Thick Europe, ontological security and parochial Europe: the re-emergence of far-right extremism and terrorism after the refugee crisis of 2015

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ABSTRACT
This article examines the re-emergence of far-right extremism and terrorism as the adversary of European integration. The European Union (EU) becoming a grievance factor for far-right extremism and terror is qualitatively new. This article examines the emergence of this new actor in line with the changing four faces of the EU presented in this special issue, namely thin, thick, parochial and global. Paradoxically, the core argument of this article is that moves towards thick Europe have contributed to this development by way of addressing core fears in Europe after the migration/refugee crisis in 2015. The chronological discourse of the construction of the EU’s identity has showed that since 2014, there has been a major shift regarding Europeans’ fears and anxieties. (In)security linked to the migration/refugee crisis has been widening the market for security, despite the contrasting fact that Europe has been thriving for the longest peace period since WWII. This article analyses the impacts of the refugee crisis on the mutation of the European perception of threats. It uses the concept of ontological security to understand how the anxiety and fear caused by the refugee crisis led to the shaping of the European self-identity crisis.

KEYWORDS
Europe; ontological security; refugee crisis; terrorism; far-right

1. Introduction
What does today’s Europe look like? Multiple heads or a single united face? The answer to this question lies in a very basic premise – it depends on which lens we use to look at it. In our analysis it would be possible to see Europe in four faces – thin, thick, parochial and global. Today’s Europe is profoundly anxious (Mitzen, 2018a, p. 394) and this is reflected in the many cultural and social transformations it has suffered over the last 70 years. The European ideal portrayed in the Treaty of Rome no longer echoes the multiplicity of nationalities, religious, cultural and social diversity of today’s Europe. This is due to the cumulative process of integration and the multi-layered impacts globalisation has in Europe. As Buhari-Gulmez and Rumford argue, the once clear division between national/international, inside/outside, public/private no longer subsist (Buhari-Gulmez &
Rumford, 2016, p. 44) and, as such, it has become more evident that there are many faces of Europes inside Europe. Thus, only by examining it through the lenses of multiplicity may we aspire to understand how Europe has been responding to its successive anxiety challenges (Buhari-Gulmez & Rumford, 2016, pp. 43–44) that are causing a growing apprehension in the rise of far-right and its ability to thrive in the context of a thick Europe.

To better comprehend this phenomenon, we have to examine the complexity of European multiplicity (Buhari-Gulmez & Rumford, 2016; Rheindorf & Wodak, 2018) and how it has been shaping the illusory image of a thick Europe. This thick Europe is profoundly rooted in the idea of a common European civilizational matrix, that sees itself as superior from the Others (Buhari-Gulmez & Rumford, 2016, p. 46). Others are those outside Europe, but also the those inside, that for many distinctive reasons, such as different religious, ethnic, gender, sexual orientation collide with the imagery of a community built upon Judeo-Christian values, with certain hidebound interests intrinsically linked to the idea of ‘Fortress Europe’ (Buhari-Gulmez & Rumford, 2016, p. 47), still echoing ancient historical relations, common lineages and a shared past (Friedman, 1994, p. 120). However, admitting that there is multiplicity amongst the Europeans strongly contradicts the idea of a cohesive Europe speaking in unison. This idea also justifies the need to further explore the dynamics of belonging, and the constant need to question Europeans about what they are, where and to whom they belong (Edmondson & Luhtakallio, 2019, pp. 282–283). Refugees, migrants and other minorities have been frequently tagged as ‘Do not belong here’ in an exercise of Othering and, most of the time, they are portrayed as existential threats when, in truth, the answer to Europe’s current dilemmas rely on much more convoluted and multidimensional political, economic, but above all, emotional issues. For that reason, to understand the phenomenon of the rise of far-right in a thick Europe, the theoretical combination of the quadripartite formulation advanced by Buhari-Gülmez and Gülmez (2020), focusing on the thick face of Europe, while make use of the ontological security lens to understand what the European Home (Kinnvall & Mitzen, 2017; Mitzen, 2006, 2018a, 2018b) is. This will allow the examination why far-right narratives that have been thriving in Europe since 2015, bearing in mind that European citizens are not born with an innate European soul and that the questions related to European identity are much more emotional than functional, where fear and anxiety play a primordial role.

