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CONSTRUCTING NATIONAL IDENTITY IN THE BRITISH PRESS: THE *BRITAIN VERSUS EUROPE* DICHOTOMY

CITATION

Isentyeva, A. & Abdel Kafi, M. (2021).
Constructing national identity in the
British press: The Britain versus Europe
dichotomy. *Journal of Corpora and Discourse
Studies*, 4:68-95

ABSTRACT

Britain's decision to leave the European Union (EU) not only marks a crucial point in its history and politics, it also evidences growing concern over issues such as British self-determination and national identity. It is therefore revealing to trace the contrasting contemporary media representations of Britain and Europe within the context of the EU membership referendum of 2016 and migration within the EU. Immigration, in its broadest sense, provides a basis for ideological debates about the nature of identity and self-representation. This corpus-based study analyses the discursive techniques employed by the national press in its representation of both Britain and Europe during the UK's withdrawal from the EU in 2016–2018. The data represents a specialised corpus containing 500 editorials, opinion pieces and news reports from five British newspapers: *The Guardian* (*The Observer*) and *The Mirror* represent left-wing ideology, while *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Daily Mail* and *The Sun* represent right-wing ideology. In terms of methodology, the study applies a mixed-method approach that combines corpus-based analysis with a further examination of wider contexts and discourses. As a first step, the analysis focuses on the left-hand collocates of the words *Britain* versus *Europe*, as well as on the right-hand collocates of the adjectives *British* versus *European* and *EU*. As a further step, a concordance analysis of the most salient and distinctive collocates is used to identify the discourses constructed around these terms; the differences between the left- and right-wing newspapers are then analysed, and finally, the findings are situated in a broader socio-political context. The study uses this combination of methods to reveal how the British press creates the *Britain versus Europe* dichotomy.

KEYWORDS

British press, distinctive collexeme
analysis, Europe, national identity,
othering, values

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DOI

10.18573/jcads.64

ORCID

0000-0002-8388-8812

ISSUE DOI

<https://doi.org/10.18573/jcads.v4>

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Constructing national identity in the British press: the *Britain versus Europe* dichotomy

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1. Introduction

Since 2016 the United Kingdom (UK) and the European Union (EU) have been negotiating the UK's withdrawal from the EU. Founded after World War II upon the idea of a united and peaceful Europe and growing steadily since it was established in 1993 with its 12 original member states (Leonard & Taylor, 2016, pp. 4–8, 28), the EU has now experienced one of its members leaving for the first time. After entering a transition period that lasted until 2020-12-31, during which the future relationship between the EU and the UK was negotiated (European Commission, 2020), the UK finally officially left the EU on 2020-01-31, under Boris Johnson's leadership (2019–present)¹. The question of why the majority of British people voted to leave the EU is frequently posed; Britain's decision to leave the EU not only marks a crucial point in its history and politics, it also evidences growing concern over issues such as British self-determination and national identity.

Analysing the contrasting contemporary media representations of Britain and Europe within the context of the EU membership referendum and migration within the EU might shed light on some of the factors that motivated the decision made by British voters in 2016. The press is one of the oldest forms of mass media and influences the construction of public discourses by selecting, transforming and contextualising socio-political events. The public usually obtains its knowledge of political events and decisions not from first-hand experience, but rather from the media. The British public's attitudes towards the EU were mainly constructed from media reports (Hughes, 2019, p. 40). Newspapers often act as intermediaries between national governments and politicians on the one hand and the public on the other (see Fowler, 1991; Hart, 2010, p. 17); they represent biased mediators that are capable of shaping public opinion (Islentyeva, 2021, p. 20).

This study aims to demonstrate how the British press constructed British national identity in the lead-up to the EU membership referendum on 2016-06-23, as well as in the period until 2019 during which the UK negotiated the terms of departure and future relations with the EU. The 500 articles collected for the newspaper corpus used in this study address issues such as EU migration, Europe and Brexit. The study applies a mixed-method approach that combines corpus-based analysis with further investigation of broader contexts; a special focus is placed on the differences between left- and right-wing

1 Years in parentheses beside Johnson, Cameron, Churchill, etc. indicate terms served as prime minister of the UK.

newspapers. This combination of methods reveals how the British press creates the *Britain versus Europe* dichotomy, in which British exceptionalism is foregrounded as something that stands in opposition to a united Europe.

First, we provide a brief historical and political background of the UK, looking at the British Empire, British exceptionalism, and the growing sense of British Euroscepticism. The notions of both British exceptionalism and Euroscepticism originated long before the founding of the EU and the emergence of the current debate. As a next step, the study introduces the methodological premises, highlighting the importance of a mixed-method approach for the analysis of media discourse and describing the design of the corpus used for this study. The subsequent linguistic analysis applies distinctive colloceme analysis to the right-hand collocates of *British* and *EU*, as well as to the right-hand collocates of *British* in the left- and right-wing newspapers and in the British National Corpus (BNC, 1991). The choice of the statistical method is explained in more detail in Section 3. Finally, the concordance analysis of the most salient collocates helps to further trace the discourses constructed around the analysed terms, placing the identified discursive patterns into a broader socio-political context.

2. Historical and political background: the British Empire, British exceptionalism and British euroscepticism

During his 2013 address, which later became known as the Bloomberg speech, British Prime Minister David Cameron (2010–2016) claimed: ‘We have the character of an island nation’ (Cameron, 2013). This address is remembered as the speech in which Cameron called for reform of the EU and committed a future Conservative government to holding a referendum on the UK’s membership of the EU (see Wodak, 2016). This speech, just like the broader debate on EU membership itself, arose from a deep-rooted sense of British exceptionalism and a mounting sense of British Euroscepticism, a phenomenon whose roots can be traced back long before the EU came into being. These two phenomena can arguably be traced back both to Britain’s relative geographical isolation as an island nation, as well as to its centuries of colonial and imperial rule.

