Reclaiming the Idea of Europe?

Brexit, Soft Euroscepticism and EU Contestation in Germany[1]

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Abstract:

In the years since the global financial crisis and the Eurozone debt crisis, European integration has become considerably more contentious, even in countries with a previously strong sense of "permissive consensus". In Germany, the emergence and ongoing transformation of the "Alternative for Germany" from a single-issue, anti-common-currency party into a far-right populist party is the clearest expression of this increasing contentiousness. Beyond the AfD's fundamental rejection of European integration, however, anti-EU contestation in Germany takes place on a predominantly issue-specific basis, contesting austerity policies or free-trade projects such as TTIP, CETA and most recently JEFTA. Drawing on the fundamental distinction between "hard"/"unqualified" and "soft"/"qualified"/"contingent" Euroscepticism, this paper analyzes the nature of Euroscepticism in the positions of civil-society organizations involved in such contestation processes, arguing that the broad distinction between hard and soft Euroscepticism is insufficient to capture the diversity of positions on the soft Eurosceptic spectrum. Drawing on a distinction between three soft forms of Euroscepticism, the paper furthermore analyzes to what extent opposition to the EU in its current form translates into specific communicative practices *defending* the idea of European integration against hard Euroscepticism and right-wing populism, in particular in the context of Brexit and the upcoming elections to the European Parliament. The analysis is based in part on interviews with activists as well as representatives of trade unions and political parties active at the state and local level in Bavaria and North Rhine Westphalia, and in part on campaign materials collected in the run-up to the 2019 European Parliament elections.

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1.   Introduction

Crisis has accompanied the European integration process virtually from the outset, as illustrated e.g. by the collapse of the European Defense Community (EDC) and European Political Community (EPC) projects in the mid-1950s, the empty-chair crisis in the mid-1960s and various treaty ratification crises in the 1990's and early 2000s (see e.g. Dinan 2015). As one of the grand theories of European integration, neofunctionalism even theorizes crisis as an important integrative driving force integration by prompting, among others, *functional* spillovers (Haas 1958; see also Niemann/Schmitter 2009). By comparison to earlier crises, however, the European Union's current crises appear to be of a much more fundamental nature. The impending departure of the United Kingdom is only the dramatic culmination of a whole range of crises that appear to challenge the very existence of the European Union, all the more so as these crises coincide with a resurgence of right-wing populism, nationalism and authoritarianism that feeds into Eurosceptic sentiment in many places around the EU (Pirro/Taggart 2018).

Yet right-wing populism is clearly neither the *only* source of Euroscepticism, nor the only significant challenge to European integration. Evidently, what many perceive to be the European Commission's neoliberal policy agenda – highlighted symbolically by the transatlantic free trade projects TTIP and CETA – has also resulted in calls for "another Europe", predominantly from actors on the (far) left of the political spectrum. The increasing contestation over the European Union's specific path to European integration has been similarly evident in the context of the austerity policies pursued in the wake of the Eurozone debt crisis, particularly in relation to the "Greek rescue packages" from 2011 onwards.

Nonetheless, the British referendum on continued EU membership on June 23, 2016, has been more than the culmination of the EU's seemingly endless crises; indeed, it has also served as an important wake-up call, and possibly even brought about a turnaround in the discursive construction of Europe. After decades of largely Eurosceptic discourse, the Brexit referendum has demonstrated that European integration cannot be taken for granted. Manifestations of the kind of the "Pulse of Europe" demonstrations indicate an awareness of the high value, normative as well as instrumental, that European integration continues to have from the perspective of European citizens. In short, such manifestations suggest that there is, indeed, some form of pro-European backlash as an unintended consequence of the Brexit referendum.

The question is however what this pro-European backlash does in terms of the communicative practices through which images of the European Union (and the integration process as such) are discursively constructed. The actors who voice their opposition to the EU's (and the Commission's) presumably neoliberal agenda and/or free-trade projects such as TTIP, CETA, and JEFTA are often not against European integration *as such*, but rather

against the specific path of European integration pursued by the European Union. From the perspective of theories of Euroscepticism, such actors thus often cover *soft/qualified* rather than *hard/unqualified* Eurosceptic positions. But whereas many of them promote at least the fundamental idea of European cooperation, even on supranational premises, the images that they construct of the EU and the European Commission presumably feed into a broader Eurosceptic sentiment among Europe's citizens.

The aim of this paper is to analyze whether, to what extent and in which ways "soft Eurosceptic" actors (according to the categories developed by Taggart/Szcerbiak) balance their criticism of the EU (in its current form) with a commitment to European integration in the post-Brexit referendum period. This question is approached by analyzing the case of soft Eurosceptic actors operating at the regional and local level in two German states, namely Bavaria and North Rhine Westphalia. Germany is a relevant case to study in this context, foremost because of its traditionally strong permissive consensus in matters of European integration (e.g. Lees 2002; 2008), but also because this permissive consensus has given way, in recent years, to both soft and hard forms of Euroscepticism, the latter underlined by the sudden rise and radicalization of the *Alternative for Germany* (AfD) since 2013 (e.g. Grimm 2015; Lees 2018).

