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Saving Europe online?
European identity and the European Union's Facebook communication during the eurozone crisis

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ABSTRACT

Since the beginning of the eurozone crisis in 2009, skyrocketing debts of some national governments of the euro area required financial contributions of all euro countries to facilitate bailout packages. Such measures of the European Union (EU) demand a certain degree of solidarity amongst the European countries. Yet, national discourses indicate renationalising trends and accusations against other member states, leading to a wider gap between struggling and better-off countries and a questioning of the European project as a whole. Thus, the eurozone crisis turned to some extent into a European 'identity crisis'.

Drawing on the concepts of *Banal Europeanism* (Cram, 2010) and *European identity light* (Risse, 2010), this paper deals with a 'thin' European identity, which seems to be the minimum needed to ensure stability in the EU. This study asks to what extent the EU promotes such a European identity during the eurozone crisis on the social networking site Facebook - one of the few channels through which the EU can reach European citizens directly. This research question was approached using a content analysis of 504 Facebook posts of the European Parliament (EP) and European Commission (EC) published between 2009 and 2012. Moreover, two semi-structured interviews with EP and EC Facebook editors were conducted to contextualise the quantitative data.

The results show that the EU institutions promote themselves as legitimate bodies for solving the crisis. However, the explicit promotion of a sense of European community through deploying a 'we-perspective' and marking the EU's distinctiveness is less prevalent. The interviews revealed that the institutions' focus is rather on creating a dialogue with the citizens on European issues. The paper concludes that such a Europe-wide public discourse is an important element of Europeanisation, but a stronger emphasis on communicating the 'commonness' of the European project may be necessary to balance hostility in national discourses.

INTRODUCTION

Presented as a powerful symbol for European integration a decade ago (Shore, 2000, 2012), the euro currency became in recent years a symbol for a crisis of historical dimensions: the European sovereign debt crisis. In late 2009 it appeared that some national governments of the euro area could not refinance their skyrocketing debts without external help. Bailout funds such as the European Union's (EU) European Stability Mechanism are based on capital contributed by the eurozone members proportional to their individual economic strength. Although the redistribution of revenues from better-off countries to struggling ones might be paid back at one point (Hix, 2012), for the first time in its young history the EU seems to need what Habermas (2006: 76) called 'solidarity amongst strangers'.

In the absence of a European-wide public discourse, however, national considerations and discriminations against other member states started to dominate national discourses. Publishing headlines such as 'The Fraudsters of the Peloponnese', Germany's influential tabloid *Bild Zeitung* consequently framed the Greek people as lazy and corrupt, even in non-economic articles (Arlt and Storz, 2011; Le Monde diplomatique, 2012). Greek and Italian media portrayed German chancellor Angela Merkel as the new 'European dictator' imposing the 'Fourth Reich' in the form of obsessive austerity measures (Galpin, 2012; Shore, 2012). Also national leaders engaged in this insulting discourse creating 'internal others' within Europe. British Prime Minister David Cameroon referred to 'countries in other parts of Europe that live beyond their means' (BBC, 2011a) and considered violating EU treaties by halting immigration of Greeks into the UK (The Guardian, 2012). Spanish finance minister, Elena Salgado, defined the negative benchmark of the crisis by claiming that regarding the extent of the crisis 'Spain is not Greece' (Daily Telegraph, 2012).

The eurozone crisis is characterised by deep mistrust, the emergence of 'internal others' and renationalising interests and identities in Europe (Bastasin, 2012; Galpin, 2012). As Fligstein et al. (2011: 5) put it, 'national concerns and national identity appeared to trump the European ideal that everyone was in the project together'. As a result, some authors conclude that this economic crisis turned into a European identity crisis (Guibernau, 2011; Galpin, 2012; Lichtenstein; 2012, Shore, 2012). Moreover, the crisis opened up reflections on the whole European project. Angela Merkel claimed drastically, 'if the euro fails, Europe fails' (BBC, 2011b). In sum, Europe is at the crossroads of deepening solidarity and integration or commencing its failure (Boldt et al., 2012).

Public opinion could be influenced by, or be influencing, these trends. Since Autumn 2009, trust in the EU has fallen from 48% to a historic low of 31% in Spring 2012 (Eurobarometer, 2012). Moreover, Europeans do not feel closer to citizens from other member states during the crisis. Yet, an overwhelming 84% of Europeans think that European countries should work closer together as a result of the crisis. Thus, it seems that Europeans still share the idea of European cooperation, but trust in the EU and other member states is declining.

This paper is concerned with the issue of European collective identity promotion in light of renationalising trends during the eurozone crisis. It assess to what extent a sense of European community is promoted by EU institutions as a counterweight to nationally biased discourses in the EU member states. The focus is thereby on the EU's public communication on the social networking site Facebook, which has been recognised as an important instrument for 'communicating Europe' and building a sense of European community in recent EU communication strategies (European Commission, 2007b; European Parliament, 2010). Bridging different disciplines such as media and communications, political science, anthropology and sociology, the theoretical part of this study (chapter 2) is driven by three assumptions: first, taking a social constructivist view on collective identities, it is argued that EU institutions and their communicative practises can play an important role in European identity building (chapter 2.1.1 – 2.1.2). Second, online communication offers one of the few transnational channels through which the EU can directly address EU citizens without relying on national media outlets (chapter 2.1.3 – 2.1.4). Third, taking into account Europe's diversity and the importance of national identities, a 'thin' European identity consisting of a basic level of a sense of community and legitimation of EU institutions could be the key to ensure the solidarity that is needed in this crisis (chapter 2.2).

Ultimately, by examining to what extent the EU promotes a European identity on Facebook, this paper seeks to contribute to the understanding of identity-related discourses during the euro crisis and the role EU institutions and their use of social media may or may not play in these processes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Collective identity formation in the context of the European Union

Issues related to 'identity' have become a highly contested terrain in social sciences and the term itself somewhat 'overstressed' (Brubaker and Cooper, 2000: 1). For the purpose of this study, a clear conceptualisation of European collective identity is therefore central. Drawing on nationalism theory, I discuss in this section the role of institutions and symbolic communication for identity formation. I argue that in the absence of pan-European media, online social networking sites offer EU institutions new opportunities for creating a sense of European community.

What is a collective identity and how does it emerge?

A useful point of departure for conceptualising European collective identity is nationalism theory, in which collective identity plays a key role (Tambini, 1998). This does not mean that the EU is equal to a nation-state, in fact Wallace (1996) and Wiener (1998) argue it is a 'non-state'. However, European identity is a matter of collective identity and as such, on a theoretical level not much different to national identity (Delanty and Rumford, 2005).

Ernest Gellner (1983) suggests that the modern nation-state was constructed in response to the requirements of the modern industrial society. From such a 'constructivist' perspective, as adopted in this paper, collective identities are created by humankind to link an individual to a group. They emerge 'in the very process by which individuals and social groups make sense of who they are and what they want' (Risse, 2010: 20). If collective identities are constructed rather than given by nature, as the 'primordialist' view proposes (Gellner, 1997), the question arises, what processes make people feel belonging to a certain group? Karl W. Deutsch (1966 [1953]) argues that the more efficient individuals can communicate with each other ('density of social communication'), the more likely it is that a national identity emerges. Although common language and culture are key aspects, other factors such as habits, preferences, symbols also facilitate a common ground, which Deutsch illustrates with the example of the multilingual Swiss people. Crucial for national identity formation is the ability to communicate more effectively and over a larger variety of topics, which differentiates the members of a nation to non-members.

Benedict Anderson (2006 [1983]) focuses less on manifest interactions between members of a community, but on the ability of the individual to imagine the nation as a whole and the nation's 'commonness'. In this view, modern nations are *imagined communities,* since an individual member will never know all other members personally; she/he has to imagine them. Similar to Deutsch, Anderson argues that new media of communication, in his account the novel and the newspaper, stimulate nation building. Key is that media allow temporal simultaneity, meaning that a member of a community might not know what the many fellows do at a certain time, but 'he has complete confidence in their steady, anonymous, simultaneous activity' (Anderson, 2006: 26). Hence, media is seen as an instrument for the individual to imagine the community.

Anderson describes the process of collective identity formation as primarily driven by administrative or authoritative units. In other words, the political identity of a nation is based on the social identity within political institutions (Risse and Grabowksy, 2008). Also Hobsbawm (1990), while acknowledging the influence from the bottom, emphasises that identity construction is essentially an elite-driven process. Moreover, Deutsch (1966: 188) draws on 'deliberate pioneers and leaders of national awakening' and Brass (1991) highlights the role of institutions as identity-transmitters. In this sense, media is a means for institutions and elites to transfer a collective identity to the masses.

After all, how do these nationalism theories inform processes of European identity formation? Two aspects seem to be crucial. First, *communication*, horizontal as well as vertical, is central for the emergence and 'imagination' of collective identities. Second, *political institutions* play an important role as identity promoters by transferring their social identity to the masses. Combining the two aspects, this paper focuses on *how EU institutions engage in the formation of a European collective identity in their public communication on Facebook.*

EU institutions as identity builders

The EU's quest to go beyond its technocratic character and form a new European identity can be traced back to its first official formulation in 1973 in the 'Declaration on European identity', developing into 'one of the central issues facing the EU today' (Mayer and Palmowski, 2004: 574). Scholars have examined the EU's tools for identity building (Shore, 2000; Laffan, 2004; Bruter, 2005; Valentini, 2005). Laffan's (2004) analysis includes a cognitive dimension (symbolic representation) of European identity formation. Although she

defines the symbolic representation as being consisted of 'words, signs, and gestures' (Laffan, 2004: 78), she only focuses on materialist EU symbols such as the EU flag, passport and driver license. Communicative practises are left out in her analysis. The same holds for other studies (Shore, 2000; Bruter, 2005), although Bruter includes the impact of political communication in the form of news media coverage.

Discursive institutionalism, an approach from political science, delivers useful insights concerning the role of institutions' public communication in identity construction. It provides the idea of 'communicative discourse' as the 'use of ideas in the mass process of public persuasion in the political sphere' (Schmidt, 2010: 57). Regarding European identity, Schmidt (2011: 16) argues:

> [W]e miss a vital element in the construction of identity if we fail to recognize that it not only involves a sense of belonging to Europe and active engagement in Europe but also that it demands communication about Europe.

Schmidt breaks down her approach to the formula that European identity building should not only include 'being' and 'doing' the EU but also 'saying' what the EU does and is. Hence, it matters how EU institutions communicate about Europe and the common project. Moreover, it matters how they mark the European identity in public communication.[1]

Media and public communication as transmitter of European identity

The idea that media plays a crucial role for collective identities is confirmed by scholars of media and communications in various contexts (Schlesinger, 1991; Fornas, 1995; Silverstone, 1999; Morley, 2001; Tambini and Rother, 2009). Georgiou (2006: 11) argues that 'media … have become organised mechanisms of great significance for constructing identities in local, national and transnational contexts within modernity'.

