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Not anxious enough: The discursive articulation of ontological security in the European Parliament

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Abstract

This paper makes the case for a discursive understanding of ontological security and demonstrates the utility of such an approach in an analysis of European Parliament (EP) debates between 1990 and 2020. We argue that articulations of ontological (in)security operate through the (re)inscription of a set of metanarratives in what we call 'discursive nodal points'. Building on an extensive analysis of EP debates over 30 years, we demonstrate that in contrast to the prevailing view of the European Union (EU) as an 'anxious community', at least on the political level, EU actors remain surprisingly confident in the European project. While they do invoke challenges to the EU, they see these as incentives to strengthen the integration project and often consider operating in crisis mode as an essential EU characteristic. In doing so, they draw on modernist metanarratives of progress, control, and power to construct an ontologically secure EU. We argue that the future ontological security of the EU will partly depend on allowing for more ambiguity in this modernist narrative without accepting a nationalist counter-narrative that undermines the idea of European integration.

Keywords: anxiety; discourse; European integration; European Parliament; ontological security; polycrisis

The study of ontological security has become a burgeoning field in International Relations (IR). Yet few studies have attempted to develop and apply a consistent empirical operationalisation of the concept covering a larger dataset. In this paper, we make the case for a discursive understanding of ontological security and demonstrate the utility of such an approach in an analysis of European Parliament (EP) debates between 1990 and 2020. We argue that in the case of collective actors such as states or the European Union (EU), ontological security is best studied on the level of articulations, and that such articulations operate through the (re)inscription of a set of metanarratives in what we call 'discursive nodal points'. Their study allows a critique of the fundamental assumptions on which the articulation of the Self and its ontological security rests.

Through application of such a framework to EP debates, we demonstrate how members of the EP (MEPs) continue to construct an ontological security of the EU as a transformative actor in international society and in doing so, reinscribe problematic assumptions of progress, control, and power. This is significant for both academic and political debate, as the EU, in light of what is often termed a 'polycrisis', tends to be seen as increasingly 'anxious', leading to ontological insecurity.[1] While such insecurity may prevail among sections of member-state societies and the media, we argue

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that MEPs continue to articulate a strong position of ontological security. Thus, we argue that they are not anxious enough as they fail to address some of the underlying problems of European integration and governance, while increasing the disjuncture between the EP and the wider electorate. By often uncritically articulating the EU as ontologically secure, MEPs risk fostering what Mitzen has termed a 'maladaptive' or 'rigid' form of ontological security.[2] Although MEPs are unlikely candidates to fundamentally question the EU and the integration process, we would expect them to take up more of the anxiety present in the broader public debate.

Our paper deliberately combines a methodological and an empirical concern. Framing the analysis of ontological security on the level of discourse enables us to empirically ground the study of ontological security within the EU. Vice versa, the study of EP debates enables us to illustrate how a discursive analysis of ontological security may proceed and provide the basis for sustained critique.

We define ontological security as a subject's self-understanding expressed in articulations of identity or routinised practices.[3] Rooted in psychology[4] and sociology,[5] the concept has been widely used in IR to argue that collective actors such as states need to protect not only their territorial integrity (physical security), but also their self-assurance.[6] In the second section, we expand on previous work that has applied ontological security in IR, develop our discursive definition of the concept, and distinguish between anxiety and ontological insecurity to argue that although ontological insecurity will always arise from anxiety, anxiety need not lead to ontological insecurity, and a certain degree and form of anxiety is necessary for productive change. The third section recaps the debate about the ontological security of the EU and presents our analysis of EP debates.

In the fourth section, we show how articulations of ontological security in the EP build on and reproduce a particular, modernist combination of metanarratives. Developing this, we discuss the normative implications of such a 'grounding' of the EU Self. Our assessment is ambivalent. On the one hand, we consider European integration a worthwhile effort to transcend the territorial exclusivity of a pluralist society of states. On the other hand, we see at least three problems in the hegemonic construction of ontological security among MEPs: its trust in technological progress and the ability of human actors to control complex social and natural processes; its Eurocentrism; and its move away from what we consider the essence of European integration in an increasing focus on becoming a (geopolitical) global power.

In the concluding section, we consider the advantages and limitations of our discursive approach to the study of ontological security. We make an argument for more positively anxious articulations of the EU that self-reflexively question the underpinning assumptions of the EU's Self. In that sense, the debates in the EP display not too much but too little anxiety. In line with some of the literature on ontological security, we argue that such anxiety need not lead to insecurity. Rather, its articulation ought to be a vital part of the political debate to prevent ontological security from turning into narcissism, a projection of the Self onto others, and to strengthen the Self through openness and innovation.[7]

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[2] Jennifer Mitzen, 'Anchoring Europe's civilizing identity: Habits, capabilities and ontological security', *Journal of European Public Policy*, 13:2 (2006), pp. 270–285 (p. 274).

[3] Bahar Rumelili, 'Breaking with Europe's pasts: Memory, reconciliation, and ontological (in)security', *European Security*, 27:3 (2018), pp. 280–95; Kinnvall, Manners, and Mitzen, 'Introduction'.

[4] Ronald D. Laing, *The Divided Self* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1969).

[5] Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986); Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991).

[6] Jennifer Mitzen, 'Ontological security in world politics: State identity and the security dilemma', *European Journal of International Relations*, 12:3 (2006), pp. 341–70; Mitzen, 'Anchoring Europe's civilizing identity'.

[7] Nina C. Krickel-Choi, 'The concept of anxiety in ontological security studies', *International Studies Review*, 24:3 (2022), viac013.

Analysing ontological security through discourse

Ontological security, as defined above, initially referred to individual actors. Yet the application of the concept in IR has raised the question of to what extent it may be 'extrapolated' to collective actors such as states or the EU.[8] Most of the literature has treated collective actors as *providers* of ontological security,[9] by supplying an identity narrative or fantasy to meet the desires of their citizens[10] or engaging them in successful institutions and routines to cope with internal or external challenges. In such a conceptualisation, ontological security remains a feature of individuals (such as MEPs), not states or the EU: institutional changes in response to crises may provoke insecurity or, if successful, restore security on an individual level rather than that of the state.[11] Alternatively, states and other collective actors have been understood as themselves *seeking* ontological security.[12] However, in these cases it is often not entirely clear whether it is not individual actors seeking security on behalf of the state, such as conflict actors pursuing seemingly irrational practices to maintain the status of their political community[13] – and of themselves. Rather than the state possessing ontological security, in such cases individuals become secure because they construct their political community as secure. Even Steele, who argues that the autobiographical narratives of states that provide ontological security operate on the collective level, observes that 'states have an ontological security … because they have a historical account of themselves that has been "built up" through the narrative of agents'.[14]

While we agree with those who are sceptical about taking the human analogy too far and attributing a psyche to collective actors,[15] we note that such analogies are widespread in everyday language. This is because state identity narratives that provide ontological security to individuals also ascribe such ontological security to the state, the EU, or other political collectives. If, in Eberle's analysis, narratives invoke a 'benign Western self' in the provision of a 'fantasy' for citizens, they not only construct an ontological security for citizens but also for the broader political community.[16] For such collectives to operate, they must be equipped with a discursive grounding that attributes to them a certain being, as studies of national identities have demonstrated.[17] Because this being cannot ever be complete, it is also always a story of becoming[18] – a general Lacanian insight for all identities, but particularly relevant for a polity such as the EU without a clear and stable constitutional structure. Due to its status as a 'sui generis', a novel political entity,[19] EU actors are constantly

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[8]Mitzen, 'Ontological security in world politics', p. 352; see also Kinnvall, Manners, and Mitzen, 'Introduction', p. 252; Karl Gustafsson and Nina C. Krickel-Choi, 'Returning to the roots of ontological security: Insights from the existentialist anxiety literature', *European Journal of International Relations*, 26:3 (2020), pp. 877–80.

[9]Jelena Subotić, 'Narrative, ontological security, and foreign policy change', *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 12:4 (2016), pp. 610–27; Brent J. Steele, *Ontological Security in International Relations* (London: Routledge, 2008).

[10]Jakub Eberle, 'Narrative, desire, ontological security, transgression: Fantasy as a factor in international politics', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 22:1 (2019), pp. 243–68.

[11]Alanna Krolikowski, 'State personhood in ontological security theories of international relations and Chinese nationalism', *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 2:1 (2008), pp. 109–33.

