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Using Europe for Independence

Exploring Secessionist Party Strategies in the European Parliament

Jasmijn van der Most



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Academic dissertation for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Political Science at Stockholm University to be publicly defended on Monday 15 June 2026 at 13.00 in Hörsal 11, hus F, Universitetsvägen 10 F.

Abstract

Since the early 2000s, pro-European secessionist parties have pursued “independence in the EU” while becoming increasingly mainstream in European politics. This suggests that the process of European integration might sustain rather than hamper the quest for independence among non-sovereign regions in the EU. This development is puzzling since EU representatives have consistently argued in public that independence is an “internal matter” and that regions of EU member states would automatically lose EU membership upon secession. Previous research has so far overwhelmingly focused on pro-European secessionist parties at the national level, even though mobilization in the European Parliament (EP) has been a consistent component of their strategy. As a result, few studies have focused on how and to what extent the EP is used as a political arena in secessionist parties’ independence strategies.

This thesis examines how pro-European secessionist parties advance their independence agendas in the EP and explores the role of European integration in contemporary secessionist politics. Although the EU has not delivered on secessionist parties’ wishes and expectations, these parties have continued to mobilize electoral support to secure representation in the EP, raising the question of how Europe matters in their pursuit of independence. The thesis addresses two research questions: how have pro-European secessionist parties used Europe in their independence strategies in the EP between 1999 and 2024, and what contextual factors help understand differences in how Europe is used in secessionist parties’ independence strategies? The thesis adopts a strategic constructivist perspective and develops a new conceptual framework based on the concept of “usage of Europe”, originally established by Sophie Jacquot and Cornelia Woll. The framework is used to structure a comparative study of three secessionist parties from Scotland and Catalonia: Scottish National Party (SNP); Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya (ERC) and Convergència i Unió/Partit Demòcrata Europeu Català/Junts per Catalunya (CiU/PDeCAT/Junts).

The thesis combines qualitative content analysis of a novel dataset of EP text data with semi-structured interviews with Members of the European Parliament. The findings show that pro-European secessionist parties have continuously used the EP to address independence, albeit the SNP has used Europe primarily pragmatically, whereas the Catalan parties have used it more idealistically, making Europe more central to their independence strategies. While the different usages of Europe are shaped by contextual factors, the study also shows that all parties engage in practices aiming at normalizing both themselves and their independence claims within the EP. Taken together, the findings suggests that despite the EU’s formal reluctance to facilitate secession, European integration still offers secessionist parties institutional and discursive resources and is therefore not perceived by them as a closed opportunity structure. The thesis thus makes both theoretical and empirical contributions to the study of secessionist politics in Europe.

Keywords: *Independence; Secessionist Parties; Usage of Europe; European Parliament.*

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Table of Contents

Abbreviations	5
1. Introduction	6
1.1 Research Puzzle	7
1.2 Research Questions.....	10
2. The State of the Art on the Role of Europe in Secessionist Parties’ Independence Strategies	14
2.1 Debates on Party Politics in the (European) Parliament.....	14
2.2 The Debate on Europeanization and Usage of Europe by Political Parties....	17
2.3 Research on Secessionist Party Politics.....	19
2.3.1 Domestic Secessionist Party Strategies	19
2.3.2 The Relationship between European Integration and Secession	24
2.3.3 Secessionist Party Strategies Towards Europe	26
2.3.4 The Europeanization of Secessionist Party Discourses	28
2.3.5 The Debate on Secessionist Party Strategies at the European Level	30
2.4 Conclusion: Gaps & Contributions	32
3. Theorizing Usage of Europe in Secessionist Parties’ Independence Strategies	34
3.1 A Strategic Constructivist Approach.....	36
3.2 Conceptualizing Independence Strategies in the European Parliament	38
3.3 Theorizing Usage of Europe in Party Independence Strategies in the European Parliament.....	39
3.4 Understanding Usage of Europe in the European Parliament	43
4. Research Design	48
4.1 Universe of Cases: Parties Seeking Internal Secession	48

4.2 Focus on the European Parliament	49
4.3 Selecting Parties and Timeframe	51
4.4 Data Sources and Collection.....	57
4.4.1 Textual Data from the European Parliament.....	57
4.4.2 Semi-structured Interviews	59
4.5 Method of Analysis.....	63
4.6 Operationalization	65
4.6.1 Analysing Usage of Europe in Independence Strategies	65
4.6.2 Operationalizing Usage of Europe in Independence Strategies.....	69
4.6.3 Operationalizing Contextual Factors to Understand Differences in Usage of Europe	76
5. SNP: A Pragmatic Goodwill Strategy in the European Parliament	78
5.1 About the SNP	78
5.2 Using the Institutional Dimension of Europe	81
5.3 Using the Discursive Dimension of Europe	91
5.3.1 EU Governance Structure: From a Confederation of Peoples to a Confederation of States.....	91
5.3.2 EU Role in the Independence Process: A Discourse of Non-Interference and Internal Enlargement.....	97
5.3.3 Europe in Independence Legitimations: Grievances, A Better Future and Principles	101
5.4 Conclusion: The SNP's Mostly Pragmatic Goodwill Strategy in the European Parliament.....	106
6. ERC: From Idealism to Pragmatism and Back Again.....	109
6.1 About ERC.....	109
6.2 Using the Institutional Dimension of Europe.....	113
6.3 Using the Discursive Dimension of Europe	123
6.3.1 EU Governance Structure: A More Federal EU	123
6.3.2 EU Role in the Independence Process – Guardian of European Principles and Law	126
6.3.3 EU in Independence Legitimations – An Idealistic Usage of European Democracy.....	133

6.4 Conclusion: ERC’s Idealistic Usage of Europe in the European Parliament	140
7. CiU, PDeCAT and Junts: An Idealist Strategy in the European Parliament for the Normalization of Self-Determination	144
7.1 About CiU, PDeCAT and Junts	144
7.2 Using the Institutional Dimension of Europe	150
7.3 Using the Discursive Dimension of Europe	160
7.3.1 European Governance Structure: Toward a More Federal EU	160
7.3.2 EU Role in the Catalan Independence Process – Guardian of EU Principles and Law	164
7.3.3 EU in Independence Legitimizations – Using European Principles.....	168
7.4 Conclusion: CiU, PDeCAT and Junts’ Idealistic Usage of Europe in the European Parliament.....	177
8. Usage of Europe in Comparison	180
8.1 Comparing the Extent of Usage of Europe.....	180
8.2 Comparing the Way Europe Is Used: Between Idealism and Pragmatism... 184	
8.2.1 Independence Objectives in the European Parliament	184
8.2.2 Discourses of EU Governance Structures in the European Parliament	188
8.2.3 Discourses of the EU in the Independence Process in the European Parliament.....	189
8.2.4 Discourses of Europe in Independence Legitimizations in the European Parliament.....	192
8.3 Usage of Europe in Comparison.....	194
8.4 Usage of Europe Contextualized.....	195
8.4.1 Perceived Access to Independence	195
8.4.2 Attachment to Europe	199
8.2.3 Perceived Party Strength.....	203
8.2.4 Public Opinion	207
8.2.5 Party Evaluations of EU Responses to Territorial Demands	209
9. Conclusion.....	212
9.1 Main Findings.....	212

9.2 Contributions	215
9.3 Implications for Research.....	217
9.3.1 Secessionist Parties' Strategies	217
9.2.2 Europe and Secessionist Political Parties	222
9.3 Reflections on Political Implications.....	225
9.4 Reflections on Further Research.....	226
References	229
Academic Sources	229
Official Documents.....	248
Online/News Sources.....	249
Annex.....	253
Annex 1: Independence Contribution Search Terms	253
Annex 2 – Codebook	254
Annex 3 — Definitions of Non-Discursive Independence Practices	271
Annex 4 – Independence Legitimation Coding Results	273
Annex 5 – Inter-Coder Reliability Results	278
Annex 6 — Interview List	279
Annex 7 - Interview Guide	280
Sammanfattning på Svenska	283

Abbreviations

ALDE	Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe
ARC	Rainbow Group in the European Parliament
ARE	Group of the European Radical Alliance
DEP	Group of European Progressive Democrats
ELDR	Group of the European Liberal, Democrat and Reform Party
CiU	Convergència i Unió
EH Bildu	Euskal Herria Bildu
EFA	European Free Alliance
EP	European Parliament
ERC	Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya
Junts	Junts per Catalunya
L	Liberal and Democratic Group
LDR	Liberal and Democratic Reformist Group
N-VA	Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie
NI	Non-Inscrit
NeCat	Nou Estat Català
SNRPS	Stateless Nationalist and Regionalist Parties
SNP	Scottish National Party
PDeCAT	Partit Demòcrata Europeu Català
PNV	Partido Nacionalista Vasco
PPE	Group of the European People's Party
RDE	Group of the European Democratic Alliance
VB	Vlaams Belang
Verts/ALE	The Greens / European Free Alliance

1. Introduction

Secession, understood as “the withdrawal of territory (colonial or non-colonial) from part of an existing state to create a new state” (Anderson 2013, p. 344), continues to be an important phenomenon in both domestic and international politics during the 21st century. There are at least 60 independence movements in Europe and beyond, that are actively pursuing statehood with varying degrees of success and recognition, ranging from the Iraqi Kurds in the Middle East and West Papua in Asia to Flanders in Europe (Griffiths, 2021). These movements are diverse in nature, as some pursue full external secession, whereas others seek internal secession (i.e., secession within a larger governance unit) (Requejo & Nagel, 2017). Some have resorted to violence, whereas others pursue peaceful means (Griffiths & Wasser, 2019; Gallagher Cunningham & McCulloch, 2023) and some seek independence in the face of grave mistreatment from their host-state, whereas others are part of established democracies.

This thesis examines how secessionist parties use Europe at the European level. These parties present an interesting case of secession, because unlike others, they pursue independence peacefully, from within established democratic systems, whose majority is difficult to sway in their favour. They also cannot appeal to severe oppression resulting from colonization as the only widely accepted justification for secession (Buchanan, 1991). Nevertheless, during the 2000s, secessionist parties in Western Europe have managed to achieve consistent electoral success at the regional level, making nationalism once more a force to be reckoned with in Europe. What is distinctive about this development, however, is that these parties became successful not merely with an independence agenda, but with an agenda for independence in the EU (De Winter et al., 2018; Elias and Franco-Guillén, 2021). They strive for self-determination, but not full self-determination, a phenomenon that can perhaps be likened to internal secessionist movements seen in India, Canada and Switzerland (Robinson, 2001; Mawdsley, 2002; Nieguth, 2009). European integration thus appears to have affected secessionist party politics in Western Europe.

1.1 Research Puzzle

The embrace of European integration by secessionist parties, however, was not long seen as self-evident. In fact, there were many reasons why separatism was considered incompatible with European integration. In the 1980s and 1990s, it was believed that integration would reduce the need for separatism, while others argued that European integration could be perceived as a threat to the nation-state, national sovereignty, and national identity (Laible, 2008; Bremberg, 2020; Massetti, 2011; Hooghe & Marks, 2018). However, contrary to these expectations, it has been argued that European integration has not only helped sustain nationalism, but has helped sustain a pro-European nationalism (Laible, 2008). This thesis engages with broader debates within European Studies on the effects of European integration (e.g., Ladrech, 2002; Saurugger & Radaelli, 2008; Bourne, 2014; Cianciara, 2016), as well as debates within the scholarship on secessionist politics concerning the factors enabling the persistence of secessionist claims in Europe during the 2000s (Laible, 2008; Massetti & Schakel, 2021), and how secessionist mobilization dynamics challenge society and the national and European order (Bankowski & Christodoulis, 1998; Keating, 2013; Portos, 2020).

The EU constitutes an opportunity structure for secessionist parties and can be harnessed to advance the secessionist project (Bourne, 2014, p. 99; Giordano & Roller, 2002, p. 99). As such, stateless nationalist and regionalist parties (SNRPs) in Europe have mobilized at the European level early on and have repeatedly tied their visions of self-determination to the European project. First, around the late 1980s, most SNRPs converged around a Europe of the Regions. The idea was essentially that regions could take up a more equal position to states within the European project and would be able to influence EU policy-making on equal terms, which would mean a significant gain in self-determination for (self-governing) regions inside the EU. However, to many SNRPs' disappointment, by the early 2000s, it became clear that the EU did not—and perhaps never intended to—seriously enhance the powers of regions in the EU, and the idea of a Europe of the Regions was essentially dead (Hepburn, 2008).

By that time, some parties, such as the Scottish National Party (SNP) and the Flemish Volksunie (VU), started to increasingly advocate for the more radical idea of independence in the EU. However, Romano Prodi, then President of the European Commission, quickly shot that idea down as well, when in a response to a question posed by an MEP from the British Labour

Party, he declared in March 2004 that EU membership would not be guaranteed for regions in EU Member States that would become independent states:

When a part of the territory of a Member State ceases to be a part of that state, e.g. because that territory becomes an independent state, the treaties will no longer apply to that territory. In other words, a newly independent region would, by the fact of its independence, become a third country with respect to the Union and the treaties would, from the day of its independence, not apply anymore on its territory (Prodi, Questions 5, 20040301).

This position became known as the Prodi Doctrine and was, naturally, a disappointment for secessionist regions. Instead of providing a sense of continuity in the event of independence, the EU had suddenly made independence considerably more risky if it meant abruptly leaving the EU without any guarantee of whether or how quickly re-entry would be possible. Support from all EU Member States would be required in the event of enlargement (Giudi & Casula, 2020, pp. 176–177). This was, however, not the end of the issue. During the 2010s, the idea of independence within the EU was more prominent than ever due to the electoral success of parties that championed it. The Commission continued to receive questions from MEPs on this matter but remained steadfast in its position (Barroso, 2012), initially claiming neutrality but eventually defending Member States' territorial integrity. Even when Catalan actors called for mediation and protection in the face of Spain's strong reaction to the illegal independence referendum and declaration in 2017, the Commission refused to intervene, declaring it an internal matter (Masseti, 2022; Bourne, 2020). Hence, Ms Johansson, on behalf of the Commission, stated in January 2021: "The European Union has limited competence in this area, as the maintenance of law and order is primarily a competence of the Member States" (Johansson, 20210104).

In other words, while stateless nationalist parties have repeatedly embraced European integration as an opportunity for greater self-determination, their territorial demands within the EU have been repeatedly rejected. Hence, the opportunity structure for using Europe seems to have become increasingly constrained over time. It could therefore be expected that secessionist parties would start to reassess their relationship with the EU, in line with Massetti and Schakel's (2021) finding that a lack of improvement in

the position of regions within the EU has contributed to increased Euroscepticism among secessionist parties during the 2000s, as well as Portos' (2020) claim of growing pessimism and progressive estrangement between secessionists and European institutions following the illegal Catalan independence referendum in 2017. It is therefore particularly puzzling that, during the 2000s, secessionist parties have continued to mobilize electoral support to secure representation in the European Parliament and have held on to their independence-independence-in the EU positions, despite the EU repeatedly failing to deliver on their wishes and expectations. This puzzle highlights the need to better understand the role Europe has continued to play in secessionist parties' independence strategies, and specifically whether it has still functioned as an opportunity structure and, if so, how parties have reconciled their objectives with their experiences inside the EU.

Thus far, the effect of European integration on secessionist party positions on the EU (De Winter & Gomez-Reino, 2002; Elias, 2008, 2009; Laible, 2008; Hepburn, 2008, 2010; Hepburn & Elias, 2011) and the role of Europe in national party discourses has been explored to some extent (e.g., Giordano & Roller, 2002; Bourne, 2014; van der Zwet, 2015; Anderson & Keil, 2016). In this regard, there has been greater focus on party positions than on party practices, and there is a theoretical gap in that we lack a conceptual framework that captures different practices of using Europe in everyday secessionist party discourse and strategy, and how these vary across cases and over time. Empirically, these studies have largely relied on party manifesto data and thus miss the everyday practice of secessionist politics, leaving it relatively unclear what secessionist parties actually mean in practice by their goal of "independence in the EU." These studies have also largely focused on the national level. However, given that EU membership is a core component of these parties' visions of independence and that they have a long history of mobilizing at the European level (Laible, 2008, p. 151), I argue that a European-level perspective is needed to fully understand the nature and significance of Europe in secessionist party strategies, as well as whether European integration has continued to sustain secessionism in Europe.

Aside from Laible's (2008) study of the SNP and Vlaams Belang's presence in the European Parliament between 1985 and 2002, we know relatively little about how secessionist parties have implemented their independence agenda at the European level and how they have used Europe as an opportunity in more recent years. Work by Moore (2008) and Jeffery (2011) suggests that regionalist parties may have made a pragmatic turn away

from idealism in the 2000s, potentially shifting the pursuit of territorial objectives from the European level back to the regional and national levels. However, it remains unclear to what extent this applies across cases, given that some parties in Western Europe have become more committed to independence and have achieved sustained electoral success at the regional level, making them once again a force to be reckoned with (De Winter et al., 2018; Elias and Franco-Guillén, 2021).

This highlights a gap in our understanding of the nature and extent to which pro-European secessionist parties use the European Parliament as part of their independence strategies. As the main European institution that provides secessionist parties with direct access to European policymaking and the opportunity to participate in European debates, it is a site where discourses on European integration and independence intersect. However, independence is rarely placed on the agenda, as it is considered an internal rather than a European matter. Therefore, it remains unclear how pro-European secessionist parties navigate this uncertainty and how, and to what extent, they have sought to construct a narrative that effectively links independence to Europe.

1.2 Research Questions

To better understand the practical meaning of pro-European secessionist parties' independence in the EU agenda and how European integration matters in pro-European secessionist politics, I pose the following two research questions:

1. How have pro-European secessionist parties used Europe in their independence strategies in the European Parliament between 1999 and 2024?
2. What contextual factors help understand differences in how Europe is used in secessionist party independence strategies in the European Parliament?

The first research question is the main focus of the thesis, while the second aims to provide contextualisation for the findings. Inspired by Woll and Jacquot's (2003) notion of political strategy, I understand independence strategy as a set of political practices oriented towards a specific independence-related goal, and I understand the usage of Europe as "social

practices that seize the European Union as a set of opportunities, whether institutional, ideological, political, or organisational” (p. 9).

The thesis departs from a strategic constructivist perspective and, based on Woll and Jacquot’s (Woll & Jacquot, 2003, 2010) notion of the *usage of Europe*, it develops and applies a new conceptual framework that captures usages of Europe in the case of everyday secessionist party independence strategies in a parliamentary setting. I do so through a comparative case study of three pro-European secessionist parties: the Scottish National Party (SNP) and the Catalan Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya (ERC) and Convergència i Unió/Partit Demòcrata Europeu Català/Junts per Catalunya (CiU/PDeCAT/Junts). Their usages of Europe are compared through a qualitative content analysis (Graneheim, Lindgren, and Lundman, 2017, 2020), based on a newly collected dataset of European Parliament contributions, including plenary speeches, explanations of vote and questions concerning independence between 1999 and 2024, as well as interviews with former MEPs and party staff in the European Parliament during that period.

A better understanding of Europe’s role in secessionist party independence strategies is particularly valuable because stateless nationalist parties have consistently enjoyed electoral success during the 2000s in several European states, including Spain, Belgium, the UK, Denmark, Ireland, France and Italy (Elias & Tronconi, 2011; Mazzoleni & Muller, 2017). They are increasingly active within the EU’s multi-level system, often exercising influence over policy implementation through their positions in regional governments, and they are also mobilized at the European level. As such, they are small yet potentially significant actors in European politics, challenging the status quo and the balance of power within the EU. The way secessionist parties use Europe also shapes perceptions among both domestic and European audiences, and therefore influences responses to demands for independence within the EU. It is therefore important to understand what conditions sustain the continued electoral success of the independence-in-the-EU agenda and, more broadly, the evolution of secessionist conflicts in Europe (De Winter et al., 2018; Elias & Franco-Guillén, 2021). Furthermore, as Schakel and Massetti (2021) point out, it is important for the EU to understand the ideas that both sustain and oppose the European project, as well as the effects of these ideas and actions (p. 2).

In this thesis, I argue that all three parties view the European level as a complementary pathway through which to conduct independence politics. The SNP exhibits a more pragmatic use of Europe, whereas ERC, CiU, PDeCAT

and Junts display a more idealistic use of Europe. I argue that this variation can be understood in terms of perceived access to independence, attachment to Europe and perceived party strength. I further show that these parties have continued to use Europe throughout the 2000s despite the EU failing to meet secessionist party demands. The EU opportunity structure has not been perceived as fully closed by secessionist parties, which continue to find both institutional and discursive value in the EU for their independence strategies. Moreover, the SNP's pragmatism has limited its disappointment with the EU, while the Catalan parties' idealistic use signaled both a strong reliance on the EU and an attachment to it that has not shifted significantly, even in the face of disappointment.

With this thesis, I seek to make an empirical and theoretical contribution. Most importantly, this thesis makes an empirical contribution to the literature on secessionist party politics based on new empirical material from the European Parliament (1999–2024), as well as a set of original interviews with party members and staff. The data is particularly valuable for our understanding of the usage of Europe by secessionist parties because it was produced in the European Parliament. There is a lack of studies on European-level independence strategies of secessionist parties, and therefore this data is uniquely situated to fill that gap. The European Parliament is a setting where the usage of Europe can be expected to be the norm rather than the exception, and the data can therefore also be expected to be rich in nature. Moreover, the data goes beyond the commonly studied national party programs (e.g., Elias & Franco-Guillén, 2021; Abts et al., 2019; Dalle Mulle & Serrano, 2019; Elias et al., 2020), thereby offering a different insight into the meaning of the independence-in-the-EU agenda on a daily basis. As such, this thesis complements previous work on national-level secessionist party independence strategies and helps paint a more holistic picture of the role that European integration plays in secessionist party strategies.

Theoretically, this thesis contributes to secessionist party politics literature (Giordano & Roller, 2002; Laible, 2008; Hepburn, 2009; Cetrà & Liñeira, 2018; Elias et al., 2021) by developing an original typology that theorizes how Europe can be used in independence strategies in the European Parliament or in other (European) institutional settings. In so doing, it draws on and extends the usage of Europe framework by Woll and Jacquot (2003, 2010), distinguishing between institutional and discursive dimensions of usage as well as introducing two usage logics: pragmatic and idealistic usage of Europe. As such, the typology enables a systematic analysis and comparison

of the role and relative importance of Europe in secessionist party independence strategies. In addition, the framework theorizes a European dimension of independence strategies by identifying a new set of independence practices that use Europe. It thereby also adds a European dimension to Dalle Mulle and Serrano's (2019) conceptual framework on independence legitimations. In doing so, it systematizes existing legitimations that use Europe but also introduces new legitimations (e.g., Dardanelli, 2003; van der Zwet, 2015; Anderson and Keil, 2016; Maddens, Muyters and Van Hecke, 2020). This fills a gap in the existing secessionist party literature, where usage of Europe in secessionist party politics has thus far been rather scattered and under-theorized.

I begin this thesis in Chapter 2 with a literature review that elaborates on the key gaps in existing work on secessionist party politics and usage of Europe and situates the thesis within the existing literature, clarifying its contributions. Chapter 3 then discusses the strategic constructivist perspective adopted and the development of my conceptual framework, which extends existing work on usage of Europe to the study of independence strategies in the European Parliament. In Chapter 4, I present my research design and outline the steps taken to conduct a content analysis of secessionist party strategies based on new European-level data. Chapters 5, 6 and 7 form the empirical part of the thesis and contain case studies of the SNP, ERC, CiU, PDeCAT and Junts, in which I analyse the ways in which they use Europe in their independence strategies in the European Parliament. Chapter 8 provides a systematic comparison of the parties' patterns of usage of Europe and a contextualization aimed at better understanding the differences between these patterns. The thesis concludes with Chapter 9, which contains a summary of the findings and a discussion of their implications.

2. The State of the Art on the Role of Europe in Secessionist Parties' Independence Strategies

By studying usage of Europe in secessionist parties' independence strategies in the European Parliament, this thesis sits at the crossroads between several fields of study: party politics in parliament, Europeanization and secessionist party politics. I will therefore discuss the state of the art and the main findings within these fields of study in order to situate the contribution of this thesis.

2.1 Debates on Party Politics in the (European) Parliament

To date, most research on party behaviour in parliament has focused on roll-call vote analysis (e.g. Benoit and Laver, 2006, pp. 69–71) and expert surveys (e.g., Elias, Szöcsik and Zuber, 2015), as well as agenda-setting and issue competition strategies. While some scholars would argue that political parties do not have much say in which issues become salient, as this is determined by external developments beyond the parties' control (Budge, 2015, Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1994), Green-Pedersen and Mortensen (2015) posit that at any point in time there exists a general party system agenda, or a hierarchy of issues that receive party attention. Parties are both shaped by this agenda, in that they sometimes need to respond to issues they would rather avoid, and able to influence it. Green-Pedersen (2019) claims that it is mainly the large mainstream political parties that determine the party agenda, based on issue characteristics, issue ownership and coalition considerations. In this regard, the issue competition literature points out that parties raise attention to their issues by emphasizing issues that they possess issue ownership of and avoiding issues that they do not possess issue ownership over, and they should somehow get other parties to address their issues (Riker, 1986; Budge and Farlie, 1983).

This literature has been limited in its ability to explain how parties actually do this, as the policy-agenda setting literature has traditionally not centred on the role of political parties (Green-Pedersen and Walgrave, 2014). There is, however, some research that has started exploring this issue. Otjes and Louwse (2018) have studied the use of parliamentary questions to mark

one's own territory and strengthen issue ownership, to force others to talk about their issues and to perhaps expose the policy failures of other parties (i.e., negative campaigning), and Rovny and Edwards (2012) have explored how parties strategically re-frame issues and introduce new issues in the context of their existing ideology and issue dimension (p. 61). Additionally, they highlight the possibility for a political party to elevate a new issue by selectively emphasizing it, but also planting it in the public sphere. In fact, as Strömbäck and van Aelst (2013) point out, seeking media visibility can be viewed as a strategy in itself, whereby political parties use the public sphere and public opinion to influence the policy agenda in parliament, pre-frame the terms of debate in their favour and thus increase party strength in parliamentary negotiations, as well as influence or pressure other policymakers and parties to take a stance or act on a particular issue (Kernell, 2007; Green-Pedersen and Stubager, 2010). As such, the party politics literature highlights the value of studying party behaviour by focusing on practices.

Understanding party behaviour—both in terms of preference formation and preference enactment—becomes more complex when studied within multilevel states or governance structures. Parties compete at different times and at different governance levels, where they have varying degrees of political weight. The European Parliament is a particularly interesting venue to study party behaviour. Here, elections are fought by national parties, but day-to-day activities are conducted through European party groups; MEPs are consequently not agents of one but two principals. Furthermore, government-versus-opposition dynamics are lacking, and parliamentary work ranges from active involvement in the legislative process to the production of symbolic resolutions in cases where the European Parliament lacks power. Such conditions are likely to produce different dynamics of party politics, which, given the intended representative function of the European Parliament in European policymaking, merit closer examination.

The academic debate on the European Parliament has thus far centred on a multitude of themes. The focus has long been directed at the institutional workings and organization of the European Parliament (e.g., Tsebelis, 1994; Hix, Noury & Roland, 2007). Some have focused on committees (Neuhold, 2001) and lobbies (Judge & Earnshaw, 2011). Recently, there has also been more attention given to the MEPs themselves and their careers in the European Parliament (Daniel, 2015). A central debate in the literature on the European Parliament concerns party cohesion, where it has been claimed that European

party groups tend to be cohesive and MEPs tend to vote based on EP group lines rather than on national lines (Hix et al., 2003; 2007; Ringe, 2010). On the other hand, Busby (2013) characterizes MEPs as free and autonomous (p. 102), while Slapin and Proksch (2010) suggest that MEPs primarily remain agents of their national party, finding that MEPs use speeches mainly in cases of dissent to explain their vote to members of their European Parliament party group and demonstrate allegiance to their national party.

Much of the work on the European Parliament is, however, quantitative in nature and based on, for example, roll-call votes, expert surveys or quantitative analyses of speeches and questions (e.g., Hix, 2001; Lindstädt, Slapin and van der Wielen, 2012; Jensen, Proksch and Slapin, 2013; Frid-Nielsen, 2018; Mijers and van der Veer, 2019; Randour, Dodeigne, Rozenberg and Teuber, 2020). As such, there has been much less attention to qualitative explorations of how MEPs seek attention for the topics that are important to them in the inter-electoral phase (Jansen, Eugster, Maier and Adam, 2018, p. 9). Much of what MEPs actually do in the European Parliament, and how they do it, thus remains a black box, and I would argue that this is a problem for our understanding of democracy as it is enacted in the European Parliament, and in particular for our understanding of the enactment of party strategies. This is largely attributable to the theoretical and methodological approaches with which these questions have been addressed so far.

There is, however, some qualitative work based on European Parliament speeches and questions. Examples of this are works on argumentative patterns in the European Parliament (Garssen, 2016), emotions in European Parliament debates (Sanchez Salgado, 2021) and the constructions of expertise in the European Parliament (Elomäki & Haapala, 2024). Moreover, there is some interpretative work on the strategies of right-wing Eurosceptic MEPs, as well as right-wing discourse on issues such as migration, immigration, democracy and gender equality (e.g., Brack, 2017; Cristoforetti and Querton, 2019; Kantola and Lombardo, 2021). On top of this, some ethnographic studies have also been conducted on the European Parliamentary environment (Abélès, 1992; Busby, 2013; Wodak, 2015). These studies provide a starting point for a different way of understanding what goes on inside the European Parliament and offer insights into how MEPs talk behind closed doors and what it is like to be an MEP. They are useful for better understanding the enactment of MEP preferences and ideas. It must be acknowledged, however, that this research has been limited in scope and often has only analysed a few meetings. It is

therefore also unclear how the activities of MEPs have evolved over a longer period of time.

The study of secessionist parties specifically, has been connected with the party politics literature (Elias, 2008; Jolly, 2007; Featherstone, 1988; Johansson and Raunio, 2001; Massetti, 2011; Elias & Mees, 2017; Royles, 2024). In particular, it has often been taken as the basis for explaining secessionist party positioning on independence or Europe. However, there a lack of theorization of how the party politics literature can explain secessionist party strategies in a parliamentary setting, let alone at the European level. As such, this thesis provides new insights into, not only how parties enact their strategies in the European Parliament, but also suggests how the party politics literature can help understand differences in usage of Europe by secessionist parties.

2.2 The Debate on Europeanization and Usage of Europe by Political Parties

Europeanization is broadly understood as the impact of European integration on the politics, policies and institutions of Member States (Radaelli, 2003). The research on Europeanization includes a subfield focused on the—predominantly top-down—Europeanization of political parties and party systems (e.g., Ladrech, 2012; 2015, Klepac Pogrmilovic, 2010). In particular, Ladrech (2002) played a guiding role here through his analytical framework for analysing the Europeanisation of political parties. This has facilitated work on what he coined as *programmatic Europeanization*, i.e., the extent to which Europe is incorporated in party programs and party positions. (e.g., Pennings, 2006; Klepac Pogrmilovic, 2010; Pardo 2012; Spoon, 2012; Vuckovic, 2016 Karabova, 2017; Havlik & Havlik, 2018), but also work on *organizational Europeanization*, aiming to explore the extent to which a party's organizational changes can be attributed to the EU (e.g., Murphy, 2013; Pittoors & Gheyle, 2022).

Research has found that parties display varying degrees of programmatic Europeanization, and while Croatian parties, for example, show slow and modest Europeanization, Spanish parties appear to be more Europeanized than those elsewhere in Europe, as a result of the pro-European attitudes of their electorate and the legal requirements of EU membership (Pardo, 2012; Klepac Pogrmilovic, 2010). It has also been established that challenger parties (i.e., parties that are not mainstream), including larger regional parties, have

been more likely to politicize the EU in their programs, especially those opposing the EU (Spoon, 2012; de Vries & Hobolt, 2020). The impact of European integration on party systems and mainstream party organization has been found to be limited but nonetheless varied (Mair, 2000; Poguntke et al, 2007; Ladrech, 2008; 2012; Pittoors & Gheyle, 2022). This is argued to depend on many factors, such as the phase of European integration, policy sector, duration of EU membership, party attitude towards the EU, internal consensus on European integration (Pennings, 2006) and the EU's politicization in a certain country, but even more so on the degree of fit of institutions and political practices (Radaelli, 2003; Mastenbroek & Kaeding, 2006; Spoon, 2012; Pittoors & Gheyle, 2022).

While this research on the Europeanization of (nationalist) parties is well developed, I argue that it has certain limitations. Research on programmatic Europeanization is, in particular, limited in its operationalization. Thus far, it has primarily been explored through the salience of the EU in party programs and explanations of this. While this is certainly relevant, Europeanization can only be fully understood and, in fact, explained if we first understand its meanings. Yet most analyses of the Europeanization of party programs do not take into account what parties actually do in terms of practices. I therefore argue that, to achieve a more holistic account of party Europeanization, the programmatic dimension of Europeanization needs to be broadened to accommodate a more interpretive analysis that moves beyond the extent of Europeanization.

Moreover, Europeanization research often adopts a top-down perspective, where the EU impacts, for example, domestic legislation or politics through EU legislation, while attention for what Saurugger and Radaelli (2008) call “creative usages of Europe” (p. 215) has been relatively overlooked. Here, the focus is more on how domestic actors can transform European level impulses and use them strategically as a recourse (Cianciara, 2016). This was also noted by Mair (2007), who called for more systematic, inductive, bottom-up, thick descriptive accounts of the ebb and flow of arguments used by parties that are suitable for comparative analysis, with the purpose of learning more about how Europe plays a role in political discourse (p. 162). To be fair, he was referring to national-level discourse, but the same applies to party discourse at the European level. This version of Europeanization is particularly relevant to secessionist parties, as stateless nationalist parties have long been said to use European integration as a resource (Lynch, 1996, pp 16-17; De Winter &

Gómez Cachafeiro, 2002, Dardanelli, 2003; Hepburn, 2010; Laible, 2008; Dardanelli, 2012).

In particular, Woll and Jacquot (2003; 2010) have theorized this version of Europeanization in their work on the usages of Europe. Several scholars have subsequently made use of their analytical framework (Sotiropoulos, 2011; Warleigh-Lack & Stegman McCallion, 2012; Cianciara, 2016, Zimmerman, 2016; Slominski & Trauner, 2018), often to better understand how political actors have used Europe in specific policies or policy processes. While this research has shown that European integration is far more than a top-down dynamic and that it can also be harnessed strategically by political actors, it is primarily aimed at studying usage of Europe in specific policies or policy processes. This makes it more difficult to study usage of Europe in relation to topics such as secession, where usage more often than not takes place outside specific policy processes. Bourne (2014), however, was the first to explicitly combine the study of secessionist movements with the concept of usage of Europe by examining independence movements' references and linkages to other European actors and policies. However, while this is one way secessionist parties can use Europe, I argue that there are others. This thesis therefore builds on the work of Woll and Jacquot (2010) and Bourne (2014) by developing an analytical framework that can capture usage of Europe by secessionist political parties as part of their independence strategies in the European Parliament.

2.3 Research on Secessionist Party Politics

There is also extensive literature on SNRPs, which have both been studied in terms of their strategies, mainly at the national level, but also in terms of their relation to European integration. In this section, I therefore discuss the literature on 1) domestic secessionist party strategies, 2) the wider literature on the relationship between European integration and secession, 3) secessionist party strategies towards Europe, 4) usage of Europe in secessionist party discourses and 5) secessionist party strategies at the European level.

2.3.1 Domestic Secessionist Party Strategies

With the increasing electoral success and increasing radicalization of SNRPs, scholars have started to pay more and more attention to this group of parties. By now there is an elaborate body of work on secession and nationalism

within the academic literature, consisting of foundational works by, for example, Birch (1989), Keating (1996) and Guibernau (1999). While the success and radicalization of SNRPS have initially been attributed to the reaction of mainstream parties to the issue of decentralization (Meguid, 2005; 2008), a growing body of work has sought to understand this phenomenon by exploring SNRP party strategies. These strategies have first and foremost been studied through a party competition lens, where strategy can be equated with party ambitions and positions along particular issue dimensions (e.g., Libbrecht et al, 2009; Massetti, 2009; Deschouwer, 2013; Massetti & Toubeau, 2013; Elias, 2015; Cetrà & Liñeira, 2018). Elias, Szöcsik and Zuber (2015), for example, theorize that SNRPs can compete on their most important issue dimension, deliberately blur their position on the second dimension, frame new issues into their dominant dimension or simply adopt a two-dimensional strategy, competing on two issue dimensions. A number of scholars have even developed datasets to study regionalist party positions on the center-periphery, ethno-national and centralist-decentralist dimensions (Massetti and Schakel, 2013; 2016; Alonso Gómez and Cabeza, 2013, Szöcsik and Zuber, 2015; Basile, 2019).

Traditionally, the expectation was that, since these parties' *raison d'être* is the center-periphery cleavage, this would also be the core issue on which they compete. Other issues would be secondary and perhaps framed or subsumed in terms of territorial issues (Meguid, 2005, 2008; Basile, 2013; Elias, 2019). However, in practice, studies find that SNRPs have engaged in issue diversification and do not consistently emphasize their territorial positions by only proposing territorial bills or framing bills in center-periphery terms, despite this being their primary ideology. Instead of acting like niche parties, SNRPs have, in many cases, become mainstream parties that compete actively on multiple issues and engage in a two-dimensional strategy, where, according to Massetti and Schakel (2015), secessionist parties opt for a left-wing position and autonomist parties for a right-wing position (Alonso, 2012; Field and Hamann, 2015; Alonso et al., 2015). Nuancing this somewhat, Abts, Dalle Mulle and Laermans (2019) argue that, at least in the case of the N-VA, most other positions the party takes on issues of social redistribution and cultural identity are still informed by a nationalist master frame grounded in the center-periphery cleavage. Hence, they claim that SNRPs may engage more in issue communitarisation than issue diversification.

Outside of studies on party positions, others have explored SNRP strategies differently. Griffiths (2021), for example, outlines that secessionist

actors can engage in different forms of “compellence,” which he understands as the use of assets to force the host-state to negotiate or the international community to make a change in its position on the matter. In particular, he theorizes that secessionist actors can use electoral capture, nonviolent civil resistance or violence as ways to increase the cost for host-states to refuse secession. Research further suggests that SNRPs can make multiple types of territorial demands simultaneously, such as independence and restructuring of the existing territorial framework, and that this can be a deliberate strategy. They can have long-term territorial aspirations as well as short-term, instrumental or pragmatic territorial demands, and these can be made at different levels of governance and across different policy fields (Hepburn, 2009; Dalle Mulle, 2016; Elias et al., 2021, pp. 4–6).

However, one way in which secessionist party strategies have remained understudied is in terms of party discourses on secession (Dalle Mulle & Serrano, 2019, p. 631; Elias & Franco-Guillén, 2021, p. 453). Recently, however, studies have appeared that focus on regionalist legitimization strategies in a more in-depth manner. These are either small-n case studies with the primary aim of understanding the cases at hand (e.g., Huzska, 2014; Field and Hamann, 2015; Dalle Mulle, 2018; Elias, 2019), or studies that claim a degree of empirical or analytical transferability by providing a conceptual framework for regionalist or secessionist legitimization strategies (Dalle Mulle & Serrano, 2019; Elias & Franco-Guillén, 2021; Elias et al., 2021).

The literature at times makes competing claims about which legitimization strategies are dominant. For example, Griffiths and Martinez (2020) emphasize that the type of legitimization strategy employed depends largely on the type of independence movement, and they find that democratized independence movements, such as those in Western Europe, mainly make a democratic case for independence. Bremberg and Gillespie (2022) similarly emphasize that in recent years the moral case for independence in Scotland and Catalonia has become important, while for *Indipendentzia Republica de Sardigna*, *Sardignia Nazione* and the Scottish Socialist Party, a moral case was made based on anti-colonialism during the 1990s and early 2000s (Hepburn, 2007, pp. 216–217).

Yet others claim that secessionist parties, in particular the SNP, *Volksunie* and *N-VA* (Dalle Mulle, 2016; Brown Swan, 2017; Dalle Mulle, 2018), but also *ERC*, *CDC* and *CUP* (Elias and Franco-Guillén, 2021), have predominantly argued in recent years that independence is needed because the

nation will be better off as a result. Dalle Mulle (2018), in particular, emphasizes the economic dimension of this argument, speaking of a “nationalism of the rich.” He finds that SNRPs in Catalonia, Flanders, Scotland and Northern Italy do not emphasize economic victimization of the region but rather the economic power and potential of the region, which is framed as a source of national pride and identity. Elias and Franco-Guillén (2021) arrive at similar findings for the Catalan case and also show that political and economic arguments for independence are more common than cultural arguments. It is argued that SNRPs have chosen these approaches to maximize voter support. Too much emphasis on culture risks excluding an important voter base within Catalonia, namely people without Catalan roots. Furthermore, given that many who are skeptical about independence worry about the economic future of the region as an independent state, parties seek to address that concern by arguing that their economic situation would improve rather than worsen (Elias, 2019). Finally, Elias et al. (2021) find similar patterns across 39 SNRPs in eight European countries, where independence claims are predominantly linked to questions of social justice, socio-economic prosperity and quality of democracy.

There are, however, reasons to believe that there are cross-case differences in secessionist legitimization discourses. Whereas Scottish independence debates have focused on substantive themes, such as (welfare, currency and the EU) underpinning the viability and desirability of Scottish independence (Keating & McEwen, 2017; Parkinson et al., 2020), the Catalan debate on independence appears focused on debates on the concept of sovereignty, who can hold it, the tension between legality and legitimacy, and the democratic basis of the Procés (Franco-Guillén & Rubio-Carbonero, 2022).

While the study of secessionist legitimization strategies has clearly made some headway, there are also still some gaps and avenues for further research. For example, the existing research has highlighted several legitimization strategies employed by secessionist parties, arguably in part as a result of different conceptual foci. Griffiths (2020), for example, does not seem to consider “better-off” type arguments, whereas studies that do include them have not explored democracy or morality discourses in depth. Hence, what is missing is a comprehensive conceptual framework that allows for the systematic evaluation and comparison of the usage of all identified legitimization strategies. Such an approach would greatly facilitate both cross-case and temporal comparison, given that most studies of legitimization strategies tend to cover relatively short time spans.

Furthermore, the above studies are primarily based on party manifesto data (e.g., Elias and Franco-Guillén, 2021; Abts et al., 2019; Dalle Mulle and Serrano, 2019; Elias et al., 2020), and Field and Hamann's (2015) study is one of the only ones that focuses on the inter-electoral period and explores the framing of bills by SNRPs in the Spanish Parliament. They, in contrast to the other studies on Catalonia, find a greater emphasis on political "better future" arguments to legitimate increased self-governance, framing their arguments in terms of legal-constitutional compliance and administrative efficiency rather than cultural or economic arguments. This suggests that the type of legitimation strategy employed may also depend on the culture and audience of the venue or context in which an argument is presented. Secessionist actors may opt for arguments that are considered most legitimate in a given setting. Whereas voters may respond to claims that Catalans would be much richer or would allocate resources differently with greater autonomy, arguments about efficiency and constitutionality may be more appropriate for European-level actors who are expected to respect legal and institutional norms. Hence, to fully understand secessionist parties' legitimation strategies, we must study them in all settings in which these parties are active and not rely primarily on election manifesto data. What is missing in particular is both a focus on the inter-electoral phase and a multi-level perspective in which secessionist party strategies are explored not only at the regional or national level but also at the European level.

Another key limitation of the existing literature is that it has largely approached secessionist legitimation strategies through a national lens and, therefore, a domestic party politics lens, resulting in a lack of attention to Europe both as a discursive tool and as a contextual factor that may help add another piece to the puzzle of understanding the evolution of secessionist strategies over time. After all, it is no longer full external self-determination that is pursued, but rather independence in the multi-level context of the EU. While not denying the relevance of a national perspective, it therefore still seems important to explore the other contextual dimension that is part of pro-European secessionist politics; namely how Europe matters in secessionist strategies. Arguably, such a European perspective is of particular importance to be able to fully place the longitudinal development of secessionist parties' independence strategies.

2.3.2 The Relationship between European Integration and Secession

While scholars still predominantly studied European integration separately in the 1960s, the first academic debate about the compatibility of the European project and separatism emerged by the 1980s and 1990s. At this point in time, a shift occurred and the integration project gained not only a social model but also a distinct regional dimension focused on remedying regional inequality, encouraging decentralist reforms, and introducing the principle of subsidiarity and a new political institution to give regions a voice in the European policy process: the Committee of the Regions. This development caught the interest of both SNRPs and scholars alike, as it was viewed as a move toward a “Europe of the Regions” (e.g., Lynch, 1996; Giordano and Roller, 2002). What this meant in practice was not understood in the same way by everyone, but at its core “Europe of the Regions” referred to a European project in which regional political participation played a greater role at both the European and national levels. Some even held the expectation that regions would constitute a real third level within European politics (Moore, 2008, p. 524). This development was assumed to have a profound impact and enabled the hypothesis that the multi-level politics of European integration would eventually render nation-states and their borders redundant and thereby reduce the incentives for stateless nations to secede from their host-states (Marks, Hooghe & Blank, 1996; Elias, 2008; Hepburn & McLaughlin, 2011, Bremberg, 2020).

However, this vision for the future of Europe did not become a reality. Secessionist parties did not disappear as a result of European integration, and Europe of the Regions could be considered a failure by the end of the 1990s. Scholars have interpreted the effects of this development in European integration on the territorial demands of SNRPs differently. Hepburn (2008), but especially Laible (2008), argue that instead of eroding the need for separatism, European integration has sustained the importance of statehood and therefore separatism. They conclude that the failure of the “Europe of the Regions” and the continued relevance of nation states in European politics convinced secessionist parties that statehood is the only way to maximize sovereignty in the European context (p. 211). Laible (2008), in particular, makes a democratic deficit argument, concluding that the objective of achieving independent statehood within the EU, preferably as soon as possible, stems from secessionist parties’ desire to be adequately represented

at the EU level and to influence European policymaking, as well as the direction of European integration. These parties find that their host-states do not adequately defend their separate interests and that their own representatives are limited in their ability to do so because of their regional status. They thus perceive their sovereignty to be compromised both at the national and at the European level, and the longer secessionist parties wait for independence, the less influence they have over the ultimate design of the European project, most notably the distribution of sovereignty. In sum, the failure of “Europe of the Regions” made it clear that a remedy to the perceived democratic deficit at the European level would not emerge anytime soon and, hence, Laible (2008) argues that pro-European secessionist parties began viewing immediate self-government as the only way to play a role in European policymaking and shape the direction of European integration (p. 211).

Others, such as Cetrà and Liñeira (2018), are more hesitant to assign too large a role to European integration when it comes to the independence aspirations of secessionist parties in the EU and therefore do not use it to explain the persistence of separatism in the EU. They instead emphasize that European integration must not be seen as the driving force behind the desire for independence, which has existed for a long time and is typically explained by domestic factors such as a distinct national identity, perceived unjust fiscal policy and unmet demands for further devolution (Boylan and Turkina, 2019, p. 3; Guibernau, 2013, p. 391; Anderson and Keil, 2016, p. 43). When examining individual cases such as Scotland and Catalonia, the timeline of the failure of “Europe of the Regions” and the shift of party goals from autonomy to secession also does not always appear to align (Hepburn and McLaughlin, 2011, p. 389; Blas, 2013, pp. 399–400), although it is not unthinkable that the trajectory of European integration after “Europe of the Regions” may have made the desire for independence at least more urgent in stateless nations within the EU.

In any case, we have yet to hear the final word on the role of European integration, and to what extent it can be considered a driving force for pro-European secessionist parties to pursue independence. While Laible’s (2008) study provides a useful starting point and important theoretical insights, more empirical evidence is needed to better understand how closely linked secessionist parties’ desire for independence and their wish to influence the future of the EU really are. In this regard, analysis of European Parliament debates could be particularly helpful, as European integration and territorial

issues are quite literally brought into the same arena, allowing for a new perspective on their connection.

2.3.3 Secessionist Party Strategies Towards Europe

Regionalist and, in particular, secessionist parties have traditionally been skeptical towards European integration, viewing it as conflicting with their territorial objectives. However, during the 1980s and 1990s, this gradually shifted, and many parties moved to adopt a pro-European stance while pursuing self-determination within the EU. Nevertheless, in recent years, the scholarly literature has debated the extent to which SNRPs can be considered Europhile (Massetti and Schakel, 2022, p. 2). Much quantitative research has found evidence of a consistent pro-European attitude over time (Massetti and Schakel, 2016a; Hix and Lord, 1997; Marks and Wilson, 2000; Jolly, 2007a), which could indicate that Europe has become a core part of these parties' identity and ideology. In contrast, qualitative research points to a more nuanced picture and shows that SNRPs have developed very different stances on European integration in relation to their territorial objectives, which have varied across time and space (De Winter and Gomez-Reino, 2002; Elias, 2008, 2009; Laible, 2008; Hepburn, 2008, 2010; Hepburn and Elias, 2011). These differences across cases have primarily been explained using party politics literature, which highlights the importance of domestic institutional factors such as party system characteristics (e.g., party competition, salience of European integration, position taking relative to other parties and voting systems), party characteristics (e.g., resources, party elites and entrepreneurs, factionalism, leadership influence, transnational links and ideology) (Elias, 2008; Featherstone, 1988; Johansson and Raunio, 2001; Massetti, 2011), and differing domestic contexts in general (for example voter preferences and constraints of state structures) as explanations for the varying impact of European integration on (secessionist) parties (Hepburn, 2008).

This literature treats SNRPs as rational actors whose strategic use of Europe depends on domestic cost-benefit calculations. Massetti (2011), for example, argues that SNRP positions on European integration are shaped by electoral demand and supply, claiming that party competition and socio-economic and socio-cultural identities in the region factor into that decision. Arguments made by Giordano and Roller (2002), Hepburn (2008) and Elias (2008) point in a similar direction, highlighting the instrumental nature of sub-state party support for European integration. Parties, including SNRPs, must

be understood as tactical actors that do not always pursue long-term goals but also weigh short-term costs and benefits (p. 577). Consequently, parties shift their positions on Europe and have not made a long-term commitment to the project, but rather view it as an opportunity to increase resources. They see Europeanization less as an effect that happens to parties without their agency, and more as a strategy used by parties to shape and manipulate a given political issue (be it autonomy, economic resources or protectionism) at the local, state or European level. In other words, the existing literature suggests that SNRPs incorporated Europe into their strategies not because it forms part of their core identity or ideology, but because they view it as a tool that can help them achieve self-government, meaning that support for Europe can be withdrawn as soon as the cost-benefit calculation turns negative.

Exploring the evolution of SNRP support for Europe, Massetti and Schakel (2021) confirm that the number of Europhile SNRPs started to decrease after 1991, fell more considerably during the early 2000s and dipped under 50 percent after 2014. However, they attribute this change to party and domestic, but also European-level factors, arguing that the choice of member states to increase regional authority in the 2000s could have fostered a Europhile attitude, but did not, because self-rule also pushed SNRPs to adopt secessionist positions, which they find are associated with a Eurosceptic attitude. At the same time, the trajectory of European integration had evolved from economic to political integration, taking a form that these parties did not favour, and SNRPs also became increasingly frustrated with their inability to influence EU policymaking, which contributed to a push towards secession and, therefore, Euroscepticism. Along similar lines, Hepburn (2007) argues that the closing of the “Europe of the Regions” opportunity during the early 2000s led to the repositioning of these parties on both the territorial and European dimensions, with a renewed focus on the state.

According to these accounts, the European context can indeed not be ignored when trying to understand the evolution of secessionist party strategies, as it interacts with domestic and party factors in producing positions on Europe. In fact, I argue that the European context is particularly worth exploring further because after the failure of “Europe of the Regions,” the EU has now also clearly closed the door on secessionist parties’ efforts to assert their nationhood through (automatic) independence in the EU, which has also enabled Euroscepticism to persist. This raises questions about the extent to which, and how, this has shaped secessionist party positions and everyday strategies. After all, it is puzzling that many secessionist parties, in

the face of Euroscepticism resulting from the EU's cold shoulder, continue to pursue independence within the EU, and one can ask how and whether these parties reconcile the two.

2.3.4 The Europeanization of Secessionist Party Discourses

As it stands, the literature that contains information about the discursive usages of Europe¹ for the legitimization of secession at the domestic level is relatively scattered and separate from the general literature on the legitimization of secession. These two literatures therefore also do not identify the same kinds of arguments. The point of departure for the former is most often a rationalist perspective and the assumption that Europe is a malleable concept that can be used in different ways to fit party goals (e.g., Giordano and Roller, 2002; Dardanelli, 2003; Laible, 2008; Bourne, 2014; van der Zwet, 2015; Anderson and Keil, 2016). Using this logic, Giordano and Roller (2002), for example, find that secessionist parties tend to portray the EU positively and the host-state negatively, while Bourne (2014, 2020) highlights the use of horizontal references to successful secession movements in Europe. However, while most of these studies focus on their own specific type of usage of Europe, the most commonly identified legitimating usage of Europe is by far the “viability” argument. Here, European integration is understood as offering a safety net, a framework that can manage the independence of small states by providing access to an economic and security structure. This is intended to convince the electorate that independence is a viable and feasible option (e.g., Keating and Jones, 1991; Keating and McGarry, 2001; Eichert, 2016; Anderson and Keil, 2016; Cetrà and Liñeira, 2018). In that sense, European integration can be viewed as offering “political capital” to make the case for secession, as Laible puts it (2008, p. 21). More recently, as a counterweight to predominantly rationalist studies of the European dimension of secessionist legitimization strategies, Bremberg and Gillespie (2022) adopt a more constructivist perspective and identify a moral usage of European norms and values to legitimate independence, suggesting that the usage of Europe may not be fully rational after all but could also be identity driven.

¹ Note that none of these studies draw on the concept usage of Europe by Woll & Jacquot (2003), except for Bourne (2014; 2020). We can thus not truly speak of a usage of Europe literature, but I call it that to indicate that these studies do say something on how Europe is used in secessionist discourse.

A gap in the literature on the usages of Europe is that relatively little is known about the extent to which secessionist parties Europeanize their independence discourses. Maddens et al. (2020), for example, claim that Europe plays a smaller role in SNP domestic secessionist discourse than it does for N-VA and Vlaams Belang (p. 138), suggesting that there may be cross-case variation in how important Europe is in secessionist legitimization strategies. Moreover, Maddens et al. (2020) hint that the use of the “viability” argument may be starting to diminish. They argue that the only reason N-VA still uses it is to legitimize its pro-European stance, whereas the SNP and ERC do not make much use of this argument at all. In principle, these parties acknowledge the logic of the argument, but simultaneously do not view EU membership as a precondition for secession. For ERC, there is life outside of the EU, and since Brexit, independence outside of the EU has become more conceivable for the SNP as well (p. 138). Bremberg (2022) further highlights that the SNP’s competitor, the Alba Party, takes a more tentative and gradual approach to Scottish EU membership and also stresses that EU membership remains a fairly divisive issue within the Scottish population, with significant groups potentially preferring further devolution or independence outside the EU (pp. 28–29). In other words, now that the EU has also closed the door on the idea of automatic independence within the EU following the failure of “Europe of the Regions,” one can wonder whether pro-European secessionist party visions of independence are slowly shifting toward an increasing openness to considering independence outside the EU, at least for a period of time, though not necessarily motivated by the same kind of Euroscepticism that was present before the late 1980s.

It is therefore timely to re-evaluate and map the usages of Europe in secessionist discourses over time and to conceptually connect it to the general literature on secessionist legitimization strategies, to get a more systematic, comparable and meaningful impression of the Europeanization of secessionist legitimization strategies and the extent to which it occurs. Given that literature on the usage of Europe is based on national level data, it is also valuable to explore the usages of Europe in the European Parliament. One can, for example, wonder whether the “viability” argument is considered to be just as useful in a European setting as in a domestic setting. If secessionist discourses are going to be Europeanized anywhere, it is at the European level, and the combination of domestic and European audiences provides a broad overview of the different usages of Europe employed, while also offering insight into

whether secessionist usages of Europe are similar or different at the European level compared to the national level.

2.3.5 The Debate on Secessionist Party Strategies at the European Level

While pro-European SNRPs have been active at the European level since the 1980s and have clear territorial goals within the European multilevel governance structure, we know relatively little about how pro-European secessionist parties have enacted their visions of independence at the European level, and there are practically no studies that explore EU level secessionist party discourses. This is particularly problematic because narratives tend to be (re)produced in interaction with their environment (Korkut et al., 2015), which opens the possibility that EU level discourses might contain different legitimation strategies and usages of the EU than at the national and regional level. Hence, insight into EU level secessionist party discourses is essential to fully understand secessionist party visions of independence in the EU.

Thus far, the more general literature on territorial interest representation has outlined several purposes for mobilization at the European level. Regions with weaker legislative powers tend to mobilize for financial purposes, while regions with stronger legislative powers mobilize for policy influence (Colino & Tatham, 2014) and predominantly use extra-state channels to achieve this end (Huwyler, Tatham & Blatter, 2018). Hepburn (2010) argues that SNRPs in particular can engage in 1) symbolic usage: using Europe to gain symbolic recognition of their nationhood; 2) regional interest usage: using Europe to secure policy concessions, financial resources or other benefits; and 3) territorial usage: using Europe to legitimize their territorial projects. Regional interest representation at the EU level may involve cooperation with the host-state and/or the intention to bypass the host-state, and more devolved regions are found to cooperate more than bypass their host-states, but the likelihood of bypassing increases in cases of conflict between the two (Tatham, 2010).

However, it remains an open question to what extent both SNRPs and, in particular, secessionist parties have been using Europe for these purposes at all. After the failure of “Europe of the Regions,” Moore (2008) speaks of a shift from idealism to pragmatism in SNRP mobilization at the European level by the 2000s, and Jeffery (2011) adds that this pragmatic turn may have meant that SNRPs moved the active pursuit of territorial goals, such as independence

in the EU, from the European level back to the regional and national level (p. 166). This thus suggests that European integration has affected whether the European platform is used to pursue territorial objectives.

Still, it is unclear whether this also applies to pro-European secessionist parties in particular, especially when they have put all of their bets on an “independence in the EU” agenda and when domestic debates have at times been strained. As Griffiths and Martinez (2020) point out, it is then possible that, aside from trying to negotiate with the host-state, secessionist actors also turn to the international community, in this case the EU, to seek recognition and put pressure on the host-state. However, as discussed previously, this has also occurred in a context of increasing disillusionment with the EU, both in terms of its lack of support and the direction of European integration (Masseti and Schakel, 2021). Therefore, it remains to be seen how secessionist actors have used the European level in recent years.

Not many in depth studies exist on secessionist party activities at the European level, but scholars have nevertheless debated about whether or not secessionist parties primarily use the EU for symbolic, regional interest/policy influence or territorial objectives (e.g., Laible, 2008; Hepburn & McLaughlin, 2011; Boylan & Turkina, 2019, Cetrà and Liñeira, 2018). Laible (2008) has provided the most detailed account so far on secessionist parties at the European level in a comparative study of the SNP and Vlaams Belang (VB) between 1985 and 1999, and she argues that secessionist parties are mainly acting at the EU level to perform symbolic actions to convince the domestic audience that they are legitimate actors. This suggests that their primary goal at the EU level is to assert nationhood and to advance the goal of independence domestically, but that it is not necessarily a serious attempt to secure broader European support for their cause. In contrast, Cetrà and Liñeira (2018) as well as Boylan and Turkina (2019) assume that secessionist parties also prioritize acting at the EU level to obtain support from the EU for their independence claims.

All three of these claims can be criticized in terms of the lack of clear evidence. Laible (2008) deduces that the domestic audience goal is more important than the goals of legislative influence and lobbying for international support for independence because these latter strategies are assumed to be ineffective. Arguably, however, it cannot be guaranteed that using EU-level activities to reach domestic audiences through regional news and party media is effective. The only audience that secessionist activity at the EU level reaches for certain is the European audience, and research by Slapin and

Proksch (2010) indicates that MEPs tend to use their speeches primarily to communicate their positions to fellow MEPs rather than voters, due to the low media and public attention for MEPs. However, we do not know whether this is also representative of pro-European secessionist MEPs, and Cetrà and Liñeira (2018) and Boylan and Turkina (2019) also do not present concrete evidence for their claims.

