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Affirmation of EU identity reduces perceived national identity threat and increases perceived legitimacy of the European Union

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ABSTRACT

Perceiving the European Union (EU) as a threat to their national identity can cause European citizens to call into question the legitimacy of the EU. Two preliminary studies ($n = 303$, $n = 150$) examined Dutch and French samples in different settings: one online and one in a real life setting. The data revealed that national identity threat is strongly related to lower perceived EU legitimacy, regardless of political ideology or type of threat activation. The main study tested whether national identity or EU identity affirmation can reduce national identity threat and increase perceived EU legitimacy, thereby extending group affirmation research to superordinate group contexts. A preregistered online experiment among individuals from twelve EU Member States ($n = 904$) revealed that affirmation of EU identity significantly reduced national identity threat and increased perceived EU legitimacy. National identity affirmation did not reduce national identity threat. Notably, not *strength*, but *content* of national identification moderated these effects.

1 Eva Grosfeld and others, 'Affirmation of EU Identity Reduces Perceived National Identity Threat and Increases Perceived Legitimacy of the European Union' (OSF, 29 November 2024) <<https://osf.io/ny3sz>>.

5.1 INTRODUCTION

When individuals experience the European Union (EU) as a threat to their national identity, they may delegitimize the EU as a strategy to uphold a positive and distinct social identity.² Since a decline in public legitimacy would have negative consequences for the EU's functioning and viability,³ it is crucial to examine how these feelings of threat can be reduced, especially considering the rise of right-wing populist politicians who portray the EU as a threat to national identity and sovereignty.⁴ In this chapter, we first examine the relation between national identity threat and perceived EU legitimacy among citizens from two EU Member States. We then propose and test affirmation of national identity and affirmation of EU identity as strategies to alleviate national identity threat. While group affirmation has proven an effective strategy to downregulate social identity threat,⁵ there has been little research on its potential in subgroup-superordinate group contexts,⁶ despite the increasing prevalence of these contexts due to migration, regional integration, and globalization. Therefore, the current research also contributes to a deeper understanding of group affirmation in these contexts.

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- 2 Eva Grosfeld and others, 'The Integration of Subgroups at the Supranational Level: The Relation between Social Identity, National Threat, and Perceived Legitimacy of the EU' (2022) 10 *Journal of Social and Political Psychology* 607.
 - 3 Thomas Sommerer and Hans Agné, 'Consequences of Legitimacy in Global Governance' in Jonas Tallberg, Karin Bäckstrand and Jan Aart Scholte (eds), *Legitimacy in global governance: Sources, processes, and consequences* (Oxford Academic 2018); Jonas Tallberg and Michael Zürn, 'The Legitimacy and Legitimation of International Organizations: Introduction and Framework' (2019) 14 *The Review of International Organizations* 581.
 - 4 Silke Adam and Michaela Maier, 'National Parties as Politicizers of EU Integration? Party Campaign Communication in the Run-up to the 2009 European Parliament Election' (2011) 12 *European Union Politics* 431; Magdalena Góra and Katarzyna Zielińska, 'Competing Visions: Discursive Articulations of Polish and European Identity after the Eastern Enlargement of the EU' (2019) 33 *East European Politics and Societies* 331; Aristotle Kallis, 'Populism, Sovereignism, and the Unlikely Re-Emergence of the Territorial Nation-State' (2018) 11 *Fudan Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences* 285.
 - 5 See for example Belle Derks and others, 'The Threat vs. Challenge of Car Parking for Women: How Self- and Group Affirmation Affect Cardiovascular Responses' (2011) 47 *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 178; Demis E Glasford, John F Dovidio and Felicia Pratto, 'I Continue to Feel so Good about Us: In-Group Identification and the Use of Social Identity-Enhancing Strategies to Reduce Intragroup Dissonance' (2009) 35 *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 415; David K Sherman and others, 'The Group as a Resource: Reducing Biased Attributions for Group Success and Failure via Group Affirmation' (2007) 33 *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 1100.
 - 6 Cf. Laura Celeste and others, 'Self-Affirmation and Test Performance in Ethnically Diverse Schools: A New Dual-Identity Affirmation Intervention' (2021) 77 *Journal of Social Issues* 824.

5.1.1 National identity threat and perceived EU legitimacy

When groups are merged into a superordinate group – for example, by an organizational merger or by a new political entity that integrates nation states – people may experience a threat to their ‘old’ group identity. Although a new, shared identity can mitigate negative responses towards people from other groups,⁷ it may also lead to fears of losing the subgroup’s distinctiveness, cultural identity, or continuity if subgroup differences are minimized.⁸ According to social identity theory, people are motivated to achieve and maintain a positive and distinct social identity.⁹ Thus, in response to threat from a superordinate group, people tend to engage in strategies to protect their subgroup identities.¹⁰ For example, subgroup identity threat has shown to reduce identification with the superordinate group,¹¹ and increase defensive responses and resistance to it.¹²

In the context of European integration, the EU is a superordinate group that can elicit threat to national identities. Citizens may perceive the EU as a threat to national sociocultural identity due to its connotation with

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- 7 Samuel L Gaertner, John F Dovidio and Betty A Bachman, ‘Revisiting the Contact Hypothesis: The Induction of a Common Ingroup Identity’ (1996) 20 *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 271.
 - 8 Mrilynn B Brewer, ‘When Contact Is Not Enough: Social Identity and Intergroup Cooperation’ (1996) 20 *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 291; Jolanda Jetten, Anne O’Brien and Nicole Trindall, ‘Changing Identity: Predicting Adjustment to Organizational Restructure as a Function of Subgroup and Superordinate Identification’ (2002) 41 *British Journal of Social Psychology* 281.
 - 9 Henri Tajfel and John Turner, ‘An Integrative Theory of Intergroup Conflict’ in William G Austin and Stephen Worchel (eds), *The social psychology of intergroup relations* (Brooks/Cole 1979).
 - 10 Matthew J Hornsey and Michael A Hogg, ‘Subgroup Relations: A Comparison of Mutual Intergroup Differentiation and Common Ingroup Identity Models of Prejudice Reduction’ (2000) 26 *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 242.
 - 11 Catherine E Amiot, Deborah J Terry and Blake M McKimmie, ‘Social Identity Change during an Intergroup Merger: The Role of Status, Similarity, and Identity Threat’ [2012] *Basic and Applied Social Psychology*; Deborah J Terry, Craig J Carey and Victor J Callan, ‘Employee Adjustment to an Organizational Merger: An Intergroup Perspective’ (2001) 27 *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 267.
 - 12 Richard J Crisp, Catriona H Stone and Natalie R Hall, ‘Recategorization and Subgroup Identification: Predicting and Preventing Threats from Common Ingroups’ (2006) 32 *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 230; Jolanda Jetten and Paul Hutchison, ‘When Groups Have a Lot to Lose: Historical Continuity Enhances Resistance to a Merger’ (2011) 41 *European Journal of Social Psychology* 335; Denis Sindic and Stephen D Reicher, ‘“Our Way of Life Is Worth Defending”: Testing a Model of Attitudes towards Superordinate Group Membership through a Study of Scots’ Attitudes towards Britain’ (2009) 39 *European Journal of Social Psychology* 114; Anouk Smeekes and Maykel Verkuyten, ‘Collective Self-Continuity, Group Identification and in-Group Defense’ (2013) 49 *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 984; *ibid.*

migration.¹³ In addition, the EU may be perceived as a threat to national autonomy and sovereignty,¹⁴ for example, because it has a supranational legal system that trumps all national laws, including national constitutions. Citizens may also fear losing their national identity altogether to a 'United States of Europe', in which nation states cease to exist.¹⁵

