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Research Article

## The EU as a Choice: Populist and Technocratic Narratives of the EU in the Brexit Referendum Campaign

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### ***Citation***

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## Abstract

The article investigates the main populist and technocratic narratives employed in the campaign in the run-up to the 2016 British EU referendum. Based on a qualitative dataset comprising 40 selected speeches, interviews and other public interventions by prominent Leave and Remain protagonists and adopting the general orientation of the Discourse Historical Approach in Critical Discourse Analysis, the paper discusses how the language of the Remain and Leave camps bore signs of both populist and technocratic discourses. The key argument developed in this article is that while, at the most general level, the populist rhetoric was discursively appropriated by the Leave campaign (with the key narratives of the EU as a failure, EU as an oppressor and of anti-establishment fury) and the technocratic rhetoric by the Remain campaign (with the key narratives of the EU as a tool, the single market benefits and the withdrawal economic effects), the Remain side displayed a lower degree of narrative consistency.

## Keywords

Populism; Technocracy; Narratives; Brexit; Referendum; Campaign; Critical discourse analysis

The article investigates populist and technocratic narratives employed in the campaign in the run-up to the British European Union (EU) referendum held in June 2016. As already well-documented (Zappettini, 2019a; Zappettini and Krzyżanowski 2019; Bennett 2019b), the referendum campaign was based on the simplistic binary logic of in versus out, integration versus sovereignty, control versus freedom, and continuity versus rupture. I argue that the referendum was partly built also on an ostensible *populism-versus-technocracy* binary, albeit not in a clear-cut fashion. The key argument developed in this article is that the language of the Remain and Leave camps bore signs of both populist and technocratic discourses. At the most general level, populist rhetoric was discursively appropriated by the Leave campaign (with the key narratives of the EU as a failure, of the EU as an oppressor and of anti-establishment fury) and technocratic rhetoric was discursively appropriated by the Remain campaign (with the key narratives of the EU as a tool, of the single market benefits and of the withdrawal economic effects). Therein, the Remain side displayed a lower degree of narrative consistency. Indeed, unlike the Leave rhetoric which suggests a relatively consistent character of discursive identity towards the EU in terms of the presence of populist narratives and non-existence of technocratic ones, the Remain campaign's communicative behaviour took on features of both technocratic and populist discourses. As a result, it was more ambiguous and, arguably, less clear.

To begin, I will outline the four-fold rationale behind this research endeavour and elucidate why I deal with 1) populism and technocracy, 2) narratives, 3) narratives of the EU specifically, and 4) the Brexit referendum campaign. Starting with the first one, populism and technocracy have increasingly been narrated as 'the two organising poles of politics in contemporary Western democracies' (Bickerton and Accetti 2017: 186). In fact, they are often recognised as the new cleavage around which the contemporary political life is being restructured (Friedman 2019; Bickerton and Accetti 2017). Both the politics of technocracy and the politics of populism present alternative forms of political representation to party government (Kurki 2011: 216), challenging the fundamental features of party democracy as such (Bickerton and Accetti 2017: 186-187). As explained more fully below, this article's understanding of populism and technocracy centres around communication and language.

Why we pay attention to narratives? In the words of Spencer and Oppermann (2020: 666), it is 'the struggle over narratives which is a defining feature of democratic politics'. Narratives are crucial in politics and international relations as they are means of making sense of the social world around us, with a substantial body of evidence attesting to their power (for example Mintrom and O'Connor 2020; Hagström and Gustafsson 2019). The importance of narratives in governance goes down to their performativity and ability to 'make problems amenable to human action via public decisions (or non-decisions)' (Baldoli and Radaelli 2019: 6), with a crucial feature of theirs being how they can 'condition the thoughts and actions of broader populations' (Mintrom and O'Connor 2020: 2).

Why focus on the narratives of the EU? The EU is an issue on which it is possible to treat populism, across its different configurations and different key actors, as a single brand, as most of recent populist parties across Europe are, albeit to differing degrees, Eurosceptic (see Baldoli and Radaelli 2019). At the same time, the EU is commonly perceived as a technocratic organisation *par excellence*, having the status of an entity which has 'perhaps more than any other faced accusations on account of the role of technocratic functions and expertise in its workings' (Kurki 2011: 212). Following de Vreese, Esser, Aalberg, Reinemann et al. (2018) who take the same approach to populism (see also Rooduijn 2014; Moffitt 2016; Jagers and Walgrave 2007; Aslanidis 2016), the focus in this paper will be on the contribution of populist and technocratic discourses to construct the EU, and 'the communicative styles that systematically co-occur with it' (de Vreese et al. 2018: 465).

Finally, why is it worthwhile to study the intriguing issue of populist and technocratic discourses in the context of the United Kingdom (UK) referendum campaign? As a critical juncture in the European integration process, in which 'different historical and contingent

discursive nexuses and trajectories have been at play' (Zappettini and Krzyżanowski 2019: 381), Brexit makes for a captivating case study, for many reasons, but three in particular. First, it is an unprecedented process that marks a turning point in European politics and is widely acknowledged as one of the EU's most serious crises (see Nugent 2018; Caporaso 2018). Second, I align myself with understanding Brexit as having emerged 'at the intersection of different path-dependent discursive trajectories which have accumulated "forces, antagonisms and contradictions"' (Clarke and Newman 2017: 102 in Zappettini and Krzyżanowski 2019: 382) and involved '(re)articulation of social, political and cultural narratives' along various logics (Zappettini and Krzyżanowski 2019: 383). At this time of crisis, understanding the ways in which politicians and their populist and technocratic discourses function is therefore more important than ever. Third, the politics of technocracy and populism curiously came together in the 2016 EU referendum, with Brexit widely interpreted as evidence of both the rise of populism all over Europe and beyond (Ford and Goodwin 2017), and as 'the leading edge of an ongoing anti-expert revolution' (Fuller 2017: 575).

