Brexit: are pro-European grassroots activists a community?

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"MY home, MY family, MY community, MY country" (Remigi, *In Limbo* 167)

When asking pro-EU activists during interviews how they would define "feeling European" the word "community" came up numerous times. Although people have made it commonplace, it is not used as broadly in social studies and has been a fertile field of research for decades. Why would pro-EU campaigners use this term? What connotation does the word "community" have in the context of militating against Brexit? Does it have any links with the structure or values of the Remain campaign? Or is it simply because the term "community" is widely used in public discourse in the UK? In this article we will focus on the notion of the European identity in the context of Brexit Britain and the people who fought against it. Empirical research was based on interviews with pro-European grassroots groups across the UK as well as in Europe, but also on fieldwork in the cities of Bristol, Liverpool and London. Being fully immersed in the pro-European movement has facilitated the understanding of the Remain campaign's identity at a local level along with the structure, organisation and networking of the movement. When, on 23 June 2016, 52% of Britons voted to leave the EU the remaining 48% saw their European dream shattered. Pro-Europeans and more particularly the 3.5 million EU citizens living in the UK, have been feeling unwanted, unwelcome and like second-class citizens ever since. Consequently, anti-Brexit activists decided to set up groups in their towns, villages and cities in order to be heard, but most importantly not to lose hope. Despite the rather sudden pro-European mobilisation, anti-Brexit activists have been successful in making their voice heard amongst politicians and the public sphere. They braved abortive political initiatives, fought side by side to keep the UK in the EU and still form, if not a community, a resilient and powerful defence against an entrenched anti-EU narrative.

1. Embracing European identity

Europe, like nations, is regarded as an imagined community (Anderson) and when the European Economic Community was created in 1957 Europe became a political, economic and cultural entity. One cannot deny the lack of self-identification with Europe amongst its different peoples. And yet Brexit triggered the dawning realisation of Remainers' attachment to the EU. If we refer to the *Cambridge Dictionary* the term "community" is defined as: "people living in one particular area or people who are considered as a unit because of their common interests, social group, or nationality." Moreover, among the *Oxford English Dictionary*'s

(OED) numerous definitions one may agree with: "a group of people who share the same interests, pursuits, or occupation, especially when distinct from those of the society in which they live". In his book *The Symbolic Construction of Community,* Cohen gives the following definition, suggesting that: "the members of a group of people (a) have something in common with each other, which (b) distinguishes them in a significant way from the members of other putative groups" (Cohen 12). Finally, in *Signifying Europe* Johan Fornäs affirms that "Europe [is] a political and cultural community—a collective of human subjects who identify themselves as members of this community" (Fornäs 50). Pro-Europeans may feel part of the same community and yet they have their own interpretation of what being European entails. In this first part, we shall look at how pro-European activists perceive Europe and the EU and to what extent European identity has filled the vacuum left by Brexit.

Measuring attachment to the EU

The Eurobarometer special report covering forty years of surveys of public opinion and attitudes says that, "European identity is multi-faceted, and that being a European means many different things to different people" and reveals that "culture, history and the economy are the elements that most create a feeling of community among EU citizens" (European Commission *40 years Eurobarometer*). What's more, looking at the UK figures more closely, for winter 2020-2021 Eurobarometer's survey showed that 35% of Britons thought that the EU conjured up a positive image (European Commission *EB94*) while in summer 2020 a small majority (54%) believed people in the EU had a lot in common (European Commission *EB93*). However, there has been a decline of attachment to the EU and an increase of its rejection since summer 2020. Indeed, 37% declared they felt attached to the EU as against 35% in Winter 2020-2021, while 65% did not feel attached. In 2019 69% of British people thought that the freedom to travel, study, live and work anywhere in the EU was what the EU meant (European Commission *EB92*), and this was shared across the other member states: it was "the first thing that most Europeans associate with the EU, and this has been the case every time this question has been asked in Eurobarometer surveys" (European Commission *40 years Eurobarometer*). Yet, when the UK officially left the EU on 31 January 2020 at 11pm (UK time) it put an end to this privilege to move freely across European borders; and shocking stories about Europeans being detained at British airports were relayed in the press after the transition period which ended in December 2020 (Tremlett and O'Carroll).

