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RECEIVED 06 October 2022

ACCEPTED 10 January 2024

PUBLISHED 24 January 2024

## CITATION

Orlando V and Conrad M (2024) Reinforcing or moderating? The impact of Brexit on Italian and German Euroscepticism. *Front. Polit. Sci.* 6:1063039. doi: 10.3389/fpos.2024.1063039

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# Reinforcing or moderating? The impact of Brexit on Italian and German Euroscepticism

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This article investigates the impact of Brexit on Eurosceptic parties' arguments for leaving (or remaining in) the European Union (EU). Drawing on a comparative design, the article looks at the images and narratives of the EU that Eurosceptic parties in Italy and Germany have advanced in the aftermath of the 2016 Brexit referendum and reflects on the broader implications in terms of the prospects of further states leaving the EU. This research is motivated by two assumptions grounded in the literature on Euroscepticism and EU polity contestation: firstly, that Euroscepticism is fuelled by external circumstances that are exploited by interested political actors; and secondly, that both the Brexit referendum and the UK's departure from the EU have had a profound impact on discourses on the EU within member states, most importantly because this process has highlighted the real possibility of replacing EU membership with trade agreements and other specific arrangements. By means of a comparative analysis of the development of Eurosceptic discourse in Italy and Germany after Brexit, the article reveals that on the structural level, Eurozone membership remains the main obstacle to leaving the EU. Yet on the ideological level, Eurosceptic discourse in the two countries centers on two principles that are at odds with each other. Beyond the alleged lack of democratic representation within EU institutions that is pointed out by Eurosceptic parties in both countries, the main criticism of the EU project in Germany is that the country shares the costs of states with lower economic outputs. In Italy, on the other hand, the criticism is that the EU benefits wealthier states while constraining the country's opportunities for development.

## KEYWORDS

Brexit, EU integration theory, Euroscepticism, Italian politics, German politics, European disintegration

## 1 Introduction

Brexit reinforced the idea that European integration might be reversible, showing how a member state can renegotiate the terms of its membership of the European Union (EU), hold a referendum on continued membership, and ultimately leave the EU in a relatively short time (Rosamond, 2016). The idea that an exit from the EU is possible, and that the path to achieving this goal has already been traced, has changed public perceptions of the EU and provided new arguments to Eurosceptic actors (Taggart and Szczerbiak, 2018). Against this backdrop, this article analyses the impact of Brexit on discursive Euroscepticism (De Wilde and Trenz, 2012) among political parties in Germany and Italy and considers the possibility that one of the two countries might leave the EU in the near future. This is done by analyzing the ways in which the EU has been represented in Eurosceptic political parties' discourse in the two countries, specifically by assessing the impact of the core ideas underlying the disintegration process. In doing so, the study pursues the dual objective of discussing European disintegration at a systemic level by

shedding light on the impact of the Brexit process on Eurosceptic discourse among German and Italian political parties. This ambition contributes to the literature on European disintegration by tracing the process through which external events catalyze Eurosceptic discourse at the national level. The two cases selected here are particularly relevant as both Italy and Germany are large founding members of the integration process that have witnessed, over the last 10–15 years, the emergence of important Eurosceptic movements and the use of Eurosceptic rhetoric by pre-existing political parties.

Following this brief introduction, the second section presents a literature review that positions this study within – and clarifies its contribution to – the literatures on *European disintegration* and *Euroscepticism*. The third section introduces the article's analytical framework and explains the article's choices in terms of case selection and the comparative approach. The fourth section presents the empirical analysis, i.e., a comparison of the main themes addressed by Eurosceptic parties in Italy and Germany in the wake of the Brexit referendum. This empirical analysis begins with a brief introduction to the main political parties that can be characterized as Eurosceptic in the two countries, followed by a comparison of the specific themes addressed by these parties in creating negative (or positive) images of the EU. This comparison highlights the impact of structural crises within the union – which are considered to have played a central role in the Leave campaign (Hobolt, 2016) – on the positions advocated by the parties examined here. On the basis of these findings, the fifth section presents a concluding discussion that addresses possible future trajectories of Eurosceptic discourse in the two countries as well as the prospect of one or both of the two countries leaving the EU. Although Brexit has strengthened Eurosceptic positions in both countries, this process has played out very differently due to different ideological forces at play, but the possibility of leaving the union seems unlikely in both cases.

## 2 Brexit, Euroscepticism, and European disintegration

### 2.1 Brexit as a case study in European disintegration

Following Vollaard (2014), European disintegration can be viewed as a process caused by the dissatisfaction of member states toward the EU. Unless they are able to reform the aspects of their membership that they consider to be problematic, this can lead them to re-evaluate and potentially also terminate their membership. Disintegration is, however, an umbrella term that goes beyond covering only the most extreme scenario of states leaving the EU. Instead, the concept also covers institutional reform or an intensification of Eurosceptic positions amongst mainstream political parties. This process can be facilitated by inequality of opportunities, i.e., the perception by a member state of being unable to affect EU governance (Jones, 2018). In this regard, Brexit sets a precedent that has reinforced such mechanisms. But this precedent is arguably not sufficient *on its own* to fundamentally alter the pre-existing integration trajectories of other member states. Furthermore, there is a broad range of Eurosceptic positions

that can change over time due to external circumstances. That said, it is still the case that the dominant narrative on European integration and/or the EU has changed over the last decade both in Italy (Brunazzo and Mascitelli, 2021) and in Germany (Krouwel and Abts, 2007). In order to come up with a nuanced analysis of the trajectories of the two states, it is therefore necessary to consider both structural and ideological factors.

