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From *Realpolitik* to *Gefühlspolitik*: strategically narrating the European Union at the national level

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ABSTRACT

Studies on European narratives predominantly focus on which narratives about the EU exist and which are more salient for political actors and audiences. The question remains as to *how* political actors can strategically utilize those EU narratives at a national level to justify their decision-making and further their objectives. We argue that to render narratives efficacious in convincing audiences of the appropriateness of political decisions, actors engage in *Gefühlspolitik* – emotional politics – rather than *Realpolitik* by strategically (re)constructing EU narratives and emphasizing their intersections with national narratives and collective memory to construct emotionally compelling stories and moral imperatives. Therefore, how EU narratives are utilized on a national level is more dependent on the national context and their affective appeal than on their actual content. We demonstrate our argument by looking at the case of the German government narrating the EU during the migration crisis. We show how the government anchored the European peace narrative in German collective memory to construct compelling moral imperatives that significantly narrowed the discursive space and let the German government’s policies appear as apolitical necessities without alternative.

KEYWORDS European union; narratives; international relations; collective memory; emotions; Germany

Introduction

The idea that ‘the glue that binds the [European Union (EU)] together is not a shared identity; it is, rather, shared projects and objectives’ (Nicolaidis, 2004) is one that has fascinated scholars of European studies for many years and that has led to a ‘narrative turn’ in the field of EU studies (Bouza Garcia, 2017). In the case of the scholarship on European integration, narratives, or ‘stories people tell to make sense of their reality’ (Andrews et al., 2015, p. 1), have been found to exist in all shapes and forms since the end of

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WWII. Scholars have observed and analysed EU narratives about, inter alia, peace, freedom of movement, ecology, neoliberalism, globalization, social dimensions, shared identity, and the ever-closer union (see, for instance, Damay & Mercenier, 2016; Kaiser, 2017; Manners & Murray, 2016; Manners & Whitman, 2003; Neumayer, 2015; Nicolaïdis & Howse, 2002; Sternberg, 2013).

However, European institutions have failed to produce a singular hegemonic and coherent narrative to legitimise the European project, and research on political communication has documented the lack of reach of the European institutions' technocratic language (Rauh, 2021). As a result, a plethora of different stories have been constructed to narrate European integration (Tonra, 2011) which necessarily co-exists at the domestic level with diverse national narratives. Therefore, not all EU narratives resonate in the same way with national, European, and international audiences: some of them are widespread whereas others only echo on certain fringes of society (Beaudonnet et al., 2022). Either way, in the context of European politics, these narratives can be strategically utilized by national governments to convince their populations – and themselves – that they are doing the right thing in the best possible ways, as well as to justify policy decisions and general orientations.

In recent years, strategic narratives, 'a communicative tool through which political actors [...] attempt to give determined meaning to past, present, and future in order to achieve political objectives' (Miskimmon et al., 2013, p. 5), have proven to be a valuable framework to understand how political actors communicate with the public, and with what implications. Scholarship on the EU has examined the lack of an efficient strategic narrative by institutions (Kaldor et al., 2007) and the use of EU narratives by member states to push for specific policies (Neumayer, 2015), showing that diverse actors have strategically used narratives about Europe to justify political positions. This is also in line with findings from a different strand of literature exploring the strategic considerations of political actors in politicizing the EU in national debates (De Bruycker, 2017; Hooghe & Marks, 2009; Hutter & Grande, 2014; Kriesi, 2007; Rauh, 2015; Rauh & De Wilde, 2017). Overall, research has shown that in times of crisis, European political actors increasingly debate the European Union (De Wilde & Zürn, 2012; Hutter & Kriesi, 2019; Rauh et al., 2020). However, this research does not indicate *how* these actors talk about the EU, that is, what narrative form these debates take and how they represent the past, present, and future of a particular political project. In parallel, research on the success of populists has insisted on the affective appeal of their narratives (see, for example, Browning, 2019; Homolar & Löfflmann, 2021; Widmann, 2021), underlining what scholarship in International Relations and psychology have concluded: that what sticks and resonates with audiences are the emotive aspects of narratives. Building on these insights, our article aims to answer the question of *how* national actors can

and do strategically use EU narratives to convince the public of political decisions concerning the EU and European integration, which remains understudied.

Drawing on emotion and memory research in International Relations (IR), we seek to advance the narrative turn in EU studies by moving away from some ideas often implicit in work on strategic communication, that is the postulation of the prevalence of *Realpolitik* amongst policymakers and the assumption that actors rationally pursue their interest and maximize their utility by convincing their audience through cognitive coherent stories and logical cost-benefit analyses whilst remaining unaffected by narratives and emotions themselves. Instead, we suggest that (European) politics should be understood as the nineteenth-century German counterpart of *Realpolitik*: '*Gefühlspolitik*'.¹ Originally intended as a derogatory term utilized by, amongst others, Bismarck himself (Frevert, 2012), it encapsulates two crucial aspects of emotions in politics. First, it indicates that actors are themselves embedded in and subject to affective dynamics which influence their preferences, normative appraisals, attention, priorities, and capacity for reason, reflection, and strategic behaviour in general (Hall & Ross, 2015). Second, *Gefühlspolitik* emphasizes that actors can nonetheless strategically utilize emotions as resources to develop compelling stories that narrow down discursive space, construct moral imperatives, and ultimately reach their political goals (Gustafsson & Hall, 2021). In fact, liberal democratic settings often require actors to engage in *Gefühlspolitik* as emotions are integral to political mobilization and mere state interests and logical economic arguments often fail to convince populations to support political projects or policy change (Gellwitzki & Houde, 2022; Ross, 2014; Van Rythoven, 2015).