Against this background, the central research question that this article addresses is: What kind of populist and technocratic discourses of the EU were at work during the Brexit referendum campaign? Adopting the general orientation of the Discourse Historical Approach in Critical Discourse Analysis, the inquiry identifies the main populist and technocratic narratives that fuelled the referendum campaign. Through this focus, this research also illuminates the commonalities and differences in the discourse of the Leave and Remain campaigns, against the backdrop of a technocratic-populist debate.

The contribution has two interrelated aims. First, it adds to the extant scholarship on the relationship between technocracy and populism (Caramani 2017; Bickerton and Accetti 2017). Nevertheless, this enquiry differs from the extant literature by explicitly taking a communication-centred perspective. Second, this study contributes to an ever-growing body of research seeking to document the discourses of/in Brexit (Zappettini 2019a, 2019b; Zappavigna 2019; Krzyżanowski 2019; Kopf 2019; Koller, Kopf and Miglbauer 2019; Buckledee 2018). Yet, whilst populist discourses in Brexit have been often commented on (Zappettini and Krzyżanowski 2019; Spencer and Oppermann 2020; Ruzza and Pejovic 2019; Demata 2019; Browning 2018), not much has been written on technocratic discourses in Brexit. It is in this sense that the article helps fill an important research gap.

The article proceeds as follows. It begins by situating the enquiry into the wider context of populist and technocratic narratives in political discourse. The next section unpacks the data and puts forward the methodological approach. The subsequent part is then devoted to the empirical analysis, mapping key technocratic and populist narratives in the Remain and Leave referendum campaigns. The concluding section summarises the key argument and contextualises the empirical findings.

## **POPULIST AND TECHNOCRATIC NARRATIVES IN POLITICAL DISCOURSE**

The intention of this article is in line with the ever-growing interest in the role of discourses of European integration. As much of the recent scholarship demonstrates, these policymaking discourses may play a powerful role 'in determining the trajectory of policy change and, as such, should be treated as objects of enquiry in their own right' (Hay and Smith 2005: 135). Theoretically, the study is based upon the social constructivist paradigm and its relation to discourse. Social constructivism accentuates the fundamental role of language in creating reality, considering it a primary means through which the social world is constructed (Mutigl 2002: 49; Gralewski 2011: 161). As Schäffner (1996:201) observes, any political action is 'prepared, accompanied, controlled and influenced by language'. The study is thus based on the governing assumption that member states' approach to the EU

is not derived only from material factors, but is also a socially constructed phenomenon shaped by ideological factors, including intersubjective meanings, norms, discourses and discursive power that involves knowledge, ideas, culture, ideology and language (Hopf 1998; Adler 1997). As such, constructivist approaches are 'crucial for an understanding of Member States' European policy and the future development of European governance' (Diez 2001: 6).

Turning to populist and technocratic discourses of the EU, populism and technocracy are in essence articulated here as communication phenomena that can be operationalised by the use of characteristic content features and presentational style elements (see de Vreese et al. 2018). Based on this, I argue that the Remain discourse was dominated (but, as discussed further below, not monopolised) by the technocratic narratives and the Leave one by the populist narratives.

This article aligns itself with the view of Kurki (2011) who contends that technocracy should be analysed not as a distinct form of government, but rather as 'a set of discursive ideals within formally "democratic" (or indeed authoritarian) forms of government'. Hence, technocratic discourse is defined here as 'a discursive set of ideals for governance, which emphasise the virtues of depoliticisation, harmonisation, rationalisation and objectification of policymaking and evaluation, and which promotes the role of technical experts in policy-making over substantively "political" or "democratic" public actors' (Kurki 2011: 216). Depoliticisation refers to the tendency to advocate technical solutions to political problems, as opposed to political solutions. In other words, technocratic discourse prioritises rational and efficient decision-making/policy implementation over normative value-based one (Kurki 2011: 215). Moreover, technocratic modes of thoughts also 'move political and social decisions to the realm of administrative control defined in technical terms and seeks to use instrumental technical criteria to measure political substance or meaning' (Kurki 2011: 215). Emphasis is therefore put on rational solutions, efficiency and constant monitoring of cost-effectiveness of policy solutions (McKenna and Graham 2000; Kurki 2011: 215). As such, it accentuates positivist, objective knowledge by unelected experts that is deemed essential to decision-making, in a belief that the public and political decision-makers should be fed the right knowledge (Salvador 1992; Kurki 2011: 215). Moreover, in line with the ideal of social harmony, technocrats are rather reluctant to deal with the conflictual interests and/or conflictual aspects in policy areas (Kurki 2011: 215).