Prior research has linked national identity threat to lower support for EU membership,¹⁶ opposition to European integration,¹⁷ and lower perceived legitimacy of the EU.¹⁸ While these Eurosceptic responses may be an adaptive strategy for individuals to restore their positive social identity when facing perceived threats from the EU, they are ultimately maladaptive for fostering European cooperation. A decline in perceived EU legitimacy would in particular be dangerous to the EU's functioning and viability. Legitimacy – the belief that an authority has the right to exercise power – is a relatively stable form of support, which allows the EU to take decisions and secure compliance from citizens.¹⁹ If people delegitimize the EU as a way to cope with national identity threat, then a key question is how to mitigate national identity threat from the EU.

5.1.2 Group affirmation

A potential strategy to mitigate national identity threat is group affirmation. Research on group affirmation was inspired by self-affirmation theory, which poses that people can restore threats to their identity by affirming positive aspects of the self that are unrelated to the threatening domain.²⁰ When people have the opportunity to positively affirm their personal self, they maintain a positive self-view and become less defensive towards the source of threat. Extending self-affirmation theory, research has explored

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- 13 Claes H de Vreese and Hajo G Boomgaarden, 'Projecting EU Referendums: Fear of Immigration and Support for European Integration' (2005) 6 *European Union Politics* 59; Roy Konings, David De Coninck and Leen d'Haenens, 'The Role of European and National Identity and Threat Perceptions in Attitudes towards Immigrants' (2023) 31 *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 446; Marcel Lubbers and Peer Scheepers, 'Explanations of Political Euroscepticism at the Individual, Regional and National Levels' (2007) 9 *European Societies* 643; Julie Van de Vyver and others, 'Brexit or Bremain? A Person and Social Analysis of Voting Decisions in the EU Referendum' (2018) 28 *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology* 65.
 - 14 Adam and Maier (n 4); Góra and Zielińska (n 4); Kallis (n 4).
 - 15 Richard J Crisp and Miles Hewstone, 'Multiple Social Categorization', *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, vol 39 (Academic Press 2007); Smeekes and Verkuyten (n 12).
 - 16 Sean Carey, 'Undivided Loyalties: Is National Identity an Obstacle to European Integration?' (2002) 3 *European Union Politics* 387; Sara B Hobolt and Sylvain Brouard, 'Contesting the European Union? Why the Dutch and the French Rejected the European Constitution' (2011) 64 *Political Research Quarterly* 309; Van de Vyver and others (n 13).
 - 17 Smeekes and Verkuyten (n 12).
 - 18 Grosfeld and others (n 2).
 - 19 Sommerer and Agné (n 3); Tallberg and Zürn (n 3).
 - 20 Claude M Steele, 'The Psychology of Self-Affirmation: Sustaining the Integrity of the Self' in Leonard Berkowitz (ed), *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, vol 21 (Elsevier 1988).

whether positively affirming one's *social* identity can also mitigate the negative consequences associated with identity threat. This strategy is called group affirmation.

Group affirmation research has demonstrated that it is possible to help people to cope with a threat to their ingroup by inviting them to focus on positive aspects of their group.²¹ This strategy pre-emptively protects or defensive responses because it fulfils the psychological need to have a positive social identity. Prior studies have shown that, in various contexts, group affirmation reduces social identity threat and mitigates associated responses, such as psychological discomfort, attribution bias, lower performance motivation, and prejudice against outgroups.²²

The effectiveness of group affirmation as a threat-reducing strategy may depend on the subjective meaning of the group for the individual in question. Prior research suggests that group affirmation may be particularly effective at reducing social identity threat among individuals who highly identify with their group, because the group is important to their self-concept. Conversely, group affirmation may be less effective for low identifiers, who may downplay the importance of their group membership as a threat-reduction strategy. Indeed, in single-group contexts, low identifiers were inclined to downregulate social identity threat by affirming their personal self instead of focusing on their group membership.²³

5.1.3 Group affirmation in superordinate group contexts

While group affirmation has been explored in a variety of contexts, there is little research on the potential of group affirmation in a situation where one's membership in a superordinate group threatens a subgroup identity. What makes this situation distinct and important is that the superordinate group is not only a source of threat, but can also serve as a source of positive identity. To illustrate, in the case of an organizational merger, employees might fear losing their pre-merger organizational identity, yet simultaneously feel proud of the enhanced status that the merger organization offers them. Making both identities salient and positive, and preserving their continuity, has shown to mitigate negative effects of an organizational merger and positively influence adjustment to the merger.²⁴ According to the Social

21 Sherman and others (n 5).

22 Derks and others (n 5); Belle Derks, Colette Van Laar and Naomi Ellemers, 'Working for the Self or Working for the Group: How Self- versus Group Affirmation Affects Collective Behavior in Low-Status Groups.' (2009) 96 *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 183; Glasford, Dovidio and Pratto (n 5); Sherman and others (n 5); Adrian J Villicana, Luis M Rivera and Donna M Garcia, 'When One's Group Is Beneficial: The Effect of Group-Affirmation and Subjective Group Identification on Prejudice' (2018) 21 *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations* 962.

23 Derks and others (n 5); Glasford, Dovidio and Pratto (n 5); Villicana, Rivera and Garcia (n 22).

24 Esther Van Leeuwen, Daan Van Knippenberg and Naomi Ellemers, 'Continuing and Changing Group Identities: The Effects of Merging on Social Identification and Ingroup Bias' (2003) 29 *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 679; Hornsey and Hogg (n 10).

Identity Model of Organizational Change, adjustment to organizational change is promoted by both maintaining the pre-existing organizational identity and experiencing the gain of a new organizational identity.²⁵ Affirmation of the superordinate identity could, therefore, potentially also reduce identity threat.

Yet the only study that, to our knowledge, investigated group affirmation in a superordinate context was done in the context of stereotype threat among Black pupils in a British school.²⁶ However, unlike the situation of interest here, the superordinate identity in this prior study (British identity) was not the source of threat. This study can therefore not be compared to the intergroup situation investigated in the current research.

5.1.4 National identity versus EU identity affirmation

In this chapter, we compare the effectiveness of national identity affirmation versus EU identity affirmation at reducing national identity threat and increasing perceived EU legitimacy. While national identity tends to be the most salient geographical identity for individuals,²⁷ identification with the EU is in general also relatively high.²⁸ In addition, people could draw on various positive aspects of EU membership to gain a positive social identity. For example, the EU offers citizens protection of fundamental, democratic, and social rights, stands for common values, and enhances the relative power of their nation state at the global level. Therefore, both national and EU identity affirmation could provide people with other options besides the strategy of delegitimizing the EU to protect their national identity.