Brexit has undoubtedly challenged the notion of identity which occupied a strong place in the Remain campaign. It has questioned and redefined what people thought of as their city, town, home and as a result what they call their community. But what do pro-Europeans identify themselves with exactly?

Symbols

The EU community's symbols and their meanings are salient as they make communities in people's minds less abstract and help define its boundaries which can be hard to mark off: as Thomas Risse explains, "the use of symbols such as flags, national anthems, and national currencies—all these mean to construct a nation-state as 'real' and to reify its existence" (52). EU symbols act as identity bearers for EU supporters and were powerful mediums used to enhance their visibility during marches.[1] Even though Britain made the decision to opt out of the Schengen System and the euro, this did not prevent Remainers from being attached to the EU in its entirety. Conversely, being an EU citizen was clearly not enough to feel European since, in the Brexit referendum, 52% of the UK electorate voted to leave. When asked, expatriates and grassroots groups all found it challenging to define Europe or what it meant for them, personally, to *be* European. Oddly enough, they did not refer to its symbols but rather enumerated values, ideas and concepts:

> [Respondents] linked notions of identity not to physical institutions, places, communities or 'things' but almost universally to abstract concepts and values centred around themes of 'openness,' 'tolerance,' 'respect for others,' 'multiculturalism,' 'progressiveness,' 'democracy,' 'rule of law,' 'solidarity,' 'decency' and 'civilised behaviour.' (Foundation for European Progressive Studies Young Academics Network 17)

What's more, interviewees all had a personal interpretation based on the impact the EU has had on their lives: "[s]ymbols, then do more than merely stand for or represent something else. […] They also allow those who employ them to supply part of their meaning. […] But their meanings are not shared in the same way. Each is mediated by the idiosyncratic experience of the individual". In other words, "[people] share the symbol, but do not necessarily share its meanings. Community is just such a boundary-expressing symbol. As a symbol, it is held in common by its members; but its meaning varies with its members' unique orientations to it'" (Cohen 14-15). Indeed, the way people picture the EU is very personal and idiosyncratic. Not only does it reflect their own life story through EU's values, principles, and symbols, but also their personal experience which translates what Europe represents and what it means to be European. Another key fact to remember is that it is not because Remainers share EU values and principles that *being European* means the same to all anti-Brexit activists: though that did not prevent them from uniting against Brexit.

European identity is a collective identity; it is "we" as Europeans and during marches activists held banners on which one could read: "We are Europeans." Belonging to a local anti-Brexit grassroots group (be it online or physically) gave pro-Europe proponents a sense of purpose

[1] Anti-Brexit campaigners would proudly wave EU flags, paint their faces in EU colours and yellow stars.

and despite the end of People's Vote,[2] the failure of Change UK[3] and the Tories' landslide victory in the 2019 general election, activists fell on their feet and rethought their campaign objectives.

European identity

Deprived of their European identity, Remainers have experienced an identity crisis, that is: "a period of uncertainty and confusion in which a person's sense of identity becomes insecure, typically due to a change in their expected aims or role in society" (OED). Furthermore, Linda Colley argues that "we usually decide who we are by reference to who and what we are not" (Colley 311). Besides, one may remember what former Conservative Prime Minister Theresa May said in 2016: "But if you believe you are a citizen of the world, you are a citizen of nowhere. You don't understand what citizenship means." This sentence still resonates in EU advocates' minds and sums up the Conservative government's attitude since 2010. What does it actually mean to feel European in the UK?