To account for the impact of structural factors in how Brexit was processed within the two countries, it is useful to look at the deeply connected aspects of immigration and economic sovereignty. The literature has widely highlighted the centrality of these two areas on Euroscepticism, looking at their role in the Brexit referendum and the political debate in the other member states. EU membership entails significant compromises both in terms of circulation of people and economic policies. It is therefore unsurprising that these two spheres were central in the negotiations unsuccessfully carried on by David Cameron in the years preceding the Brexit referendum. In the cases of Germany and Italy, the impact of EU policies is even more significant considering how the two countries are also part of the Eurozone. As regards immigration, both member states adhere to the Dublin Regulation, which provides that the state in which the asylum seeker applies first is responsible for processing the claim. As a country with no extra-European borders, Germany benefits from this regulation over countries such as Italy or Greece. During the refugee crisis, the attitudes of the German electorate toward asylum seekers shifted from being extremely welcoming in the early phases to a critical one (Conrad and Aðalsteinsdóttir, 2017). Accordingly, it is not surprising that, after suspending the application of the Dublin Regulation in 2015, the Merkel government returned to more conservative positions in the following years (Zaun and Ripoll Servent, 2021).

In Italy, a country at the center of migratory routes from Africa, the politicization of migration has followed a different trajectory. Over the years, the League and the Brothers of Italy (Fratelli d'Italia/FdI) have focused heavily on the danger associated with migrants and asylum seekers (a distinction rarely made in the two parties' political discourse).<sup>1</sup> The League's attitude toward immigration revolves around the criminalization of NGOs, and attacks on the judiciary, the press, and the European Union, presented as an establishment distant from the concerns of the population in line with the populist rhetoric discussed earlier (Berti, 2021). The EU is considered responsible due to its inability (or disinterest) to support the country. Despite this, the League was conspicuously absent from the work in the European Parliament to reform the Dublin system, at the same time exacerbating the problem of illegal immigration through two widely contested

1 In this sense, the fact that Salvini held the role of Minister of Internal Affairs in the coalition government between Lega and M5S is part of a precise political strategy. This institutional role allowed the leader of the League to define the government's agenda in substantial autonomy concerning immigration, focusing on arrivals by sea and on NGOs rescue operations in the Mediterranean. However, the latter represented a fraction of the migrants coming to Italy, and the former an even smaller percentage (Geddes and Petrachin, 2020).

security decrees as they made it more challenging to stabilize the situation of immigrants in Italy (Geddes and Pettrachin, 2020).

In the presence of other external crises, Eurosceptic actors might leverage their old narratives to take advantage of changing public attitudes toward the EU. In this context, Brexit constitutes an important precedent, as it offers a blueprint for conducting a successful Eurosceptic campaign and provides the only empirical case of successful effort to leave the EU. It is, therefore, possible to expect that EU membership will continue to be a contested issue, leading political actors to exploit it as a distinctive and polarizing element in the domestic political arena. In this sense, the emergence of a Eurosceptic public sphere observed by the literature already before Brexit (Gattermann and Vasilopoulou, 2017) is a signal that the future of the EU will depend on its ability to balance these political forces by changing in those areas that most expose it to Eurosceptic criticism.

## 2.2 Euroscepticism

The perception that the EU is an institution inadequate to meet the needs of member states is at the heart of Eurosceptic positions. Following (Vasilopoulou, 2017), this analysis is based on a multidimensional understanding of Euroscepticism that has the dual objective of understanding its causes and uncovering its consequences at a systemic level. The approach chosen for this purpose is the comparative study of political parties, and specifically of their attitude toward the European integration project and the possibility of extending the Union's competencies (Szczerbiak and Taggart, 2017). The choice to focus on political parties is motivated by their capacity to reinforce and shape Eurosceptic discourse as well as to leverage opposition to the EU to their advantage. The case of Brexit indicates that the process leading to the referendum was significantly influenced by dynamics internal to the Conservative party.

The literature has extensively explored the ties between Euroscepticism and European disintegration, showing how Eurosceptic actors center their discourse around a complete rejection of the status quo (e.g., Alonso-Muñoz and Casero-Ripollés, 2020; Rump, 2022), to the point of recurring to factually incorrect statements to mobilize support and promote their narrative. This strategy has been central in the Leave campaign (Orlando, 2022), but it has also been adopted in Germany by the *Alternative for Germany* during the 2019 European Parliament elections (Conrad, 2022). The tendency of Eurosceptic parties to exploit external crises to advance their narrative and promote negative images of the EU has also been explored with particular attention to the financial crisis of 2008 (Pirro and Van Kessel, 2017, 2018; Pirro et al., 2018) and to the refugee crisis that began in 2014 (Stockemer et al., 2020). In this article, Brexit is viewed as an additional external factor that can be instrumentalised in a similar way. Indeed, the Referendum constitutes an additional opportunity for Eurosceptic actors to voice their grievances, as it demonstrates the possibility of leaving the EU on the grounds of concerns about national sovereignty.