Despite the fact Europe has been living in consolidated and relative peace for more than 70 years, the catalyst of 9/11, coupled with the subsequent Arab Spring a decade later, the subsequent tsunami of migration and compounding multifaceted terrorist’s attacks throughout Europe, have raised a growing feeling of fear and anxiety among Europeans (Huddy et al., 2005; Mitzen, 2018a; NW et al., 2016; Rumelili, 2014). Considering, the information collected by the Eurobarometer and other informal surveys between 2007 and 2018, (in)security (related to other prevalent phenomena such as uncontrolled migration/refugee crisis, fiscal austerity, unemployment, rise of populism, sovereign debt and more recently fake news) has surely been one of the most highlighted fears for Europeans over the last 10 years (Dennison et al., 2018; European Commission, 2018; Jaeger, 2018; NW et al. 2016). An additional fuelling factor for boosting European anxiety levels was the succession of violent extremist and terrorist attacks on European soil occurring from 2015 onwards – Paris, Brussels, London, Copenhagen and Nice, among others contributed to an extreme degree of antagonism, in relation to the origin and religious
background of most refugees, promoting a fertile ground for far-right parties to discursively and politically associate migrants and refugees to criminality and terrorism (Ben-David & Matamoros-Fernández, 2016; Bilić et al., 2018; Colombo, 2018; den Boer, 2008; European Commission, 2019; Galpin, 2017; Jaeger, 2018; Krzyżanowski, 2018; Leonard & Kaunert, 2019; Liebhart, 2020; Petričušić, 2016; Triandafyllidou, 2018; United Nations, 2019). This major shifting point marked the beginning of novel security narratives and the framing of migrants as a refugee threat (Alkopher & Blanc, 2017; Bello, 2017; Bigo & Tsoukala, 2008; Bourbeau, 2011; Huddy et al., 2005; Koser, 2018; Lazaridis, 2015; Leonard & Kaunert, 2019, p. 3; Trimikliniotis, 2019). Borrowing from Browning, de la Salla, Kinvall, Mitzen and Rumelli, we provide an analysis through the paradigm of an ontological security perspective, exploring the EU’s existential anxieties and narratives linked to EU as a spatial mooring or Homespace (Browning, 2018a, p. 251; Della Sala, 2017, 2018; Kinnvall, 2016, 2018; Mitzen, 2018b, pp. 1374–1380, 2018a; Rumelili, 2015).

Since the terror attacks of 11 September 2001, European policy makers, police forces and intelligence agencies, alongside academics have predominantly focused their attentions on Islamist violent extremism. As a consequence, far-right-wing extremism and terrorism has developed into an increasing threat to Europe, which has been significantly overlooked. There have been very significant examples of its importance (Koehler, 2019): (1) in Spain, a neo-fascist plot aimed at the assassination of Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez, leading to an arrest on 8 November 2018; this constituted in revenge plots against Sánchez’s plans to exhume the remains of the dictator Francisco Franco; (2) six right-wing extremists were arrested in France on 6 November 2018 for plotting to attack and kill President Emmanuel Macron; (3) in Germany, right-wing extremists have perpetrated numerous significant terrorist attacks, for instance the so-called National Socialist Underground (NSU) cell assassinated 10 victims and attempted to kill an additional 43 by conducting a series of three bomb attacks and 15 armed robberies; (4) in Norway, the combined bomb attack and shooting spree of right-wing extremist Anders Behring Breivik on 22nd July 2011, killed 77 victims. These attacks give rise to the idea of a potential new wave of right-wing violence and terrorism. The Centre for International and Strategic Studies (CSIS) found that the number of terrorist attacks by far-right perpetrators increased by 43 per cent in Europe between 2016 and 2017. Thus, right-wing violent extremism and terrorism is on the rise and doing so faster than other types of terrorism. In Western states, the far-right accounted for 17.2 per cent of attacks in 2018 and rose by 320 per cent over the five years prior. Today’s political environment is likely to be contributing to this increase. Respected scholars have speculated that the ‘fifth wave’ of terrorism may come from the right. Despite the seriousness of the situation, the literature remains underdeveloped and the challenges posed by right wing violent extremism and the subsequent reciprocal violence that ensues has not received sustained attention from the authorities charges with maintaining law and order across the EU; Germany has recently come to be of interest due to the rising problem of far-right extremism. In this article, we use the designations extreme and far right synonymously. Koehler (2019) defines them as ‘an overlapping web of groups and ideologies based on racially, ethnically, or culturally defined superiority of one group and inferiority of all others (e.g. white supremacism, neo-Nazism, fascism).

The article is organised as follows. The first section will analyse the ontological security approach taken in this article to outline the European home space. The second section will
analyse the European anxiety momentum that has followed the European refugee crisis and the moves towards a Thick Europe. As a result of this anxiety momentum, feeding on these European ontological fears, we have seen a significant rise of far right extremism and terrorism across Europe that is fuelled through online radicalisation and has increased even more during the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, Europe’s understanding of Home space, and its related fears, have given explicit rise to Thick Europe’s Fortress mentality, initially adopted by EU leaders from Eastern Europe (Leonard & Kaunert, 2019), but subsequently more widely adopted in Western media and national discourses. This has come at the expense of thin Europe’s utilitarian approach to borders and others, and global Europe’s emphasis on the blurring of boundaries between European and global.

