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A “Europe des Nations”: far right imaginative geographies and the politicization of cultural crisis on Twitter in Western Europe

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ABSTRACT

Contestation over European integration has been widely studied in the rhetoric of parties, leaders, and movements on the far right in a variety of media. Focusing on Twitter use by far right actors in Western Europe, we apply corpus-aided discourse analysis to explore how imaginative geographies are used to politicize Europe among their digital publics. We find that the idea of a crisis of cultural identity pervades imaginaries of Europe amongst far right digital publics. While Europe is presented as facing a crisis of cultural identity, we find that the far right articulates an aspirational imaginary of Europe, the ‘Europe des Nations’ that rejects liberal-democratic pluralism in the EU and the ‘establishment’. We find that the contestation of Europe in far right digital publics relies on a crisis of cultural identity, representing a translation of *Nouvelle Droite* imaginaries of Europe into the social media space.

KEYWORDS

European integration; European imaginaries; far right; Twitter; nativism

Introduction

Imaginations of the ‘kind of Europe we Europeans wish to construct’ play an important role in the politics of European integration (Kriesi 2016, 45). Across the Union, the far right has tried to capitalize on democratic deficit, economic insecurity and changing dynamics of ethnic and cultural identity to advance its articulations of who belongs in Europe, Europe’s past, and its future. While much has been written about Euroscepticism and the far right (see for an overview Pirro and van Kessel 2018), existing studies mostly consider dynamics during elections, focusing predominantly on contestation by political parties as it appears in conventional channels of political communication (notably party manifestos). This paper explores how far right digital publics, composed of a variety of actors, politicize European culture and identity through the production and circulation of imaginative geographies of Europe in crisis.

In the literature on European integration, politicization is defined as ‘the process of more publicly visible contestation related to the various dimensions of European integration’ which are activated by partisan actors (Hooghe and Marks 2009; Hutter, Grande, and Kriesi 2016; Kriesi 2016). Among the many possible dimensions of contestation including

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the functioning of EU decision-making and its policies (Halikiopoulou, Nanou, and Vasilopoulou 2012; Pirro and van Kessel 2018), we find that the far right predominantly discusses Europe through the lens of a crisis of cultural identity to contest the norms, values, and boundaries that define Europe. These are of course not the only actors that have contested what constitutes Europe (Biebuyck 2010; Diez 2014), but they have often been studied in the context of European foreign policy, bureaucracy, and policymaking, and represent a methodological turn towards the study of how norms and values are articulated in contestation over European integration (Diez 2014).

Following Voltolini, et al. in this issue, we explore how far right digital publics engage in discursive contestation over the status of Europe, its future, and most importantly, the challenges it currently faces. Politicization of crisis involves the 'struggle over the (re)-definition of the constitutive features of EU community' (Voltolini et al. 2020, 6). Media play an important role in imaginaries of Europe, and crisis has remained an important feature for media in Western Europe (Caiani and Guerra 2017; de Vreese 2007). Constructions of crisis are embedded in social practices in radio, television, news broadcasts, print media, and popular culture, and have been an area of investigation into the political geographies of Europeanization (Bialasiewicz et al. 2009; Mamadouh 2009; Moisiu et al. 2013; Mamadouh and Bialasiewicz 2016). With the growth of support for far right parties and the populist radical right focusing on cultural identity (van Elsas and van der Brug 2015; Börzel and Risse 2018; Kneuer 2019), these imaginaries are important to understanding how public spheres affect European integration.

To study how imaginations of Europe are involved in the politicization of European integration, we explore how imaginaries of Europe are constructed by applying corpus-aided discourse analysis to a large dataset of tweets from users in far right digital publics on Twitter. By the far right, we use an umbrella term that encompasses both extreme right and populist radical right actors, leaders, movements, and parties (Mudde 2007). We focus on four Western European countries (France, Germany, Italy and the United-Kingdom) that differ in terms of important factors that may shape the intensity and form of contestation of European integration. While France, Germany and Italy are founding members, the UK joined the EU in 1973. Additionally, the four countries differ in terms of the scope of authority devolved to the EU. The UK is not part of the Eurozone and the Schengen agreement. It also voted to leave the EU following the 2016 referendum and is no longer an EU member state since January 2020. The data collected in this article reflects the time period after the 2016 referendum but before the UK's departure from the EU.

We study the words collocated with 'Europe' in each language to explore how representations of the territory are constructed as opposed to collocations of the phrase 'European Union'. In doing so, we turn our attention to how imaginaries about Europe, rather than the EU alone, are narrated. These collocations are examined in context and assigned a code that best captures which of four crisis themes that each collocation best belongs to: culture, economy, representation, and security. The study finds that that cultural crisis is the central frame of narrations of Europe in crisis among far right digital publics. In framings of cultural crisis, far right digital publics emphasize the 'threats' presented by migrants and the 'establishment' that purportedly abets them. This narration of Europe in cultural crisis allows the far right to develop its aspirational imagination of 'Europe des Nations' as a 'way out' of the crisis that far right digital publics perceive and reproduce.

