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Shaping EU Attitudes Through Identity Leadership: Investigating Pro-EU and EU-Skeptic Identity Narratives

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The European Union (EU) faces many challenges. Chief among them are (1) the growing electoral appeal of EU-skeptic parties, (2) the prevalence of negative narratives about the EU, and (3) frequent marginalization of government leaders openly advocating EU membership. It is hence unsurprising that the EU attitude literature focuses heavily on ways in which leaders undermine (rather than bolster) confidence in the EU. The aim of this conceptual article is to fill this void and to shine a spotlight on how leaders seek to restore confidence in the EU. Rather than to merely describe what pro-EU leaders say in public, we propose a conceptual model that combines older EU attitude research (into "nested" social identities and perceived identity compatibility), with more recent social psychology research (into "identity mobilization" and "identity leadership"). By combining insights from both fields, our framework enables us to gain a deeper understanding of why certain pro-EU narratives can be expected to "take hold" and instill faith in the EU among the public at large. The discussion focuses on the implications for EU leadership.

KEY WORDS: social-identity approach, European Union (EU), nested social identities, identity management, identity leadership

The Polish EU-skeptic governing "Law and Justice" Party (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość) declares on its website:

> We reject political correctness, that is, the restrictions that are becoming more and more painful for many Europeans and are now imposed not only by cultural aggression, but also by administrative measures and criminal repression. Our own sovereign nation-state is a

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> key value for us because without it, other values that we consider fundamental cannot be realized. (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, 2014)

Statements like the above can be described as political-strategic narratives with which a party or political leader seeks to construct a specific image of the EU to mobilizing their supporters and attract new ones. Parties that spread such EU-skeptic, nationalist narratives have been winning support in European countries (e.g., AfD in Germany, PVV in the Netherlands) and even within EU institutions (e.g., Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2015). The EU-skeptic narratives disseminated by these parties range from seemingly sound criticism (e.g., criticizing the EU's handling of the Eurozone crisis) to outright "wild conspiracies" (e.g., believing that the true leaders of the EU are staying out of the public eye). Although some criticisms are clearly at odds with what is widely regarded as fact, such rhetoric may nevertheless undermine citizens' identification with the EU and trust in EU institutions. Indeed, in many EU-member states, a divide has opened between vocal populist radical-right parties (PRRP) openly advocating total withdrawal from the EU and equally vocal mainstream politicians advocating for a complete overhaul of the European project (e.g., Börzel & Risse, 2020). As a result, the EU is confronted with growing schismatic tensions (Henley, 2018), culminating in one member-state (the United Kingdom) deciding to leave the EU.

Hence, it is unsurprising that the EU attitude literature features many analyses (e.g., Csehi & Zgut, 2020; Mols, 2012; Mols & Jetten, 2020) that examine the ways in which EU-skeptic leaders and parties seek to *undermine* confidence in the EU, and comparatively few analyses that examine the way in which pro-EU parties and leaders seek to *bolster* it. What is more, research into party and leader influence (on both sides of the argument) is not only limited but also tends to be overly descriptive and lacking a coherent theoretically informed framework that enables one to draw out lessons that can be applied elsewhere. To our knowledge, there is a lack of systematic, theoretically informed research into competing narratives about the EU, and hence we only have a superficial understanding of why certain narratives "resonate" while others do not. A deeper understanding of political narratives about EU membership is important, as the struggle over defining "who we are" plays an increasingly important role in European politics and is strongly linked to the transformative process of European integration (Kuhn & Nicoli, 2020).

Integrating literature on social-identity leadership (e.g., Haslam et al., 2020) and identity development (e.g., Batalha & Reynolds, 2012), leader-follower communication (e.g., Fladerer, Steffens, & Haslam, 2021), perceived collective continuity (e.g., Sani et al., 2007), and intergroup leadership (e.g., Hogg et al., 2012), we offer a *social psychological* perspective[1] that complements "[t]he current debate over 'the future of Europe[,]' [which] is to a large extent about how Europe should be governed" (Olsen, 2002, p. 922; see also Castano, 2004).

At first glance, pro-EU and anti-EU leaders may seem to adopt radically different rhetorical strategies to mobilize voters. This is accurate in that the two sides promote very different ideas about the EU's final destination. However, by unpacking EU identity leader discourses in a systematic way, it will become apparent that the *underlying dynamic* for constructing positive and negative EU identity-related narratives (i.e., stories about the social group that actors author to construct a specific understanding of the collective; Brown, 2006) is remarkably similar in both cases, in that it involves (1) crafting a (superordinate) group identity, (2) managing the group identity, and (3) sustaining it. We decided to focus on the less studied side of this coin, namely

[1]Adjacent work from the field of sociology can be found in the literature on "social movements" (e.g., Benford & Snow, 2000)—particularly by "New Social Movement" theorists (e.g., Benford, Gramson) who integrated social-psychological perspectives on collective identities and mobilization in their theorizing.

leaders advancing pro-EU messaging, to illustrate that the same identity-management processes are at work on both sides.

