

*What do they talk about when they talk about Europe? Euro-ambivalence in far right ideology*

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Abstract: Euroscepticism is frequently presented as a key ideological feature of far right parties, however, this definition masks important variations between them. This paper argues that far right positions on Europe are characterized by long-standing ambivalence rather than straightforward opposition. While far right parties frequently oppose the EU, ideological flexibility, the malleability of European integration and the protean nature of Europe also lead them to display support towards certain aspects of it and towards Europe as a civilization. The argument is illustrated through a qualitative analysis of the party literature of the Movimento Sociale Italiano and the Front National. The analysis shows that these parties conceived of Europe as an identity, a space of liberty, an endangered heritage and a construction where national interests must be defended. In each theme, they offered ambivalent readings of Europe, oscillating between opposition and support depending on how Europe and the EU were defined.

*Keywords: far right, ideology, Euroscepticism, European Union, Europe, neo-fascism*

## Introduction

Far right parties<sup>1</sup> are one of the most studied political phenomena of the last three decades (Mudde 2016). Research has tackled issues including their definition (Carter 2018, Mudde 2007), the reasons for their success (Art 2011, Halikiopoulou and Vlandas 2016, Kitschelt and McGann 1995) and their impact on democracy (Eatwell and Mudde 2004, Schain et al. 2002). While comparatively less attention has been dedicated to mapping far right positions on specific topics, the emergence of euroscepticism as a shared feature of these parties (Gómez-Reino 2018, p. 63-64, Marks and Wilson 2000, p. 457), along with their role in shaping public perceptions of the European Union (EU) (De Vries and Edwards 2009, Pirro and Taggart 2018, Pirro and Van Kessel 2017), have brought attention to their positions on European integration.

Explaining far right Euroscepticism has been a central concern of this literature. Two types of explanations have been brought forward: one rooted in the strategic inclinations of political actors, and the other in party ideology. Strategic accounts have viewed far right Euroscepticism as a response to electoral incentives (e.g., Almeida 2010, p. 141, Taggart 1998, p. 382, Vasilopoulou 2018a), while ideological explanations have presented it as a consequence of the central place occupied by the nation in their ideology (Gómez-Reino 2018, p. viii, Halikiopoulou et al. 2012, p. 508-510, Hooghe et al. 2002, p. 976-978).

While the presentation of far right Euroscepticism as an almost “natural” (Van Kessel et al. 2020) feature of the far right is a shared feature of both explanations, viewing the far right as a “homogenous Eurosceptic bloc” (Almeida 2010, p. 244) masks important historical and ideological variations between parties. First, far right parties have changed (in some cases even radically) their views of the EU (Mudde 2007, p. 158-165). Second, while opposing the EU,

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<sup>1</sup> Following Vasilopoulou (2018, p. 6), “far right” is used as an umbrella term to encompass radical and extreme right parties.

far right parties also express a measure of attachment to European civilisation that clashes with the view of them as “natural” Eurosceptics (Bar-on 2008, Brown 2019, Brubaker 2017, Fieschi et al. 1996, Glencross 2020, Wodak and Boukala 2015).

Building on these observations, this paper argues that ambiguity has been a defining feature of far right positions on Europe. While far right parties frequently oppose the EU, ideological flexibility (Freeden 1998a), the “malleability” of European integration (Flood 2002, p. 7) and the “protean” nature of the idea of Europe (Pagden 2002, p. 1) also led them to display a measure of support towards certain aspect of the EU project and towards Europe as a civilizational space. Thus, their positions have been marked by long-term ambivalence about Europe rather than straightforward opposition. The argument is illustrated through an in-depth qualitative analysis of the party literature on Europe of two “archetypal” far right parties (Vasilopoulou 2011): the Movimento Sociale Italiano (MSI) in Italy and the Front National (now Rassemblement National, FN) in France. Analysing the themes the parties employed to define Europe, the article shows that the FN and MSI conceived of Europe as a specific identity, a space of liberty, an endangered heritage and a political construction where national interests must be defended. In in each of these themes, the parties presented ambivalent readings of “Europe”, oscillating between opposition and support depending on how Europe and the EU were defined.