After World War II, the British Nationality Act awarded British citizenship to more than 850 million people (Bhambra, 2016), and the British government invited the citizens of British territories to come to the UK to work (Tomlinson & Dorling, 2016). The British Empire was always a multicultural, multi-ethnic, and multi-religious society; given its immense size, it could not have been otherwise. Between 1948 and 1971, British citizens from Commonwealth countries came to the British Isles in search of work (Taylor, 2020, p. 6), and since then, the demographic make-up of Britain has become a microcosm of its once global empire (Bhambra, 2016). At the same time, in the early- to mid-twentieth century, the desire within the colonies for independence became stronger, and British influence around the world began to wane. This also put Britain in a politically and eco-

nomically precarious position. The Empire disintegrated, giving way to the Commonwealth of Nations. The Commonwealth is nowhere near as powerful as it once was, but it is still an integral component of conservative British national identity. For example, Mycock (2010) points out that the Conservative Party has acknowledged the legacy of the British Empire as 'a policy aspiration'.

Euroscepticism and opposition to European integration can be traced back to the foundation of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) in 1951; some even go so far as to say that 'Britain is the home of the term *Euroscepticism*' (Spiering, 2004, p. 127). Euroscepticism is defined as 'a tendency to have doubts or reservations regarding the supposed benefits of increasing cooperation between the member states of the European Union; opposition to greater political or economic integration' (OED, 2008). Surprisingly, the concept of European unity was partly inspired by Prime Minister Winston Churchill (1940–45, 1951–55) himself. In 1946, he proposed 'a structure under which [Europe] can dwell in peace, in safety and in freedom [...] a kind of United States of Europe', and argued that Britain already had its 'own Commonwealth of Nations' (Churchill, 1946). However, when the ECSC was established in 1951, Britain declined the invitation to join. Later, Churchill reiterated his idea of a united Europe separate from Britain: 'We have our own dream and our own task. We are with Europe, but not of it. We are linked but not combined. We are interested and associated but not absorbed' (Churchill, 1953).

When the European Economic Community (EEC), the predecessor to the EU, was founded in 1957, Britain once again declined the invitation to join. By the end of the 1950s, however, the economic situation in Britain had become difficult to contain. With many former British colonies gaining independence and the accompanying Suez Crisis, Britain struggled to keep up with mainland Europe's economic recovery, and ultimately opted to join the EEC in the hope of halting its economic decline (Jones, 2017, p. 13–16). Britain's first application for membership was vetoed by France in 1961; France also vetoed the UK's second application in 1967, fearing that Britain would be more loyal to the US than to its European neighbours. After finally managing to join the EEC in 1973, Britain failed to experience a rapid economic recovery, which led to a first referendum on the country's membership being held in 1975, and a number of parliamentary votes were carried out on individual treaties pertaining to the extent of European integration. In the 1980s, Conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher (1979–1990) adopted a sceptical position towards European integration (Hardt-Mautner, 1995). Thatcher managed to secure more advantageous terms for Britain's membership in the EEC: for instance, in 1985, the UK rebate, the reduction of the UK's contribution to the European budget, was ratified and implemented (Daddow, 2013).

In contrast to Churchill's notion of a United States of Europe, Britain viewed European integration as a 'pragmatic and utilitarian foreign policy stripped of a normat-

ive commitment to the European ideal of ever closer union' (Glencross, 2014, p. 8). During its time as an EU member state, Britain never integrated to the same extent as other countries, refusing to join both the Schengen area and the Eurozone. However, this policy of self-exclusion ultimately proved unsustainable, especially as Brussels's goal increasingly contradicted the ideology of British Eurosceptics. The Eurosceptic narrative constructed a nationalistic discourse that positioned *Europe* as the *other* that stood in opposition to British interests and identities. This discourse stands in fundamental and principled opposition to the European integration project (Gifford, 2006, p. 864).

The issue of Britain's membership of the EU became a political powder keg, and Prime Minister Cameron included it in the Conservative Party's election manifesto for the 2015 UK General Election. Matters of national sovereignty, freedom of movement, immigration, and border control were the primary motives for the referendum on EU membership; Saunders (2016, p. 320) points out that sovereignty and immigration were very strong campaign issues. With the rise of the right-wing populist UKIP party, core issues of the European single market became a polarising argument in the debate on leaving the EU. One of the 'four freedoms' in particular (in addition to the free movement of both goods and capital, and the freedom to establish and provide services) became increasingly polarised: the free movement of EU citizens and the resulting equal treatment of British citizens and other EU citizens in terms of employment, taxes, welfare, and other social issues (Vasilopoulou, 2016, p. 219). The Conservative strategy during the Brexit debate intensively focused on issues of migration and was thus promoted by the media (Isentyeva, 2018, 2021).

Previously published studies have shown that this strategy was very successful among older voters with a lower socio-economic status and those who were especially concerned about immigration and the concomitant "multi-culturalisation" of British society (Hobolt, 2016, p. 1260). On a cultural level, most British voters – and especially the English – did not feel affiliated with the EU. The Leave campaign was able to convince these voters that membership of the EU was incompatible with their national identity, and thus linked nationalism and Euroscepticism for the purposes of their election campaign (Henderson, Lineaira, Scully, Wincott & Wyn Jones, 2016, p. 198). As parliamentary debates have shown, the Remain campaign claimed that staying in the EU would be a pragmatic economic step, whereas the Leave campaign framed the EU as an "oppressive force" that prevented Britain from thriving as a global power. However, both sides stressed British sovereignty and exceptionalism (Wenzl, 2019, p. 44)

3. Methodological framework: employing a mixed-method approach

This section elaborates on the advantages of combining corpus-linguistic methods with discourse analysis, especially when it comes to analysing media discourse. There are also a

growing number of publications (Baker, 2006; Partington, Duguid & Taylor, 2013; Taylor & Marchi, 2018) that successfully combine these two methods in different ways.

Corpus-linguistic methods can be particularly useful in instances where analysts aim to trace recurring patterns and discursive trends in larger corpora: keyword, collocational and concordance analyses help to identify recurrent patterns that cannot always be identified by close reading a limited number of pre-selected texts. In its turn, a detailed discourse analysis provides insight into various levels of discourse structure, and also requires an in-depth knowledge of the current social and political climate. In the case of the media study presented here, it is especially important that one understands the current socio-political situation in the UK with regard to Europe, migration within the EU, and Brexit, as well as pays special attention to the political stance of a given newspaper and the discourse (re)produced within it.

The analysis of context – both the linguistic and broader socio-political context – is one of the key methods in the contemporary study of discourses. In corpus linguistics, collocational analysis constitutes one of the basic forms of analysis that is employed in a wide range of studies. A *collocate* is a word that regularly occurs next to or in close proximity to a word under investigation, which is often referred to as a *node word* (McEnery & Hardie, 2012, p. 123). A span of five words to the left and to the right (+/- 5 words) of a node word is the typical span used for identifying collocates. In the analysis featured here, the focus is, however, placed on the adjectives and nouns that immediately precede or follow the words under investigation, namely *Britain* and *Europe*, and *British*, *European* and *EU*.