In other words, we do not yet know whether and how secessionist parties pursue independence at the European level. Given that the last in-depth study on secessionist party activities at the European level by Laible (2008) only covered the 1985 to 1999 period, much remains unknown about how secessionist party behaviour has developed post-Europe of the Regions, at a time when the European project underwent increasing constitutionalisation. Furthermore, previous research has predominantly focused on identifying broader objectives of regional actors at the European level and has therefore paid limited attention to the secessionist discourses through which the objective of “independence in the EU” is pursued. Such analysis would, however, be valuable in enhancing our understanding of the nature of visions of independence in the EU and the purposes for which pro-European secessionist parties act at the European level.

2.4 Conclusion: Gaps & Contributions

In this literature review, I have provided an overview of the three key fields of study this thesis relates to: the literature on party politics, the literature on Europeanization and usage of Europe, and the literature on secessionist party politics and strategies. Based on this literature, I argue that I make two main contributions of an empirical and theoretical nature. First, much of the work on party politics in the European Parliament is predominantly quantitative in nature and, for example, based on roll-call votes. As such, there is limited qualitative work on the practices of MEPs in the European Parliament. More importantly, however, I identify an empirical gap in the academic literature on secessionist party politics. Only Laible (2008) has studied secessionist parties in the European Parliament, but only between 1985 and 2002, and she was more focused on party objectives than on independence strategies as a whole. Most studies on secessionist party strategies focus on the national level and are most often based on national party manifestos (e.g., Elias and Franco-Guillén, 2021; Abts et al., 2019; Dalle Mulle and Serrano, 2019; Elias et al., 2020). This is a limitation because secessionist strategies are produced in

interaction with their environment, making it possible that different settings produce different legitimization strategies and different usages of Europe. In fact, a European-level parliamentary context may offer greater conceptual variation in different types of usages of Europe. I therefore argue that a parliamentary perspective between elections, rather than only during elections, and a European-level perspective can help to understand secessionist strategies more fully. As such, I contribute empirically to the secessionist politics literature by drawing on new empirical material from the European Parliament (1999–2024), as well as original interview data from the European level. In this way, this thesis provides up-to-date empirical evidence relevant to the debate on the role of European integration in independence strategies and contributes to a more holistic understanding of secessionist party strategies and their usage of Europe.

Further, I find that the literature on secessionist party politics lacks a theoretical framework that conceptualizes how Europe can be used in independence strategies. While there is some theorization of secessionist party aims in the European Parliament (e.g., Laible, 2008), as well as theorization of independence legitimations (Dalle Mulle and Serrano, 2019; Elias and Franco-Guillén, 2021), findings on how secessionist parties use Europe are scattered across the literature (e.g., Giordano and Roller, 2002; Dardanelli, 2003; Laible, 2008; Bourne, 2014; van der Zwet, 2015; Anderson and Keil, 2016). Therefore, I make a theoretical contribution to the secessionist party literature by offering a holistic theoretical framework of the usage of Europe in party independence strategies in a parliamentary setting by drawing on and extending the work of Woll and Jacquot (2003, 2010). As part of this framework, I add a European dimension to Dalle Mulle and Serrano’s (2019) framework of independence legitimations. As a whole, my theoretical framework facilitates a systematic and meaningful comparison of how Europe is used by secessionist parties across cases and time. It helps to better understand how Europe matters in secessionist party independence strategies. Moreover, since usage of Europe has not yet been systematically explored, there is also limited understanding of how differences in usage of Europe can be explained. This thesis therefore also makes a smaller contribution to the secessionist party politics literature by providing a first exploration of a set of contextual factors that can help better understand differences in usage of Europe in secessionist party strategies.

3. Theorizing Usage of Europe in Secessionist Parties' Independence Strategies

The party politics literature understands party behaviour as largely rational-actor responses to an external and material opportunity structure. Usage of Europe by (secessionist) parties is therefore typically explained in terms of political parties with vote-seeking, office-seeking or policy-seeking goals that respond to the European opportunity structure, which consists of, for example, funding opportunities and is constrained by institutional limits (Downs, 1957; Riker, 1962; Strom, 1990; Robertson, 1976).

While some authors take a constructivist perspective (Keating, 1996, 2001; Hepburn, 2009), much of the work on regionalist and secessionist parties is inspired by this rational party politics literature (e.g., de Winter and Türsan, 1998; Lynch, 1996; Jolly, 2007; Elias and Mees, 2017; Boylan and Turkina, 2019; Royles, 2024). It is used, for example, to explain their territorial objectives, how radical their positions are, whether they enter government and their stance on the EU. For the latter, differences across cases have typically been attributed to external structural conditions and predefined interests, such as party system characteristics (e.g., party competition, position taking relative to other parties and electoral systems), party characteristics (e.g., resources and leadership influence), and broader domestic contexts (e.g., voter preferences and constraints of state structures) as explanations for differing impacts of European integration on (secessionist) parties (Featherstone, 1988; Johansson and Raunio, 2001; Massetti, 2011; Elias, 2008).

However, what the largely rational party politics literature cannot fully explain is why secessionist parties remain present in the European Parliament and continue to use Europe in their independence strategies when the EU has, according to some stateless nationalist parties, done too little to build a true Europe of the Regions and has also provided limited support for their independence aspirations. In fact, through the Prodi Doctrine, the EU rejected automatic membership for newly seceded states from existing EU member states (Bremberg and Gillespie, 2022, p. 82) and did not offer support in the context of the Scottish and Catalan independence referendums in 2014 and 2017, respectively. The European opportunity structure for secessionist

parties thus appears more or less closed. From a rational perspective, there seems to be limited utility in using Europe when the EU appears to have rejected the secessionist project within its borders, making it arguably even more difficult for secessionist parties to use “independence in Europe” as part of their case for independence directed at their non-Euro-sceptic electorate at home.

To make sense of the continued usage of Europe in the European Parliament throughout the 2000s, this thesis adopts a strategic constructivist perspective, (Checkel, 1998; Saurugger & Mérand, 2010; Saurugger, 2016; Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998; Woll & Jacquot, 2010). From this perspective, the primary way European integration matters for secessionist party independence strategies depends on how secessionist parties choose to engage with it and make use of Europe as an opportunity structure. Both opportunity structures and party objectives, however, are understood as socially constructed, rendering them dependent on actor perceptions—flexible rather than fixed. As such, a strategic constructivist perspective is able to show that, despite the EU’s continued rejections, the socially constructed opportunity structure for the usage of Europe in independence strategies is not closed at all during the 2000s. Secessionist parties still use Europe in the European Parliament for their independence strategies because they still do perceive opportunities to use Europe and are able to make use of perceived institutional and discursive dimensions of Europe to different degrees, based on their agency, which can be either based on strategic utility calculations or normative utility calculations, to achieve their equally socially constructed territorial objectives. Hence, while there may not be a clear material benefit for secessionist parties’ usage of Europe (i.e., open EU support or pressure), it is still possible that parties perceive a benefit from using Europe in their independence strategies. Differences in usage of Europe across cases and time are also understood as the result of either differently perceived opportunity structures or different reactions to similarly perceived opportunity structures.

In this chapter, I first explore the theoretical assumptions of this approach, after which I develop an original analytical framework that both captures how Europe can be used and what factors shape different usages of Europe, to better understand how European integration plays a role in secessionist party independence strategies.

3.1 A Strategic Constructivist Approach

Strategic constructivism combines elements of rational choice and constructivism and acknowledges that actors act with intent and use norms and ideas strategically to achieve specific objectives, but also acknowledges that strategic action is enabled and constrained by social context. This allows for a more holistic picture and places *actors* and *strategic action* front and center, while still analysing them within their *social context* (Saurugger, 2016 p. 71). This is because strategic action is understood as socially constructed, and the social context of strategic action is assumed to be able to say something about both the constitution and effects of strategic behaviour (Woll & Jacquot, 2010, p. 111). When it comes to the structure/agency dilemma, i.e., whether outcomes are determined by structural conditions or by actor agency, strategic constructivists do not view actors as simple transmission belts of their institutional settings. Actors are understood to interpret their institutional settings and do not always react in the same way. Rather, they have the ability to choose and learn and thereby *develop a certain sense of agency*. This therefore also warrants a focus on actors' perceptions of the context, rather than an exploration of the context itself, in order to understand actor behaviour. As such, an exploration of discourse on norms and behaviours is needed to achieve a holistic understanding of the use of opportunity structures, motivation and purpose (Simmel, 1983; Hay and Rosamond, 2002, p. 148; Woll & Jacquot, 2003; Woll & Jacquot, 2010, p. 116; Saurugger, 2016, p. 78).

Actors are assumed to be strategic and can rationally make use of opportunities. However, their strategic action can, through repetition, eventually transform them and affect their sense of identity, preferences and behaviour (Woll & Jacquot, 2003; p. 5; 2010; p. 114). Nevertheless, a focus on strategic action is key to strategic constructivism, which is further emphasized through its concept of usage. This encourages the study of the political work of actors and describes the transformation of *resources* or constraints into *political practices* with a particular goal, which can change over time. In particular, the strategic usage of ideas, norms and beliefs is of interest to strategic constructivists (McNamara, 1998; Jacquot & Woll, 2003, p. 4; Jabko, 2006; Saurugger & Mérand, 2010, pp. 4–5).

Strategic constructivism is particularly well suited to studying the role of European integration in secessionist party strategies in the European Parliament. First, it allows us to zoom in on the work of individual MEPs, who are central to secessionist parties in the European Parliament, and MEPs

in these parties tend to have considerable freedom in implementing the party agenda there (Laible, 2008, p. 152; Brack and Costa, 2013, p. 18; Busby, 2014, p. 102). Second, it acknowledges the agency of political actors, but also the importance of the structural setting. This is key when studying political party strategies within an institution like the European Parliament, as well as the multi-level structure of the EU, and when there is an interest in exploring the role of this setting in party strategies. Third, the dual focus on context and agency also provides an analytical toolkit to understand what makes strategic action possible, even though strategic constructivism is more commonly used to highlight the effects of strategic action (Saurugger, 2013, 2020). Finally, strategic constructivism lends itself well to studying the construction of political strategies, including through the strategic usage of ideas. This therefore invites the exploration of political strategies through the study of both party ideas on independence and ideas on the EU and Europe, thereby allowing a better capture of the role European integration plays in parties' independence strategies.

A number of researchers have applied the strategic constructivist approach (Saurugger, 2009; Saurugger & Mérand, 2010; Woll & Jacquot, 2010) to the field of European Studies, as well as the study of Europeanization, more specifically. From this point of view, the European level can be conceptualized as an additional field with new social arrangements, as well as a new site of contestation for secessionist actors to operate in (Woll & Jacquot, 2010, p. 113; Favell, 2006, p. 127). More importantly, however, the EU can be understood as a system that provides political opportunities through the presence of resources and constraints, and through their use it can therefore become a vector of change, in this case in terms of how independence conflicts are fought or even what their outcomes are (Jacquot and Woll, 2003, p. 4; Woll and Jacquot, 2010; Saurugger and Mérand, 2010, p. 7; Cianciara, 2016). The EU's impact can be found in its ideas, as it can be understood as a "strategic repertoire of ideas" that can be used strategically (Saurugger and Mérand, 2010, p. 5). Nevertheless, Woll and Jacquot (2010) emphasize that while the EU offers many options for strategic action, not every actor is able to use these opportunities equally as a result of structural constraints, and non-use can also occur (pp. 120–121). Hence, the strategic constructivist approach is particularly useful for theorizing how Europe plays a role in the independence strategies of pro-independence parties in the European Parliament. It is especially helpful because of its conceptualization of the EU as an ideational resource that can be used strategically in independence

strategies in any of its forms, allowing an exploration of how the EU matters in independence strategies in the European Parliament.

3.2 Conceptualizing Independence Strategies in the European Parliament

To understand the role of European integration in the persistence of secessionist demands in Western Europe and why secessionist parties are present in the European Parliament in particular, I argue that it is necessary to study how their independence strategies are constructed there and the role of the EU and Europe within them. Independence strategies are thus the main object of study in this thesis, which I conceptualize based on strategic constructivist understanding of the term political strategy as the transformation of political opportunities (resources and constraints) into political practices with the intention to achieve particular goals (Jacquot & Woll, 2003, p. 6; Woll & Jacquot, 2010, p. 116). This is therefore also how I understand independence strategies in the European Parliament. They are a set of political practices deployed in the European Parliament with a specific independence-related goal.

The main object of study that this definition of strategy therefore provides is practices, of which there exist a wide range of definitions within political science, international relations and European studies (e.g., Bueger and Gadinger, 2018; Adler-Nissen, 2012; Svendsen and Adler-Nissen, 2019). However, in this thesis, I draw on Adler and Pouliot's (2011) definition, which conceptualizes practices as "socially meaningful patterns of action, which in being performed more or less competently, simultaneously embody, act out and possibly reify background knowledge and discourse in and on the material world" (p. 4). Here, practices can be seen as distinct from behaviour and actions. Behaviour differs from actions in that actions have meaning, that is, a conscious purpose, and practice differs from actions in that the action is performed routinely in a specific setting and the meaning derives from a specific context (Cook and Brown, 1999). In this thesis, I focus in particular on discursive practices, which can be understood as "socially meaningful speech acts, according to which saying is doing" (Searle, 1969). The thesis will sometimes also discuss non-discursive practices, understood as action outside of speech (Adler and Pouliot, 2011, pp. 2–3), but these discussions are mainly intended to contextualize how secessionist parties enact their independence strategies (see Annex 3 for examples of these non-discursive

practices). Hence, I study independence strategies by focusing on independence practices by MEPs in the European Parliament, conditioned by European, domestic and party contexts.

3.3 Theorizing Usage of Europe in Party Independence Strategies in the European Parliament

In order to study the role of European integration in secessionist party independence strategies in the European Parliament, I draw on the strategic constructivist notion of usage of Europe. I develop this notion further in an abductive manner, applying it to the study of secessionist party independence strategies in parliamentary settings, and in doing so I am able to add new insights to the secessionist party and party politics literature (e.g., Hooghe, 1995; Giordano and Roller, 2002; Jolly, 2007; Laible, 2008; Elias, 2009; Hepburn, 2009; Cetrà and Liñeira, 2018; Griffiths, 2021; Elias et al., 2021). The concept of the usage of Europe is particularly useful given that the EU has mostly taken a hands-off approach to independence conflicts within the EU, and therefore the main way that European integration impacts these parties depends on how they choose to engage with it and make use of Europe as a set of opportunities.

The notion of usage of Europe was introduced by Jacquot and Woll (2003) as a way to study Europeanization. It primarily aims to address the question “how does the EU matter,” and focuses on the resources provided by European integration and the actors that use them (p. 117). It has thereby helped facilitate the discursive turn in the study of how European integration has influenced the politics, policies and institutions of its member states, as encouraged by Schmidt and Radaelli (2004) (e.g., Graziano, Jacquot and Palier, 2011; Warleigh and Stegman McCallion, 2012; Bérut, 2021; Giorgi, 2021). However, only Hepburn (2009) and Bourne have thus far explicitly linked usages of Europe with the study of secessionism (2014; 2021).

Jacquot and Woll (2003) define the usage of Europe as “social practices that seize the European Union as a set of opportunities, be they institutional, ideological, political or organizational” (p. 9). Here Europe thus refers to various different aspects of the EU, but in my analytical framework, I also include Europe in a broader sense, beyond the EU institutions, to also consider discursive usages of European history or references to situations in European countries. Woll and Jacquot’s (2003; 2010) approach is sociological and

agency-centered in nature and offers a way to study Europeanization where individual actors “engage with, interpret, appropriate or ignore the dynamics of European integration” (Woll & Jaquot, 2010, p. 116). More concretely, the approach invites the identification of analytical priorities regarding where to look for usage of Europe, but it does not provide a pre-set theoretical model of what kinds of usages of Europe exist (Woll & Jaquot, 2010, p. 15).

Given that the analytical priorities Woll and Jaquot (2010) propose are more geared towards different stages of the European policy-making process,² and that the issue of national independence is not one over which the EU has competence, I draw directly on the definition of the usage of Europe as social practices that use Europe as a set of opportunities of various kinds, to develop an analytical framework that captures how Europe is used in independence strategies in the European Parliament.

This framework is presented in Table 1 and has been developed abductively, in order to be both in line with the notion of usage of Europe and appropriately reflective of the empirical situation of pro-European secessionist parties in the European Parliament. It contains 1) dimensions that theorize what aspects of Europe can be used: institutional and discursive (i.e., Europe as a set of opportunities based on the resources it provides) and 2) ideal-type usage logics that theorize how Europe can be used along these dimensions: pragmatic and idealistic (i.e., the nature of the social practice of using Europe). While the function of Table 1 is primarily to provide an abstract conceptualization of the usage of Europe in independence strategies in an institutional setting, it also forms the basis for further conceptual development and the operationalization of the empirical manifestations of the usage logics (i.e., the independence practices), as presented in Table 5 in the method section.

² More precisely, Woll and Jaquot (2010) propose analysing usage of Europe in the European policymaking process by looking at cognitive usage, that is, the definition of political issues during the framing phase of a reform; strategic usage, that is, the pursuit of goals by aiming to influence a policy decision or increase room for manoeuvre during the policy and decision-making phase; and finally legitimating usage, that is, using Europe when justifying political decisions during the framing phase or when justifying reform to the public.

Table 1: Theorization of the Usage of Europe in Independence Strategies in Parliamentary Settings

		Usage Logics	
		Pragmatic Usage	Idealistic Usage
Dimensions of Europe	Institutional	Use of European Parliament to pursue achievable and moderate independence goals compared to the status quo in the EU	Use of the European Parliament to pursue ambitious independence goals that challenge the status quo in the EU
	Discursive	Usage of Europe in independence discourses in a way that is in touch with the current EU governance structure and EU role in domestic independence processes, as well as independence legitimations based on European circumstances.	Usage of Europe in independence discourses that challenges the current EU governance structure and EU role in domestic independence processes, as well as independence legitimations based on European principles, norms and laws.

As outlined in Table 1, I theorize *which main aspects* of Europe are used and offer opportunities for secessionist parties in the European Parliament. I propose two main dimensions along which Europe can be used here, which are inspired by the “institutional, ideological, political and organizational” opportunities that the EU offers, as suggested by Woll and Jacquot (2010, p.9). I include political opportunities in institutional opportunities, rename ideological opportunities, and exclude organizational opportunities, as organizational opportunities would mainly concern access to EU funding, which relates more directly to regional development goals than to independence. Hence, I first identify an *institutional dimension* of Europe that secessionist parties can make use of. I understand this as usage of EU institutional arenas, their laws, rules and procedures, and political opportunities. In the study of independence strategies in the European

Parliament, secessionist parties can use their presence in the European Parliament for the independence cause. For example, they can use it to pursue a European right to self-determination or to increase domestic legitimacy. Second, I identify a *discursive dimension* of Europe that secessionist parties can make use of when talking about independence in the European Parliament. This refers to all the discursive and ideological frames of Europe that can be mobilized and connected to the independence agenda. In the study of independence strategies in the European Parliament, Europe can be discursively linked to the independence agenda through articulations of the EU governance structure the new state seeks to join, how the EU should play a role in the independence process, and how Europe plays a role in independence legitimations.

Next, I also theorize *how* Europe is used by secessionist parties, and propose two main usage logics: pragmatic and idealistic. This analytical distinction ties back to suggestions in previous literature that during the time of the Europe of the Regions (e.g., late 1980s), nationalist and regionalist actors were relatively optimistic and ambitious about achieving greater self-determination and viewed the EU as one way to do so (Keating and Hooghe, 1995; Lynch, 1996; Giordano and Roller, 2002; Hepburn, 2008; Moore, 2008). However, when it gradually became evident that there would be no such thing as a Europe of the Regions, and that the EU would instead remain a Union of States (e.g., late 1990s and early 2000s), the literature suggests that these same actors became more pragmatic. Secessionist parties grew more negative about European integration, and there was speculation that they would shift the active pursuit of independence back to the domestic level (Moore, 2008; Jeffery, 2011; Massetti and Schakel, 2021; Elias, 2008; Hepburn, 2008, 2010; Boylan and Turkina, 2019, p. 5). The literature thus first points to a more optimistic and idealistic attitude among secessionist actors toward European integration and its use for their independence agenda, followed by a more pessimistic and pragmatic attitude. I therefore theorize that this idealism and pragmatism can be expected to be reflected in how pro-European secessionist parties ultimately use Europe in the European Parliament for their independence strategies.

The analytical distinction between the idealistic and pragmatic usage of Europe is particularly useful for the purposes of this thesis, as it can show how extensively pro-European secessionist parties rely on Europe in their independence strategies in the European Parliament. As such, it helps to understand how European integration matters in secessionist party

independence strategies. I understand the pragmatic usage of Europe as using Europe where possible but not where it is not deemed possible, guided by circumstances. There is no ambition to hold out for ideal situations, but instead a focus on immediate gains. In particular, the pragmatic usage of the institutional dimension of Europe refers to the use of the European Parliament to pursue achievable and moderate independence goals compared to the status quo, whereas the pragmatic usage of the discursive dimension of Europe refers to the use of Europe in independence discourses in a way that aligns with the current EU governance structure and the EU's role in domestic independence processes, as well as independence legitimations based on current European circumstances or established European principles. In contrast, I understand the idealistic usage of Europe as guided by ideals. Actors may pursue goals that are difficult to achieve and would require a change in the status quo. These actions could be costly in that they may break existing norms and conventions. More specifically, the idealistic usage of the institutional dimension of Europe refers to the use of the European Parliament to pursue ambitious independence goals that challenge the status quo in the EU, whereas the idealistic usage of the discursive dimension of Europe refers to the use of Europe in independence discourses that challenges the current EU governance structure and the EU's role in domestic independence processes, as well as independence legitimations that challenge the meaning of European principles. I understand these usage logics as something that can vary across both time and cases. They are also not meant to be binary but rather continuous, as it is possible for parties to fall more or less within the described usage logics.

3.4 Understanding Usage of Europe in the European Parliament

In order to better understand what shapes different usages of Europe, I seek to identify relevant contextual factors. Within strategic constructivism, context, understood as socially constructed opportunities and constraints, is viewed as shaping the range of possible and meaningful forms of strategic action, or in this case, usages of Europe. Context is not, however, seen as directly determining strategic action, as actors have the agency to interpret and navigate these contextual factors. Context thus only matters to the extent that actors acknowledge it to matter, given that opportunities and constraints are not understood as external factors but rather as socially constructed.

Consequently, in cases of similar contextual factors, Europe could still be used differently as a result of different actor interpretations and strategic utility considerations, based on the perceived benefits of an action, or normative utility calculations, based on the perceived alignment of the action with identity and values. In other words, a set of socially constructed contextual factors shapes secessionist parties' perceived strategic and/or normative utility of using Europe in the European Parliament, which can help understand differences in the usage of Europe (Kratochwil, 1989; Checkel, 1998, 2005; Woll and Jacquot, 2010; Saurugger, 2013, 2021). Given that both strategic and normative utility considerations can be at play, and that these are not mutually exclusive, I primarily focus on the contextual situations that make different usages of Europe possible. I therefore consider agency not as a separate factor but as an interpretive mechanism, that is, a filter, that mediates the role that context plays in shaping strategic action (Guzzini, 2017). I therefore acknowledge actor agency in my contextual framework by highlighting actors' interpretations of their contexts.

In order to specifically theorize what determines how Europe is used in the European Parliament, that is, whether usages of Europe are more pragmatic or idealistic, I identify a set of contextual factors that provide constraints and opportunities for secessionist parties to use Europe in the European Parliament. This framework, displayed in Table 2, is inspired by the main party politics literature that has been used to explain other behaviours of secessionist parties, such as how radical their self-determination goals are, how much they foreground independence domestically or whether they appeal to Europe in their online communication (e.g., Elias and Mees, 2017; Royles, 2024; Boylan and Turkina, 2019), but has not yet been applied to understanding whether and how Europe is used in party independence strategies in the European Parliament.

Table 2: Contextual Factors Shaping Usage of Europe in the European Parliament

Contextual Factors
<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Perceived Party Strength▪ Party Attachment to Europe▪ Perceived Public Opinion▪ Perceived Access to Independence▪ Party Evaluations of EU Responses to Territorial Demands

At the party level, I identify two factors in previous research that could matter for how Europe is used by secessionist parties in the European Parliament. First, perceived party strength can shape secessionist party MEPs' perception of their capacity to use Europe effectively when pursuing independence in the European Parliament. Larger parties may feel sufficiently confident and ambitious to use Europe as they prefer, whether pragmatically or idealistically, because of the likely availability of sufficient resources (leadership, knowledge, power) at both the domestic and European levels (Hepburn, 2010, p. 209; Boylan and Turkina, 2019, p. 18). Smaller parties, however, may view their potential lack of resources as a reason to avoid using Europe idealistically and instead use it more pragmatically. They may perceive themselves to have less capacity to strategize the use of Europe and are therefore more likely to focus on low-hanging fruit, for example, easily achievable outcomes or accessible ways to build credibility, resulting in more pragmatic usage of Europe.

Second, party attachment to Europe can matter for how appropriate secessionist party MEPs perceive it to be to deploy certain usages of Europe over others in the European Parliament. Research by Elias and Mees (2017) suggests that party ideology might enable or constrain party positioning on independence, which could also apply to how secessionist parties use Europe. Moreover, Hepburn and McLoughlin (2011) find that historical ambivalence from the party toward Europe can generate greater internal debate on Europe. Hence, secessionist parties' history of positioning themselves on Europe can indicate the nature of a party's attachment to Europe (i.e. if the party has a strong or a weaker attachment to Europe), as well as the appropriateness of using Europe in certain ways based on that. Secessionist MEPs from a party with a stronger attachment to Europe may therefore perceive idealistic usage of Europe as more appropriate, whereas MEPs from a party with a weaker

European identity may view more pragmatic usage of Europe in the European Parliament as more appropriate.

At the domestic context level, perceptions of public opinion are a factor that can matter for how secessionist parties view the strategic and normative utility of one usage of Europe over the other. Since secessionist parties in this study can be assumed to be vote-seeking, at least to the extent that they aim to hold regional office, how Europe is used in independence strategies depends on how secessionist parties believe they can talk about Europe in a credible and electorally viable way, based on local public opinion on European integration (Budge and Laver, 1986; Strom, 1990). The more positive regional public opinion is perceived to be toward European integration, the more likely secessionist parties are to perceive idealistic usage of Europe as viable, legitimate and beneficial. In turn, the more skeptical regional public opinion is perceived to be toward European integration, a secessionist party that still wants to present itself as pro-European may be more inclined to perceive pragmatic usage of Europe as more appropriate and beneficial.

Moreover, perceived access to independence is another domestic context factor that can matter for how Europe is used in the European Parliament, as it can determine how reliant the party perceives itself to be on the EU. As Griffiths (2021) theorizes, secessionist parties have two pathways to reach an internationally recognized independent state. One route runs domestically and involves the secessionist party trying to convince the host-state to remove the domestic veto. In the other route, the independence movement turns to the international community and tries to convince it to sympathize with their cause and put pressure on the host-state (Osterud, 1997; Griffiths, 2016). Alternatively, the secessionist party can use international sympathy itself as a means of exerting pressure. Secessionist parties can make use of both routes, but if the domestic route appears to be a dead end with little potential for progress, the party may perceive itself as more reliant on the international route. Hence, it can be theorized that secessionist parties may use the EU depending on the extent to which they perceive they need it. As such, the smaller the secessionist party believes the access of the region to be to a legal and bilateral pathway to independence in the host-state, the more likely the party is to engage in idealistic usage of Europe in the European Parliament. This is because European sympathy and support can in this case be viewed as one of the few remaining tools to ensure the credibility and accessibility of the independence agenda when domestic routes are blocked. In turn, the

greater the secessionist party believes the access of the region is to a legal and bilateral pathway to independence, the more likely the party is to engage in pragmatic usage of Europe in the European Parliament. The reason is that the party may view Europe as less central to achieving independence and therefore rely on it to a lesser extent.

And finally, party evaluations of EU responses to territorial demands may have impacted secessionist parties' perceptions of the EU and what Europe can offer in their quest for independence, therefore shaping how they use Europe. For example, by the early 2000s it became clear that the EU would not meet the expectations that some stateless nationalist parties had about a Europe of the Regions. This led to so-called "qualified opposition" to European integration by these parties (Szczerbiak and Taggart, 2003; Elias, 2008), which meant that they still supported the European project in principle, but had become more critical of certain policy aspects. Moore (2008) even argued that regional actors had moved from idealism in their European representation to a more pragmatic approach that was more focused on achieving specific outcomes during the 2000s. In other words, during the 2000s but also the 2010s, secessionist parties may have become increasingly disappointed with the EU if it did not meet their expectations. This could have led to an adjustment in expectations of what the EU could offer them and therefore also how they would use the EU in their quest for independence. In particular, a disappointing reality at the EU level could therefore contribute to a less idealistic and more pragmatic usage of Europe in the European Parliament.

4. Research Design

Having theorized usage of Europe in party independence strategies in the European Parliament, the next step is now to arrive at a research design that can capture usage of Europe empirically. I do so first by explaining my case selection process, which is then followed by a discussion of the data and the method of analysis. I end the chapter with an explanation of how I operationalize the study of the usage of Europe in independence strategies in the European Parliament, as well as the contextual factors theorized to shape usage of Europe.

4.1 Universe of Cases: Parties Seeking Internal Secession

While nationalist movements have traditionally been theorized as pursuing full statehood, this no longer corresponds with the reality of nationalism in a globalized world, where a number of political parties and movements seek self-determination yet choose to remain within a multilevel governance structure (Laible, 2008, pp. 4–5). It is precisely this phenomenon that this project aims to explore. Most, if not all, of these movements and parties nowadays can be found in Western Europe, where they propagate independence in the EU (e.g., Flanders in Belgium; the Faroe Islands in Denmark; Bavaria in Germany; Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland in the UK; Sardinia, Venice and Lombardy in Italy; Catalonia, the Basque Country, Galicia, Andalusia and Aragon in Spain; Corsica, Savoy and Brittany in France; and Åland in Finland), but electoral support for such parties in these regions differs considerably.

It is difficult to find similar parties in Eastern Europe, where the collapse of the Soviet Union during the late 1980s and early 1990s resulted in a wave of newly independent countries, some of which eventually joined the EU. Kosovo has recently sought independence, but because it was never part of the EU, its situation is not fully comparable to the cases in Western Europe. On the world stage, there are independence movements and parties in places like Hong Kong, Taiwan and Quebec, but these are different in that they do not seek self-determination within a multilevel governance structure, but full independence.

It is, however, arguable that we can observe the pursuit of self-determination *within* the multilevel governance structure of multinational states as well. In such cases of internal secession, regions seek to split from the larger region of which they are a part, but wish to remain within the federal state (e.g., regions in India, Switzerland, Ethiopia and Canada). Although the EU is not a full federation, the Western European regions mentioned above could be understood as semi-cases of internal secession (Gilliland, 2014; Requejo and Nagel, 2017). Hence, while the type of self-determination pursued in cases of internal secession can differ, what binds them together as a universe of cases is that they seek to separate from the existing governing entity they have been part of, while not pursuing full self-determination in the form of the establishment of a fully sovereign state, but instead aiming to remain within a multilevel governance structure.³

These cases are interesting not only because they challenge traditional understandings of nationalism, but also because pursuing self-determination within a multilevel governance context makes the path toward potential secession much more complicated. These parties depend on the goodwill of the federation, supranational level or intergovernmental organization, and cannot pursue unilateral secession. The higher level, in turn, is expected to remain loyal to its member states or regions, but also to its secessionist citizens. Requejo and Nagel (2017) hypothesize that such a context certainly affects secession dynamics and may make secession easier to claim but more difficult to realize compared to other cases. It is therefore worthwhile to learn more about such cases and to explore more deeply how globalization dynamics affect secessionist parties.

4.2 Focus on the European Parliament

Because secessionist parties that pursue independence within a multilevel governance structure seem to be largely a European phenomenon, it is logical to focus on the pursuit of independence in the EU. Thus far, research has explored the effects of European integration on pro-European secessionist parties mostly at the national level by studying how it has informed their party positions on European integration (e.g., Elias, 2008) and how secessionist

³ By delineating this as my universe of cases, I thus exclude cases that pursue independence outside of a multi-level governance structure or pursue independence through violence.

parties strategically use European integration in discourse at the national level, mainly based on party manifesto data (e.g., Giordano and Roller, 2002; Bourne, 2014; Anderson and Keil, 2016; Dalle Mulle and Serrano, 2019; Elias and Franco-Guillén, 2021). However, visions of independence in the EU are not only enacted at the sub-national and national levels and in manifestoes but also at the European level in day-to-day politics.

In fact, while regionalist actors have been mobilised at the European level since the 1980s, their strategies have been understudied (Bomberg and Peterson, 1998; Keating and Hooghe, 2001; Moore, 2008). As Schakel and Massetti (2020b) outline, secessionist actors have several channels to access the EU. If in regional office, they have access to the Committee of the Regions, and they may also have occasional participation in the Council of Ministers and regional representation offices in Brussels. Aside from that, secessionist actors can also take part in regular domestic EU affairs discussions as well as acquire seats in the European Parliament.⁴ However, I argue that secessionist party independence strategies can be most directly and consistently studied through a focus on the European Parliament.

The European Parliament is the most influential and visible European channel through which secessionist parties can independently make their voice heard in European politics. It is therefore a more relevant arena for secessionist parties to make their case than, for example, the Committee of the Regions or interregional associations (Schakel and Massetti, 2020b). Even if the Commission or Council are not receptive, written questions in the European Parliament require a response, and MEPs are able to reach both domestic and European audiences through the media. Secessionist party participation in the European Parliament is also independent from the host-state or regional government. As such, European Parliament data can directly reveal the positions of secessionist parties, even on issues such as independence, on which these parties may have to bypass their host-state because it is in conflict with its territorial integrity (Högenauer, 2014; Jeffery, 2007; Tatham, 2011). Moreover, this independent participation also means that it is possible to consistently track party discourses over time, even if secessionist parties are not in regional government consistently. This makes

⁴ Aside from this, there are also two interregional organizations, CALRE (1997), which stands for the Conference of European Legislative Assemblies, and REGLEG (2000), which stands for the Conference of Regions with Legislative Competences. These are informal organizations with no formal role in EU policymaking. They influence the EU through lobbying the Commission (Schakel & Massetti, 2020b)

European Parliament data more suitable than, for example, data from regional offices in Brussels or representatives in the Committee of the Regions, as these are either nominated by the host-state or by the regional government of the day (Schakel & Massetti, 2020b).

Aside from being the most effective and unmediated access channel to the EU, the European Parliament is interesting in itself because it is a unique venue with its own culture, party politics dynamics and audience, which has the potential to highlight and produce nuances in secessionist party independence strategies that are different from other contexts in which they have been studied before. For example, elections are fought through national party structures, but day-to-day activities are conducted through European party groups. Consequently, MEPs are, while autonomous to a certain degree, not agents of one but two principals (Hix et al., 2007; Busby, 2013b; Slapin and Proksch, 2010). In the European Parliament, secessionist MEPs are consistently confronted with the national and the supranational, which likely produces an interesting balance between assertions of state and nationhood while also representing European citizens as a whole. Furthermore, government versus opposition dynamics are lacking, parliamentary work ranges from active involvement in the legislative process to the production of symbolic resolutions, and there is not only a national audience but also a European audience to cater to. Slapin and Proksch (2010) have in fact suggested that, unlike in national parliaments, MEPs may use speeches more to explain their position to their EP audience than to voters (p. 336).

Most of all, however, the European Parliament is a valuable venue to study the role of European integration in secessionist party independence strategies because it allows for the analysis of these strategies in a direct European context. This applies both through the institution itself and through its broader parliamentary setting, which encourages secessionist parties to actively and continuously reflect on Europe, develop visions and ideas about the meaning of Europe, European citizenship and identity, respond directly to significant events in European politics, and in turn link these developments to their quest for independence.

4.3 Selecting Parties and Timeframe

As I am interested in observing the usage of Europe in party independence strategies in the European Parliamentary arena between 1999 and 2024, parties need to fulfil two criteria to be considered for case selection. First, the

parties should be secessionist for at least part of the period between 1999 and 2024. This means that they must have as their objective to either, as soon as possible or eventually, establish a separate new state. I am more interested in exploring secessionist party strategies than autonomist party strategies, not only because the pursuit of statehood in an integrating Europe is more puzzling than simply using Europe as a source of funding and networking, but also because the stakes and ambitions are higher for pro-European secessionist parties than for autonomist parties, as they challenge the territorial integrity of their host-state and the status quo in the EU.

It is, however, not uncommon for parties to change their minds about their territorial objectives. At one point in time, they can be autonomist and at another secessionist, or they may simply be ambiguous about their position (Masseti and Schakel, 2016b). A party that changes its territorial position during the timeframe could be particularly interesting to explore, as this may also result in a change in its usage of Europe in the European Parliament. The Catalan *Convergència i Unió* (CiU) is such a case. There are, however, also cases where it is difficult to determine whether they would fall within the scope of this study. The Basque PNV, for example, has been relatively (and perhaps strategically) ambiguous about whether it pursues independence. This could be interesting for examining how such ambiguity plays out in the European Parliament, but it also risks not fully capturing the phenomenon of interest. Similarly, the Northern Irish Sinn Féin would be a difficult case, because it seeks reunification with Ireland rather than the establishment of a new state. I therefore ideally select parties that have had the objective of establishing a new state for a significant portion of the timeframe, at least one parliamentary term of four years.

Second, the parties selected must have existed throughout the timeframe of the study (1999–2024) and have been relatively consistently present in the European Parliament, give or take a few years. Studying parties with consistent presence is preferable because inconsistent presence does not allow for tracing the evolution of independence strategies at the European level, which is one of the primary objectives of the study, and also makes comparative analysis more difficult. Most notably, contributions to parliamentary debates would not be available for study in cases of intermittent representation.

Furthermore, parties that make it to the European Parliament evidently enjoy relatively consistent domestic electoral success, whereas similar parties outside the European Parliament probably do not. This is advantageous,

because it is in these environments that the secessionist campaign has the greatest chance of success and is most salient. These cases are therefore the most likely to display some form of independence strategy at the European level.⁵ This last criterion, of being a relatively consistent presence in the European Parliament, thus excludes some cases, such as the Sardinian Action Party, which was never represented in the European Parliament, but also parties that were present in the European Parliament inconsistently, such as the Basque EH, which was dissolved due to associations with ETA in 2003, the Basque EA, which was in the European Parliament in 1999, then absent for two parliamentary terms before returning as EH Bildu in 2014, and the Catalan NeCat, which only existed between 2012 and 2014.

This essentially leaves seven political parties in three different Member States that fulfil all criteria for observing the phenomenon of interest. These are the Flemish N-VA and Vlaams Belang; the Catalan ERC and CiU/PDeCAT/Junts; the Basque PNV; the Scottish SNP; and the Welsh Plaid Cymru. This is not a large number, but including additional parties, such as anti-European parties, fully autonomist parties or parties not represented in the European Parliament, would result in a comparison between apples and oranges, would take away the puzzle of departure, would shift the focus from understanding independence strategies in the EU towards simply independence strategies, and would limit the data available for study and comparison. These seven cases, despite their rather specific attributes, can still offer insights into ideas on self-determination and sovereignty that pro-European secessionist parties outside the European Parliament may share, and may provide an indication of such parties' practices if they were to become successful in European elections. In addition, they may shed light on cases of internal secession and the broader phenomenon of mobilization at the federal or supranational level.

⁵ It is true that it may be useful to consider selecting a secessionist party which pursues independence in the EU but is not part of the European Parliament. An example of such a party would be the Sardinian Action Party, which has existed throughout the timeframe, appears to communicate with the EU relatively frequently (Boylan and Turkina, 2019) and has been a member of the European Free Alliance. This would allow for capturing differences between being an “insider” or an “outsider” in the European Union. However, since my more narrowly defined unit of analysis is pro-European secessionist MEPs, I would not be able to integrate such a case equally into a comparative analysis, as this party lacks MEPs. It would also be much more difficult to obtain data on such a case. Therefore, I have decided to refrain from this option.

Ultimately, I opt for a comparative design consisting of three parties: the Scottish SNP and the Catalan ERC and CiU/PDeCAT/Junts. These cases were selected for several reasons. First, they all share a pro-European independence agenda and are therefore likely to engage in usage of Europe, yet they also differ across relevant contextual circumstances. This selection therefore allows for both a cross-country comparison (Scottish SNP versus the Catalan CiU/Junts and ERC) and within-region comparison (Catalan CiU/Junts and ERC), which is beneficial for understanding differences in the usage of Europe.

At the country level, the regions differ in public opinion on the EU (Generalitat de Catalunya, 2024; Curtice and Montagu, 2020) and access to independence, given that the UK was willing to acknowledge the Scots' right to a referendum, whereas Spain was not willing to do the same for Catalonia. Catalonia is also relatively wealthy compared to the host-state, while Scotland is perceived as relatively underdeveloped in relation to the host-state (Dalle Mulle, 2018).

On the party level, the two Catalan parties differ in party strength over time, given their fluctuations in electoral results during the 2000s (Parlament de Catalunya, n.d; House of Commons, 2020; 2021). Ideologically, the parties are also different. Whereas the SNP and ERC are more left-leaning and have a long independence-oriented history, CiU/Junts is a liberal party that was long autonomist and only became explicitly pro-independence after 2010. The parties also sit in different European party groups: the SNP and ERC have long been affiliated with the Greens/EFA group, whereas CiU/Junts has a long history in ALDE before becoming Non-Inscrit. The three parties also appear to have different views about Europe. The SNP has a reputation of being more critical about European integration, whereas CiU/Junts and ERC appear to have fewer reservations about this (Cetrà and Liñeira, 2018).

I also believe the three parties selected are a particularly good fit for the study because they have been the most active, visible and relevant within the EU regarding independence during the timeframe of the study (Bremberg and Gillespie, 2022, p. 19). This therefore makes them rich in data, but more importantly, socially relevant cases to study, also because smaller independence parties may see them as examples. And while these cases, because of their salience, have been researched extensively at the domestic level, there is still a gap when it comes to the European-level strategies of Scottish and Catalan independence parties. It therefore makes sense to begin by exploring these more salient cases.

Moreover, what makes CiU/Junts a particularly interesting case is that until the 2010s, it was an autonomist party, after which it turned separatist. It therefore presents an excellent opportunity to examine how, and whether, the usage of Europe for its self-determination agenda changed compared to its later usage of Europe for the party's independence agenda. Furthermore, what makes ERC unique is that throughout the timeframe, the party varied in size, being relatively small after the Catalan 1999 and 2010 elections, which may also have affected its usage of Europe in the European Parliament. Additionally, the SNP is a party from a now former EU Member State, but given that during most of the study's timeframe (1999–2024) the UK was part of the EU, the SNP can be considered a secessionist party that pursued independence in the EU from within the EU, like others of its kind. However, what makes this case especially interesting is that for a significant part of the timeframe, the EU debate was highly salient in the UK and therefore also in Scotland as a result of Brexit. This is therefore a context in which the SNP can be expected to have taken a strong position on Europe, which should be visible in its independence strategy and its usage of Europe in the European Parliament. This case therefore provides an interesting, explicit and rich example of how Europe can be used in relation to party independence agendas. It also briefly offers the opportunity to explore what happens to the usage of Europe in independence strategies when a party operates from outside the EU and no longer has the same access to EU institutions. What further makes all three parties unique and interesting is that they were involved in the organisation of two independence referenda, the SNP in 2014 and the Catalan parties in 2017, during which they also hoped that the EU would take a position, which it did not (Masseti, 2022). This is therefore also a context that could reveal potential change in how Europe is used in independence strategies in the European Parliament.

The study has a comparative set-up in order to better capture, conceptualise and ultimately understand variations in how Europe can be used in independence strategies, and to facilitate a better understanding of how different contextual factors shape these differences⁶. As such, a key goal of

⁶ I opt for a case study of three parties only, as a smaller selection allows for a more nuanced description of the phenomenon under study, in this case usage of Europe in independence strategies. This is necessary because usage of Europe can occur in many ways, both explicit and implicit, and can therefore not easily be measured. Moreover, greater attention to the context in which independence strategies are produced helps to better understand their meaning and why they are constructed

this comparison is to develop a greater understanding of the social patterns, contingencies and particularities of usage of Europe in secessionist party independence strategies (Moses and Knutsen, 2019, pp. 245–246). As Wendt (2019) points out, comparison is particularly useful in this regard because it prevents some things from going unnoticed and allows for the identification of taken-for-granted or naturalised truths, given that what is evident in one context may appear unusual in another. This will also prevent certain elements of the case from being overemphasised as nationally specific when they may also occur in other cases. As such, the logic underpinning my case selection is not grounded in full representativeness of the totality of cases, but rather in selecting a diverse group of cases to maximise learning opportunities (Stake, 1995, p. 4; Simmons, Smith and Schwartz, 2015). This case selection will therefore allow for a degree of analytical transferability and a more abstract and theoretical understanding of the independence strategies of pro-European secessionist parties.

Finally, the timeframe selected for the study is 1999 to 2024. This timeframe complements the main study on secessionist party activities at the European level by Laible (2008), which covered the period 1985 to 2002, and allows for the exploration of the most recent dynamics in how European integration has impacted secessionist party visions of self-determination and their enactment over a period of 20 years. I thus include two, and perhaps a third, significant eras and turning points in the pursuit of self-determination in the EU. First, it allows for exploration of the aftermath of the general convergence of regionalist parties around a Europe of the Regions. This took place in the late 1980s and early 1990s. When the study starts in 1999, however, some of these parties still express hope of consolidating a favourable position for the regions in the emerging European constitutional order and continue to pursue this goal. Eventually, however, it becomes clear that the EU rejects this vision of self-determination, and by the 2010s we see some regionalist parties radicalize and gradually converge around a new vision of self-determination: automatic independence in the EU. After some ambiguous positioning, however, this new vision of self-determination is also rejected by the EU, and the question remains: what comes next? Continued independence in the EU, or independence outside the EU? As such, the timeframe allows for

the way they are. This requires a more in-depth study, especially given that little existing literature addresses secessionist party independence strategies at the European level.

an examination of how independence strategies in the European Parliament change over time and how, and whether, repeated EU rejection has played a role in their evolution.

4.4 Data Sources and Collection

Whereas previous studies have examined secessionist party discourses at the national level and mainly based on party manifestos (e.g., Elias and Franco-Guillén, 2021; Abts et al., 2019; Dalle Mulle and Serrano, 2019; Elias et al., 2021), I argue that it is necessary to explore secessionist party strategies in a wider range of settings to gain a more holistic understanding of parties' independence agendas. Hence, this study's two main empirical data sources are textual data from the European Parliament and semi-structured interviews with (former) MEPs and their civil servants.

4.4.1 Textual Data from the European Parliament

I draw on textual data from the European Parliament, which includes plenary debates, explanations of vote, and oral and written questions, with the purpose of gathering information on how Europe is used in independence strategies, in particular regarding the discursive usage of Europe (e.g., EU governance structures, the EU in the independence process and Europe in independence legitimations). On top of that, the textual data is also used to capture how frequently the European Parliament is used to address independence and to identify information on some of the contextual factors of interest. This depends, however, on whether MEPs mention these aspects, and thus can vary from case to case.

This data source is of added value compared to previously studied party manifestos, given that while party manifestos may contain relatively demarcated sections devoted to independence (in the EU), textual data from the European Parliament allows for a more detailed unpacking of the meaning and implications of these visions, revealing what these statements concretely entail. Moreover, drawing on plenary speeches, explanations of vote and parliamentary questions is in this case more useful than focusing on committee work or legislative data, because independence is not considered to fall within the remit of the European Parliament. Therefore, little to no legislation is produced on this issue, nor is it typically the main focus of committee discussions for this same reason. Rather, committee and legislative

data lend themselves better to broader research on regional interest representation in the EU, which is more clearly within the EU's remit.

Instead, formal independence discussions are more likely to take place through channels with fewer restrictions on the topic. This occurs through plenary speeches, where MEPs either have the opportunity to speak on issues of political importance to them or to creatively incorporate the topic of independence. The same is true for explanations of vote, while oral and written questions provide even greater scope for MEPs to address their preferred issues. Hence, although independence-related discussion can also occur informally in committees or be embedded in legislative debates, formal independence discourse is least constrained in parliamentary questions, explanations of vote, and plenary speeches. Debates and questions also reach the largest audience, both domestic and European, and can therefore be considered particularly significant.

I also have opted to study independence discourses in all debates, explanations of vote and questions that the MEPs from the three parties took part in, rather than a setup where I focus on particular debates in the European Parliament that centre on the issue of independence. Similar to committees, there is rarely a fully fledged debate on independence. Therefore, it is preferable to directly identify independence discourses by examining all debates rather than focusing on specific debates. Hence, to study independence discourses in the selected textual data from the European Parliament, I have collected 7,893 contributions in NVivo, consisting of all individual plenary debate contributions, explanations of vote, and written and oral questions made in the European Parliament by the MEPs from the parties under study between 1999 and 2024. I have taken this data from the MEPs' personal pages on the European Parliament website. Then, to make the data more manageable for the purposes of my study, I have created a dataset of 613 contributions in total from the larger dataset that only contains what I call "independence contributions," that is, contributions that discuss preferred governance structures for the new state, the independence process, or contain legitimations for independence. These have been systematically identified by means of search words. A first search round identified explicit independence contributions, while a second search round identified the more implicit ones by entering search words that had to do with sovereignty more broadly (See

Annex 1).⁷⁸ Naturally, other contributions by secessionist parties that do not explicitly or implicitly discuss independence can still potentially provide information about independence practices: for example, an MEP could portray the host-state as bad Europeans while simultaneously portraying their own region as good Europeans. However, in cases where it was difficult to verify whether the intention of a certain practice or claim is independence-related in one of the three above stated ways, the contribution is not included in the dataset.

4.4.2 Semi-structured Interviews

At the same time, the textual data collected from the European Parliament is also not perfect. It does not reveal what lies behind these speeches or how they fit within the broader independence strategy. Occasionally, some contributions can be quite brief, consisting of only one or two sentences, and, finally, it only provides an indication of how often independence is addressed, given that it does not capture informal conversations that the relevant MEPs may have had. Most of this can, at least to some extent, be addressed through interview data. As such, I also draw on elite interviews (e.g., Empson, 2018) with former MEPs and party staff from the three parties. The purpose of this data is, first, to capture how Europe is used in independence strategies, with a primary focus on identifying the institutional usage of the European Parliament, that is, the party's independence objectives within the European Parliament. The interviews are also coded for discursive usages of Europe (EU governance structure, EU role and legitimations), but only to complement and contextualize the coding of the main data source for this, the EP textual data.

The interviews have furthermore been used to provide more contextual information. For example, they have been used to collect information on the contextual factors in this study, and they have been used to better contextualize the parties' independence objectives in the EP. As such, the interviews have also included questions intended to capture non-discursive practices, by asking about the actions of secessionist parties that contribute to realizing the independence agenda in the European Parliament, or more

⁷ See 4.6.1 for a more elaborate discussion of the research process.

⁸ While I have collected more data than I have analyzed in the end, exploring the rest of the dataset falls outside of the scope of this study.

concretely, about the activities they engage in within the European Parliament.

I relied on purposive sampling to select the interview participants. In so doing, I selected those most likely to provide useful information for the study (Kelly, 2010, p. 317). Purposive sampling furthermore assumes that different people need to be included in the sample based on the variation of information they possess (Robinson, 2014). This is ultimately meant to create greater depth of understanding based on a smaller sample rather than any form of generalizability based on a larger sample (Palinkas et al., 2015). Given my interest in the use of Europe in independence strategies in the European Parliament, I decided to interview those implementing these strategies, i.e., MEPs and their staff in the European Parliament, because they are closest to the object of study and therefore possess the most useful information for my research aims. A drawback here is that there is no guarantee that interview responses fully reflect events as they occurred, either because of recall bias related to events that happened a long time ago or because politicians may seek to present themselves and their party in the best possible light. This could partially be remedied by interviews with party staff because they possess a lot of insider information yet tend to give less “politician style” answers. Furthermore, it also helped to compare the interviews with each other to see if a particular anecdote or theme recurs across interviews. I chose not to interview anyone from the domestic party because MEPs tend to enjoy quite a lot of freedom in how they do politics in the European Parliament (Laible, 2008, p. 152; Brack & Costa, 2013, p.18; Busby, 2013, p. 102).

Given that my study covers three parties (CiU/Junts, ERC and SNP) and five parliamentary terms, I followed a purposive sampling logic by striving to interview one MEP per party per parliamentary term within my timeframe, plus at least one member of staff from each party to provide additional context and insight. Since some MEPs were present across multiple parliamentary terms, they were able to account for more than one term. As such, I conducted 12 interviews in total: four for SNP, three for CiU/Junts and five for ERC. For CiU/Junts, I was not able to interview an MEP for the fifth term (1999–2004) due to age constraints, nor for the ninth term (2019–2024) due to lack of response. The member of staff I interviewed, however, had been in place for several years and had also been present during the ninth term. Similarly, for ERC, it was not possible to interview the MEP from the fifth term due to age, and for the seventh term (2009–2014), a former member of staff was able to recount the party’s activities during that period. While it was not always

possible to interview one MEP per parliamentary term as initially intended, this limitation was largely mitigated through the inclusion of staff interviews and the use of textual parliamentary data from the relevant periods.

I chose to conduct semi-structured interviews, a format that contains mostly open-ended questions, is centered around a set of pre-determined themes and is flexible in terms of structure and follow-up questions (Karatsareas, 2022, p. 100). It therefore allows ample room to cater to the individual knowledge and information the interviewees possess while simultaneously remaining systematic enough to allow meaningful comparison. As visualized in Table 3, the interviews were centered on a set of selected themes, which served both to provide data on the nature and use of Europe in the party’s independence strategy in the European Parliament and to provide additional information about relevant contextual factors (see Annex 5).

Table 3: Overview of Interview Themes and Type of Data Collected

Interview Themes	Data on Independence Strategy	Data on Contextual Information
General aims and priorities in the European Parliament	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Independence Objective in the European Parliament 	
Independence objectives and ways of addressing independence in the European Parliament	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Independence Objectives in the European Parliament 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Perceived Party Strength • Non-discursive independence practices⁹
Descriptions of key moments in the independence process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • EU Role in the Independence Process 	

⁹ Note that non-discursive independence practices are not a contextual factor used to better understand differences in the use of Europe, unlike the other factors listed in this column. They are included here because they constitute contextual information collected during the interviews that is included when discussing “independence objectives in the EP” as part of institutional usage of Europe.

Ideas and beliefs about independence (EU design, EU membership, EU role)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • EU Governance Structure • EU Role in the Independence Process • Europe in Independence Legitimations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attachment to Europe
Organization and cooperation in the European Parliament	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Independence Objectives in the European Parliament 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Non-discursive independence practices
Experiences as a secessionist party and as MEPs representing a stateless nation in the European Parliament		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Perceptions of EU Responses to Territorial Demands • Perceived Party Strength

The questions for the party staff in the European Parliament centred on the same themes, but always began with a section inquiring about their role in the party and the European Parliament. Most interviews lasted about an hour, one lasted 40 minutes and four lasted between 1.5 and 2 hours, and all interviews were recorded with the consent of the interviewees. One challenge of the interview design was the wide variety of themes I was interested in, as I intended both to use the interviews to generate data not widely available in the textual data and to contextualise what I had found in the EP textual data to ensure a better interpretation of it. Given that the interviewees were generally eager to talk, I sometimes had to choose between following my interview design and allowing them to explore a specific topic in more depth or letting them veer off course if they mentioned something I had not anticipated but that would nevertheless be useful. This sometimes led to a situation where not all of the main themes were discussed in equal depth. This made comparison between interviews somewhat difficult, but not to the extent that it was not possible.

Finally, to better determine the nature of the contextual factors outlined in Table 2 in the theory section, I draw, as discussed, on both the EP textual data and interview data. However, I also combine this data with a range of other data sources, such as academic literature, news sources, online interviews with secessionist party members, official documents, opinion poll data and election

result data (see Table 6). This broad range of data is useful for capturing information that is sometimes scattered and for verifying, where possible, information across different sources, thereby ensuring its appropriate interpretation (i.e., triangulation).

4.5 Method of Analysis

Previous qualitative research on secessionist discourse and strategies, the use of Europe or parliamentary debates predominantly draws on frame analysis and content analysis, although in many cases the operationalization of the method is not specified in great detail (Crespy, 2015, p. 105; Giordano and Roller, 2002; Dardanelli, 2003; Hepburn, 2007; Anderson and Keil, 2016; Cetrà and Liñeira, 2018; Dalle Mulle and Serrano, 2019; Maddens et al., 2020). For the purposes of this thesis, I have opted for qualitative content analysis. Content analysis as a whole does not necessarily have a clear ontological or epistemological stance, which makes it adaptable to the researcher's point of view. Those departing from a positivist perspective can use the method as a counting exercise in search of an objective truth (quantitative content analysis), whereas those with a constructivist perspective can use the method to identify multiple subjective realities and meanings in the data (qualitative content analysis) (Sandelowski, 2011; Graneheim, Lindgren & Lundman, 2017; Marvasti, 2019).

There is not a single approach to qualitative content analysis, but instead several scholars have developed their own nuanced take on the method as well as their own definitions (e.g., Kracauer, 1952; Graneheim and Lundman, 2004; Hsieh and Shannon, 2005; Schreier, 2012; Kuckartz, 2012; 2014; Mayring, 2014; 2019). For the purposes of this study, I use the definition by Hsieh and Shannon (2005), who understand qualitative content analysis as a research method for the *subjective* interpretation of the content of text data through the *systematic classification* process of coding and identifying themes or patterns (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005, p. 1278). More precisely, this process of coding entails a systematic reduction of content, analysed with special attention to the context in which it was created, in order to identify themes and extract meaningful interpretations of the data (Roller and Lavrakas, 2015, p. 232). As such, qualitative content analysis can be seen as a balancing act between the systematic and the subjective.

Lindgren, Lundman and Graneheim (2020) describe the process of qualitative content analysis as consisting of a phase of *de-contextualization*,

in which data is taken out of its context (i.e., the reduction of content into codes) with the purpose of isolating the phenomenon under study (e.g., beliefs, experiences, practices). This is then followed by a phase of *re-contextualization*, in which the separated content is returned to its context by analysing and combining the codes in a way that illuminates new patterns through the identification of themes and by discussing these in light of current research and theory. This contributes to a better understanding of the subject under study. Central to this process is coding, which can be conducted inductively, deductively or abductively. Coding refers to the act of grouping pieces of text (or other types of content) and labelling them with a code that describes their content in a concrete manner. The goal can then be to merge these codes into smaller sets of descriptive sub-categories and categories or into smaller sets of interpretative sub-themes and themes, which become increasingly abstract when moving up the hierarchical structure.

Such an exercise ultimately allows for the uncovering of patterns of meaning that would otherwise have been missed. Due to the systematic approach to coding, it is also possible to compare across time and actors. This allows for the validation of existing conceptual understandings of a topic or the development and expansion of new conceptual understandings of a topic. The goal of qualitative content analysis is thus ultimately both description and interpretation; however, it is not a method designed to establish causal or relational relationships between concepts in the data.

Some may regard this as a limitation. However, I agree with Vedung (2018) that descriptions are useful, as they are a necessary step for being able to explain, critique and make recommendations. Moreover, as Beckman (2005) argues, while one part of explanation is about pinpointing a cause (even though this is very difficult in both qualitative and quantitative research), another part of explanation is clarification. Hence, descriptions can also explain in and of themselves by creating greater clarity. Moreover, descriptions can capture change over time as well as incorporate others' perspectives on cause and effect regarding the object of study, which can be typified by the researcher and can inspire future research (Vedung, 2018, pp. 207–209).

