# Sovereignism and its implication: The differentiated disintegration of the European Union

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**EU3D**

Differentiation
Dominance
Democracy

# Sovereignism and its implications:
# The differentiated disintegration of the European Union[1]

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## Abstract

The research paper aims to investigate nationalism in the post-Brexit period (2016-2021). Because of the political and economic costs triggered by Brexit, European nationalisms have had to redefine their role remaining in the European Union (EU), a necessity made even more stringent by the pandemic crisis and the Russian aggression of Ukraine. We conceptualize as 'sovereignism' the attempt to endogenise nationalism in the EU. The research has thus identified commonalities and differences in the sovereignist narrative of western and eastern EU member states. All sovereignists criticized the supranational character (*institutional sovereignism)* and the centralized policy system (*policy sovereignism*) which has developed within the EU. However, sovereignists differed on the rationale of their criticism, based more on an economic discourse (*economic sovereignism)* in western Europe and more on a cultural discourse (*cultural sovereignism*) in eastern Europe. The sovereignist narrative had clear opportunistic traits, whose outcome, if successful, would lead to the differentiated disintegration of the EU.

## Keywords

Nationalism | European Union| Sovereignism | Differentiated disintegration

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# Introduction

After the formation of the European Economic Community (EEC) with the 1957 Rome Treaties, a division emerged between two broad political currents, one favouring and the other opposing integration (Dinan 2014). In common political discourse, the former came to be defined as Europeanism and the latter as nationalism. For the first three decades, Europeanism had mainly an economic character. The common and then single market was so successful that it even attracted those states initially unwilling to contribute to the formation of the EEC. It was the period of permissive consensus, as conceptualized by Hooghe and Marks (2009). However, with the 1992 Maastricht Treaty and the inclusion of the EEC (then becoming the European Community or EC) into a larger European Union (EU), permissive consensus gradually transformed into constraining dissensus. Indeed, that Treaty brought the process of integration close to the traditional core state powers (Genschel and Jachtenfuchs 2014)[2], such as foreign and home affairs, or monetary sovereignty with the adoption of the single currency in the context of the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU). Thus, in the 1990s, the process of European integration activated political domestic actors (governments, parties, state apparatuses, media), whereas the previous phase of integration mobilized mainly economic domestic actors (entrepreneurs, trade unions, business roundtables). Nationalism was gradually ignited by the leap forward in the integration process and then radicalized with the multiple crises of the 2010s. The nationalistic resurgence claimed national independence as an alternative to European interdependence. If Europeanism aimed to consolidate the interdependence between national economies and polities, nationalism affirmed instead the principle of nation state independence. The confrontation between Europeanism and nationalism reached its zenith with the 2016 Brexit referendum (Fossum and Graver 2018).

The Brexit referendum was the celebration of nationalism as independence from the integration process, but the destabilizing implications of the withdrawal process in the United Kingdom (which lasted four years and led to a prolonged governmental crisis) deterred other nationalisms from pursuing the independence's road (Schiek 2021). Indeed, in the other EU member states, the Brexit referendum ended up generating the unintended effect of undermining the appeal of national independence, although it has not weakened the nationalistic narrative. Although fully legitimate, the UK's exit from the EU has remained 'a case in itself' (Lord 2017), epitomizing a sort of swan song: the defeat of independent nationalism exactly when it appeared to have won. This has had unexpected consequences for nationalism. After Brexit, nationalistic leaders came gradually to consider leaving the EU an unviable option. While having initially cultivated the idea of single national exits (*Frexit*, *Italexit*, *Poliexit, Huexit*), the nationalistic leaders of the EU member states had to reckon with reality, gradually

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[2] 'Core state powers' are policies that states consider particularly crucial for their national sovereignty. They are sensitive policies with strong political salience.

coping with the logic of European interdependence. A coping that consisted in the attempt to endogenise nationalism in the EU (Fabbrini 2020). An attempt conceptualized here as sovereignism[3], understanding it as a narrative characterized by a fundamental critique of the EU *although from within.*

In our conceptualisation, thus, sovereignism embodies the attempt to combine the radical critique of the EU with the necessity to remain within the latter. The need of nationalistic parties and leaders to operate from within the EU has been further strengthened by the pandemic crisis (Christiansen 2020) and even more so by the Russian aggression of Ukraine. The pandemic crisis led to the adoption of Next Generation EU (NG-EU), a crucial programme for making possible the post-pandemic recovery, the Russian invasion of Ukraine showed the importance of being member of a larger organisation to withstand foreign threats. Indeed, the answer to the pandemic prompted some political movements with sovereignist features (such as the Italian Five Star Movement (5SM) and the Spanish Podemos) to move towards moderately pro-EU positions, while the Russian aggression prompted sovereignist leaders (as Matteo Salvini or Marine Le Pen) to take distance from their previous hero, Vladimir Putin. Because it lacked a theoretical basis, sovereignists' coping with EU had clear opportunistic and *ad hoc* traits. That is why we decided to consider only those cases of political leaders and parties which were consistently sovereignist in the period here examined, after the Brexit referendum and before the Russian aggression of Ukraine (and in any case, as a precaution, we use the past tense).

In the western part of the EU, we consider Marine Le Pen and her *Rassemblement Nationale* in France, Matteo Salvini, and his League and Giorgia Meloni and her party Brothers of Italy in Italy, Geert Wilders, and his Party of Freedom in the Netherlands. In the eastern part of the EU, we consider Viktor Orbán and his Fidesz Party in Hungary and Jaroslaw Kaczyński and his Law and Justice Party (PiS) in Poland. We will group under the sovereignism's umbrella parties belonging to different European Parliament (EP) groups. In fact, after the 2019 EP election, Le Pen's, and Salvini's parties (but also Wilder's party) became members of the extreme right group of 'Identity and Democracy', Kaczyński's PiS and Meloni's Brothers of Italy joined the right-leaning group of 'European Conservatives and Reformists', and Orbán's Fidesz the centre-right 'European People's Party' (which it then quit in March 2021). The country selection allowed us to compare sovereignism in government (Hungary and Poland) and in opposition (France and Italy, although the League was in government from June 2018 to September 2019, and the Netherlands) (Fabbrini 2020 and Fabbrini and Zgaga 2019), but also countries that are members of the Eurozone (France, Italy, and the Netherlands) and countries that are not (Poland and Hungary).

Empirically, our analysis is based on political parties' manifestos, parliamentary speeches, and media interviews by sovereignist party leaders, *concerning their view on*

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[3] 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 EU*. We do not consider the domestic implications of sovereignism, particularly in those countries controlled by sovereignist governments. At this regard, there is a literature that has irrefutably shown the democratic backsliding triggered by sovereignist governments (Kelemen 2020). However, the external (European) implications of sovereignism have not been investigated enough. Our research questions are the following: What do sovereignist leaders criticize of the EU? What do they want the EU to be? What are the differences and commonalities in the sovereignist discourses in the western and eastern EU member states considered? We will proceed as follows. Firstly, we will examine the most recent literature on sovereignism to discuss and define the meaning of the term. Secondly, we analyse sovereignist criticisms of both EU institutions and policies. Thirdly, we will investigate the difference between western and eastern European sovereignists. Fourthly, we will test those differences during the pandemic crisis. On these bases, we conclude highlighting the plausible outcome of sovereignists' proposals, namely the EU's differentiated disintegration.

## What is sovereignism? The literature

Over the last few years, media and policy makers alike have increasingly used the word sovereignism to identify nationalistic parties and movements engaged in criticising the EU without explicitly demanding to leave it. Scholars, too, have used the concept, albeit more sparingly. The literature has acknowledged the multifaceted nature of sovereignism as a concept. The adjectives associated with sovereignism abound (economic, cultural, nationalistic, populist, civic) (Baldini, Bressanelli and Gianfreda 2020). A conceptual clarification is thus due, since sovereignism does not coincide with nationalism, or populism, or Euroscepticism. For Basile and Mazzoleni (2020: 1), sovereignism epitomizes a 'return to the traditional understanding of sovereignty based upon mutually exclusive territories' or, for Kallis (2018), a reiterated form of independent nationalism. Sovereignism consists in a call for the re-territorialisation of state power, a reaction to the supposed inability of supranational and/or international organisations to effectively address the challenges posed by multi-level governance and globalisation. At the heart of this interpretation lies the notion of restoring control, at the national level of government, over policies of national interest. This conceptualisation leaves undefined the distinction between nationalism and sovereignism, since it does not identify the peculiar features of a nationalism which accepts (out of necessity) to operate within the European integration process. Certainly, sovereignism derives from nationalism but it does not end with the claim of national independence inherent in the latter concept. Brexit is the outcome of a nationalism aspiring to independence, whereas sovereignism acknowledges that national independence, in the EU context, is not a realistic strategy. Indeed, sovereignism represents the attempt of 'hollowing out the EU rather than seceding from the EU' (Fabbrini 2019: 29). There is, thus, a discontinuity's solution between Brexiters and sovereignists.

