

Unity through crisis

A qualitative analysis of common identity formation during crisis in the European context

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Abstract

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Sammanfattning:	<p>In this thesis, I describe how Heads of Government can mobilise crises to foster unity among EU member states and strengthen the sense of a shared European identity. The thesis analyzed five statements by the Heads of Government in Bulgaria, Finland, Germany, Greece, and Luxembourg to gain a more profound understanding of how they strategically used the This is Europe debates to promote unity and solidarity. The thesis employed a qualitative method and critical discourse analysis and approached the data with a social constructivist-interpretive approach. The theory of choice was social identity theory. The research analysis revealed how crises can be indeed used to unite various EU member states if there is a common goal to work toward, such as promoting peace and defending shared values.</p>
Nyckelord:	European Identity, Unity, Crisis, Political Cues, Social Constructivism

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Introduction

Today, more than ever, the world order that established Europe as the *status quo* is being challenged as new actors and emerging economies become more prevalent in the political and economic sphere. As the traditional balance of power is reshaped to accommodate new actors, Europe must take action to find its role in the developing political arena, thereby securing its ability to shape its future (Laffan, 2019, p. 433). Analysing contemporary political circumstances is, consequently, vital for understanding the implications of geopolitical and societal developments.

Changes in the world order that place Europe and the European Union (EU) in the periphery rather than the centre can be exemplified by the international organisation BRICS+, initiated by Brazil, Russia, India, and China to challenge the economic and political power of the “West”. The organisation has grown and now encompasses nine nations and a combined population of 3.5 billion, which equals 45% of all humans. The BRICS+ economies are, furthermore, worth more than 28% of the global economy. Three of the organisation’s members, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, produce approximately 44% of the world’s crude oil (BBC, 2024). While BRICS+ is relatively new compared to the EU, its emergent relevance in the world order is undeniable.

Besides growing economic powers that challenge the West’s status quo, the EU has also encountered various internal challenges. Its vulnerable disposition was, for example, revealed through its reliance on energy supply imports, which became apparent after Russia invaded Ukraine. Furthermore, the EU has also been confronted by the UK’s decision to leave the union to regain its sovereignty, showcasing that the European integration process is not permanent but reversible (Cini & Pérez-Solórzano Berrigan, 2019, p. 419). While the liberal ideals of the EU remain at its core, external threats and crises are forging politicians to change strategies. There are two evident trends; first, a shift in the political agenda where European unity and solidarity are being discussed more frequently (Martill, 2021, p. 982). Second, EU actorness moving from an optimistic peace project to a more pessimistic and defensive direction, emphasising security and defence (Nissen & Dreyer, 2024, pp. 689-690). Closer cooperation between EU member states does, however,

present elite politicians with the challenge of uniting EU citizens to commence a sense of solidarity.

One of the founding fathers of the European Union, Jean Monnet, emphasised in a statement during the politically tumultuous time of 1967 how crises are relevant factors to consider vis-à-vis European integration. Monnet said, “Europe will be forged in crisis, and will be the sum of the solutions adopted for those crises”. Crises have historically functioned as a catalyst for social change that commences politicians toward cooperative action to find solutions. Nabers (2007) describes how change can be understood as discursive change, where different actors compete to implement their ‘systems of narration’ on the hegemonic discourse in society. Nabers argues *any* that political decision – whether large or small – is taken as a response to fill a structural void created by crises (Nabers, 2007, pp. 6-7). The actor’s ability to rule requires a certain compatibility between their worldview and the hegemonic discourse (ibid, 2007, p. 23), making the formation of collective identities a relevant element to consider.

Since the initiation of the European integration project after the Second World War, EU politicians have long been interested in the notion of a common European identity as a tool to promote unity. Hooghe and Marks (2005) emphasise that political elites and political parties primarily cue identity in the domestic arena, and public support for the European integration process depends on whether national elites are divided or supportive of the matter. They argue that Euroscepticism increases when political elites present fragmented attitudes (Hooghe & Marks, 2005, pp. 436–437). Consequently, how European Heads of State and Government publicly speak about Europe is critical for the EU’s legitimacy. While forming a common identity may produce beneficial outcomes for society - such as economic growth and peace - it remains vital to consider how it is used to gain, maintain, and legitimise political power.

Research Objectives and Research Question

This thesis aims to analyse the relationship between political power and identity formation to understand how crises can be mobilised to promote a sense of European unity. The study will examine the relationship between political power and identity by drawing upon social constructivist perspectives, which regard identities as a phenomenon formed

through social interactions (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012, p. 4). While identity is a universal phenomenon not limited to Europe, a case study was required to make the analysis more concrete, which is why this thesis will focus on Heads of Government in the European Union. The thesis will analyse five statements from the European Parliament's (EP) series "This is Europe" by the Heads of Government of Bulgaria, Finland, Greece, Germany, and Luxembourg.

The thesis will examine how historical narratives may be used to create a sense of unity while also analysing how the politicians portray the future of Europe. Narratives related to the motto of 'united in diversity' are significant. However, descriptions that may construct an "us versus them" dynamic between the EU and non-EU countries or anathematise a common enemy are also pertinent. By examining the politicians' statements through critical discourse analysis, the speeches will be placed in a context that can elucidate variance in "Europeanness" and how politicians position themselves and their country vis-à-vis the EU. While a certain level of comparison may occur in the analysis, the thesis will primarily seek to identify common themes relating to identity construction and power.

The overarching research question will guide the study forward:

- How do Heads of Government in the contemporary European context mobilise crises to forge unity amongst EU Member States and to promote a common European identity?

Delimitations

While it would have been interesting to analyse all fourteen opening and closing statements from the EU Heads of State and Government, certain delimitations were required to make the material manageable. The statements are approximately twenty to thirty minutes long each and cover many essential aspects. As this thesis aims to apply critical discourse analysis to the data, fourteen statements may have prevented a more in-depth analysis compared to an analysis of five statements, which suited the size of the thesis better. However, if I had decided to do a content or narrative analysis of the material, it may have been possible to include the additional texts. By limiting this thesis to analysing five statements, I hope to provide a more comprehensive analysis that will contribute to

the research area with additional perspectives. The decision for selecting Bulgaria, Greece, Germany, Finland, and Luxembourg as the study's cases will be further deliberated under section 'Data Collection'.

Background

This chapter of the thesis will focus on providing a contextual representation of the EU and the five member states. By ensuring that the reader is made aware of the contemporary context of the states, I hope to provide a more comprehensive depiction of the driving forces behind the politicians' statements. The background chapter will also delve deeper into describing why the five Heads of Government and their countries were chosen and how they are interesting to the analysis.