Taking its theoretical point of departure in the distinction between hard and soft Euroscepticism (Taggart/Szczerbiak 2004), the paper focuses on soft Eurosceptic actors because its main interest is in the *causal impact* of Brexit on the images that "soft" Eurosceptic actors create in their contestation of EU-related projects, specifically in the run-up to the elections to the European Parliament in May 2019. The focus on soft as opposed to hard Eurosceptic actors is explained by the underlying assumption is that such actors have an interest, whether normative or instrumental, in the EU's continued existence, whereas hard Eurosceptics (such as the AfD) will see the demise of the EU as a moment of triumph and thus have no reason to engage in any form of *pro-European backlash*.

The empirical analysis is based on two kinds of materials: Given the high salience of TTIP and CETA in German political debate on the EU in the last five years, interviews were conducted with representatives of organizations that were active and vocal in contestation processes over these projects. These organizations include political parties such as the Left Party (Die Linke), public service unions such as *Ver.di*, but also NGOs such as *Attac*, *BUND/Friends of the Earth Germany*, the *Catholic Employees' Movement* (KAB), *Mehr Demokratie*, and Greenpeace. The aim of the interviews was to gauge respondents' views of and orientations towards European integration and the European Union. The second part of the analysis is based on campaign materials disseminated by the respective organizations in the run-up to the 2019 EP elections, particularly in the context of the „Ein Europa für alle!"

demonstrations, scheduled to take place the weekend prior to the elections, i.e. on May 19, 2019.

Following this introduction, section 2 develops the theoretical point of departure, introducing the distinction between hard and soft Euroscepticism, advancing a further distinction between varieties of soft Euroscepticism and explaining how this distinction matters to the topic of a pro-European backlash. This section also discusses where the actors analyzed here (in the German context) can be placed in relation to such conceptual categories. Section 3 then presents the findings of the interviews, while section 4 presents the findings of the analysis of the campaign materials. Finally, section 5 presents a concluding discussion.

2.   The Two Faces of Euroscepticism in Germany

By now, there is a considerable theoretical as well as empirical literature on Euroscepticism that demonstrates that the phenomenon exists in a variety of forms and can be understood along a variety of dimensions (see e.g. the contributions in Leruth et al. 2018; Brack/Startin 2015; Vasilopoulou 2013; Szczerbiak/Taggart 2008a; Szczerbiak/Taggart 2008b). At the theoretical level, authors such as Paul Taggart (and various collaborators) have argued for a fundamental distinction between "hard" and "soft" forms of Euroscepticism, where the former describes "the outright rejection of the entire project of European political and economic integration, and opposition to one's country joining or remaining a member of the EU", while the latter refers to a "contingent or qualified opposition to European integration" (Taggart/Szczerbiak 2004: 3-4). Soft Euroscepticism, along these lines, is a position that is in principle open to the idea of cooperation between European nation states, but that argues for a far-reaching reform of the European institutions, or even a radical reconstruction of European cooperation.

Taggart/Szczerbiak's seminal distinction has however been widely criticized, not least for failing to come up with a clear view of the boundaries between hard and soft Euroscepticism, but also for failing to do justice to the difference between the European Union and European integration (Kopecký/Mudde 2002), which will play a key role in understanding the positions of the activists analyzed in the latter parts of this paper: it is indeed possible to combine a positive view of the basic idea of European integration with a *negative* view of the institutional reality of the current European Union. Based on Easton's distinction between "diffuse" and "specific" support for European integration, Kopecký/Mudde therefore developed a perspective on Euroscepticism that takes into account varying degrees of (diffuse) support for the idea of European integration as such, and (specific) support for the European Union in its current institutional form. This two-dimensional perspective thus results in four distinct positions on European integration, which Kopecký/Mudde labeled (a) *Euroenthusiast* (pro-

integration *and* pro-EU); (b) *Eurosceptic* (pro-integration, but *anti*-EU); (c) *Europragmatist* (anti-integration, but pro-EU); and (d) *Euroreject* (anti-integration *and* anti-EU).

When applied to the German context, it quickly becomes clear that Taggart/Szczerbiak's rough conceptual distinction – heuristic though it may be – runs into problems. It has been argued that the clearest expression of the consequences of the EU's crises over the last ten years in Germany has been the rise of the first politically relevant Eurosceptic party, namely the Alternative for Germany (e.g. Lees 2018; Arzheimer 2015). Many, if not most commentators would support the conclusion that the AfD's rejection of the European Union is so fundamental that the party's Euroscepticism should be categorized as *hard*, especially when the hardening of the party's perspective since 2015 is taken into account.[2] Yet even at present, the AfD avoids explicit statements to the effect of ruling out *any* form of institutionalized cooperation between European nation states; in its manifesto for the 2019 EP elections, the party therefore promotes a Europe of nations instead, rejects the idea of a "United States of Europe", advocates for a fundamental reform of the European Union, and reserves the option of a German exit from the EU ("Dexit") as a measure of last resort (Alternative für Deutschland 2019: 10ff.).