Sovereignism has been also used to conceptualize the political forces opposing European élites and institutions for their lack of legitimacy and accountability (Baldini, Bressanelli and Gianfreda 2020). This conceptualisation, although valuable, has however tended to overlap sovereignism with populism (Basile and Mazzoleni 2020: 159). Certainly, sovereignists criticize the unelected establishment of the EU (the European Commission particularly) and the national politicians accused of accepting subordination to their supranational counterparts. Certainly, sovereignists make appeals to the people of the nation and call for a re-empowering of national institutions. However, sovereignism does not coincide with populism, since populists are against elites (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017), while sovereignists oppose supranational elites on behalf of national ones (especially if they themselves are members of the latter). As Basile and Mazzoleni (2020: 156) put it, populism re-elaborates on sovereignist claims, emphasizing the blame placed on the establishment and the mechanisms of representative democracy, at both national and supranational levels, as being responsible for the uncertainties and unresponsiveness of current democratic systems. Sovereignism, instead, focuses its criticism on supranational elites in the name of national elites, at the condition that the latter are not under the control or influence of the former. Sovereignists are not anti-institutionalists as populists generally are but present themselves as defenders of national institutions from the invasion of supranational powers. What they oppose is the extension of the logic of integration to national democracy with the corresponding downsizing of the role of national institutions (courts and parliaments).

At the same time, although sovereignism is linked to the older tradition of Euroscepticism (Szczerbiak and Taggart, 2008), it differs from the latter as well. Using De Vries (2018: 9) conceptualisation of the three forms of scepticism (exit scepticism, policy scepticism and regime scepticism), sovereignists do not claim the exit strategy from the EU, although their scepticism concern both EU regime and policies. Unlike Eurosceptics, who express a generic anti-European sentiment, sovereignists distrust specific supranational institutions (European Commission, ECJ or European Central Bank or ECB) and advance a request for a repatriation of competences from supranational to national levels of government, although the competences to repatriate differ from one sovereignist actor to another (Fabbrini 2020: 36). This is not the case for Eurosceptics, who do not advance specific proposals for modifying the EU, expressing mainly mistrust and (sometimes) animosity towards the EU (De Vries 2018). Thus, sovereignism should be investigated as a specific political entity. It is different from nationalism although it derives from it, capitalizing on the latter's idea of a national political community to protect. It is different from populism although populist critiques emerge in different degrees in all sovereignist leaders and parties, critiques however focused on supranational elites. It is different from Euroscepticism although it shares the latter's mood that European integration might jeopardize models of life built over centuries.

Being in a conceptual transition, post-Brexit nationalism sails in uncharted waters. After all, the very concept of sovereignty is intimately ambiguous. For Krasner (1999), it is the expression of an organised hypocrisy that, in the EU's context, appears even more opaque. One might argue, following Fossum and Menéndez (2011), that sovereignists operate though a distinction between state sovereignty and popular sovereignty. With the former consisting in a bunch of concrete national policies and laws and the latter in a symbolic chest for protecting national identity. While asserting the view of a unitary popular sovereignty (and corresponding national identity), state sovereignty can be instead disaggregated in various policies and institutional contexts. Sovereignists claim to disintegrate (to repatriate) policies crucial for them, leaving integrated other policies if they are instrumental for the strengthening of their states (on European integration as 'the rescue of the nation-state', see Milward 2000). The net outcome of the sovereinists' approach to the EU is the latter's *differentiated disintegration*, i.e., exit from certain policy regimes and participation to other policy regimes (on differentiated disintegration, see Schimmelfennig 2018). What does this signify for the EU?

The empirical result of the research shows that all sovereignists are against the supranational institutions of the EU (we call it as *institutional sovereignism)*, particularly the European Commission, hereinafter the Commission, the ECJ and the ECB. This anti-supranationalism is motivated by the refusal to accept the primacy of the EU legal order over national laws and constitutions, a primacy considered to directly threat national identities. The anti-supranational attitude led sovereignists to support the decision-making role of the intergovernmental European Council, because it operates on unanimity's criteria. The research shows also that sovereignism has been generally characterized by the claim to policy repatriation (we call it as *policy sovereignism*). A claim, however, differently motivated in the western and eastern member states. In the former, it has been motivated by the opposition to the EMU and by the request to restore control over monetary policy (we call it as *economic sovereignism*). In the latter member states (particularly in those not belonging to the EMU), instead, it has been motivated by the opposition to the openness of the EU and its effects on domestic society and culture (we call it as *cultural sovereignism*). That openness has been accused of bringing in groups and views that challenge the traditional identity of member states (as with the Syrian refugees in 2015-2016), while this has not been the case with the Ukrainian refugees in 2022, who were instead welcome by those countries (Poland in particular). This four-fold dimension captures the common political discourse of sovereignists, but it highlights too the crucial distinction between economic and cultural sovereignist views (see Fig. 1).
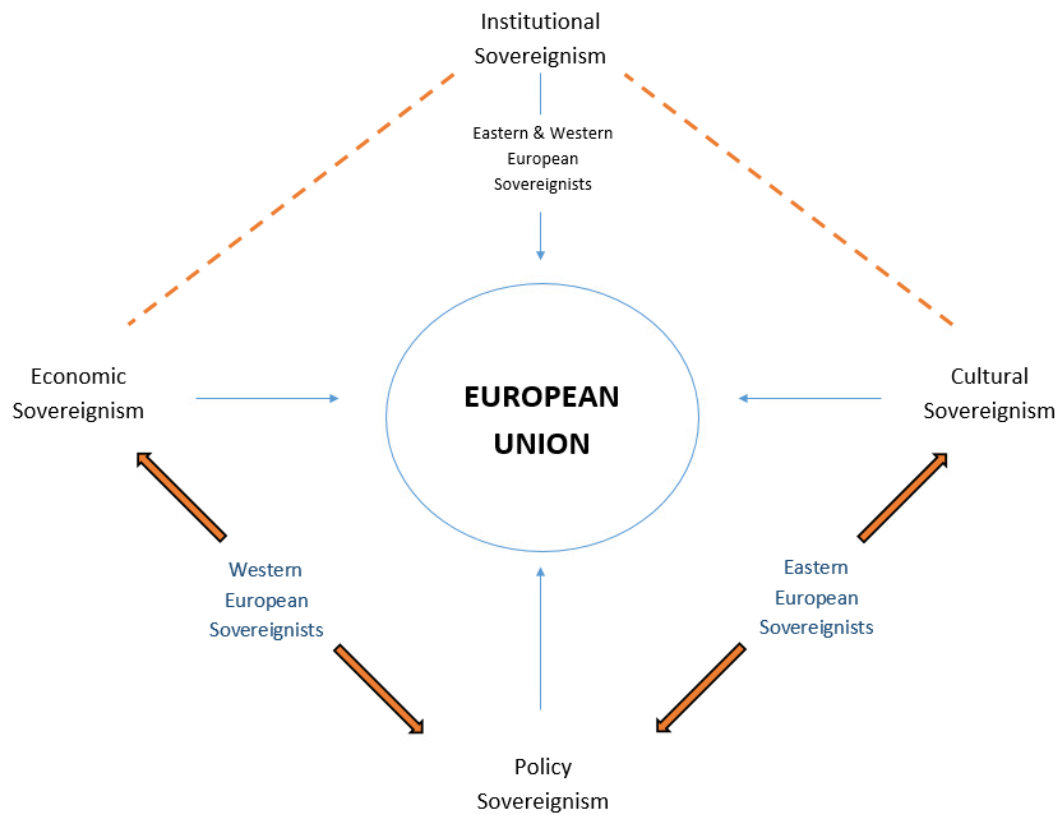
Fig. 1 – Features of sovereignism

## Institutional sovereignism

All sovereignist leaders shared a criticism of the supranational features of the EU. The criticism of supranationalism was based on the refusal of the principle of supremacy of EU law over national laws. The refusal to acknowledge the existence of a supranational legal order was shared by sovereignists from both eastern and western Europe, although it was mainly in Poland that such refusal led to a constitutional challenge to the EU legal order (with the decision of the Polish constitutional court of 7 October 2021which considered incompatible with Poland's national sovereignty two founding articles of the EU, TEU Art. 1 and Art. 19)[4]. The rejection of the supremacy of EU law (with the non-recognition of the hierarchy between the ECJ and national courts on EU competences) led sovereignist leaders to portray the EU as an illegitimate, authoritarian, bureaucratic structure. For Marine Le Pen, leader of Rassemblement

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[4] Indeed, the Commission, under EP pressure, had previously activated TEU Art 7(1) procedures against the Polish government's infringement of the rule of law principles, see, 'Brussels Commission decision to activate Article 7 (1) TEU as regards the situation in Poland', 28 February 2018, available at: http://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-8-2018-02-28-ITM-019_EN.html [accessed 10 May 2022].