In analyzing the Leave campaign's impact on the narratives of the EU that are promoted by Eurosceptic parties in Italy and

Germany, this article speaks directly to theoretical propositions about the potentially disintegrative momentum unleashed by Brexit, i.e., the idea that Brexit may in the short to medium term launch the integration process on a “centrifugal” or “centripetal trajectory” (Cini and Verdun, 2018): Brexit could result in closer integration of the remaining member states, but it could also trigger a domino effect and thus result in the withdrawal of more states.

## 3 Analytical framework, case selection, and methodological considerations

The analysis of the images and narratives advanced by Eurosceptic parties in Italy and Germany is based on a comparative analysis of the relevant parties' party platforms, elections manifestos, and public statements from relevant actors within the different parties. The study starts by looking at the how the position of Eurosceptic parties toward the EU was affected by the Brexit referendum. Against this backdrop, it then compares the state of Euroscepticism in the two countries.

### 3.1 Case selection: why Italy and Germany?

The choice to compare the impact of Brexit on Eurosceptic actors in Italy and Germany is motivated by the observation that while the two states share certain significant similarities, there are also relevant differences that are important to address. In terms of similarities, the two countries are amongst the largest EU members both economically and in terms of population. However, Euroscepticism, and Eurosceptic discourse in the two countries are based on opposite assumptions. Broadly speaking, while German Euroscepticism (initially) framed the EU as an institution that compels Germany to “rescue” other member states in times of financial crisis, Italian Eurosceptics frame the EU and, in particular, its monetary policy as driven by excessive austerity, with Germany frequently being framed as the main promoter of such policies.

The impact of structural factors, particularly the EU's economic and monetary policies, on Euroscepticism and the union's legitimacy crisis has been widely studied (Notermans and Piattoni, 2017). Germany and Italy are countries in which European austerity policies have resulted in vastly different outcomes. This disparity between the center and the southern periphery of the Eurozone has, in turn, been exploited by actors critical of the EU (Notermans and Piattoni, 2021) and has resulted in very different Eurosceptic discourses. In Germany, the AfD's initial focus was on the risk of rescuing countries perceived as less virtuous, e.g., Italy.<sup>2</sup> By contrast, for parties such as Lega, FdI and the M5S, the central narrative explained Italy's crisis as a consequence of the Euro and the loss of sovereignty imposed by an EU construed to be much closer to the interests of core members.

<sup>2</sup> The AfD was born in the context of the European debt crisis and only began to adopt its anti-immigration positions after 2015 (Arzheimer and Berning, 2019; Conrad, 2020).

For Germany, participation in the Eurozone made it possible to implement, at the EU level, the same policies underlying the German financial success, such as controlling inflation and public debt (Sepos, 2016). For Italy (and other countries with historically weaker economies), joining the common currency has involved an attempt to restructure its economy to align itself with German monetary policies (Sepos, *ibid*). This contrast is reflected in the Eurosceptic discourse of the respective countries. In Italy, the two right-wing parties and the M5S have promoted potentially inflationary policies to revive the Italian economy, a position perfectly reflected by Salvini's promise to "tear up the European rules that massacre Italy" (Reuters, 2019). This approach is also visible within the M5S, which in 2014 asked for a referendum in case Europe should be unable to support member states and, in 2019, continued to underline the need for Europe to guarantee growth-oriented reforms by loosening public budget constraints (Il Sole 24 Ore, 2019). As for Germany, the AfD adopted a position *opposite* to that of the Italian sovereignists, stressing that the main risk for Germany is to bail out other member states. This approach was also reiterated by party founder Bernd Lucke, according to whom Greece should have left the Eurozone as it could not fulfill the conditions required by the EU (Lucke and Armbrüster, 2018).

In *ideological* terms, Brexit affected Eurosceptic discourse in Italy and Germany by demonstrating the distinct possibility of a member state leaving the EU. This has allowed Eurosceptic actors to frame withdrawal from the EU both as necessary *and* possible: at least, the decision to leave the EU could be shown to be beneficial, or at least far from the catastrophic scenarios envisioned in the pro-EU discourse. Brexit is, therefore, relevant as it helps build the idea that a future outside the EU does not pose an existential threat to the former member states. This point is underlined by a Facebook post by Matteo Salvini in January 2021, claiming that "in the UK of Brexit," the state reimbursed citizens whose activities were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic (Salvini, 2021). The choice to conflate Brexit with emergency measures for the pandemic constitutes an attempt to strengthen a dichotomy that is central to Eurosceptic populist discourse, centered around sovereign states close to the people vs. the directives of EU bureaucrats. In post-Brexit Eurosceptic discourse, the UK thus became success story to be praised and a model to be emulated.

