Hijacking Europe: Counter-European Strategies and Radical Right Mainstreaming during the Humanitarian Crisis Debate 2015–16*

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Abstract

Radical right European contestation is analyzed mainly as claims denouncing European integration. Less focus is put on narratives suggesting how a supposed 'truly European' political process should be and work. This paper explores how radical right actors use such counter-European claims within their competition strategies. Computer-assisted qualitative analysis of communication by Front National, Alternative for Germany and Fidesz during the humanitarian crisis debate 2015–16 demonstrates that radical right counter-Europeanism constitutes a nuanced tactical resource deployed to normalize nativist supply in the name of Europe. Unlike Eurorejectionist FN, Fidesz and AfD redefined Europe in nativist terms, attempting to draw legitimacy from association with European identity and cooperation. Concurrently, both actors justified Euronativism not only as antithetical to current EU values and political principles, but mainly as their more fundamental practice juxtaposed against 'not (truly) European elites', effectively 'hijacking' Europe from within. The findings deepen our understanding of radical right Europe-contesting competition strategies.

Keywords: radical right; counter-European politics; Euroscepticism; party competition; 'refugee crisis'

Introduction

Justifying its stance against the EU resettlement scheme of protection-seekers, the Hungarian incumbent party Fidesz stated: 'Hungary protects Schengen borders and adheres to all Dublin and Schengen rules by all possible legal means, expecting this from other European member states' (Fidesz, 2015b). Fidesz added: 'Unlike a large part of the European political and intellectual elite, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán hears the voice of the *European* people and understands their views on immigration' (Fidesz, 2015c, emphasis added). These narratives resonated with several radical right (RR) 'originals', such as the Alternative for Germany: 'from the point of view of some EU functionaries, abiding by laws and treaties doesn't seem to belong to European values. Hungary is one of the few European states that diligently contributes to its treaty obligation of protecting EU borders' (AfD, 2016e).

Extant research provides important insights into the variety, extent and trajectories of claims which delegitimize European integration, including those from the RR (Kopecký and Mudde, 2002; Taggart and Szczerbiak, 2004; Grande and Hutter, 2016; Pirro *et al.,* 2018; Vasilopoulou, 2018). We however still know less about related relegitimizing narratives (de Wilde and Trenz, 2012) which unfold diverse propositions suggesting how a 'truly European' political process should be and work. Visions of European political community antithetical to the EU, such as ethnopluralist pan-European 'Europe of Nations' or a minimalist confederation belong to classical RR inventory (Spektorowski, 2003; Mudde, 2007; Bar-On, 2008). The quotes above nonetheless suggest that Eurosceptic actors, including those embracing RR politics, may use a more versatile repertoire of what we term counter-European framing strategies. These persuasive narratives do not only vow to replace the EU with an antithetical vision of a Europe's Union, but can also be used to self-portray a party's political supply, or programmatic offer as viable to fundamentally 'fix' how 'illegitimate EU elites' and their perceived domestic allies practice currently valid EU values and principles.

While observing claims that denounce European integration as well as substantive content behind RR visions of Europe remains vital, accounting for counter-European strategies can complement our insights on how Eurosceptic actors – here specifically the RR – may use Europe within political competition (de Vries and Hobolt, 2012; van de Wardt *et al.,* 2014; Braun *et al.,* 2016; Braun *et al.,* 2019). Recent results highlight that RR actors can attempt to shape their mobilization opportunities by flexibly shifting Eurosceptic stances if considered politically advantageous (Pirro *et al.,* 2018; McDonnell and Werner, 2019). Concurrently, scholarship observes broader and longer trends of RR normalization driven by active mainstreaming strategies of RR parties and accommodative tactics by some conventional competitors (Art, 2007; Halikiopoulou *et al.,* 2013; Pytlas, 2015, 2018; Akkerman *et al.,* 2016; Froio, 2018). We accordingly argue that counter-European politics constitutes a nuanced tactical resource by which some RR parties may not only contest European integration from sovereigntist positions but additionally, or even instead focus on increasing the mainstream legitimacy of their primary nativist supply (Mudde, 2007) directed against constructed sociocultural 'Others', simultaneously creating distance towards 'not (truly) European' political adversaries. RR counter-Europeanism and mainstreaming are older than current politicization of multiple crises. As 'existing paradigms, policies, institutional roles and rules' of Europe's Union become ever more 'tested and contested' (Laffan, 2016: 916), it concurrently becomes relevant to observe how some RR actors might engage in contests over a 'truly legitimate' Europe and use counter-European strategies to complement domestic-level attempts to normalize their supply.

This paper hence explores how counter-European politics may be used as part of RR programmatic strategies in political competition. On conceptual level we combine literatures on European contestation, domestic-level RR agency in the political process and related mainstreaming tactics with research on competition formulas of political renewal (Lucardie, 2000; Sikk, 2012) to propose a fourfold categorization of RR counter-European framing strategies. In order to empirically explore their alignment with nativism and adjustment to European-level contextual opportunities, we deploy rule-guided computer-assisted qualitative data analysis of social media communication by diverse RR actors: the French Front National, the Alternative for Germany, and

radicalized mainstream Fidesz during the peak of the European humanitarian crisis debate 2015–16.

We find that unlike the Eurorejectionist FN, both the AfD and Fidesz attempted to re-interpret Europe in Euronativist terms. Our evidence concurrently unveils a more nuanced repertoire by which RR actors may strategically justify their supply in the name of Europe. Rather than only invoking explicitly antithetical visions of 'true' Europe, AfD and Fidesz mainly tried to 'annex' (Halikiopoulou *et al.,* 2013) or 'hijack'[1] EU civic values and especially political principles, reinterpreting them as nativist arguments. Both parties furthermore responded to evolving European-level contexts, drawing legitimacy from reactions of conventional parties and governments in other European states. They accordingly redefined nativism as a seemingly non-ideological way to fundamentally 'fix' the practice of current European representative contract by 'not (truly) European' elites. These findings have important implications for our understanding of RR European strategies used in political competition.