National (RN), the EU is 'a totalitarian, imperial, hegemonic, ruling power'.[5] She has regularly criticized the supranational decision-making system based in Brussels and the institution – particularly the Commission – that epitomizes it, asserting the necessity to promote a 'Union of European nations'. For Geert Wilders and his Party for Freedom (PVV), 'the EU is the largest attempt since the collapse of Communism to rob people of their sovereignty, their democracy, their identity and their dignity'. He has criticized the EU's intrusiveness into 'issues which are vital to our nation state [like] our immigration policy, our monetary policy, our trade policy, and many other issues'. Like Le Pen, he has claimed the necessity to have a Union characterized by cooperation between countries with no supranational organisation: in short, 'a Europe without the European Union'.[6] Matteo Salvini and his League proposed to substitute the EU with a 'community of peoples, with many homelands, many people, many feelings of belonging'.[7] Integration should pursue (only) economic cooperation between states. In its 2018 electoral campaign for the Italian parliament, the League asked to renegotiate the EU Treaties that 'limit Italian full and legitimate sovereignty'. The very foundation for Italy joining the EU was put into question through the argument that Art. 11 of the Italian Constitution (which makes it possible for Italy to transfer sovereignty to international organisations that aim to maintain peace) 'is not enough for that'. For Salvini, the Italian government should go to Brussels only to defend Italian interests. The position to leave the EMU was clearly stated by Salvini after the Italian elections in March 2018[8], but then abandoned. The party manifesto for the latter elections explicitly said that '*the sine qua non* condition for Italy to remain in the EU is that all treaties must be changed'. Brothers of Italy was the only party claiming explicitly the need to promote a European confederation of states that cooperate on security, the single market, defence, migration, research, and foreign policy, leaving the states free to self-determine 'what can be better done at national level'. Related to this, the party argued for the Italian constitution to be supreme over EU Treaties and laws (Party manifesto 2020).

A criticism of the EU as a supranational organisation has been advanced also by Hungarian and Polish leaders. Victor Orbán has favoured a Europe of nation states: 'a

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[5] Rassemblement National (2019) 'Manifeste pour une nouvelle coopération en Europe – L'Alliance Européenne des Nations', available at: http://rassemblementnational.fr/telecharger/publications/Manifeste.pdf [accessed 10 May 2022].

[6] Wilders, G. (2017) 'The Europe We Want', available at: http://www.geertwilders.nl/in-de-mediamainmenu-74/nieuws-mainmenu-114/94-english/2066-speech-geert-wilders-the-europe-we-want [accessed 10 May 2022].

[7] Salvini, M. (2018a) 'Il discorso integrale dal palco del raduno leghista', 1 July 2018, available at: http://www.bergamonews.it/2018/07/01/matteo-salvini-pontida-discorso-integrale-dal-palco-del-raduno-leghista/285598/ [accessed 10 May 2022].

[8] Salvini, M. (2016) 'Salvini: se la Lega va al Governo usciamo dall'euro', 1 July 2016, available at: http://www.rainews.it/dl/rainews/articoli/Salvini-se-vinciamo-fuori-euro-ccef9339-89ce-472e-8fe1-fd3d4313a037.html [accessed 10 May 2022].

strong Europe, strong nation states and strong leaders at the head of Europe'.[9] The leader of the Polish Law and Justice party, Jaroslaw Kaczynski, claimed that 'Poland is undoubtedly an EU member state and wants to remain as such'. However, he stressed that 'the EU must be made of states that are equally respected'.[10] Poland's Prime Minister, Mateusz Morawiecki (a member of the Law and Justice party), viewed the EU as a group of interdependent sovereign states.[11] Morawiecki stated that 'the European Union is great when it is a Europe of Homelands and when it can cooperate'.[12] He has regularly criticized what he considers the EU's intrusiveness into the domestic sphere and the supposed arbitrariness of some EU institutions, particularly the Commission. As he argued: The EU [is] a mechanism for making arbitrary decisions by Eurocrats, and de facto by the European oligarchy. [...] We say an explicit Yes to the EU, but an explicit No to the mechanisms that rebuke us – like children – and treat Poland and other EU countries unequally'.[13] In Hungary and Poland, countries that achieved national independence in relatively recent times, there has been a permanent criticism of the supranational EU because 'it does not respect the capacity of countries to self-determine themselves [...] Poland is a proud country, please don't lecture us [...]. We are perfectly aware of how to manage our institutions.[14]

For sovereigntist leaders, the Commission reveals the technocratic features of a supranational political order. For Le Pen, the members of the Commission have an interest only in their personal careers. She talked of a 'Commissioners' regime' and considered it a 'soft dictatorship' directed by the principle of 'every man for himself', meaning that each commissioner is looking at the next job opportunity and not at the interests of citizens. For Salvini, the Commission is an 'unelected bureaucracy'.[15] Quite

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[9] Orbán, V. (2019g) 'Speeches of the Hungarian and Polish Prime Ministers on the Occasion of the Hungarian Holiday of March 15', 16 March 2019, available at: http://visegradpost.com/en/2019/03/16/speeches-of-the-hungarian-and-polish-prime-ministers-on-the-occasion-of-the-hungarian-holiday-of-march-15-full-speeches/ [accessed 10 May 2022].

[10] Kaczyński, J. (2016) 'Speech of May 2, 2016', 2 May 2016, available at: http://www.poloniainstitute.net/poland-current-issues/jaroslaw-kaczynski-speech-of-may-2-2016/ [accessed 10 May 2022].

[11] Morawiecki, M. (2020) 'Prime Minister in the Sejm: We want Poland to be a strong country in a strong Europe, but we will not agree to be blackmailed', 18 November 2020, available at: http://www.premier.gov.pl/en/news/news/prime-minister-in-the-sejm-we-want-poland-to-be-a-strong-country-in-a-strong-europe-but-we.html [accessed 10 May 2022].

[12] ibid. See also Orbán, V. (2019g) 'Speeches of the Hungarian and Polish Prime Ministers on the Occasion of the Hungarian Holiday of March 15', 16 March 2019, available at: http://visegradpost.com/en/2019/03/16/speeches-of-the-hungarian-and-polish-prime-ministers-on-the-occasion-of-the-hungarian-holiday-of-march-15-full-speeches/ [accessed 10 May 2022].

[13] Morawiecki, M. (2020) 'Prime Minister in the Sejm: We want Poland to be a strong country in a strong Europe, but we will not agree to be blackmailed', 18 November 2020, available at: http://www.premier.gov.pl/en/news/news/prime-minister-in-the-sejm-we-want-poland-to-be-a-strong-country-in-a-strong-europe-but-we.html [accessed 10 May 2022].

[14] ibid.

[15] Salvini, M. (2018b) 'Discussione con il Primo ministro della Croazia, Andrej Plenković, sul futuro dell'Europa [Debate with the PM of Croatia, Andrej Plenkovic, on the future of the EU], 6 February

contradictorily, he proposed increasing the powers of the EP to counterbalance the Commission (Party manifesto of the League 2018), the argument being that the EP is the only directly elected institution in the EU and thus embodies the will of the people. The League proposed to take the power of legislative initiative away from the Commission and assign it to the EP (Party manifesto of the League 2018). The criticism of the Commission was also shared by Brothers of Italy. The party argued that EU institutions in general – and the Commission in particular – serve France's and Germany's interests to the detriment of Italy's. This is said to have damaged Italian interests at the international level. Similarly, Wilders argued that 'Eurocrats don't listen'.[16]

In Hungary, Viktor Orbán had a more opportunistic approach to the Commission. He defended its role when acting in Hungary's interests. For instance, after the 2019 nomination of Hungarian Olivér Várhelyi as the Commissioner for Neighborhood and Enlargement, Orban claimed that it was good for Hungary that 'a Hungarian commissioner has the chance to manage such a fine, wide-ranging task as enlargement of the European Union', stressing also his role in preventing 'the selection of a leader in the EU who doesn't respect Hungary and the Central European countries'[17], through his veto to the candidature of Frans Timmermans as Commission president in 2019. Of course, Orbán did not refrain from harshly criticizing the Commission, particularly regarding migration policy. In a 2017 meeting of the Visegrad countries[18], he claimed that 'the institutions of the EU have clearly failed: neither the Commission, nor the Council, nor the EP has defended the Schengen Agreement'.[19] In addition, Polish

2018, available at: http://multimedia.europarl.europa.eu/it/debate-on-future-of-europe-with-andrej-plenkovic-croatian-prime-minister_8301_pk [accessed 10 May 2022].

[16] Wilders, G. (2013) 'Geert Wilders' Speech in Bonn', available at: http://www.parlementaire monitor.nl/9353000/1/j9vvij5epmj1ey0/vj6xcz568lxd?ctx=vg09llkg6xvb&start_tab0=20 [accessed 10 May 2022].

[17] Orbán, V. (2019c) 'Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's press statement at the summit of heads of government from the Visegrád Four and Western Balkan countries', 16 September 2019, http://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/prime-minister-viktor-orbáns-press-statement-after-a-summit-of-the-heads-of-government-of-the-visegrad-four-and-austria/ [accessed 10 May 2022].

[18] The Visegrad Group – V4 for short – is an alliance of four eastern and central European states: Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic and Slovakia. They take their name from the Hungarian city of Visegrad, where kings once met for economic and political negotiations, see available at: http://www.dw.com/en/this-is-how-the-visegrad-group-works/a-47402724 [accessed 10 May 2022].

[19] Orbán, V. (2017b) 'Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's press conference after a working meeting of the Visegrád Four', 13 October 2017, available at: http://miniszterelnok.hu/prime-minister-viktor-orbans-press-conference-after-a-working-meeting-of-the-visegrad-four/ [accessed 10 May 2022].

sovereignists criticized the Commission, arguing that 'it has become ideologically driven in its relationship with some member states'.[20]

Eventually, on July 2, 2021, all the sovereignist leaders here considered[21] signed a Declaration on the future of Europe in which it is stated that 'the European Union needs a deep reform […] because it has become the instrument of radical forces (aiming) to construct a Europe without nations'. For this reason, the Declaration specifies, 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'.

