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Abstract

This paper addresses how a group of predominantly EU citizens discussed Brexit, the UK and its relationship with the EU between 2016 and 2020. These discussions took place on Debating Europe, an online platform that invites EU citizens to debate topics relating to the EU and, thereby, aims to strengthen the EU-wide public sphere (H. Rivett, personal communication, June 11, 2019). Against the backdrop of past discourse analytical research on the UK-EU relationship and considerations regarding the EU/European public sphere, I home in on discussions posted between the 2016 referendum and 'Brexit day' in January 2020. Using NVivo's case classification, I exclude postings that identify the poster as a UK national. The resulting data set consists predominantly of postings by EU citizens and is examined with a focus on various linguistic and discursive parameters, such as referential and predication strategies and intertextual references. Findings indicate that Brexit is understood as particularly disadvantageous for the UK. While Brexit is also depicted as negative for the EU in some postings, there are also postings that suggest that the UK has never been an integral part of the EU and that Brexit might not be problematic for the EU at all.

Key words: Brexit, discourse analysis, online debates, UK-EU relationship

1. Introduction

This study sheds light on how a number of (predominantly) EU citizens discussed and made sense of Brexit, the EU, the UK and their relationship on the *Debating Europe* website between 24 June 2016 and 31 January 2020, i.e. the period between the publication of the referendum outcome and Brexit day. Thus, this study complements the papers in this special issue by transcending the national realm and providing an EU-wide bird's eye perspective on Brexit. In this context it is important to highlight that, as I use data taken from the internet, voices from the UK are not completely excluded (see section 3 for details on how this issue is addressed).

Debating Europe is an organization whose purpose is to foster supranational exchange and debate among EU citizens, with a focus on controversial EU-related matters (Debating Europe, 2019). Hence, it is no surprise that the organization has hosted numerous online debates – in the form of conversation threads – about Brexit and related matters on its website. Among these debates dedicated to various aspects of Brexit, two

stand out as they have yielded the largest number of responses compared to the rest of the debates on the subject matter. Incidentally, it is also these two debates that address the fundamental question regarding Brexit: should the UK indeed withdraw from the EU? Thus, this paper focuses on these two debates and poses the following research questions:

1. How did posters on the *Debating Europe* website discursively construct Brexit between 24 June 2016, i.e. after the referendum results were published, and 31 January 2020, the day the UK left the EU?
2. Connected to this, how did posters conceive of the UK and its relationship with the EU?

In order to address these questions, I first present a brief overview of the historical background regarding the EU-UK relationship, refer to existing discourse analytical research on this relationship more generally, and on Brexit and the 2016 referendum specifically. This is followed by an introduction to *Debating Europe* and a short discussion of its potential significance in the form of alleviating the lack of a European public sphere lamented and researched in discourse studies and related fields (Kim & Köhler, 2016; Sarikakis & Kolokytha, 2020; Triandafyllidou et al., 2009). In a third step, I give an overview of the data and methods of analysis. Finally, I present the central findings of my data analysis followed by the main conclusions.

2. Background

2.1 The EU-UK Relationship and Brexit

The relationship between the UK and the EU has been a turbulent one even since before the UK joined the European Economic Community (EEC, a predecessor to the EU) in the 1970s (George, 1998). Indeed, only the UK's third application for membership proved successful. Shortly after its membership came into effect, in 1975, the UK held its first referendum on whether to maintain its membership (Dedman, 2009, pp. 99–101). While the UK confirmed continued membership then, the UK's participation in various EU initiatives has been selective, e.g. the UK has eschewed to join the Eurozone. On 23 June 2016, the UK government conducted another referendum on continued membership of what had by then become the European Union, a *sui generis* entity that pursues European integration on various levels. That is, in contrast to the EEC, that the UK originally joined and whose primary purpose had been limited to fostering economic cooperation, the EU's aims also include to increase 'social and territorial cohesion and solidarity among EU countries' (Communication Department of the European Commission, 2019). The advisory, i.e. non-binding, 2016 referendum on the UK's EU membership resulted in a 51.9 percent vote to leave the EU. Since the referendum, the UK has invoked Article 50 (i.e. started the withdrawal process), has had two general elections largely triggered by controversy about Brexit, has received three extensions on the Brexit date due to the failure of its government and parliament to agree on a Brexit deal and has now finally entered into the withdrawal transition period. This means that

the UK has officially left the EU and does not have any representatives in EU institutions anymore.