The European Union and Identity

The European integration process initially began to foster peace and reconstruction after the Second World War and unite Europe (Cini & Pérez-Solórzano Barragan, 2019, pp. 2, 14). The two EU pioneers, Robert Schuman and Jean Monnet, are considered the principal architects of the European integration project. They worked together to deliver the “Schuman Declaration,” which would place all German-French steel production under one high authority. Monnet and Schuman believed that economic integration would prevent future wars from occurring (EU, n.d.), which was a substantial objective in the post-war destruction. The process began with the formation of the European Coal and Steel Community in 1951, initiated by ‘the six’, i.e., Belgium, Germany, France, Italy, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands. Later, in 1957, it continued with the additional formation of the European Economic Community and the European Atomic Energy Community (Cini & Pérez-Solórzano Berrigan, 2019, p. 15). It was primarily an elite-driven project that regarded political negotiations as too complicated for ordinary laypeople. At first, most citizens had a pretty neutral opinion about the then-European Community. Still, as the first enlargement began, Euroscepticism arose due to the permissive consensus, and the union was required to consider public opinions to ensure its legitimacy (Guerra & Terns, 2019, pp. 219-220).

The European Union has developed extensively over the years, gaining more power and authority with each treaty. Since its initiation, the union has transformed itself into a system of multi-level governance in which the national state allocates certain sovereignty to the EU institutions to gain membership. The most recent EU treaty, i.e., the Lisbon

Treaty, was launched in 2009 and attempted to increase democracy in the union by engaging citizens (Church & Pinafore, 2019, p. 41). On the treaty's tenth anniversary, President von der Leyen argued that the Lisbon Treaty had given Europe a single legal personality and a soul. While discussing the European soul, Von der Leyen described it as:

The soul that made us fight against tyranny and defeat it. The soul that brought down the Iron Curtain and re-united our continent. The Lisbon Treaty went to the core of our European identity. Democracy. The rule of law. Rights and liberties for all (von der Leyen, 2019).

Von der Leyen painted a picture of Europe as the hero or heroine who fought against its enemies to unite the continent. Her statement argues that the European identity is formed through the Lisbon Treaty and its promotion of the EU values.

Contemporary ideas of identity can relate to various classifications or markers, such as gender, locality and regionality, socioeconomic status, religion, and ethnicity (Smith, 1991, pp. 4-6). The Western notion of national identity is tied to the sense of a political community with common institutions and a distinct rule of law that covers all citizens. A well-defined territory is also a significant factor, as the notion of the community being tied to a territory promotes a distinct sense of belonging. The legal-political equality of citizens is another vital component in the Western notion of national identity, which is materialised through citizenship. The legal and political rights and obligations among citizens create a distinction between who belongs to the community and who does not. Finally, a common culture and civic ideology are central, as they unite the people and territory through historical memories, myths, symbols, and traditions (Ibid, 1991, pp. 9-11). The five statements analysed in this chapter include the characteristics of the Western notion of national identity that Smith described but place them in a European context rather than a national one.

Hooghe and Marks (2005) explain that European multiculturalism may generate more inclusive forms of identity whereby national allegiance can co-exist alongside a growing sense of Europeanness, meaning that EU citizens may identify with Europe, a nation, and a local region. However, developing a European identity may conversely provoke a sense of national identity loss, whereby protectiveness toward the nation and opposition toward European integration may increase (Hooghe & Marks, 2005, p. 423). Smismans (2019)

argues that social unity – which could come from a shared identity – is necessary for the EU’s parliamentary model as it centres around majoritarian decision-making. Forming a shared European identity could encourage European citizens to become more involved and loyal toward European polity, which could decrease allegations of democratic deficit within the EU institutions (Smismans, 2019, p. 129).

Another vital aspect concerning European identity formation and its parliamentary model is the requirements a country needs to fulfil to become a member of the EU. Becoming a candidate or potential candidate for EU accession requires the country to adopt the EU’s *Acquis Communautaire*, meaning that the state must align its governance model to the Copenhagen Criteria and make adjustments that abide by liberal democracy and market economy (Börzel & Panke, 2019, p. 118). Consequently, shared values may not necessarily be *shared* but rather a compulsory part to adopt for European integration.

Introduction to the Cases

While analysing political statements, it is essential to contextualise the information to understand the rationale behind why the Heads of Government may emphasise certain aspects. Within the political context of the EU, the member states may be referred to as equal but hold different positions regarding power and authority. Consequently, the following part of the thesis will briefly describe the context of the five countries: Bulgaria, Finland, Germany, Greece and Luxembourg. In the descriptions of the countries’ context, the following parameters were included to provide a broader insight into how the political, economic, and social dimensions of the nation-states may diverge:

- The countries’ economy and fiscal distribution to the EU,
- EU and Schengen membership,
- Contemporary political circumstances,
- Educational background of the Head of Government,
- Representation in the European Parliament, and,
- Political party ideology, i.e., which beliefs the Head of Government represents.

Bearing in mind contemporary political and financial circumstances, the length of membership, and the number of representatives in the European Parliament, a more

comprehensive depiction of the country's political stance within the EU becomes visible. Furthermore, considering the educational background of the Head of Government and their political party ideology may shine light upon the contested elitist elements of European integration, such as having a more pro-European stance whereby the benefits of integration are highlighted.

The Republic of Bulgaria

Bulgaria is a parliamentary republic that became a member of the EU in 2007 alongside Romania. It has yet to fulfil the criteria for adopting the Euro but recently joined the Schengen area. On 31 March 2024, air and sea borders were lifted after all requirements had been fulfilled; however, controls of land borders remained. Bulgaria's GDP per capita ranks below the EU average of €35,500, accounting for 0.5% of the EU's total GDP. The European Parliament currently has 17 representatives from Bulgaria. The Prime Minister of Bulgaria is the Head of Government with the most legislative power. The President is the Head of State and is primarily representative (EU, n.d.).

Over the last three years, Bulgaria has faced quite a political turmoil, with unsuccessful negotiations and a continuous cycle of elections. The solution to the unfruitful parliamentary elections became a coalition government between the conservative centre-right party GERB and the pro-European liberal electoral coalition 'We Continue the Change-Democratic Bulgaria (PP-DB). As part of their coalition, the parties implemented a "rotation" of the ministerial team every nine months. Nikolai Denkov, a professor in Chemistry and prior Minister of Education, was selected as the Prime Minister of Bulgaria for a nine-month tenure between 2023 and 2024. He led a pro-European government during his time in office (Reuters, 2024; Baccini, 2024).

The Republic of Finland

Finland is a parliamentary republic with a Prime Minister, who is the Head of Government, and a President, who is the Head of State. Finland became a member of the EU in 1995 and has 14 representatives in the EP. The country ranks ninth in the union regarding GDP, which is well above the EU average and accounts for 1.8% of the EU's total GDP. Finland adopted the Euro currency in 1999 and joined the Schengen area in 2001 (EU,

n.d.). The current Prime Minister of Finland is Petteri Orpo, who leads the liberal-conservative National Coalition Party. He holds a master's degree in social science with a major in economics and was first elected as a Member of Parliament in the 2007 elections (Valtioneuvosto, n.d.). The political climate in Finland is relatively stable. However, the 1,340 km long border between Finland and Russia does pose a threat to the safety of the country, especially after Russia invaded Ukraine. The Finnish government announced in April 2024 that the border with Russia would remain closed until further notice, as 'instrumentalised migration' otherwise may resume (Valtioneuvosto, n.d.).

