CHAPTER 6

Post-Truth Politics, Brexit, and European Disintegration

Vittorio Orlando

Introduction

This work investigates the role played by post-truth politics in the 2016 United Kingdom referendum on EU membership, exploring the links between misinformation, Brexit, and European disintegration. The concept of misinformation has been widely explored in the literature; it can be defined as the tendency of political actors to incorporate empirically incorrect statements in their discourse to influence public opinion (MacMullen, 2020). The spread of this practice, a consolidated strategy in political communication, has led some scholars to argue that we currently live in the era of post-truth (Marshall & Drieschova, 2018). This concept seems to imply a paradigm shift, thus assuming the existence of a past moment in which political actors only relied on factual information. However, this chapter does not intend to investigate such claims;

V. Orlando (✉)
University of Iceland, Reykjavík, Iceland
e-mail: vio14@hi.is

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conversely, this work argues that it is unnecessary to demonstrate the existence of a previous state of truth to speak of post-truth. Accordingly, it is sufficient to demonstrate that the actors analysed successfully implemented a strategy based on deception to use the term post-truth without ruling out the hypothesis that such tactics already existed in the past. What has changed, allowing us to use the term post-truth politics, is how these tactics are employed and their effectiveness on an unprecedented scale (Suiter, 2016).

A fundamental distinction for this chapter is the one between *campaigning*, intended as a component of the democratic process that in the case of Brexit inevitably included spreading arguments against membership in the most convincing way possible, and *misinformation*, or all those instances in which the Leave campaign circulated factually incorrect or ambiguous information. An example of this is the Leave campaign carried out ahead of the 2016 Referendum. The campaign was characterised by a series of false or equivocal messages representing the European Union in a negative way (Rose, 2017). This chapter looks at political actors, exploring their lack of interest or awareness regarding the empirical reliability of their claims during the Leave campaign; this phenomenon is the core element of post-truth politics, which offers a vantage point from which to analyse populist discourse and the future of European disintegration.

The chapter is structured as follows: the first part consists of an analysis of the most recent literature on the topics of Brexit and post-truth politics, in line with the aim to discuss the role of misinformation in the Leave campaign and frame it in the context of European disintegration. The second part focuses on the actors involved, trying to identify through which media and arenas they have made more use of factually ambiguous or incorrect statements. The third section categorises and analyses the material collected; this part aims to map the Brexit discourse by dividing it into the three frames of security, economy, and sovereignty. The subsequent section of the chapter discusses the findings from the frame analysis; it focuses on the role of misinformation and the circumstances that favoured its use as a political tactic, both in the Brexit referendum and in the discourse on European integration at large. The conclusion goes beyond assessing the impact of misinformation on Brexit by addressing what repercussions these findings can have in the context of European disintegration. Overall, this chapter is in continuity with the work already done on Brexit and misinformation; however, it aims to look

further by discussing the implications of post-truth on a continental scale, contributing to the formulation of a theory of disintegration.

Post-Truth and Brexit

The concept of post-truth has established itself in academic debates in recent years and is particularly associated with two events that occurred a few months apart: Brexit and the election of Donald Trump (Conrad & Hálfdanarson, 2022; Newman, 2019). The central notion behind it is that political debate is characterised by a substantial disinterest in empirical reality, which is exaggerated or manipulated based on the need to promote specific narratives. This disregard for factual information has significant consequences for the nature of the Western democratic system, which is based on the assumption that collective decisions result from a rational evaluation of reality.

Although this assumption on democracy is questionable, given that the nature of society is the product of a complex network of power and meaning relationships (Farkas & Schau, 2019), for the purposes of this chapter, post-factual politics is understood as the tendency of political discourse to deviate from facts as they are generally understood and interpreted by the community. Let us take, for example, the claim repeated during the Leave campaign that the UK sends £350 million a week to the EU and that this money could instead finance the NHS. A similar statement lends itself to several questions regarding the nature of our economic system and our value system; however, for the purposes of this work, it is relevant mainly as factually incorrect and as an attempt to promote a specific and distorted understanding of reality. In other words, this chapter is interested in those statements that are not in line with empirical reality and in how reality is a constantly changing social construct.

