



# Right-Wing Sovereignism in the European Union: Definition, Features and Implications

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## Abstract

This article investigates how traditionally anti-European Union (EU) right-wing parties and leaders in four EU member states reinterpreted their relation with the EU in the post-Brexit period (2016–2022). Either for the political opportunity structure's constraints or for the costs triggered by Brexit, right-wing European nationalists had to redefine their role in remaining in the EU. We conceptualize as 'sovereignism' their attempt to endogenize nationalism in the EU. Relying on discourse analysis, this article shows that right-wing sovereignism criticized the supranational character and the centralized policy system that developed within the EU. However, right-wing sovereignism differed in the rationale of its criticism, based more on an economic discourse in Western Europe and more on a cultural discourse in Eastern Europe, as well as on the policies to repatriate. The sovereignist approach of nationalist right-wing parties and leaders would lead to the nationally differentiated disintegration of the EU.

**Keywords:** nationalism; sovereignism; EU institutions; EU policies; nationally differentiated disintegration

## Introduction

The article aims to investigate how right-wing European nationalists changed their discourse on the European Union (EU) after the 2016 Brexit referendum and until 2022. The Brexit referendum was the triumph of nationalism as independence from the integration process (Fossum and Graver, 2018). However, notwithstanding the referendum's outcome, right-wing nationalists, 'despite having initially reacted to the referendum result with enthusiasm, (...) shared a reluctance to prioritise EU membership (...) in their campaign' (van Kessel et al., 2020, p. 66). This attitude is due to several factors, as an unfavourable political opportunity structure for politicizing the exit from the EU or a perception of the excruciating costs of an exit. Charlemagne (2021) pointed out that 'leaving the EU, as Britain has shown, (is) rather stressful', not to mention the destabilizing implications of the long withdrawal process (Schiek, 2021). After Brexit, thus, right-wing nationalistic leaders and parties came increasingly to accept the logic of European interdependence – an acceptance consisting of the attempt to endogenize nationalism within the EU. This attempt is here conceptualized as sovereignism,<sup>1</sup> understood as a narrative characterized by a critique of the EU *but from within*, accompanied by the request to repatriate one or another policy, leaving other policies integrated.

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<sup>1</sup>We opt for the spelling 'sovereignism/sovereignist(s)' because it is the most often used in the literature. However, a few authors also adopt 'souverainism'.

The article's focus is on right-wing nationalistic parties and leaders. We consider Marine Le Pen and her *Rassemblement National* in France, the main opposition leader and party in the period here covered (Le Pen received 41.45% of the popular vote in the second round of the French presidential elections held on 24 April 2022); Matteo Salvini and his League in Italy as well as Giorgia Meloni and her party Brothers of Italy, the latter always in opposition and the former in a coalition government for half of the 2018–2022 legislature (two parties that, allied with Go Italy, won the Italian parliamentary elections held on 25 September 2022, with Brothers of Italy becoming the first national party with 26% of the popular vote); Viktor Orbán and his Fidesz Party in Hungary, permanently in government from 2010 to today; and Jaroslaw Kaczyński and Mateusz Morawiecki and their Law and Justice Party (PiS) in Poland, in majority government from 2015 to the present.

Although the sovereignist narrative has been shared by both right-wing and left-wing nationalistic parties and leaders (Borriello and Brack, 2019), we focus on the former for the following reasons. First is because of their political relevance. Those political actors either were in government (in Hungary and in Poland) or had the capacity to affect the political process from outside the government (in France and in Italy, although the League was in government from June 2018 to September 2019 and then from February 2021 to October 2022). This relevance incentivized them to define their relations with the EU. Second is because of their empirical representativeness. The four member states' right-wing nationalists are in the western and eastern parts of the EU. In no other eastern or western member state were right-wing nationalistic parties politically so influential. Third is because they represent countries in the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) (France and Italy) and countries that are not in the EMU (Poland and Hungary). Fourth is because of their different political allegiance. After the 2019 European Parliament (EP) election, Le Pen and Salvini's parties became members of the extreme-right group of 'Identity and Democracy', Kaczyński's and Morawiecki's PiS and Meloni's Brothers of Italy joined the right-leaning group of 'European Conservatives and Reformists' and Orbán's Fidesz joined the centre-right 'European People's Party' (which it then quit in March 2021). We conceptualize the discourse of these parties and leaders as right-wing sovereignism (henceforth, RWS). Similarly, we adopt RWS actors to refer to their new discourse, not to a specific new type of actors. We thus use 'RWS' and 'RWS actors' interchangeably. For the same period (2016–2022), there was no equivalent of left-wing nationalistic parties or leaders having reached a similar (governmental or quasi-governmental) relevance, at the same time in both Western and Eastern EU. In Spain, a left-wing nationalistic party, Podemos, became part of the government in 2020, but from 2016 to 2022, there was no case of comparable importance in Eastern Europe.

