

Eager to leave? Populist radical right parties' responses to the UK's Brexit vote

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Pre-proof version, accepted for publication by *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* on September 20th, 2019

Abstract

Populist radical right (PRR) parties are naturally Eurosceptic. Many responded positively to the British referendum vote to leave the European Union; various observers even spoke of a potential PRR-instigated 'domino effect'. We ask whether this Brexit-enthusiasm prevailed in the proximate aftermath of the UK referendum, by means of a comparative analysis of PRR parties' national election campaigns in the Netherlands, France, Germany and Italy. The analysis considers whether the UK referendum result served as an external stimulus for PRR parties to harden their Euroscepticism and politicise the issue of European integration. The results show that this has, generally speaking, not been the case, and that Brexit has also not stimulated or amplified calls for leaving the EU. Relating our findings to literature on the politicisation of European integration and strategic party behaviour, we argue that PRR parties had few incentives to act differently given the uninviting political opportunity structure.

Key words: *Brexit; populism; radical right; politicisation; Euroscepticism; party competition*

Word count: 8,033 excl. references and appendix

Introduction

The UK's referendum of June 23rd 2016 resulted in a narrow vote for leaving the European Union (EU). Eurosceptic parties across the continent either celebrated this 'Brexit' vote, or at least saw it as a necessary warning signal that the EU was in need of structural reform. Several observers expected such parties to push for similar in-out referendums in other countries. One day after the Brexit vote, the British newspaper *Telegraph* (2016) published an article under the header 'EU faces Brexit "contagion" as populist parties across Europe call for referendums'. The *Independent* (2016) predicted that 'the British vote seems certain to make exit referendums a central issue in French and Dutch elections next year'.

This article investigates whether Eurosceptic parties outside of Britain indeed treated the Brexit vote as an opportunity to bolster and emphasise their opposition to the EU. Our analysis specifically focuses on the most Eurosceptic party family: the populist radical right (PRR). PRR parties oppose the EU for various reasons, yet previous studies have indicated that they are not united in the intensity of their Euroscepticism, and do not all (consistently) treat European integration as a core issue (Vasilopoulou, 2018; Pirro et al., 2018). This raises questions about the extent to which they treated the Brexit vote as an opportunity for mobilising support on the basis of a reinvigorated Eurosceptic agenda.

We study PRR parties in four founding EU member states across different parts of Western Europe (France, Germany, Italy, and the Netherlands). We ask whether they hardened their position on EU membership, and sought to politicise European integration, during national election campaigns in the aftermath of the Brexit vote. In doing so, we aim to contribute to knowledge about how, in the relatively short run, the Brexit process has affected other countries' domestic party competition (see also Adler-Nissen et al., 2017; Taggart and

Szczerbiak, 2018). Our findings are also relevant to the more general literature on the politicisation of, and strategic party behaviour around, European integration.

We find that, despite having initially reacted to the referendum result with enthusiasm, the selected PRR parties shared a reluctance to prioritise EU membership, or European integration more generally, in their campaigns. They also did not converge around an appeal to follow the British example in leaving the EU. Notwithstanding variations in PRR parties' responses to Brexit, their appetite for politicising European integration was generally low already prior to the unfolding of the difficult negotiation process between the EU-27 and the UK.

In other words, the Brexit vote as such did not serve as a clear incentive for PRR parties to harden their positions or to politicise 'Europe'. We argue that most of them had few reasons to act differently, considering conditions related to their political opportunity structure. Crucially, support for ending EU membership remained limited in our cases, issues related to European integration lacked genuine salience among voters, and PRR parties thus had good reasons to focus primarily on more tried-and-tested issues such as immigration and cultural change (Hoeglinger, 2016; McDonnell and Werner, 2018). The difficulties in the Brexit process, which are likely to have further dampened public demand for leaving the EU elsewhere in Europe, have probably reduced the viability of a PRR 'exit strategy' also in the medium term. Whether most PRR parties will continue to shy away from a hard Eurosceptic strategy in the future depends, *inter alia*, on the (perceived) consequences of Brexit in the longer run (de Vries, 2017).

The next sections proceed with a discussion, first, of PRR parties and European integration, and, second, of theories concerning the politicisation of European integration. Accordingly, we identify four sets of factors that may be expected to condition the responses of PRR parties to Brexit. We then explore these in each of our four case studies. In our final section, we offer a set of conclusions.

The PRR and European integration

The PRR has made electoral inroads since the start of the 1980s, witnessing increased electoral success during the past decade. Following Cas Mudde (2007), parties of the PRR share a common core of nativism, authoritarianism, and populism. What follows from this is an almost natural opposition to the process of European integration: the PRR typically portrays the EU as a project that threatens the sovereignty of the native people and, through the opening of borders, the cultural homogeneity of nations. Furthermore, the ostensibly complex and opaque European decision-making process is at odds with the populist nature of these parties, which favour the direct implementation of the popular will.

The PRR does not have a monopoly on Euroscepticism (e.g. Taggart, 1998; Halikiopoulou et al., 2012). Radical left parties, for instance, oppose the EU for its supposed neoliberal character and free-market drive (e.g. de Vries and Edwards, 2009). PRR parties, nevertheless, are typically the strongest opponents of the EU in national party systems (Gómez-Reino and Llamazares, 2013). Moreover, during the past decades there has been an increase of right-wing Euroscepticism, that is: opposition against the EU for reasons related to national interests, sovereignty, and identity (van Elsas and van der Brug, 2015). These typical PRR

themes also played a key role in the Brexit campaign, and the motivations of many voters who opted for 'Leave' (e.g. Hobolt, 2016; Goodwin and Milazzo, 2017).

