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Beyond Euroscepticism: radical left and right 'visions of Europe' across party and protest arenas

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ABSTRACT

This article makes a case for reassessing what counts as pro- or anti-European identity. Over the past decade, the rise of radical right mobilisations has prompted many progressive social movement organisations and parties within the EU to anchor their activism in a defence of 'Europe' and in resistance to nationalist retrenchment - even while maintaining strong critiques of specific EU policies. At the same time, actors on the radical right also and increasingly claim a European identity, though one rooted in a markedly different and exclusionary understanding of what 'Europe' represents. The present study bridges party politics Europeanisation literature with work from the field of social movement studies to find a common conceptual framework that can capture the competing visions of this European identity. We construct a multi-level (across actor type, including political parties, social movements and individual activists), cross-country comparative case study that draws on focus groups, semi-structured interviews, party manifestos, movement campaign documents as well as online and offline publications to show how visions of Europe across party politics and the protest arena are symbolically constructed and utilised in response to the evolving dynamics of European politics and across political, cultural and economic dimensions.


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KEYWORDS Europeanisation; Euroscepticism; left-wing movements and parties; radical right movements and parties; transnationalism; European identities

Introduction

In the face of an increase in radical right mass mobilisations in Europe over the last decade (Caiani & Rydgren, 2026; Castelli Gattinara & Froio, 2022),

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many progressive social movement organisations across the European Union have found a fundamental motivation in their support for ‘Europe’ and in opposition to a nationalist turn, despite their own criticisms of EU policies (Fenner, *in press*; Olear & Weisskircher, 2025; Pennucci, 2024). In March 2025, for example, citizens in Rome and other Italian cities as well as in Brussels took to the streets in a ‘demonstration of citizens for Europe, its unity, and its freedom, with zero party flags, only European flags’ and united by the slogan ‘Here we make Europe, or we die’ (La Rocca, 2025). Meanwhile in Slovakia just weeks before, tens of thousands protested in the streets after Prime Minister Robert Fico visited Moscow, chanting that ‘Slovakia is not Russia, Slovakia is Europe’, and stressing Slovakia’s European identity (AP News, 2025).

At the same time, activists and movements on the radical right also positively and explicitly identify as European, albeit with a fundamentally different idea of what that European identity is (Nissen, 2022). What is happening here? As public trust in the EU declines, scholarly attention to alternative, bottom-up visions of Europe becomes increasingly important for understanding these contestations over ‘Europe’ and their potential to shape the future of EU policies, politics, and polity (Della Porta *et al.*, 2024). There have been increasing calls for scholars to move away from narrow conceptualisations of Euroscepticism and towards more complex ‘visions’ of Europe that can capture these bottom-up visions across more dimensions (Caiani & Weisskircher, 2022). Importantly, existing research suggests that the mainstreaming of transnational European identities may not necessarily be progressive but may rather be conservative or even reactionary (Caiani, 2025).

The present study makes a case for reassessing what counts as pro- or anti-European identity for social movement activists, organisations and political parties on both the radical right and on the radical left, even when they strongly criticise current EU integration as it is implemented in practice. Our main research questions are: How do contemporary political actors ranging from parties to movements to individual activists articulate a European identity? And how does this articulation vary between political arenas and across countries? To answer these questions, we bridge party politics literature with work from the field of social movement studies to find a common conceptual framework that can capture the competing visions of this identity. Rather than focusing on ‘distinct actors’, this study examines multiple sites of contention around Europe (McAdam & Tarrow, 2010), including political parties, social movements, civil society and ordinary citizens, and focuses on both arenas and their players (recalling Jasper, 2021, albeit with a different application). This approach is further supported by studies highlighting the increasingly porous boundaries and growing connections between party politics and protest arenas (Borbáth & Hutter, 2022; Bremer *et al.*, 2020).

Movements and actors on both the right and the left have long contested EU politics and policy choices. While the wave of anti-austerity protests in the early 2010s highlighted that the era of a permissive consensus regarding European integration was long over (Hooghe & Marks, 2009), these protests were also characterised by the low visibility (Flesher Fominaya & Feenstra, 2020) or even invisibility (Kaldor & Selchow, 2013) of Europe. Many anti-austerity activists did not perceive the European Union (EU) as a political arena in which they could identify viable alternatives (Ruzza, 2004), whereas others developed distinct EU-critical positions (Accornero & Kousis, 2024; Della Porta & Parks, 2018). In recent times, activists from across the political spectrum have been increasingly advancing their own 'visions of Europe', which are based on strong European identities (Caiani & Weisskircher, 2022). Such visions are grounded in the particular 'Europe(s)' that actors claim and the stances they adopt along an inclusion–exclusion spectrum across different facets of integration, whether political, cultural, or economic.

In this article, we seek to make three contributions to the study of the Europeanisation of contentious politics building on the works of Della Porta and Caiani (2009) and Tarrow (1995). Firstly, we propose a novel conceptual framework which goes beyond 'Euroscepticism' that can capture the dominant European identities across the protest and party arenas of the 2010s and early 2020s. Exploring 'visions of Europe', we build on Caiani and Weisskircher's (2022) conceptualisation of 'Anti-Nationalist Europeans' and 'Pro-European Nativists' to capture how Europe as an imagined concept (Anderson, 2006) has become a central, contested terrain of political identity formation.

Secondly, we empirically apply these concepts to a variety of cases of contentious political mobilisation and public discourse on Europe and the EU after the anti-austerity protests of the early 2010s. By focusing on Italy, Poland, Slovenia, North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina,¹ we look at five countries that tend to be overlooked in studies on European politics and integration: although they have all received individual scholarly attention, their comparative combination remains rare. However, in combination they span a range of characteristics that are especially instructive, as they include old and new member states as well as candidate countries, and among member states present cases in which support of the EU is decreasing. Within these five countries, we examine the visions of Europe put forward by 12 different political parties on the right and on the left. Further, we examine three cases of left-wing social movements that targeted the EU level and were especially successful in mobilising participants across our five country cases, as well as various cases of left- and right-wing organisations and activists that can be considered as 'crucial cases' (Snow, 2013) of Euroscepticism in the respective countries.