Based on these insights, we argue that *Gefühlspolitik* is an essential component to understanding how actors strategically (re)construct EU narratives by anchoring them in national narratives and collective memory to emphasize their affectively appealing dimensions and render stories efficacious in convincing audiences of the appropriateness of EU-related political decisions. With this move, the article makes three contributions to the literature. First, it synthesizes the scholarships on EU, strategic, and affective narratives to theoretically articulate and conceptualize how institutional EU narratives translate into national contexts by mapping out the relationship between these EU narratives and national governments' narrative practices, an angle that so far has been left underexplored by the narrative turn in EU studies. Second, it provides a framework through which the (quantitative) work on political communication and the (qualitative) research on narratives and its strategic dimensions can be bridged with a shared focus on the affectivity of narration. Third, it demonstrates the empirical added value of the developed framework by analysing how the German government engaged in *Gefühlspolitik* by strategically utilizing the EU peace narrative during the

migration crisis to justify its seemingly contradictory policy orientations and delegitimise other positions. Moreover, since the case of the EU is so specific that traditional IR theory does not necessarily apply to its particularities, the article also contributes to the literature on emotion research in International Relations by outlining how the EU, and potentially other international organizations, are narrated by their member states.

To develop our argument, we first review the broader literature on narratives in general and in EU studies. Second, we theorize how EU narratives can be used strategically in combination with national narratives by emphasizing their affective aspects in order to justify policies. Finally, we illustrate our argument by analysing the case of Germany during the migration crisis, looking at how the government used the EU peace narrative and its intersection with German national narratives to justify its policies. Due to it resonating with Germany's collective memory, the peace narrative was initially utilized to construct moral imperatives to take in asylum seekers and follow European values, which served as a justification for the implementation of the so-called 'open-door policy', whilst it later acted as a pretext to enforce the controversial EU-Turkey deal.

The 'narrative turn' in EU studies: towards a new framework of analysis

EU narratives

As stories used to understand reality, who we are, and what our identity is (Andrews et al., 2015), narratives have increasingly become the topic of a plethora of studies in politics and IR alike. This is unsurprising as decades of research in psychology have insisted on the importance for individuals and groups to give meaning to the past, the present, and the future to establish a coherent story and to be able to orient themselves in the world (Freeman, 2015; McAdams, 1988; Somers, 1994). Moreover, individuals rely on narratives to understand the identities, values, and purposes conveyed by political systems and communities (Manners & Murray, 2016). Thereby, they not only understand themselves and the world through narratives but also how they and the world *should be like* (Patterson & Monroe, 1998). This renders narratives, on the one hand, useful tools to strategically convey political messages and, on the other hand, crucial for individuals' lives more generally, as 'without narratives, human existence might otherwise appear meaningless' (McLaughlin et al., 2019, p. 158).

Because of their utmost importance in shaping (political) life, it is therefore not surprising that European institutions have been trying to build a coherent and appealing narrative around integration to make sense of it and grant the European project legitimacy. Most fundamental to this effort has been the

EU's foundational myth (Della Sala, 2010) and its 'never again' peace narrative which assigned the prevailing peace in Europe to European integration and provided the prospect of an affectively appealing utopian future detached from the horrors of the past (Kølvraa, 2016). For many years, the narrative around the idea that unification was an 'enormous achievement' remained somewhat unchallenged and dominated the academic debate on Europe (Gilbert, 2008, p. 645), but since then, new narratives have emerged to dispute this orthodox view of integration. The setback caused by the 'No' votes of France and the Netherlands on the Constitutional treaty (Sternberg, 2013), amongst other events, produced for instance a narrative of 'Europe in crisis' (Triandafyllidou et al., 2009), whilst the rise of globalization gave birth to new EU narratives about economic prosperity or neoliberalism (Manners & Murray, 2016). Furthermore, the enlargement to the East from 2004 onwards changed the context of the EU and a narrative around the reunification of Europe emerged, alongside some policy-oriented narratives around 'social Europe', 'green Europe', etc.

Narratives are crucial dimensions of political life and critical elements of attitudes-shaping and policymaking. In the context of the European Union, plenty of diverse narratives have emerged over the years, and no singular hegemonic story has been established. However, not all narratives are equally compelling, and in the next section, we will discuss how political actors can strategically use them to justify policymaking and general political orientations by emphasizing certain aspects of these narratives.