The paper makes a two-fold contribution: from a theoretical standpoint, it offers an account of why one could expect some degree of ideological ambiguity on Europe from the far right. Second, by illustrating this argument empirically, it nuances accounts of far right parties as “natural” Eurosceptics. These findings carry broader implications for the EU and for the understanding of historical and contemporary political practices of far right transnational collaboration (McDonnell and Werner 2019). By suggesting that far right parties have ample space for ambiguity, they help understand how they may have been able to justify a “nationalist

international” created against the EU. They also suggest that European identity may not present a solution to the EU’s woes because it draws on a contested equivalence between Europe and the EU.

### Far right ideology and Euroscepticism

Euroscepticism is frequently presented as a defining feature of the far right, however, the reality of these parties’ engagement with Europe has been more complex than the term suggests. While this complexity has been studied from a strategic perspective (Heinisch et al. 2020 Vasilopoulou 2018), little effort has gone into understanding the ideological roots of the far right’s ambivalence on Europe.

From a theoretical standpoint, three factors could be expected to give rise to this ambivalence: first, the flexibility of political ideologies and their responsiveness to context can lead to varying positions over time and across countries; second, the complexity of the EU and its nature as an evolving process may lead to different positions depending on what aspect of the Union one is focusing on; finally, the fact that “Europe” and the EU remain two different constructs means that parties may be able to project ambivalence by adopting different views on them.

On the first point, while a body of critical literature on ideologies has tended to present these as monolithic constructs, more neutral approaches have stressed both their pervasiveness and their flexibility (see Leader Maynard and Mildemberger 2018 for a review). Ideologies, following this tradition, are best thought of as sets of ideas which serve to interpret the political world and guide action (Freeden 1998a, p. 3, Seliger 1976, p. 14). Importantly, while ideologies will have a conceptual core that remains mostly unchanged, this does not entail rigidity; rather, political ideologies are capable of variation both across time and depending on context

(Freeden 1998a). As a result, the same ideology may respond differently to an issue depending on time and context, as well as the nature of the issue itself. In the case of far right parties and Europe, the implication of this ideological flexibility is that one might reasonably expect different responses to the issue depending on the national and historical context in which the parties are acting.

The second source of ambiguity is the nature of the EU as a construct in constant evolution, and a complex body composed of several different parts. The EU, in fact, has changed dramatically through the decades, acquiring new powers and institutions in the process. These factors make it a “malleable” construction “open to widely differing interpretations within as well as between different ideological currents” (Flood 2002, p. 7; see also Szczerbiak and Taggart 2008, p. 257). As a result, one might reasonably expect political parties, including far right ones, to respond to these evolutions, but also, to offer differing interpretations of the EU depending on what aspect of it they are focusing on. They may offer different assessments depending on whether they are focusing on its economic functions, its role as an international actor or its legislative acts.

The final potential source of ambiguity is the fact that for as much as the EU tries to equate the two (Glencross 2020, p. 2), Europe and the EU remain two different constructions. As the rich body of literature exploring the meaning of Europe through history shows (e.g., Davies 1996, den Boer et al. 1995, Pagden 2002), the political project of the EU is only one expression of Europe. Thus, knowing how parties feel about the EU may not be revelatory about their positions on Europe, and they may even be able to discursively exploit the distinction between the two (Adamson and Johns 2008, Lorimer 2020).

Taken together, these elements suggest that there is ample space for ambiguity in the far right’s positions on Europe. While they may be plausibly applied to the analysis of other parties whose relationship with Europe has been characterised by ambivalence, they are

expected to play a particularly important role in parties dominated by nationalism (Mudde 2007). The thin (Freeden 1998b) and strongly context dependent nature of this ideology (Eatwell 2000), in fact, makes far right parties potentially more prone to ideological flexibility than parties dominated by ‘thicker’ ideologies such as liberalism or socialism (Freeden 1998a).