2. My home, your home, our home – an ontological security approach

Within the sphere of international relations, the use of ontological security over the course of the last decade, has supported a greater understanding of the emotional reasons behind the apprehensions and fears of the EU’s citizens (Croft & Vaughan-Williams, 2017; Della Sala, 2017, 2018; Kinnvall, 2004; Laing, 2010; Manners, 2002; Mälksoo, 2018; Rumelili, 2014, 2015, 2018). The cornerstone of ontological security is the analysis of autobiographical narratives and routines and how they are used as vehicles to exhale one’s anxiety. Stevens and Vaughan-Williams also applied the ontological security lens to analyse narratives and better conceptualise and understand how different perceptions and experiences of menaces to public security fluctuate according to identity, ethnicity, religion, class, gender, location, and generation (Croft, 2012; Croft & Vaughan-Williams, 2017). Moreover, according to Catarina Kinnvall, an ontological security approach allows to the unveiling of how fears and anxieties influence groups, states and to understand the psycho-socio-political effects that shape political movements and shape policy debate at the European security level (Kinnvall, 2018). Based on the initial works of Laing and Giddens (Giddens, 1991; Laing, 2010), ontological security seeks, therefore, to dissect biographical narratives and repeated practices as way to understand how these practices outline political choices and subsequent consequences.

When considering the EU, one questions the EU as a security provider and as a security community. Despite the fact that physical and ontological security are theoretically different, they are nonetheless intrinsically related. Traumatic events such as being a victim of violent crimes, being a victim of terrorist attacks or subject to harsh physical traumas, may transform negative personal and collective identities and unleash the feeling of ontological insecurity (Krahmann, 2018, pp. 358–359). Allied to the analysis of the discourses and practices, ontological security emerges as an auspicious theoretical and empirical input, not only to this particular project within the European security studies arena, but similarly opens the door to novel theoretical and methodological approaches within security studies in general. Subsequently, providing a more holistic approach to answer this research question. Issues related to the emergence of ontological (in)security are mainly related to the search for a self-identity that can emotionally structure the individual within its community. It could be argued that when all is socially known and inherently acquired, the prospect of disruption and the destabilisation may pave the way for ontological insecurity, both to the individual and to the wider society. Moreover, according to Giddens, these disruptions may not be directly focused at the
individual but may be the result of the disruption of traditional ways of life and society through the phenomenon of globalisation and the movements brought about by modernity (Agius, 2017, pp. 110–111; Giddens, 1991). This has significantly contributed to the decline of popularity of global Europe that advocates a Europe that is more open to globalisation (as an enactor and carrier of global standards to member, candidate and partner nation-states).

Considering the seminal work of Kinvall and Mitzen’s distinguishing features of what Home means – within the study of the expansion of nationalist movements in Europe, through the lens of ontological security provides a unique perspective of the subject matter (Kinnvall, 2004, 2018; Kinnvall & Mitzen, 2017; Mitzen, 2018b, 2018a). They provide a concept and understanding of the home that is a safe haven, absorbed within its cosiness, and provides a delimited space which offers individuals the essential psychological support to ensure the security of the being, to feel that individuals are ontologically secure (Giddens, 1991; Laing, 2010; Mitzen, 2018b, pp. 1374–1377). In order to diminish anxiety, Home, is therefore vital for the course of ‘self-stabilisation’ (Mitzen, 2018b, p. 1376). Therefore the way the EU frameworks the anxieties occurring within the migration/security nexus is no exception. However, as Browning and Joenniemi recall, this often collides with the urgency to build a collective identity within the logic of European security cooperation (Browning, 2018b; Browning & Joenniemi, 2013, 2017); managing the tensions that arise from the migration/security nexus may create a confrontation between member states who aspire for a closer Union, and those who aspire to maintain its uniqueness untouched (Mitzen, 2018a, p. 404). This may, obviously, generate deep rifts in the cooperation process, because there is little room for acknowledging political divergences amongst Member-States. As Mitzen argues, this only happens because EU has lost its inspiration for problem solving. She argues that the fact Europe has been in relative peace for over 60 years, keeping this golden objective made EU lose some resourcefulness and creativeness to look at alternative ways to manage the so-called migration crisis. According to Mitzen this occurs, because the EU routinely uses mechanisms of suppression, delegitimisation and repression to avoid any reactive, belligerent or dissonant narratives that might endanger the European project (Mitzen, 2018a, p. 410).

These mechanisms mirror the way the EU has dealt with the drawbacks created by the influx of migrants, especially since the peak of the so-called migration wave in 2015. The EU as a collective security community has been portrayed with disheartenment and lack of interest, but it has also failed to give body to a consistent self-identity. This might have a direct correlation explaining why ontological insecurity has arisen within the EU. First, it grounded on the idea that migration was uncontrollable and a volatile phenomenon, difficult to control and predict, and second, it profited on the succession of extremist and terrorist events to undermine the idea that the EU could not be seen as a collective security provider. Giddens had foreseen this phenomenon, about 25 years ago, reflecting that in the modern and globalised world, crises are practically uncontrollable and difficult to foresee, as they simultaneously affect the individual and the society in which he is inserted (Giddens, 1991, p. 183). The fairly (un)predictable influx of migrants into Europe, and its later (misleading) association that insecurity would boost in Europe, reasons with this idea that sowed anxieties are a disruptive factor, as they shake and question customary and deep-rooted routines and traditions (Giddens, 1991, p. 98; Mitzen,
This has ultimately led to the need of auto-observation and questioning of the individual self, and the individual as part of the European Union; eventually, the (illusory) idea that I am no longer safe as I used to be, because my community does not protect me as it did before, opened the door for free choice, deeply marketized opportunities to choose my own tailor-made security. Hence, thin Europe seems to evoke such threat perceptions in European people. Accordingly, not only thick Europe but also thin Europe contributes to the rise of ontological anxieties and the parochial Europe vision. Borrowing from Cherrier and Krahmann, the search for ontological security is no longer confined to misconnected identities and habits, as it is in the hands of each individual who has the bitter-sweet autonomy to build their own self-identity according to one’s lifestyle choices (Cherrier, 2005, p. 602; Krahmann, 2018, p. 359).