Unsurprisingly, UK-EU relations have already attracted considerable research attention. In particular, and apart from research on the discourse on UK-EU relations by policy makers, who tend to represent the UK as different and separate from the rest of the EU (Cap, 2019; Daddow, 2012; Larsen, 1997; Wodak, 2018), the UK's media landscape has been scrutinized for its representation of the EU and the UK-EU relationship. Here, various researchers have traced the evolution and perpetuation of Euroscepticism across media outlets. Already in 1995, Hardt-Mautner's (1995) analysis notes that, under the guise of educating the public, *The Sun* has pursued an agenda of misrepresenting the EU as disadvantageous for the UK. Daddow (2012) also finds that *The Sun* but also other newspapers, such as *The Daily Telegraph* and *The Times*, have relied heavily on war metaphors to portray the EU and the UK as locked in an antagonistic relationship from as early as 1984. Altogether, research has concluded that the UK-EU relationship has been discursively represented as one where the UK is separate/different from the EU at best and as one where the two players are quasi-enemies at worst.

With regard to discourse surrounding the 2016 'Brexit' referendum, and how it ties into and differs from previous pivotal moments in the UK-EU relationship, Blumler (2016) presents a comparative study of media coverage before the 1975 and the 2016 referendum. He finds that in 2016, voters were presented with very little actual information about the EU, i.e. voters were expected to make the decision to stay in or leave a *sui generis* entity they possibly knew little about, whereas in 1975 the campaigns were found to have been designed to educate the electorate. Further research on the UK's media coverage of the 2016 referendum has found that newspapers, in particular, tended to be biased in favour of the Leave campaign (Deacon et al., 2016) and that coverage in general was rather divisive (Koller & Ryan, 2019). By comparison, research on policy makers' discourse finds that Brexit was represented as an opportunity for the UK to assert itself as a global player, that even pro-EU representatives engaged in a Eurosceptic discourse or – at the very least – that such representatives failed to represent the EU as advantageous (Demata, 2019; Wenzl, 2019; Zappettini, 2019a).

This short review of some of the existing literature suggests that so far, researchers have focused on the UK's perspective. That is, the focus has been predominantly on how the UK has viewed its relationship with the EU, how various UK institutions and actors have made sense of this relationship as well as of the 2016 referendum and Brexit. However, only recently have discourse analysts started to address how other EU member states have grappled with the referendum and Brexit more generally (e.g. Krzyżanowski, 2019). While the papers in the given special journal issue contribute to redressing this gap by studying different national contexts or language communities, this study in particular complements such research by homing in on the EU transnational plane. It examines the discourse of Brexit on a website dedicated to allowing transnational opinion formation processes and providing an interface between policy makers and the EU citizenry in particular – *Debating Europe.eu*.

2.2 *Debating Europe's Discourse and the Public Sphere*

Debating Europe was launched in 2011 by 'Friends of Europe', a European think-tank that operates independently from the EU institutions but takes a decidedly pro-EU stance. On its debate website, the organization *Debating Europe* aims to 'encourage a genuine conversation between Europe's politicians and the citizens they serve' and to provide a 'platform that lets you [EU citizens] discuss YOUR ideas with Europe's leaders' [emphasis in original] (Debating Europe, 2019). In addition to highlighting the idea of contact between the citizenry and decision makers, the organization emphasizes its agenda of *transnational* exchange: *Debating Europe* aims to foster 'a European debate, not just a national one; citizens and policy makers from every country in the EU have joined in' (Debating Europe, 2019).

Debating Europe's eponymous website is designed to achieve these goals – the website consists of various sub-sites of debates about matters relevant to the EU. That is, on these sub-sites *Debating Europe* provides short debate prompts in the form of introductions to the topic up for debate. Below this overview, visitors to the site can post their views in threaded discussions. In order to motivate visitors to post comments, *Debating Europe* usually ends its introductions with questions to prompt debate, e.g. 'Should the UK remain a member of the EU or leave the EU? Let us know your thoughts and comments in the form below, and we'll take them to policy makers and experts for their reactions!'

The latter part of this illustrative prompt highlights one reason for my choice of data for this paper – *Debating Europe* confronts EU policy makers with visitors' comments.¹ That is, in terms of discourse, i.e. language use as a means of acting on the world, of creating and reinforcing or challenging and changing the societal status quo (Fairclough, 1992, p. 63; Wodak & Meyer, 2015, p. 6), material taken from *Debating Europe* is particularly poignant. Indeed, *Debating Europe's modus operandi* ensures that citizens do not merely 'scream into the void' of the internet about issues such as Brexit. Rather, the organization ensures that citizens' discourse(s) about Brexit reach(es) and stand(s) to affect decision makers, i.e. people equipped with the formal power to shape the processes discussed in the postings, here Brexit. Moreover, in essence, *Debating Europe* invites EU citizens to state their opinions but also to discuss these with one another, try to persuade and negotiate a compromise – in other words, using language, EU citizens have the opportunity to act 'upon the world and especially upon each other' (Fairclough, 1992, p. 63). At the same time, in terms of discourse as a mode of representing the world (Fairclough, 1992), analysing the postings made to *Debating Europe's* website allow a glimpse into different views of Brexit as expressed by (predominantly) EU citizens, i.e. examining discourse material from *Debating Europe* allows an insight into how a group of people that is immediately affected by the UK's decision to leave the EU has grappled with this on a transnational plane.

