

Good and bad memories in the construction of European identity: A frame analysis on Germany's attachment to the European Union

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Abstract

This study examines the impact of national memory on the construction of Germany as a member state devoted to the European project and identity. More specifically, it attempts to understand, in a comparative manner, what functions “good” and “bad” memories play in Germany's attachment to the European Union (EU). The aim of this inquiry is not only to reveal the main historical events and episodes that shape German leaders' perceptions with regard to the EU, but also to detect the degree of differentiation between the “good” and “bad” memories in this process. In order to fulfill this task, the study focuses on the Merkel era, which covers the period from 2005 to 2021. Through inductive frame analysis, it explores the historical frames utilized by German leaders in relation to Germany's attachment to the European project and identity. The relevant dataset covers the texts of speeches delivered by Chancellor Merkel, as well as those of foreign ministers and federal presidents who held office during Merkel's chancellorship. In light of the findings of this textual analysis, it is emphasized that national memory is a significant element in the construction of Germany's European identity, given the high frequency of history-related frames. Yet “good” and “bad” memories serve distinct functions, as good memories are translated into Germany's sense of debt and gratitude, while bad memories are framed as lessons that underscore the importance of the European project and identity.

Keywords

Germany, European Union, national memory, frame analysis, Merkel

Introduction

The attachment of member states to the European Union (EU) might stem from various incentives, ranging from security and economic needs to strategic orientations. This study, however, examines the impact of an ideational factor, namely that of national memory. More specifically, it analyzes the functions of national memory in the construction of Germany as a member state devoted to the European project and identity. Within this context, it seeks

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to understand, in a comparative manner, what functions “good” and “bad” memories play in Germany’s attachment to the EU.

In fact, as an ideational determinant of foreign policy at the domestic level, national memory may play a significant role in the definition and development of the foreign policy of states. As underlined by Krotz (2015, 6-7), a country’s orientations in foreign, security, and defense policies are hardly *ad hoc* or somehow emerging in a temporal or historical vacuum dissociated from the past, outside its shadows and untouched by its imprints on the present. Historical events may therefore have particular meaning as well as obligatory force for a nation, because the idea of “who we are” is significantly shaped by where we think we come from (Kratochwil 2006, 16).

As a matter of fact, national memory cannot be considered merely as a record of past events, because it is the intersubjective outcome of a series of ongoing intellectual and political negotiations (Berger 2004, 83). Indeed, as underlined by Reus-Smit (2008, 401), such a singular conception of history would run against the grain of constructivist history. Instead, states should be viewed as the bearers of national memory, which corresponds to their national interpretation of their own history (Bachleitner 2021, 2). It is in line with this perspective that this study examines the linkage between interpretations of Germany’s past and perceptions of the European project.

While undertaking this inquiry, this study focuses on one of the most significant periods in recent German history, namely the Merkel era. Through a comprehensive textual analysis, the study explores the historical frames utilized by German leaders in relation to Germany’s attachment to the European project and identity. Hence, it discusses how “good” and “bad” memories are framed as a prominent driving force behind Germany’s attachment to the EU. The following section addresses the dataset of the study as well as how the relevant dataset is assessed through inductive frame analysis. In light of the findings of the textual analysis, the second section highlights Germany’s strong attachment to the EU, while the third section discusses how this attachment is framed as a responsibility emanating from history.

On the basis of this evaluation, the concluding section underlines that national memory is a significant element in the construction of Germany’s European identity, given the high frequency of history-related frames utilized by German leaders. This memory, however, is multilayered in the sense that it does not consist solely of traumatic experiences. This means that Germany’s tendency to promote the European project and identity is not only a reaction to the Nazi era. Instead, the relevant memory incorporates various episodes

and events, some of which are interpreted as “fortunate,” while the remaining ones are considered “disastrous.” This bifurcation manifests itself in the differentiation of the functions played by the “good” and “bad” memories. While the good memories are translated into Germany’s debt of gratitude, the bad memories are framed as a lesson that demonstrates the importance of the European project and identity.