[12]Vincent Della Sala, 'Narrating Europe: The EU's ontological security dilemma', *European Security*, 27:3 (2018), pp. 266–79; Mitzen, 'Anchoring Europe's civilizing identity'; Ian Manners, 'European communion: Political theory of European union', *Journal of European Public Policy*, 20:4 (2013), pp. 473–94; Bahar Rumelili, 'Identity and desecuritisation: The pitfalls of conflating ontological and physical security', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 18:1 (2015), pp. 52–74.

[13]Mitzen, 'Ontological security in world politics'; Rumelili, *Conflict Resolution and Ontological Security: Peace Anxieties* (London: Routledge, 2014).

[14]Steele, *Ontological Security in International Relations*, p. 20.

[15]Krolikowski, 'State personhood in ontological security theories', p. 115; Richard Ned Lebow, *National Identities and International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), pp. 31–2.

[16]Eberle, 'Narrative, desire, ontological security, transgression', p. 254.

[17]Christine Agius, 'Drawing the discourses of ontological security: Immigration and identity in the Danish and Swedish cartoon crises', *Cooperation and Conflict*, 52:1 (2017), pp. 109–125 (p. 112).

[18]Kinnvall, Manners, and Mitzen, 'Introduction', p. 253. For a discussion of the problems of Giddens's conceptualisation of being, see, for instance, Alex Callinicos, 'Anthony Giddens: A contemporary critique', *Theory & Society*, 14:2 (1985), pp. 133–66.

[19]Thomas Risse-Kappen, 'Exploring the nature of the beast: International Relations theory and comparative policy analysis meet the European Union', *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 34:1 (1996), pp. 53–80.

seeking ways to enhance or stabilise the EU's ontological security. At the same time, the EU is a provider of ontological security if it can successfully project this construction to its member states and citizens. Discursive articulations of EU ontological security thus construct 'fantasies' of a stable and positive identity or of processes of transcending the inherent predicaments of the present international society.

Such a discursive grounding of being/becoming may result from the invocation of routinised practices, references to a mythical past or future, or articulations of what a state or the EU has done, does, and should do about present or upcoming challenges such as the polycrisis.[20] It may follow a reflexive strategy of articulating the achievements, characteristics, and histories of political communities,[21] or emphasise relations to other actors through othering or referring to the role of a state in international society[22] – although in most cases, both reflexive and relational strategies will have to go together to construct meaningful narratives.

We thus follow others who have suggested a narrative approach to ontological security[23] and those who, in a similar way, have made the case for a discursive approach to emotions in IR more generally speaking.[24] Our interest in the ontological security of the EU is not about the degree to which the EU as such, or individuals in the EU, *feel* or *are* ontologically secure or insecure. Instead, we are interested in the extent to which and how actors (in our case MEPs) *articulate* a grounding and thus discursively construct the EU's being and becoming. Empirical approaches to EU ontological security have often centred on the EU's role as a 'security community'.[25] Others have put more emphasis on the 'routinising relations' between the member states of the EU and their role in constructing a shared EU identity.[26] Finally, several scholars have focused on specific societal groups.[27] Within these different foci, we find a variety of attempts to operationalise ontological (in)security ranging from the focus on different 'socio-psychological lenses' to categorise and understand the various forms of collective actors' responses to perceived threats,[28] to relying mainly on opinion polls in order to assess levels and characteristics of ontological (in)security in different societal groups.[29] The approach that comes closest to our discursive understanding is the focus on the role of different narratives in producing and sustaining EU ontological security.[30]

For instance, actors may acknowledge the challenge of climate change as a crisis but construct *ontological security* through praising EU efforts in combating climate change, ascribing leadership in the climate regime to the EU, and contrasting EU efforts and achievements with those of other actors such as the United States. Alternatively, they may articulate *ontological insecurity* through fundamentally questioning EU efforts, articulating their frustration at EU climate policies, and

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[20]John Cash and Catarina Kinnvall, 'Postcolonial bordering and ontological insecurities', *Postcolonial Studies*, 20:3 (2017), pp. 267–74; Kinnvall, Manners, and Mitzen, 'Introduction'.

[21]Brent J. Steele, 'Ontological security and the power of self-identity: British neutrality and the American Civil War', *Review of International Studies*, 31:3 (2005), pp. 519–40.

[22]Simon Frankel Pratt, 'A relational view of ontological security in international relations', *International Studies Quarterly*, 61:1 (2017), pp. 78–85; Rumelili, 'Identity and desecuritisation'.

[23]Siri Veland and Amanda H. Lynch, 'Arctic ice edge narratives: Scale, discourse and ontological security', *Area*, 49:1 (2017), pp. 9–17.

[24]Simon Koschut, 'The power of (emotion) words: On the importance of emotions for social constructivist discourse analysis in IR', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 21:3 (2018), pp. 495–522.

[25]Ian Manners, 'European [Security] Union: Bordering and governing a secure Europe in a better world?', *Global Society*, 27:3 (2013), pp. 398–416.

[26]Mitzen, 'Anchoring Europe's civilizing identity'; Mitzen, 'Ontological security in world politics'.

[27]Catarina Kinnvall, 'European trauma: Governance and the psychological moment', *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political*, 37:3 (2012), pp. 266–81.

[28]Tal Dingott Alkopher, 'Socio-psychological reactions in the EU to immigration: From regaining ontological security to desecuritisation', *European Security*, 27:3 (2018), pp. 314–35.

[29]Christopher S. Browning, 'Brexit, existential anxiety and ontological (in)security', *European Security*, 27:3 (2018), pp. 336–55.

[30]Della Sala, 'Narrating Europe'.

demanding change without a clear sense of where this change may lead. Focusing on such a discursive articulation of ontological (in)security helps us to come to a more systematic and empirically applicable operationalisation of the concept and at the same time avoids some of the problems that come with upscaling it to the collective level – most importantly the need to ascertain whether actors actually feel or are (in)secure or whether they are seeking or providing ontological security.

How are these narratives able to construct security for collective selves such as the EU that are always precarious, contested, and contingent?[31] While praising one's own achievements in comparison to others or engaging in fantasies are important ingredients of the discursive construction of ontological security, they rely on the broader discursive context that supplies meaning to the Self. Collective concepts such as 'European integration' are 'essentially contested concepts'[32] or 'empty signifiers'[33] that acquire meaning only through linkages with other concepts. Thus, it is the fixation of a bundle of conceptual 'metanarratives' in what we call a 'discursive nodal point'[34] that provides a conception of being and becoming.

The idea of such nodal points rests on the assumption that there are core concepts that act as anchors to stabilise the ever-fluid and contested meanings in a discourse. They do so by drawing together several other discourses, or 'metanarratives', which on the one hand provide meaning to the concept, while on the other hand stabilising a broader set of meanings within a particular order. This approach is inspired by the work of Laclau and Mouffe, who see the articulation of such nodal points as core strategies to establish hegemony through the (always temporal) fixation of a set of meanings. If actors construct the EU as a 'normative power', for instance, they not only do so through othering practices and invocations of a fantasy of European values,[35] they also rely on as well as reinscribe particular understandings of democracy, governance, and progress, among others. In our study, we will therefore analyse the ways in which MEPs articulate EU ontological security by re-narrating discursive nodal points that give a particular meaning to European integration and thus inscribe a specific understanding of social and political order into the discourse. In particular, we will demonstrate the prevalence of metanarratives on *control, progress*, and *global power* in MEPs' articulations of ontological security.

A final pillar of our theoretical framework is the distinction between ontological insecurity and anxiety. While past literature has tended to conflate the two, we build on recent contributions that have pointed to the pervasive presence of anxiety.[36] As much as ontological security may be 'good' in the sense that it enables subjects to act or 'bad' in preventing them from change, anxiety may lead to paralysis or be the driver of productive change.[37] Researchers have returned to Laing's original formulation to point to the difference between 'normal' and 'neurotic' anxiety, where the former is an indispensable part of the human condition and, in contrast to the latter, does not necessarily lead to ontological insecurity in the sense of a fundamental questioning of the Self leading to an inability to act.[38] Without a dose of anxiety, actors lose their potential for 'change, dynamism

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[31]Richard Ned Lebow, 'Identity and international relations', *International Relations*, 22:4 (2008), pp. 473–92; David Campbell, *Writing Security* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992); Alexander Wendt, 'Identity and structural change in international politics', in Yosef Lapid and Friedrich Kratochwil (eds), *The Return of Culture and Identity in IR Theory: Critical Perspectives on World Politics* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1996), pp. 47–64.