Unsurprisingly, strong links have been identified between European identity formation and media systems and narratives (Collins, 1998; Kaitatzi-Whitlock, 2007; Bondebjerg, 2008). Most scholars agree that 'the EU as a political structure lacks a corresponding

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[1] Other authors make similar points though not focusing on EU institutions. Calhoun (1997, 2003) who theorises nationalism in the tradition of Foucault (1972) as a 'discursive formation' argues that European discourse could form European identity by how it represents Europe and how it engages with other parts of the world. Delanty (2005: 409) stresses in his account of European identity as a cosmopolitan identity that the 'most manifest expressions of Europeanization are in discourses about Europe'.

communication system' (Kaitatzi-Whitlock, 2007: 687). Often emphasised is the lack of a pan-European television channel. Two experiments of creating such channels in the 1980s – *Europa* and *Eurikon* – failed (Collins, 2002); the multilingual news channel *euronews* is largely unnoticed as it primarily targets the business elite. Consequently, the EU media representation depends on national media outlets, which are not always Brussels' best friends. Kaitatzi-Whitlock (2007) characterises EU affairs in national media as having a minimal visibility, a national bias and a focus on personalisation and 'ethno-controversial' issues. Only some studies on quality press offer less pessimistic accounts (Trenz, 2007; Koopmans and Statham, 2010).

Besides the EU's rather negative media image, the EU itself has been blamed for an inadequate 'marketing-led' information policy (Podkalicka and Shore, 2010). It is argued that the EU's 'democratic deficit' (Hix, 2008) is accompanied by a 'communication deficit' pointing to the ineffectiveness of EU communications in reaching the public (Schlesinger, 2007). In sum, the lack of pan-European media and rather negative EU media image, as well as the EU's impotent public communication, suggest that the media's potential to stimulate European identity formation has not yet been exploited.

New media, new opportunities?

In recent years, much attention has been paid to the opportunities the Internet offers for political organisations to engage with the public. While one strand of research looks at the possibilities of 'e-government' (Chadwick and May, 2003; Coleman and Shane, 2012), another strand focuses on the changing relationship between media, politics and citizens in terms of political communication (Bennett, 2003; Gurevitch et al., 2009; Negrine and Papathanassopoulos, 2011). It is argued that political organisations have gained more autonomy from the mass media, since they can bypass traditional gatekeepers more easily and communicate directly to people (Davis et al., 2009; Porta and Mosca, 2009; Koopmans and Zimmermann, 2010). For the European level, Kaitatzi-Whitlock (2007) considers the Internet as the only platform where citizens could perform their passive and active information rights, meaning inform themselves about EU issues and communicate about them in a participatory sense.

The literature also highlights potentials of the online environment in terms of identity formation (Byrne, 2009; Kendall, 2011; Bharucha, 2011). A recent focus has been on social networking sites (SNS). Two arguments from the field of political online communication seem to be relevant for this study. First, platforms such as Facebook constitute a 'semi-public'

space, which is located between the 'private' and the 'public' (Boyd and Ellison, 2007; Schmidt, 2009). People write personal messages on their friend's pages, comment on public posts of political organisations and share those political messages with their network. As a result, social media messages can be more influential than those disseminated by traditional media, 'because audience members are more likely to believe messages they receive through their personal networks', as Owen and Davis (2008: 668) argue in their study about the White House's online communication. Second, social media help people imagine the community, because it enables the interaction with strangers (Coleman, 2006). Fellow community members can even become real to the extent that we see their faces on their profile pictures. In the same vein, Grudz et al. (2011) argue that a sense of community could be created within the network of followers of a person's (or institution's) Twitter profile.

These potentials were also acknowledged by the European Commission (EC) and the European Parliament (EP) in their latest communication strategies. The EC aims to contribute 'to the development of a European public sphere' (European Commission, 2007a: 4) and 'help create a sense of European community' (European Commission, 2007b: 6) through its online communication. The European Parliament (2010: 2) sees social media's potential for 'fostering the development of a sense of shared public interest throughout the EU'. Consequently, EU institutions communicate on different SNS such as Facebook and YouTube ('EUTube') since the late 2000's, but research on these EU channels is still scarce (Podkalicka and Shore, 2010).

Conceptualising European collective identity

Up to this point, I have highlighted the role of EU institutions and their top-down public communication for the formation of a European collective identity. Still lacking is a clear idea of what a meaningful, non-national but transnational, European identity could consist of. To close this conceptual gap, this section develops European identity as a 'thin' form of collective identity by drawing on the concepts of *Banal Europeanism* (Cram, 2010) and *European identity light* (Risse, 2010). Moreover, the merits of promoting such an identity during the eurozone crisis will be discussed.

No one would die for Europe

The strongest expression of the adoption of a national identity might be one's willingness to die for the nation (Smith, 1995). Factors that contribute to such a 'self-sacrifing' attitude, thus factors that form 'thick' collective identities, are mostly described as shared characteristics of

people such as religion, ethnicity, trade relations, history, culture, language and territory (Kantner, 2006; Fligstein, 2008). EU citizens do not have much of that in common. The EU has no common language, no single culture and even no fixed territory, the latter being almost constantly subject to debate in negotiations of enlargement. In fact, being European lacks a 'clearly defined set of markers' (Delanty, 2005: 11). Thus, a strong European collective identity is unlikely to emerge, since the categories for an individual's identification with the group are simply not present (Guibernau, 2011). To put different, it seems unlikely that Europeans are willing to 'die for Europe' (Smith, 1995: 139). It must be asked, however, if this heroic or 'thick' form of identity is really necessary for a supranational organisation like the EU to be supported, legitimised and functional.

A thin concept of European collective identity

As alternatives, some authors suggest weaker versions of European identity labelled as 'Banal Europeanism' (Cram, 2001, 2010; McNamara, 2011) and 'identity light' (Risse, 2003, 2010; Checkel, forthcoming). These concepts do not presume homogeneity among the European citizens throughout a range of different categories. Moreover, identity development is not seen as a zero-sum game, but as a dynamic interaction between multiple identities such as transnational, national, regional, cultural and political identities. Risse (2005: 296) speaks in this context of a 'marble cake', in which different identity components 'influence each other, mesh and blend into each other'. In essence, European identity is an addition to existing identities. More importantly both concepts suggest that a collective identity is shaped through its symbolic representation in discourse and linguistics. I shall explain that by taking a closer look at these concepts.

Banal Europeanism

Drawing on Michael Billig's (1995) *Banal Nationalism*, Laura Cram (2010: 8) defines banal Europeanism as 'a largely implicit, even sub-conscious, attachment to or identification with, the EU as a legitimate source of political authority'. Central here is the low-level, day-to-day reinforcement of a common consciousness about the existence of the EU institutions among European people. The attachment to the EU is constantly reproduced through 'banal, contingent and contextual' (Cram, 2010: 8) processes such as carrying an EU driving license, using euro coins and reading about European politics in the newspaper. These events are not grand and glorious efforts of nation promotion - rather they constitute what Billig (1995: 14) describes as the 'unwaved, unsaluted, unnoticed flag'.

The concept becomes clearer when we look at its operationalisation. Billig (1995) and Rosie et al. (2004) examined banal nationalism in British newspaper articles by looking for 'national flag' references such as 'Britain' or 'British'. Similarly, Trenz (2006) analysed explicit 'European' references in newspapers across Europe. According to the theory, the important outcome of the daily experiences with those 'identity markers' in media is a normalisation and acceptance of the EU institutions as a legitimate authority. Acknowledging that consciously or sub-consciously as the status quo means that challenging it is more costly than tolerating it. In short, the daily albeit less intense experience of the individual with EU-related symbolic messages secures consent, or the 'taken for granted', to the EU's existence and further development.

European identity light

Thomas Risse (2003, 2010) developed the idea of an identity light in relation to the emergence of a European public sphere. In a Habermasian sense the public sphere is a space in which equal citizens freely deliberate about common issues which concern 'them' as a national community (Habermas, 1989). As the 'domain of common concern' (Habermas, 1989: 36) is one of three institutional criteria for a public sphere, 'a minimum sense of belonging to the same community' (Risse, 2003: 8) is also necessary for the emergence of a European public sphere (Eriksen, 2007; Lucht, 2011). Such a sense of European community implies that a Frenchmen not only accepts a Pole as an equal speaker, but that there is also a 'we-feeling' between them based on the acknowledgment of being part of one transnational polity that imposes regulative policies affecting both of them. Identity light refers to the 'psychological existence' of this commonness, meaning a European 'we' as a shared point of reference.

Speaking about 'us' and 'we' implies also a 'them' and 'they' (Risse, 2010). Hence, a second reference point of the community, or the 'in-group', is every group and person who does not belong to the community ('out-group'). According to Benhabib (1996: 3), 'every search for identity includes differentiating oneself from what is not'. Accordingly, the function of 'Othering' has also been emphasised for European identity formation (Schlesinger, 1993; Wodak, 2004; Schneeberger, 2009; Lucarelli, 2011). Delanty (1995) even suggests that hostility to 'Others' and exclusion are predominant in forging European identity due to missing internal commonalities. Thus, identity light refers to discursive practises clarifying

the 'we' and 'they', which constitute the sense of belonging to the same community and the sense of difference to other groups.

In short, Banal Europeanism and European identity light refer to symbolic dimensions of collective identity formation consisting of marking the European community and the commonness of the community members in discursive practises. In the following, I shall call these symbolic dimensions a *thin European collective identity*.

The role of thin European identity in the eurozone 'identity' crisis

Coming back to the EU's public communication, the question is what role can the promotion of a thin European identity play in light of discriminatory national discourses during the euro crisis? The theoretical assumption of banal Europeanism is that the daily experience with the EU creates a 'latent political community' (Cram, 2010: 13) which can be mobilised by significant events such as a crisis. The key aspect is that the members of such a community may have different ideas of how to solve the crisis, but they do not doubt the political authority and its legitimacy as such. The result 'is a permissive condition that … allows political elites to respond to crises' (McNamara, 2011: 17). In other words, banal Europeanism reinforces the 'taken for granted' of the EU and serves as a stabiliser of its political authority permitting it to solve a crisis within its own structures. On the other side, reinforcing a 'we-feeling' creates the sense of solidarity that is needed to establish a thought of 'being in the same boat' (Kantner, 2006: 512). Thus, the solution of the crisis must be found within the 'commonness', since it affects 'us' as a 'community'.