I. Counter-European Strategies and Radical Right Mainstreaming

Opposition on Europe is a relevant issue entrepreneurial strategy for radical actors in general, and particularly the RR (Kopecký and Mudde, 2002; Taggart and Szczerbiak, 2004; de Vries and Hobolt, 2012; Pirro *et al.,* 2018). Challenging the EU can create distance vis-à-vis non-Eurosceptic competitors by emphasizing divisive issues and mobilizing an alleged 'niche issue position' ignored by more conventional parties (de Vries and Hobolt, 2012; van de Wardt *et al.,* 2014; Meijers, 2017). Euroscepticism constitutes outright ('hard', polity-oriented) or contingent ('soft', policy-oriented) opposition to European integration (Taggart and Szczerbiak, 2004), respectively its diffuse or specific rejection (Kopecký and Mudde, 2002). Scholarship identified different ideal types of RR contestation on Europe: Euroreject demands to renounce European cooperation in principle, conditional support of European cooperation but rejection of its current setup, or 'loyal' compromising stance in favour of current institutional and policy status quo but sceptical of further integration (Vasilopoulou, 2018). Specifically RR Euroscepticism revolves around sovereigntist demands to salvage the primacy of national politics and identity seen as threatened by European integration and 'EU elites' (Kopecký and Mudde, 2002; Taggart and Szczerbiak, 2004; Vasilopoulou, 2018; Heinisch *et al.,* 2019; McDonnell and Werner, 2019). This nationalist anti-EU narrative is distinct from, but taps well into RR core nativist supply: exclusionary horizontal claims to protect a mythical homogeneous community ('Nation' or 'Europe') against constructed, allegedly threatening cultural 'Others' (Mudde, 2007; McDonnell and Werner, 2019).

Actor-centred perspectives increasingly investigate position taking and salience of European issues within Eurosceptic supply (Braun *et al.,* 2016; Braun *et al.,* 2019). Observations that Eurosceptic actors may fundamentally challenge competitors engaging in European politics in the name of 'true Europe' however remind us that strategies driving political contestation include not only emphasis of issues and position taking, but also

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[1]'Hijacking' strategies are attempts to appropriate sociopolitical values and rules acknowledged to already guide the political process as arguments justifying a substantively contradictory supply, such as cultural 'illiberal liberalism' (Moffitt, 2017). They concurrently imply that ideas or practices of other political actors are contrary to these principles and thus illegitimate to reflect them.

their framing (Grande and Hutter, 2016; Pytlas, 2015; Pirro *et al.,* 2018). Framing is used as a persuasive toolkit to reinterpret and justify substantive issue positions or ideological elements, thus adapting them to contexts of political competition. By spotlighting certain justifying interpretations and blurring others, frames suggest what is at stake with the perceived problem, but also what the proposed solutions, as well as the mobilizing rationale behind substantive supply are about (Gamson and Meyer, 1996; Benford and Snow, 2000). Fidesz, for example, framed support for universal right to seek asylum as an anti-European 'left-wing' idea, justifying anti-immigration positions as truly pro-European: 'Those who today uncritically favour immigration are in fact the enemy of European cooperation' (Magyar Hírlap, 2016).

The framing approach is useful to observe how political actors may rhetorically adjust even substantively unchanged issue positions or ideational elements in relation to more stable contexts such as imagined collective identity, as well as more volatile conditions such as media debates, reactions of competitors and policy change (Gamson and Meyer, 1996; Benford and Snow, 2000). Thereby, political entrepreneurs can respond to constraints and opportunities, actively shaping their chances for potential mobilization. Counter-European politics accordingly taps into understanding of competition on Europe as contests over the legitimacy of the European political community (Kopecký and Mudde, 2002; de Wilde and Trenz, 2012). Counter-European frames suggest how the European political process should be and work in order to be a 'truly legitimate' reflection of an imagined European community. Previous conceptualizations of such claims predominantly focus on their alter-European variant which contests the current European polity while supporting further supranational integration (de Wilde and Trenz, 2012) and concern mainly Eurosceptic actors substantively distinct from the sovereigntist and nativist RR (Beaudonnet and Gomez, 2016). Counter-Europeanism is concurrently broader and may even include persuasive declarations to more fundamentally fulfil current EU treaty regulations.

While framing contests are not limited to RR politics, they are relevant particularly in order to account for RR mainstreaming strategies. Rather than substantively moderating their exclusionary positions and ideology, RR entrepreneurs instead 'repackage' them in order to enhance their mainstream legitimacy, or broader social acceptance (Halikiopoulou *et al.,* 2013; Akkerman *et al.,* 2016; Moffitt, 2017; Froio, 2018; Pytlas, 2018). As salience and proximity of the immigration issue are a stronger driver of RR support compared to Euroscepticism, RR parties might have incentives to flexibly blur and adjust sovereigntist stances given potential to appeal to a broader nativist electorate (McDonnell and Werner, 2019). RR actors can thus use counter-European narratives to cloud a conflict between '(more) Nation vs. (less) Europe' and primarily or even instead redefine competition on Europe as contests around different, 'truly European' conceptions of a legitimate Europe's Union: one that is not distorted or diluted by its current 'illegitimate' institutional, ideological or political reflection. By framing their supply in counter-European terms, RR actors can accordingly attempt to strengthen their 'reputational shield' (Ivarsflaten, 2006) and domestic legitimacy in a dual way: by aligning their supply with a less stigmatized aura of a European collective identity, as well as by associating themselves with appearance of European cooperation. Both aspects can be used to create distance towards EU-level and domestic adversaries not by delegitimizing them as 'European' *per se*, but as '*not (truly)* European'.