In addition, some PRR parties have taken a 'hard' Eurosceptic position, denoting an outright rejection of European integration and/or EU membership (Szczerbiak and Taggart, 2008), which is currently rarely seen beyond this party family. The idea of following the UK's example in leaving the EU is therefore likely to appeal to PRR parties in particular. Seeing that it is possible to muster sufficient support to end EU membership, we would expect PRR parties across Europe to be the first to place the issue firmer on the political agenda. If they do not, this provides a clear indication that the UK referendum vote has not initiated a more general (hard) Eurosceptic wave across European party systems.

Brexit and the politicisation of European integration

PRR responses in theory

We embed our study in the literature on politicisation of European integration, which has been operationalised as a multidimensional process involving a) increased salience of EU affairs; b) polarisation of positions and attitudes; and c) an expansion of actors and audiences (de Wilde et al. 2016). We are specifically interested in whether the Brexit vote has stimulated PRR parties to contribute to EU politicisation by radicalising their positions on EU membership and increasing the salience of EU affairs. We thereby start out from the assumption that EU politicisation still largely occurs at the domestic level (Kriesi, 2016: 32).

Scholars have accounted for (varying degrees of) politicisation by considering the EU's increasing political authority in combination with a variety of intermediating variables (such

as competitive party politics, crises, or external shocks), which together form the political opportunity structure for EU politicisation (de Wilde and Zürn, 2012). Grande and Hutter (2016a), for instance, argue that two main sets of factors are driving forces of politicisation: (1) critical events and (2) political actors and their mobilisation strategies.

Regarding the former, events and developments related to EU integration and membership are likely to increase attention to EU issues (Hutter et al., 2016). To varying degrees, national referendums on EU issues, and debates about EU enlargement and Treaty reform have contributed to the politicisation of EU integration (Grande and Hutter, 2016b). Brexit could be seen as another critical moment triggering intense debates over the EU: for the first time a country decided to depart from the EU. Furthermore, Brexit occurred when other crises (over immigration and the Eurozone) also hit the EU, together creating ‘exceptional moments of politicisation’ (Kriesi, 2016: 34). Populist parties, in particular, have been argued to feed on, and actively perpetuate, real or perceived crises (Taggart 2000; Moffitt 2015). The Brexit vote may thus have served as a ‘focusing event’ inducing PRR parties to politicise European integration (Pirro and Taggart 2018: 258).

However, external critical events and crises are not sufficient to explain EU politicisation; one should also consider the interpretation and strategic deployment of these events by political actors. In relation to this, various scholars have argued that the politicisation of European integration has primarily been driven by Eurosceptic forces, not least political parties of the PRR (e.g. Hooghe and Marks, 2009; Hoeglinger, 2016; Kriesi, 2016). If PRR parties were serious about their Euroscepticism, the Brexit vote ostensibly heralded the right moment for them to stimulate politicisation in their domestic contexts, and to problematise their country’s EU membership. In our study, we thus assess whether the Brexit vote served

as an ‘external stimulus’ (Harmel and Janda, 1994) for PRR parties to revitalise or intensify their opposition to the EU.

Besides describing PRR parties’ responses to the Brexit vote, we also seek to tentatively explain such reactions. While it is generally assumed that PRR parties are key actors driving EU politicisation, we know little about the motivating mechanisms behind this. The Brexit process provides an exceptional case in point to explore how specific factors may hinder or stimulate EU politicisation by PRR parties. We investigate the assumption that the Brexit vote may have served as a general stimulus for EU politicisation, but argue that the behaviour of PRR parties is likely to be determined also by the specific opportunity structure they face. While it is not our aim to test causal mechanisms or the relative impact of an exhaustive list of independent variables, we intend to explore the role of several potential explanatory conditions, which we identify on the basis of extant literature on party strategies and Euroscepticism.¹

First, we expect **public opinion towards EU membership** to influence PRR reactions to Brexit. Political parties react to shifting opinions among their supporters or the public at large (Adams et al., 2006; Ezrow et al., 2011). As regards the EU issue, existing studies have shown that parties on the ideological fringes can be successful in gaining support on the basis of their Euroscepticism (e.g. de Vries, 2007; de Vries and Hobolt, 2012). Rohrschneider and Whitefield (2016), furthermore, found that growing public Euroscepticism in the wake of the financial crisis was met by a growth in Euroscepticism among ‘extreme parties’. Interpreting

¹ Pirro and van Kessel (2017) previously identified a set of four conditions to explain the EU-pessimist stance of PRR parties. Two of these (‘public opinion’ and ‘party competition’) are discussed in this section. For this study, it has proven more fruitful to reconceptualise the third condition, ‘leadership change’, as ‘internal party agreement’. The fourth, ‘incumbency status’, is left for the conclusion, given its limited empirical relevance in the period of study.

the Brexit vote as a new EU crisis, PRR parties may have been inclined to react in a similar way. However, given that the full consequences of Brexit were unknown, it may have been too early (and risky) for PRR parties to exploit the event electorally in the proximate aftermath. Particularly in cases where public opinion failed to shift in favour of leaving the EU, PRR parties may have felt discouraged to increase the prominence of EU issues or harden their Euroscepticism.

