” of Englishness (2017), and the analysis on the multi-dimension of immigration narrative help understand the surge of anti-immigration, as out-group narrative (Mason 2018). Sovereignty discourse took strength and shows how Eurosceptic attitudes could be reinforced by the referendum campaign and represent a safe refuge, and bolster the idea of the EU as the Other.

**Britain, the EU and the British (print media) Eurosphere**

A divisive issue for British citizens and politicians, the EU has always represented the “Other” in the British narrative (Daddow 2011) and a challenge for British political elites. The Conservative party new leadership under David Cameron, from 2005, opened with the decision of leaving the European People’s Party (EPP) political group in the European Parliament (EP), in 2009. The newly founded European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) group in the European Parliament (EP) viewed 25 British MEPs (Members of the European Parliament) join forces with 15 MEPs from the Polish Law and Justice Party (Śprawiedliwość i Sprawiedliwość: PiS), nine from the Czech Civic Democratic Party (Občanská demokratická strana: ODS) and a member each from radical-right or extremist representatives across Western and (mainly) Central and Eastern new member states, that little had in common with the Conservative Party. Criticism emerged following the possible decreasing policy impact that these British MEPs could play in such a minor political group, “the Tories are shooting themselves in the foot by trading power and influence in the committees dominated by the centre-right for a motley crew of Brussels-bashing populists and reactionaries on the rightwing fringes of Europe” (newspaper article from *The Guardian* cited in Bale et al. 2010: 4). Within the same British MEPs the perception was that the idea of Europe and the EU, as well as the ‘quality’ of Euroscepticism, within the Conservative Party, was changing, forecasting troubled times ahead.
Geographically distant from continental Europe, Britain felt more confident in its Commonwealth status at the founding of the European Coal and Steel Community. It was vetoed twice, in 1963 and 1967, with Charles de Gaulle asserting that the country did not show a genuine interest in the Common Market. Generally defined the awkward EU member state, Britain possibly remained the only country where, as Jeremy Paxman suggested, assertions like “joining Europe was a mistake” or “we should leave Europe” are used as if the place can be hitched to the back of a car like a holiday caravan (Daddow 2011), showing an underlying embedded ‘Other-ing’ of the EU in British history.

After joining in 1973, under the Conservative Prime Minister Edward Heath’s government, in 1975 Britain held the referendum (under the Labour government of Prime Minister Harold Wilson), but maintained the highest number of opt-outs (selective legislation) through the years. Britain did not sign up to the Economic and Monetary Union (as Denmark); does not participate in the (border-free) Schengen Area (as Ireland); is not a signatory of the Fundamental Charter of Human Rights (as Poland); and, opted out on justice and home affair legislation in the Lisbon Treaty (as Denmark and Ireland). Even though a recent contribution stresses the influence of Britain in the EU (von Bismarck 2019), the debates, in particular, in the press have tended to point otherwise.

The British press has not generally adopted an objective attitude, but by maintaining party allegiances, has also represented the different degrees of Euroscepticism across the political spectrum (McNair 2007, in Wahl-Jorgensen et al. 2010). Supportive stances are often neglected, as a consequence positive views are absent from public debates. Previous research (Eurosphere 2013) found that attitudes could be identified in two main groups. On one side political elites, practitioners and media representatives have been less likely to accept diversity and supported the view of the “British man in the street”. Concerned with globalization and the impact it could have on societal changes, their reference was to “an
idealised past, …[and] the good old days”, voicing public opinion concerns on Britain “allegedly … superseded either by migrants, terrorists, or unelected and unaccountable Eurocrats” (Wahl-Jorgensen et al. 2010: 63). On the other, some of the interviewees, from think tanks, but also among politicians, felt that the media did not project an objective image of society and would “pursue ‘desirable’ and ‘ideal’ vision of society”, pointing to the conservative attitudes of the media itself. (Wahl-Jorgensen 2010: 63) This type of narrative, embedded in the public discourse, was seen as a significant factor influencing the Europragmatic (or Eurosceptic) attitudes that supported the status quo, and represented more the “British man in the street”, nostalgic of the idealised past and the “heartland” (Taggart 2000).