Imagineries of Europe and the far right

We leverage the concept of imaginative geographies to explore how far right digital publics politicize Europe, long-discussed issues in human geography and political science. Imaginative geographies are discursive processes that have concrete effects on the ways in which territory, identity, and culture are understood. Imaginative geographies are material, discursive, and performative practices that shape the politics of their audiences (Gregory 1995; Bialasiewicz et al. 2007). In political geography, imaginative geographies have been a useful tool in understanding the ways in which texts, images, video, and other cultural objects are part of everyday life, shaping geopolitics, identities, and cultures (Dodds 2001). The concept of imaginative geographies takes inspiration from Edward Said's study of British and French representations of space in North Africa and Southwest Asia. For example, the visions of the 'Middle East' that Orientalists constructed continue to shape geopolitical, economic, and cultural flows in Iraq and Afghanistan in what Derek Gregory refers to as 'The Colonial Present' (2004).

Frames and framing processes, on the other hand, refer to how actors engage in specific forms of narration such that relations of cause and effect, definitions of a problem, and moral evaluations are emphasized in discursive practices (see Voltolini et al. 2020, 13). Both frames and imaginative geographies are key concepts in critical geopolitics and popular geopolitics, fields that explore the intersection of how the content and materiality of discursive communities are refracted through geopolitics (Sharp 1993; Ingram 2008; Dittmer 2010). For example, Mamadouh (2009) deploys imaginative geography to understand public debates and voting patterns in France and the Netherlands, showing that focus is placed on 'who belongs' to Europe in debates on the widening and deepening of the European Union, involving both discursive frames about migrants' alterity and imagineries of what – and *who* – counts as European.

We do not simply attend to specific issues facing the 'EU' but rather question the factors that affect what 'Europe' means. In this regard, we focus textual analysis on 'Europe' instead of the 'EU' to address 'new practices' of making the imaginative geography of Europe meaningful, focusing on 'different national popular cultures' and 'differing expressions of Europeanization,' turning our attention to 'the making of "European" publics beyond' the EU (Moisio et al. 2013, 752). To focus on the European Union alone would fail to account for the ways in which far right actors have imagined Europe as a civilizational space.

Contending imaginations of Europe between its constituent nations and the supranational vision that the EU projects have had important effects on the process of European integration and the articulation of a European cultural and political space (Busch and Krzyzanowski 2007; Trenz 2016). 'Western' values became an important touchstone for imagining Europe in the decades prior to the signing of the Maastricht treaty (Stråth 2000). In this sense, political practice, intergovernmental contestation, and popular culture have all played an important part in 'doing Europe', setting the boundaries of who, what, and where belong in the European community, and the values that define this community (Wodak 2007; Wodak and Boukala 2015).

Research has also stressed the extent to which politicization processes affect how the parties and political cultures of nation states imagine their relation to European integration, the European Union, and its projection of power abroad throughout the post-war

period and after (Krzyzanowski, Triandafyllidou, and Wodak 2009, 262). Szczerbiak and Taggart (2008a) distinguished varying degrees of Euroscepticism, which inform different forms of contestation of Europe. Hard Euroscepticism refers to a principled opposition to the EU as a polity and to further European integration. Hard Eurosceptics believe that their countries should withdraw from EU membership while soft Euroscepticism instead is not a principled objection but rather more specific concerns about one (or a number of) policy area(s). The role of imaginaries in informing far right contestation of Europe can also be observed in the wide range of positions on migration policy articulated by heads of state, which range from enthusiastic support among Europhilic leaders for increased integration and cooperation to affirmations of national sovereignty and challenges to increased integration from Eurosceptics (Wolf and Ossewaarde 2018).

While there are Eurosceptic positions from both the left and the right, far right parties and social movements have capitalized on Euroscepticism the most (Green-Pedersen 2012; Hutter, Grande, and Kriesi 2016). Furthermore, while some Eurosceptics are in principle opposed to European integration, other positions might suggest radical reform or even opposition to the EU's existing or planned trajectory in the future (Szczerbiak and Taggart 2008b; Vasilopoulou 2009; Leruth, Startin, and Usherwood 2017). This provides far right actors with a certain flexibility that enables some to politicize opposition to the EU entirely while others might criticize its leaders and how representative of an institution it is (Vasilopoulou 2009). More broadly, this research stresses that even within the far right there are multiple forms of contestation over European integration, from hard rejection of the EU in general to a desire to reform and reshape the EU to be more compatible with aspirational far right imaginaries of Europe.

Twitter is an important tool for the far right to circumvent media agendas and broadcast a message directly to an audience (Krämer 2017). Social media provide favourable conditions for far right actors to seize political opportunities and broadcast a message to audiences. Focusing on Twitter is particularly useful as users of social media are more likely to express critical or Eurosceptic stances, unlike traditional media users that tend to be more optimistic about the EU (Conti and Memoli 2017, 135). Research into digital media and Euroscepticism is now a well-established area of research exploring contestation of European integration online in many member states, exploring how media frames travel amongst news readers, digital news platforms, political blogs, and social media (de Wilde, Michailidou, and Trenz 2013; Michailidou, De Wilde, and Trenz 2014; Conti and Memoli 2016; Caiani and Guerra 2017). By focusing on how far right digital publics imagine this Europe of tomorrow, we add to literature that explores the role of imaginaries of Europe in far right contestation of EU politics and European integration.