Although pro-EU proponents embrace their European identity and form a homogenous body, it is impossible for all Europeans to know each other, hence the term "imagined communities." In the words of Risse: "Yet, even imagined communities have to become 'real' in people's minds in order to invoke feelings of attachment and loyalty. We can only identify with a group that we consider 'for real' even if we do not know each member personally" (52). Indeed, according to Risse, "Europeans on average know one another and trust one another, indicating a sense of community amongst strangers" (92). As a result, anti-Brexit activists have had different experiences with the EU, and it remains an elusive task to try and define what being European entails. Indeed, one can assume that even though they may have their own interpretation of what being European means or how it feels to be European, it did not prevent them from making a strong anti-Brexit alliance thanks to values, ideas, symbols and stories they might share. Indeed, Fornäs explains that while defining Europe is tough to pin down, "the complex diversity of Europe therefore need not necessarily annul the idea of a European identity. It only puts high demands on interpreting how elements of such an identity are spun around the symbols used for signifying what Europe means" (2).

Leaving the EU means that British citizens are deprived of their European citizenship and EU nationals have to gather the required documentation to be able to legally remain in the UK. In

[2] People's Vote was a pro-EU national campaign group militating for a final say on the Brexit deal. The organisation was set up in 2018 by the following politicians: Andrew Adonis, Ros Altman, Sharon Bowles, Jonathan Edwards, Stephen Gethins, John Kerr, Caroline Lucas, Anna Soubry, Jo Swinson, Chuka Umunna, and Dafyyd Wigley. It ended only a couple of weeks before the 2019 general election due to internal conflict.

[3] For a more detailed account on Change UK see Aouanes-Perrière, « Pro-European grassroots groups resisting Brexit ».

winter 2020-2021, the Eurobarometer poll confirmed that 81% of Britons felt attached to their country (European Commission *EB94*). However, 53% also considered themselves as EU citizens (European Commission *EB92*), which means that despite being British half of the country acknowledged their European citizenship as a second identity. On the one hand, Risse clearly states that Great Britain was the "odd one out" in terms of acceptance, integration or identification with Europe and the EU: "Great Britain is the least Europeanized country with regard to both identity and public sphere" (471). On the other hand, British political elites have never even tried to frame Europe and the EU in constitutive rather than interest terms. Besides, British identity is already hybrid in essence since people are also either English, Scottish, Welsh or Irish, and the European identity added an extra layer with the Maastricht Treaty (1992-3): according to Ashcroft and Bevir, "many Remain voters identify as European, which adds another layer of complexity to the conflict between plural national identities" (356). In addition, Risse talks about the "Europeanisation of identities" and "crises and critical junctures" which may influence the shift towards a European collective identity. Indeed, according to him, unlike France, Spain or Germany, Great Britain "never experienced such a crisis with regard to the EU" (201), but Brexit has certainly had an impact on Remainers a majority of whom became conscious of their European identity after the referendum results: hence the late anti-Brexit mobilisation. One can say that Brexit personifies that crisis and has made pro-Europeans question their national identity as well as the environment surrounding them:

> traumatic experiences and massive inconsistencies between cognitive schemas and beliefs, on the one hand, and novel information or experiences of failure, on the other, which then trigger identity change. […] Wars, revolutions, sudden regime change, and other crisis events should lead to profound changes in the way in which people make sense of the world including their collective identities. (Risse 89)

Rejection of British identity

Furthermore, with the idea of community comes a sense of belonging. Just like identity, belonging was a central element in the pro-EU movement as activists felt like the government had torn out a part of who they were, as well as their values, principles and fundamental rights hitherto guaranteed by the EU. For some, Europe has certainly filled an identity vacuum triggered by Brexit:

> Most activists […] found a desire to preserve their community as the most important motive for their activism. […] Remainers focused on their "love" for Europe and its cultural, geographical or historical richness. They then placed both the English and the larger British community in the broader context of a European community. (Siklodi)