A way of escaping, or suppressing, a robust political debate about migration is perceptible, for example, in the quotidian running of the migration agenda (Mitzen, 2018a, p. 408). Moving, for example, the complexity of the migration themes to the external management realm and setting them under the oversight of the Area of Freedom, Security and Justice, leaves little space for genuine political discussion and engagement about how to deal with all the problems related to the inflow of migrants and refugees. According to Sandra Lavenex, in her reflection upon the EU’s external governance in the ‘wider Europe’, this quite observable (Lavenex, 2004); External governance is more about keeping EU’s borders safe and secure than to engage in the real (human and political) implications for the European project. The same in what delegitimization is regarded. Stripping a core issue of its significance and implicitly ignoring its implications is, more than Othering,3 a mechanism of diversion that may have significant political consequences (Lazaridis & Campani, 2016). This is even more evident when we look at migration. The political ‘move’ of securitising the migrants and refugees, thus framing them as security threats is undoubtedly the most visible part of its dehumanising nature (Aas & Gundhus, 2015;; Ceccorulli, 2018;; Ceccorulli & Lucarelli, 2018 Leonard, 2007, 2009 Löfflmann & Vaughan-Williams, 2017; Vaughan-Williams, 2008, 2015). This is quite evident when looking at Frontex line of priorities that is to secure the external borders rather than saving their lives; what totally undermines the core representation of the very basics of EU’s project and principles (Aas & Gundhus, 2015; Campesi, 2014; Horsti, 2012; Leonard, 2010; Pallister-Wilkins, 2015; Panebianco, 2016). Arguably, this fortress mentality of Frontex represents a thick Europe vision. Finally, the veiled mechanisms of repression also contribute to the blundering way EU has been framing migration. Escalading from a humanitarian to a securitised dimension, the escape way for preserving its imagery and narrative of unity, is to put aside all the narratives that may undermine this idea of political cohesion and commonness. Global Europe sees the migration issue from a humanitarian perspective based on international law and ‘global culture of human rights’; borders are redundant in global era. But thick and parochial Europe visions pave the way for the securitisation of migration. The delicate we(ness) has deep-rooted links to the construction of the EU’s imagery that was born from war, destruction and pain, to become an enlightened, improved and unshakable political construction that is still struggling to cope with the unleashed and unpredictable consequences of the migration and refugee influx into Europe. This rising uncertainty and Thin Europe’s inability to manage the global flows of refugees through optimal rationality lead Thick Europe to become more influential in the EU policies in this domain. Ultimately, we can say that
this combination of factors, that make these mechanisms implicitly subsist in the EU’s decision-making dynamics regarding the migratory agenda, is one of the main amplifiers of the anxiety generated around the migratory issue. This is therefore vital to further understand how these mechanisms enhance ontological (in)security within the EU and how they feed on the anxiety to thrive.

3. The European emotional anxiety momentum

The European Union’s increasing anxiety has been often associated with various exacerbated narratives, particularly in what relates to the so-called ‘refugee crisis’ (Boros et al., 2019; Chouliaraki & Zaborowski, 2017; Colombo, 2018; Krzyżanowski et al., 2018; Kurečić & Kuhar, 2019; Petričušić, 2016; Triandafyllidou, 2018). We can fairly say that it remains one of the most fractious issues within the EU and that it continues to divide EU member states in terms of a migration management policy agenda. According to the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), amongst the 28, only Ireland does not consider uncontrolled migration as a national security threat. The remaining 27, although varying in the scale of alarm, consider it a major priority (EPRS, 2016; European Commission, 2018; NW et al. 2016; Vasilopoulos et al., 2019 Zerka, 2018). Curiously, however, amongst those who consider it a top priority we also find those who explored and profited on the issue of refugees and migration for domestic political achievements. Countries like Hungary, Bulgaria and Austria sought and seek to further make the most of domestic anxiety over migration (Cichocki & Jabkowski, 2019; Liebhart, 2020 Rheindorf & Wodak, 2018;) as it was demonstrated during the campaign for the 2019 European Parliament elections (Balmer, 2019; Human Rights Watch, 2018). Hungary, has been especially dexterous exploring and capitalising on the established feelings of xenophobia and anti-migration, amplifying its muscled government speech (Bilič et al., 2018; Boukala & Dimitrakopoulou, 2018; Colombo, 2018; Krzyżanowski, 2018; Petričušić, 2016; Szalai & Hobl, 2015; Tóth, 2019; United Nations, 2019 Vezovnik, 2018;) towards migrants and refugees along with a very tight social media control campaign (Abrahamsen, 2000; Boros et al., 2019; Cantat & Rajaram, 2019; Caponio & Cappiali, 2018; Kurečić & Kuhar, 2019 Szalai & Hobl, 2015). But harvesting the populist and nationalist political votes is more than simply to choose to be right-wing or to comply with their narratives. It is probably the biggest political manoeuvre of populist parties leading EU member-states. It is apparently about changing the appearance and the cornerstones of the European Union to build (Alexander, 2019 Chorvath, n.d.; Liang, 2016; de la Baüme & Sciorilli Borrelli, 2018, 2019).

