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Alternatives to the EU

How the Brexit crisis shaped Eurosceptic discourses in the European Union



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The European Union in Crisis: Challenges, Compromises, Results

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“Everyone understands the European Union is a failure. It has not kept any of its promises - in particular about prosperity, security - and, worst of all, has put us under a guardianship.”

- Marine le Pen, leader of the Front National

Introduction

The day is 23rd June 2016. The United Kingdom (UK) of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, the second most prosperous country of the European Union (EU) voted on a referendum to determine its fate as a member state of the EU which resulted in 51.9% of the votes cast being in favor of leaving the EU (BBC News, 2016). The outcome of the Brexit referendum sent shockwaves across the continent as Eurosceptics cheered the victory of an independent UK, while millions of European citizens expressed their surprise and incomprehension when faced with the drastic results of the referendum. The last time many felt this sensation may be in 2005 when a majority of French citizens rejected the prospects of a European Constitution during a national referendum (New York Times, 2005). Such results left lasting impressions on the minds of European citizens who now saw the future of the EU as unpredictable and uncertain. On the 31st of January 2020, after almost four years of intense negotiations, the UK became the first country to officially exit the EU, which will leave long-term impacts on the economy and society of both parties as many ask the question of who will be next. Since the formal creation of the EU in 1992, the Union has faced a series of significant crises over the last few decades and therefore, it would be relevant and in the interest of political science scholars to investigate the effects of such crises on the gradual rise over the last few years of a political phenomenon known as Euroscepticism. In this area of research two well-known academics of the field, Paul Taggart and Aleks Szczerbiak (2018) have analyzed the effects of various crises on the development of Euroscepticism in European states in many studies. In their most recent study, the two authors have concluded that the Brexit crisis actually had very little impact on the development of Euroscepticism compared to other more significant crises in the past like the Euro sovereign debt crisis in 2010 and the refugee crisis in 2015.

In fact, although many political commentators expected a new wave of national referendums resulting in the possible disintegration of the EU after Brexit, most mainstream Eurosceptic parties seem to have abandoned this radical idea and adapted their plans to change the status quo in the EU by minimizing national risks as Brexit has proven to be quite a tricky process (The Guardian, 2016, Rosamund, 2016, Malik, 2018). Therefore, one could ask the question: why did Eurosceptic politicians change their mind and what other factors besides the Brexit crisis, have contributed to this change in the Eurosceptic paradigm? Accordingly, our research question on the topic is presented as follows: Under what circumstances have Eurosceptic parties softened their stances on the European Union in the aftermath of Brexit?

This thesis argues that Eurosceptic parties have shifted their stance on exiting the EU after the Brexit crisis to gain electoral votes and increase their likelihood to govern. This thesis will focus on the case study of France which features one prominent Eurosceptic party known as the Front National (FN) which has undergone radical change throughout the last few years in regards to the exit of France from the EU also known as Frexit. Our theoretical and methodological approach will consist of qualitative discourse and content analysis with a focus on policy narratives within different variants of hard and soft Euroscepticism in France.

Therefore, this study will be structured into six parts. The first part consists of a literary review on Euroscepticism and introduces the notions of hard and soft Euroscepticism. The second part presents the theory behind the strategic behaviour of Eurosceptic parties and the expectations of this study. The third part outlines the justifications for the research design, case selection, operationalisation, methodology, and data collection of this study. The fourth part presents the results of the analysis and the fifth part provides a discussion of the results. Finally, the sixth part provides concluding remarks and the limitations of the study.

Background on Euroscepticism

Before we start investigating the pan-European transnational phenomenon known as Euroscepticism, we must first try to define it. According to Spiering (2004), the term 'Eurosceptic' has its origins in the mid-1980s in the UK, where it was first used by reporters to refer to politicians from the Conservative party who were sceptical about the path of European integration in the post-Single European Act era. However, according to certain scholars, the problem of Euroscepticism lies in the fact that it is ultimately a negative construction and that it is just another label for populism, anti-politics or nationalism. In its basic form, Euroscepticism can be defined as opposition to some aspect of European integration but this conception is quite vague as it does not say anything about why that opposition exists and what form it should take. Therefore, Euroscepticism should be understood in a way that it describes "a set of practices driven by a multiplicity of ideologies and shaped by a multitude of factors to produce myriad results" (Leruth, Usherwood & Startin, 2018). Nevertheless, there is one significant distinction in the definition of Euroscepticism. According to Aleks Szczerbiak and Paul Taggart, Euroscepticism can differ in the extent to which individuals reject EU integration and their reasons for doing so and therefore distinguishes two types of Euroscepticism: hard and soft Euroscepticism. According

to Taggart (2008), hard Euroscepticism can be defined as “principled opposition to the EU and European integration and therefore can be seen in parties who think that their countries should withdraw from membership, or whose policies towards the EU are tantamount to being opposed to the whole project of European integration as it is currently conceived” Soft Euroscepticism can be seen in parties “where there is not a principled objection to European integration or EU membership but where concerns on one (or a number) of policy areas lead to the expression of qualified opposition to the EU, or where there is a sense that 'national interest' is currently at odds with the EU's trajectory” (Szczerbiak & Taggart, 2008).