Moving onto the populist discourse, I ascribe here to the definition of populism as a 'discursive manifestation of a thin-centred ideology that is not only focused on the underlying "set of basic assumptions about the world" but in particular on "the language that unwittingly expresses them" (Hawkins, Riding and Mudde 2012: 3, in de Vreese et al. 2018: 425). Populist discourses, at their most basic level, provide a 'distinctive, empirically identifiable vision or conception of the EU – what it is and what ought to be' (Baldoli and Radaelli 2019:5) with several core constitutive attributes. One of the key characteristics concern the practice of pitting the people against the elite in a polarising 'us versus them' dichotomy. Besides, populists' legitimacy rests on claims that this political position represents the will of the people. Another pattern usually associated with the populist discourse is the outsider position in a sense of positioning oneself as being outside the system as well as the notion of an outsider threat. Finally, popular resistance to the transfer of national decision-making powers to supranational organisations also belongs to key collective signifiers of populism, as identified in the literature (Moffitt 2016; Jagers and Walgrave 2007; de Vreese et al. 2018; Aslanidis 2016).

## **DATA AND METHOD OF ANALYSIS**

Due to space constraints and the need to strike a balance between breadth and depth of analysis, the dataset comprises 40 selected speeches, interviews and other public

interventions by prominent Leave and Remain protagonists (20 speeches per campaign; nine representatives per campaign). Tables 1 and 2 summarise the key features of the corpus. All the contributions deal with the EU and/or the UK-EU relationship and have been selected on a number of criteria, including the title of the speech, its subject outlined in the introductory sentences, the occasion on which it was delivered, and the nature of the intended audience. Importantly, not only voices affiliated with the official campaigns were included in the corpus but also those outside of it. For instance, Nigel Farage was not affiliated with the official Vote Leave campaign but belonged to the most visible pro-Brexit campaigners, so he is included in the Leave corpus too. The timespan of the analysis covers the period of five months in the run-up to the referendum.

**Table 1. Remain campaign corpus**

Date	Name	Political affiliation	Role	Context
3/2	David Cameron	Conservative Party	Prime Minister	Speech on EU reform
26/2	Natalie Bennett	Green Party	Leader of the Green Party	Speech at party conference
29/2	Nicola Sturgeon	SNP	First Minister of Scotland	Speech on staying in the EU
10/3	David Cameron	Conservative Party	Prime Minister	Speech at Vauxhall
14/4	Jeremy Corbyn	Labour Party	Leader of the Labour Party	Speech on the EU
18/4	George Osborne	Conservative Party	Chancellor of the Exchequer	Article for The Times
25/4	Theresa May	Conservative Party	Home Secretary	Speech on Brexit
9/5	David Cameron	Conservative Party	Prime Minister	Speech on the UK's strength and security in the EU
11/5	Tim Farron	Liberal Democrats	Leader of Liberal Democrats	Speech on the EU
16/5	George Osborne	Conservative Party	Chancellor of the Exchequer	Concluding Statement on IMF Article IV
16/5	George Osborne	Conservative Party	Chancellor of the Exchequer	Speech at Ryanair
23/5	David Cameron	Conservative Party	Prime Minister	Speech at B&Q headquarters in Eastleigh
23/5	George Osborne	Conservative Party	Chancellor of the Exchequer	Speech on Treasury's analysis on economic impact of Brexit
24/5	David Cameron	Conservative Party	Prime Minister	Speech at easyJet headquarters
9/6	Tim Farron	Liberal Democrats	Leader of Liberal Democrats	Speech on the EU
16/6	Jeremy Corbyn	Labour Party	Leader of the Labour Party	Speech in South Yorkshire
21/6	Jeremy Corbyn	Labour Party	Leader of the Labour Party	Speech in the People's History Museum

Date	Name	Political affiliation	Role	Context
22/6	Will Straw	Labour Party	Executive Director of Britain Stronger in Europe	Interview for Evening Standard
22/6	Ruth Davidson	Conservative Party	Leader of the Scottish Conservative Party	BBC's live Great Debate
22/6	Tim Farron	Liberal Democrats	Leader of Liberal Democrats	Interview for Prospect Magazine

**Table 2. Leave campaign corpus**

Date	Name	Political affiliation	Role	Context
22/1	Dominic Cummings	-	Director of Vote Leave	Interview for the Economist
20/2	Michael Gove	Conservative Party	Secretary of State for Justice, Lord High Chancellor	Statement of reasons for backing the Leave campaign
9/3	Boris Johnson	Conservative Party	Mayor of London (until 9/5)	Speech at the headquarters of the Vote Leave campaign
13/4	Gisela Stuart	Labour Party	Chair of Vote Leave	Speech on the risks of staying in the EU
19/4	Michael Gove	Conservative Party	Secretary of State for Justice, Lord High Chancellor	Speech for Vote Leave
19/4	Michael Gove	Conservative Party	Secretary of State for Justice, Lord High Chancellor	Essay for BBC 4 Today programme
23/4	Ian Duncan Smith	Conservative Party	Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (until 3/2016)	Article for the Daily Mail
29/4	Nigel Farage	UKIP	Leader of UKIP; MEP	Speech in Westminster
10/5	Ian Duncan Smith	Conservative Party	Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (until 3/2016)	Speech on the EU as a force for social injustice
15/5	Boris Johnson	Conservative Party	Mayor of London (until 9/5)	Article for The Telegraph
26/5	Boris Johnson	Conservative Party	Mayor of London (until 9/5)	Statement on immigration statistics
2/6	Liam Fox	Conservative Party	Member of Parliament	Speech at Vote Leave
6/6	Boris Johnson	Conservative Party	Mayor of London (until 9/5)	Speech on democracy for Vote Leave
6/6	Gisela Stuart	Labour Party	Chair of Vote Leave	Speech on immigration
6/6	John Longworth	-	Chairman of Leave Means Leave	Speech on economy for Vote Leave