Our identity-based framework of leader narratives is designed to clarify what leaders (can) do to strengthen (or weaken) group members' social-group (dis-)identifications. Whereas prior EU attitude formation analyses serve as a useful reminder that nested identities can be perceived as either compatible or incompatible by social groups, the more recent identity leadership literature shows that leaders play an active role in framing identities (e.g., as (in)compatible, as under threat). Indeed, as social-identity theorists have long recognized, leaders play an important *identity management* role, and it is this task that is typically essential for ensuring a group's survival and thriving (Haslam et al., 2020; Haslam & Reicher, 2007; Selvanathan & Jetten, 2020). This social psychological literature provides us with useful insights that can be redeployed in EU attitude research. More specifically, what this literature teaches us is (1) that leaders will gain influence over followers' attitudes once followers come to perceive them as prototypical for their group, and (2) that influential leaders persuade followers to endorse their proposal by presenting it as epitomizing *what we, as a group, stand for as a group* (Reicher & Hopkins, 2001).

The EU as Case Study

The identity-based framework of leader narratives we propose can in principle be used to study leaders' identity-construction efforts in all kinds of social settings (e.g., sports teams, business organizations, nations; Haslam et al., 2020) and to mobilize people for (or against) all kinds of social issues (e.g., crisis response; Haslam et al., 2021; Selvanathan & Jetten, 2020). In U.S. politics, for example, research highlights the roles of former U.S. President Barack Obama as *identity entrepreneur* and his wife, former first lady Michelle Obama, as *identity mediator* who actively crafted a group identity that aimed to unify an increasingly socially divided America (Augoustinos & De Garis, 2012; Gleibs et al., 2018).

However, we chose the EU as the site to illustrate our model because it is a clear example of a real-world domain in which we find nested (territorial) identities that leaders can frame as (in) compatible. Moreover, identity constructions have been found to be "most influential for those without strong prior attitudes and toward distant, abstract, or new political objects" (Hooghe & Marks, 2009, p. 13), such as the EU.

The EU is typically described as a hybrid multilevel governance system, with supranational and intergovernmental decision-making features at the EU level, stakeholders at different (subnational, national, EU) levels of the governance system, and, more importantly here, with a citizenry which possesses varying degrees of a sense of belonging to the (sub)national and supranational entities and different senses of compatibility between them. As Cinnirella (1997) showed in his research comparing Italian and U.K. students, Italian students were more likely to view national and EU "belonging" in a compatibilist positive-sum way, while U.K. students were more likely to see them in an incompatibilist zero-sum way.

Such insights are valuable and show us seemingly "spontaneous" expressions of (dis) identification with the EU. However, what such analyses do not show is the extent and ways in which these attitudes are influenced by "thought leaders." It is important to recognize that EU attitudes are composite, in that they reflect a mixture of spontaneous citizen sentiments and induced sentiments cultivated by influential leaders (Hooghe & Marks, 2005; Mols & Jetten, 2020). Indeed, as research has shown, voter attitudes are the product of an interaction between the "supply side" and the "demand side" factors, with leaders simultaneously

reading and shaping public sentiment (Mols & Jetten, 2020). This research helps us appreciate that politicians often play an important role in determining *whether* nested identities become perceived as (in)compatible, and this, in turn, depends on how politicians construct the meaning and content of the categories in question. As social-identity researchers explain, once internalized, this identity content will define group members' views about "who we are," "what we want to be," and "how we move forward" (i.e., group goals, norms, rules; Haslam et al., 2020; Reicher & Hopkins, 2001).

In the case of the EU, citizens of EU member states are *automatically* granted EU citizenship, and, as legal scholars have pointed out, EU citizenship is conditional upon citizenship of one or more EU member states. Hence all EU citizens have dual (national-EU) citizenship. To rephrase this into self-categorization language, EU citizens all belong to a particular EU member state first (subordinate group), and they are expected to also feel a sense of belonging to the EU (superordinate group). The structure of the EU currently unites 27 countries, but its borders are not set in stone. A country can apply for EU membership when it adheres to the political, cultural, and economic rules of the EU. However, countries can also leave—as has recently happened. According to official EU documents, the EU defines its identity as a secondary social identity. Thus, the EU's official stance is that it does not seek to replace national identities but to complement them (Treaty on European Union of 1992). Indeed, by speaking of "the peoples of Europe" (Treaty of Rome of 1957) and by adopting the motto "unity in diversity" in the 1990s, the EU has tried to encourage Europeans to identify, for example, as both Belgian *and* European.

Furthermore, in terms of norms and values, the EU has promoted a civic (rather than ethnic) understanding of EU citizenship and political community ("polity"). In other words, the EU has sought to unite citizens in member states based on a shared "European" set of civic values, thereby leaving space for national uniqueness. These objectives are articulated in Article 3 of the 1992 Treaty on European Union.[2] As some authors point out, these values are deeply entrenched in the EU and play a key role in shaping the EU's approach to questions of social identification (Quenzel, 2005).