Furthermore, another difference in the varieties of Euroscepticism lies in its variations between right- and left-wing parties. In one of their studies, Pirro, Taggart, and Van Kessel (2018) examined the nature of populist Euroscepticism in European political parties when faced with crisis by drawing on cross-national data on the positions of parties, the framing of Euroscepticism, and the impact of Euroscepticism in different countries. In their study, populism here is defined as “the defence of the ‘pure people’ and popular sovereignty against the unscrupulous actions of unresponsive or corrupt elites.” (Mudde, 2004). In their comparative findings, they established a significant difference between left-wing and right-wing variants of the populist politics of Euroscepticism. Indeed, they found out that left-wing parties rather framed their criticism of the EU in socioeconomic terms whereas right-wing parties focused on culturally inspired notions of Euroscepticism, especially during the refugee crisis. Moreover, the authors believe that we should not assume that the electoral rise of Eurosceptic populists and support for populist parties are primarily related to their Euroscepticism and interpreted as an expression of Eurosceptic sentiments since populist parties on the left and right do not necessarily treat ‘Europe’ as their most important theme. Nevertheless, they also warn us that “the cocktail of anti-establishment populist parties with the increasing politicisation of European integration as an issue in domestic politics is an unmistakably powerful one.” (Pirro, Taggart, & Van Kessel, 2018, p. 388).

On top of that, these different Eurosceptic variations can be examined more precisely through different case studies. In the case for France, Ivaldi (2018) claims that the EU's successive crises since 2008 have been essentially ‘absorbed’ by the Front National into its existing Eurosceptic framework. Indeed, in his study, Ivaldi explains that the Front National did not become more radical during European crises and instead adjusted its priorities by using its existing repertoires of Euroscepticism to exploit the opportunities resulting from the crises.

Furthermore, the author identified significant differences between the impact of different European crises as the financial crisis had a strong impact on the left and the migration crisis a strong impact on the right whereas there were only moderate impacts when issues were switched to the other side which emphasizes the divide between left and right (Ivaldi, 2018). Additionally, according to another study on France, when it comes to Euroscepticism, economic factors play a significant role as one-third of French citizens don't see EU membership as beneficial and a waste of money. Moreover, the authors believe that on the right side of the political spectrum, cultural factors are considered to be an essential source of Euroscepticism as there is a large share of citizens who regard themselves only as French thus rejecting EU citizenship as they perceive EU membership as a threat to their national identity. (Likaj, Rieble & Theuer, 2020). Likewise, in the case for Greece, Sofia Vasilopoulou (2018) argued that as a result of the European crises, public opinion in Greece became more Eurosceptic, coalition governments were formed on the basis of a common Eurosceptic and anti-austerity agenda rather than ideological affinity and mainstream pro-EU parties faced substantive electoral losses. Moreover, she emphasized the fact that these Eurosceptic parties succeeded in their rise to power mostly due to their anti-system nature as they were not associated or deemed responsible for the crisis (Vasilopoulou, 2018).

Besides, some case studies have also explained specifically the reason why some political parties have shifted from historically hard Euroscepticism to the complete opposite. Indeed, in the case of Malta, Mark Harwood (2017) argued that the shift from stark Euroscepticism to Euroenthusiasm could be found through the change of political leadership within one of the main parties in Malta, the Maltese Labour Party which came into contact with the realities of office seeking goals as they realized there were no longer any benefit to politicize the topic further. As for the impact of Brexit on Malta's Euroscepticism, Britain's exit from the EU could raise Eurosceptic discussion and sentiment in mainstream media if the EU integrates into areas that could compromise the Maltese economy and neutrality (Harwood, 2017).

In regards to the general impact of crises on Euroscepticism, Taggart and Szczerbiak (2018) analyzed the link between the recent crises faced by the EU in the last decade and the development of Euroscepticism by drawing on expert surveys. In their study, they claimed that Euroscepticism was a symptom of an inherent existing condition in EU integration as opposed to the previously permissive consensus and elite-driven nature of the process. They also determined that there was a clear difference between the impacts of the different crises.