The Federal Republic of Germany

Germany is a federal parliamentary republic and one of the largest economies in the world. Germany is one of the co-founding members of the EU and became a member of the Euro area in 1999 (EU, n.d.). The country accounts for approximately 25.3% of the EU's total GDP, and in 2021, Germany provided the EU with contributions of 33 billion Euros, the highest of all EU member states. Besides its significant fiscal contributions, many EU politicians come from Germany, and the country has played an essential role since the European integration project began. The European Parliament currently has 96 representatives from Germany.

Olaf Scholz, the Federal Chancellor of Germany, is the Head of Government and has the most political power, while the President's role as Head of State is primarily representative. Scholz has a law degree and began his journey into politics in the late 1990s when he became a member of the Bundestag (Bundesregierung, n.d.). He represents the social democratic party (SPD) and became the Federal Chancellor in 2021 after Angela Merkel's 16-year-long reign. Germany was regarded as a relatively stable political landscape for a long time, but factions have emerged in the country, with the German far-right party AfD gaining followers. The German Nazi past remains prevalent in the political debate, with parallels being drawn to Russia's invasion of Ukraine (Angelos, 2024).

The Hellenic Republic (Greece)

Greece became a member of the EU in 1989 and joined the Euro area in 2001. It is a parliamentary republic with a Prime Minister and a President – whose role as Head of

State is primarily ceremonial and representative. Greece's GDP per capita of €23 800 ranks below the EU average and accounts for 1.2% of the EU's total GDP. Greece has 21 representatives in the EP.

The current Prime Minister, Kyriakos Mitsotakis, came into office in June 2023 and is the leader of the New Democracy party. He attended Harvard University, where he obtained his bachelor's degree in social studies, earned an MA in International Relations from Stanford University, and an MBA from Harvard Business School. The decision to enter politics may have been quite natural, as his father, Konstantinos Mitsotakis, was Prime Minister of Greece between 1990 and 1993 (Ελληνική Δημοκρατία – PrimeMinister.gr, n.d.).

Greece has met several hardships, such as the economic turmoil of the Euro crisis in 2009 and the 2015 migration crisis, which placed further strain on the country, as the financial circumstances limited Greece's ability to handle the immigration flows of almost 1 million people, causing a humanitarian crisis. The previous PM, Alexis Tsipras, was critical of the European leadership and its inability to handle the crisis efficiently, as it caused human suffering, and pointed out that "Greece is in crisis. We are a poor people, but we have retained our values and humanity, and we are not claiming a single euro to do our duty to people who are dying in our backyard." (Kambas & Koutantou, 2015).

The Grand Duchy of Luxembourg

Luxembourg is one of the six founding members of the European Peace Project, a member of the Euro area since 1999, and a Schengen member since 1995. Luxembourg is a parliamentary constitutional monarchy with a Prime Minister who is the Head of Government and has executive power and a Grand Duke who is the Head of State and has a primarily formal representative role. The country's GDP is well above the EU's average and accounts for 0.5 of the EU's GDP. Luxembourg has close relationships with its neighbouring countries, and two official EU languages, German and French, are regularly employed in the country alongside the national language, Luxembourgish (EU, n.d.).

Xavier Bettel was appointed Prime Minister of Luxembourg during the legislative elections of 2013 and 2018. He is a member of the Democratic Party and formed a coalition

during his reign with the Luxembourg Socialist Worker's Party and the Green Party. In the legislative election of 2023, Bettel was appointed Vice Prime Minister, while Luc Frieden became Prime Minister. Bettel holds a master's degree in public and European law from the previously French federal university Nancy-Université (Le Gouvernement Luxembourgeois, 2024). Luxembourg, Brussels, and Strasbourg are the three main European cities where the European Union have various offices. As Luxembourg is the home of the Court of Justice, the European Court of Auditors, the European Investment Bank, and the EU's statistical office, Eurostat, it plays a significant role in EU politics.

Previous Research

A significant aspect to consider for research is the literature review, which ensures a more comprehensive understanding of the research field and existing research. The following section will delve into a variety of literature related to the research question and the aim of the study.

Since the research aims partly to analyse how political leaders contribute to constructing a collective European identity, the research of Hooghe and Marks (2008) will be meaningful for the research question. Hooghe and Marks analyse the relationship between identity formation and European integration through a post-functionalist perspective. Their research draws on social identity theory, which has found that how groups relate to one another is particularly relevant in European identity formation (Hooghe & Marks, 2008, pp. 2, 12). Particular emphasis is placed on whether a person regards their “national identity as exclusive or inclusive of other territorial identities” (Ibid, 2008, p. 13). Curley (2009) explores the impact of group identity on integration, highlighting the consequences of weak and strong group identities.

Smith (1991) has significantly advanced the field through his research on identity formation, with a particular focus on national identities. Smismans (2019) further enriches this discourse by highlighting the political dimensions of identity formation in contemporary Europe, emphasising the crucial role of a shared identity in bolstering the EU’s democratic legitimacy. The contemporary focus of European geopolitics is deliberated by Bosse (2022), who provides the research analysis with a more in-depth perspective of the policy changes that have occurred. Bosse delves into the various changes the EU have made to security and defence strategies and how that has impacted EU enlargement procedures.

Another relevant work that aligns well with both research question is Fligstein, Polyakova, and Sandholtz’s (2012) research paper, which describes how European integration, social constructs, and historical events influence identity formation. The European integration process has encouraged some citizens to embrace a European identity. In contrast, for others, the substantial growth of the union has commenced negative sentiments,

whereby citizens regard the EU as a threat to the national states' autonomy and national identity (Fligstein et al., 2012, pp. 108-109). Fligstein et al. discern that national identities have two ideals of nationalism: civic and ethnic. The civic character of a European identity relies upon values such as peace, tolerance, democracy, and diversity. Meanwhile, the ethnic aspect of a European identity focuses on distinct historical narratives, culture, traditions, and religion, making it less inclusive as opposed to the civic ideal, where European identity relates to agreeing with liberal values (Fligstein et al., 2008, 112-113). While the article mainly focused on citizens, the civic and ethnic dimensions will be valuable in this thesis to enable a more profound understanding of European identity formation vis-à-vis elite cues.

