Article

Online EU Contestation in Times of Crisis: Towards a European Digital Demos?

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Abstract: Crises, as critical moments in the process of European integration, are particularly conducive to the increased politicisation of the European Union (EU) and its contestation. The year 2015 saw the peaks of the Greek and the refugee crises, the two crises that put the two flagships of the European project—the Euro and the Schengen zone—into imminent peril, causing a prolonged EU legitimacy crisis. Building on the literature that considers Euroscepticism as a context-dependent and discursive phenomenon, this study analyses Facebook debates that emerged in response to the Greek and refugee crises, trying to identify how the EU was evaluated and how these evaluations were justified. To answer this question, this study involved the qualitative content analysis of over 7000 Facebook comments related to the Greek and migration crises published in 2015 on the pages of the European Parliament and the European Commission. Contrary to the literature that explains popular Euroscepticism by utilitarian or cultural factors, the findings of this study show that the most recurrent justification for negative EU polity evaluations is the lack of democratic credentials. Furthermore, the commentators mostly assessed the EU's current set-up and, to a much lesser extent, the principle and the future of European integration. Moreover, the Facebook public extensively commented on the level of inclusiveness, particularly bemoaning the lack of inclusiveness of "ordinary" people in EU decision making. Nevertheless, the commentators frequently referred to themselves as "we Europeans" or "we people", opposing themselves to EU, national, or financial "elites". Despite its populist elements, this sense of "we-ness" incepted in social media suggests the capacity of transnational online discussion to foster European digital demos.

Keywords: Euroscepticism; Greek crisis; refugee crisis; Facebook

1. Introduction

The European Union has perpetually been a matter of conflicting visions on the design and competences of its institutions, its membership, and occasionally the very necessity of this kind of transnational arrangement. The debate on Europe and European integration henceforth consists of a multitude of top-down and bottom-up narratives and counter-narratives [1–3]. Although the EU is meant to tackle the economic and political challenges of globalisation, the process of European integration is increasingly perceived by EU constituencies as a generator of problems for their nation-states and them personally. Moreover, the EU is losing power to create the popular attachment as the appeal of its foundational myth based primarily on peace is no longer attractive to citizens who have only experienced peace and personal freedoms [4].

On the one hand, the EU has been constantly challenged for more than a decade. Due to a series of economic, political, and security predicaments experienced over the previous decade, directly or indirectly involving EU policies and institutions, citizens have become more critical towards the EU and started questioning its operational modes and policy choices [5–7]. Furthermore, counter-crisis measures have shifted powers from the representative institutions to the executive, causing an overall sensation of popular disempowerment [8]. Moreover, the two major priorities of Eurosceptics appeared to be migration and unemployment [9], which both have been on the upswing due to the Eurozone

crisis and the so-called refugee crisis. As evidenced in the literature, the responsibility for sharp economic recession and high levels of unemployment in the Eurozone countries was frequently attributed to the EU [10], fostering the politicisation of European integration [11]. As concerns the nexus between the refugee crisis and EU contestation, there is no consensus in the literature. Although prior scholarly work suggests a correlation between the attitudes towards immigrants and Euroscepticism [12–14], some more recent findings show that the crisis increased neither anti-immigrant sentiments nor critical attitudes toward the EU [15].

A chief goal of this study is to identify how the EU was contested in discursive online arenas during the peaks of the Greek crisis—as the most remarkable episode of the Eurozone crisis—and the refugee crisis. This paper argues that the current EU legitimacy crisis is still rooted in the events of the last decades such as the Eurozone, refugee, and Brexit crises [16–18]. José Manuel Barroso, then the President of the European Commission, called the Eurozone financial crisis "the biggest challenge in the history" of the EU, while Angela Merkel, the German Chancellor, warned "If the Euro fails, Europe fails". The Eurozone crisis lasted for several years, but its most dramatic episode was the Greek bailout crisis and its possible exit from the Eurozone. On the other hand, the refugee crisis challenged the viability of the Schengen agreement, one of the flagships of the European project. Moreover, radical right-wing parties extensively tried to capitalise on fears stemming from large influxes of refugees, by employing anti-immigration, anti-Islam, and anti-Europe rhetoric [19]. Due to the detrimental effects of both Greek and refugee crises on the public support for European integration, the legitimacy dimension of the crises deserves attention, because their effects might outlast the economic and governance problems that caused the crises.

Despite the undeniable impact of both crises on the European project, there has not been much empirical research that investigates whether and how different aspects of European integration were evaluated in the European public sphere. This paper aims to fill this niche in the literature by analysing the discourse of ordinary EU citizens on EU-related issues in EU-focused and transnational online discursive space, where the value of the EU, its future trajectories, and the recent crises are debated. This study outlines the proposition that the social media pages administered by the EU institutions are particularly informative and genuinely transnational EU-oriented arenas, which host vivid discussions on various aspects of European integration. The analysis of EU-focused transnational discussions complements the existing studies on public attitudes towards European integration, which draw on public opinion polls, and re-conceptualises the common explanations for public Euroscepticism, mainly based on a utilitarian or cultural hypothesis [20–22].

This study builds on some previous studies [23] and seeks to identify how the EU was evaluated in terms of its principle of integration, its current set-up, and the future of integration, and how were these evaluations justified. Qualitative content analysis is used to analyse over 7000 Facebook comments related to the Greek and refugee crises and published on the Facebook pages of the European Commission and the European Parliament, and to respond to the questions dealing with evaluations of different aspects of EU polity, mapping the most salient issues. Contrary to the literature that identifies utilitarian and cultural factors as the main determinants of public hostility towards European integration, the findings of this study show that the most recurrent justification for negative evaluations of different dimensions of the EU polity, in the view of the examined transnational public, is its lack of democratic credentials and the legitimacy of the supranational governance.

Moreover, the present analysis shows the surfacing of "public Europeanism" [24], meaning the sense of shared concerns over the matters of common interests that emerged during the Greek and refugee crises. In the examined debates, commentators frequently referred to themselves as "we Europeans" or "we people". However, this sense of community and enhanced cohesion in times of crises—emerged in opposition to "elites"—echoes with the emerging populist ideology [6] and certain illiberal postulates such as anti-Islamism [25]. Despite its associations with populism, the emerging sense of "we-ness" incepted in social

media suggests the capacity of transnational online discussion to foster the creation of a European digital public sphere and European digital demos.

The study takes a bottom-up approach to online Euroscepticism in times of crisis by asking: How was the EU contested in the popular discourse which was unfolding in social media during the peak moments of the Greek crisis and the refugee crisis? This question is dissected into the following sub-questions: (1) How was the EU evaluated in terms of its principle of integration, its current set-up, and the future of integration? (2) How were these evaluations justified? (3) How did citizens verbally construct these crises, and what type of discursive resources have they employed?

2. Literature Review

This section presents the state-of-the-art literature review on Euroscepticism and argues that the present research on public attitudes towards European integration needs to be complemented and re-conceptualised by the analysis of online discursive interactions.

2.1. Definition of Euroscepticism

Euroscepticism has experienced a peculiar evolution from a journalistic term, mainly present in British newspapers, to a widely discussed scholarly issue and feature of political programs in an increasing number of parties across Europe. At the beginning of the process of European integration, the adversaries of this process were categorised as communists, Gaullists, or anti-marketeers [26], whereas the term "Euroscepticism" was used for the first time in a written text in an article in *The Times*, published in 1985. The Maastricht Treaty represents a watershed in the history of the European project in multiple ways, including the shift in public support and a starting point of ascending Euroscepticism [27].