Since 2016, we have witnessed the development of a new ideological agenda linked to populist and far-right movements with the aim of reshaping the EU a project impersonating the values that these movements advocate. Amongst the most threatening populist movements in Europe, such as Steve Bannon’s (un) visible ‘The Movement,’ have shown that the real intention is not to dismantle the EU but rather to erode its fundamental principles (Chorvath, n.d.; Lewis, 2018; Stubley, 2018). Thus, there is a general rise of parochial Europe vision. This ideological orientation has also been lately echoed in recently formed young civil movements that defend an authoritarian worldview in France, Italy, Belgium and Austria, for example (European Council, n.d.; Bayer, 2016; Hinnant, 2019). This clearly makes for a ‘parochial’ vision for the future of Europe, a territorially segmented European order that sustains parochial nationalisms in European states rather than trying to build...
thick Europe’s Brussels-centred civilisation, thin Europe’s pragmatic market union or Global Europe’s efforts for de-centring Europe. Nonetheless, according to ‘What Europeans really feel: the battle for the political system’ report,\textsuperscript{4} fear is what will save Europe (Dennison et al., 2019; Leonard, 2019). The ECFR’s report brings focus, for the first time (as any other survey did before), in anxieties and, more bluntly, in what they call ‘the Emotions of Europe’ (Dennison et al., 2019, p. 14). The survey released before 2019 European Parliament elections highlighted that:

Rather than a simple split between pro-Europeans and nationalists, there is a much longer-running, much deeper conflict under way – one centred on the way Europeans feel about the democratic system. And this battle is as much about people’s emotions as their ideologies or their attitudes towards facts.

On the whole, the results of this survey concluded that nowadays emotions have a primordial and driving role in political decision making. It observed that there is also a large cleavage regarding respondents’ feelings about the European project and the future of Europe. Although the level of support for the EU is high, most respondents do not exclude the possibility of the European Union collapsing by 2040, which shows some pessimism about the continuation of the European project. What stands out the most in this study is a deeply divided picture among those who live optimistically and secure within the European project, and those, who express a great deal of anxiety and fear regarding various issues, including migration, terrorism and climate change. Surprisingly, the youngest are amid the most pessimistic. However, for the purpose of this article, and reasoning with Mitzen’s – suppression, deligitimisation and repression – explanation behind the lack of creativity to look at the migrant crisis, echoes precisely in one of the fears assessed in this survey: the fact that voters believe in the possibility of Europe falling back into war. Curiously, 28 per cent of respondents do not rule out breaking the longest peace period ever lived on the continent and this apprehension reaches more than 50 per cent amongst surveyees (Dennison et al., 2019, p. 4). The 2017 Eurobarometer survey on Europeans’ attitudes to security, highlights a significant drop in the proportion of surveyees who think that the EU is a secure place, from 79 per cent in 2015 to 68 per cent in 2017. The most significant emphasis is on terrorism, organised crime, natural and man-made disasters, as well as cybercrime and the security of the EU’s external borders (Eurobarometer, 2017, p. 15) (CoESS et al. 2018, p. 45).

\textbf{4. Far-right extremism and terrorism, migration and European anxieties}

Right-wing extremism and terrorism is not a new issue in Europe. Indeed, not only is there abundant inspiration from the fascist regimes of the past, but there have been several right-wing terrorist groups of note over since 1945, such as during Italy’s ‘Years of Lead’, Germany’s National Socialist Underground (NSU), and neo-Nazi skinhead movements across the continent, the origins of which have been traced to the UK (Koehler, 2016). The 1990s have typically been seen as a period of declining terrorism and since the 9/11 terror attacks, the issue of major concern has been islamist terrorism. The development of Right-wing extremism and terrorism in Europe appears to have been of lower importance until the 2010s, although the difficulty of separating terrorism and hate crime may well be part of this and thus mask the issue to some extent. Anders Behring Breivik’s
attack in 2011 was particularly influential in generating concern about emerging right-wing terrorism in Europe, and the Global Financial Crisis (GFC), refugee crisis, austerity, upsurge in populism, and the increasingly blurred lines between centre-right and extreme right all seem to be auspicious circumstances for its rise. Schuurman (2019) has shown that there is a paucity of research on right-wing terrorism in general. However, this gap seems to particularly acute in relation to Europe. Much is historical or focused on a limited set of states. There has been some research on Germany as it comes to terms with the upsurge of right-wing extremism and the threat of terrorism, and Pisoiu (2015) applied subcultural theory to both jihadi and right-wing radicalisation in the country, arguing for a greater focus on agency and subcultural context. In addition to Germany, Scandinavia has been of interest to scholars, perhaps spurred by Breivik but more generally by powerful far-right groups in the region (Ravndal, 2018). Right-wing extremism and terrorism is focused on the superiority of one societal group over others. In this specific instance, it is likely that the individuals and groups in question will focus on Muslims, Jews, and regionally or state-specific minorities (Koehler, 2016, 2018). Secondly, there are certain strategic and tactical trends. On the level of strategy, right-wing violent extremists pioneered the approach of ‘leaderless resistance’, which refers to individuals or small groups engaging in extremism and terrorism unrelated to a larger group. Questions abound as to whether this is an effective approach in terms of goals, but these individuals and small groups are more than just a mere nuisance; there is the potential for violent spirals between societal groups, among other things.