A qualitative content analysis is helpful for studying how Europe is used in independence strategies in the European Parliament, firstly because of its flexibility and its lack of a fixed theoretical framework or constraining conceptual assumptions. This allows the method to be adapted to the specific purposes of the study in my case. Moreover, its systematic approach benefits

the comparative element of my study across time and parties. However, most importantly, the descriptive and interpretative aims of the method are in line with the state of research on independence strategies at the European level, which, aside from Laible's (2008) study on the aims and lobbying activities of SNP and Vlaams Belang (1985–1999) in the European Parliament, remains largely underexplored. Hence, my main objective with qualitative content analysis is to conduct a first comparative mapping of how secessionist parties have used Europe in their independence strategies in the European Parliament. Based on this, my second objective is to identify secessionist party perceptions of the nature of the set of opportunities that shapes usage of Europe in different ways.

The contextual factors are analysed in a manner inspired by the structured focused comparison method (George and Bennett, 2005), which has also loosely informed constructivist political science research (e.g., Risse, Ropp and Sikkink, 1999; Checkel and Katzenstein, 2009). The method is structured in that it involves the formulation and asking of the same set of questions to each case, and focused in that these questions are theoretically informed and therefore only centre on topics of theoretical interest (pp. 85–86). The questions can be answered using a broad range of sources and are not coded but are instead presented in narrative form as well as in a summarizing table. As such, this approach is suitable for small-N case studies, is theory-driven, and facilitates comparison between the contextual settings of the secessionist parties.

4.6 Operationalization

4.6.1 Analysing Usage of Europe in Independence Strategies

While qualitative content analysis tends to involve many relatively rigid steps (e.g., Schreier, 2012), I adopt a more flexible interpretation of the analytical steps in qualitative content analysis, inspired by Lindgren, Lundman and Graneheim (2020) and Kuckartz (2014), which I consider more fruitful both analytically and in terms of the practicality of the project. As Lindgren, Lundman and Graneheim (2020) point out, before coding it is important to establish a meaning unit in the data. Meaning units can be short, i.e., the length of a sentence, when the study seeks to describe concrete phenomena, such as the pros and cons of a piece of equipment. However, this risks losing sight of context and therefore meaning (Roller and Lavrakas, 2015, p. 232), especially

when the study seeks to analyse more complex phenomena, as in my case, where I study multifaceted and often implicit independence strategies. Therefore, in the interviews, the meaning unit was organized around the different topics the interviewee addressed within each answer, whereas in the textual data from the European Parliament my meaning unit is the contribution, i.e., the entire speech, question or explanation of vote. This does, naturally, have consequences, because these texts vary on average between one and ten lines but can also be longer, and therefore may contain more than one relevant codable meaning. Hence, a single contribution may be coded for more than one type of independence legitimation. While this may not be ideal, it is not uncommon because discourses can be intertwined and complex (Lindgren, Lundman and Graneheim, 2020, p. 4). I also argue that non-mutually exclusive coding of a single contribution does not negatively affect quantification in my study, given that I, for example, count how many contributions contain independence legitimation X, a number that is not affected by the same contribution also containing independence legitimation Y. This is also not a problem when aggregating to an overarching theme that both independence legitimation X and Y fall under, because this is done in NVivo, where the contribution is only counted once for the overarching theme.

In order to identify independence strategies in the empirical material, I conducted two search rounds (Annex 1) in NVivo, where all data (7,893 contributions) was uploaded. The first round focused on more explicit independence contributions and the second round focused on words and phrases related to the theme of sovereignty more broadly. Here there is a risk that I may still have missed some implicit independence contributions because I did not read through every contribution word for word. However, I carefully constructed the list of search terms for the broader sovereignty-themed search round and tested and refined this list by reading through all contributions for two MEPs for one parliamentary term to assess whether any relevant contributions were missing. Based on this, I added a small number of phrases and words to the keyword list for the sovereignty search round. The contributions identified through the two search rounds were then read through and coded as either an independence contribution or not, depending on whether they referred to elements of the nation's own independence process or that of another. In total, this resulted in a dataset of 613 independence contributions. For the interviews, such a filtered search was not needed, given

that the questions were centered specifically on independence strategies in the European Parliament.

The coding process was primarily inspired by Lindgren, Lundman and Graneheim (2020) and Kuckartz (2014). First, I read through part of the text to identify what kind of information it contained on the use of Europe by secessionist parties regarding their independence ambitions. This exploratory reading established that, regarding the parliamentary data, independence strategies in the European Parliament could be studied empirically by looking at an institutional dimension in the form of independence objectives in the European Parliament, and by looking at a discursive dimension consisting of the EU governance structure in which secessionist parties pursued independence, the role these parties assigned to the EU in the independence process, and the use of Europe in independence legitimations. These were thus the main categories through which the use of Europe in independence strategies in the European Parliament could be identified and therefore operationalized in the textual European Parliament data as well as in the interview data.

Table 4: Main Categories that Operationalize Independence Strategies in the EP data

Theory: Dimensions of Usage of Europe	Operationalization: Main Categories
Institutional Dimension	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Independence Objectives in the European Parliament
Discursive Dimension	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ EU Governance Structure ▪ EU Role in the Independence Process ▪ Europe in Independence Legitimations

As a second step, I conducted a first round of coding for a specific main category of interest, for example, independence legitimations. Here, the goal was to code all instances of independence legitimations and to gain inspiration for possible themes and sub-themes within this category. Note that, in line with Lindgren, Lundman and Graneheim (2020), I distinguish between categories and themes, as I view the former as descriptive topics of analytical interest in the material, whereas I see the search for themes and sub-themes as a more interpretative exercise (p. 5). After this, I established themes and sub-themes for independence legitimations, informed both by the previous literature and the data (see Annex 2 for the codebook), which then resulted in

a final round of coding for these themes and sub-themes. These steps were followed for both the EP data and the interview data.

Given that I see coding as an iterative process, I did not work with a completely fixed codebook (e.g., Schreier, 2012), instead treating coding as an iterative process in which there was room for minor modifications to the codebook (e.g., mergers of sub-themes), whereas larger changes, such as the creation of entirely new themes, would warrant recoding (Kuckartz, 2014, pp. 74–75). These two coding rounds were then repeated for each of the main categories, both to identify them and to establish their themes and sub-themes. This provided multiple readings of the text and thus ample opportunities to identify instances of the main categories that may have been overlooked, while simultaneously allowing me to focus on and zoom in on individual main categories and their nature one by one. At the end of the coding process, there were a few remaining codes that did not fit into the coding framework in a meaningful way. Rather than adding them and thereby increasing the complexity of the coding framework, they were excluded. All of this resulted in a coding framework that outlines the nature and use of Europe in the Scottish and Catalan independence strategies in the European Parliament and enables comparison across cases and time.

In order to ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, I examine the intra-coder reliability of the coding. This is essentially an assessment of the consistency of the coding by introducing a considerable time gap after coding is completed, after which part of the material is recoded and a level of agreement is calculated between the two coding rounds. Ideally, such a test would be conducted by having another coder recode the material (inter-coder reliability), but given that this is an individual research project with limited resources, I instead test intra-coder reliability (Mayring, 2014, p. 111; O'Connor and Joffe, 2020, p. 2). This approach is also appropriate, as the time gap is intended to reduce recall of prior coding decisions. As such, for each case, I recoded a randomly selected subset of the data coded under each of the main categories, representing the four elements of an independence strategy (objective in the EP, EU governance structure, EU role in the independence strategy and EU in independence legitimations). When possible, I maintained a sample size of around 20 percent of the total dataset of independence contributions per party. Hence, for each main category, 25 contributions were recoded for the SNP, 35 for ERC and 64 for CiU, PDeCAT and Junts. This ensured that within each main category more than 20 percent of the independence contributions coded under this category were ultimately

recoded, because not all independence contributions for a specific party always contained information relevant to all main categories. At the same time, this also avoided recoding an insignificantly small number of contributions in cases where relatively few contributions had been coded under a specific main category for a specific party. In addition, I recoded all interviews for the category Independence Objective in the European Parliament. Based on this, I calculated the percentage of agreement, which was 95 percent for institutional use of Europe and 93 percent for discursive use of Europe (see Annex 5 for a more specific break down) (Feng, 2014; Kolbe & Burnett, 1991; Miles & Huberman).

4.6.2 Operationalizing Usage of Europe in Independence Strategies

In the theory section, I theorized that secessionist parties make use of both the institutional and discursive dimensions of Europe as part of their independence strategies (see Table 1), and that they can do so in more pragmatic or more idealistic ways. In Table 4, I then established that the use of Europe in independence strategies can be studied more specifically by looking at four elements: (1) independence objectives in the European Parliament (institutional dimension), (2) the envisioned EU governance structure in which independence is imagined, (3) the role envisioned for the EU in the independence process and (4) the role of Europe in independence legitimations (discursive dimension). Table 5 builds on this and presents independence practices as the empirical manifestations through which these strategies become observable in the data. More precisely, I understand independence practices here as the ways in which political actors articulate independence-related goals, construct governance imaginaries, assign roles in the independence process and legitimate independence. As such, these practices operationalize independence strategies and allow the identification of whether Europe is used in more pragmatic or more idealistic ways. These independence practices bridge theory and method in that they are used to guide empirical coding (see Annex 2 for the codebook), but they have also been derived partly from the existing literature and partly inductively from the empirical material. Therefore, they are not only analytical tools but also represent a degree of conceptual development regarding how Europe is mobilized by secessionist parties.

Table 5: Operationalization of Usage of Europe in Independence Strategies in the European Parliament

Dimensions of Europe	Usage Logics	
	Pragmatic Usage	Idealistic Usage
Institutional		
Independence Objective in the European Parliament	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Domestic Competition ▪ Minor European Attitude Change 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Major European Attitude Change ▪ EU Legislative Impact
Discursive		
EU Governance Structures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Union of Member States 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Europe of the Regions ▪ “Europe of the Nations” ▪ “United States of Europe”
EU Role in the Independence Process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Non-Interventionist ▪ Commentator 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Guardian of European Principles and Law ▪ Facilitator of Enlargement ▪ Mediator ▪ Legislator
Europe in Independence Legitimations	<p>Instrumental Remedial Arguments</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Bad Representation Argument ▪ Brexit Argument* ▪ EU Democratic Deficit Argument ▪ Limited EU Benefits Argument* ▪ Underperforming Argument* <p>Instrumental Better Future Arguments</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Voice in the EU Argument ▪ Better Future For EU Argument* ▪ Full EU Benefits Argument* ▪ Viability 2.0 Argument* ▪ Better Relations Argument* 	<p>Principled Arguments</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ European Democracy Argument ▪ European Law Argument* ▪ Normal Argument ▪ European Identity Argument ▪ EU Recognition Argument*

* New legitimating arguments identified from the empirical data. Legitimating arguments without * have been identified by me based on findings from previous literature.

Independence Objectives in the European Parliament

The first way to explore how secessionist parties make use of the institutional dimension of Europe in their independence strategies is by examining their independence objectives in the European Parliament. This could of course also be explored for other European institutions, but given that the European Parliament is the most relevant and important European institution for secessionist parties in the EU, it is the sole focus of this study. Previous literature suggests that there are several different independence-related objectives that secessionist parties could pursue in the European Parliament: domestic competition, EU attitude change (minor or major) and EU legislative impact (Dardanelli, 2003; Hepburn and McLoughlin, 2011; Boylan and Turkina, 2019; Griffiths and Martinez, 2020). However, it is important to note that these objectives are not mutually exclusive, and multiple objectives can apply simultaneously.

If the objective is domestic competition, then party presence in the European Parliament is not necessarily intended to produce substantive independence-related outcomes at the European level but is instead used symbolically to signal to a domestic audience of voters, the party itself and other domestic actors that the party is a legitimate political actor. This legitimacy is derived from having a sufficient voter base to be elected to the European Parliament and from demonstrating to voters at home that the party is representing their interests in all political arenas. Articulating the party's viewpoints, even in institutions like the European Parliament with limited direct power, is seen as useful, as it still provides a channel to project the party's political stance, and political communication can itself be valuable. If sufficiently linked back to the domestic audience, the idea is that this European Parliament presence may ultimately influence the domestic constitutional question (Laible, 2008).

If the objective is EU attitude change, then the goal is to use the European Parliament to change the EU's positioning on self-determination, internal secession and internal enlargement (Griffiths and Martinez, 2020; Boylan and Turkina, 2019; Laible, 2008). The nature of the intended EU attitude change can vary in scope, ranging from minor to more substantial shifts, as parties could, for example, seek EU recognition, understanding, sympathy or active intervention from the EU in the form of, for instance, EU pressure on the host-state. Parties could also seek to achieve these outcomes through the EU as a whole or through specific EU actors or MEPs. If the objective is EU legislative

impact, this means that the aim of party presence is to shape particular EU policies related to the constitutional question (Jacuot & Woll; 2003; Dardanelli, 2003; Laible, 2008).

I coded for these independence objectives in the European Parliament by relying primarily on the interview data, because I included specific questions in the interview design on this matter, and because the textual data from the European Parliament tends to be more focused on the topic at hand rather than the broader independence goal. The interview data instead allows interviewees to reflect on their parliamentary activity and what they aim to achieve with it. It must furthermore be pointed out that it is theoretically possible that all three goals co-exist and are present simultaneously, as they do not necessarily counteract each other.

Based on the presence and absence of these objectives, it is possible to assess whether secessionist parties' independence-related goals in the European Parliament lean more towards pragmatic or more idealistic uses of Europe. More specifically, if secessionist parties use their presence in the European Parliament to increase their competitiveness in domestic elections or to achieve minor EU attitude change on internal secession and self-determination, such as greater European sympathy for their cause, this can be considered a pragmatic use of Europe, as these objectives are more realistically achievable. However, if secessionist parties seek to achieve more substantial attitude change, for example, in the form of explicit European support for internal secession or their own cause, or even EU legislation on internal secession, these can be considered more far-reaching and ambitious independence-related objectives in the European Parliament, which are closer to an idealistic use of Europe.

EU Governance Structure

Discursively, one way secessionist parties link their independence agendas to the EU is by claiming to pursue independence in the EU. Hence, to understand what their independence would mean in practice and what role the EU would play in it, it is important to examine secessionist party discourses about their preferred EU governance structures. Inductive coding for the kind of EU parties envisioned was primarily based on EP textual data and interview data was coded to complement this. The interview design included a question about the parties' ideal EU, but interviewees also referred to their parties' ideal EU outside of this question. The main overarching themes that emerged were Union of Member States, United States of Europe, Europe of the Regions and

Europe of the Nations. A statement was coded as Union of Member States when it expressed a preference for an EU in which Member States are the most powerful actors and retain significant competencies. In turn, a statement was coded as United States of Europe when it expressed a preference for an EU with stronger supranational institutions, broader policy competences and more efficient decision-making. A preference for a Europe of the Regions was identified when there was support for an EU in which regions constitute a fully fledged third level of governance, requiring a restructuring of the EU system. Finally, a Europe of the Nations was identified when there was a preference for an EU that formally recognizes its internal plurality, particularly in terms of rights and powers for stateless nations. This is not an official term used by the parties themselves, but it captures a common narrative focusing on rights and powers for stateless nations in the EU, distinct from discussions of a Europe of the Regions.

Here, a preference for a Union of Member States is considered to reflect a more pragmatic use of Europe, as it represents an objective that is relatively close to the status quo. In turn, the other visions of the EU would require more far-reaching reforms, entail a greater reliance on the EU and a stronger entanglement of state, regional and European levels of authority. They are therefore considered to fall under an idealistic use of Europe.

EU Role in the Independence Process

The EU role in the independence process was also coded inductively, primarily based on the EP textual data. Interview data was also coded for this topic but played a more complementary role. The main roles identified are EU non-interference and EU commentary, guardian of EU principles and law, facilitator of enlargement, EU mediator and legislator. The first two are identified based respectively on statements that the independence process is an internal affair in which the EU should not be involved and on calls for the EU to comment on the domestic independence process. These are considered to fall under a pragmatic use of Europe, as they remain closer to the status quo in which the EU does not intervene in member state independence processes. In turn, calls for the EU to ensure compliance with EU principles and legislation, calls for a deviation from normal enlargement procedures for stateless nations already in the EU, calls for EU mediation in domestic territorial conflicts, as well as calls for EU legislation on such conflicts, are considered more ambitious given the current status quo and require a larger

and more influential role for the EU in independence processes within the EU. They are therefore understood as part of a more idealistic use of Europe.

Europe in Independence Legitimations

Usage of Europe in independence legitimations was coded abductively based primarily on the textual data from the European Parliament, which was the richest in legitimations. Inspired by Dalle Mulle and Serrano (2019), I distinguish between instrumental and principled usage of Europe in independence legitimations. Their framework highlights arguments with a principled logic and those with an instrumental or consequentialist logic. In arguments based on principles, self-determination is simply a primary right that all nations or collectives of individuals that can make democratic choices possess. As such, this is a Kantian moral argument, where self-determination and independence can be viewed as an end in itself, which does not need any further justification other than that it is morally right. In contrast, in consequentialist arguments, self-determination and independence are not unconditional rights, but are something that needs to be justified based on their effects, along the lines of Weber's ethics of responsibility. This is a more rational and instrumental type of argument, where independence is a means to either resolve grievances or produce greater well-being, resulting in either remedial or better-future type arguments (Dalle Mulle & Serrano, 2019; Elias & Franco-Guillén, 2021).

Building on this, I propose a European dimension to this framework to capture how Europe is used in independence legitimations. The distinction between instrumental and principled usage of Europe can tell us something about how Europe is constructed as relevant to the choice for independence in the EU and therefore also in the broader independence strategy. It indicates which aspects of European integration are, at least discursively, helping sustain the independence quest. The analytical distinction between instrumental and principled usage can reveal whether the wish for independence is portrayed as more situational, i.e., dependent on grievances or opportunities and therefore more subject to change as circumstances change, or whether the wish for independence is instead constructed as rights-based and therefore more permanent and harder to change. It must, however, be pointed out that this analytical distinction is limited in that it cannot determine whether the underlying motivation is strategy- or identity-driven, but what it can reveal is the message that is communicated to these parties'

audiences and which could, through repetition, become perceived as reality by both senders and receivers.

More concretely, I abductively identified three argument types that use Europe in different ways to legitimate independence: instrumental remedial arguments, instrumental better future arguments and principled arguments. I understand instrumental remedial arguments as the use of concrete EU-related grievances faced by the nation as something that independence in the EU can remedy. It consists of a set of more concrete arguments, such as the “bad representation” argument, the “Brexit” argument, the “EU democratic deficit” argument, the “limited EU benefits” argument. This legitimation type is pragmatic in that it draws on existing EU-related grievances and links them to independence. It therefore uses Europe where possible and in response to circumstances. Next, I define instrumental better future arguments in this European dimension as the presentation of independence as a tool to maximize the utility of the nation’s EU membership for both the nation and the EU. Examples of this type of argument are the “voice in the EU argument”, “the better future for the EU” argument, the “full EU benefits” argument and the “viability 2.0” argument. This legitimation type is also pragmatic in that it draws on existing aspirations of the nation and the EU and presents independence as a solution or tool to achieve them. The EU is used where possible and adapted to the circumstances of what is desired or considered problematic. The goals presented are achievable, as they are framed as realistic for independent states. Finally, I understand the European dimension of principled arguments as the legitimation of independence based on ideals, principles and standards that are attributed to Europe and the EU. This consists of the “European democracy” argument, the “European law” argument, the normal argument, the “European identity” argument and the “EU recognition” argument. These principled arguments are idealistic in that they justify independence based on normative ideals. These ideals challenge the status quo in that their meaning and implications are not necessarily interpreted in the same way by the host-state and the EU as by the secessionist party. For further details on the operationalization of these legitimations, as well as the other independence practices, see Annex 2.

4.6.3 Operationalizing Contextual Factors to Understand Differences in Usage of Europe

The study of contextual factors is inspired by the structured focused comparison approach (George and Bennett, 2005). More concretely, this means that for each relevant contextual factor identified in the theory section, I developed questions that made the abstract factors more concretely identifiable in the data (see Table 6). The same set of questions was answered for each case—SNP, CiU/Junts and ERC. The questions were answered based on the empirical material collected for this study, but also on a variety of other data sources, such as academic literature, news articles, online documents and interviews. In some cases (see Table 1), I also draw on public opinion data and election result data. This combination of data allows for the identification of the contextual factors of interest across a broad range of sources, which aids in their appropriate interpretation.

Table 6: Operationalizing Contextual Factors to Understand Different Usages of Europe

Contextual Factors	Operationalization	Data
Perceived Party Strength	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ How has the party’s strength been perceived by itself and others (based on, e.g., electoral results, opposition versus government & party leadership)? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Election Result Data ▪ Interview Data ▪ EP Textual Data ▪ Academic Literature ▪ News and online interviews
Attachment to Europe	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ How has the party historically positioned itself on European integration? ▪ Does the party assign itself a European identity? ▪ How have scholars evaluated the attachment to Europe of the party? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Interview Data ▪ EP Textual Data ▪ Party manifestoes ▪ Academic Literature ▪ News and online interviews

Perceived Public Opinion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ What was the regional public opinion on European integration between 1999 and 2024?¹⁰ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Public Opinion Data ▪ Interview Data ▪ EP Textual Data ▪ Academic Literature ▪ News and online interviews
Perceived Access to Independence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Is there a legal and bilateral pathway to independence in the party's host state? ▪ What is the party perception of the accessibility of the domestic pathway to independence? (deadlocks?) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Academic literature ▪ News and online interviews ▪ Interview data ▪ EP textual data
Party Evaluations of EU Responses to Territorial Demands	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ To what extent have secessionist parties been disappointed or not in the EU's reaction to their territorial demands in the EU? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Interview data ▪ EP textual data ▪ Academic literature

While it has been the intention, in line with the strategic constructivist perspective, to capture actor perceptions where possible rather than external realities, this information was at times unevenly available. In those cases, this study relies more on observable indicators (e.g., institutional constraints and public opinion data) that can help reconstruct likely perception environments. While these indicators do not capture actor perceptions directly, they do provide relevant information about the context that actors are interacting with and reacting to. In such cases, the findings should therefore be viewed as indicative.

¹⁰ Ideally, I would also have asked about party perceptions of public opinion here, but this data was not available.

5. SNP: A Pragmatic Goodwill Strategy in the European Parliament

In this chapter, I seek to examine how the SNP has used Europe as a means of advancing its independence agenda in the European Parliament between 1999 and 2020. I start with a short contextualization of the SNP's domestic trajectory as well as its historical presence in the European Parliament. Thereafter, I first discuss the SNP's institutional use of Europe by exploring the SNP's independence objectives. Then, turning to the party's discursive use of Europe, I examine the SNP's discourses on EU governance, the role of the EU in their independence process and how Europe is used to legitimate independence. At the end of the chapter, I summarize these findings and conclude that the SNP has predominantly made pragmatic use of Europe when addressing independence in the European Parliament.

5.1 About the SNP

The history of the SNP goes as far back as 1934, when it was established in April of that year as a merger between the National Party of Scotland (NPS) and the Scottish Party. As such, it was the first organisation to embody a form of Scottish nationalism that was not unionist in nature (Duclos, 2020, p. 225). The SNP's success was gradual, moving from a fringe position in the 1930s to more moderate success in the 1970s. The SNP has never been considered a viable coalition partner at the UK level and can only be elected in Scotland. It was Scottish devolution in 1999 that allowed the party to take center stage, first as the main opposition party and from 2007 onwards as a governing party of Scotland, with Alex Salmond (2007–2014), Nicola Sturgeon (2014–2023), Humza Yousaf (2023–2024) and John Swinney (2024–present) serving as SNP First Ministers.

While the SNP has formally been a pro-independence party since its inception, the party has long been characterized by internal disagreements about whether independence or devolution is the best way to achieve self-governance. However, as Mitchell (2009) argues, this divide did not matter much in the beginning, as the main priority was simply to put the issue of independence on the agenda (p. 41). The SNP long pushed for devolution,

which eventually resulted in two devolution referenda, in 1979 and 1997, of which the latter was successful and led to the establishment of the Scottish Parliament in 1999, as well as increasing devolution in areas such as health, education, local government and justice (Levy, 1986; Dalle Mulle, 2018, p. 91; Cairney, 2014).

As a governing party, the SNP pragmatically showed openness to both independence and devolution, as outlined in its 2007 White Paper *Choosing Scotland's Future* (Mackay, 2009, p. 83; Dalle Mulle, 2018, p. 92). The SNP's 2011 victory of an absolute majority in the Scottish elections, however, encouraged the party to push more strongly for a Scottish independence referendum, which the UK agreed to in 2012 through the Edinburgh Agreement. The referendum took place in 2014, but with a turnout of 85 percent, 55 percent voted for Scotland to remain part of the UK. However, this result did not lead to a decline in the popularity of the SNP and instead ensured that the question of independence remained open (Keating and McEwen, 2020, p. 656). The Brexit referendum then followed in 2016, in which the UK, but not Scotland, voted to leave the EU. This increased the salience of the independence debate, as the SNP claimed that Scotland would be removed from the EU against its democratic will. It also led the SNP to make renewed demands for an independence referendum in 2017 and again in 2019, both of which were rejected by the UK government (Duclos, 2020, pp. 240–243).

Beyond the regional and national level, the SNP was originally hesitant about European integration and even campaigned against the UK joining the EU. Only in 1988 did the party shift course and adopt a vision of independence in the EU (Dardanelli, 2003). The SNP has been present in the European Parliament since its inception in 1979. Since then, and as outlined in Table 7, it has been allowed to send one MEP during the first three terms, two MEPs after 1999 and three MEPs after 2019, until the party left the European Parliament in 2020 due to Brexit. Overall, the SNP's presence in the European Parliament has been relatively consistent, especially after 1999, with two of the same MEPs representing the SNP for 20 years (1999–2019) and 11 years (2009–2020), respectively. Throughout its time in the European Parliament, the SNP has been part of a range of party groups. In 1989, the SNP joined a group consisting of regionalist parties across Europe: the Rainbow Group. However, after the 1994 elections, few regionalist parties remained and the SNP joined a group with the center-left French *Energie Radicale* as the main

party, before finally finding stability in the European Free Alliance, in alliance with the Greens, from 1999 onward.

Table 7: Seats and Party Affiliation of the SNP in the European Parliament

Parliamentary Term	# MEPs	European Party Group
1979–1984	1	DEP – Group of European Progressive Democrats
1984–1989	1	RDE – Group of the European Democratic Alliance
1989–1994	1	ARC – Rainbow Group in the European Parliament
1994–1999	2	ARE – Group of the European Radical Alliance
1999–2004	2	Verts/ALE – Greens / European Free Alliance
2004–2009	2	
2009–2014	2	
2014–2019	2	
2019–2020	3	

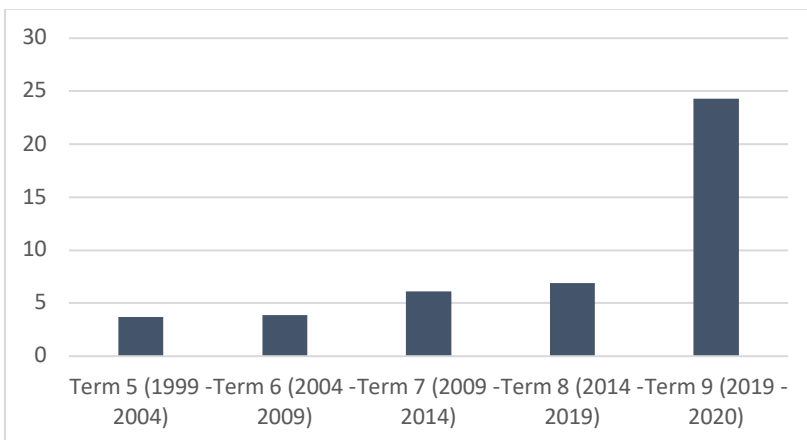
The Greens/EFA group has traditionally been a relatively small party group in the European Parliament, and SNP MEPs have not held any significant chair positions, except for Winnie Ewing prior to the timeframe of this study. Between 1999 and 2020, the party has consistently been part of the Fisheries Committee (PECH) and has also been almost equally active in the Committee on Agriculture and Rural Development (AGRI). Other committees of interest include the Committee on Economic and Monetary Affairs (ECON), the Committee on Industry, Research and Energy (ITRE) and the Committee on Constitutional Affairs (AFCO), in which the SNP has participated in three out of five terms between 1999 and 2020. It thus appears that the SNP has mainly prioritized committees aligned with its regional policy interests rather than its self-determination interests in the EU between 1999 and 2020. However, self-determination was nevertheless a key priority within the EFA and for the SNP in the European Parliament, as the rest of the chapter will show.

5.2 Using the Institutional Dimension of Europe

Independence Objectives in the European Parliament – The Quest for EU Goodwill

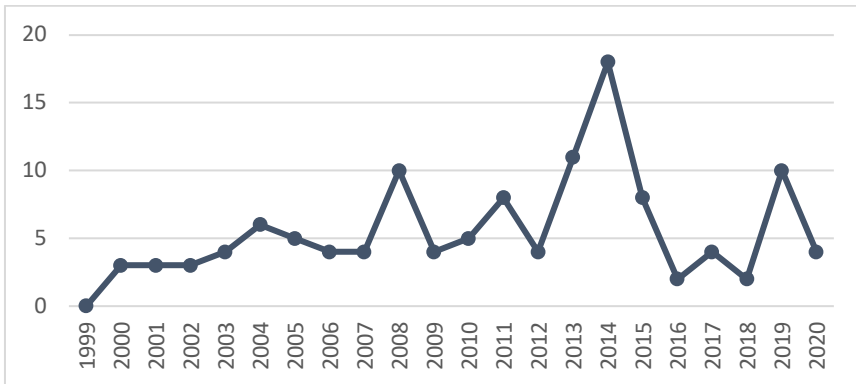
When asked about how much they used the European Parliament to address independence, one SNP interviewee replied, “No, no all the time. Every opportunity, every opportunity” (SNP 1), and another said, “I don’t think I made all that many speeches in which I did not refer to the benefits of independence for Scotland” (SNP 3). While this may reflect their personal experience, a slightly different picture emerges when examining the number of formal independence contributions made by the SNP. Figure 1, for example, shows that on average the SNP formally devoted 5.4 percent of its contributions to independence in the European Parliament. Term 9 represents an outlier at 23.4 percent, but this is due to a low number of formal plenary contributions and questions rather than an exceptionally high number of independence contributions. Figure 2 presents the number of independence contributions made by the SNP in the European Parliament broken down by year, and it is possible to observe that the SNP on average tends to make fewer than six independence contributions per year, although independence contributions also tend to peak during key moments.

Figure 1: Percentage of Independence Contributions out of Total Contributions per Parliamentary Term in the European Parliament



Data: plenary contributions, written and oral questions and explanations of vote that relate to the political status of independence, the independence process or independence legitimization. The same applies to Figure 2.

Figure 2: Number of SNP independence contributions per year in the European Parliament



This raises the question of why SNP MEPs claim to address independence so frequently. I argue that much of the SNP’s discourse in the European Parliament is not explicitly about independence but rather concerns everyday interest representation, and that even such representation can at times contribute to the party’s pragmatic independence objective in the European Parliament: the creation of EU goodwill.

Hence, throughout the years, the main activities of the SNP in the European Parliament have been twofold: (1) addressing independence in the European Parliament setting and (2) representing the SNP’s and Scotland’s everyday ideological interests in the European Parliament. The SNP’s use of the European Parliament for its independence agenda can be understood as predominantly pragmatic, and the main independence objective of the party in the European Parliament has been to moderately influence the EU’s attitude towards them by generating goodwill towards Scotland, the party and their independence agenda (SNP 1, 2, 3). Goodwill in itself can be considered a somewhat vague objective, but for the SNP interviewees, it essentially refers to seeking sympathy for the Scottish independence project and, more broadly, pursuing a positive relationship between Scotland and the EU. Hence, it does not entail a request for active EU support, but rather a form of passive support, where the EU is not expected to actively intervene to help Scotland realise its independence goals (SNP 1, 3, 4).

The need to normalize Scottish independence among European audiences appears to be a key priority in the SNP’s goodwill strategy. Some interviewees recall feeling at risk of being perceived by their European audience as “extremists” because of negative associations with the term “nationalist” in

Europe, which could be associated with Nazism or race-based ideologies (SNP 2, 4). Therefore, the SNP places importance on presenting itself to its European counterparts as a cooperative and pragmatic partner, willing to collaborate and, more broadly, as a normal political actor, rather than as the extremist label it believes some European actors have associated with its nationalist agenda. As one MEP explains: “We were the pro-European good guys, we’re the centrists, pragmatists, but there was always a bit of: ‘Yeah, ok, but you’re nationalists. You want to see your country better than anyone else’s.’ While actually: no, I don’t! You know, people who are in favour of Sweden’s independence aren’t nationalists, they are democrats.” (SNP 4). To cultivate EU goodwill towards Scottish independence, the SNP felt the need to normalize independence, which it continuously did through several practices.

The SNP addressed independence through different channels in the European Parliament. First and foremost, it addressed independence formally in speeches and questions, but since the topic of independence was rarely debated in the European Parliament, the SNP engaged in a practice of linking topics in order to bring independence into other policy discussions. This practice made it possible for the SNP to address independence in a wide range of contexts by connecting relatively niche European policy debates to Scottish independence. An example of this practice is the June 2010 plenary debate on Estonia’s adoption of the euro. Hudghton begins by pointing out that it is easy to overlook how far Europe has come in the face of difficult economic times and that, just twenty years ago, Estonia was part of the Soviet bloc and now stands to join the euro. He then concludes with a link to Scottish independence: “Nevertheless, Estonia faces the challenges as an independent nation within the EU and will accordingly be a key player in finding the solutions. I look forward to Scottish independence when the people of Scotland will also have a full role to play in Europe’s future” (Hudghton, Plenary 7, 20100614)¹¹.

Beyond this, the SNP also built goodwill in the European Parliament through organized informal meetings (SNP 3) and through limited cooperation with other stateless nations on the topic of independence. In fact, the SNP has, over the timeframe of this study, become more consistent in its individualist approach. Twenty to thirty years ago, there was a strand within

¹¹ The textual data from the European Parliament is referred to as follows:(MEP, type of setting the contribution was made & parliamentary term, year/month/day).

the SNP that preferred to work more closely with other pro-independence movements. As one MEP explains, there was an attitude of: “We are walking arm in arm with Flanders, Catalonia, the Basque Country, Corsica, wherever, to independence” (SNP 4). However, during the sixth term, there was a shift away from this “If you support us, then we support you” approach. As it stands, all EFA parties agree on the right to self-determination and respect each other’s different ways of expressing it, but there are different ideas about the role the EU should play in independence processes, as well as about how sovereignty should be divided within the EU. In hindsight, many of the connections the party had at the time were more social than ideological (SNP 2, 4). Hence, while there was cooperation between pro-independence parties within the EFA for a long time, there was no common plan or strategy on how to address independence within the European Parliament or the EU.

The SNP also resolved to remain largely silent on other nations’ constitutional discussions when they go beyond upholding democratic standards of law and free and fair elections, and made this position clear to their EFA partners. The party supports the principle of self-determination, but does not believe that actors from outside should become involved in processes of constitutional change, viewing this as a balance between supporting democracy while respecting the rule of law, state sovereignty and existing borders. As one MEP explains: “I support the right of Flanders to be independent if Flanders wants to be independent. But the first thing I would say is that: ‘that’s a matter for the Flemish and the Belgians to work out. That’s not for me’.” (SNP 4). As such, the SNP has essentially adopted an individualist strategy towards independence, whereby it neither seeks support from other stateless nations nor explicitly supports them in their own independence quests.

However, outside of the SNP’s constitutional agenda in the European Parliament, much of the party’s work consisted of regular participation in the European Parliament’s legislative processes. Over the years, particularly following its position in the Scottish Government, the SNP became a more mainstream political party with a broad set of policy ambitions, which are also reflected in its objectives in Brussels. Hence, depending on the MEP consulted, representing Scottish interests and influencing EU policy was considered an equally important objective of the SNP in the European Parliament (SNP 1, 2, 4). As one SNP MEP explained:

...there's a substantial element of Scottish public opinion, it's roundabout 50/50 at the moment, that believes our better path is independence, our better path is independence within the European Union. So there's that element of what we were there to do in Brussels, but, but meantime my job in Brussels was to get a good deal for Scottish farmers, my job in Brussels was to make sure that the EU's climate policies were ambitious, my job in Brussels was to support equalities for women, LGBT equalities. There was a whole range of political ideological things that we were there to do as well (SNP 4).

In other words, the SNP had a clear ideological agenda in the European Parliament. One part of this agenda was oriented toward the representation of Scottish territorial interests, which were symbolically intended to appeal to the domestic audience. The SNP was particularly interested in engaging with issues in areas where Scotland had devolved competence, such as transport, agriculture and fisheries. The latter, in particular, was an area in which the SNP felt it not only needed to pursue Scottish interests but also to actively defend them. Hence, the party ensured that it was represented on the Fisheries Committee during every parliamentary term. EU policy was considered overly centralized, and the SNP argued that the UK was repeatedly undermining Scottish interests in this field. This was particularly problematic because fisheries was a devolved competence, yet at the EU level authority rested with the UK rather than Scotland (SNP 1, 2, 3).

Sometimes the SNP's interest representation in the European Parliament could be seen as a continuation of domestic debates, aimed at demonstrating to a domestic audience that the SNP also defends Scottish principles at the EU level. An SNP MEP would, for example, respond to a Labour MEP on a Scotland-related issue in the European Parliament, effectively continuing Scottish political debates on the parliamentary floor (SNP 2). It was also particularly important for the SNP to show that it was representing Scottish interests at the European level because of the perception that the UK had not been prioritizing Scotland's interests, neither domestically nor in the EU. The SNP found it difficult to achieve policy goals without the backing of a Member State in the Council, as was the case for MEPs from other countries. This limitation of being a stateless nation rather than a state within the EU was therefore used strategically as an illustration in domestic campaigning (SNP 3). As such, one interviewee summarizes the party's objectives in the European Parliament as follows:

So I think possibly there were two strands. There was the European Parliament audience to try and normalize us making people aware of that we're reasonably sane, we're not extremists and then there's a domestic interest to just tell our people to – or just to, for people to see that we're defending our principles in Brussels as much as we were in Edinburgh or in Westminster (SNP 2).

Moreover, during the eighth and ninth parliamentary terms (2014–2020), it was particularly important for SNP MEPs to mitigate the effects of Brexit as much as possible. As part of this effort, they aimed to secure the best possible outcome for Scotland (SNP 4). For one former SNP MEP, Brexit was even a motivating factor for becoming an MEP and going to Europe:

And I guess for me, when I became MEP and knowing that we were, we campaigned on a platform of not only having a kind of positive vision of Scottish membership within the EU, but also that we wanted to stop Brexit. Scotland... 62% of the people of Scotland had voted to stay in the European Union and here was Scotland getting dragged out of the EU against the democratic wishes of the people of Scotland. It was just incredibly unfair (SNP 1).

In light of Brexit, the SNP sought solutions and was willing to explore creative options. As part of this effort, SNP MEPs contacted individuals within the EU to help arrange meetings between the Scottish First Minister, other Scottish government ministers and EU officials, during which the Scottish position was presented (SNP 3). Most notably, they put forward a compromise under which Scotland would remain in the Single Market and the Customs Union (SNP 1, SNP 4). This proposal was set out in the Scottish Government document *Scotland's Place in Europe* (2017), which suggested extending the Northern Ireland arrangement to Scotland. One MEP explained that this could have been beneficial not only for Scotland but also for Northern Ireland, as it might have reduced internal tensions by broadening the scope of the arrangement. The Irish government, which had lobbied for the Northern Ireland deal, also supported extending it to Scotland. However, there was no expectation that this proposal would succeed, as the EU took the position that if the UK as a whole voted to leave, it should do so as a whole. Nevertheless, the SNP advanced this proposal as part of its effort to identify workable solutions (SNP 4). In anticipation of Brexit, the SNP also increased its networking activities. There were numerous questions from fellow MEPs

about Scottish independence, which SNP representatives were willing to address, viewing this as an opportunity to explain how an independent Scotland could contribute to the EU. In addition, these informal meetings and discussions provided opportunities to build and strengthen alliances within the EU (SNP 1, SNP 4).

Another former MEP, however, stresses that there were limits to what could be achieved at the European level regarding Brexit and that they did not expect anything concrete from the EU in this regard: “As I said earlier, the bottom line of the EU is, the EU can only do what the Treaties say it can do... Really, there was no avenue open to the EU to get involved that would have been helpful or practical, I don’t think.” (SNP 3). As such, the SNP’s efforts regarding Brexit can be understood more as a signal to the domestic audience that the party continued to defend Scottish interests, while also helping to build goodwill with EU actors by demonstrating that Scotland’s orientation toward the EU differed from that of the UK (SNP 2, 4).

Aside from addressing specifically Scottish territorial interests, the SNP also engaged in forms of interest representation that were not intended to focus on Scotland directly. Here, the aim was to achieve EU-level policy impact and contribute to shaping the EU in line with SNP priorities. As such, the party sought to address broader European challenges, including climate change, international development and women’s and LGBTQ rights (SNP 1, SNP 4). The SNP thus articulated a distinct political identity for both itself and Scotland in international politics. In the context of the 2014 referendum, it began to present Scotland as a “Good Global Citizen,” a framing that reflected both the characteristics of a small state and the practical constraints associated with it, while also emphasizing an ambition to act as an open and internationalist actor committed to addressing global challenges (Scottish Government, 2021). In this context, the party also showed particular interest in Northern cooperation and the Arctic (SNP 1).

In addition to policy influence, participation in routine policy-making, particularly on issues not directly related to Scotland, is also seen by the party as a way to demonstrate normalcy and build positive relationships with colleagues (SNP 2, 3, 4). A key example of this is what I identify as Good Europeanism (SNP 2, 3, 4). I define this as the effort to present SNP MEPs as pro-European, constructive, pragmatic and valuable actors in the European Parliament through their day-to-day activities, with the aim of building strong relationships with European partners. In this context, the partnership with the

EFA and the Greens is particularly important for the SNP. As one interviewee explains:

But also, I think we were also conscious that we didn't want to just turn up and speak about Scotland all the time. You know, we want Scotland to be part of the EU. We were Europeans, we were European citizens. So we just sought to work constructively within the, with the Parliament, with all other Member states, with all other MEPs (SNP 2).

This was important both for demonstrating what an independent Scotland could contribute to the EU and for earning the respect of European colleagues. Hence, by behaving like a normal, friendly pro-European MEP who also occasionally addressed Scottish independence, the party sought to encourage its European audience to reconsider any negative perceptions they may hold about Scottish independence and, in effect, to de-radicalise their independence objectives (SNP 2, 4):

You would gain the respect of people, just by being a constructive MEP. But because they knew that you supported independence, any positive, I think any positive feeling they had towards you from your parliamentary work would perhaps demonstrate to them that you weren't some kind of extremist (SNP 2).

During regular policy-making activities, the SNP also distinguishes Scotland in the European Parliament. In this case, Scottish interest representation is not only a way to achieve policy outcomes beneficial to Scotland, or even to demonstrate good Europeanism; it is also a means of clearly differentiating Scotland from the UK for both domestic and EU audiences in the European Parliament, in a manner similar to its approach at the national level. As one MEP explains: "The Scots are distinct, we have a distinct reputation, a distinct make-up within the discussions in Brussels" (SNP 4). By emphasizing that Scotland has distinct interests compared to those of the UK, or by highlighting instances where the SNP's positions in the European Parliament are overridden in the Council by the UK (SNP 2), the party reinforces the argument that Scotland can only be properly represented by Scottish MEPs rather than by actors who represent the UK as a whole. As such, the SNP's interest representation in the European Parliament can be seen as reflecting the constitutional debate at home in the UK. By continuously putting Scotland's distinct political identity on display, the party indirectly advances

the case for an independent Scotland to both domestic and European audiences. This may, in turn, help generate goodwill among some EU actors. As such, even routine parliamentary activities and interest representation by SNP MEPs can be understood through a diplomatic lens, contributing to the cultivation of sympathy and goodwill for the Scottish cause.

It was ultimately Brexit that made the SNP's goodwill strategy appear more effective, with more EU actors reportedly beginning to understand the party's independence position. The interviewees describe an increase in EU goodwill, expressed through "interest," "understanding," "sympathy," and even "warmer body language" from European actors (SNP 1, 2, 3, 4). After Brexit became a reality, it also became particularly important for SNP MEPs to emphasize the distinction between Scotland and the UK, making clear that the UK government did not represent Scotland and could not speak on its behalf. The party therefore used its final term in the European Parliament to reinforce this distinction (SNP 1). In fact, several interviewees note that while many EU actors in 2014 did not fully understand the Scottish independence project, the Brexit referendum made Scotland's distinct position and pro-European orientation more visible (SNP 2, 4).

That changed in 2016, where a lot of people realized: "Oh Scotland is substantively different to the UK". You only need to look at the map of how we voted. It is obvious to anybody that Scotland has a different attitude to the EU. That means we have a different attitude to immigration, to where we sit in the world, who should speak to us, what sort of country we want to be (SNP 4).

After the Brexit referendum where Scotland voted so convincingly to remain the EU, but were then subsequently taken out of it. There was a, across the European Parliament I saw, from all nationalities and all groupings, suddenly people started understanding Scottish independence. They still won't understand it in terms of Scottish culture or the Scottish legal system or education, they don't understand our separate institutional things, but suddenly now that the EU Brexit question has been put on the table and Scotland answered it differently, suddenly there's much more sympathy. You know: Yes, we understand why you want to be part of the EU and not part of Brexit UK (SNP 2).

Post-Brexit, the SNP sought to maintain goodwill by establishing a Friends of Scotland Group. This is an informal network of around 20 MEPs from different political parties and 13 Member States, designed to facilitate

cooperation and dialogue with the Scottish Government, which serves as the group's secretariat, as well as with Scottish Members of Parliament. With regard to Scottish independence, the group is intended to be neutral. Instead, its focus is on cooperation in areas such as the economy, culture, climate, international development and the EU–UK relationship. The group is scheduled to meet three to four times per year (SNP 1; Scottish Government, 3 March 2025).

On top of that, the SNP also maintained contact with the European Parliament by retaining a civil servant working within the Greens/EFA group, at least for the remainder of the ninth parliamentary term. When the SNP left, one of its civil servants remained in post and now primarily works for the European party group and for a new Galician MEP, assisting her on the Fisheries Committee. This type of civil servant position within a European party group is relatively important in the functioning of the European Parliament, as civil servants, similar to those in other EU institutions, participate in committee meetings and take part in negotiations. Although this individual no longer officially works for the SNP in the European Parliament, they remained a member of the party and was regarded by it as “the SNP’s representative in Brussels.” This role involves weekly contact with colleagues in Edinburgh, as well as being consulted on matters progressing through the European Parliament. As such, he primarily provides political intelligence, in contrast to other civil servants in Brussels, who are restricted to providing apolitical information due to the nature of their positions. This position is also quite important to distinguish Scotland and maintain goodwill:

And so again, that’s part of the SNP’s role, my role in Parliament, but also the Scottish government’s role when they still have meetings or when they have ministers over in Brussels. Again, it’s building up the goodwill and just reminding people, you know: We voted against Brexit, we want to be here with you. And we’re getting much more sympathy these days. So yes, goodwill is a large part of our mission now both at the SNP level and the Scottish government level, I think (SNP 2).

In general, the SNP-led Scottish Government remains interested in developments within the EU post-Brexit. It has stated its intention to maintain alignment with EU policies in order to ensure that the Scottish legal system would be prepared in the event of an independent Scotland rejoining the EU (SNP 2). However, the SNP is also aware that Brexit cannot be reversed and

that independence cannot be achieved at the European level. As one MEP repeatedly stressed: “The bottom line for the EU is: the EU can only do what the Treaties say it can do” (SNP 3). This awareness also informed decisions about political careers, as another interviewee explained: “And ultimately, this was why I stood for Westminster. The problem wasn’t in Brussels, the problem was the UK government didn’t know what it wanted” (SNP 4).

In sum, the main independence objective of the SNP in the European Parliament is to build EU goodwill. The party does so by addressing independence explicitly, but I argue that even routine ideological interest representation can contribute to EU goodwill. It is also used to reach domestic audiences and build domestic legitimacy and competitiveness, alongside other objectives such as policy influence. While the SNP’s general presence in the European Parliament targets both domestic and European audiences, the goal of securing EU goodwill goes beyond efforts to impress the domestic audience and appears to reflect a genuine attempt to obtain EU sympathy. After all, media interest from the UK was not particularly strong (SNP 3), goodwill remained an objective after Brexit (SNP 2), and much of the effort to build goodwill took place informally through practices such as good Europeanism and networking. Overall, EU goodwill can be understood as a pragmatic usage of Europe, as it does not require concrete or far-reaching EU or European Parliament action on independence and remains broadly consistent with the status quo.

5.3 Using the Discursive Dimension of Europe

Beyond using the European Parliament to reach specific independence related goals, the SNP has also used Europe discursively for its independence agenda. Here, I discuss specifically how the SNP relies on the EU’s governance structure in its independence discourse, constructs the EU’s role in their independence process and uses Europe in its independence legitimations.

5.3.1 EU Governance Structure: From a Confederation of Peoples to a Confederation of States

While the SNP had pursued Scottish independence since its inception, it only began advocating independence within the EU in 1988 (Dardanelli, 2003). This marked an important shift in its independence discourse, as it signalled to the electorate that the party’s vision of independence was not isolationist and did not entail cutting Scotland off from Europe and the wider world, but

rather participating more fully within them. The party did not only seek EU membership, but also membership of the UN and the Council of Europe and, in later years, even NATO (SNP 4). This shift further indicated a change in the party's understanding of sovereignty-sharing and of what true independence entails:

Even though some people say that, you know, sharing sovereignty, as we do in the European Union, is not real independence, I think it is and your country doesn't consider itself not to be independent in Europe, I think? And I never came across anyone, except some British Eurosceptics, who felt that the EU and the EU Parliament was not for independent countries. So we want to be independent, yes, but we also are aware that it is advantageous and indeed necessary to share experiences and to work together with neighbours especially and other countries. And, of course, an independent Scotland would start off from the point of view of wanting to have the closest possible cooperation with the other countries in the British Isles and the EU (SNP 3).

Hence, this new, more open vision of an independent Scotland showed that the SNP wanted Scotland to be a normal country that cooperated with other EU Member States in their mutual interest. This was also seen as a way of making independence appear less radical and less risky in the eyes of the electorate (SNP 3). This was the position that the SNP, through Winnie Ewing, represented in the early years of the European Parliament.

During the 1970s, 1980s and early 1990s, the idea of a "Europe of the Regions" became popular among Europe's constitutional regions, as it offered an alternative to independence while still promising a form of self-determination for stateless nations. The SNP, however, only briefly engaged with this idea, preferring instead to focus on full independence within the EU (SNP 3; Maddens, Muyters, Wolfs & Vanhecke, 2020, p. 131). The main reasoning for this was twofold. First, the party had never pursued a broader project aimed at replacing or fundamentally reshaping the nation-state at the European level. Scotland was viewed as one of Europe's oldest nation-states, and the party's goal was to return it to that status (SNP 2, 4). Second, the party was not convinced that the a Europe of the Regions was feasible at the EU level, as it did not perceive the EU as seriously pursuing such an arrangement. As one MEP explains:

We always, and consistently and strongly, felt that Scotland should be a normal independent country. And personally, I never saw any sign that the EU, the rest of the EU was terribly, the Member State Governments, effectively, were terribly interested in taking up the idea of a Europe of the Regions (SNP 3).

Nevertheless, between 1999 and 2004, the SNP's discourse on EU governance was not entirely free from idealism. It pursued what I refer to as a "Europe of the Nations," which I understand as an EU that formally acknowledges its internal plurality and translates this into rights and recognition for nations within the EU. Such ideas were particularly prevalent within the EFA party group, especially in the run-up to the 2004 Constitutional Treaty, during which the SNP's Neil MacCormick participated in the Convention on the Future of Europe as an EFA representative (MacCormick, 2004). As such, the SNP's independence discourse during this period was influenced by the broader idealism that still characterized parts of the EFA's thinking about a "Europe of Nations." Accordingly, the party's territorial objectives at this stage included both independence within the EU and a stronger position for constitutional regions within a "confederation of peoples, countries and regions" (MacCormick, Plenary 5, 20000412). In this confederation, sovereignty would be distributed according to the principle of subsidiarity, with openness to decentralizing decision-making not only to the Member State level but also to regional and local levels where appropriate, and with regional and local governments recognized as fully respected partners in the governance of Europe and enabled to participate in EU law-making where relevant (MacCormick, Plenary 5, 19991027; 20010314; 20010312; 20010704; 20011002; 20011025; 20020515; 20030114; Hudghton, Plenary 5, 20000121).

The very reason for "recognition," the SNP and its EFA partners argued, was that EU governance structures at the time no longer reflected the reality on the ground or what Europe actually was. The party claimed that Europe did not consist solely of Member States, but of many self-governing, historically rooted nations that had recently experienced a re-emergence of democracy through the acquisition of political and legislative powers. This was also the case for Scotland, where the Scottish Parliament had been re-established as recently as 1999. As Hooghe et al. (2016) and Schakel and Masetti (2020, p. 8) note, Western Europe had experienced a wave of decentralization since the late 1970s in countries such as Spain, France, Italy, the United Kingdom and

Belgium, meaning that, alongside Germany and Austria, the EU increasingly comprised federal and quasi-federal states. This was interpreted by the SNP and the EFA as having fundamentally altered the nature of the European Union. The EU was now seen as more politically diverse than ever, and there was therefore a need to recognize and reflect the autonomy of its smaller nations through a proper application of the principle of subsidiarity (MacCormick, Plenary 5, 20010314; 20001128; 20030618; 20050413). In October 2001, MacCormick described this new European political reality as follows:

Surely indeed, this Union must recognize subsidiarity in a generous and broad sense, it must acknowledge the political and national diversity of the European Union and the debate on the future must take full account of the powers of the internal political units of the Member States, not only of the Member States themselves. In this election in Scotland, there is a debate going about whether there should be full fiscal autonomy for the Scottish parliament: autonomy is growing in all these small countries and it is vital that it be recognized (MacCormick, Plenary 5, 20010530).

The lack of regional involvement in the EU and the institutional biases that they face as a result of the state-centeredness of the EU was problematized and portrayed as a grievance by the SNP. MacCormick explains it as follows in December 2001:

We face a crisis of democracy in the Union and it will become in some ways yet more acute as the Union enlarges. If people in the regions and localities of Europe feel that their democracy means nothing, because all decisions are taken in remote places; if they are always merely told 'look to the constitution of your Member State if you are not happy with things', that will damage democracy in Europe, not help it (MacCormick, Plenary 5, 20011212).

Over time, however, the SNP's discourse on EU governance became more pragmatic in nature. While the party continued to express support for a greater role for constitutional regions in the EU, after the fifth parliamentary term (e.g., Hudghton, Plenary 7, 201015), it was clear that its main ambition for EU governance was a true confederation of Member States rather than of "peoples" (Hudghton, Plenary 7, 20110506; 20120522; Plenary 8, 20141216;

McLeod, Plenary 9, 20191010). The party's more idealist discourse consistently contained a tension: on the one hand, it challenged the state-centric nature of the EU, while on the other hand it continued to pursue statehood for Scotland within that same framework. When asked whether the party still supported the idea of the EU as a confederation of peoples, countries and regions, one MEP commented on a colleague's position: "That sounds like he was promoting the EFA line, which as an EFA speaker in that debate, he was bound to a certain extent to do. I don't think the SNP totally signed up to that principle" (SNP 3). This suggests that the SNP may not have been fully committed to at least parts of its own idealist independence discourse during the fifth parliamentary term and that it followed a degree of European party discipline based on an "if you support us, then we support you" dynamic that had emerged among regionalist parties in the European Parliament, despite clear ideological differences between the SNP and other EFA parties (SNP 4). The SNP never viewed a "Europe of the Regions" or a "Europe of the Nations" as a full alternative to independence (SNP 3), placing greater emphasis on statehood and maintaining that the nation-state should remain the primary locus of self-determination and retain control over the sharing of sovereignty.

The SNP's now more pragmatic independence discourse meant that the party's territorial objective for the EU was, in no uncertain terms, independence in the EU in a European confederation of states. Here, a new Scottish state should possess all the normal powers that states do, respect subsidiarity, take advantage of Scotland's untapped energy potential, bring economic prosperity and be cosmopolitan in nature. Cooperation with the UK would be maintained "in areas of mutual interest" (Hudghton, Plenary 7, 20131120) and within the EU, Scotland would be a constructive partner (Hudghton, Plenary 7, 20080219; 20080312; 20090325; Plenary 7, 20100309).

In debates about the future of the EU, the SNP has generally been more sceptical than its EFA colleagues and has opposed the so-called "United States of Europe" model, which it feared would entail highly centralized tax powers. This position, however, is not necessarily directly linked to its constitutional agenda, as many other parties from countries with which Scotland might identify share similar views:

So the SNP were always... it wasn't Eurosceptic because we were always pro-European. But the SNP, we always belonged to that Irish,

Scandinavian and UK idea of the Member State retaining much more powers. Whereas our other group colleagues in EFA and in the Greens too tended to be much more pro-European or pro-European integration (SNP 2).

In other words, for the SNP, independence within the EU should not mean simply replacing perceived UK dominance with EU dominance (Hudghton, Plenary 6, 20081009). Rather, it implies gaining the freedom and sovereignty to select which elements of European integration to embrace and which to reject, in a manner similar to the UK's past approach. The party therefore also supports retaining UK opt-outs (Hudghton, Plenary 7, 20120522). The SNP is firmly opposed to the EU developing into a super-state. It rejects further centralization and argues that authority over integration and decision-making should remain primarily at the national level. The party therefore holds clear positions on issues such as taxation, fisheries and transnational lists in the European Parliament (Hudghton, Plenary 6, 20081009). Furthermore, the SNP favours an EU that cooperates where necessary but avoids excessive integration, particularly when it involves top-down symbolic impositions, such as mandatory EU flags on all EU vessels (Hudghton, Plenary 5, 20040113).

After Brexit, some speculation is also possible about the party's vision of independence and what returning to the EU might mean for the conditions under which Scottish EU membership could occur, and therefore what kinds of powers an independent Scotland would be willing to share with the EU in that scenario. For example, in 2014 the SNP envisaged that an independent Scotland would retain UK opt-outs, although this now appears less likely in a future application. In fact, one interviewee suggests that the SNP may become more supportive of European integration over time: "Historically, the SNP were in favour of nations in Europe, not the European nation. That position will evolve in the future as things evolve in the EU" (SNP 2). After all, the party has previously changed its position on NATO and, as both the EU and the broader European context evolve, it may become more open to EU-level defence cooperation. Similarly, while the current party position is that an independent Scotland would seek to establish its own currency, the survival of the euro through the economic crisis, the decline in the value of the pound and the effects of Brexit may all contribute to shifting attitudes over time, meaning that the Scottish public may eventually be less opposed than previously to adopting the euro (SNP 2).

In sum, the SNP's discourse on an independent Scotland in the EU has become increasingly pragmatic over time. Whereas the party initially aligned with the more idealist EFA position on independence within an EU confederation of peoples, countries and regions during the fifth parliamentary term, it later shifted towards advocating independence within an EU confederation of states. The party therefore also moved away from explicitly challenging the EU's character as a union of states. As such, this reflects a more pragmatic discourse, as it remains closer to the status quo within the EU.

