A cross-country analysis of news reports on differentiation in the European Union

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Abstract

This article explores whether and how differentiation is covered by EU-correspondents in newspaper articles on European Union (EU) affairs. Differentiation is a central yet controversial aspect of European integration. Some believe that it makes the EU more democratic. Others worry that differentiation is susceptible to domination. Hence, media coverage of differentiation can affect not only what the public knows but also what it thinks about the EU. Drawing on a selection of news reports published between 2015 and 2020 in nine media outlets from Denmark, Germany, and the UK, we find that EU correspondents are successful in presenting complex EU processes and legislation in a manner accessible to the public. Nevertheless, the underlying criterion of newsworthiness remains the national interest, as does the framing, which is along national interest or politics lines. In-depth analysis of the implications of the EU's differentiated integration appears only fleetingly in professional news reporting, which raises serious doubts as to the potential of EU correspondents' work to facilitate evaluative-critical discourse on EU differentiation. Encouragingly, the capacity for critical debate is not altogether absent — which is an indicator that EU correspondents are still able to perform their role as facilitators of deliberative discourse, despite the external pressures their profession is facing.

Keywords

Introduction[1]

The European Union (EU) has its own currency, although not all its members have adopted the euro. Some EU member states are not willing to integrate into the eurozone, such as Denmark, where the opportunity to do so has been rejected by their citizens in referendums[2]. The governments in some other member states, including Bulgaria, are committed to adopting the currency, but these countries are made to wait until they meet the EU's criteria before they can adopt the euro and be integrated in the eurozone. At the same time, the euro is in use in a number of non-member states in Europe, with or without the EU's agreement[3]. This complex form of integration is nothing specific to the euro. In fact, differentiation as such has become a central aspect of European integration (Holzinger and Schimmelfennig, 2012; Schimmelfennig et al., 2015). The upshot is that the EU is characterised by a distinct 'differentiation configuration', in other words a manner of combining territory, function and hierarchy that clearly deviates from how these dimensions are configured and combined within the modern nation state context (Fossum, 2019).

In this article, we explore how EU correspondents inform and express opinion about differentiation in newspaper articles about EU affairs. Existing research shows that media coverage of EU affairs contributes to what people know about the EU (Marquart et al., 2018, Gattermann and de Vreese, 2020), the effect of which increases with the frequency of news exposure (Richter and Stier, 2022). In comparison, although the EU itself has increasingly been involved in public communication (Altides, 2009; Özdemir and Rauh, 2022), many remain sceptical about the effectiveness of the institutional efforts (Hillebrandt, 2021; Kelbel et al., 2021; Rauh, 2021; Özdemir and Rauh, 2022). Rauh (2021), for example, finds that the European Commission's press releases are significantly more difficult to comprehend than articles in politics sections of newspapers. Therefore, at a time when public knowledge of differentiation remains low (Stahl, 2021, de Blok and de Vries, forthcoming), if newspapers cover EU affairs, especially those involving differentiation, they could act as intermediators of the associated complexity, and the resulting communication would be more accessible to the EU citizens.

Yet differentiation is as controversial as it is complex, especially because it is associated with democracy for some and with dominance for others (Fossum, 2019; Lord, 2021, Bellamy et al., 2022). On the one hand, differentiation is seen as democratic because it allows for divergence from unification by accommodating differences in preferences. Indeed, without differentiation in common currency, for example, either unwilling member states would have to join the eurozone or the common currency would not

[2] Denmark as part of the Maastricht compromise obtained an opt-out from the third stage of EMU: EUR-Lex - l25061 - EN - EUR-Lex (europa.eu)

[3] Andorra, Monaco, San Marino, and the Vatican City are the states using the euro with the EU's agreement. In addition, Kosovo and Montenegro have adopted the euro unilaterally. See Gstöhl and Phinnemore, 2019 for more details.

exist at all, despite the wishes of most of the EU members. On the other hand, differentiation is seen as a form of dominance because it creates insiders and outsiders of integration, where the latter are excluded from the decision-making processes that affect them (Eriksen, 2019). Returning to the eurozone example, differentiation means new member states are prevented from participating in the common currency until they meet certain criteria that they have not been part of designing and have limited ability to influence. Despite all this controversy around it, large parts of the European public do not seem to have a direct or clearly articulated opinion about differentiation yet (Stahl, 2021; de Blok and de Vries, forthcoming). How the media covers differentiation in the EU, therefore, can be critical for the public opinion to be formed in the future.

For the purposes of our study, we draw on Fossum (2023) to distinguish differentiation from differentiated integration as follows: differentiated integration is about deviations from an anticipated uniform or unified process of integration whereas differentiation in the classical sociological tradition is the configuration and combination of territory, function, and hierarchy. The EU has a distinct differentiation configuration that affects what we understand by differentiated integration and notably how that operates in the EU context. The EU's distinctness is what prompts the need for a systematic examination of the relationship between differentiation and dominance and between differentiation and democracy. Differentiated integration is very often problematic given that it refers to deviations from law, whereas differentiation is far more complex. It is a necessary element in modern systems but when it is configured in ways that are distinct and novel, we must consider the cases closely to establish whether differentiation veers towards dominance or towards democracy.

Our study is designed to shed light precisely on the ways in which the journalists most often tasked with mediating the complexity and controversy of the EU polity — EU correspondents — report on EU differentiated integration. Here, our starting point is that journalists have a very important role as mediators of the EU polity but are also saddled with particular – unrealistic – expectations in the EU setting given that the EU member states have systematically shirked away from establishing both what type of political system the EU is and what type of political system they want it to become (Michailidou and Trenz 2021; Souliotis, 2022; Manners, 2013). Every effort to provide an account of the EU is thus implicitly a contribution to the construction of an EU polity account, however underarticulated that may be. If we think of differentiation in that light, journalists are facing a dual challenge: to explain what EU differentiation entails and to situate it within a political system (the EU) for which there is no agreement on what is and should be.

To this end, we have opted for a qualitative research design, which allows us to conduct in-depth yet systematic analysis of EU correspondents' work in the three EU member states with the highest degree of differentiated secondary legislation, namely, Denmark, Germany and the UK[4]. Although our sampling period amounts to three

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[4] The latest of such events in our dataset comes from September 2020 (see Table 1) while the UK formally left the EU on 31 January 2020. Therefore, it was not a member state for the

months in total, we have constructed this period from six events spanning the years 2015 to 2020. This has allowed us to capture any developments or nuances in EU differentiated integration reporting across a longer period of time and draw conclusions that go beyond one specific event. We decided to focus on six key migration events that have unfolded at the EU's external and internal borders. This decision allowed us to capture a large enough amount of news articles to conduct in-depth qualitative coding whilst ensuring representativeness of our sample. Moreover, our sampling strategy allowed us to capture articles with high impact potential on public opinion. This is because the events we selected are all broadly related to the area of Justice and Home Affairs, which is not only a highly differentiated policy area in the EU but also one of the areas most likely to generate high visibility and intense debates in the public sphere. Lastly, to ensure robustness of our analysis and reliability of our EU differentiation analysis, we built on the qualitative coding of European parliament debates covering EU differentiated integration based our coding scheme on key definitions regarding differentiation (Fossum, 2019) that constitute the conceptual framework of the EU3D project. We were thus able to achieve high levels of inter-coder understanding and interpretation of the core concepts we used to analyse EU differentiated integration. Our findings, though not surprising in terms of the persistent anchoring of EU news on national frames, do leave room for restrained optimism regarding the capacity of EU correspondents to produce in-depth, yet accessible in terms of language and presentation, analyses regarding the implications of EU differentiated integration for the future of the EU polity.