Accounting for mainstreaming strategies highlights that in addition to explicit self-portrayal as fringe prophets of ideas incompatible with currently valid values (Lucardie, 2000; de Vries and Hobolt, 2012), RR entrepreneurs may use more nuanced formulas which allow them to keep their distance from established politics and simultaneously permeate the mainstream. On domestic level, RR actors can attempt to appropriate 'the dominant concept of nation' and 'present this appropriation in opposition to the established elite's understanding of nation' (Minkenberg, 2001, p. 5), as well as portray their nativist appeals as a more fundamental version of mainstream ideologies (Mudde, 2010). In the European context, RR actors need to place their ideology in relation to an ideal 'civic Zeitgeist': civic-liberal inclusiveness of European identity, cultural pluralism, universal rights and equality, as well as political principles such as the rule of law or integrationist treaty framework (Halikiopoulou *et al.,* 2013). The RR can thus straightforwardly juxtapose ideas guiding the European community such as societal pluralism and inalienable human rights against antithetical, homogenous and exclusionary 'Europe for Europeans' (Checkel and Katzenstein, 2009; Mudde, 2007). Yet similarly to the domestic level, RR actors may also attempt to 'hijack' current EU values as well as political principles guiding EU treaties, reinterpreting them in nativist terms as arguments for exclusion of constructed 'Others' (Halikiopoulou *et al.,* 2013; Moffitt, 2017; Froio, 2018; Pytlas, 2018).

While RR parties shape their own mobilization opportunities, their competition strategies involve adjustments to current contexts, including reactions of other political actors. This is particularly the case as some conventional parties may, to a lesser or greater extent, accommodate RR positions and frames, fostering further normalization of RR politics (Art, 2007; Mudde, 2010; Pytlas, 2015, 2018; Meijers, 2017). While accounting for sociopolitical contexts remains important, extant research finds no clear influence of domestic competitor strategies on Eurosceptic RR trajectories (Pirro and van Kessel, 2017). Yet RR parties may also attempt to raise their domestic legitimacy as 'respectable radicals' by association with other European actors, for example by forging European Parliament alliances expected to boost their perception as more acceptable partners (McDonnell and Werner, 2017). Concurrently, accommodative policy change and reactions of more conventional parties active in European politics, as well as direct RR participation in an EU government might create additional opportunities for RR actors using counter-Europeanism to draw legitimacy vis-à-vis domestic competitors from developments in the European political arena. Tracing narrative shifts of counter-European strategies around and in-between critical events may thus help us to observe more closely how RR actors shape their mobilisation opportunities and attempt to increase their legitimacy in relation to European-level context.

II. The Variety of Radical Right Counter-European Strategies

Before moving to empirical analysis, we first need to categorize the nuanced repertoire of RR counter-European strategies (Table 1). For this purpose we use the literature on competition formulas of political renewal (Lucardie, 2000; Sikk, 2012), adjusting it to the above premises (for related domestic-level approach see Pytlas, 2019).

Lucardie (2000) and Sikk (2012) differentiate parties using formulas of newness by their ideological strength, and whether they compete in a new (strong 'prophets' and weak

Table 1: Variety of Radical Right Counter-European Strategies

Level of ideational re-legitimization Relational closure of representative gaps	Current idea (input legitimacy): a conception of Europe antithetical to and in-compatible with current idea/ mode underlying the European political process	Current practice (throughput legitimacy): a different practice of current idea underlying the European political process
'New niche': Bring previously not represented values or group identity into the European political process	**Europe-Prophetic** Claiming to introduce an antithetical belief system or political mode guiding European politics	**Europe-Refitting** Claiming to introduce theoretically valid yet ignored collective values or political rules into European politics
'Old niche': Make the European political process correspond with already established values or group identity	**Europe-Purifying** Claiming to take European politics to antithetical yet once already established belief system or political mode	**Europe-Refining** Claiming to fix the way European politics fulfils its already valid collective values or political rules

'prolocutors') or already operative electoral niche (strong 'purifiers' and weak 'projects of newness'). This approach is useful to analyze how distinct competition formulas promising political renewal are deployed to rhetorically adjust substantive supply along two dimensions: in relation to the programmatic offer of other political actors as well as vis-à-vis current ideational principles guiding the political process (Capoccia, 2012).

In line with our premises, the framework does not describe static party types but dynamic strategies that can be used by newer and older, more and less established Eurosceptic parties, as well as their conventional competitors. Specifically the RR can use each strategy to justify substantive supply in cultural or political terms (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017; Heinisch *et al.,* 2019). Nativist or sovereigntist stances can be made straightforwardly about salvaging (mostly nationalist) cultural collective identity or value order, or also be combined with (mostly but not exclusively populist) claims on democracy and political representation.

In the narrow relational sense, framing issues (which are rarely substantively novel, Minkenberg, 2001; Mudde, 2010) as 'new' or 'old niche' is linked to claims on how to close perceived representative gaps. Accordingly, RR actors may self-portray own supply as coming from the sociopolitical fringe or centre (Mudde, 2010). The former strategy claims to bring hitherto not represented 'truly European' identity into politics, namely to introduce a populist 'Europe of Citizens' or a classical RR pan-European conception of ethnopluralist 'European diversity' achieved by inter-European cultural separatism (Bar-On, 2008). Strategic contestation 'from the centre' instead suggests that it is European politics that needs to be taken back or closer to its (once) established, 'authentic' institutional form, political practice or values. Rather than promising a prophetic utopia, these claims invoke a mythicized imagination of a European 'heartland' (Taggart, 2004) seen as purportedly 'betrayed' or diluted by 'European elites' in the political process. RR actors may thus rhetorically redefine their substantively sovereigntist and nativist supply as a way to return to politically (once) already established European belief system embodied by 'family values' or

'Christian roots' (Lega (Nord), see Pirro and van Kessel, 2017); or to restore Europe's alleged previous constitutive form such as a 'non-political' confederation (Alleanza Nazionale, see Vasilopoulou, 2018).