5.3.2 EU Role in the Independence Process: A Discourse of Non-Interference and Internal Enlargement

The SNP generally does not envisage a role for the EU in the Scottish independence process. This follows from the party's understanding of the EU as a union of Member States, in which constitutional questions are the responsibility of the nation-state. As such, the EU does not have authority to involve itself in self-determination discussions within Member States, other than to consider accession once an independent Scotland seeks to join (SNP 2, 3, 4). However, the SNP discourse also includes references to the EU's position as additional reasoning for this non-interference stance. For example, one interviewee noted that the EU is composed of Member States with their own territorial disputes and would not necessarily be expected to intervene in Scotland's case (SNP 2). Another former interviewee refers to the EU Treaties, as well as the EU's repeated position that independence is an internal matter in which it does not intervene. As such, the SNP demonstrates a clear understanding of what it can and cannot expect from the EU. The same interviewee also expressed an understanding of the EU's at times "awkward" attitude towards stateless nations, as he explains:

It's not that the institutions in Brussels have just come up with this idea that "Oh, we'll be awkward about independence or whatever". They can't because the Member States have laid down what the powers are in the Treaties and what the restrictions and powers are in the Treaties. So it's, you know, again, it's the Member States who are the architects of that and have the power within that. Therefore, that's why: "if you can't beat them, join 'em!" (SNP 3).

As such, the SNP did take into consideration how the EU would react to its independence process. While the Treaties did not provide a formal role for the

EU, and the party did not seek such a role, it nonetheless factored the EU into its thinking when, during its 2007 campaign for the Scottish elections, it opted for a bilaterally agreed referendum with the UK as a more effective route to independence than seeking to mandate independence through a national election. This approach was seen as advantageous in part because of the expectation that the EU would ultimately need to recognize a newly independent Scotland (SNP 3).

While this overall reflects a pragmatic understanding of the EU, closely aligned with what is and is not possible under the Treaties, the SNP's narrative on "internal enlargement" between 1999 and 2014 contained a degree of idealism. By internal enlargement, the SNP referred to the idea that the EU could expand from within, with EU membership being automatic because the territory in question was already part of the Union (MacCormick, Plenary 5, 20030409). Internal enlargement is, however, not an established practice. Instead, candidate countries have always joined through a gradual and structured process from the outside, that is, through external enlargement. The EU had already clarified that internal enlargement would not be an option when, in 2004, then Commission President Romano Prodi articulated a doctrine on secession within the EU, stating that a newly independent region would be treated as a third country and would therefore need to reapply for membership under Article 49 TEU (Prodi, Questions 5, 20040301). This position was subsequently upheld by Barroso and Juncker (Bremberg & Gillespie, 2022, p. 13).

Yet the SNP continued to challenge this position (Hudghton, Plenary 7, 20091216), drawing in part on the example of Greenland, which negotiated its exit from the EU upon gaining home rule. According to the SNP, this case undermined claims that newly independent territories would automatically fall outside the EU and be required to reapply for membership (Hudghton, Plenary 7, 20110406). The EU, however, maintained its position, and in subsequent years the SNP largely stopped using the term "internal enlargement." Nevertheless, it continued to argue that an independent Scotland should be able to "remain" in the EU, understood as avoiding any period outside the Union in the context of both the 2014 independence referendum and Brexit (Hudghton, Plenary 7, 20130521; 20140204 A & B; McLeod, Plenary 9, 20190717). Even in the run-up to the 2014 referendum, the SNP still hoped for some form of automatic EU membership for Scotland in the event of independence, although it recognised this as a complex route both legally and politically for Brussels. The party appears to have accepted

this constraint, with one interviewee noting: “because states don’t want to give parts of states incentives to be independent. That’s just realpolitik” (SNP 4).

Post-2014, the SNP’s discourse on the EU’s role in its independence process has remained consistently grounded in the principle of non-interference and is therefore pragmatic in nature. One notable exception, however, concerned the Spanish response to the 2017 Catalan independence referendum, in which SNP MEPs called for the EU both to guarantee that a vote could take place and to facilitate dialogue, stating:

It is unacceptable that the Spanish Government can sack the legitimately elected government of Catalonia, and utterly incredible that elected Catalan ministers are sent to prison for exercising the democratic mandate given to them by voters in Catalonia. Surely this is a situation which demands a response from the leadership of the EU, at the very least offering to facilitate dialogue and a return to democratic order, and seeking guarantees that voters in Catalonia will be allowed to democratically determine their own constitutional future. (Hudghton, Plenary 8, 20171115; Smith, Plenary 8, 20171115).

A similar call for EU mediation was again made in July 2019 regarding the imprisonment of ERC’s Oriol Junqueras (Smith, Plenary 9, 20190716). These SNP reactions to the situation in Catalonia are somewhat surprising given the party’s emphasis on non-interference and its position that each stateless nation in the EU should pursue its independence process alone (SNP 3, 4). However, in this case, the SNP made an exception, as it perceived that fundamental rights were being violated (Hudghton, Plenary 8, 20171115; Smith, Plenary 8, 20171115).

After Brexit, the SNP’s view of the Scottish independence process changed, though not necessarily by choice. First, the party argued that a second independence referendum was necessary, as it believed Brexit had been based on false promises (SNP 4). It therefore proposed a consultative referendum followed by negotiations in the event of a “yes” vote. However, the UK Government rejected this approach, and the Scottish Government sought clarification from the UK Supreme Court on whether the Scottish Parliament could legislate for a referendum unilaterally. In November 2022, the Court ruled that it could not, concluding that the Scottish Parliament does not have the power to legislate for a second referendum on its own. This, according to the SNP, demonstrated that the UK is not a voluntary partnership of nations (SNP 3) and also meant that the party had to return to using Scottish

elections as a proxy for a referendum on independence (Brooks & Quinn, 2022). As a result, whereas Scotland had previously been in a different position from some of its European counterparts due to the Edinburgh Agreement, this is no longer the case. As one interviewee explains: “We’re now kind of in a Catalan position, where we want to have a referendum, but as with the Catalans, we get told by the central government in Westminster, or in Madrid, that we can’t have it. So we’re in a position of limbo at the moment” (SNP 2).

Another key change in the Scottish independence process since Brexit is that, if Scottish independence were to come about, the party now expects Scotland would join the EU from the outside through the regular accession process rather than from within through internal enlargement, as had been suggested in 2014. The party considers this route more feasible. With the UK no longer in the EU, there is also less need to account for its position, while at the same time there is perceived to be greater goodwill towards Scotland following Brexit. As one MEP explains:

The accession path has become a lot more straightforward. And that’s recognized within Brussels. There’s also a different sentiment, because we’re the pro-European good guys, where the Brits have thrown away a lot of capital, a lot of goodwill, by the way they’ve behaved over the last years. Now, the EU institutions are still not going to get into our domestic business, but there is a much warmer body language to us than there was and there is a much sharper recognition of our pro-European credentials (SNP 4).

Therefore, the SNP is quite confident that in the event of Scottish independence, accession to the EU would follow quite easily. However, in case it does not, Scotland would want to be independent anyway (SNP 4).

In sum, the SNP has largely made pragmatic use of Europe in its discourse on the EU’s role in its independence process. Between 1999 and 2020, the party consistently maintained a non-interference position and at times grounded this in what the Treaties do and do not allow. However, during the earlier part of this period (1999–2014), the party also advanced a more idealistic narrative by calling for the EU to enable internal enlargement, despite the absence of any such provision in the Treaties. After 2014, the SNP’s discourse became predominantly pragmatic again, with the EU no longer envisaged as playing a significant role in the Scottish independence process.

5.3.3 Europe in Independence Legitimizations: Grievances, A Better Future and Principles

The SNP's usage of Europe in its legitimating discourse for independence has predominantly been pragmatic in nature, although during the eighth and ninth parliamentary terms, particularly after 2014, there was an increase in more idealistic usages of Europe (see Annex 4). Between 1999 and 2004 (fifth term), the SNP's legitimating discourse drew primarily on Europe in a remedial sense. Most notably, it advanced an "EU democratic deficit" argument, claiming that the EU was overly state-centred and that, if it failed to make meaningful efforts to include regions in EU decision-making, stateless nations such as Scotland would have no choice but to pursue independent statehood. In this sense, independence was framed as an instrumental response to democratic grievances generated within the EU context. For example, in July 2001, MacCormick stated during Question Time with the Council:

The President in Office of the Council is very receptive to the points we are making but her colleagues, generally, have very little to say about subsidiarity that pleases us. This is the kind of thing that makes an increasing part of the population of Scotland recognize that being a Member State is a much better idea than being a constitutional region (MacCormick, Plenary 5, 20010704).

It also did not help that the 2004 enlargement of the EU was imminent, and the SNP particularly feared that the accession of many small nation-states of a similar size to Scotland, but equipped with the powers of states, would only exacerbate the invisibility of stateless nations in the EU (MacCormick, Plenary 5, 20000202; 20000412). It is, however, important to point out that the importance of the "EU Democratic Deficit" Argument was short lived, and has been used less or not at all in consecutive terms.

Another important remedial argument in the SNP's repertoire, which has shown consistency over time, is the "bad representation" argument. In this case, it is argued that Scotland should become independent because the UK regularly misrepresents or undermines Scottish interests, not only domestically but also within the EU. Scottish grievances are thus attributed to the UK's presence and representation at EU level. For example, during discussions on a new European Constitution around 2003, the SNP expressed concern about the UK granting the EU exclusive competence over issues of

particular importance to Scotland, such as biological resource conservation and the control and licensing of offshore oil and gas reserves (Hudghton, Plenary 5, 20031216). At times, the party goes further than misrepresentation and suggests that the UK is ineffective and unsuitable to represent Scottish interests in the EU. When the UK held the Presidency in 2005, the SNP criticized its lack of progress, while its conservative approach to the EU budget led the party to conclude that “the UK has lost friends and influence on our behalf” (Hudghton, Plenary 5, 20051214; 20051026). As one SNP MEP recounts:

And I remember being at an event in Brussels that I had helped to organize with him [a former SNP MEP], being told in no uncertain terms by a Commission official that the UK government had done, had said something that was totally outrageously against Scotland’s interests in a private meeting, or in a Council or whatever. It does not really matter where, but there was a significant, I think, understanding across the institutions of the European Union that the UK government was just not very good at being an EU member (SNP 3).

Between 2004 and 2014, over the course of both the sixth and seventh parliamentary terms, there is a shift in the nature of the SNP’s pragmatic usage of Europe in its legitimating discourse. The EU’s state-centered structure is no longer framed as a grievance that the EU itself needs to correct, but instead as a condition that makes independence necessary in order to create a better future for both Scotland and the EU. The party does so by means of a range of different arguments, but most importantly, it has done so through the “Voice in the EU” argument, which the party has consistently maintained over time, and where independence is argued to be needed so that Scotland is able to be an equal partner in the EU and can influence EU policy-making properly. Aside from this, the SNP also makes sure to show the EU that there is also something in it for them by means of the “Better Future For EU Argument”. The party, for example, continuously emphasizes their constructive attitude versus that of the UK and their natural energy resources that could help realize the European climate ambition. Sometimes these arguments are even combined, as is the case in the quote below:

We have a new Government – an SNP Government, which is pro-Europe and which has a vision for a new future for Scotland in Europe. Prime Minister, I want to see Scottish Ministers sitting alongside your

Ministers in the Council, not in the second row. Scotland has much to contribute to the European Union and its development: a constructive attitude and a wealth of energy resources to name but two. I look forward to a day when Scotland is welcomed as an independent Member State of this Union. Such a change, I think, would not just be good for Scotland but good for the future of Europe too. (Hudghton, Plenary 6, 20080219).

This quote was made not long after the SNP was first elected to government in Scotland in 2007, after which the party appeared to step up its efforts to address independence. It seems to have been working towards the 2014 independence referendum through a strongly positive narrative aimed at legitimizing independence in the European Parliament. What is especially notable is that, through the “better future for the EU” argument, the party was also explicitly targeting an EU audience. In addition to this, the party relied to a lesser extent on the “full EU benefits” argument and the “viability 2.0 argument”, in which it stressed that Scotland would need to be independent to take full advantage of the EU, and that small states can be successful and viable within the EU, contrary to opposing claims. In particular, the latter argument serves as a counter-claim to the idea that Scotland can only have a voice in the EU as part of the UK, and that on its own it would simply be a small state overwhelmed by larger Member States. This is a narrative that the SNP actively sought to challenge between 1999 and 2014 by drawing on examples of successful small states within the EU. For example, in June 2013, an SNP MEP referenced the success of Ireland:

The fact that this immensely difficult and politically contentious series of talks has been led so outstandingly well by Ireland demonstrates very clearly that there is absolutely no reason why an independent Scotland could not also succeed and prosper as a normal independent Member State of the EU. It is clearly not the size of a Member State which determines its political and diplomatic effectiveness (Hudghton, Plenary 7, 20130702).

During the eighth and ninth parliamentary terms, after the 2014 referendum and in light of the 2016 Brexit referendum, this predominantly positive “better future” legitimating narrative for Scottish independence became less prominent. It gradually gave way to a more remedial and, increasingly, principled tone. In particular, Brexit emerged as the central new grievance,

framing independence as a response to Scotland being taken out of the EU against its democratic will in what can be described as the “Brexit” argument. This narrative was first introduced in 2011 but recurred consistently until the SNP left the European Parliament in 2020.

In light of Brexit, the SNP also increasingly relied on a principled legitimating discourse for independence. This principled dimension had always been present, but instrumental legitimations were more prominent until after 2014, when the balance shifted. Most importantly, the SNP drew on what can be termed the “normal” argument, which uses Europe as a reference point by pointing to comparable European states such as Ireland, Croatia and Finland, and from this establishes that statehood is the norm and therefore also a legitimate outcome for Scotland (e.g., Hudghton, Plenary 6, 20060705; 20130702). As such, this argument is intended to normalize the demand for Scottish independence by framing it as neither unusual nor threatening. The party most often expresses this succinctly by stating that it hopes Scotland will be “a normal independent nation again” (Hudghton, Plenary 8, 20180528; 20180207) and by referring to independence as “the normal status of nations in Europe” (Hudghton, Plenary 6, 20110515).

In addition to this, the SNP also increasingly drew on its Europeanness through the “European identity” argument as a basis for Scottish independence in the EU. Brexit appears to be the key event that shifted the party’s traditionally more cautious framing of Scottish European identity towards a more explicit identification with Europe. Whereas previously the SNP defined European identity through the familiar phrase “unity in diversity,” emphasizing the importance of preserving distinct national identities—“what makes us proud to be Scottish, Welsh, Irish, French, Czech, or whatever” (Hudghton, Plenary 6, 20081216; Hudghton, Plenary 5, 20040113)—in the eighth and ninth terms this core understanding remained, but the emphasis increasingly shifted towards what Europeans share in common. In particular, Smith’s speech in March 2017 illustrates this development, as he highlights shared European values and frames them as being under threat from Brexit:

Mr President, I represent Scotland within this House, and the 60th anniversary of the Treaty of Rome is somewhat bittersweet from our perspective. It is right that we should celebrate our common values, solidarity, cooperation, multilateralism, the acknowledgement that any problem that we face is bigger than any one country, however big,

however small. But it is also right that we should reflect on just how fragile those values and that progress truly are. Trust me: the ingredients of Brexit exist in every one of our European countries. We cannot be complacent. I will also be in Rome next weekend, in my kilt, marching alongside you, working with you, to celebrate and defend our European values, because Scotland shares those European values – and those values must be defended. And Scotland faces the prospect of being removed from our family of nations, against our clearly-expressed democratic will. It is not fair, and if the EU is not a community of justice, law and democracy, what are we for? (Smith, Plenary 8, 20170315).

Smith defines the EU multiple times as a family of nations that are different but share a commitment to solidarity, cooperation, multilateralism, subsidiarity, justice, law and democracy. This view persists, and in March 2019, in his final speech in the European Parliament, he states that “Scotland is a European nation.” By this, SNP MEPs mean that Scotland is linked to Europe geographically and historically through monarchy, religion, trade, cooperation and its outward-looking orientation. In the final months of the SNP’s presence in the European Parliament, this shared history is mentioned more explicitly (Allard, Plenary 9, 20200115; Anderson, Plenary 9, 20200103). Moreover, the party also frames Scotland as European on the basis of political choices and institutional practices. For example, it established the Scottish Parliament in 1999 following a European model, including a hemicycle, proportional representation and an ambition for gender balance; it has participated in the European Parliament since its inception; and it voted to remain in the EU during Brexit (SNP 3, 4; Allard, Plenary 9, 20200115). Hence, what distinguishes Scotland from the rest of the UK, in this view, is its self-conscious political identification as European:

It’s partly about history and flags and anthems and kings and queens and that sort of stuff. But there’s a very deliberate, conscious effort to say: “Well this is who we are, this is who we want to be.” And this is what sort of friend and ally we want to be and what sort of partnership we want to have (SNP 4).

In other words, being European is understood not only as something one is, but also as something one actively chooses to be, and Scotland is presented as having chosen the European path. By the time the SNP left the European Parliament, there appears to have been a strong commitment to Europe, which

stands in clear contrast to the UK's decision to turn away from the EU. Such a commitment can therefore be interpreted as instrumental: as the UK's stance on Europe becomes more distant, the SNP's position moves in the opposite direction. However, Smith's choice of language also leaves open the possibility that the EU had come to represent more than a purely strategic or instrumental affiliation.

In sum, the SNP's legitimating discourse for independence in the EU has largely used Europe in a pragmatic way. First, in the remedial phase (1999–2004), EU state-centredness was framed as a grievance. In the run-up to the 2014 Scottish independence referendum, however, the party instead accepted the EU's state-centred structure as a given reality to which Scotland would need to adapt, arguing that doing so would produce a better future for both Scotland and the EU (2004–2014). In the context of Brexit, this more positive framing shifted again, with greater reliance on the grievance of Brexit, alongside more principled justifications for independence, particularly those emphasizing the normality of statehood in Europe and Scotland's Europeanness. As such, between 2014 and 2020, pragmatic uses of Europe in independence legitimations were increasingly balanced with more idealistic elements.

5.4 Conclusion: The SNP's Mostly Pragmatic Goodwill Strategy in the European Parliament

This chapter has set out to explore how the SNP has used Europe in implementing its independence agenda in the European Parliament. In doing so, I find that over the years the SNP has predominantly used Europe in a pragmatic sense, with occasional elements of idealist usage (see Table 8). As such, the party does draw on Europe in its independence strategy in the European Parliament, but to a limited extent, which is also in line with what is possible under the political status quo in the EU.

For the SNP, the main independence process takes place domestically, and the EU is not envisioned to play a central role in it. Accordingly, the primary purpose of the SNP's presence in the European Parliament has been to maintain EU goodwill, with the aim of securing a supportive environment for Scotland in the event that independence is achieved. Even after independence, the party envisages limits on the powers it would be willing to share with the EU, for example in areas such as taxation or fisheries. The SNP has also made pragmatic use of Europe in its independence legitimations by selectively

drawing on EU-related developments, whether framed as grievances or opportunities. Most importantly, the EU’s continued state-centered structure has been used at different points to support the case for independence, first as a source of grievance and later more as a basis for anticipated benefits such as influence within the EU.

Table 8 — SNP – A Mostly Pragmatic Usage of Europe in the European Parliament

Term	Independence Agenda Aim in the EP	EU Governance Structure	EU Role	Legitimisations
5 1999– 2004	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Minor EU Attitude Change: Goodwill • Domestic Competition: Domestic Legitimacy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Europe of the Nations” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitator of Enlargement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Principled
			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • EU Non-Interference 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mostly Instrumental
6 2004– 2009	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Minor EU Attitude Change: Goodwill • Domestic Competition: Domestic Legitimacy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Union of Member States 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitator of Enlargement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Principled
			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • EU Non-Interference 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mostly Instrumental
7 2009– 2014	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Minor EU Attitude Change: Goodwill • Domestic Competition: Domestic Legitimacy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Union of Member States 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitator of Enlargement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Principled
			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • EU Non-Interference 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mostly Instrumental
8 2014– 2019	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Minor EU Attitude Change: Goodwill • Domestic Competition: Domestic Legitimacy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Union of Member States 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mediator • Guardian of European Principles and Law 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • About Equally Principled
			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • EU Non-interference 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • About Equally Instrumental
9 2019– 2024	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Minor EU Attitude Change: Goodwill • Domestic Competition: Domestic Legitimacy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Union of Member States 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mediator 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • About Equally Principled
			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • EU Non-Interference 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • About Equally Instrumental

Note: Overview of the findings on how the SNP has used Europe in its independence strategy in the European Parliament over time. The boxes coloured in dark blue indicate **idealistic usage**, while the boxes coloured in light grey indicate **pragmatic usage**.

However, particularly in the earlier part of the timeframe, the party’s independence strategy was not entirely free from idealist uses of Europe.

Between 1999 and 2004, the SNP still followed the EFA line in pursuing a European confederation of peoples, countries and regions, despite this being far removed from the EU status quo. Moreover, notwithstanding the EU's rejection of the concept, the SNP continued to call for some form of internal enlargement for stateless nations within the EU between 1999 and 2014. Finally, the party maintained a small but consistent strand of principled independence legitimations, justifying independence in the EU through self-defined European standards, including the normality of statehood in Europe and, increasingly, Scotland's own connection to Europe.

Hence, it is possible to conclude that, while the SNP considers the main struggle for Scottish independence to be located at the national level, it has nonetheless made use of its presence in the European Parliament in a meaningful way. As such, Europe plays a noteworthy yet limited role in the SNP's independence strategy. The party has drawn on Europe where circumstances allow, and only occasionally extends its use beyond that.

6. ERC: From Idealism to Pragmatism and Back Again

In this chapter, I discuss how Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya (ERC) has used Europe in relation to its independence agenda in the European Parliament between 1999 and 2024. I do so by contextualizing the party's domestic trajectory over time as well as its historical presence in the European Parliament. I then outline the party's independence strategy in the European Parliament over time by addressing ERC's independence-related aims, followed by a discussion of the party's discourse on the type of EU it envisions being independent within, the EU's role in the Catalan independence process, and the use of Europe in legitimating Catalan independence. In conclusion, I argue that ERC goes beyond pragmatic uses of Europe and instead predominantly uses Europe in an idealistic way in relation to its independence agenda as expressed in the European Parliament.

6.1 About ERC

ERC was founded in 1931 and is therefore one of the oldest independence parties in Europe. Ideologically, it has from the outset been both a nationalist and a left-wing party, and throughout its history it has oscillated between prioritizing these two dimensions. For a period, ERC was the largest party in Catalonia, but during the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939), the Generalitat de Catalunya was dissolved and ERC, like all other parties, was banned. Under Franco (1936–1975), it was subject to severe repression, many of its politicians were killed, and the party went into exile abroad (Serra, 2024, pp. 3–8). ERC's post-Franco participation in Catalan and Spanish politics, however, was less successful. The party continued to lose seats and what had once been a mass party became a smaller political actor. In response, it chose to adopt a more radical territorial objective than its nationalist counterpart, CiU, by making Catalan independence its main party goal ahead of the 1992 Catalan elections. By the mid-1990s, ERC further differentiated itself from CiU by reasserting its left-wing agenda, thereby adopting a two-dimensional strategy in which it competed simultaneously on both the territorial and left-right dimensions (Elias, 2015, p. 87).

Between 2003 and 2010, ERC had the opportunity to participate in the Catalan government. The party even found itself in a kingmaker position and

faced a choice between joining a left-wing or a pro-independence government. On two occasions, ERC chose to prioritise its left-wing agenda over its territorial agenda and joined a left-wing government with ICV and PSC (Serra, 2024, pp. 1–8). In the aftermath of this governing period, however, ERC again performed poorly and faced internal problems, such as infighting and organizational weakness. A significant change came in 2011 when ERC gained new leadership under historian turned MEP Oriol Junqueras and the party elite was replaced. According to Serra (2024), Junqueras provided strong leadership and helped the party develop a clearer left-wing ideological discourse (pp. 6–12; Barrio & Barberà, 2011, p. 83; Elias, 2015, p. 89), while also recommitting to Catalan independence and promising not to make concessions to parties that did not support the right to decide (Elias, 2015, p.90).

From 2010 onward, the Catalan independence process gained momentum when fourteen articles of the Statute of Autonomy of Catalonia were declared unconstitutional by the Spanish Court and 27 more were amended, significantly weakening Catalonia's right to self-government (Argelaguet, 2014, p. 116). This led to public outrage, and pro-independence civil society groups expanded. This ultimately led the Catalan government, which ERC was not part of at the time, to organize a non-binding consultation on Catalan statehood in 2014, which was met with legal action and fines by the Spanish government (Bremberg & Gillespie, 2022, p. 56–57).

During the period that followed (2015–2017), also known as the Procés, ERC, CDC and parts of UDC worked together and sought to use the 2015 Catalan elections in September as a proxy independence referendum and secure a majority. They ran under the name Junts pel Sí and committed to declaring independence within 18 months if they achieved a parliamentary majority. Ultimately, the coalition won a majority of seats but not a majority of the vote (47.8%) and went on to form the first pro-independence majority government in the history of modern Catalan politics in 2015, under the leadership of Carles Puigdemont (Bremberg & Gillespie, 2022, p. 27).

Attempts to negotiate a referendum, however, were unsuccessful and in 2017, aware that it lacked authority, the Catalan government held an independence referendum on 1 October 2017. Out of 43% of voters, 92 percent voted for Catalonia to become an independent republic, but the vote was highly controversial. A large minority in the Catalan Parliament had objected to holding a referendum, and the Spanish state did not tolerate it, responding with a large police operation intended to prevent voting, which

resulted in police violence against peaceful voters. Many were injured, and this overshadowed the fact that the Catalan government had proceeded with an unsanctioned referendum. When intervention from the EU did not materialize, the Catalan Parliament voted to declare independence at the end of October. This led Spain to invoke Article 155 of the Spanish Constitution, resulting in the dissolution of the Catalan Parliament, the suspension of Catalan self-government, and the imprisonment of members of the Catalan government, including ERC leader Oriol Junqueras. Others, such as Carles Puigdemont, former president of the Government of Catalonia, went into exile in Belgium (Serra, 2024, p.5, Bremberg & Gillespie, 2022, pp. 59–60).

After the referendum, ERC appears to have become more pragmatic and, for the time being, focused on achieving what it can within the Spanish political system rather than pursuing a new referendum in the near future. The party has remained an important actor in both Catalan and Spanish politics. ERC was part of the Catalan government for two consecutive terms (2018–2021 and 2021–2024) and is currently supporting a minority government. At the national level, ERC supported Sánchez's Socialist (PSOE) minority government through abstention, which contributed to the later pardoning of several key independence leaders in 2021. Similarly, in 2023, ERC again supported Sánchez's party in forming a national government, this time in exchange for an amnesty for individuals linked to the independence process (El País, 2021, Jones, 2024; Heller, 2023; Serra, 2024, pp.7-8; Bremberg & Gillespie, pp. 60–63).

Beyond the regional and national levels, ERC has also long been interested in the European level. The party already had a history of supporting European integration and in the 1980s, after Franco, it viewed the European Community as a means to protect Catalans from further human rights abuses and as a source of economic modernization (Eichert, 2016, p. 67). It was also in the 1980s, during a reorganisation of ERC, that Heribert Barrera briefly proposed the idea of an independent Catalonia within the EC rather than within Spain. With Franco's rule still fresh in memory, this was largely a fear-driven proposal, in which the EC was seen as the only actor capable of protecting Catalans from further human rights abuses (Champliaud, 2011, p. 32; Eichert, 2016, p. 67).

Ever since Spain joined the European Union in 1986, ERC has been eager to take part in EU decision-making and has made a consistent effort to secure representation in the European Parliament (see Table 9). As one interviewee (ERC 2) explains, it is considered normal for Spanish regional parties to form

coalitions or joint lists in European elections, and this has also been common practice for ERC. For example, in 2004 ERC contested the European Parliament elections together with the Basque party Eusko Alkartasuna (EA), and together they won one seat. In practice, this meant that the two parties split the term, with ERC represented in the European Parliament between 2004 and 2007, and EA serving for the remainder of the term. In the following term, ERC again won a seat as part of a coalition and served between 2009 and 2011 (Interview, ERC 1; ERC 2). In later elections, the party competed as part of *Ahora Repúblicas*, a coalition of parties from Catalonia, the Basque Country, Asturias, Aragon and the Canary Islands (2019–present), and because the coalition secured sufficient votes, ERC did not need to share its seats in the same way. Notably, during the 2019 European elections, Catalan pro-independence parties strategically attempted to internationalize the Catalan conflict by nominating key figures from the independence process for Brussels. ERC therefore nominated Oriol Junqueras, who had been imprisoned for sedition and misuse of public funds in relation to the 2017 Catalan independence referendum. While this brought attention to his case, another candidate ultimately took up his seat. Junqueras was later pardoned in 2021 (Bremberg & Gillespie, 2022, pp. 62–63; Rovirosa, Heller & Zornosa, 2024, 26 September; Euronews, 2020, 14 January).

Table 9: Seats and Party Affiliation of ERC in the European Parliament

Parliamentary Term	# MEPs	European Party Group
1984–1989	0	
1989–1994	1	ARE – Group of the European Radical Alliance
1994–1999	0	
1999–2004	1	Verts/ALE – Greens / European Free Alliance
2004–2009	1	
2009–2014	1	
2014–2019	2	
2019–2024	2	

Data: European Parliament (n.d.).

ERC started out with the Rainbow Group in 1989, which was a regionalist group that had previously also included Green parties. When ERC returned to the European Parliament, it joined the Greens/EFA (Verts/ALE) group, which is again a coalition of Green and regionalist parties. The party has also been part of the European Free Alliance party federation since 1989 and plays an

important role within it, as MEP Jordi Solé has served as Secretary General of the party federation since 2016 (European Free Alliance, n.d.).

ERC has shown relatively consistent interest in the PETI committee (2009–2024), which handles petitions; CULT (2004–2014 and 2019–2024), which deals with culture and education; as well as AFET, the Foreign Affairs Committee, and LIBE, which deals with justice and home affairs (2014–2024). In terms of positions, ERC MEPs have served as Vice-Chair of the ACP–EU Joint Parliamentary Assembly (2004–2007) and Vice-Chair of the Delegation for Relations with the Andean Community (2022–2024). Overall, it is uncommon for small parties to obtain key leadership posts, but these cases demonstrate that it is nevertheless possible (ERC 1).

In sum, ERC has a long and rich history, in which it has pursued independence to varying degrees across time. Its party size has also fluctuated, and it has alternated between participation in and exclusion from the Catalan government. Especially after the 2017 independence referendum, ERC has become more pragmatic at the domestic level and has been strategic in securing concessions for those involved in the independence process. At the European level, ERC has maintained a small but relatively consistent presence.

6.2 Using the Institutional Dimension of Europe

Independence Objectives in the European Parliament: In Pursuit of Self-determination in the EU

Over time, ERC has relied on the European Parliament to varying degrees and in different ways in its pursuit of Catalan independence. The party's independence objectives in the European Parliament have shifted from idealism in the early 2000s to a more pragmatic approach, and then back towards idealism, particularly after the 2017 independence referendum. During the fifth term (1999–2004), ERC used the European Parliament in a largely idealistic way for its independence agenda and actively sought EU facilitation of its independence process through proposed changes to EU practices and rules. It argued for the inclusion of the right to self-determination in the European Constitution (Mayol i Raynal, Plenary 5, 20011212), and also sought to shape the interpretation of the right to self-determination—already referenced in several EP resolutions at the time—as allowing nations, through a referendum, to become EU Member States (Mayol i Raynal, Plenary 5, 20020116). Moreover, as part of the EFA, the

party pursued greater influence for constitutional regions within the EU as well as the concept of internal enlargement during the drafting of the 2004 European Constitution (Mayol I Raynal, Plenary 5, 20030924).

The ERC, during the sixth term (2004–2009), incorporated a more pragmatic approach by choosing not to speak about independence extensively in formal settings. The rationale was that the ERC MEP first sought to create favourable conditions for such discussions informally by building credibility, cultivating a positive working environment, prioritizing the broader European interest and demonstrating commitment to strengthening the EU before making explicit public demands on independence. A substantial part of this effort therefore focused on active engagement in routine EU policy-making, which was seen both as valuable in itself and as a means of gaining greater authority when addressing independence later on. Nevertheless, this ERC MEP also remained ambitious and did ultimately use the European Parliament in an idealistic way in relation to the party's independence agenda. He continued to emphasize that the party had supported the Constitutional Treaty's recognition of internal enlargement, as well as greater involvement for constitutional regions in the EU (Joan i Mari, Plenary 6, 20050111). In addition, he informally supported EU mediation between Catalonia and Spain and was open to cooperation with politicians from other stateless nations across the EU. He also made an active effort to represent EFA member parties without direct representation in the European Parliament and worked to build broad support for self-determination within the institution. In this context, he even attempted to establish a caucus on self-determination as a pressure group to promote recognition of the right to self-determination for stateless nations as a universal principle in the EU, although there was insufficient support for this at the time (ERC 1).

Thereafter, between 2009 and 2011, ERC's use of the European Parliament for its independence agenda became more pragmatic. At the time, party leadership appeared to take limited interest in the day-to-day activities of its MEP, so the ERC MEP and his team decided to prioritize changing how the party was perceived within the European Parliament. The ERC delegation had the impression that it was seen as unusual and as a party that did not fully belong in the European Parliament. As a result, the party sought acceptance and normalization within the EU by neither concealing nor foregrounding its independence agenda, instead focusing on EU policy-making. As part of the Greens/EFA group, the goal was to come across as more Greens than EFA. As one party staff member explains:

The way we liked to present ourselves was always putting the independence thing in the second or third or fourth list of things that explained why we were there. We were not there to make the independence of Catalonia. We were there to defend the connection to the train, the fisheries or whatever it was, but not talk about our agenda of independence, because as I said, there was no independence agenda at the time. It seemed impossible (ERC 2).

This also meant that cooperation with other stateless nationalist parties was put on the back burner. The main reason was that the ERC delegation perceived a potential risk of losing connections with those who opposed their self-government plans in that country. Only cooperation and association with the SNP was seen as more positive, as it presented a good example for both Spain and the EU of how a self-determination process could be handled (ERC 2). The main reason for not prioritizing independence at the time was that there was no domestic momentum for independence and ERC was a small party with limited power. Independence therefore seemed more like an ideal than a potential reality to actively pursue, including in the European Parliament (ERC 2).

During the eighth and ninth terms (2014–2024), an important objective for ERC has been to achieve EU understanding of Catalonia and its independence quest, especially after the 2017 Catalan independence referendum. This was considered important, not least because of the perception that the Spanish narrative is strongly present within the EU. ERC therefore felt it needed to make an effort to present a counter-narrative. As one interviewee explains:

Because there are other bigger and more powerful narratives coming from Spanish parties, unionist parties and even from Catalan parties that are against the independence and we need to counterbalance these narratives, no? So we want... what we want to achieve is that people know directly from ourselves, our vision, our view on why we advocate for independence and then that they can have better information, maybe other sources of information that they can believe or they can be convinced that we are reliable people, you know? Not maybe an image of being, you know, some, some crazy separatist as others would like to portray us (ERC 4).

In their counter-narrative, as the quote reveals, ERC seeks to portray Catalonia as a normal nation in Europe, no different from any other. They aim to convince the European audience that they are not extremists, that their wish

for independence is normal and rational, and to ensure that Europe understands where this position comes from, even if it is not shared (ERC 3; 4). ERC interviewees also highlighted that they aim to explain to the European audience why the party can simultaneously support independence and advocate for a stronger Europe (ERC 4; 5).

Since formal channels for presenting this counter-narrative are limited, ERC has relied heavily on networking. The aim is to build allies, or rather “friends”, and then to encourage these contacts and the wider European audience to understand the Catalan perspective (ERC 5). The European Parliament is therefore much more than it appears at first sight; for ERC, it serves as a gateway to the rest of Europe. For example, membership of the Greens is seen as highly beneficial not only for policy-making but also in terms of access to networks, given that several Green parties have participated in national governments (ERC 5).

One way ERC builds and maintains these relationships is through informal meetings (ERC 2, 3, 4) and the creation of platforms within the European Parliament. After the 2017 independence referendum, it was also a priority to brief members of the EU Catalonia Dialogue Platform on developments in Catalonia. This informal group consisted of close allies of both ERC and Junts, who were considered important not only for information-sharing purposes but also as a means of demonstrating to Spain that ERC had international support within the European Parliament, despite lacking formal EU backing (ERC 5). When asked whether there is also an objective of securing active support from these European allies, interviewees are clear: support is welcome, but there are no expectations of favourable European Parliament resolutions, as this is seen as unrealistic (ERC 4). Both the goal of EU understanding, which requires only modest shifts in perception, and the aim of improving domestic competitiveness reflect a continued pragmatism on ERC’s part, as they represent limited and achievable objectives.

It has, however, not been easy for ERC to disseminate its counter-narrative. Interviewees report that the Spanish delegation has allegedly adopted an approach aimed at limiting discussion of the Catalan question in the European Parliament (ERC 3; ERC 5). At times, these attempts to silence the issue have been described as highly assertive, with one interviewee even referring to them as “diplomatic bullying.” This would involve MEPs seeking to raise the Catalan issue being confronted by Spanish politicians and, in some cases, facing implicit or explicit threats to their careers. One interviewee recounts an experience in which a colleague from an Eastern European

country explained that he had attempted to raise the Catalan question within his Christian Democrat group.

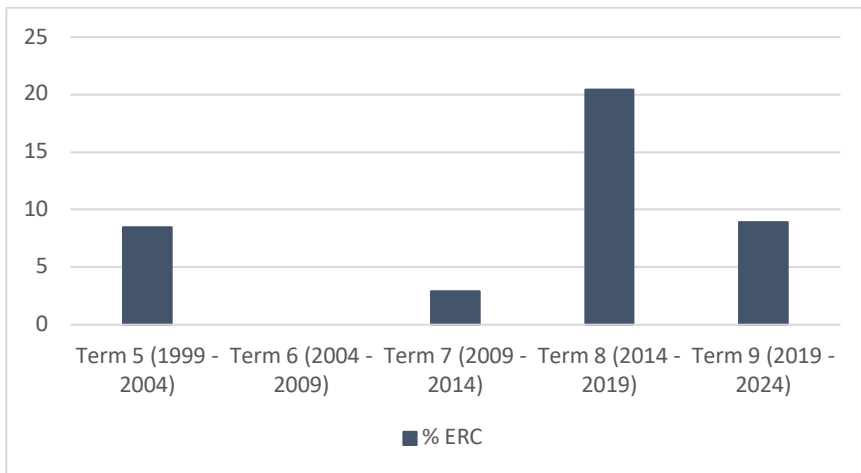
He said: "I tried to, uh, to talk about you, about the difficulties and in a very brief way and about the platform and what I received was so brutal that I kept silent. I kept silent", he said. "And then the day after that", he said, "came my chief. Big officer. And he told me: "Please don't repeat these things. If you do that, you will be not in the list on the list for next for the next Parliament"" (ERC 3).

Nevertheless, ERC has started using the European Parliament more idealistically again in recent years. The party has been disappointed with the EU's reaction to Spanish actions after the 2017 independence referendum, has called for stronger EU responses, and has also pushed the topic of internal enlargement in the AFCO committee when possible. Moreover, another objective of the EU–Catalonia Dialogue Platform was to promote a solution based on self-determination, "so that anything that would come after that would be based on the self-determination of Catalonia" (ERC 5). The party has also worked on this idea and on the establishment of a self-determination caucus in 2021, showing greater openness again to cooperation with other stateless nationalist parties. The party's MEP had already pushed for such a caucus during the sixth parliamentary term but was unsuccessful at the time. Through this caucus, ERC was able to once again advance its agenda of making self-determination more widely accepted as a European principle. As outlined in the caucus' legislative proposal, the Clarity Act, it is proposed that the EU should play a role in resolving territorial conflicts within its borders, based on the principle of self-determination. As such, both EU mediation and a more formal recognition of self-determination are independence objectives that ERC pursues within the EU and the European Parliament (ERC 4; 5; Greens/EFA, 2021). In doing so, ERC shows that it not only seeks European support for resolving the Catalan territorial conflict specifically, but that its ambitions are broader. It seeks to change the EU by promoting self-determination as a European principle that can be applied not only in the Catalan case, but in other cases as well.

Looking at the number of formal independence contributions made, it is visible that ERC has used the European Parliament to address independence to varying degrees between 1999 and 2024. As Figure 3 shows, in most parliamentary terms the party has devoted less than 10 percent of its formal

contributions in the European Parliament to the topic of independence. This is explained by the fact that during the sixth (2004–2009) and seventh (2009–2014) terms, ERC had MEPs who consciously decided to deprioritize formally addressing independence in the European Parliament in favour of more non-discursive independence practices, which I will elaborate on later (ERC 1; ERC 2). This changed during the eighth parliamentary term (2014–2019), when the party’s share of independence contributions in the European Parliament rose to slightly over 20 percent of all party contributions, only to decrease again during the ninth parliamentary term (2019–2024).

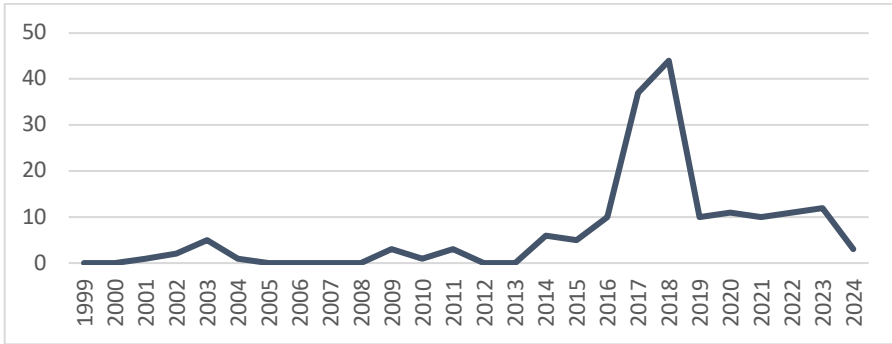
Figure 3: Percentage of Independence Contributions out of Total Contributions in the European Parliament



Data: plenary contributions, written and oral questions and explanations of vote that relate to the political status of independence, the independence process or independence legitimization. The same applies to Figure 4.

Zooming in further, Figure 4 breaks down ERC’s independence contributions by year. It shows that ERC did not address independence consistently every year and that annual attention to the issue remained relatively low until it increased sharply from 2016 onward, reaching a new high in 2017, the year of the referendum. In 2018, attention to independence peaked, as ERC was strongly disappointed with the EU’s response to Spanish actions surrounding the referendum. In the years that followed, attention declined again, but not to the low levels seen before the referendum. This pattern also corresponds with ERC’s more long-term approach to Catalan independence after 2017 (ERC 4).

Figure 4: Number of ERC independence contributions per year in the European Parliament



Even though ERC did not consistently maintain a higher level of formal attention to independence in the European Parliament, this does not mean that their MEPs did not continue to work on the party's independence agenda. After all, addressing independence formally is only one way in which independence can be addressed in the European Parliament. As ERC interviewees explain, addressing independence in plenary is not ideal, as it mainly allows for a reactive approach, given that the agendas are largely predetermined. Getting the Catalan conflict or self-determination onto the agenda is quite difficult, as the majorities simply are not there (ERC 4,5). Hence, the main realistic opportunity Catalan MEPs have to address the Catalan conflict is to wait until something sufficiently eventful occurs to warrant a European Parliament debate, as was the case after the 2017 independence referendum (ERC 4). One interviewee, however, recalls this debate as unhelpful and concludes that the only way Catalans can address self-determination is by being proactive:

Everything that we put forward on self-determination has to be like something that proactively the MEPs put forward. It's very difficult for us to kind of engage with the other groups and kind of officially trigger, for instance, plenary debates or do own initiative reports, uh, of the Parliament on these kind of issues ... I think the only experience we had with a plenary debate, it was right after the referendum in October 2017. And there the situation was highly politicized and the debate was very polarized. It didn't serve any interest other than, um you know, putting forward some discourses that were not constructive at all. So in the end, that also proves why it's not- why we don't succeed in officially from the structures of the Parliament to do something related to this,

because the majorities are not there to offer this. But this doesn't mean that we cannot do anything (ERC 5).

Hence, I find that regular interest representation is also an important part of ERC's activity in the European Parliament, both to represent their voters on other important issues and because such representation can be harnessed to convey the party's independence message in the European Parliament. Policy fields that ERC MEPs consider of particular importance to Catalonia include agriculture, human rights, EU research policy and infrastructure (ERC 2,3,5). These issues were sometimes not only important in their own right, but also reflected dissatisfaction with the degree of autonomy Catalonia had in Spain and were therefore connected to Europe and brought to the European level. During the sixth term, ERC, for example, tried to have the Mediterranean Corridor, a new train route intended to connect Catalonia to the rest of Europe, voted as one of the main infrastructure projects for the next decade. This was important because they believed Spain tends to centralize public infrastructure around Madrid, and so this European status would "help us win the battle in Spain," as one interviewee explains (Interview, ERC 2). As such, the European Parliament was sometimes used to remedy domestic problems and disputes.

However, the most consistent issue of national interest for ERC in the European Parliament has been achieving official status for the Catalan language in the EU. While not all ERC MEPs personally wanted to prioritize this objective, it has been a longstanding topic in Catalan EU politics and one of the few that has received significant media attention in Catalonia (Interview, ERC 2). ERC MEPs have pursued this issue in different ways, for example, by incorporating it into other agenda items or by speaking in Catalan in plenary, which would often lead to interruptions. Officially, however, it is permitted to speak a non-official European language, but this simply means that the speech will not be translated. To make a statement, Catalan MEPs would also sometimes speak another EU language in plenary, such as Italian, French or German (Interview, ERC 1, ERC 3). One ERC interviewee describes the lack of official EU status for Catalan as "discrimination," especially given that other languages with far fewer speakers have this status. Beyond representing specific territorial interests, ERC also pursues policy objectives related to improving the EU itself. These often relate to the committees to which they have been assigned, as well as broader efforts to create a more efficient EU apparatus. ERC MEPs, for example, describe

working to improve conditions for working people, protecting journalists in Mexico, and they also express support for abolishing unanimity voting and strengthening EU institutions overall (ERC 1, 3, 5).

Taking part in regular interest representation in the European Parliament was important in itself for ERC, in order to represent both the interests of the Catalan people and to build a better Europe. However, it was also seen as a way to work on their independence agenda simultaneously. For example, ERC engaged in the practice of linking topics. Debates on issues such as the immunity of MEPs, Pegasus spyware, the Spanish amnesty law, and the position of regions in the EU or language and cultural diversity in the EU helped situate the debate “around Catalonia,” even when it did not directly concern independence. These debates allowed ERC MEPs either to “take the debate where they want a bit” (ERC 5) or to enable more informal conversations about Catalonia and potentially independence at a later stage (ERC 4,5). Moreover, participation in policymaking to build a better EU was also considered to be in ERC’s interest, as one interviewee explained: “If we want to succeed in our fight for independence in Catalonia, we have to make a stronger European Union” (ERC 1).

And finally, regular participation in policymaking is also used as a channel to engage in “good Europeanism” and thereby build more sympathy for the independence quest (ERC 1, 2). This approach was especially used by ERC during the sixth parliamentary term (2004–2009) and the seventh parliamentary term (2009–2014), when independence-related contributions were in fact scarce to non-existent (ERC 1, 2). Interviewees see this practice as beneficial for several reasons. It can, for example, help build the stronger EU needed for independence and create good relationships with colleagues, thereby fostering a less conflictive atmosphere when difficult issues such as independence are ultimately brought up, one interviewee suggests (ERC 1). Moreover, another interviewee emphasizes that he viewed participation in normal policymaking as a way to counter perceptions that these separatists were simply extremists who belonged in the square in front of the European Parliament rather than inside it. He explains:

All these members of the Parliament who belong to small parties and belong to these minorities, like the ones who belong to the EFA group, they are perceived as something strange and at least—and sometimes even as something bad or something that shouldn't be there. So that's why we decided that the good approach was to show that we cared

about the European issues. We were not there only to wave the flag of our country (ERC 2).

Hence, by presenting themselves as good Europeans, this interviewee aimed to ultimately show their colleagues that they are just normal MEPs. As such, their strategy was to demonstrate that they were pro-independence, but not to foreground this too much and instead focus on contributing to European debates (ERC 2). Finally, it was also highlighted that good Europeanism is perceived to bring more credibility when they do talk about Catalonia (ERC 1). “You have to do something for Europe. You have to do something,” one ERC interviewee explains. “Uh, in my case, for European cooperation with the developing world, you have to do something for clean water in Africa if you want to be listened to when you demand independence for Catalonia... And not just for a practical results reason, but also for an ethical reason” (ERC 1). The use of good Europeanism is therefore key to contextualize the number of independence contributions that ERC makes in the European Parliament, precisely because it shows that it is possible to work towards normalizing self-determination in the EU while consciously not talking about independence. Hence, even by not explicitly addressing independence, it is possible to help move the independence agenda forward in the European Parliament.

In sum, ERC’s independence objectives in the European Parliament over time have at times been pragmatic, but they have also been combined with a more idealistic approach. ERC used the European Parliament pragmatically when it focused, during the sixth and seventh terms, on regular interest representation to build credibility and normalize the party’s image through good Europeanism. In a similar vein, during the eighth and ninth terms, the party also found it especially important to inform the EU audience about Catalonia’s history and how Spain was responding to their quest for independence. As such, their priority was to present a counter-narrative to that of Spain, so that the EU audience would better understand their demands and situation. In this sense, ERC focused on achieving incremental changes in the EU’s attitude towards them.

However, over time, ERC has also become more ambitious and has demanded that the EU facilitate the Catalan self-determination process in various ways. In the early 2000s, there were demands for EU acceptance of the right to self-determination, formal recognition of internal enlargement and greater political influence for constitutional regions within the EU. After a particularly clear break during the seventh parliamentary term, the ambition

for a more formal EU adoption of the right to self-determination returned, in addition to the demand for EU mediation in territorial conflicts, which was later solidified with the 2021 establishment of the self-determination caucus (ERC 1, ERC 4, ERC 5). As such, the party has pursued, to varying degrees over time, more systemic and formal change within the EU regarding self-determination, including independence. Hence, it is possible to conclude that ERC has, aside from seeking incremental changes in the EU's attitude towards them, also pursued more significant change within the EU in line with its independence agenda.

6.3 Using the Discursive Dimension of Europe

ERC has also used Europe discursively for its independence agenda. Here I discuss specifically how the party relies on the EU's governance structure, constructs the EU's role in their independence process and uses Europe in its independence legitimations.

6.3.1 EU Governance Structure: A More Federal EU

Over the years, ERC has made idealistic use of Europe in its discourse about the kind of EU in which it would like to be independent. In doing so, it drew in the early years on a "Europe of the Nations," but has overall pursued a more federal EU that is more sovereign and more principled in nature. ERC's pursuit of a "Europe of the Nations" was most evident between 1999 and 2009, but continued with lower intensity in the years thereafter. The "Europe of the Nations" vision essentially reflected a desire for an EU that respects both the unity and diversity of Europe. ERC supported EU unity through common ties and commitments, but opposed unity in the form of subjugation. Instead, unity should also respect diversity, as this would provide a place for stateless nations as well (Terricabras, Plenary 8, 20170301). As one ERC MEP argued: "I think we need a common European culture based, among other things, on the fact that we are diverse and inside this diversity, all the stateless nations, minorities and regions can also survive" (ERC 1).

The "Europe of the Nations" vision more concretely meant that ERC sought to build an EU that formally acknowledges its own plurality and, based on that, grants official language recognition as well as representation and participation rights, primarily to constitutional regions within the EU (Mayol I Raynal, Plenary 5, 20010704; 20020227; 20020612; Joan I Mari, Plenary 6, 20040721; 20050111; 20050309). According to Mayol I Raynal, MEP during

Term 5 (1999–2004), this should be more than simply a seat in the Committee of the Regions, but should instead align with their legislative competences at home (Mayol I Raynal, Plenary 5, 20010704; 20030924). Overall, he was disappointed with the position of (constitutional) regions in the EU, and the EU's continued state-centeredness led him to suggest that independence might be the only option left to realize Catalan self-determination (e.g., Mayol i Raynal, Plenary 5; 20020320; 20030904). For example, in March 2002, MEP Mayol I Raynal stated that at the Barcelona Summit of the Council, the Spanish President was received, but the Catalan President was not, leading him to draw the following conclusion:

Catalonia, one of the most Europhile nations in Europe, was treated with contempt. You, Mr President, were received by the Council. The same cannot be said of the President of Catalonia. That is a pity, but I believe that my compatriots will draw the obvious conclusions from that. In order to be recognized, we have to establish a Catalan republic by democratic means and join the Union on an equal footing (Mayol i Raynal, Plenary 5; 20020320).

While it was known that ERC had been pursuing Catalan independence long before this, the lack of progress on regional powers and position within the EU at the very least functioned as an additional rationale for independence in ERC's narrative (e.g., Mayol I Raynal, 5, 20011212).

His successor, during Term 6 (2004–2009), however, appeared not to continue these threats but instead tried, without much success, to secure full Catalan involvement in Europe (Joan I Mari, Plenary 6, 20050309). He was also more of a grand thinker and proposed an overhaul of the EU through a form of genuine European citizenship. He argued:

Working nation-states do not make a good basis for the construction of Europe. Europe should be built on the basis of national diversity comprising stateless nations, nation-states and constitutional regions, for the purpose of establishing a new European citizenship (Joan I Mari, Plenary 5, 20050111).

This kind of European citizenship seems to place stateless nations and constitutional regions on an equal footing with EU Member States, ensures recognition of the EU's diversity and creates room for equal representation. However, in the years that followed, proposals for the representation of

constitutional regions in the EU have become more ad hoc in nature (Junqueras, plenary 7, 201000122, 20111220; 2011221; Solé, Plenary 8, 20180207; Terricabras, Plenary 8, 20160120, 20180207).

Alongside its pursuit of independence and a “Europe of the Nations,” ERC has also been a strong proponent of a more federal EU. It should be noted, however, that ERC has not always been consistent in recent years about whether it envisions a federation or a confederation (Maddens et al., 2020, p. 135), yet most of the plenary, question and interview data indicate a preference for a federation. The pursuit of a European federation implies that ERC does not seek full sovereignty for a future Catalan state and instead favours a more powerful EU that is more than the sum of its parts, with stronger supranational institutions that can, at times, overrule Member States (Sole, Plenary 8; 20170216, ERC 1; ERC 3). More concretely, this includes, for example, the ability of the EU to speak with one voice in foreign policy, a stronger European Parliament, direct democratic legitimacy for the Commission and a larger EU budget with greater tax-raising powers at EU level (ERC 4; Riba I Giner, Plenary 9, 20220406). There is a perception within ERC that the EU is currently somewhat deadlocked, and that a stronger EU would be able to produce more effective policies and would have greater ambition and legitimacy (ERC 1, 2, 4; Terricabras, Plenary 8; 20141127).

ERC’s federal EU would also be more principled in nature. This was mainly pursued in the aftermath of the 2017 independence referendum (2017–2024) and largely stems from dissatisfaction with how the EU has treated the Catalan demand for self-determination, leading ERC to argue that the EU should in the future be more consistent in upholding fundamental, human, civil and political rights and democracy, acknowledge the right to self-determination and better protect the rule of law both outside and inside the EU (e.g., Terricabras, Plenary 8, 20180312; Solé, Plenary 9, 20210329; Riba I Giner, Plenary 9, 20220407). Regarding the latter, Catalan MEPs, for example, call for incidents of corruption and the Pegasus spyware scandal against the independence movement to be included in Commission rule of law reports (e.g., Riba I Giner, Plenary 9, 20230330). Finally, departing from their self-determination agenda, ERC also expresses the wish for a greener (e.g., ERC 1; Mayol I Raynal, Plenary 5, 20020116; Riba I Giner, Plenary 9, 20220406; Solé, Plenary 9, 20200916) and a more socially oriented EU (ERC 1; ERC 4; Solé; Plenary 8, 20180418); Terricabras, Plenary 8, 20160509).

ERC’s vision for the future of the EU has thus been informed both by its ideological preferences and by its independence agenda. As such, they have

striven, and still strive, for a federal EU that is green and social, but also a “Europe of Nations” and a more principled EU, seeing these as the most beneficial conditions for continuing their quest for self-determination and independence within the EU. To illustrate this, ERC MEP Solé sums up his wishes for the future of the EU in a speech in February 2017 and explains that an EU (con)federation is the best political form in which to achieve this desired more principled, diverse, social and green EU:

Sixty years after the Treaty of Rome, the Union still needs to become the place in the world where freedom, democracy and human rights are best guaranteed; where the right balance between economic progress, social justice and protection of the environment is best achieved; where a concept of open citizenship is best put into practice; where injustice inside and outside the EU is fought against with the strongest determination. But to achieve the lead in all of these domains, we need to overcome the eagerness of the Member States to block further integration. We need to get rid of populisms of all kinds, also those represented in this House, who always blame the others for their own failures. For the Union to have a future we need more integration, more solidarity, more confidence towards supranational institutions, and greater political ambition. And also the political courage needed to respect and embrace the democratic, legitimate and pro-European aspirations of European countries like Catalonia (Solé, Plenary 8, 20170216).

Overall, ERC’s wishes for a “Europe of the Nations” and a more federal EU are still a long way from being realized and therefore this can be considered a rather idealistic use of Europe in their independence strategy.

6.3.2 EU Role in the Independence Process – Guardian of European Principles and Law

ERC’s discourse on how the EU should be involved in the Catalan independence process is largely idealistic in nature. While the party often calls for EU commentary on different developments in the Catalan independence process, especially after 2014, the discourse goes beyond this by requesting different forms of EU action that would help facilitate the Catalan independence process. As such, ERC constructs the EU primarily as a guardian of EU principles and law.

Between 1999 and 2004, ERC does not say much about the EU's role in the Catalan independence process. However, what is said carries a rather idealistic tone. The ERC MEP, for example, demanded that the EU facilitate enlargement because the Catalans have been Europeans since Charlemagne (Mayol I Raynal, Plenary 5, 20030924). The same MEP furthermore constructs the EU as a legislator that could facilitate Catalan independence by establishing a European right to self-determination. More specifically, in December 2001, he asked:

Could we not include, in the future European constitution, a right that, in my view, is elementary, which is the right to self-determination. Do the Catalan people not have the right to self-determination, will they not have the right, one day, to their own State within the European Union? (Mayol i Raynal, Plenary 5, 20011212).

Though less explicit and using softer language, the ERC MEP during the sixth parliamentary term continued this effort behind the scenes by attempting to assemble a caucus on self-determination that would push the EU to recognize self-determination as a universal right within the EU (ERC 1).

During the seventh parliamentary,¹² ERC slightly expanded this narrative in which it portrays the EU idealistically as a guardian of European principles and law that calls for EU intervention in some form. As such, it continued to make demands around self-determination, calling for EU recognition of the right to self-determination for Kosovo and South Sudan, but also for the stateless nations of the EU, as this would be in line with international law and the European idea of democracy (Junqueras, Plenary 7, 20110202). In addition, ERC brought specific incidents to the plenary, such as violence committed against pro-independence supporters and organizations, as well as the existence of an illegal database of people linked to the Basque pro-independence movement that was used to disqualify people from office. This led ERC to claim that this was contrary to EU law, resulting in a demand for EU intervention to uphold EU law and European principles. (Junqueras, Questions 7, 20091105; 20110510).

When momentum for a Catalan independence process rose during the next parliamentary term (2014–2019), ERC organized the 2017 independence referendum and experienced its aftermath. This triggered more frequent and a

¹² Note that the sixth parliamentary term is not discussed because ERC did not make any formal independence contributions during that term.

wider variety of demands for EU involvement. ERC, first of all, often relied on the EU as a commentator. In other words, the party wanted the EU to be informed about, comment on and at times even evaluate national-level incidents and situations related to the Catalan independence process. ERC often asked whether the EU believed Spain was violating EU law when, for example, it received a low score on the EU Justice Scoreboard, when the Constitutional Court ordered that the independence referendum not be broadcast or when Spain sought to obstruct the organisation of the referendum by harassing workers printing ballots or threatening prosecution of the Catalan government and mayors (Terricabras, Plenary 8, 20161108; 20170911; 20170913). Most notably, after the October 2017 independence referendum took place, ERC, together with others, asked about police violence against voters and whether this was in line with Article 2 TEU (Terricabras et al., Plenary 8, 20171117). In the aftermath of the referendum, ERC continued asking similar questions, for example regarding the impartiality of the judge in the case of the 1 October referendum, whether the prohibition on wearing yellow by pro-independence supporters constituted a violation of freedom of expression, and whether the ban by the Barcelona Provincial Electoral Board on certain media expressions was in violation of EU law (Terricabras, Plenary 8, 20180108; 20180425; Terricabras & Solé, Plenary 8, 20190403).

