The role of European and national identity and refugee threat perceptions in attitudes towards immigrants

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Abstract: Identification with a superordinate entity, like Europe, reduces prejudice towards immigrants in general, but no research so far investigated if this differs between prejudice towards immigrants from inside and outside Europe. Using online survey data from four European countries, we determined whether national and European identification are (differently) related to attitudes towards immigrants from inside and outside Europe, and to which extent these relations can be explained by differences in refugee threat perceptions. We found that those who strongly identify with Europe hold more favorable views towards both European and non-European immigrants, while the reverse effect is found for strong national identifiers—an effect that can be explained by realistic and symbolic refugee threat perceptions. We did not find evidence for our expectation that the strength of the associations of national identification on attitudes and threat perceptions would depend on the level of European identification of participants. Overall, our findings provide mixed support for the Common In-group Identity Model because European identifiers, although more positive towards immigrants, did not make strong distinctions between European and non-European immigrants.

Introduction

Over the past few years, high immigration rates to European countries have been a cause of concern for many Europeans (Dennison and Dražanová 2018). People are concerned that immigrants will compete with them for scarce resources such as jobs and social benefits, and they also fear that immigrants will change national cultural practices (Dempster and Hargrave 2017; Dennison and Dražanová 2018; Wike et al. 2016). Often, people tend to perceive such issues in an intergroup context, whereby not only the self, but the national in-group is perceived to be threatened by immigrants from other national or cultural backgrounds. Indeed, it has been shown that people who identify more strongly with their nation are more likely to perceive immigrants as threatening (Jackson et al. 2001; Riek et al. 2006). Therefore, they also tend to have more negative behavioral intentions (Yitmen and Verkuyten 2018) and more unfavorable attitudes towards immigrants (Jackson et al. 2001; Louis et al. 2013). In general, these findings are in line with the social identity approach, according to which people want to achieve a sense of positive distinctiveness from others, which can be achieved by categorizing themselves and others into in- and out-groups, and by attaching positive meanings to the in-group (Tajfel and Turner 1979; Turner 2010). However, nationality is only one of several possible dimensions for categorization and identification. Following the Common In-group Identity Model (CIIM), people identifying with supranational categories, such as Europe, will perceive people from other nations inside Europe as in-group members. Following the logic of CIIM, they should have more positive attitudes towards European immigrants because of the shared group membership (Gaertner et al. 1993).

Since the 1992 Treaty of Maastricht, European policy makers agreed that promoting a feeling of European citizenship was important to European integration (Jamieson 2002). In trying to construct a European 'imagined community', several European symbols were introduced, such as a European flag and anthem, which indeed seem to enhance people's identification with Europe (Bruter 2003). Furthermore, common policies such as the freedom of movement within the EU as agreed upon in the Schengen agreement, also stimulate feelings of Europeanness (Pichler 2008). Signalling that Europeanness could also be an exclusionary category, the Schengen agreement did not grant the right to freedom of movement to people from outside the EU. Thus, although a shared identity can unite people

who previously perceived themselves as belonging to separate groups, the European identity also has an exclusionary aspect. Following the CIIM, it can thus be expected that people who strongly identify with Europe will hold more favorable attitudes towards immigrants from other European countries, but not towards immigrants from outside the EU.

Several studies have explored how European identification is related to attitudes towards immigrants in general. These have mostly shown that, in contrast to national identification, European identification is positively related to attitudes towards immigrants (Curtis 2014; Hasbún López et al. 2019; Kende, Hadarics and Szabó 2019; Skrobanek 2004; Visintin, Green and Sarrasin 2018; Quintelier and Dejaeghere 2008). Some studies also acknowledge that it is important to make a distinction between European and non-European immigrants. However, these studies have mainly used descriptive evidence (McLaren 2001; Schlenker 2013), indirect tests (Curtis 2014), or proxies for European identification (Blinder and Markaki 2019) to test whether European identification is differently related to attitudes towards European and non-European immigrants. However, to test theories regarding the beneficial effect of superordinate identities, making such a distinction is imperative. A first contribution of this study is thus to improve previous research by making a clear distinction between attitudes toward European and non-European immigrants.

Second, we also explore whether the effects of European identification depend on people's national identification. We are aware of three studies that have explored such an interaction effect. These either found no evidence for its existence (Licata and Klein 2002) or found that European identification was more strongly related to less anti-immigrant prejudice for people who scored lower on national identification (Visintin, Green and Sarrasin 2018). Using an Australian student sample, Nickerson and Louis (2008) did find evidence for an interaction between superordinate identification with humanity and national identification: National identification inhibited the positive effects of superordinate identification with the human race on attitudes towards immigrants. We will further explore this interaction effect with European identification, using large-scale samples of the adult populations in Belgium, Sweden, France, and the Netherlands.