Another current issue within the EU, elitism, is deliberated by Hobolt and de Vries (2016), who describe how elitist elements remain a part of the European integration project. They demonstrate how research has found that social status can impact the perception of the EU, depending on how beneficial the individual perceives the EU. The elite aspect of the EU is also discussed by Hadler, Tsutsui, and Chin (2012), who conducted a quantitative study using data sets from the International Social Survey Programme to analyse national and European identities between 1995 and 2004. They employed two theories, Social Identity Theory and Self-Categorisation Theory, and noted that social and economic elites were more optimistic toward promoting a European identity (Hadler et al., 2012, p. 397). Upper social classes tended to adopt a more cosmopolitan position toward integration as they recognised the benefits they could reap from their country's EU participation. The upper class were also able to convert cultural capital into social capital in the international sphere, and due to their higher level of education, they were less likely to fear losing their job due to labour immigration. High-income individuals and students were more willing to move abroad (ibid, p. 413), allowing them access to networks that encouraged European identity formation and integration. The notion of European identity formation being an elite-led project is particularly interesting, and analysing political leaders' speeches will allow the research to discern how they relate to European integration.

A distinct approach toward identity formation is found in the work of Verovšek (2022), who contends that there is a lack of European identity. He believes that forming a European identity should centre around the ethically constitutive narrative of "Stories of

Peoplehood”, emphasising the past and future significance. The past is represented through collective memories, while the future requires a forward-looking, utopian dimension that engages citizens (Verovšek, 2022, pp. 141-143). He is somewhat critical of political realism and the preference narrative of “basic legitimation demand”, which primarily focuses on the past for European identity (Ibid, 2022, p. 148). Verovšek argues that a forward-looking, utopian dimension that embraces a realistic “European story of peoplehood” is essential to further political integration by encouraging citizens to construct a shared identity narrative (Ibid, 2022, pp. 159-160).

Historical narratives and the framing of historical events are vital elements to consider concerning identity formation. The critical stance on identity formation found in Verovšek’s research is echoed in the work of De Vries (2023). De Vries argues that references to historical devastations – such as WWII – are used by European elites to signify the importance of European cooperation as well as to create a sense of a shared European past amongst citizens. The concept of foundational narratives is used to demonstrate the nature of the contemporary political order, and De Vries argues that foundational structures place certain restrictions upon future actions, making it harder for politicians to manage ethnic, cultural, and political diversity within the EU (De Vries, 2023, pp. 869-870).

To conclude, the research chapter has provided a comprehensive demonstration of the variety of literature surrounding identity formation in the European context. The research reveals that constructing a collective identity is complex, and political leaders must consider social aspects, historical events, and culture during the process. The literature emphasises elites’ substantial influence on identity formation, making the presence of cultural, social, and economic capital significant factors to consider while analysing how political leaders express themselves in speeches. An aspect worthy of consideration is the possibility that political leaders may not promote European identity and integration out of genuine interest in creating a sense of unity between member states but rather as a tool for political gain. However, the literature review has also revealed a more critical stance toward European integration and identity formation, which may help detect elements related to power aspiration and statutory influence. The study will draw upon the insights

gained in the literature review throughout the empirical investigation of statements from the European Parliament's "This is Europe" debate.

Theory

A comprehensive theoretical foundation is required for the actual research analysis to understand the complex interplay of themes that emerge through the data analysis. To ensure a systematic approach to the research, the thesis will employ the theoretical framework of Social Identity Theory (SIT), developed by Tajfel and Turner, as a tool to understand group membership and its effect on in-group perceptions of group identity. Tajfel and Turner (2004) define a group as:

A collection of individuals who perceive themselves to be members of the same social category, share some emotional involvement in this common definition of themselves, and achieve some degree of social consensus about the evaluation of their group and of their membership of it (Tajfel & Turner, 2004, p. 59).

Tajfel and Turner further explain how there exists an aspect of prestige related to social identity, which comes in the form of evaluation of one's group and the out-group. A positive comparison between the in-group and out-group will provide high prestige. At the same time, an unfavourable comparison lowers the prestige and may lead social groups to distance or differentiate themselves from the distinct group by joining a more prestigious group (Ibid, 2004, p. 60). Curley (2009) describes how SIT can be utilised to understand European integration, particularly the politicians' position toward EU enlargement. He defines two approaches toward expansion within SIT: arguments based on rational calculations and a more constructivist approach with identity-based arguments. The constructivist approach to the theory can explain why individuals with a strong group identity may oppose applicants due to dissimilarities in identity, while weaker group identities tend to allow accession to membership if the group meets the required criteria (Curley, 2009, p. 650). SIT can be valuable for understanding how collective norms can motivate or discourage collective confrontation by endorsing ideologies to protect the status quo of the in-group (Becker & Barreto, 2019, p. 153).

Methodology & Research Data

This chapter will outline the research methodology by describing the overarching approach to the research, the theoretical framework, the method, and the data collection and analysis process. It will also discuss source criticism and ethical considerations.

I will begin by outlining the thesis's epistemological and ontological dispositions to provide the reader with a theoretical context and to clarify the thesis research paradigm. Ontology relates to the subjective reality of the research subject, while epistemology relates to the theory of knowledge. In simpler terms, ontology can be understood as the "reality status" of what is being studied, and epistemology as the "know-ability" (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012, p. 19). The ontology of this thesis relates to social constructivism, while the epistemology draws from interpretivism. A constructivist-interpretivist methodology emphasises the understanding that reality is socially constructed and subjective, meaning that multiple social "realities" might exist rather than one truth. The approach likewise regards knowledge and meaning, i.e., understanding various intersubjective truths as formed through human interpretation and interaction (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012, p. 4).

Since the thesis has adopted a constructivist ontology and an interpretive epistemology, it acknowledges that the *nature of reality* and *knowledge* are subjective and that different interpretations may occur depending on the reader. Social constructivism posits that humans understand reality through interaction, meaning that one's personal experience, preconceptions, and existing biases may influence how words are perceived. Consequently, while objectivity is an integral part of research, this thesis acknowledges that it is inconceivable to be completely objective due to the subjective character of interpretation. However, being transparent about one's subjective understanding of reality and how one interprets the data will provide the data with a certain level of objectivity and reliability. Similarly, providing various research perspectives will give the thesis a more comprehensive rendition.

Data Collection

As the introduction mentions, this thesis aims to analyse statements from the “This is Europe” debates held at the European Parliament’s Plenary in Strasbourg. The series “This is Europe” was initiated in 2022 and is a recurring debate forum, with the most recent debate being held in March 2024. By March 2024, the EP had invited fourteen Heads of State or Governments to present their vision for Europe and its future. Due to the varying crises that have occurred over the last few years, I found it relevant to include statements from 2022 and forward. The research data comes from one source to ensure that the Head of State and Government had the same (or similar) conditions to convey their political messages and that the speeches were directed toward the same audience. I sought to maintain consistency and reliability by sourcing all data from a single platform.

The following table gives a short description of the speeches analysed in the thesis, including the names of the Heads of Government, the country they represent, the official position, the date of the event, and finally, the length of the videos in minutes. The European Union copyrights all videos.