1. Data and Method: Unveiling the functions of national memory through inductive frame analysis

In recent decades, the number of scientific studies utilizing frame analysis has increased in the social sciences. However, the intellectual roots of frame analysis go back to the work of the Canadian-American sociologist Erving Goffman in the 1970s. As its name implies, in his book *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*, Goffman focuses on the organization of experience by individuals. Simply stated, he suggests that people always face the question “What is it that’s going on here?” when they recognize an event, and that they are inclined to answer this question through frameworks, which serve as schemata of interpretation (Goffman 1986, 8–21). In other words, for Goffman, these frameworks, or simply frames, are the key mechanisms in the organization of experience.

In the aftermath of Goffman’s work, the organization of experience by individuals and also by social groups on the basis of frames inevitably attracted the attention of other branches of the social sciences. Within this context, frame analysis flourished especially in the field of communication studies. Robert Entman’s (1993) article dedicated to the process of framing in the early 1990s gave impetus to the utilization of frame analysis in communication science (Vliegthart & Zoonen 2011, 101). In these studies, framing is mostly conceived and examined as the manner in which the media represent a particular issue (Van Gorp & Vercruysse 2012, 1275). On the other hand, political scientists often resort to frame analysis in order to analyze the effects of the frames adopted by the media and politicians in the political sphere. This means that frame analysis is utilized for various purposes depending not only on the branch of social science, but also on the perspective of the study.

An inclusive perspective on the process of frame formulation, which is also embraced in this study, can be found in the writings of Donald Kinder and Lynn Sanders, as they emphasize that frames lead a double life. More specifically, they contend that, on the one hand, frames are internal structures of the mind that allow people to order and give meaning to the events they witness; on the other hand, frames are also devices embedded in political

discourse, produced and utilized by political elites, usually with a view to advancing their own interests or ideologies (Kinder & Sanders 1990, 74).

In parallel with the aforementioned definition and perspective on framing, frame analysis has been employed for two different purposes in the social sciences literature. On the one hand, frame analysis serves as a tool to “read minds” by detecting the perceptions, thoughts, or opinions of individuals or social groups on the basis of textual analysis. Given that frames are “internal structures of the mind” and reflect the essence of an issue in the eyes of the actors, it is possible to shed light on the perceptions of these actors through frame analysis. On the other hand, when considering frames as lenses that highlight certain parts of a story, thereby providing the audience with guidelines interpreting it (Wunderlich 2020, 1114), frame analysis can also assist in unveiling the strategic narratives employed by actors.

It is with this understanding that, for the detection of historical frames regarding Germany’s attachment to the European project and identity, the statements of German leaders are examined through frame analysis. This examination covers the sixteen-year period of the Merkel era. Accordingly, the dataset includes speeches delivered by Chancellor Merkel between 2005 and 2021, as well as those of ministers of foreign affairs and federal presidents who held office during Merkel’s chancellorship.

During Merkel’s chancellorship, four politicians—Frank-Walter Steinmeier, Sigmar Gabriel, Heiko Maas (from the Social Democratic Party [SPD]), and Guido Westerwelle (from the Free Democratic Party [FDP])—served as ministers of foreign affairs, while four individuals—Horst Köhler, Christian Wulff, Joachim Gauck, and Frank-Walter Steinmeier—assumed office as federal president. Through the examination of the frames that manifest in the speeches of these individuals, it becomes possible to assess whether representatives from different political parties share similar perspectives. This is especially valuable with regard to the duality between the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and the SPD, which constitute the two dominant forces in German political life.

To access the texts of the speeches delivered by these decision-makers, the official websites of the Federal Government (<https://www.bundesregierung.de>), the Federal Foreign Office (<https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de>), and the Federal President (<https://www.bundespraesident.de>) were consulted. As the aim is to investigate the relationship between perceptions of the past and the EU, the analysis focused on German leaders’ speeches that referred to the EU. Hence, the keyword “European Union” was entered into the search fields of the respective websites. All speeches containing references to the EU were

extracted and subsequently analyzed. The dataset comprises texts produced by eight different German leaders.¹

During the examination of the texts, an inductive approach was employed. According to Semetko and Valkenburg, inductive and deductive approaches represent the two main methodological options in studies employing frame analysis. They maintain that the inductive approach entails assessing the data with an open perspective, seeking to reveal the array of possible frames, whereas the deductive approach involves predefining frames in order to determine the extent to which these frames manifest in the textual data (Semetko & Valkenburg 2000, 94). In the latter case, the common practice is to rely on preexisting theoretical and empirical knowledge as the basis for constructing deductive framing categories (Touri & Koteyko 2014, 603).