Our research questions are the following: What did RWS actors criticize about the EU whilst remaining within it? Were there differences (and, if so, what were they) in the policy repatriation claims of the western and eastern RWS actors considered? What view on the EU's future have RWS actors come to share? Owing to its underdeveloped theoretical basis, the RWS approach to the EU had certainly opportunistic traits (Bedeia and Kwadwo, 2021). That is why we have decided to consider only those cases of RWS actors that were consistent in the period here examined (and in any case, as a precaution, we use the past tense). This article consists of a cross-country and longitudinal analysis of how RWS discourses converged and differed between (Western and Eastern) EU member

states and across time. The first section clarifies the meaning of the term ‘sovereignism’ in relation to rival concepts. The second section points out the data and the methodology employed. The third and the fourth sections identify the commonalities, and the fifth and the sixth sections the differences between western and eastern RWS actors. We conclude by highlighting the plausible outcome of RWS, namely, the nationally differentiated disintegration of the EU.

## I. What Is Sovereignism? A Definition

Over the last few years, media and policy-makers alike have increasingly used the word sovereignty to identify right-wing and left-wing nationalistic parties and movements engaged in criticizing the EU without explicitly demanding to leave it. Scholars, too, have used the concept, stressing its multifaceted nature (Coman and Leconte, 2019). Brack et al. (2019) and Borriello and Brack (2019) showed how the populist discourse of both right-wing and left-wing parties alternate between popular, national, supranational and parliamentary sovereignty; Baldini et al. (2020) discussed the adjectives (economic, cultural, nationalistic, populist and civic) associated with sovereignty; Schmitz and Seidl (2022), Crespy and Rone (2022) and Pollack (2021) showed how the concept of sovereignty was also used by EU institutional and policy actors. Here, our aim is rather to identify the features of RWS discourse regarding the EU (what RWS actors do and do not like about the EU, which policies they would and would not repatriate from the EU). In this sense, our concept of sovereignty (in its right-wing representation) conveys a different meaning than nationalism, populism or Euroscepticism. This does not mean that RWS actors do not have also nationalistic, populist or Eurosceptic features but that they came to elaborate a new narrative, reinterpreting aspects of the old ones. Our empirical analysis shows that the RWS narrative has acquired specific features.

For Basile and Mazzoleni (2020, p. 1), sovereignty epitomizes a ‘return to the traditional understanding of sovereignty based upon mutually exclusive territories’ or, for Kallis (2018), a reiterated form of independent nationalism. At the heart of this interpretation lies the notion of restoring control, at the national level of government, over policies of national interest. This conceptualization leaves however undefined the distinction between nationalism and sovereignty, because it does not identify the peculiar features of a form of nationalism that accepts (out of necessity) operating within the European integration process, as it is the case for the RWS actors here considered. Certainly, sovereignty derives from nationalism, but it does not end with the claim to national independence inherent in the latter concept. There is, thus, discontinuity between the nationalism of the ‘Brexiters’ of the United Kingdom Independence Party and that of RWS actors remaining within the EU.

Sovereignty has been also used to conceptualize the political forces opposing European elites and institutions for their lack of legitimacy and accountability (Baldini et al., 2020). This conceptualization, although valuable, has tended to overlap sovereignty with populism (Basile and Mazzoleni, 2020). However, sovereignty does not necessarily coincide with populism, as populists are against elites (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017), whilst our RWS actors opposed supranational elites trumping national elites (especially if they themselves were members of the latter). As Fossum (2023, p. 11) puts it, populism is ‘unconcerned with balancing responsibility and responsiveness (...) in

today's Europeanized and globalized context', whilst RWS actors focused their criticism on supranational elites taking the place of national elites. RWS actors criticized the supranational institutions of the EU [the European Commission, hereinafter the Commission; the EP; the Court of Justice of the EU (CJEU); and the European Central Bank (ECB)] but not those representing national governments. Our RWS actors were not anti-institutionalists as populists generally are but presented themselves as defenders of national institutions (and their role in Brussels) against the invasion of supranational powers.