By doing so, we thirdly seek to enhance methodological pluralism to empirically grasp these identities, drawing on a wide range of sources and methods that together can form a comprehensive picture of European identities across several arenas. Drawing on focus group interviews, semi-structured interviews with individual activists and representatives of civil society organisations and parties, online and offline publications as well as party manifestos, we show how visions of Europe are constructed and utilised in response to the evolving dynamics of European politics and across political, cultural and economic dimensions.

Our findings reveal that political actors on the left and on the right display consistent ideological visions of Europe across the different arenas, though there are significant variations between the different country cases. In all countries, the Pro-European Nativists are more visible than the Anti-Nationalist Europeans, but actors in current member states show generally more reformist rather than rejectionist stances, while actors in candidate states are more explicitly rejecting accession to the EU outright. We also find that an elitist critique of the EU and calls for less 'neoliberalisation' emerge across all actors and countries and cut across the left-right divide. However, for the Pro-European Nativists this critique is tied to a worry about the impact of EU policies for national economies, while the Anti-Nationalist Europeans tie it to a call for a more integrated welfare state and more protections for all EU citizens.

In the next section, we sketch out and bring into conversation existing debates on Euroscepticism and European identity from the fields of social movement studies, party politics and public opinion on the EU over the last decades, and argue for a conceptualisation of Pro-European Nativists and Anti-Nationalist Europeans that can describe political, cultural and economic visions across parties, movements and individual activists and citizens. After presenting our data and methodological approach, we first map out the visions of the political parties, social movement representatives and individual activists on the right, and then of those on the left. We close the article with a discussion of our findings, an outlook on future research and a brief concluding summary.

From Euroscepticism to visions of Europe

While the rise of Eurosceptic challenger parties and the emergence of EU-critical European protest movements fundamentally share a root, namely the increase in the politicisation of Europe expressed as bottom-up critical engagement with the EU and its policies, academic debates on them have developed largely in parallel and rarely intersected. Among those political scientists who were interested in how political parties have framed the increased levels of politicisation of European integration, the concept of

Euroscepticism, understood as ‘contingent or qualified opposition as well as [...] outright and unqualified opposition to the process of European integration’ (Taggart, 1998, p. 366), became one of the defining concepts of the field (see also Caiani & Della Porta, 2010). This core concept was soon refined into an array of further distinctions. Taggart and Szczerbiak (2002) suggested to distinguish between soft and hard types of Euroscepticism, with the former referring to ‘contingent or qualified opposition to European integration’, the latter referring to outright rejection of the European project. Kopecký and Mudde (2002) added a distinction between opinions on European integration in general and on the current form of the EU in particular. ‘Eurosceptics’, read along these lines, sit somewhere in the middle of a spectrum between ‘Eurorejects’, who disapprove of both the European idea and its reality and are the most radical in terms of their rejection of the EU, and ‘Euroenthusiasts’, who support European integration both in theory and in practice. More recently, Pirro and van Kessel (2018) have suggested that there are indeed a range of facets to support for and opposition to the EU, including cultural, legitimacy, socioeconomic and sovereignty frames, shifting towards a more complex understanding of critical visions of Europe along various dimensions.

Within social movement scholarship, concepts such as ‘critical Europeanism’ and ‘Euroalternativism’ (Della Porta & Caiani, 2009; Milan, 2020) were put forward to capture attitudes that were critical of the EU without wholesale rejecting it, and in which actors pushed for more rather than less integration, but in a more social-democratic way. Across left social movements, pro-European mobilisations have increasingly framed Europe as a space for defending democracy and countering nationalism, an identity politics evident in movements like DiEM25, the anti-TTIP protests, and the anti-Brexit campaign, but also the ‘Sardines’ movement (Caiani & Eren, 2023; Van Kessel & Fagan, 2023). Simultaneously, far-right actors such as PEGIDA and the Identitarians redefined European identity in exclusionary terms, mobilising around the ‘refugee crisis’ with narratives of defending Europe from Islamisation and moral decay. These divergent appropriations of European identity underscore a shift from earlier Eurosceptic disengagement toward a contested but intensified engagement with Europe as a meaningful political field.

Within debates on citizen attitudes towards Europe, early scholars of European integration conceived of support for the EU as a unidimensional concept (Lindberg & Scheingold, 1970). However, the age of the politicisation of Europe brought with it a ‘multidimensional turn in EU attitudes’ (Goldberg *et al.*, 2021a, p. 225). Scholars in the fields of party competition and public opinion on the EU have suggested that a useful distinction can be drawn between positions on constitutive issues such as EU membership or competencies on the one hand, and positions on specific EU policy issues on the

other hand (Bartolini, 2005; Braun *et al.*, 2016), and that ‘citizens’ preferences towards the EU have become multifaceted and can no longer be reflected by single indicators’ (Reinl & Braun, 2023, p. 393). In addition, Kuhn (2015) shows that at the individual level, support of the EU and the formation of a European identity are significantly shaped by levels of individual transnationalism.

Indeed, Goldberg *et al.* (2021b) show ‘that citizens’ EU attitudes are more complex and diverse than reflected by simple pro-/anti-EU measures. Citizens have a rather nuanced outlook on the EU, disliking specific aspects of integration while supporting others’ (Goldberg *et al.*, 2021b, p. 737). Both party scholars and movement scholars have more recently pointed out that what is at stake in EU-critical narratives escapes a simple rejection of the EU as a polity as well as its policies and politics (Pirro & van Kessel, 2018). Rather, both parties and movements on the right and on the left articulate complex visions of Europe that contain ‘simultaneous criticism of the EU and positive identification with Europe’ (Caiani & Weisskircher, 2022, p. 218). Caiani and Weisskircher (2022) call for a conceptual fusion of these dimensions and suggest a conceptualisation of alternative visions of Europe that differentiates between ‘Anti-Nationalist Europeans’ and ‘Pro-European Nativists’.