## Policy sovereignism

Because many of the 'inviolable competences' are controlled by supranational institutions, sovereignist leaders asked for repatriating them. The call for the repatriation of competences derived from the shared assumption that the nation state is the ultimate (and exclusive) repository of power. In both Italy and France (both members of the EMU), claims for repatriation concerned mainly economic and monetary competences, particularly after the disastrous consequences of EMU governance of the financial crisis in the first half of the 2010s. For this reason, sovereigntist leaders shared a negative opinion of the euro. The 2018 League electoral manifesto stated that 'the euro is against Italy's economic interests and is the main cause of its economic decline'. In 2018 the party looked for EU partners to agree on a 'negotiated exit of Italy' from EMU. However, this goal did not appear in the coalition agreement (between the 5SM and the League on June 1, 2018) which led to the birth of the sovereignist Conte I government which lasted till September 5, 2019 (Fabbrini 2021). Yet, the agreement included plans to change the ECB's statute and to amend EU economic governance (monetary policy, Stability and Growth Pact, Fiscal Compact, European Stability Mechanism or ESM) to make it less asymmetric in its effects since it was accused of favouring northern European countries. The coalition agreement of the Conte I government claimed to bring back those competences that 'member states can better exercise by themselves and at the same time increase effectiveness of competences assigned to the EU'. Brothers of Italy, too, argued that the common currency was a good deal for northern European 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 argued in favour of a reform of the ECB (Party manifesto 2018). The repatriation of

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[20] Morawiecki, M. (2017) 'EU 'completely misunderstood the situation', 14 February 2017, available at: http://www.dw.com/en/mateusz-morawiecki-eu-completely-misunderstood-the-situation/a3 7547967 [accessed 10 May 2022].

[21] Declaration sur l'avenir de l'Europe, signed by Marine Le Pen, Matteo Salvini, Viktor Orban, Jarislaw Kaczinski, Giorgia Meloni and eleven other European sovereignst leaders, 2 July 2021.

monetary competences was also claimed by Marine Le Pen. She considered the euro an obstacle to France's development.[22] Indeed, the euro 'is an overvalued currency for France, responsible for losing one million industrial jobs'. The euro resembles the previous German currency, which puts France at a disadvantage. Le Pen argued for a revision of the ECB's objectives (mandate) and the governance of financial markets.[23] In the absence of a revision of the objectives of the ECB and the governance of the European banking and financial system, for Marine Le Pen the divergence between Germany and the northern bloc and the southern countries 'will shatter Europe'.[24] Also Wilders was very critical of the monetary union. He conceived the delegation of monetary policy competences to the ECB as a threat to national sovereignt.[25] Salvini opposed the Bolkenstein directive[26], accused of supporting multinational corporations. He stressed the need to defend national agriculture ('our agriculture, our rice, our oil, our milk, our fish, our way of life'). In the League's manifesto, there were calls to increase internal demand, incentivizing the relocation of enterprises, correcting the common market, stopping dumping, abolishing laws that are not part of the juridical tradition of member states, fully repatriating responsibility for trade policy, protecting national production and know-how (Made in Italy). The coalition agreement of the Conte I government included, among its main objectives, the protection of small enterprises and the Made in Italy brand as well as the rejection of the Bolkenstein directive. Brothers of Italy argued for changes in the European rules 'that make the product chain hard to trace […] A product is Italian only if it is 100 per cent in all phases of its production'. The party thus condemned trade agreements which do not fully protect Italian products. It asked for 'civilisation tariffs' for third countries which do not comply with 'our' wage, security and environmental standards.

In Hungary and Poland, which are not members of the EMU, the repatriation of competences concerned instead the control of the national territory. As argued by Orbán, 'this is our motherland, our homeland, our lives. No one other than the Hungarian people may decide about it. No one, ever. The nation state embodies the principle of sovereignty and therefore it shall not be forced to subject itself to the laws of any form of global governance. It is the product of culture and history and is an

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[22] Le Pen, M. (2016a) 'Discours de Marine Le Pen lors des Assises du Produire en France à Reims – 9 septembre 2016', available at: http://rassemblementnational.fr/discours/discours-de-marine-le-pen-lors-des-assises-du-produire-en-france-a-reims/ [accessed 10 May 2022].

[23] Le Pen, M. (2016b) '1er mai 2016: discours de Marine Le Pen', available at: http://rassemblementnational.fr/discours/1er-mai-2016-discours-de-marine-le-pen/ [accessed 10 May 2022].

[24] Le Pen, M. (2019) 'Genève (Suisse): Discours de Marine Le Pen à la Fondation Spinoza', available at: http://rassemblementnational.fr/discours/geneve-suisse-discours-de-marine-le-pen-a-lafondation-spinoza/ [accessed 10 May 2022].

[25] Wilders, G. (2017) 'The Europe We Want', available at: http://www.geertwilders.nl/in-de-media-mainmenu-74/nieuws-mainmenu-114/94-english/2066-speech-geert-wilders-the-europe-wewant [accessed 10 May 2022].

[26] A 2004 directive on services in the EU common market named after its most prominent proponent.

irreplaceable treasure, and therefore it must be protected. And only we may say who can and who cannot settle on the territory of our state, together with our nation. Only we have the right to decide on that'.[27] On a similar line, Jarosław Kaczyński claimed that 'the undermining of national sovereignty is unacceptable and fatal'[28] because the nation state is the only expression and defender of national interests. He interpreted European integration as an 'uncontrolled erosion of the sovereignty of European fatherlands'[29] against which the state should defend itself decisively. That's why Law and Justice favoured the restoring of full national sovereignty over border control. The repatriation of competences emerged as a sensitive issue mainly with reference to migration policy. Orbán[30] and Morawiecki[31] opposed the arrival in the EU of migrants coming from the Middle-East (and more in general from 'Islamic countries'), but feared that Brexit could lead to a restriction on workers' circulation within the EU from less to more economically developed member states.

## Sovereignist divisions

If all sovereignist leaders shared the critique of the supranational EU and claimed the repatriation of competences to the member states, however, when focusing on EU policies, clear differences among them emerged. Regarding the EU budget, western and eastern sovereignists showed contrasting interests. Eastern European sovereignists (net receivers from the budget) argued for keeping unchanged (or even increasing) the budget to fund cohesion and defence policies, while western European sovereignists (net contributors to the budget) argued for a reduction in the budget. Orbán claimed that he does not reject the idea of new sources of joint revenue if the plan is to keep old policies while at the same time funding new ones.[32] For him, national sovereignty should be strengthened by EU policies, particularly structural policy. As he claimed,

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[27] Orbán, V. (2019a) 'Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's speech at the 28th congress of Fidesz – Hungarian Civic Union', http://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/prime-minister-viktor-orbáns-speech-at-the-28th-congress-of-fidesz-hungarian-civic-union/ [accessed 10 May 2022].

[28] Kaczyński, J. (2016) 'Speech of May 2, 2016', 2 May 2016, available at: http://www.poloniainstitut e.net/poland-current-issues/jaroslaw-kaczynski-speech-of-may-2-2016/ [accessed 10 May 2022].

[29] ibid.

[30] Orbán, V. (2020k) 'Address at the Hungarian Chamber of Commerce and Industry's opening event of 2020', 10 March 2020, available at: http://miniszterelnok.hu/address-by-viktor-orban-at-the-hungarian-chamber-of-commerce-and-industrys-opening-event-of-2020/ [accessed 10 May 2022].

[31] Morawiecki, M. (2018) 'Euronews speaks with Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki at the World Economic Forum in Davos', 25 January 2018, available at: http://www.euronews.com/video /2018/01/25/euronews-speaks-with-polish-prime-minister-mateusz-morawiecki-at-the-world [accessed 10 May 2022].

[32] Orbán, V. (2017) 'Speech at the 28th Bálványos Summer Open University and Student Camp', 22 July 2017, http://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/viktor-orbáns-speech-at-the-28thbal vanyos-summer-open-university-and-student-camp/ [accessed 10 May 2022].

'new joint policies can be launched, but the funds for older policies must under no circumstances be reduced to finance them: so, we support new common policies, but we cannot take money from the old ones, because they are needed'.[33] Needed to support domestic growth (and the groups of Orbán's supporters benefitting from it). He also proposed using the EU budget to finance a European army. For him, a common European defence capability – and eventually a European army – is the prerequisite for having more security as a trade-off for the financial resources that member states transfer to the budget.[34] Kaczyński proposed reforming the budget in a way that could benefit Poland, particularly strengthening the structural funds component. The view of western European sovereignists on the EU budget was quite different. In Italy, the League argued for a reduction in the budget (Party manifesto 2018) as well as a reduction in post-Brexit Italian contributions to it, while Brothers of Italy 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 (Party manifesto 2018).

Regarding migration policy, too, differences between sovereignist leaders of western and eastern Europe emerged. All of them shared a radical refusal of what they considered EU openness to globalism and multiculturalism. All of them criticized the EU migration policy because it allegedly allowed entrance into Europe to too many immigrants. However, their criticism had different emphases. In the western part, the League mobilized to limit migration, in keeping with an old battle against the so-called *ius soli* as a criterion for assigning Italian citizenship (Pontida [35] gathering, 2017). Border protection was considered a non-negotiable issue.[36] The main argument against immigration was that 'it is a business for thugs'[37]. Once in government in 2018, the party stated that EU member states 'must welcome migrants within the limits of what is possible, something which in Italy has been already reached'. The migration policy

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[33] Orbán, V. (2019c) 'Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's press statement at the summit of heads of government from the Visegrád Four and Western Balkan countries', 16 September 2019, http://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/prime-minister-viktor-orbáns-press-statement-after-a-summit-of-the-heads-of-government-of-the-visegrad-four-and-austria/ [accessed 10 May 2022].