Second, we expect the **public salience of European integration** to influence PRR reactions to Brexit. Previous research has shown that PRR parties mainly mobilise support on the basis of their positions on ‘cultural’ issues (e.g. Ivarsflaten, 2008; Spies, 2013), more so than their Eurosceptic profile (Werts et al., 2013; McDonnell and Werner, 2018). Seeing how the PRR has attained successes across European countries on the basis of salient issues such as immigration and multiculturalism, individual PRR parties may be inclined to stick to such a presumed winning strategy (see Hoeglinger, 2016). Certainly when European integration remains secondary in the eyes of potential voters, PRR parties have few reasons to politicise EU-related issues.

Third, we expect strategic considerations related **to party competition** to influence PRR reactions to Brexit. In addition to reacting to public opinion, the strategic behaviour of parties is also influenced by the actions of their competitors (e.g. Meguid, 2008). Parties on the ideological fringes have been argued to use European integration as an ‘ideological crowbar’ to put distance between themselves and mainstream parties (Taggart, 1998: 382). De Vries and Hobolt (2012) have more recently shown how Euroscepticism can be a viable strategy for ‘challenger parties’ engaging in ‘issue-entrepreneurship’. The EU issue can also be successfully used as a so-called ‘wedge issue’: increasing its salience may expose intra-party

divisions over the issue among rivals and cause reputational damage (van de Wardt et al., 2014). Then again, PRR parties may be less motivated to change course if they already are the most Eurosceptic forces in their respective party system. We therefore expect that Brexit may only act as a stimulus for politicisation or positional change in those contexts where PRR parties face competition from rival Eurosceptic parties, or where mainstream parties rivals adopt a clear Eurosceptic tone (Pirro and van Kessel, 2017).

Finally, we expect **internal party agreement (or lack thereof)** on EU membership to influence PRR reactions to Brexit. Strategic party behaviour can be conditioned by intra-party dynamics (see Schumacher et al., 2013). Not only do parties take into consideration positions and potential divisions among their voters (van de Wardt, 2014), they also want to avoid divisions within their organisation. A study of Steenbergen and Scott (2004) suggested that parties that are internally divided on Europe aim to de-emphasise the issue. This strategy will be successful insofar as the intensity of the internal dispute over EU issues is moderate and can be tamed by the party leadership (Hellström and Blomgren, 2016).

Analytical Approach

After describing PRR parties' immediate reactions to Brexit, our empirical analysis focuses on three main aspects. First, we look at the relative salience of Brexit and European integration in PRR parties' subsequent electoral campaigns. Second, we evaluate the parties' positions on these issues and their country's EU membership in particular, identifying three potential positions: 1) unconditional support for leaving the EU or an EU membership referendum; 2) conditional support for leaving the EU or an EU membership referendum; 3) no support for leaving the EU or an EU membership referendum. These positions are broadly in line with Vasilopoulou's (2018) framework on patterns of far right opposition to European

integration, which distinguishes between ‘rejectionist’, ‘conditional’, and ‘compromising’ Euroscepticism, respectively. Third, exploring motivations underlying PRR party behaviour, we inform our comparative analysis of PRR party positions with our consideration of the four explanatory conditions as identified in the previous section.

We use a qualitative approach: we aimed not only at mapping PRR party positions, but also at exposing substantive arguments in order to provide an in-depth understanding of these parties’ reactions to the Brexit vote. We focus on four different West European countries: the Netherlands, France, Germany and Italy; all founding members of the EU in which the PRR has achieved considerable electoral success (see Table 1). The main reason for selecting these cases is that they held national elections well within the first two years after the UK referendum vote, and within one year from each other. This allows us to judge whether PRR parties, during key electoral events in the relatively short aftermath of the Brexit vote, were stimulated to radicalise their positions and politicise European integration. In addition, we sought to secure sufficient geographical spread and variety in the lifespan of the selected PRRPs, including older (FN; LN), newer (PVV) and very young (AfD) PRR parties. For these reasons, and given the unavoidable trade-off between depth and breadth, the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) – which competed in the October 2017 federal election – was excluded from the main study. Its position will be discussed briefly in the conclusion.

Table 1: PRR parties in national elections in four European countries

	Election	Election date	PRR party	PRR party result
Netherlands	Legislative	15 March 2017	Partij voor de Vrijheid (PVV)	13.1%
France	¹⁾ Presidential	¹⁾ 23 April & 7 May 2017	Front National (FN)	¹⁾ 21.3% & 33.9%
	²⁾ Legislative	²⁾ 11 & 18 June 2017		²⁾ 13.6% & 8.8%
Germany	Legislative	24 September 2017	Alternative für Deutschland (AfD)	12.6%
Italy	Legislative	4 March 2018	Lega Nord (LN)	17.4%

Within our selected time-span there were also three Central and Eastern European countries with (moderately) successful PRR parties that held national elections (Bulgaria, Czech Republic and Hungary). We chose to limit our analysis to Western Europe, in view of the low levels of EU politicisation and the general lack of partisan structuring of European integration in post-communist Europe (Hutter and Kriesi, 2019). PRR parties here are not typical drivers of EU politicisation, and, while still soft-Eurosceptic, have also come to appreciate the benefits of EU membership and funding (see Pirro, 2015). In our concluding section we will, however, briefly explain how our main observations also hold in other cases.

Our main sources across the four cases include 1) election manifestos; 2) articles and new items posted on party websites; and 3) televised election debates. With regard to all of these sources, we searched for references to Brexit as well as statements pertaining to parties' more general stance on European integration. In addition to these three main sources, we considered sources that are specifically relevant for each individual case and context.² All such non-academic sources can be found in the Appendix. By relying on these combined sources, we ascertain that our interpretations of party positions are valid and accurate.