This debate stems from the observation that, while lying has never been a foreign tool within the political arena, today the truth can be systematically ignored with impunity (Newman, 2019); while politicians tried to circumnavigate the truth in the past, today they can trample on it. Similarly, this chapter does not address whether there was a paradigm shift from an era of truth to one of post-truth. This work does not investigate the causes, or even the mere existence, of such a paradigm shift. Instead, it focuses on how post-truth politics have been successfully employed in the political arena. Misinformation as a tool is particularly effective for

populist actors, due to their tendency to focus their discourse on the division between "real people" and those not conforming to their narrative (Müller, 2017).

In the case of Brexit, this phenomenon has been extensively explored within the literature. In the years following the referendums on the Constitutional Treaty, Hobolt (2007) noted how the effectiveness of referendums on European integration was linked to voters' competencies, defined as the ability to express their preferences based on factual information. Schmidt (2017) observed how the Leave campaign resorted to lying to spread persuasive, albeit unfounded, ideas among voters. The voters themselves could perceive this substantial use of misinformation (Renwick et al., 2018), leading Watson (2018) to label it as a violation of their epistemic rights. From a comprehensive analysis of the role of news media in the campaign, it also emerged how the Leave campaign managed to frame the contributions of experts as propaganda of the establishment, thus reinforcing that the Brexit vote was about the masses regaining control from the EU's antidemocratic élites (Moore & Ramsay, 2017). As for the impact of this strategy, a study conducted in 2019 highlighted the existence of a network of over 13,000 bots active on Twitter and mainly supporting Leave (Bastos & Mecea, 2019). Although Bastos and Mecea (2019) carefully pointed out how the contribution of bots is quantitatively marginal compared to the discussion on Brexit that took place on Twitter, this and other similar studies highlight the non-negligible role played by misinformation in the Leave campaign (Safieddine, 2020).

In general, any attempt to measure the exact effect of an external factor on a given vote is somewhat questionable, considering the vast number of interrelated causal factors contributing to an electoral result. However, the instances of misinformation and manipulation discussed so far, both in the mass media and in the social media dimension, suggest an attempt to cause in the voters those emotional reactions commonly referred to as "one of the causes of the Leave vote" (Clarke et al., 2017). The influence of these practices on the democratic process is also evident from the emergence of an institutional and academic debate focused on how to increase social platform accountability (Selva and De Blasio, 2021); such attempts at mitigating the impact of misinformation on the democratic functioning of society are a sign of the increasing role played by these tactics in the aftermath of Brexit and during the Covid-19 pandemic.

This work uses misinformation as an umbrella term, thus including factually incorrect and misleading material regardless of the criterion of

intentionality, upon which misinformation and disinformation are usually differentiated (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). This decision stems from the fact that this distinction is not particularly relevant for this chapter, as both misinformation and disinformation are features of post-truth politics. These tactics are powerful tools for obtaining electoral consensus, leading to decisions based on factually incorrect elements and thus representing a threat to the democratic system. Accordingly, this work aims to identify which political actors take advantage of post-truth politics, and in which circumstances this approach is effective. The Leave campaign includes all the relevant elements for this investigation since it includes populist actors, the use of misinformation, and an unprecedented impact on European disintegration.

Actors and Arenas of Post-Truth Politics

A central aspect of this work is to look at how post-truth politics can be used to shape public opinion. This approach, then, requires the existence of actors interested in carrying out this strategy and of the infrastructures through which to do so; hence, the choice herein of the distinction between *arenas* and *actors* of post-truth politics upon which this study is based (Conrad & Hálfdanarson, 2022). As for the actors, they can be defined as agents interested in influencing the outcome of the vote; hence the decision to include political actors, newspapers well-known for promoting Eurosceptic narratives, and the two leading organisations campaigning for Leave. As a consequence, it was decided to ignore the incidental actors, such as individuals or organisations active in supporting the campaign but not in shaping its tactics and language.

A further distinction can be made between foreign and domestic actors. This work includes political actors actively campaigning for Leave, social movements, and mass media. Determining foreign actors can be more challenging, but Russian interference in the Brexit vote has been widely discussed both academically and on the institutional level (Dobrowolski et al., 2020; McGaughey, 2018). The distinction between the two, not unlike the one between misinformation and disinformation, is not always clear-cut, with the extent and effectiveness of foreign attempts to influence the vote still being investigated. This study focuses on the domestic sphere, as it assumes that foreign actors mainly amplified predominantly endogenous notions and narratives, acting as an echo chamber for a discourse moulded by national stakeholders.