[34] Orbán, V. (2018c) 'Speech at the 29th Bálványos Summer Open University and Student Camp', 28 July 2018, available at: http://miniszterelnok.hu/prime-minister-viktor-orbans-speech-at-the-29th-balvanyos-summer-open-university-and-student-camp/ [accessed 10 May 2022].

[35] The League holds an annual political gathering in Pontida (Bergamo).

[36] At domestic level, migration has been centred around the preservation of legislation that the party approved when it was at the government: 'if they change our 'security decrees', we will collect 500,000 signatures for a referendum, we will collect 5 million signatures to protect the holy borders of our country, because our ancestors did not die on the Piave in order to have open borders' (Salvini, M. (2018a) 'Il discorso integrale dal palco del raduno leghista', 1 July 2018, available at: http://www.bergamonews.it/2018/07/01/matteo-salvini-pontida-discorso-integrale-dal-palco-del-raduno-leghista/285598/ [accessed 10 May 2022]).

[37] Related to this, the party states that 'true refugees come by plane, not on the sea; in recent years, 600,000 people landed in Italy not flying from war, but bringing war to us' (ibid.).

that the League proposed was 'to invest money in Africa to help potential migrants remain there'.[38] Brothers of Italy was more radical in its 2018 Party manifesto. The party pressured to keep the EU outside of the United Nations (UN) Global Compact which was accused of favouring uncontrolled migration. It proposed military control of the EU's external borders and the use of military vessels to prevent boats departing from Northern African shores. According to the party, anyone entering Europe illegally must be kept in specific hotspots and must be repatriated thanks to agreements with third countries. Also, Brothers of Italy was against *ius soli*.

Both the League and Brothers of Italy claimed the need to have EU programmes to distribute quotas of legal migrants among member states, monitoring that the migrants are integrated and do not create problems regarding security and terrorism. For both parties, foreigners who breach the law should be automatically expelled. The same is true for foreigners and Europeans who cannot prove they have the necessary means to maintain themselves in Italy. On social services, kindergarten, and assisted housing, they proposed changing European rules and giving priority to Italian citizens. They wanted to exclude foreigners and Europeans from certain measures of direct public economic support, granting social rent only for those who have lived and paid taxes in Italy for at least 15 years to stop mock family reunions which are held only to secure the social allowance for family members (Party manifestos 2018 of Brothers of Italy and the League). The perspective of sovereignist parties in Italy was clearly influenced by its being a country of first arrival. Those parties supported a common migration policy and mandatory and automatic redistribution of migrants. At the top of their agenda stood revision of the Dublin agreement. The League called for the reversal of both the Schengen Agreement and the Dublin agreement (Party manifesto 2018). The coalition agreement of the Conte I government stressed that 'Italian borders are EU borders and need to be protected by the EU'. Brothers of Italy proposed to insert into EU Treaties explicit recognition of the Christian roots of Europe. Moreover, it asked to limit the ongoing process of Islamisation by forbidding the financing of places of worship, media, and cultural activities by Islamic/fundamentalist countries. The party asked also to introduce in the Italian legal order the crime of Islamic integralism. Hence, the opposition to Turkey's entry to the EU (2018 Party manifesto). In the Netherlands, Wilders too asked to redistribute refugees among EU member states. However, he also explicitly connected migration with the Islamisation of Europe. For him, the European integration process served the goals of Islam because it undermines 'our national identities and robs us of the most important instruments for halting Islamisation: our national sovereignty'. He argued that 'the EU is characterized by cultural relativism and enmity towards patriotism [...] Patriotism is not a dangerous threat, it is something to be proud of. It means defending a nation's sovereignty and independence, and not

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[38] Salvini, M. (2018a) 'Il discorso integrale dal palco del raduno leghista', 1 July 2018, available at: http://www.bergamonews.it/2018/07/01/matteo-salvini-pontida-discorso-integrale-dal-palco-del-raduno-leghista/285598/ [accessed 10 May 2022].

selling it out in shabby compromises to the EU and its bureaucrats'.[39] However, in Italy and France, sovereignist leaders associated migration with social unrest, stressing the need to protect the national territory and to defend national workers.

Eastern European sovereignists raised upfront the fear of Islamisation of Europe through migration. Although there were differences in tone and argument, they converged on opposing any proposal to redistribute refugees among member states. Orbán transformed the opposition to migration[40] into the top priority of Europe. He declared his availability to cooperate with governments of all the other EU member states to defend European borders, but on the condition that each of them 'remains fully sovereign in controlling its own territory'. According to him, Hungary shows that migration can be stopped. Repatriation and help in countries of origin was the recipe that Orbán proposed to prevent 'bringing the strife up here'.[41] On the occasion of the 2017 Congress of Fidesz, Orbán claimed that migrants are transported to Europe 'to debilitate nations and deliver the *coup de grâce* to Christian culture'[42]. The party considered the return to Schengen rules as one of the most important points of the Bratislava Declaration.[43] Fidesz viewed migration as an existential threat because, historically, Hungary has had many problems in cohabitating with totally different cultural habits.[44] For Orbán, the EU was promoting a culture of multi-culturalism favourable to migration, characterized by the willingness to overcome concepts such as nation and state and to cancel the Christian roots of Europe. To this culture, he opposed a different view, an opposite *Weltanschauung*: 'We need Hungarian children instead of immigrants; Christian culture instead of a multicultural confusion; we are countries who do not want to transform ourselves into immigrant societies and mixed peoples, we want to remain who we already are; in our countries no single migrant will set foot in Europe's territory. And if the southern member states are unable to manage the

39 Wilders, G. (2017) 'The Europe We Want', available at: http://www.geertwilders.nl/in-de-media-mainmenu-74/nieuws-mainmenu-114/94-english/2066-speech-geert-wilders-the-europe-we-want [accessed 10 May 2022].

40 Orbán views migration not as a political issue but as an issue vital to the country as a whole.

41 Orbán, V. (2017c) 'Speech at the 28th Bálványos Summer Open University and Student Camp', 22 July 2017, http://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/viktor-orbáns-speech-at-the-28th-balvanyos-summer-open-university-and-student-camp/ [accessed 10 May 2022] and Orbán, V. (2018c), 'Speech at the 29th Bálványos Summer Open University and Student Camp', 28 July 2018, available at: http://miniszterelnok.hu/prime-minister-viktor-orbans-speech-at-the-29thbalvanyos-summer-open-university-and-student-camp/ [accessed 10 May 2022].

42 Christianity is said to be at the basis of the preservation of the nation and the nation state. It is also seen as the only guarantee for freedom.

43 Orbán, V. (2017a) 'Speech at the 27th Congress of Fidesz – Hungarian Civic Union', 12 November 2017, http://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/prime-minister-viktor-orbáns-speech-at-the-27th-congress-of-fidesz-hungarian-civic-union/ [accessed 10 May 2022].

44 The argument here is that EU institutions do not know the history of Central European countries. See Orbán, V. (2020h) 'Interview with Viktor Orbán on the Pannon RTV programme Public Affairs', 16 June 2020, http://miniszterelnok.hu/interview-with-viktor-orban-on-the-pannon-rtvprog ramme-public-affairs/ [accessed 10 May 2022].

defence of Europe's borders, at their request we will help them; we will veto again the redistribution quota but accept a repatriation quota; the right approach for us is to bring help over there, and not bring the problems here'.[45] On several occasions, the Hungarian sovereignist leader proposed intervening in the countries of origin of migration[46]. These words echo those pronounced in 2016 at an EU summit: Hungary stands in contraposition to member states that are traditionally immigrant countries. Mandatory resettlement quotas are therefore not acceptable for Hungary. The country was willing to show solidarity in the refugee crisis by protecting national and European borders. This was said to benefit not only Hungary but the whole EU. Border protection shall be a duty, which – according to Orbán – not all member states respect. Orbán reinforced his claim to admit Serbia to the EU on the basis also of security concerns relating to migration. Kaczynski claimed that 'we have a full moral right to say 'no' [to welcome migrants]'[47]. Law and Justice 'is against mandatory redistribution quota of migrants among member states'. Morawieczi considered his country to be too accommodating with migrants, mentioning the numerous Ukrainians coming to Poland[48], become hundreds of thousands after the 2022 Russian aggression of that country.

For eastern European sovereignists, thus, the anti-immigration stance was presented as a way of defending the Christian roots of Europe. According to Kaczynski, the EU's migration policy was following standards that contravened Poland's traditional family values. He claimed that 'our society […] must be based on the Polish family, the family in its traditional sense. A family which takes the form of a relationship between a man and a woman'.[49] For Orbán, 'Christian freedom means that we have the right to defend our own Christian way of life; we have the right to defend everything that – derived from Christianity over the course of two thousand years, from the accumulated lives of successive generations – has created a Christian culture'[50]. For him, Christianity is the

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[45] Orbán, V. (2018c) 'Speech at the 29th Bálványos Summer Open University and Student Camp', 28 July 2018, available at: http://miniszterelnok.hu/prime-minister-viktor-orbans-speech-at-the-29th balvanyos-summer-open-university-and-student-camp/ [accessed 10 May 2022].