Indeed, according to the authors, the Eurozone crisis had a particularly strong impact on the party systems of countries most affected by the bailout packages such as Germany and Greece, while the migration crisis had a significant impact on the politics of post-communist countries in Central Europe such as Poland and Hungary. According to the authors, the Brexit crisis only had a limited effect on national party politics and rather reinforced existing Eurosceptic narratives than increasing Euroscepticism overall (Taggart & Szcerbiak, 2018).

Similarly, Serricchio and his colleagues (2013) explored the link between the financial crisis and Euroscepticism at the level of public opinion as well as the impact of economic, identity, and institutional factors on Euroscepticism. In their study, they discovered that the economic explanation did not have significant analytical leverage and that instead exclusive national identity and confidence in national political institutions play an increasingly important role in explaining public Euroscepticism. Moreover, the writers argued that there could be a trade-off effect between confidence in national institutions and EU institutions during the crisis as during the first stage, citizens were mainly looking for solutions to financial burdens at the national level as national institutions were the ones involved in rescuing banks whereas, in the second stage, EU institutions became more involved in dealing with the crisis as they reacted and created new institutions to deal with it. (Serricchio, Tsakatika, & Quaglia, 2013).

On top of everything, Simon Usherwood and Nick Startin (2013) argued in their study that Euroscepticism has been characterised by the consolidation of an anti-integration bloc in the European Parliament, recurrent ‘no’ votes in national referendums, and the materialisation of an increasingly harmonised movement of crucial interest groups, which has become embedded and persistent at both the European and national levels. According to the two authors, Euroscepticism has become ingrained at multiple levels such as non-party groups, within governments as well as within the media, and to a greater extent a transnational pan-European phenomenon. Moreover, the authors believe that it is ultimately in the EU’s interest “to engage with sceptics if it is ever to secure its overall legitimacy and future success as a failure to do so as Europe enters an uncertain economic phase could have serious consequences for the European project as a whole” (Usherwood & Startin, 2013, p. 13). Furthermore, in the last few decades, Euroscepticism has often been used by many populist anti-establishment parties especially within radical right wing entities as a strategy to attract a particular base of voters who see massive immigration as a danger to their identity and have suffered economically throughout various European crises such as the financial crises.

Theoretical framework: Euroscepticism and strategic party behaviour

As mentioned in the introduction, this study follows the logic of strategic behaviours of political parties and especially radical right wing Eurosceptic parties. In their article, Rovny and Polk (2020) have studied the strategic behaviour of radical right parties in Western Europe and explained that the uncertainty surrounding their positions concerning economic issues remains especially higher for the radical right than any other party family in Europe. Indeed, according to the authors, the radical right can often be strategically vague about its economic programs in an attempt to avoid having an economic position that may be divisive among voters. The potential benefit and the core logic behind position blurring lies “in the deliberate misrepresentation of issue distance between the party and its potential voters in order to build a broader support base and increase its vote share.” (Rovny & Polk, 2020, pp. 249-245). Moreover, these parties need to please core supporters who are also more radical on certain issues, while at the same time appeal to broader and centrist voter groups. In theory, radical right parties are generally more devoted to cultural issues such as national sovereignty and opposition to immigration while their economic platforms seem rather contradictory and vague. Therefore, according to the authors, radical right parties face a “strategic opportunity in blurring their economic stances, given that their primary focus rests on the cultural dimension and that their potential supporters hold diverse economic preferences” (Rovny & Polk, 2020, p. 263). As a result, voters will continue to listen to the cultural ideology of the radical right while paying little attention to their blurry and vague economic point which explains their recent electoral success (Rovny & Polk, 2020).

In regards to Euroscepticism, Sitter (2020) claims that a party's decision to adopt or modify a Eurosceptic stance is a strategic decision. Indeed, the author believes that softening of Euroscepticism may be driven by changes in any of the four goals or the context in which they are pursued which are: organisational survival, and the pursuit of policy, votes and office. According to the author, a party's decision to adopt or modify a Eurosceptic stance is the product of four strategic considerations: “the weight of the party's identity and ideology, the implications of its pursuit of core policy preferences, the incentives it faces in its pursuit of votes and the constraints of coalition politics.” (Sitter, 2020, p. 250). Moreover, Sitter explains that even hard Eurosceptic parties may soften their opposition to the EU as their stance is often subject to “incentives for modification if policies change, if expansion beyond the party's core electorate is sought, or participation in office secured.” (Sitter, 2020, p. 250)

As a reminder, the Brexit crisis consists of a series of long-lasting negotiations between the British government and the European Union which put a halt to European integration and raised tensions between the UK government and the EU due to economic concessions that the UK had to make as they were going to leave the European Single Market. Based on these theoretical insights and the previous literature on hard and soft Euroscepticism, we have developed one hypothesis along with a null hypothesis as we believe that the Brexit crisis cannot account alone for the shift in Eurosceptic discourse. They are presented as follows.