At the same time, although RWS is loosely linked to the older tradition of Euroscepticism (Szczerbiak and Taggart, 2008), it differed from the latter as well. Using De Vries' (2018, p. 9) conceptualization of the three forms of scepticism (exit scepticism, policy scepticism and regime scepticism), RWS actors did not demand an exit strategy from the EU, because their scepticism concerned specific EU policies and institutions. Unlike Eurosceptics, who express a generic anti-EU sentiment, RWS actors requested the repatriation of specific competences from supranational to national levels of government, although the competences to repatriate differed from one actor to another. This is not the case for Eurosceptics, who express mainly mistrust and (sometimes) animosity towards the EU (De Vries, 2018).

RWS includes aspects of the old (nationalistic, populist and Eurosceptic) narratives, but what characterizes it is a new narrative on the EU (which is the focus of our analysis). RWS might thus be conceptualized as a distinct political *discourse* aiming to make nationalism endogenous to the European integration process (Fabbrini, 2019). Like nationalism, populism and Euroscepticism, RWS has also positioned itself along two main axes. The first, the institutional dimension, aims at criticizing the invasion of national sovereignty by supranational authorities, particularly the primacy of the EU legal order over national laws and constitutions, accompanied by the support for intergovernmental institutions. The second, the policy dimension, aims at restoring national control over specific policies, particularly those considered crucial to protect the national interest, but leaving other policies integrated.

## II. Data and Methodology

As we assume RWS as a political narrative, words matter in its public representation. That is why we rely on discourse analysis to investigate the public language used, between 2016 and 2022, by RWS actors in the four member states considered, *concerning their views on the EU* (and not in general). Discourse is here interpreted as verbal or written communication by political leaders and parties through which ideas or views on the EU are publicly presented and discussed. Discourse analysis can help conceptualize RWS's ongoing rationale, however leaving open the possibility for its further transformation (Dunmire, 2012).

Our primary sources are the public speeches of RWS actors, that is, those that are supposed to outline their fundamental positions on both institutional and policy terms. To examine the variation of RWS discourses over time, we consider one speech per year. This also allows us to perform more systematically intra-country comparison of RWS discourses. We include speeches held in different settings and addressed to different audiences: party gatherings, national parliamentary sessions and European or international

Table 1: Right-wing sovereignty and qualitative text analysis.

<i>Dimensions</i>		
	<i>Institutional sovereignty</i>	<i>Policy sovereignty</i>
Categories	Legal order: the position on the relationship between the EU and national law	Why? The justification behind repatriation
	Supranationalism: the position on competences of the Commission, the EP, the CJEU, and the ECB	What? The specific policy to be repatriated
	Intergovernmentalism: the position on the role of the Council and the European Council	How? The means to achieve repatriation
	Polity: the position on the EU as an organizational form	What not? The specific policy <i>not</i> to be repatriated

Abbreviations: CJEU, Court of Justice of the EU; ECB, European Central Bank; EU, European Union.

stages. Where suitable, we complement speeches with the party manifestos for the 2019 EP election and for national elections. We do not consider the views on domestic politics, particularly in the two eastern member states controlled by RWS governments. In this regard, there is already a literature that has shown their authoritarian character (Kelemen, 2020). However, the RWS actors' views of the EU have not been adequately investigated.

To perform discourse analysis, we ran a qualitative text analysis (Kuckartz, 2014) of speeches given by RWS actors. Qualitative text analysis is a tool to assess and compare the content of text sources based on a system of categories (Zgaga, 2020). Before approaching the data, we first developed deductive categories (i.e., derived from our research questions and from the existing literature on RWS) for institutional sovereignty and for policy sovereignty. Table 1 presents the categories with their definitions. In the analysis, we assigned the categories to the content of our primary sources. Ultimately, we drew inferences from the categories to compare the different positions of RWS actors.

### III. Anti-supranationalism

The rejection of the EU supranational legal order was shared by RWS actors from both Eastern and Western Europe (Brothers of Italy, 2019; Le Pen, 2021; League, 2019; Orbán, 2019), although it was only in Poland that such rejection led to a constitutional challenge to the EU legal order (with the decision of the Polish constitutional court of 6 October 2021, which declared the unconstitutionality of Articles 1, 2 and 19 of the Treaty on the EU).<sup>2</sup> The rejection of the supremacy of EU law (with the

<sup>2</sup>The Polish Constitutional Tribunal's ruling (case K 3/21) evoked as its moral precedent the Public Sector Purchase Programme decision of the German Constitutional Court (BVerfG, judgement of 5 May 2020 2 BvR 859/15). However, the reference is unfounded. Whilst the BVerfG aimed to establish and maintain a surveillance on *ultra vires* acts of the EU, the Constitutional Tribunal directly declared unconstitutional the overall supremacy principle of EU law.