**Collective identity and the Other**

During the referendum campaign, immigration, control, sovereignty, and England, more than Britain, grew within an exclusive collective identity (vs. the EU) that emerged behind the core of the Leave vote, and the unavoidable urgency of leaving the EU. “Londres ne répond pas”, [“London is not replying”], wrote Jean Monnet in his Memoires, in March 1949, and the detachment of Britain from the EU is embedded in the narrative of Britain in the EU since the first relationship of the country with the ECSC (European Coal and Steel Community), even before its foundation.

“Identities are anchored around a set of moral propositions that regulate values and behaviour, so that identity construction necessarily involves ideas of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’, desirable/undesirable, unpolluted/polluted etc.” (Schöpflin 2010: 53). They further tend to stick together against what is unknown, and by approaching different social and political realities, or challenged by the changing and fragile economic situation (or globalization) tend to converge towards the internal community identity against the possible threats. The
articulation of this identity develops through common norms and values, possibly to a common shared history. In Schöpflin’s words, they develop through “thought-worlds [that] organise modes of thinking about problems and thought-styles [that] determine the way in which these are articulated”. (2010: 53) As such any form of collective identity corresponds to thought-worlds, which may be short-lived. Among them, though, “ethnic and national identities generate thought-worlds that are far-reaching, sometimes claim to be all-encompassing and offer answers to all questions” (Schöpflin 2010: 53). One of the dilemmas of collective identity is met when the community of (worth moral) values encounters not so much a different and antagonistic community, but a similar one that would challenge and contest its own distinctiveness. Similarity questions legitimacy of distinctiveness (Schöpflin 2010: 51-56), and uncontrolled soaring EU immigration numbers serve this fear well.

The British case shows that the shared strong bond among the community strengthens the community’s beliefs. The rejection towards political leaders who did not deserve citizens’ trust provokes that clash of legitimacy that further reinforces identity vs. Otherness. It is the extra emotional ingredient that is triggered within the banal nationalism examined by Billig (1995). This shifts our understanding of public Euroscepticism and empowers opposition to the EU.

History is calling, and the Leave.EU campaign use of the slogan, “taking back control” could also acquire a “psychological allure of autonomy and self-respect” for communities that felt behind “for much of the past 50 years” (Davies 2016). Leaving the EU could represent leaving an international organization that was constraining Britain present and future. Davies’s sociological approach also points to the lack of any positive thinking for the future. People feel “more comforting and trustworthy if predicated on the notion that the future is beyond rescue, for that chimes more closely with people’s private experiences… many Leave voters are aghast at what they’ve done, as if they never really intended for their
actions to yield results” (Davies 2016). Those living in town are the ones who are likely to be more sensitive to the costs of globalization (Kriesi et al. 2012), and as underlined by Ivan Krastev (2018), in Germany, a party like Alternative for Germany (AfD) has mainly won in areas where there is less migration (on a strong anti-immigration banner), but suffered from the highest percentage of losses among young people, who left for big centres.

At the local level, there are rituals, everyday lives, and habits that have been lost or are feared being lost (Davies 2016; Wright 2017; Krastev 2018). The willingness is to re-create a sense of community. “Whatever the decline of ‘community’, the national society continues to exist” (Billig 1995: 55), but the lack of control on numbers, ie: immigration, the urgency of taking back control, and the perceived loss of sovereignty, with “unelected Council and Commission dictating national laws” (Raab 2016), trigger the threat towards the own space. This is reinforced by the embedded (Europhobic) persistent idea of Europe (see Daddow 2011), where the media narrative could then strengthen the in-group identity, and the “Other”-ing of the EU.

The referendum played the role of decisive turning point. A turning point or crisis is based on a construction that posits the Self vs. the Other. That resonates in the everyday lived experiences, where the national context is contrasted with the international narrative, well represented by Brussels, and the EU (see Wodak and Angouri 2014). National political actors can use a critique for ‘internal necessities’ (Wodak and Angouri 2014: 418), with “blame” entering the narrative. “Blaming involves a normative stance” and specific actors need to be blameworthy. Blame is not hard to do for people (see Sher 2006 in Wodak and Angouri 2014) and becomes an appropriate response to perceived wrongdoings, and towards the EU. This fully shut down the debate on the referendum in Britain, as Eurosceptic or Eurocritical newspapers (as the Daily Express and Daily Mail) maintained their Eurosceptic stance and the Guardian tended to perpetuate a critical voice towards the “wrongdoings” of the
Conservative party political actors, with a permanent negative tone towards politics. This hardly helped any positive news, which further became negative after the tragic (fatal stab of Jo Cox MP) event of Tuesday 14th. On both sides the position became normative, bringing values and defense towards the country, and references to Churchill on one side, and Jean Monnet on the other, passing through the blaming of Cameron, Osborne, Farage and Johnson.