As a matter of fact, history-related frames adopted by decision-makers may encompass a broad spectrum of themes. Since this study seeks to unveil all historical frames rather than focusing on a particular period or event, no initial coding scheme was established. Stated differently, no specific frame was defined in advance, in accordance with the inductive approach employed in the study. While investigating history-related frames, references to national history were coded and then sorted based on their meaning. This means that the array of relevant frames was identified upon completion of the textual analysis.

The coding process was carried out in two steps. In the first step, remarks indicating Germany's attachment to the European project and identity were highlighted. This attachment can manifest in distinct ways but should essentially imply that Germany (1) does not question its membership in the EU and instead remains committed to the European project, (2) perceives the EU as a beneficial project rather than a threat to national interests, and (3) advocates its "Europeanness" in contrast to nationalist discourses. Both explicit and implicit references to any of these aspects were considered indicators of Germany's attachment to the EU.

In the second step, the underlying motives behind this attachment were investigated. During the textual analysis, it was observed that German leaders linked their country's attachment to the EU with several factors. These included economic considerations, such as access to a large export market (Merkel 2017); security-related concerns, such as the management of transnational challenges (Maas 2019a); and normative objectives, such as the promotion of democratic

¹ Frank-Walter Steinmeier served as federal minister for foreign affairs in the first Merkel cabinet (2005–2009) and in the third (2013–2017), before becoming federal president in 2017. The dataset therefore encompasses his speeches from these different political offices.

values on the global stage. However, given this study's focus on the impact of "good" and "bad" memories on Germany's attachment to the European project and identity, only historical references were coded and quantified. More specifically, in this second step of the coding process, the analysis examined which historical frames were recurrently employed by German leaders in constructing Germany as a member state devoted to the EU.

The human coding method was chosen for the assessment of each speech text with the aim of extracting the implicit meanings embedded in the texts. Conducting the analysis solely on the basis of the presence of particular words and relying exclusively on software would risk overlooking a significant number of references to historical frames that require interpretation. To prevent this undesired outcome, the statements of decision-makers were analyzed manually by the author. Nevertheless, the benefits provided by software programs were not overlooked. Since the dataset comprises a very large number of units, a software program, namely MAXQDA, was used to organize and classify the results of the textual analysis, which are discussed in the following sections.

2. Germany's attachment to the European project and identity: The EU as German *Staatsräson*

The allegiance of member states to the European project may vary from one country to another and undergo transformation over time. This, however, has not been the case for Germany. The speeches delivered by German decision-makers highlight a solid and continuous commitment to the EU. Between 2005 and 2021, there was no statement that questioned Germany's membership in the EU. Similarly, over these sixteen years, the EU was never framed as an entity that conflicted with or harmed Germany's national interests. Instead, German leaders consistently advocated the European project and affirmed their country's European identity through the promotion of a "European Germany," while emphasizing the added value of this orientation for Germany and its people.

Indeed, throughout the Merkel era, German officials promoted the European project and framed their country's attachment to the EU as the appropriate and necessary orientation. The promotion of European integration and the recurrent emphasis on its benefits appeared to become a natural reflex for German leaders when articulating their views on the EU. Conversely, opposing orientations, namely Euroscepticism and nationalism, were firmly denounced. "A Europe without the EU" was conceived by decision-makers as a dangerous scenario, as they perceived a deterministic relationship between Germany's fate and that of the EU. In this sense, the leading figures of the

German executive never questioned the added value of the European project, nor their country's participation in this structure.

It should also be emphasized that it is not only the recurrence of statements affirming Germany's attachment to the European project and identity that underscores the strength of this orientation. In addition, the terminology employed by German officials further demonstrates the centrality of the EU for Germany. While it is common for a member state of a regional or international organization to declare its attachment to that organization, German decision-makers go beyond such conventional declarations.

For instance, President Köhler (2006) stated that the European project resides in the heart of the German people and that it would always constitute Germany's core political interest. Similarly, Foreign Minister Westerwelle (2012a) declared that the future of Europe is Germany's reason of state. While characterizing the EU as part of Germany's "DNA," President Gauck (2017a) emphasized that he could not imagine Germany leaving the European project. This commitment was also highlighted by Foreign Minister Haas (2019b), who declared that the success and further development of the European project is, and will remain, Germany's national core interest and part of its reason of state. Chancellor Merkel (2020a) reiterated this view, stressing that, for Germany, the commitment to a united Europe is part of its reason of state.