non-recognition of the hierarchy between the CJEU and national courts on EU competences) led RWS actors to portray the EU as an illegitimate, authoritarian, bureaucratic and over-regulated structure (Le Pen, 2016; Meloni, 2016, 2017; Orbán, 2020, 2021; Salvini, 2016, 2017). In defending the decision of the Polish constitutional court, Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki (2021) asserted that ‘we ought to be anxious about the gradual transformation of the Union into an entity that would cease to be an alliance of free, equal, and sovereign states, and instead become a single, centrally managed organism, run by institutions deprived of democratic control by the citizens of European countries’. For him, the states ‘are the “masters of the treaties” and it is the states that define the scope of the competences entrusted to the European Union’ (Morawiecki, 2019). For Viktor Orbán (2017), the EU can only be a free alliance of European nations, with ‘strong nation states and strong leaders at the head of Europe’. National sovereignty needs to be protected through the requirement of unanimity in the European Council. All RWS actors, indeed, oppose the extension of qualified majority voting, especially with regard to the nationally sensitive realm of core state powers (e.g., fiscal, foreign and security policy) (Brothers of Italy, 2019, 2022; Le Pen, 2021; League, 2022; Morawiecki, 2021; Orbán, 2022).

For Marine Le Pen (2021, 2022), the EU legal order hides a totalitarian, imperial, hegemonic, ruling power (Rassemblement National, 2019). Matteo Salvini (2016, 2017, 2019) opposed supranationalism. In its 2019 manifesto for the EP election, the League (2019) asked to completely renegotiate the EU treaties that ‘limit full and legitimate Italian sovereignty’, proposing to return to the level of integration before the Maastricht Treaty. Brothers of Italy (2019) explicitly argued for the Italian constitution to be supreme over EU treaties and laws. Giorgia Meloni was the first signatory of a law proposal, submitted to the Italian Chamber of Deputies on the very first day of the legislature that started on 23 March 2018, to amend the Italian constitution by inserting the following sentence: ‘the norms of the Treaties and the other acts of the European Union are applicable [to Italy] at the condition of parity and only when compatible with the principles of sovereignty, democracy and subsidiarity, as well as with the other principles of the Italian constitution’ (Brothers of Italy, 2018a).

The political translation of this view consisted of a permanent criticism of the role of the Commission. Le Pen (2018) talked of a ‘Commissioners’ regime’ and considered it a ‘soft dictatorship’ with ‘its intrusive recommendations on every issue’ (Rassemblement National, 2019, p. 27). For Salvini (2016, 2018), the Commission is an ‘unelected bureaucracy’. For Brothers of Italy (2018b, 2019), the EU institutions in general – and the Commission in particular – serve France and Germany’s interests to the detriment of Italy (Meloni, 2018, 2019, 2022). Also, Viktor Orbán (2017, 2018) harshly criticized the Commission, stressing that ‘there is no point in keeping on the agenda a proposal from the Commission on which prime ministers will never reach a consensus’ (Orbán, 2016), although he praised the Commission when acting in Hungary’s interests. For instance, after the 2019 nomination of Hungarian Olivér Várhelyi as the *Commissioner* for Neighbourhood and *Enlargement*, Orbán (2019) claimed that it was good for Hungary that a Hungarian commissioner has the chance to manage the enlargement of the EU. Morawiecki (2017, 2020) too criticized the Commission, arguing that it had become ideologically driven in its relationship with some member states.

Eventually, on 2 July 2021, all RWS actors considered here signed a Declaration on the future of Europe in which it is stated that ‘the European Union needs deep reform [...] because it has become the instrument of radical forces (aiming) to construct a Europe without nations’. For this reason, the Declaration specifies that it is necessary to define ‘a list of inviolable competences of member States of the European Union (with) a mechanism for their protection (constituted by) national constitutional courts or equivalent organs’ (De la Baume, 2021).