Euroscepticism is often seen as an umbrella term that embraces a diverse range of negative attitudes towards European integration. To describe Euroscepticism, Mudde [28] (p. 103) uses the term "container concept" to encompass any form of critique of the European integration, regardless of how marginal. However, several scholars have tried to define it more precisely. One of the early pioneers in the investigation of Euroscepticism, P. Taggart, defines Euroscepticism as "an encompassing term" which "expresses the idea of contingent or qualified opposition, as well as incorporating outright and unqualified opposition to the process of European integration" [29] (p. 366). Moreover, we can distinguish between party-based Euroscepticism and popular Euroscepticism.

2.2. Party-Based Euroscepticism

Party-based Euroscepticism was traditionally perceived as a "touchstone of dissent" [29] and a hallmark of extreme right-wing or left-wing parties. According to this reading, Euroscepticism has the shape of an "inverted U-curve", with peaks on the two ends of the traditional, one-dimensional political spectrum [30]. Similarly, Szczerbiak and Taggart [31] (p. 349) found that Euroscepticism is characterised by a core-periphery dynamic in which "the major parties in the party system will display a pervasive commitment to the European project", while Eurosceptic parties are "confined to the peripheries of the party system". Although Eurosceptic parties were considered for a long period as marginal protest parties, nowadays, the Eurosceptic political landscape has drastically changed. Previously marginal Eurosceptic parties have entered governments, "coming in from the cold" [32].

In examining the different typologies of party-based Euroscepticism, Taggart and Szczerbiak [33] draw a widely known distinction between "hard" and "soft" Euroscepticism. Hard Euroscepticism is defined as a principled opposition to the EU and European integration, expressed through the advocacy of leaving the EU or stopping the accession process in the case of candidate countries. On the other hand, soft Euroscepticism denotes a "qualified opposition" to a specific policy or policies but nonetheless remains supportive to the notion of European integration in principle. This form of Euroscepticism may

be a result of the perception that "national interest" is currently at odds with the EU's trajectory [33] (p. 7).

Euroscepticism promptly entered the political programs of right-wing parties after EU competences superseded mere free market regulations. Rightist suspicion towards European integration stems from a series of perceived threats to the national community, including immigration, multiculturalism, and the loss of national sovereignty and traditional values [30] (p. 976). On the other hand, Eurosceptics of the left oppose the alleged neoliberal nature of EU policies, which according to the leftist reading foster excessive deregulation, free trade, and globalisation [34]. Finally, due to the recent economic crisis, which is seen as a result of failed free market principles and the austerity measures which followed, left-wing Euroscepticism has become more prominent, particularly in southern Europe [35,36].

2.3. Popular Euroscepticism

Traditionally, popular Euroscepticism has been defined as low support for European integration, measured by Eurobarometer surveys or manifested through negative votes in EU-related referenda. Eurobarometer surveys, established in 1974, gauge fluctuations in public opinion, including both EU aggregate and country-specific data. A large proportion of scholarly work on public Euroscepticism has been informed by the statistical data derived from Eurobarometer surveys or the European Social Survey. The goal of this literature canon has been to map the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviour patterns of European constituencies [12,37,38].

Since the Maastricht referenda, public opposition to European integration has been constantly intriguing the academic community. Numerous scholarly endeavours have yielded a myriad of theories aiming to explain the upsurge in popular Euroscepticism such as economic/utilitarian theories, identity theory, or party cueing theory.

Utilitarian cost–benefit considerations are based on the observation that "EU membership is not necessarily a positive sum game where everyone wins; instead it frequently involves both winners and losers" [39] (p. 233). Similarly, according to Gabel and Palmer [40], popular attitudes towards European integration are based on individuals' different costs and benefits from the EU. The division between those who support and those who oppose European integration is viewed as a reflection of the wider division between winners and losers of globalisation. People endowed with "transnational competences"—predominantly acquired through formal education—are those who mostly reap benefits from globalisation [41], whereas people who stopped their education at an early stage and who are mostly manual workers tend to oppose globalisation since they benefit little from the opportunities it offers and feel threatened by increased competitiveness on the job market.

Arguing in favour of identity as fuel for Eurosceptic sentiments, McLaren [42] demonstrates that Euroscepticism at the individual level is positively correlated with a general animosity towards other cultures. Since multiculturalism is one of the basic EU tenets, those who feel animosity towards other cultures will oppose the EU as well. Furthermore, Hooghe and Marks [43,44] found that support for European integration is strongly determined by identity. They distinguish exclusive and inclusive national identity and reveal that people with multiple identities are less Eurosceptic than those who identify with only one nation. Moreover, diverse national identities and their historical evolution can serve as strong explanatory variables as well. In this interpretation, British Euroscepticism stems from its imperial history and alleged British exceptionalism [45]. On the other hand, Euroscepticism lacks salience among Germans, who are still encumbered by guilt over the Second World War, and among Spaniards, who still perceive the EU as an opportunity for development and modernisation [46].

Citizens' attitudes to the EU may be influenced by a series of political factors such as political parties' cues, ideological position, or trust in and support for national governments. In modern democracies, political parties are the most important political organisations that link political elites and citizens; hence, individuals are apt to adopt the stance on

European integration of the party they support [47]. Furthermore, the level of confrontation between parties regarding EU issues can affect popular attitudes on European integration. Citizens are more ambivalent, less apathetic, and less positive about the EU when domestic elites are more divided over EU issues [48]. Political ideologies are arguably an important determinant of the individual level of Euroscepticism: supporters of centrist parties are less likely to be Eurosceptic, whereas supporters of extreme left-wing or right-wing parties are more likely to be Eurosceptic [49,50]. Early studies on European elections and EU referenda speak about the so-called "sanction effect" and argue that popular Euroscepticism actually does not exist, and those who cast negative votes in EU referenda or elections for the European Parliament simply intend to punish current governments [51]. Finally, some studies have revealed that political or economic developments in one EU member state may foster party-based or popular Euroscepticism in other member state(s). For instance, the success of Eurosceptic parties in one country may have a contagion effect and stimulate political actors in other countries to pursue a Eurosceptic agenda [44].

2.4. New Approach to Euroscepticism: Studying Social Media Debates

Unlike the research reviewed above, this study mainly focuses on popular Euroscepticism present in social media, as a fairly new channel of the expression of Eurosceptic attitudes, which promises considerable potential for insightful analysis, since it contains a large number of spontaneous and unsolicited citizens' comments on different aspects of European integration.

Although the largest portion of the literature on Euroscepticism is based on attitudinal research, the present study draws on the argument that Eurosceptic attitudes are not fixed or predisposed but rather triggered by particular circumstances or through communication choices [23,52]. Public attitudes towards the EU are often volatile and not always innate to different categories of the population, as studies that focus on the attitudes of particular groups (e.g., the well-off, the educated, or males) would suggest. The results of opinion polls represent an amalgamation of individual attitudes, whereas the debates that are the object of this study represent discursive practices and opinion exchanges among participants.

In this study, Euroscepticism is understood as a highly responsive phenomenon, which has been highly sensitive not only to the growth of the EU's authority and competences, but also to justifications employed by politicians and institutions for further integration, also known as pro-European discourse. Going beyond the "usual suspects" such as economic or identity concerns, pro-European discourse can be also a cause of Euroscepticism [53]. If we understand the EU as a "discursive battleground", then Euroscepticism can be analysed as a counter-narrative that emerges as a reaction to a pro-integrationist narrative advocated by the EU and national actors. Social media interactions are rich sources of data for a discursive approach since they represent spaces where people holding an array of different opinions on the EU—from anti-EU to pro-EU—virtually come "face to face" and confront their positions. These positions are the relevant expression of the public opinion on the EU and are able to complement the data obtained from opinion polls. As Barisone and Ceron [54] (p. 78) argue, "the spontaneous, unsolicited opinions expressed and posted over a given political issue are a fully legitimate and politically influential form of public opinion". Yet, the present study does not argue that these online discussions represent public opinion, but rather explore the different aspects of a fairly recent phenomenon epitomised by popular or "banal" EU contestation that emerges in social media. This paper does not deny the importance of the studies based on opinion polls but argues that the collection and analysis of the discursive data is needed to complement the scholarly work founded on the statistical data.