In this conceptualisation, Anti-Nationalist Europeans ‘identify with a culturally inclusive and ‘open’ Europe that stands against nationalism, racism, and intolerance – and the political actors who promote such exclusionary stances. They regard Europe as a ‘progressive project’, in which the ‘ancient’ nation state, often seen as either inefficient or source of exclusionary nationalism, needs to be curtailed if not overcome’, whereas Pro-European Nativists ‘identify with a culturally exclusive Europe and celebrate the nation-state. [They] highlight a European identity, including their appreciation for Europe’s diversity of nation-states, [and] exclude non-European immigrants, especially Muslims’ (Caiani & Weisskircher, 2022, p. 219).

In this article, we draw on and expand this conceptualisation, arguing that it can be extended to capture visions of Europe not just across left and radical right movements, but that it should also hold analytical value for understanding and analysing visions of Europe put forward by political parties and ordinary citizens. Building on existing scholarship that has sought to distil distinct frames within attitudes towards Europe in both party politics (Helbling *et al.*, 2010) and social movement studies, we conceptualise and operationalise European identities as being formed along three dimensions. First, there is the political dimension, which revolves around questions of sovereignty, decision-making competencies, and EU membership and captures attitudes towards the EU as a political institution. Second, there is the cultural dimension, which captures ‘Europe’ as a civilisational idea. Finally, there is the economic dimension, where attitudes

towards economic integration and the single market are captured, often with regards to specific policies.

Based on the conceptualisation and findings put forward by Caiani and Weisskircher (2022) for social movements, which are also largely congruent with findings by Goldberg *et al.* (2021b) for citizen attitudes towards European integration, we expect that political actors on the left, or Anti-Nationalist Europeans, will display political visions that emphasise the democratic quality of the EU polity (or lack thereof), cultural visions that are open and inclusive, and economic visions that call for transnational economic benefits and less globalisation and neoliberalisation of the EU. For the political actors on the right, or Pro-European Nativists, we expect political visions that call for more sovereignty for the nation state, cultural visions that are exclusionary based on ethnicity, and economic visions that call for selective economic benefits that are advantageous to the nation state. Given that previous studies have highlighted how the lines between party politics and protest arenas in the EU are increasingly blurred, we expect this conceptualisation to travel well across diverse political actors, while at the same time leaving room for distinct patterns and issues to emerge.

Methods, data and case selection

We examine episodes of mobilisation and public discourse following the anti-austerity protest wave across multiple arenas and countries, as well as across the left–right political spectrum, in order to assess the extent to which the proposed concepts enhance our understanding of contemporary political actors' relationships to European identity. Our empirical strategy is based on a diverse case comparative design, in which the identification of shared patterns is not assumed. At the macro level, our country selection follows a theoretically driven comparative logic aimed at maximising variation rather than achieving statistical representativeness of EU member states. The five cases – Italy, Poland, Slovenia, North Macedonia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina – were selected to capture variation in institutional status, regional context, and trajectories of European integration. Three cases are EU member states with different integration histories: Italy as a founding member state, and Poland and Slovenia as post-2004 accession states shaped by post-socialist transformations and differing patterns of EU support. Including two EU candidate countries (North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina) allows us to extend the analysis beyond formal membership and test whether our conceptual framework applies in contexts where European integration is politically salient but institutionally incomplete. This design enables us to assess whether the identified dynamics emerge across both member and candidate countries, as well as across Western/Southern Europe, Central/Eastern Europe

Table 1. Our cases.

Actor Types & Political Orientation			
Actor Type	Political Orientation	Data Sources / Methods	Examples / Notes
Political Parties	Left / Right	Qualitative analysis of party manifestos (2015–2019), secondary sources	12 manifestos
Social Movements	Left	Qualitative analysis of campaign materials, secondary literature	Mass protests: ACTA (2012), TTIP (2013–2016), EU Copyright Directive (2018–2019)
Activists / Citizens	Left / Right	44 in-depth interviews, 22 focus groups (113 participants total, 2018–2022)	Country-specific recruitment across 5 countries

and the Western Balkans. At the meso-level, we further increase variation by comparing actors across ideological orientations (left and right) and actor types (political parties, social movements and individual activists/citizens) (see Table 1).

The broad case selection and multi-level, cross-country comparison enables an assessment of common trends concerning one specific dimension: how these diverse political players relate to Europe. This increases the external validity of our findings and gives us comparative leverage, as it can reveal whether the conceptual framework of Anti-Nationalist Europeans and Pro-European Nativists can travel across different settings, and it reduces the risk that our findings are driven by a specific context.

Methodologically, the study adopts a triangulation strategy and brings together a range of sources and research methods, aiming to increase the internal validity of the expression of positions on Europe (for a summary of our sampling of all sources, see Table 1b in the appendix). Binding these methods and data sources together into an overarching research framework is a qualitative frame analysis (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989; Snow *et al.*, 1986) with a particular focus on the framing of Europe which the political actors invoked. For all the data sources listed below, we deductively coded all instances of references to Europe/the EU, and then coded these references into the three categories representing our three dimensions. We coded as ‘political’ all references to Europe that addressed questions of sovereignty, legitimacy and competencies, as ‘cultural’ references that addressed national identity, national history or referred to culture explicitly, and as ‘economic’ all references to economic and monetary policies, subsidies and economic benefits. We then successively and inductively sorted each reference into sub-categories according to the specific issues they raised. Representative quotes from all sources across the dimensions and issues were then chosen to illustrate our main findings.