### Studying Europe in Party Literature

To study the existence of ideological ambiguity on Europe in the far right, this article traces the positions developed by the MSI and FN in their party literature. Belonging to two different traditions of the far right, with the MSI being the archetype of the “old” extreme right party, and the FN being a typical case of the “new” populist radical right (Ignazi 2003, Rydgren 2007), these two parties capture different strands of far right thinking of Europe. Most importantly, having followed different trajectories in their positions on the EU (Vasilopoulou 2011), they offer a better view of the complexity underlying the far right’s views.

The empirical analysis focuses on a selection of 102 party documents (64 for the FN and 38 for the MSI) collected in archival, library, and online research. The material covers the period 1978-2017 for the FN and 1978-1995 for the MSI.<sup>2</sup> The documents include party manifestoes, interviews, speeches, opinion articles published in party newspapers and magazines by different party figures, and in the case of the MSI, congress motions. While using different documents comes at a cost in terms of comparability, it also ensures a more realistic representation of parties as more than electoral machines. Specifically, by including documents other than party programmes, it captures both the “external-facing” and “internal facing” aspects of the parties (Mudde 2000, p. 20-21), hence providing a view of party ideology beyond

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<sup>2</sup> This is a purposeful sample selected from a larger corpus of 400 party documents. The selected documents represented the key trends of the full corpus and illustrated most clearly the parties’ definition of Europe.

the realm of electoral politics (Mair 1997, p. 24). Presenting the positions developed by individual leaders and factions, on the other hand, offers an insight into parties as non-unitary actors (Panebianco 1989).

The documents were analysed by means of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006). This method made it possible to identify recurrent concepts and ideas in the parties' understanding of Europe (or "themes"), hence facilitating the creation of a structured account of their ideological approach to Europe. It also left enough space to explore the contents of each theme and zoom into areas of ambiguity. The documents were at first coded inductively. Each document was read and references to "Europe" and "the EU" highlighted. Segments detected this way were assigned keywords or "codes" that captured their meaning (Saldaña 2016, p. 4). This process was carried out manually, as it was considered it would allow for a better appreciation of ambiguous positions. Similar codes were regrouped into broader themes, brought into a conversation with the literature on far right parties<sup>3</sup> and further refined on this basis (see Attride-Stirling 2001 for a similar procedure). Following the creation of a structured account of the themes, the contents of each theme were re-analysed in depth to identify areas of ambiguity.

This process led to the development of the four themes of "identity", "liberty", "existential threat" and "national interest". These may be viewed as the "core concepts" the parties drew upon to integrate Europe in their ideology (Freedon 1998a). While the themes are interconnected, they represent different aspects of the far right's understanding of Europe: the themes of identity and liberty are most relevant in defining the meaning of Europe; the theme of the existential threat provides a characterisation of the state of Europe; the national interest

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<sup>3</sup> This "plausibility check" was meant to ensure that the identified themes were credible and potentially transferrable (Guba 1981).

theme, finally, provides the justification of policy at the EU level. In line with the theoretical expectations developed earlier, within each of these broad themes, tensions arose between a positive and a negative view of Europe. The following sections analyse and illustrate the meanings of the individual themes by drawing on illustrative quotes representing key trends in the material.

## Euro-ambivalent? A Far Right Understanding of Europe

### *Europa patria nostra: Europe as Identity*

The first theme that emerged in the MSI and FN's conception of Europe was that of "identity", intended as "that part of the individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group(s) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership" (Tajfel 1978, p. 63). Their positions were articulated around three main sub-themes: the recognition of a distinctively European civilisation, the definition of boundaries, and the acknowledgement of a positive relationship between European and national identity. Within each of these subthemes, there was also space for ambivalence built around the distinction between "Europe" and "the EU."