The media narrative helped to renegotiate the campaign to ‘take back control’, and sustain the fear of immigrants, leading to anxiety, day by day, creating a daily storytelling in the newspapers, where Brexit helped uncover local problems. Local communities were mobilized by holding together against the Other. Jennie Portice and Stephen Reicher (2018) point to the mobilization approach to intergroup antipathy within a “broader analysis of political leadership and authority”. They argue that “authority resides in being seen to be representative of the group, to be acting for the group and to be realising group goals.” This is strengthened as the in-group needs to be defended by the (very similar, and challenging the in-group legitimacy, as noted) out-group, and is “best viewed as a matter of struggles over intra-group power and influence” (Portice and Reicher 2018). In this analysis, the power of this opposition, that in Portice and Reicher is rendered through the representation of national interests and anti-immigration rhetoric, is further reinforced by the deserved blame towards the wrongdoings of the EU (or domestic politicians, as in the Guardian), where fear is raised to provoke an unrecoverable anxiety, mainly through the immigration narratives (see also Rydgren 2008) and EU opposition. Together they are cited without a clear reference or cause, but as source of endless challenges and problems. In a New York Times interview, Robert Tombs (2016) points to the unravelling of Englishness, starting with the growth of “Scottish nationalism”,

“The English, being the majority of the United Kingdom, and in imperial days the leaders of the empire, didn’t really stress their Englishness very much, except in a nonpolitical sense, about poetry and so on. It was never a sense that England had a political identity that was different from that of Britain. Now there’s a reaction to the
fact that the other nations of the United Kingdom - the Scots, the Welsh and the Irish - have all developed a sense of separateness and have the political institutions that go along with that.”

Hence, immigrants have become the threat to welfare, to jobs, to security, to wages. Even without the presence of immigrants, local communities have changed by those who have left. The fear due to these changes or immigration are in Tombs’ words an “out-of-control process, …that is having and will have a big effect on social services, and perhaps on national cohesion.” This has increased the salience and the emotional dimension of the campaign and shifted the debate towards “a kind of revolt against the establishment” (Tombs 2016), and a battle for freedom and democracy. “Not for the first time, the defence of British independence is also a battle for the freedom and democracy of other European peoples.” (Hannah 2016: 7) Nigel Farage, as leader of UKIP, “employed one of the most deep-rooted and consistently utilised rhetorical talents – that of pathos” (Goodwin 2016), because it was time to take back the people, the “real” people (Right Side Broadcasting Network 2016) against a political class that had sold the nation.

This has been noted also by Patrick Wright (2017), who underlines the thinness of an explanation reduced towards the “left behind”, while embracing a multitude of complex life experiences. Wright recognises the appeals to xenophobia, and for the lies, misrepresentations and sheer opportunism of [its] leaders, [but also that] there is more to be said than that. (2017: 69) Indeed, he underlines, “this resurgence of English identity has been engineered by partisan politicians, campaigners and journalists, it has also been activated by the deployment of allegorical narratives that work by simplification and polarisation. In these encroachment narratives, the traditional nation and its way of life is typically squared off against a vividly imagined and probably advancing threat – be it immigrants, bureaucrats, Europe, ‘experts’ etc. Where the reality addressed is likely to be complex and full of nuance, encroachment narratives of this kind press that reality into a brutally simplified and prejudged opposition between good and evil. They often defend a traditional idea of community against modern forms of society and political organisation. They tend to favour common sense and instinct over long words, abstract knowledge and expertise. They make a virtue, particularly in the English
context, of insularity and shrinkage. They champion the small, the grounded and the localised, as opposed to the large and mobile sweep of internationalisation and cosmopolitanism. They are highly resistant to any possibility of compromise or synthesis between their opposed terms.” (2017: 69)

Stirred by Nigel Farage, Brexisters have reclaimed their political identity for the recovery of England.