The present analysis includes four parties that can be characterized as Eurosceptic – three in Italy and one in Germany. They were selected on the basis of political relevance *and* stances on European integration. While there are several parties that promote decidedly Eurosceptic positions in Italy, our analysis includes Eurosceptic parties that were elected to Parliament in the 2018 general elections, namely *Lega*/the League, *Movimento Cinque Stelle*/the Five-Star Movement (M5S), and *Fratelli d'Italia*/the Brothers of Italy (FdI). The motivation for this choice is that our interest is in parties that are politically relevant, which results in leaving out some parties from the far-left (e.g., Power to the People/PaP and the Communist Party/PC) and the far-right (e.g., CasaPound Italy and the coalition Italy for the Italians/FN-FT).<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> These parties obtained between 0.3 and 1% of the popular vote, thus falling far short of the 3% threshold needed to be elected into Parliament. While similar to the two main right-wing parties' positions on European

integration, the far-right parties excluded from the analysis tend to employ a harsher language and advocate for more drastic solutions than parties with governmental ambitions (Froio and Gattinara, 2015). In contrast, the far-left positions on the EU are rather distant from those of the mainstream Eurosceptic parties. The concluding part of the empirical section will include some observations on Italian left-wing Euroscepticism.

## 3.2 Materials and methods

The material analyzed in this article consists of party platforms, election manifestos and public statements of relevant figures within the analyzed parties. This material has been collected via the party's websites (party platforms and election manifestos) as well as via traditional mainstream media and digital media (public statements). The selection of this type of material is motivated by the observation that the negative representation of the EU in news coverage is one of the driving forces of Euroscepticism (Galpin and Trenz, 2019). In terms of selection criteria, the analysis only includes material originating from by the selected parties and/or relevant political figures associated with these parties. This approach allows us to focus on the impact of Brexit in terms of shaping narratives on the EU in the two countries.

The analysis of qualitative content is a first step to discuss the characteristics of Euroscepticism in the political discourse of the two countries. The comparison between the two cases allows us to highlight the peculiarities of each country and to assess how their integration trajectories could be affected by Brexit. Connected to this, the material furthermore illustrates the two states' different perceptions of EU institutions and, ultimately, also differences in identification with the European project. This is particularly visible in how the national discourse differed with regard to two frames that were also at the center of the Brexit campaign: monetary policies and migration.

## 4 Empirical analysis: German and Italian Euroscepticism after Brexit

### 4.1 Brief overview of Eurosceptic political parties in Italy and Germany

#### 4.1.1 The Five Star Movement

In the 2018 general elections, the M5S became the largest Italian party with 32% of the votes, up from the 25% obtained in 2013. The party was characterized from the outset by advocating

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popular sovereignty and criticizing the Italian political system, the functioning of representative democracy, and an EU that was considered to be undemocratic. In the 2014 EP elections, the party ran on a 7-point program, including a referendum to exit the Euro, the end of austerity measures, and the abolition of the European Fiscal Compact (Grillo, 2014). Although the party joined the *Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy* (EFDD) parliamentary group after the elections, an analysis of its MEPs' voting behavior shows how the party rarely voted alongside the UKIP and other EFDD members, but often voted alongside Social-Democratic and Green parties (Franzosi et al., 2015; Salvati, 2019). Notably, the party's 20-point election platform from the 2018 general elections did not mention the EU (Movimento Cinque Stelle, 2018). In its campaign for the European Parliament elections the following year, on the other hand, the party ran on a reformist platform that explicitly distanced itself from nationalist and Eurosceptic movements (Blog delle Stelle, 2019). In this platform, the party explicitly described itself as "Europeanist" and aiming to relaunch Italy and restart Europe. In the platform's foreign policy section, subsection on Europe (pp. 202–230), the party advocated institutional reform in order to close the democracy gap between citizens and EU institutions, arguing for the need to change the treaties and implement more Keynesian monetary and fiscal policies, and even discussing the possibility to extend the powers of the European Central Bank and building a common EU defense/foreign policy in order to reinforce the position of Europe internationally. After the EFDD's dissolution in 2019, the Movement has not become affiliated with any other parliamentary group.

#### 4.1.2 The Northern League

The other main Eurosceptic party in Italy, the Northern League (LN), has progressively moved from the regionalist stances that it had held since the early nineties (when the party aspired to achieve the independence of Northern Italy) to more nationalistic positions during the 2000s, in particular since Matteo Salvini's election as party secretary in 2013. Between 1994 and 2011, the party was part of four coalition governments led by Silvio Berlusconi, contrary to other far-right European parties generally confined to the opposition (Passarelli, 2013). After Salvini's election, the party has taken more markedly Eurosceptic and nationalist positions, which has also had an impact on its rhetoric (Öner, 2020). Originally, the Northern League's discourse was centered on the idea that the Italian government, personified by Rome, represented an obstacle to the sovereignty of the North. Under Salvini, the party has maintained a similar ideological structure, but has identified Brussels as the undemocratic center of power where distant bureaucrats undermine national sovereignty (Ansa, 2015; La Repubblica, 2015; Corriere della Sera, 2016). The party's original anti-Southern rhetoric has faded away and become replaced by the theme (already present in the past) of extra-European immigration. The recurring image of the criminal immigrant from Southern Italy, unable to integrate into society, stealing jobs from Northerners and abusing the welfare system, has now been replaced by the image of non-EU immigrants (Brunazzo and Gilbert, 2017). According to Maggini and Chiaramonte (2019) analysis of the contents shared on social media by LN, the European dimension