In her book *In Limbo Too*, Elena Remigi explains that "the issue of identity is complex." She adds : "Another common theme throughout these testimonies is a sense of a loss of identity,

and being forced to choose between different aspects of one's identity" (xii). On the day after Britain's second referendum on European membership a part of the British population, but more particularly many EU citizens, woke up with a sense of loss and bewilderment. Indeed, Brexit has been associated with grief, which comprises five stages: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and finally acceptance:

> How do I feel today? Well, having gone through the 'cycle of grief' like many other EU citizens, I feel I am slowly reaching the bargaining stage (i.e., after all this, could I possibly live elsewhere? I'll have to I guess!). I have spent days and sometimes weeks in the state of anger, then denial and throughout winter was most definitely going through a depressive state. (Remigi, *In Limbo* 223)

On the other hand, some Remainers have rejected their British identity as it has been triggering feelings of anger, frustration and shame: "I am truly ashamed to be British. I am a European citizen and I always will be. I will fight this stupid decision to ruin all our lives until my last breath if necessary" (Remigi, *In Limbo* 217).

Since Brexit some EU supporters have lost their sense of Britishness and feel ashamed of their country, especially many of those living in the EU who were unable to vote since they left the UK more than 15 years ago. For some, Britishness has been destroyed by the Eurosceptic narrative, nationalism and populism, promoted by political parties such as UKIP since the 1990s. It has been widely reported that British migrants living in the EU are ashamed of the outcome of the referendum. Xandra McCarthy, a former Economics teacher who retired to France, decided to apply for French nationality. In our interview she said: "I wish to be French, not British. I feel like a stateless person at the moment, I don't feel British"; or Eileen Basgallop, a 63-year-old woman who used to work for British Telecom, who also asked for French citizenship: "I don't want to be British! I was ashamed to be British after [Brexit]." Or again, in 2018, Brenda Ashton, head of the *Liverpool for Europe* campaign exclaimed:

> I am deeply ashamed, and I would go on being ashamed [...W]hat people usually like about Britain is the organisation, the tolerance, you know, the liberalism [...] I grew up in the nation where people were not allowed to apply for a flat to rent if they were Irish, Black or had dogs, you know that's what it was like in the 1950s [...W]e have laws against these things and with the last debate they had about the EU withdrawal bill, they are not going to replace the charge of fundamental rights, they're just not going to replace it [...] They think they're above the law.

The pro-EU movement is not so much an alternative to the status quo but rather an addendum if not a new lease of life for pro-European politics in the UK which obtained impressive results in the 2019 local and European elections. But is being a member of an anti-Brexit group the same thing as being a member of a community? How might these two things be linked?

2. United in solidarity

"Obviously we are united in solidarity—we all wanted the same thing and still want the same thing, meaning we want to rejoin, we want to find our way back to the EU somehow"
(Brenda Ashton)

Where does a community start and where does it end or as Cohen puts it: what are its "boundaries"? By this Cohen means*:* "The boundary marks the beginning and the end of a community. [...T]he boundary encapsulates the identity of the community and, like the identity of an individual, is called into being by the exigencies of social interaction" (12). Pro-Europeans distinguish themselves from Brexiteers, who are thus excluded from their group as they share different perspectives on the EU. The desire to stop Brexit opposes them to those who, if one uses the Leave campaign slogan, wanted to "take back control" and who blamed Brussels for the loss of sovereignty. Yet, Brexit triggered a sense of confusion and uncertainty. Is being European enough to be part of the European community? As 52% of the electorate voted to leave, one can conclude that despite being European a part of the electorate rejected the idea of belonging to the EU:

> It also necessitates that we do not simply ascribe social identities to a group because of some similarities that they share. For example, we cannot deduce a European identity from the fact that citizens from EU member states also hold EU citizenship. Essentialist or substantialist conceptions of identity typically assume that membership in a social group constitutes that group as a community of fate, as if belonging to an ethnic identity and a sense of common purpose. (Risse 39)

In this second part we shall try to describe the different parameters of the anti-Brexit movement based on fieldwork in the UK and testimonies collected by Remigi. Although there was an attempt at coordinating the Remain campaign on a national scale, grassroots groups were set up and developed locally. Groups are named after their town or city and activists put the emphasis on recruiting residents trying to make European politics accessible to a wider audience and to refute anti-EU myths.