As a first step, a distinctive collexeme analysis (Gries & Stefanowitsch, 2004), which represents one of three types of collostructional analysis, is applied to the direct right-hand collocates of the word pair *British* and *EU*, using the R-package *Collostructions* (Flach, 2017). Collostructional analysis is a family of statistical methods developed by Stefanowitsch and Gries that are designed to measure the degree of attraction or repulsion that words exhibit in relation to various constructions. At present, collostructional analysis comprises three interrelated methods: simple collexeme analysis (Stefanowitsch & Gries, 2003), distinctive collexeme analysis, and covarying collexeme analysis (Stefanowitsch & Gries, 2005). Importantly, distinctive collexeme analysis was designed to investigate “pairs of semantically similar grammatical constructions and the lexemes that occur in them” (Gries & Stefanowitsch, 2004, p. 97). In the case of our study, collocations such as *British people* and *EU migrants* are regarded as similar grammatical constructions, and distinctive collexeme analysis is especially insightful as it shows which right-hand collocates exhibit a strong preference for *British* as opposed to *EU*. As a second step, the identified collocates are divided into relevant semantic groups – for example, words denoting a sense of belonging to a group (*people, voters, etc*) or representing values (*values, culture, etc*) – and investigated in more detail via a concordance analysis.

A collexeme analysis is then also applied to the right-hand collocates of the adjective *British* in the left- and right-wing newspapers, which helps to identify the most significant collocates and thus the relevant discourses representing left- and right-wing ideologies. Finally, a collexeme analysis is applied to the right-hand collocates of *British* in the BNC (1991) and compared with a similar analysis of the newspaper corpus under investigation in order to identify differences between the meaning of *British* in the general corpus of English (BNC) and a specialised corpus that foregrounds differences between British and (EU) migrants. The following section provides an overview of the specialised newspaper corpus employed in this study and highlights the significance and relevance of this corpus for the study of media representations of (British) national identity.

4. Political allegiances of the British press, the Specialised Newspaper Corpus and its significance for the present study

The linguistic data employed in this study represents a monolingual and monogeneric corpus of 500 newspaper articles published between 2016 and 2018 in five British newspapers. Each subcorpus (newspaper) contains 100 articles, and the division into text types is quite balanced: around 50 per cent of the data is comprised of news reports, whereas the other 50 per cent is divided evenly between editorials and opinion pieces. One of the research goals of this study is to trace the discursive differences (and similarities) between how British national identity is constructed in the British left- and right-wing press. The articles in question were taken from newspapers that are representative of different ideologies; British press outlets have expressed their political allegiances in every general election since 1945 by backing one of the major parties in their editorials and opinion pieces (Butler & Butler 2000: 536; Islentyeva 2019: 213; Islentyeva 2021: 21). In the corpus used for this study, *The Guardian* (and *The Observer*) and *The Daily Mirror* represent left-wing or progressive ideology, while *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Daily Mail* and *The Sun* represent right-wing or conservative ideology. Moreover, *The Telegraph* and *The Guardian* represent the so-called quality press or broadsheets, while *The Mail*, *The Sun* and *The Mirror* are known as popular press or tabloids. *The Sun*, *The Mail* and *The Guardian* are the three most widely-read newspapers in the UK. Table 1 displays the average monthly print and digital readership of the five newspapers in question as of November 2018, since the corpus contains articles from 2016 to 2018. Table 2 provides detailed meta-information for the corpus under investigation.

British daily newspapers	Print	Digital			Total
		mobile	tablet	desktop	
<i>Sun</i> titles & website	8,250	21,174	3,209	3,210	29,286

<i>The Mail</i> titles & website	7,821	19,841	3,134	5,123	29,280
<i>The Guardian & The Observer</i> and their website	3,476	16,920	2,860	8,179	25,210
<i>Mirror</i> titles & website	4,246	17,904	2,305	2,963	23,963
<i>The Telegraph</i> titles and website	3,303	14,988	2,814	5,970	22,741

Table 1: Average monthly print and digital readership for November 2018 (in 1,000 copies). Source: Pamco (formerly the National Readership Survey)

Time period	2016–2018
Corpus size	386,393 tokens/500 articles (evenly distributed between 5 newspapers)
Newspapers	left-wing subcorpus: <i>The Guardian & The Observer, The Daily Mirror</i> right-wing subcorpus: <i>The Daily Telegraph, The Daily Mail, The Sun</i>
Major themes	EU migration and Brexit, illegal immigration, asylum policies
Types of articles	editorials, opinion pieces, news reports
Newspaper sections	UK news, European and EU news, politics, EU referendum, immigration & asylum, business & finances

Table 2: Metadata for the corpus under investigation

The data in the corpus encompasses the six months before and the two and a half years after the EU membership referendum that was held on 2016-06-23. It is worth mentioning that this corpus was initially designed to conduct research into migration discourse in the contemporary British press (Islentyeva, 2021) and therefore primarily contains articles regarding migration within Europe and Brexit negotiations between the UK and the EU. The search terms for the corpus were restricted to such words as *migrant(s)*, *immigrant(s)*, *migration*, *immigration*, *EU*, *Europe* and *Brexit*. One hundred of the most popular articles from each newspaper were retrieved from the official websites of the aforementioned newspapers, downloaded as plain text files and sorted according to the newspaper from which they were extracted, with one file for each newspaper. The corpus was annotated with the help of a part-of-speech TreeTagger (Schmid, 1994), which enables the

search for all forms of a word by inputting its lemma. The analysis of the corpus was carried out with the help of Corpus Query Processor (CQP).

The corpus also proved to have shed some light on how the media constructs concepts of Britain and British identity within the context of EU migration. Notions of a border-free Europe and the mobility of its citizens raise questions not only of national identity, but also of *British exceptionalism*, which has historically stood in opposition to the vision of a united Europe. Spiering (2015, p. 6) argues that national identities are relational; in order to define who we are, we seek to distinguish ourselves from others. For example, in their quest to forge their own identity, the English tend to define themselves in contrast to the Scots, the Welsh, and the Irish by claiming to hold a special position within Britain. Immigrants and other ethnic and religious minorities represent another big out-group, followed by mainland Europeans, who function as ‘significant others in the English quest for the national self’ (Spiering, 2015, p. 6). The corpus used in this study, which contains articles on EU migration, provides a solid basis for discussions about the nature of British national identity and self-representation, with a special focus on the differences between left- and right-wing ideologies.