Drawing on the nature of Europe as a concept beyond the EU, and influenced in the case of the MSI by the ideas of former fascist diplomat Filippo Anfuso (Mammone 2015, p. 64-85), and in the FN by those of the *Nouvelle Droite* (Bar On 2008), the MSI and FN both recognised the existence of a distinct European civilisation. For example, in a booklet discussing the party's key ideological principles, the MSI defined "Europeanism" as "the ancient and always alive aspiration towards European unity, in the conscience of a community of interests and destinies, of history, of civilisation, of tradition among Europeans" (MSI 1980). In a similar spirit, Jean-Marie Le Pen's 1984 programmatic book *Les Français d'abord* referred



to Europe as “a historic, geographic, cultural, economic and social ensemble” (Le Pen 1984, p. 154). While one might think of this Europeanism as a mere reflection of the Cold War, this frame remains present in the FN in an essentially unchanged form to this day, as illustrated by the following speech by Marine Le Pen (2017b) to local FN representatives:

For us, Europe is not an idea. Europe is a culture, it's a civilization with its values, its codes, its great men, its accomplishments, its masterpieces [...] I believe in a common destiny of the nations and peoples of Europe impregnated by the millenary civilization that they share.

This understanding of Europe as a distinct “community of civilisation” also involved reflections on its physical and symbolic boundaries. The discussion of geographical boundaries appeared especially in debates on European accession and discussions of the post-war division of Europe. Thus, in the 1980s, it was clear for both parties that Spain, Portugal and the Central and Eastern European countries under Soviet domination should belong to Europe (e.g., Le Pen 1984, p. 160-161, Mantovani 1985). On the other hand, throughout its history the FN staunchly opposed the accession of Turkey to the EU as it considered it insufficiently “European.” As Olivier Martinelli (2000), Jean-Marie Le Pen’s former chief of staff, put it in an article in the magazine *Français D’Abord*:

Geographically, only one thirtieth of the total area of the territory [...] belongs to Europe [...]. Linguistically, Turkish does not belong to the group of European idioms [...] As far as the population criteria go, the ancestors of the Turks descend from nomadic tribes close to the Mongolians [...]. On the cultural plane, finally, the progressive conversion to Islam [...] sealed its exclusion from the European sphere, which is fundamentally Christian.

The view of Europe as a community was also evident in the parties' recognition of Europeans as an "Us" threatened by dangerous "Others". While the specific Others the MSI and FN were concerned about evolved through the years, they remained an integral part of the parties' definition of Europe. In the 1980s, the USSR was the most prominent Other, as it threatened Europe physically by occupying a part of its territory, and spiritually by promoting a materialist conception of life. Following the fall of the USSR, the FN found a new Other in the EU, defined as a modern-day 'EUSSR' (Gollnisch 2008). A related Other was "the West". While both the MSI and the FN were atlanticist - albeit reluctantly so for the MSI (Parlato 2005), they also sought to distance "Europe" from the USA and distinguish "Europe" from "the West". Thus, the MSI thought of Europe as a "Third Way" between the USA and the USSR, and both parties sought to reinforce European defence.

Most importantly, both parties considered to belong to this European civilisation. The MSI stressed that "individuality (in this case national) and community (in this case European) are not in opposition but in reciprocal integration and vivification" (MSI 1980), while FN leaders frequently claimed to be true Europeans (e.g. Aliot 2011, Le Pen 2003, Le Pen 2017b, Le Pen 2019). However, for the FN it was much clearer than for the MSI that the "terminal community" (Deutsch 1966) was the one closest to home; as Jean-Marie Le Pen put it "I find it very easy to reconcile the double idea of a strong homeland in a strong Europe. In the same way that I feel more Morbihanais than Breton, more Breton than French, more French than European, more European than Atlanticist, more Atlanticist than Globalist" (Le Pen 1984, p. 164).