Before introducing our framework, it would be useful to provide a brief synopsis of landmark analyses in EU attitude research, beginning with research into growing Euroskepticism.

Understanding Euroskepticism

Whereas the 1970s and 1980s can be seen as an era marked by passive "permissive consensus" (Lindberg & Scheingold, 1970) and widespread support for *the idea* of European integration, the 1990s and 2000s can be viewed as the era of rapidly rising EU skepticism. As Mols and Jetten (2020) explain in their work on the growing popularity of populist EU-skeptic parties (e.g., the Dutch PVV, the Danish DP), this rise in EU skepticism is best regarded as a combination of spontaneous and cultivated dissatisfaction with the EU. It is hence impossible to attribute changes in EU attitudes exclusively to changes in objective socioeconomic conditions (see also Börzel & Risse, 2020; Kuhn & Nicoli, 2020). Nonetheless, this remains common in EU attitude research (e.g., Vasilopoulou, 2016).

[2]Historically, the "Declaration on European Identity" published by the Council of the European Community in 1973 first outlines those "fundamental elements of the European Identity": (1) the shared *European values* (respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law, and respect for human rights, see Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union of 1992) and (2) the *protection of national diversity*.

From this conventional perspective, there is a presumed direct link between deprivation factors (e.g., rising unemployment or economic inequality) and anti-European attitudes (see also Serricchio et al., 2013). However, this perspective cannot explain why regions that benefitted significantly from EU funding (e.g., Cornwall and Wales) nonetheless voted to leave the EU in the U.K. Brexit Referendum (Morris, 2016). This assumption was first questioned by Hooghe and Marks (2007), who postulated that "neither identity nor economic interest speak for themselves but are cued and framed by political actors." To understand variation in opinions on Europe, "one must endeavor to explain how Europe is constructed in political debate" (p. 42; see also Mols & Jetten, 2020). Thus, we base our analysis on the assumption that economic conditions alone cannot explain growing Euroskepticism, and that political narratives play a significant role fomenting pro- and anti-EU attitudes (De Vries & van Kersbergen, 2007; Reese & Lauenstein, 2014).

Looking at the political discourse, competing (leader) narratives exist about what the EU is, what role it should play in the future, and why citizens should either embrace or reject it. While dispute is to a certain degree an essential feature of a living democracy, in excessive forms it hinders efficient cooperation and threatens the maintenance of social groups (Sani, 2005, 2008). Because of the current paucity of positive EU identity leadership, populist Euroskeptics have considerable leeway to shape perceptions of the EU in a negative way (Krouwel & Abts, 2007). Parties promoting EU skepticism typically go to great lengths to foment identity-related, nationalistic narratives that fuel people's fears or identity threats, and their popularity is at least in part attributable to such tactics (Mols, 2012). One could also see these narratives as attempts to destabilize the leadership of pro-EU political leaders by portraying them as *defiling* (i.e., incompatible with the values of the collective identity), *devaluing* (i.e., thwarting the pursuit of collective goals), *dividing* (i.e., disrupting the shared identity), and *destroying* (i.e., failing to create structures and activities that matter to the group) the national identity (Maskor et al., 2021). Meanwhile, pro-EU political leaders have struggled to develop positive counternarratives that offer voters a more optimistic outlook on the EU.

In sum, EU attitude research assumes that (1) politicians play an important role in framing EU membership (and identification; Börzel & Risse, 2020; Hooghe & Marks, 2009); (2) superordinate social categories are complex, contested social structures (Maskor et al., 2021; Portice & Reicher, 2018; Reicher & Hopkins, 2001); and (3) politicians have considerable control over whether (or not) followers come to view this overarching social category as compatible and desirable. This is why superordinate identities need to be actively managed by *identity stewards*[3] (e.g., EU representatives) to secure and win the support of their citizens (Kuhn & Nicoli, 2020; Mols & Jetten, 2020; Portice & Reicher, 2018).

Identity Leadership and EU Attitude Formation

As researchers focusing on the supply side of identity formation have pointed out, "[n]arratives are […] speech-acts [by thought leaders] that 'bring into existence a social reality that did not exist before their utterance'" (Ford & Ford, 1995, p. 544 as cited in Brown, 2006, p. 734). There are typically competing narratives about social issues in society, and there is often considerable disagreement within a social group about which narrative should prevail

[3]We define identity stewards in line with Bednar et al. (2020) as "formally sanctioned individuals who act on behalf of the [collective] to create and promote a positive view of its identity" (p. 205). In the case of the EU, these are primarily the (elected) political representatives but can also be other members of the formal structure of EU organizations.

(Brown, 2006). There is arguably greater scope for competing narratives in multilevel-governance systems (e.g., the EU), where citizens can identify with one or more territorial identities (Börzel & Risse, 2020; Kuhn & Nicoli, 2020). As researchers have shown, in such multilevel settings, different kinds of dynamics will shape identification. For example, EU attitude researchers have argued that "ingroup projection" moderates support for the EU, with citizens being more likely to support the EU if they feel their local or national identity is reflected in the EU's superordinate identity (Risse, 2004). As Wenzel et al. (2008) explain in their work on ingroup projection more generally, in nested social identities, people seek to project their subgroup identity onto the superordinate group—partly to increase their own significance.