However, ERC discourse did not just stop at asking for EU commentary. The party also sought action from the EU through the construction of the EU as a guardian of European principles and law. This is therefore the most dominant narrative about the role of the EU during the eighth parliamentary term. During the earlier years of the term, ERC appears critical of Spain but still quite optimistic about the EU taking on the role of protecting European principles (Terricabras, Plenary 8, 20161212; 20170607). There was at this stage a belief that the EU would help Catalonia exercise its right to self-determination because of its stance on democracy and human rights. After all, according to them, it was about the right to participate, the right to protest and the right to vote (ERC 1, 4). In relation to Spanish actions against the 2014 independence consultation that took place in Catalonia, one MEP says:

The Spanish Government had prohibited this citizen participation and has prompted the courts to sentence the President of Catalonia and two members of his Government. It is incomprehensible that a State of the European Union wants to prevent citizens from voting freely about their future. It seems to me that the time is coming for the European

democrats and the European Parliament to openly defend the democratic rights of the Catalans (Terricabras, Plenary 8, 20141124).

ERC, however, changes its tone after the 2017 independence referendum, after help did not materialize and the EU appeared to support Spain's efforts to prevent the referendum from taking place. There had not been any expectation that the EU would explicitly support the independence of Catalonia, but there had been an expectation that the EU would seek to uphold the right to self-determination as enshrined in several UN texts (ERC 4). Hence, the party now sounded less friendly and openly expressed disappointment with the EU, calling for more action rather than silence (Solé, Plenary 8, 20180117; 20180419; Terricabras, Plenary 8, 20180312). Soon after the referendum, when Spain imprisoned leaders and announced the suspension of Catalonia's autonomy, one ERC MEP stated in plenary that he felt "ashamed" of his European Parliament because it had not stood up for the Catalans (Terricabras, Plenary 8, 20171023). This critical tone continued and in 2018, on Human Rights Day, another ERC MEP made the following speech, calling on the EU to stand up for Catalan political prisoners:

Shall we talk about human rights today, which is International Human Rights Day? Are we talking about the nine Catalan political prisoners, four of them on hunger strike? The complicit silence of the institutions of the European Union with what is happening in Catalonia is a sign of weakness and hypocrisy. We true Europeanists do not look the other way. We true Europeanists defend fundamental rights always and everywhere. Also today, and also in the European Union (Solé, Plenary 8, 20181210).

In so doing, the ERC MEP makes it very clear that he believes it is the EU's obligation to defend fundamental rights. The fact that the EU is not doing so, according to this same MEP, simply means that the EU has "disassociated" itself from European values (Solé, Plenary 8, 20190415).

ERC also demanded that the EU act as a mediator in a secondary strand of argumentation. This idea of an EU mediation role was already present in the early 2000s but was not widely shared among members (ERC 1). This demand, however, reappeared during the eighth parliamentary term (Solé, Plenary 8, 20140930; 20171004; Terricabras, Plenary 8, 20170903; 20171129). An interviewee also explained that they did not see mediation as an unrealistic request, as the Commission has already mediated in other types

of domestic conflicts, such as the mediation by Mr Reynders, Commissioner for Justice, between the two largest political parties in Spain over the Council of Judicial Power after a long deadlock (ERC 4). Hence, the party occasionally formally called for mediation in the European Parliament. For example, in April 2018 an ERC MEP called for help in finding a solution for Catalonia and Spain, stating that they want the EU to:

...intervene and help find a political and democratic solution to complex conflicts that take place within the Union and that neither judges nor repression are going to solve. Mr Juncker, Mr Tusk, Mr Tajani: be brave, lead; Show us that you are at the forefront of a political Europe and help find a political solution through dialogue to the conflict between Catalonia and Spain (Solé, 20180418).

When it comes to the EU as a facilitator of enlargement, ERC at this point does not make an active case for internal enlargement, but rather expresses the wish that the EU would support the outcome of an independence referendum (Terricabras, Plenary 8, 20150907; 20151105).

During the ninth term, the most prevalent narratives were those of the EU as a commentator and the EU as a guardian of European principles and law. ERC, for example, asked whether the Commission was aware of certain Spanish actions, such as the spying by the Spanish state on political opponents, or the attempts by the Teachers Forum of international journals not to publish Catalan researchers' work (Riba I Giner, Plenary 9, 20200817; Solé & Riba I Giner, Plenary 9, 20220830). ERC also sometimes asked the Commission to explain itself, such as when a Europol report characterized the Catalan and Basque independence movements as the most active and violent in Spain (Riba I Giner, Plenary 9, 20230703). However, ERC again went beyond demanding positions and comments from the EU, and instead also called for action to protect European principles. One of the most notable issues on which ERC demanded EU action was the Pegasus espionage scandal involving figures linked to the independence movement, including both ERC MEPs. As these revelations came to light, the party devoted several speeches to the topic and demanded that the EU take action against this violation of EU principles, for example through the suspension of surveillance technology and the establishment of a regulatory framework that would prevent similar abuses in the future (Riba I Giner, Plenary 9, 20220504; 20221115; Riba I Giner, Questions 9, 20200827; Solé, Plenary 9, 20220504; Riba i Giner & Solé,

Plenary 9, 20221210). One ERC MEP said the following on the topic in a plenary debate in May 2022:

Mr President, I was spied on by Pegasus as an MEP. Therefore, all of you in this room are also collateral victims of this espionage. My political rights, your political rights, have been violated... In the case of Spain, when there were sixty-five pro-independence supporters spied on, the response of the Executive was nil. They even went so far as to insinuate that we deserved to be spied on because, of course, we are pro-independence. We won't say the same. No one should suffer massive and illegal espionage. It is a matter of democratic principles... The biggest opposition, the biggest resistance to authoritarian dynamics in Spain is the independence movement. That is why we are imprisoned, we are ruined financially, and now we are spied on. I would like to appeal to the European institutions: stand by those who fight for democracy, transparency and fundamental rights, not only in Poland Hungary, but throughout Spain (Riba i Giner, Plenary 9, 20220504).

In this speech the ERC MEP claims that it was the Spanish government that spied on pro-independence figures, including herself. She argues that this espionage constitutes authoritarian behaviour by Spain and that democracy, transparency and fundamental rights have been violated. She therefore calls on the EU to address the violation of these principles. As such, this is one example of how ERC has used its presence in the European Parliament to hold Spain to account for actions that have obstructed the Catalan independence process. However, ERC has also held the EU to account regarding its perceived lack of intervention. Therefore, the party most notably developed a “double standards” narrative during the eighth and ninth parliamentary terms, critically pointing out that the EU seems to stand up to protect fundamental rights in Poland and Hungary but not in Spain. An example of this can also be found in the above quote, where the ERC MEP points out that Spain has not received the same critical attention as Poland and Hungary (e.g., Solé, Plenary 8, 20171113; 20180205, 20181211; Terricabras, Plenary 8, 20170313; 20171024; Solé, Plenary 9, 20201126; 20210429; 20210706; Riba i Giner, Plenary 9, 20201019; 20220504; 20230614).

And finally, during the ninth term, the idea of a legislating role for the EU returned. With this goal in mind, one ERC MEP tried to have the right to self-determination included as a universal right in the annual reports for 2018 and 2019 on the situation of fundamental rights in the European Union (Riba I

Giner, Plenary 9, 20201124). ERC went further than this, and as part of the self-determination caucus, initiated a Clarity Act that would clarify and regulate how territorial conflicts should be handled at EU level based on the right to self-determination and with the support of a mediating role for the EU (ERC 4, ERC 5). An ERC interviewee explained that this initiative was motivated by dissatisfaction with the aftermath of the Catalan independence referendum in 2017, as well as the existence of other unresolved self-determination conflicts in the EU (ERC 5, EFA, 2021). In other words, during the ninth term, ERC made an active case that self-determination conflicts cannot be treated as purely internal matters, but should instead be understood as Europe-wide issues when they touch on European values.

In sum, ERC's discourse on the role of the EU in its independence process has been idealistic in nature. Whereas the EU has regarded the Catalan territorial conflict as an internal matter, ERC has increasingly made the case that it should be considered a European matter. Between 1999 and 2011, ERC did not comment extensively on an EU role in the Catalan independence process, apart from the wish that the EU would formally commit to the right of self-determination. However, from 2014 onwards and in the context of a more active domestic independence process, ERC has invited the EU to comment on domestic developments, while mainly assigning it the role of guardian of European principles and law. This did not mean that ERC expected clear support for Catalan independence, but rather that the EU would assist in making an independence referendum possible. More concretely, this meant that the party expected the EU to seek to prevent, or at least object to, the obstruction of an independence referendum, because such a referendum, they strongly believed, was in line with European principles such as the right to vote and the right to participate. When it became clear that the EU would not do this, ERC's tone became more critical towards the EU, but the party continued to call for the EU to act as a guardian of European principles and law. Complementary to this, ERC also called for the EU to act as a mediator of the Catalan conflict and, during the ninth term, the party even resumed its calls for the EU to act as a legislator by means of a Clarity Act. This shows that ERC's ambitions extend beyond Catalonia itself, and that it seeks general EU-level rules on territorial conflicts and self-determination.

6.3.3 EU in Independence Legitimizations – An Idealistic Usage of European Democracy

ERC predominantly uses Europe in an idealistic way when legitimating independence, by building a largely principled case for independence (see Annex 4). Much of ERC's legitimating discourse, however, is only linked to Europe in that it is performed at the European level, and a significantly smaller number of contributions contain legitimations that are explicitly linked to Europe. In the earlier terms, the low number of legitimations corresponds to the low number of independence contributions, which only really pick up between 2014 and 2024. In this period, ERC is working towards the Catalan independence referendum and dealing with its aftermath; hence much of its independence discourse focuses more on the independence process rather than legitimating it. Nevertheless, there are a few patterns that can be observed regarding how ERC has legitimated Catalan independence and a referendum and how it has used Europe in doing so.

During the fifth parliamentary term, the ERC MEP uses Europe both in a principled and in a more instrumental way. In so doing, he relied on a wide variety of arguments. He relied on Europe in a principled way by, for example, comparing Catalonia both to Slovenia and to other stateless nations in Europe, claiming that Catalonia, similar to these other nations, had a right to independence (Mayol I Raynal, Plenary 5, 20011212; 20010116). He also referred to European Parliament resolutions that already acknowledged the right to self-determination, claiming: "Más Europa" also means enabling all nations, if they wish, to become full members of the Union; this is contained in several European Parliament resolutions acknowledging the right to self-determination" (Mayol i Raynal, Plenary 5, 20020116). In addition, he argued that the right to self-determination should be a shared European principle and that Catalonia should be able to become an independent Member State in the EU because the Catalans are Europeans (Mayol i Raynal, Plenary 5, 20011212; 20030924). In addition, the ERC MEP also made a more instrumental use of Europe by emphasizing that Catalonia could only fully benefit from EU membership once it was a state and by reacting to negotiations on the European Constitution by arguing that Catalonia would have to be a state in order to fully and equally contribute to Europe (Mayol I Raynal, Plenary 5, 20020320; 20030904a; 20030904b).

During the consecutive terms between 2004 and 2014, ERC formally makes very few independence contributions and correspondingly does not

spend much time legitimating independence. The interview data, however, reveals that during the sixth term, the normality of border changes, limited direct access to the EU and the need to have a voice in the EU were motivations for the pursuit of independence in the EU (ERC 1). During term seven, the few independence legitimations made were similarly a mix of principled, remedial and better-future instrumental arguments. Between 2014 and 2019, independence contributions pick up again and during this period ERC's case for Catalan independence is predominantly principled. In so doing, the most common legitimation focuses on democratic choice and the harnessing of European democracy ("European Democracy" Argument). Aside from this, ERC also uses Europe by constructing an idea of what is normal and just in Europe (the "normal" argument) and by arguing that their case for an independence referendum is legal, also in the eyes of European law (the "EU law" argument).

To start, much of ERC's legitimating discourse for Catalan independence in the European Parliament is based on the idea of democratic choice. This essentially means that ERC sees the right to self-determination as the solution to the Catalan territorial conflict and that a democratic majority in both the Catalan government and the Catalan nation would be necessary to legitimate independence (ERC 4, 5). In their democratic-choice legitimating narrative, ERC emphasizes the will of the Catalan people and the Catalan Parliament, which are then also used to justify the actions of the public officials involved in the independence process. For example, MEPs highlighted large demonstrations in favour of self-determination and independence and election results indicating that a majority of Catalans support independence because they voted for pro-independence parties (Terricabras, Plenary 8, 20141124, 20151005, 20160912, 20170913, Solé, Plenary 8, 20171004).

It is, however, notable that ERC mostly seeks to legitimate an independence referendum rather than Catalan independence as a whole in the European Parliament, claiming that there is widespread public support for it (e.g., Terricabras, Plenary 8, 20160912; Solé, Plenary 8, 20170703). ERC also expresses that, for them, democracy includes a right to a referendum, as it is a tool for the democratic expression of the will of the people (Solé, Plenary 8, 20170505; 20171004; 20171023). An ERC MEP reminded the European Parliament in June 2017 how tightly interwoven democracy and referenda are for them. He said:

We will make our choice, we will exercise our democratic right even if the Spanish state does not want us to, because, in a democracy, setting out ballot boxes and letting people vote can never be illegal. For a democracy to prevent a legitimate and widely demanded vote would be a dour, perverse undertaking that no democracy should accept. The people of Catalonia will vote because it is our right (Solé, Plenary 8, 20170612).

This shows that, according to this MEP, democracy and referenda are so closely linked that there are virtually no conditions under which a referendum could be considered illegitimate in a democracy, as a referendum “can never be illegal.” As such, in this view, there always appears to be a right to a referendum in a democracy.

Alongside the association of referenda with democracy, ERC also actively associates Europe and the EU with democracy. In particular, between 2014 and 2019, ERC’s MEPs construct the idea that democracy is inherent to the identity of the EU and that Catalonia and the EU share an understanding of democracy. As such, this would lend more credibility to ERC’s understanding of democracy and their independence process (the “European democracy” argument). For example, one ERC MEP references that the EU has always resolved conflicts based on dialogue and democracy, that it has always respected human rights and that there have been many border changes in Europe using democratic means, thereby establishing that Europe and the EU have a history of democratic practices when it comes to territorial conflicts. The same MEP continues this line of argument throughout 2015, 2016 and 2017, also claiming European support for other independence referenda in Scotland and Quebec (Terricabras, Plenary 8, 20140930; 20151005; 20160912; 20170913).

ERC also argued that the Catalan independence conflict was not an internal matter but, in fact, a problem of European democracy, and drew a clear contrast between Spain, whose actions were in conflict with European values and in particular democracy, and Catalonia, which was acting in line with European democracy (Terricabras, Plenary 8, 20161212; Solé, Plenary 8, 20170703; Solé, Plenary 8, 20170612). By the time Catalan MEPs were actively mentioning their plans to hold an independence referendum in 2017, one ERC MEP explained that they would proceed with or without consent from the Spanish state because: “We have a democratic mandate that we do

not intend to renounce and we will do so legally, legitimately, democratically and peacefully, as things are done in Europe” (Solé, Plenary 8, 20170201).

However, this optimistic and confident European democracy discourse is strongly challenged when, after the independence referendum in October 2017, the EU does not defend the democratic rights of the Catalans. ERC MEPs express strong disappointment with how the EU has upheld its principle of democracy, and it becomes clear that the Catalans had constructed a different understanding of European democracy for themselves than others in the EU. European democracy did not guarantee the right to a self-determination referendum after all. In the following years, however, ERC does not shift its European democracy discourse. In fact, it doubles down. Despite feeling let down by the EU and adopting a more critical and confrontational attitude towards it regarding their right to self-determination, the party still maintains that European values stand against repression and should be part of the solution (Solé, Plenary 8, 20180912). ERC, however, clearly expresses the wish for a different EU (Solé, Plenary 8, 20171211). In fact, it argues that the EU has abandoned its values and that the Catalans will have to restore these values. In April 2019, an ERC MEP tells the European Parliament:

Madam President, one of the topics of this European legislature, which we are ending this week, has been Catalonia. Many of you will have discovered a country that wants to decide its future by voting, that wants to determine itself; they will also have seen how the police have attacked voters, how they have jailed our legitimate representatives for having organized a referendum and how they are now being tried as if they were criminals. But while you were discovering this, we Catalans were discovering something else: we were discovering the most hypocritical face of Europe. While the majority was silent, while Juncker received prizes in Spain and while Timmermans saw no problem with democracy and fundamental rights in Spain, our disenchantment with Europe multiplied. But if what they want is for the Catalan independence movement to disassociate itself from Europe, I tell them that they will not succeed, that we are not going to do them this favour. We are not the ones who have disassociated ourselves from the project of European values: it is you. So we will return, and with more force, to recover the Europe of the rights and freedoms that should never have been abandoned (Solé, Plenary 8, 20190415).

As such, ERC was telling the European Parliament that it is not the Catalans who were wrong, but the European leaders and institutions that have lost their way. Once, European values had a clearer meaning and were more consistently upheld, but it is the EU that now no longer fully understands European values and European democracy.

ERC also relied on the “normal” argument to legitimate Catalan independence in the European Parliament. As such, the party linked Europe to the legitimacy of Catalan independence by consistently referring to other nations in Europe that once were, or are, in a similar position to the Catalans. By highlighting that comparable European nations either have states within the EU or are allowed self-determination, ERC helps construct the idea that their demands for independence are normal and not something to be feared. In fact, from this European perspective, it is the Catalans who are the odd ones out by not having a state, and they are presented as simply seeking to be treated as normal and to have what similar European nations have. Hence, if these nations in Europe have states, then it would only be fair for the Catalans to also have a state. As such, the sovereignty of small European nations functions as a benchmark and therefore as a way of legitimizing Catalan independence through a European lens.

ERC primarily compares Catalonia with small nation states in the EU and/or those that have recently become independent and are EU Member States, such as Slovenia (Mayol I Raynal, Plenary 5, 20011212; Solé, Plenary 9, 20210706). In the interviews, ERC MEPs also make comparisons and references to the new states that emerged in the last 30 years from the former Soviet Union (ERC 1, ERC 3, ERC 4). They thereby construct a historical argument that independence is normal in Europe because there is a history of border changes in Europe and the Catalan case would simply be another one. Drawing on Europe’s past, an ERC MEP explains:

But in, in European lens or lenses, um, our case should be seen as a case of democratic rights. Of a nation, as many other nations in the past in Europe, achieved their own independence. We are a bit in delay, let's say, in historical terms, but more or less, it's also the right of every nation to decide, no? On their own political status. And that this happens in a European Union where there are not anymore, there are no borders anymore, that shouldn't scare anyone (ERC 4).

This quote therefore situates Catalan independence in Europe in the period when many European nations gained their independence. The Catalan wishes are therefore portrayed as normal and only fair. The only difference is that Catalonia is presented as being somewhat delayed in this process.

ERC also compares itself to Scotland, as this case is seen as able to set a precedent and normalize independence processes in the EU (ERC 2). An ERC MEP, for example, claimed that after the pro-independence win in the Catalan elections in 2015 (receiving 72 out of 135 seats), they even had a stronger democratic mandate for a referendum than Scotland and Quebec. Using these cases as benchmarks, the ERC MEP was essentially saying: “If they get an independence referendum, then so should we” (Terricabras, Plenary 8, 20151005). This continues ahead of the October 2017 independence referendum, when ERC again emphasizes that the Catalans simply want a referendum “like the Scottish one” (Terricabras, Plenary 8, 20170913).

References to other stateless nations are present but are somewhat more scarce when it comes to self-determination and independence (Mayol I Raynal, Plenary 5, 20020116; Solé, Plenary 9, 20210706). This reflects the general shift in attitude that has evolved since the fifth parliamentary term (1999–2004), where strategies at the European level have become more individualized rather than collective. As an ERC interviewee explained, each stateless nation also comes with its own liabilities and the potential downside of losing the sympathy of MEPs from that Member State, which may not be beneficial for the party’s own cause. As such, the link is made mainly with small European nation states and Scotland, whereas others are largely omitted.

In addition to legitimating narratives on democracy and normality, ERC also suggested that the 2017 independence referendum was legitimate because it would be legal and in line with EU law. More specifically, an ERC MEP acknowledged that the Spanish Government had interpreted the Spanish Constitution in such a way that the referendum was not allowed, but then argued that 600 experts had told the Catalans otherwise (Terricabras, Plenary 8, 20171024; 20170913). ERC’s legal argument is also grounded in the European Charter of Fundamental Rights, which is considered EU law. The party’s MEPs put forward the idea that, according to the Charter, the Spanish judiciary should not be allowed to violate the fundamental democratic rights of the Catalans or their right to organize an independence referendum. Instead, they argued that the Catalans have simply been displaying democratic political behaviour and pursuing goals that, according to fundamental rights,

should not be treated as criminal offenses (Terricabras, Plenary 8, 20150209; Solé, Plenary 8, 20180416; 20180419).

Finally, ERC also made a small instrumental case for Catalan independence between 2014 and 2019 by highlighting how the EU would be better off if Catalonia became an independent EU member state. ERC sketches an image of Catalonia as a good member state that wants to help improve the EU, in particular by building a more just EU. In the case of ERC, this would involve fighting to protect the justice and freedom of citizens (Terricabras, Plenary 8, 20160509). Hence, ERC outlines its vision for an independent Catalonia in the EU as follows:

From Catalonia we want to contribute directly as a new Member State to forging and strengthening this common area of freedom, progress, solidarity and justice that we want the European Union to be. We will exercise democracy: we will vote, we will decide and we will stay in the European Union to improve it. (Solé, Plenary 8, 20170201).

However, the EU would not only benefit from the contributions of an independent Catalonia. It would also be able to realize more fully what it seeks to stand for, namely a legitimate, democratic union based on diversity, freedom and efficiency, according to ERC (Junqueras, Plenary 7, 20110202; Terricabras, Plenary 8, 20170302).

During the ninth parliamentary term (2019–2024), ERC does not spend as much time legitimating Catalan independence as in the previous term, and when it does, it seldom uses Europe to do so. Nevertheless, in the legitimating discourse that is present, democracy remains important. Democratic means are still emphasized as a legitimate way to change borders, and public support for Catalan independence is highlighted (Solé, Plenary 9, 20210623; Riba I Giner, 20230927). However, the interviews reveal that ERC had learned the lesson that a larger, consistent majority of pro-independence voters was needed and that only then could opponents no longer deny Catalans the right to self-determination (ERC 2, 5). ERC no longer invokes European democracy as a legitimation for an independence referendum, but it still considers a democratic and negotiated solution to the conflict the only viable type of solution within the EU (Solé, Plenary 9, 20210915). Instead, the party adopted a more legalistic approach to establish that the right to self-determination is part of European democracy through the European Clarity

Act, even though this did not lead to much success (Solé, Plenary 9, 20220503).

In sum, while much of ERC's legitimating discourse in the European Parliament does not explicitly rely on Europe, when it does, it is done in a mostly idealistic manner, given its distance from the political status quo in the EU. ERC uses Europe in its legitimations between 1999 and 2004 and 2009 and 2011, but most extensively between 2014 and 2019, when it was more actively pursuing Catalan independence domestically. ERC predominantly uses Europe in a principled manner, as its discourse suggests that the EU and Europe have principles and standards that are in line with a right to self-determination for Catalonia. This is achieved through the careful construction of the EU and its Member States. Most importantly, the EU is portrayed as having a shared understanding of democracy with ERC through references to previous democratic practices in the EU, such as the use of and respect for referenda as well as a European history of democratic border changes. Furthermore, Europe is constructed as a place where independence is the norm for small nations, and allowing Catalan independence would simply give Catalonia what other similar nations already have. Finally, the EU is also portrayed as a legal entity where the right to self-determination can be considered a fundamental right of EU citizens that can be derived from the European Charter of Fundamental Rights, signed by many EU Member States. As such, Europe is treated as a malleable concept that can be used in many different ways to fit party goals (e.g., Giordano & Roller, 2002; Dardanelli, 2003; Laible, 2008; Bourne, 2014; van der Zwet, 2015; Anderson & Keil, 2016).

6.4 Conclusion: ERC's Idealistic Usage of Europe in the European Parliament

In this chapter, I explored how ERC has used Europe when enacting its independence agenda in the European Parliament. As Table 10 shows, I find that ERC's use of Europe is predominantly idealistic, with some pragmatic elements, and that it has had the ambition not only to normalize the image of the party and Catalonia but also to achieve a (formal) European right to self-determination for stateless nations. It is, however, necessary to point out that ERC has not displayed this idealism with equal intensity over time. Between 1999 and 2015, the frequency with which independence was addressed in the European Parliament was relatively low, and much of the independence work

occurred through non-discursive practices such as good Europeanism. In particular, during the seventh term (2009–2011), ERC’s independence agenda in the European Parliament was deprioritized in favour of normalizing the party’s image. Nevertheless, even during this time, the party’s independence discourse, where present, was often still idealistic in nature. When attention to independence increased during the eighth parliamentary term (2014–2019), this continued to go beyond pragmatic uses of Europe. Hence, beyond the notion that Catalan independence should be decided domestically, ERC’s independence work in the European Parliament shows that Europe plays a significant role in the Catalan independence strategy, one that goes beyond what the current status quo in the EU provides for.

Table 10 ERC’s Usage of Europe in their independence strategy in the European Parliament

Term	Independence Agenda Aim in the EP	EU Governance Structure	EU Role	Legitimatio ns
5 1999– 2004	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Legislative Impact: Formalization of the Right to SD 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “Europe of the Nations” United States of Europe 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Facilitator of Enlargement Legislator 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Principled
				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Instrumental Better Future
6 2004– 2009	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Minor Attitude Change: Building Credibility 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “Europe of the Nations”¹³ United States of Europe 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Guardian of European Principles and Law 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Principled¹³
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Major EU Attitude Change: Defend Fundamental Rights and Rule of Law Legislative Impact: Formalization of the Right to SD 			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Instrumental Remedial Instrumental Better Future
7 2009– 2011	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Minor Attitude Change: Normalize Party Image 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “Europe of the Nations” United States of Europe 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Guardian of European Principles and Law 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Principled
				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Instrumental Better Future Instrumental Remedial

¹³ The findings on the discursive use of Europe (e.g., EU governance structure, EU role in the independence process, and Europe in independence legitimations) are based on data other than the “independence contributions,” since the MEP during term six did not make any. The thesis therefore draws on interviews and other contributions that the MEP made in the European Parliament.

8 2014– 2019	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Minor Attitude Change: Understanding/Normalization of Catalonia • Domestic Competition: Show Spain International Backing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Europe of the Nations” • United States of Europe 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Commentator 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mostly Principled
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Major EU Attitude Change: Defend Fundamental Rights and Rule of Law • Legislative Impact: Formalization of the Right to SD 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Guardian of European Principles and Law • Mediator 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some Instrumental Better Future
9 2019– 2024	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Minor Attitude Change: Understanding/Normalization of Catalonia • Domestic Competition: Show Spain International Backing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Europe of the Nations” • United States of Europe 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Commentator 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Principled
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Major EU Attitude Change: Defend Fundamental Rights and Rule of Law • Legislative Impact: Formalization of the Right to SD 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Guardian of European Principles and Law • Mediator • Legislator 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instrumental Remedial

Note: Overview of the findings on how the ERC has used Europe in its independence strategy in the European Parliament over time. The boxes coloured in dark blue indicate **idealistic usage**, while the boxes coloured in light grey indicate **pragmatic usage**.

More specifically, ERC’s independence strategy in the European Parliament relies on Europe through its pursuit of a European right to self-determination. Achieving this would help the party exert more domestic pressure in favour of an independence referendum and perhaps even overcome the domestic deadlock altogether. However, the party has been pursuing this since the 1990s and has not yet been successful (Esquerra Republicana, n.d.). At the moment, the majorities are simply not there (ERC 5). Moreover, Europe is important in ERC’s vision of independence in that the party pursues Catalan independence within a federal EU with which it shares powers. One interviewee even claimed that this more supranational and effective EU is needed for Catalonia and for Catalonia to be able to become independent (ERC 1). In other words, a stronger EU might have the power to commit to a European right to self-determination and be willing to ensure, through intervention, that Member States adhere to this. This is another way in which ERC’s independence strategy relies on Europe: the EU is expected to act as a guardian of European principles and law, as well as a mediator and a legislator on territorial issues.

Here, ERC again counts on active EU intervention to facilitate and support the Catalan independence process. The absence of such intervention made the Catalan independence process considerably more difficult. Finally, ERC, especially between 2014 and 2019, relied on the notion of European democracy, understood to include the right to self-determination for stateless nations, as part of its broader principled case to legitimate independence.

Overall, ERC's independence strategy in the European Parliament has made predominantly idealistic use of Europe. Europe therefore plays an important role in its independence strategy, but this has also made ERC's independence agenda disproportionately dependent on it. This was especially problematic when it became clear around the 2017 independence referendum that ERC could not rely on the EU in the way it had expected.

7. CiU, PDeCAT and Junts: An Idealist Strategy in the European Parliament for the Normalization of Self-Determination

This chapter discusses how *Convergència i Unió* (CiU), *Partit Demòcrata Europeu Català* (PDeCAT) and *Junts per Catalunya* (Junts) have used Europe when pursuing their independence agenda in the European Parliament. In so doing, I first introduce the three parties and their relationship to each other in a contextual section. This is then followed by the empirical analysis, which covers how Europe is used in the parties' objectives in the European Parliament and in their discourses on EU governance, the independence process and independence legitimations expressed in the European Parliament between 1999 and 2024. At the end of the chapter, I conclude that the parties have, since 2012, largely used Europe in an idealistic manner in their independence strategies in the European Parliament.

7.1 About CiU, PDeCAT and Junts

CiU was founded in 1978 and consisted of an alliance between the moderate *Convergència Democràtica de Catalunya* (CDC) and the Christian democratic *Unió Democràtica de Catalunya* (UDC). CiU and its successors proved to be electorally successful and spent much time in Catalan government. Under the leadership of Jordi Pujol, the party performed well in the first Catalan elections in 1980 as well as in subsequent elections, making it the governing party in Catalonia between 1980 and 2003, with absolute majorities between 1984 and 1995 (Barrio & Barbera, 2011, pp. 75–81). After being out of office since 2003, CiU returned to Catalan government in 2010, with Artur Mas as president of Catalonia.

CiU started out as an autonomist party, pursuing autonomy for Catalonia within a Spanish (con)federation. This idea has a long history, one interviewee explains, pointing out that from the 12th century onwards until 1714, Catalonia formed part of a confederative arrangement. The king was shared,

but the Catalans had their own laws, their own political organization and, at certain points, even their own Constitutional Court to keep the monarchy in check (CiU 3). One way CiU pursued its autonomist agenda was by at times offering support to national-level governments in exchange for enhanced autonomy. For example, between 1996 and 2000, CiU supported the Partido Popular's minority government in exchange for greater decision-making autonomy, an increase in the share of tax revenues for autonomous communities, the creation of a Catalan regional police force and the abolition of mandatory military service. These agreements with the PP did, however, also constrain CiU, as they were conditional on the party refraining from reforming Catalonia's Statute of Autonomy and the funding arrangements at the time, limiting its ability to advance Catalan self-government. Moreover, from the mid-1980s the Spanish state sought to harmonize decentralization by extending concessions granted to Catalonia to other autonomous communities as well, which frustrated the party's efforts to clearly differentiate Catalonia (Barrio & Barbera, 2011, pp. 90–95, Elias, 2015, p. 88–93).

CiU, over time, moved from being an autonomist party to a pro-independence party. Already in 2008, CDC became more open to the idea of pursuing independence. At its fifteenth party congress that same year, the party even voted that it wanted to have “a state of our own” and that it wanted Catalonia to be a “free and sovereign nation in the Europe of the 21st century” (Bremberg & Gillespie, 2022, p. 53). According to one interviewee, this was the result of shifting internal majorities within the party. Compared to earlier periods, younger generations in the party began to hold more strongly pro-independence positions and, at internal party conferences, resolutions were adopted that contained discourse concluding it had been “enough” and that talking to Spain was “worthless.” This eventually led to Artur Mas replacing his own MEP because the MEP would not vote in favour of a potential independence referendum at the end of 2008 (CiU 1). For the time being, however, CiU continued to refrain from officially pursuing a pro-independence agenda. In the meantime, momentum for independence grew when the Spanish Constitutional Court significantly watered down Catalonia's newly negotiated Statute of Autonomy in July 2010. Yet CiU still campaigned on an agenda of greater fiscal autonomy for Catalonia rather than independence in the 2010 Catalan election campaign. This choice was motivated by the party's reputation for economic management and the reluctance of its coalition partner UDC to support independence. Hence, it was only after the Partido Popular refused to negotiate further fiscal autonomy

that CiU's official position shifted to supporting a referendum on Catalonia's constitutional future in 2012 (Elias, 2015, pp. 89–90; Bremberg & Gillespie, 2022, p. 27).

CiU's new push for independence manifested in two calls for snap elections in 2012 and 2015, which were intended to function as referendum proxies, as well as a non-binding consultation on the political future of Catalonia in 2014. In the meantime, in June 2015, CiU split, as UDC could not commit to independence and PDeCAT was established as the successor party to CDC (Sala, 2025; Noguer, 2015). Based on a majority of seats, but not a majority of votes, the Junts pel Sí coalition, including ERC and the newly formed PDeCAT, formed the first pro-independence majority government in the history of modern Catalan politics in 2015 under the leadership of Carles Puigdemont (Bremberg & Gillespie, 2022, p. 27). After failed negotiations with Spain, this government resolved to hold a unilateral independence referendum on 1 October 2017. Spain did not tolerate this and responded with a large-scale police operation intended to prevent voting, the suspension of elements of Catalan self-government and legal action against members of the Catalan government. Carles Puigdemont, former president of the Government of Catalonia, and others went into exile (Serra, 2024, p.5, Bremberg & Gillespie, 2022, pp. 59–60).

Post-referendum, PDeCAT and ERC again formed a pro-independence Catalan government under the leadership of Quim Torra, despite Ciutadans becoming the largest single party. In July 2020, Carles Puigdemont split from PDeCAT and founded Junts per Catalunya (Junts), taking many PDeCAT members with him. This led to PDeCAT losing relevance, effectively being replaced. Junts participated in the Catalan government between 2021 and 2022 but later left, leaving an ERC minority government. Since 2024, Junts has not been part of the Catalan government.

Aside from regional and national politics, CiU, PDeCAT and Junts have also been active at the European level. CiU has a strong history of supporting European integration. Hence, when Spain joined the EU in 1986, the party was eager to take part in European decision-making and to enhance the role of constitutional regions in the EU. The party has also maintained a continuous presence in the European Parliament, ranging between one and three MEPs (see Table 11). Over the years, CiU/Junts has competed in European elections both alone and as part of coalitions. For example, the party participated in the 2004 European elections within Galeusca, in 2009 and 2014 within Coalición por Europa and in 2019 within the Junts per Catalunya

coalition. Since CiU was an alliance, its constituent parties also followed different European alignments: UDC, with its Christian democratic ideology, sat with the European People’s Party (EPP), while CDC aligned with ALDE and its predecessors, seeking liberal parties as its main allies.

Table 11: Seats and Party Affiliation of CiU/Junts in the European Parliament

Parliamentary Term	# MEPs	European Party Group
1984–1989	3	PPE – Group of the European People’s Party (1)
		L – Liberal and Democratic Group (2)
1989–1994	2	PPE – Group of the European People’s Party (1)
		LDR – Liberal and Democratic Reformist Group (1)
1994–1999	3	PPE – Group of the European People’s Party (1)
		ELDR – Group of the European Liberal, Democrat and Reform Party (2)
1999–2004	2	PPE – Group of the European People’s Party (1)
		ELDR – Group of the European Liberal, Democrat and Reform Party (1)
2004–2009	1	ALDE – Group of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (1)
2009–2014	2	EPP – Group of the European People’s Party (1)
		ALDE – Group of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (1)
2014–2019	1	ALDE – Group of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (1)
2019–2024	3	NI – Non Attached

Data: European Parliament (n.d.).

Over time, CiU/Junts have held seats on a wide variety of committees in the European Parliament and have at times also obtained more significant positions within the institution. The two most frequent committees for the party have been AFCO (1989–2009) and ECON (1989–2004 and 2009–2024).¹⁴ AFCO deals with constitutional affairs and would be the most logical

¹⁴ Which committee positions MEPs obtain is constrained by the number of seats available to each political group based on its size, but it also largely depends on personal expertise or interests, as well as the extent to which the role is publicly visible or communicable (CiU 1).

forum for raising questions surrounding treaty change, sovereignty and enlargement, but the party has not been able to use its seat for independence-related purposes since it was only represented on the committee before the party turned pro-independence. Over time, CiU MEPs have also held a few more significant positions, such as Vice-President of the Delegation of the European Parliament to the Joint Parliamentary Assembly of the ACP–EU Agreement (2002–2004) and Vice-Chair of the AFCO Committee (2004 and 2007). The latter MEP, however, was forced to leave the position due to a perceived lack of space to engage in debates with more experienced members (Interview, CiU 1). Thereafter, this MEP became Vice-Chair of the International Trade Committee (2007–2009), and later another MEP served as coordinator for ALDE in the ECON Committee (2017–2019), a position that was disputed by Ciudadanos but ultimately confirmed by ALDE on the basis of the MEP’s economic expertise. This was an important position for the party, as it was held by its only MEP at the time (CiU 2).

In 2018, the party, then called PDeCAT, was expelled from ALDE on the grounds of corruption allegations linked to the former CDC (Contiguglia, 2018). However, the party itself reportedly interpreted this decision as political pressure from another Spanish party that had joined the group in 2016, Ciudadanos, and as being linked to PDeCAT’s pro-independence position (CatalanNews, 2018). In the following term, Junts, formerly PDeCAT, chose to remain in the European Parliament as non-attached members (NI) rather than join the Greens/EFA group.

While the nomination of MEPs for the European Parliament by CiU/Junts had generally been uncontroversial, this changed in 2019 when the party sought to internationalize the Catalan independence issue by putting forward MEPs who had been involved in the organization of the 2017 independence referendum. The MEPs concerned were former Catalan president Carles Puigdemont and former Catalan Health Minister Antoni Comín. This created an unusual situation in which these politicians faced arrest warrants in Spain, while simultaneously seeking to take up seats in the European Parliament and participate in everyday debates with their Spanish and European colleagues.

However, European Parliament President Tajani did not grant them their seats because Spain had not included them on the list of Spanish MEPs, as they had not travelled to Spain to swear an oath to the Spanish Constitution. This was something the two Junts MEPs-elect could not do, as they were in exile in Belgium and any return to Spain would have resulted in their arrest. Eventually, however, under President Sassoli, the European Parliament did

grant Puigdemont and Comín their seats from January 2020 for the remainder of the term, based on a CJEU ruling that granted them immunity (Rovirosa, Heller & Zornosa, 2024; Euronews, 2020). In March 2021, however, the European Parliament voted to lift their immunity, including that of the third Junts MEP, Ponsatí, who had obtained her seat following Brexit. This was followed by a General Court ruling in 2023, which cleared the way for Spain to pursue extradition, although this ultimately did not occur (Deutsche Welle, 2021; BBC, 2021).

During the 2024 to 2029 term, Antoni Comín was again elected to the European Parliament, but his seat has so far remained vacant. This is because the Spanish Electoral Board has refused to certify his mandate, arguing that MEP status is only acquired after swearing an oath to the Spanish Constitution. While this position appears to conflict with the 2019 CJEU ruling that MEP status is acquired once election results are declared, the European Parliament has stated that it cannot recognise an MEP without formal notification from national authorities. As a result, Comín's case remains an unresolved conflict between Spanish law and EU law and is currently before the Court of Justice of the European Union (Van Campenhout, Faus & Russell, 2024). In March 2024, incoming Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez's party and Catalan separatist parties, including Junts, agreed on an amnesty law intended to remove legal action against individuals accused of separatist activity during the 2017 push for Catalan secession. However, the law ultimately did not apply to Puigdemont and Comín, as they were still subject to charges of embezzlement of public funds in connection with the organisation of the referendum (Van Campenhout, Faus & Russell, 2024, 26 September).

In sum, it can be concluded that CiU and later PDeCAT and Junts, and their ideas, have been a consistent force in Catalan politics, more often than not as a governing party. Up until 2012, the party was autonomist, seeking Catalan self-government within Spain, but later shifted towards pro-independence positions and actively pursued this through cooperation with ERC, the organization of a non-binding consultation, and ultimately the 2017 independence referendum. CiU, PDeCAT and Junts have also maintained a small but continuous presence in the European Parliament, where they have aligned with different party groups, based first and foremost on ideology rather than territorial ambitions. They have held a number of different positions in the European Parliament, though none particularly powerful. Nevertheless, during the 2019 to 2024 term, PDeCAT/Junts generated

additional attention for the Catalan independence conflict by nominating MEPs who had been involved in the 2017 independence referendum, which Spain declared illegal.

7.2 Using the Institutional Dimension of Europe

Independence Objectives in the European Parliament – Normalization of the Pro- Independence Cause

CiU, PDeCAT and Junts MEPs describe themselves as having a dual role in the European Parliament, involving both the pursuit of their independence agenda and participation in regular policy-making (CiU 2, 3). Up until 2012, CiU did not formally use the European Parliament to pursue independence-related goals, given that the party was autonomist in nature at the time. When the party did begin pursuing independence, an important objective of CiU/PDeCAT and Junts became seeking greater EU understanding of Catalonia. This was important for the party because it perceives the Spanish narrative as strongly present within EU institutions and therefore feels a need to present a counter-narrative. As one interviewee explains:

Spanish parties every chance they have to toxify the environment against us, they use it. So they have a big, big megaphone in Spanish media and European media. So our task is to try to compensate the balance. It's never possible to compensate fully the balance. But our job, the reason why people vote for us and send us to Europe is to try to compensate the balance. To make as much people as possible understand that we're just a normal nation in Europe. We're just not anything different from a Czech or from Portuguese, or from a Swede, no? From a Dutch? We just had, you know, bad luck historically (CiU 3).

Explaining their position to a European audience is therefore seen as an important way of defending their stance at the European level. Second, receiving EU understanding, rather than active support, is considered most important for the party because, ultimately, independence is a decision that would be taken domestically. Nevertheless, when another opportunity for independence arises, the European audience would at least be familiar with its origins. Moreover, it would be expected to respect that decision. As such, the party places strong emphasis on the image of Catalonia within Europe (CiU 2, 3).

Representatives of the party emphasize that they do not seek isolation, but rather a seat at the table. They also address current events in Catalonia and explain Catalan history, highlighting that it had broad self-governance within different confederations until 1714 and that, throughout history, Catalonia has been oriented towards Europe. The party even organized annual events to communicate about Catalonia to those who wished to participate (CiU 2, 3). In this way, CiU, PDeCAT and Junts aim to construct an image of Catalonia as a “normal” European nation, but more importantly, to normalize the pro-independence cause among their European audience.

We are a small nation. No, we're not a small nation, we are a normal nation. But we are minorized, no? We don't have much resources. So it means that we cannot participate in other forums with people from other member states where you can create relations in a normal way, where they can get to know us in a normal way. So it's as important for us to be able to make the difference in European legislation if we can, as to use this forum for people to normalise the pro-independence cause. It doesn't even mean that they support it fully. It means that they can look eye to eye to you and say: "yeah, this guy is normal" (CiU 3).

The goal of seeking EU understanding of Catalonia and making the pro-independence quest appear normal is motivated by the party's limited resources, as it cannot make deals with others due to a lack of material leverage, as well as by a desire to contribute from its position using the means available to it (CiU 3). As such, this independence objective is largely pragmatic in nature.

However, the normalization of the pro-independence cause has gone beyond simply seeking EU understanding. In parallel, the party has also pursued more ambitious and idealistic objectives in the European Parliament that aim at a more substantial shift in the EU's attitudes. An interviewee explained, for example, that for PDeCAT and Junts, being present in the European Parliament is also seen as a way to potentially connect with national parliaments across Europe through the networks they build there. While they do not expect direct support from their allies in the European Parliament, they see an opportunity that these contacts may be willing to assist them indirectly through actions in their respective national parliaments (CiU 3).

Especially after the 2017 independence referendum, PDeCAT and Junts sought a stronger EU stance on fundamental rights and the rule of law. While the choice for independence was considered an internal matter, the defence of

fundamental rights was seen as clearly a European matter. As such, one interviewee recalled how the party mobilized ten percent of Members of the European Parliament across political groups to wear yellow T-shirts in support of freedom for Catalan prisoners (CiU 2). Another way in which the party pursued this goal was by calling on the EU to recognize, defend and regulate the right to self-determination, especially during the ninth parliamentary term (2019–2024). The party had abandoned the expectation that the EU would interpret the right to self-determination in the same way as it did and instead concluded that it needed to invest more effort in establishing this right for stateless nations within the EU (Ponsatí Obiols, Plenary 9, 20200617; 20221213; 20221215; 20230329; 20230418). As such, Junts MEPs called on the EU to “change its stance on self-determination and grant a safe and clear path for minorities to exercise it within the Union” (Ponsatí Obiols, Plenary 9, 20221213). Beyond the EU, Junts MEPs also called on the EU to defend self-determination in cases such as Kosovo, Indigenous peoples and Ukraine (Tremosa i Balcells, Plenary 8, 20101120; Oliveres, Plenary 9, 20200129; Ponsatí Obiols, Plenary 9, 20220309). Beyond this, the party began calling on the EU to regulate the right to self-determination. In January 2020, Puigdemont called on the EU to “find a common democratic mechanism for self-determination.” In 2021, the party took this a step further as part of the self-determination caucus, which developed a proposal on how the EU should handle territorial conflicts based on self-determination. One interviewee explains the party’s demand as follows:

If someone wants to change a border, should it stay rigid forever and ever because someone lost a war 200 years ago, 300 years ago, 150 years ago? Or should we put it to the ballot box in a civilized way and decide democratically on it? And I think this is the Catalan question to the future of the EU. What is the model to solve this kind of conflict? And what is the European model? Is it the Scottish model? Is it the Spanish model based on repression? What do we tell people around the world when they have a conflict? (CiU 3).

In the years that followed, the party repeated this message, but without much success as this proposal was ignored at the Conference on the on the Future of Europe, organized in 2022 (Puigdemont, Plenary 9, 20220503; Ponsatí Obiols, Plenary 9, 20220609; 20221213).

When addressing Catalan independence, the parties intended to do so mainly individually. Over time, the parties have started to think more

strategically about how much they want to be associated with other sub-state parties. Simply cooperating with as many regionalist and stateless nationalist parties is no longer seen as the best way to create the best conditions for Catalan independence in the EU. They are still willing to help and cooperate informally with MEPs from other sub-state nations through sharing contacts, information and ideas, but they are not eager to engage in any formal cooperation or to publicly make solidarity claims for other stateless nations, especially when this is not explicitly requested. The party's main reason for this is the fear of the European idea of precedent, where EU actors assume that if they create the conditions for independence of one stateless nation, they will set in motion a domino effect for all other stateless nations in the EU. Therefore, it is important for the Catalans to, of course, cooperate to ensure that stateless nations are heard in the EU, but at the same time not to link their cause too closely with others so that they do not lose their claim to uniqueness, as this is seen as diminishing the threat. An interviewee explains it as follows:

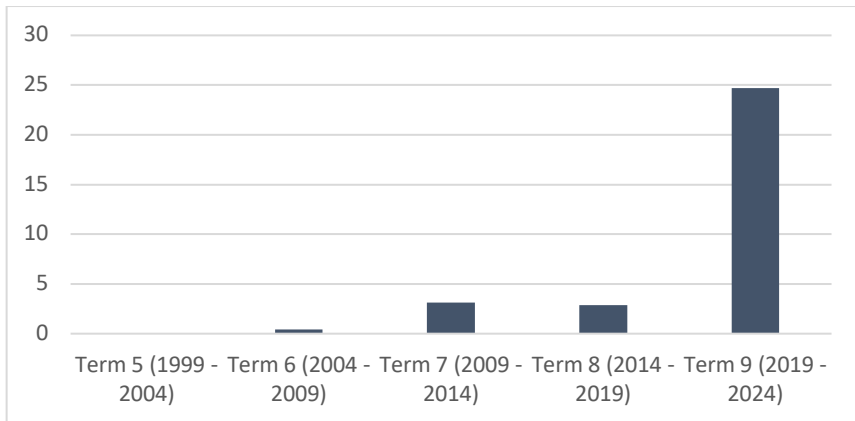
Our friendship with the Breton, Corsican is there. We help them every time we can, but the future of Corsica depends on the Corsican people. We don't really care if they are going to become independent or not. It's not that we don't care, but it's not what we have to defend. And we know that when people look at Catalonia, they're fearful that if Catalonia becomes independent, they're in their heads, and then I don't know who will become independent and the other will become independent and it will be chaos. Which is funny to talk about chaos in a European Union of 27 member states ruled by unanimity, that's going to be enlarged to 30 or 31. And the chaos is because of the Catalans? Well, it's kind of strange, this perspective, but we know it's an excuse to be against us. But anyway, uh, we are aware of this fear of precedent, so we cooperate with other substate nations, but we don't link our cause to their cause (CiU 3).

As such, Junts still engages in cooperation with parties from stateless nations through platforms that it has helped establish: the EU Catalonia Dialogue Platform, established in 2017, and the Self-determination Caucus, established in 2021. These are, however, informal platforms that do not consist solely of parties from stateless nations but also include others. As such, Junts now considers it important that its cooperation is balanced and includes both cooperation with other stateless nations and with parties from nations that

already have states, the latter of which are considered its most important allies (CiU 2; 3).

Looking at the number of independence contributions per term or per year, however, shows that formal attention to independence in the European Parliament was relatively low and only peaked at specific moments. More specifically, Figure 5 shows that the parties have, in most years, devoted less than 5 percent of their formal contributions in the European Parliament to independence, except during term nine, when this rose sharply to 25 percent with Junts in the European Parliament. This, however, gives a slightly misleading picture because CiU, during term seven, made more than 1,000 contributions and PDeCAT, during term eight, made close to 2,000 contributions in the European Parliament, levels of activity that are not observed with the other two parties. As Figure 6 shows, CiU and PDeCAT still made close to 50 independence contributions during terms seven and eight, but over 200 during term nine.

Figure 5: Percentage of Independence Contributions of Total Contributions in the European Parliament



Data: plenary contributions, written and oral questions and explanations of vote that relate to the political status of independence, the independence process or independence legitimization. The same applies to Figure 6 & 7.

Figure 6: Number of Independence Contributions CiU, PDeCAT and Junts per Term

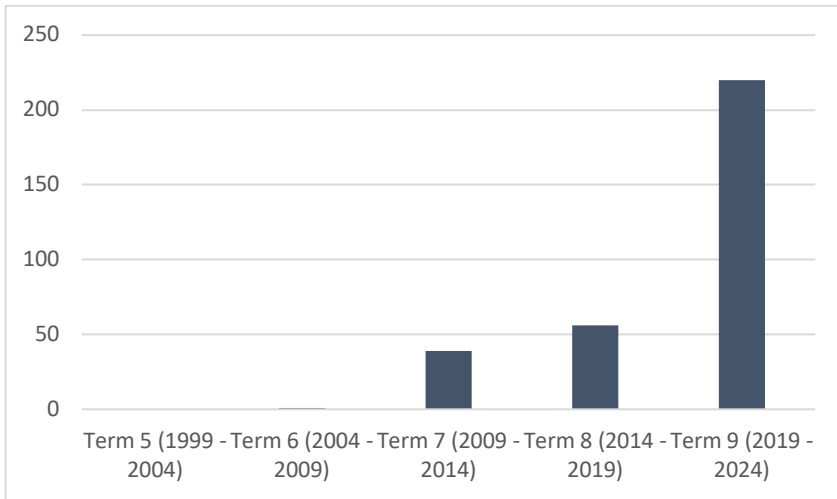


Figure 7: Number of CiU, PDeCAT and Junts Independent Contributions per Year

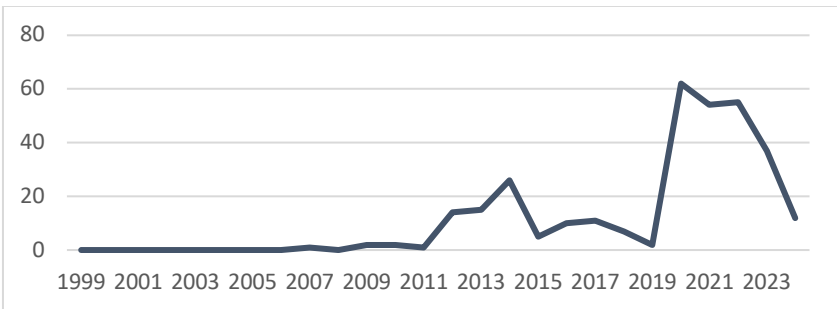


Figure 7 shows the volatility of the parties' formal attention to independence in the European Parliament even more clearly. In the run-up to the non-binding independence consultation organized by the Catalan government in 2014, the party's attention to independence in the European Parliament steadily increased, but after the fallout it declined and remained comparatively low, even during the 2017. Only during the ninth term did Junts significantly increase its formal independence contributions. During this time, Junts appears interested in demonstrating the resilience of the Catalan independence movement, as well as highlighting the hardships it is enduring.

Formal independence discourse, however, does not capture the full picture of CiU, PDeCAT and Junts' independence work in the European Parliament.

The parties also rely on the informal practice of networking. One way this is done is through informal meetings (CiU 3), which are especially important during less intensive periods. One interviewee describes these meetings as follows:

Well, it's nothing special. It's just you meet someone about something and you tell him or her to go for a coffee one day, and then you talk about some European stuff and you also talk about Catalonia and you explain and then they know you better. And then maybe another day you make another coffee, or maybe they can know better about your case when the issue arrives or when they see something in the news. Or they can write to you and ask, you know? It's, uh, it's not nice to say, but it's like lobbying (CiU 3).

These lobbying activities are, however, not seen as anything out of the ordinary, because other MEPs engage in similar practices on issues they consider important (CiU 3). On top of that, CiU, PDeCAT and Junts have relied on regular conferences and the above-mentioned platforms within the European Parliament (e.g., the EU and Catalonia Platform and the Self-determination Caucus). This was not only a means through which Catalan MEPs can freely discuss the Catalan self-determination question and keep those interested informed, but it also allows them to organize themselves in such a way as to coordinate specific actions.

It has, however, not always been easy for CiU, PDeCAT and Junts MEPs and staff to turn informal sympathy into active support in the European Parliament. The interviewees describe a particularly hostile environment in which they have experienced being shunned by European actors who do not want to be associated with them, such as certain MEPs from Italy or France. More seriously, however, the interviewees report that the Spanish delegation has allegedly adopted an approach aimed at silencing the Catalan question in the European Parliament, which at times has even become aggressive (CiU 2, CiU 3). MEPs seeking to raise attention for the Catalan cause in the European Parliament would be shouted at by Spanish politicians and/or have their careers threatened. An interviewee from CiU recounts that, because of these strong reactions from Spanish representatives, many MEPs do not feel able to speak out publicly in support of Catalonia, making it difficult to gauge the level of sympathy for the Catalan cause in the European Parliament:

Obviously, of the people that support us, there are two kinds. The kind that speaks about it and the kind that don't want to speak about it because they are fearful. You have to understand these people are crazy. And when I say crazy, I don't mean it as a metaphor, I mean it literally. I have friends who were speaking, were working in their office, and then a Spanish politician comes open the door and begins to shout at them. Because they had spoken up in favour of Catalonia. This has happened to friends of mine. One stopped in the middle of the corridor and shouted at them or threatened them: "If you do this, you will not be able to be a, b, c. We will not support you. We will block you. We will (better?) you." In fact, one of my best friends in European Parliament right now, who is an MEP from Slovenia from S&D, he has been marginalized by the Spaniards as well, that were controlling the group. Because of his support against them (?). He's brave and he keeps doing it. But how many there are? Who are brave enough to continue to support a cause from not your nation, against your own political career? (CiU 3).

Outside of addressing independence, CiU, PDeCAT and Junts have also sought to use the European Parliament for regular interest representation, both to defend Catalan interests in Brussels and to contribute to a better EU (CiU 2, 3). Examples of policy fields that the MEPs consider of particular importance to Catalonia include the economy and the internal market, trade, and even soccer (CiU 1, 2, 3). At first sight, this may seem like a normal aim for any MEP, but for CiU MEPs, as one interviewee explains, national interest representation in the European Parliament is especially important precisely because they do not feel fully represented, as they also do not have a seat in the Council. Catalan interest representation in the European Parliament therefore transcends the representation of ideological preferences:

Obviously, we participate in green debates. Obviously, we participate in debates about trade and debates about geopolitics, but we always do it with a Catalan perspective. We have the duty as we don't have a seat in the Council, we have the duty to defend the Catalan national interest in the European Union. So overall, is not as normal MEPs, we have a plus of responsibility. On every vote we do, we try to think about it not as ourselves, ideologically, but as Catalans. What is better for Catalonia in this vote, in this other vote? (CiU 3).

Part of this national interest representation also involves advocating for Catalonia's continued involvement in European policy processes. As one

interviewee explains, there has been a perception that the EU, in the name of efficiency, has increasingly centralized the Common Agricultural Policy. Whereas the European Commission previously worked directly with Catalonia on these matters, it now works more with Spain, which in turn coordinates with the regions. The interviewee considers this problematic for Catalonia because Spanish policymaking is not seen as beneficial to Catalan interests (CiU 3).

Moreover, the European Parliament is sometimes used to remedy domestic problems and disputes. The CiU MEP during the seventh and eighth terms frequently pointed out instances in which Spain was in breach of EU law, as part of an agenda to encourage Spain to work more efficiently. The effect of such plenary speeches and questions was to show that Spain was engaging in poor policymaking, and this could be seen as an attempt to influence Spanish policy through EU law (Interview, CiU 1, 2).

However, the most consistent issue of national interest for Catalan parties in the European Parliament has been achieving official status for the Catalan language in the EU. While not all Catalan MEPs personally prioritized this objective, it has been a longstanding issue in Catalan politics in the EU. One interviewee who was active between 2004 and 2009 explains that, even though the topic was not a personal priority for him, CiU cared about it greatly:

The language issue was a very important issue all around. Uh that was the most nationalistic or specific. I mean the Catalan in the European Parliament, what to do, what not to do, how to do it? That was, that was part of a continuum that was fought for all along the mandate. I did not want to make it the only focus of that, because I don't believe in that. But I believe, I believe it was an important issue, so I dedicated a lot (Interview, CiU 1).

CiU interviewees also see a number of practical benefits of making Catalan an official EU language. It would not merely mean that Catalan could be spoken in European Parliament plenary sessions, but would also ensure stronger protection of the language. Knowledge of Catalan would become an asset for working in EU institutions, for example, and it would provide legal protection under single market and artificial intelligence regulations, thereby helping to maintain the language's relevance. It would also require large companies, such as Huawei, to offer Catalan as a language option, meaning

Catalan politicians would no longer have to request this on an ad hoc basis (Interview, CiU 2, 3).

Beyond specifically representing the Catalan interest, CiU, PDeCAT and Junts also sought to build a better Europe from the European Parliament. In many ways, CiU, PDeCAT and Junts saw themselves as normal MEPs whose policy priorities in the European Parliament largely relate to the committees to which they have been assigned, to voting with a European conscience and to helping create a more efficient and stronger EU apparatus with less unanimity voting (CiU 3). One CiU MEP, for example, devoted considerable time to audiovisual broadcasting and the international trade agreement with Canada (CiU 1), while another prioritized work in the ECON Committee and described his regular activities in the European Parliament as follows: “I tabled 1,000 written questions to the Commission. 99 percent related to trade, agriculture, industry, free trade agreements, environmental directives, and 1 percent about democracy and linguistic rights” (CiU 2).