In the ideational sense, we distinguish strategies not by ideological strength but by different levels on which political entrepreneurs fundamentally contest the legitimacy of the European political process: input and throughput (Schmidt, 2013). RR actors may frame their supply as explicitly incompatible with the EU's criteria of democratic or ideological validity (input legitimacy), evoking antithetical visions of 'populist' or culturally 'illiberal' Europe; or instead promise to fundamentally change the 'illegitimate' way currently dominant EU values are being practised (throughput). Practice contestation is thus not about input or specific policy-related outputs *per se*. Rather, what is suggested to be at stake is a 'truly legitimate' ideological and political fulfilment of current EU principles; and fundamental efficacy of formal politics to deliver legitimate policies at all (Schmidt, 2013).

In cultural terms, such RR mainstreaming strategies reinterpret values such as solidarity, laïcité or women's rights as nativist arguments (Halikiopoulou *et al.,* 2013; Moffitt, 2017; Froio, 2018). In political terms, some RR actors may copy the self-image of 'anti-establishment reform parties' (Hanley and Sikk, 2016), justifying nativism in valence terms as an alleged way to 'fix' how established politics fulfils obligations from current representative contract (Pytlas, 2018). This formula promises to fundamentally change the manners of doing politics rather than to overhaul its contents (Sikk, 2012). RR actors can thus attempt to reinterpret nativism as renewed (responsive, responsible, rational, etc.) European governance essential to seemingly 'fix' the political practice of current EU treaties by 'EU elites'.

Summing up, counter-European strategies differ from explicit Eurorejectionism (Vasilopoulou, 2018) or other proposals not justified in the name of Europe. Counter-Europeanism concurrently goes beyond merely policy-oriented 'politics as usual' (de Wilde and Trenz, 2012). While some counter-European strategies do not explicitly vow to overturn current EU polity or values, they are also not limited to keeping the policy status quo. Some counter-European strategies instead promise to fundamentally change the 'black box' of the European political process seen as dominated by illegitimate procedures and networks of domestic and European elites. Throughput-oriented claims thus fall between 'conditional' and 'compromising' European contestation. Overall, the RR may hence rhetorically justify its supply not only as prophetic or purifying 'truly European' idea antithetical *to* and incompatible *with*, but also as fundamentally 'refitting' or even 'refining' the representative practice *of* values and political principles seen as currently guiding the European political process (see Table A1 in the Online Appendix):[2]

Europe-prophetic strategies, unlike Euroreject claims, unfold a vision of previously not existent European political community. These narratives suggest that such 'true' European cooperation is only possible by introducing a previously not represented European idea or identity explicitly antithetical to the current 'distorted' conception of a collective European belief system or representative contract.

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[2]The substantive supply may naturally depend on specific social and political context, yet related framing strategies are comparable in functional terms. Furthermore, diverse RR actors within a single country may frame nativism differently, while a single party may change its strategies across time (Pytlas, 2015; Froio, 2018; Pirro *et al.,* 2018).

Europe-purifying strategies similarly justify substantive supply as a way to replace current guiding values or representative contract of Europe. Unlike prophetic claims, they nonetheless promise to take politics back to an antithetical 'betrayed' idea argued to have once defined the European community, or to established societal identities abandoned by formal politics. Rather than a brand new era yet to be installed politically, purifying strategies vow to restore Europe's 'authentic' identity or (mostly 'non-political') institutional form. This imagined community is usually associated with once established yet now gone 'European' values or mythicized societal 'good old times' allegedly existent prior to undesired political changes (Taggart, 2004).

Europe-refitting strategies, unlike prophetic claims, do not explicitly frame issues and ideology as incompatible with current EU political mode or values. They instead portray their supply as the only way to introduce these values or political principles seen as formally valid yet shunned by 'European elites'. Unlike purifying claims, Europe-refitting narratives do not suggest that any political option has previously represented these principles in practice, but instead that they are hypocritically invoked only in theory. Accordingly, the promise is not to explicitly overturn, but to refurbish the practice of currently underlying values and political rules by introducing their 'true' ideological interpretation, or prioritizing 'neglected' groups or ideas.

Europe-refining strategies, finally, differ from refitting claims in that they do not explicitly demand to introduce previously not represented values or rules into European politics. The promise is instead to fundamentally fix the way principles seen as already established are practiced in the European political process. Entrepreneurs may justify their stances as a more decisive representation of already valid yet politically 'diluted' collective beliefs. They denounce 'EU elites' and perceived domestic allies as threatening Europe with their fundamental inability to realize their current values. In political terms these claims may justify substantive supply as a way to bring about a 'better' European politics driven by 'common sense' popular wisdom, own expertise or other 'non-ideological' virtues (attentiveness, responsibility, rationality) deemed as necessary to more fundamentally fulfil the current representative contract (decisively defending current treaty regulations, efficaciously managing European 'crises', etc.).

III. Research Design

In order to investigate RR counter-European strategies, their alignment with substantive supply, as well as their adjustment vis-à-vis mid-ranged European-level context we analyze social media communication by Front National (FN) in France, the Alternative for Germany (AfD) and Hungarian Fidesz during the European humanitarian crisis debate 2015–16 (for detailed methodological report see Online Appendix).