[32]William E. Connolly, *The Terms of Political Discourse*, 2nd ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983).

[33]Ernesto Laclau, *Emancipation(s)* (London: Verso, 1996), pp. 36–46.

[34]Thomas Diez, *Die EU Lesen* (Opladen: Leske+Budrich, 1999); Thomas Diez, 'Europe as a discursive battleground', *Cooperation and Conflict*, 36:1 (2001), pp. 5–38.

[35]Thomas Diez, 'Constructing the self and changing others: Reconsidering "normative power Europe"', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 33:3 (2005), pp. 613–36; Thomas Diez, 'Not quite "sui generis" enough', *European Societies*, 14:4 (2012), pp. 522–39.

[36]Catarina Kinnvall and Jennifer Mitzen, 'Anxiety, fear, and ontological security in world politics: Thinking with and beyond Giddens', *International Theory*, 12:2 (2020), pp. 240–256 (p. 245).

[37]Krickel-Choi, 'The concept of anxiety in ontological Security Studies', p. 12.

[38]Mitzen, 'Anchoring Europe's civilizing identity', p. 273; Lauren Rogers, 'Cue Brexit: Performing global Britain at the UN Security Council', *European Journal of International Security*, 9:1 (2024), pp. 122–140 (p. 124); Gustafsson and Krickel-Choi,

and renewal',[39] and their ontological security becomes rigid and 'maladaptive'.[40] Fighting anxiety through securitisation or retrenchment in old value systems therefore often inhibits necessary adjustments.[41]

Not so anxious: Articulations of ontological security in the European Parliament

In what follows, we study the discursive articulation of EU ontological (in)security by MEPs in debates of the European Parliament. While overcoming the war-struck past and facilitating peace on the continent has been one of the foundational narratives of the EU[42] – and still appears, as we will see below, in many articulations of 'progress' in EP debates – direct aggression, conflict, or war have been the exception rather than the rule in Europe since the foundation of the EU in 1993. This remains the case, even though Russia's war in Ukraine is by no means the first war challenging the EU in its immediate neighbourhood, and the 1990s wars in the former Yugoslavia have sparked similar debates demanding solidarity and enhanced capability to act.[43] Overall, instead of direct threats to its physical security, the challenges that Europe has faced rather pertained to its ontological security.[44] They often revolved around anxieties about the nature and role of the Union in relation to its internal functioning and cohesion, and its role in the international sphere. Examples are debates about its democratic deficit, the functioning and effectiveness of its political organs, its ability to speak with one voice and act internationally, the common market and monetary union, Brexit, and its controversial approach to migration.[45]

Since the mid-2010s, political practitioners, the media, and scholars alike have increasingly painted a picture of a more and more ontologically insecure EU that is in constant crisis concerning the further path of integration and its ability to face future challenges. Moreover, long-standing core narratives such as the EU as a peace project, economic success story, or normative power have lost traction in the public debate.[46] Analysts have thus labelled the EU an 'anxious' or '(in)security community'.[47] At the same time, EU officials have repeatedly portrayed the EU as a guarantor for security in insecure times and have emphasised a unique 'European way of life' including the goal to protect EU citizens and their values.[48]

Among the different arenas in which one may look for anxiety, not to speak of ontological insecurity, the EP is among the least likely places. An important function of politicians is not to raise doubts but to propose solutions, and, as such, they are less prone to articulate anxieties than a newspaper commentator who does not have to develop policies. Furthermore, the EP has traditionally

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'Returning to the roots of ontological security'; Christopher S. Browning and Pertti Joenniemi, 'Ontological security, self-articulation and the securitization of identity', *Cooperation and Conflict*, 52:1 (2017), pp. 31–47.

[39]Browning and Joenniemi, 'Ontological security, self-articulation and the securitization of identity', p. 35.

[40]Mitzen, 'Anchoring Europe's civilizing identity', p. 274.

[41]Bahar Rumelili, '[Our] age of anxiety: Existentialism and the current state of International Relations', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 24:4 (2021), pp. 1020–1036 (p. 1021).

[42]Diez, 'Constructing the self and changing others'; Ian Manners and Philomena Murray, 'The end of a noble narrative? European integration narratives after the Nobel Peace Prize', *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 54:1 (2016), pp. 185–202 (p. 188).

[43]James Rogers, 'From "civilian power" to "global power": Explicating the European Union's "grand strategy" through the articulation of discourse theory', *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 47:4 (2009), pp. 831–62.

[44]Kinnvall, Manners, and Mitzen, 'Introduction'; Browning, 'Brexit, existential anxiety and ontological (in)security'.

[45]Yvonne Braun, 'Nach der Krise ist vor der Krise: Die "Flüchtlingskrise" als Herausforderung für den Zusammenhalt in der EU', *Integration*, 39:4 (2016), pp. 333–40; Andreas Grimmel (ed.), *The Crisis of the European Union* (London: Routledge, 2018); Dingott Alkopher, 'Socio-psychological reactions in the EU to immigration'; Maurizio Ferrera and Carlo Burelli, 'Cross-national solidarity and political sustainability in the EU after the crisis', *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 57:1 (2019), pp. 94–110.

[46]Della Sala, 'Narrating Europe'; Manners and Murray, 'The end of a noble narrative?'; Thomas Diez, 'The end or the beginning of normative power Europe?', in Burcu Baykurt and Victoria Grazia (eds), *Soft-Power Internationalism. Competing for Cultural Influence in the 21st-Century Global Order* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021), pp. 251–73.

[47]Kinnvall, Manners, and Mitzen, 'Introduction'; Mitzen, 'Anxious community'.

[48]European Commission, 'Promoting Our European Way of Life' (2019).

been characterised by a strong pro-integrationist stance, the emergence of Eurosceptic fringe parties notwithstanding.[49] However, in contrast to governments, parliamentarians are also supposed to scrutinise and critically interrogate policies, and if the EU has indeed become an 'anxious community' in a state of ontological insecurity, we would expect this sentiment to be reflected in EP debates to a significant degree.

In addition, analysing EP debates has some advantages: in contrast to the more technical wording of documents issued by the European Commission, the European Council, or the Council of the EU, speeches of MEPs offer an ideal vantage point to observe how narratives of (in)security are constituted, strengthened, or destabilised over time. Moreover, although the speeches are short (usually about 400 words) and mostly scripted, they nevertheless often appeal to an emotional dimension and contain more affective, spontaneous elements than policy documents and therefore are better suited for studying the articulation of ontological (in)security. To triangulate this analysis, we have conducted 11 interviews with EU experts in the Commission, Parliament, the External Action Service (EEAS), and the permanent representations of member states in Brussels. To capture differences between the broader societal and political debates, we have also done a discourse analysis of op-eds in German newspapers (*Süddeutsche Zeitung*, SZ, centre-left and *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, FAZ, centre-right).

To build a broad empirical basis and capture changes over time, we have looked at key plenary debates in the EP between 1990 and 2020 and manually coded[50] them using the Maxqda software.[51] In total we included 156 debates in the analysis and ended up with 10,560 coded segments. On the one hand, we have looked for articulations of *ontological security* in the form of positive notions of EU identity or emphasising the process of European integration as transcending the problems of the structure of current international society, which highlight the EU's ability to cope with change and challenges and inscribe a sense of affirmative continuity between past, present, and future identity.[52] Based on the different pathways towards creating or strengthening ontological security described in the literature, we have divided this overall category into five sub-dimensions: emphasising successful policies, values/history, functioning routines/institutions, optimism concerning the future, and the ability to act/agency (see Table 1). These sub-dimensions include both reflexive and relational elements of OS.

On the other hand, we have coded articulations of *anxiety* – questions about one's own existence and role in society[53] – that primarily problematise internal insecurities and deficiencies of the EU's own identity and capacity to act.[54] Analogous to ontological security, we have divided the overall code into five sub-dimensions: questioning policies, values, routines/institutions, uncertainty/pessimism, and the observation of an inability to act or helplessness (see Table 2). We should reiterate that articulations of anxiety do not per se amount to expressions of ontological insecurity. They do so only if they fundamentally dispute an actor's being and becoming and are thus particularly strong and pervasive. As we will see, neither of these is the case in EP debates.