And while taking part in regular policy-making was certainly an end in itself, it was also recognized that such activities could benefit the party’s independence agenda, as they could help build trust. The party engaged in Good Europeanism to be perceived as credible when independence was discussed. As one interviewee described: “I had my normal activity because gaining credibility as a good MEP, I was much more respected when I talked on Catalonia” (CiU 2). It is therefore key to contextualize the number of independence contributions that the parties make in the European Parliament, precisely because it shows that it is possible to work toward normalizing self-determination in the EU while consciously *not* discussing independence.

In sum, CiU mainly aimed to represent both the Catalan interest and contribute to a better Europe between 1999 and 2012. After that, the party took on the additional task of representing its pro-independence stance in the European Parliament and promoting the normalization of self-determination in the EU. As such, the parties pursued the pragmatic objective of explaining Catalan history, their independence quest and how they were being treated by Spain in order to generate greater understanding among their European audience and, ideally, normalize their independence quest. The party’s regular policy-making activities were also seen as contributing to this through the construction of credibility via Good Europeanism. These efforts can be interpreted as pragmatic in nature, as they could be pursued on an individual basis and were feasible with only a small number of MEPs and staff in the European Parliament. However, after the 2017 independence referendum and

in the face of Spanish actions against the Catalan pro-independence movement, the party also adopted a more idealistic objective of prompting the EU to more actively defend fundamental rights, most importantly the right to self-determination, which they believed was being violated by Spain. Finally, between 2019 and 2024, Junts more actively pursued the formalization of the right to self-determination in the form of a proposal for a Clarity Act. These objectives were more idealistic because they required a more systemic change to the status quo and have therefore not been achieved thus far.

7.3 Using the Discursive Dimension of Europe

Beyond using the European Parliament to pursue independence related goals, CiU, PDeCAT & Junts have also used Europe discursively in their independence discourse by addressing their ideal EU governance structure and EU role in the Catalan independence process. They also use Europe to legitimate their independence quest.

7.3.1 European Governance Structure: Toward a More Federal EU

Over the years, CiU, PDeCAT and Junts' discourse on the kind of EU they would like to be autonomous in, and after 2012, independent in, is consistently idealistic in nature. The parties have long pursued a "Europe of the Nations," while also supporting a more federal EU that is more sovereign and principled in nature. CiU mainly discussed a "Europe of the Nations" between 1999 and 2004, but the party and its successors continued to do so with lower intensity in subsequent years. The "Europe of the Nations" vision essentially refers to a desire for an EU that respects both the unity and diversity of the Union. The party supports EU unity through common ties and commitments, but rejects unity in the form of subjugation. Instead, it advocates for a form of unity that also respects diversity (Ponsatí Obiols, Plenary 9, 20240424). At times, the party even used the term "Europe of the Peoples," placing emphasis on Europe's (stateless) nations rather than its states or regions. This was a way of highlighting culture and identity as a lens through which to understand the EU. As such, during the early 2000s, the party expressed its desire to create an EU that recognizes and acknowledges that it is, by nature, a diverse rather than a uniform entity. Hence, Vallvé explained to the plenary in 2004:

When we talk about cultural plurality, in cases where this culture also has a differentiated history, its own linguistic characteristics and a

structural form of society, we are talking about stateless nations, a phenomenon which also exists in the European Union... In this regard, I believe that the European Union must ensure recognition of this plurality within it (Plenary 5, 20040113).

Only by acknowledging the EU's peoples, after all, could the EU bring itself "closer to its citizens" (e.g., Vallvé, Plenary 5, 20030604; Gasoliba i Böhm, Plenary 5, 20030924; Guardans Cambó, Plenary 6, 20050111; CiU 1). More concretely, this idea entailed a special status of association for constitutional regions in the EU, direct representation within EU institutions, and, in particular, greater powers for constitutional regions, such as the ability to bring cases before the Court of Justice, official language status within Member States, and participation in the Council of Ministers (Vallvé, 5, 20030113, 20030604, 20030924; Ferrer, 5, 20020516, 20030113, 20030924; GIB, 5, 20030924).

This idea of a "Europe of the Nations" coincided with the drafting of the Constitutional Treaty. In the years that followed, however, when EU politics became less focused on Treaty change after 2009, CiU can still be seen seeking to promote the involvement of (constitutional) regions in EU decision-making on a more case-by-case basis, such as when the new intergovernmental treaty on economic governance was drafted (Tremosa i Balcells, Questions 7, 20120110; 20120111) or when Brexit created additional seats for Spain in the European Parliament, in which context Tremosa i Balcells argued that Catalonia should have its own constituency in the European Parliament (Plenary 8, 20180613; 20180704). Even during the latest term (2019–2024), Junts can still be seen continuing its vision of creating an EU that is closer to its citizens, in particular those from regions with constitutional powers (CiU 3). Former MEP Ponsatí Obiols even referred again to a Union of the Peoples during the 2023 debate on European electoral law. She states:

But beware of attempts to use this reform to take the power of representation even further away from the peoples of Europe, especially from us, the peoples forced to live as minorities in our Member States. We are not represented in the institutions of the Union and our voice is limited to the extreme that we cannot even speak our language in this Chamber – as if our language was worse than others, as if we were second class. If this law becomes another tool for Member States and Europe's bureaucrats to impose uniformity, then it will not strengthen

the Union but undermine it, because the peoples of Europe have proved time and again their resilience against all attempts to erase diversity. In the past, European peoples have successfully resisted imperial, authoritarian and totalitarian projects that wanted to erase them. So if the EU does not live up to its founding promise to be the Union of the peoples, it will go down in history as yet another of those failed imperialistic attempts (Ponsatí Obiols, Plenary 9, 20230613).

This quote reveals that despite the parties' predecessors' shift from autonomy to independence, Junts' view of the EU has not changed significantly compared to how CiU depicted it during the early 2000s, except for perhaps some added bitterness, because in their view the EU has not succeeded in getting "closer to the citizens." They still view the EU as a union that should acknowledge its plurality and as consisting of peoples that require recognition and representation within the EU (Ponsatí Obiols, Plenary 9, 20220609; 20230613).

In parallel, CiU, PDeCAT and Junts also pursued a more federal EU. The party has not always been equally clear in recent years on whether it prefers a federation or a confederation (CiU 3; Maddens et al., 2020, p. 135), yet most of the plenary, question and interview data points in the direction of a federation. The quest for a European federation means that CiU, PDeCAT and Junts simply want "more Europe" (Gasoliba i Böhm, Plenary 5, 20020702; Tremosa i Balcells, 20111201). They do not seek full sovereignty for a new Catalan state and instead prefer a more powerful EU with stronger supranational institutions that can, at times, overrule Member States (De Paula Gambús Millet, Questions 7, 20140923; CiU 2). More concretely, this implies a federal rather than subordinate relationship between Member States and regions with legislative powers, a stronger international presence, the elimination of unanimity voting and a larger EU budget with greater tax-raising powers for the EU (Ferrer, Plenary 5, 20020516; Gasoliba I Böhm, Plenary 5, 20020702; Guardans I Cambó, Plenary 6, 20050111; Oliveres, plenary 9, 20200212; 20200716; 20231121).

PDeCAT and Junts' vision of a more federal EU is also principled in nature. This was mainly pursued in the aftermath of the 2017 independence referendum (2017–2024) and largely stems from the parties' dissatisfaction with how the EU has treated the Catalan demand for self-determination, leading PDeCAT and Junts to argue that in the future, the EU should better and more consistently uphold fundamental and human rights, acknowledge

the right to self-determination and better protect the rule of law (e.g., Puigdemont, Plenary 9, 20200102; Oliveres, Plenary 9, 20200212; Ponsatí Obiols, Plenary 9, 20220504). Regarding the latter, the MEPs emphasized the need to uphold the civil and political rights of Catalan politicians who were imprisoned or went into exile after the Catalan independence referendum in 2017 (Oliveres, Plenary 9, 20200114; 20201124; Ponsatí Obiols, Plenary 9, 20210519; Puigdemont, Plenary 9, 20200708; 20200709), as well as the need to protect European citizens and politicians against spyware used by states (Oliveres, Plenary 9, 20201212; Ponsatí Obiols, Plenary 9, 20220504). Finally, departing from the self-determination agenda, Junts also expresses a wish for a greener and more equal EU, with more research and innovation (e.g., Oliveres, Plenary 9; 20200212; 20201006).

CiU, PDeCAT and Junts' vision for the future of the EU has thus been informed both by their ideological preferences and by their self-determination agenda. As such, they strive for both a "Europe of the Nations" and a more federal EU that is more sovereign and principled and that pays attention to a range of policy issues, seeing these as the most beneficial conditions for continuing their quest for self-determination and independence in the EU. To exemplify this, a Junts MEP sums up his wishes for the future of the EU as follows:

For the 2021–2027 financial perspective, there are a few priorities: prioritising research and innovation, which are the oil of our century; make the allocation of cohesion funds conditional on respect for the rule of law and democracy; combating climate change; fight against social and economic inequalities, etc. Similarly, when will we have the courage to build a real system of own resources? The carbon tax, the digital tax and the financial transaction tax should be used to feed a European budget. Democratic legitimacy, political powers and financial capacity are the three sides of a triangle on which the future of the Union depends (Oliveres, Plenary 9, 20200212).

Hence, Junts currently envisions an EU that is more democratic, more powerful and more capable. In sum, CiU, PDeCAT and Junts have relatively consistently pursued both a "Europe of the Nations" and a more federal Europe, which I have labelled the vision of a "United States of Europe." Given that these visions are still a long way from being realized, they can be considered an idealistic use of Europe in the parties' independence strategy.

7.3.2 EU Role in the Catalan Independence Process – Guardian of EU Principles and Law

Ever since CiU became pro-independence, the party and its successors have advanced an idealistic narrative on the role of the EU in the Catalan independence process. While they believe that Catalan independence is ultimately a national decision and that formal EU support is not necessary (CiU 2, 3), the EU is still expected to play a role in facilitating the Catalan independence process. As such, the two main narratives advanced about the EU's role are that of guardian of European principles and law and that of commentator.

Over the years, CiU, PDeCAT and Junts have considered it important to ensure that EU audiences were informed about the Catalan independence process and Spain's response to it. At the same time, however, they argued that the issue was not merely internal, but also European in nature, linking their own actions and those of Spain to specific EU principles or legislation. As such, the parties regularly asked the EU for commentary on whether certain actions were in line with EU law or whether EU law was being correctly implemented in Spain (e.g., Tremosa i Balcells, Plenary 7, 20131219; Tremosa i Balcells, Plenary 8, 20161104; Puigdemont, Ponsatí Obiols, Oliveres, Plenary 9, 20200402). This was the case in November 2022, when Junts asked whether the spying on pro-independence activists by Spain was in line with the values and principles of the European Union (Puigdemont, Ponsatí Obiols, Oliveres, 20221114). Moreover, at times the EU itself took actions that the parties considered unacceptable, prompting them to request explanations for specific incidents. One such case occurred shortly before the 2015 Catalan election, when two different answers appeared to the question of whether the EU would recognize a unilateral Catalan declaration of independence. The English version described it as an internal matter, whereas the Spanish version was longer and questioned the legality of such a declaration. This led to concern within CiU and a demand for clarification (Tremosa i Balcells, Plenary 8, 20150922). Another example occurred in 2023, when a Europol report labelled the Catalan and Basque independence movements as the most active and violent in Spain. In response, Junts MEPs questioned the Commission on how this assessment had been made and what measures were in place to ensure the objectivity and reliability of the data (Oliveres, Puigdemont, Ponsatí Obiols, Plenary 9, 20230703).

However, more often than not, the parties' demands did not stop at seeking commentary from the EU. Rather, they frequently called for EU action in cases where they believed Spain was violating European principles and laws. More concretely, the expectation that the EU should act as a guardian of European principles and law meant that during term 7 (2009–2014), the EU was asked to pressure Spain to recognize Kosovo (Tremosa i Balcells, Plenary 7, 20120328; 20120329; Questions 7, 20101020; 20120330) and to take action when threats were made against the Catalan independence movement within Spain, as these were considered to be in violation of European values and principles (Tremosa i Balcells, Questions 7, 20111114; 20120705; 20130917; 20130924; 20140113; 20140210). During the next term (2014–2019), CiU continued to raise concerns about threats of violence against the Catalan independence movement, particularly in 2014, and called on the EU to intervene based on the principles and values enshrined in the Charter of Fundamental Rights, as well as specific EU directives and regulations, because the party did not perceive Spain to be taking sufficient action (e.g., Tremosa i Balcells, Plenary 8, 20141023; Questions 8, 20140917; 20140923; 20141010). In the following years, PDeCAT addressed Spanish actions related to the Catalan independence process, including attempts to obstruct the referendum, the prosecution and imprisonment of pro-independence politicians, and the perceived lack of judicial independence in Spain. These developments were again considered to violate European principles and law. As a result, the EU was called upon to intervene, for example by establishing a European mechanism on democracy, the rule of law and fundamental rights, or by launching infringement procedures for breaches of EU fundamental rights, although the specific form of action was often left open (e.g., Tremosa i Balcells, Plenary 8, 20161025; 2061212; 20181113; Questions 8; 20140709; 20161104; 20170320; 20170927; 20180228; 20180926).

In the years thereafter (2019–2024), Junts continued to address perceived Spanish attempts to obstruct the Catalan independence process, including police violence, the removal of pro-independence politicians, their imprisonment and police infiltration. At times, this also led to demands that these issues be included in the EU's rule of law report or that an investigation be launched (e.g., Ponsatí Obiols, Plenary 9, 20201216; 20200514; 20220923; 20230510; Puigdemont, Plenary 9, 20200211; 20230117; Oliveres, Plenary 9, 20201006; 20210915; 20210209; Questions 9, 20201022). Finally, Junts also paid significant attention to the Pegasus spyware scandal, in which the Spanish government was reported to have spied on prominent pro-

independence politicians (e.g., Oliveres, Plenary 9, 20231017; Ponsatí Obiols, Plenary 9, 20201019; 20210915, 20220504; Puigdemont, Plenary 9, 202031017).

The narrative of the EU as guardian of European principles and law is a critical one, as the EU is seen as failing to meet the standards set by CiU, PDeCAT and Junts. The parties repeatedly articulate their expectations of the EU, despite anticipating that it will not act accordingly. As a result, between 2016 and 2023, PDeCAT and Junts can often be seen combining this narrative with the idea of double standards as a way to push the EU toward action and intervention. In doing so, the parties regularly refer to Poland and Hungary as comparable cases to Spain in terms of violations of the rule of law. In those cases, the EU has set a precedent by intervening to defend the rule of law, whereas it has not done so in the case of Spain. This difference is attributed to Spain's position as a powerful Member State, while Eastern European countries are perceived as less influential. As such, the lack of intervention is considered unjust, as the EU has already established a precedent by acting in other cases (e.g., Tremosa i Balcells, Plenary 8, 20161212; 20161214; Ponsatí Obiols, Plenary 9, 20201216); Puigdemont, Plenary 9, 20200211).

Moreover, the parties stress the potential damage to the EU and beyond if it does not intervene in the Catalan conflict. More specifically, they argue that maintaining such double standards is not in the EU's interest, as it undermines its credibility and moral authority when criticizing other countries for, for example, having political prisoners. Whether to intervene in Spain is therefore not merely a case-specific or internal matter, because granting Spain a *carte blanche* would indirectly extend the same tolerance to others, including Poland and Hungary, as well as countries outside the EU such as Russia and Turkey (Oliveres, Plenary 9, 20201124). As a result, it is argued, EU foreign policy regarding the protection of political or national minorities loses its credibility (CiU 2, 3). An example of this is the 2021 press conference in Moscow between EU High Representative Borrell and Lavrov, shortly after Navalny was imprisoned. As one interviewee recounts: "Borrell goes there. Foreign Affairs guy from the EU, no? Vice President. And says: 'I'm here because of Navalny. You should liberate Navalny', in the press conference. And Lavrov comes and says: 'You also have political prisoners in Spain. So what?' What do you do against that?" (CiU 3). This incident was later taken up by former president of Catalonia, turned MEP, Puigdemont, stating:

We have warned that the double standard applied by the EU undermines its global credibility as a defender of freedoms. There are now humiliating consequences for all. The EU cannot go around the world recommending recipes that it does not apply to itself. I want a Europe with a strong voice for human rights and without complexes in front of anyone, not only in front of Russia, not only in front of the United States, China, Morocco or Turkey, but with anyone. You are not that voice Mr Borrell. Mr Borrell, please do a Borrell exit (Puigdemont, Plenary 9, 20210209).

The explicit criticism not only of the EU, but of Borrell specifically, also reflects Junts' concerns about having a Catalan, yet anti-independence, High Representative in the EU. More broadly, these statements form part of a wider narrative in which the perceived fundamental rights violations by Spain are framed not as merely a Catalan or Spanish issue, but as a European one, because failing to draw a line in Spain could trigger a chain reaction in which other states also feel free to act without constraint. Simply put, if the EU does nothing about Catalonia, it will struggle to credibly challenge authoritarianism elsewhere (e.g., Oliveres, Plenary 9, 20201124, 20210915; 20211022; 20220504; Ponsatí Obiols, Plenary 9, 20200915; CiU 3).

These broader narratives were complemented between 2019 and 2024 by more specific narratives portraying the EU as a mediator, legislator and facilitator of enlargement. While the parties did not regularly call for mediation in their speeches or questions in the European Parliament, they did not consider it unrealistic, arguing that the Commission had been prepared to mediate between Scotland and the UK after the 2014 independence referendum (CiU 2), and that Juncker had also been prepared to propose mediation in the Catalan case before this was halted by Spanish opposition (Puigdemont and Ponsatí Obiols, Plenary 9, 20210629; CiU 3). Junts also expressed a preference for resolving the Catalan independence conflict through legislation. As part of the self-determination caucus, the party supports a clarity act that would define how territorial conflicts based on self-determination should be handled in the EU, although this proposal has not been received favourably (Ponsatí Obiols, Plenary 9, 20201218; 20220609; Puigdemont, Plenary 9, 20200114; CiU 3). Finally, CiU and Junts argued that the EU should establish a clear path into the EU for stateless nations. In 2012, when this issue became more relevant for Catalonia, a CiU MEP argued that internal enlargement should be possible on the basis of European citizenship, given that the Treaties contained no provisions stating that citizens of a

seceding region would lose their EU citizenship (Tremosa i Balcells, Plenary 7, 20120917). Although this idea gained little traction, Junts revisited it in 2020 by calling for a pathway for Scotland to re-enter the EU following Brexit (Ponsatí Obiols, Plenary 9, 20200617). This was later linked to Catalonia, showing that the earlier discussion on internal enlargement is not yet settled, at least from Junts' perspective: "it (the EU) should also establish clear paths into the EU—a path that we hope our fellow Scottish friends will follow soon. The basis, also, for the internal enlargement of the Union should also be fixed — with no taboos. This is the path that we, as Catalans, wish to follow soon" (Ponsatí Obiols, Plenary 9 20201218).

In sum, CiU, PDeCAT and Junts have used Europe in an idealistic way in their discourse on the role of the EU in the Catalan independence process. While the parties do not envision a direct role for the EU in the Catalan independence process, they regularly demand that the EU comment on situations related to their independence process and they see a role for the EU as a facilitator of that process. This role is considered especially important in the face of Spanish obstruction of the Catalan independence process, and since CiU formally became pro-independence in 2012, the EU has consistently been constructed as having a duty to act as a guardian of European principles and law. More concretely, the parties demand that the EU confront Spain when it violates European principles or European legislation, open investigations, launch infringement procedures or include such matters in rule of law reports. In addition, especially between 2019 and 2024, there has also been some attention to the EU as a mediator, legislator and facilitator of enlargement. Overall, CiU, PDeCAT and Junts have thus envisioned a relatively far-reaching involvement of the EU in their independence process. It falls short of active support for independence, but it is expected to help make a referendum possible, as this is seen as being in line with European principles and law. The parties have nevertheless not been very successful in getting the EU to fulfil any such role beyond answering their questions. As such, the EU's perceived inaction has made the parties rather critical and disappointed with the EU.

7.3.3 EU in Independence Legitimisations – Using European Principles

CiU, PDeCAT and Junts' legitimating discourse for independence mainly relies on Europe in an idealistic manner (see Annex 4). Between 2009 and

2024, CiU and its successors consistently advanced principled legitimations in the European Parliament, far more than instrumental ones. The party especially used Europe in its independence legitimations between 2009 and 2014 in a mostly principled manner, whereas between 2014 and 2024 the usage of Europe remained largely principled, but more independence legitimations did not rely discursively on Europe than those that did (see Annex 4). During the seventh term (2009–2014), CiU’s usage of Europe in its independence legitimations was relatively scattered, as the party relied on a wide variety of principled and instrumental “better future” arguments. During the eighth (2014–2019) and ninth term (2019–2024), this variation narrowed somewhat and usage of Europe was predominantly principled, although it still varied within that category.

The most significant legitimating narrative used by CiU, PDeCAT and Junts that draws on Europe is the one based on the idea of European democracy. This narrative complemented the wider democratic case made by CiU and its successors for independence. In so doing, the party constructed its own notion of European democracy, in which democracy is associated with certain basic rights, such as the protection of minority rights, the right to participate, the right to protest, the right to self-determination and ultimately the right to a self-determination referendum, which is also presented as how Europe and the EU understand democracy. Despite the lack of a clear EU acknowledgement of this shared understanding of democracy, CiU, PDeCAT and Junts have over the years constructed the EU as supportive of this interpretation, based on descriptions of how the EU has handled (independence) referenda in the past.

Around 2010–2012, CiU actively constructed the EU as respecting independence referenda, drawing on the examples of Kosovo and Montenegro (Tremosa i Balcells, Questions 7, 20101020; Plenary 7, 20120328; 20120329a; 20120329b). For example, Tremosa i Balcells thanked the EU “for being always respectful of freedom and democracy” when referring to the EU’s attitude towards Montenegro’s independence in 2006 and its steps towards European integration (Plenary 7, 20120328). As such, CiU actively constructed the EU as a consistent and reliable gatekeeper of democracy and freedom in cases of territorial conflict. When the Catalan quest for independence intensified that same year, this framing was also applied to the Catalan case. On 21 September that year, a CiU MEP suggested that their understanding of European democracy was in line with the EU Treaties but the party nevertheless sought confirmation from the Commission, asking:

Does the Commission believe that a democratic self-determination referendum in an EU region is consistent with the Treaty on European Union democratic principles, in particular Articles 2 and 10? (Tremosa I Balcells, Plenary 7, 20120921).

A month later, after Catalan President Artur Mas called early elections to assess support for independence, a CiU MEP formally announced the party's ambition for a Catalan independence referendum in the European Parliament. Referencing the Scottish independence referendum planned for 2014, he expressed hope that "in Catalonia a new era for European democracy is being opened" (Tremosa i Balcells, Plenary 7, 20121022). In other words, this referred to a Europe in which democratic independence referenda, such as the Scottish and Catalan cases, can take place.

Interview data echoes this approach, where a CiU interviewee, through references to different referenda in Europe such as those in the Netherlands on the Association Agreement with Ukraine, in Scandinavian countries on the euro and, of course, the Scottish independence referendum, makes the case that a self-determination referendum fits within the European democratic tradition. Moreover, the interviewee recounts feeling supported by German MEPs across the political spectrum in their view that Spain should consider Catalonia's demand for an independence referendum, as well as experiencing support from a UK MP (CiU 2). Regarding the latter, the interviewee said:

One was (...), which now is a minister, I think, from the Tory party, saying: "Of course I want a United Kingdom, I don't want the independence of Scotland, but I am a Democrat. I support." This is for us honey and not- So this is why we feel that we are at home when we talk about Catalonia in the European Parliament, much more than in the Spanish Parliament (CiU 2).

As such, the CiU interviewee not only highlights that others in the EU consider it normal to support an independence referendum as a democratic matter, but also links this example to broader attitudes towards referenda and democracy in the European Parliament. In doing so, the example is incorporated into the party's wider understanding of European democracy.

In the face of perceived repression from Spain, CiU also sought to expand the understanding of European democracy. In this view, European democracy came to mean that people should not be disadvantaged for holding separatist views and that they should be able to participate in the political process with

protection and without being threatened or harassed. In other words, democratic independence movements should not be obstructed (their democratic nature making them legitimate) and the EU has a duty to act against such obstruction to ensure that the European idea of democracy is upheld in its Member States (Tremosa i Balcells, Questions 7, 20130430; 20140113; Plenary 7, 20131009; Plenary 8, 20161214). As such, after the November 2014 consultation on Catalan independence, one of CiU's MEPs claimed that the Catalan independence conflict in Spain was not an internal matter but a matter of European democracy, because Spanish efforts to prevent Catalans from organizing an independence referendum were not in line with how the party understood the European idea of democracy:

In Catalonia, several million of these people participated last Sunday in a consultation to freely express our opinion about the political future of our country, although not in the way we would have liked, since we did so when the Spanish Government had suspended everything that could be suspended. However, Catalan society continues to take the initiative in the face of silence, refusal to dialogue and prohibition. Prohibition and threats can never constitute the solution to a political problem, a problem that directly affects democracy within the European Union (De Paula Gambús, Plenary 8, 20141112).

PDeCAT's optimistic and confident discourse on European democracy is strongly challenged when, after the independence referendum in October 2017, the EU does not defend the democratic rights of Catalans. Nevertheless, the party still insists, this time without linking its discourse to Europe, that the actions of the Catalan government were peaceful and based on a democratic mandate from the Catalan people (De Paula Millet Gambus, Plenary 8, 20171113; Tremosa I Balcells, Plenary 8, 20180228; 20180416).

Entering into the ninth parliamentary term (2019–2024), Junts' interpretation of European democracy remained unchanged and the party maintained that the Catalan government did not violate European principles and values when it organized the 2017 independence referendum, but that Spain did so thereafter through its repression (Oliveres, Plenary 9, 20211020; Ponsatí Obiols, Plenary 9, 20221215). The party therefore pushed for the EU to live up to its principles. One MEP, for example, stated in a discussion on the conclusions of a European Council meeting: “We will not stop our fight until our right to self-determination, and through that our political rights, are respected and the Union lives up to its promise of democracy” (Ponsatí

Obiols, Plenary 9, 20230329). In so doing, the party in particular placed a stronger emphasis on the right to self-determination, constructing it as part of European democracy and as something that was supported by many European citizens (Puigdemont, Plenary 9, 20200114; 20220503; Ponsatí Obiols, Plenary 9, 20220609; 20230329).

Another principled argument that CiU, PDeCAT and Junts have relied on over the years is the “EU law” argument. Alongside a more general legal legitimating discourse, CiU, PDeCAT and Junts draw on EU law to legitimize their vision of independence. One key concern for the party was internal enlargement: the idea that stateless nations in the EU would have the right to hold a referendum and then become an EU Member State without leaving the EU first. CiU expressed in the European Parliament that, legally, this should be an option based on EU law and in 2012, when this discussion became somewhat more relevant for Catalonia, CiU explored whether a seceding region in the EU would retain EU membership, to which the EU replied that it would not. However, CiU argued in response that alternative legal interpretations should be considered, such as one in which internal enlargement would be possible on the basis of European citizenship. After all, there were no provisions in the Treaties stating that citizens of a seceding region would lose their European citizenship upon secession:

However, other legal interpretations, such as the so-called ‘internal enlargement’ state that it is the people and not the Member States who enjoy the rights of identity and nationality. Consequently, in the event of the democratic secession of a region by European citizens, the latter would retain their status since there is no provision to the contrary in the treaties. The paradox could become even greater if the new States meet the economic conditions to remain in the Union better than the Member States they have separated from. 1. Does the Commission believe that it is citizens and not Member States who enjoy the right of identity or citizenship? 2. If so and if new States are created as a result of democratic processes within the Union, what provision of the treaties could serve to expel from the EU people who are EU citizens and clearly state their wish to continue being so, albeit in the context of a new country? (Tremosa I Balcells, Plenary 7, 20120917).

As such, Catalan independence is viewed as an issue of EU law based on Catalan EU citizenship, from which certain rights flow that must be equally applied to all EU citizens. In the event of secession, it is assumed that Catalan

citizens would remain EU citizens whose democratic will regarding their political status should be taken into account, because there are no provisions to the contrary. This ambitious interpretation, however, does not gain traction and in later years CiU is seen to have accepted the view that a seceding country would automatically lose its EU membership and would have to reapply (Tremosa I Balcells, Plenary 7, 20140113).

Moreover, during the eighth parliamentary term CiU begins portraying the Spanish government and judiciary as violating fundamental rights enshrined in the European Charter of Fundamental Rights (Tremosa i Balcells, Plenary 8, 20170927). Hence, in November 2016, Tremosa i Balcells again tells the European Parliament that it is a fundamental right of Catalans to organize an independence referendum:

I abstained on the European Ombudsman 2015 report because despite attention paid in violations of certain EU citizens' rights in several countries, in particular Hungary and Poland, she didn't pay attention to what is happening in Catalonia: Spain's judicial actions against Catalans and violation of fundamental democratic rights of the Catalans, including the right to decide their future in a referendum (Tremosa I Balcells, Plenary 8, 20161124).

The quote shows that there is an expectation that all EU citizens' rights should be protected equally and when the EU appeared to place greater attention on citizens' rights violations in Poland and Hungary, CiU was able to discursively link the perceived violation of Catalan citizens' rights to Europe through a comparison with these cases, arguing that all involved breaches of EU citizenship rights.

According to CiU, the Catalans have simply been displaying "democratic political behaviour and the pursuit of goals that, according to fundamental rights, should never be considered crimes" (Tremosa i Balcells, Terricabras, 20180416). Through its strong counteractions, the party claims, the Spanish government has been violating Catalans' civil liberties and civil rights as enshrined in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (Tremosa i Balcells, Questions 8, 20170927). Hence, while EU law does not stipulate a right to secession or to an independence referendum, CiU uses EU law to argue that the Spanish state and its judiciary are violating EU citizens' civil liberties by seeking to halt Catalan attempts to organize an independence referendum. During the ninth parliamentary term (2019–2024), Junts again

emphasizes the Catalan right to self-determination, drawing on the fact that many European countries have signed the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (Puigdemont, Plenary 9, 20210705). By the end of 2023, the party further drew on the ruling of Schleswig-Holstein judges, claiming that German courts did not find the 2017 Catalan referendum illegal and that it constituted an exercise of fundamental rights (Oliveres, Plenary 9, 2023121).

Another way in which CiU, PDeCAT and Junts have used Europe to legitimize Catalan independence is through references to other small nations, presenting statehood as both fair and normal in Europe. The underlying argument is that if these nations in Europe have states, it would also be fair for Catalonia to have one. As such, the sovereignty of small European nations functions as a benchmark and is used to legitimize Catalan independence through Europe. CiU often compares Catalonia with small European nation states and those that have recently become independent, such as the Baltic states. One key example occurred in 2013, when support for Catalan independence was rising and the independence movement organized a demonstration modelled on the Baltic Way. This was a demonstration held in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania in August 1989, in which people formed a kilometre-long human chain to draw attention to their wish for independence from the USSR. The Catalan movement organized its own equivalent, and one CiU MEP said the following to the European Parliament:

This Wednesday there will take place in Catalonia a huge and passive demonstration, which we call the Catalan Way. More than one million people will hold hands in a 400 km-long human chain, asking for independence and for the creation of a new European state: Catalonia. It will be the biggest demonstration for decades – a human chain inspired by the Baltic Way 20 years ago. (Tremosa i Balcells, Plenary 7, 20130909).

By highlighting this, CiU draws on a European example and sends the message that the Catalans see themselves as similar to the Baltic states, sharing a similar right to independence.

It is important to note that CiU and its successors see Catalonia as similar to small nations that have their own nation-states, with the only difference being that those nations were fortunate enough to become independent, whereas Catalonia represents a case of adverse geopolitical circumstance. One interviewee exemplified this by comparing Catalonia to Portugal, noting that

both Portugal and Catalonia declared independence from the Hispanic monarchy 45 days apart in 1640 and 1641 respectively. Spain chose to send its army first to Catalonia, which resulted in an unexpectedly long struggle of at least 12 years and gave the Portuguese time to prepare for the Spanish army. Eventually, Catalonia was defeated, while Portugal was not. The interviewee then, in a thought experiment, wonders aloud:

But imagine that it would have been the contrary. Imagine that in those debates in late 1640 and early 1641, Madrid Court would have said: "Oh no, it's super important we keep Portugal because... I don't know... keeping the Atlantic sea is more important than the Mediterranean because of the silver" Whatever, right? This could have happened, and that they would have sent the army to Portugal and stay there for 10 or 12 years, and then Catalonia would have time to prepare itself. Keep its independence, etc., etc. and now maybe it will be the contrary in Catalonia. Maybe it would be an independent nation in the European Union and Portugal maybe would be just a regional community of Spain where Portuguese would be treated as a secondary language, you know? And who would deny that Portugal is a nation, right? So I think that it's very important to know history to understand a place like Catalonia (CiU 3).

As such, in this recounting of Catalan history, the only difference between Portugal and Catalonia is framed as geopolitical luck, and the logic follows that if Portugal is considered a normal EU Member State, then Catalonia should be viewed as one as well.

CiU, PDeCAT and Junts furthermore like to compare themselves to Scotland, as this case is seen as capable of setting a precedent and normalizing independence processes in the EU (Tremosa i Balcells, Plenary 8, 20121022; 20130909; 20131009; Puigdemont, Plenary 9, 20201021; CiU 2), but references to other stateless nations are somewhat more scarce when it comes to self-determination and independence (Puigdemont, Plenary 9, 20220503). This reflects a broader shift in strategy since the fifth parliamentary term (1999–2004), in which the European-level approach has become more individualized rather than collective. As one interviewee explains, they are very aware of the problem of precedent and the fear within the EU of a domino effect of stateless nations all demanding independence after the first successful case is recognized. Therefore, they are very careful to link their cause only selectively to others (CiU 3).

Beyond this, CiU, PDeCAT and Junts have relied on a few other, less consistently employed legitimations, such as the idea that being European legitimises an independence referendum (Tremosa i Balcells, Plenary 8, 20120901; de Paula Gambús Millet, Plenary 8, 20141112), as well as some instrumental arguments. CiU and PDeCAT's instrumental case for independence is not extensively linked to Europe, but the parties do at times construct Europe both as contributing to the need for independence and as offering a better future after independence. There is, for example, some argumentation that the EU's continued state-centered structure may have contributed to Catalonia's need for independence, as articulated during the ninth term (Ponsatí Obiols, Plenary 9, 20221215; 20230418). As an interviewee explains, this idea was already present in CiU during the early 2000s:

I strongly supported this whole idea of the EU respecting not only states, but also other those other sub -state political entities with their own parliaments and their own direct democratic legitimacy. I was and I am convinced that the fact of ignoring them has contributed, at least in the case of Catalonia, to the calls for independence. The EC only understands a political community if it has a state of its own. Size, GDP, history, demographics, or culture do not count, it seems. If you are not a state, you are less relevant as a player within the EU than any large company. That is wrong. Now, of course Catalan nationalists will not even accept being called a "region" anymore: a nation without a state, and nothing less (CiU 1).

In other words, the conclusion is that the EU did too little to accommodate constitutional regions during the early 2000s, leaving independent statehood as the only way in which a political entity can matter in the EU. Beyond this, CiU also links its instrumental case for independence to Europe by highlighting how the EU would be better off if Catalonia became an independent EU Member State. CiU paints a picture of Catalonia as a good Member State that seeks to help improve the EU, in particular by contributing to a more just EU, for example by addressing multinational tax privileges and improving efficiency in budget distribution, and (Tremosa I Balcells, Plenary 8, 20151125; Ponsatí Obiols, Plenary 9, 20221019).

In sum, when CiU, PDeCAT and Junts use Europe to legitimate independence, they do so mainly in an idealistic manner. The party consistently and most importantly relies on the idea of European democracy

by constructing an EU that shares the Catalan view of democracy, in particular the notion that in democracies referenda, including self-determination referenda, can never be illegal and must be allowed. In addition, the party relies on its interpretation of EU law and on references to other small nations to benchmark what is considered normal in Europe. By relying on Europe in such a principled manner, CiU and its successors construct an idealized Europe, far removed from reality, that would support Catalonia's right to decide. Instead, however, the party encounters an EU that does not share its understanding of European democracy, does not share its interpretation of the European Charter of Fundamental Rights and for which comparisons with other small nations are not sufficiently persuasive. In spite of this, the party does not make any radical change in its legitimations, persisting in its principled argumentation and its idealistic use of Europe, which may become slightly less frequent but remains consistent in meaning. The finding that CiU, PDeCAT and Junts mainly rely on principled legitimations for independence is in line with work by Griffiths and Martinez (2020) and Bremberg and Gillespie (2022), but contrasts with work by others (Field and Hamann, 2015; Dalle Mulle, 2016; Brown Swan, 2017; Dalle Mulle, 2018; Elias and Franco-Guillen, 2021). It is also in line with suggestions by Bremberg and Gillespie (2022, p. 115) that pro-European secessionist parties draw on a specific idea of European democracy to legitimate independence. The focus on a normal argument aligns with work by Bourne (2014, 2020) and van der Zwet (2015).

7.4 Conclusion: CiU, PDeCAT and Junts' Idealistic Usage of Europe in the European Parliament

In this chapter, I examined how CiU, PDeCAT and Junts have used Europe in their independence strategies in the European Parliament. I found that CiU long used the European Parliament for regular Catalan interest representation, but this shifted around 2012 when the party formally became pro-independence and began making largely idealistic use of Europe in pursuit of its independence agenda in the European Parliament (see Table 12). In so doing, the party and its successors have sought to achieve the normalization of self-determination in the EU, both by building greater understanding of the Catalan case and by striving for EU acknowledgement, defence and regulation of a European right to self-determination, especially between 2019 and 2024.

Table 12: CiU, PDeCAT and Junts’ Usage of Europe in their independence strategy in the European Parliament

Term	Independence Agenda Aim in the EP	EU Governance Structure	EU Role	Legitimations
7 2009– 2014	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Minor EU Attitude Change: EU Understanding and normalization of the Catalan independence quest 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “Europe of the Nations” “United States of Europe” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Commentator 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mainly Principled
			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Guardian of EU Principles and Law Facilitator of Enlargement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Instrumental Better Future Very little Instrumental Remedial
8 2014– 2019	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Minor EU Attitude Change: EU Understanding and normalization of the Catalan independence quest 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “Europe of the Nations” “United States of Europe” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Commentator 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mainly Principled
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Major EU Attitude Change: Defend Fundamental Rights and Rule of Law 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Guardian of EU Principles and Law 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Some Instrumental Better Future
9 2019– 2024	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Minor EU Attitude Change: EU Understanding and normalization of the Catalan independence quest 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “Europe of the Nations” “United States of Europe” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Commentator 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mainly Principled
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Major EU Attitude Change: Defend Fundamental Rights and Rule of Law Legislative Impact: Formalization of the Right to Self-determination 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Guardian of EU Principles and Law Facilitator of Enlargement Legislator Mediator 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Some Instrumental Better Future Some Instrumental Remedial

Note: Overview of the findings on how the CiU, PDeCAT and Junts have used Europe in their independence strategy in the European Parliament over time. The boxes coloured in dark blue indicate idealistic usage, while the boxes coloured in light grey indicate pragmatic usage.

CiU, PDeCAT and Junts’ independence strategy in the European Parliament relies on Europe most importantly in relation to their independence process. The parties expect the EU to facilitate the Catalan independence process by defending European principles and law, and in particular by upholding the right to self-determination, in order to stand a chance against Spain. The

parties have therefore sought EU interventions ranging from condemnations and infringement procedures to sanctions to make the Catalan independence process possible (e.g., Tremosa i Balcells, Plenary 7, 20141023; Plenary 8, 20170927; Oliveres, Plenary 9, 20211215). This has so far not been successful and therefore remains difficult to achieve. Junts has nevertheless not abandoned the pursuit of this aim in the European Parliament. In addition to this, the parties also care greatly about the image of their party and the Catalan independence movement in the eyes of the European audience, as building EU understanding is an important objective of the party in the European Parliament. In its discourse on EU governance, the parties also assign Europe a significant role in relation to a potential Catalan state and are willing for Catalonia to share considerable powers with the European level. Finally, the party at times also relies on European principles and ideas, such as European democracy, interpretations of EU law and references to other small nations to legitimize independence. All in all, Europe has thus played a significant role in CiU, PDeCAT and Junts' independence strategies in the European Parliament.

8. Usage of Europe in Comparison

In this chapter, I compare the usage of Europe by the SNP, ERC and CiU, PDeCAT and Junts as part of their independence strategies in the European Parliament. First, I compare the extent to which Europe was used, in order to make visible the relative salience of Europe in these parties' independence strategies. Second, I compare the way in which Europe was used, that is, whether more pragmatically or more ideally, in the parties' independence strategies by examining four elements: 1) independence objectives in the EP, 2) EU governance structures, 3) the role of the EU in the independence process and 4) Europe in independence legitimations. Finally, the chapter sets out to understand the identified differences in usage of Europe by evaluating a set of contextual factors, based on the secessionist party politics literature.

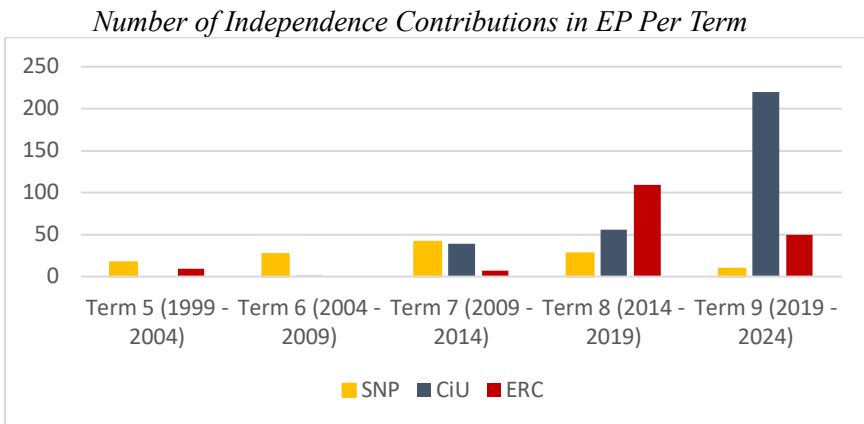
8.1 Comparing the Extent of Usage of Europe

SNP, ERC and CiU, PDeCAT and Junts have all, to varying degrees, brought their independence cause to the European Parliament, sometimes formally and sometimes informally. While informal attention cannot be measured, formal attention can at least provide an indication of how relevant secessionist parties consider the European Parliament for addressing their independence agenda and in what moments they choose to do so. Looking at the absolute number of independence contributions, it is clear that CiU, PDeCAT and Junts have made the most formal independence contributions in the European Parliament between 1999 and 2024 (316), followed at some distance by ERC (175) and then the SNP (122). However, a closer look at Figure 8 reveals a more nuanced picture. The figure shows the number of independence contributions in the European Parliament per parliamentary term (top left), per year (top right), and the share of independence contributions relative to total contributions (bottom left and bottom right).

The top two graphs show that it was, in fact, the SNP that in absolute numbers used the European Parliament the most to address independence between 1999 and 2014. Then, during term 8 (2014–2019), ERC takes that position and during term 9 (2019–2024) Junts pays the most attention to independence in the European Parliament. Overall, SNP's use of the European Parliament to address independence is relatively consistent over time, whereas

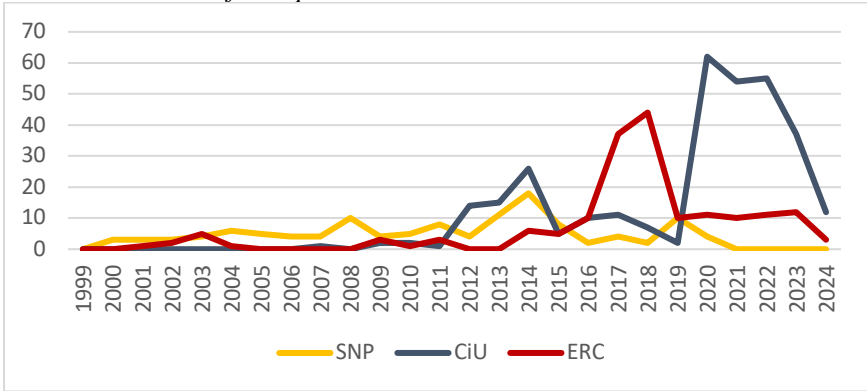
that of CiU, PDeCAT and Junts and ERC is more volatile. Attention for independence also does not necessarily peak in the same years. Most notably, the three parties also used the European Parliament differently in the face of their respective independence referenda. Peaks in usage of the European Parliament can be found around the times of the Scottish (2014) and Catalan (2017) independence referenda for the SNP and ERC, although ERC relied on the European Parliament much more than the SNP did in that context. PDeCAT, in turn, did not strongly increase its attention for independence in the European Parliament in the face of the Catalan independence referendum. Instead, Junts increased its attention later, mainly addressing its dissatisfaction with the Spanish reaction to the referendum.

Figure 8: Independence Contributions in the European Parliament in Comparison¹⁵

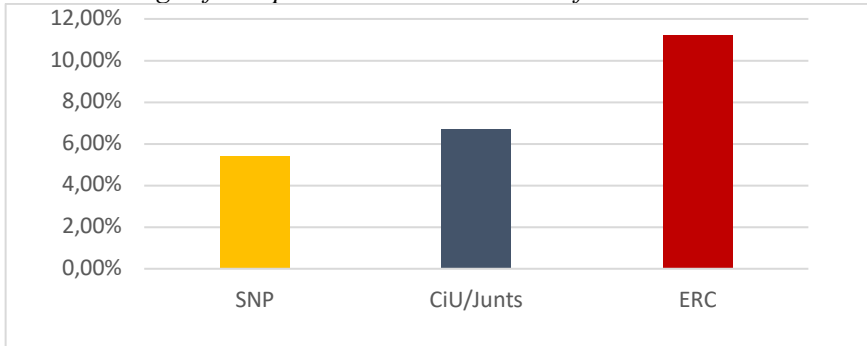


¹⁵ Note that the data in the first two tables in Figure 8 are not adjusted for the number of MEPs each party has in a given term. All parties had between 1 and 3 MEPs throughout the years (see the number of MEPs per party in the “about” sections in each chapter) and there is no strong correlation between the number of MEPs and the number of independence contributions. Moreover, as the last table in Figure 8 shows, the MEPs each had more opportunities to speak about independence formally than they used. The last table in Figure 8 does, however, place the number of independence contributions in proportion to how many contributions were made in total by a party per term.

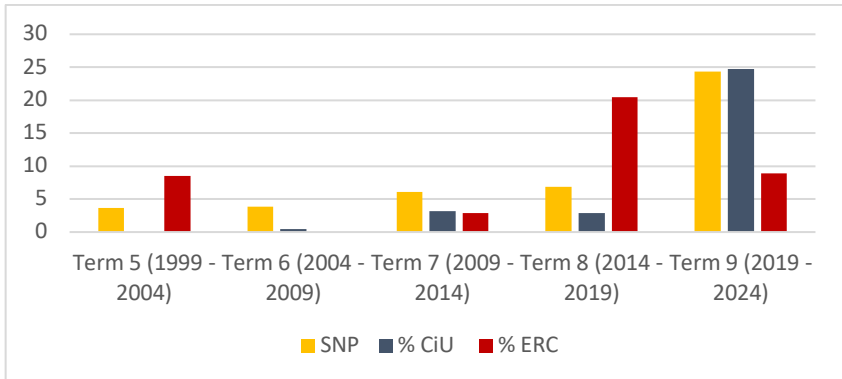
Number of Independence Contributions in EP Per Year



Percentage of Independence Contributions of Total Contributions



Percentage of Independence Contributions of Total Contributions Per Term

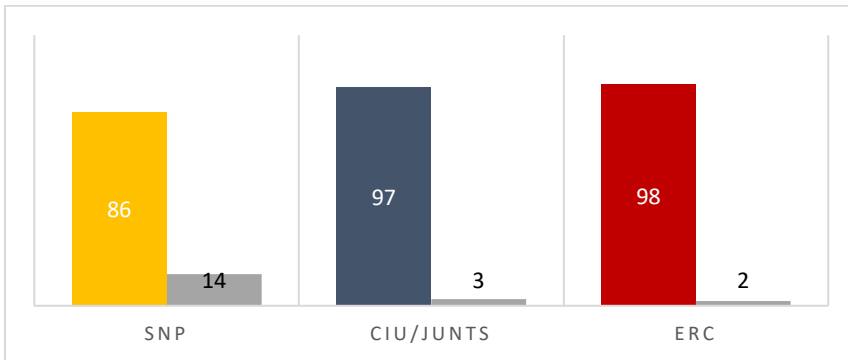


The bottom graphs of Figure 8 furthermore indicate that all three parties were not only in the European Parliament to talk about independence. A substantial share of their contributions concerned other topics, showing that they are far from single-issue parties. At the same time, ERC (11.2%) is the party that has dedicated the highest percentage of its total speeches, questions and explanations of vote to the topic of independence, followed by CiU, PDeCAT and Junts (6.7%) and the SNP (5.4%). The reason why CiU, PDeCAT and Junts do not top this list, however, is that they have been far more active overall in the European Parliament than the other two parties. Over time, the SNP's share of independence contributions relative to total contributions has been more stable, whereas those of ERC and CiU and Junts have increased strongly towards the end of the timeframe, indicating a growing focus on independence compared to earlier periods.¹⁶

Finally, I also find that all three parties have very frequently linked their independence contributions to Europe, either by discussing independence within the structure of the EU, envisioning a role for the EU in the independence process or by using Europe in their legitimations. While the SNP used Europe most frequently in its independence legitimations, CiU, PDeCAT and Junts, and ERC used Europe most in their narratives about their independence process. This is further outlined in Figure 9, which shows that ERC and CiU, PDeCAT and Junts did this 98 percent and 97 percent of the time, respectively, whereas the SNP did so slightly less often at 86 percent of the time.

¹⁶ Note that the SNP has a relatively high share of independence contributions out of total contributions during the ninth term, but this is skewed because the party left the European Parliament early in that term due to Brexit. Moreover, PDeCAT appears to have very few independence contributions during term 8, but this is also skewed by the high total number of contributions the party made during that term.

Figure 9: Percentage of Independence Contributions Linked to Europe in the EP (1999–2024)



Note: the colored columns indicate the percentage of independence contributions per party that is linked to Europe, whereas the grey bars indicate the percentage of contributions per party that is not linked to Europe.

In sum, it can be concluded that the Catalan parties CiU, PDeCAT and Junts and ERC have used the European Parliament more frequently to address independence than the SNP, but in a more volatile manner. When doing so, the two Catalan parties also link EU governance, the independence process and independence legitimations to Europe slightly more often than the SNP. As such, based on the extent of usage of Europe, Europe appears to be slightly more important in the two Catalan parties' independence strategies than in that of the SNP.

8.2 Comparing the Way Europe Is Used: Between Idealism and Pragmatism

8.2.1 Independence Objectives in the European Parliament

SNP, ERC and CiU, PDeCAT and Junts find it important to be present in the European Parliament as it provides a way to be in direct contact with the EU, an opportunity they, as representatives of stateless nations, do not easily get elsewhere. Over time, it is possible to identify both similarities and differences in the purpose with which they use the European Parliament in relation to their independence agenda. All three parties share the aim of using the European Parliament to build sympathy and understanding among their European audience for their party, their nations and their independence quests through networking and Good Europeanism. In the SNP's case, this is referred to as

“goodwill,” whereas ERC and CiU, PDeCAT and Junts more often speak of seeking “understanding.” This need for goodwill and understanding stems from a similar source: the perception of being misunderstood. The parties feel that there are negative associations with being nationalist in the EU and that they are perceived by some as “crazy separatists,” “terrorists” or “extremists.” Instead, they aim to be perceived as normal and reliable in the eyes of their European audience, like other European small nation-states. Therefore, the parties’ MEPs view the European Parliament as a useful place to interact with their European colleagues, show who they are and explain more about their nations, so that others better understand them and are not surprised when the party pushes more strongly for independence (SNP 2, ERC 3, 4, CiU 2, 3). In particular, in the case of Catalonia, ERC and CiU, PDeCAT and Junts also perceive a need to counter the strong voice of Spain in the EU, so the European audience can hear directly from them what they stand for. Trying to control their image in the European Parliament remains a relatively modest goal, as the aim is not to convince the entire European Parliament or EU of their normality, let alone to demand support for independence. Rather, relations are improved one person at a time. All three parties therefore see this objective as pragmatic, achievable through their presence in the European Parliament.

One of the main differences between the three parties is, however, that the SNP has mainly focused on achieving a minor EU attitude change in relation to its independence agenda, whereas the Catalan parties have sought more profound change by also pursuing major EU attitude change and legislative impact. One way in which this becomes particularly clear is in how the parties have acted on their support for the right to self-determination. Throughout its time in the European Parliament, the SNP has upheld its commitment to the right to self-determination by calling on the EU to consider it in specific cases, such as those of the people of Gibraltar and the Sahrawi people in Western Sahara (e.g., MacCormick, Plenary 5, 20020320; Hudghton, Plenary 6, 20060515; Plenary 7, 20111214; 20131210; Smith, Plenary 8, 20170203), but the interviewees did not identify this as one of the party’s main objectives in the European Parliament (SNP 1, 2, 3, 4). The party also does not appear to believe that the EU should significantly change its attitude towards self-determination, as an interviewee stated:

Where I support the principle of self-determination, I’m absolutely silent on anybody’s constitutional discussion—well, there needs to be

a rule of law, free and fair elections, all of that good stuff, but everybody agrees on that (SNP 4).

As such, the quote displays the party's attitude that it will only speak up about self-determination if fundamental principles such as the rule of law and free and fair elections are violated, but that the interviewee perceives that "everyone," implying everyone in the EU, agrees on these principles and that this should therefore rarely be necessary. Hence, while the SNP supports the principle of self-determination, it does not seem to seek far-reaching change in EU attitudes towards it.

For ERC and CiU, PDeCAT and Junts, in turn, the pursuit of self-determination in the EU has held greater importance. The Catalan parties have not only called on the EU to respect the right to self-determination, but have been more forceful and demanding by asking the EU to actively defend it, redefine it, recognize it and ultimately formalize it in EU legislation. As such, the Catalan parties have called for a major attitude change within the EU regarding self-determination, as well as corresponding European legislation. In contrast, the SNP has only once demanded that the EU actively protect the right to self-determination, which was in November 2017, regarding Catalonia (Hudghton and Smith, Plenary 8, 20171115). By comparison, the Catalan parties have made many more such demands and have therefore more systematically pursued the formalization of the right to self-determination in the EU. In particular, ERC already sought a European right to self-determination between 1999 and 2009 and continued to do so thereafter, while Junts only strongly intensified its attention to this between 2019 and 2024 (e.g., Mayol i Raynal, Plenary 5, 20010116; 20020116; 20030409; Junqueras, Plenary 7; 20110202; Oliveres, Plenary 9, 20200129; Ponsatí Obiols, Plenary 9, 20221213; ERC 1,5; CiU 2, 3).

As one interviewee explains about their party's ambitions for the principle of self-determination in the EU, as proposed in 2021:

The idea was to, to put forward a concrete legislative proposal that would allow for the democratic and peaceful solution to these kind of territorial conflicts. In a way to- so that the Catalan case doesn't happen ever again in Europe... And thus, they put forward a concrete proposal. How would also the EU play a role here as a kind of mediator between the member state and the region concerned to find an agreed solution and based on self-determination in the end (ERC 5).

The quote shows that the proposal would certainly apply to the Catalan case, but that the legislation proposed goes beyond this and aims for a systematic and formal change in how the EU would apply the principle of self-determination.

Finally, the parties seem to differ on whether they use the European Parliament to build domestic legitimacy and improve their domestic competitiveness. An ERC interviewee explicitly highlighted that connections in the EU could be used to show domestically that the party enjoyed a certain degree of European support (ERC 5), and SNP interviewees also showed awareness of their domestic audiences by continuing domestic debates at the European level, to demonstrate to their domestic audience that they were defending their principles in that arena (SNP 2, 3). The CiU, PDeCAT and Junts interviewees also sought to cater to their domestic audiences by representing them on issues important to Catalonia and by organizing conferences and petitions. However, the interviewees did not state as clearly that they viewed their activities as a way to build legitimacy or perform better in domestic politics. Rather, they were much more focused on building a better Europe and fostering understanding with the EU audience (CiU 1, 2, 3).¹⁷

In sum, all the parties pragmatically aim for minor EU attitude change and have sought to build relationships and alliances to build either goodwill or normalization of the independence quest among a European audience. ERC and SNP have also sought to use the European Parliament to reach their respective national audiences and improve their domestic competitiveness. However, for the SNP, this is where its ambitions in the European Parliament stop, whereas the Catalan parties also idealistically seek major EU attitude change and legislative impact, especially when it comes to the recognition, defence and ultimately legislation for a European right to self-determination. This shows that the presence in the European Parliament plays a greater role in the Catalan parties' independence strategies than in that of the SNP. Nevertheless, it also shows that the parties do not only use the European Parliament to directly reach their domestic audiences, but that they also seek to reach their European audience.

¹⁷ This, however, does not mean that CiU, PDeCAT and Junts did not have such objectives, but the interview data did not provide sufficient evidence that domestic competition was an important consideration when active in the European Parliament.

8.2.2 Discourses of EU Governance Structures in the European Parliament

The SNP's discourse about the kind of EU they want to be independent in is largely pragmatist, whereas that of ERC and CiU, PDeCAT and Junts is fully idealist, in terms of its usage of Europe. During the early years of the timeframe, 1999 to 2004, the three parties still seemed to share a narrative, as all three parties had adopted a "Europe of the Nations" narrative that aimed for a better position of constitutional regions in the EU. This was also the time when the EU was working towards the European Constitution, and the parties had some concrete objectives on how to reform the EU. SNP's MacCormick represented EFA's interests in the Convention on the Future of Europe and some of the things they sought to achieve were, for example, regional rather than state membership in the Committee of the Regions, access to the Court of Justice for constitutional regions and better involvement of the parliaments of constitutional regions in EU policy-making (MacCormick, 2004, pp. 340–342).

SNP later shifted course and more or less abandoned the "Europe of the Nations" narrative. It was therefore also no longer seeking a European confederation of peoples, countries and regions, because this position had mostly followed the EFA line (MacCormick, Plenary 5, 20000412; SNP 3). The other two parties did not necessarily keep foregrounding the "Europe of the Nations" narrative, but they still from time to time indicated that they wanted an EU that was more adapted to stateless nations (e.g., Puigdemont, Plenary 9, 20221213; Terricabras, Plenary 8, 20170301). This nevertheless means that the three parties, at least at some point, relied on the EU to improve their capacity for self-government and that they prioritized this either instead of, in the case of CiU, or alongside their independence agenda in the EU, in the case of ERC and SNP.

Nevertheless, the most significant difference between the SNP and the two Catalan parties, ERC and CiU, PDeCAT and Junts, was that the former advocated a confederal EU, or what I call a "Union of Member States," whereas the latter two advocated a federal EU, or a "United States of Europe" type model. This key difference between the Catalan and the Scottish pro-independence parties is also noted by the parties themselves. An ERC interviewee, for example, says about the SNP:

I tried always to combine this Catalan position for independence with the clear Europeanist position. It was not clear in all the members and

all the group of the political parties in European Free Alliance. In that time, the Scottish, for instance, is: "Europe, we don't know exactly what Europe is" (ERC 1).

Whereas an SNP interviewee said about ERC and its vision of the EU: "Catalonia gets its independence, but ultimately, I think Spain might disappear, France might disappear" (SNP 2). This means that Europe, quite literally, plays a larger role in the Catalan parties' vision of independence, because once independent, they are willing for Catalonia to share more sovereignty with the EU than the SNP would be in the case of Scottish independence. Rather, the SNP would prefer to keep sovereignty-sharing within limits and therefore strives for Scotland to be a more sovereign, more powerful state than the Catalan parties do for Catalonia. Given that the EU is currently far from a federation, the Catalan parties' discourse is considered more idealistic and the SNP's discourse more pragmatic.