“…[W]hile reluctant to end its commitment to the unitary British state, UKIP has appeared increasingly keen to tap into and articulate a sense of English grievance.” It is, as John Harris (2014) has observed, “the conduit for a specifically English political revolt, and full of people who highlight the notion of England as an angry, introverted place.” (Hayton 2016: 401). In Farage’s narrative, the English increasingly became an “endangered” grouping, “derided by a political establishment” that gave advantage to minorities or the others and neglected “the indigenous English” (Hayton 2016: 407). Victimhood provides legitimization, while references to the past, and quite often in the Leave.EU blog and newspaper articles, to Churchill or Thatcher, offer a sort of overarching mythical positive past that no counter-reading can halt, but can sustain coherence and accountability, and can fill, and provide significance, to cognitive gaps. “Myths do help to sustain nations, and nations rely on myth for that reason” (Schöpflin 2010: 78).

This fills the gap of the perceived marginality that is created by the changing political and social landscape, due to globalization and the process of European integration, and impacts on the perception of the margins, and produces an ontological and epistemological shift, on space, perception, borders, centre and periphery (Parker 2008: 9-10). By starting with the assumption that space is constructed and can be “re”-constructed, European integration creates new centres, peripheries and margins, and perceived “outcasts”, the losers of integration (Tang 2000; Kriesi et al. 2006), in this analysis.
In the actual space, and looking at the process of European integration, Britain, and Denmark, have always represented (with Greece, in the South), the “margins”. According to Parker this has benefitted Britain that has pursued “commercial profit backed by inexpensive political influence” (Parker 2008: 103), but it has never helped a different narrative on the EU in Britain. In particular, when the ratio between cost and benefit shifts towards the costs, a re-bargaining process would take place, as in the case of David Cameron, before calling the referendum in February 2016. This has been solicited by the changing number and reaction of the other players in this picture (EU member states), but also underlines the possible success in using the marginal position and general practices across international actors. While Parker addresses the permanent effects of marginality due to Europe’s “deep tendency toward internal multi-polarity, and the peculiar inside-outside dynamic of the continent”, efforts at shaping Europe can though, also, backfire, as it has happened, by calling the referendum.

At these margins, this analysis address the top-down powers and processes in place, developing and affecting new “dynamics in the formations of space.” (see also Davies 2016) As such space is reconstructed at the margins, and tends to reject whatever does not fit in (Parker 2008), in particular here the EU, immigrants and domestic political leaders, and specifically the immigrants that came to represent the silent out-group and main target of the Leave campaign.

**Research design**

An analysis of the British vote at the referendum (23 June 2016) carried out on survey data, by YouGov, two weeks after (6-7 July 2016), as part of the research project “Brexit or Bremain: Britain and the 2016 British Referendum” (Guerrina et al. 2016) shows that the most salient issues for voters were as distinguished as convincingly solid, immigration (71 per cent) for Leavers, and the economy (72 per cent) for Remainers. “Immigration”, the
“economy” (or economic stability), and “sovereignty” are the most cited reasons among those who voted. Fears and emotions played an important role on citizens’ decision-making and were likely to influence the rational evaluation of the referendum position. It appears that both official campaigns had an influence in increasing citizens’ anxieties and uncertainties, with uncertainty quite widespread among those who voted Remain. Among their open answers, they cited the anti-Brussels sceptic views, their opposition to the government, but also the possible challenges towards the future, the lack of stable expectations, probable economic instability and uncertainty. It is clear, when listening to citizens’ voices, that the British narrative that emerged pointed to the raising salience of immigration, sovereignty and uncertainty. These themes also return in the newspapers. “Project Fear” is often cited in the Daily Express to blame the Remain campaign, with the economic situation vastly covered in the news. British newspapers are well known for their documented “chauvinistic excesses” and as provider of a routine nationalism (Billig 1995: 48-49). Reading the cover of the Daily Express in the days leading to the referendum can offer just a partial view of the emotional terminology, around the threat of immigration and the Other-ing of the EU, used in the articles:

“Britain ‘has too many’ migrants”; “Germany push for EU army”; “EU opens door to 79m from Turkey”; “Britain faces migrant chaos”; “Britain’s 1.5 million hidden migrants”; “Soaring cost of teaching migrant children”; “Migrants cost Britain £17bn a year”; “Migrant worker numbers surge”; ‘EU migrant numbers soar yet again’; “Migrants pay just £100 to invade Britain”; “The invaders” (in capital letters); “‘Cover-up’ over migrants sneaking into UK”; “Migrant sized every 6 minutes”; “Proof we can’t stop migrants”; “EU ‘very bad’ for pensions”.