Strategic narratives

Having established what narratives are, why they are essential, and how they have been studied in the context of the European Union, two more relevant questions remain: how can European actors use narratives about the EU, and how do they make those narratives efficacious? To answer the first question, scholars have studied strategic narratives which are narratives used by political actors to construct a shared story for a community, one that people can understand and relate to, in order to shape the behaviour of other actors and audiences and control the discourse over an issue (Miskimmon et al., 2013). In other words, political actors tap into stories that will resonate with the audience to explain and justify political choices. In the European context, the official peace narrative surrounding European integration has been, for example, used by European institutions as a way to oppose the American war in Iraq and justify the non-intervention they were promoting (Gnesotto, 2003; Kølvraa, 2016). Actors articulate their interests through strategic narratives in a way that suggests why certain policies must be implemented under the presented circumstances and the moral imperatives stemming from them (Miskimmon et al., 2013).

These narratives, however, cannot be produced at any time by any actor and be expected to stick with an audience. Actors must navigate between the story they want to tell, and the broader narratives given by the different political contexts in which it is evolving (Subotić, 2016). In the case of EU politics, European and national narratives act as ‘normative and cognitive maps’ (Della Sala, 2010) that define the political imaginary and the scope of possibilities that governments need to navigate between and draw upon to develop their strategic narratives. They can thus choose to highlight different aspects of pre-existing narratives and their history and propose a specific interpretation to justify choices, orientations, and policies (Miskimmon et al., 2013). What remains to be explored is which of those aspects resonates more with the audience and make the strategic narratives more effective?

Affective narratives and memory

People want stories they ‘like to hear’ and will relate to (Ringmar, 2006, p. 411). For most researchers analysing narratives, this means that the social context or the relevance of including norms, values, and culture in narratives is deemed crucial to fully grasp the resonance of certain stories over others (Andrews et al., 2015; Eberle & Daniel, 2019). Hence, for a narrative to resonate and be efficient, it must feel familiar to the audience and be affectively appealing (Eberle & Daniel, 2019; Solomon, 2012, 2017; Stavrakakis, 2012). Narratives do not only or primarily need to make sense on a cognitive level: they need to *feel* right and convincing, hence negative stories about national traumas and humiliation can be equally affective as stories about past glories (Kinnvall, 2004).

In principle, any narrative can be(come) efficacious if its *form*, that is the content, and its *force*, that is its affective appeal, are convincing in a specific context (Homolar, 2021). The question, thus, is not whether some narratives are affective and others ‘only’ cognitive or rational, but rather which narratives are most affective in a particular context. To develop convincing strategic narratives, actors need to engage in *Gefühlspolitik* by, for instance, presenting their strategic narratives as emotional or moral appeals that express their own feelings and beliefs; attempting to stir and invoke specific emotions in the audience; or portraying an affectively appealing argument as a rational, logical, and unemotional proposition. Affect, a ‘range of diffuse and often unconscious embodied experience and processes, including moods, sentiments, and attachments’ (Van Rythoven & Sucharov, 2020, p. 2), can be stimulated by actors when using narratives by referencing collective memory, rendering those narratives more appealing to the public. This affective aspect of narratives can be nonconscious but nonetheless guide behaviour and influence perception, judgement,

preferences, and normative appraisals of actors and audiences alike (Hall & Ross, 2015).

One particularly efficient way to make a narrative affective is to emphasize the more emotional aspects of the shared history of a group, especially of trauma, and their implications for contemporary politics (Bachleitner, 2021; Hutchison, 2016; Kinnvall, 2004; Zehfuss, 2007). Invocations of collective memory and their affective attachments constitute the 'opportunity to influence decision-making and limit the potential critical scope for action' (Campbell, 2020, p. 127), and referring to emotional events from the past is a way to make people emotional about the present in a similar way (Ross, 2014). Narratives drawing on collective memory, in that sense, are not only cognitive frames but also emotional ones. This is especially crucial when talking about strategic narratives, as tapping into the more emotional aspects of collective memory is more likely to resonate with audiences than stories that merely emphasize rationality and logic.

What makes the case of EU member states special is that in the European context, political actors need to navigate not only their national narratives but also the broader European narratives. European governments can and do strategically use European narratives by highlighting their more emotional aspects that resonate with national narratives and collective memory to develop compelling stories and further their political ambitions. In other words, we argue that governments decide which aspects of the EU narrative they want to emphasize and merge them with their own historical national context to pursue political goals and offer an appealing and convincing justification to narrow the discourse around specific policies and orientations.

That is not to say that actors cannot depart at all from the official narratives: EU narratives can be modified to fit the national narrative better. For example, Neumayer (2015) shows that East European member states (re)constructed the emotion-laden EU peace narrative by emphasizing the focus on the protection of human rights to get communist crimes acknowledged as equal to fascist crimes, an issue particularly emotional in their respective national contexts. This (re)interpretation of the European foundational peace narrative, firmly embedded in domestic preoccupations, was strategically used to pursue a political objective whilst being both affectively appealing to the domestic public and aligned with the official narrative based on European collective memory.