Furthermore, research shows that EU identification is moderated by perceptions of the relationship between one's country's national government and "Brussels." More specifically, this research found that citizens in peripheral regions who feel dissatisfied with their region's domestic position (i.e., viewing their region as marginalized) will be inclined to reject their national government's EU stance (Mols & Haslam, 2008).

Likewise, another study showed that leaders can exert influence over followers' identification with the EU by rendering other social categories salient and by framing them as (in)compatible with a "European" identity. Indeed, such research not only confirms that social identities can be best regarded as "continuous processes of narration" (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1994, p. 198, as cited in Brown, 2006), but also that leaders can exert considerable influence over whether followers come to view EU membership as desirable or undesirable (Mols, 2012).

However, not all narratives are equally effective. For example, when identity stewards do not represent the shared interests of the group, the potency of their narratives will be limited (Haslam et al., 2020) and their position contested (Maskor et al., 2021; Portice & Reicher, 2018). For example, shortly after she was elected in 2019, European Union Commission President Ursula von der Leyen commented on "the European way of life," and the pro-EU views she expressed triggered a heated debate (Stevis-Gridneff, 2019).

There are many actors at different political levels who produce different narratives of the EU to advance their goals. PRRPs often utilize "alarmist" narratives in which they present social events and problems as existential threats to "us." Taggart and Szczerbiak (2018) outline four main frames of EU-threatening crisis narratives: economic factors, immigration, democracy/sovereignty, and national factors. Csehi and Zgut (2020) focus in this context on Hungary and Poland and show that PRRPs equate the EU with "the corrupt elite," whose actions harm "the pure people" (Hungarians and Poles) and undermine national popular sovereignty. As Mols (2012) explains, "[b]y persuading the electorate of an imminent threat to the collective 'us,' radical opposition leaders are able to gain considerable control not only over whether an 'issue' becomes regarded as a problem requiring a policy-solution, but also over whose evidence/knowledge counts" (p. 339). Such narratives not only postulate an alleged threat to the collective "us," but they also construct and shape the ingroup and its self-understanding (Hooghe, 2007). This bold strategy helps PRRPs to receive disproportionate media attention, which further increases their visibility (Mols & Jetten, 2020).

The EU's multilevel governance system offers leaders considerable scope to engage in creative identity entrepreneurship (Reicher & Hopkins, 2001). Leaders can not only invoke particular territorial social identities (e.g., European, Catalan, Italian) but also include other real and imagined social identities (e.g., "baby-boomers", "the 1%," "ordinary hard-working families"). Looking at populist narratives, there are two main factors that seem to

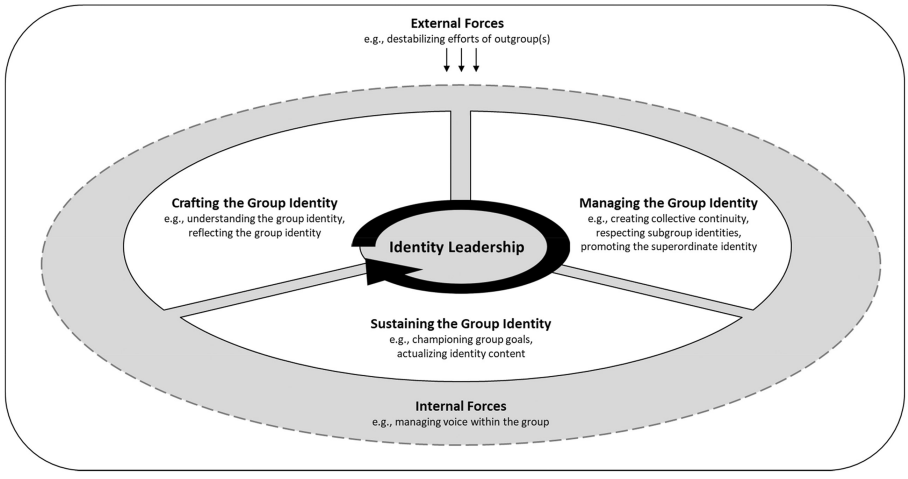

Figure 1. Identity-based framework of leader narratives.

underlie their particularly high visibility: a direct, unmediated communication with the population they are reaching (e.g., via social media) and the fomenting of latent fears and prejudices, thereby framing and categorizing society in "us–them" terms (Mols, 2012; Mols & Jetten, 2020). By invoking certain social categories, and triggering "us-them" comparisons, leaders gain traction over (1) which social identities become salient, (2) how they are being invoked and compared, and (3) whether or not followers come to view the EU as compatible with their existing (subgroup) identities (e.g., Mols et al., 2009). In the end, the narrative that will have the greatest impact on voter attitudes is the one that is most effective in crafting and harnessing shared sense of "us," and in framing the issue at hand (e.g., being for/against EU integration) as either an existential threat to the group's identity (EU-skeptic) or as epitomizing what the group stands for (Pro-EU).