Previous analyses (see Galpin and Trenz 2019) have already pointed to the diffuse negativity in the UK media. The comparative analysis of their study on the 2014 European Parliament elections shows that the UK actors and news tend to speak negatively about the EU, and also when addressing specific issues, the general tone of the articles is identified as negative. In
the UK, ‘negativity is specific, directed against a diffuse idea of Europe and part of polity, 
policy and political debates’ (Galpin and Trenz 2019: 271).

This analysis suggests that Michael Billig’s study (1995: 38) offers a picture of Britain 
before the campaign started, where “nationalism [had ceased] to appear as nationalism, 
disappearing into the ‘natural’ environment of ‘societies’. At the same time, nationalism is 
defined as something dangerously emotional and irrational”. Recent analysis on images 
reveal that they matter (Casas and Webb Williams 2018). As the media, and visibility and 
tone affect vote choice (Hopmann et al. 2010), images have a positive mobilizing effect and 
are successful in triggering a stronger emotional reaction, in particular affecting anger, 
enthusiasm, and fear (Casas and Webb Williams 2018). The public debates re-started a 
feeling of opposition and defence, and “Powellism” (Hampshire 2018) was able to influence 
the Leave discourse,

“Boris Johnson, with his blend of esoteric vocabulary and low-brow racial signalling, 
including reference to ‘piccaninnies with watermelon smiles’; Farage’s ‘breaking 
point’ poster; and Gove’s dismissal of experts. It may have been by accident rather 
than design, but it is striking how the division of the Leave campaign into an official 
and unofficial version allowed Brexiteers to mobilise both the more high-minded 
aspects of Powellite nationalism - sovereignty, freedom, and so on - and an uglier, 
populist opposition to immigrants.” (Hampshire 2018: 7)

While Anthony Ridge-Newman (2018) points to the articulation in the domestication and 
globalization of news content, here the analysis starts from a similar approach to Michał 
Krzyżanowski (2019) to further explain the British referendum, as crisis, and beyond. This 
analysis agrees with the analysis of critical junctures, but it differs in pointing to the 
unavoidability and unattainability, to date, of Brexit. As brilliantly stressed, critical junctures 
describe situations of uncertainty, when institutional choices constrain further development 
over alternative paths (Krzyżanowski 2019). In this analysis, Brexit, as referendum, and the 
following process, shows the peculiar character of this phenomenon, which will probably 
remain the only case in the history of EU integration. Article 50, triggered by Theresa May in
March 2017, had been designed to be opened after the agreement of the negotiation process and the accomplishment of the transition. In the case of Britain and the EU, the closer to the target – i.e.: an orderly exit – the more critically difficult to reverse the process, while at the same time the orderly exit also appears as more unattainable. Here, the empty signifier, that before the referendum could be articulated through different dimensions, is studied in the referendum campaign, through the immigration narrative, as predominant in the debates. This is further supported by Hampshire’s analysis on the emotional division that was successful by retracing the underlying narrative of the embedded discourse of British Euroscepticism that resonates with Daddow’s work (2011).

“If Britain must choose between Europe and the open sea, she must always choose the open sea.”

“A language is a dialect with an army and navy” (Weinrich, in Kamusella 2009: 1). An analysis on the Leave.EU blog through comments and posts stress four main underlying logics (Fanoulis and Guerra 2017) that seemed to develop during the referendum campaign and can be traced across the news. First, a focus on sovereignty and the vote in the referendum to “get rid of” EU “dictatorship”, as its policies harm “British producers and the British market” (13 July 2016), and citizens should “Support Britain’s fishing industry” *(Daily Express, 16 June 2016)*. Voting Leave becomes a patriotic duty.

“Think of those who gave their lives for our country” (Jack, 92 years old, Norwich, *Daily Express, 16 June 2016*)

“My grandfather was gassed in WW1, my uncle in WW2” (Brian, Midlands, *Daily Express, 17 June 2016*)

Second, a dichotomous antagonistic relationship, and the idea that Britain can “do better” outside the EU emerges, using a “us vs. them” dialectic, where voting “No” protects future generations,
“[F]or my three children, [they will have] more opportunities without [this] failed EU and its market regulations” (45 year-old mother, Winchester, *Daily Express*, 16 June 2016).