For the political parties, we conducted a qualitative analysis of party manifestos stemming from national elections between the years of 2015

and 2019 (see List A1 in the appendix). This timeframe was chosen to have the closest possible overlap with the timeframe of our interviews and focus groups, as well as the three EU-directed social movement campaigns. Drawing on the Manifesto Project Database, we analysed 12 manifestos issued by the same number of parties that contained references to Europe along political, economic and cultural dimensions. We chose to analyse national election manifestos rather than manifestos from European elections, in order to retain consistency across the cases, including the non-member states.

We selected all party manifestos that contained mentions of Europe on all three of our dimensions, which resulted in *League, Democratic Party and More Europe* as the parties analysed for Italy; *Law and Justice, Civic Platform and Modern* as the Parties analysed for Poland, *Homeland League, Slovenian National Party, Social Democratic Party and The Left* analysed for Slovenia; *Democratic Renewal of Macedonia and Democratic Union for Integration* for North Macedonia; and the *Party of Democratic Progress of the Republika Srpska* for Bosnia and Herzegovina.² Party manifestos from North Macedonia and Bosnia–Herzegovina were not available in a translated form in the database but were machine-translated with Google Translate by the authors.

For the EU-directed social movements on the left of the political spectrum, we draw on a qualitative analysis of campaign materials and secondary literature for three distinct instances of mobilisation that were especially pronounced in the EU member states among our country cases. Those three instances were the mass demonstrations against the Anti-Counterfeiting Trade Agreement (ACTA) in 2012, the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) between 2013 and 2016, and the EU Copyright Directive in 2018 and 2019.

In addition, this study draws on in-depth semi-structured interviews with 44 representatives of right-wing and left-wing Euro-sceptical/Euro-critical civil society associations and political parties at the local and national level, as well as data from 22 focus groups with a total of 113 representatives of social movements, associations and political parties as well as ordinary citizens, from both the left and right of the ideological spectrum (see table B1 and C1 in the appendix). The interviews were conducted between 2018 and 2022, and the focus groups held in 2021.

Focus group participants in all five countries were selected based on having a distinct, Euro-critical position on Europe and being either a member or a supporter of a left or right movement, party or civil society organisation, and in addition on whether they represented a 'typical' supporter of their group or party in terms of their demographics. The movements, parties and civil society organisations themselves were selected as a sample of all relevant organisations on the left and on the right, excluding

niche and short-lived parties and organisations, while at the same time representing the full diversity of left-and right-leaning Euro-critical organisations across the five countries.

Pro-European Nativists across Europe

Political visions of Europe: defending sovereignty

In the case of Italy, the political party *League* can be considered a Pro-European Nativist party in the current political environment of the country. *League* was previously a Eurorejectionist party which opposed the euro, pushing for Italy's exit from the EU. Indeed, as the local representative of the party emphasised, *League* claimed that the EU represented 'everything that was opposed to the core ideals of the party: attention to territorial specificity' (ID IT3), and called for the independence of the so-called Padania, both from Italy and from the EU. In the lead-up to the 2018 election, *League* in its manifesto described the lack of democratic legitimacy of the EU and called to 'avoid any further centralisation of decision-making or transfer of powers to Brussels and reduce all programming to what is really needed for feasible development and innovation goals' (League, 2018). However, after 2018, *League* opted for a more moderate and reformist position focused on 'rethinking the Union with a focus on the specificities of the individual territories' (ID IT3). The party's exponent stressed the urgent need for a reform in the structure of the EU and stated that the EP should 'become a real democratic agora with greater powers than the powers that the various representatives of national governments have, in this sense, I am obviously referring to the Council' (ID IT3).

In the case of Poland, the *Law and Justice* party (PiS) can be considered as a counterpart of the Italian *League*. *Law and Justice* defines Polish national sovereignty as the chief element of its political ideology. The party harshly criticises Germany, arguing that the EU as an organisation is completely dominated by Germany, which uses it instrumentally to subjugate Poland. *Law and Justice* calls for a 'law on the exercise of state sovereignty' which, among other things, 'affirm[s] the supremacy of the Polish Constitution over EU law and ECJ (Court of Justice of the EU) rulings, detail[s] the principles and conditions for the transfer of powers to EU bodies, guarantees of the subjectivity of the bodies of the Polish state in the field of public finance and taxation' (Law and Justice, 2015).

In Slovenia, the *Slovenian National Party* goes further in calling for a withdrawal from the EU, arguing that the EU is a 'sprawling bureaucratic structure that dictates the agenda to our governments even at the expense of the physical and economic protection of the citizens of individual member states' (Slovenian National Party, 2018). In the cases of North Macedonia

and Bosnia and Herzegovina, it is visibly harder to detect the Pro-European Nativism among the political parties. Still, both countries have various Eurosceptic and Eurorejectionist political parties. An interviewee from the political party *Rodina* (Fatherland) stated that:

Artificial war-mongering creations such as the EU and NATO are falling apart as we speak, and our programmatic goal is to prepare Macedonia for the upcoming geostrategic reality and the only natural option for the next 100 years minimum – Euroasia from Lisbon to Vladivostok, as a community of free and sovereign peoples. (ID MK3)

In the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the *Party of Democratic Progress of the Republika Srpska* argues that ‘at the heart of the current EU integration process is the achievement of nationalist and war goals’ (Party of Democratic Progress of the Republika Srpska, 2018).

Across the activists and citizens who were interviewed and took part in the focus groups, a clear distinction between the European identity and the EU identity points out a crucial pattern in nativists’ vision of Europe, which, similarly to the parties described above reveals a political articulation of a sovereigntist stance (see Table 2). The common theme in all cases is an emphasis on restricting the impact of the EU on national sovereignty and the urgent need for a reform in the structure of the union. Despite this consensus, there are nuances in the narratives of the interviewees especially regarding the source of conflict around national sovereignty: For most of the interviewees from Italy, the source of limitations on national sovereignty is ‘North’ mainly consisting of ‘Germany’ and ‘Brussels’; for the interviewees from Slovenia and Poland it is the ‘old states’ and their federalist oppression; and for the interviewees from Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia it is the EU as a form of ‘other’ that aims to assimilate them. In all these nuanced responses, the emphasis on the ‘European elites against national sovereignty’ and ‘elites vs. people’ narrative can be seen as a common pattern that is manifested in different forms.