A qualitative approach and explorative research design are best suited to pursue our goals. The chosen debate is particularly useful to trace dynamic patterns of counter-European strategies. Following the diverse case selection technique pertinent to our research design we aim to choose cases expected to maximize the range of variation (rather than its broader distribution) along relevant analytical categories (Gerring, 2007: 97–101) – here specifically along the ideational and relational aspects of Europe-contesting strategies. In ideational terms, our cases cover currently available categories of RR Euroscepticism: the FN is seen as a prime example of Euroreject RR; the AfD

which consolidated around its core RR ideology by mid-2015 can be seen as conditional Eurosceptic; the nominally centre-right Fidesz can be seen as a compromising Eurosceptic, radicalized mainstream party which increasingly embraced RR politics (Lewandowsky, 2016; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017; Pirro *et al.*, 2018; Pytlas, 2018; Vasilopoulou, 2018). In relational terms, issue entrepreneurship literature suggests that non-established FN and newcomer AfD are more probable to portray themselves as fringe than governing Fidesz (de Vries and Hobolt, 2012).

The sample consists of posts containing Europe-related claims on asylum, immigration and collective identity published between 1.1.2015 and 31.12.2016 on the official Facebook page of each party. While a 'refugee crisis' continued to be perpetuated afterwards, focusing on the onset and peak of the debate allows us to assess the strategies close to its major developments as well as key European migration and external border policy-making processes (Moreno-Lax, 2018). All data sources come with trade-offs yet social media is most pertinent to our goals: it allows us to trace narrative shifts closer to key developments; and to assess non-mediated, party-controlled strategic choices directed at broader publics (Engler *et al.*, 2019).

Balancing fine-grained and systematic exploration, we deploy rule-guided qualitative content analysis performed with computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software. The interpretative hand-coding procedure is guided by pre-defined categories conforming to the conceptual discussion (Table A1, Online Appendix). The coding unit is a quasi-sentence, yet following our premises some codes may co-occur. This allows us to analyze framing interaction between Europe-contesting strategies (counter-European, plus Euroreject and other non-European claims included for contrast) and substantive sovereigntism/nativism.

IV. Analysis

Before moving to main analysis, we first assess the parties' Europe-contesting strategies on European cultural supply more generally. As visible in Figure 1, RR Europe-contesting claims were not limited solely to explicit Eurorejectionism or other proposals not justified in the name of Europe. While the analyzed supply of all parties continued to revolve around Eurosceptic claims that fundamentally denounced the European political process (Table B1, Online Appendix), AfD and Fidesz combined them predominantly with relegitimizing counter-European narratives.

For the FN, counter-Europeanism was less salient compared to Euroreject or other non-European responses. The FN demanded to restore full national sovereignty or dismiss EU policies on the basis of their 'European' character. Fidesz' non-European sovereigntist calls to decline a 'Brussels dictate' were limited mainly to the campaign around Hungary's EU resettlement scheme plebiscite in October 2016. Both the AfD and Fidesz instead engaged primarily in counter-European politics. On closer look (Table B2, Online Appendix), incumbent Fidesz indeed focused less on portraying its supply as a 'new niche'. Yet unlike the FN and contrary to expectations, newcomer AfD depicted itself predominantly as established than fringe. Furthermore, while substantive AfD positions tapped conditional Euroscepticism, the party used mainly practice-oriented justifications, and that to a similar extent as Fidesz. Finally, both parties did not primarily invoke prophetic visions of Europe. Instead, their main strategy was a

Figure 1: Europe-Contesting Strategies on European Cultural Issues by the FN, AfD and Fidesz 2015–16
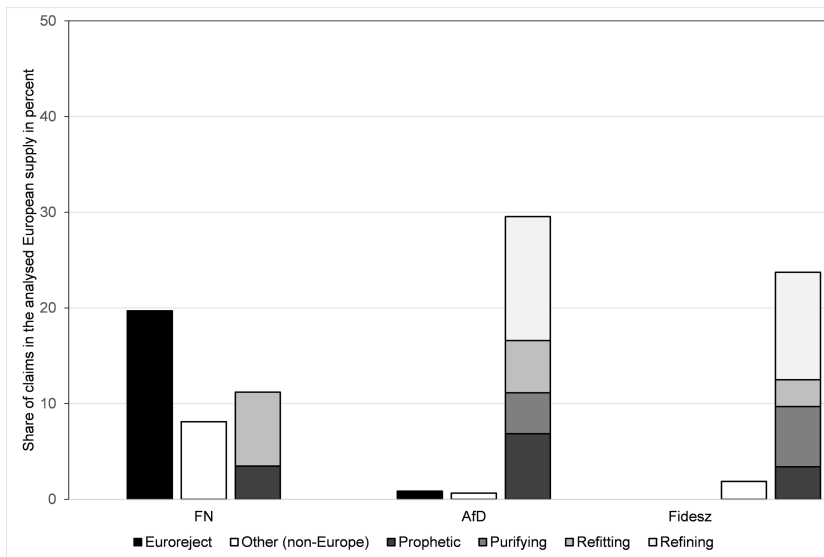
Note: In percent of all quasi-sentences. The *Y*-axis ranges fully to 100. See Table B1, Online Appendix.

political Europe-refining justification of their supply as a more fundamental practice of EU's current treaty principles contrasted against illegitimate 'EU elites'.

Alignment: Hijacking Europe

Our insights indicate the importance of including counter-European strategies in observations of RR competition on Europe. We accordingly move to the main analytical step: assessing the intensity to which investigated parties combined these and further Europe-contesting strategies with nativism or sovereigntism (Figure 2).