In order to analyse popular Euroscepticism present in social media discussion, we have to define different categories of popular attitudes towards European integration that will be identified in the Facebook commentary analysed. The seminal work of Taggart [29], which proposes a distinction between hard and soft Euroscepticism of political parties, can be

also applied to public attitudes towards European integration. While hard Eurosceptics are against the very idea of transferring powers to any supranational institution and express a principled opposition to the European project as such, soft Eurosceptics oppose concrete EU policies or have an aversion towards the planned trajectory of the further extension of EU competencies. However, the distinction between hard and soft Eurosceptics is insufficiently able to embrace all the nuances of public attitudes towards European integration. Moreover, it is focused solely on those who oppose the EU, excluding those who support the European project. Furthermore, Kopecky and Mudde [55] criticise the theoretical precision of Taggart's classification, proposing their own classification criteria. According to them, there are four ideal-type categories of party attitudes regarding the EU: (1) the Euroenthusiasts that combine Europhile and EU-optimist positions, supporting both general ideas and the integration process; (2) the Eurosceptics that merge Europhilism and EU-pessimism, approving of general ideas but not their current application; (3) the Eurorejects that are both Europhobe and EU-pessimist; (4) the Europragmatists, who disapprove of general ideas but support the current EU integration anyway, pragmatically taking into account the fact that even if they are ideologically against the European integration, they benefit from it.

Although the categorisation proposed by Kopecky and Mudde [55] is more nuanced in comparison to the one proposed by Taggart, De Wilde et al. [23] developed an even more holistic scheme for the differentiation of various levels and targets of EU evaluations. Drawing on Morgan's [56] three dimensions of the EU polity evaluations—principle of integration, EU institutional set-up, and project of integration—De Wilde et al. [23] derive six categories of EU polity evaluations: "affirmative European", "alter-European", "status quo", "Eurocritical", "pragmatic", and "anti-European". In addition, they identify a seventh category called "diffuse Euroscepticism", which they define as a negative evaluation lacking a clear and well-argued justification. Furthermore, they operationalise EU polity justification building on Boltanski and Thévenot's [57] work and identify a series of the most commonly invoked reasons for EU support or criticism. These reoccurring bases for EU polity evaluations are democracy, shared culture and values, necessity, economic prosperity, and safety. This scheme, although rather complex, offers a very nuanced variety of Eurosceptic attitudes as well as affirmative evaluations.

3. Methodology and Data

Popular Euroscepticism evident in social media debates is a discursive phenomenon that requires an in-depth qualitative analysis and the illustration of the most salient concepts and lines of argument. This study argues that qualitative methods are able to accommodate the richness and the variations of the popular attitudes on European integration. However, although this study takes a qualitative approach when analysing social media content, it also quantifies some of the findings to show the preponderance of certain concepts. However, by showing the quantitative representation of the findings, this study does not claim their representativeness with respect to the broader population but tries to identify the most salient EU evaluations and arguments within the selected sample.

Facebook pages are chosen as the main source of data due to several reasons. The importance of social media in communication with EU citizens has been recognised by all EU institutions. The Parliament and the Commission have formed social media teams, which continuously update a multitude of social media channels and maintain contact with an ever-increasing number of followers. These followers are an interactive public, constantly commenting and inquiring about different aspects of EU governance [58]. However, Facebook is by far the most popular social media in Europe, with Pinterest, Twitter, YouTube, and Instagram lagging significantly behind. Due to the massive number of users both in Europe and worldwide, Facebook tends to reflect "offline" demographics more precisely than any other social media [59]. Despite the fact it has been emerging as a leading forum for discussions—mainly due to the ever-increasing practice of commenting on the

pages of various socially engaged actors such as politicians, public institutions, or the media—Facebook has not received extensive scholarly attention [58–60].

In order to identify how the role of the EU in the two crises was assessed and how European integration in more general terms was evaluated by the Facebook public, this study employed content analysis of Facebook commentary. Content analysis can be defined as "a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use" [61] (p. 18). Due to the proliferation of social media, content analysis has become an extensively used technique for dealing with digital materials in the area of social sciences.

The data were collected by the researcher in 2015. Since purposive sampling is often a multistage process [61] (p. 119), the amount of initially downloaded raw textual data was gradually reduced to their most relevant components for tackling the research problem at hand. The resulting corpus of commentary is not intended to be representative of the group of comments but to contain the most informative parts of the large volumes of data. Logically, the comment threads under the posts tackling crises-related issues were likely to be dominantly dealing with the two crises and containing the evaluation of the EU. It should be noted that Facebook pages include not only text posts (such as posts or comments), but also photos, videos, hyperlinks, and "likes" (at the time of the sampling, Facebook "reactions" had not been introduced). However, for the purpose of this study, only textual comments were sampled, since the focus was on the statements evaluating the EU polity, and these could not be retrieved from multimedia elements or simple "likes". Moreover, the qualitative research software Atlas.ti was used for coding a large number of downloaded comments.

As concerns the time frame of the analysis, the apex of the Greek crisis occurred between the end of June 2015 and mid-July 2015. At the end of June 2015, the Greek government failed to pay a tranche of its debt and withdrew from negotiations with the Troika, announcing a referendum on the Troika's new bailout proposal. The referendum was held on July 5, and the Greek authorities accepted the deal proposed by their creditors in mid-July, although the majority of the Greek electorate voted against it. Hence, almost all posts dealing with the third Greek bailout were published during these weeks. As a result, the downloaded sample consisted of 11 posts addressing the Greek question and 1803 respective comments from the Facebook page of the Parliament, and 7 posts and 1751 comments from the Facebook page of the Commission. These posts were published in the period between 28 June and 17 July 2015.

Unlike the Greek crisis, which was brief and intense, the migration crisis lasted longer and varied in intensity. The critical moments of the migration crisis happened between August and October 2015, as during this period, the largest number of asylum seekers arrived in Europe and, consequently, the unprecedented influx of people generated a crisis of migration management at both national and EU levels. This period saw several important events: Germany announced their willingness to accept all Syrian refugee arrivals; the EU program for refugee redistribution among member states was adopted and the first refugees relocated; and several EU member states overtly protested against the redistribution scheme and/or started building fences along borders with both EU and non-EU countries to prevent the transit of migrants through their territories. Thus, the selected posts dealing with the migration crisis were published between 5 August and 26 October 2015. The Commission was much more active in terms of Facebook interactions due to its leading role in crisis management. Therefore, the selected sample consisted of 37 posts from the Commission's page and 1721 comments published as reactions to these posts, and 13 posts from the Parliament's page and 1805 respective comments.

After the selection of posts addressing the Greek third bailout and the migration crisis, the Facebook commentary published in reaction to the contents of these posts was downloaded. The data were extracted using a Facebook application "Netvizz"[1], which facilitated the retrieval of Facebook contents.