Fieldwork

From 2017 to 2021 I conducted interviews and fieldwork in the UK to investigate anti-Brexit organisations that had formed locally. Most of what I say here is thus based on empirical evidence collected through face-to-face discussion and participatory observation. Interviews comprised of a series of questions on the origins, identity, organisation, structure, objectives and network of the grassroots groups. Moreover, observatory participation in the cities of Bristol, London and more particularly Liverpool enabled me to see the movement in action and also to understand the emotional charge which held these people together.

Pro-European grassroots groups are independent non-profit-making cross-political organisations, operated by ordinary citizens for whom Brexit was a mistake. Indeed, EU progressive and liberal values are what activists tried to defend ardently. Groups were associated with a safe space where Remainers could share how they felt: "The day after the Referendum, I started a support group on Facebook for 'EU citizens in the UK and Brits living abroad,' and we have grown in number since. We share the same worries and fear" (Remigi, *In Limbo* 162). Indeed, Remainers found support and individuals they could connect with: "I am actively seeking other foreigners to become friends with on social media [...]. At least with them, I feel safer, with like-minded people, who understand my fears and worries because they have the same" (189). What's more, the group The3million[4] has been militating to protect EU citizens living in the UK. It is "the largest campaign organisation for EU27 citizens in the UK, formed after the 2016 EU referendum to protect the rights of people who have made the UK their home." Indeed, this not-for-profit organisation has been providing EU migrants with a space of support and hope for some:

> In the run up to the Referendum my husband and I campaigned in the streets, we organised a local event to teach our neighbours about the EU and we hoped that Brits would see sense in the end. I felt as if someone had died on that terrible day. I felt my idyllic image of Britain had been shattered and everyone was against me and my family. [...] Nine months on and I am actively campaigning locally, and I spent all my free time working with the pressure group the3million standing up for our rights. (Remigi, *In Limbo* 129-30)

> A few days later, I see people are starting to organise. My friend invites me to be part of a group. 'Bradford says no to racism, Bradford says everyone stays!' This picks up my brain… it will keep my brain busy, and hopeful. Yeah, it reminds me it's not totally out of control, we can organise, we can… 'We'? There's hope! […] We have the power to challenge! It's not 'them vs us' anymore, it's a 'We'… We are Bradfordians together! I get to network with people who accept us, who care about our family, my friends and any other migrants. We, with the kids, get together to do placards with Wur Bradford, we give out leaflets and posters, we create new groups to do petitions to challenge the government not to use us as bargaining chips… We link up with national groups such as the3million, we speak out. (Remigi, *In Limbo* 214)

Collective action

The "Revoke Article 50 and remain in the EU" petition gathered over 6 million signatures[5] and the London marches hundreds of thousands of EU supporters—rebelling against the new political status quo—created special bonds between them. Indeed, having a common goal gave activists hope but also the strength to denounce what felt like injustice and distress. What's more, preventing Brexit was Remainers' ultimate objective as well as preserving citizens' rights

[4] Its name refers to the 2.9 million EU nationals living in the UK at the time which they rounded up to 3 million.
[5] The petition was closed on 20 August 2020.

until 31 January 2020 when the incumbent Conservative government announced that the UK had officially left the EU.

Pro-EU national rallies made all the grassroots and pro-EU activists from all over Europe come together under the slogan: "Stop Brexit. It's not a done deal." At the start, activists protested against the Referendum results, then gradually in 2018 campaigned for a public vote on the deal, in March 2019 for a second referendum and finally, in October 2019, people marched for a popular vote on the Withdrawal Agreement terms. Protesters came to London together as groups on coaches, trains, cars (and even planes!). All met at the same place, wore the same colours, the same tee-shirts, badges, hats, face paint, sang in unison, shouted the same slogans, held the same signs, walked at the same pace, in the same direction to form one single group: a pro-EU, anti-Brexit gathering. They prepared for the marches months in advance and made signs, stickers, placards, banners, leaflets etc. so that their mobilisation would be visible. In addition to large-scale demonstrations, they also organised street stalls on a weekly basis, leafleting, local events, and wrote extensively to MPs and to the press.