To obtain a broad sample of ontological (in)security constructions, we did not only look at traditional and directly 'security'-related parliamentary debates but also included other policy sectors.

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[49]Simon Hix and Bjørn Høyland, 'Empowerment of the European Parliament', *Annual Review of Political Science*, 16:1 (2013), pp. 171–89; Michael Shackleton, 'Transforming representative democracy in the EU? The role of the European Parliament', *Journal of European Integration*, 39:2 (2017), pp. 191–205.

[50]The complete coding scheme may be found online: available at: {https://uni-tuebingen.de/de/203221}.

[51]The analysis was done in German. The plenary debates were available in German translation up until 2011. After 2012, we have translated the debates into German using DeepL and Google Translator. While this automatic translation is not ideal, the quality nevertheless was relatively good, and since we do not rely on specific keywords but broader argumentative structures, we do not think that this poses a problem for our analysis.

[52]Subotic, 'Narrative, ontological security, and foreign policy change'; Eberle, 'Narrative, desire, ontological security, transgression'.

[53]Filip Ejdus, 'Critical situations, fundamental questions and ontological insecurity in world politics', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 21:4 (2018), pp. 883–908.

[54]Kinnvall, Manners, and Mitzen, 'Introduction'.

Table 1. Typology of ontological security articulations

Types of ontological security articulations	Explanation & examples
Emphasising successful policies	Focus on outcome legitimacy of the EU, e.g. EU as guarantor for peace and stability, common market, EU as climate vanguard, EU emission trading system
Emphasising values/history	Multilateralism, rule of law, European values and 'way of life', shared history, human rights
Emphasising functioning routines and institutions	Focus on input legitimacy of the EU, e.g. European elections, fruitful collaboration of the EU Institutions, freedom of movement
Optimism concerning the future	Stability and prosperity in Europe due to enlargement and common market
Ability to act, agency	Focus on the EU's ability to act on the international level, e.g. decisive role in the climate negotiations, successful EU influence in its neighbourhood policies

Table 2. Typology of anxieties

Types of anxieties	Explanation & examples
Questioning policies	Focus on outcome legitimacy of the EU, e.g. insufficient policies to deal with the financial crises, failure to adopt effective climate policies
Questioning values	Failure to uphold human rights (e.g. concerning migration), rule of law, or democracy, decay of shared Christian values in the EU
Questioning routines and institutions	Focus on input legitimacy of the EU, e.g. democratic deficit, non-functioning of EU institutions or their collaboration
Uncertainty and pessimism concerning the future	Could concern the state of international society in general, e.g. the rise of emerging economies and the decrease in Europe's influence
Inability to act, helplessness	Focus on the EU's inability to act on the international level, e.g. inability to rein in the war in former Yugoslavia

Thus, starting out from key themes discussed in the *Yearbooks of European Integration*,[55] published annually since 1980, we have identified central debates for each year in five policy sectors: the political sector (with a focus on debates on the future of Europe, enlargement, EU treaties, and state of the Union addresses), societal sector (racism, migration/asylum), security sector (common security and defence policy), environmental sector (ozone layer, climate change), and economic sector (economic and monetary union, euro crisis, inequality). Figure 1 shows the relative percentage of ontological security and anxiety codes over time.

A first key finding is that in contrast to the claims in the literature and despite the multiple crises the EU has been facing, MEPs in their majority remain confident about the EU. Articulations that we coded as reaffirming ontological security prevail in most years, even if we also found a significant number of anxiety articulations. However, apart from notable exceptions, often coming from far-right or Eurosceptic parties, they rarely become completely desperate or picture the EU as intrinsically incapable of coping with these challenges, as the image of an 'insecurity community' suggests. Instead, most of the time they construct such anxieties only to represent the EU as

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[55]Werner Weidenfeld and Wolfgang Wessels (eds), *Jahrbuch der Europäischen Integration 2021* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2021).
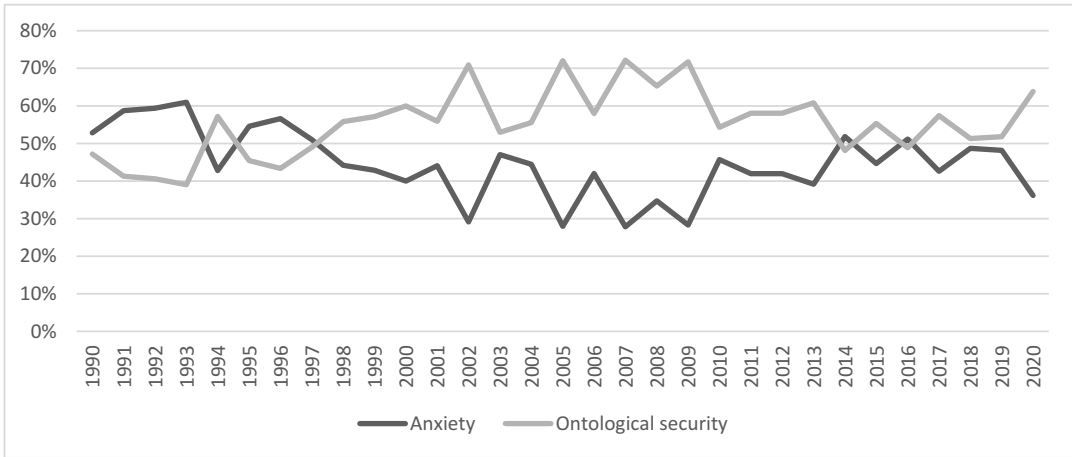
Figure 1. Articulations of ontological security and anxiety over time

fundamentally equipped to deal with or adapt to any kind of crisis, a sentiment also reaffirmed in expert interviews.[56]

In contrast, op-ed pieces on 'Europe' in German newspapers showed anxiety clearly outweighing articulations of ontological security. Moreover, although the articles frequently mention values, institutional arrangements, or policies that could strengthen EU ontological security, most of the time they portray these as not realised or under immediate threat, thus further contributing to the narrative of 'anxious Europe', and sometimes even constructing a sense of ontological insecurity. While this difference between MEP speeches and newspaper commentaries to a considerable extent may be explained by the different functions and rhetoric of political practitioners and the press, it nevertheless is interesting to note that the narrative of anxious Europe does not find as much reflection in the parliament as one would expect.

Even more striking than the dominance of ontological security articulations overall is that in our analysis of parliamentary debates, the highest level of anxiety prevails not in the 2010s – where most of the literature locates the advent of the anxious community – but in the 1990s when the EU had just been founded. Especially in central debates about key political milestones of the Union, MEPs in the early 1990s stated, for instance, that 'the faith in European integration is tarnished',[57] questioned the practicability of the monetary union, and criticised the EU's democratic deficit. One explanation for this early peak in anxiety is that at that time, EU institutions and especially the Parliament – at least as a consequential actor – were still in their infancy[58] and had not yet established routines to refer to as a source of ontological security. Thus, MEP articulations displayed more anxiety when it came to their responsibilities, power, and identity, but also the EU's role in the world.

Since the mid-1990s and especially in the first decade of the 21st century, we see MEPs becoming much more confident concerning the EU's abilities and identity. Articulations of ontological security now most of the time account for over 50 per cent with a peak of 72 per cent in 2005, 2007, and 2009. A typical example for this trend is a debate about the adoption of the Lisbon Treaty in 2007, in which most MEPs praise the adoption as considerably strengthening the EU's confidence and ability to cope with future challenges:

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[56]Franziskus von Lucke, Interview with EU Commission officials, Brussels, 11 October 2022; Franziskus von Lucke, Interview with European Parliament officials, Brussels, 11 October 2022.

[57]European Parliament, 'Verhandlungen des Europäischen Parlaments: Vertrag von Maastricht', 27 October 1993, p. 4.