Politician	Country	Position	Event Date	Time (min)
DENKOV, Nikolai	Bulgaria	Previous PM	22/11/2023	21:43
ORPO, Petteri	Finland	Prime Minister	12/03/2024	21:38
SCHOLZ, Olaf	Germany	Federal Chancellor	09/05/2023	21:32
MITSTAKIS, Kyriakos	Greece	Prime Minister	05/07/2022	36:22
BETTEL, Xavier	Luxembourg	Prime Minister	19/04/2023	22:35

Europe is a diverse continent with a rich cultural heritage, encompassing a complex historical past and a wide variety of social norms and traditions. I intentionally selected countries from different geographic regions within the EU to ensure that a broader range

of political, economic, cultural, and social contexts were covered. However, while the EU member states do embody a range of viewpoints and priorities, their membership in the union emphasises alignment with the common EU values of human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, and the rule of law, which are laid out in Article 2 of the Lisbon Treaty and the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights (EU, n.d.).

I considered using only statements in English but decided to pick statements in various EU languages, as the decision of the Head of State and Government to use the native language rather than the current lingua franca is another aspect relevant to consider in relation to national representation and power. The European Parliament's Multimedia Centre had already transcribed French, German, Greek, and Bulgarian statements into English. For the speeches that were in German and English, I could ensure that the translation and transcription aligned with the speech myself. However, for the statements that were in Bulgarian, French, and Greek, I relied on the provided transcriptions.

Data Analysis

The following part of the thesis will describe how the data has been processed, structured, and examined. I will begin by describing how the raw data was coded into themes through Strauss and Corbin's model and then continue by describing the data analysis, where the qualitative research method of Critical Discourse Analysis was applied to interpret the themes from the coding process.

Coding of the Raw Data

Strauss and Corbin's model includes three stages of the coding process: open, axial, and selective (Styhre, 2013, p. 59). During the open coding of the raw data, the statements were assigned various colour highlights to differentiate between the recurring topics. I initially considered coding words that implicitly referred to identity but found that identity was not explicitly mentioned but instead submerged in the overarching themes of the statements. Therefore, after reading through the statements a few times, it became evident that the research analysis would benefit more from having a broader perspective that included the overarching themes rather than centring the focus on the particular usage of words. Consequently, words, sentences, and even paragraphs were highlighted and

systematically put into a table, where similar topics were gathered into sections. The next step of the process, axial coding, continued with the creation of sub-categories for the already grouped themes that emerged during the open coding of the data. During the final stage of selective coding, the sub-categories that emerged during the axial coding were refined into main theme categories.

The main themes identified through the data coding were:

- Threats and Security,
- EU Enlargement and European Integration,
- Unity and EU Values, and,
- The Role of Europe?

Critical Discourse Analysis

To enable a more profound analysis of power dynamics and ideological processes within the political statements, the most suitable method that aligned well with the objectives of the thesis was Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Other methods, such as narrative or content analysis, could have been applied to the data. However, then the focus of the analysis would not have fully supported the particular interest in power dynamics vis-à-vis identity formation, crisis, and unity. CDA is a method that enables a comprehensive understanding of how aspects such as power and dominance are manifested in language, as semiotic details are analysed in the light of social and political contexts (Huckin et al., 2012, p. 107).

By approaching the coded data with CDA, the thesis's thematic aspects will be placed in a context. Instead of only focusing on what the Heads of Government have said, the CDA concentrates on *why* something has been said and what the politician's position suggests. Consequently, CDA appeared to be the most suitable method for uncovering hidden power structures within the five selected statements from the "This is Europe" Debates. CDA will enable consideration of relevant social, historical, cultural, and institutional settings, thereby generating a more comprehensive analysis of how political cues and political framing may shape public identity formation. The analysis will not compare the statements but rather examine correlations and consonance.

The term ‘discourse’ can be understood as diverse representations of social life, and according to Fairclough, identity may be semiotically constructed through social practices and activities. (Fairclough, 2001, pp. 3-4). Fairclough describes how a vital aspect of CDA relates to interdiscursive analysis, which incorporates the context into the text analysis to mediate the relationship between concrete events and social structures. He further argues that changes in the semiosis, i.e., the order of discourse, are preconditions for a more exhaustive process of social change (Ibid, 2001, p. 5). Changes in semiosis may impede the inculcation of new discourses into society, and Fairclough argues that discourses are not only influenced by semantic aspects but also materialised through actual people. Inculcation, he explains, relates to how people position themselves inside a discourse and, through rhetorical deployment and strategic use of body language, may influence the current social, political, and cultural realities to suit their preferred narrative (ibid, 2001, p. 7).

Van Dijk (1993) argues that CDA should take an explicit socio-political stance and predominantly centre the analysis on discourse dimensions relating to power abuse and the injustices that result from it. Consequently, from his point of view, the primary target of CDA is power elites, who, through their actions, may endorse or legitimise social inequality (Van Dijk, 1993, p. 252). Van Dijk further expresses how power involves control pertaining to action and cognition, whereby a powerful individual or group may restrict actions and influence the minds of others to suit their interests (Ibid, 1993, p. 254). According to van Dijk, power can be measured by an individual or group’s control of social representations and power-relevant discourse variables, such as control of the context and communicative acts. Those lacking power may be restricted, and the powerlessness can be exemplified through segregating discourses, such as an individual being excluded, marginalised, silenced, ignored, or censored (Ibid, 1993, pp. 259–261).

In this thesis, the critical dimensions will primarily focus on what Fairclough describes as ‘strategic critique’, which emphasises how social agents use discourse to change societies in a particular direction (Fairclough, 2001, p. 12). The strategic critique within CDA will enable a more in-depth analysis of the recontextualisation of identity through the politician’s employment crisis and unity in debates. The analysis will delve into how the

Head of Government contributes to constructing narratives of social representation by employing inculcation to commence a common European representation of reality.

Source Criticism

Certain deficiencies could be detected while analysing the transcribed data material from the European Parliament's Multimedia Centre. The Greek transcription could have been translated in a more precise manner, as certain words had been transcribed with 'X' instead of an actual word. However, since the analysis primarily focused on capturing the statement disposition in its entirety rather than the meaning of individual words, the essence of the speech could still be apprehended. Furthermore, since the transcription of Kyriakos Mitsotakis' statement was published on the EP's official Multimedia Centre, it has gained approval to be published regardless of spelling mistakes. Nevertheless, it remains significant to remain transparent and disclose the limitations of the material. Minor spelling mistakes could be found in the other statements as well.

Ethical Considerations

While doing research, it is always important to consider the ethical dimensions and implications of the endeavour. While handling complex social issues, researchers should uphold the research process's integrity to ensure that the research outcome does not cause harm to individuals or communities. Eldén (2020) describes how the ethical dimensions of research can be challenging to navigate, particularly while handling data from online sources. Since the online research field continues to develop, the ethical approach should be determined by the degree of how public and sensitive the data material is. If the data is openly available and easily accessible, the ethical considerations are less severe than data that requires access (Eldén, 2020, pp.117-119). Since the European Parliament publishes statements on their multimedia centre, which is openly available and accessible to all internet users, the data has not been regarded as sensitive information that requires explicit agreement to be used.