had only a marginal role in the 2018 electoral campaign due to the fact that at this point, the party was part of a coalition with Forza Italia (FI) and other parties with diverging positions concerning European integration. The party's discourse on the EU has therefore arguably been determined more by its government alliances than by external factors such as Brexit.<sup>4</sup> In the 2019 European Parliament elections, the party supported the manifesto of the Eurosceptic Movement for a Europe of Nations and Freedom (MENF) that was later merged into the *Identity and Democracy* group (Lega Salvini Premier, 2018). However, the party's participation in a government coalition with the Democratic Party (PD), suggests that the LN has repositioned itself as a governing party with little interest in leaving the EU.

#### 4.1.3 The Brothers of Italy

The 2022 general elections saw Giorgia Meloni's *Brothers of Italy* (Fratelli d'Italia) win the highest share of votes of all parties (26%). Consequently, the party became the leader of the new center-right coalition government. As suggested by a quantitative content analysis of Facebook posts during the 2018 election campaign, the party extensively drew on the narrative of elites threatening Italian values such as, e.g., the traditional family, and of immigrants unable or unwilling to integrate into Italian society. However, Europe is rarely mentioned in this context (Bobba and Roncarolo, 2018).

#### 4.1.4 The Alternative for Germany

Given Germany's deep-rooted commitment to European integration, Euroscepticism has traditionally not been a politically relevant phenomenon in the country (e.g., Lees, 2002; *Alternative für Deutschland*, 2019; Böttger and Tekin, 2021). This has however changed significantly over the EU's decade of crisis. Evidently, the increasing contentiousness of European integration did not begin with Brexit, but Brexit has nonetheless contributed to the dynamic development of EU polity (and policy) contestation in Germany in this period (Baloge, 2021). However, the most relevant events that have resulted in and shaped the emergence of a politically relevant Euroscepticism in Germany are the Eurozone debt crisis, in particular the "Greek bailouts," as well as the refugee crisis of 2015–2016. These events have resulted in the emergence and gradual radicalization of the Alternative for Germany (AfD) as the country's first politically relevant Eurosceptic party (Arzheimer, 2015; Decker, 2016; Lees, 2018; Conrad, 2020). As the analysis below will demonstrate, Euroscepticism and EU polity contestation are phenomena that are largely confined to the AfD in the German context, and are set against the backdrop of a broad consensus of the continued desirability of European integration (Conrad et al., 2019). Similar to the Italian case, there is however also a politically relevant criticism of the current form of European integration. As

<sup>4</sup> Just in the years following the 2018 general elections, LN has left the centre-right coalition to form a government with the M5S, then returned to the opposition after the 2019 European Parliament elections while the M5S formed a coalition government with the Democratic Party (PD), and ultimately joined a national unity government led by Draghi (2021) in February.

a case in point, the German Left Party (Die Linke) is profoundly skeptical of the presumably *neoliberal* orientation of the European project (Die Linke, 2019), but staunchly emphasized the high value of European integration as well as the need to defend the project against right-wing populism in its manifesto for the 2019 EP elections (ibid.; see analysis below).

As the only politically relevant Eurosceptic party in Germany, the AfD emerged as a direct consequence of the Merkel government's handling of the Eurozone debt crisis and, in particular, the "Greek bailout packages" (Arzheimer, 2015; Grimm, 2015; Böttger and Tekin, 2021). The party was founded in 2013, its name alluding to Angela Merkel's oft-quoted statement that there was no alternative to bailing out Greece and saving the Euro. At the time of its founding, the party was essentially a party of academics, drawing its support primarily from disgruntled supporters of the conservative CDU and the liberal FDP. However, it has also been observed that the party was *also* supported, from the outset, by voters on the far right of the political spectrum, and also that the party from very early on attempted to utilize its appeal to such voters. The party's development is therefore also a story of an increasing radicalization, as the party gradually transformed from a single-issue soft Eurosceptic party (Grimm, 2015), aiming to withdraw Germany from Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) while staying in the EU, into a radical-right populist party, focusing mostly on issues of immigration and multiculturalism (Goerres et al., 2018), that ultimately also called for a more or less unconditional withdrawal from the union.

## 4.2 Themes addressed by the selected parties

Our analysis points to four themes that are particularly salient in the way the selected parties construe the EU in the selected materials. These four themes are (1) the need for a fundamental reform of the EU and its institutions; (2) the EU as a threat to national sovereignty and/or democracy; (3) the EU as a threat to national identity/culture/way of life; and (4) the EU as a threat to economic prosperity. In the following sections, we will now look at how those four themes were used by the respective parties. In doing so, we will highlight the role and impact of the Brexit process by emphasizing the ways in which Brexit has been taken up as a point of reference and either enhanced or moderated the respective parties' Eurosceptic discourse (see Table 1 for a summary of the findings of the thematic analysis).