The comments that contained evaluations of European integration or the EU were coded. As aforementioned, the coding scheme that this study employed to identify different forms of EU polity evaluation was borrowed from De Wilde et al. [23]. Their scheme draws on Morgan's [56] three dimensions of justifications for European integration: the principle of integration, the institutional and constitutional set-up, and future trajectories of integration. The principle of integration concerns the dilemma of whether European states are better off cooperating and pooling sovereignty in certain areas or acting as independent, fully sovereign Westphalian states. While the principle of integration is an integral category, the categories "the EU current set-up" and "the future of the European project" are divided into sub-categories by using three dimensions of integration: level, scope, and inclusiveness. Lindberg and Scheingold [62] introduced the differentiation between the level and the scope of integration. The level of integration concerns EU powers in relation to the member states, EU decision-making procedures, and the distribution of powers among member states within the EU framework. The scope of integration regards policy fields that the EU should regulate and have competences in. "Inclusiveness" refers to different groups of people that are affected by EU decisions and (un)represented at the EU level, such as nations, minorities, young people, or even very general categories such as "ordinary people".

To classify a statement as an EU polity evaluation, it has to address at least one of these variables: the principle of European integration, the institutional set up, or the project of integration. The variable "principle of integration" can have three values: positive, negative, or not available. The other two variables "institutional set up of the EU" and "project of integration" can have the following values: level—positive, level—negative, scope—positive, scope—negative, inclusiveness—positive, inclusiveness—negative, and not available (NA).

Six types of EU polity evaluations can be derived by combining the three variables (see Table 1). Affirmative European evaluations are characterised by positive evaluations of the principle of integration and/or the current set-up and/or the future of integration and, thus, completely devoid of negative assessments of European integration. Anti-European evaluations lie on the opposite side of the spectrum and denounce all three dimensions of European integration. Status-quo evaluations positively assess the principle of integration and the current institutional set up while rejecting further integration. Eurocritical statements are in favour of European integration in principle, but they oppose both the current institutional set up and further integration. Pragmatic statements are those which denounce the principle of integration while supporting the current institutional set up. However, no pragmatic EU polity evaluations were found in the Facebook comments sampled, and therefore, this category was excluded from the findings. Alter-European evaluations disapprove the current EU institutional set up while positively assessing the future of the project of European integration. EU polity evaluations rarely address all three of these dimensions concurrently, rather, one or two of them. Thus, another category—"diffuse Eurosceptic evaluations"—was introduced to put these underspecified statements under an umbrella term.

Table 1. Typology of EU polity evaluation.

		Principle of Integration			
		Positive		**Negative**	
		EU Polity			
		Positive	**Negative**	**Positive**	**Negative**
Project of Integration	Positive Negative	Affirmative European Status Quo	Alter-European Eurocritical	- Pragmatic	- Anti-European

Source: De Wilde et al. [23].

De Wilde et al. [23] (p. 35) complement their coding scheme with justifications of worth. According to them, EU legitimacy can be defended or contested based on the following justifications: (1) the EU increases/decreases democracy; (2) the EU contributes to the conservation/destruction of European cultural heritage and shared values; (3) European integration is necessary to effectively deal with modern challenges/is redundant; (4) European integration enhances/hinders economic prosperity; (5) the EU contributes/does not contribute to safety against internal or external threats. Democracy, culture, efficiency, economic prosperity, and safety are crucial public goods in all modern Western societies, and therefore, it is important to find out if the process of European integration has been perceived as beneficial or detrimental to these six pillars of Western societies.

4. Results

This section investigates how the EU was evaluated in terms of its principle of integration, its current set-up, and the future of integration and what justifications for these evaluations were put forward by analysing Facebook debates that emerged in the context of the third Greek bailout crisis and the migration crisis. During these crises, public, media, and academic attention turned to the EU not only because of its prominent role in resolving these crises but also due to widespread perceptions that the EU partly triggered these crises by its unsuccessful economic and migration policies or aggravated them by the consequences of ineffective crisis management. The survival of the two hallmarks of the European project—the Euro and the Schengen agreement—was in peril, inevitably questioning the very idea of European integration. Moreover, both crises involved core state powers such as fiscal resources and border control as well as democratic self-determination, which are easily politicised and cause divisions along national or macro-regional borders [63].

4.1. Third Greek Bailout in Public Discourse

The crisis over the third Greek bailout provoked fervent debates across the EU due to several reasons. First, it became clear that more than five years of EU-led management of the Greek sovereign debt crisis had proven unsuccessful, as the country was again on the brink of bankruptcy. Second, the issue of a new loan to the Greeks triggered discussions on solidarity and redistribution among member states, highlighting the prosperity gap between southern and northern Europe and the problematic nature of the decision to create a common currency despite conspicuous economic divergences among the states. The German government took a particularly hard line on Greek debt, since Germany was notably the main creditor but also a supporter of austerity measures as the main mechanism for tackling the Greek economic predicament. On the other hand, the Greek government under Tsipras was elected on an explicit anti-austerity platform. Third, Greek debt reopened the issue of the viability of the common currency and its future. At the peak of the crisis, "Grexit"—meaning either Greece leaving the Eurozone or the EU—was no longer a "buzzword" present in the public discourse but a plausible scenario.

The commentators who assessed the principle of European integration were quite polarised in their views on the utility of the process of the integration of European states. A tight majority maintained that their countries would be better off being out of the European project since, in their view, the EU either had only harmed their countries by means of causing pauperisation and depriving their countries of sovereignty or making an impact on decision making in Brussels. Many of them denied the desirability of the European project, putting forward various arguments, such as its putative undemocratic character and its self-serving elites. The following comment illustrates the way the EU is contested in principle:

> It's already a monstrosity. The future of the EU is total financial dominance by the bigger countries. It is a long way from a union trading block it began with. No thanks, I'm not at all interested in an undemocratic/unelected giant European corporation deciding to protect private banks over the fate of ordinary citizens. If ever I get to vote, it's out! (Facebook page of the Parliament, 7 July 2015)

Nevertheless, as shown by Figure 1, approximately 45 percent of commentators who evaluated the principle of integration recognised the necessity for close cooperation among European states and praised the EU as a capital achievement of modern Europe. These commentators highlighted the most important accomplishments of the project of European integration such as the Schengen zone, the Euro, the Erasmus programs, and long-lasting peace among EU member states. The following comment illustrates these affirmative evaluations of the principle of integration:

> The problem with people like you is that you think that EU is useless... Roaming will disappear in 2018 (thank you EU, don't forget it when you will call abroad) crossing boarders without queuing (thank you EU), I don't need anymore dollars to go abroad (thank you EU), Erasmus (thank you EU maybe you are / were one of those students?), Leonardo (thank you EU), 70 years of peace (thank you EU). (Facebook page of the Commission, 6 July 2015)
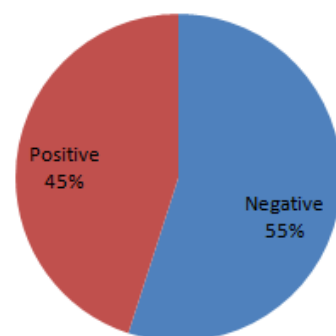

Figure 1. Principle of integration (n = 131).