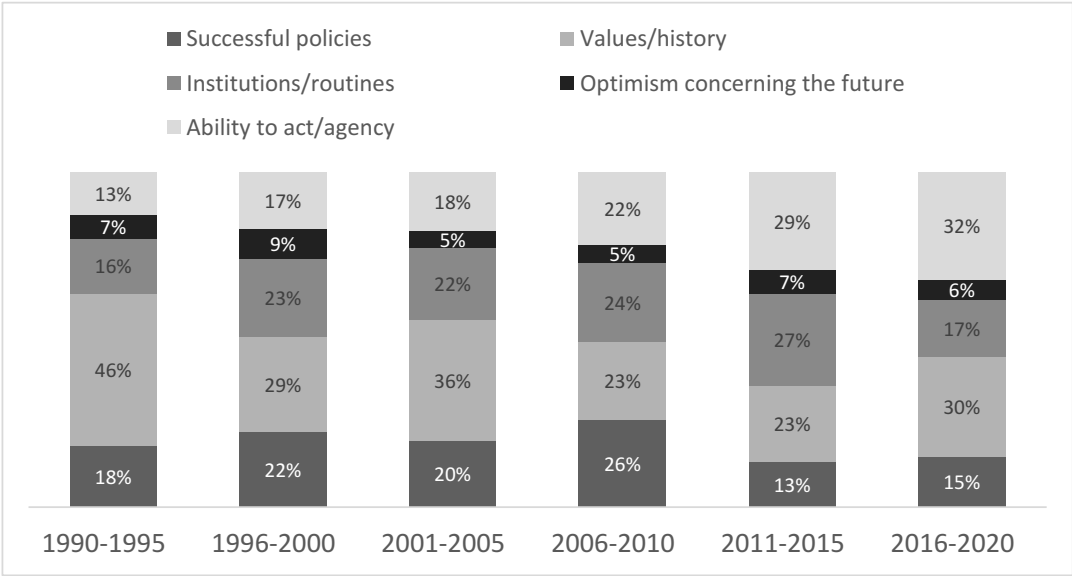[58]Hix and Høyland, 'Empowerment of the European Parliament'.

Figure 2. Sub-dimensions of ontological security over time

> When the history of the treaty is written, we will better understand the significance of this political decision, the decision not to wait until the end of the year to complete the task, when we were in a position to complete it earlier. Europe needed a quick agreement and it got it. Europe needed a sign of confidence and it got it. Europe needed to turn to the future and has done so.[59]

Zooming into the sub-dimensions of ontological security (see Figure 2), one of the key sources of confidence in the EU – particularly in the early 1990s – was the belief in 'shared values and a common history', accounting for 30 per cent of all articulations of ontological security. Thus, MEPs would often point to the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, the EU championing human rights on the international level, its role as a climate vanguard (including climate justice concerns), or the EU's adherence to international law and multilateralism. Another important driver of ontological security was 'trust in the EU's agency and ability to act', especially concerning the international level. Interestingly, this dimension steadily grew over the 30 years that we analysed – even in the 2010s when ontological security in general took a considerable blow – underlining the continuous maturation of the EU as an independent political actor and, as we will discuss in more detail in the next section, also the importance of its self-understanding as an influential – and 'good' or 'normative' – global power. An exemplary articulation, taken from a debate about the EU constitution in 2005, thus claims that:

> The main argument for this great reform is clearly that it strengthens the European Union. It increases our capacity to act outside the EU and within our Member States, so that we can stand on our own two feet in international affairs. It is Europe's political response to globalisation.[60]

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[59]European Parliament, 'Plenardebatte: Ergebnisse des Informellen Gipfels der Staats- und Regierungschefs (Lissabon, 18./19. Oktober 2007) (Aussprache)', 19 October 2007, p. 2.

[60]European Parliament, 'Plenardebatte: Verfassung für Europa', 11 January 2005, pp. 8–9.

Besides these two dominant dimensions, references to 'confidence in functioning EU institutions and routines' and 'successful policies' were also fairly common, though both became less central in the late 2010s. In contrast, 'optimism concerning the future' only played a minor role.

As Figure 1 indicates, towards the end of the 2000s there was a notable drop in the share of ontological security and instead anxiety became more significant again, reflecting the perception of an anxious community discussed in the literature. Among the multiple crises, a key source of this revitalisation of anxiety was the financial and euro crisis, which started in 2008 and seriously challenged the belief in a unified, capable, and political Union:

> Mr Barroso, I think we will not make any progress because of this gibberish. Martin Schulz is right: we need to describe the reality of the crisis and tell it like it is, but we equally need to describe the reality of our own political powerlessness and the reasons for that powerlessness. There is no point in simply stating that we have made the right decisions. You know as well as I do, and everybody here knows that, that we have always made them too late. We take one step forward and two steps back.[61]

Ultimately, our analysis shows that while there has been a rise in anxiety since the 2010s, it is not as steep and less exceptional than the literature suggests. This is especially true given the fact that the EU has undeniably faced severe challenges (financial and euro crisis, migration, rule of law, Brexit, Russia's attacks on Ukraine) during this period. Moreover, a closer look at MEP speeches shows that although they do acknowledge internal and external challenges to the EU, this rarely leads them to fundamentally question the EU or the integration process and thus only occasionally leads to full-blown ontological insecurity. Instead, articulations of anxiety often serve as an argumentative starting point for demanding renewed attempts to 'control' the crisis, to continue the 'progress' and further integration of the EU, and eventually to reinstate ontological security. As we will discuss below, they thus do not only not lead to ontological insecurity, but they also fail to turn expressions of anxiety into a productive force for change. Thus, even in the midst of the 2010 financial crisis, statements that invoke the severity of the situation tend to be followed by a reassurance that the needed counter-measures were already initiated: 'Since the beginning of the crisis, we have shown our determination to take the necessary measures to preserve financial stability and promote a return to sustainable growth.'[62] This perception has been underlined by our interviews with EU officials in the Commission and the EEAS. Thus, although they acknowledge that the EU is constantly dealing with multiple crises, this does not lead to existential anxiety or despair. Instead, it fosters a view of the EU as a 'crisis professional' that can grow and prosper by managing and overcoming these persistent challenges.[63]

A modernist project: Providing meaning to the EU Self

What is the basis of this self-confidence of MEPs? What does this tell us about their understanding of the EU's role and identity? And how do they therefore articulate a particular vision of European integration?

We reread core EP debates with a high number of ontological security and anxiety codes for references they made to understandings of other core concepts in their 'discursive nodal points'. We did so with some initial concepts in mind that drew on earlier analyses of such nodal points in EU discourses.[64] Thus, we expected articulations of ontological security to be linked to expressions of history, identity, economics, and politics. At the same time, we did an initial reading of a subset of

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[61]European Parliament, 'Plenardebatte: Vorbereitung des Europäischen Rates (16.–17. Dezember 2010) – Einrichtung eines ständigen Krisenmechanismus zur Wahrung der Finanzstabilität im Euroraum (Aussprache)', 15 December 2010, p. 7.

[62]European Parliament, 'Plenardebatte: Vorbereitung Des Europäischen Rates (16.–17. Dezember 2010)', p. 1.

[63]von Lucke, Interview with EU Commission officials, Brussels; von Lucke, Interview with European Parliament officials, Brussels.

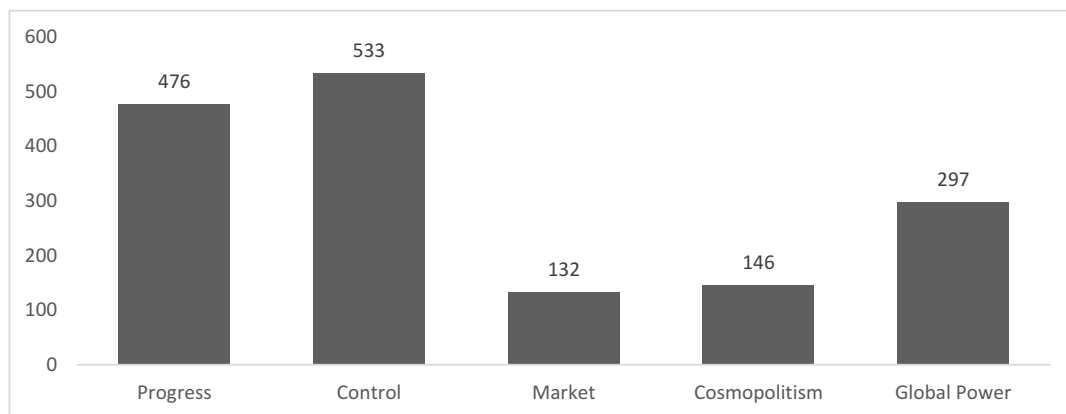[64]Diez, 'Europe as a discursive battleground'; Diez, *Die EU Lesen*.