5. Corpus analysis and discussion

The comparative analysis outlined here traces the differences and similarities in terms of how British national identity is constructed in the British left- versus right-wing press within the context of EU migration discourse. Table 3 provides the raw frequencies of *Britain*, *British*, *Europe*, *European* and *EU* and the number of tokens in each subcorpus of the newspaper corpus. Table 4 provides the normalised frequencies of the words under investigation per 10,000 words in order to compare their distribution in the subcorpora.

UK newspaper	Britain	British	Europe	European	EU	Number of tokens
left-wing	603	222	220	254	1,224	165,244
right-wing	855	345	236	252	1,194	221,148
TOTAL	1,458	567	456	506	2,418	386,392

Table 3: Raw frequencies of the words under investigation in the newspaper corpus

UK newspaper	Britain	British	Europe	European	EU	Number of tokens
left-wing	36.5	13.4	13.3	15.4	74.1	165,244

right-wing	38.7	15.6	10.7	11.4	54.0	221,148
TOTAL	37.7	14.7	11.8	13.1	62.6	386,392

Table 4: Normalised frequencies of the words under investigation (per 10,000 words)

Both the left- and right-wing newspapers frequently employ the terms *Britain* (36.5 and 38.7 occurrences per 10,000 words) and *British* (13.4 and 15.6 occurrences per 10,000 words). In (corpus) linguistics, where we are often interested in comparing the frequencies of the words under investigation, the chi-test (χ^2) is especially useful as it enables us to compare the frequencies we actually observe with those that we should expect on the basis of a hypothesis about the distribution of the characteristics concerned (Oakes, 1998, p. 112). When comparing the occurrences of the words *Britain* and *British* in the different newspapers, no statistical significance was detected ($\chi^2=1.1851$, $df=1$, $p=.27631$ and $\chi^2=3.0274$, $df=1$, $p=.081868$). The words *Europe*, *European* and *EU*, however, occur noticeably more often in the left-wing newspapers, and all three terms show a significant p-value ($\chi^2=5.6007$, $df=1$, $p=.017953$; $\chi^2=11.4327$, $df=1$, $p=.000722$ and $\chi^2=61.3284$, $df=1$, $p=.00001$); all three words are therefore significantly more frequent in the left-wing publications under investigation, compared to their right-wing counterparts. The right-wing newspapers, in turn, feature a greater number of occurrences of the words *Britain* and *British* than left-wing newspapers, but this figure is statistically insignificant.

Table 5 lists the adjectives and nouns that are most frequently used to describe *Britain* and *Europe* in the corpus under investigation.

Britain	Europe
10 Brexit Britain	24 Eastern/eastern Europe
7 Open Britain	8 Western/western Europe
6 Great/greater Britain	5 Fortress Europe
5 global/Global Britain	5 Southern/southern Europe
3 better Britain	4 Open/open Europe
3 modern Britain	3 mainland Europe
2 Change Britain	2 continental Europe

2 post-referendum Britain	1 border-free Europe
2 unskilled Britain	1 civilised Europe
1 divided Britain	1 little Europe
1 marginalised Britain	1 modern Europe
1 multicultural Britain	1 Nazi Europe
1 new Britain	1 Northern Europe
1 post-Brexit Britain	1 peaceful Europe
	1 social Europe

Table 5: Most frequent left-hand collocates (adjectives and nouns) of the words Britain and Europe

In our qualitative analysis, let us first take a closer look at the right-wing press, which attempts to construct a systematic binary opposition between Britain and Europe (cf. Hardt-Mautner 1995, Spiering 2015). For example, in its representations of *Brexit Britain*, *The Sun's* editorials and *The Telegraph's* opinion piece employ a range of positive adjectives such as *better*, *greater*, *stronger* and *new*, leading to a portrayal of Britain as a stronger, mightier entity when it is no longer part of the EU.

- (1) A VOTE FOR LEAVE IS A VOTE FOR A BETTER BRITAIN (*The Sun*, editorial, 2016-06-13; *The Sun's* emphasis)
- (2) BREXIT campaigners have listed 10 reasons why a vote for their side is for a *stronger, better* Britain. (*The Sun*, news report, 2016-06-22; emphasis added)
- (3) The people have spoken. We have woken up to a *new* Britain. It is a *momentous turning-point* in our history. (*The Sun*, editorial, 2016-06-24; emphasis added)
- (4) With major countries around the world also ready to welcome *Brexit Britain* as a *new* trading partner, *our EU-free future* is looking *rosy*. (*The Sun*, editorial, 2016-07-25; emphasis added)
- (5) It's time for creative thinking on immigration for a *greater* Britain. (*The Telegraph*, opinion piece, 2016-08-28; emphasis added)

The right-wing press often refers to Europe as a monolith, as if it were a single state or country, while severely criticising and mocking the idea of European unity and freedom of movement. Being part of the EU is also depicted as an economic burden shouldered by

British taxpayers, and Brussels is portrayed as a rival force that is *taking control* away from the UK (Islentyeva, 2019) – see also Table 9 and the corresponding analysis below:

- (6) Through *bitter experience*, they [Sweden and Denmark] are finally beginning to see the *utter folly of a border-free Europe*. (*The Mail*, opinion piece, 2016-01-05; emphasis added)

When discussing EU migration, the right-wing press often conceptualises Britain as a MAGNET for Europeans, especially for low-skilled and unskilled workers (“cheap labour”) from Eastern Europe (see Taylor; 2014; Islentyeva, 2018; Islentyeva, 2021, pp. 96–107). Furthermore, in contrast to Europe, Britain is often represented as superior and capable of finding more effective solutions to immigration and asylum issues:

- (7) Britain has found a *better way*. We shall continue to welcome workers from Europe but we shall do so on *our terms*. (*The Sun*, opinion piece, 2017-02-27; emphasis added)
- (8) Mr Cameron should consider that of all the countries in Europe, Britain has *the longest established tradition of offering sanctuary to refugees* from war and oppression. (*The Mail*, opinion piece, 2016-04-28; emphasis added)