An Identity-Based Framework of Leader Narratives

It should be clear from the above that there is a growing body of research documenting the ways in which leaders frame social identities, and how, in practice, this framing can be used to either bolster or undermine confidence in the EU. However, research so far has been rather skewed, and it has passed over the fact that while pro- and anti-EU leaders may be at opposite sides qua political project, their persuasion techniques are similar. In the remainder of this article, we advance a theoretically informed framework for the analysis of both pro- and anti-EU narratives, but with a focus on pro-EU messaging.

In doing so, the framework combines descriptive elements—illustrated by representative quotes from EU political leaders—and research-based suggestions on developing effective identity-based narratives. The framework not only focuses on the content and language of effective narratives (*managing the group identity*) but uncovers elements and political strategies contributing to the successful construction of narratives (*crafting a [superordinate] group identity*) and sustaining their effectiveness over time (*sustaining the group identity*) (Figure 1). However, this should not imply a rigid time sequence of the elements of the identity-management process, as they are recursive in character. While there is reason to

suggest that all elements of the framework are necessary for effective leadership narratives and function in an additive manner, the weighting and relevance of individual elements may vary due to internal and external factors (e.g., intragroup turmoil; Maskor et al., 2021). We will discuss *voice within the group* as a relevant internal factor influencing the acceptance of leader narratives.

Crafting a (Superordinate) Group Identity

> Europe has seen a historical miracle. 70 years of peace between yesterday's hereditary enemies. (Emmanuel Macron)

Certainly, it would be beneficial for identity stewards to have an in-depth understanding of the importance of group and social-identity processes for leadership and political behavior (e.g., in multinational negotiations; Batalha & Reynolds, 2012; crisis response; Haslam et al., 2021) as this will help them to mobilize potential supporters. To be sure, we do not assume that all leaders have this knowledge in explicit theoretical form. However, Haslam et al. (2020) argue that "it is impossible to lead a group unless one first understands the nature of the group that is to be led" (p. 203). For some leaders, the process of reflecting and understanding the group in terms of its goals, norms, and values may involve a conscious effort of study and research, while for others it may involve a more intuitive, implicit form of understanding the group.

Understanding the group identity, though, is the foundation of engaging in activities in accordance with the members' common values, interest, and goals (Haslam et al., 2017, 2021). It is important that identity stewards in superordinate groups reflect their own group identities, relevant subgroup identities, and their interplay (Hogg et al., 2012; Wenzel et al., 2008). Reflecting social groups and their characteristics can take three perspectives: the past, the present, and the future. Social groups have a beginning and a history (Reicher & Hopkins, 2001; Sani et al., 2007). In their founding story, a group's core values, beliefs, and mentalities are inscribed, that is, the "true" essence of "who we are" which is the basis on which people came together. It is also the reference point to which people can return as the group moves through time (Sani et al., 2007). These founding stories are often tied to exceptional historical group members who embody what the group stands for. In the case of the EU, it is Robert Schuman's vision of a more peaceful united Europe, articulated in the 1950 Schuman Declaration, which was regarded as the birthplace of a new vision for Europe and a new shared social identity as "European" rather than as French or German:

> Europe will not be made all at once, or according to a single plan. it will be built through concrete achievements which first create a de facto solidarity. the coming together of the nations of Europe requires the elimination of the age-old opposition of France and Germany.

It is also important to learn about the defining failure and success stories of the group (Haslam et al., 2020). In this respect, Hofmann and Mérand (2020) argue that the construction of collective memory frames (i.e., the creation of a community of fate) was and continues to be an important driver of Europeanized cooperation. With a future-facing perspective, identity stewards may identify areas where discrepancies between "who we are" and "who we want to be" exist. Identity stewards must be aware of the group's understanding of "who we are" to be able to *represent* and serve the shared identity, which will allow them to influence

the group members (Haslam et al., 2020; van Knippenberg, 2011). Another important part of reflecting the social group is understanding the relations between (sub)groups (e.g., nations; Hogg et al., 2012). This allows insights into "subjective representations of the key identity-based relations that are likely to impinge upon, and structure, their [superordinate group] behavior" (Haslam et al., 2017, p. 7).

Managing the Group Identity

Creating Collective Continuity

> Today we must find the courage to start a new chapter together. […] We owe it to all of those who have worked over the past seventy years to build this exceptional Europe. (Emmanuel Macron)

Social identities are perceived as enduring entities that move through time (Sani et al., 2007). Thus, the past is connected to the group's present and its future. In this regard, the perception of historical and cultural continuity is positively associated with a person's need satisfaction (e.g., belonging, uncertainty reduction) and several social-identity measures (e.g., social identification, group entitativity; Sani et al., 2007). Thus, to develop effective narratives, those interested in the continuation of the group must be aware of the group's history and also the plurality of voices within the group—this is particularly true for superordinate groups with multiple subgroups (Eggins et al., 2002; Hogg et al., 2012). If there was only one story, there would hardly be any disagreement and therefore no threat of group schism (Sani, 2008).

