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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Emotions, International Relations, and the everyday: Individuals' emotional attachments to international organisations

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Abstract

In recent years, various crises such as the financial crisis, Brexit, and the Covid-19 pandemic have shed light on citizens' (dis)satisfaction with international organisations (IOs). Yet, despite their crucial importance for the support of IOs, individual citizens' connection to these organisations remains understudied. This article contributes to the literature on emotion research in International Relations (IR) by exploring the everyday emotions of ordinary individuals about IOs and their repercussions on world politics, moving beyond the state or community level to examine how citizens actually experience international politics. It does so by (i) theorising individuals' emotional attachments to IOs and demonstrating how they shape perceptions and preferences that impact the future of organisations, and (ii) advocating for the use of focus groups as a research method to study emotions in IR. Contributing to the 'everyday turn' in emotion research in IR, it uses the European Union as a case study and analyses 21 focus groups with individuals from four different countries (Belgium, France, Italy, and Portugal). The article's insights provide a deeper understanding of the micro-political foundation that enables and legitimises government action, and against whose background international relations are conducted.

As international organisations (IOs) have been facing various crises over recent years, the question of their public support seems more relevant now than ever. The global financial crisis, the Covid-19 pandemic, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, for instance, have shed light on citizens' (dis)satisfaction with issues such as the economic conservatism of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the (lack of) power of the World Health Organization (WHO), or the necessity (or otherwise) of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). The year 2016 served as a stark reminder of the importance of taking into account the opinions of citizens: a majority of British citizens voted to exit the European Union (EU), setting a precedent for other countries to follow suit and prompting citizens to re-evaluate their relationships to IOs. Recent debates surrounding applications by Finland and Sweden for NATO membership and Moldova and Ukraine seeking to join the EU have highlighted the necessity of thinking about the *future* of IOs, which demands taking citizens' connection to them into account. Following a recent strand of research in International Relations (IR), in this article, I argue that this relationship is best understood through one specific aspect: emotions.

In its early days, the investigation of emotions in IR was dedicated to proving their relevance in the realm of global politics. More recently, the field's focus has shifted towards examining *how*

they matter and the full extent of their influence. A flourishing research agenda followed, which has supplied extensive knowledge about what role emotions play in identity-shaping, diplomacy, decision-making, and discourse, amongst others.[1] In this article, I build on this existing scholarship and focus on *how* emotions matter, but also on *how to study* them. I do so in two ways. First, I seek to shift the locus of analysis from the macro-level towards how emotions matter in individuals' daily lives by exploring and theorising the everyday *emotional attachments* – the emotional connection of an individual to a political entity – to IOs. Current studies in emotion research in IR have primarily examined emotions at the state or community level, and there has been little engagement with the everyday emotions of citizens and the micro-level of politics. Yet these dynamics have unequivocal importance for world politics, revealed by the insights from the literature into the heterogeneous and unique ways in which everyday and micro-level emotions can be expressed and subsequently become politically significant.[2] Second, I investigate some of the mechanisms through which we can study emotions. For this purpose, I employ a methodology hitherto underutilised in emotion research in IR: focus groups. I argue that through the use of focus groups and the investigation of their *sensitive moments*, situations full of graspable tension and great emotionality, we can not only unveil some of the everyday emotions at the individual level, but also do so whilst still capturing their social dimension.

I analyse 21 focus group discussions in four European countries to investigate the case of the European Union, which has received the most attention from scholars interested in citizens' rapport to IOs. Ultimately, I find that emotional attachments manifest themselves in the everyday through the experience and understanding of the EU as an emotional community with shared (internalised) values, morals, and imperatives and become most visible during the 'sensitive moments' that emerge in group discussions. Attachments, expressed most often implicitly rather than explicitly, play a crucial role in shaping how citizens envision the future of the EU. They narrow down the alternative paths the EU should take, rendering some desirable and others anxiety-inducing and to be avoided. Furthermore, emotional attachments are also challenged or reinforced when faced with significant events such as Brexit, which lead individuals to reconsider their connection to IOs. Still, in terms of IOs, the EU is special in many ways: it is more integrated than any other, more present in the everyday, and more likely to generate a sense of community in its members than other institutions. Thus, whilst some organisations such as the African Union (AU) or the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) might eventually generate similar responses, it is evident that emotional attachments to the EU might be stronger than to other organisations such as NATO, and even more so for some such as the World Trade Organization (WTO) or WHO. Attachments to other political entities might thus be weaker, but the framework and method developed here can still uncover the emotions citizens

harbour about other political entities and what political implications these emotions have for their future.

As they allow us to move beyond elite discourse towards how individuals actually experience international politics, insights from the findings of my analysis are crucial to understanding how individuals' perspectives on IOs are constructed. To that effect, the remainder of the article is structured as follows. First, I review the state of the literature on emotions in IR and indicate how my article builds on it. Second, I present my theoretical framework based on the concept of emotional attachments as everyday emotions, and how it can help unearth individuals' preferences for the future of an IO. Third, I outline my methodology for studying them in focus groups, introducing the concept of *sensitive moments*. Fourth, I offer an empirical account of the role of emotions in citizens' connection to the EU by analysing data from focus groups held in Belgium, France, Italy, and Portugal. Finally, I conclude with a discussion of these findings, which pertain to the EU but are relevant to other IOs, as they provide valuable insights into how to study and understand individuals' attachments to IOs more generally.

Emotion research in IR

Over the last two decades, emotion research in IR has flourished. Whilst a first strand of scholarship sought to challenge realist assumptions and demonstrate the added value of considering emotions in world politics,[3] more recent work has been mainly preoccupied with understanding their role in specific aspects of the international. This includes the investigation of dimensions related to decision-making,[4] diplomacy,[5] emotional practices such as norms and rituals,[6] the use of emotions in the justification and instrumentalisation of politics,[7] their role in narratives and securitisation processes,[8] in foreign policy,[9] and more. These studies have thus primarily looked at how political actors are embedded in affective dynamics whilst also mobilising emotions to reach their political objectives.[10] Although their predominant focus is on discourse and

[3] Crawford, 'Passion of world politics'; Mercer, 'Rationality and psychology'.

[4] See Philippe Beauregard, *The Passion of International Leadership: How Emotions Shape Transatlantic Cooperation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2022); Robin Markwica, *Emotional Choices: How the Logic of Affect Shapes Coercive Diplomacy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

[5] See Todd H. Hall, 'We will not swallow this bitter fruit: Theorizing a diplomacy of anger', *Security Studies*, 20:4 (2011), pp. 521–55; Hall, 'Emotional diplomacy'; Markwica, 'Emotional choices'; Michelle Pace and Ali Bilgic, 'Studying emotions in security and diplomacy: Where we are now and challenges ahead', *Political Psychology*, 40:6 (2019), pp. 1407–17.

[6] See Hall, 'Emotional diplomacy'; Simon Koschut, 'Emotional (security) communities: The significance of emotion norms in inter-allied conflict management', *Review of International Studies*, 40:3 (2014), pp. 533–58.

[7] C. Nicolai L. Gellwitzki and Anne-Marie Houde, 'From *Realpolitik* to *Gefühlspolitik*: Strategically narrating the European Union at the national level', *Journal of European Public Policy*, early view (2022), pp. 1–25; see Karl Gustafsson and Todd H. Hall, 'The politics of emotions in international relations: Who gets to feel what, whose emotions matter, and the "history problem" in Sino-Japanese relations', *International Studies Quarterly*, 65:4 (2021), pp. 973–84; Catarina Kinnvall, 'Ontological insecurities and postcolonial imaginaries: The emotional appeal of populism', *Humanity & Society*, 42:4 (2018), pp. 523–43; Koschut, 'Emotional (security) communities'.