A Slovenian supporter of the Pro-European Nativist *Homeland League* called for reform toward a pre-Maastricht structure:

Each member state should manage its own policy, while only joint problems are handled collectively in Brussels. *Homeland League* strongly supports subsidiarity: only issues unsolvable at the national level should go to the EU. Originally, the idea was simple – free trade, lower barriers, and a tariff union, which worked well. Problems arose when multicultural globalists pushed to weaken national democracies and the state. The EU should focus on security and economic coordination, leaving the rest to sovereign nations. Today, the EU is a hybrid drifting toward a federation. Yet sovereign nation states must remain the foundation, unlike the federation envisioned by Weber and Macron – the ‘United States of Europe. (SI FG1c)

**Table 2.** Paths of Europeanisation: visions of Europe across actors, political orientations and arenas of contention.

Visions of Europe Dimension / Actor Type	Arena 1: Political Parties		Arena 2: Social Movements		Arena 3: Activists / Citizens	
	Pro-European Nativists (Right)	Vs. Anti-Nationalist Europeans (Left)	Pro-European Nativists (Right)	Vs. Anti-Nationalist Europeans (Left)	Pro-European Nativists (Right)	Vs. Anti-Nationalist Europeans (Left)
Political Europe	Support the EU selectively; emphasise national sovereignty; reformist approach	Demand more integration, transparency, and democratic accountability	Limited engagement with EU; focus on national sovereignty	Demand EU transparency and accountability; support democratic reform	Concern over national sovereignty; critical of EU political power	Support democratic EU reforms; engagement in EU policy debates
Cultural Europe	Exclusive, culturally-defined Europe; EU identity differentiated from national identity	Inclusive, pluralist Europe; end 'fortress Europe'; European identity aligned with democracy	European identity separated from EU; traditional values emphasised	Focus on civil liberties and individual rights; inclusive identity	Strong exclusionary identity; protect national culture	Inclusive, transnational identity; emphasis on pluralism and solidarity
Economic Europe	Support economic integration if it benefits national economy; critical of neoliberal EU policies	Critique neoliberal EU; support integrated social protections and fair labour standards	Economic integration acceptable only if it benefits nation and preserves cultural/national values	Critique 'neoliberal EU' in trade/economic policies; vision varies by movement focus	Favor selective economic integration benefiting national interests	Support economic integration with social protections; critical of neoliberal policies

Among Polish interviewees, anti-federalisation sentiments and criticism of the dominance of 'old states' over 'new' members were widespread. Using a projective method (the Chinese portrait technique), respondents were asked to imagine the EU as a vehicle. Most depicted broken cars symbolising the divide between 'old and rich' states and 'new and poor' ones. One respondent described:

The front is taken from a sports car ... representing rich states like Germany and France. The back is tattered and dirty, representing Poland and other CEE countries. These states are left behind; the richer do not allow them to develop for fear of being outrivaled. (PL FG)

In this imagery, newer states are dragged into an 'abyss of federalisation' by powerful older ones that shape their national politics through EU institutions. As one respondent put it:

There is an attempt to dictate a worldview ... but every country is different' (PL FG). Many interviewees believed the EU is dominated by Germany, and to a lesser extent France, both of which 'within a framework of supposed cooperation, pursue their chauvinistic interests. (PL FG)

Policies on climate, migration, and human rights – especially gender and LGBTQ+ rights – were viewed as serving Germany's agenda. A more radical respondent argued that Germany had 'simply kidnapped the EU', leaving other states in a subordinate role, with CEE countries at the lowest level (PL FG).

Like their Slovenian and Italian counterparts, Polish respondents were critical of EU elitism and called for reform. They argued that EU elites are 'not accountable to anyone, certainly not to the citizens of the Union', and warned that 'with these elites, the EU will fall apart', citing corruption and 'ambiguous interests' (PL FG). Respondents from North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina expressed criticisms similar to those from other countries but framed within a strong identity conflict. One North Macedonian respondent stated that the EU 'propagates European values but then deny our right to self-determination and tolerate Bulgaria's absurd demands' (MK FG5), while another noted, 'We are too obedient to others; we need to start thinking for ourselves' (MK FG5). Despite generally positive attitudes toward the EU, many felt they were 'stuck in the waiting room' (MK FG4).

These concerns were often paired with a search for alternative partnerships. One respondent explained:

The EU for us is the closest natural and geographical partner. However, the problem is if they do not want to integrate us ... There are countries like Norway and Switzerland that are not members but cooperate closely. If they do not want you, you have to look for an alternative, whether America, China, or Russia' (MK FG4).

Similarly, another said: 'I am pro-EU and I will fight to the end for North Macedonia to be part of the EU, but realistically, there must always be an alternative. (MK FG2)

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, respondents similarly perceived Europe as mostly a 'geographical term', noting that they 'do not feel European and part of the broader EU process' (BA FG7c), that 'the EU does not perceive them as Europeans' (BA FG7c), and that 'the EU is not ready to grant them membership and unity on equal footing' (BA FG3a). While acknowledging potential economic benefits, these respondents emphasised that both national sovereignty and ethnic identity risk being damaged during EU integration (BA FG9c).

Cultural visions of Europe: European vs. national identity

Among the Pro-European Nativist parties, cultural visions of Europe are centred around conservative Christian values and a return to a nativist conception of cultural heritage. For Polish *Law and Justice*, the dominant vision of Europe is one in which the European Union has 'betrayed' its Christian identity based on traditionalism and conservatism. The party calls for a 'Union built on the permanent roots of civilisational identity, not on social constructivism. Let's not create Europeans, because Europeans exist, and European civilisation has a magnificent Greco-Roman-Christian root' (Law and Justice, 2015). Therefore, the EU cannot be identified with 'genuine' Europe, so it should be reformed. *Law and Justice* advocates for a cultural 'Eurorealism instead of aggressive political correctness' (Law and Justice, 2015), where political correctness is mistakenly seen as 'Europeanness' and stands for the 'spreading of gender ideology', 'post-colonialism', and 'primitive experiments in civilisation' (Law and Justice, 2015).