As for the political forces involved in the Leave campaign, the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) played a central role. In the years leading up to the referendum, the party led by Farage managed to attract the support of those voters disappointed by the convergence towards the centre of both Cameron's Conservative Party and Blair's Labour; it did so by promoting a narrative centred around the notion that the two mainstream parties represented the interests of the establishment, at the expenses of the British people (Tournier-Sol, 2020). This narrative is typical of the populist and Eurosceptic discourse, and part of the Conservative party also adopted it during the campaign (Bale, 2018). Moreover, as both the positions and the methods employed by those actors can be found in other EU member states, looking at the leave campaign sheds light on European disintegration at large.

Indirectly, the rhetoric adopted by UKIP had an impact on the Conservative party, especially by influencing its position in the debate on European integration. In this context, Cameron opted first to include the reform of the European institutions in his programme and later to promise a referendum on EU membership if this process of reform proved unsatisfactory. Moreover, due to UKIP's increasing electoral success, Cameron was concerned with the possibility of losing the support of the more Eurosceptic elements within his party (Hayton, 2018); against this backdrop, it is not surprising how a sizeable minority within the Conservative Party can be counted among the actors in the Leave campaign. While UKIP and part of the Conservatives constituted the campaign's backbone, some members of the Labour Party, various Northern Irish Unionist parties, and exponents of other minor parties, also campaigned for leaving the EU. However, compared to the two major political forces, those political actors did not significantly shape the campaign's narrative; therefore, they should be considered secondary forces for this analysis.

Three organisations mainly carried out the Leave campaign, focusing on somewhat different aspects of a shared Eurosceptic narrative. The main one, designated by the Electoral Commission as the official campaign, was Vote Leave, an organisation formed by exponents of the Conservative and Labour parties, and also supported by the Eurosceptic association Business for Britain. The group focused on the economic drawbacks of EU membership rather than on the immigration dimension. The second organisation, Leave.EU, was closer to the positions and rhetoric of UKIP, thus carrying out a campaign centred on immigration and promoting itself as distant from the establishment, represented in this case by Vote

Leave (Vasilopoulou, 2016). A third group, Grassroots Out, was founded by representatives of several parties, including Farage, in 2016; the organisation merged with Leave.EU and other smaller groups in a failed attempt at being designated by the Electoral Commission as the official campaign (Hall, 2016).

Another actor who played a decisive role in the campaign and in shaping public opinion on the issues of European integration is the British press. The role of mass media emerges from a content analysis conducted by Zappettini (2021), which highlighted how tabloids routinely resorted to populist rhetoric strongly biased towards the Leave campaign and often used incompletely or factually incorrect with the aim of influencing public opinion. While promoting a specific political position falls within the prerogatives of journalism, this analysis looked at those newspapers that for decades promoted a Eurosceptic framing of the EU, often through sensationalistic reporting and factually incorrect claims (Birks, 2021). These findings align with a phenomenon widely studied within the literature on the subject, namely how media discourse has promoted the same antagonistic representation of the EU at the heart of the Leave campaign (Daddow, 2015).

After identifying the actors responsible for the use of misinformation in the electoral campaign, it is necessary to establish *where* they employed misinformation strategies. The analysis carried out in this chapter looks at three arenas, understood both as spaces where narratives are constructed and as infrastructure for their diffusion. The first one, definable as the political dimension, includes declarations by political actors in speech and interviews, as well as material spread by the official campaigns on their websites. The second arena is the social media one, and it has already been deemed relevant in the case of Brexit, given how it promotes a high level of mobilisation and accentuates the pre-existing polarisation in the public debate (Brändle et al., 2021). The third dimension is that of the legacy media, and especially the newspapers in their online form. The importance of this last arena has been often pointed out, for instance, by Maccaferri (2019), who showed how the Europe/Britain dyad had been constructed by the press over the years, emphasising the need for the British people to regain control and reverse a process of decline caused by EU membership.

The actors and arena dimensions might appear to conflate, such as in the cases of social media and newspapers. This stems from the fact that the actors shaping the political discourse are deeply interconnected

with the tools and spaces in which they operate—shaping and being shaped by them—and are better understood through a holistic approach. However, this work considers actors as agents able to carry out a determined strategy to achieve a pre-determined goal, which translates to implementing Eurosceptic practices through misinformation. The arenas are those loci where these practices occur, and the public attitude towards Euroscepticism takes shape in line with what has already been theorised within the literature (de Wilde & Trenz, 2012).