[8] See Neta C. Crawford, 'Institutionalizing passion in world politics: Fear and empathy', *International Theory*, 6:3 (2014), pp. 535–57; Khaled Fattah and K. M. Fierke, 'A clash of emotions: The politics of humiliation and political violence in the Middle East', *European Journal of International Relations*, 15:1 (2009), pp. 67–93; C. Nicolai L. Gellwitzki and Anne-Marie Houde, 'Narratives, ontological security, and unconscious phantasy: Germany and the European myth during the so-called migration crisis', *Political Psychology*, 44:2 (2023), pp. 435–51; Hutchison, *Affective Communities*; Eric Van Rythoven, 'Learning to feel, learning to fear? Emotions, imaginaries, and limits in the politics of securitization', *Security Dialogue*, 46:5 (2015), pp. 458–75.

[9] See Jakub Eberle, *Discourse and Affect in Foreign Policy: Germany and the Iraq War* (London: Routledge, 2019); Ty Solomon, *The Politics of Subjectivity in American Foreign Policy Discourses* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2015); Özlem Terzi, Trineke Palm, and Seda Gürkan, 'Introduction: Emotion(al) norms in European foreign policy', *Global Affairs*, 7:2 (2021), pp. 93–102.

[10] Gustafsson and Hall, 'The politics of emotions in international relations'.

the state level, they also provide some insights about IOs, revealing for instance that their members share emotions and norms,[11] that decision-making or membership issues regarding them are contingent on political actors' emotions,[12] and that IOs' own behaviour is influenced by emotions.[13]

In more recent years, a different strand of literature has instead taken interest in how emotions become social and emerge at the collective level as reactions to political events. Research has shown, for example, a connection between emotions and identities[14] from the investigation of trauma[15] to memory.[16] Meanwhile, others have found that emotional contagion and circulation of affect can have important implications for world politics. Notably, when facing crises, the exposure to emotions in discourse or media can be transmitted to individuals at the collective level.[17] In the same vein, when it comes to IOs, the use of emotions has been shown to impact how audiences relate to them. For example, studies have demonstrated that the emotional framing and rhetoric during referendums on the EU have contributed to treaty rejections, as well as to Brexit and its emotional aftermath.[18]

The remainder of the article builds on these growing literatures and theoretically contributes to it principally in two ways. First, previous scholarship has established that emotions influence political actors' behaviour regarding IOs, and IOs' behaviour regarding diplomacy and foreign policy. Yet how emotions influence the general public's attitudes and behaviour *vis à vis* IOs remains crucially understudied. Second, significant work has uncovered how communities' and individuals' emotions matter for international politics, notably with regard to identities and memory, and how they are shaped and reinforced by crises and political events. However, whilst this gives crucial insights into audiences' emotions at the collective level, not much is known about the role of emotional attachments at the micro-level, how they are influenced by the collective, and how individuals' everyday emotions shape their perspectives on politics and ultimately politics itself when these emotions are aggregated. The next sections will seek to address these questions, starting with assessing how I theorise emotional attachments.

[11]Linus Hagström, 'Disciplinary power: Text and body in the Swedish NATO debate', *Cooperation and Conflict*, 56:2 (2021), pp. 141–62; Koschut, 'Emotional (security) communities'.

[12]Felix Berenskoetter and Yuri van Hoef, 'Friendship and foreign policy', Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics (2017) available at: {https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.429}; Hall, 'Emotional diplomacy'; Jelena Subotić and Ayşe Zarakol, 'Hierarchies, emotions, and memory in international relations', in Simon Koschut (ed.), *The Power of Emotions in World Politics* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020), pp. 100–112.

[13]Michelle Pace and Ali Bilgic, 'Trauma, emotions, and memory in world politics: The case of the European Union's foreign policy in the Middle East conflict', *Political Psychology*, 39:3 (2018), pp. 503–17; Terzi, Palm, and Gürkan, 'Introduction'.

[14]C. Nicolai L. Gellwitzki, '*Stimmung* and ontological security: Anxiety, euphoria, and emerging political subjectivities during the 2015 "border opening" in Germany', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 25:4 (2022), pp. 1101–25; Mercer; 'Rationality and psychology'; Brent E. Sasley, 'Theorizing states' emotions', *International Studies Review*, 13:3 (2011), pp. 452–76.

[15]Jenny Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Karin Marie Fierke, 'Whereof we can speak, thereof we must not be silent: Trauma, political solipsism and war', *Review of International Studies*, 30:4 (2004), pp. 471–491; Hutchison, *Affective Communities*.

[16]Luke B. Campbell, 'Affect, that old familiar feeling', in Eric Van Rythoven and Mira Sucharov (eds), *Methodology and Emotion in International Relations: Parsing the Passions* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020), pp. 113–29; Subotić and Zarakol, 'Hierarchies, emotions, and memory'; Maja Zehfuss, 'Forget September 11', *Third World Quarterly*, 24:3 (2003), pp. 513–28.

[17]Hall and Ross, 'Affective politics'; Ross, 'Mixed emotions'.

[18]Ece Özlem Atikcan, *Framing the European Union: The Power of Political Arguments in Shaping European Integration* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Ece Özlem Atikcan, Richard Nadeau, and Éric Bélanger, *Framing Risky Choices: Brexit and the Dynamics of High-Stakes Referendums* (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2020); Christopher S. Browning, 'Brexit populism and fantasies of fulfilment', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 32:3 (2019), pp. 222–44; C. Nicolai L. Gellwitzki and Anne-Marie Houde, 'Feeling the heat: Emotions, politicization, and the European Union', *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, 60:5 (2022), pp. 1470–87; Francesca Melhuish, 'Euroscepticism, anti-nostalgic nostalgia and the past perfect post-Brexit future', *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, 60:6 (2022), pp. 1758–1776.

Everyday emotional attachments

The main focus of this article is emotional attachments, which refer to the emotional connection, whether conscious or not, that an individual has with an object or a group or, in the context of this study, political entities such as IOs. Attachments are thus aimed directly towards a specific object,[19] in contrast to affective or emotional investments, which relate to kinds of identities or discourse[20] or to an interest in an issue giving it the potential to be politicised.[21] They also exhibit greater stability in time than investments, are less volatile, and tend to undergo significant changes in response to impactful events. Whilst an individual might, for example, become emotionally invested in a specific issue during a crisis or an election and see this investment subside once the event has passed,[22] attachments tend to be longer-lasting, as they are related to the object specifically. They can be positive and engender emotions such as love or hope, or negative and elicit emotions of hate or pain.[23] Like investments, attachments are also intertwined with collective memory. They are anchored in elements from the past through 'affective familiarisation',[24] which suggests that significant events feel socially familiar and that narratives around them become internalised and taken for granted. These narratives hold emotional significance and, when connected to a political entity, can fuel attachments towards it. This is especially important for attachments to IOs, many of which have been created amidst crises or crises resolution, and for which these narratives might carry weight – one might think of how narratives around the creation of the EU or the UN are often linked to the end of World War II and the peace that ensued. In turn, these attachments can lead to political outcomes: when considering leaders' attachments to an object, the greater the attachment, the less flexible a political leader is when making decisions about foreign policy towards that object.[25] Little attention has, however, been paid to 'ordinary' individuals' everyday relation to political entities, into which attachments give insights.

Building on the literature on attachments, I theorise emotional attachments as possessing different characteristics. First, they can be expressed explicitly or implicitly. Second, the expression of attachments can be more or less intense depending on the context in which an individual finds themselves. Attachments to NATO, for instance, might carry more weight in a debate about war than they would in a conversation about local elections. Third, individuals are diverse; their emotional attachments to political entities are influenced by a multitude of factors and will depend on the IO's characteristics.