The second problem with the basic distinction between hard and soft Euroscepticism is that the field of Eurosceptic contestation, at least in the case of Germany, is highly diversified on the soft side – an observation possibly reflecting the legacy of the country's overarching sense of permissive consensus, that is: the notion that issue-specific contestation over projects such as TTIP/CETA and criticism of the European Commission and its presumably neoliberal policy agenda *do not* automatically and/or fundamentally challenge the nature and legitimacy of the European Union. This results in an image of the German Eurosceptic field as one in which *hard* Eurosceptic positions are rare (though they do exist), but where greater differentiation is necessary in order to capture the differences between political actors that are critical of the EU in relation to specific projects, but that have very different visions of the extent to which the EU has to be reformed in the future. Kopecký/Mudde's two-dimensional typology on Euroscepticism clearly offers a more differentiated perspective, which is reflected in the analysis of a number of the "Eurosceptic" (pro-integration, anti-EU) positions reviewed below. At the same time, this perspective still leaves considerable room for more differentiation with regard to various soft Eurosceptic positions – some of which are very strongly anti-EU, with a highly diffuse support for the idea of European integration, whereas others appear Eurosceptic

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[2] The AfD first emerged as a single-issue, anti-common-currency party in the wake of the Eurozone debt crisis. While European actors on the left of the political spectrum were more or less united in their criticism of the austerity policies imposed most notably on Greece from 2011 onwards, the emergence of the AfD was catalyzed by the impression (communicated not least in tabloid newspapers) that the German government's position was considerably *too lenient* towards Greece.

mainly on a discursive level, without actually viewing themselves as overly EU-critical. This clearly reflects the increasing contentiousness of European integration in Germany over the last decade, in the wake of the EU's different crises, with all that this has entailed for the German party system and political landscape.

While there may thus be a fine line between hard and soft Eurosceptiscm in Germany (given the at least rhetorical commitment to European cooperation articulated even by the AfD), the empirical reality of the diversity of soft Eurosceptic positions suggests a further distinction between up to three categories of (more or less) "soft" Eurosceptic positions.

a. Actors who more or less fundamentally *oppose the existence* of the European Union can be categorized as *virtually hard* Eurosceptics. This category includes those who *diffusely* support the idea of European integration, even on supranational premises (which hard Eurosceptics reject), but who fundamentally reject the European Union, question its potential for reform and thus argue for a dismantling of the European Union in its current form (as some activists in Attac and parts of the Left Party do). In terms of Kopecký/Mudde's matrix, these would take a position close to the anti-EU end of the "support for the EU" continuum, and a position close to the center of the "support for European integration" continuum.

b. Actors who *support the existence* of the European Union in principle, but reject the fundamental principles, policy preferences and/or current institutional design of the EU, can be categorized as *conventional soft* Eurosceptics, broadly in line with the definition offered by Taggart/Szczerbiak. Such positions are already more difficult to place within Kopecký/Mudde's matrix, given that they are neither purely anti-EU nor purely pro-EU.

c. Actors who support the EU in its current form, but are *critical of specific policies or policy priorities* pursued by the EU or specific institutions within the EU, can be categorized as *ambiguously pro-EU*. In Germany, this category includes actors who were active in the contestation of the TTIP/CETA projects, many of which are traditionally pro-European in orientation, e.g. Ver.di, BUND/Friends of the Earth Germany, or Mehr Demokratie.

The latter position is arguably the most problematic in relation to Taggart/Szczerbiak's *as well as* Kopecký/Mudde's typologies, because it arguably qualifies neither as "soft Eurosceptic" in relation to the former, nor as "Euroenthusiast" in relation to the latter. At the same time, the discursive ambiguity of this position in relation to the EU is what makes it a particularly relevant object of inquiry in the context of the question of a "pro-European backlash": in terms of the communicative practices that contribute to shaping the discursive construction of the EU, it is precisely the normative ambiguity – supporting supranational integration, yet evoking negative images of the EU beyond an issue-specific criticism – that has fed into Eurosceptic discourse

at large. This observation also motivates the aim of this research, i.e. to investigate the causal impact of the Brexit referendum on such communicative practices, in particular in relation to such normative amgiguity. In other words, the paper analyzes to what extent and in which ways soft Eurosceptic actors – including those who are essentially, but not always unambiguously pro-European – respond to the EU's existential crisis by engaging in a pro-European backlash by communicating more explicitly positive images of the EU.

3.   Soft Eurosceptic Actors at the Regional and Local Levels in Germany

The empirical analysis is structured in two parts: first, the analysis presents the findings of the interviews, which are then contrasted with an analysis of the communicative practices observable in campaign materials in the run-up to the EP elections in May 2019, in particular in the context of the „Ein Europa für alle!" demonstrations on May 19, 2019.

The purpose of the interviews was to establish the views of the respondents on European integration and the European Union, specifically in order to determine where they can be placed in terms of the conceptual distinction between the three categories of soft Euroscepticism outlined above. This analytical step is however only the first part of the overall analysis in this paper, the aim of which is to determine the extent to which the Brexit referendum has resulted in a communicative practice of defending the European Union against (hard) Eurosceptic claimsmaking.