From this point of view, the online press is an actor inasmuch as the editorial policy of a given newspaper spreads articles and content to create and reinforce a Eurosceptic narrative. At the same time, it counts as an arena given how said content finds a place within it—regardless of whether they originate from individuals affiliated with a given newspaper—and originate from public statements by political actors or by the public debate in general. At the same time, content originating from the press (seen in this case as an actor) can be shared on social media, which in these circumstances becomes an arena (Table 6.1).

This chapter identifies cases of misinformation carried out by the following actors: politicians from the Conservative Party and UKIP, the four most widespread newspapers siding with Leave, and the two most prominent campaign organisations: Leave.EU and Vote Leave. As for the arenas, the frame analysis looks at material collected on Facebook and Twitter; on the online editions of the four newspapers, alongside other media outlets of national importance that hosted relevant content regardless of their position in the campaign; and lastly, all the material that does not fall into the first two categories, including the websites of the two campaigns, is classified together. The material analysed consists of

Table 6.1 Actors and arenas analysed

Actors	*Arenas*
1. Politicians from UKIP and the Conservative Party	1. Social Media (Facebook, Twitter)
2. Newspapers supporting Leave (Daily Mail, Express, The Sun, The Telegraph)	2. British mass media, regardless of their stance in the campaign
3. Leave.EU and Vote Leave	3. Campaign websites and public statements

statements either subsequently proven to be factually incorrect by inde-
pendent fact-checking websites such as Full Fact, or misleading due to
the language utilised. On a quantitative level, the cases included in the
sample were selected to include a similar amount of material for each of
the actors and the arenas analysed; nonetheless, as shown in Tables 6.2
and 6.3, political actors and mass media are over-represented, respectively,
in the actors and arenas groups. This imbalance results from two charac-
teristics of the political debate. First, politicians were at the centre of the
campaign; second, the analysis of material on newspapers included both
opinion pieces and news.

In the choice of material, the chapter is in continuity with similar works
focused, among other things, on the narrative promoted by the most
prominent exponents of Leave (Spencer & Oppermann, 2020) and on
a wide-ranging analysis of the content shared on social media (Lilleker &
Bonacci, 2017). Unlike big data studies, in which a large amount of
material is selected to identify a specific narrative, each instance of misin-
formation included in this work was selected purposefully. This allowed
for an in-depth analysis of the empirically verifiable claims and, more
importantly, the purpose and meaning of the material collected. The
reason for this choice is that the existence of such practices in the case
of the Leave campaign is already widely recognised, and this work builds

Table 6.2
Misinformation by
articles (total number of
articles in parentheses)

Actors (total)	Category		
	Security	Economy	Sovereignty
Political actors (25)	17	19	17
Newspapers (12)	6	9	8
Campaigns (14)	6	11	5

Table 6.3
Misinformation by
arenas (total number of
articles in parentheses)

Arenas (total)	Category		
	Security	Economy	Sovereignty
Social Media (16)	9	10	4
Mass media (20)	11	15	13
Campaign material (15)	9	14	13

upon this to analyse the nature of this material and draw conclusions on a systemic level.

The choice of framing misinformation in the categories of actors and arenas underlines some of its features; in particular, it shows how political actors and mass media differ in manipulating information and how the content changes depending on the context in which they are shared. This vantage point also allows for some reflections on how the language of misinformation is not univocal; instead, it changes depending on the policy problems discussed and specific rhetorical choices. A consequence of this approach is that the corpus examined is smaller than similar works, as the material was selected to highlight specific narratives and not to demonstrate their existence.

Misinformation in the Leave Campaign

The subsequent analysis looks at 51 instances of misinformation that emerged during the Leave campaign, manually selected from thousands of content generated by the relevant actors between October 2015 and the day of the referendum. For the purposes of this work, disinformation refers to factually incorrect or highly misleading content deliberately spread to pursue political goals; this definition draws explicitly from the work of Bennett and Livingston on disruptive communication (2016). However, as noted earlier, the actor's intentionality is assumed in the broadest sense, thus going beyond the terminological distinction between misinformation and disinformation. Indeed, this work assumes that the protagonists of post-truth politics are not interested in knowing if the information is accurate, misleading, or false as long as it resonates with the narrative they are trying to establish. Accordingly, the cases of misinformation selected here either contain precise statements that were later disproven by independent third parties or are phrased to imply a factually incorrect understanding of reality. Hence the need to distinguish between rhetorically charged statements and claims based on false premises: a methodological approach consistent with the one adopted by similar studies (Höller, 2021).

