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'Brexit' in transnational perspective: an analysis of newspapers in France, Germany and the Netherlands[1]

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Abstract:

The Brexit vote of 23 June 2016 is expected to have a profound impact, not only on Britian itself, but also on the remaining twenty-seven member states of the European Union. This article looks at how the Brexit debate was perceived outside of Britain. Was there a sense of understanding for British concerns or was there rather a focus on maintaining unity in the face of British exceptionalism? Combining insights from European public sphere research and Euroscepticism research, we conduct a qualitative framing analysis of the discourse in leading centre-right newspapers in France, Germany and the Netherlands, as common ground with British Eurosceptics is most likely to be found here. Our analysis shows that initially there was some support for British calls for amending its relationship with the Union, in particular in Germany and the Netherlands. However, as the referendum drew nearer, the discourse shifted towards the need to maintain unity among the remaining member states.

Keywords: Brexit, Euroscepticism, European Public Sphere, Media, Transnationalism

Introduction

On 23 June 2016 the British population voted for a British exit ('Brexit') from the European Union (EU) by a narrow majority of 52 per cent. Calls for a membership referendum date back to the ratification of the Maastricht Treaty, when the Conservative Party's split over the issue of Europe became deeply entrenched amid fears that the single currency would lead to the development of a federal EU (see Menon and Salter, 2016). Europe has long been seen as a 'threat' to the United Kingdom (UK), its significant other against which British identity has been constructed (e.g. Spiering, 2015). However, criticism and even rejection of European integration is no longer confined to the EU's 'awkward partner' (George, 1990). From the Dutch and French 'no' to the European Constitution in 2005, to the rise of the *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD; Alternative for Germany), Euroscepticism has increasingly become a mainstream phenomenon across Europe (Brack and Startin, 2015). The Euro and refugee crises have contributed to a politicisation of European integration and an increasing mobilisation of Eurosceptic movements that increasingly *transcend* national borders (FitzGibbon *et al*, 2017). In the wake of the referendum, fears about so-called 'contagion' to other countries have grown.

This article compares how the Brexit debate was perceived in the public spheres of three of Britain's strategic partners: France, Germany and the Netherlands. Eurosceptic movements in these countries – the National Front, the AfD, and the Party for Freedom – have gained influence since the 2014 European elections. Thus, the way in which Brexit is reflected in those member states becomes important. We define 'public sphere' as a 'space' for the exchange of information and opinions, in this case about EU affairs. It is widely believed that national media will continue to play an important role in fostering EU discourses (e.g. Risse, 2010). Hence, our research draws on an analysis of national newspapers. We ask to what extent the Brexit debate has a transnational dimension, that is,

whether there is a shared understanding of Brexit in our three countries. One the one hand, we consider whether the debate about Britain's future relationship with the EU reflects similar needs and concerns in other member states. On the other hand, we examine whether the Brexit debate served to create a sense of unity amongst the other twenty-seven member states through understandings of shared risks and challenges associated with Brexit.

Our analysis concentrates on four key events in the Brexit debate: David Cameron's January 2013 speech at Bloomberg, during which he presented his plans to renegotiate Britain's EU membership; the UK General Elections held on 5 May 2015; the referendum campaign, which started on 19 February 2016 when the EU and the UK reached agreement on a 'renegotiated' membership; as well as the immediate aftermath of the 23 June 2016 referendum. We compare the newspapers' coverage of the Brexit debate, combining insights from Euroscepticism research with those of public sphere research. As such, this article contributes to the ongoing debate on Euroscepticism and related calls for a focus that extends beyond political parties and public opinion (e.g. Usherwood and Startin, 2013). Simultaneously, it contributes to existing research on the possible contribution of Europeanised public spheres to EU democracy.

Euroscepticism and the European public sphere

The body of research on EU media coverage and the European public sphere has steadily increased since the 1990s (e.g. Risse, 2015; Statham and Trenz, 2013). Due to the limited scope of pan-European media, scholars have looked particularly into the possibilities of the development of a *transnational* European public sphere. From this perspective, a European public sphere develops not through pan-European media but through the Europeanisation of national public spheres, in which national media offer a platform for the debate of EU affairs

(see Risse, 2010). Europeanisation of public spheres happens as EU affairs become increasingly politicised and contested (Statham and Trenz, 2013). The volume of mass media coverage of EU affairs is rather substantial, in particular when European policies are considered to be controversial at the national level or when they are linked to certain events. For instance, one way in which the EU becomes politicised is through EU referendums, which can be considered political opportunity structures (Usherwood 2017; see also Statham and Trenz, 2013). Europeanisation can be measured according to a number of criteria, including visibility and inclusiveness of EU actors and communication between European and national actors (Koopmans and Statham, 2010).

With regards to a potentially disruptive event such as Brexit, we would thus expect greater visibility of European actors and issues. Indeed, quantitative research by the European Journalism Observatory (2016) shows that media across Europe extensively covered the referendum. However, investigating the visibility of European actors in the public debates cannot tell us much about whether issues are understood in similar ways. A Europeanised public sphere is not just a question of issue salience, but also about debates that contribute to an ethical self-understanding amongst Europeans (Kantner, 2006). This relates to a normative function of the public sphere for the development of political community and solidarity to sustain EU democracy (Habermas, 2001). Going beyond questions of visibility, Risse (2010, p. 133-139) thus adds the importance of discussions that are based on 'similar frames of reference and interpretation'. These 'same criteria of relevance' require agreement on a particular problem or at least the 'potential interpretations of the problems' (p. 119). Whether Brexit can contribute to the Europeanisation of public spheres therefore depends not just on the issue and European actors being visible in the media but also on whether there are transnational interpretations of Brexit that contribute to the perception of a shared community of Europeans.