[46] A proposed solution is to create hot spots outside the territory of the EU.

[47] Kaczyński, J. (2016) 'Speech of May 2, 2016', 2 May 2016, available at: http://www.poloniainsti tute.net/poland-current-issues/jaroslaw-kaczynski-speech-of-may-2-2016/ [accessed 10 May 2022].

[48] Morawiecki, M. (2017) 'EU completely misunderstood the situation', 14 February 2017, available at: http://www.dw.com/en/mateusz-morawiecki-eu-completely-misunderstood-the-situation/a-37547967 [accessed 10 May 2022].

[49] Kaczyński, J. (2016), 'Speech of May 2, 2016', 2 May 2016, available at: http://www.poloniainsti tute.net/poland-current-issues/jaroslaw-kaczynski-speech-of-may-2-2016/ [accessed 10 May 2022].

[50] Orbán, V. (2020b), 'Address at a thanksgiving service held to celebrate construction of the House of the Sower Calvinist Church', 31 October 2020, available at: http://miniszterelnok.hu/address-by-prime-minister-viktor-orban-at-a-thanksgiving-service-held-to-celebrate-construction-of-the-house-of-the-sower-calvinist-church/ [accessed 10 May 2022].

quintessence of European culture. On migration and identity, Orbán claimed that 'there's undoubtedly an attempt at intellectual oppression, which one can trace through the debates on migration, on freedom of the press, and on the rule of law'.[51] For him, EU institutions 'promote multiculturalism, they are pushing forward pro-migration policy, they follow an anti-family policy, they want to get rid of the concept of nations and states, and they consider irrelevant the Christian social teachings'.[52] According to Orbán, there is 'a collective central European answer to the question of how we [...] should conduct [...] life'. Cultural identity and the protection of Christian culture of Hungary is considered to be part 'of the constitutional identity and as such shall be an obligation of every organ of the state'.[53] Fidesz' view was that 'only the state has the authority to determine the identities of a country [...] and we cannot allow anyone else to have a say on this'.[54] Each member state has the right to decide for itself about its own constitutional identity. According to Orbán, 'Europe is not Brussels. Europe is us, and we do not have to measure up to the tired Brussels elite, who will soon be disillusioned even with themselves. We used to think that Europe was our future; today we know that we are the future of Europe'.[55] For Orbán, indeed, 'the centre of the entire European Union is shifting eastwards, to Central Europe'[56]. The Visegrad Group (Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic, and Slovakia, the V4, with significant differences between Poland/Hungary and Czech Republic/Slovakia), considered to be part of central and not eastern Europe, 'is becoming the counterbalancing element to France and Germany'.[57]

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[51] Orbán, V. (2020d), 'Address by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán at the opening of the Budapest office of R4S Consulting', 8 October 2020, http://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/address-by-prime-minister-viktor-orbán-at-the-opening-of-the-budapest-office-of-r4s-consulting/ [accessed 10 May 2022].

[52] Orbán, V. (2020g) 'Lecture of Viktor Orbán', 8 July 2020, http://miniszterelnok.hu/lecture-of-viktor-orban/ [accessed 10 May 2022].

[53] Orbán, V. (2017) 'Speech at the 28th Bálványos Summer Open University and Student Camp', 22 July 2017, http://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/viktor-orbáns-speech-at-the-28th-balvanyos-summer-open-university-and-student-camp/ [accessed 10 May 2022]. Orbán also predicts that 'the European debates of the next decade will centre on identity: the identities of people, of peoples, of countries, and even of continents.' (*ibid.*)

[54] Orbán, V. (2018c) 'Speech at the 29th Bálványos Summer Open University and Student Camp', 28 July 2018, http://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/viktor-orbáns-speech-at-the-28th-balvanyos-summer-open-university-and-student-camp/ [accessed 10 May 2022].

[55] ibid.

[56] Orbán, V. (2020) 'Address by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán at the foundation stone laying ceremony for construction of the high-voltage power line between Pince and Cirkovce', 16 October 2020, http://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/address-by-prime-minister-viktor-orbán-at-the-foundation-stone-laying-ceremony-for-construction-of-the-high-voltage-power-line-between-pince-and-cirkovce/ [accessed 10 May 2022].

[57] Orbán, V. (2020d) 'Address by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán at the opening of the Budapest office of R4S Consulting', 8 October 2020, http://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/address-by-

Finally, western, and eastern European sovereignists also had differing views on EU enlargement. Orbán proposed enlarging the EU, most notably to admit Serbia [58] because 'it's clear from the history of the last few years that Serbia, Montenegro and Macedonia – and now that we are where we are, Albania – have an interest in being in the European Union, and it's also in our interest for them to be members'.[59] After the 2022 Russian aggression of Ukraine, eastern sovereignists pushed for considering also Moldova and Georgia, other than Ukraine, candidates for entering the EU. Further enlargement was instead opposed by western European sovereignists, particularly Marine Le Pen.

## Sovereignism and the pandemic

The coronavirus pandemic, which arrived in Europe (in Italy and Spain first) in February-March 2020, dramatically changed the political scenario, pressuring the EU to adopt NG-EU (agreed by national governmental leaders in the European Council during the meeting on 17-21 July 2020) of unprecedented nature (Schmidt 2020; Ferrera, Mirò, and Ronchi 2021). Having at its financial core the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF), NG-EU consists of loans and grants to allocate to the EU member states according to the destruction inflicted on each of them by the pandemic. Moreover, in the 2020 July meeting it was decided to support the programme through the issuing of European debt, guaranteed by the EU budget and by an increase in the EU's own resources (EU taxes[60]).

Initially, NG-EU was opposed by all sovereignist leaders and governments because it was expected to promote more (fiscal) integration. However, the criticism had different emphases in western and eastern Europe. According to the League, NG-EU was a 'rip-off' because the money will be dribbled out only at the end of 2021. Instead, the Italian government should not wait for EU support and should finance national recovery through permanent bonds purchased by the ECB. Specifically, RRF was considered a rip-off because 'it is a mega European Stability Mechanism (ESM)', with the difference that the latter 'was imposed on Greece by the Troika and the former will now be imposed by the European Commission'. All this would lead to new taxes, including taxes on housing, savings, and property. The League also criticized the fact that funds

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prime-minister-viktor-orbán-at-the-opening-of-the-budapest-office-of-r4s-consulting/ [accessed 10 May 2022].

[58] See Orbán, V. (2020h) 'Interview with Viktor Orbán on the Pannon RTV programme Public Affairs', 16 June 2020, http://miniszterelnok.hu/interview-with-viktor-orban-on-the-pannon-rtv-programme-public-affairs/ [accessed 10 May 2022].

[59] ibid.

[60] The European Council Conclusions of 21 July 2020 read as follows on p. 8: "The Union will over the coming years work towards reforming the own resources system and introduce new own resources" (European Council Conclusions of 21 July 2020).

were targeted to the future 'while they are needed now'.[61] According to Brothers of Italy, negotiations on the NG-EU 'are well below expectations because the final deal has fewer grants and more conditionality'. Moreover, for Giorgia Meloni, 'we risk an unacceptable compulsory administration of our economic policy decisions'. Both the League and Brothers of Italy stressed the time factor: 'we do not have time to wait for the money from the RRF. We should keep only the part that includes grants. We should use the low interest rates that ECB has set to finance national recovery through the issuing of sovereign bonds'.[62] At the same time, the League and Brothers of Italy argued for a revision of EU fiscal rules (SGP, Fiscal Compact, Two Pack and Six Pack), without however specifying in which direction. Italy should use – without limit and without the need for co-financing – all the European funds from the Multiannual Financial Framework 2014-2020 which it has not yet used in order to face the pandemic. The two parties underlined that health risks should be limited also by fighting illegal immigration. Specifically, Brothers of Italy demanded immediate (economic) support from the ECB, without the need to 'waste time discussing fiscal criteria'. Both parties reiterated their opposition to the use of funds from the special programme set up by the ESM for dealing with the healthcare costs generated by the pandemic (ESM Pandemic Crisis Support). The conditionality assumed to be attached to such funds was considered an unjustifiable constraint on the autonomy of national decision-making.[63] Although sharing the same criticism of NG-EU, the following year the two parties assumed a different position regarding the formation of the national unity Draghi government (inaugurated on February 13, 2021) which was set up exactly for the need to accelerate the management of NG-EU funds by the Italian state. In parliament, the League voted in favour of the Draghi government, Brothers of Italy opposed it. For Marine Le Pen, the July 2020 deal was 'the worst deal for France in the history of the EU, sacrificing France's future and independence'[64]. 'France will become a contributor to the RFF while having no control over the allocation of funds'[65]. For Le Pen, the pandemic 'has shown the limitations of the EU project, particularly its celebration of

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[61] Salvini, M. (2020) 'E' una fregatura, è un super MES', 21 July 2020, available at: http://www.huffingtonpost.it/entry/salvini-e-una-fregatura-e-unsupermes_it_5f16b3d9c5b6ca c5b7313c01?i6d&utm_hp_ref=it-homepage [accessed 10 May 2022].