## 4.3 Fundamental reform of the EU

The first theme that is commonly addressed in the analyzed material is the need for a fundamental reform of the EU and its institutional architecture, which is frequently connected to claims for a transfer of decision-making authority back to the member states. This theme can be addressed in quite contradictory ways: in some cases, it can be used as a way of promoting the dissolution of the EU in its current form, but it can also be used as a way to promote – and indeed *save* – the very idea of European integration.

TABLE 1 Summary of findings of the thematic analysis.

Theme	Used by	Impact of Brexit
Fundamental reform of the EU	Lega, FdI, AfD	<i>Reinforced</i> Euroscepticism
	M5S	<i>Moderated</i> Euroscepticism
Threat to national sovereignty/ democracy	Lega, FdI	Reinforced claims for renegotiation of relationship with EU
	M5S	Reinforced claims for democratic reform
	AfD	Reference point in hardening Euroscepticism
Threat to national identity/culture/way of life	FdI	Unchanged
Threat to economic prosperity	AfD	Reinforced claims for a German exit from the Eurozone and/or the EU

Possibly the most interesting finding regarding the impact of Brexit on Eurosceptic parties in Italy and Germany consequently also has to do with their respective positions regarding the claim for a fundamental reform of the EU. Before Brexit, all parties included in our analysis emphasized the need for such a fundamental reform. After Brexit, on the other hand, we see a shift in emphasis on a subtle, but very important point: while the stance of parties such as Lega, FdI and the AfD hardens, the positions of the M5S in fact shows a certain ambivalence, thereby suggesting a moderating effect of Brexit (see below).

In the German context, the AfD advocated for a fundamental reform of the EU already *pre-Brexit*. In its first federal election campaign in 2013, where the party received 4.7% of the votes and fell just short of making it into parliament, the party's main concern was the German government's handling of the Eurozone debt crisis, not membership of the EU as such. Consequently, a withdrawal from the EU was not mentioned in the election manifesto, but what was included was the demand that Germany should push for the right of member states to leave the Eurozone. Having said that, the party promoted the vision of a "Europe of sovereign nation states with a common market" (*Alternative für Deutschland*, 2013, p. 1) already at that point. Brexit then had a clear impact on the party's position on German EU membership and the demand for a fundamental reform of the EU's institutional architecture. Already in the party manifesto for the 2017 federal elections (the first federal elections in the immediate aftermath of the Brexit referendum), the party demanded a referendum on Germany's continued membership of EMU and "potentially also the EU" (*Alternative für Deutschland*, 2017, p. 14). This demand cannot be explained exclusively by Brexit, but the explicit reference to "the British role model" (ibid.) clearly underlines the impetus given by the recent Brexit referendum. In terms of institutional reform, the 2017 election manifesto also expressed the party's continued commitment to reducing the EU to a confederation of sovereign nation states. Arguably, the Brexit process also motivated

the explicit emphasis on article 50 TEU and the right of member states to leave the EU (ibid.: 7), as it was Brexit that first drew attention to the existence of this treaty article. But maybe most strikingly, the AfD's manifesto explicitly urged that "Germany has to follow the example of Great Britain and leave the EU" (ibid.: 8) *unless* the goal of reducing the institutional scope of the EU could be achieved. The party's insistence on a fundamental reform (or better: reduction of the EU's supranational powers) then hardened in the context of the 2019 EP and 2021 German federal elections. In the manifestos for these elections, the claim for a German exit from the EU (now referred to as "Dexit") is notably connected to the EU's supranational powers: the only way for the party to support continued membership is if the EU would be reformed along the lines of a Europe of sovereign nation states. The causal impact of Brexit is also clear here, as Brexit is explicitly "respect(ed) as a sovereign decision of the British citizens to leave the EU"; if anyone is to blame for Brexit, it is "the EU's political classes" which are claimed to have caused "severe damage to Europe" (*Alternative für Deutschland*, 2019: 13). At this point, "DEXIT" is included as a separate subchapter in chapter 2 of the 2019 EP manifesto ("A Europe of Nations"), proposing a German exit or, alternatively, a dissolution of the EU and the founding of a new "European economic and interest-based community" (ibid.: 12). Finally, Dexit becomes a declared aim of the AfD in the campaign for the German federal elections in 2021. The party's manifesto now demands Dexit as a *necessary* step without qualification (*Alternative für Deutschland*, 2021, p. 28), without leaving institutional reform as any sort of backdoor. Consequently, the manifesto advocates for the founding of a new "European economic and interest-based community" (ibid.) and supports this by claiming that the EU's "transformation into a planned-economy superstate" shows that the EU cannot be reformed fundamentally (ibid.).<sup>5</sup>

In Italy, Giorgia Meloni's Brothers of Italy (FdI) insisted on the renegotiation of all European treaties, with particular attention to the single market and migration policies (*Fratelli D'Italia*, 2018). The party's 15-points program in 2018 mentioned the EU already at the second point, titled "Italy and Italians first."