Each group has its own identity, starting with their names and also with what they wore. They sold and put on customised tee-shirts, badges, flags, all sorts of accessories with the emblem of their town or city,[6] which reinforced their identity at a local level as well showing allegiance to the European Union. Each local branch has a name, usually referring to the town or city it represents with a European twist to it (e.g. *Liverpool for Europe*), thus reinforcing the idea of community since not only did they want the UK to remain in the EU, but also to help their community warn and protect residents and local businesses from economic repercussions. Activists could show moral support by showing up to street stalls and marches, helping out with leafleting and/or providing financial support by donating money to the group. Political activity included lobbying local MPs, signing petitions or commenting and posting on social media. Pro-Europeans encouraged residents to lobby their local MPs by writing letters and postcards and some groups even provided templates online. It was also the opportunity for them to respond to people's worries, discuss politics and compare opinions. People were invited to fill in forms so they could receive updates on Brexit and local pro-EU events. But they were also invited to inform national groups about the different issues raised by leaving the EU, as well as how people voted in the 2016 referendum, in the 2019 EU election and how they might have voted if a second referendum had been held. By doing so groups were aware of what constituted a priority and what was secondary, so that they could be more efficient at a local level. The answers people provided helped the grassroots groups to orientate their approach and strategy for their campaign even though they were misused by the national group

[6] For instance, *Liverpool for Europe* combined the EU flag and the liver bird.

Open Britain.[7] It is clear that Brexit has not only strengthened a European sentiment nationally but also locally with the consolidation of cities' and towns' identities: activists campaigned for Europe in the name of their local community, whereas the national organisation they were affiliated to was secondary. Amongst their strategies, acting on a local level to influence soft-leavers and swing voters was considered as the most efficient way to curb Brexit.

However, is fighting for the same cause a sufficient, if necessary, condition to constitute a community? Do pro-Europeans in the UK form a community? Or is it rather the idea that being European is to belong to a community?

3. Is community the key to a successful pro-EU campaign?

"We must become masters of understanding our own communities"
(Grassroots for Europe, *Breakout Session*)

Pro-EU supporters coalesced to combat Brexit but more particularly Eurosceptic politicians and their sympathisers by condemning the economic, social and political consequences Britain could face if it left the EU. Brexit revealed disagreements within the EU electorate in the UK as voters did not seem to be united on the political front. Indeed, some EU supporters did not vote for former Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn[8] in the 2019 general election and the Liberal Democrats failed to attract Conservative Remainers living in rural areas, fighting Labour instead for the same electorate when they campaigned to revoke Article 50. As for Labour, in the light of the 2019 general election, they vacillated between keeping their youth demographics in the cities and holding on to the working-class electorate at the same time. Mike Galsworthy[9] insisted on the importance of community and the need to centre the campaign around it:

> [Labour and the Lib Dems] did zero work in those communities where they should have been working hard and we should've as well, working with those of our communities and we need to turn around saying: 'this is what it means to your lives, this why your loyalty, your identity should be bound in community: local, national and international, for your protection.' (Grassroots for Europe, *Breakout Session*)

[7] Open Britain jealously guarded data and money sent by the grassroots which eventually led to its collapse in 2021—see Aubrey Allegretti, "Lead campaigner in People's Vote group quits as director", *The Guardian*, 12 Aug. 2021.
[8] J. Corbyn wanted to reunite the country and please both sides of the electorate. In 2019, his party finally opted to support a second referendum in the aftermath of the EP elections where it arrived third behind the Brexit Party and the Liberal Democrats. Corbyn still claimed a neutral position with on the one hand a people's vote with a remain option and on the other hand a renegotiated deal with a customs union with Brussels.
[9] Mike Galsworthy is the founder of Scientists for EU, a pro-EU national organisation which has been campaigning for the preservation of an EU-UK Science partnership since 2015.