H1: The Brexit crisis has softened the stance of hard Eurosceptic parties as a result of new economic calculations.

H0: Domestic politics and electoral interests have softened the stance of hard Eurosceptic parties.

In other words, hard Eurosceptic parties may change their stance either because of economic calculations which may have induced Eurosceptic leaders to reconsider a complete exit from the EU or because of political calculations related to a party's wish to attract a broader base of voters to increase governability chances and win a significant election.

Outline of the research design and case selection

In order to examine the phenomenon of Euroscepticism, the research design for this study will be centred around a single case study using qualitative methods. For this study, France has been chosen as a crucial case to test the hypothesis that hard Euroscepticism turned into soft Euroscepticism after Brexit. The independent variable is the Brexit referendum which triggered article 50 and the dependent variable is the Eurosceptic views of the Front National before 2014 and the Rassemblement National after 2019. A case study is useful in this case as it allows an up-close, in-depth, and detailed examination of a particular case (Halperin & Health, 2017). In the case of France, this will be a most-likely crucial case. According to Gerring (2007), the most-likely crucial case is predicted to achieve a certain outcome and yet does not as we would have expected Brexit to encourage Eurosceptic parties across Europe, especially the Front National as it was the prime example of the kind of party to embrace hard Euroscepticism following the Brexit example and start their own anti-EU project: Frexit.

France has been specifically chosen due to the prominence of Marine Le Pen's far-right Eurosceptic party known as the Front National now renamed Rassemblement National (RN) after the French presidential election of 2017. Although the origin of Euroscepticism lies in the UK with Margaret Thatcher's speech in 1988 who was known as the first leader to challenge directly the direction in the EU was progressing (Usherwood & Startin, 2013), the figure of Marine Le Pen has become for many the face of Euroscepticism among French citizens as she was known for her former strong position over the rejection of the EU and also for European citizens as she has been involved with the European Parliament (EP) and more recently after the 2019 EP elections known as the leader of the pan-European Eurosceptic movement with former Italian Prime Minister Matteo Salvini. Moreover, France is also known as one of the EU countries with the highest levels of Euroscepticism which has remained persistent since the creation of the EU from former French President Charles De Gaulle's sovereign position on Europe until now (Likaj, Rieble & Theuer, 2020).

Operationalisation

Furthermore, the independent and the dependent variables are operationalised as follows. The independent variable will consist of the results of the Brexit referendum as well as the British Prime Minister's act of triggering article 50 of the EU to start the official procedure to leave the EU. During the negotiations, the economic consequences of Brexit became apparent as a result of tensions between the British government which wanted to keep the economic benefits of being in the single market and had to make political concessions on the Irish border for instance. The two main concepts capturing the dependent variable are 'hard Euroscepticism' and 'soft Euroscepticism'. According to Taggart and Szczerbiak, hard Euroscepticism can be defined as "principled opposition to the project of European integration as embodied in the EU, based on the ceding or transfer of powers to a supranational institution such as the EU" while soft Euroscepticism can be defined as "when there was not a principled objection to the European integration project of transferring powers to a supranational body such as the EU, but there was opposition to the EU's current or future planned trajectory based on the further extension of competencies that the EU was planning to make" (Taggart & Szczerbiak, 2018, p.13). In order to measure hard and soft Euroscepticism, we will look for the keywords as mentioned in the table below in the political speeches, interviews and electoral programs given by Marine Le Pen's party during the 2014 and 2019 EP elections to analyse if the discourse has changed. The main difference

in the shift from one to the other lies in Le Pen’s new narrative from leaving the EU through a national referendum to reforming the treaties of the EU and building a coalition of right-wing parties against the current neoliberal establishment. The table below provides an overview of the main terms and their operationalisation. To reflect the null hypothesis, we will also consider domestic interests and particularly electability in upcoming elections.