Two axes are particularly relevant here: *proximity* and *time*. *Proximity* can be understood in geographical and spatial terms (e.g. the member states of the AU are on the same continent) or in social terms (e.g. by sharing common interests of objectives). For instance, IOs such as NATO, in which members view themselves as an in-group and share ideological viewpoints and a common out-group, are more likely to foster emotional attachments than IOs seen as less 'exclusive' and in which members are seen as having more diverse interests (e.g. the WHO has 194 member states). Proximity is expressed on a spectrum ranging from emphasis on closeness, associated with positive attachments, and distance, associated with negative ones. Exclusive membership and similar interests are however insufficient to fuel attachments. Proximity is not solely determined by how close or distant members are to each other but also by how close or distant individuals are

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[19]John Bowlby, *Attachment and Loss: Volume I: Attachment* (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1969), pp. 1–401.

[20]Ty Solomon, 'The affective underpinnings of soft power', *European Journal of International Relations* 20:3 (2014), pp. 720–741.

[21]Gellwitzki and Houde, 'Feeling the heat'.

[22]Gellwitzki and Houde, 'Feeling the heat'.

[23]Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014).

[24]Campbell, 'Affect, that old familiar feeling'.

[25]Brent E. Sasley, 'Affective attachments and foreign policy: Israel and the 1993 Oslo Accords', *European Journal of International Relations*, 16:4 (2010), pp. 687–709.

to the political entity and how pervasive it is in the public's daily lives.[26] Political entities such as the EU are part of the everyday politics of many ordinary European citizens, who are also likely to recognise and be somewhat familiar with organisations such as NATO or the United Nations due to exposure to them in educational curriculums or media outlets. In contrast, institutions such as the IMF or the WHO might elicit some emotional investments in times of crisis – as seen during the financial crisis or the Covid-19 pandemic – but are generally likely to engender weaker attachments, as they remain mainly disconnected from most individuals' involvement with politics.

As a political entity becomes more integrated into citizens' everyday, attachments tend to grow over *time*. For instance, the longer a country has been a member of an IO, the more it can be perceived as 'taken for granted', the more affectively familiar it can become, and the more likely attachments (positive or negative) are to develop. This process is not necessarily linear; emotions can be activated, challenged, or reinforced when the organisation to which individuals are attached is confronted with events or objects eliciting emotions in individuals. This means that how citizens emotionally respond to crises impacting organisations hints at how strong and positive – or negative – this connection was in the first place. These events also influence the attachments by fortifying them and leading citizens to perhaps wish to protect the IO or, on the contrary, impair their attachment and lead to distrust. IOs are indeed not impervious to crises, and their legitimacy can be questioned when facing challenging situations. Political events that question their scope of influence, functioning, or even existence are bound to elicit emotions. For example, attachments to NATO, positive or negative, are likely stronger today than over a year ago before the Russian invasion of Ukraine. In a similar vein, as a significant event that implicates the EU, Brexit is bound to elicit some reactions, which, depending on whether the individual was positively or negatively attached to the EU – and how strongly – might resemble responses such as outrage and anger, or jealousy and hope, and become less intense over time as the crisis subsides.[27] In turn, one's attachment to the EU may be strengthened by experiencing negative emotions related to the idea of its disintegration. Conversely, if Brexit is seen as desirable, the attachment to the EU could weaken or become more negative. In other words, some – often ephemeral – emotions about the IO can emerge when it is faced with a crisis, and they may have a lasting influence on how and in which direction attachments will develop. Thus, emotional attachments do not emerge or evolve in a vacuum, are not unaffected by outside pressures, and are subject to the (social) environment in which individuals find themselves.

The analytical use of emotional attachments is manifold. First, it reveals that individuals do harbour emotional connections to IOs, which may vary in intensity and complexity yet still hold significant influence. Second, it provides a deeper understanding of citizens' connection to IOs, as attachments can be latent and non-conscious but nonetheless critical. This dimension is often lost if one is to only consider, for example, survey data asking individuals how they feel about an IO. Furthermore, examining emotional attachments also provides insights into the other crucial factors that help shape citizens' connection to IOs, such as memory, experience, emotional framings, and emotional reactions to specific claims. Whilst concepts like identity might be relevant to understanding relationships to countries or regions, in the case of IOs attachments might be more relevant: apart from a few well-integrated entities such as the EU, individuals are not likely to consider their connection to other IOs as a part of their identity. Third, emotional attachments also serve as a valuable lens to comprehend individuals' inclinations towards future outcomes, as they narrow the alternatives desirable for their country's membership to an IO. When individuals envision various potential scenarios for the future, these scenarios are assigned a 'somatic marker' – a reaction from the body associated with different emotions – that gives them a positive or negative

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[26] Kathleen R. McNamara, *The Politics of Everyday Europe: Constructing Authority in the European Union* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

[27] Gellwitzki and Houde, 'Feeling the heat'.

connotation and renders them desirable or to be avoided.[28] This is of utmost importance when assessing preferences for the future of IOs: positive emotional attachments can decrease the likelihood of wishing for a withdrawal from the organisation, an option made more attractive by weak or negative attachments.

Whether it be *uncertainty* or *anxiety* leading to strong feelings about remaining within an IO, *hope* prompting a desire for more integration, or *ambition* to pursue a path such as leaving the organisation, emotions about how recent events have impinged on organisations also help to understand citizens' perspectives towards it. The question remains, however, as to how we can empirically account for these everyday emotional attachments. The upcoming sections are dedicated to exploring these dynamics, starting with presenting the method, research design, data, and analytical strategy employed.

Capturing and analysing everyday emotions with focus groups

My analysis is based on focus groups, a method defined as 'a research technique that collects data through group interaction on a topic determined by the researcher'.[29] Through social interaction and building on each other's arguments, focus groups encourage individuals to delve into topics they may have never thought about in detail before, such as their connection to political entities.[30] The result is often lengthy discussions and thoughtful insights that generate emotional dynamics; participants' responses create reactions in others as they comment on each other's arguments, challenge their points of view and debate, and ultimately co-construct meaning. The group discussion thus 'serves as liminal time and space where the new and unexpected may occur and where novel communication can be achieved'.[31] I argue that focus groups are especially interesting for emotion research in IR as they occupy a middle ground between commonly used methods such as ethnographic research and individual interviews.[32] Unlike the former, they allow capturing individual emotions about international politics. Compared to the latter, they also enable a more insightful discussion than an individual interview, as the participants react to each other's claims and not just to the interviewer's questions. Claims or inconsistencies that might have gone unchallenged during an interview can be contested by other focus group participants, forcing the speakers to reflect on their answers. This is particularly interesting in cases where a subject admits to having low levels of knowledge on the topic, which is often the case when discussing international politics. Participants might not have given an elaborate answer to the interviewer but are able to bounce off other participants' arguments. Focus groups, therefore, have an intrinsic social dimension that cannot be observed in individual interviews.

Whilst the analysis of this social dimension and group interaction is a main advantage of focus group research, it also comes with some limitations regarding group effects. It is crucial to acknowledge that some individuals may feel hesitant to speak up and express their views, especially if they are contesting the opinions of others or if their position deviates from what is culturally expected.[33] Equally, others might have a proclivity to dominate the conversation. Sensitivities can also lead participants to prioritise reaching consensus instead of engaging in conflict, possibly resulting in some participants conforming to the opinion of others or refraining from expressing their own opinions to maintain a peaceful atmosphere.[34]

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[28]Antonio R. Damasio, *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason and the Human Brain* (London: Vintage, 2006).

[29]David Morgan, *Focus Groups as Qualitative Research* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 1997), p. 6.

[30]Morgan, *Focus Groups*.

[31]Jenny Kitzinger and Clare Farquhar, 'The analytical potential of "sensitive moments" in focus group discussions', in Rosaline Barbour and Jenny Kitzinger (eds), *Developing Focus Group Research* (London: SAGE Publications, 1999), pp. 156–172 (p. 165).

[32]Morgan, *Focus Groups*.