#### IV. Policy Repatriation

RWS actors had however a different list of ‘inviolable competences’ to repatriate. In Italy and France, claims for repatriation concerned mainly economic and monetary competences, particularly after the negative consequences of EMU governance of the sovereign debt crisis in the first half of the 2010s (Jacoby and Hopkin, 2020; Mazzoleni and Ivaldi, 2020). Until 2017, Salvini (2016, 2017) supported leaving the EMU to replace the euro with ‘a fairer currency’ – possibly after a popular referendum. The 2018 League electoral manifesto stated that ‘the euro is tailor-made for Germany, against Italian interests, and the main cause of Italy’s economic decline’ (League, 2018, p. 9, 2019). Hence, the party looked for EU partners to agree on a ‘negotiated exit of Italy’ from the EMU (League, 2018). However, after the 2018 election, this position was abandoned. The goal of leaving the EMU did not appear in the coalition agreement (between the 5SM and the League on 1 June 2018), which led to the creation of the first Conte government that lasted until 5 September 2019 (Coalition Agreement Conte I Government, 2018; Fabbrini and Zgaga, 2019). The agreement instead included plans to change the ECB’s statute and to amend EU economic governance to make it less asymmetric in its effects as it was accused of favouring northern countries. Brothers of Italy, too, argued that the common currency was a good deal for northern countries (mostly Germany) and a bad one for others (especially Italy). It asked for compensatory measures between those that benefitted most from the euro and those that were most damaged. Giorgia Meloni (2016, 2017, 2019) argued in favour of a reform of the ECB (Brothers of Italy, 2018b, 2019). The repatriation of monetary competences was also demanded by Marine Le Pen. She considered the euro an obstacle to France’s economic development and ‘an overvalued currency for France, responsible for losing one million industrial jobs’ (Le Pen, 2016). The euro resembles the previous German currency, which puts France at a disadvantage. Le Pen (2019) argued for a revision of the ECB’s objectives (mandate) and the governance of financial markets.

In Hungary and Poland, which are not members of the EMU, the repatriation of ‘inviolable competences’ concerned mainly the control of the national territory and emerged as a sensitive issue in 2015–2016 with reference to migration policy (Kaczyński, 2016; Morawiecki, 2018; Orbán, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2020). The governments of both countries opposed the arrival in the EU of migrants from the Middle East (and more in general from ‘Islamic countries’) as well as their reallocation amongst EU member states as decided by the Council in 2015. For Orbán, the mandatory redistribution quota of asylum seekers across EU member states is an ‘indefensible idea’ (Orbán, 2016) because ‘only we may say who can and who cannot settle on the territory of our state, together with our nation’ (Orbán, 2019). Law and Justice favoured the restoration of full national sovereignty over

border control (Kaczyński, 2016; Morawiecki, 2018). At the same time, both governments feared that Brexit could lead to a restriction on workers' circulation within the EU from less to more economically developed member states. The opposition to migrants disappeared (particularly in the Polish case) when it came to accepting hundreds of thousands of Ukrainian refugees following the 2022 Russian invasion of the country, because of their cultural affinity with Poles. Although all western and eastern RWS actors shared a radical rejection of what they considered EU openness to globalism and multiculturalism and although all of them criticized the EU migration policy because it allegedly allowed entrance into Europe to too many immigrants, their criticisms, however, had different emphases.

## V. RWS Differences (I)

In the west, the League mobilized to limit migration, in line with an old battle against the so-called *ius soli* as a criterion for assigning Italian citizenship. Border protection was considered a non-negotiable issue. At the domestic level, Salvini's main argument against migration was that 'it is a business for thugs' (Salvini, 2016), to thus assert that 'true refugees come by plane, not on the sea; (...) bringing war to us' (Salvini, 2017, 2019). Once in government in 2018, the party stated that EU member states must welcome migrants within the limits of what is possible, something that in Italy had already been reached (Salvini, 2019). The migration policy that the League (2018, 2019) proposed was 'to invest money in Africa to help potential migrants remain there'. Brothers of Italy pressed to keep Italy outside of the United Nations Global Compact (finally agreeing in 2020), accused of favouring uncontrolled migration (Meloni, 2017, 2019, 2021). It proposed military control of the EU's external borders and the use of military vessels to prevent boats departing from North African shores. According to Brothers of Italy, anyone entering Europe illegally must be kept in specific hot spots and must be repatriated through agreements with third countries. Brothers of Italy shared with the League the opposition to *ius soli*.

The perspective of RWS actors in Italy on migration was clearly influenced by its being a country of first arrival. Although both the League and Brothers of Italy called for the reversal of the Schengen and Dublin Regulations, they did not refrain from supporting some forms of redistribution of migrants. In France and Italy (in which large Islamic communities already exist, although more in the former than in the latter), it was problematic to connect migration with the Islamisation of Europe. Rather, Italian and French RWS actors associated migration with social unrest, stressing the need to protect the national territory and to defend national workers (Le Pen, 2018, 2020; Salvini, 2016, 2017, 2019).