Overall, these statements reflect the centrality of the EU for German foreign policy. As the decision-makers considered the European project the pivotal element of foreign policy, they repeatedly declared their country's attachment to the EU. They further emphasized that Germany regards itself, first and foremost, as a European country. For instance, President Steinmeier (2020) maintained that his country had opted for a European Germany and that Germany would continue resolutely on this path. In a similar vein, Westerwelle (2012b) stated that Germany does not want a German Europe but a European Germany, while emphasizing that there can be no promising future for Germany without a united Europe. While expressing these views, German leaders frequently referred to historical events and episodes that illustrate the perceived linkage between the past and present orientations.

3. Framing the attachment to the European project and identity as a responsibility emanating from history

The textual analysis highlights that national memory is a significant element in the construction of Germany's European identity. This is because the dataset comprises over three hundred statements that frame Germany's attachment to the European project and identity on the basis of its own history. More

specifically, during the Merkel era, German leaders employed history-related frames a total of 302 times, which demonstrates a strong linkage between perceptions of the past and the European project.

Indeed, among German political elites, there is a shared understanding that national history prescribes embracing the European project and identity, and that a glance at this history demonstrates the added value of the EU. For instance, Chancellor Merkel (2007a) stressed that it is history that compels everyone to fight for the European project and to pass it on to future generations. For his part, Westerwelle (2012c) declared that it is Germany's historical duty to equip the EU with solid foundations. Furthermore, in the eyes of German leaders, it is also history that mandates them to stand against those who criticize the EU. President Steinmeier (2017), for instance, underlined this perspective with the following statement: "We must not abandon this precious heritage [EU] and leave it to the opponents of Europe. We must preserve, maintain and improve it—that is our historic mission." As can be observed in these remarks, history is framed as an essential motive to advocate for the European project.

On the other hand, German decision-makers rarely frame national history as a generic concept. This means that, rather than solely employing the term "history" as a frame supporting Germany's attachment to the European project and identity, they usually refer to specific historical events and episodes. Hence, there exists a multitude of historical elements that are conceived as incentives to promote the European project. These subframes include "the painful European history," "the German question," "the Nazi past," "the dictatorship of East Germany," "the readmission to civilization," and "the German reunification" (Table 1).

Table 1: *Subframes of the historical responsibility*

Subframe	Date
Painful European history	Centuries of "bloodshed" (civil wars, world wars, etc.)
German question	Different episodes of German/ European history (Prussia, etc.)
Nazi past	1933-1945
Dictatorship of East Germany	1949-1990
Readmission to civilization	Post-World War II
German reunification	1990

In the statements of German leaders, the subframe “painful European history” is based on the perspective that the foundation of the EU constitutes a turning point in the entire history of the European continent. More specifically, it signifies that European history, of which Germany was a part, had been characterized by constant interstate conflicts, civil wars, and other human-made disasters over centuries, whereas the EU has enabled the conclusion of this dark chapter of history. President Steinmeier (2019a), for instance, describes the EU as the best idea the European continent has ever had, since it brought an end to centuries of wars that resulted in the deaths of millions. Like Steinmeier, Chancellor Merkel (2007b) defines the European unification process as a lesson drawn from centuries of bloody conflict on the continent and considers its foundation a reversal of history.

With regard to the subframe “painful European history,” it should be emphasized that certain episodes of this centuries-long period are perceived by German leaders as particularly important. These are, namely, the two world wars that broke out during the first half of the 20th century. For German politicians, in order to understand the value of the European project, it is sufficient to examine the consequences of the two world wars and the suffering they caused for both the German and European people. Accordingly, they have invited those questioning the utility of the European project to visit the military cemeteries, such as Verdun (see, for example, Maas 2018).

Euroscepticism is indeed strongly rejected by Germany on the basis of “the painful European history.” At a time when Euroscepticism increased following the Eurozone crisis, Westerwelle, for instance, warned against renationalization in light of the conflicts in European history. He (2010a) insisted that those who question the European idea solely because of the Eurozone crisis have learned nothing from history or from the consequences of the wars in Europe. This view was reiterated by President Steinmeier. For him (2019b), everyone should be aware that they are fortunate to be united in Europe and that nationalistic tendencies should never again be an option for the continent, considering its historical legacy.