Date	Name	Political affiliation	Role	Context
6/6	Michael Gove	Conservative Party	Secretary of State for Justice, Lord High Chancellor	Speech for Vote Leave
6/6	Michael Gove	Conservative Party	Secretary of State for Justice, Lord High Chancellor	Speech on security for Vote Leave
8/6	Dominic Raab	Conservative Party	Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Civil Liberties	Interview for Sky News
8/6	Dominic Raab	Conservative Party	Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Civil Liberties	Speech on controlled immigration
21/6	Nigel Farage	UKIP	Leader of UKIP; MEP	Article for the Express

In an attempt to detect and interpret key macro-conversational practices against the background of the populist versus technocratic debate, the article adopts the general orientation of the Discourse Historical Approach in Critical Discourse Analysis (Wodak 2011; Reisigl and Wodak 2015, 2001; Fairclough and Wodak 1997). Guided by Krzyżanowski (2010), the analysis entails the thematic analysis which zeroes in on the embedded, easily identifiable dominant narratives that characterise campaigns' imaginings of the EU and form the structure of the Leave and Remain discourses but is also interested in related linguistic features. The definition of a narrative employed in this article follows that of Kreuter, Green, Cappella, Slater et al. (2007: 222) as 'a representation of connected events and characters that has an identifiable structure, is bounded in space and time, and contains implicit or explicit messages about the topic being addressed'. In line with the common approach, the topics were defined by means of indicative analysis, via 'decoding the meaning of text passages – usually taking place via several thorough readings – and then ordering them into lists of key themes and sub-themes' (Krzyżanowski 2010: 81), with the focus being on discourse, and not text, topics. Such an approach enabled concentration on the use of populist and technocratic narratives and specific representations of the EU as premises for framing argumentative schemes (see Fairclough and Fairclough 2012).

## EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS

As Fairclough and Wodak's (1997) understanding of discourse underlines the context, so basic discursive characteristics, both in terms of the content and style, of the Remain and Leave campaigns are analysed first. Starting with the Remain campaign, Remainers frequently communicated within the formalised, sophisticated jargon-filled discourse, so-called high speech as opposed to the low speech favoured by Leave campaigners, relying mostly on data, facts and figures (Buckledee 2018). It is essentially this kind of technical knowledge that served as the base of power in their technocratic line of arguing (see Fisher 1987). The main emphasis was on instrumental knowledge with a large number of very specific examples. In the Remain discourse, it was the experts with specialised knowledge that were to serve as a key reference point in public policy decision-making and implementation (Buckledee 2018). Relatedly, throughout the campaign, Remain protagonists presented themselves as knowledgeable, putting themselves in sharp contrast to Leave supporters who were 'unable to set out a clear, comprehensive plan for our future outside the EU' (Cameron 2016d) and whose campaign was 'based on lies' (Farron 2016a; see also Davidson 2016) and 'short on facts' (Bennett 2016). As mapped out below, the focus in their discourse was on rather unemotional, technical and future economic advantages of the EU membership which was in line with the typical technocratic exercise

devoid of 'irrational' or unreasonable passions and emotions (see Hensmans and van Bommel 2020: 373).

By contrast, the Leavers' communicative style was less formal and plainer, foregrounding a simple and easily understandable, rather than complex, story (Spencer and Oppermann 2020: 667). As others have highlighted (see Spencer and Oppermann 2020; Demata 2019; Buckledee 2018), speakers for the Leave campaign routinely employed a highly emotional language. Invoking a sense of unified national identity vis-à-vis the EU, the UK was systematically presented as a distant outgroup, antithetical to the European integration and constructed in opposition to the EU by means of the othering concept (see Spiering 2015; Malmborg and Stråth 2002; Daddow 2015). Indeed, through the exclusionary rhetoric of othering, the Leave side explicitly constructed the difference between the UK and the EU, reinforcing the centrality of British national narratives set in opposition to the European integration. By means of various intertexts, the EU was habitually depicted as a monolith, alien body outside the UK with a governance and institutional framework that was politically and economically incompatible with the UK, or outright in direct contrast with it (see Zappettini and Krzyżanowski 2019: 383). Equally important, the very (and only) solution to the problem that the Leave campaign offered, to withdraw the UK from the EU, was well in line with the tendency of populists to suggest solutions that are 'not fully-fledged programs, but rather aspirations that evoke desirable future' (Baldoli and Radaelli 2019: 12).

### **Key Narratives of the EU Employed in the Remain Campaign**

The systematic analysis uncovered three semantic macro-propositions related to the discursive construction of the EU: 1) narrative of the EU as a tool, 2) narrative of the single market benefits, and 3) narrative of the withdrawal economic effects and all of them can be classified as technocratic. At the same time, a key discursive construct, narrative of the will of the people, which traditionally fall within the populist discourse, was also identified in the Remain corpus.