Finally, and connected to this, it is worth noting that by providing a space for debate and encouraging citizens to engage with one another, the *Debating Europe* website arguably redresses the oft-lamented lack of a European public sphere (EPS) crucial for democratic societies² and vital for concerted opinion formation, if not the formation of political will beyond the nation state level (for research on the EPS see, e.g. Commission of the European Communities,

2001; Triandafyllidou et al., 2009). Regarding the latter point, Brexit in particular is an issue that primarily concerns and affects the EU as a bloc rather than individual member states only. Therefore, it could be argued that it is particularly important for citizens to have spaces to engage with EU-related matters on an EU-wide level, not least to redress the negative effects of national bias: research has shown that the representation of EU-related matters on the nation state level tends to be distorted by national interests (Triandafyllidou et al., 2009).

While the aim of this paper is not to assess if, how and to what extent the *Debating Europe* website meets the requirements of a true transnational or even European public sphere, it bears mention that the site is designed to function as such (H. Rivett, personal communication, June 11, 2019). Indeed, the internet's and particular sites' potential to redress the lack of a transnational or European public sphere has been acknowledged and sparked research (Batorski & Grzywińska, 2017; Chadwick & Stromer-Galley, 2016; Dahlberg, 2001; Dean, 2003; Jin & Feenberg, 2014). With regard to an EPS specifically, the online discussion forum 'Futurum', now defunct but at its core not dissimilar to *Debating Europe*, has been examined. Although it was found not to support an EPS, not least due to it being an EU-run site, Wright (2007) acknowledges that EU citizens did have the opportunity to engage in debate and opinion formation, if not policy making. *Debating Europe* might represent another evolutionary step in this context – the site aims to connect EU citizens with policy makers, i.e. possibly feed citizens' views into decision making, and it is not run by any EU institution itself (see Eriksen, 2005; Fraser, 1995; Habermas, 1990; Koller & Wodak, 2008 for more on (the) public sphere(s)).

3. Data and Method

The examined dataset consists of postings made in response to two debate prompts. One debate is entitled 'Should the UK remain a member of the EU or leave the EU?' and was started in February 2016; the prompt for the second one is 'Should Britain leave the European Union?' and was posted in May 2015. Focusing on the period after the referendum outcome had been published, I collected 117 postings made between 24 June 2016 and 31 January 2020 (87 comments from the latter debate and 30 postings from the former).

With respect to data treatment, to ensure that the investigation does not focus on UK citizens' perspectives, I use NVivo's case classification function to split the comments into comments that identify the poster as a UK national (group 1) and comments that either clearly identify the poster as an EU citizen or ones where the poster's nationality cannot be determined (group 2; see table 1). The classification into the two groups is facilitated by the fact that the UK and the EU are regularly referred to in the form of personal pronouns which indicate the posters relationship to the UK and the EU, e.g. 'Yes [in response to the question 'Should the UK leave the EU?']', and then, '*they* [the UK] should sign a tremendous, great trade deal with *us* [the EU]' (emphasis added). As this study is interested in non-UK perspectives on Brexit and related matters, the subsequent analyses focus predominantly on group 2

postings – comments from group 1 merely provide context and facilitate comprehensibility of the (partly) dialogic data (see table 1).

The data are examined in a two-step process. First, using NVivo, all group 2 postings are coded for references to Brexit and for references to the UK/EU and their relationship. In a second step, all references to Brexit, the EU/UK and their relationship identified via NVivo are subjected to further close reading. That is, I observe linguistic and discursive parameters, such as referential and predication strategies, interdiscursive/intertextual references and metaphor usage (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980/2003; Reisigl & Wodak, 2001), to find out how the discussants make sense of Brexit and what attributes and characteristics they ascribe to the UK/EU and their relationship.

4. Data Analysis and Discussion

4.1 The Referendum Outcome and Brexit

Generally, there are two types of posters (see table 1). First, there are a number of postings that provide information on the poster's status as a UK national, some of whom declare if they voted to leave (e.g. 'I voted LEAVE.') or to remain – however, as the focus of this paper is the discursive construction of Brexit *outside the UK*, these postings are not discussed in depth. The second group of posters consists of posters who do not provide information on their national background and ones that explicitly identify as non-UK citizens. The data discussion below focuses on group 2 postings.