Nativism and cultural identity play an important role in how far right digital publics express Eurosceptic viewpoints. For example, different configurations of online networks of far right parties diffuse an anti-EU message. Frames of the EU that cohere across far right political communication online are identitarian, economic, and utilitarian in nature (Pavan and Caiani 2017). However, this work focuses on the content of official websites of far right organizations, rather than social media, which affords analysis of both leaders, parties, movements, and their audiences (a limit that Pavan and Caiani acknowledge, see 2017, 173). In a study of far right pages on Facebook, focusing on both the audience and far right parties and movements, Klein and Muis (2019) find significant variance between the topics discussed by audiences. Pages representing parties tended to attract more anti-

elite content from users, while pages representing non-institutionalized groups tended to host comments from users about migrants and Muslims (2019). At the transnational scale, research into Twitter use in far right digital publics has shown that while these publics tend to be nationally focused, nativist themes are the primary ones that tend to gain transnational attention from audiences (Froio and Ganesh 2019). This research shows that in digital communication, advancement of nativist frames are central to how far right digital publics imagine Europe in a crisis of cultural identity that centres on the politicization of both migrants and the 'establishment' as threats to Europe, its culture, and its identity (Hervik 2012).

The far right has long made use of various media to construct fears of 'maurauding', 'invading' immigrants (Wodak 2015), and the centrality of nativism in far right movements has been a feature of their discourse and ideology for decades (Rydgren 2005). The far right imagines that European culture faces a terminal crisis that is a consequence of liberalism. This crisis is cultural and political, involving the performance and construction of a sense of crisis in response to the influx of a large number of migrants on Europe's southern and eastern borders (Moffitt 2016). However, this imagination of crisis is part of a repertoire of ethnonationalist, anti-Semitic, and anti-Muslim performances by both political actors and their audiences that construct crises to frame the European people as facing an existential threat. This cultural crisis is interwoven with far right politics and activism against multiculturalism in Europe that has developed in the past three decades, which has been described as a backlash against multiculturalism both in North America and Europe (Ignazi 1992; Minkenberg 2000; Hewitt 2005; Rensmann 2017).

Data and methods

By far right digital public, we refer specifically to an assemblage of far right leaders, political parties, social movements, and audiences that are able to interact in specific ways afforded by the architecture of a platform. Our research design explores how actors within these publics imagine Europe and the crisis themes that are involved in the articulations of Europe. Twitter, as a site that is geared towards the rapid circulation of texts, images, and videos is an ideal site to consider how the far right constructs imaginative geographies of Europe especially considering its growing relevance to political communication across the world (Graham et al. 2013; Vaccari 2017; Bright et al. 2019). Our use of the term far right digital public draws on the concept of networked publics, which are 'publics that are restructured by networked technologies' (boyd 2011, 41). boyd stresses that the specific architecture of a given platform has a significant effect on the types of interactions that can be hosted in these publics. Twitter is particularly valuable for political communication because it enables direct communication without intermediaries between a political actor and an intended audience. It also allows users to communicate directly with leaders, movements, parties, and one another (though recent research shows that interaction is not particularly salient despite Twitter's structure, cf. Graham et al. 2013; Bright et al. 2019). It also enables individuals to engage in public displays of personal political positions (cf. Papacharissi 2013), allowing users to support, challenge, or contest those of others. Because of its functions for retweeting and liking, Twitter makes it easy for digital publics to produce and circulate content.

We take an approach that draws on research into the social construction of imaginaries of Europe. Similar to recent work by Klein and Muis (2019) and using methods in corpus-aided discourse analysis (Bayley and Williams 2012), we focus on collocations of the word Europe in tweets. Specifically, for each language, we collect all instances of the word Europe for the seed and the audience. We then display the 10 most common collocations with the word Europe in the tweets, with a span of 4 words before and after 'Europe', ranked by the likelihood of their association. We present eight collections (4 for the audience, 4 for the seed) of top collocations in Table 1. The collocations are based on 40 Twitter accounts in France, Germany, Italy, and the UK. Based on official reports and secondary literature by scholars and watchdog organizations, we build an initial purposive sample identifying the most important far right actors that are active in France, Germany, Italy and the United Kingdom that use Twitter (see Froio and Ganesh 2019). We then collected all of the followers of these accounts, and took a stratified random sample of the accounts based on how many of the users in our seed they followed. We only include users that followed 5 or more of the 40 seed accounts selected. This stratified random sample consists of 249 accounts. For the 40 accounts in the seed and the 249 accounts in the audience, we collected their last 3,200 tweets, the limit set by Twitter's public REST API.¹

We code the 80 collocations by studying 20 tweets randomly selected from all tweets in which the collocation exists. We then code the collocations according to four topics the far right might use to construct crisis. In order to derive frames by which crises are constructed in the tweets, we focus on word collocations at scale. In such short documents, framing is often intertextual and involves repetition across users in a digital public. Consequently, our approach allows identification of key frames in the construction of crisis by looking across many texts and identifying framing processes relevant to each of our crisis themes.