As illustrated by these examples, German decision-makers have consistently promoted the European project while rejecting nationalist agendas, based on the experiences of the pre-EU period of European history. This is primarily because they consider the EU to be a guarantor that prevents a return to “the painful past.” This perception is also evident in the remarks of Chancellor Merkel (2010): “The European continent has achieved something that had not been possible for centuries. The nation-states of Europe have waged wars against each other for centuries. The EU is the guarantor that this will not

happen again.” Within this context, the European project is described as an entity that rules out the possibility of a recurrence of “painful history.”

In the eyes of German politicians, the current period of peace should never be taken for granted, as the Europeans could once again face a conflictual period. This means that, in their view, there is always a risk of reliving the same suffering, which can be prevented through remembrance and continued attachment to the EU. With this understanding, Maas (2019c) asserts the following: “It’s important not to forget history. Because remembering it makes it clear what a great treasure the united Europe is. And even if war in Europe is, thank God, unimaginable today for our peoples, the following still applies: Nothing is irreversible.” Thus, the conflict-ridden part of European history is not perceived as something that has been buried once and for all. On this point, the EU is believed to function as a mechanism that prevents such recurrence.

Besides the “painful European history,” the “German question” is another subframe that supports Germany’s advocacy for the European project. In essence, it suggests that the EU has enabled the resolution of one of the central issues in European and German history, commonly referred to as the “German question.” On this point, it should be emphasized that it would be erroneous to equate the German question with a single event in German history. This is because the term, employed for different purposes depending on the context, may carry multiple connotations.

On the one hand, the German question is associated with the power vacuum created by the dissolution of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation at the beginning of the 19th century. This development intensified debates regarding the reorganization of the former states of the Old Reich (Kerren 2021, 58), which ultimately culminated in the unification of Germany and the proclamation of the German Empire in 1871. However, this only gave rise to another iteration of the German question. This time, instead of an absence of power, the issue concerned the concentration of excessive power at the center of the continent by Prussia. More specifically, in the eyes of other European countries, Germany was seen as a source of destabilization due to its size and central location, with its ambitions culminating in the destruction of Europe in two world wars (Kundnani 2015, 9-21).

The post-Second World War period was also marked by the emergence of new iterations of the German question, as the future of Germany became one of the most complex issues among the Allied powers (Steininger 2001, 9). Consequently, Germany was divided into two states, and the status of Berlin remained a central source of tension between the Western and Eastern blocs.

A further episode of the German question arose towards the end of the Cold War, this time concerning German reunification.

As these examples illustrate, the German question manifests through diverse historical phenomena but fundamentally centers on the peaceful integration of a united Germany into the European political system. From this perspective, resolving the German question entails Germany's peaceful incorporation into the European and international order without posing a threat to other actors or being perceived as such. German decision-makers regard this aspect of the German question as a central paradox in German history and frame the EU as the definitive solution to this dilemma. In other words, they see the EU as a project that prevents the German question from resurfacing, thereby underscoring their commitment to the EU.

For instance, Maas (2020) designated the EU as the only definitive answer to the German question, which, according to him, had plagued the European continent throughout the past century. When advocating the European project, Minister Steinmeier (2015) similarly argued that the EU remains the only convincing solution to the German question. Notably, Westerwelle frequently invoked the subframe of the German question, portraying the European project as its resolution in many of his speeches. According to him, European integration ensured the elimination of the question in the past, yet he emphasized that it continues to fulfill this role today. Within this context, Westerwelle (2010b) maintained that the settlement of the German question is, in itself, sufficient reason to continue promoting the EU. This view also implies that the suppression of the German question depends on the continued existence of the EU, while the absence of the latter could give rise to a renewed episode of this chronic issue in German and European history.

As for the subframe of the "Nazi past," it highlights the link between support for the European project and the darkest chapter of German history. During this period, the totalitarian regime established in Germany pursued, on the one hand, irredentist policies that paved the way for the deadliest war in modern history, and on the other hand, committed unprecedented crimes against humanity. Analysis of the dataset reveals that German politicians frame commitment to the EU as a direct response to this dark episode in their national past. Accordingly, they argue that, in light of the crimes committed by Nazi Germany, national history imposes a special responsibility on Germany, namely the promotion of the European project.