Group 1	UK citizens	52 postings
Group 2	Other: EU citizens (or no nationality provided)	65 postings

Table 1. Types of posters/postings

Throughout the debates discussants do not question if the 2016 referendum will/should result in the UK leaving the EU. Indeed, none of the discussants who posted immediately in the wake of the publication of the referendum outcome on 24 June 2016 questioned if the *non-binding* referendum result would actually translate into Brexit. Rather, their reactions suggest that they consider Brexit inevitable, e.g.:

- (1) So sad, esp. for the younger British, Scottish³ and Irish. Dragged out by elderly empire dreamers ;-(Good luck for the future, you will need it.
- (2) This is the crucible that will test the mettle of the British, to tighten their belt, and work smarter to pass the fires of uncertainty. The world is changing and if Britain can weather the storm, they will again if played smart be the Captain of their fate. You cannot fall of the bottom. You can only rise up!

In example 1, the poster uses indicative mood, albeit in elliptical sentences, to discuss Brexit, which indicates that they assume that the referendum result means that Brexit will definitely happen. Example 2 already moves to discussing the UK's future in the indicative mood and only uses a conditional

clause to discuss the UK's options in the Brexit process ('if Britain can weather the storm') (see below for a more detailed analysis). What is more, there are postings that refer to the notion that, in line with democratic principles, the referendum result – as the expression of the electorate's will – ought to translate into actual Brexit, for example, in response to the debate question 'Should Britain leave the European Union?', posters repeatedly argue:

- (3) If you believe in respecting a democratic mandate, then yes.
- (4) I like democracy and respect the results of elections [here referendums]. No matter the outcome.

Homing in on group 2 postings, example 1 above illustrates one type of reaction to the referendum outcome and – as the outcome is taken as meaning that Brexit will definitely happen – Brexit itself, expressed by representatives of group 2 (see table 1), namely *sadness/regret* about the referendum outcome/Brexit and for particular groups of citizens or parts of the UK (on emotion in the Brexit debate see Bouko & Garcia, 2019; also see Miglbauer & Koller, this issue). This example also illustrates that while a part of the UK is pitied, another part is evaluated negatively – the parts deemed responsible for the Brexit decision. Initially, the poster expresses general sadness and then zooms in on groups who predominantly did not vote for Brexit ('esp. [...] younger British'). These are then passivized as the goal of the negatively connoted material process 'to drag out', the actor being 'elderly empire dreamers'. The predication and referential choices with respect to the actor are notable as they suggest various levels of negative judgement passed on those who the poster considers in favour of, and responsible for, Brexit.

First, as Mautner (2007) found, the connotations of 'elderly' are questionable. The word has associations with disability, vulnerability and dependence – individuals described as elderly are thus certainly not envisioned as reliable to make sound decisions. Second, 'empire dreamers' may be interpreted as referring to the UK's past status as a global and powerful empire; 'dreamer' highlights that the poster does not deem these people's alleged thoughts about a UK empire as solidly steeped in today's reality. The fact that it is these 'empire dreamers' that supposedly favour withdrawal from the EU shows that the poster ascribes a particular view of Brexit to these 'dreamers'. One interpretation is that the poster alleges that the 'empire dreamers' view leaving the EU is a means to an end: Brexit as the means that allows the UK to restore its status as an empire. An alternative, although arguably less plausible interpretation is that the poster believes that these 'dreamers' voted to leave the EU as they still consider the UK a powerful empire that does not need the EU (see section 4.2). Irrespective of the interpretation, the poster obviously does not share either view of Brexit as, not least of all, the subsequent emoticon implies. This emoticon could be interpreted as expressing sadness but also sardonicism – sadness about the outcome, especially for the perceived 'victims' and sardonicism about the 'dreamers'. The posting's final sentence and the preceding expression of sadness about Brexit for the 'victims' allows an understanding of how Brexit is viewed by the poster themselves, namely as severely negative for the UK, without specifying in what sense precisely. In the final sentence the poster moves to wishing 'you'⁴ good luck for the future as, allegedly, luck will be needed. Thus, for one, Brexit/the Brexit decision is portrayed as a cause for

sadness and, on the other hand, the poster views Brexit as so problematic that the UK/parts of it will require ‘luck’.

Generally, Brexit is depicted as negative across postings, e.g. ‘this idea [Brexit] is so shitty’, ‘Just look at the mess. And they haven’t even left yet’ and – backgrounding the actors who decided to support Brexit – ‘Brexit is a stupid decision’. What is more, and similar to example 1 above, Brexit is repeatedly asserted as disadvantageous for the UK in particular: ‘unlike the brainwashed DM [Daily Mail] readers in the street politicians know that the “people” voted to be – to use a scientific term – fucked over’,⁵ ‘leaving the EU would be a big mistake for the UK’ and:

- (5) Take your head out of the sand and face the facts that staying in the Eu is a better option and preferable for scotland ireland wales and england also better for business, research, communication with Eu plus etc etc. Stay in europe -please.