Furthermore, the statements include public political figures invited to express their opinions in an open, recurring debate, meaning that the Heads of Government knew their statements would become public. Because of the statements' public character, no consent

agreement exists between this author and the Heads of Government. However, as mentioned previously in the thesis, an individual's subjective understanding of reality will determine how they interpret semantics. Consequently, the context of the statements is vital to consider providing objectivity to the analysis.

Analysis

This chapter will discuss the themes that emerged during the data analysis. The themes are at times quite entwined, where one aspect may relate to another. Consequently, there might be small overlaps where themes subsist in other theme sections. This aspect is, however, anticipated since the geopolitical landscape is indeed characterised by spillover, where policies may affect different areas.

Threats and Security

Nikolai Denkov, the Bulgarian PM, proclaims that Europe is today united in peace and a union of equal partners with shared values. He emphasised that Europe is, however, not “an isolated island” and is surrounded by war and unstable political situations, with “a devastating war on our doorstep” and various conflicts in the Middle East, Asia, and Africa. He argues that geopolitical challenges cannot be neglected, and Europe can only become strong through unity. According to de Vries, the initial promise of ‘no more war’, which drove the European integration process forward after the Second World War, remains the EU’s foundational *raison d’être*. The Russian invasion of Ukraine illuminated how significant cooperation is for the peace and security of the EU, and de Vries argues that the war has indeed revived public support for strengthening Europe’s defence capabilities through a stronger common defence policy (de Vries, 2023, p. 868).

The EU has taken substantial measures on security and defence by providing military support to Ukraine and starting its sanctions regime against Russia. The union has also shown solidarity with the Ukrainian citizens by arranging shorter asylum procedures and attempted to strengthen unity by offering Ukraine and Moldova EU candidacy status (Bosse, 2022, pp. 532-533). Understandably, security is a common theme running through all Future of Europe debates, and Finland’s Petteri Orpo reasons that “without security, we cannot ensure the prosperous future for Europe.” Orpo emphasises that “the vitality of the EU’s external border regions is crucial not just for national security, but for the cohesion of our society”. He also describes how external borders are the core of “EU’s existence”. The territorial dimensions of Orpo’s statement, which stresses external borders as a critical aspect of promoting national security and social cohesion, are particularly interesting to consider vis-à-vis identity formation.

Strong territorial identities relates both to opposition and support of regional integration. The sense of belonging that an individual feels to a geographic or cultural collective is essential to the formation of social and political activities and relates to social identity. If during attempts to unite a group, the individual is forced to associate with one form of identity and dissociate themselves from another, conflicts may arise (Hadler et al., 2012, pp. 394-395). Consequently, the mobilisation of group identities in politics is essential to understanding public perceptions of identity. A person can have a strong sense of national identity while being positively oriented to European integration, but only if the individual regards their identity as inclusive of other territorial identities. If the political cues insinuate that national identity is incompatible with European integration, the citizen is likelier to adopt an exclusive predisposition toward other identities (Hooghe & Marks, 2008, pp. 12-13).

The threat of war is also visible in Mitsotakis' statement as he emphasises border security while discussing Russia's invasion of Ukraine. He proclaims that Greece "are on the side of peace and international rule of law against an invasion and an infringement, a violation of borders" and holds a critical stance toward autocratic nepotism that diminishes democracy in society. Mitsotakis further states that Greece "will not see anyone questioning its national sovereignty and its territorial integrity." According to Bosse, two norm-based reasons promote EU member states to action during a crisis: value-based norms that emphasise the common EU values – such as solidarity – and rights-based norms linked to respect for the state's sovereignty and territory (Bosse, 2022, p. 535). For Mitsotakis, the rights-based norms are crucial for security; however, it became evident that the value-based norms were also apparent in his statement, but in another context. Mitsotakis describes how, in 2015, Greece was one step away from leaving the European Union due to the fiscal crisis. Mitsotakis regards the support Greece received from Europe as "a sign of solidarity" that allowed the country to stay "as a supporter of democracy" and maintains that solidarity would enable Europe to collectively aim toward achieving common social objectives.

Luxembourg's PM, Xavier Bettel, also discusses how crises - such as the Euro crisis, rising nationalism, and the referendum in the UK - encouraged various member states to reconsider their membership in the EU. However, Bettel was pleased to see that instead of allowing challenges to divide the member states further, Europe tackled challenges

collectively to preserve the single market and show solidarity. According to Anghel and Jones (2023), having a common purpose and working collectively to achieve it will commence the kind of ‘we feeling’ that encourages solidarity among EU member states (Anghel & Jones, 2023, p. 774). The single market is particularly significant for Luxembourg since the country relies on cross-border workers to uphold the internal social infrastructure. According to Luxembourg’s PM, the single market allows the EU to remain competitive globally and promotes European values and fundamental rights. Bettel further states that the open market and human rights will always be part of European prosperity, as “protectionism makes you poorer, and it also ultimately makes you dependent”.

EU Enlargement and European Integration

A significant aspect to consider regarding European integration is that due to the initial elitist approach of the EU project, citizens still tend to lack a more comprehensive understanding of the union. This knowledge gap enables national politicians to deflect blame for domestic issues onto the EU (Hobolt & de Vries, 2016, pp. 414-416). However, Hobolt and de Vries note that, on average, mainstream political elites tend to be more supportive of European integration compared to citizens and tend not to politicise integration as it may split voters (Ibid, 2016, p. 422). The supportive stance is echoed in all the statements, and enlargement is described predominantly as a tactical means that aligns closer with the rationality-based arguments of SIT that Curley describes rather than identity-based arguments (see theory chapter). However, another relevant aspect in relation to the Heads of Government’s pro-European stance is their higher educational backgrounds. Hadler et al. describe how wealthier and more educated individuals tend to have a more positive attitude toward European identity, as they can see benefits with EU membership, such as the mobility to move abroad to study or work, providing them with a more cosmopolitan perspective (Hadler et al., 2023, p. 213).

Bulgaria’s PM, Denkov, argues that the EU needs strategic partners and unity. He regarded the accession of Western Balkan countries, Ukraine, and Moldova as vital since “the larger the EU becomes, the more powerful and strong it is today in Europe.” Similarly to Denkov, the German Federal Chancellor Scholz states, “You belong to us” while discussing the accession of the West Balkan states, Ukraine, Moldova, and potentially Georgia. He underlined, “We want you to become part of the European Union.” Scholz

also expresses direct criticism of the EU due to the West Balkans' 20-year-long accession path and argued that an "honest enlargement policy sticks to its promises" and demarcates honesty as an essential part of the EU's legitimacy, proclaiming that without it, "the EU loses influence and attraction." For Scholz, enlargement is not about altruism but "credibility and good economic sense."