We propose that far right parties draw on four parallel processes to construct as crises that have been unfolding in Europe: migration and cultural and demographic shifts, economic changes following from the 2008 recession, the perception of a 'democratic deficit' in the European Union, and recent terrorist attacks. Each of these processes correspond to the crisis themes we use to code word collocations with Europe. In our use of the word framing, we follow Entman's definition that 'to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text in such a way as to promote a problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation' (Entman 1993, 52). Our crisis themes represent framings of particular events that affect how Europe is constructed discursively and allow us to identify the incidence of these themes across the four countries that we study. By looking at the deployment of these crisis themes across far right digital publics, we are able to elucidate the imaginative geographies of Europe within and across them.

Crisis theme: cultural identity

While Europe is facing significant demographic shifts, the far right has used identity politics to politicize migration and articulate exclusionary narratives of European identity. Nativism can be considered the 'master frame' mobilized by the populist radical right (Rydgren 2005). The far right opposes multiculturalism, cosmopolitanism, and the

Table 1. Collocates with Europe across audience and seed corpora.

| Seed Corpora | | | | | |
|---------------------------|----------------|--------------------|------------------------|----------------|--------------------|
| Collocate | Log-Likelihood | Crisis Theme | Collocate | Log-Likelihood | Crisis Theme |
| DE | | | EN | | |
| Europa, publizieren | 85.3 | Cultural Identity | across, Europe | 93.72 | Cultural Identity |
| Identitäres, Europa | 85.3 | Cultural Identity | migrant, Europe | 24.02 | Cultural Identity |
| Europa, soeben | 76.04 | Cultural Identity | invasion, Europe | 22.91 | Cultural Identity |
| Voigt, Europa | 67.68 | Cultural Identity | capital, Europe | 19.68 | Cultural Identity |
| Deutschland, Europa | 35.07 | Cultural Identity | States, Europe | 19.57 | Representation |
| Festung, Europa | 23.8 | Cultural Identity | return, Europe | 16.19 | Defence & Security |
| Verteidiger, Europa | 22.02 | Cultural Identity | rest, Europe | 14.37 | Cultural Identity |
| Europa, Nostra | 20.01 | Cultural Identity | flood, Europe | 14.08 | Cultural Identity |
| Europa, Terra | 20.01 | Cultural Identity | move, Europe | 13.49 | Cultural Identity |
| Europa, Vaterland | 13.04 | Cultural Identity | Enrichment, Europe | 12.94 | Cultural Identity |
| FR | | | IT | | |
| Europe, Nations | 66.47 | Cultural Identity | islamizzazione, Europa | 38.78 | Cultural Identity |
| Europe, coopération | 59.59 | Representation | Europa, popolo | 18.86 | Representation |
| Europe, fédéral | 29.23 | Economy | Europa, banca | 12.85 | Representation |
| autre, Europe | 25.96 | Representation | Italia, Europa | 11.27 | Cultural Identity |
| défendre, Europe | 20.68 | Cultural Identity | defendemos, Europa | 10.92 | Cultural Identity |
| fort, Europe | 17.84 | Cultural Identity | somos, Europa | 10.92 | Cultural Identity |
| Europe, respectueux | 17.12 | Representation | OGM, Europa | 9.88 | Economy |
| vouloir, Europe | 14.85 | Cultural Identity | viale, Europa | 9.63 | Other |
| ethnique, Europe | 13.07 | Cultural Identity | Europa, reagire | 9.49 | Defence & Security |
| partout, Europe | 12.92 | Representation | Europa, libero | 9.45 | Representation |
| Audience Corpora | | | | | |
| Collocate | Log-Likelihood | Crisis Theme | Collocate | Log-Likelihood | Crisis Theme |
| DE | | | EN | | |
| vereinigt, Europa | 77.87 | Representation | across, Europe | 286.23 | Cultural Identity |
| Selbstmord, Europa | 46.89 | Cultural Identity | Western, Europe | 169.71 | Cultural Identity |
| Staat, Europa | 45.95 | Representation | invasion, Europe | 144.61 | Cultural Identity |
| Europa, zerstören | 23.37 | Economy | Europe, #wecount | 126.48 | Representation |
| ganz, Europa | 22.55 | Representation | States, Europe | 109.05 | Representation |
| hinauslaufen, Europa | 19.69 | Cultural Identity | Eastern, Europe | 83.65 | Cultural Identity |
| Festung, Europa | 18.05 | Defence & Security | destroy, Europe | 82.39 | Cultural Identity |
| Zahlmeister, Europa | 17.44 | Representation | United, Europe | 68.72 | Representation |
| Europa, via | 17 | Cultural Identity | Europe, invasion | 64.57 | Cultural Identity |
| Europa, Europa-Liebhavern | 15.66 | Representation | come, Europe | 55.8 | Cultural Identity |
| FR | | | IT | | |
| Europe, Nations | 194.34 | Cultural Identity | Europa, League | 241.66 | Other |
| partout, Europe | 85.44 | Cultural Identity | Uniti, Europa | 91.35 | Representation |
| Defend, Europe | 78.94 | Cultural Identity | islamizzazione, Europa | 31.44 | Cultural Identity |
| Europe, Ouest | 74.25 | Cultural Identity | volere, Europa | 26.58 | Cultural Identity |
| Europe, nation | 61.24 | Cultural Identity | mezza, Europa | 22.72 | Economy |
| Europe, Est | 58.33 | Defence & Security | Europa, M5S_Europa | 21.89 | Representation |
| islamisation, Europe | 53.35 | Cultural Identity | ansa, Europa | 21.29 | Other |
| Europe, coopération | 52.41 | Representation | Europa, scivolare | 20.02 | Economy |
| Europe, fédéral | 48.8 | Representation | M5S, Europa | 19.06 | Representation |
| avenir, Europe | 48.21 | Cultural Identity | affanculo, Europa | 18.57 | Representation |