In Slovenia, *Homeland League* positions itself against progressive principles related to migrants and LGBTQ+, and the *Slovenian National Party* argues that 'the preservation of Slovenia's cultural and historical heritage, both immovable and movable, is of particular importance' (Slovenian National Party, 2016). It rejects 'immigration of any kind from Asia and Africa' and decries 'the current practice of the Slovenian government, which opens the country to all possible suspicious individuals, as dictated by the EU' (Slovenian National Party, 2016). In Italy, *League* similarly rejects immigration and stresses that 'migration policies should prioritise entry from culturally related countries' (League, 2018).

Among individuals from Pro-European Nativist organisations, a moderate identification with European identity coexists with a sceptical, culturally exclusionary approach that emphasises national identities. In this view, the

European Union is framed as a supranational institution potentially threatening national identities and traditional values. Mirroring what we have just shown for the political parties, European identity is seen as a shared identity rooted in Christian values and historical legacy and does not necessarily correspond with EU membership (see [Table 2](#)).

Polish respondents exemplify this distinction. One noted that EU citizenship is ‘as legitimate as the question of if I am a citizen of NATO or the International Monetary Fund ... the EU is simply an organization’ (PL FG). Another added, ‘Europe is not the EU. I do not see how the two terms could be identified together’ (PL FG). Similarly, a Serbian respondent from Bosnia and Herzegovina argued that while Serbs ‘consider themselves as an old European nation’, the EU is ‘out of order’, particularly due to its immigration policies (BA FG6b). An Italian interviewee from the right-wing youth association *Azione Studentesca* emphasised that Europeans ‘recognize a community of states’ but ‘do not feel any closeness to the EU or its offices in Brussels or Strasbourg’ (IT FG2a).

In newer or candidate states such as Poland, Slovenia, North Macedonia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, EU integration policies – often imposed by ‘old states’ – are perceived as threatening local cultures, national identities, and traditions. A Bosnian respondent acknowledged the economic benefits of EU integration but worried that ‘national and ethnic identity would be damaged during the process’ (BA FG9c Bosnia and Herzegovina). North Macedonian respondents echoed this scepticism, describing EU membership as ‘an illusion’ with disappointing ‘double standards’ (MK FG2).

Economic visions of Europe: more benefits, more integration

In Italy, *League* sees Italy’s entry into the Eurozone as the main reason for economic decline. The party sharply criticises Germany’s role, arguing that the Euro is ‘a currency custom-designed for Germany and multinational corporations and contrary to the needs of Italy and small business’ (League, 2018). In Poland, *Law and Justice* embraces the need for EU funds and expresses approval of the economic aspects of the Union, stating that ‘the most important achievements of the Union are the common market, the free movement of people, goods, capital and services, freedom and equality, common rights and common duties’ (Law and Justice, 2015). In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the *Party of Democratic Progress of the Republika Srbska* laments that ‘citizens do not feel the benefits of EU integration’ (Party of Democratic Progress of the Republika Srbska, 2018).

A key theme among individual supporters of Pro-European Nativist organisations is the criticism of economic integration, seen as a potential threat to national economies (see [Table 2](#)). Respondents argued that EU integration is acceptable only if it delivers tangible economic benefits and supports

national growth, development, and sovereignty. Many highlighted that current EU policies restrict economic freedom and suggested that economic cooperation could continue without the EU unless reforms are made. Participants from new member and candidate states frequently noted perceived inequalities caused by EU policies, which they argued harm not only local economies but also cultures and identities. One Polish respondent stated: 'I am in favour of cooperation ... but not under a bureaucratic cap. Are they doing anything positive in Brussels or Strasbourg, or are they just squandering our money?' (PL FG). Another added that Poland 'should stay in the EU as long as it is beneficial ... but the EU cannot impose conditions on us' (PL FG). Slovenian participants highlighted socioeconomic issues as central to their criticisms. One participant observed: 'Expected more. There are no jobs and those that exist are poorly paid'. Others mentioned loss of policy independence, constraints on business, unemployment, and weakening social structures. North Macedonian respondents emphasised the conflict with traditional values, noting that 'with European working hours, we cannot maintain our traditional values' (MK FG3). Several Bosnian respondents noted that the EU is 'not the land of milk and honey ... you have to work hard only to assure your existence' and similar sentiments (BA FG1c, BA FG1e, BA FG3b).

Anti-Nationalists Europeans across Europe

Political visions of Europe: more transparency, more accountability

The political visions of the identified Anti-Nationalist European parties express support for more European integration, but in a more democratic manner. The Italian *Democratic Party* argues that 'More Europe is needed. And we need more politics in Europe. If many European citizens have lost confidence in Europe, it is because they have found it too many times immobile in the face of today's great challenges, retreating to a predominantly technocratic approach' (Democratic Party, 2018). This is coupled with a call for a more social Europe that has a common framework for social policy and the creation of a European social citizenship, in which the EU 'can make a difference in the daily lives of its citizens' (Democratic Party, 2018).

In Slovenia, the *Social Democratic Party* similarly stresses a need for more integration, but in a more social-democratic manner, stating '[t]he belief that the European Union is a neoliberal project to protect corporate interests and agendas is gaining ground. We need to build an alternative to this understanding, based on building a progressive, social, just and secure European society, deepening democracy and rigorously implementing human rights. We need to give the European idea a new lease of life!' (Social Democratic

Party, 2018). *The Left* in Slovenia argues along similar lines that there is a need for more common EU policies for an EU-wide minimum wage, a common framework of social rights, and a common minimum corporate tax rate. Polish *Modern* centres the importance of more political integration in a strengthening of 'NATO's eastern flank' as well as common efforts towards more energy security, promising that their 'raison d'être will be to actively strengthen European integration and participate in its major project' (Modern, 2015).