Instead, in the east, RWS actors put the fear of the Islamisation of Europe through migration front and centre, opposing any proposal to redistribute refugees amongst EU member states (Bedeia and Kwadwo, 2021). Orbán (2017) transformed the opposition to migration into the top priority for Europe. For him, the EU was promoting multiculturalism favourable to migration that would sweep aside concepts such as nation and state and cancel the Christian roots of Europe (Orbán, 2017). Kaczyński (2016) claimed that 'we have a full moral right to say 'no' [to welcoming migrants, *ed. note*]'. Law and Justice was against mandatory redistribution quotas of migrants amongst



member states, because this policy ‘contravenes Poland’s traditional family values’ (Kaczyński, 2016). Orbán (2019) stressed that cultural identity and the protection of the Christian culture of Hungary should be considered part ‘of our constitutional identity (whose defence is) an obligation of every organ of the state’. Western and eastern RWS actors were thus against migration, but for different reasons and with a different approach. Whilst the latter claimed national control over migration, the former were asking for intergovernmental co-ordination to redistribute quotas of migrants amongst member states.

Eastern and western RWS actors also had differing views on other topics. On the EU budget, the former (net receivers from the budget) argued for keeping unchanged (or even increasing) the budget to fund cohesion and defence policies, whilst the latter (net contributors to the budget) argued for a reduction in the budget. Orbán (2020) claimed that he does not reject the idea of new sources of joint revenue if the plan is to keep old policies whilst funding new ones. For him, national sovereignty should be strengthened by EU structural policy (Orbán, 2019, see also Morawiecki, 2022), a programme needed to support domestic growth (and the groups of Orbán’s supporters benefitting from it). Kaczyński too proposed reforming the budget in a way that could benefit Poland, strengthening the structural funds component. He also considered new funds to support a stronger EU defence policy (Kaczyński, 2016; Morawiecki, 2016). The view of western RWS actors on the EU budget was quite different. In Italy, the League (2018, 2019) argued for a reduction in the budget as well as a reduction in post-Brexit Italian contributions to it, whilst Brothers of Italy (2018b, 2019) argued for a different use of it (support for the family and to boost the birth rate, including a European mother’s income, such as a monthly allowance for each child). In short, RWS actors asked to disintegrate certain policies and integrate others, although they differed on the policies to consider for the former and latter processes.

## VI. RWS Differences (II)

To promote post-pandemic recovery, the EU adopted the crucial NextGenerationEU (NGEU) programme in July 2020 (Fabbrini, 2022; Ferrera et al., 2021; Schmidt, 2020). Having at its financial core the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF), NGEU consists of loans and grants to be allocated to the EU member states according to the damage inflicted on each of them by the pandemic. Moreover, the EU decided to support the programme by issuing debt guaranteed by the EU budget and by an increase in the EU’s own resources (EU taxes) (European Council, 2020, p. 8).

NGEU was opposed by western RWS actors because it was expected to promote more (fiscal) integration. According to the League, NGEU was a ‘rip-off’ because ‘it is a mega European Stability Mechanism (ESM)’, with the difference being that the latter ‘was imposed on Greece by the Troika and the former will now be imposed by the Commission. All this would lead to new taxes, including taxes on housing, savings, and property’ (Salvini, 2020). According to Brothers of Italy, NGEU ‘will bring an unacceptable compulsory administration of our economic policy decisions’ (Meloni, 2020). Both the League and Brothers of Italy asked to keep only the part that includes grants and to use the low interest rates set by the ECB to finance national recovery through the issuing of sovereign bonds. Both parties reiterated their opposition to the use of funds from the special

programme set up by the ESM to deal with the healthcare costs generated by the pandemic (ESM Pandemic Crisis Support), arguing that the latter would introduce an unjustifiable constraint on the autonomy of national decision-making (Meloni, 2020; Salvini, 2020). Although sharing the same criticism of NGEU, the following year, the two parties took a different position regarding the formation of the national unity Draghi government (inaugurated on 13 February 2021 and brought down on 22 October 2022), which was set up exactly due to the need to accelerate the management of NGEU, funds by the Italian state. In Parliament, the League changed its view on NGEU, thus voting in favour of the Draghi government (Salvini, 2021, 2022), but Brothers of Italy continued instead to oppose it (Meloni, 2021, 2022).

For Marine Le Pen (2020), NGEU represented ‘the worst deal for France in the history of the EU, sacrificing France’s future and independence’ because France would become a contributor to the RRF whilst having no control over the allocation of funds. For Le Pen, the pandemic had shown the limitations of the EU project, particularly its celebration of the free movement of goods and people and the respect of the Maastricht parameters. Indeed, to respond to the crisis, ‘the EU had to close its borders, had to increase the debt and deficit limits, had to free the member states from the constraints of anti-state aid regulation’ (Le Pen, 2020). Instead of giving back competences to member states, NGEU ‘insists on promoting more Europe’ (Rassemblement National, 2020).