[33]Sophie Duchesne, Elizabeth Fraser, Florence Haegel, and Virginie Van Ingelgom (eds), *Citizens' Reactions to European Integration Compared: Overlooking Europe* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

[34]Duchesne, Fraser, Haegel, and Ingelgom (eds), *Citizens Reactions.*

These limitations can be, if not completely avoided, mitigated by a good recruitment strategy and clear instructions for the moderator(s). For instance, researchers should aim for either homogeneity or a balance in profiles (e.g. not having one woman in a group of men; not having one person with a different ethnic background in an otherwise ethnically homogeneous group; not having one less educated participant in a group of highly educated ones, etc.) to avoid minority participants feeling uncomfortable. The groups should therefore be homogeneous in the socioeconomic characteristics of the participants but diverse in their views on the topic of the discussion (e.g. their opinion on the EU and politics).[35] Additionally, the role of the moderator should not be underestimated, as encouraging everyone to speak or having pre-established rules (e.g. participants should not speak for more than x minutes at a time; participants should raise their hand or use a predetermined way to disagree with a claim without interrupting the speaker, etc.) is a valuable way of avoiding uncomfortable settings. Ultimately, for these reasons, group effects might promote consensus and agreement rather than polarisation and conflicting views. However, when studying emotions and politics, it is this precise dynamic that is of interest. Since participants strive for consensus, the moments when they risk confrontation and disagreement are likely to be linked to the arguments that hold greater emotional significance to them, the ones they *care* more deeply about, which helps reveal their emotional attachments.[36]

Research design

My analysis was conducted utilising the European Union as a case study. Existing scholarship looking at citizens' connection to Europe has suggested that most citizens do not harbour strong emotions towards European integration. Even Jacques Delors, one of European integration's most influential figures, admitted that 'you cannot fall in love with the single market'.[37] This assumption, however, is contrasted with several emotion-laden events occurring in Europe in recent years, as well as with a growing 'emotional turn' in European studies, which has begun to show the importance of emotions for studying the EU.[38] Despite this rising interest in emotions, individuals' emotional attachments to the Union still remain underexplored. Thus, although this article's contribution lies mainly in the field of IR, it also furthers the emotional turn in EU studies.

As mentioned in the introduction, as a peculiar form of political entity, the EU is more likely to engender emotional attachments than other organisations; its position on the proximity and time axes renders it a sort of 'ideal type'. Indeed, the EU's members are geographically close and form an exclusive community, and the Union itself has a strong historical background and has been through several crises. To ensure a relative homogeneity of these factors, the data used for the analysis had to reflect this positioning. Data were collected in four cities – Louvain-la-Neuve (Belgium), Grenoble (France), Florence (Italy), and Lisbon (Portugal) – during the spring of 2019.[39] The cities were chosen on account of their comparability.

[35]Duchesne, Fraser, Haegel, and Ingelgom (eds), *Citizens Reactions*.

[36]Duchesne, Fraser, Haegel, and Ingelgom (eds), *Citizens Reactions*.

[37]Jeffrey T. Checkel and Peter J. Katzenstein, 'The politicization of European identities', in Jeffrey T. Checkel and Peter J. Katzenstein (eds), *European Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 1–26; Jacques Delors, 'Address given by Jacques Delors to the European Parliament (17 January 1989)', *Bulletin of the European Communities* (1989); Virginie Van Ingelgom, *Integrating Indifference: A Comparative, Qualitative and Quantitative Approach to the Legitimacy of European Integration* (Colchester: ECPR Press 2014).

[38]Gellwitzki and Houde, 'Feeling the heat'; Ian Manners, 'Political psychology of European integration: The (re)production of identity and difference in the Brexit debate', *Political Psychology*, 39:6 (2018), pp. 1213–32; Melhuish, 'Euroscepticism'; Gabriel Siles-Brügge, 'Transatlantic investor protection as a threat to democracy: The potency and limits of an emotive frame', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 30:5–6 (2017), pp. 464–88.

[39]The data was collected within the RESTEP (RÉSeau Transatlantique sur l'Europe Politique), an international research network bringing together researchers from 10 European and Canadian universities, led by Laurie Beaudonnet and Frédéric Mérand (Université de Montréal) and funded by the 'Jean Monnet activities' component of the European Commission's Erasmus+ Programme (project 587460-EPP-1-2017-1-CA-EPPJMO-NETWORK). In addition to funding from the Jean

All four of them have relatively similar demographics and are situated in Western European countries that joined the EU at the beginning (or relatively early in the case of Portugal) but have different levels of public opinion towards the Union and different political national contexts.[40]

Having countries with similar relationships to the EU in terms of proximity and time ensures that participants are unlikely to have vastly divergent national experiences with the EU, as could be the case for newer member states or countries with more tumultuous relationships with the organisation (e.g. the UK). This would have rendered comparing their emotional responses difficult, as collective memory and historical references could have been too different. Additionally, concentrating on countries with higher levels of closeness to the EU on the proximity spectrum guarantees a better ideal type. However, within the countries, some variation was desirable to enable accounting for a wider scope of emotional responses to the EU. The literature in EU studies states that citizens' opinions towards the Union tend to vary according to national contexts and socioeconomic backgrounds.[41] Thus, some socioeconomic background variability was included in the research design; different groups were chosen to reflect various age levels, education, and employment. Ultimately, group discussions of about three hours were organised with participants from five socioeconomic and demographic groups – students, young unemployed citizens, young professionals with no higher education, white-collar workers, and elderly retired individuals. Participants were asked general questions about politics and the EU. These include questions about their vote in a hypothetical referendum on EU membership, their opinion on who the winners and losers of European integration are, and their reaction to polarising cartoons representing European crises.

Everyday emotions in individuals' discourse

To analyse the data, I focus mainly on the role of language – although I did take into account instances in which non-verbal actions were illustrative of a sensitive moment or a strong emotional reaction (e.g. nodding, shaking one's head, banging one's fist on the table, etc.), as they can help emphasise the salience of a sentiment. I do so as emotions can be provoked through the expression of emotionally laden symbols, emotional narratives, and emotional discourse.[42] Language is inextricably emotional and can testify to the speaker's perceived salience of an issue.[43] Thus, studying emotional discourse helps capture not only conscious and explicit emotions but also implicit, perhaps non-conscious ones. A significant portion of human emotional experiences happens non-consciously, and 'sometimes political actors are driven by emotions they do not know they have; others may be aware of their emotions but unable to describe them accurately'.[44] Therefore, when only using self-assessed feelings in surveys, we can merely grasp the emotional experiences individuals are able to be consciously aware of and also explicitly express, losing much of the nuance behind what it means to 'feel attached to the EU'.

Of course, as researchers will never be certain of how an individual is actually feeling, it is not possible to distinguish which attachments are conscious or not within an individual. Nevertheless, looking at implicit attachments as proxies facilitates the capture of some that might be non-conscious and so enables us to analyse a more significant and more nuanced portion of

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[40]See Laurie Beaudonnet, Céline Belot, Hélène Caune, et al. 'Studying (de-)politicization of the EU from a citizens point of view: A new comparative focus group study', *Politique Européenne* 75:1 (2022), pp. 100–22, for more details on the research design.

[41]Duchesne, Fraser, Haegel, and Ingelgom (eds), *Citizens Reactions*.

[42]Hall and Ross, 'Affective politics'.

[43]Hall, 'Emotional diplomacy'.

[44]Damasio, *Descartes' Error*; Ross, 'Mixed emotions', p. 160.

emotional experiences. Indeed, representations of emotions, or 'the manner in which emotions are expressed and communicated – whether this is done through touch, gestures, speech, sounds, or images; whether it is from one person to others or in response to events that trigger emotional responses; and whether this event is experienced directly or at a distance through media and other representations'[45] – is the best (and perhaps the only) way to account for emotions. There is thus always a degree of interpretation involved in the analysis of emotions.