Indeed, the lack of collaboration and sensible workshare between national and local groups was one of the reasons why the Remain campaign failed.

One must note that "British political elites have never tried to frame Europe and the EU in constitutive rather than interest terms. Moreover, they have left the identity discourse to the Eurosceptics on the right and the left—and to the tabloids" (Risse 471-472). It is obvious that Brexit left pro-Europeans with a challenge: to restore a positive image of Europe in an anxiety-inducing climate. Indeed, the anti-EU rhetoric prevailed and, when reflecting on their campaign, Remainers acknowledged their failure and conceded that promoting fear (i.e. Brexit consequences on British society) was not an effective nor an auspicious message. In this last part we shall focus on how campaigning locally and privileging communities are both key in order to achieve better results for pro-Europeans in a post-Brexit Britain. We will also see what strategies anti-Brexit activists have put in place to restore a positive EU rhetoric and what they have put in place to keep the issue alive.

The campaign

In January 2020, after the Conservative's crushing victory in the 2019 general election and a few days before the UK legally left the UE, pro-Europeans took the opportunity to re-evaluate their campaign's objectives. "Grassroots for Europe"[10] organised a national conference at Central Hall, Westminster. "Where Now for Remain?" brought together 450 activists representing 250 local groups from all over Europe. The aim was to get some feedback on the Remain campaign and to re-evaluate objectives: to re-join the EU and promote proportional representation. The meeting showed a real collaboration between the groups with clear objectives such as focusing on lobbying the Labour party and local businesses.

Grassroots organisations used their local community as an existing network to recruit members. One of Jasper and Poulsen's recruitment theories relied on the anti-nuclear movement in the USA. In 1984 1,000 people demonstrated against the Diablo Canyon nuclear plant and "family and friends" appeared as one of the main factors which made them join the movement. It is worth noting that although the initiative to stop Brexit was national the recruitment took place locally: "That's what resonates with people [...] it's about family, friends, people in your workplace, people you know: that's what people listen to, not the blanket wall of the media [...] and hoping that there's going to be a trickle-down" (Grassroots for Europe, *How we lost again*). Indeed, *Best for Britain*, one of the main national campaign organisations clearly states in its *Grassroots Guide to Local Campaigning*:

[10] Grassroots for Europe "is a network of over 250 local pro-EU campaign groups. [Their] aim is to support the activities of all groups, regardless of affiliation, by sharing knowledge and expertise, facilitating links between groups and their members, and backing innovative grassroots campaign initiatives" grassrootsforeurope.org.

> Local campaigners-like you-are vital. I cannot hope to develop your understanding and deep personal knowledge and connection with your community. But as a movement, we need to use all our assets. That's why distinct, unique local campaigns are needed to complement our national campaigning. (Best for Britain)

What's more, in 2020, when reflecting on their campaign anti-Brexit activists concluded that focusing on the concept of community was essential to the longevity of the movement: "[Mike Galsworthy] stressed the need for community-based messaging. Electors were deaf now to national media on this issue. Local people, family members, even the publican—these were key influencers. We must become masters of understanding our own communities" (Grassroots for Europe, *Breakout Session*).