To summarize, affect is crucial in explaining and understanding which narratives stick with the audience and are more efficacious than others; at the same time, actors engaging in *Gefühlspolitik* will attempt to appeal to audiences' emotions to convince them of their respective political projects. In the next section, we take a closer look at the case of the German discourse on Europe during the 2015 migration crisis to illustrate the analytical utility of our theoretical framework. To that end, we explore the German

government's engagement in *Gefühlspolitik* by comparing how the European peace narrative was merged with the German national narratives and used to justify seemingly contradictory policies.

Strategically narrating European integration: the case of Germany during the migration crisis

Amongst the different narratives about the EU, one resonates significantly in the German context: the peace narrative. Germany's particular history has far-reaching political implications as the way it is remembered has to this day a strong influence on its policymaking (Bachleitner, 2021; Zehfuss, 2007). Because 'the end of WW2 and becoming part of European integration have entailed a sudden and radical rupture with [Germany's] Nazi past' (Rumelili, 2018, p. 290), the European Union's foundational narrative resonates with Germany's collective memory as European integration has provided Germany not only with economic benefits and reconstruction in the aftermath of WWII but with the perceived possibility of reconstructing its image (see Diez Medrano, 2003).

In the following sections, we look at how German officials strategically merged the EU peace narrative with contemporary German narratives, resulting in an affective and compelling story that initially justified the 'open-door policy' and the pro-migration positions of the government, but also entailed moral imperatives to act in a certain way, thereby limiting possible policy options. In contrast, a few months later, German officials used the same EU narrative but emphasized other emotive aspects – the fear that the European (peace) project would fall apart because of the crisis – that resonated with the public in order to justify contriving and backing the controversial EU-Turkey deal that was contradictory to previous positions.

We use a dataset composed of 91 speeches and 14 interviews retrieved from the website of the German government and delivered by Chancellor Angela Merkel (39 texts), her ministers Steinmeier, De Maizière, Schäuble, Gabriel, Müller, Hendricks, Von der Leyen, and Wanka (51), the president of the Bundesrat Bouffier (2) and the first mayor of Hamburg Scholz (1), as well as president Gauck (12), from March 2015 to March 2016.² The speeches were given in various contexts, for example, summits and speeches to the rest of the government to public events, and for a large range of audiences ranging from German citizens, European or German politicians, and business owners. The interviews were published in newspapers but were chosen by the government to appear on its website. Regardless of the context and audience, the discourse on the EU and the migration crisis remained consistent throughout the entire dataset from one politician to the other. As our focus is specifically on the use of EU narratives during the migration crisis, we conducted a qualitative search for texts containing terms referring to

migrants ('*Flüchtling*'* (refugee), '*Migrant*'* (migrant), '*Asylsuchende/r*' (asylum seeker)) and words used to refer to Europe ('*Europa*', '*Europäische Union*', '*EU*'). We coded and analysed the data by hand to conduct a qualitative emotional discourse analysis (Koschut, 2017), that is, we searched for elements of EU narratives and looked for mentions of emotional terms but also connotations, and figures of speech like metaphors and metonyms, to explore the affective dimension of the strategic narratives the government constructed. All coding was done in German and translated by the authors and all selected direct quotes are representative of broader tendencies in the data.

Choosing the German government as a case study to analyse affective narration might, for different reasons, seem counterintuitive. On the one hand, due to its unique relationship to the EU, integration is bound to be narrated distinctly from how other member states would; on the other hand, important German political figures such as Angela Merkel are not exactly known for their expressive and emotional styles. Regarding the first point, it is important to note that whilst not all member states would narrate the EU as positively as Germany did, and not all of their histories are as deeply intertwined, they nonetheless have to navigate EU narratives and resort to *Gefühlspolitik*. For example, during the Brexit campaign, the EU was narrated as having disrupted the UK's path and was deeply rooted in an affectively appealing nostalgia (Melhuish, 2022; see also Browning, 2019); more generally, research has shown that framing the EU emotionally resonates stronger with audiences (Atikcan, 2015; Atikcan et al., 2020). Moreover, analysing the case of Germany allows us to bring a comparative angle and demonstrate how the same narrative was strategically used within a short timeframe to justify two starkly different positions: the pro-refugee 'open-door policy', and the backing of the EU-Turkey deal. Regarding the second point, research has shown that the emotional appeal of language transcends tone or expression, and certain topics can be very affective despite not being delivered in speeches that are performed in an emotional way (Ross, 2014). Thus, regardless of whether or how Merkel and her colleagues are performing particular emotions, the stories they tell can nonetheless be affectively appealing.

Emotionalizing European integration and German narratives

For Germany, events like World War II, German reunification, or European integration are highly emotional and deeply ingrained in collective memory. German government officials made many references to history throughout the migration crisis, often to push for specific EU policies and solutions, to justify the existence of the EU and defend it against criticism, or simply to talk positively about it. More specifically, the German government utilized the EU peace narrative according to which European unification is responsible for the absence of wars on the continent to push for European

solutions that would either follow ‘European’ humanitarian values or ‘protect’ the EU against internal and external pressures and ultimately also secure German interests.