Third, although it is well established that threat perceptions explain the relationship between national identification and unfavorable attitudes towards immigrants (e.g., Caricati

2018; Louis, Esses and Lalonde 2013; Verkuyten 2009), it has not yet been tested whether threat perceptions also mediate the relationship between European identification and attitudes towards immigrants. Still, such information would be very important for a better understanding of the extent to which theories like integrated threat theory and social identity theory can be applied to explain attitudes towards out-groups and the role of other identities than the national ones in these relations.

We are aware of only one study that has explored the relationship between perceived threat and European identification, and it found that people who perceived greater threat were less supportive of the EU (McLaren 2002). In particular, given the refugee crisis, which European countries were facing from 2015 onwards, we will focus on how threat perceptions of refugees may mediate the relation between European identification and attitudes towards immigrants. Not only was this group, due to extensive media coverage, a very salient source of threat in the European context during data collection (2017), but refugees in general are also more likely to possess characteristics that are perceived as threatening to in-group members (e.g. low education level, low language proficiency) (De Coninck et al. 2018). This likely makes perceptions of this specific groups of immigrants important in studying relations between European and national identification on the one hand, and attitudes towards immigrants in general on the other hand. In this study, we thus aim to further examine the relationship between perceived refugee threat and European identification in the aftermath of the European refugee crisis. We expect that such threat perceptions will then also negatively reflect on attitudes towards immigrants in general.

The Importance of Identification

Following the social identity approach (Tajfel et al., 1979; Turner 2010), people tend to perceive themselves and others not only as individuals, but also as members of social groups. Which groups people categorize themselves and others into depends on actual or perceived similarities within and between social groups (Oakes, Haslam and Turner 1998; Turner et al. 1994). Once these perceptions are shaped, people tend to further emphasize similarities within and differences between groups (Turner et al. 1994). These categorization processes offer people a sense of belonging to the in-group and a sense of distinctiveness from the out-group. Furthermore, people associate more positive meanings to groups they

identify with compared to out-groups, thus fulfilling their need for positive distinctiveness (Tajfel et al. 1979). In the case of national in- and out-groups, such categorization processes contribute to the development of so-called national 'imagined communities' (Anderson 2006). Still, identifying with one's (national) in-group, and associating positive meanings to this group does not necessarily imply that negative meanings are associated with out-groups (Brewer 1999).

National Identification

However, national identification and attachment have often been found to correlate with out-group prejudice. For instance, people who identify more strongly with their national in-group are not only more likely to hold unfavorable attitudes towards asylum-seekers (Nickerson and Louis 2008), or immigrants (Ariely 2012; Caricati 2018; Jeong 2013; Louis, Esses and Lalonde 2013; Sides and Citrin 2007) but are also more likely to have negative behavioral intentions towards such out-groups (Pehrson, Vignoles and Brown 2009; Yitmen and Verkuyten 2018).

It should be noted that these relationships vary depending on several factors. First, the strength of the relationship between national identity and out-group attitudes depends on how strongly attached co-nationals are to the nation (Pehrson, Vignoles and Brown 2009). Second, the extent to which national identification is related to out-group prejudice also depends on which categorization criteria are used. That is, people can choose more achievable criteria to determine whether a person belongs to the in-group, such as whether one speaks the national language, or they can choose more ascriptive criteria, such as whether one is born in the country (Wright 2011). It has been found that people who adopt achievable criteria hold more positive attitudes towards immigrants, whereas people who adopt ascriptive criteria hold more negative attitudes towards immigrants (e.g., Verkuyten and Martinovic 2015). This also makes sense in a social identity framework, as immigrants can become part of the national in-group if one adopts achievable criteria, but not if one adopts ascriptive criteria (Wright 2011). Most people value ascriptive criteria more than achievable criteria (Wright 2011), and it is therefore not surprising that national identification is mostly related to less favorable attitudes towards immigrants.

Still, the question remains why people who perceive immigrants as out-group members also hold more negative attitudes towards out-group members. One important reason for this can be found in the idea of the social identity approach (Turner et al. 1987) that people who identify more strongly with a specific group (e.g., the nation) may be more inclined to perceive people who do not belong to their in-group as a threat. Out-group members could be perceived as threatening to the material well-being of the in-group (realistic threats, e.g., Sherif 1966), or to the values and traditions of the in-group (symbolic threat, Stephan and Stephan 2000). In a meta-study, Riek, Mania and Gaertner (2006) found support for this idea: individuals who more strongly identified with their nation were more likely to perceive out-groups as threats. Furthermore, following integrated threat theory (Stephan and Stephan 2000), perceiving out-group members as threatening can stimulate unfavorable attitudes towards them (Caricati 2018; Louis, Esses and Lalonde 2013; Yitmen and Verkuyten 2018). Following the social identity approach and integrated threat theory, we expect that people who identify more strongly with their nation, are more likely to hold unfavorable attitudes towards European and non-European immigrants compared to people who do not strongly identify with their nation (H1a), because high identifiers report higher realistic and symbolic refugee threat (H1b).