I examined two main aspects pertaining to emotions about the EU: the emotional attachments hinted at throughout the discussions, and the emotional language conveying these attachments, for which I build on Simon Koschut's framework on emotional discourse analysis in IR and adapt it to analyse everyday emotions in the discourse on IOs.[46] First, I observed how participants hinted at an emotional attachment to the EU *explicitly* or *implicitly*. Importantly, whilst explicit attachments are concordant with feelings and conscious emotions, implicit attachments can be either conscious or non-conscious. One way emotions can be represented and identified in everyday discussions is through what the literature on focus groups calls 'sensitive moments', or moments that are possibly uncomfortable and full of tension. Sensitive moments make visible the porous and fragile nature of everyday interactions through strong reactions to a particular claim, including 'hesitation and awkwardness, reactions of surprise or shock, individual defensiveness or tentative collective exploration'.[47] By definition, *sensitive* moments are emotional and provide crucial information on what kind of claims and arguments make participants react strongly, make them uncomfortable, or, by contrast, touch them. Sensitive moments emerge from interactions between participants and serve to identify emotions at the individual level without forgoing the group dynamics that influence them. These moments can interrupt the tone of the conversation, making it go from friendly and relaxed to full of tension. Sensitivities are not necessarily explicitly acknowledged by participants but are instead demonstrated through the use of emotional language or behaviour; sensitive moments indicate that the 'discussion is going beyond the pre-rehearsed public knowledge'.[48] This enables them to provide insights into not only what arguments provoke them, but also when and why.

Sensitive moments are thus useful to recognise the presence of emotions and emotional attachments. Whilst an explicit attachment would be best captured in a survey or by a participant saying straightforwardly that they like or feel emotionally attached to the EU, an implicit attachment could be indicated by the use of positive or negative emotions towards the organisation, its portrayal as a community to which the participant belongs or from which they are excluded, or its connection with mentions of history, since transferring emotions from one temporal context to another can transform how individuals feel about a topic by injecting (social) memories and their associated emotions into the present.[49] As Campbell puts it, affect and social memory are connected through the 'representation of the past in the present through rhetoric, symbols, monuments, memorials, and comparisons, all of which are assumed to have in them ingrained, "ritualised" or "habitual" effect created out of repeated iterations'.[50] Hence, citizens anchoring their perspectives on the EU in the past by, for example, bringing up memories about World War II and the context of integration, is, in itself, implicitly highly emotional. Similarly, drawing links to the different crises also translates emotions, albeit perhaps more negative. Implicit attachments can also be *reactive* and take the shape of a defensive reaction when the object of attachment is threatened. For example, during sensitive moments, participants often exhibited signs of attachment by reacting strongly to negative remarks about the EU and standing up for it. Thus, identifying the sensitive moments in a discussion about the EU helps pinpoint which attachments can be activated and by what. In turn,

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[45] Hutchison and Bleiker, 'Theorizing emotions', pp. 505–6.

[46] Koschut, 'Discourse and emotions'.

[47] Kitzinger and Farquhar, 'Analytical potential', p. 156.

[48] Kitzinger and Farquhar, 'Analytical potential', p. 156.

[49] Ross, 'Mixed emotions'.

[50] Campbell, 'Old familiar feeling', p. 115.

analysing the emotional language used by participants in sensitive moments enables us to seize the intensity and nuances of these attachments.

Second, I borrowed elements from Koschut's emotional discourse analysis framework and observed three forms of emotional communication: emotion terms, emotional connotations, and metaphors, comparisons, and analogies.[51] *Emotion terms* refer to explicit mentions of feeling, whether nouns, adjectives, adverbs, or verbs, whilst *emotional connotations* are words with an undertone that intensifies sentiments and contain words that '[convey] the speaker's emotional attitude', such as 'genocide, terrorist, rogue state, outlaw, and massacre [which] are affectively "loaded"' negatively as opposed to 'emotional connotations such as peaceful, freedom fighter, hero, honest broker, and responsible member of the international community [which] indicate emotions such as pride, joy, or sympathy'.[52] I also looked into figures of speech such as *metaphors, analogies, and comparisons* that use symbolic images to transmit emotions. For instance, in the context of the EU, any mentions of comparison or of 'fortress Europe', 'colander Europe', and similar expressions should be considered as communicating emotions. The following section explores the findings from this analysis.

Emotional attachments to the EU in Belgium, France, Italy, and Portugal

Whilst surveys asking individuals whether they feel European or feel emotionally attached to the EU are interesting in understanding how individuals perceive their own feelings or identity, some individuals do not explicitly admit being attached to the EU. Implicit attachments can, however, be unearthed with a focus group method, as shown in the following analysis. Looking at the data, traces of implicit emotional attachments to Europe were present in all focus groups, no matter what their national or socioeconomic context, and almost every participant hinted at one point or another at a sense of belonging in the EU. Ultimately, attachments did not strongly vary depending on the national or socioeconomic contexts, but some marginal differences that hint at how emotions can be mediated by these circumstances can be noted. For instance, elderly individuals tended to be more explicit in their attachments, whereas younger participants relied more on implicit expressions. Participants with a higher education degree made more mentions of the closeness aspect than less-educated participants, whose attachments were more often in the context of references to crises and scenarios for the future. Moreover, when expressing emotions in terms of proximity, some national variations arose. Whilst smaller countries (Belgium and Portugal) insisted on their country needing the community, bigger countries (France and Italy) portrayed the EU as needing their country.

During the discussions, attachments were often expressed in the context of proximity and time. First, participants insisted on closeness rather than distance, and the EU was depicted in the data as a close emotional community to which participants belong. They emphasised aspects ranging from a tacit discursive distinction between the in-group and the out-group, the sharing of values and responsibilities and the insistence on abiding by them, and the positive portrayal of an affective narrative based on the idea of community and togetherness. Moreover, emotional attachments indicated that the EU could be perceived as part of everyday politics, which contributed to its internalisation and the strengthening of individuals' connection to it. Second, some emotions cropped up when events impacting the EU were referred to or discussed, and attachments were often disclosed in relation to the temporal dimension. Mentions of past events such as World War II and the context of integration, of current crises such as Brexit, or of hypothetical future scenarios for the EU challenged or (re)activated attachments to it. In general, implicit attachments were stronger when they related to the EU's closeness and expressed with mentions of past, present, and future events. The quotes selected in the analysis are generally representative of the dataset.

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[51] Koschut, 'Discourse and emotions'.
[52] Koschut, 'Discourse and emotions', p. 483.

Proximity and the EU as a close emotional community

The first manifestation of the EU being depicted in terms of an (emotional) community with shared history, values, goals, responsibilities, and emotions[53] can be found in the tendency for participants to speak in terms of in-group/out-group. During the discussions, participants insisted on Europeans being a 'we' and occasionally pitted this 'we' against the non-European 'others'. The first question asked of participants in the focus groups was 'what is the most important issue for us today?'. Whilst most participants answered from a national, socioeconomic group, or personal standpoint, some immediately answered from a European perspective, despite no prior mention of the topic.[54] This phenomenon may not be exemplary of all discussions, in which the topic of the EU usually came a little later in the conversation. Yet it still highlights that the EU is on citizens' minds when asked to talk about their in-group, their 'we'. As Lucia,[55] an Italian student, puts it, 'being a European citizen means you are part of the European system at 360 degrees', and so even though the EU is not as visible to individuals as other political entities, it is still omnipresent.