Overall, through the concept of identity, the MSI and FN expressed positive views of "Europe" seemingly in contrast with the view of them as Eurosceptic – at least insofar as Europe is approached as a civilisation, rather than as the political project of the EU. The distinction between these two conceptions of Europe was particularly marked in the FN

(although present also in the MSI, e.g., Gasparri 1988), which, following the introduction of the SEA, drew on the protean nature of Europe to develop a “Europhile EU-sceptic” profile (e.g., FN 1991, p. 115, Le Gallou 1989, Le Pen 2017b). This position is still present today, and was recently reaffirmed by Marine Le Pen when in a speech she claimed that “the EU is Europeans’ worst enemy [...] It is because we are European that we oppose the EU” (Le Pen 2019).

### *Between power and self-rule: Europe and Liberty*

The second theme the MSI and FN drew upon to conceptualise Europe was that of “liberty”, understood as an essential attribute of the European continent, and, at least in the 1980s, potentially of the EU.<sup>4</sup> Three sub-themes dominated this area: Europe as a continent in need of freedom from external constraints, Europe as a construction free to project power in the external realm, and the EU as a limit to domestic self-rule. It is in this area that evolution of the EU, as well as its multi-faceted nature, most clearly affected how the parties approached “Europe.”

European autonomy dominated the concerns of the MSI and FN in the 1980s. In the context of the Cold War, both parties understood Europe to be under foreign domination. Subject to the “twin imperialisms” of the USSR and of the USA through the “diktat” of Yalta, Europe had, in their view, been split in two and lost the ability to make its own choices. Liberty for Europe meant freeing it from the “vassalage” to the US and the USSR and exiting the “duopolistic logic” that had dominated Europe since World War Two (e.g., MSI 1979).

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<sup>4</sup> While there is significant overlap between this understanding of liberty and the notion of national sovereignty, this paper opts for the former as to reflect the parties’ language.

Building on this view of the European continent as divided and devoid of autonomy, both parties advocated for Europe to regain its “power” by freeing itself from the control of the USA and USSR, and by restoring its own ability to impose its will on others. Present only in the 1980s and early nineties, this narrative informed the parties’ expectations for the future of the EU as more than a mere economic project. Leader of the MSI’s youth movement Maurizio Gasparri (1988) expressed this clearly in an article for the party newspaper *Il Secolo*:

A united Europe can be a protagonist, strengthened by its culture, traditions [...] [W]e know that it is the right way, the only one that Europe can follow if it wants to return to thinking big, if it wants to build a future of political, military and cultural autonomy, if it wants to measure up with its great past. [...]. Our Nations alone cannot compare with the great empires. A common policy and a common defence are a binding necessity. (For similar arguments in the FN, see FN 1989, p. 95)

This understanding of liberty was also entangled with the parties’ view of what the role of their country should be. For the FN, European “*puissance*” was about reasserting France as a leader in Europe and of Europe. For the MSI, whose core electorate lay in the Southern Italy, the key concern was to ensure that more relevance was given to those regions through the development of a “Euro-Mediterranean” perspective for the expansion of European influence.

The introduction of the Single European Act (SEA), the fall of the Soviet Union and the adoption of the Maastricht Treaty led to a slow disappearance of this focus on European power and a growth in concerns about liberty as self-rule. In particular, Maastricht fixed a course of integration that did not fit the parties’ view of the EU as a primarily foreign policy actor. For the MSI, this translated into moderate opposition to the EU, grounded in the view that the Maastricht Treaty had failed to transform it into a strong foreign policy actor, and had created disparities in the decision-making powers of member states through the introduction of

opt-outs (MSI 1994). For the FN, the Maastricht Treaty raised crucial issues for national sovereignty because it limited a nation's ability to make its own rules, a view that became entrenched in following years. Thus, in 2004, Jean-Marie Le Pen called French people to vote against the Constitutional treaty in the name of "independence", "the most precious good" for a Nation (Le Pen 2004), while the FN's 2012 programme took issue with "faceless unelected bureaucrats" in Brussels making more laws than the *Assemblée Nationale* (FN 2012). In the 2002, 2012 and 2017 presidential elections, it even went so far as advocating "Frexit" to restore national sovereignty (FN 2002, FN 2012, Le Pen 2017a).