We see that more than half of total analysed Europe-contesting strategies of all parties, and almost two-third by nominally centre-right Fidesz intersected with nativism. Europe-contesting supply of FN was additionally strongly sovereigntist, merging both claims into an overarching 'globalist' threat. The AfD blurred, and in case of practice-oriented strategies even largely muted sovereigntism. Sovereigntist claims did not fully disappear though, but were disguised as an antithetical conception of 'true Europe'. For example, AfD's Europe-purifying frame demanded to revert the EU to non-political 'economic interest community of sovereign, loosely connected states in its original sense' (AfD, 2016c). This inevitably meant departing from an 'ever closer union'. A closer look shows that while cultural motivations related to European identity were most intensively nativist, at least every second pledge of AfD and Fidesz to resolve a European crisis of political representation was aligned with exclusionary scenarios of threat from cultural 'Others' (Figure B1, Online Appendix).

Figure 2: Alignment between Europe-contesting strategies and nativist/sovereigntist supply
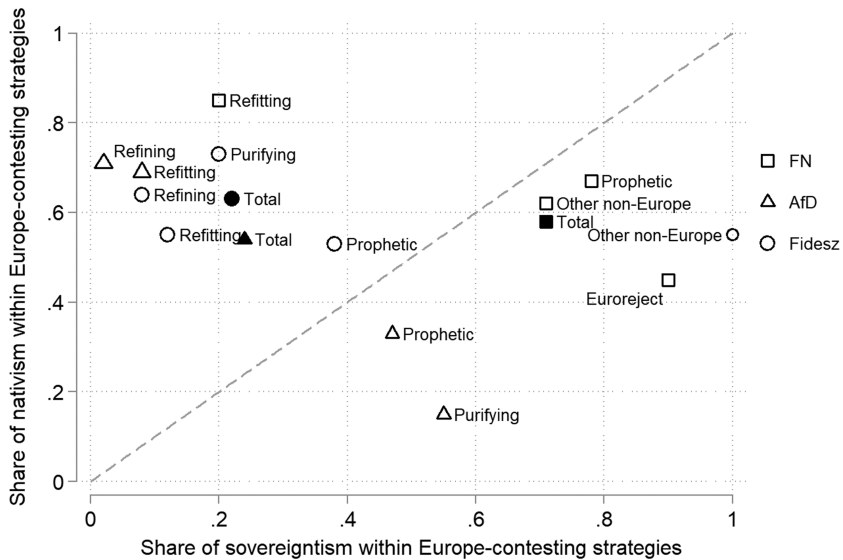
Note: The values are ratios of Europe-contesting codes which intersected with sovereigntist (*X*-axis) and nativist claims (*Y*-axis) to the frequency of each Europe-contesting code. Strategies on the left of the diagonal line are more intensively nativist than sovereigntist. See Table B3, B4, On-line Appendix.

A key finding here is that rather than just blurring sovereigntism, the AfD and Fidesz used counter-European strategies primarily to justify nativism. The AfD argued that a solution to a 'refugee crisis' is a prophetic ethnopluralist 'Europe of Fatherlands' (AfD, 2016a). Fidesz stated that Europe needs to 'close a political and intellectual era and open another era in order to be able to protect the cradle of Western civilization' (Orbán, 2015). It also demanded 'a democratic European Union whose internal relations, rules of life, ethnic composition, culture are determined by Europeans, not a bureaucratic elite in Brussels, which is currently acting against the will of the European people' (Orbán, 2016). The AfD similarly reiterated the ethnopluralist 'Europe of Fatherlands' through a populist lens, promising to 'reinvent' Europe as 'Europe of Citizens' (AfD, 2016b). Justifying nativism with populism, these claims evoked a monist Will of a '*European* People' as a way to defend Europe from allegedly threatening cultural 'Others'. Fidesz' Europe-purifying claims to return to Christian roots or traditional values were also predominantly nativist. The party stated: 'We want Europe based on families, not on immigration; we want to get rid of the mind-set that binds the EU and return to those values that have made it so successful earlier' (Fidesz, 2015d).

Overall, the most important takeaway is nonetheless that AfD and Fidesz did not primarily frame nativism as an explicitly anti-European ideology or as antithetical utopian vision of Europe's Union. They instead reinterpreted currently valid EU values, and most particularly current political principles in nativist terms. As we observe, refitting and refining strategies implying an accommodative stance to current EU values and principles were not less nativist than explicitly adversarial ones. AfD's Europe-refitting strategy

justified demands for a 'Fortress Europe' as necessary to realize 'much evoked, but de facto not existent European solidarity' (AfD, 2015b). AfD's statement to build a 'Fortress Europe' as a 'common European approach for securing the borders of Europe' adapted from the Austrian Interior Minister from centre-right ÖVP Johanna Mikl-Leitner (FAZ, 2015), further implied that in order to refurbish a Europe's Union, EU politics must embrace a nativist interpretation of European solidarity, representing powerless 'small states' hitherto forsaken by hypocritical EU elites (AfD, 2015b).

As already mentioned, the most frequent counter-European strategy of AfD and Fidesz were Europe-refining claims. In cultural terms, the AfD justified demands to set up refugee camps in Northern Africa as a way to save refugees from dangerous travel across the Mediterranean (AfD, 2015a). This claim framed restricting rights to seek asylum as a supposedly 'humanitarian' measure (in broader context see Moreno-Lax, 2018). Both parties nonetheless motivated Europe-refining strategies predominantly in political terms, thus avoiding a too close association with European civic-liberal values. Fidesz portrayed exclusionary stances as fulfilment of current EU treaties: 'Schengen is a value, which we must protect. (…) Europe follows the rule of the law, not following the rules will lead to chaos' (Fidesz, 2015a). While the AfD did not call to salvage Schengen, after the German government's application of Dublin III sovereignty clause in September 2015 the party justified exclusionary asylum policy as fulfilment of allegedly breached Dublin Regulation (AfD, 2016d; for expert refutation see i.a. Cremer, 2018). Rather than focusing just on policy effectiveness, both parties depicted their positions as viable to 'fix' European politics, binding it to popular responsiveness, 'common sense' and responsibility associated with actions of Hungarian and other European governments (Antal, 2016; Fidesz, 2016; AfD, 2016f).