“A world of opportunity awaits a fully independent United Kingdom. In supporting a vote to leave the EU, we are not harking back to some Britannic golden age lost in the midst of time but looking forward to a new beginning for our country.” (*Daily Telegraph*, cover page, 21 June 2016)

Third, EU membership is viewed as a mistake (the legacy of history),

“Brexit was a bad decision for the rest of the EU but spot on for Britain” (Leave.EU blog, 29 September 2016)

and legacies help take the final decision, “I am voting Leave

[f]ulfilling my mum’s wish, 19 years after she died” (*Daily Express*, 20 June 2016).

Fourth, increasing disillusionment with political elites, “the cronies”, due to the uncertain pace of the path towards Leave and the triggering of Article 50, but also the negative tone of the campaign, also among Remainers:

“By now Tim Peake is probably wishing he had stayed in space for another few days and avoided all the garbage the politicians are throwing at us.” (*The Guardian*, 23 June 2016)

“The Brexit Britain needs or the Brexit we voted for, …, NOTHING IS HAPPENING, typical British government inaction” (Leave.EU blog, 13 October 2016)

Before the referendum, the EU, the fear of immigration and the defence of democracy become a priority in taking a final decision,

“I vote Leave for two reasons, immigration… and [this] unaccountable institutions I do not trust” (Ann, 78 years, *Daily Express*, 16 June 2016)

“Let’s not surrender our democracy to the EU” (Ray, Devon, *Daily Express*, 20 June 2016).

By examining the referendum campaign the week prior to the referendum, this study shows not just the persistent increasing negativity, but also the actors and policies that characterize
the debate on the EU. Overall the actors identified as both sources (as providing direct quotations) or cited are prevalently men (85 vs. 15 per cent in the *Daily Express*). This is not unexpected, when examining the most accessed sources of information, traditional and online media are also read slightly more by men than by women (38 vs. 35 per cent) (Guerrina et al. 2016).

Nonetheless just looking at the actors would neglect the quality of the information or frames used to present some political actors. “Migrants flock to Britain” and Migration Watch UK warns of “serious consequences” over the next 20 years if Britain vote to Remain in the EU (*Daily Express*, 22 June 2016). The EU, represented by Jean-Claude Juncker, President of the European Commission, is often viewed as failed project, “a failed organisation that mixes rampant megalomania and epic incompetence”, living through “endless migration crisis, expensive bailouts, terrorist incidents [and] growing political extremism and social breakdown” (*Daily Express*, 23 June 2016). Also, when letters to the editors were addressed to the Remain campaign (*The Guardian*, 21 June 2016), and calling for the preservation of citizens’ well-being and answering their demands, the section headline was framed as ‘Facing the threat’ (and ‘revolt for the working class’). The tone tends to converge to the emergence of the referendum on both sides. The predominant narrative emerging sometimes used pleas, as to “leave this ship heading for the rock” as soon as possible (*Daily Express*, 20 June 2016). This returns in the *Daily Telegraph*, where articles on the Prime Minister, David Cameron, often report the contrast between facts and fake news, with reference, for example, to the possible enlargement to Turkey. However, when this happens, the newspaper sometimes adds on the same page pictures of refugees or alarming numbers of migrants. That is the case with pictures both in the *Daily Express* and *Daily Telegraph* of a lorry pulled out by policemen in Essex on the 20th of June. The battle for Britain, or at least England, was in full swing, “[a]nti-immigrant campaigners know this:
mostly tooting on the dog whistle, but occasionally blowing the foghorn—as in the case of the Leave.EU campaign’s ‘Breaking Point’ poster” (Hampshire 2018: 6), presented in the *Daily Telegraph*. John, from Buckinghamshire writes,

“For all the arguments put forward from both sides of this debate, there is only one principle that really matters. This is to return power from the EU to the people of Britain, who can hire and fire their politicians as they wish. This is democracy.” *(Daily Telegraph, 21 June 2016)*

On the same day, Robert, from West Yorkshire adds,

“To those who advocate remaining in the EU and reforming it from within, I would ask: how many more years, in addition to those past, are needed to achieve that? *(Daily Telegraph)*”