Beyond such negative assessment of Brexit, the poster touches upon concerns commonly raised in connection with Brexit and Brexit effects – the economy and academic research (Kopf, 2019). Arguably, the poster refers to the UK’s economy and research as the subsequent element is ‘communication with Eu’ and preceding elements are also UK-focused, i.e. the poster consistently refers to UK-related aspects here. Several additional aspects are notable about this posting: first, the poster refers to staying in the EU as ‘a better option and preferable’ – the phrasing implies that while Brexit is worse, remaining part of the EU is not entirely positive either, it is merely better than the alternative. Second, the poster uses the metaphor of an ostrich who allegedly puts its head in sand, i.e. is ‘unwilling to recognize or acknowledge a problem or situation’ (Merriam-Webster, 2020). Thus, the UK’s plan to Brexit is depicted as the action of putting one’s head in the sand – an act of avoidance. Arguably, according to the poster, the problem the UK does not want to acknowledge is that EU membership is the best option available. Finally, the posting, having been made in January 2019, closes with a direct address of the UK in the form of a plea for the UK to stay in ‘europa’,⁶ i.e. the poster might have considered it still possible to stop Brexit at that time.

Another facet of representing Brexit as disadvantageous for the UK is the idea of a loss of decision-making power. For instance, a posting by a UK national expresses a negative attitude towards the idea of creating an EU army and how leaving the EU is beneficial for the UK with regard to this. The posting yields the following response by a group 2 poster:

- (6) An EU army can be created BECAUSE you left. [Inside] you had a veto.

This posting makes a causal connection between establishing an EU army and the UK leaving (the poster uses ‘you left’ even though at the time of posting – December 2016 – the UK had not withdrawn from the EU yet). The posting highlights that being ‘inside’ the EU⁷ means being part of decision-making processes; using past tense, the posting also implies that the UK is not in this position of power anymore. Another example of this is:

- (7) [The UK] has or at least had a significant say [in the EU] on what is decided so why does Uk want to be cut off and have no say. [...] Take backcontrol ? [...] The EU has nothing to do with funding or running the NHS nor the

schools or universities nor how the roads are filled with tarmac! Other eu countries have better control of immigration than Uk

This posting recontextualizes the Leave campaign's slogan 'Take back control' and dismantles it. The poster does so by referring to concrete and allegedly problematic state-run operations that are already within the UK's purview (NHS, school funding etc.), i.e. control of these cannot be regained from the EU. The poster then moves on to discussing a key issue in connection with the referendum outcome – immigration. The poster claims that genericized '[o]ther eu countries' have 'better' control regarding immigration and thereby implies that being an EU country does not prevent the UK from controlling immigration (see also Zappettini, 2019b).

A number of postings also touch on how Brexit relates to the EU. Indeed, there are voices who oppose Brexit for the EU's sake, e.g. in response to the prompt whether the UK should leave the EU, a poster responds with 'No, EU is not EU anymore' without the UK and another poster argues that Brexit would be 'a great loss for the EU member states'. Additionally, although only once throughout the data, Brexit is described as a warning sign for the EU: 'this referendum serves as a loud wake-up call for the project Europe', i.e. Brexit is not cast as advantageous for the EU.

In contrast to the notion of Brexit as particularly disadvantageous especially for the UK, example 2 above (cited again below) takes an entirely different position and frames Brexit as a challenge which – once overcome – would strengthen the UK:

- (2) ⁸This is the crucible that will test the mettle of the British, to tighten their belt, and work smarter to pass the fires of uncertainty. The world is changing and if Britain can weather the storm, they will again if played smart be the Captain of their fate. You cannot fall of the bottom. You can only rise up!⁹

Brexit/the decision to brexit is cast as a 'crucible', as 'fires of uncertainty', as a 'storm' and as placing the UK at 'the bottom'.¹⁰ That is, the poster mixes metaphors and draws on rather unpleasant and trying phenomena to capture the nature of Brexit as they see it. Thus, in the first part of the posting, Brexit is portrayed as an uncomfortable test for the UK citizenry (their mettle, their ability to 'work smarter', etc.). In addition to 'crucible' and 'pass[ing] the fires of uncertainty', especially the use of 'testing the mettle', defined as the ability to cope with 'doing something difficult' (Cambridge Dictionary, 2020b), highlights that Brexit is conceived as an obstacle, an adversity to overcome and/or a test to pass. Furthermore, Brexit is depicted as taking a toll on UK citizens: according to the poster, the British will need to 'tighten their belt' to pass the test and adversity that is Brexit. This metaphor¹¹ draws on the idea of food shortage, subsequent weight loss and the associated tightening of belts and thus serves to depict Brexit as having negative consequences for the UK population.

Still, Brexit as a test and difficulty to be 'weathered' and 'passed' is portrayed as ultimately leading to a positive outcome. The metaphor of 'again' being 'captain of one's fate' draws on the idea of self-determination, re-gaining control and decision-making power, i.e. it harks back to the Leave campaign notion of 'taking back control', presumably from the EU. 'Rising up' when being placed at 'the bottom' draws on the orientational/spatial metaphor UP IS

GOOD (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980/2003, pp. 14–15) and, together with the notion of making it through the difficulty of Brexit and taking control, this metaphoric conception paints Brexit as a challenge but also an opportunity for the UK to regain the ‘captaincy’, i.e. control.