Our analysis contributes to extant research in the following ways. On the one hand, we zoom in on the role of the particular cohort of EU correspondents that is little studied. Yet, as we have argued elsewhere (Michailidou and Trenz, 2021), they play a critical role in bridging the communicative gap between European publics and EU institutions, not necessarily by fostering a more positive public opinion of the EU polity, but by facilitating public opinion formation based on a plurality of opinions and knowledgeable discussion of the implications that EU governance and differentiated integration have for EU citizens' lives. Our focus on EU correspondents as key mediators of the EU public sphere comes at a critical juncture for democratic public spheres in Europe: Not only is the overall complexity of the EU institutional set-up and policies increasing, but the public communication capacities of the system decrease. This is in large part due to a generalised decrease in the supply of quality journalism (Pickard, 2019). Nevertheless, in the case of the EU in particular, the effects of this decreasing availability of quality journalism are reinforced by the EU's failure to deliver on its own goal to invest in better and more efficient public communication (Rauh et al., 2020). EU correspondents are among few journalists who may still have both the in-depth knowledge and appropriate budget and access to EU institutional networks to be able to present and analyse the developments in the EU polity structure in a manner that is accessible to as broad EU publics as possible. At the same time, this specific media perspective is largely missing from the EU differentiation literature. Schimmelfennig, Leuffen and de Vries (2022) document in detail both the, until recently, lack

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complete duration of our analysis. However, it was still subject to EU law during the entire period under study of this research.

of knowledge on the public salience and assessment of differentiated integration, and on the effects of differentiated integration on support for the EU; and the surge of studies focusing on precisely these aspects in recent years (Leuffen et al., 2022; Schraff and Schimmelfennig, 2020). Despite this growing body of data documenting the correlation of differentiated integration and public opinion regarding the EU, the lack of empirical findings regarding the ways in which differentiated integration is framed in news media persists, even though the role of media coverage in shaping public opinion about the EU has been extensively documented in the past three decades (indicatively, de Vreese and Boomgaarden, 2005; van Spanje and de Vreese, 2014; Vliegenthart et al., 2008; Marquart et al., 2019).

EU in the news

The EU can enter the news in various ways. Often, the EU and its main actors appear backstage in domestic politics or in economic news, e.g., when EU law and regulation applies (Trenz, 2005). As such, the EU is part of everyday reality of its member states and does not need to be specifically addressed or further explained. At the frontstage, EU news is generally created as part of foreign news coverage by a specialised group of journalists who are temporarily sent to Brussels to cover the EU (Hannerz, 2004; Siapera, 2004, Meyer, 2010; Terzis, 2008). Here, not only information but also explanation is often required about what the interests at stake are, why policies are needed and why coordination becomes desirable. EU correspondents can be freelancers or employed by national news organisations. Their degrees of specialisation vary, some might have a law or political science degrees in EU studies, others have a background in journalism, and again others are career changers (Lloyd and Marconi, 2014). Ethnographic research on the corps of EU correspondents has shown that not only their educational background, but also socialisation in Brussels matter in their daily work, as EU knowledge is not only learned in textbooks but requires specific know-how (Meyer, 2010; Sobotova, 2018). As a result of socialisation, EU correspondents from different national and educational backgrounds might develop similar attitudes about the EU. The old cohort of EU correspondents was found to be predominantly pro-European with strong traits of European identity and increasingly distanced from their national origin. This has changed with a new cohort of young correspondents who tend to be more critical of the EU. A stay in Brussels is for many journalists part of career building as more profitable or recognised jobs wait for them at home. The number of correspondents who plan a life career in Brussels is small and probably shrinking (Sobotova, 2018).

EU news coverage is generally characterised by a mismatch between supply and demand (Michailidou and Trenz, 2021). The supply chain of EU news is not only held in motion by the work of EU correspondents but also by specialised press agencies and by the press offices of the EU who deliver ready-made textual and visual material for the free use of journalism (Aldrin, 2013). Demand for EU news is channelled through the daily news selection by the copy editors in the home offices of the national news organisation, who only reserve limited space for print or TV news from Brussels

(Meyer, 2010). This is in line with the perceived preferences for news of national audiences who devote only a limited amount of time and attention to news from Brussels (Martins et al., 2012). This draws attention to the selection criteria that are applied by national news organisations to sell EU news to their audiences. Research on EU news has shown that several filters apply in the selection and framing of EU news: (1) a nationalist filter: EU news is highlighted whenever national interests are at stake at the cost of a European common good orientation; (2) a conflict filter: EU news are highlighted when simple conflict lines between states can be drawn at the cost of complex coalitions and often shifting majorities; and (3) a negativity filter: negative EU news about scandals or mismanagement are highlighted over positive or neutrally framed news (Galpin and Trenz, 2019).

Table 1: List of events and dates behind the time frame for analysis

Event	Date	Period
Speech by Angela Merkel on Germany's open border policy	31 August 2015	From 24 August 2015 to 7 September 2015
Proposal by the Commission, to reform the Common European Asylum System	13 July 2016	From 6 July 2016 to 20 July 2016
Joint statement by Visegrád Group, titled 'Strong Europe — Union of Action and Trust'	02 March 2017	From 23 February 2017 to 9 March 2017
Informal Council meeting on internal security, migration, and Brexit	19 September 2018	From 12 September 2018 to 26 September 2018

Migration policy in the strategic agenda 2019-2024	20 June 2019	From 13 June 2019 to 27 June 2019
Migration Pact statement by Ursula von der Leyen	16 September 2020	From 9 September 2020 to 23 September 2020

These selection and framing filters in the working routines of EU journalism have consequences for the coverage of the complexity of EU differentiation. Journalists, in general, are translators of the complexity of the world of politics that is explained in a common language understood by lay people. Journalists, in other words, de-differentiate. They round up and summarise instead of covering details. In this sense, differentiation implies a loss of newsworthiness. For EU news, a trade-off applies between the complexity of a news story that is needed to inform about facts and to engage in critical opinion-making and the limited attention of audiences. The higher the information value of an EU news story, the lower its market value to be sold and reach out to broader audiences. This reduces the likelihood to cover EU-differentiation in the news. Differentiation can however also be seen as an opportunity for a specialised corps of expert journalists to fill a market niche for critical news about EU politics (Michailidou and Trenz, 2021). This responds to specific demands for information and critical engagement by smaller segments of the audience. In response to EU differentiation, also media markets and audiences would differentiate. Especially EU correspondents would take a new role as driver of critical discourse about the EU and a watchdog of EU differentiated integration.

Data and Design

Our analysis draws on a sample of news reports on EU affairs. We took three main decisions in creating the sample. First, we limited the time frame of analysis to cover 90 days across six years from 2015 to 2020. For this purpose, we chose the date of six important events in the EU, one for each year, and added the seven days immediately before and after each event to the time frame. Table 1 provides the list of the chosen events and dates.

The events in Table 1 are all broadly related to the area of Justice and Home Affairs, and specifically to the topic of migration through internal and external borders of the EU. Justice and Home Affairs is a highly differentiated policy area in the EU (Comte and Lavenex, 2021; Duttle et al., 2017). For example, as Figure 1 shows, it has the highest share of differentiation in terms of secondary legislation, with one or more member states opting out of about 42 per cent of the legislation in this area between 1958 and

2012. Focusing on periods around important events in Justice and Home Affairs increases the likelihood that our dataset includes observations where differentiation might be covered. It also provides a common background to our three constructed months as the time period, which is otherwise divided across six years.
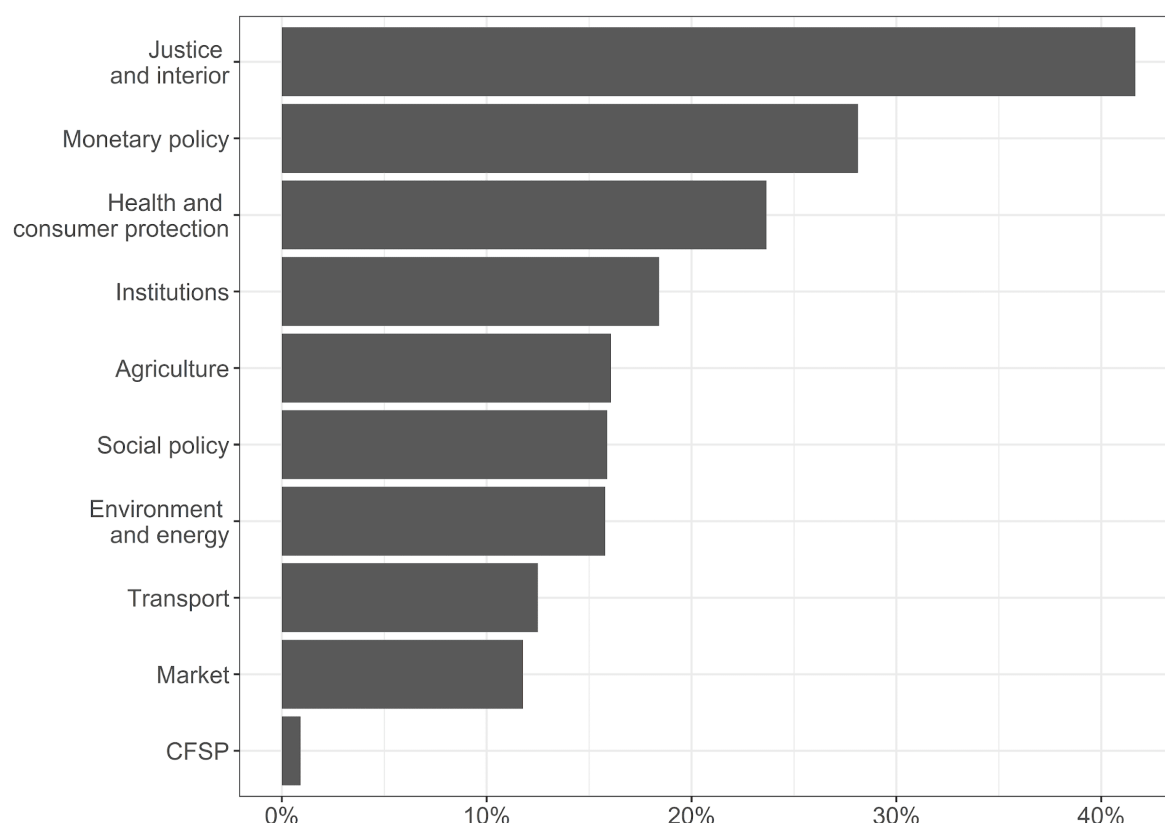