Building on this historical understanding, an identity leader may seek to develop a coherent narrative that spans the past and the present and connects these with the future of the group (Sani et al., 2007). Venus et al. (2019) uncovered the importance of collective continuity in the communication of vision statements. Visions of continuity—that is, visions that "frame change as a different expression of the [shared] identity that preserves identity-defining aspects" (Venus et al., 2019, p. 682)—convey the perception of collective continuity that lead to a higher degree of support for future change. Above and beyond the focus on the representativeness of our "true self" (e.g., by utilizing historic accounts or national symbols), Reicher (2004) elaborates that to induce engaged followership (i.e., active support and identification), visions also need to be presented as "vital" for the survival of the group.

Respecting Subgroup Identities

> To love Europe, is to love its nations. To love your country is to love Europe. Patriotism is a virtue. Unchecked nationalism is riddled with both poison and deceit. (Jean-Claude Juncker)

In addition to highlighting group continuity, it is important that identity stewards pay respect to the group structure (e.g., Fladerer, Steffens, & Haslam, 2021). Research by Hornsey and Hogg (2000) demonstrates that persons are reluctant to forsake a valued group identity (e.g., national identity) in favor of a superordinate identity (e.g., EU) if their subgroup is not acknowledged. More specifically, in an experimental condition where only a superordinate identity was salient (i.e., as university member), participants showed stronger identification with

their subgroup (i.e., faculty) and more intergroup bias towards other subgroups. However, when the superordinate group and subgroup were made salient simultaneously (or solely the subgroup identity), participants reported more favorable attitudes towards other subgroups. Thus, a potential relief for this challenge is to promote the superordinate identity while acknowledging (relevant) subordinate identities (Eggins et al., 2002).

One should also not forget that a representative of a superordinate group will always be a representative of a specific subgroup as well. For example, Ursula von der Leyen is not only President of the European Commission, but also German, and Angela Merkel is not only German, but also from (formerly) Eastern Germany. Such identity characteristics affects a person's ability to influence others within the superordinate group (Duck & Fielding, 2003), as potential followers are aware of the subgroup affiliation and concerned whether the leader is really for "us" (rather than using his position to advance the interests of their subgroup).

Promoting the Superordinate Identity

> Solidarity is the glue that keeps our Union together (…) When the Portuguese hills were burning, Italian planes doused the flames. When floods cut off the power in Romania, Swedish generators turned the lights back on. When thousands of refugees arrived on Greek shores, Slovakian tents provided shelter. (Jean-Claude Juncker)

Promoting the superordinate identity can be supported by shaping the intergroup norms on the subgroup level (e.g., Hogg et al., 2012). This encompasses reducing negative feelings as well as strengthening positive feelings towards the outgroup ("we like them"), which should facilitate intergroup cooperation and the identification of common ground in terms of interests and goals. The salience of the superordinate identity is heightened through the promotion of positive intergroup feelings, as its fittingness for the collective achievement of interests and goals is underscored (Turner et al., 1987) which, then, will enhance identification with the superordinate group. Further, identity stewards can invoke intergroup comparisons on the superordinate level (e.g., comparing the EU to the United States) to increase the comparative fit (Turner et al., 1987) of the superordinate identity. Such comparisons should lead to perceptions of homogeneity (of attitudes and beliefs) within the identified group (e.g., EU) and distinctiveness of other groups (e.g., United States; Oakes et al., 1994).

Using Inclusive Language

> Sometimes I think: When we are so busy expanding and renewing our common European home, then we can easily overlook the great, the unique, in the face of all the construction work. Because after all the wars and endless suffering, something great has come about: We citizens of Europe are united to our happiness. Europe is our common future. It was a dream for generations. (Angela Merkel)

Inclusive language—that is, referencing "we" and "us" (rather than "I" and "me")—is another important means to develop shared identities (Fladerer, Haslam, et al., 2021; Reicher & Hopkins, 2001). Along these lines, an analysis of 43 Australian federal elections showed that in 80% of elections, the winning Prime Ministerial candidate used more collective pronouns than his or her opponent (e.g., "we," "us;" Steffens & Haslam, 2013; see also: Fladerer, Haslam, et al., 2021). Inclusive political rhetoric (e.g., "we Australians") conveys

that identity stewards themselves identify with the group and provides them with the opportunity to shape the understanding of "who we are" (e.g., Reicher et al., 2001; Reicher & Hopkins, 2001)—partly to position themselves as a prototypical member (i.e., as a representation of *what the group aspires to be*; Steffens et al., 2021). Being seen as prototypical for the social identity is indeed crucial for leader effectiveness (Barreto & Hogg, 2017; Steffens et al., 2021). However, as identity entrepreneurs, leaders can actively shape the group's prototype (which is malleable; Reicher et al., 2001; Reicher & Hopkins, 2001). Moreover, prototypicality is not the only route towards influence. Studies by Steffens et al. (2015) suggest that leaders who are seen to be less prototypical may still be able to influence others by demonstrating their strong identification with the group. By demonstrating that one is "of the group" and "for the group" (Steffens et al., 2015), leaders may neutralize attacks aiming at portraying them as defiling and devaluing "us" (Maskor et al., 2021).