This idea of unity, illustrated by the frequent use of the word 'community' to refer to the EU, was also ubiquitous at many sensitive moments. For example, Roger, an elderly participant from Grenoble, provoked a moment of tension when he admitted to not believing in the 'United States of Europe'. He explained his choice by emphasising the diversity between its different peoples, to which Jean-Michel replied: 'I think we are not different peoples at all, and what brings us closer is more important than what distinguishes us … compared to, er, Indians, Asians – Chinese people, er, Africans … What brings us together as Europeans on the continent is way more important than what sets us apart. (…) *One must really be blind [not to see that]*'. This claim is then approved by other participants and leaves Roger silent as Jean-Michel uses a figurative phrase to bring the debate to an end, discredit opposite views, and narrow down the discursive space for a counter-argument. Here, identifying a sensitive moment enables us to uncover what type of arguments activate emotional attachments – in this case, one that questions the geographical and social closeness and exclusivity of the EU. It is worth pointing out that in this discussion about who is in the in-group and the out-group, 'Europeans' are implied to be white and Christian in comparison to 'Other' non-Europeans. Whilst the general idea of the EU as an in-group was widely shared, the racialised elements carried by this stance were not representative of the participants' general discourse, which focused primarily on the EU as an organisation.

More often, closeness was indeed mainly brought up when participants compared the EU's scope of influence to that of other countries, for example, China, Russia, or the United States ('the European Union must exist to counterbalance the US, China, all of that. We have to remain a big power … We are worth nothing, France alone, Belgium alone … we must unite' [Louvain-la-Neuve, elderly individuals]). Participants insisted that the EU must act as a counterbalance to those powers and that the only way of doing so is through unity. This unity is portrayed as something valuable; when discussing the integration of different groups of non-Europeans, the EU is, in turn, described with several emotional connotations, as it is referred to as a 'house' (André, Lisbon, elderly individuals), a 'closed community' (Aymeric, Grenoble, young unemployed), a 'family' (Antoine, Grenoble, young unemployed), and as 'something we choose to do together and therefore we decide together' (Margaux, Grenoble, young unemployed), reiterating the in–out group dynamic. Put differently, the EU is seen as something exclusive, with a membership not given to all.

The second manifestation of an emotional community is the conviction that Europeans share common values, responsibilities, or moral imperatives as part of the in-group. For participants, at

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[53] Koschut, 'Emotional (security) communities'; B. H. Rosenwein, *Emotional Communities in the Early Middle Ages* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006).

[54] Participants were warned that the discussion's topic was 'social issues', not Europe, as exploring its salience was one of the project's objectives.

[55] All participants' names have been changed for anonymity purposes.

the end of the day, the EU could not act without the citizens' and the national governments' consent, which renders every European accountable for the EU's decisions. Reaffirming this shared responsibility, Simone argues, for instance, that 'Europe is us' (Florence, white-collar workers) and that member states signed the treaties and thus cannot blame the EU for its policies. Elderly participants from France also talked about a shared European responsibility when discussing Brexit, lamenting that the UK's withdrawal from the EU was Europeans' fault as they should have 'raised the children better'. Feeling a shared responsibility to raise a generation of children not only from their own country but also from other member states to be part of a community, as well as feeling *guilty* about failing to do so, should be understood as a sign of an emotional community with shared emotions and accountability.

Some sensitive moments occurred specifically when the EU's common values were questioned. For example, in the French elderly individuals' group, Corinne, one of the participants, remained silent for a few minutes whilst her fellow participants were criticising the EU's management of migration before getting more defensive and expressing how so much negativity about Europe and its commitment to solidarity and humanitarianism made her feel uncomfortable. When she expressed that feeling, the rest of the group listened carefully and agreed with her that they had perhaps been a bit too harsh. Another sensitive moment was shared by the Belgian elderly individuals, who regretted that populations were too quick to discard the European project when they disliked a policy, arguing that 'we tend to reject everything as soon as something doesn't work', that 'every work made by a human is imperfect', 'we are not in a football club', and 'we said we stay in Europe, so we stay in Europe, that's it'. Comparing the EU to a football club, participants insisted that being part of a community means one cannot leave whenever something goes wrong, suggesting once again some emotional attachments. This feeling is particularly well exemplified by another sensitive moment in the discussion with French elderly individuals, where Marilyn, visibly upset, has a very strong reaction to the negativity expressed about Europe in the discussion so far:

Marilyn: I would like to express my discomfort, as I was told it was possible to do so. (…) All these pictures, none of them is positive.

Jean-Michel: Yeah. [strongly approves] Yes, yes, yes, it's true.

Marilyn: And this bothers me because earlier, I really did not feel good because [takes a more confident tone] me, I believe in Europe. I believe we have to believe in it at this moment and that there is an unbelievable challenge in Europe today. And [becomes agitated] many things are getting messy [her vocabulary loosens from this point on and becomes a lot more informal], that much is true. Many things are not working well, that we will have to change, etc. But eh! That's what life is like [her tone gets higher]. Nothing is sleek, smooth …

Sophie: Easy.

Marilyn: Easy, and, etc. And we have to get to work. There are many topics for which we have to find energy and motivate ourselves. But that does not mean that Europe is not good. (…) We have to believe in it, otherwise we won't pull through.

Sophie: We're a little bit *depressed* due to Britain leaving …

Marilyn: Yes.

Sophie: Because it is a *calamity* … Because the conditions …

Marilyn: Yes, but we cannot wallow in depression. Ah!
               (Grenoble, elderly individuals)

Therefore, how citizens express attachments can take many shapes and is not always as straightforward as, as surveys would suggest, explicitly saying they 'feel attached to the EU'. The European emotional community is based on many dimensions, like the othering of non-Europeans and shared values, responsibilities, and emotions, which are not always a conscious experience. Participants did not all say plainly they were (positively) attached to the EU, and yet

most – arguably, all – of them showed at some points some signs of it, albeit sometimes implicitly. Emotional attachments were often expressed in the context of proximity, but they were also communicated with regard to time; participants made references to the past, present, and future when disclosing their emotions.

World War II, Brexit, and time

As was the case for proximity, participants relied on time to communicate emotional attachments to the EU. Throughout its history of integration, the EU and its predecessors have been closely linked to the narrative of bringing peace to Europe. Therefore, it is not unexpected that individuals would refer to the EU's historical significance when expressing emotional attachments. During a sensitive moment with the older participants from Grenoble in a discussion about the future of the EU, Sophie shared a personal story about her grandparents. She explains that they experienced the hardships of two world wars, which led them to instil in her appreciation of and gratitude for the EU. Marilyn concurs with this sentiment and stresses the significance of commemorating World War II in relation to the future of the EU as she recounts her own family history with war:

Marilyn: Yeah, so, I will tell you something … I am the daughter of a military worker, my father was in the Resistance, he was in a concentration camp, etc. And it is true that for me, [the peace] aspect [raises her voice] I believe we must never forget it. And that what we are building, with the new generations, with our children, our grandchildren, etc., is a transmission of history … And that, we have to reflect on that, and on the consequences of …
Jean-Louis: If Europe exploded, yes.
Marilyn: Exactly [nods vigorously] *if Europe exploded*.
(Grenoble, elderly individuals)

Elderly individuals thus relied on their personal or familial experience with the past – and the future through mentions of children and grandchildren – to advocate in favour of the EU and demonstrate positive attachments to it.[56] Still, it is worth noting that even in groups with younger participants, references to collective memory were also present, albeit less personal than those shared by older citizens. Young participants frequently conveyed positive emotions about the current state of the EU when contrasted with its war-ridden past. During an argument in the Belgian young professionals' group over the necessity (or otherwise) of the EU, Léonard provoked a sensitive moment when he brought up the topic of peace and the context of integration:

Léonard: But another argument for staying in the European Union is clearly the *feeling* of safety [Louis agrees]. I think we are in a super position [*sic*] in that regard, we haven't been at war since … well, for a super long time [sic] … But since 1945 there hasn't been an armed conflict in which Belgium has had dead civilians. […] So, I think we are safe in Belgium, for wars and all.
Jérôme: Yes, I agree.
Gaël: And it is thanks to Europe?
Léonard: Well, I think it helps.
Benjamin: The Union in any case. The fact that all countries are … *work together*.
(Louvain-la-Neuve, young professionals)

Benjamin insists once again on the idea of community and countries working together, whilst Léonard later adds that 'to say that we *feel better* because there is no war, I don't see how that

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[56]Laurie Beaudonnet, Céline Belot, Hélène Caune, Anne-Marie Houde, and Damien Pennetreau, 'Narrating Europe: (Re-)constructed and contested visions of the European project in citizens' discourse', *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, 61:1 (2023), pp. 161–78.

could be negative. It proves that [the EU] works.' This enables him to pre-empt any negative emotions from entering the discursive space: when alluding to the peace narrative and references to World War II, emotional attachments to the EU are expressed exclusively in positive terms. The emotionality of the past is clearly based mainly on temporal anchors and is salient in most groups: '[European integration] was the first time there were 75 years of peace on the territories of member states since the Roman empire so … it is not negligible, the peace question' (Basil, Louvain-la-Neuve, students).