Figure 3. Frequency of overlaps of ontological security with hegemonic metanarratives

debates across policy fields and the time frame of our analysis to check inductively whether we were able to trace any other metanarratives. On this basis, we identified the following metanarratives as those that provided meaning to the EU's ontological security in the EP debates:

- narratives of progress and origin
- narratives of the (im)possibility of controlling developments
- narratives of the economy (market or otherwise) and its social implications
- narratives of identity (cosmopolitan, communitarian, subsidiary)
- narratives of power (global, national, anti-power).

We did not follow a fixed codebook to identify these narratives but instead used Maxqda to inductively highlight their articulations and then condensed their different expressions in comparative tables. We ended up with five *hegemonic* metanarratives, i.e. metanarratives that appear relatively frequently and align with the mainstream political parties, and seven *counter-hegemonic* metanarratives that are less common and often articulated by opposition parties.

As a result, we argue that the ontological security expressed by MEPs draws in particular on conceptualisation (a) of the EU as a carrier and result of historical progress, (b) of the necessity and ability of the EU to control natural, social, economic, and political processes, and (c) of global politics being dominated by a classic conception of great power and thus the EU having to play that game even if it may want to change it at the same time (see Figures 3 and 4 below).

The EU as a carrier and result of historical progress

One of the core conceptions that MEPs refer to when articulating ontological security is a strong sense that history is moving constantly forward, that there is real, linear *progress*, and that the EU is a result and the carrier of such progress. In other words, it is the strong association of the EU with progress – often contrasted to stagnation that had to be avoided at all costs – that provides MEPs with ontological security. The following quote from a 2005 debate about the EU constitution exemplifies this notion:

> I believe that the Constitution marks a point of no return, and just as the Constitution of my country was conceived not very long ago as a constitution of unity that allowed us to move forward towards the future, the European Constitution will allow all Europeans to move forward united in a project of common civilisation.[65]

[65] European Parliament, 'Plenardebatte: Verfassung für Europa', 11 January 2005, p. 2.
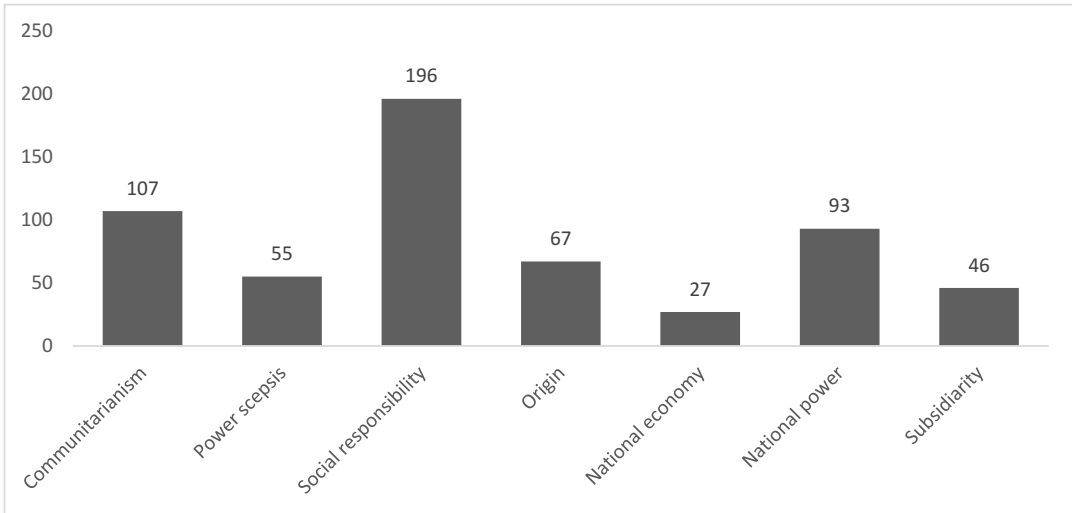
Figure 4. Frequency of overlaps of ontological security with counter-hegemonic metanarratives

While in the early years of the debates that we analysed progress was focused on the EU having overcome the war-prone history of the European continent through a transcendence of nationalism, in later years MEPs emphasise the historical success of having achieved prosperity and the rule of law, the continuous enlargement of the EU – with potential new members states eagerly lining up to join the EU[66] – but also being a forerunner in the battle against climate change. Making the EU fit for the 21st century is not just a challenge, it is in the EU's very nature that it is the torch-bearer for addressing the challenges of climate change and pandemics. That the EU's post-Covid strategy is called NextGen and focuses on a rebuilding of the economy and energy consumption is thus no coincidence, but in line with the conviction that shaping the future is what the EU is about.

A typical example of this linkage between articulations of ontological security and progress is this quote from the debate on the European Constitution: 'After a Europe of ration cards, this Constitution affirms a Europe of prosperity and material well-being. After overcoming a Europe that had disappeared from the world, this Constitution establishes a Europe of solidarity.'[67] Yet such conceptions of progress not only provide the EU's *becoming* with a specific meaning, they inscribe a particular understanding of history into the discourse. They present progress as something natural, logical, and unidirectional. They thus serve to demonise celebrations of the past unless the past itself is understood as merely a transitory phase towards the present and future. They counter both articulations of the exclusivity of national histories and traditions on the right and anti-globalist calls for a return to traditional sovereigns as political decision-makers on the left. Moreover, the strong focus on progress in the EP also delegitimises stagnation. On the flip side, this means that a careful reflection or political deliberation of policies becomes difficult or potentially destabilising concerning the EU's ontological security. In fact, if we look at core debates on EU integration, in many instances the mainstream political parties largely agree, leaving it to far-right or Eurosceptic parties to provide critical reflections, which often does not lead to a constructive debate and at the same time underlines the populist narrative of a detached elite ignoring the people.

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[66] European Parliament, 'Plenardebatte: Verfassung für Europa', 11 January 2005, pp. 4–5.
[67] European Parliament, 'Plenardebatte: Verfassung für Europa', 11 January 2005, p. 2.

The necessity and ability of the EU to control natural and societal processes

Progress is intimately linked to the concept of *control*. For the hegemonic discourse in the EP, the future of integration hinges on the possibility of exerting control over developments, whether natural or societal. A central feature of politics in this understanding is thus the possibility of accurately mapping problems and planning and verifying counter-measures, which contributes to achieving or maintaining stability. Often, control is linked to what in Foucauldian terms would be captured by the concept of governmentality: a decentralised form of technocratic governance that, rather than setting norms, relies on normalisation through statistics and the identification of best practices as well as on surveillance measures and the 'conduct of conduct'.[68] Thus, MEPs emphasise in particular the importance of verification mechanisms and accurate data, for instance, in relation to emissions or migration, as well as technological innovation that would allow the shaping of the future.

In debates about climate change, MEPs ask for a new 'technology programme' and 'concepts for city planning'.[69] The individual must be able to take environmentally responsible decisions; but these must be controlled through incentivising correct behaviour by increasing the taxation of emissions and other damaging consequences of human activities:

> Madam President, the climate needs the EU; the environmental threat does not stop at national borders. Nor do the solutions. The climate needs action, and it needs it fast. With several green-liberal solutions, we can turn things around before it's too late. It must be easier for individuals to make good environmental choices, but it must cost a lot to waste and emit. Our emissions trading system needs to work much, much better than it does today. A common carbon tax for sustainability and growth would be best of all.[70]

However, at the same time we also see control conceptualised in traditional forms of binding legislation and top-down governance, or in Foucauldian terms, sovereign and disciplinary power.[71] In this context, the core of the EU is conceptualised as a legal community built on the rule of law, and the establishment of this legal community is one pillar of progress that needs to be safeguarded and further expanded. In relation to racism as a challenge to European solidarity, for instance, MEPs demand a 'surveillance function' for the EU to check on national measures[72]. They insist on legal mechanisms to oversee member-state politicians' compliance with the rule of law.[73] Additionally, MEPs often stress the central function of the EP itself when it comes to controlling the political process and safeguarding the rule of law as well as individual political rights within the EU. Debates on migration are also characterised by the insistence on controlling immigration both through incentives and surveillance on the one hand and better scrutiny of the EU's external borders on the other.[74] This desire to maintain control often transcends the polarised public debate that mainly revolves between 'fortress Europe' and 'open borders'. The focus is on carefully managing migration, on maintaining a stable balance, and MEPs for instance ask for 'objective criteria' to establish how many migrants societies are able to take in:[75]

> It is about the goal of being able to handle the immigration of workers in a controlled manner and to maintain stability in the social, economic and political spheres of the European Union.