By comparison, Brexit has a very different impact on the development of the Five-Star-Movement's (M5S) Euroscepticism. *Pre-Brexit*, the party's Euroscepticism was characterized by a demand for fundamental institutional reform, as underlined by, e.g., Beppe Grillo's 7 points for Europe ahead of the 2014 EP elections: the leader of M5S demanded an increase of the 3% balance deficit, abolition of the principle of a balanced budget, abolition of the fiscal compact and, notably, a referendum on Eurozone membership (Grillo, 2014; *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, 2014). But the Brexit referendum drew attention to the potentially existential threat that it represented to the integration process. In the aftermath of the Brexit vote, M5S therefore warned that the EU was "going to die" unless it changed, thereby suggesting that European integration does have a high value that should not be relinquished. This is an important point because it

suggests a *moderating* effect of Brexit on this particular party's Euroscepticism. It is also against this backdrop that we need to see the fact that the M5S did not take a clear position with respect to the need for an Italian referendum on EU membership (*La Repubblica*, 2016; Zaffarano, 2016).

However, this finding also has to be seen in the context of Italian domestic politics. The Conte I coalition government between M5S and Lega (June 2018 to September 2019) started with some controversies over the proposed appointment of the economist Paolo Savona as Minister of the Economy. Designated by the M5S, Savona – who had advocated an emergency plan to leave the Eurozone – ultimately became Minister of European Affairs due to the opposition of the President of the Republic (*La Repubblica*, 2018). While this rough start, culminating as it did with Luigi di Maio (M5S) advocating the impeachment of Mattarella, could have suggested a Eurosceptic turn for Italy, the Conte I government's policies with the respect to the EU turned out to be in continuity with its predecessors. Accordingly, the two parties' coalition agreement only addressed the need to protect Italian interests in Europe and reform the existing treaties, but did not mention the possibility of leaving the Eurozone, let alone the EU (*Movimento Cinque Stelle and Lega Nord*, 2018).

Strikingly, the example of Brexit did not necessarily constitute an example for Italy to follow for Matteo Salvini's Lega, either. When the Brexit negotiations ended in December 2020, Salvini expressed his support for the UK government and defined the negotiations' end as a *victory for democracy*, but did not go as far as framing Brexit as an example to follow for Italy (*Libero*, 2020).

#### 4.4 Threat to national sovereignty/democracy

A second central theme in the Eurosceptic discourse of the analyzed parties concerns the EU as a threat to national sovereignty and/or democracy. In Italy, this theme is particularly salient in the cases of the Lega and FdI, both of which construe and celebrate Brexit as a triumph of democracy in the days following the referendum (*Il Sole 24 Ore*, 2016; *Rai News*, 2016). The two parties' initial enthusiasm could be interpreted as a consequence of the need to conform to their electorate's expectations rather than by a concrete intention to follow in the UK's footsteps. In the years following the referendum, both parties have distanced themselves from hard Eurosceptic stances. Although the two parties' leaders occasionally mentioned the option of an Italian referendum on membership, the possibility of leaving the EU was not addressed in their respective programs.

With regard to FdI, Giorgia Meloni did not directly comment on the UK's withdrawal from the European Union. However, in an open letter published in the *Corriere della Sera* (2021) in late December 2020, she discussed the position of the European right on the EU in her role as chairperson of the European Conservatives and Reformists Party (ECR) (*Galici*, 2020). Though not referring directly to Brexit, the letter emphasized how conservative parties are not opposed to the EU, but to how it interferes with citizens' rights. The leader of FdI also warned against the risks of a Franco-German coalition dictating EU's policies. Brexit is not

<sup>5</sup> The inclusion of this demand came as the result of a hard-fought battle at the party's convention in Dresden in April 2021 and was interpreted as a defeat for the moderate party chair and MEP Jörg Meuthen (who ultimately left the party in January 2022) and other moderate forces within the party.

explicitly addressed here, but Meloni mentioned the danger of excessive interference by the two largest member states after the UK's departure.

Similarly, the Lega construed Brexit as an opportunity for changing Italy's relationship to the EU rather than as an opportunity to break away from the union. In its program for the 2018 general elections, the party did not refer directly to Brexit, but addressed the undermining of Italian sovereignty and democracy by construing the EU as a "gigantic supranational body, devoid of a true democratic legitimacy [...]" that sets the agenda for our Governments [...]" remarking how Italy's membership of the EU should be conditional to the re-discussion of all treaties, especially in the areas of monetary and migration policies (Lega Salvini Premier, 2019). This rhymes with the FdI's manifesto for the 2019 EP elections opens with the proposal to reform Europe, transforming it from a "giant led by bureaucrats" into a "confederation of free and sovereign states," replacing Brussels as the capital with Athens or Rome (Fratelli D'Italia, 2019). By comparison, M5S did not express a clear stance on Brexit after the end of the negotiations, but Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio mentioned the consequences of the deal for Italian citizens in the United Kingdom, without addressing the impact of Brexit on his party's position (Rai News, 2020).

#### 4.5 Threat to national identity/culture/way of life

A theme that was fairly pronounced in the discourse of the *Brothers of Italy*/FdI construed the EU as a threat to national identity, culture and/or way of life. Interestingly, the program presented for the 2022 elections did not include any significant Eurosceptic contents besides general remarks of how the interests and culture of Italy must be protected (Fratelli D'Italia, 2022). However, the program emphasized the need to protect Italy and its citizens from the EU, which serves the interests of high finance while threatening national identities (Fratelli D'Italia, 2019). Similarly, and consistent with the previous year's electoral campaign, the FdI's 2022 program reiterated the party's support for welfare and the traditional family as well as protection of national borders from migrants (Fratelli D'Italia, 2019).