Terrorist use of the internet can likely be seen as a game changer for leaderless resistance as more people can access relevant material, such as how to make and utilise weapons as well as contributing to wider terrorist strategies such as proliferation of ideas, attack planning and the general dissemination of extreme ideas. Recent high-profile attacks by right-wing violent extremists, such as Anders Behring Breivik, were carried out by single-actors, but, who seem to have engaged with other individuals online, or, otherwise who offered them support, encouragement, and direction. Rarely have right-wing terrorists organised in large groups or lasted for a long time, at least not in Europe. Indeed, Koehler (2014, pp. 53–54) points to an increasing trend of small unit tactics among German right-wing groups since 2000, and 73.2 per cent of groups existed for no longer than a year. In terms of tactics, a wide range of methods have been used, but explosives and arson appear to have dominated in Germany (Koehler, 2014). Shootings have been particularly noticeable in some of the aforementioned recent high-profile attacks also. Finally, moving on to something slightly unusual about right-wing violent extremists is that there has been a tendency not to take responsibility for attacks, which is problematic because terrorism is usually seen as a form of political communication. It also further renders any distinction between terrorism and hate crime more difficult.

The impact of immigration on far-right extremism and terrorism in Europe is beginning to be explored, with McAlester (2020, p. 179) arguing that between 1980 and 2004, increases in migration were positively related to increases in hate crime and right-wing terrorism, ‘in part because they aggravate the grievances of those on the radical right’, with this terrorism ultimately being seen as a strategic choice. In Germany, Angela Merkel’s ‘unilateral open-arms policy’ became symbolic for the far right in their grievance. ‘Wir schaffen das’
I say simply: Germany is a strong country. We should approach things with motif: we have done so much – we will manage this! [...] The federal government will do everything in its power - together with other countries, together with the municipalities [...]. (Merkel, 2015)

It is this statement that is articulated against Angela Merkel, over and over again. This statement became the rallying cry for the far-right against a policy which they thoroughly despised. In several EU countries, radical right-wing parties campaigning on anti-immigration platforms have achieved electoral successes, including UKIP in the United Kingdom (UK), the Swedish Democrats, the Freedom Party in Austria under Joerg Haider and, more recently, Heinz-Christian Strache, the National Front in France, the League in Italy, the People’s Party in Denmark, the Freedom Party under Geert Wilders in the Netherlands, and the Vlaams Blok (now Vlaams Belang) in Belgium (Leonard & Kaunert, 2019). However, in most countries, strong rhetoric on migration matters is not exclusive to radical right-wing parties. It permeates to some extent the whole electoral debate. A significant example is a comment by Marcus Pretzell (AFD: Alternative for Germany) after Anis Amri’s attack on the Christmas market in Berlin in December 2015: ‘These are Merkel’s dead’ (Donahue, 2016). Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán became a symbolic political figure for all those who wanted to make a security link between terrorism and refugees, when, at the 2017 Malta congress of the European People’s Party, he described migration as the ‘Trojan horse of terrorism’ (Brunsden, 2017). Furthermore, the securitisation of asylum-seekers and refugees, particularly those with a Muslim religious background, as a threat to European culture, has taken various forms in the public debate. For example, Marine Le Pen has suggested that ‘[there] are a number of neighbourhoods where you are no longer living a French life [...] France isn’t burkinis on the beach. France is Brigitte Bardot. That’s France’ (Leonard & Kaunert, 2019). Hungarian Prime Minister Victor Orban has even declared ‘Islamisation’ unconstitutional in order to protect Hungarian culture. His arguments have deliberately blurred the lines between Islam as a religion and Islamism as a political ideology. Some of the statements made by securitising actors have even come close to conspiracy theories. For instance, Le Pen’s culturalist security threat argument appears to be embedded in a conspiracy theory, when she claims that ‘[at] some point in the 2000s, migrants and their children – not all, but a large majority – declared war on France’ (Leonard & Kaunert, 2019). Orbán’s construction of the recent influx of refugees to Europe as ‘mass migration that [...] masquerades as a humanitarian issue but its’ true nature is to occupy space’ (Gorondi, 2016) also strikes a conspiratorial note. Thus, an analysis of European far-right leaders shows the latter’s willingness to appeal to both parochial and thick Europe supporters.