However, although relevant for the purposes of the empirical rigour of this analysis, the distinction between mere claims and verifiable arguments is not as clear-cut, given how post-truth politics also consists of a communication strategy in which reality is redefined to provoke strong emotional

responses in the electorate. The coexistence of these two sides of post-truth is a consequence of the intrinsic nature of electoral campaigns, which do not consist of the mere presentation of facts rationally analysed by the electorate but rather in an attempt to shape the voter's identities and preferences. Accordingly, the information presented in the articles, speech, and social media content categorised in this chapter can be seen as the foundation on which the Brexit narrative was built; the same narrative was then amplified and spread in the material discarded due to its highly speculative and unfalsifiable nature. For these reasons, some claims that would appear to be hardly falsifiable due to their vague nature, such as the notion that the Eurozone was due to collapse in a few years (Leave Eu, 2016a) or that Churchill would have voted Leave (Lawson, 2016) were included as they can give some insights on the rhetoric that permeated the campaign. In this framework, the material excluded from this analysis is still relevant as it contributed to creating a climate of mistrust towards European institutions by promoting and reinforcing the same narratives found in the factually incorrect data.

The cases of misinformation collected are classified according to three frames: economy, security, and sovereignty. The frames are identified inductively based on what appear to be the pillars of the Eurosceptic rhetoric adopted during the campaign. The first category pertains to the negative economic consequences of EU membership, such as the claim that leaving the EU would have allowed an increase in public spending in the NHS by £350 million a week (Reuben, 2016). This claim, constantly repeated throughout the campaign and later denied by, among others, Nigel Farage (Stone, 2016), shows how the Leave campaign has tried to leverage a real problem perceived by the electorate by associating it with the EU. This strategy is in line with what Watson (2018) observed regarding how the Leave campaign succeeded in convincing voters dissatisfied with the status quo and feeling "left behind" after decades of ineffective liberalists policies, and therefore willing to vote for the promise of change offered by Brexit.

The association between the economic sphere and the migration one promotes the notion that migrants are detrimental to the healthcare system, the economy, and their presence has worrying security implications. The ties between the discourse on immigration and the vote results have been widely explored (Dennison & Geddes, 2018), and this appears clearly in the second category developed for this study, namely that of security. The idea that immigrants represented a threat not only to the

economy but also to the security of the United Kingdom is evident both from the constant references to the risk of Turkey's imminent entry into the EU and from news reports linking the arrival of refugees to the EU (Slack & Groves, 2016), claims later corrected by the Daily Mail due to their misleading content (Khomami, 2016). The choice not to consider immigration as a separate category is since, generally, immigration itself is not considered a danger by the sources analysed but rather in terms of its impact on the economic and security dimensions.

The third category is that of sovereignty, a residual group encompassing all the material not directly classifiable in the first two and those statements highlighting how EU membership is incompatible with the independence of the United Kingdom. In the Leave campaign narrative, the notion of sovereignty also touches the economic sphere and the immigration one, but it transcends these two dimensions as it emphasises how Britain is a prisoner of an undemocratic system both at the institutional and cultural level. This discourse promoted a narrative in which sovereignty is fetishised, and voters must "Take Back Control"; a slogan implying that the British people were menaced due to European bureaucrats controlling them from above and immigrants threatening their freedom from below, for instance, by stealing jobs and hindering the healthcare system (Pencheva & Maronitis, 2018).

This narrative draws from several topics, including the constant threat of Turkey joining the EU, the perspective of the UK forcefully bailing out other member states on the verge of bankruptcy (Vote Leave, 2016a), and some hardly qualifiable claims such as the fact that the EU imposes oppressive regulations on light bulbs and vacuum cleaners (The Telegraph, 2016). While some of these claims have been proven false or misleading (Full Fact Team, 2016), others escape similar scrutiny due to their abstract nature but have nevertheless been included as significant examples of the discourse adopted during the campaign.