Scholars are divided on the implications of a politicisation of the EU. On the one hand, an increase in communication about Euroscepticism can promote further Europeanisation by helping to develop a European democratic public (e.g. Follesdal and Hix, 2006). For instance, de Wilde and Trenz (2012) claim that it can contribute to the EU's democratic legitimacy by generating public debate about the course of European integration. Europeanisation of national public spheres can therefore also be promoted through the appearance of 'dissenting voices' (FitzGibbon *et al*, 2017), particularly media coverage of non-domestic Eurosceptic actors, as they contribute to the visibility of European issues (Gattermann and Vasilopoulou, 2017). These voices may then spark defence of the European project through common European frames.

On the other hand, several scholars argue that politicisation reinforces conflicts in Europe. For example, Hooghe and Marks (2009) argue that politicisation of the EU relates not simply to a left/right conflict but is also shaped by inclusive and exclusive notions of national identity. With regards to media, Galpin and Trenz (2017) argue that the negativity bias already established in political news is often amplified in reporting of the EU which can drive support for Eurosceptic parties. Europeanisation of public spheres can therefore lead to what Gattermann and Vasilopoulou (2017) have called a 'Eurosceptic public sphere', in which populist politicians such as Le Pen and Wilders present a shared understanding of *their* take on European integration. Brexit could therefore lead to Europeanisation that is not necessarily positive for the EU, by increasing the presence of Eurosceptic actors, shared criticisms of the integration project and divisions between member states.

In this respect, we look for shared interpretations of Brexit by identifying different public sphere dynamics triggered by Brexit debates. We define a transnational frame as one which reflects concerns or interests shared beyond the national level. As Trenz (2008, p. 278) argues, Europeanisation 'can be analysed as a process that enlarges the scope of public

discourse beyond the territorial nation state'. We are interested in the development of 'an interpretive space in which meaning structures converge, common standpoints are crystallised and a collective self develops' (p. 277).

This suggests a number of possible findings. Firstly, Brexit debates may have no transnational dimension, highlighting instead interpretations rooted in the national sphere (Statham and Trenz, 2013, p. 57). This would signify a renationalising of the debate, in which Brexit sparks a re-focus on national issues. Secondly, Brexit debates may reveal transnational frames that support the European integration project. This would signify a Europeanisation of the debate, emphasising commonalities, shared values and the strive for a common future (Kantner, 2006, p. 513). Thirdly, they might include transnational frames that demonstrate a common understanding of the flaws of the integration project. In the latter, Europeanisation can transform into a Eurosceptic Europeanisation that leads to common delegitimisation of the EU. These transnational frames may be confrontational, as collective identities often develop through conflict (p. 516). This would pitch, for instance, 'we' (the Europeans) against 'them' (the UK).

Research design

Euroscepticism has become an increasingly embedded phenomenon since the early 1990s. Yet, research has long been confined to issues related to party politics and public opinion, and has only recently been expanded to issues such as transnational politics and media (e.g. Caiani and Guerra, 2017; FitzGibbon *et al*, 2017). As Euroscepticism is often not about the outright rejection of the EU, but rather about putting forward a different kind of Europe, one approach has been to develop a spectrum of attitudes towards the EU. For instance, Startin (2015, p. 321) distinguishes between 'Euro-positive', 'Eurosceptic' and 'Euro-ambivalent'

newspapers, whereas Bijsmans (2017) distinguishes between 'soft' and 'hard' Eurosceptic positions, as well as 'supportive' and 'Euroalternative' positions.

While we also consider Euroscepticism a diverse phenomenon, such spectrums will not tell us much about shared meanings and interpretations. Instead, we are interested in how discourse reflects a specific view on reality (e.g. Hardy *et al*, 2004; Semetko and Valkenburg, 2000). We look for shared meanings through a qualitative framing approach. In this context, framing essentially concerns the way in which a theme is laid out 'to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described' (Entman, 1993, p. 52). Building on the work of Leconte (2010) and Sørensen (2008), we look at what we call 'sources' of Euroscepticism to identify transnational interpretations of the Brexit debate. Leconte distinguishes between four main 'varieties' of Euroscepticism: utilitarian, political, value-based, and cultural anti-Europeanism. Sørensen's four 'types' of Euroscepticism concern issues related to economy, sovereignty, democracy and politics.

Taking into account these perspectives, we analysed mediated debates in the Dutch, French and German public spheres by looking at four sources (*integration*, *identity & values*, *history*, and *utilitarianism*), eventually adding a fifth one (*democracy & sovereignty*). We use these five sources of Euroscepticism (*Table 1*) as a starting point to identify areas of shared meaning in the context of the Brexit debate, which is followed by inductive generation of sub-frames. De Wilde and Trenz (2012, p. 539) argue that Eurosceptic discourse unfolds 'as the counterpart of EU legitimation discourse'. Linked to each of these sources of Euroscepticism, then, we also expect to identify pro-European arguments (cf. Entman, 1993).

[TABLE 1 HERE]

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In addition, we categorise our findings along three dimensions to help us identify areas of common interpretation: *shared British concerns*, i.e. where the articles expresses agreement or understanding of issues raised by the UK; *risk*, i.e. where Brexit or calling for a referendum is presented as a threat or danger in terms of the aforementioned frames; and *opportunity*, i.e. where articles discuss the opportunities presented by the referendum, such as potential benefits to the economy. This then allows us to compare areas of shared interpretations between the three chosen countries.