Figure 1: Share of differentiated secondary legislation per policy area, 1958–2012. *Source*: Duttle et al. (2017). *Note*: Duttle et al. (2017) uses *Justice and interior* as the title for the policy area, instead of Justice and Home Affairs, which we have kept in creating this figure.

As for the second sampling decision, we chose to focus on nine media outlets from Germany, Denmark, and the UK. As Figure 2 shows, these are the top three countries in terms of legislative differentiation. However, in Justice and Home Affairs, they are at the extreme ends of the scale: while Germany did not opt out from any of the related 180 legislative acts enacted in EU secondary law in this area between 1958 and 2012, Denmark and the UK opted out of, respectively, 38 per cent and 21 per cent of these acts (Duttle et al., 2017). Nevertheless, Germany is said to be 'the major driver of differentiated integration' in Justice and Home Affairs (Comte and Lavenex, 2021, p. 3), leading the development of EU policies in this area. Yet, although it does not seek differentiated integration for itself, Germany allows for the sceptical countries to opt out, so that the remaining countries further integrate along the lines of their lead. As a result, our case selection follows a most-similar-case design in terms of salience, and we expect the media outlets from this set of countries to be more likely to report on differentiation.

Figure 2: Share of differentiated secondary legislation per country, 1958–2012. *Source*: Duttle et al. (2017).

When it comes to the selection of specific media outlets, we had two criteria in mind: (1) our selection should include one centre-left, one centre-right, and one economy outlet per country and (2) each outlet should have at least one correspondent in charge of EU affairs in the time frame under analysis[5]. Table 2 provides the list of outlets and their correspondent with the highest number of articles published in our time frame. We then went through the website of these outlets, and collected any article written by EU correspondents. We also collected articles written by other correspondents if these were clearly about EU affairs. This resulted in 1,363 news articles, written by 251 correspondents. Most of these articles are single-authored, but 30 per cent are written by multiple correspondents.

Table 2: Case selection, and the correspondent with highest number of articles per outlet

Country	Orientation	Outlet	Top Correspondent

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[5] The titles of correspondents in charge of EU affairs change from one outlet to another. In addition to 'EU correspondents', some are called Europe or Brussels correspondents (or, reporters, editors). In this article, we disregard these differences.

Germany	Centre-left	Sueddeutsche Zeitung	Alexander Mühlauer (38)
Germany	Centre-right	Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung	Werner Mussler (75)
Germany	Economy	Wirtschaftswoche	Silke Wettach (22)
Denmark	Centre-left	Politiken	Nilas Heinskou (34)
Denmark	Centre-right	Berlingske	Jakob Ussing (37)
Denmark	Economy	Dagbladet Børsen	Tore Keller (57)
United Kingdom	Centre-left	The Guardian	Daniel Boffey (103)
United Kingdom	Centre-right	The Times	Bruno Waterfield (88)

United Kingdom	Economy	The Financial Times	Mehreen Khan (158)

Notes: The *Top Correspondent* column lists the correspondents with the highest number of news articles (in parentheses) per media outlet.

As a final decision on sampling, we randomly ordered the news articles within each country before beginning the coding process. Given that our qualitative coding strategy, which we describe in the next subsection, is highly resource intensive, we anticipated that we may not be able to code all articles that we have collected. By randomly ordering the articles to be coded, we aimed at avoiding selection bias, in the likely event that we may not be able to code all articles that we collected.

Coding

Our coding is based on qualitative content analysis of each sentence in newspaper articles, designed to understand whether and how differentiation is covered in newspaper articles on EU affairs. Hence, it combines a diagnostic and an evaluative dimension. First, the instances of EU differentiation need to be identified or pinpointed by the journalists, i.e., found to be of public relevance. Second, these instances need to be assessed, i.e., found to impact EU legitimacy in either affirmative or critical ways. Within this general framework, the coding was carried out by three coders, one for each language in the sample[6]. Appendix B provides our codebook, which formed the basis for the training of the coders. After an initial round of training sessions, the coders coded the same, randomly chosen, ten articles with a total of 329 sentences from the sample[7]. We then calculated the intercoder reliability scores. For example, in terms of agreement over whether sentences included a statement about differentiation in the EU, the *Krippendorff's Alpha* was 0.258. With feedback from the coders, we then improved the codebook to clarify issues that might hinder intercoder reliability. A second training practice, with 192 sentences from randomly chosen five articles, returned a much-improved score of 0.777.

As our study is primarily about the coverage of differentiation in the media, especially with regards to dominance and democracy, we initially coded whether the sentences in news articles included a statement about differentiation, dominance, and/or democracy in the EU. For sentences without a reference to differentiation, we did not code any other variables. Otherwise, we continued the coding with the following variables.

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[6] The coder for the Danish language also helped with coding the data from the UK.

[7] Because English was the common language among the three coders, we chose all training articles from the UK outlets.

For outcome variables, we coded whether the sentences included a suggestion that (1) differentiation is politically acceptable or sustainable. Moreover, we coded whether there is a suggestion that differentiation is (positively or negatively) related to (2) dominance and/or (3) democracy. For independent variables, we coded the (a) type of differentiation in the statement and (b) the makers of these statements (correspondents themselves, citizens, and/or actors from public, private, and/or civil sectors). Finally, we coded whether the sentences were about migration, as our time frame was constructed around events related to the topic of migration through internal and external borders of the EU.

We distinguish between four types of differentiation — as defined by Fossum (2019):

- *Law-making differentiation* refers to changes in the way legislative decisions are made at any level of government in the EU, such as the European Parliament becoming more or less powerful in the EU legislative process.

- *Competence-based differentiation* refers to changes in the functions of the political system or its actors, such as the creation of a new EU agency.

- *Territorial differentiation* refers to changes in the European integration at national borders, such as Ireland not being a part of the Schengen Area.

- *Rights-based differentiation* refers to the changes in the rights that citizens have, such as EU citizens having the right to vote in local elections but not in national elections, if they are residing in an EU member state other than their country of origin.

Analysing text at the level of sentences increases precision in qualitative coding, yet this strategy has two potential disadvantages (Roller and Lavrakas, 2015). First, sentence-level analyses might miss relevant contextual information provided elsewhere in the text, but not repeated in every sentence. To address this challenge, we allowed our coders to drive contextual information for a given sentence from the previous sentence. Second, analyses at the lower level increase the number of decisions that coders have to make, and therefore they are resource intensive. As explained above, to address this challenge, we used three sampling steps to reduce the number of news articles in the dataset.