[62] Party manifesto of Fratelli d'Italia on the EU ('Brothers of Italy') (2020), available at: http://www.fratelli-italia.it/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Programma-completo-1.pdf (last access 21 November 2020).

[63] Fratelli d'Italia (2020) 'Coronavirus: le proposte del Centrodestra' [Coronavirus: proposals by the Centre-wing', available at: http://www.fratelli-italia.it/propostecentrodestra/ [accessed 10 May 2022].

[64] Le Pen, M. (2020), Twitter profile, available at: http://twitter.com/MLP_officiel/status/1285462 202158329857?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E128546220215 8329857%7Ctwgr%5E&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.dhnet.be%2Factu%2Fmonde%2Fplan-europeen-le-pire-accord-selon-le-pen-5f16d048d8ad58621946a6f6 [accessed 10 May 2022].

[65] Rassemblement National - press notice (2020) 'Union européenne : vers un impôt européen', available at: http://rassemblementnational.fr/communiques/union-europeenne-vers-un-impot europeen/ [accessed 10 May 2022]

the freedom of free movement of goods and people and the respect for 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'. Instead of giving back competences to member states, 'the agreement reached by the European Council insists on promoting more Europe'.[66]

In Poland and Hungary, sovereignist leaders developed a different criticism of NG-EU, focused on the rule of law conditionality attached to the distribution of funds. After the political decision taken by national leaders at the meeting of 17-21 July, the Council and the EP approved (in November 2020) a regulation which allows the Commission to withhold the funds from those member states not respecting the legal principles founding the EU. Both Polish and Hungarian sovereignist leaders threatened to veto the regulation which required unanimous approval by all national parliaments. For Orbán, the rule of law conditionality was an infringement on national sovereignty. According to him, 'the EU considers only those member states that admit migrants as those governed by the rule of law'. He viewed conditionality as 'a blackmail through which only those supporting migration will benefit from EU funds'. According to Orbán, rule of law conditionality is not based on objective criteria and undisputed legal standards. In any case, 'any new procedure aimed at penalizing member states should only be introduced with the unanimous amendments of the Treaties'.[67] Moreover, in line with a moral hazard argument, Orbán asserted that 'Hungary has never considered treating the economic fallback with joint loans as an adequate solution'.[68] Indeed, 'the whole idea of what is called 'the New Generation' is philosophically very far from what Hungarians think of the world. Hungarians think that money must first be earned before it is spent; if anyone wants to reverse this order – if they want a loan and want to spend it, and only then work for it – then they should only do so at their own risk'.[69] At the end, he supported NG-EU due to the extraordinary circumstances of the pandemic, continuing to criticize, however, the Commission's role in the distribution of funds. Not only because the Commission would privilege the richer member states,

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[66] Rassemblement National - press notice (2020) 'Plan de relance de la Commission européenne: une tartufferie au service du projet européiste', available at: http://rassemblementnational.fr/communiques/plan-de-relance-de-la-commission-europeenne-une-tartufferie-au-service-du-projet-europeiste/ [accessed 10 May 2022].

[67] Orbán, V., (2020a) 'Information Note Statement by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán', available at: https://miniszterelnok.hu/information-note-statement-by-prime-minister-viktor-orban/ [accessed 10 May 2022].

[68] Orbán, V. (2020i) 'Press statement following talks among members of the Visegrád Four', 3 July 2020, available at: https://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/press-statement-by-prime-minister-viktor-orbán-following-talks-among-members-of-the-visegrad-four/ [accessed 10 May 2022]. Also in another speech he said that 'Hungary is instinctively opposed to collective borrowing'

[69] Orbán, V. (2020j) 'Press statement following a meeting of heads of government from the Visegrád Four', 11 June 2020, available at: https://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/press-statement-by-prime-minister-viktor-orbán-following-a-meeting-of-heads-of-government-from-the-visegrad-four/ [accessed 10 May 2022].

but mainly because 'money is needed for different purposes in the North, in the South, in the West and in Central Europe' (again, for Orbán there is no eastern Europe). Interestingly, according to him, Hungary did not need financial assistance to deal with the pandemic's consequences, contrary to other countries 'overwhelmed by their massive state debt'. [70] There will be 'a Hungarian way of life, tax cuts, production instead of debt, work instead of welfare benefits, enterprise instead of sharp practice, a patriotic economy instead of globalist wheeler-dealing, national identity and character instead of servility, and Hungarian children instead of migrants'. [71] Orbán often underlined that 'central European countries were less hit by the pandemic and have contrasted it in an excellent way'.[72] That is why he was critical of increasing public debts to face the pandemic. A statement that contradicted the importance that cohesion funds have for Hungary. For Orbán, 'what the European Left refers to as the 'rule of law' is in fact the rule of blackmail: it is not about the rule of law initiative, but a blackmail strategy. 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'.[73] Orbán reiterated his argument that 'the growth of the entire European Union is shifting eastwards, to central Europe'.[74] According to him, 'this region [central Europe] is much more promising – in terms of competitiveness, international competitiveness – than the rest of Europe'.[75] Finally, Orbán connected the pandemic to migration, arguing that 'the incidence of epidemic disease on the migration route is continuously increasing'. The pandemic is said to open 'an era of

[70] Orbán, V. (2020i) 'Press statement following talks among members of the Visegrád Four', 3 July 2020, available at: http://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/press-statement-by-prime-minister-viktor-orbán-following-talks-among-members-of-the-visegrad-four/ [accessed 10 May 2022].

[71] Orbán, V. (2020l) 'Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's "State of the Nation" address', 16 February 2020, available at: http://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/prime-minister-viktor-orbáns-state-of-the-nation-address-2/ [accessed 10 May 2022].

[72] Orbán, V. (2020i) 'Press statement following talks among members of the Visegrád Four', 3 July 2020, available at: http://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/press-statement-by-prime-minister-viktor-orbán-following-talks-among-members-of-the-visegrad-four/ [accessed 10 May 2022].

[73] Orbán, V. (2020e) 'Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's address to the Hungarian parliament before the start of daily business', 21 September 2020, available at: http://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/prime-minister-viktor-orbáns-address-to-the-hungarian-parliament-before-the-start-of-daily-business/ [accessed 10 May 2022].

[74] Orbán, V. (2020c) 'Address by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán at the foundation stone laying ceremony for construction of the high-voltage power line between Pince and Cirkovce', 20 October 2020, available at: http://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/address-by-prime-minister-viktor-orbán-at-the-foundation-stone-laying-ceremony-for-construction-of-the-high-voltage-power-line-between-pince-and-cirkovce/ [accessed 10 May 2022].

[75] Orbán, V. (2020f) 'Press statement by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán After the Bled Strategic Forum', 31 August 2020, available at: http://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/press-statement-by-prime-minister-viktor-orbán-after-the-bled-strategic-forum/ [accessed 10 May 2022].

sobriety after an era of liberal and global illusions'. The pandemic helped Orbán to repropose his criticism of liberalism.[76]

Faced with an unprecedented crisis, western European sovereignists had to accept, although gradually and grudgingly, the adoption of new fiscal instruments. They adapted to NG-EU, developing a criticism around the amount and timing of the funds, the supposed deception that the funds brought with them ('this is not free money, it is loans with a hidden conditionality inside') and, paradoxically, the overall inadequacy of the funds to face the pandemic. Eastern European sovereignists, who looked favourably to NG-EU, became however rigid in denouncing the rule of law conditionality attached to the disbursement of its funds. Indeed, Hungarian, and Polish governments threatened to veto the approval of NG-EU, notwithstanding their interests in receiving those funds, although at the end they withdrew the threat. Eventually, they submitted to the ECJ their opinion on the (presumed) 'illegality' of the rule of law clause inserted in the NG-EU's regulation. After the ECJ considered fully legitimate the clause[77], the Commission decided to withhold the funds to transfer to Hungary and Poland, because of their 'open violation of the EU rule of law principles'.

## Sovereignism and differentiated disintegration

Western and eastern sovereignists shared several criticisms of the EU, but they showed also to have significant differences. All sovereignists questioned the principle of EU law supremacy, with the corresponding role by the ECJ and the Commission to supervise member states' respect of Treaty provisions. All sovereignists claimed the necessity to repatriate competences (*policy sovereignism*), particularly those close to core state powers. Two core state powers were crucial to sovereignists in the 2010s: on the western side, economic policy, which was at the centre of the public debate during the financial crisis (2009-2015), whose main issue involved national fiscal sovereignty. On the eastern side, migration policy[78], which ignited a reaction with the 2015-2016 Syrian refugee crisis, whose main issues involved territorial sovereignty. Both policies continued to be at the centre of sovereignist criticism also in the post-2016 period. Western European sovereignists mainly targeted the EMU, according to a logic of *economic sovereignism*. Although exiting the EMU was gradually abandoned as an option, western sovereignist leaders raised strong criticism of the constraints on

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[76] Orbán, V. (2020i) 'Press statement following talks among members of the Visegrád Four', 3 July 2020, available at: http://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/press-statement-by-prime-minister-viktor-orbán-following-talks-among-members-of-the-visegrad-four/ [accessed 10 May 2022].

[77] On 16 February 2022, available at: http://www.hrw.org/news/2022/02/16/eu-top-court-approves-linking-eu-funds-rule-law [accessed 10 May 2022].