Our analysis looks at the ways in which the Brexit debate was framed in the public spheres of three of the UK's strategic EU partners, namely France, Germany and the Netherlands. As mentioned before, these are also countries with influential Eurosceptic movements. The occurrence of Euroscepticism in British media is rather well-documented (e.g. Copeland and Copsey, 2017; Startin, 2015), yet the EU is also becoming increasingly contested in media in other countries (e.g. Bijsmans, 2017; Galpin, 2017). While a focus on quality newspapers may suggest a bias towards audiences that are more likely to be broadly supportive of the EU (see Risse, 2010), centre-right newspapers tend to be most critical towards the EU. Hence, we might expect that conservative-leaning newspapers find common ground with British Eurosceptics. We specifically look at three leading centre-right quality newspapers: *Le Figaro* (France), *Die Welt* (Germany) and *NRC Handelsblad* (the Netherlands). *Le Figaro* is the most read conservative newspaper in France. *Die Welt* is the conservative newspaper with the second highest circulation in Germany, following the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, but far exceeds the latter in online readership. *NRC Handelsblad* is the most important Dutch centre-right quality newspaper, with an influential op-ed section (see Leruth *et al.* 2017).

Our analysis concentrates on key events in the Brexit debate: 21 January-3 February 2013 (Bloomberg speech) and 4-17 May 2015 (UK general election). For the campaign, we

looked at the period 15 February-24 June 2016 and we analysed the rest of June 2016 in order to assess newspapers' immediate responses to the result. Articles were retrieved using LexisNexis using a combination of keywords for the first two periods and 'Brexit' for the referendum period. We included only those that referred to issues related to the renegotiation or referendum in the title or the first paragraph. Summaries or purely explanatory articles regarding various issues related to the referendum were also excluded.

Altogether, we analysed 758 articles. As *Figure 1* shows, in all three newspapers the referendum became highly salient in June 2016 in the run up to and aftermath of the referendum. This perhaps suggests that it was only when the reality of the referendum approached that it truly became a 'European' issue. But was this comparable news cycle matched by shared understandings of Brexit?

[FIGURE 1 HERE]

Analysis

The Bloomberg Speech and the 2015 General Election

Le Figaro

In *Le Figaro*, articles covering the Bloomberg speech focused on its transnational implications for the future of the EU, framed in terms of *integration*. Most of these focus on issues related to the future of European integration as a whole. The initial reaction to the Bloomberg speech highlights the *risks* of leaving the Union, not only for the EU (in terms of potential disintegration) but also for the UK. The majority of articles insist on the *risk* of

'jumping into the unknown' (*Le Figaro*, 24 January 2013a), with the UK needing to gain support from key member states in order to secure a new membership deal. One article is particularly critical of David Cameron's strategy, calling it 'dangerous' and 'illusory' (*Le Figaro*, 26 January 2013b). The newspaper also emphasises Cameron's weak position within the Conservative Party, and states that he put his own political career at risk in the likes of Margaret Thatcher and John Major.

The newspaper does not demonstrate much evidence of *shared British concerns* in France, but many articles deal with reactions from other countries. A couple of articles assess Merkel's position, who believes that the EU should become 'more liberal' on issues such as free trade and competitiveness. Accordingly, the newspaper highlights *shared British concerns* in Germany. One article written from the perspective of Germany emphasised France's potential loss of influence in an increasingly liberal Europe, and the erosion of the long-standing Franco-German axis. The discussion also focuses on *identity & values*, highlighting the UK's peripheral position and the long-term 'clash of culture' between a British emphasis on national sovereignty and a pragmatic approach to European integration based on the French political institutions. The focus on the impact on the UK as well as Germany's shared concerns suggest that *Le Figaro* does not reveal shared concerns about the EU with the UK and Germany. Yet, another opinion piece portrays the possibility of a UK referendum as an *opportunity*, addressing the potential for a 'two-speed Union', consisting of the Eurozone on the one hand and an enlarged European Economic Area on the other, is perceived as a viable option to meet David Cameron's demands (*Le Figaro*, 24 January 2013c). Overall, however, Cameron's demands are met with scepticism in the French right-wing newspaper, which does not believe that the EU needs to be reformed.

Transnational implications of the UK referendum for 'Europe' were also a theme in coverage of the 2015 election. An opinion piece by Paris 3 Professor Pauline Schnapper

highlighted the so-called 'British paradox', as the Conservatives pledged to hold a referendum to potentially leave the EU while Brussels is becoming increasingly 'British, i.e. more flexible and intergovernmental, with a weaker Commission' (*Le Figaro*, 6 May 2015a). One editorial piece offered some cautious optimism, believing that the outcome of the election favours the UK staying in the EU, as 'the European question lost most of its relevance' during the campaign (*Le Figaro*, 9 May 2015b). The theme of immigration which is perceived as a key issue to determine the outcome of the referendum was mentioned in two articles, especially with regards to the refugee crisis; yet *Le Figaro* did not frame the issue of immigration as a shared concern.   However, most of the discussion focused specifically on Cameron's leadership style and how he intends to conduct negotiations in order for the UK to stay in the EU, despite strong opposition from Tory backbenchers and pressure from the UK Independence Party (UKIP). The newly appointed government is considered to be Eurosceptic, emphasising the prominent roles given to key Eurosceptic figures. Thus, while there is some transnational understanding of the referendum, in terms of risks for the EU and shared British concerns, *Le Figaro* primarily emphasises the *risks* of Cameron's strategy for the UK.

Die Welt

In contrast to *Le Figaro*, most articles covering the Bloomberg speech in *Die Welt* provide evidence of transnationally *shared British concerns*. There are sympathies with Cameron's demands, especially the hope that they could lead to a reformed Europe that is competitive in the global economy. *Die Welt*'s coverage reflects a similar enomomic vision in Germany and the UK, and Germany's leading role as an export nation, that is contrasted strongly with France. One article describes the speech as a call for 'a maritime, outward-looking Europe

instead of a self-absorbed continental block in the spirit of Napoleon' (*Die Welt*, 25 January 2013a). This frame emphasises the importance of the German-British relationship as a counterweight to the Franco-German relationship, which is seen as in decline. One article maintains that France 'is drifting geographically into the south of the EU, while the push for reforms is coming from the north of the EU, including England' (*Die Welt*, 31 January 2013b). The UK is viewed as a key partner in economic policy, sharing similar ideas about competitiveness and liberal economic reforms. Articles also often discuss a democratic deficit in the EU, as well as agree that there needs to be reform of political union, clarity on subsidiarity and greater transparency. Cameron's speech therefore finds resonance in *Die Welt* in terms of similar concerns about democracy and subsidiarity in the EU.