Findings

The Netherlands

Geert Wilders's Freedom Party became the dominant PRR party in the Netherlands since its entry into parliament in 2006. The party has always been Eurosceptic, but its opposition to the EU intensified prior to the parliamentary election of 2012, when the party, for the first time, proposed to end Dutch EU and Eurozone membership.

² For the PVV, for instance, these include party newsletters, which *inter alia* include all online articles, parliamentary speeches, media interviews and campaign videos. In the Italian and French cases, party statements represented in national media were used.

Wilders's take on Brexit was in line with this position. In a newspaper interview prior to the referendum, Wilders expressed the hope that the Brexit vote would stimulate calls for leaving the EU elsewhere, and notably predicted that organising a 'Nexit' referendum would become a key theme in the upcoming Dutch election campaign (PVV, 2016a). After the referendum results came in, the PVV leader congratulated the British on their 'Independence Day', and argued that the Dutch deserved their own referendum (PVV, 2016b). In parliament, Wilders spoke of a 'historical day', and argued that the 'liberation' of the Netherlands was also nigh (PVV, 2016c).

Closer to the March 2017 parliamentary election, Brexit and the question of EU membership received occasional attention. The party's official manifesto covered one page, and included one bullet point on leaving the EU (PVV, 2016f). In a more comprehensive newspaper op-ed, Wilders declared that the Dutch should liberate themselves from the 'Europhiles in Brussels', but did not concretely speak about leaving the EU, let alone Brexit (AD, 2016). A campaign video aired in February 2017 did allude to Brexit (and the election of US President Trump), calling on the Dutch to follow the British and American examples, and vote for 'change' (PVV, 2017). In a 40-minute long TV interview with Wilders in the same month, Brexit and the question of leaving the EU were addressed, but only for a few minutes and on the initiative of the interviewer (WNL, 2017). The UK referendum vote also featured very briefly in one of the two main televised election debates in which Wilders participated (EenVandaag, 2017). Wilders had to defend himself against the claim that withdrawing from the EU was an irresponsible idea – he retorted that Nexit was in fact 'the best thing that can ever happen to us'. The PVV leader remained silent about Brexit in the TV debate on the eve prior to the

Dutch election – and tellingly declared that Islam was by far the most important issue for the PVV (NOS, 2017).

Ultimately, then, Brexit and ‘Europe’ more generally were not crucial themes in the PVV’s electoral campaign, certainly in comparison with 2012 (Pirro and van Kessel, 2018). In interviews and party publications, issues related to immigration and multiculturalism took centre stage instead. The EU featured in only one of the 18 specific policy proposals in the short PVV manifesto, whereas eight proposals related to the ‘de-Islamisation’ of the Netherlands (PVV, 2016f). Wilders’s previous prediction that a Nexit referendum would constitute a crucial campaign theme proved wildly inaccurate.

The reluctance of the PVV to politicise Brexit or EU membership cannot be attributed to intra-party dynamics, since the party has essentially been dominated by a single individual: Geert Wilders. It may instead signify a lesson learned from 2012, when the party’s parliamentary election campaign *did* largely revolve around European integration, yet resulted in a loss. Indeed, survey data have indicated that, in terms of their voting motivation, PVV supporters have previously prioritised cultural issues, not least immigration, over European integration and EU membership (van Kessel, 2015). An opinion poll of September 2016 similarly indicated that cultural integration, and fighting crime and terrorism, were considered most important by PVV supporters (Kantar TNS, 2016). The same survey indicated that, in comparison with June 2012, the salience of ‘Europe’ had decreased among the electorate at large; a mere 3 per cent of respondents mentioned the EU as most important theme.

Furthermore, public opinion towards EU membership has appeared stable and positive over the years. Eurobarometer data from May 2016 indicated that 76 per cent of the Dutch disagreed with the statement that their country could better face the future outside of the EU, while 18 per cent agreed – respectively the highest and lowest percentage of all member states (European Commission, 2016: 102). In the spring of 2017, when the Dutch election was held, the figures were 83 per cent (disagree) versus 13 per cent (agree) (European Commission, 2017: 90).

As far as competition with rival parties was concerned, the PVV's hard Euroscepticism contrasted with the positions of other parties represented in parliament, including the soft-Eurosceptic Socialist Party. The PVV, in other words, already occupied a unique position prior to the Brexit referendum. Wilders's party faced genuine competition from another hard Eurosceptic party only after the election. The PRR 'Forum for Democracy' (FvD), which had experienced a modest breakthrough in 2017, surpassed the PVV in the years after the election both in terms of media attention and electoral potential.

France

Not least due to the majoritarian electoral system, the *Front National* (now re-named *Rassemblement National*) has been a minor player in French parliament for most of its history. Yet in the two rounds of the French presidential elections, the party's leader, Marine Le Pen, received the highest vote shares ever for the party (21.3 and 33.9 per cent, respectively).

At the time of the UK's referendum, 'Mme Frexit' – as Le Pen was branded by the centre-right newspaper *Le Figaro* – was unequivocal in her praise for Brexit, stressing that 'it was

the beginning of a wider movement that would also take France' (Figaro, 2016; see also Monde, 2016). Of the 42 news items posted on the party website during June 2016, thirteen were about Brexit. Le Pen portrayed the French as 'prisoners' of the EU and the euro, unlike the newly-emancipated British (FN, 2016a). The Brexit vote had shown 'the face of true democracy' (FN, 2016b). In an interview with TIME (2016), Le Pen denounced the EU as 'objectively a total failure' and boasted she was the only major candidate to propose a membership referendum. She further declared: 'I would go to the European institutions, I would demand for the French people four sovereignties: territorial – our borders; monetary and budgetary; economic; and legislative. Either the European Union says yes to me, or they would say no, and I would say to the French, there is no only other solution but to leave the EU' (TIME, 2016). Given that her demands were highly unlikely to be agreed on by other EU members, this position came close to supporting an unconditional withdrawal.