Additionally, we explore whether and how the effects of affirmation depend on *strength* and/or *content* of national identification. As indicated above, the impact of group affirmation may increase when identification with the threatened group is high, because then, the group is important to people's self-concept. For low national identifiers, other strategies might help them to maintain a positive social identity. For example, low-identifiers may prefer to focus on another, more positively valued group, or embrace their inclusion in another superordinate group.²⁹ Therefore, we examine the moderating impact of national identity strength.

In addition to the moderating effect of strength of national identification, we explore whether *content* of national identification influences the effects of affirmation. Prior research suggests that content of national identification – how people conceive of their country and national identity – is a

25 Neela S Mühlemann and others, 'Understanding Responses to an Organizational Take-over: Introducing the Social Identity Model of Organizational Change' (2022) 123 *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 1004.

26 Celeste and others (n 6).

27 Denis Sindic, 'Psychological Citizenship and National Identity' (2011) 21 *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology* 202.

28 Grosfeld and others (n 2).

29 Mathias Blanz and others, 'Responding to Negative Social Identity: A Taxonomy of Identity Management Strategies' (1998) 28 *European Journal of Social Psychology* 697.

better predictor of attitudes towards the EU than strength of national identification.³⁰ For example, a combination of high patriotism and low ethnic nationalism has been positively related to EU support, while a combination of high chauvinism and high ethnic nationalism has been negatively related to EU support.³¹ Patriotism refers to feelings of pride about one's country, while chauvinism refers to the feeling of national superiority over other countries or cultures. Ethnic nationalism refers to the belief that national identity is defined by having a common ancestry. This can be contrasted with civic nationalism, which defines national identity as having common political institutions and principles. In this chapter, we explore whether national identity profiles, based on these four dimensions, moderate the effect of affirmation strategy on national identity threat and perceived EU legitimacy. As these analyses were explorative, we have no hypotheses about the moderating effect of national identification content.

5.1.5 The present research

We first conducted two preliminary studies to extend prior correlational findings on the relation between national identity threat and perceived EU legitimacy. We furthermore examine the causal pathway by experimentally inducing national identity threat to see whether this negatively affects perceived EU legitimacy. The key results of these preliminary studies are reported in the next section. The main study was an online, preregistered experiment testing the impact of national and EU identity affirmation manipulations against a control condition (no affirmation). Deviations from the preregistration will be reported. The study materials, data files, codebook, and analysis code for all studies can be found on OSF at <https://osf.io/u4jyh/>. The research was approved by the Ethics and Data Committee of Leiden Law School.

5.2 PRELIMINARY STUDIES

In two preliminary studies, we first established the effect of national identity threat on perceived EU legitimacy. Preliminary Study 1 was an online study conducted in a convenience sample of 305 French and Dutch individuals. Preliminary Study 2 was conducted in a more ecologically valid sample of 150 Dutch individuals, during the national elections for the Dutch national

30 Hajo G Boomgaarden and others, 'Mapping EU Attitudes: Conceptual and Empirical Dimensions of Euroscepticism and EU Support' (2011) 12 *European Union Politics* 241; Liesbet Hooghe and Gary Marks, 'Does Identity or Economic Rationality Drive Public Opinion on European Integration?' (2004) 37 *PS: Political Science & Politics* 415; Liesbet Hooghe and Gary Marks, 'Calculation, Community and Cues: Public Opinion on European Integration' (2005) 6 *European Union Politics* 419.

31 Julian Aichholzer, Sylvia Kritzinger and Carolina Plescia, 'National Identity Profiles and Support for the European Union' (2021) 22 *European Union Politics* 293; Leonie Huddy, Alessandro Del Ponte and Caitlin Davies, 'Nationalism, Patriotism, and Support for the European Union' (2021) 42 *Political Psychology* 995.

parliament, in November 2023. Both studies used two types of prompts to induce national identity threat by presenting information about the primacy of EU law (written in Study 1 and video/ audio recorded in Study 2),³² and compared responses to these manipulations to a control condition. Both studies assessed self-reported national identity threat (six items) and perceived EU legitimacy (single item in Study 1, eight items in Study 2). Study 2 also assessed strength of national identification, to explore the relations between national identification, national identity threat, and perceived EU legitimacy. Detailed information on the samples, methods, and results are reported in the appendix to Chapter 5. The means and standard deviations of national identity threat and perceived EU legitimacy across demographic groups are presented in Supplementary Tables 1 and 3 in the appendix to Chapter 5.

The results of Preliminary Study 1 showed that perceived EU legitimacy was lower after both threat manipulations ($M = 6.20$, $SD = 2.09$; $M = 6.36$, $SD = 2.24$) compared to the control condition ($M = 6.54$, $SD = 1.95$). A One-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) revealed that these means were not significantly different, $F(2, 300) = 0.64$, $p = .528$, $\eta^2 < .01$. A multiple linear regression analysis showed that self-reported national identity threat was a significant predictor of perceived EU legitimacy, controlling for nationality and political ideology, $b = -1.09$, $SE = .06$, 95% CI = [-1.21, -0.96], $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .45$ (see Supplementary Table 2 in the appendix to Chapter 5 for details).³³

As in Preliminary Study 1, we conducted a linear regression analysis with the data of Preliminary Study 2.³⁴ While controlling for political ideology – participants indicated for which party they had voted, which constituted the measure of political ideology – perceived EU legitimacy was significantly predicted by self-reported national identity threat, $b = -0.64$, $SE = .07$, 95% CI = [-0.78, -0.50], $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .18$ (see Supplementary Table 4 in the appendix to Chapter 5 for details). National identity threat was a

32 This legal principle entails that any norm of EU law trumps any norm of national law, including the national constitution. Consequently, when there is a conflict between EU law and national law, national judges are obliged to disapply the national rule and let the EU rule prevail, even if this means disapplying the national constitution or core national values.

33 The plotted data showed that perceived EU legitimacy declined with more right-wing political ideology, $\rho = -.18$, $p = .001$, but that there was a declining trend on the left-wing side as well, suggesting a negative quadratic relation. This is consistent with prior work showing that the relationship between political orientation and euroscepticism is U-shaped with an increasing trend of euroscepticism on the right-wing scale-end over time, Erika J Van Elsas and Wouter Van der Brug, 'The Changing Relationship between Left-Right Ideology and Euroscepticism, 1973–2010' (2015) 16 *European Union Politics* 194. As the R^2 increase of the model including political orientation as a polynomial predictor explained only an additional 1% of the variance, we added political ideology as a linear predictor.

34 The effect of experimental manipulation on perceived EU legitimacy is not reported, due to a failed manipulation check: the threat manipulation did not significantly increase self-reported national identity threat, $F(2, 147) = 0.77$, $p = .463$, $\eta^2 = .01$. This might be explained by that the sample may have been too small to detect small effects of the manipulation, or a video may have been less ideal to induce threat compared to a written text manipulation, possibly because when watching a video, participants cannot process the information at their desired speed.

significant negative predictor of all dimensions of perceived EU legitimacy (see Supplementary Table 5 in the appendix to Chapter 5). Furthermore, the plotted data and Spearman correlations showed that national identification was not linearly and not significantly related to national identity threat, $\rho = .06$, $p = .452$, nor to perceived EU legitimacy, $\rho = .09$, $p = .284$. This finding suggests that strength of national identification does not reliably predict the degree to which people experience a threat to their national identity from the EU or how legitimate they find the EU. Therefore, in the main study we explore the possibility that not strength of national identification predicts these outcomes, but that the different meanings people give to their national identity are a more powerful predictor and therefore explain why strength of national identification was found to be unrelated.