Log-likelihood is a measure of the probability of co-occurring words. Higher scores indicate higher probability. The value is dependent on the sample size and only provides a ranking of words in relation to one another within one corpora. The statistic should not be compared across corpora.

European Union – seen as an embodiment of these ideas – on the grounds that these principles advance the interests of ‘outsiders’ that are constructed as a civilizational threat, a salient feature in far right Eurosceptic discourse and for populist radical right parties and movements (Mudde 2007; Rydgren 2017; Wodak 2015). We refer to this crisis theme as one that focuses on culture and how non-European immigrants appear as threats to the hegemony of European culture. This crisis theme is used to emphasize threats to the allegedly ‘proper’ and ‘organic’ culture of European territory.

Crisis theme: economy

The second crisis theme refers to economic framings of challenges that face Europe. In reference to the post-2008 economic crisis, Pirro and van Kessel (2018) note that in ‘financially troubled EU countries’, far right parties had an opportunity to capitalize on citizen discontent, while in more economically resilient countries, they were ‘inclined to express opposition to the bailing out of financially troubled EU members’ (2018, 407). Economic opposition to European integration remains an important thread. Given the importance of economic arguments for far right forms of Euroscepticism (Ivaldi 2018), it is important that we consider economic framings that affect contestation of European integration. This frame references challenges faced around austerity, job opportunity, and welfare.

Crisis theme: representation

Research into the populist forms of far right parties finds that they position the general will of the people against so-called ‘political elites’ (Müller 2017; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017), which refers to far right’s mobilization of the democratic deficit in the EU. Caiani, Della Porta, and Wagemann (2012) find that online discourse between parties and movements on the EU are mainly driven by nativist arguments often paired with anti-liberal populist critiques of its institutions. Anti-elite frames within the far right’s imaginative geographies of Europe frequently refer to actions taken by leaders and focus on issues of governance, political correctness, and the neglect of the general will of the population (Helbling, Hoeglinger, and Wüest 2010; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017). Thus, we define our third crisis theme, ‘representation’, to describe imaginaries that frame native Europeans as victims of actions taken by unresponsive moderates and cosmopolitans in member states or in Brussels.

Crisis theme: defence and security

Finally, fears over defence and security particularly with reference to terrorist attacks is a fourth potential frame involved in imaginations of Europe in crisis. With recent terrorist attacks in Western European countries perpetrated by jihadists, the far right often frames these events as crises that represent insecurity in Europe on social media. It is true that terrorist attacks result in acute bursts of Twitter activity; exploring the publics discussing the attack on Charlie Hebdo, Smyrniaios and Ratinaud (2017) find that a small minority of users were active in an opportunity to criticize Muslims. Research has found that the far right amplifies existing Islamophobic frames

that are well documented in newspapers (Törnberg and Törnberg 2016). Refugees were also presented as potential terrorists and criminals on Twitter after the attacks in Paris in November 2015 (Siapera et al. 2018). While they find that hashtags enabled a range of different frames that also connect to other themes such as political representation and cultural identity, this research suggests that a specific crisis theme on terrorism is likely to be mobilized by the far right. This enables us to differentiate between framings that refer to cultural identity which might make allegations that Islam is violent, that refugees are criminals, and the pending 'Islamisation' of Europe. References to terrorist attacks in Europe and constitute our fourth frame, which allows us to explore tweets that are specifically connected to incidents of political violence.

For the vast majority of collocations, the appropriate code was easy to select and relatively few were difficult to categorize. What was striking is that there were very few instances in which our deductive coding schema of four crisis themes did not fit. These four crisis themes provide a comprehensive (but rather coarse-grained) starting point for identifying the ways in which the far right might attempt to frame events and processes as a crisis. Our coding process was executed for 40 collocations for the tweets of the seed and 40 collocations for the tweets of the audience (the top 10 in each country). In total, more than 1,600 tweets were reviewed to code the collocations. The code 'other' was used for collocations that were not relevant to political imaginaries of Europe (e.g. 'League Europa' in Italian is a reference to football), but these cases are uncommon. Taken together, these collocations and their analysis allow us to reconstruct the framing of the British, French, German, and Italian far right digital publics' imaginative geographies of Europe and the crisis themes that affect their discourse of European integration.