8.2.3 Discourses of the EU in the Independence Process in the European Parliament

Overall, the SNP is largely pragmatist in its discourse on the EU's role in its independence process, whereas ERC and CiU, PDeCAT and Junts have been more idealist. More concretely, the parties differ in that the SNP has adopted a non-interventionist position and has refrained from calls for the EU to become involved in the Scottish independence process (SNP 2, 3, 4). In principle, the Catalan parties agree that Catalan independence is up to the Catalans and must occur by means of a domestic referendum (CiU 2, 3; ERC 4), but they nevertheless make a clear effort to involve the EU in the Catalan independence process. This already begins with providing ongoing information about the Catalan independence process and inviting the EU to comment and give its opinion or interpretation based on EU law (e.g., Tremosa i Balcells, Questions 7, 20111114, Questions, 8, 20170320; Solé, Questions 9, 20221111; Riba i Giner, Questions 9, 20230703).

The Catalan parties also present the EU as a guardian of European principles and law much more systematically than the SNP. With this comes the expectation that the EU would speak out and intervene when Spain obstructed the Catalan independence referendum and resorted to harsh measures afterwards, because the parties believed that this was in violation of European principles and law. The nature of the interventions demanded varies from naming and shaming and launching an infringement procedure to

sanctions and suspension of certain membership rights, but it is often also left open (e.g., Tremosa i Balcells, Questions 7, 20140210; Solé, Plenary 8, 20171004; Terricabras, Questions 8, 20170927). The SNP, in turn, did not systematically demand that the EU defend European principles and law in relation to territorial conflicts. It only did so a few times during the eighth term (2014–2019) (Smith, Plenary 8, 20170315; 20171115; Questions 8, 20141210). An SNP interviewee acknowledged this difference, stating about their fellow EFA member ERC:

I think Equerra have more hopes that the EU...I think they have hoped that the EU would speak out more strongly than the EU has done. And I think they're still hopeful. They still want the EU somehow to assist in their quest for independence. I don't think the SNP, we never really saw that the EU would come to our help. You know, we recognize that there are other countries: there's Spain, there's Belgium, France. There are other countries with independence movements who aren't going to necessarily assist us (SNP 2).

The interviewee thereby also takes a more pragmatist approach, basing their non-interventionist position on the perception that the EU would not come to their aid, as the EU itself consists of countries with their own independence movements and therefore has no interest in creating any precedent by supporting the Scots.

On top of that, especially during the ninth term, as part of the self-determination caucus in the European Parliament, the Catalan parties also suggested that the EU should provide legislation on how territorial conflicts in and outside the EU should be handled. The SNP did not take part in this, since the caucus had been set up only after its departure from the European Parliament in 2021. Nevertheless, there had been earlier attempts to set up such a caucus during the sixth term (2009–2014), but the SNP had been against this (ERC 1). As such, the SNP has not advocated that the EU should have a legislative role when it comes to handling territorial conflicts.

There are not many significant differences between the Catalan parties in how they have constructed the EU's role in their independence process. They essentially show the same preference for the EU to act primarily as a commentator and as a guardian of European principles and law. However, because CiU was not yet pro-independence before 2012, the party did not support ERC's efforts to set up a caucus on self-determination during the sixth term (2009–2014), which aimed to advocate for a European right to self-

determination. CiU furthermore did not formally advocate internal enlargement during the fifth term (1999–2004), as ERC did. Instead, it addressed enlargement in more general terms, without reference to Catalonia, and only during the seventh (2009–2014) and ninth term (2019–2024) did it explicitly engage with internal enlargement (e.g., Gasoliba i Böhm, Plenary 5, 20020702; Ferrer, Plenary 5, 19990721; Vallvé, Plenary 5, 20030904).

While there are fewer similarities than differences between the three parties regarding their discourse about the EU's role in the independence process, there are some. For example, all three parties, though at different times, can be found speaking out in favour of the EU as a facilitator of enlargement for stateless nations. ERC pushed for internal enlargement to be included in the European Constitution during term 5 (1999–2004) (Mayol i Raynal, Plenary 5, 20030409; 20030924). Between 2009 and 2012, both the SNP and CiU began asking questions about how internal enlargement would work in the case of Scotland and advanced arguments for why automatic EU membership should be available for stateless nations within EU Member States when they become independent (Hudghton, Plenary 7; 20091216; 20110406; Tremosa i Balcells, Questions 7, 20120123; 20120917). Finally, once Brexit became a reality, Junts again called for the EU to provide a framework for internal enlargement (Ponsatí Obiols, Plenary 9, 20200717; 20201218).

Furthermore, the parties more or less agree that the EU should take on a mediating role in the face of the Catalan territorial conflict. ERC is the most vocal about this, but CiU, PDeCAT and Junts and the SNP address it as well (e.g., Terricabras, Plenary 8, 20170913; Solé, Plenary 8, 20180418; Ponsatí Obiols and Puigdemont, Plenary 9, 20210629; CiU 2, 3). This is slightly surprising in the case of the SNP, given its generally non-interventionist attitude (SNP 2, 3, 4), but in solidarity the party eventually expressed support for EU dialogue facilitation after the violence towards Catalan voters in the 2017 referendum, as well as the removal of the Catalan government following the vote and the imprisonment of politicians (Hudghton and Smith, Plenary 8, 20171115; Smith, Plenary 9, 20190716). Nevertheless, the party did not continue to push for this, in line with its policy of letting each independence movement fight its own battle (SNP 4). In sum, while all parties expect the EU to be neutral on whether their nation actually becomes independent or not, the SNP does not expect the EU to safeguard its independence process, whereas the Catalan parties do. In other words, the SNP does not rely on the EU in the same way as the Catalan parties, and therefore Europe plays a more

important and central role in the Catalan parties' independence strategy than in that of the SNP.

8.2.4 Discourses of Europe in Independence Legitimations in the European Parliament

There are some commonalities but also quite a few differences in how the three parties have used Europe in their independence legitimations. First, it is worth pointing out that what the three parties have in common is that they rely on a largely overlapping set of legitimations that make use of Europe. Most significantly, the three parties have all relatively consistently, but to different degrees, made use of the “normal” argument, which uses statehood for small nations in Europe as a benchmark for what is normal and just in Europe (e.g., MacCormick, Plenary 5, 20030409; Hudghton, Plenary 8, 20180217; Mayol i Raynal, Plenary 5, 20020116; Terricabras, Plenary 8, 20170913; Tremosa i Balcells, Plenary 7, 20121022; Plenary 8, 20150311). This therefore shows that European precedent is an important way in which the case for independence in the EU is made. On top of that, all three parties also, to a lesser extent, make use of “European democracy” arguments (e.g., Hudghton, Plenary 7, 20121212; Plenary 8, 20150311; 20171115; Smith, Plenary 8, 20171115; Tremosa i Balcells, Plenary 7, 20120329; Plenary 8, 20161214; Junqueras, Plenary 7, 20110202; Solé, Plenary 8, 20171211) and “better future for the EU” arguments (Tremosa i Balcells, Plenary 8, 20151125; Ponsatí, Plenary 9, 20230418; Solé, Plenary 8, 20170201; Hudghton, Plenary 6, 20080312). As such, the parties seem to a certain extent to have a shared way of using Europe to legitimate independence.

Beyond this, however, the usage of Europe in the legitimating discourses of the three parties differs quite significantly. The SNP has used Europe more frequently in its independence legitimations than the Catalan parties. The party also has a more diversified set of legitimations that it uses with higher intensity (at least more than 10 times) compared to the Catalan parties, which concentrate mainly on one argument (see Annex 4). The SNP's usage of Europe is also largely pragmatic and instrumental in nature, whereas the usage of Europe by the Catalan parties is more idealist and principled in nature.

The SNP most commonly uses Europe through the “voice in the EU” argument. As such, it places emphasis on a positive case for independence, arguing that independence in the EU is needed for Scotland because it would allow it to have greater influence in EU policymaking. In contrast, the Catalan

parties place much less emphasis on their need to influence EU policymaking. On top of that, the SNP also relies quite consistently on the principled “European identity” argument, whereas the Catalan parties do not do so to the same extent. The SNP also makes a much stronger instrumental remedial case for independence, whereas the instrumental case of the Catalan parties is more focused on constructing a better future in the EU. As such, the SNP places more emphasis on Europe-related grievances, such as the EU’s state-centered structure and the perceived under-representation within the host-state in the EU. That is not to say that the Catalan parties do not express grievances, but these are mainly related to the independence process and the EU’s perceived lack of intervention, rather than being used directly to legitimize independence in the European Parliament.

ERC and CiU, PDeCAT and Junts have used Europe very similarly in their legitimating discourse, and the most common way they use Europe in this discourse is by drawing on the idea of European democracy. Given that an important part of their mission in the European Parliament was not to legitimize Catalan independence itself but rather their right to decide in an independence referendum, portraying their interpretation of democracy as a European idea was important in lending it more credibility. In the same spirit, the Catalan parties also regularly relied on their interpretations of European law to legitimize an independence referendum. This principled use of Europe can be understood in light of the need to convince both domestic and European audiences that they had the right to self-determination and independence. Even in the aftermath of the 2017 referendum, it became clear that the EU interpreted European principles of democracy and the rule of law differently from the Catalan parties, leading to a need to also enter into debate with the EU about the meaning of key European principles. The SNP, in turn, departing from a different context where there was no dispute about the Scottish right to decide, did not rely on European law when legitimating independence and drew less on the “European democracy” argument. The Scottish right to decide was enshrined in the 2012 Edinburgh Agreement, and after that the party only occasionally called on the EU to respect this as well (e.g., Hudghton, Plenary 7, 20121212; Plenary 8, 20150311; 20171115; Smith, Plenary 8, 20171115). Overall, the idealistic and principled use of Europe by ERC and CiU, PDeCAT and Junts, as well as the pragmatic and instrumental use of Europe by the SNP, is in line with how the three parties see the EU. The SNP envisions an EU that cooperates where there are benefits, whereas

the Catalan parties envision an EU that is more than just the sum of its parts and therefore should also stand for its own ideology.

8.3 Usage of Europe in Comparison

This chapter compared how the SNP, ERC, CiU, PDeCAT and Junts used Europe in their independence strategies in the European Parliament. The comparison shows a small set of ways in which all three parties use “Europe,” regardless of whether their overall approach is more pragmatic or more idealistic. For example, during the early 2000s, all three parties subscribed to a vision of “Europe of the Nations” and have supported the EU enabling internal enlargement. In addition, there is a shared emphasis on normality. The parties primarily used Europe in different ways to legitimize independence, but they shared a focus on the normality of statehood, the process of becoming a state in Europe, and the desire to be perceived as normal political actors. Zooming out to the parties’ objectives in the European Parliament related to their independence agendas, the theme of normality reappears. All parties sought to use the European Parliament to build goodwill and understanding by relying on networking as well as on Good Europeanism during regular policy-making processes within the institution. For all three parties, this objective stemmed in part from a shared perception of being misunderstood as extremist nationalists in the European context, while all they wanted was to normalize their status as Members of the European Parliament and as parties with an independence agenda.

Nevertheless, the use of “Europe” by the SNP differs in several important ways from that of ERC, CiU, PDeCAT and Junts. Overall, the SNP has used Europe largely in pragmatic terms, whereas ERC and CiU, PDeCAT and Junts have tended to use it in a more idealistic manner. More specifically, the SNP has used the European Parliament less frequently than the Catalan parties to address independence. Where the SNP primarily uses the European Parliament to build goodwill, the Catalan parties also use it to promote more substantial shifts in EU attitudes regarding the protection of fundamental rights and EU law, and even to advocate for the possibility of legislating self-determination. In the SNP’s vision of independence, it is willing to share significantly less sovereignty within a confederal EU than the Catalan parties would under their conception of a federal EU. The Catalan parties also envision a more federal EU playing a more significant role in their independence processes, effectively expecting the EU to safeguard the

Catalan independence process, whereas the SNP has not made such a demand. In addition, the SNP has primarily used Europe in an instrumental and pragmatic way to legitimize independence, whereas the Catalan parties have relied more heavily on their interpretation of European principles in an idealistic manner. Differences between the Catalan parties are minor, as illustrated by ERC's earlier formal pursuit of a right to European self-determination in term five, whereas Junts only became more vocal on this issue in term nine. Overall, the Catalan parties' independence strategies are more deeply interwoven with Europe and assign it a more significant role than the SNP does. The Catalan parties rely on their own construction of what Europe should be, whereas the SNP relies on what the EU already offers.

8.4 Usage of Europe Contextualized

The differences in how the SNP, ERC, and CiU, PDeCAT and Junts use "Europe" can be better understood by examining a set of contextual factors identified in the theory section: perceptions of access to independence, party attachment to Europe, perceived party strength, perceived public opinion and parties' evaluations of EU responses to territorial demands.

8.4.1 Perceived Access to Independence

A contextual factor that helps explain differences in the use of Europe is perceived access to independence. For the SNP, perceived access to independence appears to have been relatively high given Scotland's position within the UK. When the SNP won an absolute majority in the 2011 Scottish Parliament elections with a manifesto commitment to hold an independence referendum, the UK government acknowledged this mandate. Because Scotland was already recognized as a distinct nation within the UK, the UK government also chose not to obstruct the process. There were, however, discussions about whether the Scottish Parliament could legislate for an independence referendum itself and whether the UK Parliament should instead legislate for and administer the referendum. Ultimately, the matter was resolved bilaterally in the 2012 Edinburgh Agreement, whereby an independence referendum was to be legislated by the Scottish Parliament under Section 30 of the Scotland Act before the end of 2014. The agreement also stated that both governments intended to "work together constructively in the light of the outcome, whatever it was" (Edinburgh Agreement, 2012, par. 30), and by demonstrating mutual commitment to the agreement even in

the event of defeat, both governments reinforced its legitimacy (Casanas Adam, 2019, p. 4-6).

Overall, the Edinburgh Agreement provided legal certainty for the Scottish independence process, but it was limited in that it did not provide a basis for any potential future independence referenda (Casanas Adam, 2019, pp. 4–6). Hence, the SNP’s access to a second independence referendum was again constrained after 2014, given that constitutional matters are reserved to the UK. A referendum would therefore require agreement from the UK government, which it has so far refused to provide. This became a problem for the SNP when it sought to organize another independence referendum, as indicated by Nicola Sturgeon in June 2022, while in the same year the UK Supreme Court ruled that the Scottish Parliament does not have the jurisdiction to legislate for an independence referendum (Paun, Sargeant, Henderson, Allen and Isaac, 2024). The UK government has justified its refusal of another referendum by arguing that 2014 constituted a “once in a generation vote” (BBC, 2020, 2025) and by employing what Meislová (2022) describes as a “now is not the time” discourse. This discourse, used by figures such as May and Johnson, has relied heavily on fear-based framing and the invocation of worst-case scenarios that remain relatively abstract. As such, the UK government has walked a tightrope: while not denying that the Scottish people retain a right to self-determination, it has in practice delayed any renewed referendum process in recent years. Consequently, Scotland retains a formal pathway to independence in principle, but it remains unclear whether this could materialize in the near future.

In contrast, ERC, CiU, PDeCAT and Junts in Catalonia have had significantly fewer opportunities to perceive access to independence. Spanish courts have, since at least their rulings on the Basque “right to decide” from 2003 onwards, held that an autonomous region does not have the authority to call an independence referendum or possess a unilateral right to decide, as the Spanish Constitution does not provide for such a mechanism. As a result, any independence referendum would require constitutional reform at the national level. In addition, Spain does not recognize the international right to self-determination as applicable to Catalonia, arguing that it is limited to colonial contexts, whereas Catalonia is an autonomous region within a liberal democracy (Lopez and Sanjaume Calvet, 2020, pp. 508–509). As Lopez and Sanjaume Calvet (2020) note, this makes the organization of an independence referendum extremely difficult, since even agreement between the Spanish and Catalan governments would be insufficient without broader constitutional

change. Consequently, the framing of the right to decide as dependent on constitutional reform effectively closes a wide range of institutional pathways for Catalan independence actors (pp. 508–509).

These conditions were not conducive to the Catalan independence movement and forced both Esquerra and CiU to adapt their strategies. According to the nationalist narrative, it was particularly in 2012 that CiU encountered a genuine deadlock. Two years earlier, in 2010, the Spanish Constitutional Court had ruled that Catalonia's Statute of Autonomy could not be further expanded, triggering public and political outrage in Catalonia. CiU initially responded cautiously and attempted to negotiate a fiscal agreement with the Spanish government in order to obtain arrangements similar to those of the Basque Country and Navarre. However, when this proposal was rejected, it became increasingly difficult to accommodate Catalan demands for greater self-determination within Spain (Kraus and Verges, 2017, p. 148). The perception of deadlock intensified as, between 2012 and 2015, the Spanish government repeatedly rejected Catalan requests to negotiate a referendum (Serra, 2024, p. 5).

Nevertheless, Catalan pro-independence parties continued their efforts and increasingly resorted to more creative strategies to overcome this impasse. For the first time, pro-independence parties ran together in an electoral coalition under the name *Junts pel Sí*. In 2014, the Catalan Parliament also proposed legislation granting itself the authority to organize an independence referendum, but this was rejected by the Spanish Congress. The Catalan government subsequently proposed a law on a non-binding popular consultation, which was declared unconstitutional by the Constitutional Court. Eventually, a participatory process was organized on 9 November 2014 by the Catalan government with the support of volunteers. Following these developments, the *Junts pel Sí* coalition, including CDC and ERC, increasingly shifted toward unilateralism. The 2015 elections were framed as a proxy referendum on independence, but since *Junts pel Sí* only secured a majority of seats and not of votes, the only perceived legitimate path to independence became the organization of a unilateral referendum in October 2017. In response, the Spanish government deployed a police operation to prevent the referendum, enforcing court rulings that Catalonia does not have the right to secede (Lopez and Sanjaume Calvet, 2020, pp. 506–507). In the aftermath, ERC and *Junts* Members of the European Parliament continued to maintain that Catalonia could achieve independence and would in the future have an opportunity to organize a referendum. However, they also

acknowledged that a more substantial majority would be required for any referendum and its outcome to be considered legitimate (CiU 2, 3, ERC 4). As one interviewee explains:

We have to build up more and stronger alliances within our society, within our country, but also outside. That's why also international dimension is important for us. Because if we want to be successful, which we want, we need to be stronger. We need to be a more consistent majority. The bigger the majority and the more consistent and persistent the majority is, then the more difficult will be for others to keep denying us our democratic rights, to choose our political future. So it's not a matter of when, but a matter of how we get to this (ERC 4).

As such, the Catalan parties acknowledge the legal obstacles they face in organizing an independence referendum, yet they seek to continue to work around these constraints. This makes the EU all the more important, as it represents one potential pathway through which they may pursue their objectives.

Hence, Scotland and Catalonia, while both having organized independence referenda, present significantly different contexts in terms of perceived access to independence. While Scotland does not have the unilateral power to call an independence referendum, it has already held a bilaterally agreed referendum, whereas Catalonia has never had such an opportunity and is unlikely to obtain one in the future without constitutional change. Although Scotland and the SNP have, in the short term, been denied the possibility of organizing a second independence referendum, the precedent set by the 2014 referendum demonstrates that the UK government recognizes a negotiated right to decide, leaving open the possibility that such a referendum could be granted again in the future. This difference in access to independence between Scotland and Catalonia also aligns with, and helps explain, why the SNP has used Europe largely in pragmatic terms, whereas ERC, CiU, PDeCAT and Junts have tended to use it in more idealistic ways. After all, from 2012 onwards the SNP had already secured the possibility of a bilateral independence referendum. As such, the party did not rely heavily on the EU in its independence strategy. Moreover, the fact that the UK accepted the outcome also increased the likelihood that the EU would accept it. In contrast, Catalan parties faced a persistent institutional deadlock in their pursuit of independence, which made even a limited potential role for the EU in legitimizing a referendum all the

more significant. This may have encouraged a more idealistic use of the EU, particularly in relation to demands for EU involvement. Catalan interviewees confirm that there was indeed a degree of reliance on the EU in their independence efforts. For example, they viewed the Scottish precedent as something that could “help us gain ground in Madrid”, and there was also a belief that Spain’s EU membership would constrain state repression (CiU 2), as it would be inconsistent with EU law (ERC 3; 4). When this expectation did not materialize, one ERC interviewee argued that the EU’s lack of intervention led him to conclude that unilateralism was no longer the appropriate strategy (ERC 3).

8.4.2 Attachment to Europe

Attachment to Europe also seems to matter for how secessionist parties use Europe in the European Parliament. While the SNP is currently a firmly pro-European party, its attachment to Europe can in some respects be considered relatively weak in historical terms. The SNP has a comparatively short history of pro-Europeanism. Until 1988, when the party officially declared support for independence within the EU, it was instead Eurosceptic. At that time, the EU was viewed as an undemocratic, elitist, centralizing and bureaucratic free-market project that would sideline Scottish interests, particularly in agriculture and fisheries (Hepburn and McLoughlin, 2011, p. 388; Maddens, Muyters, Wolfs and Van Hecke, 2020). The party even supported a “leave” vote in the 1975 EEC referendum on whether the UK should remain in the European Economic Community, which it had joined in 1973, partly on the grounds that Scotland had not been consulted as a nation on accession (Dardanelli, 2003, p. 275). After 1988, however, the SNP reversed its position and became supportive of European integration, increasingly framing the EU as facilitating Scottish independence rather than constraining it (Dardanelli, 2003, p. 827).

When the SNP changed its position on Europe in the late 1980s, scholars argued that it did so for mainly rational rather than identity-driven reasons, i.e., a reinterpretation of the opportunity structure (e.g. Dardanelli, 2003; Ichijo and Smith, 2004; Hepburn and McLoughlin, 2011, p. 395). Ichijo and Smith (2004), for example, emphasize the SNP’s strong need to distinguish itself and claim that an important reason the SNP changed its attitude towards Europe was that the Conservatives became more critical of Europe. In their words: “If being Scottish means not being English, and being English means

being Eurosceptical, being less Eurosceptical is one way of asserting one's Scottishness" (p. 143). Dardanelli (2003) and Hepburn and McLoughlin (2011) also focus on rational reasons for the SNP's pro-Europeanism. While they argue that there was a possibility that party figures, mainly Winnie Ewing, may have been socialized into being more favourable towards the EU, Dardanelli (2003) emphasizes the ideological shift within the party regarding how sovereignty did not need to be a zero-sum game but could be shared. In addition, both scholars point out that the EU moved ideologically closer to the SNP with its increased attention to regional and social policy (Dardanelli, 2003, p. 281; Hepburn and McLoughlin, 2011, p. 388). Based on this, the SNP recalculated the costs and benefits of a pro-European position and concluded that pursuing independence in the EU would minimize the costs of secession while limiting constraints on independence (Dardanelli, 2003, p. 281). On top of that, Hepburn and McLoughlin (2011) also argue that the SNP did not have a deeply ideologically rooted attachment to the EU that would outlast periods of increased Euroscepticism during the 2000s (p. 395). This therefore means that it remains to be seen how deep-rooted the SNP's favourable attitude towards the EU, and therefore also its attachment to Europe, really is.

While the SNP has chosen to embrace the EU and European integration, it has done so with clear limits and a degree of hesitation. In particular, after 1999 the SNP gradually became more critical of the EU (Maddens, Muylers, Wolfs and Van Hecke, 2020, p. 131). Former SNP leader John Swinney, for example, indicated in a 2005 interview that he believed the party had been naïve in its early pro-European phase, accepting EU policies uncritically, but that it should no longer automatically agree to everything and should establish clearer boundaries (Hepburn and McLoughlin, 2011, p. 390). The party was also critical of the 2004 Constitutional Treaty and the 2009 Lisbon Treaty, emphasizing the need to ensure that EU policy did not undermine Scottish interests. In particular, it has consistently criticized the centralization of the Common Fisheries Policy, and in its 2014 election manifesto it opposed Scotland's membership of the eurozone and Schengen (SNP, 2009, p. 16; Hepburn and McLoughlin, 2011, p. 390; Maddens, Muylers, Wolfs and Van Hecke, 2020, p. 132). Ultimately, Hepburn and McLoughlin (2011) argue that the SNP's pro-Europeanism has not been central to the party's self-understanding, but has instead been primarily instrumental and pragmatic (pp. 396–397).

Right before Brexit, official SNP discourse in the European Parliament appeared to emphasize more than ever the importance of the EU for Scotland,

as well as the idea that Scotland is a European nation (e.g. Smith, Plenary 7, 20111213; Plenary 8, 20170315; Allard, Plenary 9, 20200115). When asked what this means, SNP interviewees first refer to history, including old trading links such as the Hanseatic League, as well as shared elements of royalty, religion and geography. Some also argue that Scotland is European in its political choices, referring not only to deliberate choices about the type of partners and allies it seeks, but also to institutional design choices such as the use of a hemicycle in the Scottish Parliament and the adoption of proportional representation when the Parliament was established in 1999 (SNP 1, 3, 4). Ultimately, being European also appears to be defined in contrast to England:

And the result of the Brexit referendum in Scotland was very different from that in England, and I think that, while it may have surprised some people, illustrates that current residents of Scotland still see themselves as having, wanting to have, links to Europe (SNP 3).

As such, the SNP's Scottish attachment is constructed less on emotional identification and more on historical connections, political choices, and an attempt to distinguish Scotland from the United Kingdom. This aligns with Nicholson's (2022) conclusion that pro-Europeanism has become part of the SNP's cosmopolitan and outward-looking identity, one that relies on cooperation with European countries. However, it also continues to function as a tool for differentiation from Westminster (p. 14). While the SNP, upon its exit from the EU, asked Europe to "leave a light on" for Scotland, independence outside the EU remains a possible option as well (Brown, 2017, p. 145; SNP 4). Overall, the SNP has increasingly demonstrated an attachment to Europe, but this attachment is relatively recent and is widely characterized in the literature as limited and pragmatic. As such, the SNP's European attachment can be considered present but relatively weak.

The Catalan parties, in turn, exhibit a stronger attachment to Europe. ERC has a long and consistent history of supporting European integration and has been notably willing to share sovereignty with Europe, more so than with Spain (Maddens, Muyters, Wolfs and Van Hecke, 2020, p. 133; ERC/EFA, 2021). An ERC interviewee further explains Catalonia's attachment to Europe by noting that Catalans turned their attention to Europe during the Franco regime:

Some Catalan people organized this Europeanist movement and it was prosecuted by the dictatorship because they were not very Europeanist. But they wanted the isolation of Spain after the World War. But for us Europeanism was the way out, after the dictatorship and we had a long Europeanist tradition coming from the end of the ninth century. So I vindicate this Europeanist tradition of Catalonia and the Catalan people (ERC 1).

In the 1980s, following the end of Franco's regime, the EU was seen by ERC as a means of protecting Catalans from further human rights abuses and as a source of economic modernization (Eichert, 2016, p. 67). Since then, ERC has remained consistently supportive of European integration. This support has undoubtedly been accompanied by disappointment over the EU's lack of intervention in response to Spanish countermeasures during the 2017 independence referendum, yet the party has remained strongly pro-European. On its website, the party frames its pro-Europeanism as part of its nationalist identity, stating that it is "faithful to the Europeanist tradition inherent in political Catalanism" (Esquerra Republicana, n.d.). In the European Parliament, the party's MEPs can likewise still be seen expressing their European orientation, or "Europeanism" (Solé, Plenary 9, 2023).

CiU has also shown a long and consistent history of support for European integration. For CiU, as well as its predecessor, Lliga Regionalista, Catalonia joining the EU and European citizenship was viewed as a way for Catalonia to become a modern democratic society (Giordano and Roller, 2002, pp. 104–105; Gómez-Reino, 2014). While the party does not frequently explicitly discuss its European identity, its MEPs can be seen expressing "feeling European and Catalan" and talking about "European identity" as something positive (De Paula Gambús, Plenary 7, 20141112; Tremosa i Balcells, Questions 7, 201110). An interviewee also in particular emphasizes how Catalan history is tied with European history and also explains that Catalonia has been used to the idea of sovereignty as something to be shared from early on (CiU 3). What particularly indicates that both ERC's and CiU's attachment to Europe is particularly strong is that both parties have held on to their pro-European identity, even though Spanish parties are also pro-European and support European integration. Therefore this pro-European position does not offer anything significant to distinguish themselves on.

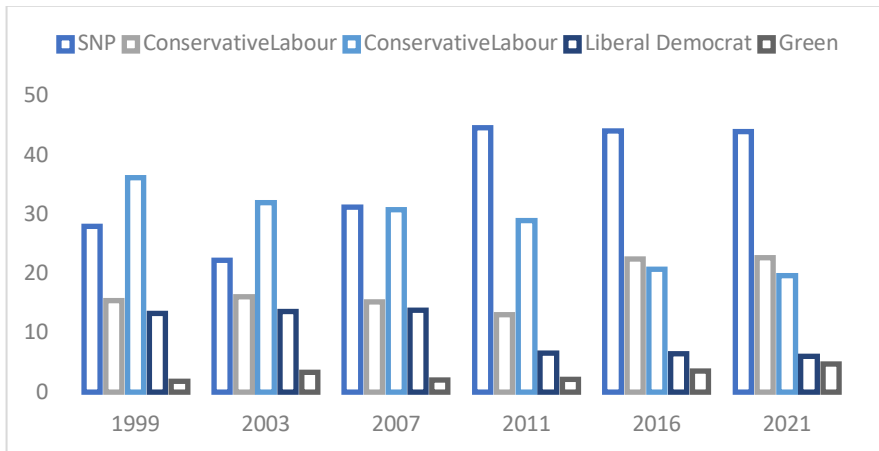
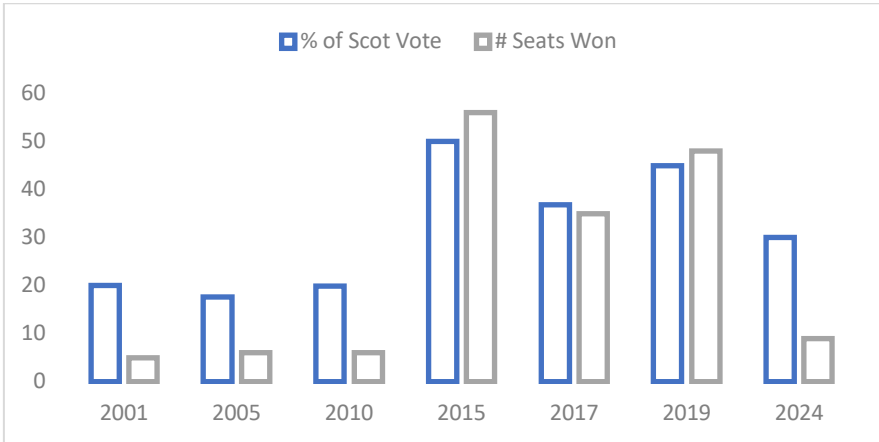
As such, neither CiU nor ERC has used its positioning on Europe strategically to distinguish itself from Spain, indicating more genuine support

for European integration (Giordano and Roller, 2002, pp. 104–105). In sum, over the years the SNP has displayed a relatively weaker attachment to Europe, which corresponds with a more pragmatic use of Europe, whereas ERC and CiU, PDeCAT and Junts have displayed a stronger attachment to Europe, helping to explain their more idealistic use of Europe in the European Parliament.

8.2.3 Perceived Party Strength

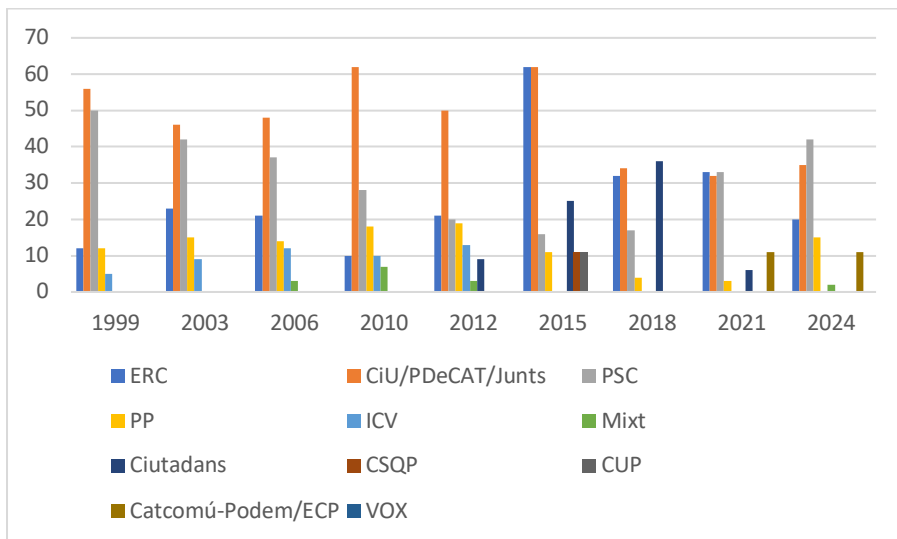
Firstly, perceptions of party strength may help explain differences in the use of Europe. Overall, the SNP has had a strong track record in Scottish politics during the 2000s. Between 1999 and 2024, the SNP became increasingly electorally successful: in 1999, it became the largest opposition party in the Scottish Parliament, and from 2007 onwards it became a steady governing party in the Scottish Government. As Figure 10 shows, the 2014 independence referendum appears to have increased the party’s popularity in the House of Commons as well, despite the “No” vote (Carrell, 2011; Carrell and Brooks, 2019). As such, SNP leaders have been aware that they have had a strong mandate to pursue independence for Scotland. Moreover, under Alex Salmond and Nicola Sturgeon, the party had leaders who were widely perceived as strong. They both led the party in a centralized manner, supported by a close-knit inner circle (Bush, 2023). According to Michael Russell, a prominent SNP figure, the party recognized early on that Salmond was an “exceptional talent” and was praised for his ability to be both strategic and connect with people (Brooks and Carrell, 2024). Nicola Sturgeon also maintained consistently high approval ratings, even after her surprise resignation in 2023, and was voted “best politician in the last 30 years” in a survey conducted by Ipsos (Ipsos, 2025; McKay, 2025). In addition, the SNP had access to two MEPs who served in the European Parliament for over 20 and 15 years respectively, allowing them to develop substantial institutional knowledge of how the European Parliament and the EU function. As such, the SNP was able to use Europe from a position of sustained electoral success, strong leadership and long-standing representation in the European Parliament.

Figure 10: Vote Share SNP UK General Elections (left) and Scottish Elections (right)



Source: House of Commons, 2020; 2021)

Figure 11: Catalan Regional Election Results in Number of Seats



Note: In the 2015 election, ERC and CiU/PDeCAT ran together in a coalition. That is why they are indicated to have the same number of seats (Parlament de Catalunya, n.d.).

While ERC has largely used Europe in an idealistic way, the party’s MEPs leaned more pragmatic between 2009 and 2011. Even in the years before (1999–2009), the party’s independence-related activity in the European Parliament was very limited, despite its idealistic discourse. This corresponds with a period in which the party was not perceived to have strong leadership (Serra, 2024, pp. 6–12), and the ERC MEP was largely left to determine independently how Europe would be used. The party also saw itself as small domestically, holding 20 seats in the 2006 elections and 10 seats in the 2010 elections for the Catalan Parliament. Between 1999 and 2011, the party also had only one MEP at a time, and a different one in each term, which may have weakened institutional memory. Especially during 2009–2011, there did not appear to be a belief that the party could use Europe in any significant way to advance its independence agenda, beyond efforts to normalize its image. As one interviewee explains when asked about the party’s objectives in the European Parliament at the time:

I think for a small party that, like Esquerra, the European Parliament seems very far away, and we didn't feel like we were channelling any

kind of strategy from the party to Brussels. We felt like it was up to us to. And I think that's something. I mean, I'm not proud of it. I think we were kind of asking the party to be more serious about it, but at the end of the day, you realize that for a regional party with, with at that time, it was very, very weak, Esquerra. Now we are governing and we have the presidency of Catalonia. But in 2010, for instance it was very weak (SNP 2).

Regarding the pursuit of independence in the European Parliament specifically, the interviewee added: “We only had between 20 and 10 seats in the Catalan Parliament. And at that time we were very, very weak. So for us it was an ideal. It was not something realistically to pursue independence there” (ERC 2). In the years that followed, this changed: the party developed more stable leadership under Oriol Junqueras, expanded electorally, and became one of the largest parties in Catalonia between 2015 and 2021 (Serra, 2024). The party also re-entered the Catalan government and, with two MEPs, gained greater ambition in the European Parliament with regard to independence. One of these, Jordi Solé, served two consecutive terms (2014–2019 and 2019–2024), providing continuity in the European Parliament. As such, when ERC perceived itself as weak, it tended to adopt a more pragmatic use of Europe rather than pursue its idealistic objectives.

CiU and later PDeCAT and Junts can be argued to have viewed themselves as strong parties, although this perceived strength appears more vulnerable after 2015. First, the parties have consistently been among the most popular in Catalonia (see Figure 11). After 2015, the party may have declined in seat share, but PDeCAT and later Junts remained among the largest parties. In addition, they were in the Catalan Government between 2010 and 2024, providing them with strong access to information and institutional resources. There is also anecdotal evidence that CiU's party leaders considered it a strong party. For example, Secretary General and leader of UDC Josep Antoni Duran i Lleida stated in a 2007 interview with radio station RAC1 that he saw CDC as “a very strong party” (Europa Press, 2007), and party leader (2001–2015) and President of Catalonia (2010–2016) Artur Mas also described CDC as “a success story for 40 years” in a speech at the national CDC Council in 2016, as well as a “decisive party” when speaking to CDC youth in 2016 (Antena3, 2016; Navarra Información, 2016). However, CiU's weakness ultimately lay in its nature as a party federation, and Mas's move toward supporting

independence ended CDC's 37-year partnership with UDC in 2015 (Lasalas & Alcázar, 2019).

The perceived party strength of CiU's successors is arguably more contested. When PDeCAT was established in 2016 as essentially a successor to CDC, General Coordinator Marta Pascal initially expressed confidence that, with Puigdemont on the list, the party would perform well in the regional elections, describing the party as young but rooted and Puigdemont as a strong leader (Europa Press, 2016). However, the party soon experienced internal disagreements, as Puigdemont clashed with PDeCAT's leadership over both strategic and organizational issues (Mompó and Barberá, 2025). As a result, Puigdemont left the party and continued his own project under the name Junts per Catalunya in 2020, while PDeCAT's electoral success declined and the party was eventually dissolved in 2023 (Catalan News, 2023). Junts, in contrast, became more strongly centered around the figure of Puigdemont, whose leadership was supported by 90% of party members at the 2024 party congress. However, following the regional elections in May 2024 and his inability to defeat PSC, more voices within the party have reportedly begun to question whether it is time for new leadership (Falcó, 2024; Aragonés, 2025). At the European level, the party did benefit from some continuity, with Tremosa i Balcells serving in both the seventh and eighth parliamentary terms (2009–2014 and 2014–2019), although otherwise representation in the European Parliament varied across terms.

In sum, it is possible to identify a correspondence between perceived party strength in the SNP and CiU, PDeCAT and Junts and their ability to choose how to use Europe. For the SNP and CiU, PDeCAT and Junts, there are no clear indications that the parties perceived themselves as weak, whereas ERC does show evidence of such a perception. ERC perceived itself as weak, especially between 2009 and 2011, and felt constrained in how it could use Europe, which contributed to a more pragmatic approach. In the years that followed, this constraint became less pronounced and the party was able to use Europe in a more idealistic manner.

8.2.4 Public Opinion

Public opinion is also a contextual factor that may help explain differences in the use of Europe. Existing research indicates a discrepancy between the SNP's pro-European discourse and Scottish public opinion on European integration (Bremberg and Gillespie, 2022, p. 96). At times, the logic behind

the SNP's "independence in the EU" agenda has been that the EU could provide a safety net and reduce the risks of economic and political isolation for a potential independent Scotland. This argument has been seen as particularly appealing to more moderate voters who might not support independence at any cost but could be reassured by the prospect that independence would not be too radical, since Scotland would remain within the EU (e.g. Keating and Jones, 1991; Keating and McGarry, 2001; Eichert, 2016; Anderson and Keil, 2016; Cetrà and Liñeira, 2018). However, despite the Scottish vote to remain in the Brexit referendum and continued majority public support for Scottish independence in the EU between August 2016 and January 2023 (What Scotland Thinks, 2023), public opinion research suggests that the Scottish public has in fact been relatively Eurosceptic. More specifically, Curtice and Montagu (2020) find that between 2013 and 2019, more than 50 percent of the Scottish public supported either leaving the EU or reducing its powers, whereas support for the EU, in the form of maintaining or expanding EU powers, fluctuated around 30 percent, surpassing 40 percent only in 2019. Moreover, whether Scotland could become independent inside or outside the EU does not appear to significantly affect public attitudes toward independence. There is even evidence of a segment of the electorate for whom support for independence would increase if it implied Scotland would be outside the EU (Dardanelli, 2003, p. 279; Muro and Vlaskamp, 2016). As such, Europe may not be a particularly decisive factor in shaping Scottish public attitudes toward independence. In fact, at times it may even constitute a liability rather than an advantage. As Bremberg and Gillespie (2022) argue, Europe may no longer be an effective way for the SNP to increase public support for independence. Hence, the SNP may present itself as more pro-European than its electorate, which suggests that it may be more rational for the party to use Europe in a pragmatic rather than idealistic way. After all, a Eurosceptic audience may be alienated by appeals to European identity, European principles and deeper European integration, while it may be more receptive to concrete benefits associated with the EU.

In Catalonia, support for European integration has generally been high. However, Muro and Vlaskamp (2016) also find that the prospect of EU membership does not significantly affect whether an individual is more likely to support Catalan independence. Moreover, the EU's lack of intervention during the 2017 independence referendum appears to have had some effect on trust in the EU among parts of the Catalan electorate. More specifically, there was a decline in trust among supporters of Catalan independence who

identified as exclusively Catalan in 2016 and 2017, in the run-up to the referendum, including among PDeCAT and ERC voters (Bremberg and Gillespie, 2022, p. 68). Nevertheless, overall public support for the EU remained high. Most recently, for example, the Catalan Centre for Opinion Studies reported in March 2024 that 72 percent of Catalans view EU membership as positive, compared with more than 70 percent in Spain and around 60 percent in the EU as a whole (Generalitat de Catalunya, 2024). Overall, the Catalan public can therefore be characterized as strongly Europhile.

As such, public opinion on Europe and European integration differs notably between Scotland and Catalonia. Despite voting to remain in the EU, the Scottish public is more hesitant and critical toward European integration than the Catalan public. Therefore, the SNP may need to be cautious about overemphasizing Europe in its independence strategy, whereas the Catalan parties face no such constraint. This aligns with the SNP's more pragmatic use of Europe and ERC, CiU, PDeCAT and Junts' more idealistic use of Europe.

8.2.5 Party Evaluations of EU Responses to Territorial Demands

Another contextual factor relevant for understanding how Europe is used, according to the secessionist party strategy literature (Elias and Mees, 2017; Royles, 2024), is parties' evaluations of EU responses to territorial demands during the 2000s. The SNP, first of all, has not expressed strong disappointment with the EU in relation to the treatment of stateless nations or its own independence project. The party did vote against the 2004 Constitutional Treaty on the grounds that it did not sufficiently recognize self-determination for stateless nations, but by that time it was already more focused on independence within the EU. It did not support a "Europe of the Regions" nor the self-determination caucus that the ERC MEP sought to establish between 2004 and 2009 (SNP 3, ERC 1; MacCormick, 2004; Hepburn and McLoughlin, 2011, pp. 389–390). It can therefore be questioned whether the party's position was primarily strategic alignment with the European Free Alliance line rather than a deeply held institutional critique (SNP 3).

Regarding its demand for internal enlargement, the party has also been understanding, with one MEP arguing that it makes sense that the EU does

not facilitate internal enlargement because it would not want to set a precedent for additional stateless nations to make similar demands (SNP 4). The SNP was also largely satisfied with the EU's approach during its 2014 independence referendum, although it occasionally expressed a preference for the EU to adopt a more explicitly neutral stance (SNP 2). While the party has at times felt misunderstood within the EU context, especially prior to Brexit, SNP interviewees also report experiencing considerable support and goodwill from EU actors in later years. Overall, the SNP's experiences in the European Parliament, including its perceptions of the EU's stance toward stateless nations, do not appear to have been particularly negative (SNP 1, 2, 3, 4). Hence, given that the SNP has not reported strongly adverse experiences at the EU level and has remained largely pragmatic in its use of Europe between 1999 and 2020, this approach cannot be primarily attributed to negative experiences within the EU context.

The Catalan parties, in turn, have experienced greater disappointment in the EU regarding its treatment of their independence aspirations. During the early 2000s, ERC and CiU were eager to participate in the drafting of the European Constitutional Treaty. CiU's Jordi Pujol had even established a Catalan convention on the future of Europe in anticipation, collecting proposals from Catalan civil society on the future of the EU. He subsequently brought these proposals to Europe, where CiU's main demands included greater influence for constitutional regions in EU decision-making as well as enhanced status for minority languages within the EU (Bremberg and Gillespie, 2022, p. 41). ERC similarly called for direct participation of stateless nations in the EU, recognition of the right to self-determination, official status for Catalan, and broader institutional reforms, including greater federalization, a stronger European Parliament, and a second chamber representing regions (ERC, 2004, pp. 13–14; Maddens et al., 2020; Bremberg and Gillespie, 2022, p. 43). Despite these extensive preparations, stateless nations were not granted significant involvement in the drafting process through their member states and were instead largely dependent on other regional representatives, such as SNP's Neil MacCormick (Bourne, 2006, pp. 16–17). Ultimately, the Constitutional Treaty was judged to fall short in improving the position of constitutional regions, leading ERC to vote “no,” as it viewed the process as insufficiently democratic. CiU also came close to voting “no,” conditioning its support on recognition of Catalan as an official EU language and guaranteed representation for Catalonia in EU bodies. The party ultimately voted “yes” after Catalan was granted status as a language of

communication, though not as a working language. Overall, the Constitutional Treaty was nevertheless a disappointment for CiU and arguably reinforced the belief among CDC activists that only statehood would allow Catalonia to achieve its objectives within the EU (Bremberg & Gillespie, 2022, pp. 43–44).

In later years, CiU increasingly challenged the EU’s interpretation of the Prodi Doctrine. Artur Mas, for example, stated at a press conference in Brussels in 2012 that the European Treaties “do not establish that Catalonia would remain within the EU, but neither do they provide anything to the contrary” (Generalitat de Catalunya, 2012). A government memo in January 2014 similarly claimed that it was incorrect to assume that Catalonia would cease to be an EU member (Vilaweb, 4 January 2014). Most importantly, however, the Catalan parties expressed clear disappointment when the EU did not intervene as Spain obstructed the Catalan independence referendum and implemented strong measures afterward. This disappointment was also frequently voiced in the European Parliament, where the parties pointed to what they saw as EU double standards (e.g., Terricabras, Plenary 8, 20170313; Solé, Plenary 8, 20171113; Oliveres, Plenary 9, 20211020; Puigdemont, Plenary 9, 20210518; CiU 3).

These accounts show that ERC and CiU, PDeCAT and Junts have generally experienced more disappointment with the EU’s inaction regarding their territorial demands than the SNP. Despite this, however, both ERC and CiU, PDeCAT and Junts have not moved away from their idealism toward a more pragmatic use of Europe. They continue to rely strongly on their vision of what the EU should be in order to support and legitimize their independence strategies. As such, the SNP uses Europe in a pragmatic way despite not being particularly disappointed with the EU, whereas the Catalan parties continue to use Europe in a more idealistic way despite their dissatisfaction with the EU. Therefore, the EU’s response to territorial demands does not appear to explain how Europe is used by secessionist parties.

9. Conclusion

In order to conclude the thesis, this final chapter returns to the research question and summarizes its main findings and contributions. The chapter then discusses the implications of the findings and contributions for research on secessionist politics in Europe, in particular the fields of secessionist party politics and the Europeanization of political parties. The chapter concludes with reflections on political implications that can be derived from the thesis' findings as well as reflections on further research.

9.1 Main Findings

In the past 25 years, pro-European secessionist parties have managed to become increasingly mainstream in European politics, and they did so on the basis of an “independence in the EU” agenda. This is puzzling, because the EU has not been keen to deliver on secessionist parties' territorial demands, such as internal enlargement, a European right to self-determination and involvement in the independence process. Still pro-European secessionist parties have kept mobilizing at the European level, raising the question of how Europe continues to matter in their pursuit of independence.

Against this backdrop, the thesis formulated research questions to explore different uses of Europe in secessionist parties' independence strategies in the European Parliament between 1999 and 2024, as well as to understand the contextual factors that shape differences in usage. Departing from a strategic constructivist perspective and Jacquot and Woll's (2003; 2010) notion of usage of Europe, the thesis has developed a new conceptual framework that captures different ways in which secessionist parties can use Europe in a parliamentary setting. Usage of Europe was then studied by means of a qualitative content analysis of a new dataset of European Parliament speeches and questions, as well as interviews with representatives of three different pro-European secessionist parties (SNP, ERC, CiU,PDcCAT& Junts) in the European Parliament.

The thesis finds that the SNP has used Europe largely in a pragmatic way. The party has used Europe consistently, but with varying intensity over time and the goal was mainly to build goodwill among a European audience, with the aim of securing a supportive environment for Scotland in the event that independence is achieved. In its discourse, the SNP has aimed for

independence within a Union of member states, indicating that an independent Scotland should retain important powers, such as taxation and fisheries upon independence within the EU. The party also has not sought a role for the EU in its independence process, and has used Europe primarily in an instrumental way to legitimize Scottish independence. A recurring theme here was the EU's state-centeredness which was first portrayed as a grievance (1999-2004), but later treated as an opportunity to argue that only independent statehood would provide Scotland with a true voice in the EU. The SNP has therefore used Europe in a way that remains close to what is feasible given the status quo at the time. In other words, the party does not demand substantial change from the EU in relation to its territorial ambitions. When legitimizing independence, Europe is primarily presented as a means to achieve a better future or to address specific grievances. This suggests that independence is framed as partly contingent on European circumstances, meaning that if these circumstances were to change, the European dimension of the argument could be reformulated. Europe thus functions primarily as a strategic resource rather than a normative framework.

ERC and CiU, PDeCAT and Junts, in turn, have used Europe mostly in an idealistic way, calling for significant changes to the EU, which may or may not materialize. Both parties have used Europe with varying intensity, with ERC limiting its formal independence contributions between 2004 and 2011 and CiU only starting to address independence around the time the party itself turned pro-independence in the 2010s. The Catalan parties have nevertheless assigned Europe a more significant role in their strategies than the SNP. They have used the European Parliament mainly to build understanding and credibility within the EU, but go beyond the SNP's usage of Europe by also promoting a more substantial shift in EU attitudes regarding the protection of fundamental rights and EU law, and even to advocate for the possibility of legislating self-determination.

In their discourse, in contrast to the SNP, the Catalan parties have sought independence within a more federal EU, meaning that they are willing to for a new Catalan state to delegate significant powers to the EU level if this makes the EU more effective. They have also called for active EU involvement in their independence processes, effectively expecting the EU to safeguard the Catalan independence process. They have also used Europe primarily in a principled way to legitimize independence. In so doing, they have used Europe by drawing on a conception of European democracy that conflicts with that of the EU, by way of including the right to organize an independence

referendum in their argumentation. Europe is thus treated as a normative value system which, if fully realized in practice, would justify independence within the EU. Overall, ERC and CiU, PdeCAT & Junts' discourse assigns a more central role to Europe in its independence strategy than the SNP and also challenges the status quo in the EU when it comes to how territorial conflicts are handled. The parties essentially seek to reform the EU, not only when it comes to its governance structure or its role in domestic independence conflicts, but they also propose a reinterpretation of the principle of democracy.

Despite their differences, all three parties have been relatively consistent over time in their usage of Europe, albeit with minor variations. They have also used Europe with varying intensity over time, with increased engagement particularly around independence referenda. A key similarity in the parties' independence strategies in the European Parliament, however, is the recurrence of the theme of normality. All three parties maintained some shared practices of using Europe, which were directly or indirectly focused on normalizing the party and its independence quest. The parties share a focus on using the European Parliament to build goodwill, understanding and credibility among a European audience that they are normal parties with a normal independence quest. This need was in part a product of a shared perception that their European colleagues perceived them as extremists. All parties also agreed on the importance of Good Europeanism, i.e., partaking in regular activities in the European Parliament without always talking about independence in order to help build this goodwill and credibility among the European audience, and take away the image of them as extremists.

Furthermore, during the early 2000s, there was a shared discourse around a "Europe of the Nations," aimed at making constitutional regions in the EU a more normal part of the Union, by integrating them better in the EU apparatus and giving them a more prominent role in European policymaking. All three parties also shared a legitimating discourse centered on the normality of statehood. This was based on precedent with especially small European nations as the benchmark. Closely connected to that, another theme that recurred in all three parties' independence strategies is the notion of the EU's state-centeredness. This theme was part of a number of independence legitimations, such as the "normal" argument, the "EU democratic deficit" argument, the "voice in the EU" argument and the "viability 2.0" argument, where the need for independence was connected with the notion that the EU was built for states, not regions. As such, in order to be equal and normal in

an EU where statehood is perceived as the norm, stateless nationalist regions would also have to become states.

Finally, the thesis identifies several contextual factors that may have shaped differences in the use of Europe across parties. These include perceived access to independence, party attachment to Europe, perceived party strength and public opinion. In contrast, the EU's responses to secessionist parties' territorial demands are not found to have contributed to changes in how these parties' use of Europe at the European level.

9.2 Contributions

In relation to the thesis' research puzzle, the findings contribute to our understanding of secessionist politics in Europe by way of showing that secessionist parties have continued to use Europe in the European Parliament during the 2000s, despite the EU not delivering on secessionist party demands. This is because the EU's opportunity structure has not been perceived by them as being as closed as it might appear from the perspective of an external observer who would focus primarily on the EU's protection of Member State territorial integrity. Presence in the European Parliament still gives secessionist parties access to a European audience, from which they can at least gain understanding or, in some cases, seek attitudinal or even legislative change. Discursively, the EU also provides the potential of a perceived economic and political safety net upon independence, normative authority that can be used to potentially facilitate independence, and a repertoire of principles and precedents that can be mobilized to legitimize independence. As such, in part, secessionist parties continue to use Europe throughout the 2000s for their independence agenda because secessionist parties still perceive that there are European institutional and discursive resources that can help legitimize their independence quest both domestically and at the European level. In addition, the parties have shown that the EU's state-centered structure has, paradoxically, helped sustain their independence claims. This confirmed to the parties that in order to be equal and normal in Europe, the regions these parties seek to represent need to become independent states.

The parties' continued pursuit of independence in the EU and their usage of Europe can also be understood in relation to the role assigned to Europe in their independence strategies. The SNP, consistent with its pragmatism, has not demanded much from the EU and claims to understand the EU's position. It therefore has not expressed strong disappointment with the EU and instead

presents the EU as being relatively sympathetic towards them. This allows the party to continue to use the EU in a credible way to legitimize and support its independence project. ERC and CiU, PDeCAT and Junts, by contrast, have continued to use Europe in an idealistic way and have maintained this approach despite disappointment with the EU's inaction following the 2017 referendum. Their idealistic usage indicates a greater reliance on Europe, with the EU assigned a more significant role in the independence process and, given domestic deadlock, it has had little other choice but to keep engaging with it. Moreover, the Catalan parties' idealistic usage of Europe also reflects a stronger attachment to Europe that does not simply disappear in the face of disappointment with the EU. Rather than abandoning the EU, the Catalan parties seek to reshape it to better align with their vision. In addition, idealism is by nature more tolerant of unmet expectations, as it is oriented toward an aspirational rather than existing institutional reality. Hence, taken together, the findings suggests that despite the EU's formal reluctance to facilitate secession, secessionist parties continue to use Europe because European integration still offers secessionist parties institutional and discursive resources.

Overall, by means of examining the usages of Europe in secessionist party independence strategies in the European Parliament between 1999 and 2024, this thesis has made two key contributions. First, it has made an empirical contribution to the literature on secessionist party politics by addressing the lack of studies based on European-level data during the 2000s. By drawing on new empirical material from the European Parliament, as well as original interview data with party members and staff who have been active in the European Parliament, this thesis moves beyond existing studies on secessionist party strategic behaviour and discourses at the national level, which are often based on party manifesto data (Elias and Franco-Guillén, 2021; Abts et al., 2019; Dalle Mulle and Serrano, 2019; Elias et al., 2021). It also presents a follow-up and expansion of Laible's (2008) study of the SNP and Vlaams Belang in the European Parliament (1985–2002), focusing on the 2000s and broadening the analytical scope beyond independence objectives in the European Parliament alone. The European-level focus of this thesis complements existing national-level studies and thereby offers a more holistic picture of how Europe matters in secessionist politics.

This thesis has also made a theoretical contribution by developing a typology of how Europe can be used in independence strategies in the European Parliament. It thereby extends the usage of Europe literature (e.g.,

Woll and Jacquot, 2010) through its focus on institutional and discursive usage and the introduction of pragmatic and idealistic usage logics. The conceptual framework further contributes to the secessionist politics literature (Giordano and Roller, 2002; Laible, 2008; Hepburn, 2009; Cetrà and Liñeira, 2018; Dalle Mulle and Serrano, 2019; Griffiths, 2020; Elias and Franco-Guillén, 2021) by structuring previous work that implicitly addressed the usage of Europe and by conceptualizing what the European dimension of independence strategies may look like. The framework could also be used to study the usage of Europe by other secessionist parties in the European Parliament or other EU institutions. In addition, elements of the framework could be applied to other policy areas or issues and help understand how European integration has affected them. While the components specific to secessionist politics would need to be removed, the distinctions between institutional and discursive, and between pragmatic and idealistic usage, may remain relevant for assessing how Europe is relied on in a given policy area across parties, party groups or member states. Finally, this thesis also takes initial steps toward understanding differences in how secessionist parties use Europe. However, as its primary aim has been to conceptualize and map these usages, there remains scope to further explore the applicability of the identified contextual factors in other cases.

9.3 Implications for Research

The above presented findings have a number of implications for research on secessionist party strategies and more broadly for the research on the role of Europe in secessionist party politics, within the fields of secessionist party politics and the Europeanization of political parties.

9.3.1 Secessionist Parties' Strategies

To begin with, the findings have implications for research on secessionist parties' strategies within the field of secessionist party politics. Regarding the research on the purpose of secessionist party presence at the European level, I argue that, in contrast to Laible (2008), secessionist party presence in the European Parliament serves more than a purely symbolic purpose. It is not solely directed at the domestic audience regardless of outcomes, but is also, at times, directed at achieving outcomes at the European level. While it is true that any achievement at the European level can ultimately be used strategically in the domestic arena, all three parties studied as part of this thesis

acknowledge that objectives such as EU attitude change, the building of EU goodwill, or the normalization and formalization of self-determination at the EU level have intrinsic value for the independence project, regardless of domestic visibility. This becomes even more explicit in the Catalan parties' pursuit of some form of EU intervention. There is both an intention to influence EU attitudes and a belief that such influence is possible. This form of "lobbying" is also not necessarily conducted in the public eye, but often informally through networking, which makes it difficult to communicate to a domestic audience. There is also frequently limited media attention for what these parties do at the EU level, which would pose a challenge if domestic legitimacy and electoral competition were the only objectives of European Parliament presence. Hence, these findings contribute to existing research by providing empirical support for the claims made by Boylan and Turkina (2019) and Griffiths (2021) that secessionist parties also seek to engage the European arena. I therefore argue that we should understand Europe as more than a tool for domestic secessionist politics, but as a complementary pathway through which independence politics is pursued.