5.3 MAIN STUDY

5.3.1 Method

In both preliminary studies, perceived EU legitimacy was significantly predicted by self-reported national identity threat, regardless of sample nationality (Dutch or French), political context (close/distant to national elections), or political ideology. The aim of our main study is to test whether national identity threat can be reduced and perceived EU legitimacy can be increased by affirmation of national identity (subgroup) or EU identity (superordinate group). To achieve this goal, we conducted an online experiment among individuals from twelve EU Member States. The study had a 3-condition between-participants design, where participants were randomly assigned to a control condition (no affirmation), a national identity affirmation condition, or an EU identity affirmation condition. There were two dependent variables: national identity threat and perceived EU legitimacy. We also tested the moderating effect of strength and content of national identification on the effect of affirmation strategy on the dependent variables. The study was preregistered on <https://osf.io/2k6cw>. As can be read in the preregistration, it was expected that both affirmation strategies would reduce national identity threat and increase perceived EU legitimacy compared to the control condition. It was also anticipated that these effects would be stronger for high national identifiers after affirming the national identity and for low national identifiers after affirming the EU identity. There were no hypotheses for the moderating effect of content of national identification. We explored this possibility by creating distinct content categories (i.e., 'national identity profiles') based on a latent profile analysis with four national identity dimensions (i.e., civic nationalism, ethnic nationalism, patriotism, and chauvinism), revealing three national identity profiles: non-nationalists, inclusive nationalists, and exclusive nationalists (see Measures for this analysis).

5.3.1.1 Participants

Given the absence of similar tests of affirmation in the context of national identity threat, we calculated the desired sample size based on a small effect size of Cohen's $D = .2$. An a priori power analyses in G*Power showed that a sample size of 863 participants would be required to detect small effects, assuming high statistical power (.95) and an alpha of .05. Participants were recruited on Prolific. Individuals who had participated in Preliminary Study 1 were excluded from participation. The sample comprised 904 participants (age: $M = 31.44$, $SD = 10.49$, 18-76; 56.9% male, 41.2% female, 1.9% non-binary or gender not indicated) from twelve EU Member States (Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Netherlands, Poland, Romania, Slovenia, Sweden). These Member States were selected to ensure a diverse representation of Member States with regards to geographical location, population size and time of accession to the EU. The sample was on average highly educated (27.2% had received low education, 10.8% medium education, and 61.7% high education), and 35.0% of the participants was a student. 18.6% of the participants lived in a rural area or small village, 42.4% in a small or medium-sized city, and 39.0% in a large city. Participants were slightly more left-oriented on the political spectrum ($M = 37.90$, $SD = 23.62$). Average subjective socioeconomic status was slightly higher than the mean of the scale ($M = 5.85$, $SD = 1.51$).

5.3.1.2 Procedure

After indicating their nationality, participants were directed to a page where they could complete the study in their native language. We first measured subjective socioeconomic status, political ideology, strength of national identification, and the four dimensions of national identity. National identity threat was then induced in all experimental groups, to better test the effects of affirmation strategy. Participants read a fictional newspaper article, which was based on a real article, that explained how the European Parliament voted for the codification of the principle of primacy in the Treaties. As the video manipulation in Preliminary Study 2 was less successful at inducing national identity threat than the text manipulation in Preliminary Study 1, we used the text manipulation but aimed to further strengthen it by connecting primacy of EU law to rules about migration, which was a highly salient social issue across Europe at the time of data collection. We expected that emphasizing primacy in the field of migration would lead to stronger feelings of national identity threat because intra- and extra-EU migration has been shown to trigger national identity threat.³⁵

35 de Vreese and Boomgaarden (n 13); Konings, De Coninck and d'Haenens (n 13); Lubbers and Scheepers (n 13); Johannes Ullrich, Oliver Christ and Elmar Schlüter, 'Merging on Mayday: Subgroup and Superordinate Identification as Joint Moderators of Threat Effects in the Context of European Union's Expansion' (2006) 36 *European Journal of Social Psychology* 857; Van de Vyver and others (n 13).

Next, participants were randomly assigned to one of the two affirmation strategies or to the control condition. The national identity affirmation focused on positive elements of the national identity, and emphasized that these are valued within the EU. In contrast, the EU identity affirmation condition emphasized the shared values of the common EU identity. Thus, while the goal of national identity affirmation was to restore the positive value and distinctiveness of the national identity, EU identity affirmation aimed to recognize the positive value of the EU identity (see Table 1 for the instructions participants received, translated to English).

Table 1. Instructions of national identity and EU identity affirmation strategies

National identity affirmation	EU identity affirmation
As you read in the newspaper article, EU laws will always win from national laws if there is a conflict between them. The EU, however, is also obligated to respect the national identities of the Member States. In this way, EU law offers protection to core parts of your national identity. Elements of the [nationality] identity are listed below. We would like to know which of these elements are most important to you. Please take a look at the elements in the list and rank them according to their importance to you. You can do this by dragging the elements in your preferred order, such that your most important element is on top of the list, and your least important element is on the bottom of the list.	As you read in the newspaper article, EU laws will always win from national laws if there is a conflict between them. The EU, however, is also obligated to respect the European values, which are common to the Member States. In this way, EU law offers protection to your shared European values. These values are listed below. We would like to know which of these values are most important to you. Please take a look at the values in the list and rank them according to their importance to you. You can do this by dragging the values in your preferred order, such that your most important value is on top of the list, and your least important value is on the bottom of the list.
1. [Nationality] traditions such as (...) 2. [Nationality] holidays such as (...) 3. [Nationality] values such as (...) 4. The [nationality] language(s) 5. The [nationality] flag 6. Conditions for [nationality] citizenship 7. The [nationality] form of government 8. Other (specific to each nationality)	1. Europe's shared history and cultural heritage 2. The continent's unique nature and environment 3. The melting pot of European cultures 4. The EU's multilayered representative democracy 5. The principle of equality between member states and nationalities 6. Protection of fundamental human rights and human dignity 7. Solidarity between EU countries in times of crisis (helping those countries in need) 8. The freedom to live and work everywhere in the EU
Now look at the element that is ranked on top of your list. Please elaborate in a few sentences, or give an example of, why this element makes you proud to be [nationality].	Now look at the element that is ranked on top of your list. Please elaborate in a few sentences, or give an example of, why this element makes you proud to be an EU-citizen.

Participants in both conditions were provided with a list of eight elements. The list of national identity elements was adapted to participants' nationality. Each participant thus ranked a list of eight elements that are typical to their national identity, in their national language (e.g., '[national] holidays such as [...]; [national] traditions such as [...]; 'the [national] flag') (see the appendix to Chapter 5 for these lists). In contrast, participants in the EU identity affirmation condition read that, by EU law, the EU is obligated to respect European values. They were provided with a list of eight of these values (e.g., 'protection of fundamental human rights and human dignity'; 'Europe's shared history and cultural heritage'; 'the freedom to live and work everywhere in the EU'), asked to rank their importance, and to explain why the element on top of their list makes them proud to be an EU citizen. Participants in the control condition did not participate in an affirmation task.