#### **Technocratic Narrative of the EU as a Tool**

A central macro-narrative identified in the Remain corpus is that of the EU as a tool. With the key topic here being that of *taking advantage*, it was especially interest-based and instrumental arguments that played a central role in the campaign's justification of the EU membership. The Remain campaigners explicitly marketed the EU as a tool that 'helps us achieve the things we want' (Cameron 2016d; see also Sturgeon 2016). The Remain side exploited this topic in a bid to send the message the UK was profiting from, or even exploiting, the EU, as in 'Taking advantage of the single market is one of the ways this country has made itself great' (Cameron 2016).

The type of knowledge that the Remainers highlighted within this narrative was positivistic in nature, with the EU membership deemed instrumental for a variety of other ends, particularly economic prosperity (especially Cameron 2016b), internal and external security (especially Cameron 2016d) and stronger voice on the international stage (especially Cameron 2016d). Furthermore, Remain discourse occasionally foregrounded more normatively engaging arguments for the EU as tool, for example by promoting the EU as a powerful tool to guarantee social rights and protect workers across Europe (for example Corbyn 2016c).

Curiously enough, the Remain campaign simultaneously downplayed the importance of this tool, effectively equating the EU membership to country's memberships in other international organisations. For example:

our membership of the EU is one of the tools – just one - which we use, as we do our membership of NATO, or the Commonwealth, or the Five Power Defence Agreement with Australia, New Zealand and our allies in South East

Asia, to amplify British power and to enhance our influence in the world.  
(Cameron 2016d)

### **Technocratic Narrative of the Single Market Benefits**

Intimately related to the previous macro-proposition is the narrative of the single market benefits, built around the topic of *profit*. With this macro-area functioning to highlight the advantages that the UK and its people could reap by voting to stay, the EU was discursively portrayed in an inclusive way. Drawing on the neoliberal market logic and virtually equating the EU with the single market, this discursive construction was characterised by the positive potential of the UK-EU relationship and a discursive code that perceived the EU as a reliable and stable business partner with complementary business interests. The campaign's notion of the UK-EU relationship was founded on the principle of mutually beneficial, constructive economic cooperation based on the comparative advantages of both entities (see Brusenbauch Meislová 2018).

Alongside this, the imagery employed here evokes a picture of a capable actor, albeit by no means perfect, as evidenced by frequent use of comparatives in the Remain corpus that signal the implicit critique of the EU (Demata 2019: 131), with a large number of specific positive (and neutral) evaluations of the single market. For example: '[the single market supports] 140,000 jobs in the car industry; supporting an extra 300,000 jobs; and generating £12 billion a year for our economy' (Cameron 2016b; see also Cameron 2016c; May 2016; Osborne 2016). Here the strong reliance on data and figures is obvious as well as the emphasis on factuality, almost as an inevitability requiring no choice.

Heavily drawing on experts and their specialised technical expertise, the narrative of the single market benefits accentuated instrumental, technical knowledge and evidence-based (scientific even) approach to the EU membership, putting into foreground the authority of the merit-based knowledge elite. As summed up by Ruth Davidson (2016): 'I would vote for the experts every day of the week and twice on a Sunday' (see also Osborne 2016).

### **Technocratic Narrative of the Withdrawal Economic Effects**

Another macro-proposition is that of the withdrawal economic effects. The key topic here was the *downfall* which functioned to convey an image of disastrous economic/market repercussions of Brexit. This narrative served to distinctly show that leaving the EU would be a 'disaster for the British economy' (Osborne 2016c), would entail the inevitable downfall of the UK (which is, essentially, 'a trading nation' [Cameron 2016e]) and have 'profound consequences on our economy' (Osborne 2016a), inevitably making the UK 'permanently poorer' (Osborne 2016). This overarching scheme was reproduced in more concrete arguments in several distinct areas, including Brexit impact on economic success, or rather lack thereof, specific industries and international trade relations.

Indeed, overwhelmingly legitimising the UK's membership in the EU through the economic output, it was the economic dimension that was a key collocate with Brexit implications in the Remain corpus. In line with the typical feature of technocratic discourse, and also with the archetypal British preference for the EU doing business in contrast to the EU doing politics (Wodak 2016: 19), Remain campaigners clearly prioritised economic (rationalistic) aspects of the UK's membership in the EU. Their eagerness to acknowledge that cooperation between the UK and the EU was driven mainly by economic considerations is suitably illustrated by the following excerpts: 'Nothing is more important than the strength of our economy' (Cameron 2016d) and 'There is nothing more positive than having a stronger economy supporting jobs and opportunities' (Davidson 2016).

Moreover, the case for staying in the EU was justified by rationally defined, objective long-term welfare of the British society. For example: 'the long-term impact of leaving would be a cost to every household equivalent to £4,300' (Cameron 2016c; see also Osborne 2016b). Significantly, Remainers made references to Brexit's economic impact mainly in

negatively connotated words, such as 'loss' (Cameron 2016b; May 2016), 'uncertainty' (Farron 2016a, 2016b; Osborne 2016a) or 'damaging' (Cameron 2016b; Osborne 2016b).