And yet, enlargement is undeniably a strategic process from a political point of view. The Finnish PM, Orpo, claims that the EU's enlargement is a "geopolitical necessity and a question of security." Orpo, Scholz, and Mitsotakis employ a rationality-based argument to express support for the inclusion of the above-mentioned countries, which aligns well with the social identity theory. According to Curley, a weak group identity will produce more supportive opinions toward accession of membership as long as the required criteria are met (Curley, 2009, p. 659). An interesting aspect is mirrored by the Bulgarian PM, Denkov, who stresses that negotiations for accession are necessary and proclaims that "unstable peace is better than the best war". He further states that Bulgaria has always also been strongly in favour of the West Balkans accession but maintains that "Their accession should be based on their merit, on their sincere will to become real members of the European family."

Denkov further elucidates that while the EU is nowadays united in peace, historical efforts to unite Europeans were unsuccessful since the approaches for forging unity were primarily military means. Denkov exemplifies how Julius Caesar, Napoleon, Hitler, and Stalin failed to unite Europe, as they utilised weapons and war to conquer the land. Meanwhile, the German Federal Chancellor ascertains that the European Union's motto of united in diversity acts as insurance to protect the union from a return to a past where larger countries dictated over smaller ones and where freedom and rights were only available to a few.

The motto 'united in diversity' is interesting from a social identity perspective. Curley explains that in-group members with a weak identity are more likely to accept membership requests, as the new member is not considered a threat to the group identity. Instead of protecting the group identity, Curley argues that the in-group members are concerned with the out-group meeting the membership criteria (Curley, 2009, p. 652), which in the case of the EU is the Copenhagen Criteria. For the EU, unity and solidarity among

member states are paramount, as illustrated by the union's motto, 'united in diversity'. However, the idea of Europe having demos, i.e., a people with shared values and a common identity, has and continues to be disputed and argued for (Smismans, 2019, p. 129).

Luxembourg PM Bettel also approaches the accession from a rational stance. Bettel only describes Ukraine's accession to the EU but argues that the EU needs creative efforts as a geopolitical tool and emphasises how finances need to be mobilised to stop the war and rebuild Ukraine. Meanwhile, as the Grecian PM Mitsotakis describes the EU's need for an agenda of resilience, defence, and development, he touches upon the union's role in the Western Balkans, stating that "Greece, as a Balkan country fully supports that enlargement. We want Europe in the Balkans, but we also want the Balkans in Europe."

While one may think that Mitsotakis' statement should align with the identity-based argument within SIT, it is not completely discernable since the argument does not diverge from an agent-centric approach. Yet, as Curley argues, "SIT finds that individuals strongly identifying with their group attempt to protect their group identity from perceived threats" (Curley, 2009, p. 654). It is evident that enlargement is nowadays employed as an instrument to protect the EU from external threats – i.e., Russia – meaning Mitsotakis' emphasis of Greece being Balkan is relevant, as it may function as a strong group identity, whereby the likeness of the states encourages in-group membership. Mitsotakis argues that "we also have to fight for the European Identity" but emphasises that the first duty is to ensure that the European Union consists of strong and stable states, which will benefit the citizens.

While analysing the five statements, it becomes apparent that the elite aspects remain. Since the European integration project has primarily centred its focus on economic cooperation and market integration, trade liberalisation has been advantageous for citizens with higher income levels, and from a utilitarian perspective, the benefits upper classes reap will encourage support of European integration (Hobolt & de Vries, 2016, p. 420). The West Balkan 20-year-long accession path is distinct evidence of accession being rationality-based, as it exemplifies how unless a threat occurs that may diminish the unions status quo, the accession path is rather protracted. The threat of Russia invading another European country is the foundation for the EU acting, to avoid a repeat of the past, according to Denkov's statement:

When we defend, protect Ukraine, we defend and protect Europe. Otherwise, tomorrow, Moldova could become a new Ukraine. The other day, the Baltic states, Poland, Romania, Bulgaria and other European countries.

Unity and EU Values

The war in Ukraine has not only encouraged sentiments of strengthening the EU's external borders but also shifted the focus to the foundational core of the EU and its values. Finland's PM, Petteri Orpo, notes that the present political landscape with a war raging in Ukraine calls for Europe's "courage, unity and determination" and states that the war threatens the principles upon which the union was built. According to Bosse, foundational changes that create uncertainty in the geopolitical sphere – such as the Cold War or Russia's invasion of Ukraine - will commence redefinitions of security structures. The constructivist approach assumes that the decision-making outcome is defined by the historical context and social and cultural norms which influence the identity and actions of political actors (Bosse, 2022, pp. 534-535).

The present geopolitical situation has, according to Orpo, transported the EU back to its foundational core of "promoting peace and defending our values." According to de Vries, many Europeans regarded Russia's aggression toward Ukraine not only as an attack against the country but also against the paramount EU values of democracy, freedom, and human rights (de Vries, 2023, p. 868). However, the EU values are not the only ideological aspects mentioned vis-à-vis handling geopolitical challenges and the future of Europe.

Smith maintains that national identity is a complex construction of civic and territorial dimensions and ethnic and genealogical components. Its multidimensional essence cannot be reduced to a single element; however, it can be combined with distinct ideologies, such as liberalism, nationalism, and communism (Smith, 1991, pp. 14-15). Bulgaria's PM, Denkov, uses these distinct forms of ideologies in his statement while discussing European unity and the war in Ukraine. In his speech, he articulates how liberalism and conservatism have played major roles in Europe. He argues that conservative values that emphasise Christianity and family are still needed in the world today. He states that:

We need to turn our back on the extremes and we need to be united around the most important values conservative and liberal ones. We need to fight that polarisation as a political platform to come to power.

Out of the five statements analysed, Denkov was the only Head of Government who expressed that conservative values relating to Christianity and family were important aspects of the unity of Europe. Denkov did, however, also underscore the EU values by affirming the EU as a union of equal partners committed to ensuring that “values of democracy, rule of law, human rights are upheld as well as human dignity and the rights of each and every citizen.” Meanwhile, the four other Heads of Government - Orpo, Scholz, Mitsotakis, and Bettel - only emphasised the significant role of the EU values.

Fligstein et al. describe how national and European identity are either characterised by ethnic or civic membership. The identity that adopts an ethnic character emphasises religion, language, traditions, and ancestry as the base for national allegiance, thereby clearly distinguishing who belongs to the group. However, citizens who identify as Europeans tend to follow a more civic conception. The civic dimensions of the European identity can be exemplified through citizens favouring peace, tolerance, democracy, and cultural diversity instead of ethnic dimensions (Fligstein et al., 2012, p. 112).