Yet, research on the EU citizen's attitudes towards redistributive policies across Europe suggests a rather weak sense of solidarity (Gerhards, 2008; Risse, 2010). However, crises are seen as somewhat special events in nationalism theory. People reflect more consciously about the community in the course of those events, which involves a potential for strengthening the identity, but also to weaken it (Giesen, 2004; Kantner, 2006). Thus, it matters how political elites communicate to the citizens about the crisis and the 'commonness', to overcome the crisis and use the potential for strengthening the community.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The literature review highlighted the importance of discursive practises within the process of collective identity building through public communication of political institutions. With the help of banal Europeanism and European identity light those discursive practises can be specified for the case of the EU through certain linguistic means (identity markers), building the two-dimensional conceptual framework of thin European identity of this paper (see figure 1). The first dimension refers to the creation of European frames of reference through linguistic means ('flagging the Union') deriving from banal Europeanism. In the following, this dimension is called *flag dimension*. The second dimension deriving from identity light is called *commonness dimension*. It refers to discursive practices, which constitute the community from an inward ('we') and outward ('them') perspective. As both dimensions emphasis explicit linguistic means (identity markers,) the promotion of thin European identity can be seen as linguistic identity formation.
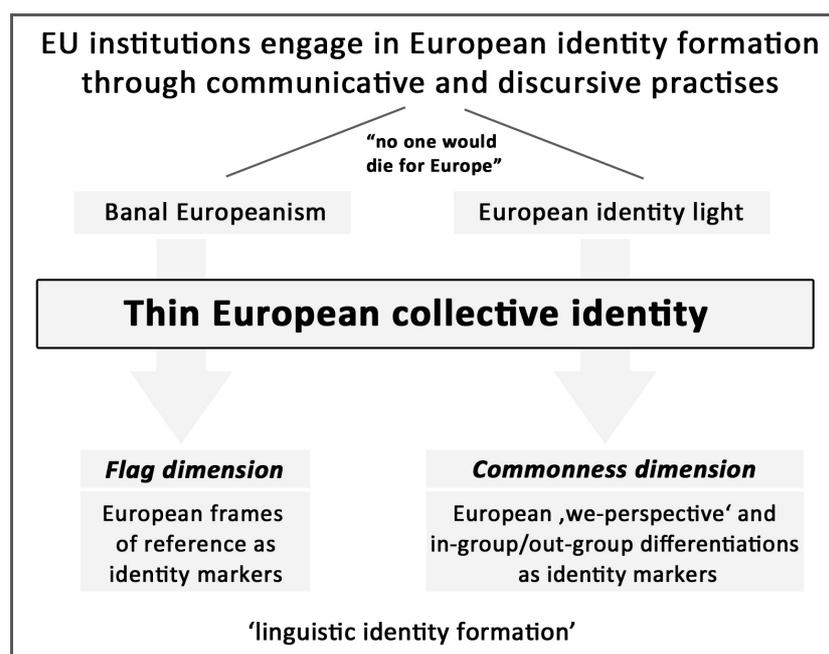
Figure 1: Conceptual framework.

Although the thin European identity concept is two-dimensional, it remains on a weak and unemotional level of identification. Cultural, historical, ethnical, religious and other indicators of 'thick identities' are mostly ignored. However, the identity concept offers clear strengths, as already touched on above. In particular, it is seen as an additional European dimension to existing identities, which might help to promote a European point of view during the eurozone crisis.

Objective of the research and research questions

The objective of this research is to assess the EU's public communication on Facebook in terms of the promotion of a thin European identity during the eurozone crisis. The rationale behind this research sits in the theoretical assumptions of Cram's banal Europeanism and Risse's European identity light: reinforcing the sense of community and 'taken for granted' of EU institutions can be a way to counterbalance overdosed nationalist public discourse, which endangers European integration. Considering the EU's aims to create a sense of community through their social media communication as well as the 'identity forming' potential of SNS highlighted in the literature, the EU's Facebook communication becomes the relevant site for this research.

The results might contribute empirical data to debate on Europe identity and its formation by looking at the particular case of the EU's efforts to promote such an identity via social media. This is also relevant because past empirical studies have been primarily concerned with media coverage on European issues, citizen's identification with the EU and EU's use of symbols.

Given the objective of this research, the overall research question reads as follows:

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Specifying that the European Parliament's and European Commission's Facebook channels shall be examined and drawing on the two-dimensional conceptual framework, the research question is divided into three subquestions:

RQ1: To what extent do the EP's/EC's Facebook posts contain European flag terms?

RQ2: To what extent is a European 'we-perspective' present in the EP's/EC's posts?

RQ3: With which, if any, nations or groups (out-groups) is the European community (in-group) contrasted in the EP's/EC's posts?

Since collective identities are socially constructed (see chapter 2.1.1), another question is added, which aims to widen the view and include the 'identity builders' as well:

RQ4: To what extent is the promotion of a collective European identity taken into account by the EP's/EC's Facebook editors?

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Methodological approach

An appropriate research method must fulfil the requirements that derive from the research questions: Regarding RQ1 to RQ3, the analysis of text (Facebook posts) of a specific timeframe (eurozone crisis) must enable us to identify predefined text characteristics (identity markers). Text can be analysed with the help of different instruments such as content analysis, semiotic analysis or discourse analysis (Bauer et al., 2000). For this research, I chose content analysis, which is a 'technique for making inferences by objectively and systematically identifying specified characteristics of messages' (Holsti, 1969: 14).

Content analysis serves well the objective of this study: First, as discussed earlier, the 'thin European identity' is expressed through explicit linguistic means (identity markers such as 'we Europeans') rather than underlying symbolic meanings. Thus, the identity markers are measurable through the occurrence of specific text attributes. A key ability of content analysis is to detect those message attributes (Neuendorf and Skalski, 2009). Secondly, since the EP and EC publish relatively short Facebook posts on a daily basis and the eurozone crisis has been ongoing for two years at the time of the research, a quantitative approach seems appropriate. Content analysis allows with the help of statistical analysis an 'accurate representation of a body of messages' (Hansen et al., 1998: 57) based on reliability, replicability, validity and generalisability (Neuendorf, 2002; Krippendorff, 2004). Moreover, it is suitable for comparing different 'message senders', in the present case the EP and EC. In sum, content analysis enables us to systematically analyse a large body of Facebook posts and describe and compare the occurrence of thin European identity markers.

Gathering quantitative data might only reveal the 'big picture' (Deacon et al., 2007), whereas qualitative approaches can help contextualise these data and reveal a detailed understanding of the subject (Gaskell, 2000). Therefore and in order to answer RQ4, in-depth, semi-structured interviews were chosen as a second complementary method. They involve interviewing individuals 'whose understanding of the subject matter might prove helpful in interpreting events, documents, and the like' (Hansen et al., 1998: 75). For the present research, these individuals are bureaucratic elites of the EU who have special insights in the EU's public communication on Facebook. Hence, these elite interviews serve as 'a tool to tap into political constructs' (Beamer, 2002: 87), namely EU institutions, and provide some additional rich data to interpret the findings of the content analysis.

The best approach?

In identity research, discourse analysis is the dominant method, yet there is a substantial number of studies on this wide subject employing quantitative content analysis (Neuendorf and Skalski, 2009). Nevertheless, measuring identity via content analysis involves some limitations and weaknesses. Such an approach does not provide an in-depth analysis of text, because it is limited in grasping meaning (Berelson, 1952). Content analysis does not dive into a text as deep as semiotic or discourse analysis, which focus on meaning and the intersubjective context of text by using interpretative skills and social knowledge (Abdelal et al., 2009). Moreover, visual analysis approaches account for the importance of symbols and signs in identity building processes. Finally, my approach does not deliver insights into media effects such as the user's responses towards the EU's potential identity promotion.

Each of these methods has strengths to detect particular elements of the multidimensional processes of identity formation. For the purpose of the present study, content analysis offers the best alternative and its limitations are acceptable, since the 'thin identity' comes into practise through explicit identity markers. A richer contextualisation and in-depth analysis of the identity related messages as well as reactions of the audience should follow once identity promotion has been detected.

Methods and procedures

Content analysis

Sampling

The timeframe of the eurozone crisis can be specified as from 10 December 2009, when Greece's public debts started to be perceived as a common European concern (see eurozone crisis chronologies from Le Monde, 2011; BBC, 2012; Die Zeit, 2012), until 10 June 2012, the day of this research. Yet, the potential timeframe of the sample is 11 June 2010 to 10 June 2012 (104 weeks), because the EC did not publish on Facebook before June 2010.

On average, both institutions taken together publish 14 posts per week.[2] Thus, the EP and EC published in total 1,456 posts during this timeframe. Since salience of the crisis varied over

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[2] Since statistics about the number of posts of a Facebook page are not available and automated counting is not possible, this number is based on personal observations of the EP's and EC's Facebook activities.

time, I chose a purposive sample strategy, which enables a sample most appropriate to the research objective (Krippendorff, 2004). The sampling strategy was event-driven, meaning that the six most critical events of the crisis were identified (see table 2). Then, the posts published two weeks before and four weeks after these events were included in the sample. As a result, the sample has a manageable sample size of 504 posts, which were published by the EC and EP during the 36 weeks around the identified events.

Event	Timeframe included in the sample
22 November 2010: Approval of 85 billion euro bailout for Ireland.	8 November – 20 December 2010
17 May 2011: Approval of 78 billion euro bailout for Portugal.	3 May – 14 June 2011
22 July 2011: Approval of the second bailout for Greece (109 billion euro).	8 July – 19 August 2011
15 September 2011: The EU predicts a standstill of growth in the eurozone; EC President Barrosso says, the EU "faces its greatest challenge".	1 September – 13 October 2011
31 October 2011: Greek Prime Minister Papandreou calls for a national referendum on the third EU bailout.	17 October – 28 November 2011
9 December 2011: Failure of treaty changes on budgetary rules at EU summit due to UK's objection.	25 November – 6 January 2012

Table 1: Events included in the sample (dates and facts from Le Monde, 2011; BBC, 2012; Die Zeit, 2012).

Coding frame

The coding frame includes a total of 49 variables composed of 13 parent variables and 36 sub-variables (see appendix A). A few variables measure general characteristics of the posts (unit of analysis) such as date, length and topic, whereas the large majority measure the occurrence of three categories of identity markers deriving from the conceptual framework: flag terms, 'we-perspective', and in-group/out-group distinctions. Hence, collective European identity is operationalised through the 'flag' and 'commonness' identity markers deriving from the thin European identity concept.

Sub-variables in the coding frame help clarify to what the 'identity terms' refer. For instance, if the term 'we' occurs in a post, the coding frame allows to specify if that 'we' relates to 'we Europeans', to 'we, the European Commission' or other groups. Moreover, it can be differentiated whether such an identity marker occurs in the editorial part of the posts or in a quote.