The interviews were conducted with 17 activists and representatives of NGOs, trade unions and political parties active at the local and regional level in the states of North Rhine Westphalia and Bavaria. Respondents were recruited on the basis of their respective organizations' participation in events and/or debates related to the campaign against TTIP/CETA in the last five years. The organizations included Attac, the Catholic Employees' Movement (KAB), Friends of the Earth Germany (BUND), Greenpeace, the Left Party, Ver.di and Mehr Demokratie. A number of respondents were top-level representatives of their respective organizations, including several state-level heads; respondents' anonymity was ensured by assigning pseudonyms prior to the transcription of the interviews (which was done by a research assistant). The same pseudonyms are also used in the presentation of the findings below. The interviews were semi-structured, based on a previously determined interview guide with questions on a broad range of topics related to the respondents' activism over the last 5-10 years. The parts relevant for this study addressed respondents' views of and orientations towards European integration and the European Union, including in relation to TTIP/CETA. The interviews took place in the summer of 2018 (with the exception of one that took place in December 2017) and lasted between 45 and 75 minutes. They were carried out in locations chosen by the respective respondents and included offices and private homes

in the cities of Aachen, Cologne, Düsseldorf, Munich, Münster and Regensburg. The responses were analyzed by means of thematic analysis, where themes were developed inductively in successive rounds of coding.

Table 1: Pseudonyms, locations (states) and organizations of interview respondents

Organization	State	Pseudonym
Attac	Bavaria	Karlheinz
Attac	Bavaria	Karolin
Attac	Bavaria	Luitpold
Attac	North Rhine Westphalia	Kerstin
Attac	North Rhine Westphalia	Gudrun
Attac	North Rhine Westphalia	Eckhard
BUND/Friends of the Earth	North Rhine Westphalia	Gerhard
Catholic Employees' Movement	North Rhine Westphalia	Stephan
Catholic Employees' Movement	North Rhine Westphalia	Gustav
Die Linke	North Rhine Westphalia	Hannelore
Die Linke	North Rhine Westphalia	Leopold
Die Linke	Bavaria	Günther
Greenpeace	North Rhine Westphalia	Hans
Mehr Demokratie	Bavaria	Christoph
Ver.di	Bavaria	Ferdinand
Ver.di	Bavaria	Klementine
Ver.di	Bavaria	Charlotte

The analysis highlights that the distinction between hard and soft Euroscepticism is too broad to capture the variety of respondents' positions regarding on the EU, its potential for reform and the very desirability of (supranational) European integration to begin with.

(1) Virtually hard Euroscepticism:
The category of *virtually hard Eurosceptics* contains actors who share a highly ambivalent perspective of the European Union in the sense that they combine a diffuse support for the idea of European integration, possibly even on supranational premises, with a more or less fundamental reject (and indeed *vilification*) of the European Union *in its current form*. This position is qualitatively different from the hard Euroscepticism of the Alternative for Germany, primarily in the sense that the view of European integration presented here is an essentially *internationalist* one that emphasizes solidarity between nations and thus scandalizes the form

of antagonism and competition that the EU, in its current form, allegedly forces nations into. Consequently, this perspective emphasizes the stark contrast between the European idea on the one hand, and the institutional and economic reality of the European Union on the other. The European Union is presented here as a system of *competition* rather than *friendship/solidarity* between the peoples of Europe.

Such views are particularly prominent among the respondents from the Left Party and Attac, both in Bavaria and North Rhine Westphalia. However, it has to be noted that there is considerable variation among these respondents as regards the conclusions to be drawn regarding the potential for reforming the EU and the role that it should play in the future. As a consequence, *some* of the arguments made by respondents from Attac and the Left Party fit better into the middle-ground category of "conventional soft Euroscepticism" than others, as discussed below. Common to all the respondents from Attac and the Left Party is however a shared emphasis on the distinction between the European Union and the European idea as such. Consequently, they emphasize that their "EU-scepticism" in no way entails a skepticism towards the European idea, but rather points to the vast discrepancy between the idea of Europe as a project of friendship and solidarity and the reality of competition and neoliberal principles in the European Union.

As a case in point, Gudrun (Attac) points out the role of the mass media in sustaining an image that undeservedly conflates the EU and the European idea, at the same time as the EU can be characterized as "a political construct that does not function and is completely unsocial", serves the interests of the powerful and has nothing to do with the idea of a Europe of friendship between peoples. In fact, Gudrun goes as far as claiming that the austerity policies imposed on Greece in the wake of the Eurozone debt crisis were a deliberate effort to ruin a state and make people's lives miserable.

Regarding the possibility of reforming the EU, another Attac activist (Karolin) questions whether the continued existence of the EU even makes sense, given its current "neoliberal orientation", which she perceives as counterproductive with regard to a European sense of community. Her argument for a change to the Treaties is supported by Luitpold (Attac), who argues that the Maastricht Treaty and the decision to create Economic and Monetary Union is the source of most problems, which in turn explains the need to a radical reform of the EU "on a completely different basis".

The respondents from the Left Party, whether in North Rhine Westphalia or in Bavaria, are similarly emphatic in their distinction between the idea of Europe and the institutional reality of the European Union. Günther (Die Linke) finds it clear that "we cannot continue with the EU and its institutions in their current form" and criticizes the EU as a highly neoliberal project, but also emphasizes that "EU-sceptical" or "EU-critical" by no means translates into the wish for a return to the national level. Similarly, Hannelore (Die Linke) argues that "things

cannot go on as they have in the EU", given the extent to which the project is based on "core principles such as a liberal market, free trade and competition", yet without complementing these principles with any social rights. She also presents a view of the EU as the root of many problems both at the domestic and European, but also at the international level, for instance with regard to austerity policies, migration, or arms exports.