Within this narrative, Remain campaigners also constructively and reproductively employed arguments which reinforced the authority of a technical elite in providing evidence, as in 'Every major financial institution – from the Treasury and the Bank of England to the IMF, the OECD and the World Bank – not to mention just about every credible economist in the country, thinks leaving Europe will hurt Britain's economy' (Farron 2016a). Moreover, the provided information was constantly framed as 'detailed and rigorous' (Osborne 2016b).

### **Populist Narrative of the Will of the People**

Simultaneously, however, the Remain discourse was also interspersed by recurring elements of populist discourse, with the Remain side addressing similar constructs as Leavers, especially 'the people'. In particular, it was the claims to stand up for the people's concerns that were worded according to a populist vocabulary. With this discourse topic interwoven into the fabric of the Remain camp, the Remain rhetoric echoed the same populist ideas entertained by the Leavers about the legitimising character of the referendum, spotlighting the belief that the people should have a direct, non-mediated say in the country's destiny and understanding the referendum on EU membership as the expression of the *volonté générale* of the people (Corbyn 2016a; see also Mudde, 2004: 543). The people, the 'obstinately practical, rigorously down to earth, natural debunkers' (Cameron 2016d), were discursively constructed as a unitary, monolithic entity with no internal divisions (see Taggart 2000: 92). Out of the prominent Remainers, the most articulate (re)productions of populist discourses were to be found in Jeremy Corbyn's rhetoric (Corbyn 2016a; 2016b, 2016c; see also Demata 2019). Apart from that, it was also David Cameron (2016a; 2016b; 2016c; 2016d; 2016e) who foregrounded populist stylisation of political messaging in his discursive portrayal of the EU, using several rhetorical devices that signified (re)connecting with the people and redistributing power to them (Alexandre-Collier, 2016: 119; see also Smith 2020).

### **Key Narratives of the EU Employed in the Leave Campaign**

The analysis revealed three dominant semantic macro-areas related to the discursive construction of the EU in the Leave corpus: 1) narrative of the EU as a failure, 2) narrative of the EU as an oppressor, and 3) the narrative of anti-establishment fury, and all of them qualify as populist. At the same time, despite including some elements of technocratic discourse too, the Leave campaign produced no comprehensive narratives that would fall within the technocratic discourse.

### **Populist Narrative of the EU as a Failure**

The narrative of the EU as a failure served to cast the EU, and the UK's membership in the EU, *ex negativo* as an inevitable failure. The key topic here was *dysfunctionality* with the EU systematically depicted as a dysfunctional, erroneous, problematic entity, almost exclusively standing for something negative (or even outright dangerous and menacing). For example: 'It [the EU] is extraordinarily opaque, extraordinarily slow, extraordinarily bureaucratic, extraordinarily wasteful' (Cummings 2016). To convey this image of the EU's inadequate interventions, and thus create a sense of ongoing crisis, which is an ideological core of populism (Demata 2019: 130), the EU was for the Leave side a 'disaster zone' (Farage 2016b) and a 'failed project' (Farage 2016b; Johnson 2016b) that is haunted by multiple crises which are 'utterly out of control' and cause 'human misery on a shocking scale' (Farage 2016b).

No less important, to cast the EU into the context of an absolute, multi-policy crisis and assign it the role of a calamitous disaster, this macro argumentative scheme touched not only on the failures of individual policies (for example Gove 2016e), but also on the general

trajectory of the European integration (for example Stuart 2016a) and its quality (for example Raab 2016b; Gove 2016d). Interestingly, this imagery was linguistically expressed via a realisation of several constitutive metaphors, out of which the metaphor of hell particularly stands out (the EU is 'hell bent on further, deeper centralisation' [Farage 2016b]), as it moves these imaginings into a highly suggestive domain.

### **Populist Narrative of the EU as an Oppressor**

This narrative functioned to convey the image of the EU as something that has usurped power from the UK and jeopardised the power of the people as such. Central to this construction was the topic of *subjugation*. In substantive terms, this discursive construct was driven by a major effort to paint a picture of the EU as an oppressor that is constantly blamed for having trapped the UK and the 'common citizens' in a system that eroded their sovereignty and compromised their 'independence' (Johnson 2016b). The EU 'tramples over the rule of law' (Gove 2016b) and effectively 'holds the country back in every area' (Gove 2016a). The Leave campaign backgrounded the idea that the EU, which 'makes the majority of British laws', has deprived the UK of the right of self-determination, made it surrender 'fundamental sovereignty', stopped it 'acting in our own national interest', and forced it 'to be represented by unelected old men in Brussels' (Farage 2016b). Not only did the EU make the UK and its people 'a hostage' (Gove 2016c) and entirely incapable, it was also abusing the UK's generosity (Johnson 2016c). Significantly, this narrative was permeated by more emotionally charged expressions than others.