In the period between the UK referendum and the French 2017 elections, she returned to the theme on various occasions. During a rally in Paris, Le Pen declared that her first measure as president of France would be to 'take back control' of the country's border by ending the Schengen agreement (see also FN, 2017). Brexit was evoked on fewer occasions as the election drew closer. Only three of 103 online news items from March to June 2017 were devoted to Brexit, while 33 focused on immigration. However, EU membership remained at the forefront of the party's strategy, and the party initially retained its pledge to put EU membership to the people. In Le Pen's election manifesto, the very first commitment was to 'return to France its national sovereignty in a Europe of independent nations at the service of its peoples (Le Pen, 2017: 3). To this end, the document argued, 'a negotiation will be initiated with our European partners followed by a referendum on our membership of the European Union' (Le Pen, 2017: 3). However, FN's Euroscepticism was toned down and its

position ‘recalibrated’ prior to the second round of the presidential election, and in the months afterwards (Ivaldi 2018: 286). The party signalled, for instance, that leaving the Euro was no longer a priority, and its general position on EU membership became more ambiguous.

When considering public opinion as a potential driver of FN’s position, Eurobarometer data showed that, in May 2016, 62 per cent of French disagreed with the statement that their country could better face the future outside of the EU, while 27 per cent agreed (European Commission, 2016: 102). In the Spring of 2017, the percentages were exactly the same (European Commission, 2017: 90). Ultimately, the salience of the theme should not be overestimated. The question of Europe was electorally significant in so far as it interconnected with the key issues driving voter behaviour, namely, spending power; unemployment and immigration. According to an IPSOS (2017: 13-14) poll, French voters in general, and FN supporters in particular, found these issues clearly more important than ‘European issues’ in deciding which presidential candidate to support (see Strudel, 2017: 216).

As far as competition with other parties goes, both mainstream parties and the far left had for some time espoused sceptical positions towards French EU membership. In fact, in the aftermath of the Brexit vote, all mainstream party candidates proposed significant changes to the EU. In particular, the far-left party *La France Insoumise* campaigned on a similar Eurosceptic platform to the FN’s. This might have acted as a potential driver for the FN to claim ownership of the issue, accusing rivalling parties of a ‘soft’ stand towards EU policy and consequently, presenting the FN as the true Eurosceptic party in France.

Internal party dynamics certainly influenced the FN's more general positioning on 'Europe': the clash between Le Pen and her more pronounced Eurosceptic second-in-command, Florian Philippot, was a key factor here (see Ivaldi 2018). The latter was set to keep the withdrawal from the Euro as one of the party's main campaign pledges – despite polls showing that only 22 per cent of the French (and 34 per cent of FN supporters) wanted to return to the franc (Kantar Barometer, 2017). But Le Pen herself wavered on the issue, most publicly in the TV debate between her and rival candidate Emmanuel Macron, held prior to the second election round on 3 May 2017. Her performance on the issue was considered a failure, and the challenge of formulating a coherent position on EU and Eurozone membership is likely to have contributed to the downplaying of these issues in the remainder of the 2017 French electoral cycle.

Germany

The Alternative for Germany broke through at the federal level in the election of September 2017. Under the previous leadership of Bernd Lucke (2012-2015), the party was generally considered as a single-issue Eurosceptic party (Grimm, 2015; Havertz, 2018); after a leadership shift in July 2015, the party became a clear exponent of the PRR party family (Lees, 2018).

During the days prior to the British referendum, the AfD welcomed the idea of Brexit; in fact, the co-lead candidate Alice Weidel raised the possibility of holding similar referendums across the EU, including in Germany (AfD, 2016a). The party executive moved away from this position in its post-Brexit statement on June 27th, however, instead arguing more ambiguously that there was a 'need to rethink Europe' (AfD, 2016b). The referendum result was mainly represented as a symptom of the EU's deficiencies (AfD, 2016c), and a

consequence of ill-advised policies at the federal and EU level, which had ‘provided the British people with plenty of good arguments for Brexit’ (AfD, 2016d).

The issue practically disappeared as the federal election drew closer. In the AfD’s election campaign, between June and September 2017, there were no mentions of Brexit in articles posted on the party website. The topic also remained unmentioned by Weidel during two TV debate appearances. Brexit did feature in the federal election manifesto, and the AfD outlined a consistent two-tiered strategy. In the first instance, the AfD demanded a redefinition and reorganisation of the EU as a confederation of sovereign states. Only if such a constellation proved impossible to agree on with EU partners, would Germany be ‘forced to follow the example of Great Britain and withdraw from the existing EU’ (AfD, 2017: 8). Once again, the emphasis was laid on the ill-conceived politics of the EU and the German *Altparteien* (old parties), instead of signalling the putative benefits of exiting the EU, which was recursively portrayed as a last resort.