Imagining Europe in and out of cultural crisis

After calculating and coding the 8 sets of top-10 collocations with Europe across the seed and audience corpora with the four crisis themes, we find significant variance between the audience and the seed and between the countries, produced in Table 1 and visualized in Figure 1. What emerges from this analysis of collocations with the word 'Europe' is a particular imaginary that centres on a cultural crisis through which all the other crisis themes are mediated. While we doubt that we surprise any readers that this theme is central given the focus on the far right, we contribute an analysis that shows that for the far right, events and processes that pertain to representation, economy, and security are framed through the prism of maintaining an imagined representation of authentic Europeaness that roots ethnicity to territory.

The most common collocate with Europe in the English seed is the word 'across'. While it does not seem connected with cultural identity, it is used primarily to indicate that *all* of Europe finds itself under a threat that has been dispersed across the continent due to migrants. The tweet, 'Across Europe, gangs of migrants are attacking, robbing & raping young women, yet we are STILL allowing more' specifies 'what' exactly is spreading 'across Europe' in the other collocations. That 'we are STILL allowing more' demonstrates that the blame is on liberal forms of multiculturalism that has accepted Muslims into Europe. The *crisis* at play references 'outsiders' whose cultural differences, often

constructed through representations of migrants as imposing men that attack innocent European women (Tufail 2015; Mondon and Winter 2017), present an existential threat to the ‘real’ Europeans. The protection of white women from non-European men is a well-worn white supremacist trope, documented across North America and Europe (Ferber 1999; Daniels 2016). It is cultural difference that presents a threat; here, the violence of these migrants is presented as an essential quality.

Muslims are constructed as a primary threat in the far right digital publics we study. In the Italian seed, ‘islamizzazione’ [Islamisation] tops the list of words collocated with Europe. The central role of Islamophobia in far right politics and ideology across parties and movements has been noted in Italy (Castelli Gattinara 2017). Take, for instance, the tweet by Giorgia Meloni, ‘We want to defend our identity from the Islamization [islamizzazione] of Europe. It makes no sense to stop the Islamic invasion with centuries of wars, from Poitiers to Lepanto, and then invade us in this way’.² This trope parallels the anxieties referenced in the English collocation ‘across’ described above. Both constructions also imply an aspirational vision to fight *for* a Europe that does not face this allegedly ‘existential’ threat. ‘Partout’ is the second most common word collocated with Europe in the French audience, which extends a construction of Europe under threat from migrants: ‘It is getting worse and worse everywhere [partout] in Europe, the religious war is on the MOVE’.³ Another user retweets, ‘Family reunification amplifies migratory chaos in Germany just as everywhere [partout] else in Europe’.⁴ Europe is configured as a civilizational space under threat from non-European migrants.

The factors that led to this crisis in Europe, however, are not conceived as cultural. Rather, blame is on the liberal political orientation of European integration. It is important to remember that the ‘establishment’ is constructed as a set of empowered traitors whose

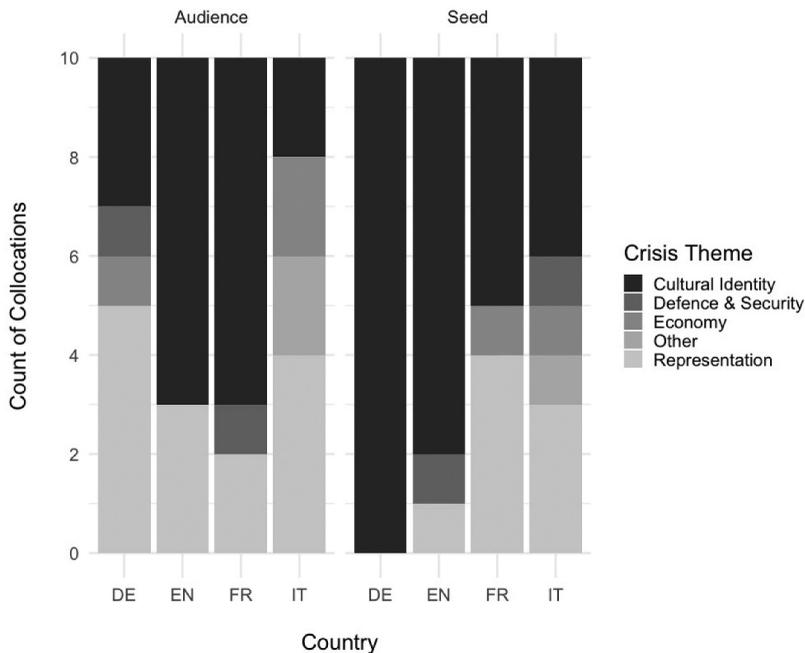


Figure 1. Visualisation of crisis themes in audience and seed.

commitment to openness and celebration of cosmopolitanism has betrayed the European people by allowing in outsiders that threaten Europe's purportedly 'authentic' culture. The far right's imaginative geography of Europe is grounded in an organic relationship between tradition, territory, identity, and culture (Camus and Lebourg 2017, 123). This is particularly evident in *Nouvelle Droite* thinker Alain de Benoist's definition of 'liberty' as a product of 'one's identity as a member of a folk,' what should be considered the 'privileged historical agent' of a democracy (2011, 98), consistent with his earlier work that links 'ethnic ties to qualitative "democratic" participation' (Spektorowski 2003, 112). De Benoist's argument is that liberalism deracinates man from his 'roots' in territory, identity, and culture. This deracination has undermined fraternity in democracies and severed the historical agency of the 'folk' by subjecting it to the claims of non-native subjects in the territory. Thus, de Benoist makes the claim that democracy is undermined by the recognition of non-native political subjects.