Sustaining the Group Identity

Championing Collective Goals

> On its own, every European country is too weak to face global challenges. That is why there can only be one answer: Do not act alone, but together in a united Europe. … It was and is a decision for our European way of life. It combines economic success and social responsibility. (Angela Merkel)

While most of these aspects of the framework focus on communication and rhetoric in the present, they will count for little when the superordinate identity does not approach its goals in the (near) future. Group members draw self-esteem from their group memberships and therefore commit more strongly to high-status groups (Ellemers et al., 1997). Therefore, stewards of the superordinate identity need to champion the group's collective interests and goals and make their achievements visible to group members (Haslam et al., 2020). Maskor et al. (2021) emphasize that a leader is destabilized as soon as they are seen as "thwarting the pursuit of collective goals" (p. 270) and thus devaluating the group. Championing group goals also incorporates embedding the identity in the social reality of its members (Haslam et al., 2020). Members need to be able to see and feel the achievements of the superordinate group. This is particularly relevant for superordinate identities because they are typically more abstract and more distal for group members as subgroup identities (e.g., national identities; Cinnirella, 1997). In other words, the superordinate identity must become a (positively loaded) part of peoples' everyday lives. Advancing the collective interests will also lead to more leeway to shape the group's values and norms in the future (Steffens et al., 2013).

Actualizing the Identity Content

> Only together can we preserve our European ideal of society in the future. Only together can we enforce economic and social standards on an international level. Because we should not be mistaken: the world is not waiting for Europe. Other regions of the world are developing at an almost breathtaking speed. That is why Europe needs one thing above all: it needs dynamism. Because without dynamism there is no prosperity and without dynamism there is less and less solidarity in Europe. (Angela Merkel)

Lastly, narratives are in a continuous contest; developing a narrative is never a one-shot activity. Thus, identity construction is a continuous process that runs through cycles of reflecting, representing, and realizing (Haslam et al., 2017, 2020). This is underscored by examples of schisms in groups (Sani, 2008). Identity stewards need to be sensitive to internal and external forces that (deliberately or unintentionally) undermine or subvert the group's shared identity (Greenaway & Cruwys, 2019). Internal forces may seek to lead the group into a different direction from the identity stewards' version of identity and their representativeness of the group (Maskor et al., 2021; Portice & Reicher, 2018). External forces, such as outgroups, may seek to subvert the group by undermining its cohesiveness or status. However, outgroup threat is also a powerful force to bring a group together (Greenaway & Cruwys, 2019).

The Relevance of Voice within the Group

> The Belgian newspaper "La Libre Belgique" wrote about the negotiations on the Treaty of Rome—I quote: "The Germans are all important doctors and well organized. The French are well-bred, love plans and theories. The Italians wear wonderful ties and stockings, and they even have fireworks statistics exploding." Yes, ladies and gentlemen, we are all of this and much more. This is Europe. Scepticism, contradictions, diversity, also some beloved clichés, but not least courage—all of that is Europe. (Angela Merkel)

Taken together, developing narratives that resonate with (potential) followers (i.e., mobilizes followers to action) is a dynamic, ongoing process (Haslam et al., 2020, 2021). Several factors are likely to affect these processes (e.g., competing narratives, group configurations, external threats) and its outcomes (e.g., identification, voting behavior). Of these, *voice within the group* has been flagged as particularly important in the literature (e.g., Sani, 2008). Voice within the group refers to allowing group members to express dissenting opinions without the fear of repression or exclusion (e.g., Eggins et al., 2002). Even though leaders (or identity stewards) have some influence on a group's understanding of the collective identity (and, hence, behavior), followers' agency must not be underestimated (e.g., Haslam et al., 2020). For example, group members may decide to leave the group (e.g., found their own party) if they see that the group no longer represents what it used to (Sani, 2005, 2008).

There is likely a complex relationship between *voice opportunities* and group functioning: with too few (dogma) and too many (cacophony) voices both undermining leaders' efforts of developing a *core* narrative (i.e., a set of values and beliefs that are shared by most members; see "master frame"; Benford & Snow, 2000). Finding the balance may be facilitated by a group's self-definition in terms of its values and norms (Hornsey et al., 2006). In this respect, in contrast to autocratic governments, democratic systems—like the EU—see the plurality of opinions as defining element of "who we are." For such a system, a certain degree of dissent is perceived by group members as fruitful and an expression of a lively group (Jetten & Hornsey, 2014). However, identity stewards need to emphasize and protect the common ground the shared identity builds on (and thus define the confines of dissent; Sani, 2008). Dissenting behavior that strongly subverts the group identity (e.g., a severe deviation from the group norms) not only leads to hostile attitudes towards the dissenter but also to intentions to leave the group when the dissenter is not contested (Ditrich & Sassenberg, 2016). These findings would suggest that within a social group that defines itself as "diverse" and "democratic" (see Treaty on European Union of

1992), identity stewards need to contest nationalist outbursts. In the face of such outbursts, it will be particularly important for pro-EU leaders to "stand up" for the superordinate group and to actively promote it.