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[68]Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977–1978*, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave, 2007), pp. 97–8; Mitchell Dean, *Governmentality*, 2nd ed. (London: Sage, 2010); Jens Henrik Haahr and William Walters, *Governing Europe: Discourse, Governmentality and European Integration* (London: Routledge, 2004).

[69]European Parliament, 'Plenardebatte: Bewältigung Des Globalen Klimawandels', 16 November 2005, p. 15.

[70]European Parliament, 'Plenardebatte: Klima und ökologischer Notstand (Aktuelle Debatte)', 23 October 2019, p. 22.

[71]Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, pp. 89–90.

[72]European Parliament, 'Rassismus und Fremdenfeindlkichkeit'', 9 October 1990, p. 51

[73]European Parliament, 'Plenardebatte: EU–Konjunkturpaket (Aussprache)', 27 May 2020, p. 7.

[74]European Parliament, 'Plenardebatte: Aktuelle Probleme im bereich Einwanderung', 12 October 2005, pp. 1, 3.

[75]European Parliament, '*Verhandlungen des Europäischen Parlaments: Zuwanderung und Asyl*', 20 September 1995, p. 13.

But in view of September 11, we also need to be more vigilant when it comes to hospitality, aid and the freedoms of the Union, so that they are not abused by individual elements against the security of European citizens or the global world as a whole.[76]

While these articulations see the ontological security of the EU in its ability to exert control and create stability, they also display a deep trust in technology as well as legal and technocratic expertise through which governance becomes possible. Such articulations thus serve to reinforce typical elements of a modernist bureaucratic discourse and an ideal of governance as expert-led, building on the possibilities of knowing and thus planning the future.

The EU having to play the global power game

Last but not least, articulations of ontological security in the EP are often linked to the metanarrative of *global power*. On the one hand, a clear EU Self is needed to project power on the global level; on the other hand, the role of being a global power provides ontological security to the EU and its citizens. It is this metanarrative that is, relatively speaking, most linked to expressions of anxiety and even ontological insecurity, as the EU is often seen as not occupying the place that it ought to occupy on the world political stage. Yet the picture is more complex than this. Often, even if MEPs deplore the current global role of the EU, they either emphasise progress on the way to assuming more power, or they qualify the ambition of the EU. An example of the first rhetorical strategy, taken from the debate about the Lisbon Treaty, is the statement that 'we are pursuing the right path, even if we are not doing it with the full consequence and to completion, but we are pursuing the right path, a path that is summarised by the sentence: Unity gives strength!'.[77] An example of the second strategy is the assessment that the EU 'is no world power but Europe has the responsibility of a world power. And we must do justice to this responsibility.'[78]

While there are some question marks about the current role of the EU as a global power, the fact that it ought to play a more important role on the world stage – supposedly desired by the international community and EU citizens[79] – is hardly ever disputed. As a metanarrative, however, it is interesting to note in the light of the debate about the EU as a 'different kind of power'[80] that the conceptualisation of international politics as dominated by great powers is largely accepted, although this is articulated in English School terms rather than in a realist framework.[81] Thus, and linked to the progress narrative, the EU needs to become a power in order to shape global governance in a more responsible fashion. For instance, the EU must in the eyes of many MEPs seek a seat as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, not for its own sake but to 'do justice to our responsibility to further stability and peace in the world'.[82] In this context, it is worth noting that MEPs take up notions of normative power. However, in Manners's original work, normative power was to overcome the old debate about EU actorness and to conceptualise the EU as a different type of entity, whose normative power rested at least in part on its own existence. In contrast, MEPS tie normative power to becoming a great power: 'The EU must stick to its role as a peace power and mediator … yet we should amend the soft side [of our power] with a harder one through developing the dimensions of CSDP and our military capabilities.'[83]

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[76]European Parliament, 'Plenardebatte: Asyl- und Einwanderungspolitik', 2 October 2001, p. 8.

[77]European Parliament, 'Plenardebatte: Vertrag von Lissabon (Aussprache)', 20 February 2008, p. 8.

[78]European Parliament, 'Plenardebatte: Verfassung für Europa', 11 January 2005, p. 15.

[79]European Parliament, 'Plenardebatte: Jahresbericht 2006 über die GASP – Europäische Sicherheitsstrategie und Europäische Sicherheits- und Verteidigungspolitik (Aussprache)', 4 June 2008, p. 7; European Parliament, 'Plenardebatte: Strategie des Rates für die Konferenz von Bali zum Klimawandel (COP 13 und COP/MOP 3) (Aussprache)', 14 November 2007, p. 3.

[80]Thomas Diez (ed.), *A Different Kind of Power?* (New York: IDEBATE, 2014).

[81]Richard Little, 'The balance of power and great power management', in Richard Little and John Williams (eds), *The Anarchical Society in a Globalized World* (London: Palgrave, 2006), pp. 97–120.

[82]European Parliament, 'Plenardebatte: Gemeinsame Außen- und Sicherheitspolitik', 24 October 2001, p. 2.

[83]European Parliament, 'Plenardebatte: Jahresbericht 2006 über die GASP', 4 June 2008, p. 1.

The ambiguities of narrating EU ontological security

Ontological insecurity is a problem for actors. It may lead to paralysis or unleash destructive forces.[84] An ontologically insecure EU would be a weak actor on the international stage. It would not be able to perform the role of setting an example of how to overcome nationalism. It would not push the international climate regime in the way that many hope for. So, our finding that actors in the EP articulate much higher degrees of ontological security is a good thing. But is it?

The problem that comes with our results is twofold. First, actors that are too ontologically secure tend to be too self-centred and unreflexively impose their own views on others. They may ignore challenges and respond to changing environments with stubbornness. As noted above, Mitzen refers to such ontological security as 'rigid' or 'maladaptive'.[85] In her terms, actors with a 'healthy' form of ontological security keep a 'critical distance' from themselves. While for Mitzen routines are the decisive element for ontological security, the argument applies to self-narratives as well. Actors who are too self-assured about themselves will not be in a position to question their beliefs and will preach to others rather than reflect on their own behaviour. Thus, anxiety is not a bad thing in itself and is essential for a 'healthy' ontological security. It is the foundation of the possibility of change, of actors critically assessing their own practices and adapting to new challenges.[86] Likewise, tying the definition of one's ontological security solely to stable and fixed identities leaves no room for difference. Instead, positively secure actors are able to leave some room for doubts about themselves without their lives collapsing.[87] They will not need to rely on securitisation or othering but on less marginalising and exclusionary ways of articulating their identities and through them their ontological security.[88]

The features of a 'rigid' ontological security are not unknown to observers of EU foreign policy. While one would have expected the history and the institutional set-up of the EU to make it act on the international level as a self-reflexive 'normative power', previous research has demonstrated how it has played that role far too often in a self-centred, Eurocentric, missionary way.[89] While the contributions to the parliamentary debates we analysed were not without self-doubt, the surprising overwhelming trust in the EU and reaffirmation of the EU's 'integration method' suggest that 'rigid' forms of ontological security still prevail among core EU decision-makers. This may have allowed them to turn challenges such as Brexit into self-affirmation rather than existential crises. Yet it also means a lack of openness to 'recognising disagreement or difference'[90] both within and outside of the EU. This lack of openness then quickly translates into an inability to listen and engage with other voices – a fundamental problem of EU policy in many areas. An illustrative example is the EU's climate strategy up to the 2009 Conference of the Parties in Copenhagen, which was mainly focused on 'leading by example' and on binding and regulatory climate targets, often referred to as the 'targets and timetables' approach. Being overly certain that this approach was best for all, EU actors were greatly surprised when they encountered severe contestation especially from large developing countries in Copenhagen and eventually were mostly sidelined in the crucial moments of the negotiation. Ultimately, it was only through this moment of anxiety that the EU was able to reorient its climate strategy towards a more self-reflexive and globally accepted direction, and to

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[84]Browning, 'Brexit, existential anxiety and ontological (in)security'; Rumelili, 'Identity and desecuritisation'; Mitzen, 'Anchoring Europe's civilizing identity'.

[85]Mitzen, 'Anchoring Europe's civilizing identity', p. 274.

[86]Gustafsson and Krickel-Choi, 'Returning to the roots of ontological security', pp. 889–90.