A look at the Anti-Nationalist European social movements that directly targeted the EU shows a similar orientation with calls for more democratic EU decision-making (see Table 2). At the heart of the left-leaning social movements against ACTA and TTIP was the lack of transparency of the processes through which the agreements were negotiated. Although the movements addressed substantial policy issues, this lack of transparency became a central grievance for each of them and contributed significantly to the mobilisation of hundreds of thousands of protesters who joined the demonstrations (Fenner, *in press*). Activists against ACTA asked the EU institutions 'to call on European negotiators to establish transparency in the negotiation process and publish the draft agreement, and not to accept any proposal which would undermine citizens' rights and freedoms'.³ Similarly, the lack of transparency with which the TTIP agreement was negotiated became a central issue of the mass protests against it (Fenner, 2025). Both of these movements were centred around a vision of a more democratic EU in which policy-making processes happen in a transparent way, and in which policy-makers can be held accountable by European citizens. None of these movements called into question whether the EU should be in a position to negotiate such agreements in the first place. Rather, they advocated for a political vision of a more democratic version of the EU and its policy-making processes than currently exist.

In the case of the Copyright Directive, the issues of transparency and accountability were not initially central to the protests, which revolved mainly around the preservation of a 'censorship-free' internet (Fenner, *in press*). However, this changed when the European Commission reacted to the (mostly online) protests by calling protesters a 'mob' in a blog post and insinuating that the protests had been created by big tech corporations, rather than being genuine grassroots movements (European Commission, 2019). Though the blog post was soon deleted amid a public outcry, it led to an even greater mobilisation of protesters in the streets, where now thousands of citizens joined specifically as a reaction to the Commission's delegitimisation of the online campaigns (Naranjo, 2022). Though less explicit than the other two movements, the example of the protests against the Copyright Directive serves to further illustrate how central a more democratic and responsive version of the EU is to the political vision of the Anti-Nationalist

European movements, and how what are perceived to be undemocratic actions by EU institutions can spark mass mobilisation against them.

Cultural visions of Europe: civil liberties and individual rights as central European values

The cultural visions of Europe put forward by parties, movements and individual activists and citizens revolve around openness and pluralism and are simultaneously critical of EU migration policy in its current form. Calling for the reform of the Dublin accords, the Italian *Democratic Party* stresses that ‘Mindful of its values and history, Europe has a duty to welcome political refugees’ (Democratic Party, 2018), but also argues that the EU needs to develop a shared policy to welcome economic migrants. In Slovenia, *The Left* argues that ‘so-called Fortress Europe is much more unfriendly to people outside its borders: razor wire has grown on the Schengen border’, and that ‘All members of the working classes are disadvantaged in the social ladder, but Roma and foreigners, both immigrants from other republics of the former Yugoslavia and immigrants from non-European countries, have the worst chances’ (The Left, 2018).

Turning again to the three social movements that we explore in this study reveals a cultural vision of a Europe that is centred around the protection of civil liberties and individual rights. In the case of the protests against ACTA and the Copyright Directive, these were mainly digital rights and the right to open access and a free internet for all people (Heermann, 2024; Losey, 2014). In the case of TTIP, the campaigns against the agreement demanded an EU that acted as a defender of consumer protection and labour rights against US corporate interests. Campaigners warned against a ‘race to the bottom’ of food and labour protection standards (Fenner, 2025). The protests against ACTA broke out as a reaction to the passing of the very similar bills SOPA and PIPA in the US, which were ‘widely reported in Europe, [and] brought the issue of internet freedom to greater public attention’ (Dür & Mateo, 2014, p. 1202), after Civil Society Organizations argued that a ‘European version’ of these bills had to be prevented (Parks, 2015). While the protection of civil liberties and rights undoubtedly has a strong political dimension, we argue that the way in which the progressive social movements that campaigned against ACTA, TTIP and the Copyright Directive framed these issues as central to the very identity and values of Europe reflects a broader cultural vision of what Europe represents.

Economic visions of Europe: against a further ‘neoliberalisation’ of the EU

Among the Anti-Nationalist Europeans, the Italian *Democratic Party* envisions deeper economic integration that enables EU member states to jointly deal

with systemic risks and asymmetric shocks to the system. The party advocates for a 'Eurozone finance minister who would take over the functions of the commissioner for Economic and Monetary Affairs and the president of the Eurogroup, be vice president of the Commission and be elected by the European Parliament', in order to make the Eurozone a 'true economic union' (Democratic Party, 2018). Both the Italian *Democratic Party* and *More Europe* argue that there need to be reforms in order to create a 'true European labour market' (More Europe, 2018), where mobile workers across Europe are protected through a common social security system.

Polish *Civic Platform* similarly focuses on a deepening of the economic integration in the labour market, and seeks to work against the discrimination of Polish workers and consumers within the common market. Slovenian *The Left* is more critical of the economic aspects of European integration, flagging the competitiveness pressures on Slovenian agriculture that have come with European integration and that make it difficult for smaller farms to survive. The party also stresses that 'European neoliberalism' has resulted in a lack of common social standards and a dismantling of the welfare state.

Among the three movements examined for this article, the protests against TTIP are the only case in which a clear economic vision of Europe was formulated in the mobilisation against the agreement. These protests specifically contested the market-oriented nature of the regulatory framework and framed it as giving unfair advantages to aggressive private corporations from the US. Søndergaard argues that 'the anti-TTIP movement stands as an alternative project of opposition to neoliberalism, motivated by civic considerations, and rooted in a multifaceted range of social concerns' (Søndergaard, 2020, p. 294). Though the agreement ultimately failed, the impact of the large-scale mass contestation of TTIP was unambiguous (Fenner, 2025), and the movement has been attested to have halted 'what may well have been one of the most far-reaching attempts towards imposition of a market-oriented commercial regulatory framework' in the EU (Søndergaard, 2020, p. 294). Table 2 offers a summary of all findings in comparison.