Indeed, on several occasions and across different time periods, German decision-makers have framed their country's attachment to the EU as a responsibility emanating from the Nazi past. For instance, according to

President Steinmeier (2019c), Germany's commitment to the European integration process represents a lesson drawn from this dark chapter of history, a lesson that must be preserved and passed on. This connection between the Nazi past and Germany's dedication to the European project has also been emphasized by German officials during visits to countries that were ravaged by Nazi Germany. One such instance can be seen in the following statement by Foreign Minister Maas (2021) during his visit to Serbia:

We are very aware of these serious crimes committed by us, Germans, on the territory of today's Serbia. [...] We will never forget that. And my government has a special responsibility to preserve the memory of everything that happened here back then and, above all, to commemorate the victims. In my view, the answer to this dark chapter of German and European history was and is the European integration.

For her part, Chancellor Merkel (2008a) emphasized the need to remember these crimes in order to understand the value of the European project and to take the right steps toward the future:

Unspeakable suffering was brought to Europe and to the world from German territory. The incredible breach of civilization, Shoah, was committed in the name of Germany. We can only shape the future if we keep the memory alive. Only when we recognize this, we remain aware of [...] what a miracle the peace work of European unification is.

These examples suggest that the Nazi past serves as a driving force behind Germany's embrace of the European project. German decision-makers believe that the atrocities of the past demonstrate the importance of the EU, while also placing a special responsibility on Germany. Moreover, Germany's participation in European integration is framed as a response to the former "nationalist" Germany, one that has been replaced by a new, "European" Germany, in large part thanks to the EU.

The subframe of the "Nazi past" also manifests in Germany's rejection of Eurosceptic and nationalist tendencies. During his visit to Italy, President Wulff (2012), for instance, emphasized that Germany and Italy, in particular, must oppose Eurosceptic rhetoric, as both nations have experienced the destructive consequences of extreme nationalism. As this example illustrates, Germany rejects any deviation from support for the European project toward Euroscepticism, as the latter is closely associated with the country's Nazi past. In other words, national memory concerning the Nazi era serves

as a motivating factor for Germany to distance itself from Eurosceptic and nationalist discourse.

As for the subframe of the “dictatorship of East Germany,” it represents a primary point of intersection between the state and individual levels. This is because the subframe appears in the speeches of German leaders who spent part of their lives in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) before reunification. These include Angela Merkel and Joachim Gauck, who served respectively as the first Chancellor and the first Federal President of reunified Germany hailing from the GDR.

The evaluation of their speeches indicates that their attachment to the European project is also shaped by Germany’s division into two states and by their personal experiences under the authoritarian regime established in the GDR, which they designate as a dictatorship. This connection is evident in the following statement by Chancellor Merkel (2020b): “Let me say this personally: As a German, as someone who lived in the GDR for the first 35 years of her life, Europe [...] still fills me with great gratitude and with the obligation to support this European promise with all my strength.”

For his part, President Gauck (2017b) stated that, as a citizen of the GDR living behind the Berlin Wall, the longing for the European project was always in his heart and that he still remembers those feelings. These examples suggest that both Merkel and Gauck view the GDR as a negative episode in their personal lives and in German history. What they share is the belief that their experiences under the GDR regime constitute an additional factor contributing to their attachment to the EU. In other words, this historical period serves as an added “lesson” that reinforces their advocacy for the European project and the European identity of Germany.

On the other hand, it should also be emphasized that not only the “unfortunate” episodes of German history have been perceived by German officials as incentives to promote the EU. As discussed above, “the painful European history,” “the German question,” “the Nazi past,” and “the dictatorship of East Germany” represent the dark chapters of national history, which, according to German decision-makers, ought to serve as moral lessons guiding appropriate behavior toward the EU. Put simply, these experiences are seen as demonstrating the added value of the European project while prescribing sustained commitment to it. However, the dataset also indicates that certain “positive” elements of German history are linked to the country’s pro-European stance. In these cases, history does not function as a cautionary lesson drawn from past failures, but rather as a source of gratitude. Specifically, German officials regard certain “fortunate” moments

in the nation's history as obligating Germany to remain committed to the EU, particularly as an expression of historical indebtedness. These subframes include "the readmission to civilization" and "the reunification of Germany."