Mentions of history were, at times, also anchored in the national context. For instance, Romain, a Belgian student, argues that 'history plays too, I mean, historically, it's … Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg created the European Union so … well, historically it is something *dear to our hearts*'. André, an elderly participant from Portugal, admits that 'Portugal should stay. Poor little things, alone where would we import to? … Our importers would all stay in the EU, *we would suffer… a misfortune … we would panic*. Before we entered the European Union we had already seen [such misfortune]'. Meanwhile, in larger countries such as France and Italy, there is also an insistence on their founding and historically important country status, which guides attachments to the EU and their preferences for the future. The collective memory was also often connected to crises happening currently, such as Brexit and the rise of populism, as well as to how they could impact the future.

Arthur:	Yeah, but we have a history, we know how things are happening at the moment and how they happened before, in the European Union. So, if everything goes wrong, we have no reason to stay, but if it goes well, we know that we have to stay.
Jonathan:	For example, before there has been the World War. So maybe it is a bit *scary* to have to … well, I think it won't happen again but … gaps between countries can create tensions, and that can quickly create wars…
	(Grenoble, young professionals)

When considering present crises that have impacted the EU and likely provoked emotional responses, it is imperative to acknowledge the significant role of Brexit. The decision made in 2016 has made it challenging to envision the future of European integration without considering its impact on the path towards unification and the idea of an 'ever-closer Union'. Existing scholarship has indeed found Brexit to have affected a plethora of political issues such as identity, geopolitics, narratives, foreign relations, and global economy.[57] Yet, whilst reactions within the UK public[58] or in other Commonwealth countries[59] have been examined in the literature, reactions to Brexit in the rest of the EU have yet to become as entrenched, despite their crucial importance for the EU's future, and remain dominated by quantitative findings.[60] This major event in the history of European integration had repercussions on the broader narrative surrounding the European

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[57]Rebecca Adler-Nissen, Charlotte Galpin, and Ben Rosamond, 'Performing Brexit: How a post-Brexit world is imagined outside the United Kingdom', *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 19:3 (2017), pp. 573–91; Christoffer Kølvraa, 'European fantasies: On the EU's political myths and the affective potential of utopian imaginaries for European identity', *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, 54:1 (2016), pp. 169–84.

[58]Christopher S. Browning, 'Brexit, existential anxiety and ontological (in)security', *European Security*, 27:3 (2018), pp. 336–55; Sara B. Hobolt, 'The Brexit vote: A divided nation, a divided continent', *Journal of European Public Policy*, 23:9 (2016), pp. 1259–77; Sara B. Hobolt, Thomas J. Leeper, and James Tilley, 'Divided by the vote: Affective polarization in the wake of the Brexit referendum', *British Journal of Political Science,* 51:4 (2020), pp. 1476–1493; Jonathan Moss, Emily Robinson, and Jake Watts, 'Brexit and the everyday politics of emotion: Methodological lessons from history', *Political Studies*, 68:4 (2020), pp. 837–56; Richard Nadeau, Éric Bélanger, and Ece Özlem Atikcan, 'Emotions, cognitions and moderation: Understanding losers' consent in the 2016 Brexit referendum', *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties*, 31:1 (2021), pp. 77–96.

[59]Natalia Chaban and Serena Kelly, 'Tracing the evolution of EU images using a case-study of Australia and New Zealand', *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, 55:4 (2017), pp. 691–708.

[60]See Sara B. Hobolt, Sebastian Adrian Popa, Wouter Van der Brug, and Hermann Schmitt, 'The Brexit deterrent? How member state exit shapes public support for the European Union', *European Union Politics,* 23:1 (2021), pp. 100–119; Stefanie Walter, 'EU-27 public opinion on Brexit', *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, 59:3 (2021), pp. 569–88, for notable exceptions.

Union, on individuals' attachments, and on their perspectives on the future. Brexit indeed compelled citizens to reconsider their country's relation to the EU and to position themselves in a debate about whether they would rather leave or remain. Upon reviewing the focus group data, this idea is echoed by participants such as Maude (Grenoble, students), who admits that the UK's departure from the EU served as a catalyst prompting other Europeans to rethink the benefits they derive from the EU. In a different group, Jessica (Grenoble, young unemployed) also affirms that 'what is happening in the UK influences a lot'. Brexit thus activated emotional attachments to the EU by leading participants to (i) compare their situation with the UK's to build a narrative about the necessity of remaining in the Union, or (ii) experience negative emotions about a hypothetical future with a Union-less Europe.

Generally, the British referendum was used as a cautionary tale translating emotions such as fear or anxiety and acting as a prescription for what *not* to do. Despite most groups voicing concerns over the UK's exit from the EU, young French and Belgian participants maintained an optimistic outlook and insisted on the opportunity Brexit represented to reinforce social connections and strengthen the bonds of the European community.

Solange:	… I think that for the European identity, Brexit is a good thing. With all the shit [sic] that came for the Brits and now they're asking themselves what will happen (…) all of this, we realised it was a good thing for us, the European Union.
Antoine:	You mean that it reinforced the European identity? (…)
Solange:	There you go. I think on this aspect it was a good thing. For us.
Antoine:	And for Britain you think it's good?
Solange [laughs]:	Ah no, no, no. Hahaha! (…)
Margaux:	I never thought that Britain leaving could influence this type of, of … (…) identity. (…) Or the conviction that Europe is a good thing … (…)
Antoine:	I totally agree with you. Because, actually, it's like we are in a *community*. And er, if one [member] doesn't know how to position themselves and then leaves, it will *unify* the community.
	(Grenoble, young unemployed)

Regardless of their stance on its merits, Brexit indubitably elicited some emotional responses, positive and negative, from European citizens. In many cases, participants used the concrete case of Brexit as a cautionary tale to warn against the potential consequences of another member state choosing to leave. There is, for instance, a very salient *fear* of economic consequences if their respective countries were to leave the EU, as this option is deemed 'catastrophic' (Mia, Grenoble, white-collar workers; Meryem, Grenoble, young professionals), 'a suicide' (Georges, Louvain-la-Neuve, white-collar workers) and one that would lead to the country being 'eaten up' (Romain, Louvain-la-Neuve, students), 's[unk]' (Antoine, Grenoble, Young unemployed) and 'cut adrift' (Selene, Florence, students). For some, especially elderly individuals, the idea of 'Europe explod[ing]' (Grenoble, elderly individuals) has the potential to ignite anxiety, fear, and overall negative emotions, which are exacerbated by the comparison of their own situation with Britain's. Withdrawing from the EU is also perceived as an insult to the collective memory of World War II and the resolution for peace and European values, rendering the option unimaginable for many participants.