One of the rapporteur's notes stated that social media were not pivotal in the fight against Brexit. Indeed, they relied too much on them and they concluded that "[t]his year's campaign [2020] should be about how to do politics more effectively. The marches had no real impact and we need a better method this year" (Grassroots for Europe, *Breakout Group D*). Indeed, according to William Wallace: "We have not yet discovered how to build national narratives that are compatible with globalisation, to create and maintain a sense of shared and multi-level community above and beyond the nation state" (205). The Brexit referendum on EU membership reflected not only a deeply divided country but also the rejection of Europe and globalisation in general. The author later adds:

> The failure of successive British governments to develop an alternative narrative to that of Anglo-Saxon exceptionalism over the 25 years since Margaret Thatcher's resignation was compounded in the referendum campaign by the failure of the Remain campaign to present a positive or emotional case for continued European engagement. (206)

EU narrative

It took Leavers several decades for Eurosceptics to build an anti-Europe narrative and to succeed in mastering their rhetoric as they managed to get Brexit through: "all the work that we have been doing as a community was then taken from our hands and put in the hands of people who run those parties. In the general election you are asking people to vote for parties, so their leaders, their messaging, their infrastructures is what dominated" (Grassroots for Europe, *How we lost again*). To Brenda Ashton from *Liverpool for Europe*: "Our messaging was boring […] the EU is about bringing nations together with all the emotions that I feel as an EU citizen of unity, solidarity, all these things."

Remainers must therefore be patient and Denis MacShane[11] suggested: "the narrative should be that we should identify as Europeans. We should be proud of that. The EU is a political

[11] Denis MacShane is a British politician and former Labour MP who served as Minister of State for Europe from 2002 to 2005.

project that we are still part of. We needed to get out of our bubble and find our 3-word slogan: Brexit Isn't Working was suggested" (Grassroots for Europe, *Breakout Group D*). What's more, anti-Brexit campaigners need more inspirational people to promote the EU movement and presumed that disputing Leavers' lies did not bear fruit. Indeed, re-establishing a pro-EU message across the UK seemed to be the priority in the aftermath of the 2019 General Election. Indeed, pro-Europeans have decided to "stop wasting political energy on arguing with trolls" (Grassroots for Europe, *Breakout Group D*). According to campaigners to persist in saying that Brexit was a mistake might deter pro-Europeans from supporting the Remain movement. Nevertheless, Brexit fatigue and then the Covid-19 health crisis have both severely weakened the campaign. Thus, it remains a real challenge to keep the issue alive and to ensure they continue to be informed on the subject as "the Government will introduce many other policies: commission on constitution, updating Human Rights to avoid the Brexit debate. Remainers must be ready to scrutinize these policies as well" (Grassroots for Europe, *Breakout Group D*).

Conclusion

> [I]t's a community of states that I have been a part of, it's a community of languages, it's a community of states. I strongly believe in community, I am, if you like, a communist in that sense, I am not an individualist, so it fits all my way of thinking. And I also believe it helps keep peace amongst Europe for such a long time and that's one of the things I feel very strongly about, so breaking that up may well start to cause division instead of unity. It's about unity; it's celebrating differences between the states but within a base of unity. (Meadows)

When the UK left the EU, it was the first time a British government had deprived its citizens of some of their rights: in February 2021 the European court handed down the verdict that British citizens living in the EU would not be able to keep their pre-Brexit rights, a decision which angered pro-Europeans who consider EU citizenship as "one of the most significant achievements of the union" (Henley). Undoubtedly the anti-Brexit mobilisation forms a strong alliance of activists who, in spite of never being involved in any kind of protest in the past, have managed to get together to fight for the same cause. Moreover, the groups succeeded in joining forces thus creating a national and European network as British expatriates set up grassroots organisations in the EU as well. Since the 2019 General Election and in the aftermath of the failure of People's Vote and Open Britain, the local grassroots groups remained united and invested money in local Facebook groups growing "from 100,000 followers to collectively over 600, 000 followers incidentally since the general election and is still growing and *that* is what we need to be building on now, because that's what resonates with people" (Grassroots for Europe, *How we lost again*). Anti-Brexit activists continue to stand up for European values and one can say that they form a community not just in UK towns and cities but also nationally and beyond borders. The main objective for activists who have been promoting the EU is to

keep supporting EU citizens, to campaign for proportional representation and re-join even though not all activists might agree on what should be the main priority.

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