As with identity, even when it came to liberty, the two parties' positions displayed a level of ambivalence and change. While in the 1980s, they understood liberty to be primarily about power and autonomy, the end of the Cold War and the evolution of the EU led to a shift of focus to questions of domestic self-rule. This shift also informed different views on the EU: initial positive assessments of it as a potential bulwark against a progressive loss of influence were replaced by more critical positions grounded in concerns about sovereignty and effective foreign policy influence. The differing approach adopted by the parties can be largely understood by focusing on how they conceived of the national interest in a European setting, an element which the following sections will return to.

### *Europe in danger: Existential Threats and treacherous Others*

A third theme that was essential to the definition of Europe in the eyes of the MSI and FN was that of the "existential threat". Europe was presented as a community endangered by external threats posed by foreign actors, internal threats situated within national boundaries, and diffuse threats located at the intersection of the internal and external realm. While what counts as a danger often changed with time, the notion of an existential threat endangering the core ideas

of identity and liberty both at the national and European level remained consistently present in the ideology of both parties. The discussion of threats stresses that the MSI and FN acknowledged the existence of a form of European community, while highlighting its complex relationship with the EU: Europe thus appeared as an endangered space worth protecting and, in the form of the EU, as a danger to fend off.

As far as external threats are concerned, there was significant overlap with the category of the “Other” discussed earlier. In the 1980s, for the MSI and for the FN, Communism represented the true enemy. It threatened Europe’s liberty by holding captive the nations of Eastern Europe and limiting Europe’s agency, and it endangered its identity by promoting a materialist (as opposed to “spiritual”) way of life. While not as physically threatening as the USSR, the USA also threatened Europe’s way of being by “Americanising” its culture and limiting its autonomy – when not acting directly in favour of international communism through policies of “*détente*.” As the 1979 majority congress motion “*Continuare Per Rinnovare*” resumed it:

We must reassess, motivate and document our opposition to the ‘civilisation of Coca-Cola’ coming from the United States of America, which disaggregates the spirit and the soul of our popular and national traditions. In particular, the deep link that unites the US presidency and the USSR, at the expenses of Europe and the free world, must be highlighted.

A final external threat to Europe which, given their differing intra-party and national contexts (Ignazi 1994), mattered more to the FN than it did to the MSI, was Islam and foreign immigration. The 1991 guide for activists “*Militer au Front*”, for example, argued that “our French identity is less threatened by Germany and Great Britain than our identity of Europeans is by the Muslim Third World” (FN 1991, p. 117), and Islam and immigration are still targets of the FN’s critiques of the EU (e.g., FN 2012).

Narratives of danger do not stop at a threatening world outside Europe, but also affect it from the inside. “Internal decline” was another existential threat identified by the parties which was made up of several factors, including the political class (a feature that maps on the parties’ populist and anti-system positions), increased immigration, economic decline, and demographic crises (e.g., FN 1986, Le Pen 2003, MSI 1990). The result of this internal decline was that Europe (and the nation along with it) had lost its standing and could no longer ensure the safety of its own identity or protect its own liberty.

The final existential threat worth discussing is globalisation, which became an increasingly relevant bogeyman for the FN from the early 1990s, especially through its relationship with the EU. Globalisation is best thought of as a diffuse threat which is external at birth, but ends up altering domestic politics. For the FN, it raised a series of issues for identity by affecting the material conditions of the nation through increases in inequality and impoverishment; it also engendered a loss of control that limited the nation’s liberty. Its relationship with Europe was mainly negative, since in their view, the EU was nothing but the “Trojan horse” (FN 2012) of globalisation, and a simple “stepping stone” towards globalism (Le Pen 1999). In this sense, through its connection with globalisation, the EU transformed from bulwark against foreign threats into a diffuse threat to the French nation. The MSI followed a different path: globalisation never became a central issue for the party, and its assessment of the EU remained significantly less critical. The following section will develop this point further and discuss the link between each party’s conception of the nation and their differing assessments of the EU.