As noted above, most of the sources analysed include misinformation relevant to more than one of the three categories. This tendency is evident from the subdivision presented in Table 6.2, and it derives from the nature of the sources collected. Those include lists of reasons to vote Leave (Green et al., 2016; Daily Mail, 2016a); speeches or interviews in which the speaker refers to different topics (Johnson, 2016; Farage & Neil, 2016); and articles that move from crucial topics in the Eurosceptic discourse to describing the consequences of these events over the three

categories discussed (Vote Leave, 2016a). The latter is prevalent with articles discussing Turkey's accession to the EU or the NHS.

Concerning the subdivision of the collected sources among the actors (Table 6.2), it emerges how the material shared by political actors generally includes references to several categories. This strategy is evident in a speech by Nigel Farage to the European Parliament, reshared by his party on Facebook. In the speech, the British MEP observes how Turkey is about to join the European Union, with negative consequences linked to the country's poverty, the influx of "75 million migrants", and remarking the EU's inability to negotiate with Turkey during the 2015 refugee crisis. The speech, like other interviews and public statements by Boris Johnson, Farage himself (Farage, 2016; Ross, 2016), and other politicians (Fox, 2016), shows a certain tendency to start from a single issue, such as Turkey joining the EU or the NHS crisis, to move onto a broader narrative encompassing the three dimensions conceptualised in this work. The conclusion is that a vote to remain is a vote for Turkey, for uncontrolled immigration, and it will expose Britain to terrorism, remarking the need to choose Leave and regain control of the country's borders (UKIP, 2016).

As for the newspapers, the predominant element seems to be the economic one. Alongside the previously mentioned lists of reasons to vote No, both the articles and the pieces of opinion analysed focus on the economic aspect, even when they mention immigration, and on a vague concept of sovereignty (The Sun, 2016). The concept of sovereignty is also present in a more abstract than practical sense in the material shared on social media by the two campaigns. Here, it is preferred to leverage more immediate images, such as the riots that took place in Cologne (Leave.eu, 2016b)—which, according to the campaign, was "neglected by British media"—and the costs of financing Turkey's accession to the EU instead of the NHS (Vote Leave, 2016c).

As far as arenas are concerned, the division between the various categories seems more homogeneous, as shown in Table 6.3. Sovereignty is less present in social media, probably as this concept is more of a broader backdrop than a source of specific topics. This homogeneity suggests that arenas, more than actors, are the determining variable when selecting a topic; although it maintains some constant characteristics, misinformation adapts according to the channels by which it is spread. The analysis shows how social media are used both by political actors and by the official campaigns, and similarly, the websites of the two campaigns host

several interviews and speeches by political actors. As for legacy media, the analysed newspapers mainly present two types of content: news articles presenting factually incorrect or misleading information (Dominiczak & Whitehead, 2016) and opinion pieces or interviews serving as an echo chamber for the positions of political actors active in the Leave campaign. Lastly, all the arenas include lists of reasons why voters should choose Leave, frequent references to Turkey and the NHS, and the notion that the collapse of the EU is imminent and inevitable.

BREXIT, POST-TRUTH POLITICS, AND EUROPEAN DISINTEGRATION

As the analysis in the section above attests, several actors employed misinformation in the Leave campaign in different arenas. This phenomenon can suggest a paradigm shift in political communication strategies. The ambition of this chapter is not to question whether this approach is in discontinuity with the past; instead, it focuses on how false or ambiguous content plays a role in Brexit and in EU disintegration. To this end, this section tries to draw a conceptual map of the conditions necessary for misinformation to become an effective political tool. Regarding Brexit, the Referendum needs to be contextualised in the framework of EU politicisation. As noted, among others, by Zürn (2019), the increase in dissent against European institutions has given rise to a conflict between mainstream political parties supporting the European project and a substantial part of their electorate.

A consequence of this contrast has been the emergence of identity politics, which was promoted and shaped by those political entrepreneurs interested in obtaining the consent of this Eurosceptic electorate. Suppose we accept the notion that the intersection between identity politics, cultural and economic instability, and the EU was constructed by purposive actors (Hooghe & Marks, 2009). In that case, it follows that EU membership has been associated over time with a series of harmful elements attributable to the three categories discussed above; this emerges from the literature, and from the material collected in this chapter.