The EU was narrated by emphasizing the themes of community, peace, and freedom. For example, in one speech chancellor Angela Merkel (2015e) stated that ‘... The European Union is the community of peace, it is the community of stability, it is the community of freedom. [...] there is an enlarged European Union. We did that too, and we Europeans can be proud of that’. Here, Merkel emphasizes all the affectively appealing aspects of the EU peace narrative, peace, stability, and security, whilst also telling a story of ‘community’, essentially rendering anti-EU sentiments illegitimate. The idea of community remained salient throughout the crisis, during which both the crisis itself and the EU became increasingly debated and politicized (see also Hutter & Kriesi, 2019). Prominent figures of the government, Merkel for example, referred to the EU as not only a community of ‘peace’, ‘stability’ and ‘freedom’, but as a ‘*Wertegemeinschaft*’ (community of values) (2015a, 2015b, 2015d); a ‘*Verantwortungsgemeinschaft*’ (community of responsibility) (2015a, 2015b, 2015d; see also Gabriel, 2015) and a ‘*Schicksalsgemeinschaft*’ (community of destiny) (2015b, 2015c, 2016). The sense of community is here self-evident and endowed with positive emotional connotations implying togetherness and amity (see Koschut, 2014). The use of the EU peace narrative to justify policies that Europe would approve of thus remained constant in German officials’ discourse.

This narrative of integration was also strongly associated with the German national narrative. Evolving within the peace narrative, German officials insisted that Germans should be grateful for European unification, without which peace and forgiveness would not be guaranteed. At a commemoration ceremony for the 70th anniversary of the end of WWII, foreign minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier put it as follows:

... Germany, from which all this suffering, all the war, deaths, the expulsions, the destruction, and unprecedented crimes have spread throughout the world, this country has been granted over the last seven decades to slowly and gradually grow back again into the international community and to grow into the heart of the international community and a united Europe. We were granted it – also because many victims shook hands with the perpetrator’s country. Today we live in friendship with our neighbours and former war opponents. We must cultivate this friendship! (Steinmeier, 2015a)

During the migration crisis, the peace narrative that attributes the stability and security of the continent to European unification was overall very present in the German official discourse. In general, references to WWII were often used to illustrate the undesirable and anxiety-inducing perspective of a union-less Europe to delegitimise any policies that would risk subverting European integration and European values. Put differently, as the migration

crisis was likely to entail implementing controversial and unpopular opinions, the government's strategic narrative affectively anchored the peace narrative in collective memory to appeal to the public and narrow the room for policy alternatives. In the process, policy decisions were 'naturalised' and communicated as apolitical necessities, potentially deflecting blame by claiming a lack of viable alternatives.

The following two sections will explore how exactly German officials emphasized the intersections between the EU peace narrative and German collective memory to construct compelling moral imperatives within which Germany then had to act and how these imperatives differed depending on the strategic objective. Ultimately, the peace narrative was used to justify humanitarian policies, take in refugees, and favour the protection of the European borders. In both cases, *Gefühlspolitik* was instrumental in communicating, promoting, and justifying the government's policies.

Refugees and moral imperatives

Strategically translating the EU peace narrative into the national context by anchoring it in the German collective memory of the twentieth century, the German government developed affectively compelling stories through which it constructed moral imperatives for humanitarian policies and, initially, to take in refugees. The European peace narrative is, of course, especially appealing to Germans. German national self-identity narratives and collective memory place the country as a perpetrator who brought shame about itself during the Nazi era and is now redeeming itself through its EU membership and the moral imperatives that stem from it. However, in the last two decades or so, collective memory has been complemented by the narrative of German civilians as victims of allied bombing and flight and expulsion during and after WWII (Siddi, 2017). All this renders flight and expulsion relatable and emotional topics that became integral when discussing contemporary asylum seekers. Drawing on these collective affective memories, Merkel (2015a) argued, for instance, that:

[t]he fates that millions of Germans have suffered as a result of flight and displacement are also a reminder and a mandate for us today to ensure that we and future generations are spared such suffering. The best answer to the challenge of securing peace, freedom, and stability is and remains European unification.

The more emotional aspects of the peace narrative were thus strategically used by linking today's refugees with the German memory of war and expulsion; moreover, asylum seekers were (initially) associated with German refugees after WWII, rendering them more relatable and the construction of moral imperatives for humanitarian responses compelling.

Throughout their speeches, German officials insisted on the moral duty of saving and helping refugees by recalling Europeans' past and shared objectives. Volker Bouffier (2015), then president of the German Bundesrat, stated, for example, that:

We are rightly happy today about the triumph of freedom in our country and Europe. At the same time, [...] [m]illions of people fleeing and being expelled like we have not had since the Second World War must depress and shake us up. Many of these refugees strive towards Europe and Germany in particular [...] It is our task – together with these refugees – to integrate them and turn them into fellow citizens.

Then German president Joachim Gauck (2015) also drew attention to the fact that '[n]ever since the end of the Second World War have so many people been uprooted as right now' and argued along a similar line as other officials that 'it is a moral duty of all European countries to save refugees from dying in the Mediterranean' and that it should also 'remain a self-evident moral duty of all European countries to grant safe refuge to people who are being persecuted'. German officials thus invoked a common responsibility and called for a collective response to the crisis. As De Maizière (2015) put it in a quote that is representative of the government sentiment throughout the speeches, 'We must do all of this together and in solidarity: in Europe and for Europe.'