Moreover, this construction of asylum-seekers and refugees as security threats can also be identified in official and social media reporting across the EU. The Council of Europe produced a report in 2017 about the coverage of the ‘migration crisis’ across Europe (Georgiou & Zaborowski, 2017). This report argues that the European press played a central role in framing the arrival of refugees and migrants to the European shores in 2015 as a ‘crisis’ for Europe. It also identifies differences between Western and Eastern Europe in the reporting of this ‘crisis’, notably the persistent presence of hate speech in some parts of Eastern Europe, especially in Hungary. The report divides the period of analysis into three separate phases: (1) careful tolerance, from July to September 2015; (2) ecstatic humanitarianism, from September to November 2015; and (3) fear and
securitisation, after November 2015. In fact, these three phases in the media narratives reflect a predominance of thin Europe, subsequently Global Europe, and, finally, the thick and parochial Europe visions, respectively. Of particular interest is the conclusion that, in the third phase, militarisation became the dominant frame of European reporting, with over 60 per cent of all reporting being framed in military terms. In line with the military frame, the authors also note an increase in distant and emotionless framing of asylum-seekers and refugees.

The role of social networks in contemporary society is particularly important for an analysis of far-right grievances, especially since the start of the ‘so-called’ migration crisis. It has been a breeding ground for online hate proliferation and cloaked manifestations of discriminatory discursive practices. The role of digital media as a self-learning vehicle to indoctrination, to radicalisation, to shaming, and discrimination has revolutionised the way we perceive politics and has opened the gap and launched the debate on how the European Union may frame online hate speech in its policy agenda. Since 2015, coinciding with the peak of the ‘so-called’ migration crisis, we have seen a mushrooming of amplified discourse via blogs and web pages that are blatantly offensive and openly discriminatory, but also a growth in other web platforms where hate messages are spread, spanning from music videos to online gaming hidden messages (Leonard & Kaunert, 2019). The ‘othering’, construction of online hate speech featuring offensive, aggressive and hostile language aimed at specific individuals or social groups based on their personal features, has highlighted novel forms of xenophobic and discriminatory discursive practices aiming old targets, with a refurbished and apparently inoffensive language, where they surge as saviours and moral guardians of a certain old Europe that no longer exists. Mottos such as ‘let’s save Europe’ or ‘let’s stop the invasion’ have been ubiquitous in most recent political campaigns in Italy, France, Hungary, Slovenia, UK, to name a few. While there are traces of Thick Europe visions in these discourses, which emphasise European-originated standards of civilisation (such as human rights, etc.), these discourses are dominated by parochial Europe which focuses on Christendom as representing an exclusive civilisation.

Earlier works have shown that there is a pervasiveness of online hate speech particularly linked to far-right and extremist political ideologies (Assimakopoulos et al., 2017; Brown, 2018 Costello et al., 2017; Klein, 2017). Racist, xenophobic, anti-Muslim and anti – Roma, and in certain cases, homophobic speeches have been closely related to the rampant growth of populist and nationalist parties in the digital and real worlds of the EU political arena. Previous EU funded projects supported by the REC Programme, such as MANDOLA, SELMA, sCAN, Hatemeter, Pericles or Silence Hate amongst others, despite their major contribution to understand the phenomenon of online hate speech and having developed new tools to tackle the different impacts on the above mentioned groups, still left open several avenues for research, namely those ought to examine the broad spectrum of right-wing online hate speech or how disinformation and propaganda may influence the implementation of the rule of law in the EU and its Member States. The pervasiveness of online hate speech particularly linked to far-right and extremist political ideologies, but also potentially far left and Salafi-jihadi groups, has been closely related to the rampant growth of populist and nationalist parties offline and online in the EU political arena. Actions, for examples, as the ones of radical right-wing party AfD, allegedly linked to the organisation of the project Reconquista Germanica’(Ebner, 2017; Martin,
a synchronised social media campaign operated with the assistance of software applications running automated tasks, known as bots, and with and additional help of 5000–6000 persons, working actively to diffuse inflammatory and aggressive online contents in several social media platforms, newsgroups and blogs, known as trolls. The intention of inciting emotional response and distress in users has been used as a powerful digital weapon to target specific goals and to spread right-wing messages faster than ever before. According to Nina Horaczek’s, 2018 report on right-wing groups media strategies, they seek amongst other things to multiply fear and distrust using disinformation while using social media as an amplifier.

5. Conclusion

In order to survive in its originally intended format, the European Union will have to look inside itself and critically analyse how populist and far-right movements have established themselves within the European space. The EU now faces many problems that undermine its identity and its ontological security, but the biggest phantoms that the EU will have to battle are the ‘anxieties, fear and hate’ spaces created by social media and populist movements. They have been fuelling the public opinion with hostile reactions towards refugees and migrants whilst corroding and questioning the validity of the European project. The EU needs to find a balance between the security and the humanitarian domains as it can no longer overlook that the fears and anxieties raised for the last six years are deeply rooted in the way the European Union securitised the so-called refugee crisis and externalised its border management (Avenue et al., 2016 Frelick et al., 2016; Gammeltoft-Hansen, 2011;; Leonard, 2009; Leonard & Kaunert, 2019). It will need to overcome European’s feeling of not belonging. Linked to this, EU-led integration, based on a functionalist market logic, ‘thin Europe’, can sometimes go hand in hand with a global Europe vision and invite global actors such as the US or the UN, among others, to propose solutions to the EU’s crises. This article demonstrates, paradoxically, that moves towards thick Europe have contributed to increased far-right radicalisation due to core fears in Europe after the migration/refugee crisis in 2015. There have clearly been moves towards thick Europe, whereby the EU advocates more of a Fortress Europe mentality (Leonard & Kaunert, 2019). The EU did not manage to reform the Dublin asylum system, but managed to conclude a deal with Turkey to keep asylum seekers outside of Europe. Despite this, we also see that the EU policies reflect a co-existence of both thin, thick, global Europes.

Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent worldwide lockdown has widened financial insecurity and also social alienation, heightening the space for further grievance, thus fostering a fertile ground to novel forms of right-wing radicalisation and online promotion of radical manifestations and instrumentalization. Since January 2020, the securitisation of COVID-19 speech has been used as an argument and a tool to foster stronger measures against black and ethnic groups as well as migrants, and it has deepened populist and right-wing speeches in Europe. Moreover, the pandemic has raised unparalleled concerns that go beyond health itself. The COVID-19 has released an unscaled fear amongst European and world economies as jobs and well-being of the whole populations. This has been particularly exploited by far-right actors, presenting a unique opportunity to spread hate, fear, panic and chaos,
in Italy, Spain, Germany and UK (Ariza, 2020; Johnson, 2020). Initially by othering COVID-19 as the ‘Chinese Virus’ or the ‘Virus from China’, many world leaders tried to dissociate themselves in a move to politically blame and shame China (Lindaman & Viala-Gaufrey, n.d.; Zargar, 2020, p. 19). Moreover, this argument has also been used by right-wing extremist groups referring to the pandemic as a coordinated plot created by China and Israel weaponizing the virus, especially when examining the proliferating online publications that frequently impute to migrants, Chinese, Muslims and Jews not only for the spread of the virus, but also imputing to these groups social fragmentations and job losses. Among the publications that continue to be visible on various online platforms for the general public (Twitter and Facebook and some news agencies), there are also developed several conspiracy theories that accuse the Jews for the conception, development and dispersion of the virus, as well as it has been circulating for the last two months, that Israel would have already developed a vaccine with the aim of manipulating and profiting from the disgrace that the pandemic has caused. Several text and visual publications are manipulating or publishing old images of Muslims in mosques praying claiming that they are violating the rules of confinement and are virus spreading vehicles (Parveen, 2020).

Similarly, in some social media platforms it has been recurrent online posts that incite violence against citizens of Asian origin by calling for attacks such as spitting on door handles, cars, or even splashing in the face of Muslims or Chinese in public transport, manifesting a clear weaponization of the pandemic. The handling of global health intertwined with the fracturing international migration governance has raised the need to further investigate to what extent will the securitisation of the pandemic boost online extremist speech and how the declaration of human biosecurity emergency by many European states may deepen identitarian and populist narratives online. The growing politicisation of the pandemic by the extreme right, but perhaps also the far left, in Spain, Italy, Germany and the United Kingdom has been revealing of how the narrative has been instrumentalized to accentuate racist, xenophobic, anti-migrant and anti-Semitic discourses and how the manipulation of fear can further weaken a Europe that has recently lost one of its members (UK) and is being actively threatened by other Member States with right-wing policies that jeopardise European solidarity and cohesion. Thus, increasingly, the ideological left-right divide becomes redundant as they both adopt parochial Europe visions. As mentioned before, this article demonstrated, paradoxically, that moves towards thick Europe have contributed to moves to parochial Europe. Thick Europe and a Fortress Europe mentality (Leonard & Kaunert, 2019) are increasingly on the rise, especially with the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet, despite this, we also see that the EU policies reflect a co-existence of both thin, thick, global Europes, as shown throughout the article.

Notes

1. https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/fight-against-terrorism/foreign-fighters/history-foreign-fighters/
2. Studies on the mechanisms of suppression are not new and they can be found in IR literature, namely in the work of Mills, Bower and Alcoff (Bower, 1990; Alcoff, 2007; Mills, 2007). According to Mills, in his considerations about the weight of white ignorance about the multiplicity of
races amongst Americans helps to build the American narrative of an egalitarian and ‘all-inclusive society’. Basically, looking over the shoulder and looking to the problem of race as an exception and not a norm does not weaken the American narrative (Mills, 2007). The same happens if we look to the EU’s migration in a parallel way.

3. Further works on the concept of Othering in migration studies please see Neumann’s, Baumgarten’s Waever’s, Lazaridis’, Ambrosini’s or Taylor’s (amongst others) analysis (Weaver, 1995; Neumann, 1999; Lazaridis & Campani, 2016; Baumgarten, 2017; Taylor, 2017)

4. The survey was ordered by ECFR and conducted by YouGov during March and April 2019, before the elections, in 14 countries: Austria, the Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Spain, and Sweden.

5. Please see http://mandola-project.eu/; https://hackinghate.eu/; https://scan-project.eu/the-project/; http://hatemeter.eu/; https://project-pericles.eu/tag/hate-speech/

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