In the end, we coded 18,566 sentences in 570 (42 per cent) articles, written by 146 (58 per cent) correspondents from all nine outlets. The decision to not code the entire dataset of articles was taken after we evaluated the results of about 10-15 per cent of all sentences coded across the 3 countries (The totals are as follows. Germany: 351 articles / 11,327 sentences; Denmark: 313 articles / 11,509 sentences; UK: 699 articles / 19,434 sentences), whereby it became clear that there was very little variation in the variables assigned across and within country data. We subsequently agreed to randomly select a sub-sample per country. Setting the confidence level at 98 per cent and error margin at 3 per cent, we rounded up the number of sentences that needed to be coded at 1500 per country. After randomly ordering the sampled articles, we instructed our coders

to code until there are at least 1,500 sentences coded as related to differentiation, dominance, and/or democracy. We reached this threshold at sentences numbered 3,035 in Germany, 9,474 in Denmark, and 6,009 in the UK.

Results

The diagnostic dimension

Figure 3 plots the share of sentences with statements on differentiation, dominance, or democracy in the EU. It shows that these statistics are significantly higher in outlets from Germany. For example, we find that about 55 per cent of randomly selected sentences from outlets in Germany are about differentiation. This compares with only 16 per cent in Denmark and 24 per cent in the UK. Further descriptive analyses, which we report in Appendix 1, provide a similar pattern. While competence-based differentiation is the most common type in German outlets, Figure A1 shows that it is the territorial differentiation that features most frequently in outlets from Denmark and the UK[8]. Likewise, the most common source of differentiation-related statements originates from correspondents themselves in Germany, but from public figures in Denmark and the UK.

It follows from this that country differences in the way journalists inform and also raise critical concerns matter. EU correspondents in Germany speak more in the role of experts, whereas their counterparts in the UK and in Denmark appear more in the role of general translators trying to reduce complexity and provide easier explanations to their readers. This is also confirmed by Figure A1 indicating that news articles in Germany are mainly about EU differentiation in terms of division of competences (thus the more abstract level), whereas EU news in DK and the UK are mainly about territorial differentiation (thus the more general level). Differentiation in the UK and DK is discussed in relation to states and territories but not to law and its impact on empowering or disempowering individuals. What strikes us most is that only in Germany, EU law making is taken up and becomes an object of criticism, whereas the differentiated impact of EU law is almost completely ignored by EU correspondents in DK and the UK. Equally, questions of differentiation with regard to civil and political rights, freedom of movement and citizenship are rarely taken up by correspondents in all countries.

According to Figure A2 in the appendix, information about EU differentiation in German news indeed mainly originates in statements by EU correspondents as both experts and critical pundits, whereas in the Danish and British news, EU correspondents step back and tend to give more voice to political actors to talk about differentiation. Further, there seems to be a correlation in the case of Germany as shown in Figure 3, that whenever journalists make frequent references to EU differentiation (speak as experts), they also tend to become more aware of related normative concerns and tend to raise these. Overall, national journalism culture matters with regard to higher attention and sensitivity for EU affairs in Germany and lesser attention in the UK and in

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[8] All tables and figures pre-fixed with the letter A are in the Appendix.

DK. EU correspondents talk about differentiated integration quite differently, with much higher intensity in Germany and lower intensity in DK and the UK and with a focus on law and division of competences in Germany and a focus on territorial differentiation in DK and the UK and with sensitivity towards the normative implications of EU differentiation on democracy and dominance in Germany, and low attention to these normative issues in DK and the UK. EU-differentiated integration is not the same when explained to different national audiences as different issues and normative concerns are brought to the attention.
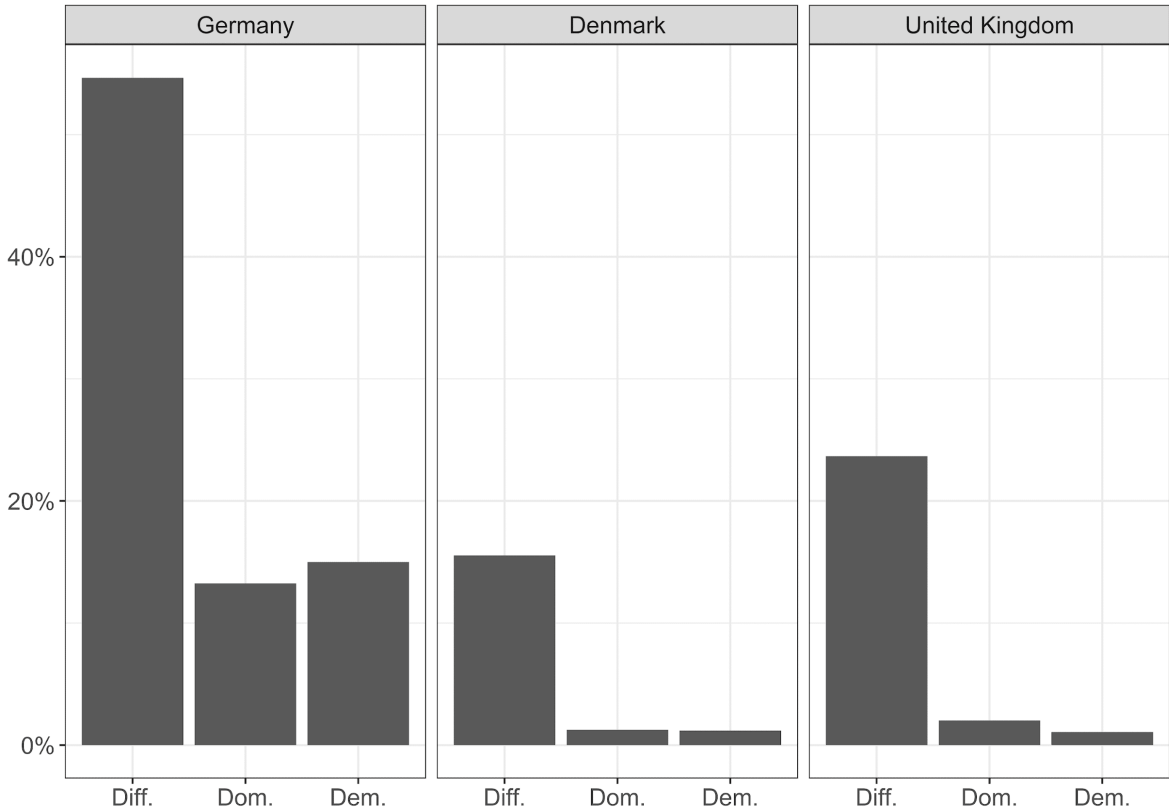

Figure 3: Share of sentences with statements on differentiation, dominance, or democracy in the EU.

The critical-evaluative dimension

From the literature on the normative dimensions of EU-differentiation (Fossum, 2019, Bellamy and Kroeger, 2021) we derive three critical questions that underpin the public debate about the EU polity's legitimacy: (1) Is EU differentiation sustainable? (2) Does it lead to domination? (3) Is it democratic? In the following, therefore, we assess the degree EU correspondents engage in such critical debates addressing the normative dimensions of EU differentiation and what types of responses are provided by them. Table 3 provides estimates from regression models of relationships between differentiation on the one hand, and sustainability, dominance, and democracy on the other. For each concept, we have two models: one for a dependent variable (*Related*) indicating any kind of − negative or positive − relationship and another (*Positively*) indicating only the positive relationships. Although these dependent variables are binary,

here we estimate ordinary least square regression models, for ease of interpretation. In Appendix 1, we provide a robustness check on this strategy, with logistic regression models. The results, provided in Table A1, remain the same. In terms of independent variables, we include indicators for whether these statements come from correspondents or not as well as the country of origin of outlets where these statements are published.

The results show that, in comparison to other actors, correspondents are in general less likely to make a statement on the sustainability of differentiation, but more likely to make a statement on the relationship between differentiation and democracy. The changes in these probabilities are –0.16 and 0.02 respectively, and these are statistically significant changes. We also find that correspondents are less likely to claim that differentiation is good for democracy. Specifically, the probability that correspondents will make such a claim is 11 per cent lower, in comparison to other actors. The remaining estimates for correspondents return statistically insignificant results.

Table 3: Ordinary Least Square (OLS) regression models.