The main discursive thrust of this macro-area was the repeated emphasis on the EU's undemocratic nature, with EU institutions continuously denounced as 'unaccountable' (Gove 2016a, 2016e, 2016d) and the EU as a whole as an 'anti-competitive and undemocratic club' (Raab 2016b) or, alternatively, 'Brussels club' (Duncan Smith 2016b). In this context, mocking, quasi-anecdotal language was often used, for instance 'showing a mule-like refusal to listen to democratic concerns' (Stuart 2016a), with the witty negative evaluations working to augment the sense of affiliation among interactants (see Zappavigna 2019: 64). Symptomatic were also various parallels drawn between the EU and the 'ancient régime' (Johnson 2016b), specifically Austria-Hungary under the Habsburgs', the 'collapsing Soviet system', 'the Russian Empire under Nicholas the Second', or 'Rome under its later Emperors or the Ottoman Empire in its final years' (Gove 2016c). All of these served to intentionally discredit it and convey the image of an impotent, collapsing oppressive regime.

Another notable element in this context is the outsider position strategically invoked by the Leave campaign to strengthen ingroup cohesiveness and raise a sense of belonging. The UK was continually portrayed as an outsider who was 'powerless' (Fox 2016) and 'so uninfluential inside the EU' (Duncan Smith 2016a) that it only ever got 'short shrift' (Raab 2016b).

In tandem with this, staying in the flawed EU was almost uniformly discussed in terms of a doomsday scenario as 'a real danger' (Gove 2016c). To avoid this, the only proposed solution was to leave the EU. Accordingly, the Leave side aligned itself with a discursive code that unequivocally framed Brexit and its effects on the UK in a positive light in a bid to sell it as a way to regain British independence (see Farage 2016b). This strategy was linguistically realised via the means of ostentatious self-affirming proclamations, attributing the post-Brexit future with positive adjectives such as 'prosperous' (Duncan Smith 2016b; Johnson 2016b) and 'better' (Gove 2016c) and conveying that Brexit was going to be a sheer triumph.

### **Populist Narrative of Anti-Establishment Fury**

Inextricably linked to the previous macro argumentative scheme was the narrative of the anti-establishment fury. The Leave's arguments were reasserted and articulated through

a discursive contingency based on the polarising people-versus-elite dichotomy. This was functionalised via anti-establishment sentiments, with the campaign's communicative behaviour pitting the distinct ingroup of 'the people' against the distinct out-group of the EU elite which was excluded from the 'true people'. As can be expected, a prominent topic within this macro-area is that of anti-establishment *revolt* against the technocratic, detached, corrupt and non-elected elites, embodied especially by the Commission, the European Central Bank and the Court of Justice of the European Union.

In the Leavers' view, the EU's leadership came to epitomise an image of a technocratic elite, detached from the concerns of the ordinary public. Very often, the EU elite, the people's enemy, was conceived as a homogeneous entity in which political and financial establishment merged (Gove 2016a; see also Demata 2019: 130). Through close analysis of the context, it becomes clear that most often the referential range included the 'EU/EU's bureaucrats', with the attributive qualifications ascribed to this genericised group mostly being 'wealthy' (for example Farage 2016b), 'super-rich' (for example Johnson 2016a), 'powerful' (for example Johnson 2016a), 'remote' (for example Farage 2016b), 'big' (for example Gove 2016a) and 'unelected' (for example Gove 2016a). Not infrequently, the Leave campaigners also used ridicule and mockery with an ironic undertone in conjunction with the EU elite, as in 'Brussels army of bureaucrats' (Duncan Smith 2016a) or 'bureaucratic follies' (Gove 2016a).

What figures prominently in this narrative is the topic of the *nation-state predominance* as the main tool for the protection of national interests, the defence of which Leave campaigners ostentatiously prioritised (for example Farage 2016b; Gove 2016c; see also Maccaferri 2019). Detectable here were also the values of national self-determination, national sovereignty and popular sovereignty against what Leavers routinely referred to as the 'Brussels club'.

Yet, in Leave discourse, the end bearer of the idea of national sovereignty was 'the people'. Importantly, uses of the notion 'people' (both with and without the definite article) both served a key purpose of establishing the people-versus-elite dichotomy. This imagining was functionalised by the portrait of the people as a homogeneous national entity assaulted by the EU elites (the villains) in a number of ways. With the campaign claiming to give the voice (back) to the people, the British as a whole represented the demos/the common people who have been always upright, courageous and virtuous, but, in parallel, unrepresented and unheard.

In true populist fashion, speakers of the Leave campaign gave agency to the virtuous, moral people who were constructed as underdogs with no power in their hands and whom they encouraged to stand up to fight for a better world against powerful adversaries (see Stanley 2008: 102-106). In doing so, they self-cast themselves as courageous and determined agents who solely understood the will of the people in its entirety and the evil done by the EU and were willing to defend the ideals of democracy and freedom against the EU. Accordingly, the anti-elitist logic rested on the promise of emancipation of the 'people' from over-institutionalised and too-rational political practices of the EU (see Laclau 2005), with this macro argumentative scheme driven by the construction of the referendum as an essential means to empower the ordinary people, as an act which was 'fundamentally about who we are as a nation' (Farage 2016b).

### **Technocratic Narrative(s)**

Finally, Leave communicative behaviour was also interspersed by elements of technocratic discourse, but these were limited and can only be found in speeches of Boris Johnson (2016b, 2016d) and Michael Gove (2016c, 2016e). Indeed, in some cases, also Leave protagonists were calling upon experts, as in 'Ronald Noble, the former head of Interpol, called the EU open borders policy a "real and present danger" that "abets terrorists" (Raab

2016b), and using facts and figures, as in 'net migration from the EU was 184,000 alone' (Raab 2016b).