The emphasis on EU values is expected since the Heads of Government are discussing the future of Europe. However, the accentuation of Christianity, family, and conservative and liberal values by the Bulgarian PM, Denkov, as a means to combat polarisation is intriguing since it creates a distinction between what is considered European and what is not, thereby shaping the discourse of what he perceives as European unity and identity. The Luxembourgish PM, Bettel, discusses another aspect related to the EU values of fundamental rights of citizens and the rule of law. He expresses deep concern over the Hungarian desire for a law that would prohibit the representation of homosexuality in the media and emphasises, from his perspective, that “Nobody's asking for pity or solidarity or compassion. Just respect. Just respect. There is no point in having a double life or a secret life.” For Bettel, the European project is about respecting people as they are through the rule of law and fundamental human rights.

The Role of Europe?

While analysing the statements, it became evident that all Heads of Government enjoyed referring to past historical events and important political characters who, through one form or another, impacted the evolution of the European integration project. The reference toward past events and people helps illustrate how the Heads of Government perceive contemporary EU, and in which direction they desire for it to evolve.

Verovšek argues that a transnational European identity will be built through both collective memories of a shared past and a desire for collaborative action toward a utopian Europe. Verovšek believes that the EU should build a common identity that centres around cooperatively confronting shared problems (Verovšek, 2022, pp. 143-144). According to the German Federal Chancellor Scholz, those who are nostalgic for Europe to reemerge as a great power are stuck in the past, as are those who predict its decline. Scholz underlines that Europe has, again and again, proven its ability to change and act. Meaning that the future of Europe is “in our hands”. For Scholz, Europe’s future requires unity, more openness, and cooperation. He believes that Europe should not attempt to remain at the top of the food chain but rather stand alongside others on equal footing. He emphasises the significance of honest trade agreements that foster economic development rather than hinder it. Scholz also argues that free trade agreements are important to ensuring that environmental and social standards are upheld.

The German Federal Chancellor also proclaims that Europe's founding fathers assigned Europe a task centred around more than just the European sphere. According to Scholz, the fathers found that Europe had a clear responsibility for global affairs, which could not be separated from the rest of the world. According to Scholz, one of the essential tasks of Europe is to pursue the development of the African continent. While previous development ventures in Africa, Asia, and Latin America were of a Eurocentric nature with the aim of colonial exploitation, nowadays, Scholz believes that the future will be multipolar, which requires establishing partnerships with equal terms. De Vries discusses how foundational narratives, such as the EU as a peace project that has learned from the past, can be used to justify the past (de Vries, 2023, p. 869). De Vries's approach to narratives seems applicable to Scholz’s justification of Europe’s imperial endeavours through the establishment of equal partnerships to promote development. However, from a social

identity perspective, collective action can also be regarded a way to defend the status quo, which requires a ‘social change mindset’ that regards the groups’ hierarchical relations in society as unstable (Becker & Barreto, 2019, pp. 143, 153).

The hierarchical relations and the status quo dimensions of Europe become especially evident in The Finnish PM Orpo's statement, where he emphasises the significance of strategic competitiveness since the European continent is falling behind in productivity, causing the standard of living to diminish. While Scholz wanted to stand on equal footing with others, Orpo believes that if the productivity decline persists, Europe will no longer be able to stand on its own feet. Orpo argues that cutting the bureaucratic tape, implementing more sustainable fiscal policies, and strengthening the internal market to encourage innovation and research is the way forward. Orpo believes Jacques Delors, the father of the EU’s Single Market, would be “deeply concerned by the current practices regarding the relaxation of state aid rules” and argues that the EU must refocus on trade policies to remain relevant.

Denkov illustrates in his statement how a national hero, Vasil Levski, inspired the European spirit in Bulgaria. The revolutionary leader, Levski, believed that well-being depends on united efforts and argued that Bulgaria should become a place where all ethnic groups (Bulgarians, Turks, and Jews) are treated equally. The concept of ‘stories of peoplehood’ (Verovšek, 2012, p. 144) can be applied to Denkov’s illustration of Levski, as Denkov uses the story to depict the sense of a common European identity within Bulgaria with interests and ideals that align with the EU’s values.

Mitsotakis, the Greek PM, focuses on various crises, such as climate change and the migration crisis, and contends that in a connected world, collaboration is required as no state can manage a substantial crisis alone. He further argues that national challenges are often European ones, meaning that there should be no place for local egoism. Bettel, the Luxembourgish PM, also emphasises the significance of handling the climate crisis by moving toward renewables over fossil fuels. For him, the change toward sustainability is necessary to ensure that future generations may enjoy the same quality of life. Common solutions are essential, according to Bettel, and he regards European manufacturing as important, along with cooperation with partners who share the same values. Collaboration and unity are evident, and Bettel ended his statement by quoting Winston Churchill, who

argued, “Alone we can move faster, but together we can move further.”

Discussion and Conclusion

The thesis has delved into various aspects while examining the research question of how Heads of Government in the European context mobilise crises to forge unity amongst EU member states and to promote a common European identity. While various forms of crises were mentioned, such as climate change, waning productivity, and mass migration, Russia was portrayed as the primary antagonist that required the European member states to actively cooperate to ensure the integrity and sovereignty of Ukraine (and the EU member states).

Besides reinforcing the EU's collaborative efforts to promote security and peace, the concern about emerging threats and crises was directly associated with deeper integration. The position toward EU enlargement was cohesive among the Heads of Government, and all regarded it as a strategically beneficial step to ensure the EU's resilience. The union's enlargement was represented as the instrument that would create political stability and ensure that the EU exhibited a united and strong front, which would protect EU borders and the Western liberal values of human rights, democracy, and individual freedom.

The formation of a European identity was less evident than initially predicted. However, Verovšek's idea of a European identity being forged through a collective past and a shared hope for the future seems very applicable. While only Kyriakos Mitsotakis from Greece explicitly mentioned a European identity, all Heads of Government placed significant emphasis on protecting EU values to ensure peace. The shared EU values are relevant since—as mentioned during the background chapter—Ursula von der Leyen described during the tenth anniversary of the Lisbon Treaty how the treaty gave Europe a soul and a European identity through its shared values.

The analysis has, furthermore, methodically delved into the themes while utilising the choice of theory, SIT, and employed a critical stance, which was the foundation of the method, CDA. It has uncovered novel insights into how the strategic methods are employed by Heads of Government in the European context: a multifaceted approach where crises are managed and actively mobilised to foster unity among EU member states. The four themes from the data coding demonstrate how these leaders navigate a complex

geopolitical landscape, driven by the desire to secure the EU's borders, maintain its role as the status quo, and unite European citizens under a common goal: peace.

In conclusion, the analysis underscored the strategic potential of various crises to foster deeper integration and promote unity and strength among EU member states. The research findings have demonstrated how Heads of Government strategically use crises to initiate a common narrative that addresses immediate threats and works towards a more united union with a shared identity based on common values and a sense of solidarity.

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