Voting Leave for some meant also getting rid of “more austerity, and Cameron and Osborne” (Maurice, Hertfordshire, *Daily Telegraph*, 21 June 2016), but immigration, with reference to the nearing (as framed by political debates and the newspapers) membership of Turkey, is widespread across all the news, with the *Guardian* and the *Daily Telegraph* seeking to bring in the “facts”. With the *Express*, the enlargement narrative, with the possible membership of Serbia, Montenegro, Macedonia and Albania (*Daily Express*, 16-23 June 2016), increases the perception of threat coming from the lack of control of numbers, “by leaving the EU we can put a bolt on it” (*Daily Express*, 22 June 2016). “Cameron lied, Turkey is joining the EU, we will know the week after the referendum” (*Daily Express*, 23 June 2016). Meanwhile a “lorry full of illegal children migrants [is] found at Exeter … EU obsession with open borders” (*Daily Express*, 16 June 2016). Britain cannot have any “control on immigration”, Lord Greene (formerly director of Migration Watch UK) observes (*Daily Express*, 20 June 2016). Articles with reference to ‘flocking’ migrants are sometimes published next to articles related to issues relevant to fears, as on market prices (price can soar, as demand upsurges with waves of migration), and the increasing number of burglars (next to pictures of burglary), or the Essex lorry (uncontrolled immigration), while prisons undergo massive problems due to raising numbers of foreign criminals in England and Wales.
Across the three newspapers, the majority of news items was relevant to the position of Britain vis-à-vis the EU, with reference to independence, democracy, and democratic values, more on domestic political leaders in the *Guardian* and *Daily Telegraph*. This could sometimes be linked to immigration and uncontrolled free movement of citizens. In particular, as stressed by Krzyżanowski (2019), Brexit enabled a discursive shift, that was, and still is, based on the domestic situation, where the new Brexit Party that has recently won the 2019 European Parliament elections based the main narrative of its campaign on ‘democracy’. The demand to exit EU membership is a question of ‘democracy’ and legitimation of Brexit.

During the 2016 referendum campaign, the narrative tended to focus on the emergence of immigration. Focus groups carried out by the *Guardian* underlined that people were perceiving that “it [was] all about immigration”

> "Immigration, that’s what everyone’s thinking about, whether they say so or not” (Guardian, man in Knowsley, 15 June 2016)

> "Immigration is the first thing that seems to get mentioned. I saw it on the news, the radio” (Guardian, woman in Brighton, 15 June 2016)

Images were successful, as expected, in cutting through the general public,

> “Vote Leave’s claim that Britain sends £350m a week to Brussels may have been disputed by experts, but it cuts through with the public. Even the remainers were attracted to the poster spelling out the £350m a week argument, and connecting it to the cost of the NHS and schools, when presented with a selection of alternatives. Stronger In’s poster claiming that average households would be £4,300 a year worse off, by contrast, looked like ‘scaremongering’” (Guardian, 15 June 2016)

The public debate focused so intensely on immigration, the economy, sovereignty and security that among those voters who are 65 and older, health became only the seventh (15 per cent) most important issue after immigration (57 per cent), the economy (39 per cent), sovereignty (30 per cent), security (29 per cent), Europe (26 per cent) and terrorism (25 per cent) (Guerrina et al. 2016). In most of the cases the focus was on British sovereignty, the
challenges of managing diversity, and increasing costs due to higher numbers of immigrants, in particular in future perspective, and the opportunity, of leaving the EU, the country could not miss.

In the news, the EU became the enemy, and Cameron himself was not considered credible. David Cameron, George Osborne, and, in the case of the Labour Party, the Labour leader, Jeremy Corbyn, resonated as false, while expecting terrible news after the referendum (ie: close Turkish membership). Remainers were perceived as “snob” (Daily Express, 16 June 2016), with British citizens “bullied because of political correctness” (Daily Express, 23 June 2016) and a cruel EU towards its member states (taking the case of Greece, 23 June 2016). In the end, the referendum was perceived as a sort of call for the British people, able to influence the outcome, generally constrained at national elections, due to the majoritarian voting system. Brexit could be felt as unavoidable, the opportunity of raising their voice against the EU.