### *Does it serve the national interest? Assessing Europe*

The final theme that emerged from the empirical analysis was that of “national interest”. Through this theme, the MSI and FN assessed the EU, discussing both its aims and its results. While both parties considered that the main objective of the EU should be the protection and enhancement of the national interest (especially in light of the afore-mentioned existential threats), they came to different conclusions concerning its ability to achieve that objective.

Throughout its history, the MSI remained more positive than the FN in its assessment of the EU. Due to its focus on external threats to liberty and its negative assessment of the overall ability of Italy to project power on its own (especially after losing a war), it saw in the EU a form of defence from the outside world and a way for Italy to retrieve a voice in international relations. As a result, it insisted significantly more on the idea of a common European defence that could return Europe, and Italy with it, to a leading position in the world (see for example the MSI’s 1987 political programme). As argued above, a stronger Europe was also seen as a way to solve some of Italy’s long-standing issues, such as the backwardness of its Southern regions. Conversely, the EU was mostly considered in negative terms when it came to its nature as an economic “Europe of merchants” (Toppi 1993, Gasparri 1988), that is, a construction that was not politically ambitious in nature. In sum, in the MSI’s view, the EU opened up new possibilities to defend and enhance Italy’s national interest and international standing, and was criticised when it failed to do so because of its primarily economic focus.

In the 1980s, the logic of unity against a common enemy also marked a positive assessment of the EU in the discourse of the FN, with Jean-Marie Le Pen insisting for example, that Europe needed to become a Nation to defend itself against external dangers (Le Pen 1984, p. 164). However, as those external dangers faded away and the EU evolved, the FN shifted positions, with its overall negative vision of the EU being mostly dictated by the ways in which it hampered the legitimate interests of the nation by limiting its sovereignty and “dissolving”



its identity. This threat was often presented as a betrayal of Europe, as exemplified by the following point in the 2009 European election manifesto:

the Nationals fight resolutely the criminal evolutions of the European Union. This refusal of a euro-globalist super State is compatible with the true European tradition, since Europe [...] has invented the freedom and equality of Nations, governing themselves freely without external interference.

The FN's turn against the EU can also be understood as the result of its different assessment of the strength of France in the world. The FN, largely in line with national traditions (e.g. Frank 2002), thought of France as a powerful nation which could make it on its own, especially once the 'bipolar order' of the Cold War turned into a multi-polar world (Camus 2016). As a result, pursuing the national interest was something it thought it could do independently of Europe.

In sum, while both parties thought the EU should be about protecting and enhancing the national interest, different perceptions of their nations' strength led them to different assessments concerning whether it effectively achieved that objective. For the FN, French greatness was never in question: they considered France could (and should) make it on its own. For the MSI, Italy was not a country that could easily protect its national interests on its own, and could hence truly benefit from collaborating with others in a European framework.

## Conclusion

The objective of this paper was to explore areas of ambiguity in the far right's conception of Europe and demonstrate that ambivalence about Europe was a constant feature of their vision. It argued that ambiguity could be expected because of ideological flexibility, the complexity of the EU, and the protean nature of "Europe." This contention was supported by the empirical

analysis of the MSI and FN's positions on Europe. In each of the themes identified in the analysis, the parties oscillated between opposition and support for Europe, depending on how they understood Europe, and how they conceived of the EU. Within the theme of identity, for example, they both displayed support for a European civilisation, but the FN frequently pitted this European civilisation against the political project of the EU. When it came to liberty, responsiveness to the international context and the evolution of the EU following the SEA and Maastricht Treaty led them to shift from support for the EU as a potential (albeit imperfect) bulwark against foreign domination from the USSR and USA, to opposition to it as an insufficiently powerful actor and limit on national sovereignty. Ambivalence also appeared in the final two concepts of existential threat and national interest. Here, the flexibility of ideologies and their responsiveness to (national) contexts led similar parties to offer different answers to the same question: while both parties considered that Europe was endangered, the MSI viewed Europe as a potential response to danger and further integration in a certain direction as in Italy's national interest; the FN, on the other hand, shifted from supporting the EU as a protection from external threats to seeing it as a threat to France.