A closer look at the concordances from the left-wing press shows that *The Guardian* argues that remaining in the EU is vital for Britain’s economic and cultural prosperity. As part of Europe, Britain is described as a tolerant, outward-looking, progressive, technologically advanced, and socially liberal place, whereas Brexit Britain is portrayed as an insular and inward-looking island nation preoccupied with curtailing foreigners’ legal right to settle there:

- (9) Instead we should be putting our shoulders to the task of building a *democratic, devolved, multicultural* Britain with a fair deal for all, connected to the world and working with our *European neighbours*. (*The Guardian*, editorial, 2016-06-20; emphasis added)
- (10) The Home Office plans cast *Brexit Britain* as an *insular and introspective* island, preoccupied with preventing almost all migrants from having a legal option to settle in this country. (*The Guardian*, editorial, 2017-09-06; emphasis added)

In the left-wing press, Europe is represented as a union of nations that is successfully working together to achieve its goals, while Britain is seen as a country whose development has been influenced by Europe and that shares the same values as its European neighbours. While the left-wing publications acknowledge that there are flaws in the way the EU is structured and led, they repeatedly emphasise their view that it would be better for Britain to remain a member of the EU. Europe’s status as the UK’s largest trading partner and closest neighbour is also referred to, and cooperation between the two entities is depicted as vital:

- (11) We need, too, to remember our history. Britain was *formed and shaped by Europe*. And we are – in historical as well as cultural, geographical and trading terms – a *European nation*. (*The Guardian*, editorial, 2016-06-20; emphasis added)
- (12) our economic, strategic and cultural *future* is as part of Europe (*The Guardian*, editorial, 2018-09-19; emphasis added)
- (13) We can only tackle the *big problems* that *we all face in Europe* [...] by working together (*The Mirror*, news report, 2016-06-10; emphasis added)

Table 6 provides the results of a distinctive collexeme analysis, listing the fifteen most salient right-hand collocates that are attracted to the words *British* and *EU* respectively, in both the left- and right-wing newspapers. Columns 3 and 4 provide the observed and expected frequencies for the collocates of *British*, columns 5 and 6 give the observed and expected collocates of *EU*, columns 7 and 8 provide collostructional strength and statistical significance, respectively. Collostructional strength is measured using the log-likelihood test (Oakes, 1998, p. 42). In terms of statistical significance, ***** is significant at $p < 0.00001$, **** is significant $p < 0.0001$, *** is significant at $p < 0.001$, ** is significant at $p < 0.01$, and * is significant at $p < 0.05$. The last column indicates whether a collocate is shared by both terms under investigation. The distinctive collexeme analysis thus enables the identification of the most salient collocates and provides a basis for the further contextual analysis of the most distinctive collocates, and identification of the dominant discourses produced in the press.

Rank	Noun	British		EU		G	Sig.Level	Shared
		Obs	Exp	Obs	Exp			
Distinctive collocates for <i>British</i>								
1	people	84	25.8	0	58.2	208.55	*****	N
2	government	22	6.8	0	15.2	52.58	*****	N
3	values	19	5.8	0	13.2	45.33	*****	N
4	public	17	5.2	0	11.8	40.51	*****	N
5	economy	13	4.0	0	9.0	30.91	*****	N
6	society	12	3.7	0	8.3	28.51	*****	N
7	voters	11	3.4	0	7.6	26.12	*****	N

8	future	8	2.5	0	5.5	18.96	****	N
9	jobs	7	2.2	0	4.8	16.58	****	N
10	businesses	6	1.8	0	4.2	14.21	***	N
11	chambers	6	1.8	0	4.2	14.21	***	N
12	Muslims	6	1.8	0	4.2	14.21	***	N
13	business	5	1.5	0	3.5	11.83	***	N
14	history	5	1.5	0	3.5	11.83	***	N
15	adults	4	1.2	0	3.2	9.46	**	N
Distinctive collocates for EU								
1	migrants	2	54.4	175	122.6	119.90	*****	Y
2	referendum	0	28.3	92	63.7	69.95	*****	N
3	nationals	11	46.7	141	105.3	54.49	*****	Y
4	migration	0	21.5	70	48.5	52.78	*****	N
5	citizens	37	81.8	229	184.2	47.58	*****	Y
6	leaders	0	10.8	35	24.2	26.04	*****	N
7	countries	0	9.8	32	22.2	23.78	*****	N
8	rules	0	6.1	20	13.9	14.80	***	N
9	member	0	5.5	18	12.5	13.31	***	N
10	law	0	4.6	15	10.4	11.08	***	N
11	membership	1	6.8	21	15.2	9.74	**	Y
12	withdrawal	0	3.4	11	7.6	8.11	**	N
13	states	0	3.4	11	7.6	8.11	**	N

14	immigrants	0	2.5	8	5.5	5.89	*	N
15	arrivals	0	2.5	8	5.5	5.89	*	N

Table 6: Right-hand noun collocates attracted to *British* versus *EU*

The most salient right-hand collocates of *British* can be divided into four semantic fields: references to humans/people (*people, public, society, voters, adults, Muslims*), the economy (*economy, jobs, business, businesses*), identity (*values, future, history*) and political entities (*government, chambers*). It should be noted that none of the right-hand collocates of *British* is shared by the term *EU*. The right-hand collocates of *EU* can likewise be divided into a series of different semantic fields: references to people and their movements (*migrants, nationals, migration, citizens, immigrants, arrivals*), political entities (*leaders, countries, rules, member, law, states*), and terms related to Brexit (*referendum, membership, withdrawal*). It is important to note that the terms *British* and *EU* cannot directly be compared with each other, either linguistically or politically. Unlike *British*, the term *EU* is technically not an adjective and describes a supranational institution rather than a nation state, which means that terms like *EU people* or *EU government* do not occur in the corpus.

Frequency	Collocation
149	European Union
33	European countries
19	European Economic
14	European Commission
13	European migrants
12	European Parliament
11	European Court
11	European court
9	European citizens
9	European commission
8	European workers
6	European leaders
6	European parliament
6	European states

Table 7: Right-hand collocates of *European*

As Table 7 shows, except for collocates belonging to political entities (*Union, countries, Commission, Parliaments, Court*), the corpus does not offer enough right-hand collocates of

European that can be compared to right-hand collocates of *British*. Our research has revealed that the press has predominantly resorted to using the shortened form *EU*.