However, in contrast to example 2, it is notable that even postings that take a pro-Brexit perspective do not necessarily suggest that Brexit is beneficial for the UK and that it should therefore proceed with leaving the EU. Rather, on the one hand, postings that argue for Brexit are based on the fallacious notion that not acting in accordance with the referendum’s outcome would violate democratic principles (see, e.g. examples 3 and 4 above).¹² On the other hand, there are postings that welcome Brexit from an EU perspective. For one, the UK is discussed as being too different from the rest of the EU, as never having been fully ‘in’ the EU to begin with or just having hindered EU processes: ‘Britain politically and culturally is not a European country’, they ‘never really subscribed to key elements’ and ‘yes UK always opposed to all common policies’. Statements to this effect echo David Cameron’s 2013 speech in which he attests the UK ‘the character of an island nation’ (Wodak, 2018) and, even earlier than that, Charles the Gaulle’s 1963 statement about ‘insular’ England (Salmon & Nicoll, 1997, p. 88). Alternatively to this view of the UK, there are postings that deem the UK unworthy of EU membership (‘They don’t deserve to be in the EU’) or argue that the EU will benefit from the UK’s withdrawal:

- (8) [The UK] is heading to a Banana Kingdom so free the EU from that bunch.
[...] Britain is the Greece of Western Europe. EU not again the same mistake get rid of immature UK.

In the above posting, Brexit is framed as an act of liberation – Brexit frees the EU from the UK as a declining country. Indeed, since the poster uses imperative mood, the posting can be interpreted as an appeal to EU officials to ‘free the EU’ and to ‘get rid of’ the UK (see Miglbauer & Koller, this issue). That is, instead of casting the UK as an actor who ‘withdraws from the EU’, the posting assigns EU representatives the power to oust the UK. Moreover, the UK is depicted as ‘immature’ and, in an analogy, (‘the Greece of Western Europe’) as a country that requires EU assistance to maintain financial stability – aiding the UK is cast as a ‘mistake’.

The following section homes in on the UK and its relationship with the EU as sketched by the postings on the *Debating Europe* website. First, it revisits postings already discussed above and interprets these with a focus on the representation of the UK and its relationship with the EU. It then complements these findings with a discussion of additional comments.

4.2 The UK and its Relationship with the EU

As already alluded to above, one version of the UK sketched in a number of postings is of the country as always having been special among/different from European countries to the degree that ‘Britain politically and culturally is not a European country’. What is more, posters suggest that the UK’s position in the EU has always been different from any other member states, e.g. ‘UK always opposed to all common policies’ and:

- (9) [The UK] has never really subscribed to key elements, such as the political objective, of the European Union and has obtained so many opt-outs that,

after two referendums, launched because of doubts about the European adventure, it has shown that it does not want to fit. If a new referendum (not an election) showed a majority for remain, we might keep them in on conditions that both the current rebate and all opt-outs are abolished. This is the view of a European who loves the British, but wants Europe to deepen in order to last. If Scotland and Northern Ireland want to join, they should be accepted with open arms.

The beginning of the posting presents evidence of how the UK allegedly has never supported 'key elements' of the EU. However, this evidence is relatively vague, e.g. the EU's 'political objective' is not specified, nor does the comment elaborate on the 'many opt-outs'. The poster then ascribes a particular motivation to the UK's two referenda on EU membership (1975 and 2016), namely 'doubts about the European adventure'. 'Adventure', generally positively connotated, may be defined as 'an unusual, exciting, and possibly dangerous activity' (Cambridge Dictionary, 2020a), i.e. the poster represents European integration (a goal pursued by the EU) as an activity involving some risk but also excitement. The poster then ascribes a particular desire to the UK as a *totum pro parte* sensor – it does not merely not 'fit in' with the EU, rather, the UK is depicted as not 'wanting to' do so. This is key as it suggests that the UK could fit in if it so chose and if it made the effort – an idea the poster subsequently builds on. They, arguably rather defiantly, assign power of action to the EU. Instead of the UK as the party to decide whether to leave or stay, the EU – referred to in first person plural 'we' i.e. inclusive of the poster – is depicted as the party who 'might keep' the UK, if only on certain conditions. That is, the poster would allow the UK to remain in the EU only reluctantly (despite their professed 'love' for it) as they view the UK's alleged reticence as an obstacle to European integration, which they consider vital ('in order to last'). By contrast, the poster would warmly welcome Scotland and Northern Ireland into the EU ('with open arms'), which indicates that these parts of the UK are not perceived as exhibiting reluctance to 'fit in' with the EU.