Dimension of thin European identity	Research question	Measurement (identity markers)	Literature
Flag dimension	RQ1: To what extent do the EP's/EC's Facebook posts contain European flag terms?	Flag Terms: Europe, Europeans, European (as an adjective)	Billing, 1995; Cram, 2001, 2010; Trenz, 2006
Commonness dimension	RQ2: To what extent is a European 'we-perspective' present in the EP's/EC's posts?	Terms: We, us, our	Risse, 2010; Sifft et al., 2007
	RQ3: With which, if any, nations or groups (out-groups) is the European community (in-group) contrasted in the EP's/EC's posts?	In-group/out-group distinctions: Sentences including the in-group (EU) and an out-group	Lucarelli, 2011; Schneeberger, 2009; Risse, 2010

Table 2: Operationalisation of 'thin European collective identity'.

In order to assess reliability of the coding frame, two coders - a fellow media and communications student and myself - tested the instrument in a pilot study. I calculated the intercoder reliability (ICR) across all and for each variable (see appendix B) using the ICR measure Krippendorff's alpha (Krippendorff, 2004; Krippendorff and Hayes, 2007)[3]. The overall ICR of 89.6% (α = 0.8961) is acceptable, but some variables had α-values below 0.7. These variables were improved through reducing the number of values within the categories as well as providing better clarifications in the codebook.

Data collection and analysis

The sampled posts were downloaded as pdf files from Facebook. After coding all posts in a Microsoft Excel database, the data were loaded on to SPSS for statistical analysis. Main methods of analysis in SPSS included descriptive statistics (sums, means), frequency counts and percentages, crosstabulations as well as some significance test as appropriate.

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[3] To calculate Krippendorff's alpha, I used a SPSS macro developed by Andrew Hayes, Ph.D. (http://www.afhayes.com/spss-sas-and-mplus-macros-and-code.html [19 May 2012]). See also the description of Krippendorff and Hayes (2007).

Interviews

Interviewees

As the interviews served as a complementary method to gather contextual information from the 'producers' of the Facebook posts, only two interviews were conducted. Despite the small number of interviews, both institutions, the European Parliament and the European Commission, were represented. Hence, the interviews ultimately served the purpose of gaining 'inside' background information. After all, two staff members (one senior and one mid-level) of the EP and the EC web communications units, who are directly involved in the writing and posting of Facebook messages, were interviewed.

Topic Guide

Serving as an 'Aide-Mémoire' during the interviews, the topic guide (see appendix D) was structured in three sections: 'objectives of EP's/EC's Facebook communication', 'topics and style of Facebook posts' and 'Facebook communication during the eurozone crisis'. Each section started with one main question and included optional follow up questions. To increase the chance of yielding valid answers, I chose an 'open-ended question' strategy (Aberbach and Rockman, 2002). For example, instead of asking if the Facebook editors deploy identity markers in their posts, I asked them to explain their writing style. Through rather 'unspecific' wording of the questions, this strategy helps avoid biased responses based on official policies and keeps academic jargon out of the interviews (Beamer, 2002; Dexter, 1970). Also the topic guide was piloted with a fellow student and unclear questions were rephrased afterwards.

Interview setting and ethics

The Interviews were conducted as face-to-face interviews on 4 and 5 June 2012 at the respondent's offices at the European Parliament and Commission in Brussels. The interviews were 58 and 65 minutes long and recorded. Interviewees were guaranteed anonymity and all other standard ethical procedures mainly centred on the issue of consent were followed (Kvale, 1996).

Data Analysis

After transcribing the interviews a thematic analysis was conducted to identify, analyse and report patterns within the text (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The analysis roughly included a two-stage-process: the first stage consisted of several re-readings of the transcripts, coding of

the data and developing of themes (as groups of codes). The second stage comprised the validation and usage of the codes and themes. A mix of 'data' and 'theory-driven' approach was employed for identifying the themes, but the key driver was the research question (RQ4). The analysis generated a thematic map representing the relevant meanings and ideas linked to specific extracts of the interviews.

RESULTS

Content analysis

Overview sample

The sample contains 304 posts published by the EP and 200 posts of the EC. Regarding the length of the messages, the EC's posts have on average a greater length than the EP's posts (means: 157 words versus 45 words). The distribution of topics (see figure 2 and 3) reveals that only a minority of the EP's (9.8%) and EC's (4.5%) posts published around the most critical events of the eurozone crisis actually deal with the crisis. The majority of posts from both institutions fall into the category 'other EU politics' (EP: 28.7%; EC: 32.2%). On the EP's Facebook page the second and third most prominent topics are global issues (17.6%) and citizen participation (16.0%). On the EC's profile it is events/campaigns (19.3%) and 'various topics' (14.4%). The latter stands almost solely for the weekly news update that the EC publishes.
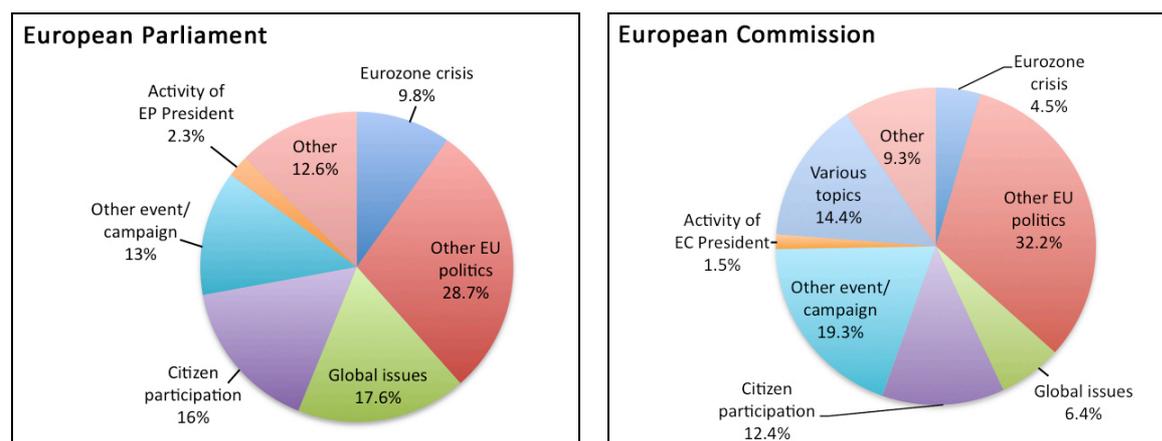

Figure 2 and 3: Topic distribution of the EP's (left) and EC's (right) Facebook post.

Looking at the usage of identity markers, it appears that both EU bodies deploy at least one of the previously defined identity markers in the majority of their posts (see table 3). The EC

employs identity markers in 81.5% of its posts, the EP does so in 57.2%. This difference is statically significant at any conventional significance level (Z = 5.67; p < 0.001).

		EP		EC		Both institutions	
		Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage
Any collective Identity marker	Present	174	57.2%	163	81.5%	337	66.9%
	Not present	130	42.8%	37	18.5%	167	33.1%
	Total	304	100.0%	200	100.0%	504	100.0%
Flag term[1]	Present	170	55.9%	162	81.0%	332	65.9%
European 'we-perspective'[2]	Present	19	6.3%	31	15.5%	50	9.9%
In-group/out-group Differentiation[3]	Present	29	9.5%	31	15.5%	60	11.9%

[1] Z = 5.82, p < 0.001; [2] Z = 3.43, p < 0.001, [3] Z = 2.05; p < 0.001

Table 3: Summary of the EP's and EC's usage of all categories of identity markers.

To answer the research questions of this study, the following sections analyse the deployment of the individual identity markers in greater detail.

RQ1: To what extent do the EP's/EC's Facebook posts contain European flag terms?

At least one of the flag terms 'Europe', 'Europeans' and 'European' (as an adjective) occur in 65.9% of the 504 analysed posts of the EC and EP (see table 3 and 4). Whereas the EC deploys flag terms in 81.0% of its posts, the EP uses them less (55.9%). The difference between the institutions becomes more clear when considering the flags deployed per post: a post of the EC contains on average 4.14 flag terms, while the EP uses 0.8 flags per post. This difference is statistically significant at any conventional significance level (see table 4).

	All posts						Eurozone crisis posts					
	EP		EC		Both		EP		EC		Both	
	Posts incl. flag (%)	Flags per post (mean)	Posts incl. flag (%)	Flags per post (mean)	Posts incl. flag (%)	Flags per post (mean)	Posts incl. flag (%)	Flags per post (mean)	Posts incl. flag (%)	Flags per post (mean)	Posts incl. flag (%)	Flags per post (mean)
Europe	16.4%	0.19	32.5%	0.61	22.8%	0.36	21.4%	0.25	33.3%	0.33	24.3%	0.27
Europeans	4.9%	0.05	12.5%	0.21	7.9%	0.12	0.0%	0.00	0.0%	0.00	0.0%	0.00
European (institution)	34.2%	0.40	64.0%	2.74	46.0%	1.33	67.9%	0.86	66.7%	1.00	67.6%	0.89
European (other official)	3.9%	0.04	16.5%	0.26	8.9%	0.13	0.0%	0.00	0.0%	0.00	0.0%	0.00
European (non-official)	10.9%	0.12	22.0%	0.31	15.3%	0.19	17.9%	0.18	33.3%	0.33	21.6%	0.22
Any flag term	55.9%	0.80[1]	81.0%	4.14[1]	65.9%	2.12	82.1%	1.29	88.9%	1.67	83.8%	1.38

[1] There was a significant difference in the scores for the EP (Mean = 0.8, Std. Deviation = 0.906) and EC (Mean = 4.14, Std. Deviation = 6.745); t = -8.511, p < 0.001.

Table 4: Occurrence of flag terms in Facebook posts of the EP and EC.

A closer look at the individual terms reveals that the adjective 'European' referring to a EU institution is clearly the most used flag term (EC: in 64.0% of its posts; EP: 34.2%) followed by 'Europe' (EC: 37.2%; EP: 16.3%) and 'European' in a non-official context[4] (EC: 22.0%; EP: 10.9%). On the other side, the EU institutions speak less about the 'Europeans' (EC: 12.5%; EP: 4.9%). This trend is confirmed by the presence of flags per post: 'European' relating to institutions occurs on average 1.33 times per post (EP and EC taken together), whereas 'Europeans' occurs 0.12 times and 'Europe' 0.36 times per post.

The widespread use of flag terms is more prevalent if we look only at the posts dealing with the eurozone crisis (see table 4): 88.9% of EC's and 82.1% of EP's 'crisis posts' contain at least one flag term. 'European' referring to EU institutions ranks first again (EC: in 66.7% of these posts; EP: 67.9%), followed by 'Europe' (EC: 33.3%; EP: 21.4%) and 'European' with a non-official reference (EC: 33.3%; EP: 17.9%). However, the low number of 'crisis posts' (EP: n = 30; EC: n = 9) reduces the significance of these posts.