At the same time, the technocratic tendencies of the Remain discourse were routinely criticised and ridiculed by the Leave supporters. This was related, but not means limited, to the field of economic forecasting which Leavers often condemned as 'phoney forecasts' (Duncan Smith 2016b), in an effort to challenge the status of experts and cast doubt on their reliability. The following example provides a useful illustration of such disapprobation tactics and is indicative of the 'broader societal shift towards a post-truth/post-factual discourse' (Kopf 2019: 163):

Treasury civil servants cooked up numbers for what will happen to our incomes after gazing into their crystal balls and trying to guess what the world is going to look like in 14 years' time. In reality, they have enough trouble working out what will happen 14 weeks ahead. (Duncan Smith 2016b)

## CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

To contribute to the strategic use of narratives by political actors, this article has demonstrated that the discursive perspective is a promising avenue for advancing research on populism and technocracy. To identify the populist and technocratic discursive trajectories at play during the British 2016 referendum campaign, it has understood populism and technocracy as features of political communication and interpreted populist/technocratic rhetoric as the combination of interrelated discursive dimensions involving both form (style) and content (proposition). Having mapped populist and technocratic representations which specifically supported the Leave/Remain claims, it became clear that each camp legitimised its vision and interpretation of the EU, and the related policy choices it proposed, through different narratives and linguistic devices as well as various combinations thereof.

Yet, it would be over-simplification to frame the referendum campaign as an easy will-versus-reason debate. The picture that emerges from the analysis of populist and technocratic narratives of the EU is complex, varied and multi-layered. As has been shown, the discourse in the debate combined technocratic and populist elements in a way that reflected the actors' strategic language use and Europe has, once again and probably not for the last time, proved to be a 'discursive battleground' (Diez 2001).

The analysis points to a number of structural similarities between Leave and Remain discourses. The discourses of the two campaigns were not irreducibly opposed to each other but often mirrored themselves in several ways. For instance, both were based on a unitary, unmediated, non-pluralist vision of the British society's general interests. Both sides also made use, albeit in an often differentiated manner, of two intertwined discursive strategies of positive self-presentation, reinforcing positive qualities of the self, and accusation/discrimination, highlighting negatives of the others. Indeed, to strengthen the imaginings of a new and better post-referendum UK, strong, positive self-presentation of the current UK were repeatedly emphasised, with both sides talking in proud, collective terms about the UK (see Brusenbauch Meislová 2019: 683). What the campaigns also shared was a recurrent accent on the specific and unique character of British and Britishness, the country's privileged position and its exceptional status.

At the same time, however, both camps differed, not least when it came to the employment of populist and technocratic narratives. The analysis showed how radically the campaign narratives differed in their structure, function, and procedures for verification and how different elements of populist and technocratic discourses were endowed with pragmatic meaning. The interpretivist account of the Remain discourse suggests that its communicative behaviour in the referendum campaign did not conform to one particular

style and displayed a lower degree of narrative consistency. Most discursive constructs foregrounded by the Remain campaign can qualify as technocratic, with the main ones being the narrative of the EU as a tool, the narrative of the single market benefits and the narrative of the withdrawal economic effects. Its rhetoric was primarily driven by rational arguments about the costs and benefits of the EU membership. In a bid to rationalise, objectify and depoliticise the UK's membership in the EU, the main focus was on unemotional, technical and present and future economic advantages of the EU membership that the UK could reap. Showcasing signs of instrumental reductionism, the solutions offered by the Remain campaigners were discursively portrayed as pragmatic and mature. Yet, alongside the dominant technocratic narratives, the Remain rhetoric also bore signs of discursive patterns that are usually associated with populist discourses, especially people-centrism in a sense of emphasising the sovereignty of the people, advocating for the people and capturing the will of the people, and legitimising the nature of the referendum.

In comparison, the critical-analytic exploration of typical macro-conversational practices of the Leave discourse, and the examples presented, suggest a better narrative management and a relatively consistent character of the campaign's discursive identity towards the EU in terms of the employment of populist tropes (with the central ones being the narrative of the EU as a failure, the narrative of the EU as an oppressor and the narrative of the anti-establishment fury) and non-existence of technocratic ones. Leave campaigners' pre-referendum communicative style also included a tendency towards value-based rhetoric in a sense of value aims and value-related forms of argumentation, and verbal means of persuasion. Furthermore, the general tone of the Leave discourse was more normative in nature. Overall, the Leave campaign was more consistent in its employment of narratives than the Remain one.

These findings come with several caveats. They are limited in a sense that the presence of populist narratives in the Remain campaign is being based largely (albeit not solely) on Jeremy Corbyn who has been a life-long Eurosceptic, widely criticised for his inability/refusal to have an authentic, identifiable position on the UK's membership of the EU. On the other hand, he did argue for a Remain vote, was officially a Remainer and a prominent political figure, and as such needs to be studied as a firm part of the Remain camp (see Demata 2019; Bennett 2019a). Yet, the next step in my research is systematic exploration of populist discourse in an even more representative Remain sample, comprising a larger number of political figures and speeches. In addition, the exact nature of interactions between populist and technocratic narratives also requires further research.

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