(2) "Just not the neoliberal way!" Conventional soft Euroscepticism

Despite the reservations discussed above against the EU in its current form, it has to be emphasized that the respondents from the Left Party are rather moderate in their criticism of the current EU, although they do acknowledge that there are considerably more radical voices within their organization who claim that the EU cannot be reformed, similar to the argument made by some of the Attac respondents reviewed above. Having said that, there is also a diversity of views among the respondents from Attac, especially at higher levels within the organization, some of whom find a considerable value in the existence of the EU and take issue mostly with neoliberal aspects of competition between nations or regions.

Arguably the clearest expression of this can be found in Eckhard's reflections on Attac's position towards the EU. Despite all legitimate criticism of the EU, especially regarding the neoliberal approach to globalization, Eckhard argues that decisions in some policy areas simply need to be made at the supranational level and that Europe should by all means play an important regulatory role in this regard. At the same time, he expresses "great concern" about the EU falling apart, which he considers to be the "worse option". He also speaks of a "fatal polarization on the EU question" among the German left, which has resulted in the paralyzation of EU supporters and opponents.

As another case in point, Karlheinz (Attac) argues that European integration must not be about "organizing, from Brussels, gigantic free markets that force regions into competition against one another"; but that the EU *does* have an important role to play, for instance with regard to setting "minimum standards that must not be undercut"; consequently, the EU should "be strengthened in a certain way – but just not the neoliberal way!"

The arguments presented in this context make it clear that there is indeed a more nuanced and thus separate category along the lines of a more conventional soft Euroscepticism. This middle-ground position is thus critical of the EU in its current form, but nonetheless committed to the existence of the EU. It is furthermore characterized by a fundamental belief in the possibility of reforming the EU, which makes the problems created by the EU only partly a question of institutional design, but most importantly a question of policy orientation. This position is therefore strongly pro-integration, but also modestly pro-EU, although it would certainly be an overstatement to place it in Kopecký/Mudde's category of "Euroenthusiast".

(3) *"We are Europeans all the way!"*: Ambiguous, but pro-EU

The third category introduced here is possibly the most interesting with regard to the research question of this paper, since this position requires most in terms of the discursive balancing act of emphasizing the high normative and instrumental value of European integration, while at the same time maintaining a critical position on specific policies. In terms of Kopecký/Mudde's typology, this position might be described as Euroenthusiast, but such a categorization would severely downplay the issue-specific Euroscepticm, but more importantly the discursive ambiguity contained in it. This position views the problem to lie less (or not at all) in the institutional architecture of the European Union or the idea of supranational cooperation at the European level, but rather with concrete policies/projects or images of the policy orientation/agenda of the EU, e.g. by reference to the Commission's "neoliberal" agenda. Examples of such positions include organizations that have mobilized against projects such as TTIP/CETA, often by invoking negative images of the EU or the European Commission *despite* an overall commitment to the idea of European integration in its current form. In the interviews, this position is clearly reflected in the responses of respondents from Ver.di, BUND/Friends of the Earth Germany and the Catholic Employees' Movement (KAB).

A central feature of this kind of ambiguous Euroscepticism is the assertion that its adherents generally consider themselves to be both pro-integration and pro-EU, but oppose specific projects, orientations or developments within European integration. When describing the position of the Catholic Employees' Movement (KAB) on European integration, Stephan declares immediately that "we are Europeans all the way" and adds that this also applies to the question of a transfer of policy competences from the national to the European level, which the KAB considers to be urgent. This commitment to European integration also applies to the respondents from Ver.di, the umbrella organization of public service unions. All three respondents declare that they are "pro-EU" and emphasize both the instrumental and normative value of European integration – instrumental in the sense that certain problems can only be solved at the supranational level (as argued by e.g. Charlotte), normative in the sense that European integration is a way to avoid that future wars in Europe (as emphasized by Ferdinand and Klementine).

Despite this consensus on the normative and instrumental desirability of supranational European integration, this ambiguous form of Euroscepticism is also characterized by a critical stance on the current state and, in particular, the current policy agenda pursued by the EU and specifically the European Commission. Similar to the respondents from the Left Party (who draw more anti-EU conclusions), ambiguous Eurosceptics of the kind addressed here bemoan the lack of a social dimension in European integration. Stephan explains that the KAB "vehemently advocate[s] redistributive policies in Europe, not just at the regional level […], but

also between the member states." Similarly, the respondents from Ver.di celebrate the introduction of the common currency, but point out that its purely economic dimension is a major problem in European integration. In that context, Charlotte (Ver.di) argues that although the introduction of the common currency was a "great idea", "integration cannot end there, but has to be complemented by common social and labor standards." Along the same lines, Ferdinand (Ver.di) emphasizes the community-shaping potential of the common currency, but argues that social flanking policies are needed to overcome competition of states against one another. He furthermore notes that he understands people who experience the EU as making their situation worse, which is due to the fact that there is too little development in the direction of a social union.

Arguably the clearest expression of this issue-specific/ambiguous Euroscepticism is the critical stance on the EU's international trade policy in general, and the opposition to TTIP/CETA in particular. Similar to the respondents from the Left Party (but, again, with fundamentally different conclusions), Stephan (KAB) is highly critical of the EU's international trade policy in that subsidies for and exports of agricultural products result in the destruction of regional markets. Ferdinand (Ver.di) is more lukewarm on TTIP and CETA and argues that free-trade agreements of this kind *can, but need not be* a tool to undermine social standards, cut down on public services and make working conditions worse. Similarly, the liberalization of public services is clearly also an object of critique for Ver.di, whose participation in the campaign against the privatization of water services was motivated by the view that the EU had "crossed a red line with regard to how far striving for profit can go" (Klementine, Ver.di).