The manifesto also revealed that AfD adopted migration and cultural issues as primary elements of its discourse, and gradually disguised Eurosceptic claims. Whilst the federal election manifesto of 2013 still placed great emphasis on the EU and the euro-bailout policies, the edition of 2017 only counted three pages out of 76 dedicated exclusively to the Eurozone, referring only sporadically to the EU in more general terms (AfD, 2013; 2017; Lees, 2018). The subordination of EU issues to more central topics in the discourse of AfD was also evident during the election campaign. From June to September 2017, only 16 out of 244 articles posted on the party website focused on the EU, in contrast to 81 articles devoted to migration or the ‘refugee crisis’.

As alluded to above, the AfD's reaction to Brexit should be understood in connection with the successive leadership changes in July 2015 and April 2017, which rebalanced the party orientation towards classic PRR topics. In contrast to the EU-centred discourses of the 'first' AfD, the election in 2017 of Gauland and Weidel as key figureheads consolidated the party's turn towards national-conservative positions, and the marginalisation of its more moderate-liberal wing (Lees, 2018; Havertz, 2018).

Such a strategy seemed electorally prudent, considering that, following a study by the Hans-Böckler-Stiftung, potential AfD voters exhibited a starker opposition to migration than to the EU (Hilmer et al., 2017: 37-40). Among the German public at large, the salience of the EU in the context of the federal election was also relatively low. Following an Infratest dimap survey, Europe and its 'crises' ranked at the very bottom of the selected 15 themes in terms of salience – it still ranked 6th in 2013 (Berliner Morgenpost, 2017). In contrast, the themes of immigration, refugees and cultural integration ranked first. Considering public attitudes towards EU membership, Eurobarometer data from May 2016 indicated that two thirds of Germans disagreed with the statement that their country could better face the future outside of the EU, while 25 per cent agreed (European Commission, 2016: 102). By May 2017, appetite for leaving the EU had ostensibly decreased: 75 per cent of respondents now disagreed with the statement, as opposed to 18 per cent who agreed (European Commission, 2017: 90).

Lastly, the competition for anti-EU issue ownership in the German party system has been nearly non-existent. Only the party on the radical left (*Die Linke*) posits an open, yet qualified, criticism to the EU. Given its position as the only right-wing Eurosceptic party, as well as the

other conditions pertaining to its opportunity structure, there were no incentives to AfD to harden or give more salience to its EU-opposition.

Italy

The *Lega Nord* (LN, the Northern League) has been analysed as a PRR party for around twenty years (e.g. Mudde, 2007). Under the leadership of Matteo Salvini, LN devised a more nationalistic strategy – illustrated by the name change into ‘Lega’ prior to the 2018 election – and also toughened its Euroscepticism (Brunazzo and Gilbert, 2017). In the 2014 elections for the European Parliament, the LN campaigned for an exit from the euro (LN, 2014: 15).

In response to the Brexit vote, the LN hailed the British voters’ decision as ‘a great episode of freedom’ (LN, 2016a). Salvini tweeted that the ‘heart, the mind and the pride [of the British people] have defeated [Europe’s] lies, threats and blackmails’. In a newspaper interview, he specified more precisely the desired implications of Brexit: ‘I would like Italy to control again its borders, currency, banks, agriculture, trade and fisheries’ (Repubblica, 2016). Yet, the LN did not advocate a complete withdrawal from the EU. Brexit was seen as the last ‘sound of the bell’ to reform and bring democracy to EU institutions (LN, 2016b). In the subsequent months, Brexit practically disappeared from the LN’s political discourse.

Brexit also hardly played any role in the LN’s strategy for the March 2018 elections. The LN ran as part of a centre-right coalition with three other parties, including the fellow right-wing Eurosceptic *Fratelli d’Italia* (FdI)³ and Silvio Berlusconi’s *Forza Italia*. Brexit did not appear in the 12-page electoral programme of the coalition, while the lengthier (74-page) manifesto of the LN only made a few brief comments on the consequences of the UK’s

³ Similar to the LN, FdI initially praised the Brexit vote as courageous (FdI, 2016), but Brexit soon disappeared from their agenda.

departure for EU politics. The party manifesto dedicated one section (out of 27) to the EU – in addition to loose references to EU policies and institutions throughout. The LN intended to stay in the EU only if the pre-Maastricht order was to be restored, which showed that Brexit did not revert the post-2013 hardening of the LN’s EU policy (cf. Brunazzo and Gilbert, 2017). At the same time, however, the party did not unconditionally advocate an exit from the EU/Eurozone, or a referendum in these matters. The party also refrained from reviving its ‘stop Euro’ campaign that started in 2014. What is more, in terms of salience, immigration rather than Europe was at the forefront of the LN’s political strategies. The party manifesto reserved thirteen per cent of its items to Europe and foreign policy, whereas law and order issues covered 40 per cent of the programme (Istituto Cattaneo, 2018). Of the 800 news items posted on the party website between July 2016 and mid-March 2018, 43 mentioned the EU/Europe, while 288 focused on immigration.

The relative downplaying of EU- or Eurozone membership in the LN’s campaign can be related, to some extent, to public opinion and the greater salience of other issues. Italian Euroscepticism has remained high – although there is no evidence that it hardened post-June 2016. Judging from Eurobarometer data, in May 2016, 42 per cent of Italians agreed that it would be better to leave the EU, against 46 per cent who disagreed (European Commission, 2016: 102). In March 2018, the percentages were 41 and 48, respectively (European Commission, 2018: 113). Whilst these figures indicate considerable demand for ‘Italexit’, most Italian voters considered socio-economic and cultural issues more important than the topic of European integration. For instance, in an early 2018 poll, reducing the retirement age and limiting the reception of refugees were a priority for 80 per cent of respondents (90 and 96 per cent, respectively, of LN supporters); leaving the EU or the Eurozone for 34 and 39 per cent, respectively (58 and 62 per cent of LN supporters). The best strategy for the LN’s

2018 electoral campaign was to campaign on the basis of cultural issues: as a study showed, the first three optimal electoral issues for *Lega* were related to immigration, while leaving the euro and the EU were only the seventh and tenth optimal items, respectively (Emanuele and de Sio, 2008).