[78] According to some authors (Bedea and Kwadwo 2021), the migration crisis has been a strong driver of the linkage between populism and sovereignism. Indeed, migration was a crucial issue also in western European member states.

national fiscal rules. In the Netherlands, the preoccupation was on preventing the bail out of the member states in financial stress. French and Italian sovereignists proposed changes to the ECB's mandate, although without specifying in which direction. Sovereignist parties in Italy, France and (to a lesser extent) in the Netherlands called for a closer involvement of national parliaments in EU economic governance[79]. For different reasons, the euro was considered an inadequate currency for the economic systems of the three countries.

In Hungary and Poland, instead, a critique of EU policies was instead based on identity claims, according to a logic of *cultural sovereignism*. Some EU policies were considered a threat to their cultural and religious roots. Both Hungarian and Polish sovereignist governments argued that it is the state's duty to determine the constitutional identity of a nation. Contrasting the EU's aims to impose liberal values on its member states, 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, whose outcome has been, according to Scheppele (2018), a form of autocratic legalism. Sovereignism in eastern Europe was motivated by the willingness to defend a specific national identity from the multicultural corruption triggered by the EU. The criticism of supranational actors was based on the latter's lack of understanding of national cultures and traditions due to their cosmopolitan culture. The Commission was the main target of this criticism, but also the EP was not spared. Indeed, eastern European sovereignists asked for a stronger role for national parliaments, proposing (as the Orbán government did as a contribution to the Conference on the Future of Europe, Council of the European Union 2021) to transform the EP into a 'Parliamentary Assembly [constituted of] representatives of national parliaments'. In short, for them, opposition to migrants had mainly a cultural, not an economic, rationale. Indeed, that opposition disappeared (particularly in the Polish case) when it came to welcoming the hundreds of thousands Ukrainian refugees in March 2022, because of their cultural affinity with Poles.

Economic and cultural sovereignisms led, between 2016-2021, to different attitudes and positions on crucial policies. Regarding the EU budget, while Viktor Orbán and Jaroslaw Kaczyński defended the EU budget for funding cohesion and defence policies which benefited their countries (Bedea and Kwadwo 2021), Marine Le Pen and Matteo Salvini pushed for a drastic reduction in the EU budget. This was certainly due to their respective countries' differences as net recipients and net contributors to the budget. Regarding migration policy, while eastern European sovereignists perceived the quota system proposed by the Commission as an instrument for undermining their control over national borders, western European sovereignists were instead determined to support the Commission's proposal. Although both western and eastern sovereignists were against the openness of the EU, for eastern European sovereignists the

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[79] Sovereignist parties called for help from China or Russia and were in favour of increasing the debt limits with the purpose of strengthening sovereignty at domestic level.

Commission did not have the right to advance the redistribution proposal because of its supposed lack of legitimacy[80] while western European sovereignists argued that migration should be tackled as a European, not a national, issue, thus requiring an active role for the Commission. In Italy, sovereignists were split between two recipes for dealing with migrants: helping them go back home (Brothers of Italy) or pushing for mandatory and automatic redistribution schemes (the League). Eastern European sovereignists formulated the idea of solidarity as protecting national and European borders against a threat.

Sovereignist claims for the repatriation of competences were justified by different rationales. For western European sovereignists, it was based on the supposed *damage* that the deepening of EU integration brings. The euro damaged the national economy, migration policy put excessive burdens on countries located on the EU's external borders. Competence repatriation was thus the reaction to that damage. For eastern European sovereignists, supranational integration represented instead a *threat* to their national identity. The rule of law conditionality threatened Poland's sovereign capacity to organise its judicial system according to its constitutional traditions, migration policy threatened Hungary's Christian identity built up over centuries. These differences not only did not make an alliance between European sovereignists easy, but they did not help them to agree on the policies to repatriate (or better, to disintegrate).[81] After 2016, all sovereignists came gradually to share the view that the EU cannot be left but can be emptied from inside, transforming it into an association of 27 sovereign states expression of a Europe of homelands. Since then, no sovereignist government or opposition has raised the issue of exiting the EU, not even the Polish government which solicited the revolutionary judgement of the Polish constitutional court of 7 October 2021, an exit made even more unrealistic by the pandemic crisis and the Russian aggression of Ukraine. Rather, sovereignists have gradually claimed the disintegration (repatriation) of specific policy regimes and yet accepting the integration of other policy regimes or even proposing the formation of new integrated policy regimes, such as defence and security. This perspective of differentiated disintegration, although lacking a theoretical conceptualisation, has become the electoral narrative of sovereignts leaders. During the French presidential elections held on April 2022, the sovereignist candidate for the French presidency, Marine Le Pen, argued that 'British-style exit from the European Union is not in my plans […], my plan is to build a European alliance of nations […]. (My program 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'[82].

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[80] They argue that to respond to the crisis they (and not the Commission) had to decide how to act, including closing borders.

[81] The 'exception' here are Hungary and Poland, which belong to the Visegrad group.

[82] Roger Cohen, 'Le Pen Backs NATO-Russia Reconciliation and Reduced French Role in Alliance', *The New York Times,* 13 April 2022.

For sovereignist leaders, the process of differentiated disintegration should be necessarily managed 'intergovernmentally', specifically by the European Council. Because the latter's decision-making is regulated by the unanimity criterion, for sovereignist governmental leaders it is the only institution that could keep the 'disintegration-integration' dynamic under control. The unanimity requirements assure each member state governmental leader a veto power to use for balancing centripetal and centrifugal pressures (Fossum 2020). Yet, although intergovernmentalism implies the pooling, not the sharing, of national sovereignties (Fabbrini 2015), also the pooling of national sovereignties might imply their limitation. Indeed, several studies (Bickerton, Hodson and Puetter 2015) have shown that the European Council is a highly institutionalized form of intergovernmental coordination and not a traditional diplomatic forum (see also, Wessels 2016 and Puetter 2014), a feature that contravenes sovereignist expectations.

Thus, two dilemmas arise for sovereignists: first, if intergovernmentalism is the preferred form of governance, how to preserve national control over policymaking and at the same time accept the institutionalized policy coordination of the EU that might limit national control? Second, if exiting the EU is no longer on their agenda and each member state can decide the policies in which to stay and those from which to get out, how to preserve the EU and to de-institutionalize it at the same time? If the domestic implications of sovereignism consisted in promoting the model of 'illiberal democracy' (Bertoncini and Reinié 2022), the external (EU) implications might consist in promoting the differentiated disintegration of the EU. If sovereignists refuse the primacy of EU laws over national ones, and the corresponding tertiary role of supranational institutions, the EU would be transformed into a generic alliance of nations, although keeping the same name. In its contribution to the Conference on the Future of Europe (Council of the European Union 2021), the Orbán government asserted that 'the European Union will either become a union of nations or it will cease to exist'.

## Conclusions

The paper has investigated the positions taken by nationalistic leaders from 2016 to 2021. Notwithstanding some initial uncertainties (on possible *Frexit* or *Italexit* or *Poliexit* or *Huexit*), nationalistic leaders or parties did not follow the British example of leaving the EU. Besides the opportunism of their decision, those leaders and parties had to elaborate a new narrative for dealing with the EU. We defined as sovereignism the project to endogenise nationalism within the EU. Our research showed that institutional sovereignism was the least common denominator among the different European sovereignisms, based on their refusal of the supremacy of EU laws over national ones (with the implication of cutting down ECJ's supervisory role). All sovereignists argued for a repatriation of competences, with the corresponding downsize of the Commission's prerogatives (and the ECB's role in the EMU). All

sovereignists asked for policy repatriation, claiming the necessity, for the nation state, to play a larger role in policymaking. However, western, and eastern European sovereignists focused their call for repatriation on different types of policy. In eastern Europe, sovereignist leaders requested the repatriation of policies such as migration but supported a larger EU budget for financing cohesion and structural funds or promoting a common European army (protecting those countries from the expansionary ambitions of Russia, dramatically confirmed by the Russian invasion of Ukraine, although the relation with Putin's Russia remains a dividing topic between Polish and Hungarian sovereignists). In Western Europe, policy sovereignism concerned primarily economic competences, particularly the disintegration of EMU. While both western and eastern sovereignists opposed the deepening of the EU, however they divided regarding the enlargement of the EU. If eastern European sovereignists repeatedly called to admit Serbia and other West Balkan countries to the EU (and, after the Russian aggression, Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia), this perspective was anathema for western European sovereignists.

In conclusion, if all sovereignists criticized the supranational character (*institutional sovereignism)* and the administratively centralized policy system (*policy sovereignism*) developed within the EU, they differed on the rationale of their criticism, based more on an economic discourse (*economic sovereignism)* in western Europe and more on a cultural discourse (*cultural sovereignism*) in eastern Europe. The sovereignists' approach would lead to the *differentiated disintegration* of the EU, although it remains unclear which policies they aimed to disintegrate and which ones to keep integrated. In general, sovereignists, if domestically are promoting the illiberal involution of their country, externally they are favouring the transformation of the EU into an alliance of nations devoid of supranational bonds, but with the same name.

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All speeches analysed can be found at available at: https://www.dropbox.com/sh/n3djkye92qgcgl2/AADry-Ds44Jd9ya4oIMAYIYaa?dl=0

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