Table 1. Concept operationalisation and measurement

Concept	Measurement
Brexit	'triggering article 50 of the EU', 'exit the EU', 'Brexit referendum'
Hard Euroscepticism	'leave the EU', 'leave the treaties', 'return to the franc', 'liberate France', 'EU prison', 'regain sovereignty', 'hold national referendum', 'Frexit'
Soft Euroscepticism	'reform the EU', 'reform the eurozone', 'reform the treaties', 'European cooperation', 'Europe of nations', 'change Europe', 'new Europe'
Domestic interests	'upcoming election', 'chances to govern', 'attract voters', 'governability', 'broader base of voters', 'win election', 'win new electoral votes'

Methodological approach

This paper’s method of analysis will consist of a mix of qualitative discourse analysis, more specifically policy narratives, and content analysis. Policy narratives display different stories told by political actors inspired by their own norms which in turn affect their policy solutions (Jones & McBeth, 2010). According to many scholars, ideas have played an important role in shaping policy-making and policy narratives are often used to look at “how different traditions of thought, paradigms or frames have influenced public debates and political decision-making” (Boswell, Geddes & Scholten, 2011). Qualitative content analysis is aimed at the systematic mapping and classification of textual data while qualitative discourse analysis aims to interpret the implicit meaning of discourse fragments and situate them in the context of larger frames, discourses or narratives (Halperin & Health, 2017). During the analysis, we will apply these methods to our case by examining the discourse and narrative employed by Marine le Pen and looking for the presence of key words from Table 1 to see whether there is a link between the different variables. One of the major elements of analysis

will consist of the presence of ‘holding national referendum’ and ‘regaining sovereignty’ to identify hard Eurosceptic discourse while soft Eurosceptic discourse can be spotted by a plan to ‘reform the EU’ through ‘European cooperation’. The focus will also be put on the political narrative to detect whether or not the story told by Marine le Pen has shifted after the Brexit crisis as we will look for the element of ‘Brexit’ in her anti-EU argumentation. For this study, the main data sources will consist of newspaper articles, political speeches and interviews given by Marine Le Pen as well as electoral programmes of her party between 2014 and 2019 as these are the key dates for European elections. This will allow a comparison between Eurosceptic views before the Brexit crisis and after as throughout the years, Marine Le Pen and her party has shifted their views on the matter for a number of reasons which we will examine carefully by looking at the different arguments presented by the party to explain why they abandoned this policy in relation to the Brexit crisis and upcoming elections at the European and national level.

Results and analysis

Front National’s 2014 European elections program

In 2014, Marine le Pen’s party’s policies can be characterised as hard Euroscepticism. Indeed, the exit of the EU consists of the core of her program as she believes that France should return to its national currency and that staying in the Eurozone will be costly for France as it will only increase its debt. Moreover, she claims in her program that “stopping Schengen means breaking with the laxity of the European Union, for which the only response to illegal immigration is to encourage mass reception and quasi-systematic regularisations. In our opinion, this measure must be supplemented by the elimination in our law of the possibility of regularising illegal immigrants.” (Le Monde 2014). Based on this quote, we can clearly see that the exit of the Schengen agreement which consists of one of the core ideas of the EU is directly associated with the party’s anti-immigration ideology. Likewise, this proposal is closely associated with the FN’s opposition to the EU Posted Workers Directive which allows to pay a foreign worker less than a French worker which Marine le Pen considers to be a ‘scandal’ as she wishes to put an end to this fiscal and social inequality. This comment fits into her narrative about low cost manual workers coming from Eastern Europe to France and stealing jobs from the French people who are suffering because of the EU. Moreover, these immigrants aren’t paying enough social charges to France due to the ‘unfair’ EU directive.

Additionally, in an interview given by Marine le Pen, she claims that she is here to ‘save the French people’ from the EU which is built like a ‘prison’ because it was not designed to let countries leave the euro and that she is the ‘key’ to get out of the EU prison (Euronews, 2014). In regards to massive immigration from Africa, Marine le Pen tells another narrative about how the EU encourages migrants to come to work in France and that it is the EU’s fault if France is one of the top destinations of migrants as she claims that countries like Italy are not worried about letting these migrants into Europe because they know that they will end up in countries like France. Therefore, according to her, the only way for France to take back control of immigration is to simply re-establish her national borders by leaving the EU (Rassemblement National, 2014). Likewise, she claims that it is also the EU’s fault that France is losing industry jobs because the EU stands for unfair international competition and doesn’t allow French protectionism. Furthermore, Marine le Pen claims she wants a ‘Europe of nations’ as in a “free association of European states sharing the same vision and the same interests on subjects such as immigration or the rules governing foreign trade and the movement of capital” (Toute l’Europe, 2014). According to le Pen, this type of Europe could only exist outside of the EU and therefore France has to leave this ‘prison’ through a national referendum which she plans to hold if she is elected and that only a national referendum would allow the French people to give their opinion about the EU as the European elections are not enough, but this hard Euroscepticism may change after Brexit (FranceOutreMer, 2014).