However, while there is much sympathy with Cameron's demands and visions for the EU, authors often suggest that by demanding such reforms, he is trying to 'save Europe'. This suggests a solid commitment to European integration not necessarily matched in British conservative newspapers. Furthermore, there is concern about the *risk* of Cameron's plans, with references by then Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle and then President of the European Parliament Martin Schulz to Goethe's *Zauberlehrling*, describing Cameron as a Sorcerer's Apprentice who risks unleashing forces that he will not be able to control. Overall, Cameron's Bloomberg speech is received by *Die Welt* as a welcome call for reform, suggesting a willingness amongst German conservatives to negotiate with Cameron.

The German newspaper's interpretations of the Conservative win in the 2015 election are mixed. Firstly, as in 2013, some articles reflect *shared British concerns*. One commentary expresses optimism as the 'Britons do not want an all-powerful Brussels, a fiscal union, or a softening of austerity [...] thankfully' (*Die Welt*, 9 May 2015a). This article shares Britain's strive for a more competitive European economy and opposition to a federal EU. Some articles identify areas of common concern in terms of European integration and European

democracy. However, the *utilitarian* and *integration* frames also highlight *risks* to the EU and UK. One article raises concerns about contagion to other countries with right-wing populist movements. However, there is also focus on national implications for the UK economy, highlighting implications of the referendum for the UK's economic growth or the uncertainty it was likely to cause on the markets. Nevertheless, there is a clear ambivalence – while it is pointed out that the UK economy is less dependent on Europe than the German economy, articles also reveal confidence that the UK will ultimately vote to remain. Altogether, as in *Le Figaro* and *NRC Handelsblad*, the reaction to the election is relatively muted. During these periods there is a transnational dimension in terms of shared British concerns as well as concerns about the wider EU, but also a clear focus on the national implications of the uncertainty for the UK alone.

NRC Handelsblad

In *NRC Handelsblad* Cameron's Bloomberg speech and the prospective of a possible Brexit are predominantly framed in terms of *integration*, in a debate that clearly has a transnational dimension, reflecting common interests between member states. *Shared British concerns* particularly relate to the need to limit EU legislation. The Netherlands is certainly not unwilling to think along these lines and discussing competences is also not something that is refuted outright. As in *Die Welt*, this reflects commonalities between the UK and the Netherlands, particularly their histories as maritime trading nations. Correspondent Caroline de Gruyter notes that many countries are actually willing to give in somewhat, as they value British EU membership (*NRC Handelsblad*, 23 January 2013a). Initial reactions in Germany are also reported as being relatively positive. The *utilitarian* and *democracy & sovereignty* frames also appear through references to Cameron's emphasis on the benefits of the internal

market and his criticism of the gap between the EU and its citizens. British membership of the internal market is seen as vital, also for the Netherlands. In the words of Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte, the UK is 'growth-oriented' in contrast to policymakers in Brussels (*NRC Handelsblad*, 26 January 2013c). There are occasional references to *opportunities*, with Cameron's speech offering a chance to reform the EU. However, opportunities are mostly seen by populist politicians, such as Geert Wilders who calls for a Dutch membership referendum.

Despite these shared concerns, and similarly to *Le Figaro*, there is also extensive reference to the *risks* emanating from Cameron's proposals. Like France, the Netherlands was at the time also facing strong populist challenges. References to *risks* tend to follow the line that Europe must stay united and should not be downgraded to a cherry-picking project. The general view is that a referendum will be a guaranteed loss for Europe, with Brexit seen as jeopardising national, European and global economies. Generally, it is noted that European cooperation should be cherished, otherwise European values and solidarity could be at risk. There is reference to Europe's past when asked what a British exit would mean for the continent, as it may lead to destabilisation, whereas European integration has brought peace. German Minister of Foreign Affairs Guido Westerwelle is quoted as having referred to Europe as a *Schicksalsgemeinschaft* (community of fate) (*NRC Handelsblad*, 24 January 2013b).

The surprise win by the Tories at the 2015 General Election is seen as the starting point of the debate about British EU membership. *Integration* is the dominant theme, while other frames only occur infrequently. As in both *Le Figaro* and *Die Welt*, coverage focuses on the national implications for the UK, with some reflections from the Dutch perspective and only few insights from elsewhere. Nevertheless, there are some references to *shared British concerns* in the guise of the need to reform the EU. In an editorial, *NRC Handelsblad* (9 May

2015a) stresses that Britain and the EU need each other *and* that Cameron's surprise win offers an *opportunity* for swift negotiations. Overall, UK membership is seen as important for the Netherlands as well as for the rest of Europe, both in terms of economy and politics. Yet, transnational *risks* are raised too, especially regarding the need to maintain unity in light of global challenges and the potential economic consequences of a Brexit. Columnists question the extent to which there are shared views on what a better EU entails, with one even noting that British and Dutch views are not as similar as often suggested (*NRC Handelsblad*, 15 May 2015b).