After this, national identity threat and perceived EU legitimacy were measured. At the end of the study, participants were debriefed and redirected to Prolific where they were appropriately reimbursed for their participation.

5.3.1.3 Measures

Subjective socioeconomic status was measured through the MacArthur Scale of Subjective Social Status on a scale from 1 to 10 where a higher score represents higher subjective socioeconomic status.³⁶ Other demographic information (age, gender, education, student status, ethnicity) was retrieved from Prolific. To measure political ideology, participants indicated their political orientation on a scale running from 1 (left/progressive) to 100 (right/conservative).

Strength of national identification was assessed with the 10 group-level self-investment items of the in-group identification scale.³⁷ These items measured the sub-scales solidarity (three items; e.g., 'I feel a bond with Dutch people'), satisfaction (four items; e.g., 'It is pleasant to be Dutch'), and centrality (three items; e.g., 'Being Dutch is an important part of how I see myself'). Internal consistency of the total scale was high ($\alpha = .93$). For descriptive purposes, these sub-scales were also measured for EU identity.

Content of national identification was measured with four dimensions of national identity, each with a single item: ethnic nationalism ('For being a true [national], it is important to be of [national] descent'), civic nationalism ('For being a true [national], it is important to speak the [national] language(s) and respect [national] political institutions and laws'), patrio-

36 Elizabeth Goodman and others, 'Adolescents' Perceptions of Social Status: Development and Evaluation of a New Indicator' (2001) 108 *Pediatrics* e31.

37 Colin Wayne Leach and others, 'Group-Level Self-Definition and Self-Investment: A Hierarchical (Multicomponent) Model of in-Group Identification.' (2008) 95 *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 144.

tism ('I am proud of [country]'), and chauvinism ('Generally speaking, [country] is a better country than most other countries'). All items were answered on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. Based on these dimensions, we estimated the national identity profiles through latent profile analysis (LPA) using the tidyLPA package in R.³⁸ This analysis revealed three meaningful profiles (see the appendix to Chapter 5 for details). Profile 1 ($n = 463$) was characterized by low levels of all national identity dimensions, meaning that participants in this class scored below the mean of all variables. This class was therefore labelled 'non-nationalists'. Profile 2 ($n = 207$) was characterized by positive levels of chauvinism and civic nationalism, but a highly negative level of ethnic nationalism. Participants in this class thus believe their country is in general better than other countries, but do not believe that a true nationalist is being defined by having national descent. We labelled them 'inclusive nationalists'. In contrast, participants in profile 3 ($n = 234$) had high positive levels of ethnic nationalism and scored high on the other dimensions as well, making them 'exclusive nationalists'.

National identity threat was measured with six items (e.g., 'In the European Union, the [nationality] way of life is preserved', '[country] might lose part of its identity due to the European Union') on 7-point Likert scales ranging from *totally disagree* to *totally agree*. Some items were reverse-coded. Internal consistency of the scale was high ($\alpha = .89$).

Perceived EU legitimacy was measured with eight items, capturing trust in the EU, perceived morality of the EU, perceived lawfulness of the EU, and felt duty to obey the EU. All items were answered on 7-point Likert scales ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. Internal consistency of the scale was high ($\alpha = .95$).

5.3.2 Results

5.3.2.1 Preliminary analyses

Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics of and correlations between national identification, the national identity dimensions, national identity threat, and perceived EU legitimacy. There were small positive relationships between national identification on the one hand and national identity threat and perceived EU legitimacy on the other hand. Of the national identity dimensions, ethnic nationalism was most positively related to national identity threat and it was the only dimension that was negatively related to perceived EU legitimacy. National identity threat was highest among exclusive nationalists ($M = 4.02$, $SD = 1.22$), followed by anti-nationalists ($M = 3.40$, $SD = 1.20$), and lowest among inclusive nationalists ($M = 3.12$,

38 Joshua Rosenberg and others, 'tidyLPA: An R Package to Easily Carry out Latent Profile Analysis (LPA) Using Open-Source or Commercial Software' (2018) 3 Journal of Open Source Software 978.

$SD = 1.25$). Perceived EU legitimacy was highest among inclusive nationalists ($M = 4.95, SD = 1.15$), followed by anti-nationalists ($M = 4.60, SD = 1.18$), and lowest among exclusive nationalists ($M = 4.56, SD = 1.33$). See Supplementary Table 6 in the appendix to Chapter 5 for the descriptive statistics of the main variables across nationality. Supplementary Table 7 reports the descriptive statistics of the identification sub scales for both national and EU identity. More right-wing political orientation was associated with higher national identity threat ($r = .43, p < .001$) and lower perceived EU legitimacy ($r = -.31, p < .001$). Higher subjective socioeconomic status was associated with lower national identity threat ($r = -.08, p = .016$) and higher perceived EU legitimacy ($r = -.20, p < .001$).

Table 2. Means, standard deviations, and correlations for study variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. National identification							
2. Ethnic nationalism	.33***						
3. Civic nationalism	.28***	.32***					
4. Patriotism	.74***	.29***	.26***				
5. Chauvinism	.36***	.15***	.30***	.43***			
6. National identity threat	.12***	.38***	.18***	.12***	.13***		
7. Perceived EU legitimacy	.10**	-.19***	-.02	.11***	.03	-.69***	
M	4.52	3.09	4.91	4.32	4.29	3.50	4.67
SD	1.24	1.78	1.63	1.63	1.63	1.26	1.22

Note. ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

5.3.2.2 Main effects of affirmation strategy

An ANOVA with affirmation strategy as independent variable and national identity threat as dependent variable showed a main effect of affirmation strategy, $F(2, 901) = 5.58, p = .004, \eta^2 = .01$. A Tukey’s test of honestly significant difference (HSD) showed that national identity threat was significantly lower in the EU identity affirmation condition ($M = 3.33, SD = 1.24$) than in the control condition ($M = 3.67, SD = 1.26$), 95% CI [-0.57, -0.10], $p = .003$. Although national identity threat was also lower in the national identity affirmation condition ($M = 3.46, SD = 1.25$) than in the control condition, this difference was not significant, 95% CI [-0.44, 0.03], $p = .107$.

The ANOVA with perceived EU legitimacy as dependent variable showed a main effect of affirmation strategy, $F(2, 901) = 3.84, p = .022, \eta^2 = .01$. EU identity affirmation led to significantly higher perceived EU legitimacy

($M = 4.84$, $SD = 1.20$) compared to the control condition ($M = 4.59$, $SD = 1.23$), 95% CI [0.02, 0.48], $p = .029$. Perceived EU legitimacy in the national identity affirmation condition ($M = 4.61$, $SD = 1.21$) was also higher than in the control condition, but not significantly, 95% CI [-0.21, 0.25], $p = .974$.

Exploratively, we ran separate ANOVA's with each subdimension of perceived EU legitimacy as dependent variable. Interestingly, there were no main effects of affirmation strategy on perceived lawfulness of the EU, $F(2, 901) = 2.62$, $p = .073$, $\eta^2 = .01$, nor on a felt duty to obey, $F(2, 901) = 1.47$, $p = .232$, $\eta^2 < .01$. There were main effects on trust in the EU, $F(2, 901) = 4.83$, $p = .008$, $\eta^2 = .01$, and perceived morality of the EU, $F(2, 901) = 4.81$, $p = .008$, $\eta^2 = .01$. Affirmation of EU identity significantly increased trust in the EU and perceived morality of the EU as compared to both the control condition and affirmation of the national identity (see Supplementary Table 8 in the appendix to Chapter 5 for details of Tukey HSD comparisons).