The EP's and EC's use of flag terms show little deviations over time (see figure 4 and 5). Yet, there is a downward trend observable in the EP's usage of flag terms after the second bailout of Greece (July 2011), whereas the EC's flags usage is inconsistent and shows a slight increase towards the end of the timeframe.

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[4] Non-official context means that the adjective 'European' does not refer to a EU institution or other European institution, organisation, campaign, event etc. For example: the European values.
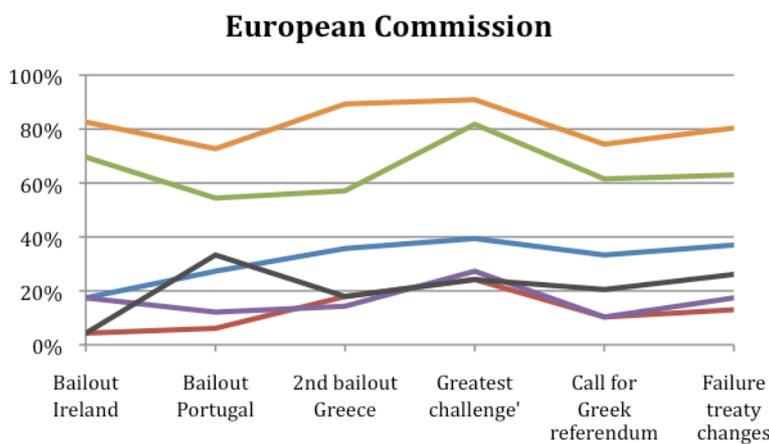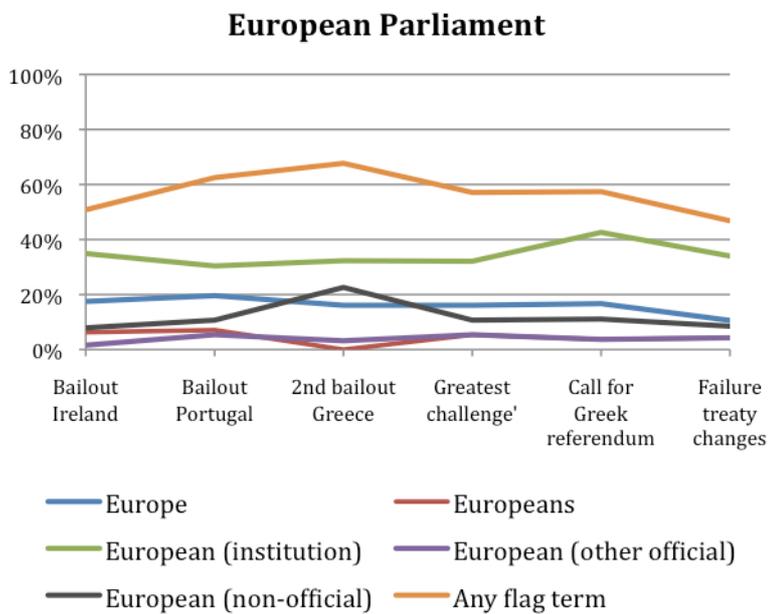
European Parliament

Legend:
- Europe
- Europeans
- European (institution)
- European (other official)
- European (non-official)
- Any flag term

European Commission

Figure 4 and 5: Percentages of posts containing at least one of the individual flag terms or any flag term (orange line).

In answer to RQ1, it can be summarised that flag terms are present in a clear majority of the EP's and EC's posts. However, in most cases these terms are employed in an institutional context such as 'the European Council' and less as general non-technical terms such as 'the Europeans'. Moreover, the EC waves the European flag more frequently than the EP does.

RQ2: To what extent is a European 'we-perspective' present in the EP's/EC's posts?

The results reveal that the EU institutions employ a common European 'we-perspective' less than the flag terms. 'We', 'us' or 'our' standing for 'the Europeans' occurred in 9.9% of the

posts with a difference between the EC (15.5%) and the EP (6.3%), which is statistically significant at any conventional significance level (Z = 3.43; p < 0.001) (see table 3).

The results also show if the European 'we-perspective' occurs in quotes or in the editorial part of the posts (see figure 6). While the EP's Facebook editors put this identity marker in the posts mostly themselves (80% are in the editorial part versus 20% in quotes), the majority (56.2%) of the European 'we-perspective' in the EC's posts are included in quotes of Commissioners, EC President Barrosso or other EU officials.
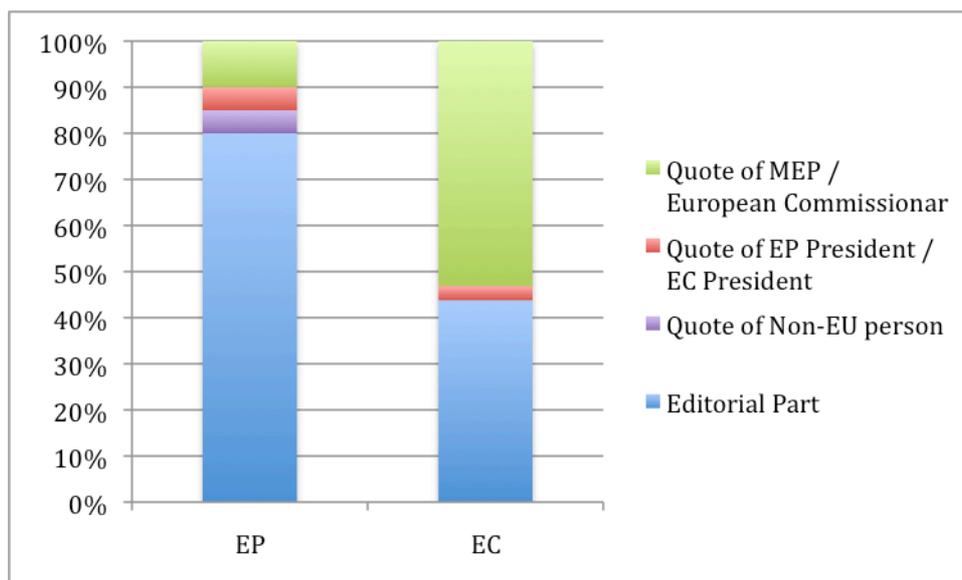
Figure 6: Distribution of European 'we-perspective' between quotes and editorial part.

Furthermore, the coding scheme allowed the detection of any 'we', 'us' and 'our' and the group these terms refer to (see figure 7 and 8). The results show that when employing 'we', 'us' or 'our' the EC speaks in most cases about itself (38%) and 'we, Europeans' (38%). The EP refers in the majority of these cases to 'we, the communications staff' (52%).

Figure 7 and 8: Reference groups of 'we-perspectives' employed in the EP's (left) and EC's (right) posts.

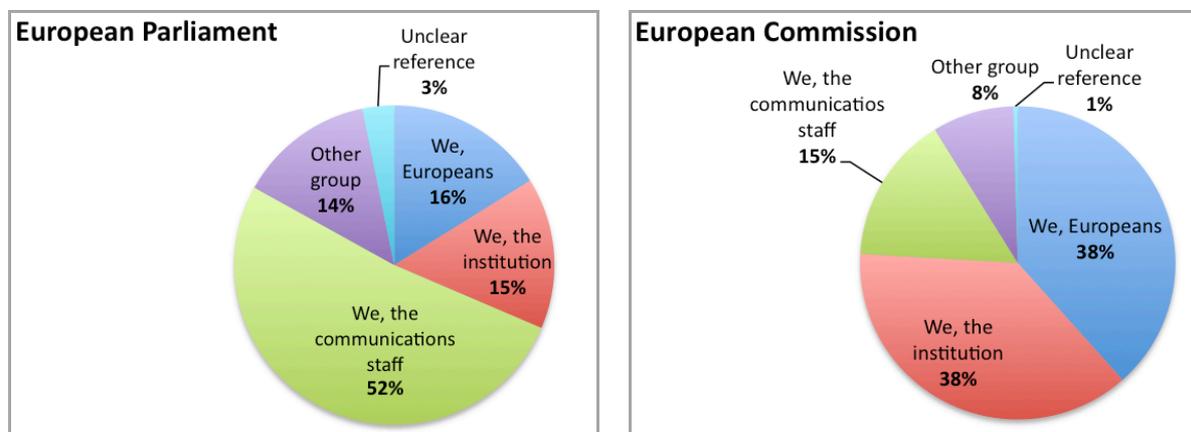Looking only at the posts which deal with the eurozone crisis[5], the picture changes: the EP employs a European 'we-perspective' in 23.3% of these posts. In contrast, the EC does not use a European 'we-perspective' in any of the 'crisis posts', but a 'we-perspective' relating to the institution itself ('we, the European Commission') in 22.2%. Thus, when speaking about 'us' in 'crisis posts', the EC refers to itself, while the EP emphasises a European 'we'.

A comparison of the different events of the eurozone crisis reveals that both institutions tend to increase the usage of the European 'we-perspective' towards later events of the crisis, although the EC's usage is more unstable (see figure 9). It is remarkable that the EC used this identity marker not in a single post in the beginning of the crisis and the EP only in 1.8% of its posts at the time when EC President called the crisis the EU's 'greatest challenge'.
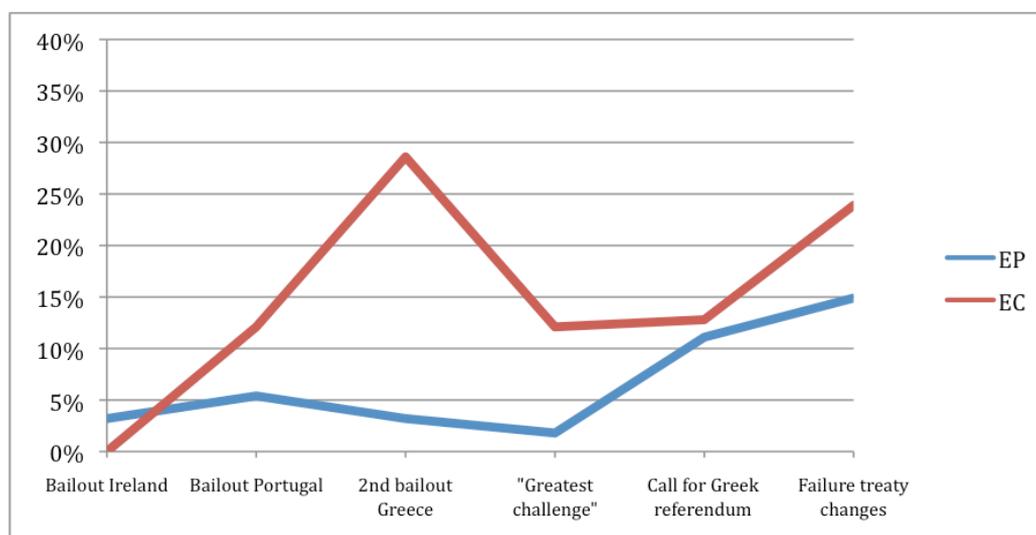
Figure 9: Usage of European 'we-perspective' over time.