The Referendum Campaign and its Aftermath

Le Figaro

The referendum campaign was extensively covered in *Le Figaro*. Many articles were framed in terms of *utilitarianism*, mostly from the perspective of the UK, thus not indicating transnationally shared meanings. Among these, most of them emphasised that the economic *risks* of leaving the EU, which are perceived as catastrophic for the UK as it could face a period of recession, lose jobs and damage the British banking sector. Yet, a couple of articles covered the debate over the potential economic *opportunities* discussed in the UK in the case of a Brexit, as advocated by prominent Leave supporters: EU membership fees, which could be used to invest in national infrastructure (though the newspaper insists that membership figures used do not take in consideration the British rebate); the UK's dynamic economy which could benefit from further free trade agreements; and the opportunity to create jobs especially within the City. In addition, many articles further highlighted political risks of leaving the EU for the UK at the domestic level, covering issues such as the relationship with

Ireland, a potential second Scottish independence referendum and the weakening influence of David Cameron within his own political party.

However, much of the discussion did demonstrate a transnational dimension, through a focus on the transnational *risks* of such referendum for the future of European integration. The risk of a 'domino effect' was often mentioned, with articles focusing on the rise of Eurosceptic movements across Europe as well as on the risks of holding referendums which can be used as a political tool to weaken the EU. The lack of a 'plan B' in the case of a victory of the 'Leave' vote is also often criticised, as this would lead to a period of political instability both for the UK and the EU. Yet, some articles framed Brexit in terms of *opportunities*, outlining that it could have a positive impact over the future of European integration. These articles either advocate 'more Europe' based on a federal model of integration (*Le Figaro*, 16 June 2016a) or calling Brexit 'a chance for the EU', which could lead to a wave of reforms to create a 'Confederal Europe' (*Le Figaro*, 19 April 2016b).

The outcome of the Brexit referendum is extensively discussed in *Le Figaro*, especially compared to the two other newspapers included in this analysis (see Figure 1). Again, there is discussion of both the transnational and national implications of the result. In general, articles tend to cover three negative impacts of the vote – these are framed in terms of *risks*. Firstly, the uncertainty surrounding the EU's future is extensively discussed. According to the newspaper, the vote means that the European continent is now facing a deep and unprecedented political (and potentially economic) crisis. Many articles emphasise the need for the 27 other member states to find a fast common answer to avoid a risk of contagion. The newspaper also emphasised the lack of solutions proposed by European leaders to relaunch the European integration project; the absence of a Franco-German proposal is heavily criticised. One editorial emphasises the needs for deep political reforms, but also criticises the lack of a 'plan B'.

Secondly, however, several articles published within the week following the vote focused on the national consequences of the Brexit vote for the UK, mostly on the British economy. There seems to be a broad consensus that the vote will mostly harm the UK and create major political uncertainties, which could ultimately lead to another Scottish independence referendum. Thirdly, domestic reactions are also covered quite extensively, again renationalising the debate to focus on France: one article predicts that a 'Frexit' referendum will be a key aspect of the 2017 presidential election, while others emphasise the divisions within the two mainstream political parties (the Socialist Party and the Republicans) over the consequences of Brexit for the influence of France in the EU. The relations between France and the UK are also questioned, especially with regards to the Touquet Agreement regarding asylum seekers. Finally, despite the broadly negative reaction to Brexit, a few articles highlight potential opportunities for France, as the British people's decision could have a positive impact on the French economy by attracting London-based companies in Paris and by strengthening the ties between France and the United States.

Die Welt

In *Die Welt*, the coverage also shifted in 2016 to focus much more on the transnational *risks* of Brexit to integration and the economy. Similarly to *Le Figaro*, there is a sense that the EU is facing a severe existential crisis. One article states that 'the EU will be shaken to its very foundations' (*Die Welt*, 31 May 2016a). The concern is often related to worries about growing populist movements across Europe, as Brexit could spark a 'domino effect' – a concern shared in both France and the Netherlands. There is also discussion about the value of referendums, which journalists argue allow populist politicians to work outside the framework of normal representative institutions. Nevertheless, some articles also discuss

opportunities for Germany and the rest of Europe, sometimes viewed as a opportunity for reform or further integration. Economically, London future as a financial centre is repeatedly questioned as 'financial institutions in Frankfurt, Paris or Zurich will gladly offer to inherit their British competitors' business' (*Die Welt*, 15 June 2016d).

Some articles, however, highlight *shared British concerns*. Firstly, many reiterate Germany's shared interest in pursuing EU reforms, and the North/South divide again emerges through a common vision of a liberal and competitive Europe. The UK is still seen as a neoliberal ally for Germany not just in economic matters but also in preventing deeper European integration. There are also shared concerns in terms of EU democracy, for example, Euroscepticism is blamed on those who have supported deeper integration. These *shared British concerns* thus call for reforms of the EU or a reorientation of the EU's goals.

There is nevertheless some attention to national implications of the referendum. The potential risks to the British economy are highlighted, such as overall projected losses to the GDP. Some articles also focus on the impact on London as a *Finanzstandort*, as well as a predicted loss of jobs. Some attention is also paid to the likely economic impact on Germany, such as on small and medium-sized businesses. Finally, *identity & values* and *history* are also raised, with the UK framed as inherently 'different' to the rest of Europe. One article, for example, describes a nostalgic middle England that 'wishes the old England back, an England that possessed a global Empire' (*Die Welt*, 23 June 2016f), while another notes that 'the Brits bear a deep mistrust of the central European tradition of consensus' (*Die Welt*, 10 June 2016g).

After the vote, a number of articles discuss the need to maintain unity in the EU, particularly with regards to the response by EU leaders who endeavour to 'protect the unity of the 27'. This determination to maintain unity separates the EU's future from the UK's much before Brexit effectively happens, as it 'forces the remaining EU partners to […] design a new

future strategy for Europe' (*Die Welt*, 30 June 2016i). There are also concerns that Brexit will leave Germany in a too-powerful position in Europe. One article notes that the German government will want to keep the UK in the EU to avoid 'growing aversion to them supposedly as the only big power in the club (*Die Welt*, 30 June 2016j). As during the campaign, there is some attention to the *opportunities* that Brexit might offer, with calls for deeper integration in areas such as economic and monetary union and foreign and security policy.