Front National’s 2017 national presidential elections program

In reaction to Brexit, Marine le Pen employs another narrative similar to the EU prison as she calls Brexit the “most important event since the fall of the Berlin Wall” and how the UK broke down the ‘Brussels wall’ by voting for Brexit (BBC News, 2016). According to her, the EU deprives France of its sovereignty: legislative sovereignty because she believes that French laws are more important than EU directives, territorial sovereignty because France should decide who can stay in France, economic and banking sovereignty because France has a right to promote economic patriotism and finally monetary sovereignty. Just like in 2014, she also uses the same narrative about immigration and explains that those who are coming to France are young men aged from 20 to 40 who are looking for work and therefore qualifies them as economic migrants, not political refugees fleeing from war and political persecution. Similarly, she portrays France as a country in danger and that she will deliver the French people from the EU which is responsible for all kinds of insecurity and massive immigration.

Indeed, in her discourse, massive immigration is directly linked to islamic fundamentalism and the rise of terrorism in France as she claims that this is the way how terrorist can easily infiltrate France along with migrants. Moreover, massive immigration is also associated with the poverty and homelessness of the French people who are not able to sustain themselves due to the submersion of illegal refugees who can easily access housing and therefore puts them to an unfair advantage. In addition, Marine le Pen will accuse the EU for letting these migrants come and live in inhumane conditions and will even talk about the prostitution of children and rape in refugee camps. In summary, according to her, the EU is responsible for the misery of the French people and also the refugees (BBC News, 2016).

Additionally, she believes that Brexit is a historic moment and that it will help the FN to achieve Frexit because it shows that leaving the EU is a possibility unlike what other European leaders were claiming and that the UK will see the benefits of leaving the EU. Besides, she also claims that the majority of EU leaders, media, political scientists who are part of the elites and voted for Remain lost to the people who voted for Leave. In addition, she claims that European leaders are afraid of the power of the people and of a referendum in their own countries which is why she is the only one who will hold a referendum if she wins the presidential elections. Moreover, during the interview, we can see a Frexit campaign poster where the hands of the French people are literally chained by the EU and reveals once again the discourse employed by Marine le Pen who called the EU a 'totalitarian system'. Based on the narrative exploited by le Pen, we can clearly see how she frames the role of the EU and herself as being the only option to break free from the EU (BBC Newsnight, 2016).

In another interview, she claims that the left right divide in France is an artificial one to hide the real division between patriotism which she incarnates and globalism which is portrayed by the EU and its leaders. Likewise, she describes the EU as part of the 'savage globalization' and that the current liberal world order will no longer exist and that it will be replaced in the future by the new movement that she embodies along with radical leaders like Donald Trump who reject the interests of multinationals. Furthermore, she also declares the fact that the EU created peace in Europe is a pure myth and that it is rather in fact peace that allowed cooperation between European nation states (BBC News, 2017). According to her, European countries are witnessing a 'massive rejection of the EU' and that many will rally behind France to negotiate new terms with the EU which is an 'accumulation of weakness' which makes France weak and 'puts the people in danger' (FRANCE 24, 2017).

In summary, the Front National's program in 2017 is very similar to their program in 2014. Marine le Pen still wants to regain French sovereignty by leaving the Euro and the Schengen agreement but also modify and renegotiate EU laws which puts French workers at a disadvantage. This fundamental opposition to the EU can also be seen through her proposition to remove the European flag from public buildings to defend the exclusive French national identity and the wish to hold a national referendum and leave the EU which is even stronger after the British people voted for Brexit (Toute l'Europe, 2017).

Rassemblement National's 2019 European elections program

In 2018, Marine le Pen's party the Front National changed its name and is now called the Rassemblement National after the party's defeat in the 2017 presidential elections. This name change appears to come from a wish to appeal to a broader electoral base although the party's political line remains the same. In 2019, many parts of her program appear to be the same compared to 2017 and 2014 such as the plan to repeal the EU Posted Workers Directive in order to fight against what she calls 'unfair competition' and prioritise French companies and workers. Moreover, nothing changes in the RN's immigration program as Marine le Pen still wants to 'stop illegal immigration' and 'reestablish national borders' along with the fight against islamism. Besides, Marine le Pen wishes to reorganise the EU and talks about 'a new institutional organization' by abolishing the European Commission and give more power to the European Parliament and the European Council so that "each member state must be able to decide whether or not it is involved in a cooperation policy" in an initiative of 'European cooperation'. This new European Parliament will be able to 'initiate new laws' and will instead consist of "national members of parliament delegated by member states" (Toute l'Europe, 2019). During an interview, Marine le Pen claims that the European Commission is profoundly undemocratic as it consists of non-elected members and that therefore should no longer exist. According to her, the European Commission should rather serve as a 'technical secretariat' and should not have the power it has today. Moreover, she claims that the Commission is favorable to immigration like Germany and that therefore she does not trust European migration policies and institutions such as Frontex which she qualifies as a 'immigration receptionist' (Euronews, 2019). Marine le Pen also claims that the European Commission has abused its powers and in no way defends the interests of France by opening its borders to massive imports which is destroying French industry sectors. Therefore, she is convinced that she can modify the structure of the EU to create a new European organisation.