These findings encourage a more nuanced understanding of the far right's relationship with Europe. While opposition to the EU certainly represents an important feature of their ideology, it is not a straightforward one, suggesting that the link between "nationalism" and "euroscepticism" may be more complex than some accounts hold. The ideological link between the two has been under-researched so far (see Halikiopoulou et al. 2012 for an exception) because far right euroscepticism has appeared as a somehow obvious outcome of their ideology. This paper invites to qualify this reflection and dedicate more attention to the connections between ideology and Euroscepticism, as there is usually no obvious link between the two (Flood and Soborski 2018).

At this stage, it is important to sound two notes of caution. First, these findings are based on the study of a small number of (Western European) parties, and as such, are not immediately generalisable. However, the themes identified in the analysis are not exclusive to the MSI and FN; rather, they reflect broader trends in far right ideology such as the centrality of the nation and the constant reference to threats and dangers (Mudde 2007, Wodak 2015). It is therefore plausible to expect other parties belonging to the party family to define Europe using similar frames and display similar levels of ambiguity, although they may show variations depending on their own national and historical circumstances. In addition, because the identified theoretical mechanisms are not specific to the MSI and FN, or to the far right, there is no reason why they could not be applied to the analysis of other parties who have displayed ambiguous positions on Europe. Future research may analyse the positions of other far right ‘equivocal eurosceptics’ (Heinisch et al. 2020) such as the Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs and the Lega, but also, of left-wing and Green parties whose positions on Europe have been marked by ambivalence (e.g., Bomberg 2005, Gartzou-Katsouyanni 2019, Wolkenstein 2020).

Second, because this paper focused primarily on identifying the ideological sources of far right ambivalence, it did not consider the role of other organisational and strategic factors which may help understand evolutions in party stances. These elements, however, may have also played a role in shaping these positions. As Vasilopoulou (2011, 2018) has persuasively shown, the MSI’s pattern of compromising euroscepticism was not only ideological in origin, but also part of the strategy of mainstreaming pursued by party leader Gianfranco Fini; similarly, the FN’s growing opposition to European integration was influenced by the party’s willingness to demarcate itself from a predominantly Europhile mainstream (Reungoat 2015). Ideological and strategic accounts, however, need not be seen as mutually exclusive: the existence of ideological ambiguity may feed into and facilitate changes based on strategic

considerations by making it easier for parties to present strategic choices as consistent with ideological belief.

The findings of this study are not only important in terms of presenting a more accurate picture of the far right's approach to Europe, but also help understand recent trends such as the transnational collaboration of far right parties. In particular, they highlight both how these collaborations may be justified, as well as their limitations. On the first count, they suggest that the notion of a European identity may act as a federating issue because it draws on familiar notions of identity, but reinterpreting them beyond narrow national parochialism. However, it also shows the limits of collaboration by stressing that all European politics is secondary to national politics, and that the "national interest" will always trump the collective "European" interest. Collaboration may be able to proceed successfully for as long as the two coincide, but would be unlikely to survive should conflicts between them arise.

Second, the findings may lead to question whether a European identity is really the solution to the EU's woes. This paper has highlighted that both the MSI and the FN defined themselves as "Europeans", but belonging to Europe did not necessarily translate into support for European integration. This points to the persistent "contestedness" of the nature of the EU as an embodiment of Europe. The EU has drawn on the mystique of "Europe" to claim legitimacy for itself by asserting to be a modern representation of an ancient concept (Delanty 1995, Glencross 2020). By promoting a parallel vision of Europe, and constructing it against the EU, far right parties reclaim what being European means against an EU that seeks to appropriate the concept of Europe and the associate notion of a European identity. This counter-narrative, while not hegemonic, could in the long-term undermine the project of European integration by questioning its very bases.

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