The most contested dimension of the EU polity was the current EU set-up, since the majority of commentators assessed the value of the EU based on its current inclusiveness, level of power, and/or scope of integration. The largest portion of these comments evaluated the EU polity based on the criteria of inclusiveness, while the level and the scope were evaluated to a much lesser extent (see Figure 2). These findings show that the transnational Facebook mini-public was prone to assess the EU mostly based on the current state of affairs and reflected little on the desirability of integration in general terms and on the future avenues of European integration. The evaluations of the current EU set-up were mostly negative and expressed dissatisfaction with the degree of inclusion of citizens in EU policy making, but also with the degree of inclusion in the reallocation of benefits that European integration had generated.
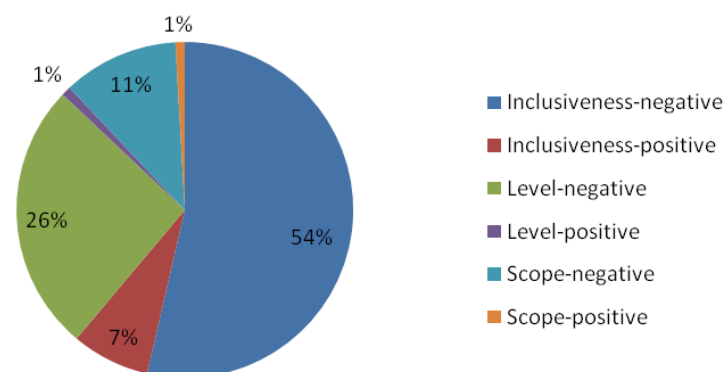

Figure 2. Current EU set-up (n = 332).

Despite having found a large number of comments that criticised the EU for "humiliating", "impoverishing", "enslaving" "killing", or "abusing" the Greeks, this type of criticism

was typically only an introductory statement for more general accusations that the EU had completely excluded a much broader category of "ordinary people" from the current decision-making process. The following comment illustrates this category of arguments:

> The EU has brought Greece to its knees—democracy is dead there now. Humiliated and brought to heel. You may think you have won, by using vast amounts of our money to prop up your euro project—all you have done is to speed up the process of collapse of your vile institution. [. . .] The nations and peoples of Europe can survive and thrive without you—you cannot exist without us—we don't need you—you need us—and it seems to me that you have lost the will of the people. [emphasis added]. (Facebook page of the Parliament, 13 July 2015)

Commentators repeatedly expressed the complaint that ordinary people had no say or that their voice was insufficiently heard at the EU level. This category of popular dissatisfaction with the EU is tightly connected with the idea of the alleged democratic deficit [64–66]. However, public criticism was phrased in very general terms without specifying concrete procedures and channels of representation that citizens were excluded from; consequently, explicit proposals for potential reforms aimed at the alleviation of the democratic deficit were almost completely absent.

Even though popular discontent with EU democratic credentials was framed vaguely, diffused popular frustration with the EU and occasionally with political and financial elites, in general, resonated powerfully across the examined discussion forums. Interestingly, the cleavage that the commentators most recurrently referred to was not the one reflecting national or regional divides (e.g., Greece versus Germany, southern Europe versus northern Europe) but the one delineating the gap between "the people" and "the elites". Despite dominantly negative evaluations of the current state of EU affairs, the emergence of a transnationally shared sense of a common destiny might be interpreted as a positive sign of a nascent European-ness: "One thing is clear after the debate: The friction is running along worldviews—not borders anymore. This is a good sign. We are already Europeans (Facebook page of the Parliament, 8 July 2015)".

The second aspect of excluding "the people" focused on their deprivation of the benefits generated through EU policies. Commentators perceived themselves—understood either as nationals of a specific member state or the European Union—as the underdogs of the process of European integration, whereas political, financial, or business elites were viewed as absolute winners. Moreover, many commentators denounced the enfeeblement of the social state, which was qualified as a European "trademark" and a distinctive feature with respect to its extra-European counterparts, such as the US.

One example of disapproval of alleged EU neoliberalism is:

> Well done Greece! National debt is non-sustainable and it is only hurting more and more ordinary people with no power and responsibility in a situation created by politicians and financial institutions. European politicians and bankers are destroying social democracy. (Facebook page of the Commission, 6 July 2015)

Approximately a quarter of commentators who addressed their views on the current EU set-up via online contributions evaluated the current level of power held by the EU as negative. The EU is often said to exercise its powers in an undemocratic way and that certain member states, specifically Germany, have more de facto powers in comparison to others. The EU is accused of, among others, depriving national states of their sovereignty, self-interested acting, and imperial aspirations.

Commentators assessed the future of the European integration in rather negative terms: 67.2 percent of the commentators who expressed their views on future avenues of European integration were not in favour of further European integration in terms of one of the three dimensions of integration. As Figure 3 shows, the largest proportion of evaluations of further prospects of European integration—almost 40 percent—negatively assessed the inclusiveness, almost a quarter of those evaluations assessed the level, whereas the number of evaluations based on the future scope of integration is rather low.
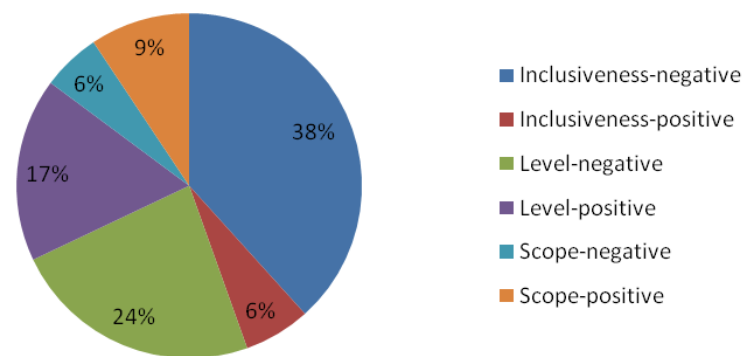
Figure 3. Future of the EU (n = 128).

The largest proportion of the commentators who suggested the exclusion of certain categories of people from the European project in the future referred to Greece as a "burden" that should be "offloaded", whereas a minority suggested that Germany should have been deprived of EU membership. Negative comments on the future of European integration in terms of the level of power suggested that the EU will/should "disintegrate", "dissolve", "die", "break into pieces", or "be consigned to the dustbin of history". These comments were loaded with negativity towards the EU, emotionally intense, and usually contest European integration in principle. However, a minority of commentators was more moderate and called for recessing to the European Economic Community.

Those commentators that advocated for further integration in terms of the level of power of the EU offered a myriad of suggestions: the federalisation of Europe and the formation of the "United States of Europe", a genuine political union, a stronger European Parliament, or a European Constitution.

Negative evaluations of the future scope of integration usually consisted of arguments that the EU should have reverted to a free trade area or to national currencies. These comments mainly encompassed the idea that the EU had gone too far and that the primary remedy needed for EU citizens and member states is a simple trading block of European states. In contrast, positive evaluations of the future of European integration revolved around the idea that the EU needed to evolve into a fiscal union. This argument is mostly linked to the notion that the monetary union is only sustainable if there is a common fiscal policy that permits monetary transfers between the member states.

Figure 4 shows that Eurosceptic evaluations represented the largest part of the total number of EU polity evaluations present in the Facebook discussions regarding the Greek crisis; more than a half of evaluations are Eurosceptic, which means that they negatively assessed either the current EU set-up, the future of integration, or both. However, they contained no evaluations of the principle of integration.
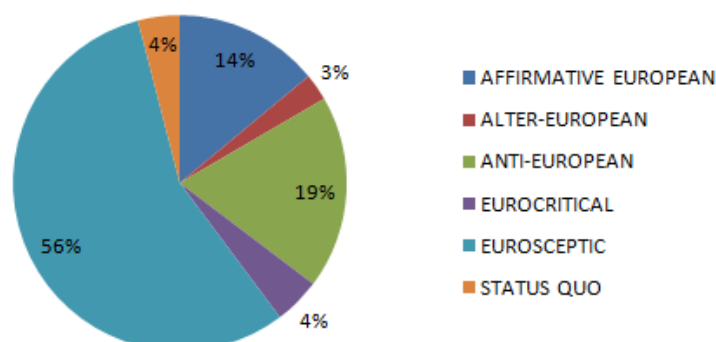

Figure 4. EU polity evaluations (n = 422).