As for the immigration dimension, we have the usual clichés against immigration predating the debate on the EU. The typical features of this discourse are that immigrants commit more crimes than citizens, are unwilling or unable to integrate with the cultural environments of the host countries and will place excessive pressure on public services. These

aspects are partly reworked in an anti-European key, for example, by underlining the risk of Turkey joining the EU by portraying the country as an inexhaustible source of immigrants or by linking immigration with terrorism. In the economic sphere, which is intrinsically linked with the sovereignty dimension, the main criticism is that the UK would have been forced to come to the rescue of the other EU countries in the event of another economic crisis. Furthermore, there is a tendency to underline how resources are diverted from services (mainly, in the material analysed, the NHS) as EU membership forces the UK to allocate its budget differently.

Lastly, concerning the dimension of sovereignty, it is evident how this category draws from the other two. This connection is a consequence of how migration and economic policies fall within the area in which sovereignty is expressly limited by adhering to EU treaties. Accordingly, failure to reform the European treaties was the central element behind the initial push towards the Referendum; throughout the campaign, Cameron was portrayed as unable to guarantee the UK's sovereignty within the EU. This lack of sovereignty is constructed as implying negative consequences on multiple levels. It hinders the country's international competitiveness, preventing the state from determining its tariff policies independently; it also affects the capacity of distinguishing between "positive" and "negative" immigration, a dichotomy typical of Eurosceptic rhetoric and corollary to the notion that EU membership causes "uncontrolled" migrations due to free circulation of people. An example of this tendency can be seen in how the fact that the 2004 EU enlargement led many CEE workers to migrate to the UK has been used to construct a narrative of immigrants burdening the welfare system.

These notions pre-existed both the Leave campaign and the domestic debate on whether the UK had to renegotiate its membership in the EU; in fact, they had been the subject of strategy competition between British political parties for years, in line with the dynamics highlighted by Hooghe and Marks (2009) in their postfunctionalist theory of European integration. This "logic of party interaction and issue politicisation" promotes fertile ground for the use of misinformation, as past parties' commitments constrain their strategic positioning over time. The signs of this vicious cycle, consisting of political actors unable to keep pace with their narrative, can be seen within the Conservative party in the years leading up to the Referendum; specifically, those Tories in support of

Remain saw their room for manoeuvre reduced by having to compete against the Leave front while using its same arguments.

In a context characterised by these ideological forces exploited by political actors, an additional element can contribute to forming a fertile environment for misinformation. This element is the presence of an external systemic crisis, which lends itself to being instrumentalised and tied to existing ideas. Political actors can construct this sort of connection, which can become real for the public as long as people accept it and consider it part of the political discourse. In other words, it is not enough to associate an external event with a series of pre-existing ideas, but this juxtaposition must appear convincing enough to be digested by the public. In the case of Brexit and the three categories analysed in this chapter, the two external events in question are the 2009 Eurozone crisis and the 2015 European migrant crisis. The impact of these events on the European integration debate has been extensively explored in recent years, mainly focusing on how such crises have been used to reinforce predating Eurosceptic positions (Taggart & Szczerbiak, 2018). Specifically, and regarding the Leave campaign, these two events served as a catalyst. For example, in the case of immigration, the causal chain that led to misinformation in this area can be summarised as follows.

Over the years, the UK's population has changed demographically, both due to the influx of immigrants from the former British colonies and due to the EU enlargement in 2004. This demographic change has led to the emergence of racial tensions, accentuated by a markedly Islamophobic attitude due to the association between Islamic minorities and terrorism which is promoted by the mass media (Capdevila & Callaghan, 2008). These tensions have, in turn, been used by political actors in their rhetoric, which focuses on the contrast between "us and them" and which identifies membership in the European Union as one of the causes of immigration and as an obstacle in allowing the United Kingdom to carry out an independent migration policy (Zappettini, 2019).

In this context, external events such as the Syrian refugee crisis have reinvigorated a narrative that sees immigration as a burden to economic development and a threat to security. As was also highlighted by an analysis of comments on the decision to resettle Syrian refugee children in 2015, the juxtaposition between refugees and Brexit intensified following the crisis (Goodman & Narang, 2019). This connection is partly due to how the press and political forces have exploited the Syrian crisis to build a rationale for Brexit. In the campaign, this narrative included

Turkey's entry into the EU; an understandable link considering the country's geographic location and its majority Muslim population. Moreover, the ties between the two events are further strengthened by how Turkey welcomed millions of refugees following the Syrian civil war.