5.3.2.3 Moderation of national identification strength

To analyse whether the effects of affirmation strategy on national identity threat and perceived EU legitimacy were moderated by strength of national identification, we ran two multiple linear regression models with the interaction between affirmation strategy (dummy-coded, reference category = control condition) and national identification.³⁹ In all regression models, nationality (dummy-coded, reference category = Austria) and political orientation were added as control variables. Subjective socioeconomic status was not controlled for to avoid overfitting and because adding it as a predictor to the models did not significantly increase the variance explained. Numeric independent variables were mean-centred.

The model with national identity threat as dependent variable (see Supplementary Table 9 in the appendix to Chapter 5 for details) showed that, relative to the control condition, national identity threat was significantly lower in the national identity affirmation condition ($\beta = -0.24$, $SE = .09$, $p = .010$) and in the EU identity affirmation condition ($\beta = -0.39$, $SE = .09$, $p < .001$). There was no main effect of national identification ($\beta = 0.04$, $SE = .05$, $p = .414$). The contrasts between the slopes of national identification across different levels of affirmation strategy revealed no significant differences (correcting for multiple comparisons using Tukey, see Supplementary Table 10 in the appendix to Chapter 5), indicating that there was no moderating effect of strength of national identification.⁴⁰

39 Here, we deviated from the preregistered analysis, which originally regressed the dependent variables on the contrast between national affirmation and EU affirmation. Instead, we opted to regress them on affirmation strategy, including all three categories. This deviation was motivated by our interest in understanding the effects of the affirmation strategies relative to the control condition.

40 The contrasts were not significant either when we exploratively included each of the national identification subscales (i.e., solidarity, satisfaction, solidarity) instead of the composite scale in the regression model.

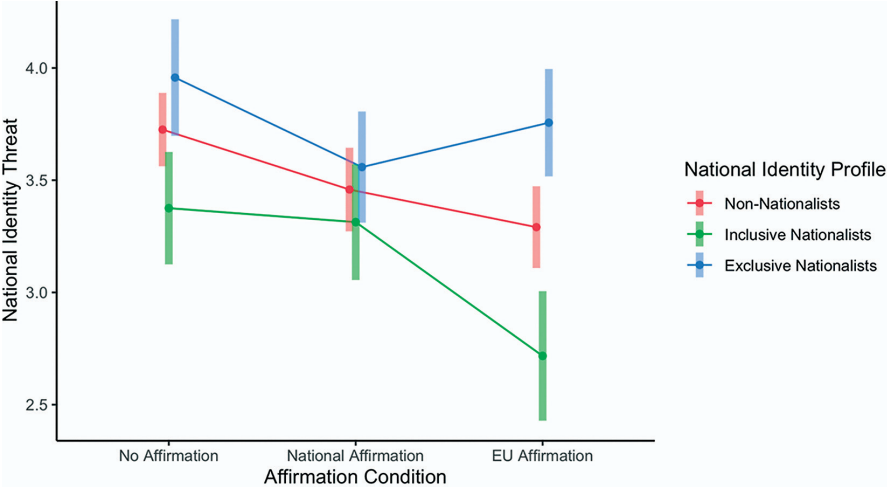
The model with perceived EU legitimacy as dependent variable (see Supplementary Table 11 in the appendix to Chapter 5 for details) showed that, relative to the control condition, perceived EU legitimacy was significantly higher in the EU identity affirmation condition ($\beta = 0.26$, $SE = .09$, $p = .005$) but not in the national identity affirmation condition ($\beta = 0.01$, $SE = .09$, $p = .935$). National identification positively predicted perceived EU legitimacy ($\beta = 0.151$, $SE = .05$, $p = .003$). Again, the slopes of national identification across different levels of affirmation strategy were not significantly different (correcting for multiple comparisons using Tukey, see Supplementary Table 12 in the appendix to Chapter 5), indicating that there was no moderating effect of strength of national identification.

5.3.2.4 Moderation of national identification content

To analyse whether content of national identification moderates the effects of affirmation strategy on national identity threat and perceived EU legitimacy, we ran two regression models including the interaction between affirmation strategy and national identity profile. The regression models were similar as to those described above.

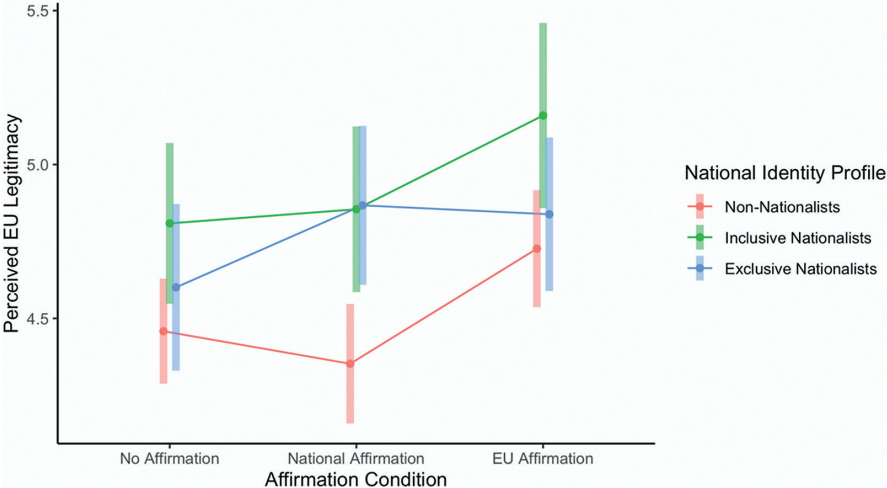
Regarding the model with national identity threat as dependent variable (see Supplementary Table 13 in the appendix to Chapter 5 for details), national identity threat was significantly lower in both the national identity affirmation condition ($\beta = -0.27$, $SE = .12$, $p = .032$) and in the EU identity affirmation condition ($\beta = -0.43$, $SE = .12$, $p < .001$) than in the control condition. As depicted in Figure 1, these effects were moderated by national identity profile. Simple effects correcting for multiple comparisons using Tukey showed that, relative to the control condition, EU identity affirmation most strongly reduced national identity threat among inclusive nationalists, $b = -0.66$, $SE = 0.19$, $t(883) = -3.45$, $p = .002$, followed by non-nationalists, $b = -0.43$, $SE = 0.12$, $t(883) = -3.52$, $p = .001$, but that it did not reduce national identity threat among exclusive nationalists, $b = -0.20$, $SE = 0.17$, $t(883) = -1.14$, $p = .488$. In addition, among inclusive nationalists, national identity threat was significantly lower in the EU identity affirmation condition than in the national identity affirmation condition, $b = -0.60$, $SE = 0.19$, $t(883) = -3.09$, $p = .006$. Only among exclusive nationalists, national identity affirmation reduced national identity threat compared to the control condition, despite that this difference did just not reach the conventional level of significance, $b = -0.40$, $SE = 0.18$, $t(883) = -2.22$, $p = .069$.