Let us refer to Table 6 once again: The most salient collocate of *British* is *people* (84),² which also happens to be among the keywords that are frequently employed in populist discourses. The word *people* refers to a unified entity, especially with the use of the definite determiner (see Kranert, 2019; Stefanowitsch, 2019). The collocation *the British people* occurs 48 times in the right-wing newspapers, especially in the context of discussing the *will*, *wish*, *verdict*, or *decision* of the British people. In most cases, it is a reference to the Brexit referendum and its outcome:

- (14) Only our Brexit deal for Britain truly respects *the will of the British people*. It is the Brexit this country demanded. (*The Sun*, opinion piece, 2018-07-11; emphasis added)
- (15) But whatever your own view of immigration, there has never been an issue on which the political class has so consistently gone against *the wishes of the British people*. (*The Mail*, opinion piece, 2017-05-20; emphasis added)

These findings correspond with Stefanowitsch's (2019) analysis of populist patterns in Theresa May's Brexit rhetoric. It is not uncommon for right-wing newspapers to reproduce the rhetoric of conservative politicians. *The British people* are constructed as one single politically homogeneous group. Interestingly, the left-wing press also adopts this pattern, thereby reproducing the right-wing discourse:

- (16) But we respect *the will of the British people*. And we accept we are leaving Europe. (*The Mirror*, editorial, 2018-10-07; emphasis added)

The collocation *British society* (12) is used exclusively in the right-wing publications in the corpus under investigation; the term is not as inclusive and all-encompassing as *the British people*. The right-wing press clearly contrasts the collocation with *migrants* by repeatedly referring to the issue of *integrating into British society*.

- (17) Nearly two thirds of the public believe that migrants are *not integrating well into British society*, according to a poll. (*The Mail*, news report, 2016-10-31; emphasis added)
- (18) Concern about migrants *integrating into British society* is in line with the global average, with 40 per cent agreeing that most refugees will integrate successfully, while 47 per cent disagree. (*The Mail*, news report, 2016-08-11; emphasis added)

Similarly, the collocation *British voters* (11) is mostly found in the right-wing press (8 occurrences) and is employed in the context of British voters competing with immigrants for jobs, housing and health care:

2 The number in parentheses indicates the absolute frequency of occurrence of the corresponding collocate.

- (19) It was a smear that silenced furious *British voters* as they found themselves squeezed out of jobs, housing and health care by the influx of millions of people. (*The Sun*, opinion piece, 2017-09-11; emphasis added)

When it comes to the British economy, the discursive patterns produced in the left-versus right-wing newspapers represent two extremes: The right-wing press claims that the British economy can survive without the UK remaining a member of the EU – in fact, it will even benefit from the withdrawal and a halt to immigration:

- (20) *Ending free movement* in a measured way is exactly what the low-productivity British economy needs. [...] London house-building [...] have become *damagingly over-dependent on EU labour*. (*The Telegraph*, opinion piece, 2018-01-31; emphasis added)

The Mirror and *The Guardian*, on the other hand, emphasise the contributions made by EU migrants to the British economy. The collocation *British economy* (13) occurs in the left-wing press (7 occurrences) in the context of Brexit having a negative economic impact for Britain:

- (21) There is no question *migrants* are net contributors to the British economy. (*The Mirror*, editorial, 2016-06-18; emphasis added)
- (22) Leave Means Leave are clearly intent on *crippling the British economy* and wrecking public services by keeping *essential workers* out of the UK. (*The Guardian*, news report, 2017-04-09; emphasis added)

Similar discursive patterns can be observed with the collocation *British jobs* (7). The right-wing press demands that *British jobs* go to British workers, a slogan ('British jobs for British workers') that was initially coined by former Labour Prime Minister Gordon Brown (2007–2010).

- (23) *British jobs* will have to be offered to *British workers* [...] *EU jobseekers* will be banned entirely as they must have a guaranteed job before they come here. (*The Telegraph*, news report, 2017-09-05; emphasis added)

The left-wing press, on the other hand, argues that British jobs heavily rely on the European market:

- (24) 'Two thirds of *British jobs* in manufacturing are dependent on demand from Europe' says Labour's Alan Johnson. (*The Mirror*, news report, 2016-06-18; emphasis added)

Similar argumentative patterns can be observed regarding the collocation *British business(es)* (11), which is primarily found in the left-wing newspapers. The left-wing press argues that British businesses rely on foreign labour and that Brexit would have a damaging impact on them:

- (25) *Migrant workers* contribute to our economy and to British culture – we should be welcoming them in the traditional spirit of British tolerance. Leave Means Leave clearly don't

understand why *British business* relies on *migrant workers*. (*The Guardian*, news report, 2017-04-09; emphasis added)

- (26) Recent research shows that more than half of *British businesses* are *struggling* to recruit the skilled labour they need. ‘This Government must act urgently to give assurances to skilled and hard-working EU citizens, before any more damage is done to our already weakened economy.’ (*The Mirror*, news report, 2017-08-24; emphasis added)

Rank	Noun	left-wing		right-wing		G	Sig.Level	Shared
		Obs	Exp	Obs	Exp			
Distinctive collocates in the left-wing subcorpus								
1	business	5	1.9	0	3.1	9.73	**	N
2	Future	6	3.0	2	5.0	4.57	*	Y
3	children	2	0.8	0	1.2	3.87	*	N
4	labour	2	0.8	0	1.2	3.87	*	N
5	architects	1	0.4	0	0.6	1.93	ns	N
Distinctive collocates in the right-wing subcorpus								
1	values	1	7.2	18	11.8	11.71	***	Y
2	society	0	4.6	12	7.4	11.69	***	N
3	Muslims	0	2.3	6	3.7	5.80	*	N
4	population	0	1.5	4	2.5	3.86	*	N
5	Sikhs	0	1.1	3	1.9	2.89	ns	N

Table 8: Right-hand noun collocates attracted to *British* in the left- and right-wing subcorpora

As Table 8 shows, economic terms such as *business* (5) and *labour* (2), as well as *Future* (6) and *children* (2) are among the distinctive collocates of *British* in the left-wing subcorpus. The collocation *British Future* is the name of a UK-based think tank. In the right-wing subcorpus, terms that constitute part of national identity, such as *values* (18) and *society* (12) are the most salient collocates of *British*. Three other salient collocates (*Muslims*, *population* and *Sikhs*) refer to people. It is worth mentioning that the way the right-wing me-

dia reports on *British Muslims* (6) and *British Sikhs* (3) is also connected to the act of othering, even if these collocations are provided in the context of integration into *British society* and the representation of Muslims in the British press is particularly biased (Gabrieltos, Baker & McEnergy, 2013).