	Sustainability		Dominance		Democracy	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	Related	Positively	Related	Positively	Related	Positively
Correspondent						
Yes	–0.16***	–0.01	0.01	–0.05	0.02*	–0.11*
	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.01)	(0.03)	(0.01)	(0.06)
Country						
DE	0.30***	–0.13***	0.19***	–0.03	0.21***	–0.21
	(0.02)	(0.03)	(0.01)	(0.05)	(0.01)	(0.11)

DK	0.12***	0.06**	0.02	−0.03	0.00	−0.30*
	(0.01)	(0.02)	(0.01)	(0.06)	(0.01)	(0.13)
Intercept	0.73***	0.55***	0.04***	0.95***	0.02*	0.80***
	(0.01)	(0.02)	(0.01)	(0.04)	(0.01)	(0.10)
Observations	4232	3498	4362	512	4360	449

Notes: *Related* refers to whether (1) or not (0) actors make a statement where differentiation is associated with sustainability, dominance, or democracy while *Positively* refers to whether or not these relationships are assessed to be positive. The UK is the baseline category for countries. See Table A1 for results from logistic regression models. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

In terms of analysing country differences, as our baseline country is the UK in the regression models, all comparisons are with outlets from this country. To start with Germany, we find that statements in German outlets are significantly more likely to relate differentiation to the remaining three concepts. For example, the probability that differentiation is evaluated in terms of sustainability is 3 per cent higher in sentences from German outlets. However, if a sentence does evaluate the sustainability of differentiation, these evaluations are more likely to be negative in outlets from Germany, compared to outlets from the UK. Specifically, the probability that differentiation is evaluated as sustainable is 13 per cent lower in Germany. This is in complete contrast to Denmark, where the same probability is actually 6 per cent higher than it is the case in the UK. As in Germany, Danish outlets are more likely to relate differentiation to sustainability, but not to dominance or democracy. Finally, differentiation is less likely to be seen as democratic both in Germany and Denmark, but this decrease in probability is statistically significant only in Denmark. In the UK, EU differentiation is thus more likely to be found sustainable and democratic, which is explained by the overall focus on territorial differentiation, which is supported by Brexit. When EU journalists report on what Leavers say, they are bound to include arguments that Brexit, as a form of territorial differentiation, is actually good for democracy (take back control, etc.). In Denmark, where EU correspondents equally put a strong focus on territorial differentiation of the EU, the normative assessments of journalists are much more negative, probably because territorial differentiation is less of an option for Denmark. In Germany, instead, there is a dominantly negative view expressed on EU differentiation by EU correspondents, but the focus shifts from territorial to functional differentiation (competence and law-making), which is largely seen as non-democratic.

Figure 4 plots the marginal effect of statements coming from correspondents, as opposed to other actors, in each country. These estimates are based on regression models with interaction terms between actors and countries, as reported in Table A2. It shows that all significant effects stem from the evaluations of differentiation in terms of sustainability. In all three countries correspondents are less likely than other actors to comment on the sustainability of differentiation in the EU. This is especially noticeable in Denmark and the UK. When correspondents do evaluate it, their evaluations are significantly more likely to be negative in Denmark and the UK. In Germany, correspondents' evaluations of sustainability of differentiation are slightly more positive than other actors, but this effect is not significant at the 5 per cent level.
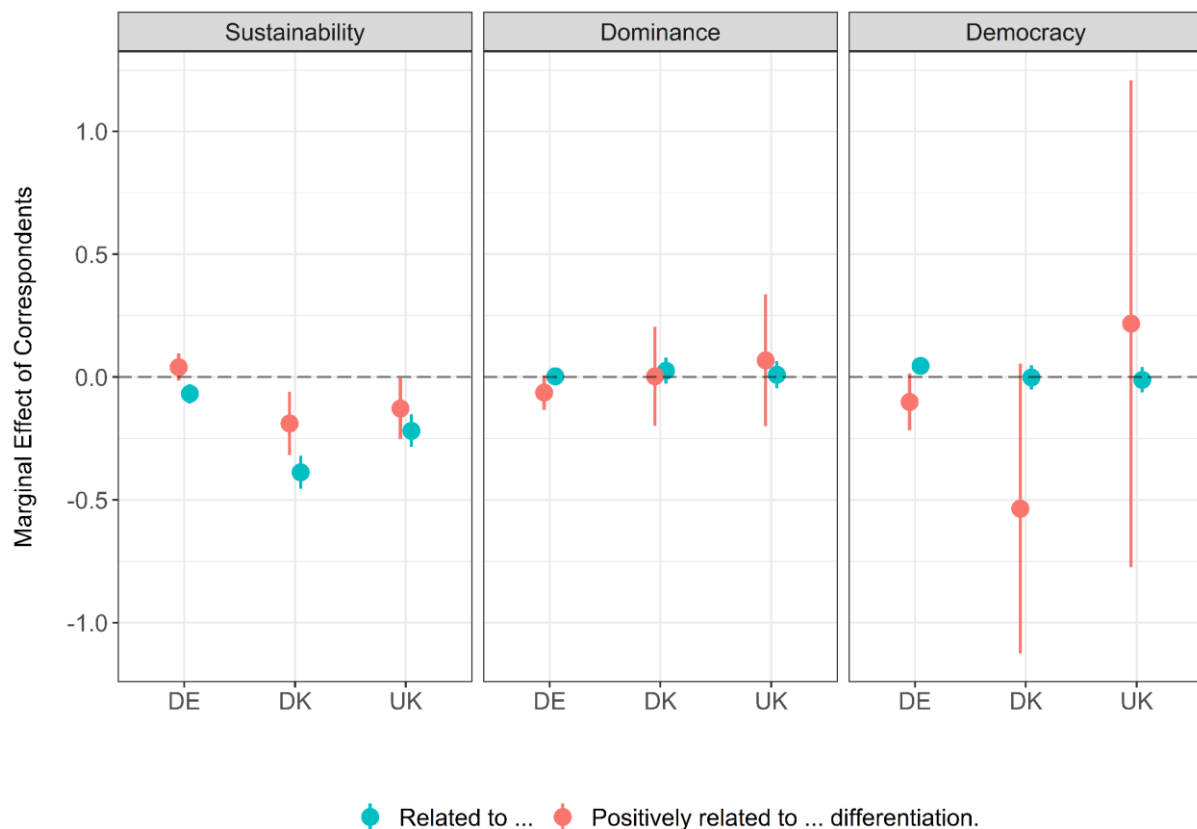

Figure 4: Marginal effect of statements coming from correspondents, as opposed to other actors, in each country. *Note*: *Related to* indicates whether (1) or not (0) actors make a statement where differentiation is associated with sustainability, dominance, or democracy while *Positively related to* indicates whether or not these relationships are assessed to be positive relationships. For underlying models with interaction terms, please see Table A2.

Discussion and conclusion

Our paper started from the premise that if citizens are to be in a position to make meaningful contributions to the debate about the future of the EU and the shape that differentiation within it should take, citizens need to acquire knowledge about the multi-level governance system that characterises the EU, about the division of competences between member states and EU institutions and about the differentiated integration process. We have further argued that at this critical junction for the EU polity,

high-quality professional journalists have a crucial role to play as a guarantor of democracy in the face of differentiated integration and growing complexity of governance. EU correspondents are best placed to function as translators of EU technocratic and differentiated governance, as they combine insights into the Brussels-based policy-making mechanisms with first-hand understanding of national politics and interests. We then set out to investigate how these two complementary functions of European journalism as experts of differentiated governance and as translators that make the EU understandable and accessible play out in the public sphere, when it comes to reporting on EU differentiation events or processes. We focused on EU correspondents' coverage in three 'most likely' EU differentiation cases: Denmark, Germany and the UK. In our analysis, we did not go looking for evidence of blanket-neutral or unbiased coverage of the EU but rather for balance of voices given publicity; of points of view regarding differentiation; and of type of coverage (i.e., balance between purely informative reports and editorials or other types of journalistic or expert analysis regarding differentiation, democracy and legitimacy).

We were anticipating one of three possible scenarios: One possibility would be that journalists professionalise and specialise as experts of EU governance; but then they may not necessarily succeed in translating EU into public parlance, but rather they replicate the hard-to-relate-to Brussels jargon. A second possibility would be that journalists focus on random details instead of systematically monitoring EU differentiated governance, selecting clickbait EU news without providing a cohesive narrative or bringing audiences closer to understanding the system that produces these noteworthy news bites. A third possibility would be that journalists succeed in translating EU jargon into public parlance but do so by differentiating along national lines and providing mainly news for national audiences and along national criteria of relevance.