Narrative Shifts: Adjusting (to) Europe

With this insight, we turn to tracing the shifts of counter-European strategies in their political or cultural variant, focusing on interactions with European-level contextual changes. Figure 3 depicts the attention AfD and Fidesz put on specific strategies relative to other counter-European claims across time. We exclude the FN here as its counter-European narratives were insufficient for meaningful temporal analysis. While the FN intensified counter-Europeanism in 2016, its use remained largely intermittent.

In 2015 both parties mostly followed a Europe-refining strategy, complemented by cultural Europe-purifying (Fidesz) and Europe-refitting (AfD) claims. The AfD swerved particularly between statements that cued its supply as fringe or established. While the party's leadership change in July 2015 cannot be disregarded, our mid-ranged picture suggests that the AfD advanced prophetic or refitting claims only around critical junctures of the European debate around September 2015 and mid-2016, while framing its supply as purifying or refining in between. While the party was constrained by domestic context such as comparably strong societal *cordon sanitaire*, it attempted to actively defy this context depending on opportunities at hand. Fidesz, bestowed with legitimacy by its incumbent position and membership in a conventional European party group articulated its own political Europe-refining 'master frame' in a more stable manner.

We concurrently observe that in 2016 Fidesz, and especially the AfD incrementally muted cultural counter-European frames, promising primarily to reform the European

Figure 3: Shifts of Counter-European Strategies by the AfD and Fidesz
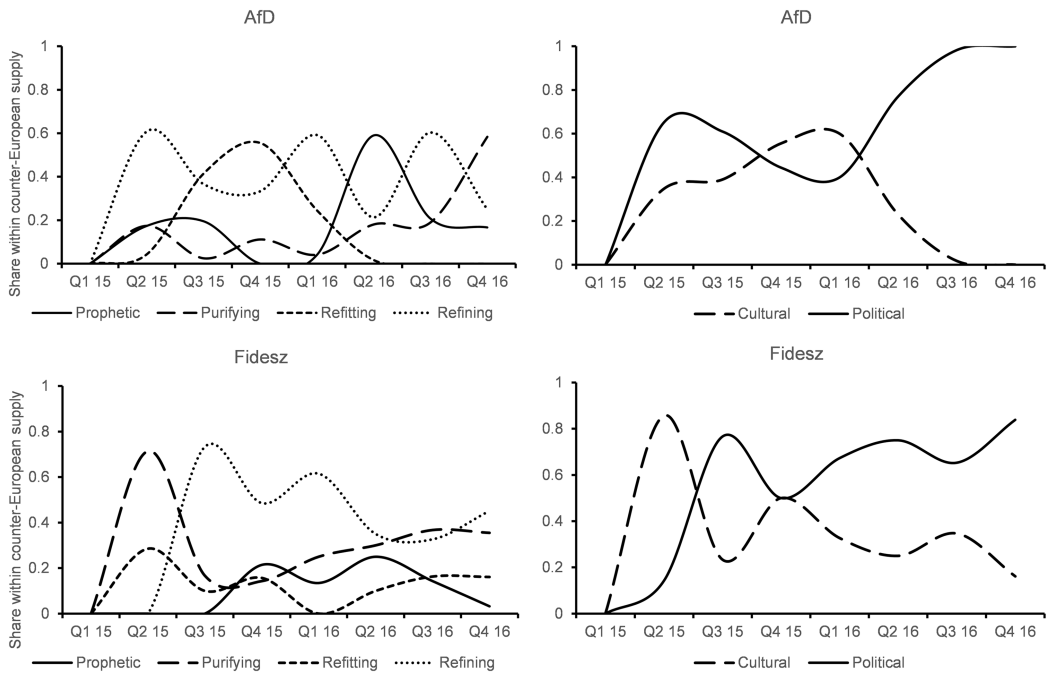
Note: The *Y*-axis displays the share of each frame relative to all counter-European statements coded within each quarter-year period. Counter-European claims and socio-cultural/political motivation evaluated separately for parsimony. For details see Table A3, Online Appendix.

representative contract as such. These findings mirror similar developments in the economic crisis (Halikiopoulou and Vasilopoulou, 2018) and highlight how political actors can use counter-European framing to actively adjust (to) European 'crisis' debates. Prophetic demands of a new 'direct democratic' EU peaked only closely around Hungarian and British referendums and were dropped shortly thereafter. Political motivations became dominant much earlier and relate to a more general transformation of the debate. By 2016, several EU governments opposed the refugee resettlement scheme and restricted their domestic asylum and immigration policy (The Guardian, 2016). After the Western Balkan Summit in February 2016, Austria, Croatia, Slovenia, Bulgaria and neighbouring Western Balkan states blocked the 'Western Balkan route', a policy justified by Interior Minister Mikl-Leitner as 'chain reaction of reason' (Die Presse, 2016).

This critical junction marks a general trend towards portraying demarcative cultural positions as a valence issue redefined in seemingly non-ideological terms as both a more responsive and responsible 'management of migration'. After the 2016 Vienna summit on migration along the Western Balkan route, the AfD commented: 'Hungary, Austria and the Balkan states finally clamp down on the German particularistic path in the migration policy. Europe refocuses on ethics of responsibility and takes away border protection competence away from a country spinning out of control in its midst, before it is too late' (AfD, 2016f). The party delegitimized German incumbents as allies of EU elites isolated

in Europe and simultaneously justified own supply as part of truly European 'realistic and people-centric' politics of other EU governments (AfD, 2016g).