(27) ‘This in turn helps to feed a grievance narrative promoted by extremist groups who want to drive a wedge between *British Muslims* and *the rest of British society*. So, we need a more honest conversation about all this in the mainstream, in a way that helps bind people back together again, not drive them apart.’ (*The Telegraph*, news report, 2016-12-05; emphasis added)

1 mandate in British history to *take back control* over **our laws,our immigration**
 2 **MOST of Britain** now wants to *take back control* over **immigration**. But yester
 3 ate seized the first chance to *take back control* of **our borders**. As if that w
 4 n out of the single market and *take back control* of **our borders**. The UK needs
 5 ursday. Third, **our plan** will *take back control* of **our laws**. We will no long
 6 **ORDER CONTROL Britain** will *take back control* **its borders** for the first tim
 7 who comes here ' **BRITAIN** will *take back control* of **its borders** for the first
 8 to LBC, Mrs May said **they** `` *take back control* of **our borders**, brings an en
 9 ferendum. **The public** voted to *take back control* . At the very least, it dese
 10 ear not just that **Britain** will *take back control* of **its borders**, but how. MP
 11 derstandable that **we** should `` *take back control* of **our borders**". It has be
 12 rs **who voted Leave** in order to *take back control* of **immigration policy**. And
 13 flects a view that **we** will `` *take back control* ' over **immigration policy**
 14 of Brexit wo n't be that **we** `` *take back control* ' of **our borders**, as the pr
 15 omised the British public - **we** *take back control* of **our immigration policy**. `
 16 hould form part of plans to `` *take back control* of **migration from the EU**".
 17 **4 million people** voted ` to *take back control* and leave the EU. That Bru
 18 saying for some time. **We** will *take back control* of **immigration policy** but we
 19 of Brexit won't be that **we** `` *take back control* ' of **our borders**, as the Pr
 20 nomy buoyant after **the country** *takes back control* of **its borders** following Brexit
 21 nores **Theresa May's wish** to ` *take back control* of **Britain's borders** EU de

22	he Prime Minister's wish to `	<i>take back control</i>	of Britain's borders and
		<i>taken back</i>	
23	Otherwise we will not have	<i>control</i>	in the way demanded by the re
		<i>takes back</i>	
24	nomy buoyant after the country	<i>control</i>	of its borders following Brexit

Table 9: KWIC concordance for the collocation *take back control* in the right-wing subcorpus

When it comes to the distinctive collocates of the word *EU* (displayed in Table 6), a number of references are also made to people: for example, *migrants* (175), *nationals* (141), *citizens* (229), and *immigrants* (8). It is worth pointing out that the collocations *EU citizens* (132) and *EU nationals* (82) proved to be more frequent than *EU migrants* (61) in the left-wing subcorpus, whereas the right-wing press predominantly uses *EU migrants* (120) (Isentyeva, 2021, p. 107–113). These findings also correspond with corpus-based studies that showed that the right-wing press mainly refers to EU citizens as unskilled or low-skilled migrant workers who compete with British employees (Isentyeva, 2021, p. 98, 103; Stefanowitsch & Scheffler, 2020). This discourse is closely related to the idea of taking back control of Britain’s economy – as well as British borders and immigration policy – as is illustrated by the concordances of the pattern *take back control* in Table 9. The slogan *Take back control* was first introduced by the Leave campaign (Vote Leave Campaign 2021) and swiftly adopted by the right-wing press. The official Leave campaign portrays the EU as an opponent of Britain and calls for regaining control of UK law, trade, human rights, and migration. The corresponding pattern in the right-wing press is represented by recurrent collocates such as *our laws*, *our/Britain's borders*, *our immigration policy* and *migration from the EU*. The EU is portrayed as taking control from the UK (see Isentyeva, 2019), while migrants are framed as both a threat to and a burden on Britain (see Isentyeva, 2018, 2021).

Rank	Noun	EULOBUS		BNC		G	Sig. Level	Shared
		Obs.	Exp.	Obs.	Exp.			
Distinctive collocates in the newspaper corpus								
1	people	84	8.6	382	457.4	257.86	*****	Y
2	citizens	37	2.0	70	105.0	162.77	*****	Y
3	workers	35	1.7	58	91.3	160.91	*****	Y
4	values	19	0.5	6	24.5	125.18	*****	Y

5	Future	8	0.1	0	7.9	64.05	*****	N
6	voters	11	0.5	16	26.5	52.21	*****	Y
7	nationals	11	0.6	21	31.4	47.71	*****	Y
8	citizenship	12	1.0	41	52.0	40.95	*****	Y
9	border	5	0.1	0	4.9	40.00	*****	N
10	immigration	7	0.2	5	11.8	39.91	*****	Y
11	businesses	6	0.3	10	15.7	27.21	*****	Y
12	Sikhs	3	0.1	0	2.9	23.99	*****	N
13	public	17	4.3	217	229.7	22.34	*****	Y
14	Muslims	6	0.5	19	24.5	21.15	*****	Y
15	jobs	6	0.5	22	27.5	19.72	*****	Y

Distinctive collocates in the BNC

1	Rail	0	21.9	1191	1169.1	45.24	*****	N
2	Telecom	0	9.5	518	508.5	19.43	****	N
3	Isles	0	7.3	396	388.7	14.82	***	N
4	industry	0	7.3	394	386.7	14.75	***	N
5	Aerospace	0	6.6	361	354.4	13.50	***	N
6	Museum	0	6.5	351	344.5	13.13	***	N
7	Steel	0	6.3	343	336.7	12.82	***	N
8	Coal	1	9.4	509	500.6	12.58	***	Y
9	Library	0	5.3	288	282.7	10.76	**	N
10	Airways	1	7.4	402	395.6	9.01	**	Y

11	Government	1	6.1	330	324.9	6.70	**	Y
12	troops	0	3.2	174	170.8	6.49	*	N
13	Empire	0	3.2	172	168.8	6.41	*	N
14	Gas	3	8.9	480	474.1	5.41	*	Y
15	Association	0	2.5	138	135.5	5.14	*	N