Whereas existing knowledge on the purpose of secessionist party presence at the European level remains relatively abstract or unspecified (e.g., Laible, 2008; Boylan and Turkina, 2019), this thesis provides a more detailed account. It shows that, first and foremost, the image of the party and of the independence quest is central to secessionist parties' independence-related ambitions at the European level. All parties in this study have approached the European Parliament pragmatically to a certain extent and have acknowledged that they are unlikely to achieve majorities on self-determination and independence, and so the least they can do is win over some, not all, of the European audience and build trust, understanding and sympathy, both formally but most importantly informally. One way they have done this is through a practice that I introduce as "Good Europeanism." This finding in particular highlights that independence politics at the European level does not occur only when independence is explicitly and formally discussed, but also emerges within discussions of other topics. At the same time, in contrast with Laible (2008), this thesis also shows that secessionist parties, despite a lack of support from the EU, can also be more idealistic and ambitious at the European level when it comes to the defence of fundamental rights and the formalization of the right to self-determination. As such, the study of independence politics should not automatically be understood through a rational and pragmatic lens.

The findings of this thesis also have implications for the research on secessionist party independence legitimations. For example, I argue that previous research has underestimated the extent to which secessionist parties legitimate independence, and use Europe, in a principled manner. This thesis identifies a greater diversity of uses of Europe in independence legitimations than previously recognized. In this respect, the findings contrast with the view that independence legitimations are predominantly instrumental in nature and increasingly centered on a more optimistic “better future” type of argument (Dion, 1996; Dalle Mulle, 2018; Dalle Mulle and Serrano, 2019; Elias and Franco-Guillén, 2021). While this pattern holds for the SNP, it does not fully apply to ERC and CiU, PDeCAT and Junts, who instead use Europe predominantly in a principled manner in their independence legitimations and display a more consistently principled legitimating style overall. This is a particularly important finding, as it shows how secessionist actors can construct the EU’s meaning and values in ways that allow them to “normalize” or “de-dramatize” secession in Europe (van der Zwet, 2015; Maddens et al., 2020), presenting it not as something exceptional or extremist, but as something consistent with European principles. The findings of this thesis are therefore more closely aligned with work by Bremberg and Gillespie (2022) and Griffiths and Martinez (2020), who also note that some parties advance a more principled case for independence and explicitly draw on EU norms and values. Therefore, I argue that research on secessionist party independence legitimations should more consistently include principled legitimations in their coding frameworks.

At the level of specific arguments, I find that the parties deploy a number of legitimations that have been implicitly identified in national-level studies. This, for example, concerns the use of a “European democracy” argument, which aligns with Bremberg and Gillespie’s (2022, p. 115) suggestion that pro-European secessionist parties can draw on a particular idea of European democracy to legitimate independence. This also applies to the “normal” argument, which is consistent with Bourne’s (2014, 2020) discussion of horizontal Europeanization among Catalan pro-independence actors, whereby the legitimacy of a referendum is justified by reference to the UK granting one to Scotland. The emphasis on normality further fits with van der Zwet’s (2015) argument that secessionist parties may seek to demonstrate that claims that appear extreme in a domestic context can be reframed as normal from a European perspective. The finding that secessionist parties—and the SNP in particular—also deploy an “EU democratic deficit” argument between 1999

and 2004 corresponds with arguments by Dardanelli (2003) and Laible (2008) that ongoing EU integration, and the limited control secessionist parties have over its direction, is perceived as a grievance (p. 211). Laible (2008) therefore argues that “it is that Europe continues to integrate, and not necessarily on the terms that they [secessionist parties] like or that they believe are favourable to their constituents, that ultimately underpins nationalist arguments for immediate self-government” (p. 211). This suggests that not only the national context but also the European context can be a contributing factor in the choice for independence. Finally, the “bad representation” argument also corresponds with suggestions in existing literature (e.g., Dardanelli, 2003; Laible, 2008). Anderson and Keil (2016), however, find that such an argument has been used by both the Scottish and Catalan governments, whereas in my data only the SNP makes use of it when discussing independence.

I, however, expand the analytical toolkit of the use of Europe in independence legitimations by identifying a complementary set of legitimations based on European Parliament data. If anything, the wide variety of these legitimations highlights how malleable the concept of Europe is for secessionist parties, and suggests that the European Parliament context has encouraged these parties to broaden the ways in which they use Europe in their independence narratives. More specifically, I identify two new principled uses of Europe in independence legitimations in the European Parliament: the “EU law” argument and the “European identity” argument. Beyond democracy, interpretations of EU law and notions of European identity can therefore be understood as additional resources that secessionist parties draw upon. Among the instrumental uses of Europe in independence legitimations, the “voice in the EU” argument is an important newly identified category and was the most frequently used legitimation by the SNP. While Dardanelli (2003) and Laible (2008) argue that independence in the EU would help a nation maximize its sovereignty, the former in terms of greater self-determination and the latter in terms of sovereignty pooling within a larger bloc, I find that the SNP’s argument in the European Parliament is more focused on gaining the opportunity to influence EU policy on an equal basis, rather than on maximizing sovereignty. Another significant category is the “better future in the EU” argument, which further illustrates how secessionist parties seek to present independence in the EU as attractive to a European audience, in contrast to Laible’s (2008) claims. In addition, I identify a “Brexit” argument, which had not previously been observed in the literature as it emerges as a consequence of Brexit.

And finally, I also identify a “Viability 2.0” legitimization. This builds on, but differs slightly from, the original “viability” argument, or alternatively the “safety net” argument, which is perhaps the most well-known independence legitimization and the most frequently identified in national-level studies. More specifically, it refers to claims by secessionist actors that independence within the EU reduces the costs of independence and provides a range of economic benefits that can secure the economic position of a new state in international markets, as well as ensure continued political cooperation at the international level. In this way, it seeks to reduce the concern among potential pro-independence voters that independence is an extreme choice that would lead to economic and political isolation, by framing independence as occurring within an already familiar and stable institutional structure (e.g., Keating and McGarry, 2001; Dardanelli, 2003; Jolly, 2007b; Laible, 2008; van der Zwet, 2015; Anderson and Keil, 2016). Maddens et al. (2020) suggest that the popularity of the traditional “viability” argument may be declining, and I likewise find limited evidence of this argument in the European Parliament. Instead, I identify a different, still relatively infrequent variant, which frames independence within the EU as producing a viable small state, drawing on examples of other small European states considered successful. It is therefore used to counter claims that small states are too weak or too economically vulnerable to effectively sustain independence.

There are also implications for research on secessionist party discourses on their preferred EU governance structure and preferred EU role in the independence process, but these are smaller because there has been less previous research done on these topics, compared to the aims of secessionist parties at the EU level and independence legitimations. The findings on party discourses regarding their preferred EU governance structure from the European Parliament data are in line with Cetrà and Liñeira’s (2018) claim that sub-state nationalist parties pursue a twofold territorial objective in the EU. First, they seek independence within either a federal or confederal EU, and second, they aim to strengthen the role of regions and self-governing institutions in EU governance. However, I find that by 1999 the idea of a “Europe of the Regions” was no longer central, and that secessionist parties instead pursued something similar but distinct, which I term a “Europe of the Nations”. Others, such as Hepburn (2008), have pointed to alternatives such as a “Europe of the Peoples” or a “Europe of the Small States”. However, she, as well as Keating (2000), treats these as part of the broader “Europe of the Regions” framework, in which existing states gradually fade and small nations

and regions take their place (p. 539). In contrast, I find that in the European Parliament none of the MEPs in this study refer to a “Europe of the Peoples” in plenary or questions, except CiU on three occasions, nor to a “Europe of the Small States”. Instead, the ideas expressed by all three parties do not aim to replace the state but are less ambitious than either a “Europe of the Regions” or its variants, in that they primarily seek greater recognition and more formal participation for a limited set of constitutional regions. I therefore show that secessionist parties have increasingly become more individualist in their pursuit of self-determination in the EU, first by moving away from a “Europe of the Regions” towards a “Europe of the Nations,” and, post-2004, towards a focus on independence in the EU.

My analysis of secessionist party discourses on the role of the EU in their independence process relates to work on how the EU has acted, and how it should and could act. The former has mainly focused on EU mediation and the EU’s initially neutral and non-interventionist stance on internal enlargement, which later shifted towards a position favouring territorial integrity (e.g., Holesch and Jordana, 2023; Bourne, 2020; Massetti, 2022), whereas the latter has examined broader questions of internal enlargement, the regulation of secession, and self-determination, with some arguing against an EU role in this (Weiler, 2012; 2017; Closa, 2016), and others in favour (Tierney, 2013; Edwards, 2013; Kenealy, 2014; Walker, 2017). This thesis shifts the focus to how secessionist parties have wanted the EU to act in their independence processes. The findings show that secessionist party expectations, whether for neutrality in the case of the SNP, or for the EU as a guardian of the Treaties, facilitator of enlargement, mediator and potential legislator, did not match what the EU was actually providing.

9.2.2 Europe and Secessionist Political Parties

Zooming out, I identify implications of this thesis both for the research on secessionist party politics and how Europe plays a role in it, as well as for the research on the Europeanization of political parties more broadly. First, this thesis shows that a lack of EU facilitation or support for the territorial objectives of secessionist parties during the 2000s has not changed how parties use Europe. Instead, the secessionist parties in this study have remained steadfast in their “independence in the EU” strategy and have continued to pursue it at the European level. This finding contrasts with

suggestions by Moore (2008) and Jeffery (2011) that, after the decline of the “Europe of the Regions,” regionalist actors might move from idealism to pragmatism and shift the active pursuit of territorial goals back to the national and sub-national level. I find that this did not apply to the SNP, ERC and CiU, PDeCAT and Junts, as all parties continued to address independence in the European Parliament throughout the 2000s, and there was no “pragmatic turn” following the failure of a “Europe of the Regions” to materialize.

Similarly, arguments by Hepburn (2010) and Massetti and Schakel (2021) that stateless nationalist parties became more Eurosceptic towards the end of the 1990s and into the early 2000s do not fully apply to the cases studied in this thesis. It has been argued that parties became more Eurosceptic as it gradually became clear that a “Europe of the Regions” would never be realized: the Committee of the Regions would not develop into a stronger institution, and regions would not receive meaningful recognition in the 2004 Constitutional Treaty, leaving the EU firmly state-centered. Massetti and Schakel (2021) even suggest that this applies more strongly to secessionist parties, while Hepburn (2010) argues that this rapid shift in attitude indicates that party support for the EU was primarily tactical from the outset. However, in this thesis I find that, while the SNP, ERC and CiU, PDeCAT and Junts have experienced periods of disappointment with the EU, they have remained firmly pro-European throughout the 2000s. They do not display a sudden shift in attitude towards the EU when expectations were not met. If anything, they have at times “stubbornly” maintained their visions of independence, despite limited alignment with EU-level developments. In contrast, disappointing developments in European integration on territorial issues appear to have had surprisingly little impact on the pro-European orientation of these secessionist parties, nor on their broader vision of independence in the EU.

This does, however, not mean that European integration has not been important at all in secessionist politics. A second implication concerns the nature of European integration’s influence on secessionist politics: while it may not have affected the goal of independence itself, it has shaped party strategy. I find further evidence that throughout the 2000s, Europe has indeed been used as an opportunity structure and functions both as an institutional arena and as a discursive resource that offers secessionist parties capital to help sustain the quest for independence. These findings are in line with Laible’s (2008) study of the SNP and Vlaams Belang between 1985 and 2002 at the domestic and European levels and Campaña’s (2020) arguments about small states in the EU. They claim that the EU sustains the quest for

independence by providing a safety net once independent, by guaranteeing power to small states and by remaining state-centered and not providing sufficient recognition to regions. This thesis strengthens these claims by providing new and more recent evidence directly from the European Parliament during the 2000s. While the SNP and the Catalan parties have not placed much emphasis on the safety-net argument at the European level, I mainly find new evidence of the importance of the EU's state-centeredness at the European level. The parties' use of the "normal" argument, the EU democratic deficit argument and the "voice in the EU" argument all show how secessionist parties perceive the EU as state-centered. The "viability 2.0" legitimation, furthermore, although not used very frequently, also shows that the successes of small states inside the EU are used to support and motivate the choice for independence in the EU.

On top of that, I furthermore find that the EU also helps sustain the independence quest by providing a malleable framework of principles and precedents that can be used to legitimize independence, through the principle of European democracy or precedents of how the EU has treated referenda in the past, for example. This suggests that the EU may have been more successful at constraining stateless nationalist parties if it had, during the 1980s, 1990s and early 2000s, done more to accommodate the constitutional regions of the EU. While some, like the SNP, would likely have remained in favour of independence regardless, the Catalan parties might have been more satisfied with alternative routes to influence that the EU could have offered. It is therefore clear that how the EU treats constitutional regions can matter both for the stability and unity of its Member States and the Union as a whole.

Finally, in contrast to the findings of limited organizational Europeanization of political parties (Ladrech, 2012; Hoon & Pittoors, 2021; Pittoors & Gheyle, 2022), I find that the secessionist parties in this study are "Europeanized" in the sense that they make use of Europe in their independence strategies, and they do so pragmatically and idealistically. In line with Cianciara (2016), I therefore argue that while parties may not be organizationally adapting to Europe as an external pressure, Europeanization could still be taking place in the form of political parties using Europe as a resource in their political strategies (Cianciara, 2016). While some, like Murphy (2016), suggest that usage of Europe can only constitute a superficial form of Europeanization, this thesis shows that there are different ways in which parties can use Europe, such as pragmatically and idealistically, where Europe plays a more central role. Hence, the findings of this thesis suggest

that the study of Europeanization of political parties would benefit from a more thorough exploration of different types of usage of Europe.

9.3 Reflections on Political Implications

The pragmatic and idealistic uses of Europe adopted by the SNP, ERC and CiU, PDeCAT and Junts in the European Parliament also have several political implications for secessionist politics. The SNP's more pragmatic use of Europe in its independence strategy is more closely aligned with dominant EU discourse on stateless nations seeking independence. Conflict between EU and party narratives is therefore kept to a minimum, which can enhance the perceived credibility of its independence strategy among both domestic and European audiences. The strategy also avoids excessive dependence on EU intervention while still working to build EU goodwill, thereby aiming to secure a smoother transition toward eventual EU recognition and membership in the event of independence. This also contributes to credibility, but it simultaneously indicates that the party views independence as primarily a domestic process. This more pragmatic approach also keeps the connection between Europe and independence relatively narrow. This means that pragmatic usage of Europe is not oriented toward reshaping the EU into a more supportive framework for stateless nations, but instead encourages a case-by-case approach. As such, while pragmatic usage of Europe may contribute to the credibility of the independence strategy at home, it has little consequences for wider independence politics in Europe, given that it reinforces the status quo.

The Catalan parties' idealistic use of Europe is based on reliance on an ideal EU that does not, or at least not yet, exist. This creates uncertainty and can undermine the credibility of the independence strategy. For domestic audiences, it may be difficult to assess whether the claims being made actually hold. Does the EU, in practice, consider the Catalan demand for an independence referendum legitimate under European principles? And would the EU actually make an effort to safeguard a Catalan independence process in the name of European principles and the rule of law? Idealistic usage of Europe therefore sets a high standard for both the secessionist parties and the EU, while also creating a significant risk that this standard will not be met. This can lead to strong disappointment among both political actors and domestic audiences to the extent that expectations were shaped by this

idealistic framing. This was certainly the case for ERC and CiU, PDeCAT and Junts politicians following the 2017 independence referendum in Catalonia.

Nevertheless, a second consequence of ERC, CiU, PDeCAT and Junts' idealistic use of Europe is that it also allows them to increase the visibility of the Catalan territorial situation. Because this strategy is based on ideals that are difficult to achieve, it creates additional room for confrontation and for raising the salience of Catalan self-determination across Europe, potentially increasing international pressure on the host-state. Moreover, the idealistic use of Europe allows the Catalan parties to highlight that Europe carries different meanings for different actors within the EU and creates space to debate the need for change within the EU itself. The fact that the right to self-determination can be framed as a European issue, rather than solely a domestic one, provides additional normative legitimacy to the parties' independence goals. Independence is presented as more than a matter of self-interest, as it is linked to principles that are framed as central to the EU. Therefore, in the long run, idealistic use of Europe in independence strategies can therefore be understood as a way to advocate for an EU in which stateless nations do not each have to pursue their claims individually, but could instead rely on certain European-level protections, for example, through a European right to self-determination. In sum, the choice between pragmatic and idealistic uses of Europe in a party's independence strategy involves a trade-off between enhancing credibility for a specific independence project and increasing the international salience and the normative legitimacy of the case as well as secession more broadly.

9.4 Reflections on Further Research

Taken together, the implications discussed above suggest that the role that Europe plays in secessionist politics remains complex. While this thesis has aimed to improve our understanding of it, there is still ample opportunity for further research. First, it would be interesting to expand the empirical scope of study. While this thesis has focused on three of the most "active" parties when it comes to the pursuit of independence in Europe, it would be of interest to also explore the use of Europe by other secessionist parties throughout the 2000s, such as the Flemish N-VA or Vlaams Belang, the Welsh Plaid Cymru or the Basque PNV. This would allow for a broader cross-case comparison and help determine whether the commonalities observed among the SNP and the Catalan parties represent more widely shared practices or are unique to

these cases. This would reveal whether, despite the trend towards individualism in European-level cooperation during the 2000s, one can speak of a shared culture among secessionist parties in how they use Europe for territorial objectives. Furthermore, the framework could be adapted to also study the use of Europe at the national level, be it in a parliamentary setting or based on party manifestos, allowing systematic comparison of the use of Europe not only across cases, but also across levels of governance.

It would also be valuable to better understand both the context and the implications of the usage of Europe in party independence strategies at the European level. While this thesis starts by exploring contextual factors that could help explain differences in the use of Europe, there is room to further develop the analysis, for example, by examining their relevance in other cases as well as by applying different operationalizations or methods, such as process tracing. Furthermore, a deeper investigation of the domestic implications of parties' use of Europe in the European Parliament would be equally valuable. How and to what extent are secessionist parties able to capitalize on their activities at the European level at home, and how does the domestic political arena, and not least the domestic public, receive these uses of Europe, if at all?

There is also room to explore secessionist parties' usage of Europe at the European level in even broader ways. While this study focuses mostly on the formal uses of Europe in the European Parliament, an important finding from this research project is that a significant part of the independence work that secessionist parties do in the European Parliament is also informal, for example, through networking and Good Europeanism. It would therefore be an interesting next step to conduct a more ethnographic study of informal secessionist party independence practices in the European Parliament. This would offer a more holistic picture of how secessionist parties use Europe for their independence agenda. Moreover, while this thesis has used European Parliament data in a relatively targeted way to study "independence contributions" specifically, the data also contained much other, thus far untapped, information about the priorities and aims of secessionist parties in relation to other policy issues. This is also, broadly interpreted, part of the usage of Europe and part of territorial politics. As such, there is room for future research to more broadly explore the policy priorities of secessionist parties in the European Parliament and how they relate to the parties' independence agenda.

Finally, usage of Europe could also be explored more broadly by expanding to other institutions or parties. Further research could, for example focus on how secessionist parties use other channels that they have at their disposal, such as the Committee of the Regions, regional government representation offices in Brussels, or engagement with EU funding programs. Exploring these channels would allow for an even more holistic picture of how secessionist actors approach and use Europe in their independence quest. But usage of Europe could also be studied more broadly by looking at political parties with other types of missions or ambitions, as this is likely to advance our understanding of how European integration affects party politics more broadly.

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Annex

Annex 1: Independence Contribution Search Terms

Search round 1: Explicit Independence Contributions

“independence”, “independencia”, “independiente”, “separatis”, “secession”, “secession” “statehood”, “own state”, “self-determination”, “autodeterminación”, “autogobierno”, “referendum”, “referendum”,

Search round 2: Implicit Independence Contributions

"confederation" "confederación" "federation" "federación" "federal" "federal region", "federal state" "constitutional region" "legislative region" "región legislative" "autonomous region" "regional autonomy" "autonomy" "autonomous" "autonomía", "autónomo" "sub-national" "subnacional" "Europe of the Regions" "European region" "región europea" "multilevel governance", "gobernanza multinivel" "subsidiarity" "subsidiariedad", "delegation of powers" "division of sovereignty", "distribución de poder" "self-governing", "autodeterminación" "constitutional" "constiucional" "constitutional power" "legislative power" "regional power" "decentralization" "descentralización" "devolution" "devolución" "sovereign" "soberanía" "nationalism" "nacionalismo" "competence" "competencia" "poder", "regional" "regional parliament", "parlamento regional" "Scottish parliament" "Flemish Parliament" "Catalan Parliament", "Basque Parliament", "Welsh Parliament", "Galician Parliament" "Catalan" "Catalonia" "Catalunia" "Cataluña" "Scot" "Scotland" "Escocia", "Escoc" "Flanders" "Flemish", "Flamenc" "Flandes", "Kurds", "Kurdas" "Brexit"

Annex 2 – Codebook

Independence Objective in the European Parliament

Theme	Guidelines	Examples
Domestic Competition	Any statements that the goal of party presence in the European Parliament is to improve the party’s position in domestic party competition. This includes any instances in which the EP is used to win or put pressure on domestic battles, but also instances in which EP presence is used to increase party legitimacy in the eyes of domestic audiences.	“And for us to have a new European paper saying that the Mediterranean corridor is something that has to be on, on the, on the top priorities. It was very relevant because then the, um, the margin for the for the Spanish government not to do the, the Corridor is narrower.” (ERC 2).
Minor EU Attitude Change	Any statements that the goal of party presence in the European Parliament is to change the EU’s position and/or behaviour when it comes to self-determination and secession or the secessionist party itself. Includes only minor attitude changes that do not have to be formalized or apply to the EU as a whole, such as EU recognition, understanding or sympathy.	“And we’re getting much more sympathy these days, so yes goodwill is a large part of our mission now both at the SNP level and the Scottish government level, I think.” (SNP 2).
Major EU Attitude Change	Any statements that the goal of party presence in the European Parliament is to change the EU’s position and/or behaviour as a whole when it comes to self-determination and secession. Alternatively, specific EU officials are asked to help the secessionist cause through	”We put a yellow t-shirt asking for freedom for Catalan prisoners. So, we, imagine there are 700 MEPs that attend to at 12:00 to vote, and about a 10% in all groups wearing a yellow t-shirt” (CiU 2).

	action. Applicable to more ambitious attitude changes, excluding legislation, such as for example demands for EU intervention to put pressure on the host-state.	
EU Legislative Impact	Any statements that the goal of party presence in the European Parliament is to achieve EU policies that relate to the independence quest.	“And the idea was to, to put forward a concrete legislative proposal that would allow for the democratic and peaceful solution to these kind of territorial conflicts” (ERC 5).

EU Governance Structures

Theme	Guidelines	Examples
Europe of the Regions	Any statements that indicate that the party pursues an EU in which all EU regions form a fully fledged third level in EU governance, requiring an overhaul of the EU governance structure.	“I think Esquerra look at France, Spain, Belgium, they see these modern 200 year old constructs and ultimately they would see Europe as being a Europe of the Regions. Of, you know, Catalonia gets its independence, but ultimately, I think Spain might disappear, France might disappear. It would be a much more patchwork of regions. That was never the SNPs vision of Europe”
“Europe of the Nations”	An EU that formally acknowledges its own plurality, primarily in regard to rights and powers for all nations in the EU. Can include statements that demand politics that respects the cultural diversity of the EU and/or provides more language	“I voted against Amendment 110, which envisages this House having cooperation with Member State parliaments but not with sub-Member State parliaments. This ignores the constitutional realities of some Member States; for example, although Flanders has taken an

	<p>and cultural recognition for stateless nations in the EU.</p>	<p>historic step this week towards independence, the Belgian Federal Parliament remains for now the ‘national’ parliament in EU terms. Nevertheless, in Belgian constitutional terms, the Flemish Parliament has full competence for certain EU matters. The amendment also ignores the political realities of other Member States: it is ridiculous that this House cannot fully cooperate with the Scottish Parliament on matters such as fisheries, where Scotland holds the biggest UK stake.” (Hudghton, Plenary 7, 20100615).</p>
<p>“Union of Member States”</p>	<p>Statements that express the wish for an EU in which the Member States are the most powerful actors in the EU and retain important powers.</p>	<p>“So the SNP were always... it wasn’t Eurosceptic because we were always pro-European, but the SNP, we always belonged to that Irish, Scandinavia and UK idea of the Member State retaining much more powers” (SNP 2).</p>
<p>“United States of Europe”</p>	<p>Statements that express the wish for an EU with more powerful institutions, more areas of responsibility and more efficient decision-making. Includes federal visions of the EU with Member states giving up some power to the European level.</p>	<p>“We would like the EU to be able, uh, of speaking with one voice in the world. That's one of the weaknesses that we have as EU today, that it's very difficult for us to have a, um, let's say coherent, uh, foreign policy because it's very difficult in some issues to, to get to consensus. Um, and also, um, a European Union where, um, let's say the,</p>

		the, the social pillar or social issues, uh, are more, you know, up in the, in the agenda” (ERC 4)
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EU Role in the Independence Process

Categories	Guidelines	Examples
Non-Interventionist	Comments that construct the independence process as an internal affair that does not require EU involvement.	<p>“Q: And that even, sort of, with the situation later on with the Catalan independence referendum, for example. I believe that they really wanted the EU to somehow interfere or help out. Do you see a role for the EU regarding that?”</p> <p>A: There was, I mean we, I think we, the SNP felt rather less enthusiastic about such things than our Catalan colleagues” (SNP 3)</p>
Commentator	Calls for the EU to comment on the domestic independence process or the actions of the host-state regarding the independence process. This could include general commentary, but also evaluations on compliance with rule of law and fundamental rights.	<p>“Bearing in mind the acts of violence perpetrated by the Spanish security forces against voters in Catalonia on 1 October 2017: 1. What is the Commission’s view regarding the question of whether possible military action against civilians engaged in peaceful protest is consistent with Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union(3)?” (Terricabras & Tremosa i Balcells, Plenary 8, 20180115)</p>
Guardian of EU Principles and Law	Calls for the EU to ensure compliance with EU principles and EU legislation.	<p>“How will the Commission recommend to the Spanish Government that it apply Framework Decision</p>

		2008/913/JHA, taking into account the legislation in force and the constant threats to the process in Catalonia” (Tremosa i Balcells, Plenary 8, 20141006).
Facilitator of Enlargement	Calls for the EU to make possible internal enlargement and guarantee automatic EU membership for newly seceded states whose former host-state is part of the EU. Demands for fast-track membership are also included.	“The basis, also, for the internal enlargement of the Union should also be fixed—with no taboos. This is the path that we, as Catalans, wish to follow soon.” (Ponsatí Obiols, Plenary 9, 20201218)
Mediator	Calls for EU mediation to remedy territorial conflicts.	“Mr Juncker, Mr Tusk, Mr Tajani: be brave, lead; Show us that you are at the forefront of a political Europe and help find a political solution through dialogue to the conflict between Catalonia and Spain.” (Solé, Plenary 9, 20180418).
Legislator	Calls for EU legislation on internal territorial conflicts.	“And the idea was to, to put forward a concrete legislative proposal that would allow for the democratic and peaceful solution to these kind of territorial conflicts.” (ERC 5)

Europe in Independence Legitimizations

Principled Usage of the EU	Independence is legitimized because it is a right based on European principles, ideas or laws.	“Mr President, when I look at the stars on our flag, I see old and young nations rising up in the four corners of Europe. They all wish to take their place, their rightful place in this common Chamber. Allow me to finish in Catalan... .. Visca Catalunya lliure! [Long live a free
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		Catalonia!] <i>Visca Europa unida!</i> [Long live a united Europe!” (Mayol i Raynal, Plenary 5, 20020116).
Instrumental Usage of Independence in the EU	Independence is a legitimate instrument to resolve grievances (remedial) caused by the EU or related to European conditions. Or independence is a legitimate instrument as it allows to make better use of the opportunities the EU has to offer and thereby be better off (better future).	“Catalonia, one of the most Europhile nations in Europe, was treated with contempt. You, Mr President, were received by the Council. The same cannot be said of the President of Catalonia. That is a pity, but I believe that my compatriots will draw the obvious conclusions from that. In order to be recognized, we have to establish a Catalan republic by democratic means and join the Union on an equal footing” (Mayol i Raynal, Plenary 5, 20020320).

Europe in Instrumental Remedial Arguments

Sub-Theme Name	Guideline	Example
Bad Representation Argument	Independence <i>in the EU</i> is needed to resolve the grievance that the host state either misrepresents the interests of the region in the EU and/or lacks influence or somehow <i>fails at achieving results</i> for the region at the European level. Here the origin of the grievance is at the national level, not at the EU level. Yet, the very existence and membership of the EU does facilitate this problem.	“While it is true to say that the EU institutions need reform, it is also true that euroscepticism has grown in Scotland because you have continued the traditional UK Government practice of selling out Scotland’s interests in cobbled together compromises. The best form of constitutional reform for Scotland would be to represent ourselves in the European Union as an independent Member State.”

		(Hudghton, Plenary 6, 20050623).
Brexit Argument	Independence in the EU is needed to avoid the negative consequences of Brexit, including being dragged out of the EU against the democratic will of the Scottish people.	“But, if we in Scotland are removed from our family of nations against our will—against our clearly democratically expressed view—independence will be our only route back.” (Smith, Plenary 8, 20190327).
EU Democratic Deficit Argument	Independence in the EU is needed to resolve the democratic deficit stateless nations suffer in the EU, as a result of the EU’s state-centredness.	“Now what is going to happen if we retain a ceiling of 700, bring in 26% more population over time, and then adopt the Commission’s, I think ill-considered, proposition, that there should be a European list of candidates. What will happen to a place like Scotland, which I represent here? It will become totally invisible! Members of this House should not in these circumstances be in the least surprised that in these discussions, people in Scotland other such countries are asking whether enlargement should not also take the form of admitting new Member States from within existing ones. A growing body of opinion in Scotland holds that view.” (MacCormick, Plenary 5, 20000202)
Limited EU Benefits Argument	The host-state limits the benefits the nation can obtain from EU membership as well as the ability to meet EU standards and	“States, thereby easing the path to an enhanced single market. However, Spain refuses to join this great European project. I

	<p>independence in the EU can remedy this.</p>	<p>find it embarrassing that Spain, for petty nationalistic reasons, wants to be out. Because of this, thousands of Catalan innovative enterprises will be damaged by this Spanish exception. As a Catalan MEP coming from Catalonia, which generates more than 30% of new Spanish patents every year, I find this astonishing. I will support this European patent because by enhancing the single market we enhance our chances of future prosperity. The Spanish Government seems to be providing further rational incentives for more and more Catalan citizens to ask for an independent state inside the EU.” (Tremosa i Balcells, Plenary 7, 20121211).</p>
<p>Underperforming Argument</p>	<p>Independence is needed because compared to other European nations, the stateless nation is underperforming and independence is the solution.</p>	<p>“These new EU figures are just the latest to show that the Scottish economy is seriously under-performing. Small countries such as Ireland, Denmark and “Finland yet again overtake Scotland in terms of wealth. ... Scotland ought not to be so poor. The Irish don’t have oil. The Finns don’t have a world-class whisky industry. What they do have is the power to take charge of their own wealth. The key element lacking in the Scottish economy is the power to make real</p>

		decisions – independence is the missing ingredient” (Hudghton, Plenary 6, 20050126).
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Europe in Instrumental Better Future Arguments

Sub-Theme Name	Guideline	Example
Voice in the EU Argument	Independence in the EU is motivated by the desire of self-governing regions to actively take part in EU policy-making and help shape the EU future. It refers both to actual influence in EU policy-making, but also simply to clear representation in that own interests can be represented and essentially being an equal partner.	“I want to see Scotland joining the family of European nations and playing a constructive part in decision-making as a Member State, not as an observer from the sidelines.” (Hudghton, Plenary 6, 20110220)
Better Future for EU Argument	Independence in the EU would be mutually beneficial and would make the EU better off. For example, the EU would gain a constructive partner, EU law would be abided by and the new state would unleash new potential that could help the EU reach its policy objectives that was previously blocked because of the constraining effects of the host-state.	“From Catalonia we want to contribute directly as a new Member State to forging and strengthening this common area of freedom, progress, solidarity and justice that we want the European Union to be. We will exercise democracy: we will vote, we will decide and we will stay in the European Union to improve it.” (Solé, Plenary 8, 20170201)
Full EU Benefits Argument	Independence in the EU will help the nation reap and keep maximum benefits from being a part of the EU.	“I voted in favour of the Connecting Europe Facility which will do much to boost the European economy. I aim for Scotland to play a full role in Europe after next year’s independence referendum and

		the CEF will help Scotland fully contribute to and benefit from our continued EU membership” (Hudghton, Plenary 7, 20131119).
Viability Argument 2.0	Independence in the EU will lead to a viable small state in the EU. It is wrong that independence in the EU is not viable. Small nations are not too poor, too weak to be able to exercise normal rights to independence. The EU does not make independence possible but examples of European nations inspire small stateless nations that independence in the EU is possible and will be an improvement to the current situation. NOTE: This is not a safety net argument, where it is argued that small nations can rely on the safeguards of the EU and where the existence of the EU thus makes independence possible, and in that way encourages it because it makes independence a less risky solution to the self-determination problem at home.	“We in Scotland are frequently told that as a small country we would have no great standing in Europe if we were likewise to achieve independence in Europe through democratic departure from a larger union. During the current fisheries negotiations, on the other hand, we have been warned not to expect too much since the UK lacks solid allies in Europe. There are five million Danes and five million Scots. I salute the huge achievement of one of the ancient small nations of Europe. I look forward to the day when my own ancient nation can play a similar role. The idea that small states count for nothing while large ones can cut the mustard has been shown up for the nonsense it is.” (MacCormick, Plenary 5, 20021219)

Europe in Principled Arguments

Sub-Theme Name	Guideline	Example
European Democracy Argument	Independence is legitimate because it is in line with the European notion of democracy.	“I take the opportunity to remember that last September, with 77% participation,

		<p>Catalan pro-independentist parties achieved an absolute majority in the Catalan Parliament. 2 million voters voted for independence. Carme Forcadell was elected President of the Catalan Parliament and she allowed a debate on Catalan independence in September. On Friday Carme Forcadell has to appear in front of the Spanish court to make a statement, which follows orders from the Spanish Government. She could be banned from public office because she allowed Catalan MPs to debate on independence! Commissioner Jourová, dear colleagues, don't be indifferent to the actions of the Spanish State against Catalan democratic politicians. Don't let Spain undermine with total impunity our fundamental rights as Europeans." (Tremosa i Balcells, Plenary 8, 20161214).</p>
<p>European Law Argument</p>	<p>Independence is legitimate based on European law and principles. Also includes references to international law, if claimed that the EU subscribes to this.</p>	<p>"If a unilateral declaration of independence can be legal in accordance with international law, it goes against European values that there are currently five EU member states, including Spain, that do not want to recognize it" (Oliveres, Plenary 9, 20211020).</p>

<p>Normal Argument</p>	<p>Independence in the EU is normalized based on comparisons with other stateless nations, small nation-states or European history. If other similar nations can have independence in the EU, then we should be able to as well.</p>	<p>“Ireland will lead the process of welcoming ten new member states – many smaller than Scotland – into the EU. These new members will have full rights of participation including votes on Fisheries Policy, while Scotland is a mere observer. I wish Ireland success in its presidency and look forward to the day when an independent Scotland takes its rightful place in the world” (Hudghton, Plenary 5, 20040102).</p>
<p>European Identity Argument</p>	<p>Independence in the EU is legitimate based on claims of a European identity, sometimes in combination with a distancing from the host-state identity.</p>	<p>“In Scotland our devolved institutions are based on European laws. The foundation of modern Scotland comes from the EU. Scotland is looking forward to contribute to the debate as a future Member State of the European Union.” (Allard, Plenary 9, 20200115).</p>
<p>EU Recognition Argument</p>	<p>Independence is legitimate based on European recognition.</p>	<p>“On 29 March 2012, the European Parliament once again expressed its support for the process for the Republic of Kosovo to become part of the European Union in the long-term, with 475 votes in favour, 97 against and 76 abstentions. There are currently 85 states that officially recognize the independent State of Kosovo, and 22 of those are EU Member</p>

		<p>States. Spain, one of the most populous EU countries, has still not recognized Kosovo, and refuses to do so for purely internal political reasons, as admitted by the Spanish Government(1). This opposition may represent a barrier to normalising the political situation in Kosovo within the framework of the EU, despite the large majority of Member States that already officially recognize it.” (Tremosa i Balcells, Plenary 7, 20120330).</p>
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Instrumental Arguments¹⁸

Sub-Theme Name	Guideline	Example
Remedial Argument	Independence is a justified instrument based on its ability to resolve grievances.	“Too many people in my own country are living in dire conditions, and Scotland remains one of the few places in the world to have discovered oil yet got poorer. Years, decades and centuries of London rule have brought about this situation, and only with Scottish Independence will we be able to build the fair

¹⁸ This is a codebook of independence legitimations that were not linked to Europe, yet were presented in the European Parliament. They were mostly left out of the empirical discussion in order to focus the argument. However, they are presented here as background information, as it is important to acknowledge that not all independence legitimations presented in the European Parliament were linked to Europe.

		and just society that our nation should take for granted.” (Hudghton, Plenary 7, 20111105)
Better Future Argument	Independence is a justified instrument based on its ability to produce greater well-being (better future).	“We also have in Scotland a significant offshore oil and gas resources, and it is essential that we maintain a set of economic circumstances which will encourage exploration and full extraction of that resource. My belief is that an independent Scottish government would ensure that all of Scotland’s energy resource potential can be maximised” (Hudghton, Plenary 7, 20070215)

Principled Arguments¹⁹

Sub-Theme Name	Guideline	Example
Democratic Choice Argument	Independence is legitimate if there is a democratic majority for it. Includes implicit statements that the independence movement is democratic in nature.	“The Edinburgh Agreement recently signed by the UK and Scottish Governments is founded on that democratic principle: that the people of Scotland have the right to decide upon Scotland’s constitutional future” (Hudghton, Plenary 7, 20110406).

¹⁹ This is a codebook of independence legitimations that were not linked to Europe, yet were presented in the European Parliament. They were mostly left out of the empirical discussion to focus the argument. However, they are presented here as background information, as it is important to acknowledge that not all independence legitimations presented in the European Parliament were linked to Europe.

<p>Legal Argument</p>	<p>Independence is deemed legitimate based on domestic or international law or principles.</p>	<p>“The right to exist and to decide freely about one's future is a guiding principle of international law.” (Puigdemont, Plenary 9, 20220303).</p>
<p>Inherent Sovereignty Argument</p>	<p>Independence is legitimate based on previous statehood.</p>	<p>“When Scotland wins back her independence, it will be appropriate for those levels of government below the Scottish national government to be fully involved in implementing Single Market rules” (Hudghton, Plenary 7, 20110404).</p>
<p>Earned Sovereignty Argument</p>	<p>The right to independence is based on one’s own democratic nature versus the undemocratic attitude of the host-state.</p>	<p>“We democrats are ashamed that a minister of a supposedly democratic government can still use the methods of the Franco dictatorship. And we are ashamed that there is an electorate that does not reject or embarrass him. Canyone still be surprised if the Catalan democrats and Europeanists do not want to participate in a State that accepts and rewards both corruption and espionage against the adversary?” (Terricabras, 20160704)</p>
<p>Communitarian Argument</p>	<p>Appeal to nationhood to legitimate independence.</p>	<p>“Because, um, every nation has the right to self-determination, to decide on their own future. And as we regard ourselves as a nation, and we have many arguments to sustain that argument. Historical, cultural,</p>

		institutional, uh, the will of the people. Uh, arguments like this. We are a nation, and we have the right as every other nation to choose our relations and our, uh, our level of sovereignty, let's put it that way” (ERC 4)
International Recognition Argument	Independence is legitimate based on international recognition.	“Four years after its democratic declaration of independence, 85 countries in the world have recognized Kosovo as an independent country. Of these countries, 22 belong to the EU, but five still refuse to recognize it. One of these is Spain. Spain, one of the biggest Member States, shows a democratic deficit in not recognizing this reality. I hope that the EU forces Spain to address this situation in the coming months and years. Internal affairs should not be used to oppose the freedom of the Kosovar people to decide their own future.” (TIB, Plenary 7, 20120329).
Negotiation Argument	Independence is legitimate when it is based on peaceful negotiations.	“After so many years of conflict in the Middle East, the only possible solution is the peaceful and negotiated coexistence of two states, Israel and Palestine. This recognition must be the consequence of a negotiation process between the parties that guarantees

		peace and security for both” (GM, Plenary 8, 20141217)
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Annex 3 — Definitions of Non-Discursive Independence Practices

Themes	Definitions	Examples
Good Europeanism	Showing dedication to parliamentary work and interest beyond the independence agenda to EP colleagues in combination with limited independence talk to normalize the independence quest.	“But I had my normal activity because gaining credibility as a good MEP, I was much more respected when I talked on Catalonia” (CiU 2).
Linking Topics	The creation of space to talk about independence where there formally is none. Done by linking a certain topic, for example EU energy policy, to the quest for independence.	“The Internal Market Scoreboard provides a useful overview of the application of Community rules in areas of vital importance to European consumers and businesses. Unfortunately, Scotland does not as yet feature as an independent country on the scoreboard. I consider it essential that the Scottish parliament gains full powers in those areas currently reserved to London; when that happens, I am confident that Scotland will feature among the Member States implementing measures for the benefit of consumers and businesses” (Hudghton, Plenary 7, 20100309).
Distinguishing the Nation	Discursive or non-discursive efforts to distinguish the nation from the host-state. Even without an explicit link to independence, these constructions of the self and the host-state construct a context in which independence arguments	“It it it, it’s obvious to anybody that Scotland has a different attitude to the EU, that means we have a different attitude to immigration, to where we sit in the world, who should speak to us, what sort of country we want to be” (SNP 4).

	can more convincingly be presented.	
Selective Alignment and Party Cooperation	The practice of engaging in limited cooperation with MEPs from other stateless nations	“I think that, uh, we kind of keep cooperation, but simultaneously, we don't abuse it. Uh, because one of the biggest problems we have at the European level with our case, it's the idea of precedent.” (CiU 3)
Networking	Efforts to engage in bilateral or informal meetings with fellow European actors where independence is discussed, as well as efforts to set up conferences or groups where independence plays a role.	“And as I said in the beginning, you know, we try to see, you know where are the kind of areas of kind of common interest, where we can kind of build alliances and, strategic alliances and cement those relationships. There was, there were a lot of MEPs who were asking questions about, you know, what was happening with independence ehm (silence). What that, you, know, what that could look like. You know, so its an opportunity for Scotland to kind of set out, you know, this is the positive role that we can play and the positive contribution that we can make to European debates and discussions as an independent country.” (SNP 1)

Annex 4 – Independence Legitimation Coding Results

SNP – Legitimizations in European Parliament — Linked to Europe

Legitimation	Term 5 99-04	Term 6 04-09	Term 7 09-14	Term 8 14-19	Term 9 19-23
Principled Legitimizations					
Normal Argument*	3	5	5	3	
European Identity Argument*		2	2	3	4
European Democracy Argument			3	4	
EU Law Argument*			3		
Instrumental Remedial Legitimizations					
EU Democratic Deficit Argument	6	1	2		
Bad Representation Argument ²⁰	1	3	3	2	
Brexit Argument*			2	4	3
Limited EU Benefits Argument*			1	1	
Underperforming Argument*		1			
Instrumental Better Future Legitimizations					
Voice in the EU Argument*	3	9	6	3	1
Better Future for EU Argument*		6	7	2	
Full EU Benefits Argument*		1	4		
Viability 2.0 Argument*	3	2	1		
Absent Arguments					
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Instrumental: EU Recognition Argument*, Misrepresentation Argument 					

Note: The table indicates the number of independence contributions that contain the specific independence legitimizations, in which Europe is used. The colours indicate the overall importance of the argument, based on its total frequency. White: Absence / Light Grey: Below 10 in total / Medium Grey: 10 -20 / Dark Grey: 20 – 30 / Very Dark Grey: 30 or above in total. Star*: new arguments that have been identified by me in from the empirical data. Arguments without * have been identified by me based on findings from previous literature.

SNP – Legitimizations in European Parliament – Not Linked to Europe²¹

Legitimation	Term 5 99-04	Term 6 ²² 04-09	Term 7 09-14	Term 8 14-19	Term 9 19-24
Principled Case for Independence					
Democratic Choice Argument	3		5	5	1
Inherent Sovereignty Argument	1	3	3	4	
Earned Sovereignty Argument	1			1	
Legal Argument				2	
Communitarian Argument	1	1			
Instrumental Case for Independence					
Political Remedial Argument	1	2	5	2	
Political Better Future Argument	1	4	6	2	
Absent Arguments					
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Principled: Negotiation Argument ▪ Instrumental: culture, environmental and socio-economic 					

Note: The table indicates the presence/absence of a certain argument within a given parliamentary term. White: Absence / Light Grey: Below 10 in total / Medium Grey: 10 -20 / Dark Grey: 20 – 30 / Very Dark Grey: 30 or above in total. Star*: new argument compared the conceptual framework based on the literature review

ERC – Legitimizations in European Parliament — Linked to Europe

Legitimation	Term 5 99-04	Term 6 04-09	Term 7 09-14	Term 8 14-19	Term 9 19-24
Principled Legitimizations					
European Democracy Argument	1		1	14	1
EU Law Argument*	1			4	1
Normal Argument	2			5	1

²¹ Note that this, as is the case for the other two parties, is not discussed in depth in the analysis, because of the focus on usage of Europe. Nevertheless, it is included here because it can give an impression of the relative usage of Europe in independence legitimizations.

European Identity Argument*	1				
Instrumental Remedial Legitimizations					
EU Democratic Deficit Argument	3				
Limited EU Benefits Argument*			1		
Brexit Argument*					1
Instrumental Better Future Legitimizations					
Better Future for EU Argument*			1	5	
Voice in the EU Argument*	2				
Full EU Benefits Argument*	1				
Absent Arguments					
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Principled: EU Recognition Argument* ▪ Instrumental Remedial: Bad Representation Argument, Underperforming Argument* ▪ Instrumental Better Future: Viability 2.0 Argument* 					

Note: The table indicates the presence/absence of a certain argument within a given parliamentary term. White: Absence / Light Grey: Below 10 in total / Medium Grey: 10 -20 / Dark Grey: 20 – 30 / Very Dark Grey: 30 or above in total. Star*: new arguments that have been identified by me in from the empirical data. Arguments without * have been identified by me based on findings from previous literature.

ERC – Legitimizations in European Parliament – Not Linked to Europe

Legitimation	Term 5 99-04	Term 6 ²³ 04-09	Term 7 09-14	Term 8 14-19	Term 9 19-24
Principled Case for Independence					
Democratic Choice Argument	2		1	33	8
Legal Argument*			1	5	1
International Recognition Argument*			1		1
Earned Sovereignty Argument				4	1
Negotiation Argument*					

Inherent Sovereignty Argument	2				
Communitarian Argument					
Instrumental Case for Independence					
Political Remedial Argument	1			1	1
Political Better Future Argument					1
Absent Arguments					
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Principled: Negotiation Argument ▪ Instrumental: culture, environmental and socio-economic 					

Note: The table indicates the presence/absence of a certain argument within a given parliamentary term. White: Absence / Light Grey: Below 10 in total / Medium Grey: 10 -20 / Dark Grey: 20 – 30 / Very Dark Grey: 30 or above in total. Star*: new argument compared the conceptual framework based on the literature review

CiU, PDeCAT and Junts – Legitimations in European Parliament — Linked to Europe

Legitimation	Term 5 99-04	Term 6 04-09	Term 7 09-14	Term 8 14-19	Term 9 19-24
Principled Legitimations					
European Democracy Argument			9	3	7
EU Law Argument*			1	3	5
Normal Argument			3	1	2
European Identity Argument*			2	1	
EU Recognition Argument *			2	2	1
Instrumental Remedial Legitimations					
EU Democratic Deficit Argument					2
Limited EU Benefits Argument*			1		
Instrumental Better Future Legitimations					
Better Future for EU Argument*			1	1	2
Better Relations Argument*			1	2	
Voice in the EU Argument*			1		
Full EU Benefits Argument*			1		

Viability Argument 2.0			1		
Absent Arguments					
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Instrumental Remedial Legitimizations: Bad Representation Argument, Brexit Argument, Underperforming Argument 					

Note: The table indicates the presence/absence of a certain argument within a given parliamentary term. White: Absence / Light Grey: Below 10 in total / Medium Grey: 10 -20 / Dark Grey: 20 – 30 / Very Dark Grey: 30 or above in total. Star*: new arguments that have been identified by me in from the empirical data. Arguments without * have been identified by me based on findings from previous literature.

Ciu, PDeCAT and Junts – Legitimizations in European Parliament – Not Linked to Europe

Legitimation	Term 5 99-04	Term 6²⁴ 04-09	Term 7 09-14	Term 8 14-19	Term 9 19-24
Principled Case for Independence					
Democratic Choice Argument			10	13	16
Legal Argument*			1	4	6
International Recognition Argument*			3	1	
Negotiation Argument*				3	
Communitarian Argument				1	1
Instrumental Case for Independence					
Political Remedial Argument			1	1	7
Political Better Future Argument			1		2
Absent Arguments					
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Instrumental: Inherent Sovereignty, Earned Sovereignty, culture, environmental and socio-economic 					

Note: The table indicates the presence/absence of a certain argument within a given parliamentary term. White: Absence / Light Grey: Below 10 in total / Medium Grey: 10 -20 / Dark Grey: 20 – 30 / Very Dark Grey: 30 or above in total. Star*: new argument compared the conceptual framework based on the literature review.

Annex 5 – Inter-Coder Reliability Results

	Agreements	Recoded Observations	Agreement %
Independence Objective in the EP	173	182	95%
EU Governance Structure	103	112	91%
EU in Independence Process	119	124	96%
Europe in Independence Legitimations	89	96	92%

Note: As suggested by Miles & Huberman (1994) the percentage of agreement is calculated by taking the # of agreement and dividing it by the total number of observations recoded for a given category. Discursive usage of Europe taken together has a percentage of agreement of 93%,

Annex 6 — Interview List

Interview Label	Role	Date, Place
SNP 1	Former MEP	21 June 2023, Edinburgh
SNP 2	Former SNP Staff in European Parliament	5 September 2023, Zoom
SNP 3	Former MEP	6 July 2023, Zoom
SNP 4	Former MEP	18 July 2023, Zoom
ERC 1	Former MEP	14 March 2024, Barcelona
ERC 2	Former Assistant to MEP	14 March 2024, Barcelona
ERC 3	Former MEP	15 March 2024, Barcelona
ERC 4	Former MEP	6 March 2024, Barcelona
ERC 5	ERC Staff in European Parliament	4 March 2024, Brussels
CiU 1	Former MEP	5 March 2024, Brussels
CiU 2	Former MEP	12 March and 14 March 2024, Barcelona
CiU 3	CiU/PDeCAT and Junts Staff in European Parliament	4 April 2024, Zoom

Annex 7 - Interview Guide

The purpose of this interview guide is both to further clarify the institutional usage of the European Parliament by secessionist parties, but also looks into ideas and beliefs about independence and intends to gather further contextual information. The goal is to get a better insight into how Europe matters in secessionist party independence strategies in the EP²⁵.

The beginning

- You have served X number of terms in the European Parliament as an MEP, can you tell me how you ended up becoming an MEP?

General aims & priorities in the European Parliament

- Looking back what was it that your party and you personally wanted to achieve by being in the European Parliament?
 - a. What did you see as your main priorities in the European Parliament and more generally at the EU level?

Independence objectives & ways of addressing independence in the European Parliament

- In regards to your party's quest for independence specifically, what did you hope to achieve, by your activities in the European Parliament?
- How much of your time as an MEP did you spend, in particular, on addressing independence in the European Parliament versus your other activities?
- How did you go about addressing your and your party's independence agenda in the EP? (moments, settings, audiences, messages/framing)
 - In your experience what ended up being the most useful way in which to discuss independence at the EU level and why ?
- Did your ways of addressing independence change over time? If so, how and why?

²⁵ Note that this guide is meant for a generic secessionist MEP, and would be modified with person specific questions, depending on who I am interviewing. The interview guide would of also look slightly different if I am interviewing someone from the EP supporting staff. Based on the time available more or less questions were included and themes were discussed in the order that flowed most naturally for the conversation at hand.

Descriptions of key moments in the independence process

- What moments, issues, or policies, would you say, during your time as an MEP stand out to you particularly important for your party's independence quest?
 - How did your party feel about a Europe of the Regions? Was it ever an alternative to independence?

Ideas and beliefs about independence

- Your party pursues independence in the EU. Why do you believe this is the way forward for your nation?
- In an ideal world, what kind of EU would you and your party want your nation to be independent in? Is there anything that needs to change about the way in which things work currently? (ideology, priorities, sharing of power, level of democracy)
- How important, would you say, is EU membership for an independent X?
 - Why do you and your party prefer to have your nation become an independent state inside of the EU, instead of outside of the EU?
 - Would your party also consider becoming independent outside of the EU? Why?
- Ideally, what kind of role should the EU adopt when it comes to your region's quest for independence?
- What is it, in your view, that makes your region European?

Cooperation in the European Parliament

- How would you describe the cooperation between your party and your EP party group?
 - Where do you cooperate, where do you not cooperate? Where do you agree and where do you disagree?

Experiences as a secessionist party in the EP

- Coming from X you, unlike many other MEPs represented a specific stateless nation. What was and is it like, according to you, to represent a stateless nation in the European Parliament?
- Can you describe how, over the years, EU actors have reacted when you brought up Scottish independence?

- How receptive have your audiences/the EU been, in your experience?
 - Have there been supportive reactions to your message of independence outside of other secessionist actors in the European Parliament?
 - Do you feel like your efforts to address independence as an MEP have made a difference? If so, in what way?
- Over the years, the EU has not exactly come out and supported your quests for more subsidiarity and independence in the EU. How do you feel about the way in which the EU has handled demands by stateless nations for independence in the EU?
 - In particular, how did you feel about the EU's attitude in the run-up to the Scottish independence referendum, as well as when Catalonia unilaterally declared independence in 2017?
 - How did you feel about the EU's claims that secessionist conflict within Member States is an internal matter as well as claims that internal enlargement is not possible?

Looking ahead

- Looking ahead, how do you expect party's quest for independence to continue? Are there any new or existing avenues to take that will bring your nation closer to becoming an independent state?

Sammanfattning på Svenska

Det finns i nuläget omkring 60 självständighetsrörelser i världen som aktivt strävar efter att bilda egna stater genom secession, varav flera återfinns i Europa. Sedan 2000-talet har separatistpartier i Västeuropa dessutom blivit allt mer framgångsrika i val, inte minst genom en politisk agenda som kombinerar självständighet med fortsatt medlemskap i EU. Denna utveckling går emot tidigare förväntningar om att europeisk integration successivt skulle minska nationalstatens betydelse och därmed undanröja behovet av separatism. Europeisk integration betraktades dessutom länge som oförenlig med separatistpartiernas agendor, eftersom de kunde uppfattas som ett hot mot nationalstaten, nationell suveränitet och nationell identitet. I stället tycks separatistpartier ha anammat den europeiska integrationen, vilket antyder att EU snarare kan ha bidragit till att upprätthålla strävanden efter självständighet, snarare än att motverka dem. Denna utveckling är särskilt anmärkningsvärd mot bakgrund av att EU-företrädare konsekvent har framhållit att självständighetsfrågor utgör medlemsstaternas ”interna angelägenheter” och att regioner som lämnar en medlemsstat automatiskt skulle förlora sitt EU-medlemskap.

Tidigare forskning har främst fokuserat på proeuropeiska separatistpartier på nationell nivå, trots att mobilisering i Europaparlamentet länge utgjort en central del av dessa partiers strategier. Följaktligen har få studier undersökt hur och i vilken utsträckning Europaparlamentet används som politisk arena inom separatistpartiers självständighetsstrategier. Denna avhandling analyserar hur proeuropeiska separatistpartier driver sina självständighetsagendor i Europaparlamentet och undersöker den europeiska integrationens betydelse för samtida separatistisk politik. Trots att EU inte har uppfyllt separatistpartiernas förhoppningar och förväntningar har dessa partier fortsatt att mobilisera stöd för att säkra representation i Europaparlamentet. Detta väcker frågor kring vilken roll Europa spelar i deras strävan efter självständighet.

Avhandlingen undersöker två forskningsfrågor: hur har proeuropeiska separatistpartier använt Europa i sina självständighetsstrategier i Europaparlamentet mellan 1999 och 2024, och vilka kontextuella faktorer bidrar till förståelsen av skillnader i hur Europa används i dessa strategier? Med utgångspunkt i ett strategiskt konstruktivistiskt perspektiv samt Jacquot och Wolls (2003; 2010) begrepp ”användning av Europa” (usage of Europe)

utvecklar avhandlingen ett nytt analytiskt ramverk som fångar olika sätt på vilka separatistpartier kan använda Europa i en parlamentarisk kontext. Användningen av Europa studeras genom en kvalitativ innehållsanalys av ett nytt empiriskt material bestående av tal i Europaparlamentet, parlamentariska frågor och intervjuer med företrädare för tre proeuropeiska separatistpartier: Scottish National Party (SNP), Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya (ERC) och Convergència i Unió/Partit Demòcrata Europeu Català/Junts per Catalunya (CiU/PDeCAT/Junts). På så sätt bidrar avhandlingen till forskningen om den europeiska integrationens konsekvenser för separatistisk politik.

Resultaten visar att proeuropeiska separatistpartier kontinuerligt har använt Europaparlamentet för att främja sina självständighetsagendor. SNP har framför allt använt Europa på ett pragmatiskt sätt, medan de katalanska partierna i högre grad har använt Europa idealistiskt och därmed gett den europeiska dimensionen en mer central roll i sina självständighetsstrategier. Även om användningen av Europa formas av olika kontextuella faktorer visar studien också att samtliga partier använder strategier som syftar till att normalisera både partierna själva och deras självständighetsanspråk. Sammantaget tyder resultaten på att även om EU inte stödjer secession erbjuder den europeiska integrationen trots allt separatistpartier institutionella och diskursiva resurser.

Avhandlingen bidrar empiriskt till forskningen om separatistisk politik genom att analysera nytt empiriskt material från Europaparlamentet. Det europeiska perspektivet kompletterar tidigare nationellt inriktade studier och erbjuder därmed en mer heltäckande förståelse av Europas betydelse för separatistisk politik. Avhandlingen bidrar även teoretiskt genom att utveckla en typologi över hur Europa används i självständighetsstrategier inom Europaparlamentet. Därigenom vidareutvecklas forskningen om hur Europa används både institutionellt och diskursivt. Det analytiska ramverket bidrar vidare till forskningen om separatistisk politik genom att systematisera tidigare forskning och begreppsliggöra hur den europeiska dimensionen av självständighetsstrategier uttrycks. Ramverket kan även användas för att studera hur andra separatistpartier använder Europa.

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Although the EU has not delivered on secessionist parties' wishes and expectations these parties have continued to mobilize electoral support for representation in the EP, raising the question of how Europe matters in their pursuit of independence. The thesis addresses two research questions: how have pro-European secessionist parties used Europe in their independence strategies in the EP between 1999 and 2024, and what contextual factors help understand differences in how Europe is used in secessionist parties' independence strategies in the EP? The thesis adopts a strategic constructivist perspective and develops a new conceptual framework based on the concept of "usage of Europe." The framework structures a comparative case study of three secessionist parties from Scotland and Catalonia: Scottish National Party (SNP); Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya (ERC) and Convergència i Unió/Partit Demòcrata Europeu Català/Junts per Catalunya (CiU/PDeCAT/Junts). The study combines qualitative content analysis of a novel dataset of EP text data with interviews with Members of the EP and their staff. The findings show that pro-European secessionist parties have continuously used the EP to address independence, albeit the SNP has used Europe primarily pragmatically, whereas the Catalan parties have used it more idealistically, making Europe more central to their independence strategies. While different usages of Europe are shaped by contextual factors, the study also shows that all parties engage in practices aiming at normalizing themselves and their independence claims within the EP.

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