In addition to risks of Brexit to European integration, some post-referendum articles discuss the result in *utilitarian* terms. On the one hand, the *risks* to the European economy are seen as potentially disastrous. Unlike *Le Figaro*, which primarily discussed the economic risks to the UK, the main fear in *Die Welt* is the likely destabilising effect of Brexit on the Euro. Brexit is compared with previous economic shocks amid concerns that Brexit could cause a 'black Friday' on the financial markets. The concerns also involve fears that the Euro could break up altogether as the European economy is still seen as highly vulnerable to another global crisis. However, there is also discussion of national implications, such as the view that the economic effects will be tempered by the stability of the German economy, or, like in *Le Figaro*, the opportunities of Brexit, which suggest a sense that Brexit could help strengthen Germany's economic identity as *Standort Deutschland*. Furthermore, British difference is again mentioned by explaining the vote through Britain's 'maritime history', which forms British identity.

NRC Handelsblad

In *NRC Handelsblad integration* still plays an important role, but so do other frames, particularly *utilitarianism*, and they are often discussed in a transnational perspective. Initially

the focus is still very much on the deal between David Cameron and the other European leaders. While proponents of Brexit such as Boris Johnson reject the deal as being insufficient and some academics and former politicians warn that it is unclear how parts of it will actually work in practice, the coverage in *NRC Handelsblad* initially reflects a *shared understanding* of a deal that is important for European unity, even though further reform may be needed in the future. Once again the strong ties between Britain and the Netherlands are stressed throughout. Generally, Britain is described as being intrinsically linked to Europe and stronger when part of it.

Yet, as in *Die Welt* during this period, such considerations soon give way to reflections on the *risk* to the integration process of the upcoming referendum, which could lead to a process of gradual disintegration. In this context, Europe's recent history is also portrayed as one of peace and stability due to European integration; Brexit may cause new instability. Brexit is also seen as a *risk* for national, European and global economies. The general argument throughout does not focus on the benefits of membership, but rather on the risks of not being a member. In contrast to *Le Figaro*, which discusses the opportunities for France, Brexit is sometimes discussed in terms of *opportunities* for European integration. A few opinion pieces perceive Brexit as a chance to redefine or deepen European integration, and it is noted that banks might relocate to Amsterdam or other European cities.

However, the referendum is also discussed in a national perspective. For example, immigration is framed in different ways: as an issue of *integration* (the UK not being a member of Schengen), but also partly in terms of *identity & values* (outside influences that threatened British values) and a matter of national *sovereignty* (the need to regain control of British borders). British supporters of Brexit, often through emphasising British exceptionalism and national identity, stress the opportunities of a Brexit. References to regaining control over British borders and taking back control from unelected bureaucrats are

abundant. This rhetoric is also picked up by Le Pen and Wilders, who hope for, respectively, 'Frexit' and 'Nexit' referendums, which *NRC Handelsblad* describes as being risky and unwise. This focus again reflects domestic pressures from the Party for Freedom, and matches similar concerns in Germany and France about a 'domino effect' across Europe.

The day after the referendum *NRC Handelsblad* (24 June 2016a) calls the outcome a 'leap in the dark'. The transnational *risks* associated with Brexit are prominent throughout *NRC Handelsblad*'s coverage– often phrased in terms of uncertainty. This uncertainty concerns the future of the EU and the need to maintain unity, but also relates to possible repercussions of Brexit for the economy. Post-war peace is also discussed in terms of Germany's position in Europe and peace in Northern Ireland. At times the emphasis on unity is contrasted with the lack of plans and the general feeling of disarray in the UK. The referendum is described as a wake-up call for the EU, suggesting shared concerns. EU leaders argue that the gap between the EU and its citizens needs to be closed by democratic reforms, yet *NRC Handelsblad* notes the absence of concrete plans and the many ad-hoc meetings rather give a disunited impression. Berlin believes that further integration may currently not be opportune, while French politicians rather talk in terms of the EU focussing on a number of key areas. Reactions in the Netherlands follow similar lines, once again stressing British-Dutch relations.

Regarding national implications, *identity & values* are discussed from the perspective of UK immigration, a key reason why many people voted against EU membership. The fact that Northern Ireland and Scotland voted in favour of EU membership adds additional insecurity, as it raises questions about British unity. *Opportunities* of Brexit are again mostly discussed from the perspective of those who see an end to European integration as a good thing. 'Taking back control' and regaining national sovereignty are identified as key reasons for Brexit, with the economic case for EU membership made by the Remain camp not seen as

sufficiently convincing. The day after the referendum Nigel Farage refers to 'independence day' and hopes that Brexit will be a first step towards a 'Europe of sovereign nations' (*NRC Handelsblad*, 24 June 2016b). Fellow populist leaders, such as Le Pen and Wilders, echo these sentiments and call for referendums in their own countries and elsewhere.

Discussion and conclusions

As Menon and Salter (2016, p. 1318) write, the Brexit referendum is 'a turning-point in the history of both Britain and the EU'. The analysis presented above reveals that, from David Cameron's Bloomberg speech to the immediate aftermath of the referendum, the potentially historic outcome of the process was acknowledged by all three newspapers. A concise overview of how the debate developed is depicted in *Figure 2*.