Overall, then, humanitarian policies and European-level responses were narrated as apolitical but affectively compelling moral imperatives without alternatives rather than the result of political deliberations and decisions. Importantly, German officials insisted not only on these moral dimensions but also on the need for European solutions rather than unilateral action. Responsibility was thus externalized to the EU level whilst the range of policy options was presented as limited and restricted. By strategically emphasizing the emotional aspects of the EU narrative, such as the shared European values, the German government tried to elicit emotional reactions from the public in order to convince them of their policies and orientations, for example, the 'open-door policy' and the general positive framing of refugees, but also the positive view of the EU.

Burden sharing and protecting the borders

Interestingly, even when the discourse and the policies shifted to security-informed decisions such as the backing of the EU-Turkey deal, the broader narrative remained the same; simply, other aspects of it were emphasized. Put differently, even when policy decisions seemed once again guided by what can be described as *Realpolitik*, the government nonetheless resorted to *Gefühlspolitik* to communicate, promote, and justify these decisions.

Rather than merely focusing on national interests, public opinion, and political viability, officials continued drawing on the EU peace narrative. Departing from the same understanding of the past, that is, that the EU brought peace and stability to the continent after WWII, the narrated implications for the present shifted from how European values constituted moral imperatives to follow humanitarian principles and to take in and help refugees to the necessity to protect the EU and migrants through the implementation of restrictive policy measures. The failure to implement these policies was represented as subverting and threatening the EU in its very existence, a prospect portrayed as threatening, anxiety-inducing, and potentially fatal to the European peace project. Notably, despite this dramatic shift in narration, the EU always maintained the narrative's emotionally salient and positive centrepiece. As Merkel (2015b), for example, put it:

[...] if we think too much about ourselves, then this will [...] be a great threat to Europe. [...] Because those in Europe who think they are not affected by [the migration crisis] will be affected in some way tomorrow – even if it is by questioning the unity of Europe. [...] The first answer is to [...] protect the external borders. The second answer is: [...] [W]e must insist that the burdens are shared fairly within the member states of the European Union. Otherwise, the whole system will not work [...] That is why we are urging [...] – and I am very happy that Jean-Claude Juncker is supporting us in this – that an agreement between the EU and Turkey that will legalise migration can be concluded quickly.

This quote illustrates the government's overall narrative practice when pursuing restrictive measures. Merkel argued for the necessity of increased and improved bordering practices to protect the EU despite criticizing other member states for not taking in asylum seekers. At the same time, she externalized responsibility and blame by insisting on the necessity of a European rather than a national solution to the crisis, as otherwise, the EU would once again be threatened by unilateralism. Importantly, Merkel specifically exempts the EU itself from her criticism and indirectly narrates other member states as responsible for the policy deadlock (see Gellwitzki & Houde, *in press*). Still seeking consistency with the humanitarian narrative, Merkel also insists that the proposed EU-Turkey deal is supposed to 'legalise' migration, thereby ultimately protecting asylum seekers, even though it effectively ended it (see Squire, 2020). Overall, the German discourse on the EU during the migration crisis remained stable in so far as that the past and the EU were framed similarly throughout the entire crisis. However, the government strategically insisted on its different affective dimensions to narrate the present and justify and push for certain policies.

European values were not only brought up to construct moral imperatives to adopt humanitarian policies but also those linked to the sharing of 'burdens' and protection of the borders, as illustrated in the quote by

Merkel above. Other officials argued along similar lines: then German president Gauck, for instance, stated that:

I say 'our continent' quite deliberately because we all feel at the moment that we can only bear the burden of taking in refugees together. We must not leave each other's problems to one another, such as securing the external borders. Right now we have to reach out to each other. [...] Much more needs to be done in the European Union so that we can continue to maintain our cohesion, adequately secure our borders and remain true to our values – peace, freedom and human rights. (Gauck, 2016a)

Insisting on the crucial importance of European values, German officials emphasized simultaneously that other member states needed to share the 'burden' of taking in asylum seekers whilst also pushing for a closure of the borders. Both these demands were argued to be imperative to protect the EU from falling apart, an achievement that cannot and must not be 'sacrificed' for refugees, or as Gauck (2016b) put it, 'do we really want to risk that the great historic work that brought peace and prosperity to Europe is broken on the refugee issue? No one, really no one can want that'. In other words, humanitarian policies and taking in refugees were justified with the moral imperatives stemming from the peace narrative, but so was the implementation of restrictive policies. As the crisis progressed, government officials shifted the affective emphasis from humanitarianism and empathy to solidarity, peace, and freedom, to promote, justify, and push for protecting the external EU borders and save the future of the European project.