Our findings point to the second and third scenarios as most likely developments when it comes to specialised EU reporting. On the one hand, and in line with numerous previous empirical studies (e.g., on EP election campaigns: Galpin and Trenz 2019; Michailidou et al. 2014), our analysis shows a divergence of the topical agenda that is covered by EU journalists: EU-differentiated integration is not the same when explained to different national audiences as different issues and normative concerns are brought to the attention of national audiences. EU correspondents are succeeding in translating EU jargon into public parlance, but the underlying criterion of newsworthiness remains the national interest, as does the framing, which is along national interest or political lines. On the other hand, differentiation as a topic features irregularly and overall seldom in EU correspondents' work, an observation which points to a tendency to report on random details rather than consistently monitor the EU's integration/differentiation process. The implication of this pattern of reporting is that the normative-critical dimensions of the EU's differentiated integration appear only fleetingly in professional news reporting, which, from a quantitative perspective, raises serious doubts as to the potential of EU correspondents' work to facilitate evaluative-critical discourse on EU differentiation. Nevertheless, the capacity for critical debate is not altogether absent – which is an indicator that EU correspondents are actually doing their job, to the extent that external pressures allow them to. To establish more concretely the effect that these critical interventions of EU correspondents have on public

discourse/public opinion regarding EU differentiation further research is needed, whereby critical pieces/op-eds are tracked in the public sphere, both as sources (i.e., the extent to which an op-ed is shared and replicated in other media, news or social) and as points of view (the extent to which we find the same opinion as that expressed by the journalist) is subsequently found and repeated by other public actors.

Recent developments in the way the Brussels Press Corps operates may further contribute towards higher visibility and influence of journalists' expert analyses of EU differentiation. Currently, the dwindling number of accredited Brussels correspondents, in combination with severe cuts in news media budgets across Europe, have meant that it is often one correspondent per news outlet – and sometimes only one for several news outlets or a whole country – who takes responsibility for the whole of EU coverage. Involving other journalists who might also wish to cover EU stories and need to specialise (for instance, specialists on EU agrarian policies do not necessarily sit in Brussels but might be found working for national or regional newspapers) would contribute to broadening the specialist views available to EU citizens and increase the likelihood of critical journalistic pieces appearing alongside more informational reports. The recent opening up of virtual EU briefings and press conferences represent a move in such a direction, even though it has been heavily criticised by existing accredited EU correspondents. Unlike EU differentiation as such, a move towards differentiated EU journalism could therefore arm the European public sphere(s) with better capacities for dealing with the complexity of EU differentiated integration.

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Appendix A — Further Analyses

Differentiation types

Figure A1 plots the shares of differentiation types in each country, in sentences that contain a statement about differentiation.
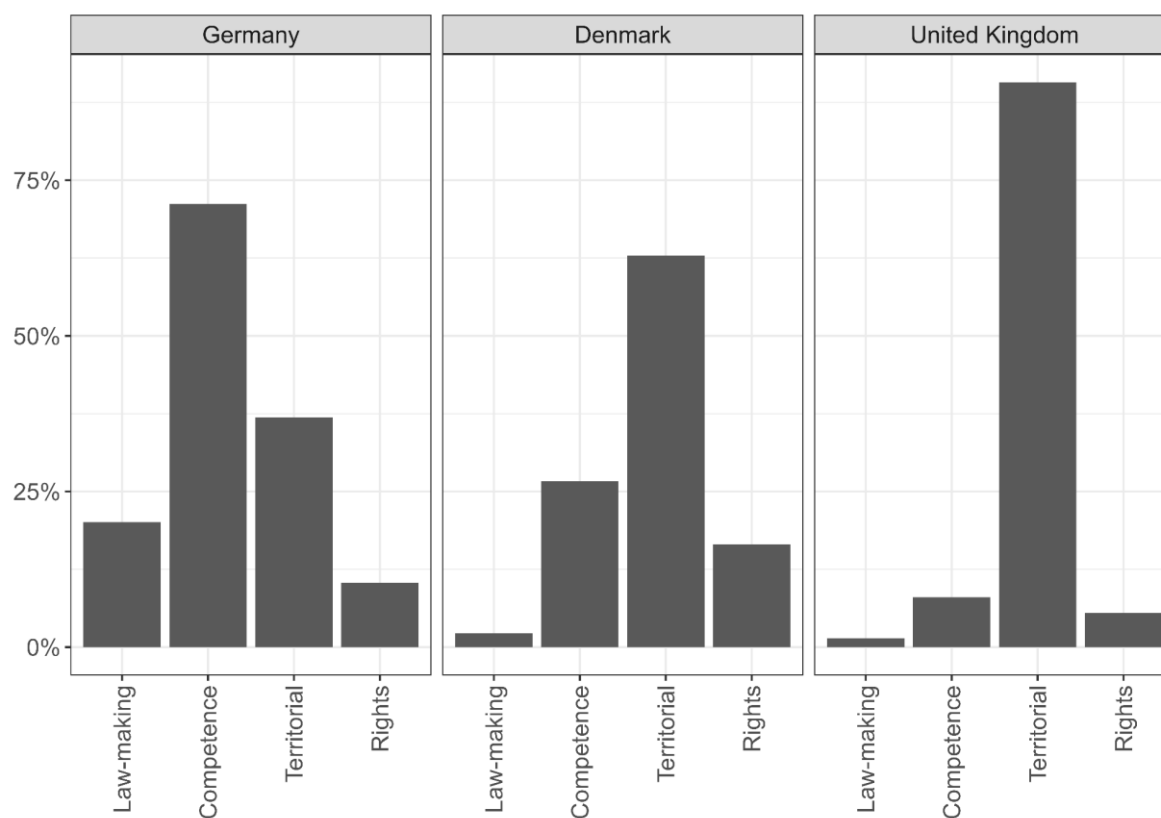
Figure A1: Differentiation types. Note: As a single sentence can constrain statements about more than one type of differentiation, the sums of shares do not equal to 100 per cent.

Statement sources

Figure A2 plots the sources of differentiation-related statements. It shows that most statements originate from correspondents themselves in the outlets from Germany. In contrast, in Denmark and in the UK, the members of the public sector, such as ministers or parliamentarians, are the main source.
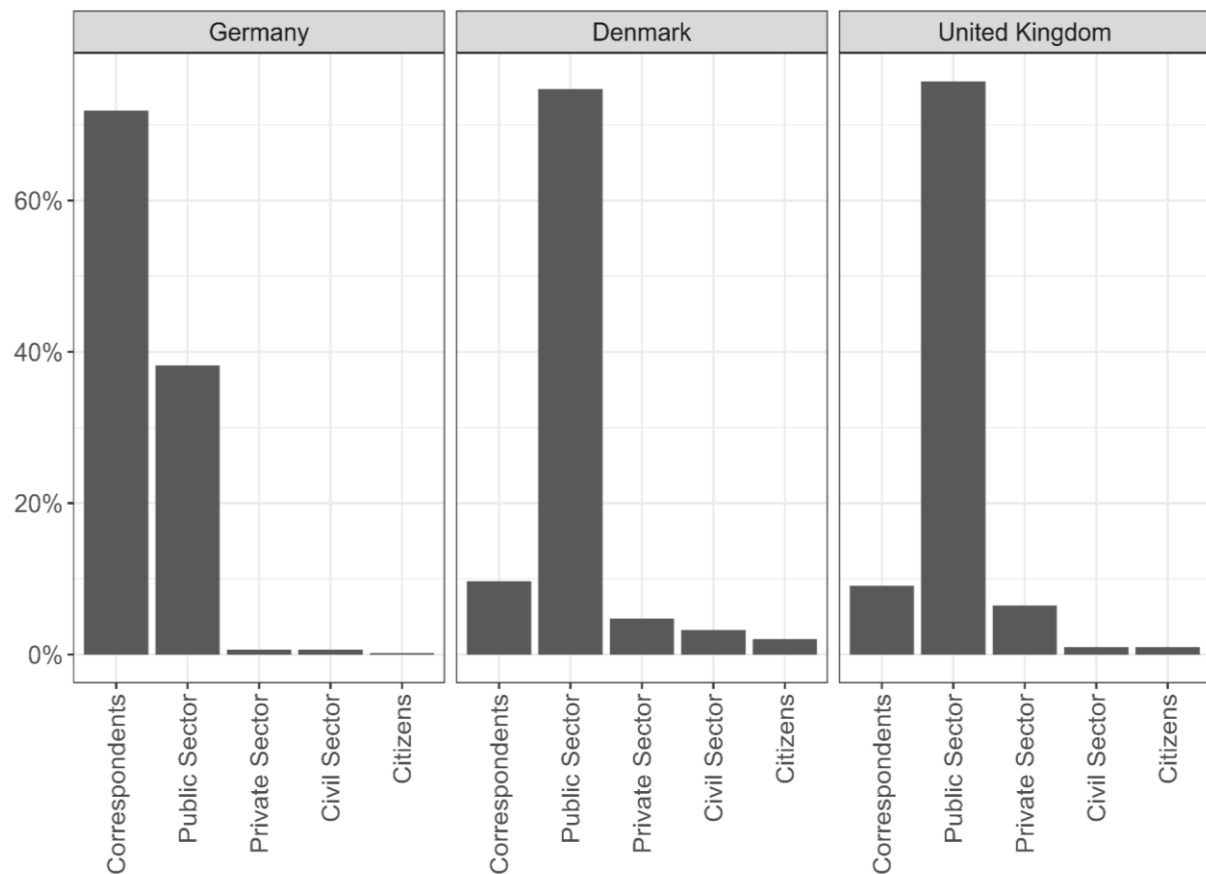
Figure A2: Sources of differentiation-related statements.