[FIGURE 2 HERE]

Two sets of conclusions, relating to the spatial and temporal dimensions of Brexit, can be drawn from our analysis. Firstly, while the newspapers do discuss the national implications of the referendum for their own countries and for the UK, we find a clear transnational dimension in the meanings given to 'Brexit'. Media coverage about a country's EU membership can promote a Europeanisation of debates based on an ethical self-understanding that emphasises shared values and a common future. In particular, this stems from a concern about Eurosceptic parties in all three countries. This concern drives a reassertion of the importance of European cooperation and solidarity.

However, we do also find evidence of shared British concerns about the EU, particularly in the German and Dutch newspapers prior to the referendum campaign, which reflect transnational challenges to the EU's democratic legitimacy and institutional set-up. Such shared concerns reflect similar economic visions and attitudes to sovereignty amongst conservative actors in Germany, the Netherlands and the UK, and contrast strongly with France. Both *NRC Handelsblad* and *Die Welt* gave considerable importance to the Dutch-British and German-British relationships and identify with Britain as a proponent of a liberal

market economic model as part of a 'Northern' European political culture. Here, British attempts to reform the EU find resonance transnationally and spark calls for reforms to the EU's structures. In this sense, we see evidence of a 'Eurocritical' (Statham and Trenz, 2013) identity based on shared values and constructed in conflict with the EU itself. Brexit thus clearly demonstrates the way in which public debates about the EU translate into a form of transnational polity contestation that challenges the EU in fundamental terms (de Wilde and Trenz, 2012).

Secondly, this paper sheds light on the temporal evolution of the debate on Brexit. During the pre-referendum period, there were degrees of support in *NRC Handelsblad* and *Die Welt*. However, by 2016, all three newspapers become highly critical of the strategy pursued by the British Prime Minister, which is perceived as putting the EU's future at risk. This might be explained by the fact that, by this point, a referendum had been officially announced and was no longer merely a 'renegotiation' of the UK's membership. Brexit is perceived as a threat to the cohesion of the EU, with possible negative repercussions for economic development and the peace that has characterised European integration. Both *Le Figaro* and *Die Welt* also give some coverage to the economic and political opportunities presented by Brexit. The fact that all three newspapers also extensively cover the likely negative implications for the UK, rather than the EU, suggest that they view Brexit more as an act of self-harm for the UK. This suggests that the debate could evolve towards a more optimistic approach for the EU 27. In sum, the post-referendum discussion evolved in all three countries to be collectively framed as 'us', Europeans, versus 'them', the Brits.

There are a number of implications of this research. On the one hand, we see that there are likely unintended consequences of Brexit for the UK which raises questions about the degree of flexibility that the EU27 will adopt with regard to forthcoming exit negotiations. While there was considerable support for Cameron's demands in his Bloomberg

speech in the Dutch and German newspapers, the referendum itself strengthened the resolve to protect the unity of the EU 27. Indeed, since the beginning of the Article 50 negotiations, it has become clear that the EU member states are highly united in their commitment to protect the EU. Holding the referendum was thus likely counter-productive to promoting the UK's interests. This echoes Adler-Nissen's (2014) finding that British and Danish opt-outs actually promote European integration through the perception of a threat to European unity. This might result in the UK experiencing difficulties achieving its objectives as it leaves the EU (cf. Oliver, 2016).

On the other hand, the Brexit debate reveals emerging coalitions in the EU which might create further difficulties for the EU-27. Before 2016, the Dutch and German newspapers often emphasised the importance of their relations with the UK, suggesting a willingness to remain close partners of the UK outside the framework of the EU. The possibility of 'Eurosceptic' coalitions between leaders of Eurosceptic parties or, for example, the Visegrad states might also emerge that lend support to the UK's position. Recent developments, such as the relatively poor electoral performance of Eurosceptic movements in the three countries and the election of Emmanuel Macron as French President, would, however, suggest that the UK is becoming increasingly isolated, with many EU27 countries starting to focus on the opportunities raised by the Brexit vote for the future of European integration.

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Die Welt (2016d) Das Zurück zur Normalität wird schwer werden.

Die Welt (2016f) Je ärmer, desto Brexit.

Die Welt (2016g) Good-bye; Warum mein britisches Kind jetzt einen deutschen Pass bekommt.

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Table 1: Sources of Euroscepticism