Altogether and as stated above, this posting depicts the UK as different from the rest of the EU. Moreover though, the UK is cast as not wanting to participate fully, almost as a troublemaker or spoilsport by choice. That is, this representation of the UK is rather unfavourable (see also example 8 above: the 'immature UK'). By comparison, with regard to the representation of the EU, the comment focuses especially on the process of European integration, which is deemed desirable – this can be seen by their reference to the 'European adventure', a noun that connotes action and activity rather than a static entity (see above definition of 'adventure'). Moreover, the poster 'wants' European cooperation to 'deepen' and views the EU as the entity deciding whether the UK may remain part of the EU or not (see also example 8 above).

At the other end of the spectrum, there are postings that suggest that the UK is an integral part of the EU: the 'EU is not EU any more without Britain' (also see above) and 'It is not a case of them and us. Britain IS a big part of the EU'. Compared to example 9, these postings suggest a radically different view of the UK's role in the EU. What is more, they implicitly negate a key discursive strategy frequently deployed to mark and establish division – us versus them. Instead, the latter poster asserts that the UK is part of the EU, and a 'big' part at that. Interestingly, the same posting later introduces a 'you'

in reference to the UK/UK citizens ('Take your head out of the sand' (see example 5 above) and thus returns to marking the UK's status as separate from the EU.¹³

As example 1 in section 4.1 has already indicated, another view of the UK is of an 'empire' or an entity that seeks to regain its status as the dominant global power – its 'former glory':

- (10) The dream that the UK will be able to rediscover its former glory is quite astonishing in an era where internet has no borders. The British voters for "OUT" are clearly misguided and drowned in the belief that Britain can once again regain the common wealth glory standing at the centre of an international trading system wider than Europe. Day dream?

Here, comparable to example 1 above, the poster ascribes a particular motivation to Leave voters, namely to restore the UK's former position as a global power. The view that such a restoration is possible and/or that Brexit might even aid in this endeavour is evaluated as 'astonishing', 'misguided' and a '[d]ay dream' by the poster.

Another notable representation of the UK is of it as a country in decline (see example 8) or at least a country that has a number of systemic problems and uses the EU as a scapegoat (see example 7 in section 4.1). The following posting lists a number of state-run operations that allegedly experience problems in the UK and highlights that these are under the UK's, not the EU's purview (e.g. 'UK have problems whit NHS health and care – sorry but that is dependent by decision to UK government'). Then they follow this list with:

- (11) You can see is not single area. It's a Whole system falling a parts. And just because is easy to blame someone outside the real problems UK try to blame EU. But even UK to leave EU all the problems will stay in UK

Thus, the poster first sketches the UK's supposed multi-system failure. Against this backdrop, the poster alleges that the UK uses the EU as scapegoat and then argues that leaving the EU will not solve the UK's problems.

Finally, the debates also touch upon the EU-UK's post-Brexit relationship, with one poster arguing for favourable conditions for the UK:

- (12) We are Europeans, regardless of EU membership. Britain is entitled to exceptionally great special conditions :D, its prosperity remains in our interests. Because you catch more flies with honey than vinegar. The EU is not a jail for countries and peoples. Or is it?

Originally, the poster seems to support favourable conditions based on the idea that '[w]e' are all Europeans, i.e. the poster first establishes an in-group of Europeans. The UK as part of this group has a right to 'special conditions'.¹⁴ Then, however, the argument changes as the poster introduces an 'it' (the UK) versus 'us' (the EU) distinction, a division that contrasts with the preceding inclusive 'we'. Moreover, economic motivations are foregrounded: the UK's prosperity is cited as beneficial for the EU and thus, the benefits expected for the EU are implicitly set up as the factor motivating the poster's argument for favourable conditions. Another interesting element here is the poster's view of the EU: first, it is depicted as the entity that gets to grant favourable conditions, and secondly, the EU is activated as the one metaphorically

‘catching the flies’, i.e. the EU is depicted as the entity that can employ particular strategies, using either honey (favourable conditions) or vinegar (harsh conditions). Finally, the poster draws on another metaphor – the EU as a jail, which they first negate but then provocatively rephrase as a question. Thus, overall the poster represents the EU as a rather powerful entity that ought to protect its interests, which include supporting the UK’s prosperity. The posting also touches on the idea that the EU is an institution of voluntary members – the question at the end may be interpreted as alluding to the idea that, at least, this should be the case and thus the UK should be allowed to withdraw without fearing negative repercussions.

5. Conclusions

This study has addressed two questions:

1. How did posters on the *Debating Europe* website discursively construct Brexit between 24 June, i.e. after the referendum’s results were published, and 31 January 2020, the day the UK left the EU?
2. Connected to this, how did they conceive of the UK and its relationship with the EU?