As a response to RQ2, it can be summarised that both institutions deploy a 'we-perspective' incorporating all Europeans in a minority of their posts. The EC employs it more frequently than the EP, but largely through quotes. Yet, the EP employs this perspective much more regularly in posts on the eurozone crisis. Finally, an upward trend in the second half of the timeframe was observed for both institutions.

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[5] See also SPSS output (appendix).

RQ3: With which, if any, nations or groups (out-groups) is the European community (in-group) contrasted in the EP's/EC's posts?

Identity markers in the form of in-group/out-group differentiations occur in 11.9% of all analysed posts. Also in this category, the EC engages in a statistically significant higher proportion of its posts in identity promotion than the EP does (15.5% versus 9.5%) (see table 3). Migrants constitute the out-group the EP contrasts the EU with the most (see figure 10). The second rank goes to the US, followed by candidate countries for EU accession. The EC draws the EU's boundaries in most cases to other non-European countries, followed by migrants and the Middle East. An 'internal other' separating the bulk of member states to a single economic struggling member state occurred only once.
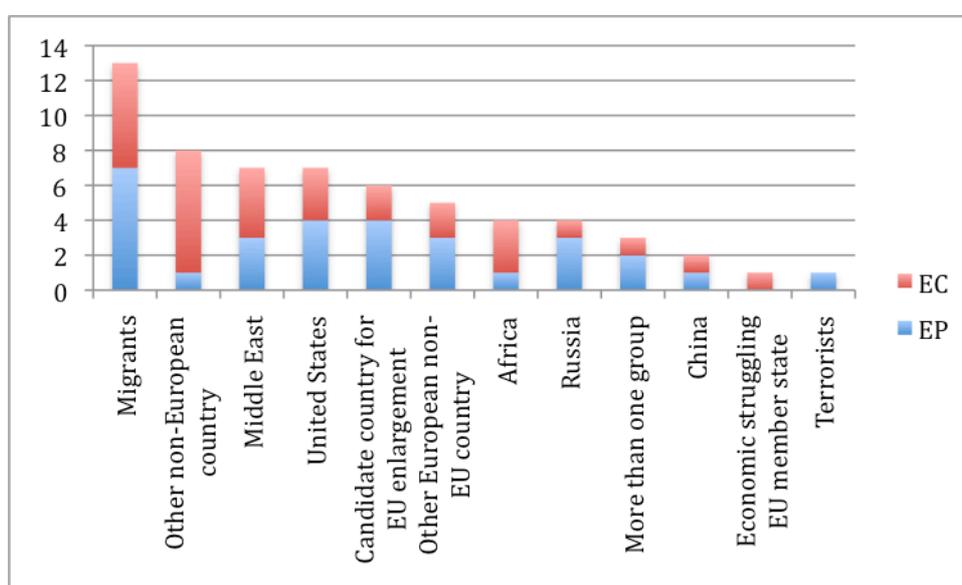
Figure 10: Out-groups deployed in the posts (total numbers)

In almost none of the messages on the eurozone crisis do the EU bodies deploy this form of identity marker. In the EC's posts they mostly occur in posts on various topics, which are usually the weekly news updates. The EP uses in-group/out-group differentiations mostly when writing about global issues.[6]

Comparing the employment of 'Othering' over time suggests that both institutions rather decrease the usage of that identity marker in the course of the crisis (see figure 11). While the EC uses in-group/out-group references the most around the bailout of Portugal (in 24.2% of these posts) and Barroso's 'greatest challenge' comment (also 24.2%), the EP uses this identity marker the most around the second bailout of Greece (16.1%).

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[6] See also SPSS output (appendix).

Figure 11: Deployment of in-group/out-group references over time.

In answer to RQ3, it can be said that the EC and EP use in-group/out-group references in a minority of their posts, while a higher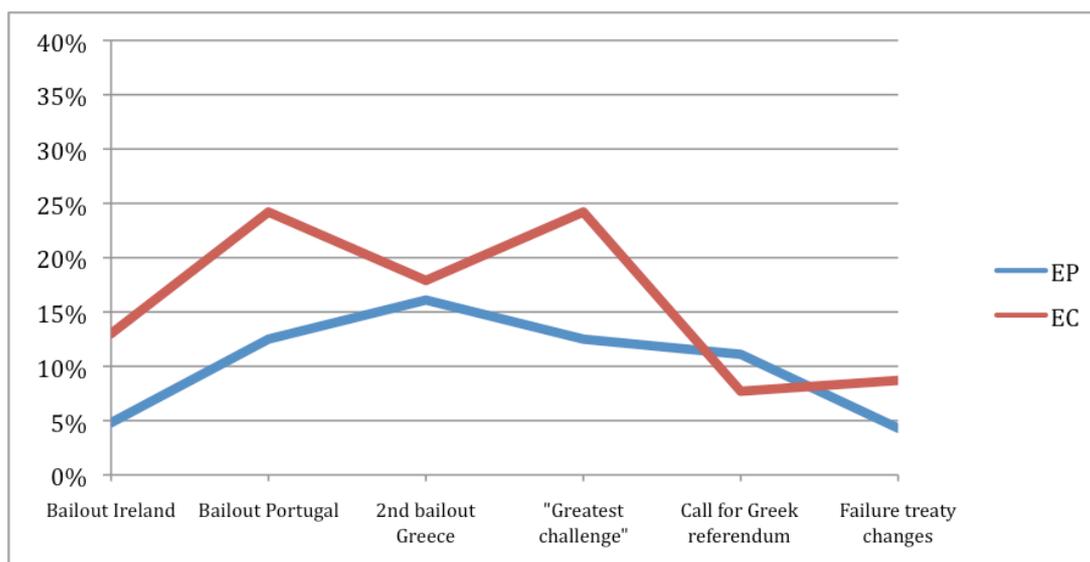 percentage was found in the EC's posts. Moreover, migrants and non-European countries are the most prominent out-groups in the posts.

Interviews

RQ4: To what extent is the promotion of a collective European identity taken into account by the EP's/EC's web communication staff?

As the interviews were conducted to provide contextual information to the quantitative data, I report only four relevant themes and sub-themes that emerged from the analysis: objectives of EU's Facebook communication, posting about the eurozone crisis, propaganda versus information, and Europeanising potential of social media.

In terms of the objective of the EP's and EC's Facebook communication, both interviewees highlighted first and foremost the generation of dialogue about EU politics with their Facebook audience. '[G]etting people to interact and discuss the EP's issues with each other and with us and as much as possible with MEPs [Members of the European Parliament]' is according to Interviewee_EP the EP's primary goal. Similarly, the EC aims to 'to foster some sort of dialogue between officials and people on the other side' (Interviewee_EC).

Posting about the eurozone crisis

The interviews confirmed the finding of the content analysis that the crisis is of minor importance in the EU's Facebook communication. For the Commission this seems to be caused by internal procedures and competences. Interviewee_EC explained, she/he 'do[es] not, honestly, have the knowledge' to write about the crisis and thus relies on 'pre-validated' content provided by the different 'Directorate-Generals' of the EC. Interviewee_EP stated that the crisis is quite 'technical' for Facebook, but the EP would report the EP related news of the crisis such as votes on legislation for financial regulation. Moreover, the EP approaches the crisis dialogue-oriented by offering chats with MEPs and asking for the user's opinions and stories on the crisis. Nevertheless, both institutions focus rather on other topics such as 'social affairs, the EU in the world and also environment' (EC), 'human rights and fundamental rights' and 'enlargement related subjects' (EP). These insights complete the quantitative data of the content analysis regarding the institution's thematic focus on Facebook.

Propaganda versus information

Another theme that emerged in the analysis was the consideration of promoting Europeanness in a propagandistic sense versus informing about and discussing the EU. Both interviewees expressed that Facebook is not used as a 'propaganda machine' (Interviewee_EC), but their line of argument differed. While taking into account the promotion of Europeaness, Interviewee_EC argued that it would be more promising 'to be more open to conversation and in that way grow a friendlier attitude towards Europe'. According to Interviewee_EC a major problem is that 'there's really not a lot of people in the European context', because 'they [the media] are not reporting about discussions from the EU' and most people would lack an affective connection to Europe:

> I think if you haven't had a real European experience yourself, you are not going to be that keen on taking those messages. ... Erasmus students, who have emotional connections with other Europeans, who feel connected with someone in Portugal or Greece would be more willing to take that sort of challenge and interact in that sort of discussion. But if I look at my parents, they don't have any friends in other countries. (Interviewee_EC)

Interviewee_EC concludes that discussing the EU in relation to local issues and in local languages would be more promising than attempting to reach citizens through the corporate English Facebook channel.

The EP's focus on information and dialogue on Facebook derives from another perspective:

> My approach here is that we provide political reporting. This is what's happening, this is what people are saying and inviting people to react to it. ... [A]nd if we give prominence to what Schulz, Verhofstadt, Swoboda are saying, we would also have to give some prominence to what Farage is saying. ... We have to show the plurality of opinion. (Interviewee_EP)

The 'neutral' and 'journalistic' writing style of the EP is thus based upon the nature of the institution itself, as the EP attempts to reflect the different political streams within the Parliament including eurosceptic voices like the British Neigel Farage. This approach might explain the low usage of a European 'we-perspective' in the EP's posts. Despite these remarks on the EP's writing style, both interviewees reported that they do not have a formal style guide.

Europeanising potential of social media

Both interviewees pointed out some potential for promoting the European project through social media during and outside the crisis. Interviewee_EP sees the potential in fostering a pan-European discourse:

> We want people to think about Europe in terms of European elections, in terms of European issues. And we want people to consider such a thing as European politics. ... There's an opportunity within the crisis to say to people, 'well, if you want to deal with this problem, then you've to take an interest in Europe as well, because that's the level of which this crisis is happening. And that's the level of which it's going to be sorted out.' (Interviewee_EP)

What Interviewee_EP describes is, in theoretical terms, the promotion of a 'domain of common concern' amongst Europeans, which is one theoretical criteria constituting a European public sphere. Interviewee_EP already observes a kind of transnational public sphere emerging through the social media profiles of MEPs, as some of them 'have followers outside of their own countries'. In particular, she/he observed 'non-Dutch voters taking an interest in what a Dutch MEP is doing, because that person deals with a particular subject'.