Discussion

The world faces many challenges, and many of them (e.g., the climate crisis, COVID-19) require coordinated multilateral efforts (Batalha & Reynolds, 2012; Haslam et al., 2021). To facilitate transnational cooperation and policy coordination, the world's nations have established transnational organizations like the United Nations, the World Health Organization (WHO), or the EU. What makes the EU unique is its depth of integration, as it is based not only on intergovernmental features but also on supranational ones like policy domains that were devolved upwards to the European Commission (Kuhn & Nicoli, 2020). Hence, it is not surprising that the EU (unlike other intergovernmental international organizations) has become the realm of intense identity contestation.

In this contestation, the EU is facing growing EU skepticism among the public at large, and the rise of parties that claim to "give voice" to growing popular dissatisfaction with the EU. Pro-EU leaders have meanwhile gone to great lengths to underscore the importance of transnational unity and solidarity and to explain that Europe is currently facing many challenges that require cross-borders cooperation within the EU. Such pro-EU narratives may be reported in the news media, but they appear to receive much less airtime than the often alarmist negative EU narratives advanced by PRRP leaders. Hence, it seems that EU skeptics have gained an upper hand in the advancement of identity narratives, and there are fears the EU may disintegrate further (Portice & Reicher, 2018).

However, as researchers have shown, it would be naive to view negative EU attitudes as merely reflecting a rise in spontaneous dissatisfaction with the EU's performance and/or direction, as this would overlook that (EU) leaders play an active role in shaping followers' (EU) attitudes (Hofmann & Mérand, 2020; Hooghe & Marks, 2009; Mols & Jetten, 2020). So far, research has focused on EU-skeptic actors and their negative EU narratives, rather than on pro-EU parties and leaders advancing positive EU narratives. A further problem is that EU attitude research is often overly descriptive and lacking a theoretically informed framework. The aim of this article has been to address both shortcomings.

Our identity-based framework of leader narratives comprises the following elements: (1) crafting a (superordinate) group identity (i.e., understanding and reflecting it); (2) managing the group identity, which includes creating collective continuity, using inclusive language, and promoting the superordinate identity while respecting subgroups; and (3) sustaining the group identity by championing collective goals and actualizing the identity content. As we saw, EU skeptic and pro-EU leaders use very different narratives to weaken or strengthen support for European integration, and it may therefore be tempting to conclude that these narratives have little or nothing in common. However, by unpacking EU identity leader discourses in a systematic way and by analyzing the way in which shared social identity is being invoked and harnessed, we show that the *underlying dynamic* for constructing positive and negative EU identity narratives is in fact remarkably similar in both cases. In other words, while EU-skeptic and pro-EU leaders harness and advance completely different categories (either "the nation" or "the EU") and promote diametrically opposing (national vs. transnational) policy solutions, they use a remarkably similar discursive/rhetorical strategy to frame issues and mobilize (would-be) followers (Maskor et al., 2021). In our view, it is important

to keep this similarity in mind, since it helps us to see more clearly that senior politicians all mobilize identity, but in different ways depending on their political project. Therefore, rather than to view pro-EU leaders as appealing to reason and EU-skeptic leaders as appealing to emotions, it becomes clear that leaders on both sides of the divide appeal to emotions and a shared sense of belonging.

This insight is essential if we are to gain a deeper understanding of why EU-skeptic (rather than pro-EU) leaders have gained the upper hand in political discourse in recent decades. It is beyond the scope of this article to provide a definitive answer to this question. However, it is clear from existing research that populist EU-skeptic leaders have often benefited from being in (permanent) opposition and from being able to interpret issues more creatively than leaders of governing parties (Mudde, 2007). Another possible explanation is that pro-EU leaders have failed to form a united front in the defense of the EU, resulting in a leadership vacuum that EU-skeptic leaders were able to fill. Finally, it is also plausible that pro-EU leaders struggled to "make the case for Europe" because the EU ran into problems it was ill-equipped to address (e.g., the Euro-crisis, the Syrian refugee crisis, corporate tax evasion). However, leaders play an important role in shaping perceptions about such challenges, including perceptions about whether or not these challenges are surmountable (Börzel & Risse, 2020; Haslam et al., 2021; Mols & Jetten, 2020). Changing EU attitudes can never be attributed exclusively to "societal developments," and this is why it remains important to develop a more refined understanding of the strategies (pro-EU and EU-skeptic) leaders use to influence EU attitudes, a process that typically involves invoking and harnessing social identities in a systematic and strategic way.

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