Migration and differentiation

Figure A3 plots the share of migration-related sentences, among the sentences that are coded as including a statement on differentiation in the EU. The time frame for analysis has been constructed around five important events related to the topic of migration through internal and external borders of the EU. Nevertheless, Figure A3 shows that only a small portion of our data is actually related to this topic.
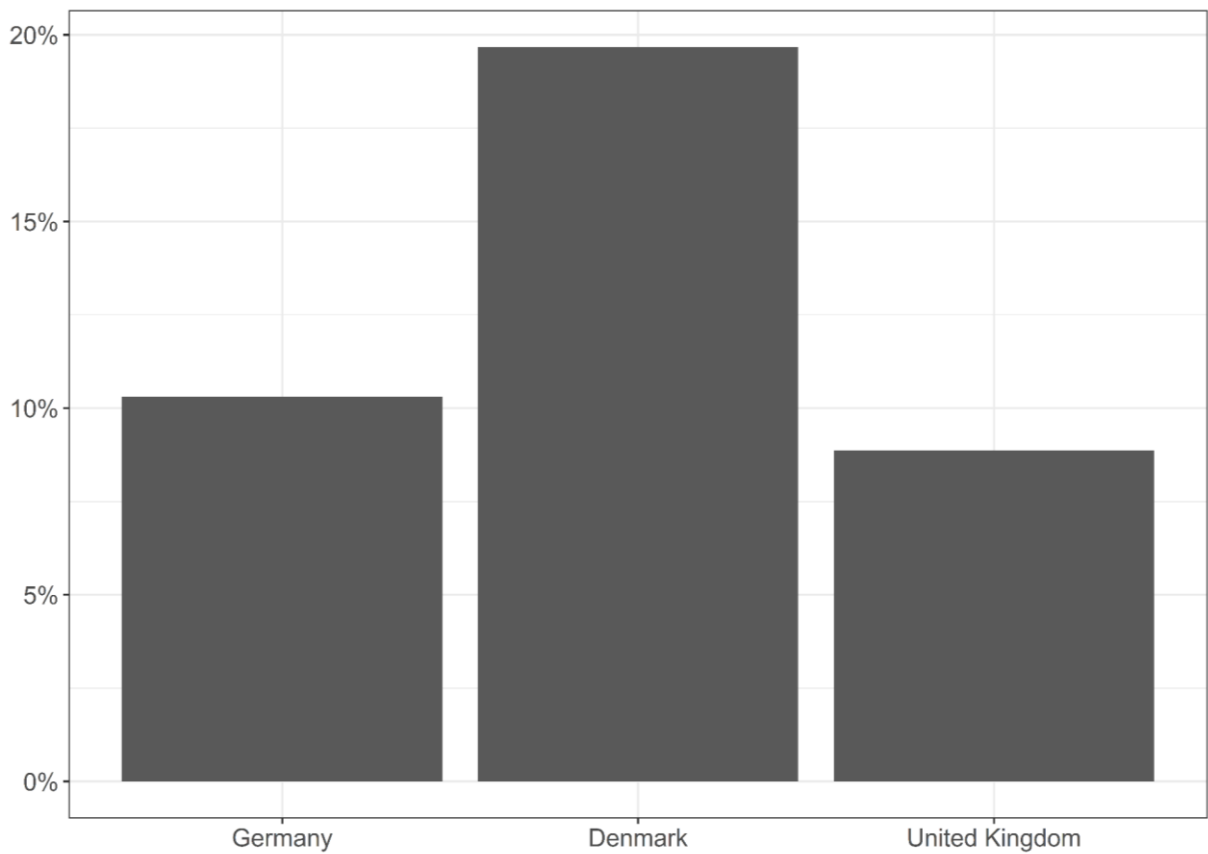
Figure A3: Share of migration-related sentences, among those coded as differentiation-related in the first place.

Logistic regression models

Although our dependent variables are all binary measures, in the main text we modelled them using ordinary least squares. In Table A1, we provide a robustness check on this strategy by using logistic regression models. The results do not change our conclusions.

Table A1: Logistic regression models.

	Sustainability		Dominance		Democracy	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	Related	Positively	Related	Positively	Related	Positively
Correspondent						

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Yes	−1.37***	−0.06	0.08	−0.52	0.21+	−0.46+
	(0.13)	(0.10)	(0.12)	(0.35)	(0.13)	(0.23)
Country						
DE	2.37***	−0.54***	2.01***	−0.45	2.71***	−1.02+
	(0.15)	(0.11)	(0.17)	(0.65)	(0.23)	(0.54)
DK	0.74***	0.25**	0.37*	−0.46	0.21	−1.38*
	(0.10)	(0.09)	(0.19)	(0.72)	(0.27)	(0.62)
Intercept	1.07***	0.21**	−3.25***	2.83***	−4.02***	1.36**
	(0.06)	(0.07)	(0.14)	(0.60)	(0.21)	(0.50)
Observations	4232	3498	4362	512	4360	449

Notes: *Related* refers to whether (1) or not (0) actors make a statement where differentiation is associated with sustainability, dominance, or democracy while *Positively* refers to whether or not these relationships are assessed to be positive. The UK is the baseline category for countries. See Table A1 for results from logistic regression models. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Models with interaction terms

Table A2 provides the regression models behind Figure 4 in the main text.

Table A2: Ordinary Least Square (OLS) regression models, with interaction terms.

	Sustainability		Dominance		Democracy	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)

	Related	Positively	Related	Positively	Related	Positively
Correspondent						
Yes	−0.22***	−0.13*	0.01	0.07	−0.01	0.22
	(0.03)	(0.06)	(0.03)	(0.14)	(0.03)	(0.51)
Country						
DE	0.23***	−0.18***	0.20***	−0.01	0.19***	−0.21
	(0.02)	(0.03)	(0.02)	(0.06)	(0.02)	(0.12)
DK	0.14***	0.06**	0.01	−0.03	0.003	−0.25
	(0.01)	(0.02)	(0.01)	(0.06)	(0.01)	(0.14)
Interactions						
Yes x DE	0.15***	0.17*	−0.01	−0.13	0.06	−0.32
	(0.04)	(0.07)	(0.03)	(0.14)	(0.03)	(0.51)
Yes x DK	−0.17***	−0.06	0.02	−0.07	0.01	−0.75
	(0.05)	(0.09)	(0.04)	(0.17)	(0.04)	(0.59)

Intercept	0.73***	0.56***	0.04***	0.93***	0.02*	0.78***
	(0.01)	(0.02)	(0.01)	(0.05)	(0.01)	(0.10)
Observations	4232	3498	4362	512	4360	449
R^2	0.086	0.037	0.082	0.010	0.124	0.032

Notes: *Related* refers to whether (1) or not (0) actors make a statement where differentiation is associated with sustainability, dominance, or democracy while *Positively* refers to whether or not these relationships are assessed to be positive. The UK is the baseline category for countries. See Table A1 for results from logistic regression models. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Appendix B — Codebook

Method

Qualitative content analysis of text in newspaper articles.