The two categories with significant representation in the data set were anti-European and affirmative European evaluations. This finding demonstrates a significant polarisation

of opinions on European integration and the tendency of the Facebook mini-public to evaluate this process in purely negative or purely positive terms, and a lack of more complex evaluations such as alter-European or Eurocritical.

As Figure 5 shows, the impact of the EU polity on democracy was the most frequently used justification for various EU polity evaluations within the debate on the Greek crisis. Almost 40 percent of the total number of evaluations that assessed the value of European integration were based on the perceived capacity of the EU to enhance or harm democratic standards at both national and EU levels. Delving into the linkages between different categories of EU polity evaluations and corresponding justifications (see Table 2), one should note that a large majority of those who referred to democracy as the main criterion of evaluation mainly expressed negative opinions on European integration. More than 50 percent of Eurosceptic evaluations contained references to democracy as a justification for the negative stance towards one or more dimensions of European integration. Following in popularity, the second most frequently invoked justification for a negative stance was "economic prosperity", which, nevertheless, significantly lags behind "democracy". A minor percentage of commentators based their EU arguments on "necessity" and "culture" as criteria of evaluation, whereas the number of references to "safety" was negligible.
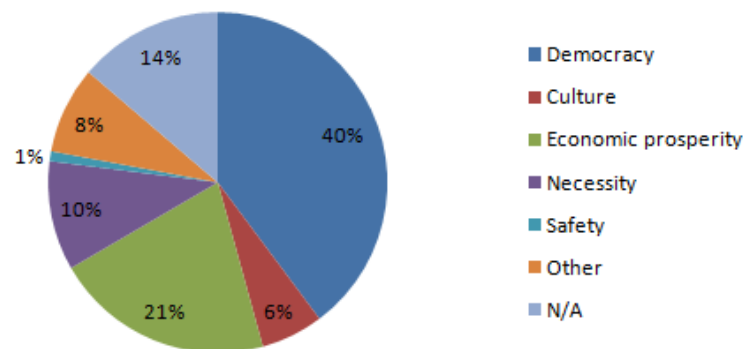

Figure 5. Justifications of EU polity worth.

Table 2. EU polity contestation and justifications (Greek crisis).

Justifications of the EU's Worth	Types of Evaluation					
	Affirmative European	Alter-European	Anti-European	Eurocritical	Eurosceptic	Status Quo
Democracy	15%	44.5%	32.5%	47.3%	51.1%	11.8%
Culture	20%	0%	7.5%	5.3%	1.3%	17.6%
Economic prosperity	23.3%	22.2%	18.7%	21%	19.7%	29.4%
Necessity	21.7%	22.2%	18.7%	5.3%	5.2%	11.8%
Safety	1.7%	11.1%	0%	5.3%	0.4%	0%
Other	3.3%	0%	8.8%	10.5%	9.9%	5.9%
N/A	15%	0%	13.8%	5.3%	12.4%	23.5%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

This finding confirms the already existing arguments in the literature on Euroscepticism [67,68] that sustain the idea of the decreasing explanatory power of economic/utilitarian calculations, which were a dominant hypothesis on the causes of popular Euroscepticism for years [69,70].

The EU was compared to different forms of undemocratic government: a dictatorship, an unelected autocracy, a tyranny, or a fascistic organisation. Moreover, "#ThisIsACoup"

was a widely spread hashtag that interpreted the EU intervention in the Greek crisis as an attempt to topple the democratically elected government in Greece. The EU is often described as "the German empire", "the Fourth Reich", or "a talking shop for Germans".

As Table 2 shows, economic prosperity as an underlying justification for the evaluations of EU polity worth was rather uniformly distributed among various categories of evaluations. Those commentators who took a critical stance towards the impact of European integration on the economic prosperity of member states and their citizens put forward an array of arguments. The alleged incapacity of European integration to ensure economic convergence was attributed to three factors: the austerity measures and their disastrous effects on the living standard; direct transfers from citizens to private banks; and the harmful impact of the Euro that only benefits a few countries. The commentators who positively evaluated the impact of European integration on the economic prosperity of its member states (or citizens) most commonly argued that economic wellbeing had been one of the most important achievements of the European project.

4.2. Refugee Crisis in Public Discourse

The refugee crisis represented a critical moment in the process of European integration, as it happened to be another challenge for member states' solidarity, which had been already called into question during the bailout negotiations when rescue funds had been strongly contested by certain member states. The main point of friction among member states during the refugee crisis was the system of quotas designed by the Commission to redistribute asylum seekers more equitably. Hitherto, migrants' desired destinations had rarely been southern and eastern European countries, whose territories lay in closer geographic proximity, but northern countries, such as Germany or Sweden. However, several eastern and Central European governments refused the redistribution plan, justifying this decision by the argument that refugee admissions should be a sovereign national decision.

The principle of integration was again the least addressed dimension of EU policy evaluation by the participants in Facebook debates on the refugee crisis: the commentators expressed their opinion three times more often on the current EU set-up than on the principle of European integration. Those who addressed the principle of integration in their contributions were rather divided: roughly half of them claimed that their country or member states, in general, were better off outside of any form of integration arrangement of European states, whereas the remaining portion of commentators assessed European integration as an a priori positive scenario for the European continent (see Figure 6).
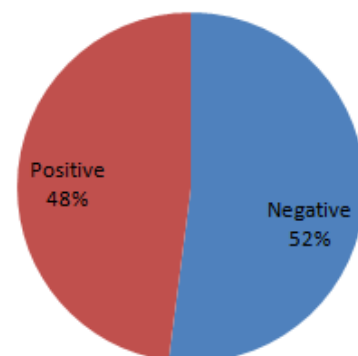

Figure 6. Principle of integration.

The commentators who contested the EU in principle mainly denied the necessity for integrating and renouncing national sovereignty and called for the exit of their country from the EU. This kind of negative attitude towards raison d'être of the EU is often justified by the fear of losing national identity and security in the context of increased migration. One illustrative example is quoted below.

> The european union needs to be erased. It's undemocratic and works against the interests of every european country. The relocation scheme's agenda is to replace and permanently corrupt the ethnic identity of every european country. Say goodbye to your culture and history, people of europe. The Kebab has won. (Facebook page of the Commission, 9 October 2015)

However, there are some comments that are written in a very affirmative fashion and portray the EU as an indispensable framework for European states:

> If the EU fails, Europe will be doomed. Well not the rich and educated ones, they will leave, but the countries will become cheap labour paradises. I know you will disagree, but it would happen, 22 out of 28 countries would not be able to stay economically competitive in the world market, So an EU downfall is no option for us. (Facebook page of the Commission, 14 September 2015)

As Figure 7 shows, the current EU set-up was almost completely evaluated in negative terms in the examined discussions, as approximately 95 percent of evaluations were negative. As in the case of the Greek crisis, the current inclusiveness of the EU was the most criticised dimension of the EU's present construction. One of the most pervasive arguments is that the EU treated Europeans as "second-hand" citizens and discriminated them by protecting, hosting, and creating opportunities for migrants/refugees.
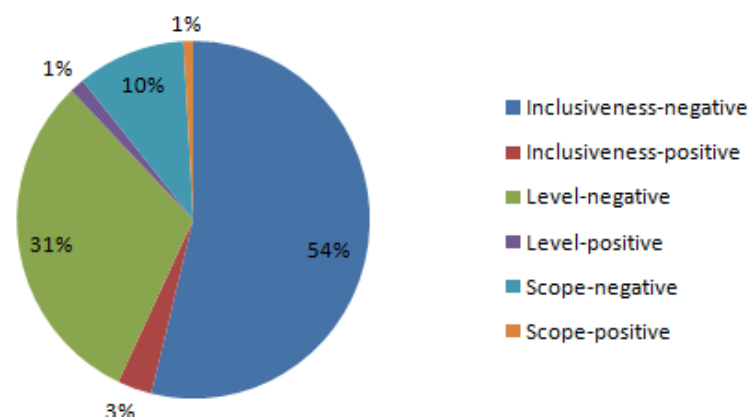

Figure 7. Current EU set-up (n = 223).