Table 10: Right-hand collocates attracted to *British* in the newspaper corpus versus the BNC

Finally, Table 10 provides the results of a distinctive collexeme analysis, listing the 15 most salient right-hand collocates of *British* in the newspaper corpus under investigation compared to those in the BNC (1991). These results are in line with the analysis given in Tables 6 and 8. The noun collocates most attracted to *British* in the newspaper corpus can be divided into four semantic categories: references to people (*people, citizens, nationals, voters, workers, public, Muslims, etc.*), the economy (*jobs, businesses*), immigration (*border, immigration, citizenship*), and values (*values*). The four most salient collocates actually belong to the semantic categories that constitute the core of British national identity, with references to *British people* (84), *British citizens* (37), *British workers* (35), and *British values* (19). It is also worth mentioning that the collocation *British values* (19) occurs 18 times in the right-wing subcorpus; a closer look at the expanded concordances reveals the discursive pattern surrounding this collocation:

- (28) School curriculums should be rewritten to include more specific teaching of *British values*, such as *tolerance, democracy and free speech*. (*The Sun*, news report, 2016-12-04; emphasis added)
- (29) *New immigrants* should *swear an oath to uphold British values* as soon as they arrive in the UK and not wait until they gain British citizenship, up to 10 years later. (*ibid.*; emphasis added)
- (30) Britain has always been renowned for its avoidance of extremism. But we will avoid the same fate only if the state adopts *a new approach on immigration*, including more political honesty, *tighter border controls* and an *emphasis on British values*. That is not racist. (*The Sun*, opinion piece, 2018-09-18; emphasis added)

As is the case with the collocation *British society*, which is contrasted with *migrants* by way of recurrent references to the issue of *integration into British society*, the collocation *British values* likewise frequently occurs in contexts regarding integration, with an emphasis on the fact that migrants should be taught British values and expected to uphold them.

Democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, and tolerance are often cited in *The Sun*, *The Mail* and *The Telegraph* as ‘core British values’.

As for the most distinctive collocates of *British* in the BNC (1991), the list in Table 10 contains a number of UK companies and other entities such as *British Rail*, *British Telecom*, *British Airways*, *British Museum*, and *British Library*. In the context of the study presented here, it is relevant to mention that the collocation *British Empire* (172) belongs to the 15 most salient collocations of general British English.

6. Conclusion

This corpus-based study has shed some light on the ways in which the media has framed and constructed concepts of British national identity within the context of the EU referendum, with an emphasis placed on the differences between the discursive methods employed by the left- and right-wing newspapers included in the corpus analysed here. Analysing discourses around Europe and Europeans not only demonstrates how Europe and EU citizens are represented in the British press, but also provides information on the discourses surrounding British identity.

The construction of British national identity did not begin during Brexit or with Cameron’s Bloomberg speech – it started much earlier. With the introduction of national borders come national identities. National identities are not necessarily dangerous constructs in and of themselves, but they are liable to become dangerous when they are fused with privilege and entail the exclusion of other people – in this case the exclusion of immigrants and migrants from Europe and elsewhere. Bhambra (2017) argues that Britain was never a nation, but rather was always an empire, and ‘the vote for Brexit is a vote that represents the delayed resentment at the loss of Empire and at the loss of privileges associated with Empire’.

As the analysis presented here has shown, the right-wing press systematically creates a binary opposition in an attempt to ensure the distinction between Britain and Europe, as well as between the people and values of Britain versus those of Europe, with recurrent references made to *British people* and *their will*, *British society*, *the British public*, *British economy* and *British values*. Within this discourse, Britain does not belong to Europe; on the contrary, it is portrayed as a victim of Brussels and of domineering European rule. Brexit Britain, on the other hand, is depicted as a global player that can keep up as a world economy. In any case, British identity is distinct from European identity, which is framed in terms of *EU migrants*, *EU citizens*, *EU workers*, and *EU labour*; prominent points thus revolve around the British economy and British immigration policy. The process of othering, in which British identity is seen as the standard and anything that deviates from it is marginalised and should thus be assimilated into British society, is one of the key discursive strategies employed by the right-wing press. When it comes to the economy, the discursive patterns produced in the left- versus right-wing newspapers represent two ex-

tremes: The right-wing press claims that the British economy will benefit from the country's withdrawal from the EU and a halt to immigration, whereas the left-wing press highlights the EU's status as Britain's largest trading partner and closest neighbour.

It could be argued that the discourse (re)produced by the right-wing press influenced the decision of British voters to vote in favour of leaving the EU, although the exact extent to which the British media was involved in this process cannot be definitively determined. Due to its higher circulation figures (see Table 1), the right-wing press reaches a wider audience than the left-wing newspapers, which allows it to form and spread dominant discourse in contemporary Britain. It should also be emphasised that the left-wing newspapers often lack their own corresponding discursive patterns that are able to fully contrast the narratives of the right. Instead of producing their own discursive frameworks, the left-wing press primarily discusses and criticises the patterns employed and developed by the right-wing press, thus reproducing them (cf. Islentyeva 2021: 86). The left-wing press should use its language in such a way that it develops its own corresponding discursive patterns, thus allowing it to be distinguished more clearly from the right and provide an alternative to nationalist narratives and discourses.

In terms of scope for further research, the source of linguistic data employed here could be expanded to include data from different periods, as well as from social media platforms. The search patterns could include a wide range of terms such as *UK citizens*, *UK nationals*, *Brits*, and *Britons*. Possessive pronouns are also of great interest; words like *our* versus *their* or *Britain's/UK's* versus *Europe's* should clarify questions of ownership and belonging. Additionally, a focus on British nationals and citizens living abroad in EU countries or British nationals in Northern Ireland might offer an even more comprehensive insight into how national identity is constructed. In this regard, one could also look at the differences between the other constituent countries of the UK and analyse how and to what extent Scottish, Welsh and English identities influence the mainstream British one. Furthermore, research on other countries' representation in contrast to the EU would be of great interest, possibly comparing countries that are generally considered to constitute the "heart" of the EU, such as Germany or France, with countries that are commonly known to be Eurosceptic, like Greece or Hungary.

Acknowledgements

We owe a great deal to Torben Scheffler and Willi Werner, who helped us collect corpus data. We also thank Anatol Stefanowitsch for his help in annotating the newspaper corpus employed in this study.

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