While Interviewee_EP is concerned with fostering a European public sphere, Interviewee_EC considered the potential to transmit a rather emotional sense of community to the audience, which, however, is not exploited by the EC yet:

> Facebook is the one [platform] that appeals the most to people's emotions in the sense of belonging, but it's still difficult, because we depend on really good content. ... So they [the audience] want to identify the EU with something good and something worthwhile. And getting the good and worthwhile on Facebook, I guess that's the challenge. (Interviewee_EC)

This quotation shows that in comparison with her/his counterpart of the EP, Interviewee_EC takes into account ways of promoting stronger emotional attachment to the EU through Facebook. Both interviewees expressed that Facebook also serves them as 'a tool of listening' (Interviewee_EP) during the crisis, enabling them to capture and react to what their audience cares about.

In answer to RQ4, it can be summarised that the promotion of a European collective identity is more an issue for the EC than EP, partly because of the self-understanding of their institutional nature. Yet, both are not consciously active in identity promotion. Interviewee_EP rather emphasised the potential and first evidence of an emerging European (online) public sphere while assessing stronger forms of 'EU promotion' as propagandistic. Interviewee_EC described an emotional potential of Facebook, which the EC might not be able to exploit yet, because most European citizens are not Europeanised enough. The different foci set by the interviewees might also be a result of the 'open-ended question' interview strategy.

DISCUSSION

The previous section presented the results of the content analysis and interviews and answered the sub-questions RQ1 to RQ4. In this chapter, I discuss the EP's and EC's performance in the flag dimension and discursive dimension of thin European identity promotion and answer the overall research question. Drawing on other empirical data on EU citizen's attitudes, it is argued that highlighting the Europeans' commonness could reinforce existing attachments to the idea of Europe. The chapter concludes with reflections on the limitations of the results in relation to the applied methodology.

Flag dimension of European identity building: promoting institutional banal Europeanism

By employing European flag terms in the majority of the posts, the EP and even more the EC promote banal Europeanism on Facebook. According to the theory, flagging the Union regularly reinforces the latent political community (the 'taken for granted'), stabilises the legitimacy of EU institutions and ultimately permits them to be the framework of crisis resolution. Compared to Cram's (2001) original account, in which she even considers 'member state' as a flag term, the present study took a more conservative approach by only coding terms starting with 'Europe' or 'EU' as European flag terms. Hence, in a Cramian sense the results show that the EU's Facebook posts, as Interviewee_EP confirmed, promote the EU as the level of crisis solution. This might also satisfy theorists of discursive institutionalism, who argue that 'saying needs to be added to the process of doing' (Schmidt, 2011: 28) to ensure the acceptance of EU's actions. Bruter's (2005) focus group study confirmed that the EU's symbolic top-down communication actually does reinforce the European identity of citizens. Moreover, considering the declining trust in EU institutions since the beginning of the crisis (Eurobarometer, 2012), the extensive use of flag terms might after all act as a counterweight to eurosceptical attitudes and discourses.

Through a more critical lens, one should not only consider the quantity of flag terms but also qualitative differences between them. As the results showed, the flag terms referring to European institutions such as the 'European Central Bank' are the most prominent, while less technical flag terms such as 'Europeans' or 'Europe' are less frequently employed. In light of the discriminatory national discourses creating 'internal others' and questioning the whole

European project, reinforcing the idea of 'Europe' and the 'Europeans' seem to be as important as reminding the people of the rather unpopular, albeit relevant, institutions.

In sum, the EP and EC reinforce the 'taken for granted' of EU institutions through their Facebook communication, but the promotion of the more general idea of Europe is less prevalent in the flag dimension of European identity formation. The banal Europeanism found in the EU's posts can be thus called an *institutional banal Europeanism.*

Commonness dimension of European identity building: weak common European perspective and 'Othering'

Both institutions only write in a minority of their posts from a common European viewpoint. The interviewees provided explanations for their reserved usage of a European 'we-perspective'. Whereas the EP's approach is to deliver journalistic-style reporting of its activities and diverse opinions, the EC's interviewee doubts that the people would respond to these identity markers due to their strong national feelings.

Let us first turn to the EC's stance. In contrast to the interviewee's doubts, other data suggest that most European citizens have developed a sense of being European and a feeling of European commonness as an addition (not contradiction) to their national identity (Bruter, 2005; Risse, 2010). Based on Eurobarometers and the European Election Study, Scheuer and Schmitt (2009) argue that the majority of Europeans share a European 'we-feeling', which they measure by a person's trust in people from other European countries. Although this might have changed in the course of the crisis, a Eurobarometer (2010) showed that 74% of European citizens still felt 'European' in 2010 - 3% more than in 2008. In essence, Europeans feel European, despite national sentiments and declining trust in EU bodies. Thus, through using a European 'we-perspective' in Facebook posts, the chance of reinforcing or reimagining a sense of European community is greater than the risk that these messages will be ignored as assumed by Interviewee_EC.

The EP's approach of 'neutrally' showing Parliament's pluralism does not necessarily exclude the promotion of European commonness. Opinions within the institution are naturally diverse, but all members are unified by the fact that they are representatives of European citizens, which presupposes the acceptance of certain commonness. There is no use of being pedantic, but there seem to be some good reasons why the EP might want to stimulate the commonness of the European electorate. First, a number of authors argue that the French and Dutch rejection of the Constitutional Treaty in their 2005 referenda was also caused by the citizen perception of EU institutions being distant and hyper-bureaucratic (Golding,

2007; Guibernau, 2011); an attitude that was confirmed by survey data (Eurobarometer, 2009). This indicates rather an 'us' and 'them' difference between citizens and EU institutions than a sense of being one polity. Secondly, turnout in EP Elections has been in constant decline since the first European Elections in 1979, resulting in the lowest turnout (43%) in 2009 (Eurostat, 2012). Creating a sense of commonness could help the EP to overcome its distant and deficient image in people's mind.

Similar to the employment of a 'we-perspective', the EP and EC engage in less than 12% of their posts in 'Othering'. Migrants are the most prominent out-group, which is in line with other research. As Fligstein et al. (2011: 16) observe '[t]he stereotyped non-European is often the non-white immigrant Muslim' representing the stranger against which European identity is constructed. Following Lucarelli's (2011) typology of the functions of 'Othering', migrants perform the function of boundary construction for Europe. Boundary construction plays an important role for internalising the meaning of belonging to the in-group such as cultural, ethical or religious characteristics of the Europeans compared to people from other region such as North Africa. On the one hand, it might make sense from Brussels' perspective to use those demarcating identity markers in their public communication, as the Union's borders are still unclear to many people. On the other hand, ethnic and religious minorities, especially Muslims, have ever been part of Europe, which means that this boundary drawing actually takes place in the inside and enhance racist sentiments (Delanty, 2005). Moreover, migration is a contested issue amongst EU member states and opinions about the strictness of migration policies differ. Thus, it is questionable if this issue is appropriate for boundary drawing.

Other European 'Others' highlighted in the literature such as the US (Moes, 2012) and the Middle East (Adamson, 2004; Grillo, 2004) were also identified in the posts, but do not play a significant role. Moreover, the construction of internal out-groups as observed in national media discourses is not an issue.

European identity promotion on Facebook between propaganda and public sphere?

Having discussed the answers to the sub-questions, I turn now to the overall research question of this paper: To what extent does the European Union promote a collective European identity through its Facebook communication during the eurozone crisis?

On the one hand, the EU does promote a thin European identity on Facebook in terms of

normalising the EU institutions as the legitimate sites of crisis management (institutional banal Europeanism). On the other hand, the EU bodies do not regularly promote European commonness in the sense of conveying a 'we-feeling' and boundary drawing. In sum, the EU puts a strong emphasis on promoting support for its institutions, but offers fewer stimuli for imagining the European community.

To account for the nuanced findings of this study, a few points should be addressed. First, the EC engages stronger in both the flag and commonness dimension of thin identity promotion than the EP does, which was explained with the nature of the institutions. Secondly, the eurozone crisis is only a marginal issue in the posts published by the EU institutions during the weeks of the six most critical events of the crisis. According to the interviewees the little attention paid to the crisis is due to the technical nature of the issue and the Facebook editor's lack of expert knowledge. However, by mostly ignoring this issue, the debate might be framed by others in ways contrary to the EU's interest. Thirdly, the interviewees see their role rather as facilitators of a dialogue between the EU and its citizens than as identity promoters. The prioritisation between dialogue and identity formation, termed by the interviewees as tension between information and propaganda, seems to be a key issue for explaining the reserved promotion of a sense of community. This issue should therefore be discussed in greater detail.

Fostering a European public sphere without a common identity?

If the EU puts the emphasis of its Facebook communication on developing a European public sphere, at least two objections emerge from Habermas' (1989) original conception. First, as an arena for critical reasoning between citizens the public sphere is largely autonomous from the state. Strategic communication interventions from authorities, such as government communications, limit this rational-critical debate, as their aim is power affirmation. As a result, government public relations contribute to the 're-feudalisation' (Habermas, 1974) of the public sphere, which then only serves the acclamation of power as in the times of feudalism. Hence, the EU should be the key issue but not the key actor in a public sphere of European people.[7] Secondly, the results of the present study do not suggest that the EU communicates European issues explicitly as 'common concerns'. Those issues seem to be flagged as concerns of European institutions, but making it a concern of 'us' is left to the audience. Thus, acknowledging the common relevance of issues as specified by Habermas

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[7] see Brüggemann (2010) for a less critical account of the EU's role in constructing a European

(1989: 36) as the 'domain of common concern', might be a missing precondition for the evolvement of a European public sphere. Without perceiving common European issues as such, or in other words sharing a minimum understanding of European collective identity, it seems to be difficult to foster a European public sphere, which goes beyond the elites (Scharpf, 1999; Eriksen, 2007).

Is promoting the imagined European community during the eurozone crisis propaganda?

The interviews revealed that EU Facebook editors associate identity building with propaganda. Labelling the extreme forms of public communication as information (and dialogue) versus propaganda (Brüggemann, 2010), it must be asked whether government communication can ever be purely non-propagandistic? Moreover, is European identity promotion in light of hostile national discourses during the eurozone crisis necessarily 'direct manipulation of social suggestion' as Harold Lasswell (1971 [1927]: 221) negatively defined propaganda?

First of all, accepting that collective identities are social constructions implies at least for a number of nationalism theorists that they are grounded on a certain 'nationalist idea' (Deutsch, 1966), 'doctrine' (Kedourie, 1960) or 'invented traditions' (Hobsbawm, 1992). The soil on which European integration is growing is in principle no different and it is still debated if the European idea is rather an ethno-cultural one (Delanty, 1995) or indeed based on 'universal values' (Treaty of the European Union, 2010). After all, EU communication can never be free from a certain pro-European integration bias, and thus never at the far left end of the information-propaganda continuum.