[87]Browning and Joenniemi, 'Ontological security, self-articulation and the securitization of identity'.

[88]Rumelili, 'Identity and desecuritisation'.

[89]Nora Fisher-Onar and Kalypso Nicolaïdis, 'The decentring agenda: Europe as a post-colonial power', *Cooperation and Conflict*, 48:2 (2013), pp. 283–303; Diez, 'Constructing the self and changing others'; Franziskus von Lucke, Thomas Diez, Solveig Aamodt and Bettina Ahrens, *The EU and Global Climate Justice: Normative Power Caught in Normative Battles* (London: Routledge, 2021); Ian Manners, 'Normative power Europe reconsidered: Beyond the crossroads', *Journal of European Public Policy*, 13:2 (2006), pp. 182–99.

[90]Mitzen, 'Anxious community', p. 405.

accept different pathways to tackling climate change, which ultimately paved the way towards the Paris Agreement.[91]

The second problem raised by our findings relates to the specific discursive nodal point that is articulated in the MEPs' narrations of EU ontological security. The connection of integration with historical and often technological progress, the technocratic and biopolitical belief in the ability to control different aspects of life through expertise, and the acceptance of great power politics as the game the EU must play, have all been the focus of critiques of EU governance in the past. They relate to a particular, modernist understanding of politics – not so much in the sense of a commitment to the modern world of territorial states (although the great power narrative seems not so far away from reproducing the state system), but in its commitment to science, progress, and bureaucracy. The ontological security articulated by MEPs thus is grounded in modernity, which produces tensions with the understanding of the EU as a 'postmodern' union of 'multiperspectivity'.[92] Mitzen, discussing more specifically the EU's narrative of past wars as its defining Other, nonetheless captures the problem that such a grounding may 'effectively freeze a certain subjectivity and render it more difficult to reflect on contemporary European practices'.[93]

More anxiety, yet no insecurity

This study has demonstrated the value of focusing on the discursive articulation of ontological security. Our approach has allowed us to systematically analyse a large set of parliamentary debates and trace the articulation of anxiety and ontological security over a period of 30 years and across different policy sectors. While a longer exposition of the data would be necessary to investigate the production of ontological (in)security in more detail, we have nonetheless been able to move beyond the focus in the literature on limited cultural or political events, 'Sunday speeches', or public opinion data to analyse articulations of anxiety and ontological security in the broader political debate. The focus on discourse has also allowed us to link individual articulations to the collective inscription of an EU Self and its ontological security, and to pursue a critical interrogation of how ontological security narratives draw on and stabilise connections between fundamental assumptions of societal and political order.

The results of our analysis of EP debates, mirrored in a recent analysis of routines among European Commission bureaucrats,[94] stand in contrast to the widespread claim of the EU as an 'anxious community': while MEPs are fully aware of the many challenges to European integration, the majority have not lost trust in the integration process and in EU institutions and policies. This is amplified by the metanarratives of articulations of EU ontological security, which reify conceptions of progress, modernity, and control that are characteristic of European integration as a functional process towards an 'ever closer Union among the peoples of Europe', as the preamble of the Treaty on European Union stipulates.

We have argued that the problem of the EU, at least within the institutional context of the EP, is thus not that it is too anxious but rather that it is not anxious enough. There are at least three reasons why a bit more anxiety would be a good thing. First, without a dose of anxiety, actors lose their potential for 'change, dynamism and renewal'[95] and instead become self-centred and arrogant towards others, as reflected in the often-Eurocentric approaches of EU politicians towards representatives from other world regions and the resulting contestations. Second, in light of the

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[91]von Lucke et al., *The EU and Global Climate Justice*.

[92]John G. Ruggie, 'Territoriality and beyond: Problematizing modernity in international relations', *International Organization*, 47:1 (1993), pp. 139–74.

[93]Mitzen, 'Anxious community', p. 407.

[94]Aline Bartenstein, Hendrik Hegemann, and Oliver Merschel, 'The everyday life of a security project: The "security union" in the EU's "engine room"', *European Security*, 26 February 2024 (online first), available at: {https://doi.org/10.1080/09662839.2024.2319230}.

[95]Browning and Joenniemi, 'Ontological security, self-articulation and the securitization of identity', p. 35.

increasing politicisation of integration in the broader political debate,[96] a lack of anxiety on the level of the political elite only serves to legitimise articulations of a gap between a supposed 'elite' and the 'people' and thus to delegitimise 'Brussels' as shorthand for the integration process. Our findings confirm earlier studies that have shown politicisation of integration to largely occur outside the mainstream of the pre-2004 member states,[97] Brexit notwithstanding. We consider this problematic, as it leaves the political interrogation of the integration process to those opposed to it. Third, while we do support regional integration as a process to overcome nationalism and the divisions in Europe, the modernist and technocratic underpinnings of a functionalist understanding of integration is not without its problems and contestations. A more critical stance towards technological possibilities of progress and control, without rejecting technological innovation altogether, would be needed to minimise the risk of unintended negative consequences, such as climate change and a loss in biodiversity in the past, and to open up spaces for dialogue with actors from different cultural or religious backgrounds. This is all the more important in light of the increasing significance of great power ambitions, which we have also observed in our analysis, and which would otherwise turn the EU from an ambitious 'normative power',[98] however problematic this may often have been, to an openly neo-imperialist power.

One possible objection to our empirical analysis is that our findings are hardly surprising, first because the EP is still the home of the highest degree of enthusiasm for the EU, especially if one does not focus on Eurosceptic fringe parties, and second because it is not the function of politicians to openly question their policies. While we readily concede that there is some truth in both arguments, we nonetheless maintain that they do not undermine the relevance of our findings. MEPs are elected representatives whose function, among others, is to openly debate and challenge policies. If they do not articulate sufficient self-doubts, we must at the very least note a problematic discrepancy between the debates among the broader public and in the EP.

Finally, one may object to our normative claim that we would need more, not less anxiety in the EP. One possible objection is that our argument hinges on a neoliberal conception of politics in which anxiety leads to both de-politicisation and fantasies of 'absolute security'.[99] Yet the anxiety we are calling for is not of the neurotic kind that makes citizens seek diversionary entertainment. Instead, it is a reflexive form of anxiety in policymakers that makes them interrogate their assumptions and thus opens up the very possibility of politics as a debate about policy options and thus change. This is also our response to those who may caution that anxiety might jeopardise the integration project to an extent that would be irresponsible. The anxiety we want to see does not lead to ontological insecurity; instead, it makes ontological security possible in the long run by allowing actors to creatively deal with and adapt to the challenges of the polycrisis. In contrast, we see a lack of anxiety as eventually undermining the integration project because of an ultimate mismatch between challenge and proposed remedies as well as between the visions of a future Europe constructed in the metanarratives we observed and those in the larger public debate.

In sum, our analysis of core EP debates has shown a surprising preponderance of articulations of ontological security. These were related to conceptions of progress and control in line with traditional technocratic understandings of integration and linked to a rising aspiration to make the EU a global power. For the reasons outlined above, we think that this discursive nodal point of ontological security is problematic. We have thus advocated a more positively anxious European

[96] Pieter Wilde, Anna Leupold, and Henning Schmidtke, 'Introduction: The differentiated politicisation of European governance', *West European Politics*, 39:1 (2016), pp. 3–22; Swen Hutter, Edgar Grande, and Hanspeter Kriesi, *Politicising Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

[97] Christoffer Green-Pedersen, 'A giant fast asleep? Party incentives and the politicisation of European integration', *Political Studies*, 60:1 (2012), pp. 115–30.

[98] Ian Manners, 'Normative power Europe: A contradiction in terms?', *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 40:2 (2002), pp. 235–58; Diez, 'Constructing the self and changing others'.

[99] Engin F. Isin, 'The neurotic citizen', *Citizenship Studies*, 8:3 (2004), pp. 217–35; see also Brigitte Bargetz, 'Haunting sovereignty and the neurotic subject: Contemporary constellations of fear, anxiety and uncertainty', *Citizenship Studies*, 25:1 (2021), pp. 20–35.

Union that does question its own existence self-reflexively. More rather than less anxiety in the EP would at least put some limits to the sometimes-messianistic Eurocentrism displayed by the EU in its past engagement with actors elsewhere in the world and would allow for a more productive debate about the future of European integration.

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