This claim is translated into political communication by the seed's narrations of the 'establishment' which rests on its rejection of the political subjectivity of minorities that have been accepted by a cosmopolitan elite. In this argument, democracy has been fundamentally undermined not only in the context of a so-called 'refugee crisis' but by recognition of the political claims made by minority struggles for recognition of both universal and specific rights and entitlements. In the German audience, words such as 'zerstören' [to destroy], 'ganz' [all], and 'Zahlmeister' [paymaster] all direct anger and frustration at elites, who are seen as 'selling out' Europe to liberal, cosmopolitan elites: '#Merkel wants to make #EU Money to accept refugees. She wants to destroy [zerstören] all of Europe'.⁵ In the English audience, tweets that reference 'Western Europe' focus on how the region's culture and 'native' population is under threat. For example, two popular tweets include a user's 'advice' to 'Western Europe' that 'Christian countries' need to defend their 'people and religion.' Another popular tweet was from British tabloid commentator Katie Hopkins, who writes (in reference to the 'white genocide' allegedly underway in South Africa): 'The slaughter of minority whites in South Africa will be repeated in Western Europe'. The integration of Muslims appears (as it does amongst the seed) the most prescient threat as indexed by the collocates 'invasion' and 'destroy'.

While cultural crisis plays a fundamental role, the common appellation to refer to the 'establishment'-run Europe is 'United States of Europe,' which appears in the top-10 collocations in English and German. This naming of the 'establishment' also appears in qualitative analysis of the tweets in French and Italian. In German, the terms 'vereingt' and 'Staat' closely collocated with Europe refer to the argument against the 'United States of Europe,' which is seen as the opposite of the 'Europe of Nations'. The United States of Europe represents an endpoint in their imagined teleology of the history of European integration. Economic frames focus on connecting to the anti-liberal ideology of the *Nouvelle Droite*, but do not directly reference issues of migration or cultural identity. A German audience user writes, 'No to the Schulz fantasy of the "United States of Europe", YES to freedom, YES to self-determination'.⁶ Using different terminology, Marine Le Pen references the 'United States of Europe,' represented by Emmanuel Macron: '#Macron wants to increase CSG [social security contributions], he wants to increase tax on life insurance, he wants a federal Europe.' Le Pen is trying to absorb outrage at Macron's expansion of the state apparatus in personal finance and makes a slippery connection to a logic of liberal governance that is constructed as responsible for

the crisis that Europe faces. Here, crisis is not directly being constructed or invoked; rather, these users seek to repeat the sense of betrayal of 'the people' by the elites. These constructions of the 'United States of Europe' or a 'federal' Europe provide a diagnostic metaphor that directs rage at liberal elites.

The most common collocation in both the French seed and audience is between 'Europe' and 'Nations,' which refers to 'Europe des Nations', an aspirational European project that serves as the way out of the cultural crisis that Europe continues to face. Renaud Camus's tweet is particularly descriptive in this regard: 'Long live the Europe of Nations, united in its resistance to invasion and its desire to put an end to foreign occupation!'.⁷ The federated states of Europe, centred on national communities, is presented as the necessary palliative to the apprehension of an 'invasion' and 'foreign occupation,' inventing a state of radical crisis that Europe must restructure itself to mitigate. The Europe the far right claims to defend is one defined in opposition to an 'oppressive' one governed by liberal elites that are sacrificing European culture and identity, presented rather succinctly by Marine Le Pen: 'In the face of their prison-Europe, we defend a Europe that conforms to the history and values of our continent'.⁸ The establishment here is invoked by 'their prison-Europe' that has undermined democracy by deracinating polities from their 'organic' roots.

The imagination indexed by 'Europe des Nations' rests on the 'ethnopluralism' articulated by the *Nouvelle Droite*. Figured as a view of the world in which every nation has the right 'to maintain their cultures and traditions against the homogenizing tendencies of liberal democracy (and hence civic nationalism), multiculturalism, capitalist globalization, the EU, or even a global human rights regime' (Bar-On 2008, 340), Europe des Nations resignifies the European project as one of cooperating, ethnically homogeneous states connected by their shared European heritage. In their Manifesto of the French New Right, de Benoist and Champetier imagine a world of homogeneous regions: 'the future belongs to large cultures and civilizations capable of organizing themselves into autonomous entities and of acquiring enough power to resist outside interference' (de Benoist and Champetier 2012, 38; Griffin 2000, 45)

The corpora make clear that the discourse of the far right digital publics we study foreground an imaginary of Europe that is fundamentally guided by cultural crisis. The other crisis themes we coded for are frequently invoked in the context of this cultural crisis. The 'populist' characteristics of these groups, despite being the subject of much debate amongst academics and policy professionals, are revealed as *formal* rather than formative of their discursive practice. That is to say that a certain populism is inherently implicated in their mobilisation of cultural crisis which stipulates a culturally-pure, nativist construction of 'the people' in reference to white Europeans.