Discursive institutionalism emphasises that promoting a pro-European discourse matters especially in crisis times, if EU institutions want to engage in 'reshaping historical paths as opposed to being shaped by them' (Schmidt, 2010: 61). Moreover, as discussed above, the EU can draw on the fact that citizens feel attached to the idea of Europe, which suggest that somewhat biased communicative efforts are not necessarily manipulative. The challenge for the EU is thus to communicate why it is worth to defend European cooperation against backward nationalist and hostile thinking without playing with people's emotions in a propagandistic sense.

As some final concluding remarks, I propose that such a public communication could include a more frequent use of a European 'we-perspective', for instance through posing questions to

public sphere.

the audience ('how should we respond to issue x or y?') or in well-selected quotes of EU officials. Second, 'Othering' should not build up walls against internal and external groups, but highlight the EU's positive distinctiveness such as being the 'most successful example of regional integration' and 'champion of multilateralism' (Lucarelli, 2011: 155-156). Third, not only EU institutions should be promoted as 'taken for granted', but also the less tangible idea of Europe and European citizens, especially when Europe gets an increasingly negative connotation. Lastly, the EU should communicate more about the crisis, particularly at major 'crisis events'. This is the time when the issue is most salient in the reports and comments of the news media. And this is also the time when an increased visibility of EU politicians and their opinion is desirable from a European perspective.

Limits of the findings

Before concluding, I shall critically reflect on my findings in light of the applied research design. First of all, this study looked only at the side of the sender (the EU as identity promoter), not at the receiver side (the Facebook audience). Therefore, no conclusions can be drawn about the relationship between the usage of identity markers and the sense of and support for the European community Facebook users might develop or not. Another limitation is rooted in the pre-defined categories of the codebook, which allowed only the detection of particular identity-related linguistic means. However, a collective identity could also be constructed through other forms of identity markers in words, images and videos. Especially images and videos are an increasingly important part of content in SNS. Finally, Facebook is not the whole story. Although the number of Facebook users increases and their socio-demographic profile becomes more diverse, the EU reaches only a small number of EU citizens with a particular, arguably already more or less pro-European stance on Facebook. Moreover, the EU does much more in terms of public communication such as regional campaigns, cinema ads and festivities. This study looked only at a particular part of the EU's public communication puzzle.

Nevertheless, the research design proved to be appropriate for answering the research question and revealed relevant findings. Particularly the interviews, despite their small number, provided valuable explanations to the quantitative data.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper examined the European Parliament's and European Commission's Facebook communication regarding the promotion of a European collective identity – conceptualised as a 'thin' identity – in light of emerging renationalising trends in national discourses during the eurozone crisis. The key insights of the study, based on a content analysis of EC' and EP's Facebook posts and interviews with the editors of these posts, show that both institutions promote an institutional banal Europeanism, meaning that they frequently name EU institutions, thus reinforce the 'taken for granted' and legitimisation of EU institutions. On the other side, they are cautious about communicating European commonness and offering stimuli for imaging the European community, as they doubt the effectiveness and appropriateness of those 'commonness markers'. Both institutions understand their mission in facilitating dialogue with citizens or even a European public sphere on Facebook. The promotion of a sense of community is not seen as very promising.

Whether the promotion of a European collective identity would fall on fertile ground or not can only be tested through audience research (see below), but widespread pro-Europe attitudes indicate that it might not necessarily be perceived as an attempt of manipulation. A thin European identity is only the linguistic generation of a common point of reference in a common project and by no means equal to glorious and emotional efforts of nation building. Who if not the EU itself will offer European citizens such as discursive reference point if Europe shall once become a Europe of the people, leaving its bureaucratic character behind? Even more in the short term, reminding the citizens of the interconnectedness of European countries and also the ideals and merits of the common project seems to be a necessary counterweight to populist national discourses in times of crisis. However, this paper should not be seen as just another proof of the poor information efforts of the EU. Although some weakness such as the low coverage of the crisis were identified, the dialogue-oriented approach seems sound in terms of providing a forum to speak about European issues and thereby providing people with a 'European experience'.

One of the issues that should be addressed in further research is therefore the dialogical interaction between EU institutions and citizens. For instance, analysis of discourses and narratives in the user comments of EU's Facebook channels might reveal insights about the degree of Europeanisation of the EU's Facebook audience. Surveys and interviews with these users could be another way of approaching their attitudes and beliefs towards European integration and the influence the online interactions with 'Eurocrats' have on that.

Researchers should also pay attention to the disintegrative discourse observable in national media during the euro crisis. Does the media reinforce stereotypes? Do some media outlets even push a certain anti-Europe agenda in this turbulent time? Questions like these might also put back on the agenda the issue of pan-European media, whether based on a public, private or private-public model. Finally, there might be also a positive side of the coin: the fact that European issues are very much salient these days entails opportunities for Europeanisation in terms of Europe-wide discourses, which should be explored in more detail. In this vein, and to close with some optimistic words, John F. Kennedy said once, 'in a crisis, be aware of the danger - but recognize the opportunity'.

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APPENDIX

Relevant SPSS outputs

	Events of eurozone crisis												All events		Post topic = eurozone crisis	
	Bailout Ireland		Bailout Portugal		2nd bailout Greece		'Greatest challenge'		Call for Greek referendum		Failure treaty changes					
	EP (N=63)	EC (N=23)	EP (N=56)	EC (N=33)	EP (N=31)	EC (N=28)	EP (N=56)	EC (N=33)	EP (N=54)	EC (N=39)	EP (N=47)	EC (N=46)	EP (N=307)	EC (N=202)	EP (N=30)	EC (N=9)
We	15.9%	.0%	10.7%	18.2%	22.6%	25.0%	8.9%	30.3%	20.4%	38.5%	29.8%	34.8%	17.3%	26.7%	33.3%	22.2%
Europeans	3.2%	.0%	3.6%	9.1%	.0%	21.4%	1.8%	9.1%	11.1%	7.7%	12.8%	21.7%	5.5%	12.4%	23.3%	.0%
The institution	1.6%	.0%	1.8%	9.1%	6.5%	3.6%	.0%	18.2%	3.7%	23.1%	6.4%	21.7%	2.9%	14.4%	10.0%	22.2%
The staff	7.9%	.0%	3.6%	9.1%	12.9%	3.6%	7.1%	3.0%	1.9%	17.9%	8.5%	4.3%	6.5%	6.9%	3.3%	.0%
Other reference	4.8%	.0%	1.8%	.0%	.0%	.0%	.0%	3.0%	1.9%	5.1%	2.1%	4.3%	2.0%	2.5%	.0%	.0%
Unclear reference	.0%	.0%	.0%	.0%	3.2%	.0%	.0%	.0%	3.7%	.0%	.0%	.0%	1.0%	.0%	.0%	.0%
Us	9.5%	.0%	8.9%	.0%	19.4%	14.3%	7.1%	24.2%	3.7%	7.7%	8.5%	15.2%	8.8%	10.9%	3.3%	11.1%
Europeans	.0%	.0%	.0%	.0%	3.2%	3.6%	.0%	6.1%	.0%	5.1%	.0%	6.5%	.3%	4.0%	.0%	.0%
The institution	1.6%	.0%	1.8%	.0%	.0%	.0%	3.6%	12.1%	.0%	2.6%	.0%	8.7%	1.3%	4.5%	.0%	11.1%
The staff	7.9%	.0%	5.4%	.0%	16.1%	10.7%	7.1%	3.0%	3.7%	.0%	8.5%	.0%	7.5%	2.0%	3.3%	.0%
Other reference	.0%	.0%	1.8%	.0%	.0%	.0%	.0%	3.0%	.0%	.0%	.0%	2.2%	.3%	1.0%	.0%	.0%
Unclear reference	.0%	.0%	.0%	.0%	.0%	.0%	.0%	3.0%	.0%	.0%	.0%	.0%	.0%	.5%	.0%	.0%
Our	7.9%	.0%	8.9%	21.2%	3.2%	14.3%	10.7%	21.2%	.0%	20.5%	6.4%	23.9%	6.5%	18.3%	3.3%	.0%
Europeans	.0%	.0%	1.8%	6.1%	.0%	14.3%	.0%	9.1%	.0%	7.7%	2.1%	17.4%	.7%	9.9%	.0%	.0%
The institution	1.6%	.0%	1.8%	6.1%	.0%	.0%	1.8%	6.1%	.0%	12.8%	2.1%	8.7%	1.3%	6.4%	.0%	.0%
The staff	1.6%	.0%	5.4%	9.1%	3.2%	.0%	5.4%	9.1%	.0%	2.6%	2.1%	2.2%	2.9%	4.0%	.0%	.0%
Other reference	4.8%	.0%	.0%	.0%	.0%	.0%	1.8%	.0%	.0%	2.6%	.0%	2.2%	1.3%	1.0%	3.3%	.0%
Unclear reference	.0%	.0%	.0%	.0%	.0%	.0%	1.8%	.0%	.0%	.0%	.0%	.0%	.3%	.0%	.0%	.0%
We, us or our	22.2%	.0%	23.2%	30.3%	32.3%	39.3%	25.0%	48.5%	22.2%	43.6%	36.2%	41.3%	26.1%	36.1%	33.3%	22.2%
Europeans	3.2%	.0%	5.4%	12.1%	3.2%	28.6%	1.8%	12.1%	11.1%	12.8%	14.9%	23.9%	6.5%	15.8%	23.3%	.0%
The institution	4.8%	.0%	3.6%	15.2%	6.5%	3.6%	5.4%	24.2%	3.7%	23.1%	6.4%	23.9%	4.9%	16.8%	10.0%	22.2%
The staff	14.3%	.0%	10.7%	15.2%	22.6%	14.3%	16.1%	15.2%	5.6%	17.9%	12.8%	6.5%	13.0%	11.9%	3.3%	.0%
Other reference	7.9%	.0%	3.6%	.0%	.0%	.0%	1.8%	3.0%	1.9%	5.1%	2.1%	6.5%	3.3%	3.0%	3.3%	.0%
Unclear reference	.0%	.0%	.0%	.0%	3.2%	.0%	1.8%	3.0%	3.7%	.0%	.0%	.0%	1.3%	.5%	.0%	.0%

SPSS Output 1: Overview usage of 'we-perspective'.

		In-group/out-group differentiation		
		Not present	Present	Total
		% of Posts	% of Posts	% of Posts
V5 TOPIC	Eurozone crisis	94.6%	5.4%	100.0%
	Other EU politics	89.5%	10.5%	100.0%
	Global issues	74.2%	25.8%	100.0%
	Citizen participation	100.0%	.0%	100.0%
	Other event/campaign	98.7%	1.3%	100.0%
	Activity of EP/EC President	90.0%	10.0%	100.0%
	Various topics	28.6%	71.4%	100.0%
	Other	94.8%	5.2%	100.0%

SPSS Output 2: Usage of in-group/out-group-differentiations and post topics

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