In Poland and Hungary, RWS actors supported NGEU as a necessary financial instrument for helping member states to recover from the pandemic. However, they fiercely opposed the clause on the rule of law conditionality attached to the distribution of EU funds. In November 2020, the Council and the EP transformed NGEU into a regulation (Regulation 2021/241 establishing the RRF), connected to the EU multiannual financial framework (2021–2027), and approved the Budget Conditionality Regulation (Regulation 2020/2092, formalized on 16 December 2020), which would allow the Commission to withhold the funds (from any EU expenditure) intended for member states that do not respect the legal principles founding the EU. Both Polish and Hungarian RWS actors threatened to veto the regulation that required unanimous approval by all national parliaments. For Orbán, the rule of law conditionality was an infringement of national sovereignty, ‘a blackmail through which only those supporting migration will benefit from EU funds’. That is why, ‘together with Poland we managed to foil the institution of EU procedures aiming to blackmail us, which would have affected Hungary’s cohesion funds and financial interests’ (Orbán, 2020, 2021). Eventually, Orbán and Morawiecki submitted their opinion on the (presumed) illegality of the rule of law clause inserted in Regulation 2020/2092 to the CJEU. After the CJEU considered the clause as fully legitimate on 16 February 2022,<sup>3</sup> the Commission decided to withhold the funds to be transferred to Hungary and Poland, because of their open violation of the EU rule of law principles. It is yet undecided whether the Commission will finance Poland in consideration of the costs met by the Polish government in helping Ukrainian refugees and of the promise made by the Polish government that it would amend its rule of law infringements. In conclusion, western and eastern RWS actors and parties opposed the supranational turn of the

<sup>3</sup>Hungary vs. European Parliament and Council C-156/21 EU:C:2022:97 (16 February 2022) and Poland vs. European Parliament and Council C-157/21 EU:C:2022:98, CJEU, 16 February 2022.

EU post-pandemic recovery, although differences remained on the reasons for opposing the latter.

## VII. Nationally Differentiated Disintegration

In the period here considered, western and eastern RWS actors shared several criticisms of the EU, but they also showed significant differences. All of them questioned the supranational side of the EU and the principle of EU law supremacy, with the corresponding role for the CJEU and the Commission to supervise member states' respect of Treaty provisions. Western RWS actors questioned also the ECB's legitimacy, and eastern RWS actors questioned also the EP (the Orbán government, as a contribution to the Conference on the Future of Europe, proposed to transform the EP into a 'Parliamentary Assembly [constituted of] representatives of national parliaments', Council of the European Union, 2021).

All RWS actors claimed the necessity to repatriate competences: on the western side, economic policy, which involved national fiscal sovereignty, and, on the eastern side, migration policy, which involved territorial sovereignty. Western RWS actors targeted the EMU, according to a logic of economic sovereignty; they called for help from China and Russia and were in favour of increasing the debt limits with the purpose of strengthening sovereignty at the domestic level. Eastern RWS actors targeted migration policy, according to a logic of cultural sovereignty.

RWS claims for the repatriation of competences were, however, justified by different rationales. For western actors, policy repatriation was based on the supposed damage created by European integration. The euro damaged national economies, and migration policy puts excessive burdens on countries located on the EU's external borders. For eastern actors, policy repatriation was based on the supposed threat to their national identity triggered by European integration. The rule of law conditionality threatened Poland's and Hungary's sovereign capacity to organize their judicial system according to their constitutional traditions, and migration policy threatened Poland's and Hungary's Christian identities built up over centuries. Indeed, the Hungarian government defined itself as illiberal in the sense of being based on Christian values, on a communitarian and non-individualistic culture, on a specific approach to work and on an anti-globalist attitude, the outcome of which has been, according to Scheppele (2018), a form of autocratic legalism.

After 2016, none of our RWS actors raised the issue of exiting the EU, not even the Polish government, which solicited the revolutionary judgement of the Polish constitutional court of 6 October 2021, an exit made even more unrealistic (for that government) by the Russian aggression against Ukraine. Rather, RWS actors gradually claimed the disintegration (repatriation) of specific policy regimes and yet accepted the integration of other policy regimes or even proposed the formation of new integrated policy regimes, such as defence and security, a perspective definable as differentiated disintegration. Indeed, the latter, according to Schimmelfennig (2018, p. 1154), consists of 'the selective reduction of a state's level and scope of integration (which) can lead to internal differentiation if a member state remains in the EU but exits from specific policies', whereas uniform disintegration consists of leaving the EU and all its policy programmes altogether (as in the British case) (for a comprehensive debate, see Gänzle et al., 2020).