The subframe of "readmission to civilization" is grounded in Germany's perceived gratitude for being welcomed back into the international community despite the crimes it committed during the Second World War. In this context, the subframe originates from the early post-war period. According to German leaders, their country was extremely fortunate that other European nations, ravaged by the *Wehrmacht*, chose not to adopt a revanchist stance toward Germany. On the contrary, they extended a hand of friendship to their former enemy, initiating the process of European integration together. This gesture is framed by German officials not only as a priceless gift to their country but also as the basis for a special responsibility. More specifically, they argue that Germany owes a debt of gratitude, one that must be repaid by working wholeheartedly for the success and well-being of the European project.

In line with this conviction, various German leaders such as Merkel, Maas, President Steinmeier, and Gauck frame their country's attachment to the EU as an expression of gratitude. Yet it is especially Sigmar Gabriel (2017) who has drawn upon this subframe extensively. An example of this perspective appears in his following statement:

It is a miracle that those who suffered the most from Germany's terror are the ones that invited us afterwards to return to the table of civilized peoples and to build a common and peaceful Europe. Not least because of this uniquely successful example, we Germans in particular have a responsibility for the future of this common Europe.

As stated above, Chancellor Merkel also perceives a connection between Germany's appropriate stance toward the European project and the country's readmission to civilization following the Second World War. In this context, she (2014) emphasized that Germany's stable development was made possible by the forgiveness of its European partners—an act that, in her view, reinforces Germany's responsibility to protect the European project. On this basis, Germany's attachment to the EU is also framed as a debt of gratitude.

The dataset further reveals another historical dimension that links Germany's commitment to the European project to a key event: the subframe of "German reunification." Like the "readmission to civilization," reunification is regarded by German leaders as a fortunate development in the nation's history, one that was made possible, in part, through the establishment and presence of the

EU. This perspective leads German decision-makers to promote the EU and to frame their advocacy for the European project as an expression of gratitude for reunification.

In fact, the association between the reunification of Germany and the process of European integration cannot be regarded as a development specific to the Merkel era. It was originally Chancellor Adenauer who argued that German unity and European unification were two sides of the same coin, a view later embraced and reiterated by the Chancellor of reunification, Helmut Kohl (Müller-Brandeck-Bocquet 2016, 386). However, analysis of the dataset indicates that officials during the Merkel era also perceived a continuing relationship between German reunification and European integration. In this context, reunification, regarded as a fortunate historical development, is framed as creating an obligation to support and advance the European project. In other words, the year 1990, a turning point in Germany's national history, is invoked as a motivating factor for commitment to the EU.

On this basis, Chancellor Merkel in particular stated on several occasions that Germany should always act in accordance with its debt of gratitude. It is this understanding that led her (2008b) to describe the EU as Germany's reason of state, as illustrated in the following example:

We in Germany agree that the peaceful reunification of our country would not have been possible without the European unification. As federal chancellor, Helmut Kohl often said: German reunification and European unification are two sides of the same coin. That is why the EU is part of our reason of state in Germany. We know what we owe to Europe.

While the subframe of "German reunification" appears in numerous speeches delivered by Chancellor Merkel, other German politicians also draw upon this subframe to articulate Germany's attachment to the European project. For instance, Foreign Minister Maas (2020) stated that Germany's gratitude for reunification remains closely tied to the conviction that the country's future lies in a united Europe. Such remarks suggest that, even decades after reunification, German decision-makers continue to interpret this historical event in conjunction with European integration, often invoking the metaphor of "two sides of the same coin." In this context, reunification functions as a subframe, like the others, that further reinforces Germany's commitment to the EU.

Conclusion

The high frequency of history-related frames utilized by German leaders demonstrates the perceived linkage between national history and the appropriate code of behavior towards the EU, as the former serves as a guideline for the latter. German leaders invoked history to frame their country's attachment to the European project and identity 302 times in the dataset analyzed in this study. The relevant subframes range from the German question, which took different forms across the centuries, to German reunification in 1990, demonstrating the multilayered nature of national memory. Although the existing literature highlights Germany's attachment to the European project and identity in response to the Nazi past, various historical developments and episodes actually shape the perceptions of the political elite with regard to the EU, thereby nourishing the pro-European stance of Germany.