Ambiguous Eurosceptics also criticize democratic deficits in the EU, which could however be fixed through institutional reform, thus *rejecting* the notion that the EU cannot be reformed. Examples of this view include Mehr Demokratie, which presents a fairly negative view of the EU in its external communication, but whose respondent Christoph maintains an unambiguously pro-integration position. In the interview, he defines his organization's position as "pro-European, definitely" and "considerably more pro-European than all the parties that we have", based on his observation that Mehr Demokratie would in fact "go considerably further than other organizations" with regard to a European constitution drafted by a democratically elected constitutional convention and approved in an (EU-wide) referendum. The main problem with the EU in its current form, Christoph argues, is that it needs to become more democratic and transparent. Democratic deficits are also pointed out by Stephan (KAB) and the respondents from Ver.di, who also point out that too little is done on the part of the EU to engage with criticisms raised by hard(er) Eurosceptics and to explain why a return to the nation state is the wrong answer (Charlotte, Ver.di).

4.	*„Ein Europa für alle"* and the run-up to the EP elections

This section analyzes the extent to which any kind of shift can be witnessed in the communicative practices through which images of Europe and/or the EU are constructed in the post-Brexit context, specifically in the run-up to the EP elections in May 2019. As discussed above, the Brexit referendum can be seen as a wake-up call that reminds both EU supporters and soft Eurosceptic actors of the simple fact that in a period of "constraining dissensus" (Hooghe/Marks 2009), European integration and the European Union cannot be taken for granted. This poses a challenge at least to those soft Eurosceptic actors who are committed, beyond the purely rhetorical level, to the continued existence of the EU, while still maintaining the demand for a more or less fundamental reform of its institutions/institutional architecture or a review of its fundamental policy orientiations and/or priorities. These actors have to perform the balancing act of remaining critical of the fundamental principles of an organization whose continued existence one still advocates. The difficulty of this task is arguably connected to the degree of Euroscepticsm, at least for actors who are actually within the spectrum of soft Eurosceptic positions discussed in the previous section: the closer an actor is positioned towards the hard end of the spectrum, the more difficult the task of defending the existence of the European Union against hard Eurosceptics might be. This is consequently also arguably where the least of a discursive shift may be expected.

The EP elections in 2019 present more than a symbolic event that can demonstrate that citizens are still interested in the existence of the EU. It is also constructed as an event to speak up for the *kind* of European cooperation that citizens desire, and to push back the tide of right-wing populism and hard Euroscepticism that has accompanied European integration over the last decade. Maybe most importantly for the context of this paper, the EP elections are also a useful opportunity for soft Eurosceptic actors to perform the kind of balancing exercise described above: to use the Brexit context as an illustration of the problems facing the EU, but also to emphasize that European integration has a high normative and instrumental value that should be protected against hard Euroscepticism.

The analysis in this part of the paper is based on material collected in the context of the „Ein Europa für alle"/"One Europe for Everybody!" demonstrations that are scheduled to take place one week ahead of the EP elections on May 19 in seven German cities, possibly with more European cities to join (to be confirmed).[3] This event is particularly useful for an analysis of the communicative practices (and discursive shifts) used by soft Eurosceptic actors

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[3] The „Ein Europa für alle" demonstrations are organized by a network of eight organizations with a fairly clearly progressive and/or environmentalist profile, including *Attac, Campact, Paritätischer Gesamtverband, Mehr Demokratie, NaturFreunde Deutschland, Pro Asyl, Seebrücke, NaturFreunde Jugend.* In addition, the demonstrations are supported by around 70 other civil-society organizations and nine political parties (including SPD, Greens, Left Party, Pirate Party).

because the network of organizing and supporting organizations includes several of the organizations included in the interviews analyzed in the previous section, and is therefore exceptionally well-suited to trace any changes that may have taken place in the discursive construction of Europe.

The demonstrations' organizers emphasize the existential importance of the 2019 elections, arguing that these elections "will help decide the future of the European Union," as "[n]ationalists and right-wing extremists want to use them to herald the end of the EU and bring back widespread nationalism" (Ein Europa für alle 2019a). The EP elections are thus presented as an opportunity to vote "against nationalism and racism" and "for a democratic, peaceful and united Europe" (ibid.). Right-wing populism is presented as an expression of "contempt for humanity and racism" as well as for "hate and resentment against refugees and minorities". As a consequence, the organizers urge EU citizens to participate in the elections in order to defend "the rule of law and independent courts […], human rights and freedoms […] and the right of asylum". However, the organizers also clearly claim that the EU in its current form has not achieved these goals: "The EU must change if it is to have a future. We fight together for our vision of a different Europe." This vision of a different Europe entails "humanity and human rights", "democracy, diversity and freedom of expression", "social justice" as well as "fundamental ecological change and solving the climate crisis" (ibid.).