Conclusions

Our explorative analysis of communication by Front National, Alternative for Germany and Fidesz during the peak of the European humanitarian crisis debate 2015–16 complements our insights on how Eurosceptic radical right actors can use Europe as part of their competition strategies (de Vries and Hobolt, 2012; van de Wardt *et al.,* 2014; Braun *et al.,* 2019). Accounting for counter-European strategies which suggest how a 'truly European' political process should be and work demonstrates a more fine-grained and dynamic repertoire of tactics by which RR entrepreneurs can justify their substantive ideological positions in the name of European identity and cooperation.

Our findings speak to extant insights that RR parties can shape their own mobilization opportunities by adjusting their Eurosceptic supply if considered politically advantageous (Pirro *et al.,* 2018; McDonnell and Werner, 2019). By focusing on related counter-European strategies we find that these narratives constitute a nuanced tactical resource used by RR actors not only to blur their substantive sovereigntist appeals, but especially to further enhance the mainstream legitimacy of their primary nativist supply. Unlike the Euroreject FN, AfD and Fidesz dynamically gauged their supply as fundamentally distinct from 'not (truly) European' EU elites and simultaneously normalized nativism in the name of European values and representative contract. However, direct antithetical redefinition of Europe, where 'the image of Europe as a shining city perched on the hill of perpetual peace, social welfare, and inalienable human rights is replaced with the cry of '"Europe for Europeans"' (Checkel and Katzenstein, 2009, pp. 1–2) was only part of the story. Most essentially, both Fidesz and the AfD justified nativism not only as an idea antithetical *to*, but primarily as a more fundamental practice *of* currently valid EU values and political rules.

Counter-European politics can be used to contest the political practice of current EU values from egalitarian and inclusionary positions. It can however also be deployed to redefine civic-liberal EU values and political principles in contradictory, nativist terms. Such RR 'hijacking' strategies offered a Euronativist redefinition of 'European solidarity' and effectively stripped the right to seek asylum of its universalistic character in the name of human rights. Most importantly, by selectively evoking EU regulations and separating them from their guiding values, nativism was redefined as a way to salvage EU treaties and integration achievements, such as border-free movement. Despite this framing, substantive RR supply remained exclusionary. RR entrepreneurs merely 'repackaged' and broadened the justifying repertoire behind their core ideology, effectively pervading the mainstream from within. Concurrently, the interdictive character of EU external border policy, lacking translation of already imprecise human rights clauses in respective EU policy documents into actual compliance, and broader securitization of human rights (Moreno-Lax, 2018) only fostered the opportunities for RR actors to pursue these mainstreaming strategies.

Our findings contribute to insights that RR parties can try to enhance their 'reputational shield' not only in relation to domestic but also to European-level context (McDonnell and Werner, 2017). By engaging in counter-European politics, RR actors

can attempt to justify their policies as a 'European' way to resolve self-perpetuated crises, but also to draw additional legitimacy from accommodative reactions of conventional parties and governments in other European states. Broader demarcative policy shifts justified as valence-oriented crisis management facilitated conditions for AfD and Fidesz to normalize their positions as established, 'responsive' and 'responsible' European cooperation contrasted against 'not (truly) European' domestic actors and 'EU elites'. Accommodative mainstream reactions enhanced opportunities for incumbent Fidesz to portray itself as respectable key player able to directly impact European politics. These developments were particularly relevant for newcomer AfD which used them to counter domestic constraints by attempts to shine with the reflected light of European conventional politics.

Our analysis provides just a snippet of continuously developing Europe-contesting RR strategies which concurrently speak to broader observations of RR mainstreaming. Except the Dutch Party for Freedom or cases in the UK, by 2019 most Euroreject actors including the renamed Rassemblement National cloaked explicit demands to leave the EU (Pirro *et al.,* 2018) in favour of prophetic counter-Europeanism. Other parties such as Salvini's Lega shifted to portraying their stances as a way to 'reform' the EU from within (McDonnell and Werner, 2019). Mainstreaming strategies can naturally pose constraints for the RR related to intra-party conflicts as well as risk of losing its radical image (Froio, 2018). Future research can profit from analyzing how RR actors attempt to mediate these trade-offs, and explore paths behind contingent choices of RR party leadership to (dis-)engage in counter-Europeanism. Furthermore, RR actors continuously adapt their strategies: they may refocus on cultural justifications, reactivate manifest sovereigntism, or link it to secondary issues such as economy if deemed necessary or profitable. In order to evaluate current findings more broadly, future research should analyze more RR cases across regions, time and further issues, as well as explore distinctions between social media and further data sources such as online news portals or events aimed at the core electorate.

Finally, further research is necessary to analyze conditions that mediate the resonance of RR counter-European strategies. The extent to which RR parties may impact public debates, political culture and policies is not automatic. In addition to demand-side factors it essentially relates to accommodative or adversarial reactions by the media and political competitors (Minkenberg 2001; Rydgren, 2003; Art, 2007; Pytlas, 2015). While RR parties actively attempt to hijack Europe, their propensity to do so crucially depends on whether liberal-democratic actors, including conventional parties, themselves let the European idea be hijacked by nativist politics.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of the article.

Table A1: Codebook and examples.
Table B1: Distribution of coded claims within the Europe-related supply on immigration, asylum and collective identity 2015–16 by the Front National. Alternative for Germany and Fidesz.
Table B2: Relative share of particular strategies within counter-European supply by the FN, AfD and Fidesz.
Table B3: Alignment between Europe-contesting strategies and nativism.
Table B4: Alignment between Europe-contesting strategies and sovereigntism.
Table B5: Relative share of particular strategies within counter-European discourse by the Alternative for Germany and Fidesz over time.

Figure A1: Issue salience in AfD European social media communication 2015–16.

Figure B1: Alignment between cultural and political justifications of Europe-contesting strategies and nativism/sovereigntism.