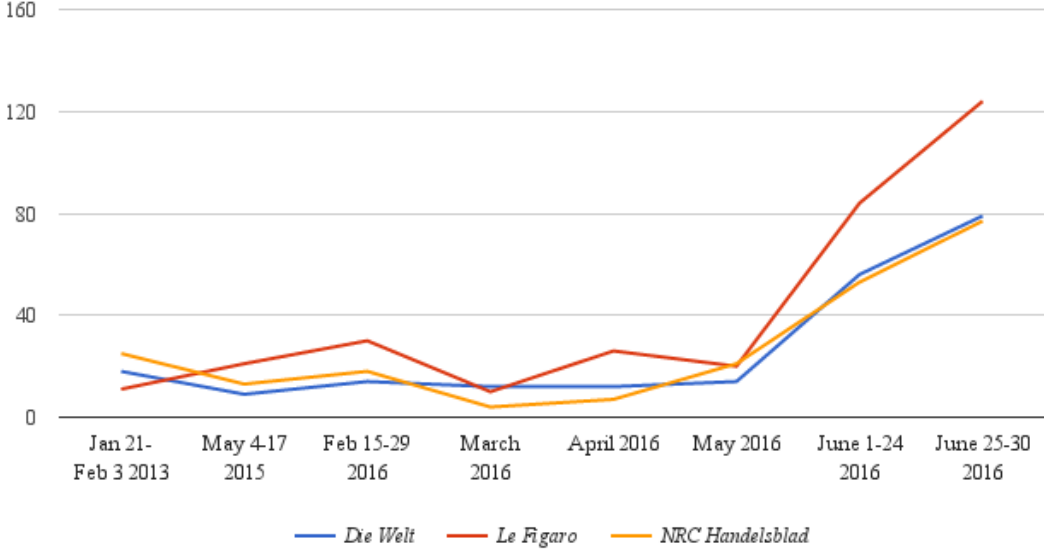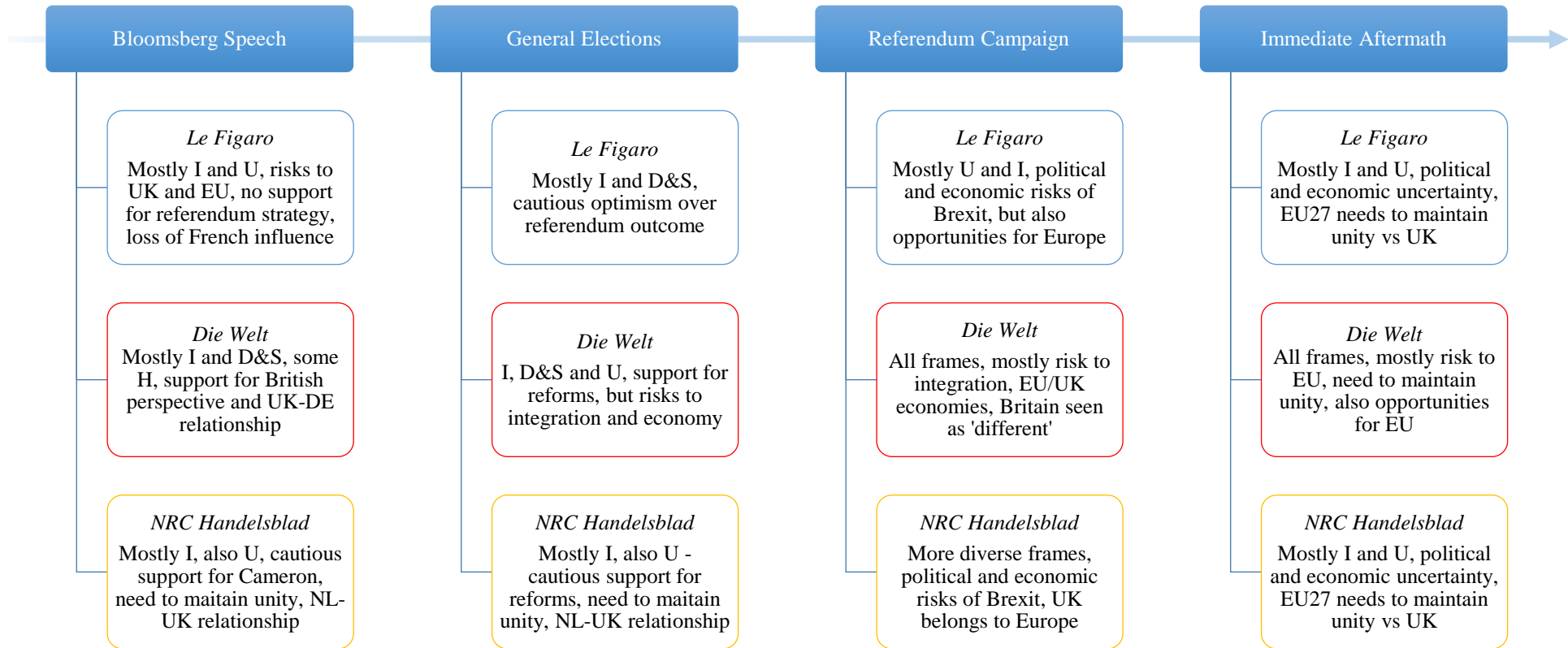| Source	Explanation
Integration	Issues related to more integration versus less integration; increasing or decreasing EU competences; polity issues.
Democracy & Sovereignty	Issues related to the EU's 'democratic deficit' and how to bring the EU closer to its citizens; issues related to national sovereignty and decision-making (who is in control).
Identity & Values	Issues related to identity (EU vs. national identity) and to rights and beliefs (e.g. human rights, citizenship rights, freedom of movement).
History	Issues concerning Europe's past, present and future; relatively peaceful since the end of World War II, but a continent of countries with diverse histories.
Utilitarianism	Issues concerning the (economic) costs and benefits of European integration.

Figure 1: Number of analysed articles over time

Die Welt   Le Figaro   NRC Handelsblad

Figure 2: How the debate developed*

Bloomsberg Speech	General Elections	Referendum Campaign	Immediate Aftermath
Le Figaro Mostly I and U, risks to UK and EU, no support for referendum strategy, loss of French influence	*Le Figaro* Mostly I and D&S, cautious optimism over referendum outcome	*Le Figaro* Mostly U and I, political and economic risks of Brexit, but also opportunities for Europe	*Le Figaro* Mostly I and U, political and economic uncertainty, EU27 needs to maintain unity vs UK
Die Welt Mostly I and D&S, some H, support for British perspective and UK-DE relationship	*Die Welt* I, D&S and U, support for reforms, but risks to integration and economy	*Die Welt* All frames, mostly risk to integration, EU/UK economies, Britain seen as 'different'	*Die Welt* All frames, mostly risk to EU, need to maintain unity, also opportunities for EU
NRC Handelsblad Mostly I, also U, cautious support for Cameron, need to maintain unity, NL-UK relationship	*NRC Handelsblad* Mostly I, also U - cautious support for reforms, need to maintain unity, NL-UK relationship	*NRC Handelsblad* More diverse frames, political and economic risks of Brexit, UK belongs to Europe	*NRC Handelsblad* Mostly I and U, political and economic uncertainty, EU27 needs to maintain unity vs UK

* Abbreviations refer to the frames *integration* (I), *utilitarianism* (U), *history* (H), *democracy & sovereignty* (D&S), *identity & values* (I&S).