#### 4.6 Threat to economic/monetary stability

Conversely, the theme of economic and monetary stability plays a key role in the Eurosceptic discourse of the AfD in Germany. In fact, this aspect constitutes one of the founding pillars of the party, considering that the party originally emerged as a "professors' party" critical of the Merkel government's handling of the Eurozone debt crisis. In fact, when the party first ran for the European Parliament in 2014 (receiving 7.1 % of the vote and getting seven candidates elected to the EP), a German exit from the EU was still not considered as an option in the manifesto. However, the AfD demanded a dissolution of the Eurozone, or a complete reorientation of monetary policy, or alternatively a smaller monetary system of "stability-oriented member states" (Alternative für Deutschland, 2014). In its manifesto for the

2017 federal elections, the party described Germany's citizens as the "paymasters of Europe" who are made to pay for the continuously growing debt of other EU member states (Alternative für Deutschland, 2017: 8). Brexit has given additional momentum to this claim. In the same manifesto, the AfD explicitly referred to the "British role model" in demanding that "the German people be allowed to vote on Germany's continued membership of the Eurozone and potentially also the EU" (ibid.).

## 5 Conclusion: possible future trajectories of Euroscepticism in Italy and Germany

This article explored the links between Brexit and European disintegration by analyzing Eurosceptic parties' discourse/narratives on the EU in Italy and Germany. Specifically, it examined how such parties within the two countries framed Brexit in their respective narratives of the EU. Analyzing these dynamics allows us to understand better how the process of European disintegration was influenced by Brexit, allowing us to hypothesize the future developments of the phenomenon. Based on material collected from news articles, social media, and election programs, the analysis looked at Brexit as a potential catalyst alongside the two main events indicated by the literature as turning points in Euroscepticism: the European debt crisis and the migrant crisis. The analysis showed that Eurosceptic parties within the two countries understood Brexit threefold: as a sign of the decline of the EU, as an example of democracy in action, and as proof that there is an alternative to the mode European integration advocated and defended by the elites.

The empirical analysis revealed certain differences between the Italian and German cases. In Italy, the League and the Five-Star Movement softened their stance on leaving the EU and the common currency, largely due to their coalition governments between 2018 and 2019 and from 2021 to 2022. In Germany, the development of the AfD – which has never been part of any government, whether at the federal or at the regional level – underscores the continued salience of the issue of European integration and EU membership, especially as a means to promote a narrative critical of the government and/or elites more broadly.

The two countries also differ in how the two crises mentioned above have been metabolized in their respective Eurosceptic discourses. Concerning the Eurozone crisis, Eurosceptic parties in Italy consider the austerity measures imposed by the EU as a form of tyranny and a limit to its development. In Germany, the main concern was having to bail out other member states unable to meet the criteria established by Brussels. As for immigration, Italy was portrayed by Eurosceptic actors as a country penalized by the Dublin Regulation; in Germany, one of the AfD's main criticisms concerned the decision to temporarily suspend the Regulation during the Syrian refugee crisis.

Structural differences are at the basis of the different trajectories of the Eurosceptic discourse in Italy and Germany. However, the main obstacle to a referendum on EU membership in either country is also of a legal nature, as a similar referendum would require constitutional reform. Moreover, in line with neofunctionalist theorizing, interdependence between member



states creates common interests that outweigh the potential benefits of disintegration (Chopin and Lequesne, 2020). Unlike the UK, Italy and Germany are both Eurozone member states, so that withdrawal from the common currency would be a necessary preliminary step to further disintegration. As shown by the party positions analyzed in this article, anti-Euro stances are much more common than anti-EU ones. The likelihood of either state withdrawing from EMU seems low, however. Similarly, in the years following the financial crisis, Lega, FdI and M5S have gradually abandoned their strongly anti-Euro positions, limiting themselves to reiterating the need to reform the treaties and protect national sovereignty. However, the mere belonging to the common currency and the fact that this element is not seriously questioned in the programs of the major parties is not enough to rule out the possibility that the situation will change. Notwithstanding the important differences regarding structural and ideological aspects, this article demonstrated how Brexit reinforced the idea that a state can leave the EU while also providing a prime example for how to carry out an election campaign on the issue. For this reason, it is possible that in the presence of future crises, the gradual process that culminated in the referendum could be repeated, with the necessary variations, in other European states. Therefore, to have a deeper understanding of European disintegration, it is necessary to monitor how external factors are metabolized in the national political discourse while accounting for each member state's pre-existing circumstances.

## Data availability statement

Publicly available datasets were analyzed in this study. This data can be found at: The political manifestos, articles, and

statements included in the article are all referenced in the text and available online.

## Author contributions

VO carried out the empirical analysis on the Italian case. MC carried out the empirical analysis on the German case. VO and MC developed the theoretical and analytical framework. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

## Funding

VO's research for this article was funded by a Doctoral Student Grant of the Icelandic Research Fund (IRF; Grant Number 228943-051).

## Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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