In light of the findings of this study, it can be concluded that national memory fulfills two different functions with regard to Germany's attachment to the European project and identity. The "dark" chapters of German history appear as frames to promote the EU, in particular, in order to avoid facing the same tragedies again. In these subframes, the commitment to the European project and identity manifests itself as a reaction to the past, while the EU is conceived as an entity ensuring detachment from this past marked by suffering and danger. On other occasions, the "fortunate" chapters of German history are framed as the basis of Germany's attachment to the European project and identity, as they are interpreted as a responsibility to promote the EU out of gratitude.

On the other hand, all these subframes converge when it comes to the appropriate orientation vis-à-vis the EU. This indicates that German leaders perceived the tasks arising from their country's history in a similar manner. Indeed, whether stemming from the "good" or "bad" episodes of national history, the conclusion drawn by German leaders from the past was largely consistent. They collectively recognized the necessity of promoting the European project and identity while refraining from Eurosceptic orientations in response to historical experiences. However, this pattern was possible only because national memory during the Merkel era was not characterized by significant internal conflict. Had there been divergent interpretations of history, a more nuanced national memory would likely have produced more complex outcomes.

As a matter of fact, in states where national history is subject to widespread and conflicting debates, varying perceptions tend to emerge concerning the

responsibilities derived from historical experience. In light of this study, it is evident that this was not the case for Germany during the Merkel era. The Christian Democratic Chancellor, as well as prominent figures from the SPD, FDP, and successive federal presidents, shared a coherent perspective and a common understanding regarding the historical foundations of Germany's attachment to the EU. This linear and strong affiliation of the history with the perceived benefits of European integration ultimately contributed to Germany's steadfast advocacy for the EU.

This, in turn, suggests that a reinterpretation of national history and the emergence of divergent views regarding the responsibilities derived from the past could alter Germany's stance towards the EU. Stated differently, the questioning and denunciation of the existing historical interpretations might pave the way for alternative orientations. A German leadership that draws different conclusions from the Nazi past, or that does not perceive any linkage between that period and appropriate orientation in the present, would likely develop contradictory or ambivalent conceptualizations of Germany's position within the EU. Among other implications, such a profound transformation could redefine Germany's attachment to the European project and identity.

The central question that arises at this point is whether such a fundamental historical reinterpretation is plausible in the near future. Arguably, in previous decades, such a development would have been considered implausible, given the convergence among major political groups regarding the significance of the most critical episodes in German history. Indeed, the dataset analyzed in this study contains no indication of a deeply divided national memory. Throughout the Merkel era, the country's key decision-makers from various political parties did not adopt contradictory frames that would suggest the emergence of new trends in historical perspective. However, current circumstances raise questions about whether this shared understanding will persist. This uncertainty is largely due to a recent domestic development that points to the potential for transformative reconfigurations across multiple domains, including interpretations of national history, namely the rise of the *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) in Germany.

As a far-right political party, the AfD can no longer be dismissed as a marginal force in German political life. In the 2024 European Parliament elections, it secured second place nationwide, demonstrating its emergence as one of the country's leading political parties. In the same year, the party topped the polls in the eastern state of Thuringia, thereby becoming the first far-right party to win a state election in Germany since the Nazi era. In the 2025 federal elections, the AfD became not only the second-largest party nationally but

also the leading political force across all five eastern German states (Wilson Center 2025). These developments suggest that both the German political landscape and prevailing perceptions of national history are increasingly subject to change. Through its alternative interpretations of the past,² the AfD presents an unprecedented challenge to widely accepted historical frames, and by extension, to Germany's attachment to the European project and identity. In this context, if the AfD's political ascent continues and the party assumes a decision-making role, it may become possible to witness a large-scale reconstruction in Germany's orientations within the EU framework.³ In such a scenario, alternative historical interpretations could lead to the repudiation of previously endorsed positions and/or the construction of new ones grounded in revised perspectives. The realization of this possibility depends on whether these perspectives take root and gain widespread traction within the domestic political sphere in the coming period, in conjunction with the AfD.

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2 A statement by one of the leading figures of the AfD, Björn Höcke, illustrates this point: "Up to now, our state of mind is still one of a totally defeated people. We Germans, our people, are the only people in the world who have planted a monument of shame [Holocaust memorial in Berlin] in the heart of its capital. We need nothing less than a 180-degree shift in the politics of remembrance" (Euractiv 2017).

3 On several occasions, the leading figures of the AfD expressed their skepticism regarding the European project, to the extent that they called for a referendum on Germany's EU membership. For example, see Politico (2024).

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