Overall, with the shift in emphasis also came a shift in the form of narration. As also seen in the examples above, the language of security, threat, and urgency became more prevalent, and the crisis was increasingly framed as an existential threat to the European project. For example, Steinmeier (2015b) argued that:

when building the Schengen system, we had the philosophy that if the internal borders in Europe fall, there must also be effective external border protection around Europe. Nevertheless, that has been neglected because nobody expected that Europe would suddenly become the centre of such a large influx of people. We have to catch up now! And as soon as possible. Our European institutions are unprepared for the current onslaught. That is why we must now have the political courage to move towards a European border protection authority that can take over when a member state is overwhelmed.

The language employed here is specifically illuminating. Steinmeier uses emotional terms such as 'large influx', 'onslaught', 'unprepared', and 'overwhelmed' to narrate the crisis as fearsome and argue for increased bordering practices. Fear, or rather the representations of the unfolding events as fearsome existential threats, was instrumental in pushing for these policies as it

both justified the implementation of security measures as well as framed it as apolitical necessity to protect the union rather than politically motivated.

Approximating public resonance

As shown in the previous section, narratives need to be affectively compelling to be effective, but the efficaciousness of the German government's *Gefühlspolitik* during the migration crisis remains to be determined. Whilst our paper does not allow for – nor does it seek to – uncovering a direct causality or directionality between narrative and public opinion, looking at the public resonance of the migration crisis can hint at the efficacy of the government's narrative. Scholarship on migration and public opinion surveys indicate that the government's narrative at least partially resonated with the public. In media discourse, asylum seekers were framed and represented as predominantly 'deserving' of help until New Year's Eve of 2016 (Vollmer & Karakayali, 2018) and the perception of asylum seekers remained generally welcoming throughout 2015 with surveys indicating support for the intake of refugees (Lemay, 2021). This is reminiscent of the government's narration of humanitarian responses and taking in refugees as a moral imperative. Towards the end of 2015 and especially after New Year's Eve, however, public discourse and opinion shifted and became more hostile towards migration (Lemay, 2021; Vollmer & Karakayali, 2018; Wigger et al., 2022), coinciding with the government's increasing push for protecting the EU's external borders.

The (bi)monthly surveys by *Infratest Dimap* and *Forschungsgruppe Wahlen* offer snapshots of public opinion at the time and can serve as proxies for the efficaciousness of the government's strategic narrative. When it comes to the government's attempt to shift responsibility to the EU level, the first *Politbarometer* survey from January 2016 indicated that only 19 per cent of respondents expected that Germany could significantly reduce the 'influx' of refugees by itself whereas 77 per cent did not (Forschungsgruppe Wahlen, 2016a). Similarly, the *Deutschlandtrend* survey from March 2016 found that 77 per cent of the respondents believed that pushing for a European solution made 'the most sense' (Infratest Dimap, 2016c). From that perspective, the government's narration that only EU-level solutions were feasible seemingly convinced large parts of the public. Despite the expectation that the EU would need to address the crisis, generally believed to be the most pressing political issue (see, for example, Infratest Dimap, 2016a), were consistently not met until March 2016, the opinion that Germany's membership in the EU had more disadvantages than advantages remained relatively low throughout the crisis (see, for example, Infratest Dimap, 2015a, 2016b; Forschungsgruppe Wahlen, 2016b). The central element of the government's strategic narration of the crisis, the EU peace

narrative, was in that sense efficacious and resonated strongly with the public as the EU and its legitimacy was not challenged.

Despite this successful shift in responsibility to solve the overall crisis, surveys showed a general dissatisfaction with the government's work in the migration crisis (Infratest Dimap, 2015b, 2016c) and research indicates that the government's response to the crisis ultimately led to losses in votes during the following national elections (Dostal, 2017). Other research, however, has pointed out that the 'open-door policy' resonated with Germany's self-identity as moral 'civilian power' (Dinggott Alkopher, 2018), addressed the German population's emotional needs for a positive self-image (Mavelli, 2017), and, more generally, managed public anxieties (Gellwitzki, 2022). Closing the German border would have necessitated a forceful intervention by the police, which the government conceived as intolerable for the public and therefore constituted an unfeasible policy option (Lemay, 2021). The public backlash to the proposal of AFD politicians to close the border by force and, if necessary, shoot asylum seekers attempting to cross it is illustrative of this issue (see, for example, Teffer, 2016). Therefore, whilst the 'open-door policy' might have cost the government votes in the federal election of 2017, it is unascertainable whether a different course of action would have resulted in a preferable outcome for the government, especially considering that it nonetheless stayed in power for another term. The government navigated the crisis, not unscathed but ultimately successfully.

In sum, during the migration crisis, the German government constructed a compelling strategic narrative that posited certain moral imperatives and justified the implemented policies by emphasizing the affectively loaded intersections between the European peace narrative and Germany's national history. However, the government had to navigate between the established peace narrative and collective national memory to ensure the resonance with the German public, but it was also constrained by this narrative as it could not criticize or question the EU since the narrated alternatives were a return to the horrors of the past. This insistence on the European peace narrative and the positive depiction of the EU was pervasive throughout the analysed data. Nonetheless, by strategically anchoring their story in the affective elements of the EU peace narrative and collective memory, different policy options could be pursued whilst concurrently narrowing down the room for political manoeuvres as policy alternatives had to remain within the built narrative. Put differently, by strategically insisting on following and protecting affectively salient European values, either humanitarianism or solidarity with member states, the German government could pursue different orientations as long as these did not contradict the broader narrative of peace, exemplified by the narrative shift from protecting asylum seekers at the start of the crisis to protecting the EU later on. Crucially, through this

form of *Gefühlspolitik*, the government consequently shifted responsibility onto the EU level and presented its political decision as apolitical and moral necessities rather than strategic deliberation.