Regarding the competition with other parties, the *Lega* was ostensibly well-placed to tap into Italian Euroscepticism. Mainstream parties (*Partito Democratico* and *Forza Italia*) traditionally ran around EU-friendly or EU-neutral platforms. In addition, the LN often criticised the Five-Star Movement for their wavering positions on the EU (see e.g. LN, 2017). For instance, Salvini condemned the reaction of M5S figurehead Beppe Grillo to Brexit for being prudent rather than jubilant and unabashed – thus presenting the LN as the genuine and the only consistently Eurosceptic party in the country (Corriere della Sera, 2016). On the other hand, the *Lega* was part of an electoral coalition with the more moderate *Forza Italia*, which, as was the case in the past, tied its hands to a certain extent. The electoral programme of the coalition was indeed less antagonistic towards (and detailed on) Europe than the LN's own manifesto.

Finally, internal party dynamics are unlikely to have prevented a fiercer Eurosceptic campaign. Although the LN has been based on delicate regional balances and was fraught in recent years with internal conflicts, the leadership of Salvini has appeared very secure (Repubblica, 2018b). Significantly, no sizable disagreements on the post-2013 intensification of Euroscepticism emerged within the party. Vocal advocates of euro-exit, like Alberto Bagnai and Claudio Borghi Aquilini, have recently ascended the party's ranks.

Discussion and Conclusion

The Brexit vote thus far failed to leave a lasting mark on the strategies of PRR parties across Europe. European integration did not feature prominently in the election campaigns of three of our four selected PRR parties (see Table 2). All of them questioned the merits of their country’s EU membership, but they did not – with the possible exception of the French FN – genuinely seek to politicise the issue. In terms of their positions, three of the PRR parties studied ultimately shied away from unambiguously calling for a unilateral withdrawal, and typically argued that membership should only be revoked in case the EU failed to fundamentally reform – thereby essentially kicking the can down the road. The Dutch PVV already advocated a Dutch departure from the EU prior to the UK referendum, but notably turned the volume *down* on the issue in its most recent election campaign.

Table 2: Political opportunity structure conditions and outcomes

	Public support for leaving EU	Public salience EU	Competition Eurosceptic parties	Party unity on EU	Position PRR on EU membership	Saliency of EU in PRR campaign
Netherlands	-	-	-/+	+	1	-
France	-/+	-	+	-	1 → 2	+ → -
Germany	-	-	-	-/+	2	-
Italy	+	-/+	+	+	2	-

Note: The table indicates the values on the various conditions and outcome from a comparative perspective: low/limited (-); moderate (-/+); or considerable (+). Regarding ‘position on EU membership’, 1 = unconditional support for leaving the EU or an EU membership referendum (‘Rejectionist Euroscepticism’); 2 = conditional support for leaving the EU or an EU membership referendum (‘Conditional Euroscepticism’); 3 = no support for leaving the EU or an EU membership referendum (‘Compromising Euroscepticism’).

There is, however, variation that is worth discussing, both in terms of PRR parties’ stances and the conditions pertaining to their political opportunity structure (see Table 2). First, we find some support for the notion that PRR parties were unlikely to politicise EU issues when public opinion towards EU membership remained largely favourable. The Brexit vote has had

little effect on public support for EU exits across our cases; if anything, support for staying in the EU has risen after the UK referendum. However, public attitudes are clearly not the sole motivator of party strategy: Geert Wilders's PVV has been hard-Eurosceptic since 2012, in a country with very limited support for leaving the EU. At the same time, the LN has remained soft-Eurosceptic despite the considerable public support for an Italian exit.

It is, therefore, also important to look at the salience of 'Europe'. In none of our selected cases was European integration considered the most salient issue by PRR supporters or the electorate at large. In line with previous research (Werts et al., 2013; McDonnell and Werner, 2018), we found no indication that EU issues are of key importance to potential PRR voters. Therefore, as long as PRR parties are successful by focusing on more tangible issues, not least those related to immigration and cultural change, their leaderships have little reason to take a risk and focus on themes that potentially divide their electorates or parties (e.g. Hoeglinger, 2016; van de Wardt, 2014). At the same time, as McDonnell and Werner (2018: 15) observed, European integration remains an issue on which PRR parties 'remain flexible to perform significant shifts', precisely because of its relatively limited salience. This appears to be demonstrated by the PVV's shift towards hard Euroscepticism in 2012 – and its downplaying of the issue (in terms of salience) in the subsequent election campaign – as well as the wavering strategy in 2017 of presidential candidate Marine Le Pen in France.

We also find support for the expectation that PRR parties have little reason to emphasise or radicalise their position on the EU when they are already the most prominent Eurosceptic forces. The AfD and PVV – which prior to the election of 2017 was still the most notable Eurosceptic party – are illustrative in this regard. In France and Italy, PRR parties faced more considerable competition from Eurosceptic rivals. In the latter country, however, LN's

Euroscepticism was tempered by its participation in an electoral coalition with a more EU-friendly party. This suggests that PRR parties may dampen their Euroscepticism when they engage in collaboration with mainstream parties and/or seek office, even when public opinion and party competition dynamics are ostensibly conducive to a hard Eurosceptic strategy. Indeed, Ivaldi (2018: 286) has cited governmental credibility and coalition potential as two incentives also for the FN to tone down its Euroscepticism. Still, given the relatively fierce competition over the ownership of the Eurosceptic issue position in France, it is understandable that, besides PVV, the FN initially flirted with an EU exit most noticeably.