The EU's level of power was criticised by a substantial number of the commentators who evaluated the current EU set-up, as around 30 percent of them expressed discontent with the present redistribution of power within the EU. The most common accusation is that the EU forces the member states to agree on certain decisions such as quota systems. The power of the EU was characterised in this context as excessive, dictatorial, fascistic, or totalitarian. In contrast, some claimed that the EU possessed insufficient power to deal with the challenges of the refugee crisis and compared the state of affairs in the EU during the peak moments of the crisis to anarchy. Finally, a portion of the commentators referred to the lack of more equitable and fairer redistribution of powers among the member states and particularly the dominant role of Germany.

As Figure 8 shows, the largest proportion of the commentators that expressed views on the future of European integration—approximately 40 percent of them—assessed the future inclusiveness of the Union in negative terms. The majority of these comments contain appeals for leaving the Union, the projections of Brexit, or the exit of eastern European member states.
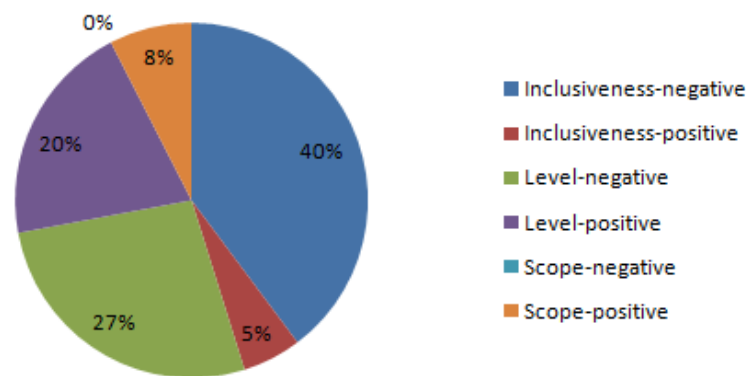
Figure 8. Future of the EU (n = 93).

The future level of integration was assessed negatively by more than a quarter of those who commented on the future of integration. These commentators suggested that the EU should be "disbanded", "dismissed", "abolished", "erased", or that it was "doomed", "on the brink of collapse", and about to "vanish".

The largest share of EU polity evaluations, almost 60 percent, pertain to the category of Eurosceptic evaluations, which contain the least specific or actionable content (see Figure 9). Two diametrically opposite categories of EU polity evaluations, affirmative and anti-European, shared a similar frequency. The remaining four categories of EU polity evaluations were much less recurrent than the leading three categories. These findings run parallel to the Greek crisis and confirm the tendency of the monitored public to either categorically support or categorically oppose the EU or even contest European integration in an insufficiently specific way, by addressing only the current set-up of the EU, the future prospects of integration, or both of them.
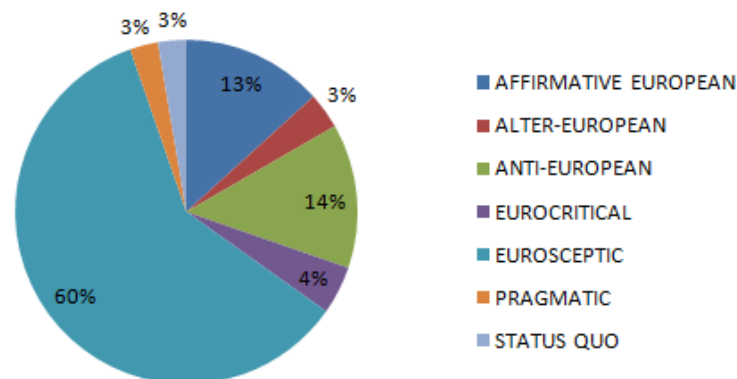

Figure 9. EU polity evaluations (n = 264).

The commentators whose contributions contained an evaluation of EU polity mainly referred to democracy in the EU as a criterion for a positive or negative evaluation they expressed. Commentators commonly justified their negative evaluations by citing the lack of democratic credentials. Looking closely at the linkages between different categories of EU polity evaluations and corresponding justifications (see Table 3), one could notice that a large majority of those who referred to democracy as the main criterion of evaluation mainly expressed negative opinions on European integration. They accused the EU of being unaccountable to its citizens, disconnected from them, unresponsive, dictatorial, or autocratic. Many complained about the supremacy of Germany over the other member states and argued that Germany imposed the receptions of migrants to the other member states against their will. Moreover, as Figure 10 shows, culture, economic prosperity, and necessity as underlying justifications of EU polity worth occurred approximately the same number of times in the debate (approximately 15%).

Table 3. EU polity contestation and justifications (refugee crisis).

Justifications of the EU's Worth	Types of Evaluation					
	Affirmative European	Alter-European	Anti-European	Eurocritical	Eurosceptic	Status Quo
Democracy	8.6%	11.2%	19.4%	16.7%	40.5%	57.1%
Culture	8.6%	22.2%	8.3%	16.7%	17.7%	14.3%
Economic prosperity	8.6%	11.2%	16.7%	8.3%	17.7%	0%
Necessity	37.1%	22.2%	33.3%	25%	7%	0%
Safety	11.4%	11.2%	8.3%	0%	7%	0%
Other	2.8%	22%	8.5%	33.3%	5.7%	14.3%
N/A	22.9%	0%	5.5%	0%	4.4%	14.3%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
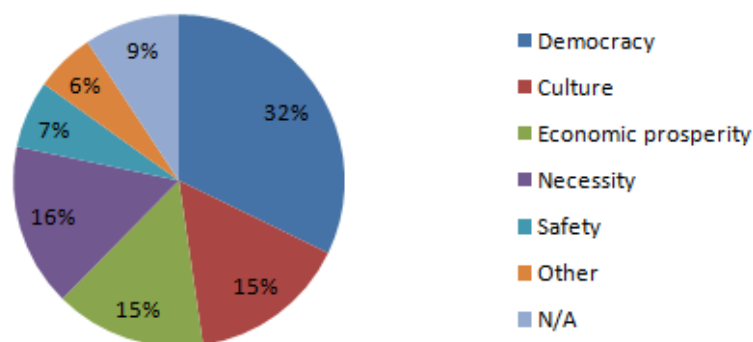
Figure 10. Justifications for EU polity worth (n = 258).

5. Discussion

The bottom-up approach employed in this study paints a better informed and detailed picture of the way the EU was contested among ordinary citizens in the context of the Greek crisis and the refugee crisis, which are considered existential for the process of European integration. The findings of the present study show that the most recurrent justification for negative evaluations of different dimensions of the EU polity is its lack of democratic credentials. Although one could expect utilitarian and identity concerns to outnumber the legitimacy concerns, the alleged democratic deficit was the most commonly invoked justification for Eurosceptic evaluations in both debates.