Conclusion

In recent years, researchers have identified a profusion of narratives around the European Union, showing that integration is not understood the same way by all and that its complex nature leads to diverse narratives about its past, present, and future. However, some narratives are more compelling than others, and as we have demonstrated throughout this article, we argue that actors attempt to increase the efficacy of their strategic narratives by emphasizing the intersections between European narratives and national narratives and collective memory. The result are affective narratives that can be used strategically to justify policies by emphasizing those affective aspects that resonate within the national context. For instance, we have shown that the German government used the European peace narrative to justify both pro-refugee policies and protectionist positions during the migration crisis. A similar dynamic occurred more recently during the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine: whilst in the first few days of the war, the German response insisted on the moral imperatives stemming from the EU foundational narrative to remain neutral towards the situation due to the ties with Russia, a few weeks later the same narrative was used to justify sending arms to Ukraine (Herszenhorn et al., 2022).

It is, of course, well established that Germany's relationship to the EU is unique, which raises the question of how other member states narrate Europe in times of crisis, what meta-narratives these stories draw on, and whether these narrations are more or less affective and more or less locally connected. Whilst these questions can only be answered in detail by future research on the *Gefühlspolitik* of national governments, it is nonetheless possible to make some general inferences. As we have argued, national governments have to (re)construct EU narratives when talking about the EU and European crises, and to make these issues understandable to their public they will need to connect these stories with their national contexts. Crucially, crises coincide with spikes in EU politicization and emotional upheaval and actors can utilize the latter for political mobilization (Gellwitzki & Houde, 2022). Especially emotional stories about Europe can rally support to alleviate the population's uncertainty and anxieties in times of crises; in fact, EU narratives become more affectively appealing when the utopian future they promise appears increasingly unlikely (Kølvraa, 2016). To reiterate, that is not to say that EU narratives will always be utilized to emphasize the positive aspects of the European project, as illustrated by the case of Brexit and the British government under Boris Johnson, the Greek government during the

euro crisis, or the Visegrád states' response to the migration crisis. Nevertheless, in light of our analysis we suggest that European governments will engage in *Gefühlspolitik* to 1) rally support for their political projects, 2) narrow down the morally permissible policy options, 3) delegitimise political opposition and 4) address the emotional needs of their population; this all ultimately contributes to actors' success to reach their objectives which are themselves guided by affective dynamics.

The study of affect and emotions in political discourse is not novel; research on populism (Browning, 2019; Homolar & Löffmann, 2021; Widmann, 2021) or referendum campaigns (Atikcan, 2015; Atikcan et al., 2020) for instance has been demonstrating their role in framing issues to appeal to the population. Parallel to that, research on the EU's politicization has shown that actors and the public increasingly talk about the EU in times of crisis (De Wilde & Zürn, 2012; Hutter & Kriesi, 2019; Rauh et al., 2020), implying a heightened emotionality of European issues (Gellwitzki & Houde, 2022). However, in both strands of research less attention has been paid to the general *Gefühlspolitik* in the EU, or put differently, how actors are influenced by affective dynamics themselves or how they deliberately invoke emotions and develop affective strategic narratives to reach political objectives. This includes, for example, how mainstream parties in government can also use forms of affective communication strategically, especially when using EU narratives employed at the national level to justify policymaking. Our findings show that this dynamic has important implications for political communication and policymaking and thus should not be neglected. Future research should therefore take a closer look at which elements of the different EU narratives tend to be emphasized and at the cross-country differences, whether governments succeed in establishing hegemonic narratives, how and to what extent EU narratives are merged with national narratives, and at which narratives work better to justify certain types of policy. Additionally, attention needs to be paid to systematically interrogating how actors engage in *Gefühlspolitik* to gain legitimacy and shift blame onto others.

In sum, the 'narrative turn' in EU studies is a first step towards systematically exploring stories about the EU and their implication in politics. We have shown that actors strategically utilize European narratives and render them appealing by emphasizing their intersections with affective aspects of national narratives and collective memories. As such, we call for a shift of the locus of analysis from *Realpolitik* to *Gefühlspolitik* in order to capture these crucial dynamics. Still, more research is needed on how political actors instrumentalise affective narratives to render their political actions acceptable to citizens and explore how these narratives resonate with audiences (see Beaudonnet et al., 2022 for a notable exception). To that end, a more substantial engagement between and integration of the (qualitative) literature on EU narratives and (quantitative) scholarship on political

communication and EU politicization can further our understanding of how actors narrate the EU and how this affects the European public.

Notes

1. Emotional politics, literally feeling politics.
2. The German president is not part of the government but as a representant of the German state, his speeches are insightful in the context of this study.

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