Conclusion

This study uses the discourse of far right parties, movements, leaders, and audiences on Twitter to understand how imaginative geographies are used to politicize European culture and identity in contestation over European integration. By focusing on the framing of the term Europe, rather than 'European Union', the study argues that on the far right, contestation of the EU is not simply motivated against the principle of European integration; rather, it attempts to articulate another version of such a project grounded in ethnicity and sovereignty. In other

words, the apprehension of Europe in cultural crisis is at the centre of how far right digital publics imagine the challenges that Europe currently faces, and the trope of 'Europe des Nations' articulates an aspirational image for the future. While the idea of another 'Europe des Nations' is offered, it is really only a shell that promises little else than a federation of consanguine nations. As these digital publics narrate European identity under threat by migrants and Muslims, they participate in a political movement of racist, exclusionary politics that reproduces strains of post-war fascism in Europe (Griffin 2000; Bar-On 2008).

From this study, we can derive two key findings about the role of the politicization of a crisis of cultural identity on publics' narrations of Europe, and the impact this may have on European integration. Our findings are consistent with research into a variety of media sources from far right publics which suggests that in far right Euroscepticism, criticism of the 'establishment' is tightly connected with anti-migrant and nativist imaginaries (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017; Pavan and Caiani 2017; Rydgren 2017; Hutter and Kriesi 2019; Klein and Muis 2019). Our analysis shows that the politicization of a crisis of cultural identity draws on events and processes to establish a sense of 'permanent crisis' as a consequence of both migrants and the establishment that allegedly abets them. Second, we find that social media provide a space for a wide range of actors to participate in the narration of Europe and the construction of crisis. Like Pavan and Caiani (2017), we find a prognostic vision of 'Europe des Nations' on Twitter as they do with using far right webpages. In a wider context, post-functionalist research into European integration in the context of the migration crisis has stressed the rise of identity politics (Börzel and Risse 2018; Hooghe and Marks 2019). Our findings demonstrate that this is refracted on Twitter. By taking a deeper dive into the tweets, our research reveals the centrality of *Nouvelle Droite* thought in these narrations of Europe in banal forms to produce a sense of crisis that is repeated daily, with the repetition of frames of crisis indexed in terms such as 'invasion', 'across', and 'destroy'. This work suggests that future research into the politicization of crisis on the far right pay close attention to the ways in which narrations of *ethnos* are at the centre of how digital publics both diagnose the current time as one of crisis and aspire for the development of the 'Europe des Nations'.

Notes

1. The data collected raises ethical considerations. Data are collected from two types of accounts: the seed accounts that represent organisations or public figures and audience accounts that represent their followers. For the former, informed consent for quotes need not be sought (see University of Oxford Central University Research Ethics Committee 2016, 5). According to the most recent ethical guidelines by the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR), informed consent in research collecting data from APIs is 'manifestly impracticable' (Franzke et al. 2020, 10). However, reproduction of content from users whose tweets we have collected risks identification of these users. We take the following measures to protect the identity of the study subjects in the audience sample. We only reproduce their tweets where we are certain that the author cannot be identified, and we do not reproduce a complete tweets from the audience sample. We provide no information gleaned from metadata (eg. date and time of the post). To ensure the privacy of all users in the audience sample, we used Google and Twitter to search direct quotes to ensure that the users that appear from searching the quotes in this article are not the ones that exist in our dataset. This was done by cross-referencing our sample with the list of hits from either search engine. We thus ensure that while some Twitter users do

appear upon search of quoted tweets, these are not the same users as exist in our database. In two instances, we report on tweets from public figures that were retweeted by users in our audience. Both tweets have more than 200 retweets and are quoted.

2. Original: Vogliamo difendere la nostra identità dal processo di islamizzazione dell'Europa. Non ha senso aver fermato l'invasione islamica con secoli di guerre, da Poitiers a Lepanto, per poi farci invadere in questo modo.
3. Original: ça va aller de pire en pire partout en Europe, la guerre de religion est en MARCHÉ.
4. Original: Le regroupement familial amplifie le chaos migratoire en Allemagne comme partout en Europe.
5. Original: #Merkel will #EU-Gelder an Aufnahme von #Flüchtlingen knüpfen. Sie will ganz Europa zerstören.
6. Original: NEIN zur Schulz-Phantasie der 'Vereinigten Staaten von Europa', JA zur Freiheit, JA zur Selbstbestimmung.
7. Original: Vive l'Europe des Nations, unie dans sa résistance à l'invasion et son désir de mettre fin à l'occupation étrangère!
8. Original: Face à leur Europe carcérale, nous défendons une Europe conforme à l'histoire et aux valeurs de notre continent.

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