The triad formed by Turkey-immigration-terrorism is a constant presence in the material collected and applicable both to the security and the economic dimensions. The same also applies to the Eurozone crisis, especially relevant in the economic framework; according to the Leave campaign, the UK was about to sacrifice its sovereignty in favour of deeper EU integration, which would have led the country to be financially responsible for other member states (Jessop, 2017). These external events have been exploited as catalysts for pre-existing ideas by interested actors, leveraging emotions, and recombining narrative elements, often in a factually inaccurate fashion. This approach is in line with the communication methods typical of populism, mirroring what Waisbord (2018) has defined as an "elective affinity" between populism and post-truth. This affinity is particularly evident with regard to the division between people and the establishment, personified in this case by the EU, as well as the tendency to reject and distort facts in contrast with a specific narrative.

However, the type of populism that played a crucial role in the case of Brexit is difficult to position within the political spectrum. It exhibits some significant internal inconsistencies, such as rejecting the European elites and globalisation while embracing economic liberalism and arguing how the UK would strengthen its position in this system by leaving the EU. This ideological ambiguity, at least concerning the grand debate between right and left, and between alternative economic systems, makes this strand of populism—heavily relying on misinformation—particularly well-suited to deal with the theme of European integration through referendum campaigns.

Populist political actors can simplify or ignore reality, focusing instead on the voter's emotional dimension; simultaneously, followers of post-truth politics can reject any factual information in contrast with the preferred narrative as lies of a corrupt political elite. As a result of these dynamics, campaigning does not require discussing concrete policymaking solutions since it is sufficient to attribute any issue to EU membership and propose a clear solution, such as Brexit, to solve them. This process has allowed populist actors to exploit the lack of high-quality

information (Renwick et al., 2020); in the contest of European disintegration, this can mean either more states leaving or different forms of institutional reform within the EU.

Conclusions

Within this chapter, analysis was undertaken to examine how misinformation was systematically used as a tool in the Leave campaign, exploring the links between post-truth politics, Brexit, and European disintegration. Specifically, it explored how populist actors exploit misinformation to shape the public discourse on the EU; the study of these dynamics can help trace the future patterns of European disintegration. This chapter shows the dynamics through which different arenas offer political actors the infrastructures necessary to spread misinformation, and it does so through a frame analysis of material collected on newspapers, social media, and campaign websites. The material collected was then divided into three analytical frames: security, economics, and sovereignty. The analysis highlighted how, throughout the Leave campaign, the actors claimed ownership of the narrative on UK membership in the EU, directing the public debate within the three frames discussed above and thus crafting a narrative appealing to undecided voters. This process was facilitated by relying on pre-existing ideas on immigration and sovereignty, consistent with the arsenal of populist rhetoric and identity politics. These ideas were particularly effective in influencing the vote as external factors, such as the Eurozone and the refugee crises, were exploited as catalysts during the campaign.

Another element that strengthened this process was the use of misinformation, a very effective tool in the hands of populist actors. As highlighted by this study, the use of incorrect or ambiguous information is very effective in the debate on the EU, given the complexity of the matter; this approach also lends itself well to referendum campaigns, as the choice between two options makes simplistic solutions more enticing. Although the sample of sources analysed by this work is limited, it is still possible to come to some conclusions, regarding both Brexit and European disintegration, in general. Brexit is, currently, the only case of a country leaving the EU; inevitably, the Leave campaign is the only successful antecedent available to actors interested in promoting an agenda of European disintegration in their respective countries. The same tactics implemented during the Leave campaign are likely to be adopted by Eurosceptic actors

in other EU states. This chapter has contributed in two ways: first, by proposing the study of Eurosceptic discourse through the three analytical frames discussed above; and second, by describing a pattern behind the misinformation processes based on the triad of actors, ideas, and external crises. Future research will need to look at these dynamics in other member states, as the ability to identify and study the change in these elements could provide a deeper understanding of European disintegration. Furthermore, considering how misinformation proved itself an essential political tool, we can expect it to be used again in the future; especially by those populist actors interested in reversing the process of European integration, the heroes of post-truth politics.

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