In the main, the discussants represent the UK’s decision to leave the EU as regrettable, but also as inevitable after the outcome of the referendum. Moreover, posters ascribe a particular motivation and way of thinking to Leave voters, namely that a) leaving the EU might allow the UK to restore its position as a global power or b) that Leave voters’ outdated/flawed view of the UK as a global power and ‘empire’ affected their decision to vote for Brexit. The commentators also represent Brexit as decidedly disadvantageous – especially for the UK – and remaining in the EU as the best option for the country. In this context, the posters refer to disadvantages for the UK’s economy and research and to a loss of control the UK would experience on leaving the EU. In doing so, they debunk the Leave campaign promise to ‘take back control’ by leaving the EU. Alternatively, Brexit is conceptualized as a challenge, which, if the UK manages to overcome it, will ultimately yield positive results.

While the EU is not the focus of the debates, the commentators still refer to the UK’s leaving as a ‘loss’ for the EU. An alternative representation is Brexit as an act of liberation, with the EU being freed from the UK. Here, posters also tend to move from representing the UK as the party engaging in an action (leaving) to representing the EU as the active entity that might decide to allow the UK to stay in the EU or not.

Generally, posters repeatedly refer to the UK’s past status as an empire and to its ‘former glory’. The posters represent this view of the UK as outdated but argue that viewing the UK as such might have influenced the country’s decision to leave the EU. Another representation of the UK is as a declining country that uses the EU as a scapegoat for its problems. Finally, postings range from describing the UK as different from the EU by choice to depicting it as an integral part of the EU. However, it is worth noting that the former representation of the UK is the prevalent one.

Two elements deserve mention regarding the broader implications of the *Debating Europe* discussions. First, most postings are primarily expressions of opinions without interaction with other discussants – e.g. in the debate ‘Should the UK remain a member of the EU or leave the EU?’ there are only 228 threads (out of a total of 550 threads created since the beginning of the debate) in which people respond to each other. While a comprehensive assessment of *Debating Europe*’s potential to function as a European public sphere still constitutes an important future project, this preliminary observation suggests that the platform is not used for lively debate and opinion formation.

Second, as *Debating Europe* frequently confronts policy makers from the EU (and the UK) with postings, it is highly likely that these decision makers will learn that Brexit is not popular among EU citizens but that it is not the EU these citizens are particularly concerned about. More importantly, especially UK policy makers who might wish to aim for rejoining the EU at some point may learn from the comments that, perhaps surprisingly, it is EU citizens who could oppose such a move, except if the UK were willing to accept the rights and obligations of a regular member state. Thus, possible future campaigns for the UK to rejoin the EU would have to focus not only on the UK’s electorate but would also have to address and persuade EU citizens.

Notes

1. Various debate prompts indeed recontextualize postings and quote policy makers’ reaction to these statements, i.e. *Debating Europe* indeed confronts policy makers with citizens’ comments.
2. We may only speak of a functioning democracy if the electorate consents to and legitimizes its representatives and their decisions (Wodak & Wright, 2006, p. 253). A prerequisite for such processes of legitimation are spaces where citizens can debate issues, share information and form opinions (Habermas & Pensky, 2001, p. 110).
3. To facilitate readability, I do not use [sic] for nonstandard orthography or grammar used in the online postings.
4. The ‘you’, while slightly ambiguous, refers to parts/citizens of the UK or the UK population as a whole.
5. The use of ‘people’ – in inverted commas - may be interpreted as interdiscursive reference to Brexit supporters who based their push for Brexit on the referendum’s outcome as expressing the will of the people (e.g. Freedland, 2019).
6. ‘[E]urope’ is either a case of imprecise phrasing and a conflation with the EU or it is a broader statement on the idea that leaving the EU is equal to seceding from the imagined community of Europe.
7. See Lakoff (2016) for a more detailed discussion of Brexit as a metaphor itself; see Berberović and Mujagić (2017) for a discussion of metaphors in the context of Brexit.
8. This is the same as example 2 cited above. As I retained original numbering, it is still quoted as example 2.
9. This posting is one of the few group 2 postings (see table 1) whose categorization presented a challenge. Still, pronoun usage suggests that the poster is not a UK national and it was categorized accordingly.
10. An alternative interpretation is that the UK’s EU membership places it ‘at the bottom’, i.e. in a disadvantaged position, and that leaving the EU will allow the UK to ‘rise up’, i.e. improve its situation.
11. Classifying this as a metaphor presumes that there will be no actual shortage of food or a substantial increase in food prices after the end of the transition period.
12. This is fallacious because the referendum was advisory and non-binding in nature.

13. However, it is worth noting that, as the UK's withdrawal from the EU is the topic of discussion, such singling out of the United Kingdom and/or its citizens and their (potential actions) is to be expected.
14. The laughter emoticon may signal that the preceding phrase is intended in a jocular manner – the poster uses hyperbole to refer to 'exceptionally great special conditions', possibly with the intention of poking fun at British exceptionalism and associated expectations.

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