Expanding on a discussion over Brexit, Simone (Florence, white-collar workers) asserts that 'the sole idea of proposing a referendum to Italians is *madness* … It is a *colossal absurdity* … in England, people voted *with their guts*, and today they are in the shit [sic]'. This emotionally charged language is illustrative of an attempt to dissuade anyone who would consider leaving the EU, depicting Brexit as undesirable, something 'scandalous' (Jean-Michel, Grenoble, elderly individuals). This feeling is common amongst many groups, but it is especially noticeable amongst Italian white-collar workers, who believe Brexit will be a 'massacre' and that the

British people will 'bitterly regret it', hence the 'insanity' that a similar referendum in Italy would represent. Words such as 'massacre', 'bitterly', and 'regret' convey strong emotional connotations that highlight the negative impact of leaving the EU on Britain. In the discussions, there was a widespread feeling that the British population had made the wrong judgement, which was expressed through its designation as the 'losers' (several groups) of the situation and through the belief that it had '[shot] itself in the foot' (Grenoble, elderly individuals) with a 'stupid' decision (Grenoble, white-collar workers), and was better off within the EU, as it is now in a situation that is 'not a happy one' (Louvain-la-Neuve, young professionals). Labelling the UK as the 'loser' of the situation and voicing negative opinions on its decision reveals that participants were not only considering the referendum 'rationally', but emotionally. By comparing their situations to Britain's, their conviction in remaining is reinforced and helps bolster their positive attachments to the EU.

Another manifestation of emotional attachments occurred when discussing different possibilities for the future. As the EU is portrayed as an everyday experience by many participants, the alternative of a union-less Europe sounded strange and unfamiliar to them, and ultimately undesirable. This is exemplified by a comment made by Veronica, an Italian white-collar worker who claimed that '[the EU] is very important … (…) Going back to states with borders … *I cannot even imagine it*.' This quote is indicative of a sentiment found in most focus groups at one point or another. The more Eurosceptic participants saw this incapability to imagine their country outside of the EU as negative and felt hopeless. But, for the vast majority, these instances were simply an illustration of the attachments that some participants felt, leading them to dismiss possibilities such as a union-less Europe as overly pessimistic to contemplate. During a group discussion with unemployed youth in Belgium, participant Domenica echoed this thought and expressed concern that many young people take the European Union for granted and fail to recognise its benefits. Fellow-participant Fabienne agreed, deploring that 'it's such a part of our everyday lives that some people don't even notice the European presence and the impact of the European Union'. These attachments influence how citizens think about the future and shape their attitudes towards organisations as they narrow down the possibilities for different alternatives and render the idea of leaving the EU almost an absurd thought and a laughable matter:

Moderator:	is there a red line … are there any conditions under which you would choose to leave? Are there any events that could happen and make you vote not to stay? (…)
Gaia:	Realistically? … Because in a hypothetical future … (…)
Moderator:	Even imaginary …
Gaia:	I don't know, if tomorrow the European Union wakes up and says, 'let's sink Sardinia and Sicily and keep only the peninsula' … no, more realistically, things that could happen soon … that could justify leaving the European Union, I don't know … if they restore the monarchy in Savoy!
Arturo:	Exactly [laughs]. Maybe if ideas move too much towards … I don't know how to say … if … (…) ideas of equality and all collapse in a certain way … maybe (…) …
Gaia:	If a totalitarian regime takes over Europe (…)
Giacomo:	Well, until Merkel starts growing a moustache [laughs from the rest of the group], we can stay, come on …
	(Florence, young professionals)

Since its creation, the EU has been through a lot: treaties, economic and migration crises, and a global pandemic. However, before Brexit, no member state had ever left the Union, threatening its stability and existence in such a clear and direct manner. Such an important event would inevitably have repercussions on the emotional responses of citizens about the EU. As observed in the discussions, talking about Brexit activated some emotional reactions. These emotions prompted participants to (re)consider their own country's relationship to the EU, as the

departure of one member state undeniably made them ponder what would happen if their own country left. In most cases, as this perspective was undesirable, it restricted the alternatives for the future by ruling out the option of leaving. Thus, emotional attachments are reinforced or challenged by such events, and they can be implicit and require triggers to be expressed. Yet they remain undeniable:

Moderator: Since there are apparently some opinions that seemed to think that '[these images][61] do not represent reality well, they are too cartoonish', what would be a good description of Europe then?
Sophie: Well, the 'Ode to Joy', I don't know?
           (Grenoble, elderly individuals)

Conclusion

Looking at the focus group data, we can observe different traces of positive emotional attachments to the EU, which is portrayed as an emotional community with shared values and morals. These attachments can be particularly salient when the EU is discussed in reference to the past, especially World War II, or when it faces a crisis. For instance, Brexit led the participants of the focus groups to rethink their own country's relationship with the EU, as the departure of one member state evidently drew them to imagine what would happen if they were in the British situation. Brexit's impact, therefore, is not reduced only to Britain leaving the EU: the UK's departure also influenced how the remaining European citizens perceive it and how emotional they are about it, most often reinforcing their connection to the EU either positively or negatively. Individuals' emotional connection to the EU is thus crucial in order to understand citizens' perspectives towards the future. Generally, the stronger and more positive the emotional attachments are, the more unthinkable some options like leaving an organisation sound to citizens. This does not mean that a specific degree of emotional connection will necessarily lead to one particular preference for integration, and suggesting so would be neglecting the complexity of emotions and individuals altogether. However, I argue that solid positive attachments do render options like disintegration less likely.

In the last few years, the EU's legitimacy crises hinted at the role of emotions in citizens' relationships to IOs. Of course, the case of the EU is unique in many ways: it is more integrated than other IOs, has a specific history and resonance, and is likely to be more present in individuals' everyday life. Similarly, the countries represented in the focus group analysis are generally inclined towards integration and thus more likely to be supportive compared to more Eurosceptic member states, which might have insisted on the distance dimension of proximity rather than on closeness, and on crises rather than on peace narratives. However, this does not mean that the insights from this article are not relevant to other contexts or organisations. The empirical findings might best translate into cases of 'closer' organisations such as the AU or ASEAN, arguably more similar to the EU. Attachments to organisations occupying different positions on the proximity and time axes might indeed not be as intense or as sophisticated, and more empirical research is needed to determine how exactly emotional attachments are expressed negatively. However, the framework proposed here framework can help to understand them, a crucial move as they still undoubtedly have political repercussions that could eventually harm international cooperation.

Insights from my analysis indeed have broader implications for emotion research in IR, starting with the method employed. Scholarship on emotion in IR has long been interested in group emotions and how emotions become social phenomena and circulate in society but has paid less attention to the micro-level of citizens. In that sense, speaking directly to individuals has some advantages, as it allows us to understand how social emotions translate into the everyday

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[61]This refers to the polarised cartoons participants were asked to react to.

and how they are activated through group dynamics in the context of focus groups. When individuals are put in a group setting, emotional reactions to a certain topic can create 'feedback loops': an angry reaction to a topic from a participant can elicit outrage in another, which in turn engenders more anger from a third, and so on. Equally, sensitive moments can arise from negative responses and hereby reveal strong emotions in individuals who feel positively passionate about a specific issue. For instance, in the focus group discussions, criticism against the EU often made other participants uncomfortable, and the expression of this discomfort frequently elicited new responses. This emotional dynamic is particularly interesting as it can help uncover some emotional attachments that otherwise would have remained hidden and could have passed for indifference. Thus, focus groups as a method have the potential to provide rich data for emotion research into what individuals, elite or not, feel about (international) politics.

Emotions are becoming increasingly crucial when attempting to understand citizens' connection to IOs and how they will shape their future, and they need to be considered by both researchers and policymakers. As the Russian invasion of Ukraine is bringing back debates around NATO, the question of support for diverse IOs is likely to gain in importance, and individuals' everyday emotions about it will indubitably come into play. Thus, to paraphrase Jacques Delors, perhaps people do not indeed fall in love with the common market, or with international organisations more generally.[62] However, this should also not mean that citizens harbour no emotions about them, or that these emotions are negligible and politically inconsequential.

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[62]Delors, 'Address'.