Figure 1. Simple effects of affirmation condition on national identity threat within national identity profiles



In the model with perceived EU legitimacy (see Supplementary Table 14 in the appendix to Chapter 5 for details), EU identity affirmation ($\beta = 0.27$, $SE = .13$, $p = .034$) but not national identity affirmation condition ($\beta = -0.11$, $SE = .13$, $p = .416$) increased perceived EU legitimacy relative to the control condition. Simple effects revealed that, among non-nationalists, EU identity affirmation led to higher perceived EU legitimacy than national identity affirmation, $b = 0.37$, $SE = 0.14$, $t(883) = 2.72$, $p = .018$. See Figure 2 for an illustration of these simple effects.

Figure 2. Simple effects of affirmation condition on perceived EU legitimacy within national identity profiles



5.3.2.5 *Exploratory analyses*

As national identity affirmation and EU identity affirmation were not equally effective for people with different national identity profiles, we sought to explore whether national identity profile also influenced how people ranked elements of the national identity and EU identity. In other words: are people with different national identity profiles proud of different aspects of their national/EU identity? Interestingly, this turned out not to be the case. There were no remarkable differences across national identity profiles (see Supplementary Table 15 in the appendix to Chapter 5 for the order of ranking). More or less universally, participants were proudest of their national values and language(s). For non-nationalists and inclusive nationalists, the list was followed by the national form of government, while for exclusive nationalists, the list was followed by national holidays and traditions. With regards to the EU identity, participants were proudest of the protection of fundamental human rights and human dignity, the freedom to live and work everywhere in the EU, and the principle of equality between Member States and nationalities.

5.4 DISCUSSION

As established in the two preliminary studies conducted in the current research, a sense of threat from the EU to national identity may undermine the legitimacy of the EU in the eyes of citizens. Perceived threats to the national identity thus not only result in lower support for European integration,⁴¹ but may also harm the more fundamental belief that the EU's exercise of authority is appropriate, which may have negative consequences for the EU's viability and problem-solving abilities.⁴² Therefore, the main aim of this chapter was to test whether affirmation of national identity and of EU identity could alleviate national identity threat and increase perceived EU legitimacy.

5.4.1 Main findings

We found that affirmation of the EU identity effectively reduced national identity threat and increased perceived EU legitimacy. Participants who were offered the opportunity to positively affirm their EU identity had lower feelings of national identity threat and higher perceptions of EU legitimacy. This demonstrates that EU identity is an accessible group membership for most EU citizens, which can provide them with a positive social

41 Carey (n 16); Smeekes and Verkuyten (n 12).

42 Allen Buchanan and Robert O Keohane, 'The Legitimacy of Global Governance Institutions' (2006) 20 *Ethics & International Affairs* 405; Sommerer and Agné (n 3); Tallberg and Zürn (n 3).

identity, and that emphasizing positive aspects of the EU identity allows people to overcome feelings of national identity threat. One prior study found a similar effect, showing that the EU flag presented a threat to the national identity, which decreased when instrumental benefits of EU membership were emphasized.⁴³ Our study shows that more symbolic aspects of EU membership may also function as a source of positive identity which can reduce national identity threat. While EU identity may not be perceived as a source of positive identity when experiencing national identity threat, because threat makes the national identity highly salient and temporarily dominating,⁴⁴ our study shows that people can be stimulated to switch towards EU identification or simultaneously identify with the EU and in that way overcome national identity threat. Furthermore, our study promisingly shows that this may even increase perceived EU legitimacy, despite the relatively stable nature of legitimacy beliefs.⁴⁵

In contrast, unexpectedly, when participants were offered the opportunity to positively affirm their national identity, their feelings of national identity threat were not significantly lower as compared to participants who did not participate in an affirmation task. Accordingly, national identity affirmation did not result in higher perceived legitimacy either. There are two methodological explanations that may clarify why national identity affirmation was not as effective as EU identity affirmation. First, the threatened domain of the national group was the same as the affirmed domain, while, originally, non-congruence between these domains has been considered important for group affirmation to be effective.⁴⁶ To clarify, the induced threat and the affirmation task targeted not a specific domain of national identity but national identity more generally; this overlap may thus have limited the effectiveness of affirmation. However, a recent meta-analysis suggests that this is not problematic for the effectiveness of group affirmation manipulations.⁴⁷ Second, it could be that due to the setup of the study (asking questions about EU identification before inducing national identity threat), the EU identity was already made salient, making it easier for participants to switch towards EU identification when experiencing national identity threat and making the affirmation of national identity less relevant.

43 Stratos Patrikios and Laura Cram, 'Better the Devil You Know: Threat Effects and Attachment to the European Union' (2016) 14 *Comparative European Politics* 717.

44 Sonia Roccas and Marilyn B Brewer, 'Social Identity Complexity' (2002) 6 *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 88.

45 Tallberg and Zürn (n 3).

46 Constantina Badea, Michael Bender and Helene Korda, 'Threat to National Identity Continuity: When Affirmation Procedures Increase the Acceptance of Muslim Immigrants' (2020) 78 *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 65.

47 Heather J Smith and Diana R Grant, 'How to Improve Group Affirmation Manipulations: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis' [2024] *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations* 13684302241276070.

Alternatively, there may be a theoretical explanation for the unexpected findings. This relates to the findings of the moderation analyses, which suggest that national identity affirmation might reduce national identity threat, but mainly for one particular group of people, namely those who are strongly attached to their nation and have an ethnic conception of national identity (i.e., people who exclude non-ethnic nationals from their national identity). EU identity affirmation, on the other hand, reduced national identity threat among people who were not strongly attached to their nation and among people who were strongly attached and inclusive towards non-ethnic nationals, but not among exclusive nationalists. This shows that when people conceive of their national identity as exclusive of other territorial identities, they are not likely to perceive the positive value of EU identity or to even have integrated the EU identity into their social identity.

5.4.2 Theoretical implications

Our research has two main theoretical implications. First, we extend group affirmation research to superordinate group contexts that elicit subgroup identity threat, such as the threat posed by organizational mergers or regional integration projects, by testing whether subgroup or superordinate group affirmation is more effective at reducing subgroup identity threat posed by superordinate groups. Research on the application of group affirmation in these situations has thus far been rather limited, while these situations have become increasingly common in our modern world where globalization and organizational upscaling are everyday business. To our knowledge, only one previous study investigated group affirmation in such a context, although the specific group context in that study (i.e. stereotype threat among ethnic minorities in a school) is quite different.⁴⁸ In that study, stereotype threat among Black pupils was reduced after a dual identity affirmation (i.e., emphasizing that the school values both minority cultural backgrounds and the common British identity, and asking to explain why this is good policy), but not after a one-group affirmation (i.e., emphasizing that the school values the common British identity, and asking to explain why this is good policy).