Nevertheless, the party changed one fundamental aspect of their program which is the plan to exit the Euro and the EU. Indeed, the RN no longer sees abandoning the Euro as a ‘priority’ and would rather “align money creation with the needs of the real economy, for example by increasing the proportion of national debt that can be held by national central banks”. Instead of leaving the EU, Marine le Pen wants to radically reform the European institutions and revise European treaties as she believes in "the values of civilization, common roots and history" that "the nations of Europe have in common". (Franceinfo, 2019). Indeed, in an interview, Marine le Pen claims that she is convinced that she can change the EU through a free alliance with other right-wing political parties who she plans to cooperate with within the European Parliament. Moreover she claims that she has allies all over Europe including Matteo Salvini’s Italy, Poland and Hungary with whom she seeks to work with to remodel the EU into a ‘Europe of nations’ and build a new organisation based on ‘freely agreed cooperation’. Additionally, Marine le Pen no longer talks about Frexit or holding a national referendum because she is absolutely convinced that she can achieve her goal in changing the EU. According to her, Brexit is the result of the EU going against the people and she still qualifies the EU as a ‘prison’ which blackmails countries like the UK when one country is trying to leave (Euronews, 2020). Likewise, in another interview, the European Commission acts with an ‘authoritarian nature’ by threatening countries to cut their budget if they do not accept refugees. Marine le Pen believes that the EU is engaging in a policy of incitement to illegal immigration which is madness. According to her, France and the EU should adopt a dissuasive policy of immigration like Italy and no longer accept clandestine migrants who do not come from warzones but rather poor countries who seek economic opportunity in Europe. Moreover, she believes that all refugees should be able to seek policy asylum in countries of origin rather than on European soil to fight illegal immigration (FRANCE 24, 2018).

Discussion of results

Based on the analysis conducted on the three programs of the FN/RN, this is what we can observe. First of all, to test our first hypothesis, we believe that the Brexit referendum has not softened Marine le Pen’s party’s stance on Euroscepticism. Indeed, based on her electoral program for the presidential elections in 2017, the Frexit still featured as a prominent aspect of her program and the fact that the UK has been able to decide to leave the EU reinforced the party’s belief that it can also achieve its goal and also leave the EU by holding a national referendum just like the UK which proved that leaving the EU ‘prison’ is possible after all.

Nevertheless, we could assume that the three-year long Brexit negotiations between the British government and the EU has contributed to FN/RN to abandon Frexit as the economic consequences of Brexit became clear and could be devastating to the UK (Dhingra & Sampson, 2019). Although this hypothesis seems plausible as, it is not the object of the study and also cannot account alone for the shift in the party's behaviour to abandon its hard Eurosceptic stance. Indeed, our null hypothesis seems to be a more credible explanation to this political phenomenon. Based on the argument by Sitter (2003), "a party's decision to adopt or modify a Euro-sceptic stance is the product of four strategic considerations: the weight of the party's identity and ideology, the implications of its pursuit of core policy preferences, the incentives it faces in its pursuit of votes and the constraints of coalition politics." In the case of the FN/RN we can eliminate the first consideration as the party's identity and ideology has not changed despite the change in the name of the party which appears to be political rebranding, and also the last consideration as France's semi-presidential system does not operate within coalition politics. Therefore, the party's change can be based on two elements: policy preferences and pursuit of votes.

According to many articles, Marine le Pen's abandoning of Frexit results from a multitude of internal events related to the structure of her party and external events such as the results of the presidential elections and other elections in other European countries. (Europe 1, 2017, Le Monde, 2019, Euractiv France, 2021). First of all, one of the major events which led to the party's change lies in a dispute internal to the Front National between the party's vice-president Florian Phillipot who still advocated for Frexit and Nicolas Bay who wants to renegotiate European treaties. As a result of the clash and the party's decision to abandon Frexit, Florian Phillipot decided to leave the FN and start his own party as a supporter of Frexit. In an interview, Marine le Pen claimed that "in many areas, we can improve the daily life of the French without leaving Europe or the Euro" (Le Monde, 2019). Besides, the other major event that led to this change lies in the French presidential elections of 2017. Indeed, in the midst of the presidential campaign, Marine Le Pen promised a referendum on leaving the European Union and that if the French people answered "no", she was planning to step down. She claimed "I will leave because if the result is 'no', about 70% of my project could not be implemented" (Europe 1, 2017). Moreover, she realised that many workers on the border of Luxembourg were afraid of Frexit as they could lose their job as she declared "I am aware that the subject of the euro has worried the French considerably, in an almost irrational way" which emphasises a wish to appeal to a broader base of voters (Europe 1, 2017).