This perspective of nationally differentiated disintegration has become the political narrative of RWS actors. During the French presidential elections held in April 2022, Marine Le Pen argued that a ‘British-style exit from the European Union is not in my plans [...], my plan is to build a European alliance of nations [...]. [My programme is to repatriate] a series of measures – including favouring French over EU citizens for jobs and housing’. France will remain in the EU but outside ‘its constraints’ (Cohen, 2022). In a letter to an Italian newspaper on 13 April 2022, Giorgia Meloni made clear that she is not against the EU but against ‘the left’s view of an increasingly strong transfer of sovereignty from the member states to Brussels’ (Meloni, 2022).

For RWS actors, the process of nationally differentiated disintegration should be necessarily managed intergovernmentally, specifically by the European Council. Because the latter’s decision-making is regulated by the criterion of unanimity, for RWS actors, it is the only institution that could keep the disintegration–integration dynamic under control. According to Meloni (2022), ‘what has not been done in the last years has nothing to do with the right of veto within the European Council’. For Morawiecki (2021), the European Council is necessary for protecting member states ‘from what the institutions of the Union (Commission, *ed. note*) tell them to do’. For Orban (2019), the veto power that characterizes the European Council’s deliberations is ‘out of question’. The unanimity requirements of the European Council guarantee each member state, thus balancing centripetal and centrifugal pressures (Fossum, 2020). Yet, although intergovernmentalism implies the pooling, not the sharing, of national sovereignties (Fabbrini, 2015), the pooling of national sovereignties might also imply their limitation. Bickerton et al. (2015) have shown that the European Council is a highly institutionalized form of intergovernmental co-ordination and not a traditional diplomatic forum (see also, Puetter, 2014; Wessels, 2016), a feature that contravenes RWS expectations.

Thus, if the internal implications of RWS led to ‘illiberal democracy’ (Bertoncini and Reinić, 2022), the external implications might lead to the nationally differentiated disintegration of the EU.

## Conclusions

This article has investigated the views on the EU expressed by RWS actors in four EU member states from 2016 to 2022. Notwithstanding some initial uncertainties, those actors did not follow the British example of leaving the EU. Besides the opportunism of their decision, they had to elaborate a new political narrative to criticize the EU yet remain within it. What has emerged is a political discourse aiming to endogenize nationalism within the EU.

Based on cross-national discourse analysis, this article showed, first, that the different RWS actors had in common the refusal of the supremacy of EU laws over national ones, and thus of the supranational side of the EU, a supremacy that is considered to have fostered a process of administrative decision-making centralization within the EU. The anti-supranational position was thus accompanied by a pro-intergovernmental one. Second, the article showed that all RWS actors have asked for specific policy repatriation. However, western and eastern actors focused their call for repatriation/disintegration on different types of policy. In Eastern Europe, RWS actors demanded full national control over policies such as migration or asylum but supported a larger EU budget to finance

cohesion and structural funds (or new EU policies on defence and security). In Western Europe, RWS actors concerned primarily economic competences, particularly the disintegration of the EMU. Third, the article showed that both western and eastern RWS actors criticized NGEU on the basis of different rationales. Differences and commonalities between eastern and western RWS actors were evident also in other policy areas (as enlargement). These differences prevented western and eastern RWS actors from agreeing on the policies to disintegrate and those to keep integrated. Policy disintegration would thus be nationally differentiated.

If the RWS approach would lead to the nationally differentiated disintegration of the EU, the polity form that the EU should acquire to accommodate the latter remains an unresolved puzzle (for them). Indeed, for the Orbán government, ‘the European Union will either become a union of nations or it will cease to exist’ (contribution to the Conference on the Future of Europe, Council of the European Union, 2021); for the Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki (2021), the EU ‘should be an alliance of free, equal and sovereign states’; for Marine Le Pen (Rassemblement National, 2019), the EU should be a ‘European alliance of nations’; for Matteo Salvini (2016, 2017, 2019), the EU should be ‘a community of European peoples’; for Georgia Meloni (2022), the EU should be transformed ‘into a confederation’. Owing to the growing electoral success of RWS actors in western and eastern member states, the RWS ambiguity on the polity form to accommodate the strategy of nationally differentiated disintegration will affect the future of the EU. Future research might thus investigate whether similar transformations to RWS are taking place on the left-wing side of nationalism. What could be the narrative of left-wing sovereignty?

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