Unit of analysis

A sentence.

Variables

1. *eu3d:* **Does this sentence include a statement about differentiation, dominance, and/or democracy in the EU?**

   - **[0] No**

   - **[1] Differentiation**

   - **[2] Dominance**

   - **[3] Democracy**

Instruction:

Continue coding the remaining variables for this sentence, only if there is a differentiation-related statement in the sentence.

Definitions and Examples:

<u>Differentiation</u> covers both differentiated integration and differentiated disintegration, while "differentiated integration refers to specific features of the EU integration process, such as multiple speeds, exemptions, opt-outs and opt-ins, and questions of variable geometry" (Fossum, 2019, p.7). For detailed definitions of the types of differentiation, see variable 3.

<u>Dominance</u> is defined as "relationship or a circumstance wherein an actor (be that a person, an organisation, or a collective) can be arbitrary interfered with and/or manipulated" (Fossum, 2019, p. 2). There are several possible types of dominance referring to actors' "formal legal status; limits to or constrains on the actor's choice options; vulnerability or susceptibility to external influences; deprivation (material and emotional such as sense of self-worth); lack of or denial or recognition; undue impositions; and forms of exclusion" (Fossum, 2019, p.3).

Examples include:

- a powerful member state takes decisions informally without notifying those affected

- ECB acts beyond its bounds through undertaking a monetary policy that effectively trumps national fiscal policy

- Eurogroup side-lines parliaments

- European Stability Mechanism is regulated by international (not Community) law and its decisions are not accountable to the European Parliament

- there is a breakdown of coordination and governing no longer proceeds according to predictable rules but is the result of caprice and circumstances

- an actor knows that their interests and concerns will be affected but they don't know by whom, when and how

- an asylum seeker is denied legal standing or access to legal recourse

- a state is no longer recognised on a par with other states

- a rights-holder is stripped of rights or their rights are 'less worth'

- an actor experiences material loss or negative distributive effects that can be traced back to a wilful act or structural-institutional arrangement and not some natural disaster

- an actor is actively held down and controlled by another that it has not authorised

"<u>Democracy</u> is an arrangement whereby those subject to the law are able to understand themselves as the authors of the law. A key requirement for that is that citizens have private and public autonomy. Autonomy in turn enables democracy to combine a principle of justification with an organisational form for the handling of common affairs" (Fossum, 2019, p.12).

2. *immigration:* **Is this statement about immigration as well?**

   - **[0] No**

   - **[1] Yes**

   - **[2] Unclear**

3. *differentiation:* **What type of differentiation is the statement about?**

   - **[1] Law-making**

   - **[2] Competence-based Functional**

- **[3] Territorial**

- **[4] Citizenship and Rights**

- **[5] Unclear / Other**

Definitions and Examples:

<u>Law-making differentiation</u> refers to the proposals that argue for change in the relation between law-making arrangements and the relations between the executive, legislature and courts at a given level of government (EU level, member state level, regional level). The claims mostly refer to make-up of political system. This is about how power is functionally organised at a given level of governing (horizontally). This is about the democratic nature and quality of the EU, as understood in the structure of the system of governing and how accountability is structured: who is accountable to whom?

Examples include:

- The EP (or, the Commission, Council) becomes more (or, less) powerful in the law-making process in the EU.

- The law-making process involves more (or, fewer) actors at the EU level.

<u>Competence-based Functional differentiation</u> refers to the political system's scope of competence and the degree of functional specialisation: which issues and how many a governing system at a given level is in charge of, what kind and range of expertise it possesses, how that is organised, and how specialised this political system is. It focuses on the nature, range and scope of functions that are undertaken at a given level of governing (EU, national or subnational). It seeks to capture the role of expertise; the extent to which the EU is technocratic; the scope of expertise and possible built-in biases in the type of expertise that is available at the EU-level. It focuses on the type of expertise and policy specialisation: how many agencies, what type of agencies and the relationship between EU agencies and EU directorates. This dimension includes focus on the type and range of policy instruments: regulatory, fiscal, and monetary, shedding light on the EU's biases in terms of monetary union without a fiscal union; and the EU's strong regulatory imprint and its weak redistributive ability.

Examples include:

- A competence, the authority to control the borders, is transferred to (or, from) the EU, from (or, to) member states

- The EU establishes a new agency to accomplish a specific task.

- The EU army is created.

<u>Territorial differentiation</u> refers to set-ups in which not all EU member states take part in a common policy or institution. It also refers to the selective participation of third countries in EU policies.

Examples include:

- Ireland is not being the party of Schengen Area.

- The UK exits from the EU.

- Sweden opts out of using the euro as its currency.

- The EP passes a legislation that applies to only a subset of EU member states.

Citizenship and Rights differentiation refers to proposals that argue for issues connected with the nature and range of rights to persons, such as civil and political rights, freedom of movement, citizenship, etc.

Examples include:

- EU citizens can vote (and, stand for election) in local/municipal or EP elections only if they are resident in a different member state than their own, while the citizens of the recipient country can also vote in national elections.

- EU citizens resident in another member state gain (or, lose) certain rights and/or obligations.

- The EU creates new regulations for asylum seekers.

- An EU member state creates a special category of rights and obligations for British citizens resident in their country after Brexit.

Unclear / Other category is for statements about types of differentiation that does not fit in any of the categories above. However, please note that the following examples are not considered differentiation:

- An EU member state has a different culture, history, or identity than another member state.

- EU member states disagreeing on how to address a problem. For example, Germany would like to open the borders to refugees while Hungary would like to close them.

- The EU decides to sanction Belarus.

4. *actor:* **Who does the statement originate from?**

   - **[1] The reporter(s)**

   - **[2] Public-Sector Actors**

   - **[3] Private-Sector Actors**

- **[4] Civil-Sector Actors**

- **[5] Citizens**

- **[6] Unclear / Other**

Definitions:

<u>Public-Sector Actors</u> include, for example, commissioners/ministers, politicians, MEPs/MPs, bureaucrats, and their spokespersons.

<u>Private-Sector Actors</u> refer to those who own, or work for, for-profit businesses and industries that are not controlled by governments.

<u>Civil-Sector Actors</u> work for, or represent, non-governmental and non-business organisations such as universities (including private ones), trade unions, and charities.

5. *acceptability:* **Does the statement include a suggestion that differentiation is politically acceptable or sustainable?**

- **[0] No**

- **[1] Acceptable / Sustainable**

- **[2] Unacceptable / Unsustainable**

Definitions:

An <u>acceptable differentiation</u> is one that is framed as satisfactory. It is at least good enough to be initiated or to be allowed to continue existing, given the conditions – even if not great or otherwise ultimately desirable.

An <u>unacceptable differentiation</u> is one that must be rejected; altered, or completely removed if already in existence.

A <u>sustainable differentiation</u> is one that would continue to exist (if initiated) at least over a period of considerable time, irrespective of the framer's opinion as to whether it is (or, would be) acceptable or not.

An <u>unsustainable differentiation</u> is one that cannot continue to exist (even if initiated), irrespective of the framer's opinion as to whether it is (or, would be) acceptable or not.

6. *dominance:* **Does the statement include a suggestion that there is a positive or negative relationship between differentiation and dominance?**

- **[0] No**

- **[1] Positive relationship**

- **[2] Negative relationship**

Definitions and Examples:

<u>No</u> refers to sentences that do not relate differentiation to democracy in any way.

<u>Positive relationship</u> occurs when differentiation leads to more or emergence of dominance. In other words, the more we have differentiation, the more we have dominance.

<u>Negative relationship</u> occurs when differentiation leads to less dominance or removes it completely. In other words, the more we have differentiation, the less we have dominance.

Examples include:

- [Positive relationship] The UK has a weaker hand in the Brexit negotiations due to its small size compared to the EU

- [Negative relationship] A small EU member state is outside the eurozone, and therefore avoids being dominated by large eurozone states

7. *democracy:* **Does the statement include a suggestion that there is a positive or negative relationship between differentiation and democracy?**

    - **[0] No**

    - **[1] Positive relationship**

    - **[2] Negative relationship**

Examples:

- [Positive relationship] The UK leaves the EU because the majority of the electorate voted for Brexit in the referendum

- [Negative relationship] Due to the EEA Agreement, Norway is subject to rules decided by other states, but it cannot affect these rules because it is not on the table.