Discussion and conclusion
Between these dynamics, there emerge, as stressed by Billing (1995), the return of the underlying narrative, often used in the Daily Express, but also visible in Farage’s poster on the Syrian refugees, on the uncontrolled numbers (Hampshire 2018), with the nearing Turkish membership. By voting Leave, Brexeters could “put a bolt on it”. The in-group is order, the out-group becomes threat. The sense of loss, disenfranchisement, lack of trust, unaccountability that the Guardian found across the UK focus groups, enabled to trigger the “number emergency” that was used by Powell (and by Cameron), leading then the Leave campaign narrative to address his government missing target, and sustaining an identity formation that can successfully produce its own image and take strength from it.
The 2004 enlargement led to free movement from Europe (Hampshire 2018), but these “[i]ndividual and collective identities are created not simply in the difference between self and other but in those moments of ambiguity where one is other to oneself, and in the recognition of the other as like)” (in Neumann 1998: 8). It is when the similar is foreign that legitimacy to resistance is created, as noted by Schöpflin (2010). This generates the we-group and in-group identity, that also Hampshire (2018) stresses in his analysis, where the self feels threatened by the enemies outside and within, and produces a tension that is unresolvable within the “politico-social world”, but is created both in the citizens’ perception and the narrative discursively created. Brexit temporarily fixed it.

Britain, in particular England, as Wright underlines, has strengthened its “self”, perceived as “under attack”, by the evocation of other identities. Banal nationalism enables to keep the identity option open, as auspicated by Bauman (1996), who underlined the challenge of avoiding fixation. Both the past legacy and the underlying narrative helped strengthen the Other. This public opposition to the EU goes beyond the form of party-based and public level Euroscepticism, and offers through its binary dimension a dialectic that divides, and polarizes (Tsebelis 2018) the two sides of the referendum, adding an affective dimension. In the case of the frames adopted, the EU was articulated as threat to one of citizens’ key identities. This leads to protectiveness of in-groups (social groups an individual belongs to and identifies with), reflected into national identity. Hence, the European project can bring about the perception of a loss of national identity, exclusively underlying national identifiers and leading towards hostility to the EU.

This analysis has focused on the strengthening of Euroscepticism as rejection of the EU by Other-ing, which is done by using an embedded tradition, a return to Powellism, in the narrative, and the encroachment of identity. The limits of the focus on the Other-ing, and immigration, in this case study, enables a deeper understanding of how Euroscepticism can
be enhanced at the public level. As attitudes towards the EU can be understood as supportive or in opposition, both the binary nature of Euroscepticism, and the complex nature of the perceived remote governance of the EU, can be enacted as crisis, threat, or the ‘Other’.

First, this analysis underlines the strengthening of individual and collective identities in those moments of ambiguity in oneself and in the recognition of the other as like (Neumann 1998), which further provides legitimacy to resistance towards the foreigner. The tension laid on the embedded traditional Euroscepticism and enabled to generate the “we-group” and “in-group” identity. This produces a tension that is unresolvable, but present in the citizens’ perception. The threat and fears in the narrative that is discursively created temporarily provide an answer to the urgency of citizens’ demands by leaving the EU. Although later leave voters could feel shocked (Davies 2016).

Second, this further changes Euroscepticism, as we have studied it and moves beyond simply levels of support or opposition to the EU, as this shows embedded national themes and emotions attached. However narrative is defined, people know it, when they also feel it. The narrative engages through psychological realism, as, for example, the red bus and 350 million pounds weekly sent to the EU that could fund the NHS instead, in the British Leave campaign. Narrative and emotions are recognizable, strictly interlinked and offer believable interactions. While the 2015 Greek referendum signalled a crisis in the EU integration process, the British referendum reclaims the urgency to understand how the EU is represented and articulated to not just re-build the relationship between Britain and the EU anew, but to accept the challenge of the persistent distance between the EU and citizens and understand public Euroscepticism.

Third, it stresses the complexity of the Leave vote. Blame is towards everyone (the discourse is not just framed in opposition to the EU), where the EU is perceived as a failed incompetent project, living through endless crises. Yet the complexity of the Leave vote
cannot be solely reduced to immigration, the economy or sovereignty. Discursive shift (Krzyżanowski 2019) enables the ‘plea to leave’ to persist by changing main narrative, more focused on democracy after missing the March 2019 deadline to exit, and supported by the perception of crisis, with Brexit both unavoidable and, apparently, unattainable.

As already noted in the literature, the debate on the EU can be complex, but it is also coherent and is not chaotic. It reveals its embedded connection to domestic political conflict, (see Hooghe and Marks 2009), and the British referendum helps us understand how public Euroscepticism can be understood within this context and conflict, in its traditional narratives and mobilizing emotions.

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References