Moreover, the commentators mostly addressed the EU's current set-up and, to a much lesser extent, the principle of integration and the future of European integration. Thus, it appears that the Facebook public was concerned about the state of affairs at the moment of commenting, which is also understandable bearing in mind the crises with which the EU and its member states were struggling. More high-level reflections on the utility of European integration and the future avenues of the process of integration surfaced less frequently. Regarding the aspects of integration that were addressed, the Facebook commenters mainly assessed the level of inclusiveness, particularly bemoaning the lack of inclusiveness of "ordinary" people in EU decision making. Following the inclusiveness, the second most addressed aspect of EU polity was its level of power and the unequal redistribution of powers among EU institutions and inside of them. On the other hand, a small number of online contributions referred to the scope of integration; this implies a weak tendency of commenting on concrete policies but debating more in terms of power and access to power.

The debates analysed have shown the preponderance of negative comments on the EU, particularly those containing "diffuse Euroscepticism". This finding speaks to the argument of Michailidou [71] (p. 332) that the common characteristic of the EU online public spheres is "a generalized, underspecified dissatisfaction or even disaffection with the EU polity". However, the majority of the contributors to the two debates did not contest the principle of integration, thus confirming a tacit consensus over the necessity for the collaboration of European states given their economic, political, and cultural linkages. The salience of the opposition within the system and not against it suggests that the EU was viewed as a desideratum by the commentators, despite the predominant negative framing of different aspects of European integration.

The high salience of democratic concerns in the debates analysed speaks to the findings of previous studies on the public discourse [23,60,72], which have shown mounting popular concerns over the democratic legitimacy of the EU. Thus, one should be careful not to discredit and dismiss their legitimate concerns by simplistically labelling Eurosceptics as nationalists, racists, or neo-communists, since motivations for Eurosceptic attitudes seem to be multiple and context-dependent.

The study conducted by De Wilde et al. [23], which this study draws on, examined online Euroscepticism, addressing online news media and political blogs which tackled EU-related topics during the 2009 European Parliament election campaign. Although it looked at a different time period, the present study confirmed several findings generated by the research of De Wilde and his colleagues: first, the predominance of negative online contributions; second, the focus of online contributions on the current EU set-up; third, democracy as the most invoked justification for EU polity evaluations, particularly for the negative ones. The congruence of the findings of this study with the findings of akin studies may suggest the existence of a pattern in EU polity contestation in online fora.

Moreover, the present analysis revealed a frequent occurrence of the concept "we, Europeans" or "we, people", which erases inter-member states animosities and conflicts and contrasts "the people" to elites. Yet, these "Europeans" often opposed the EU as their supranational government, blaming it for harming the (European) public good. In examining the debates, one could detect elements of "discursive integration", which refers to increased levels of transboundary communication and a combination of "attention to political developments in other countries" and "the circulation of ideas between speakers in various countries" [73] (p. 12). One could also notice a trans-nationalisation evidenced by collective identification that occurred when speakers simply acknowledged a transnational collectivity, declaring a sense of belonging to that collectivity by "including themselves in a collective "we"' or by 'pointing to (or inventing) historical or cultural commonalities or by setting it apart from other communities which are often devalued in the process" [73] (p. 12). However, it needs to be highlighted that the debates analysed were often inundated by illiberal values such as anti-Islamism and nativism. This finding speaks to prior studies that concluded that only two issues are able to foster the creation of transnational audiences: opposition to Muslims and to 'anti-native' economic programs [74].

Despite its occasional illiberal characteristics, we could call these emerging demos "the European digital demos". Claiming that social media can resolve the "no demos" conundrum of the EU [75] would be an overstatement, but the findings of this study suggest that social media allows citizens to form new transnational publics who seek to export their views beyond home borders and influence supranational authorities. While national discussions often perpetuate national stereotypes and the national culture of debating, transnational discussions may ideally lead to a convergence of distinctive national perspectives.

Regardless of the novel contributions of the current study, some limitations need to be acknowledged. One of its major limitations is the fact that the results obtained are not statistically representative, and the findings cannot be extended to wider European populations with the same degree of certainty that quantitative analyses can. This study seeks to understand Eurosceptic attitudes within a specific online setting and in a particular time period. Moreover, this study quantifies some of the findings in order to show the

preponderance of certain concepts. However, by showing the quantitative representation of the findings, we do not claim their representativeness with respect to the broader population but try to identify the most salient EU evaluations and arguments within the selected sample.

The plethora of different hypotheses about major causes of Euroscepticism shows that it is difficult to make causal statements or predictions about the social world. Therefore, this research is in line with the interpretivist research paradigm, whose aim is to understand and interpret the meanings in human behaviour rather than to generalise and predict causes and effects [76,77].

Notwithstanding these limitations, this study offers interesting avenues for future research. Firstly, the focus of research could be moved to some more recent crises such as the Brexit crisis or the COVID-19 crisis. A series of crises that the world has experienced in recent decades have accentuated the dilemma of whether more or less integration or collaboration would help remedy the adverse consequences of these crises and avert future crises. Global problems in different domains, such as economy, financial stability, humanitarian protection, or security, may spur closer cooperation among states or, vice versa, the retrieval of their sovereign powers. Thus, one important question is to comprehend the enduring effects of these crises on the conflicting visions of the international political setup and its legitimacy. Secondly, an interesting question to explore is whether and to what extent public debates are taken into consideration when creating policy responses. It is important to understand if the popular feedback provided through the online platforms administrated by EU institutions reaches higher political instances and if these popular preferences inform, directly or indirectly, political and/or policy choices at the EU level.

6. Conclusions

President Donald Tusk, in his speech at the event marking the 40th anniversary of the European People Party, said:

"Obsessed with the idea of instant and total integration, we failed to notice that ordinary people, the citizens of Europe do not share our Euro-enthusiasm. Disillusioned with the great visions of the future, they demand that we cope with the present reality better than we have been doing until now".[2]

Indeed, the aforementioned gap between disillusioned, disempowered ordinary people and EU elites has been evidenced by the present study. By moving decision making one level higher, "the architects of the European construction have been able to leave democratic procedures behind" [78] (p. 135). This study manifested that the idea of an EU democratic deficit transcends the borders of particular national settings traditionally attached to democratic postulates or scholarly discussions, inundating transnational online debates.

However, despite denouncing EU democratic qualities, the commentators suggested few propositions regarding the democratisation of the EU system. Although the study revealed the pronounced criticism of the current state of affairs in the EU setting, there have been few suggestions on possible reform or improvement. The analysed debates move towards the same conclusion that the current EU structure is flawed but lack a clear vision of potential remedies. A referendum was the most frequently proposed solutions for the lack of EU legitimacy. However, more EU referenda would not be an optimal solution, since complex and controversial issues are rarely resolved by binary outcomes, and sporadic referenda in a few member states could deepen the inequality in influence between national constituencies, exacerbating the EU democratic deficit [79].

A way forward might be the creation of new channels for public grievances. The EU is widely perceived as rigidly imposing a set of values from above, particularly openness to immigration at all costs, or a set of economic solutions such as austerity. Forums such as citizen consultations or digital policy platforms could give a voice to those who feel left behind, but the creation of new mechanisms to gather inputs from below and carefully scrutinise them is necessary.

During the history of European integration, proponents and vociferous advocates of European integration have often been labelled as progressivists, while those who expressed criticism and scepticism have been condemned as reactionaries. However, Euroscepticism is not necessarily negative for the process of European integration. In practice, critics have significantly shaped and developed the European project, whereas its passionate supporters have often risked destroying it by their actions [80] (p. 187–188). Thus, embracing critical arguments may plant a seed of a new consensus.

Notes

1   Netvizz is a tool that extracts data from different sections of the Facebook platform (groups, pages, search) for research purposes. File outputs can be easily analysed in standard software.
2   Source: http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2016/05/30/pec-speech-epp/ (accessed on 7 January 2022).

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