Interestingly, in our study the results were the opposite to those reported by Celeste et al., which asks for an explanation. A first factor that may play a role here is that strictly speaking our national identity affirmation manipulation was not a dual identity affirmation, because it did not clearly emphasize the value of the EU identity as well. Still, this does not explain why a one-group affirmation (EU identity affirmation) was highly effective in our study. A second factor that may play a role here is that the effects of subgroup, superordinate group, and dual identity depend on the context and type of superordinate situation.⁴⁹ More specifically, it

48 Celeste and others (n 6).

49 Gaertner, Dovidio and Bachman (n 7).

may depend on how salient, important, and positive the superordinate identity is. The EU may be a source of positive identity for many people, while British identity may not for Black pupils. In line with this, Gaertner et al. showed that there are important differences between group contexts regarding whether a one-group or dual identity approach is more effective in improving intergroup relations.⁵⁰ Like in Celeste et al.'s study, Gaertner et al. showed that in a multi-ethnic school setting, a dual identity approach was more effective than a one-group approach. This fits with the observation that ethnic identity is typically very central to people's identity and stressing a one-group approach may make especially minority-group members feel that they have to give up this important part of their identity. In contrast, in a bank-merger study, Gaertner et al. found that a one-group representation was more effective than a dual identity approach, presumably because in that context people need to work on common goals, and because too much stress on subgroups may threaten common goal accomplishment. In a sense, the bank merger study better fits the current context than the multi-ethnic school setting, as the EU was set out precisely for establishing common goals (e.g., peace, economic prosperity), despite that the idea of a union of values is so often stressed. Therefore, similar effects as found in the current study may be found among other projects of regional integration, provided that those authorities can be perceived as a positive ingroup.

A second theoretical contribution of the current research is that it illustrates how national identities can differ in content, and that this differently predicts how people perceive the EU and its legitimacy. Preliminary Study 2 showed that mere strength of national identification was not related to national identity threat or perceived EU legitimacy, and the main study showed that it did not moderate the effects of affirmation strategy. While previous research showed that higher subgroup identification relates to lower legitimacy of the superordinate group,⁵¹ and higher resistance against it,⁵² our research suggests that this may not apply to national subgroup membership within the EU. Rather, in this context, what that national identity entails matters. Thus, instead of only measuring strength of national identification or attachment to one's nation, research should combine this construct with content of national identification in order to understand feelings and attitudes towards the EU.

5.4.3 Strengths, limitations, and future directions

Several strengths of the current research are that it was conducted among individuals from twelve different EU Member States, that it was administered in the native language of the participants, and that the national identity affirmation was adapted to specific elements of their national identity.

50 *ibid.*

51 Jetten and Hutchison (n 12).

52 Sindic and Reicher (n 12).

This offered a rich dataset, providing information on identity and perceptions of the EU in a diverse sample. Another strength is that we pre-tested the expected relationship between national identity threat and perceived EU legitimacy, both in an online Dutch and French sample and in a more or less representative Dutch sample. The analyses indicated that this relationship exists beyond political orientation.

The current research also has limitations which should be noted. First, an important limitation is that, although it is also a strength, the diversity of the sample with regards to nationality may have led to high heterogeneity. To account for this, we controlled for nationality in the analyses, but since the sample was relatively small (75 participants per nationality), the analyses would ideally be replicated in larger samples to test for country differences through multilevel modelling. Another limitation related to the sample is that it was relatively young and highly educated (e.g., roughly 30% was student). Although we found no relation between age and the outcome variables, and the effect of education on Euroscepticism has been questioned,⁵³ it remains important for future research to test national and EU identity affirmation in a more representative sample. Furthermore, although the internal consistency of our measure of perceived EU legitimacy was high, and national identity threat was a consistent predictor of all legitimacy dimensions in Preliminary Study 2, the affirmation strategies had a different impact on the different dimensions of legitimacy. More specifically, EU identity affirmation only increased the trust and morality dimensions of legitimacy, but not the other dimensions. We agree with other authors that legitimacy is a multidimensional construct,⁵⁴ and should therefore be measured with multiple dimensions. However, it is important to disentangle whether and how these different dimensions are shaped. Possibly, the more affective dimensions (i.e., trust, morality) may be influenced to a stronger extent by affective factors such as identity than the other two dimensions (i.e., perceived lawfulness, felt duty to obey). Finally, the items used to assess the four variables based on which the national identity profiles were determined, were single items. As the use of single items may carry some disadvantages with regards to validity and reliability, it would be advised for future research to establish national identity profiles with multiple items.

We believe that our research could inspire future research in both the public EU attitudes domain and the group affirmation domain. In what follows, we highlight two directions which we think are particularly promising. First, future research could take into account and further investigate the influence of political context, considering that we found that political

53 Sander Kunst, Theresa Kuhn and Herman G van de Werfhorst, 'Does Education Decrease Euroscepticism? A Regression Discontinuity Design Using Compulsory Schooling Reforms in Four European Countries' (2020) 21 *European Union Politics* 24.

54 Lisa Dellmuth and Bernd Schlipphak, 'Legitimacy Beliefs towards Global Governance Institutions: A Research Agenda' (2020) 27 *Journal of European Public Policy* 931.

ideology is a strong predictor of national identity threat and perceived EU legitimacy. In our analyses, we controlled for political ideology because prior research has shown that EU attitudes are to a large extent determined by left-right orientation, and that in particular right-wing citizens are concerned with fears of losing national identity.⁵⁵ Political ideology may also interact with national identity. For example, political messages that frame the EU as a threat to national identity and sovereignty have shown to heighten salience of the national identity.⁵⁶ Furthermore, prior research found that when a national elite is highly divided on European integration, people are more sensitive to national identity cues, more likely to see their national identity as exclusive to EU identity, and more likely to oppose European integration.⁵⁷ This shows that the political context may affect the content of national identity and, accordingly, the effectiveness of affirmation interventions.

A second direction for future research is to investigate which factors, in addition to a divided national elite, influence exclusive national identification. Research on social identity complexity may provide an explanatory framework. Social identity complexity refers to the extent to which people define their ingroups as similar. A higher complexity means that ingroups are perceived as less similar (i.e., a more complex cognitive representation of the multiple ingroups), and has shown to lead to more positive intergroup attitudes.⁵⁸ Antecedents of social identity complexity (e.g., tolerance for ambiguity, need for closure, uncertainty orientation, conservatism, cognitive load) may also be antecedents of an inclusive or exclusive national identity.

5.4.4 Conclusion

In conclusion, our research extends group affirmation research to superordinate group contexts like regional integration projects, which are becoming increasingly common in a globalizing world, and proposes EU identity affirmation as a promising legitimization strategy that may reduce national identity threat for the majority of EU citizens. However, our work also shows that affirmation of EU identity is unlikely to reduce national identity threat for citizens who have an ethnic conception of national identity.

55 Marcel Lubbers and Peer Scheepers, 'Divergent Trends of Euroscepticism in Countries and Regions of the European Union' (2010) 49 *European Journal of Political Research* 787; Van Elsas and Van der Brug (n 33).

56 Michaela Maier, Silke Adam and Jürgen Maier, 'The Impact of Identity and Economic Cues on Citizens' EU Support: An Experimental Study on the Effects of Party Communication in the Run-up to the 2009 European Parliament Elections' (2012) 13 *European Union Politics* 580.

57 Hooghe and Marks, 'Calculation, Community and Cues' (n 30).

58 Roccas and Brewer (n 44); Katharina Schmid and others, 'Antecedents and Consequences of Social Identity Complexity: Intergroup Contact, Distinctiveness Threat, and Outgroup Attitudes' (2009) 35 *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 1085.