The next question that this paper needs to address is to what extent the claims raised by the participating organizations, both in the context of the demonstrations and in the wider context of the upcoming EP elections, constitute any sort of departure from the positions articulated in the interviews. Three findings are of particular relevance for this study, namely that (1) Europe is discursively reclaimed by all organizations; (2) organizations at the hard end of the spectrum maintain their confrontational position towards the EU; and (3) organizations at the soft end of the spectrum explicitly and unambiguously emphasize the high normative and instrumental value of European integration.

"Together for our Europe": A discursive reclaiming of the European project
The first finding is that a *discursive reclaiming* of the European project can be observed. The participating organizations emphasize that what is at stake in the European Parliament elections is nothing short of "our Europe": Europe has been taken hostage by right-wing forces that threaten both its existence and its achievements; Europe should thus be taken back by more progressive forces. This *does not* by any means imply that the status quo of the EU is necessarily considered desirable, but it does spell out a sense of ownership of – and thus responsibility for – the European project. Consequently, this discursive reclaiming of Europe is accompanied by specific visions of the kind of Europe advocated by the respective organizations. For instance, Christoph Bautz, chair/director of Campact – which has been

instrumental in the opposition to TTIP/CETA in Germany – states that "the future belongs to Europe, nationalism belongs to the past," and that "[w]e will not let ourselves be divided, but we will fight together *for our Europe* – a Europe of human rights and democracy" (emphasis added).[4] Similarly, Ulrich Schneider, director of the *Paritätischer Gesamtverband*, argues for a "positive vision of a community in which the individual, not the economy, is at the center of attention, and in which all human beings can live from existential fears" (Ein Europa für alle 2019b).[5]

This discursive reclaiming of Europe, coupled with the promotion of a specific vision of "another Europe", also occurs at the hands of organizations that follow a more confrontational style, such as e.g. Attac (see next paragraph). While presenting the problem of right-wing populism and extremism as essentially home-made, attributable to "a decades-long neoliberal policy for the benefit of the wealthy and at the expense of the many", Attac also advocates a fundamental change towards "a different kind of politics" in the EU, arguing that "it is not enough to prevent nationalist and right-wing extremist parties from turning the EU Parliament into their stage. Europe needs a *different, a peaceful, social and ecological kind of politics*" (Attac 2019, emphasis added).[6]

Maintaining the confrontational position

Beyond this discursive reclaiming of the European project (both from right-wing populists and extremists, but notably also from neoliberal forces within the EU and its institutions), organizations situated at the hard end of the spectrum maintain their confrontational position towards the EU in its current form, with no sign of any clearly discernible "pro-European backlash".

In the interview part of the study, the views expressed by respondents from Attac were among those closest to the hard end of the spectrum, despite some variation in the responses received by different interviewees. The analysis shows that no profound shift in communicative practices can be observed, whether in the call for the demonstration or in other materials issued by Attac in the run-up to the EP elections. In the former, Attac combines its call for participation in the demonstration with an explicit and unambiguous criticism of the EU's

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[4] In the German original: „Europa gehört die Zukunft, Nationalismus die Vergangenheit." [...] „Wir lassen uns nicht spalten, sondern streiten gemeinsam für unser Europa – ein Europa der Menschenrechte und der Demokratie."

[5] In the German original: „Wir brauchen eine positive Vision einer Gemeinschaft, in der der Mensch und nicht die Wirtschaft im Mittelpunkt steht und alle Menschen frei von Existenzängsten leben können."

[6] In the German original: „Als Folge einer jahrzehntelangen neoliberalen Politik zugunsten der Vermögenden und zulasten der Vielen schaffen sie Angst und Verunsicherung bei einem großen Teil der Bevölkerung. Deshalb reicht es nicht, zu verhindern, dass nationalistische und rechtsextremisti-sche Parteien das EU-Parlament zu ihrer Bühne machen. Europa braucht eine andere, eine friedliche, eine soziale und ökologische Politik!"

neoliberal policies and, in fact, even *blames* the EU as at least one important root cause of right-wing populism. Roland Süß, a member of Attac's coordination circle, presents "the current economic system as a source of frustration and nationalism" and promotes a "Europe of solidarity" in which people and the environment enjoy priority over the economic interests of the few (Ein Europa für alle 2019b). In other materials issued in the run-up to the EP elections, Attac makes it clear that "the Europe that we are living in is not the Europe that we want!" and that the neoliberal policies of the EU in fact *exacerbate* current social, economic and ecological crises (Attac 2019; emphasis added).

Similarly critical views are expressed by spokespeople of various organizations promoting changes in the EU's asylum policies, such as e.g. *Seebrücke.* Laura Kettel, the organization's spokesperson for the demonstrations, invokes the image of "fortress Europe" to advocate for "an *EU of human rights*" as well as "a Europe of *diversity and solidarity*" (emphasis added), highlighting the need for "safe routes for refugees and a right of asylum" (ibid.).[7]

Mehr Demokratie certainly does not in any way consider itself to be Eurosceptic, as indicated in the interview discussed above, but its director Roman Huber certainly does send mixed messages by speaking of an "ever more nontransparent and centralist EU", even though this claim is complemented by the call for a "democratic restart of the EU" (ibid.).