Finally, intra-party disagreements have shown to be relevant to the Eurosceptic trajectories of the FN and AfD. In the case of the former, the soft-Eurosceptic wing ultimately prevailed to make way for more traditional PRR themes. Dissenter Florian Philippot left the party entirely to form his own harder Eurosceptic party. The AfD has continued to face internal divisions about the question of 'Europe', and also chose to downplay the relative attention to the issue during the 2017 campaign. In Italy and the Netherlands, intra-party dynamics were less relevant.

PRR parties' positioning and strategies on the EU are thus dictated by a complex interplay of motivations, and leadership agency ultimately appears to play a large role (Pirro and van Kessel, 2017). Even in a context with a seemingly uninviting opportunity structure, such as the Netherlands, PRR parties may choose a 'hard Eurosceptic' strategy – even though, within the PRR party family, the PVV and FvD are exceptions to the rule in taking this position. On the other hand, while the political conditions in Italy appeared most favourable to pursuing such a strategy, the Italian LN refrained from unconditionally supporting 'Italexit'.

Besides country-specific explanations, we should also consider the possible impact of the Brexit negotiations between the EU-27 and the UK. The uncertainty of the outcome, as well as the political instability in the UK, may have induced a cautious ‘wait-and-see’ approach among PRR parties. The difficult negotiation process is also likely to have played a role in declining public support for leaving the EU in other countries. Then again, our study has shown that PRR parties were reluctant seek inspiration from Brexit already prior to the genuine unfolding of the negotiation process and the related domestic upheaval in the UK. Indeed, the negotiations formally started in June 2017, when the Netherlands and France had already held their national elections

In the following few years, and prior to the European Parliament (EP) election of May 2019, PRR party behaviour did not fundamentally change. In Italy, the issue of EU membership came to prominence several times – for instance when the electoral promises of the new M5S-LN led government clashed with the Eurozone rules. The LN, often supported by the M5S, has whipped up anger against the EU, while at the same time avoiding (thus far) confrontations to spiral out of control (Economist 2019). Prior to the EP elections, the party continued to advocate reforming the EU from within, and again toned down prospects of Italy leaving the bloc. This position was virtually identical to that of Le Pen, for whom leaving the EU, by the time of the 2019 EP elections, was no longer a priority (Monde, 2019). Irrespective of continuing internal debates on German EU membership, the AfD also remained soft-Eurosceptic. In its EP election manifesto the party raised the option of ‘Dexit’, but qualified this as ‘the last option’ (AfD, 2019: 12). The Dutch PVV and FvD, on the other hand, remained hard Eurosceptic. During the course of 2019, however, FvD downplayed its desire to leave the EU, which has been related to intra-party disagreements, the difficult Brexit process, as well as broad public support for EU membership (Trouw, 2019).

Our general findings are likely to travel beyond our four cases. A more general survey of EU countries suggested that Brexit has had a minor impact on party-based Euroscepticism across the continent, and that, beyond the UK, Brexit is ‘a rather distant and abstract process, with little apparent popular resonance’ (Taggart and Szczerbiak, 2018: 1207). This was also apparent in the post-referendum national election campaigns in several other countries. In its 2017 campaign, the PRR Austrian Freedom Party refrained from following a hard-Eurosceptic trajectory, and discussed the EU at the very end of its manifesto (FPÖ, 2017). Brexit was a non-issue also in the 2017 Czech legislative elections, with no party seriously discussing any prospects of ‘Czexit’ (Kaniok, 2018). Notwithstanding the explicit Eurosceptic discourse by the Fidesz-led government (Csehi, 2018), both the parties Fidesz and Jobbik remained committed to EU membership. In the Swedish national election campaign of September 2018, the PRR Sweden Democrats showed little desire for a membership referendum (Braun, 2018).

Our findings are consistent with previous studies indicating that the various crises the EU has faced in recent years may have incentivised PRR parties to (temporarily) amplify their general criticism of ‘Europe’, but less so to unambiguously harden their position (see Pirro et al., 2018). While the presence of PRR parties may certainly contribute to the politicisation of European integration at the party-system level (e.g. Dolezal and Hellström, 2016), the issue does not always feature as a central element in those parties’ electoral strategies. Although this remains speculative and hypothetical, a general shift of PRR parties towards hard Eurosceptic positions would probably require, most of all, an increase in salience of European integration issues and a concomitant rise in ‘exit scepticism’ among European citizens (see de Vries, 2018).

There is no good reason, however, for PRR parties to drop their Euroscepticism, particularly since it links in with some of their key themes, such as national sovereignty, mistrust of elites, and resistance to opening borders and immigration. We predict that the more ‘Europe’ can credibly be connected to such issues, the more salient it itself will become. What is more, if the consequences for the UK of leaving the EU turn out to be less dire than many expect, or if a political entrepreneur is able to formulate a convincing narrative about how to manage an exit from the EU more successfully, demands for more ‘exit’ referenda may well appear back on the table (de Vries, 2017). For the moment, however, few PRR parties go as far as to support an unconditional withdrawal of their country from the EU.

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