Furthermore, the political circumstances in Europe have drastically changed between 2014 and 2019 as Marine le Pen now has the ambition to transform the EU from within thanks to her European allies from the Italian League and the Austrian Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ). Marine le Pen explained “For a long time, we had no choice - we had to go through it or get out of it. We were too isolated to have a real impact” (Le Monde, 2019). With her new allies the party now seeks to reform the European Central Bank, assigning it new missions such as the fight against unemployment. Moreover, the defence of French economic interests would go through the re-establishment of "customs protections at the borders of Europe", rather than at national borders, as proposed as before in 2014 and 2017 (Le Monde, 2019).

Therefore, as a result of multiple factors and changing circumstances, Marine le Pen’s party successfully changed the message of her party on the EU as the Rassemblement National ranked first on the 2019 European elections (Franceinfo, 2019). Although her narrative surrounding immigration and sovereign economic policy has not fundamentally changed, the idea of completely rejecting the EU has indeed changed as she realised the coalition potential of working with European allies to reform the EU which was much harder before as she still struggled to form a parliamentary group in the EP in 2014 but with the new configuration of the EP in 2019, she became convinced that changing the EU from within is now a possibility. Despite the fact that abandoning a national referendum meant losing a considerable part of her electoral power, she managed to gain political momentum in 2019 as French President Emmanuel Macron’s number one adversary with her new radical vision of a different Europe.

Conclusion

To conclude this study, we will now look at how we can answer our research question: Under what circumstances have Eurosceptic parties softened their stances on the European Union in the aftermath of Brexit? After defining the differences between hard and soft Euroscepticism and its variants within left and right wing parties, we discovered that hard Euroscepticism was often strategically used by populist right wing parties to protest against the elite project establishment known as the EU and align themselves with the common interest of the people. Furthermore, we also emphasized previously that Euroscepticism is now today a transnational pan-European and therefore subject to external shocks such as the Brexit crisis. Nevertheless, the effects of such external events are debatable as it acted more often symbolically on the image of Eurosceptic parties rather than the form. Moreover, based on our analysis, the effect

of Brexit can be seen as a two-stage process with a positive reinforcement to the party's belief and anti-EU sentiment as a direct reaction to the results of the Brexit referendum and a second impact once Eurosceptics parties have realized the economic considerations and political repercussions of such a drastic measure which often doesn't align exactly with the public opinion as with France for example. Indeed, the reason why Eurosceptic parties softened can also be found in circumstances internal to the party and the political events of the country. As we demonstrated for the case of Marine le Pen's party, much of the calculation was mainly political rather than economical based on Brexit as in the preparation of the 2021 French presidential elections, the RN is especially concerned with its chances to win the elections and govern France in the near future. Besides, these political calculations can also be seen at the European level with potential coalitions with other right wing Eurosceptic parties who share the same ambition to change and radically reform the EU.

Nevertheless, as our study focuses on the case of France, our findings cannot be directly generalized to other European countries as we must consider the national political atmosphere and settings of other cases before making the same conclusions as for Brexit. Although the explanations for the development of Eurosceptic discourse in other countries may be similar to the case of France, it is important to carefully analyze future trends in the EU and take into account the different national elements before making a generalization. Indeed, although Eurosceptics parties have gained political momentum recently after the 2019 EP elections, this trend may change drastically either way due to the recent COVID-19 pandemic which hit disproportionately southern European countries like Italy, Spain and to some extent France. Besides, due to the current pandemic, the EU has sought to reform itself in many aspects to increase solidarity between European states which will most likely affect Eurosceptic parties. These external shocks are often politicized to gain political support but this kind of phenomenon doesn't usually last in the long run as we have seen with Brexit. Therefore, as the COVID-19 crisis is still being played out right now, it would be interesting to study the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on Eurosceptic discourse in complement to our study on the effects of Brexit to better understand the impacts of crises on Euroscepticism. Moreover, future studies should also take into account national factors instead of only focusing on crises to explain the rise of Euroscepticism as it would provide a better understanding overall. As the development of Euroscepticism is crucial to the advancement of European Integration and the future of the EU, it should be carefully monitored and especially listened to as we may learn a few valuable lessons from Eurosceptics which may save the EU from disintegration.

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