Unambiguously in favor of European integration
The organizations that are closer to the ambiguous end of the spectrum now explicitly and *unambiguously* emphasize the high normative and instrumental value of European integration. This does not by any means imply that these organizations spare the EU their at times heavy criticism, but it appears clear that, despite all legitimate criticism, they want to avoid mixed messages as regards their fundamental conviction that European integration, especially along supranational lines, is both normatively desirable and instrumentally useful. The emphasis in these contributions is clearly placed on the EU's potential as a progressive force in terms of social or environmental concerns.

This view is expressed most unambiguously by the Catholic Employees' Movement (KAB) and by BUND/Friends of the Earth Germany. In its materials for the EP elections, BUND/Friends of the Earth Germany decidedly and unambiguously spells out the high normative and instrumental value of European integration, arguing that "the project of a united Europe is a good project! It is more necessary today than ever" (BUND 2019). The organization also advocates collective and supranational problem solving and explicitly calls

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[7] In the German original: „Wir wollen eine EU der Menschenrechte. Statt die Festung Europa immer weiter auszubauen, brauchen wir sichere Fluchtwege und ein Recht auf Asyl. Wir stehen für ein Europa der Vielfalt und Solidarität."

for a *deepening of European integration* as a "core requirement for an effective fight against today's environmental problems" (ibid.): the immense challenges facing humanity can only be solved collectively, which is why Europe needs to be developed into an "environment- and people-friendly community of values" (ibid.).

Similarly, the KAB emphasizes social justice at the European level and expresses support for candidates who work for a "reconstruction" of the EU into a social, just and dignified Europe. Consequently, the organization explicitly rejects "nationalist, right-wing populist and anti-European parties" and encourages EU institutions to work on a shared vision to ensure that everyone profits from changes (Katholische Arbeitnehmer Bewegung 2018).

Despite the clear position taken for a deepening of European integration, BUND also expresses strong criticism of the predominance of economic aspects in the EU, especially when they come at the expense of environmental concerns. In the call for the "Ein Europa für alle!" demonstrations, Hubert Weiger, the head of the federal branch of BUND, demands that steps be taken towards a sustainable Europe and that "politicians in Brussels listen to the people in Europe instead of prioritizing "privatization and deregulation for the benefit of powerful corporations" (Ein Europa fuer alle, 2019b). Along similar lines, Maritta Strasser, the head of the (left-wing) environmental NGO *NaturFreunde Deutschlands* emphasizes the instrumental role that the EU can play in the fight against climate change and the worldwide loss of biodiversity, stating that "we in Europe can show the way to how a good life for all human beings can be reconciled with a planet that will remain inhabitable in the long run" (ibid.).[8]

5.   Concluding Discussion

Given the magnitude of the EU's current crises, it is certainly no exaggeration to claim that the upcoming elections to the European Parliament constitute a critical juncture for European integration. European integration has clearly become more contentious even in countries with a previously strong sense of permissive consensus, all the more so as right-wing populists have gained a foothold in most EU member states. In the ongoing Brexit process, this creates a dilemma for soft Eurosceptic actors who are committed to the basic principles of supranational cooperation of European member states, but who reject the EU in its current form, whether on the basis of its institutional architecture, its ideological roots or specific policies or projects. This is especially true in a context in which criticism of the EU can be construed as opposition to the project of European integration as such, and thus perceived as

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[8] In the German original: „Europa muss eine Führungsrolle im Kampf gegen den Klimawandel und das weltweite Artensterben übernehmen. Wir in Europa können den Weg aufzeigen, wie ein gutes Leben für alle Menschen mit einem langfristig bewohnbar bleibenden Planeten vereinbar ist."

a contribution to the gradual dismantling of the achievements of the EU. It is also clear that the (arguably) inadvertent ambiguity of essentially pro-European voices may very well have contributed to the kind of anti-EU sentiment that has accompanied the integration process for a longer time than the series of crises that have marked the EU over the last decade.

At the conceptual level, these observations draw attention to the need for a more differentiated approach to Euroscepticism than the basic distinction between *hard* and *soft* version of the phenomenon has to offer. On the one hand, the empirical analysis of soft Eurosceptic actors at the regional level in Germany – both in terms of interview data and written materials – has shown that the line between hard and soft Euroscepticism is much finer than the notion of an "outright rejection" of European integration (Taggart/Szczerbiak 2004) appears to imply, in particular because even seemingly hard Eurosceptics – at least in countries like Germany – maintain at least some form of *rhetorical* commitment to the desirability of European cooperation. More importantly, it is highly striking that even actors who perceive themselves to be decidedly pro-European can be highly ambiguous in the messages that they send out in their external communications. The real lesson of this research is therefore not related to the question of how to categorize different political actors, whether parties, trade unions or NGOs, on a spectrum of various soft Eurosceptic positions, but rather to the observation that there is ambiguity in this regard in the first place.

The empirical analysis has shown that the Brexit process has been a wake-up call that has resulted, at least to some extent, in a change in communicative practices regarding the discursive construction of images of Europe and the European Union. This change is certainly not a uniform process, as suggested e.g. by the continued strong criticism that organizations such as Attac launch on the EU. With regard to at least some of the organizations that perceive themselves to be decidedly pro-EU, we have however seen a shift towards more explicit and unambiguous references to the high normative and instrumental value of European integration, despite all legitimate criticism that such organizations continue to articulate. In terms of the workshop for which this paper is written, this certainly constitutes a noteworthy pro-European backlash.

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