Discussion and conclusion

This article examined Europeanisation 'from below', focusing on the diverse ways in which Pro-European Nativist and Anti-Nationalist European actors engage with European integration. It identified and mobilised analytical concepts from both party politics and social movement studies to define and characterise contemporary Euroscepticism and its nuances, rather than investigate its determinants. By doing so, it moved beyond simple binary distinctions and considered how these frameworks, originally developed in Western contexts, can be applied to a broader range of actors and regional settings,

shedding light on the diverse ways in which European integration is interpreted, contested, and appropriated across different political and cultural arenas.

We showed empirically how contemporary political actors ranging from parties to movements to individual activists articulate European identities across political, cultural and economic dimensions. Three key patterns emerged across our findings. *The first one is the consistency across the ideological dimensions* (see Table 2). Both sides of the political spectrum display recurring patterns across all of their actors, but this is particularly visible in the existence of notable *movement-party parallels*. Social movements' visions largely mirror the positions of ideologically aligned parties, especially in political and cultural dimensions. This suggests a potential for coalition building (Van Dyke & McCammon, 2010) across the protest and political party arenas on these new European identities.

With regard to cultural visions of the Pro-European Nativists, there is a general tendency to differentiate the European identity from the EU identity. While the concept of European identity is not typically at odds with national identities and indeed contains traditional values that resonate with national ones, the EU identity is associated with the EU and its integration policies, which have the potential to harm national identities as well as the European one. This cultural dimension is significantly related to the political one. The overarching theme that emerges from the findings is that the prevailing EU integration policies and the Union's structural framework are perceived to pose a threat to the national sovereignty and independence of member and candidate states.

For the Anti-Nationalist Europeans, a dominating theme among the cultural visions is a call for more pluralism and an end to 'fortress Europe'. The political visions converge in a demand for more integration, but in a more transparent and democratic manner that is closer to European citizens. Economically, they are calling for more economic integration in order to be able to jointly deal with shocks to the system, while simultaneously criticising 'neoliberal Europe' and demanding better labour standards as well as integrated social security nets.

A second key finding is that there is an observable variation across different countries. With regard to the political parties, the Pro-European Nativist parties are more visible, especially in member states such as Italy, Slovenia and Poland. Here, these political parties are predominantly characterised as once-rejectionist parties that have undergone a shift towards a more reformist stance, a phenomenon exemplified by the case of *League* in Italy. With regard to the candidate states, the former Yugoslav republics of North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Eurosceptic approach has not undergone a complete metamorphosis into a reformist nativism, and the rejection of EU accession and a nationalist stance is more dominant. This *country variation* points to the classical explanation of European support in both party

politics and social movement studies, related to the context where actors do mobilise: the length of EU membership/or not membership (e.g., Kriesi *et al.*, 2025), and the political and discursive opportunity structure in the language of contentious politics (Della Porta & Caiani, 2009). Western EU member states show reformist shifts in previously Eurosceptic parties; candidate countries retain more nationalist stances. Future research could further explore how the structural differences between these countries affect the discursive opportunities available to both movements and parties that shape these stances.

Finally, the elitist critique of the EU is a recurring theme across all actors and countries. Crucially, this critique cuts across the left-right cleavage, as both sides frequently evoke it and call for less ‘neoliberalisation’ of the EU in their economic visions of Europe. However, while the Pro-European Nativists tie this critique to a worry about the impact of EU policies for national economies, the Anti-Nationalist Europeans couple it with a call for a more integrated welfare state and more protections for all EU citizens.

In sum, our findings underline the usefulness of the applied conceptualisation of Anti-Nationalist Europeans as well as Pro-European Nationalists. On the one hand, we have shown that this concept holds analytical value across the party and protest arenas, between East and West, member states and candidate countries, and movements, parties, individual activists and ordinary citizens. At the same time, the concept has also proven to be particularly useful in unpacking in detail the frames and narratives that form the political actors’ visions of Europe, leaving space for their individual iterations and imaginaries. While we have found that the conceptualisation travels well between arenas and should thus be a fruitful point of connection between the literatures on party politics and social movements in the EU, empirical instances of explicit cross-referencing, in which actors from the two arenas referred to each other, were negligible in our data. Given the increasingly blurred lines between the two arenas, this is somewhat surprising and warrants further investigation in future research endeavours.

Future research could also fruitfully take up this conceptualisation and expand it to uncover visions of Europe among ordinary citizens across the EU and explore in which ways it might map onto existing attitudes towards the EU polity and European integration at a larger scale. For example, large-N quantitative studies picking up this conceptualisation at the individual level could help us understand how European citizens relate to the EU better than one-dimensional approaches that are frequently used in surveys to ask citizens about their support for the polity. Importantly, this could reveal whether the often-decried decrease in support for the EU is in fact a wholesale rejection of the EU, or whether it conceals differentiated and strong European identities similar to those we have uncovered across movements, activists and parties. Finally, against the backdrop of current

geopolitical developments, this conceptualisation of ‘positions toward Europe’ could be extended beyond the economic, political, and cultural dimensions employed in this article by adding a fourth dimension focused on the EU’s role in foreign and security policy. This dimension would capture competing visions of the kind of Europe actors seek to promote on the international stage. While still emerging, particularly in research on the radical right (see Eder, 2024⁴), this debate is likely to become increasingly relevant for future studies of Europeanisation.

Notes

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2. For North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, we lowered the threshold for manifestos to include reference to at least two out of the three dimensions, as otherwise we would have had to exclude these because of a lack of references.
3. *ACTA: A Global Threat to Freedoms* (2009). Retrieved October 9, 2025, from <https://www.laquadrature.net/en/2009/12/10/acta-a-global-threat-to-freedoms-open-letter/>.
4. See also, <https://carnegieendowment.org/features/radical-right-europe-foreign-policy?lang=en>

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