European Identification and European Immigrants

Given that identification with Europe is more inclusive than identification with a nation, European identification can be seen as a form of a superordinate identity (Curtis 2014). According to the CIIM, superordinate identities stimulate more positive attitudes towards individuals who would be considered out-group members in subordinate identities (Gaertner et al. 1993). Thus, if people identify more strongly with the more inclusive European in-group, they are less likely to categorize European immigrants as out-group members (to the national group), and more likely to categorize them as in-group members (to the European group). Given that people who identify more strongly with Europe are more likely to associate positive meanings with the European in-group, it is likely that these positive meanings, and thus lower threat perceptions, also apply to people from different nations within Europe. Therefore, people who identify more strongly with Europe, are, ceteris paribus, more likely to have favorable attitudes towards European immigrants

compared to people who do not strongly identify with Europe (H2a); a reason for this could be that strong European identifiers perceived less realistic and symbolic refugee threat after the European refugee crisis (H2b).

European Identification and Non-European Immigrants

However, just like European immigrants are excluded from the national in-group, non-European immigrants are excluded from the European in-group. Thus, it could be expected that non-European immigrants will be viewed in a more negative light given that higher identifiers tend to be more prone to view social reality in terms of group distinctions, and therefore, particularly in the wake of the European refugee crisis, may also be more concerned that refugees are threatening the in-group. There are some empirical findings that are in line with these arguments (e.g. Hasbún López et al. 2019; Licata and Klein 2002).

Thus, following the Common In-group Identity model and the integrated threat theory, we expect to find that, ceteris paribus, people who identify more strongly with Europe, are more likely to have unfavorable attitudes towards non-European immigrants compared to people who do not strongly identify with Europe (H3a), and the reason for this is that they perceived more realistic and symbolic refugee threat in the wake of the European refugee crisis (H3b).

Combining National and European Identification Effects

Studies often find a positive correlation between European and national identification (Hasbún López et al. 2019), suggesting that European and national identification are far from mutually exclusive categories. In fact, it could be expected that the effect of European identification on attitudes towards immigrants depends on the level of national identification (Licata and Klein 2002). Non-European immigrants are an out-group to both European and national identifiers. Therefore, following CIIM (Gaertner et al. 1993), people who strongly identify with both categories at the same time, may hold even more negative attitudes towards immigrants from outside Europe, because they may be perceived as a threat to both in-groups. Thus, the anticipated negative association of European identification with attitudes towards non-European immigrants based on CIIM, possibly could be even greater for people who also strongly identify with the nation.

However, for people who strongly identify with both the nation and Europe, immigrants from *inside* Europe are an in-group on the European dimension, but an out-group on the national dimension. Therefore, following CIIM (Gaertner et al. 1993), such people will hold less favorable attitudes towards immigrants from inside Europe compared to people who identify with Europe only. Thus, it may be expected that the positive effect of European identification on attitudes towards European immigrants is smaller for people who also identify with their nation, as to them, immigrants are still likely to be a threat to the nation.

Data and Methodology

We distributed an online questionnaire to adults aged 18 to 65 in Belgium, Sweden, France, and the Netherlands, in September and October of 2017. Data collection continued until a sample size of 6,000 respondents (1,500 per country) was reached. We opted for an online questionnaire because of its (cost) efficiency, and country selection was based on convenience: the Belgian polling agency we worked with has a strong presence in the four countries under study, which meant we could limit the cost of the study and obtain a large dataset. The polling agency drew a random sample out of its panel with heterogeneity in terms of age and gender. The cooperation rate was about 35 per cent and responses were weighted by gender and age.[1] Respondents were contacted through e-mail with the request to cooperate in a study, of which the specific subject was not communicated. The survey itself was distributed via the polling agency's own survey tool, and in the official language of the country or region (either Dutch, French, or Swedish) that respondents resided in. Translations of the survey were carried out by professional translators, ensuring that the terminology used in the questions is considered 'everyday language' by the respondents. Respondents were unable to skip questions, but some did have a 'no answer'-option. Each question in the survey was presented on a different page, and respondents did not have the option to return to previous questions and change their answer. Approval for this study was obtained from the Social and Societal Ethics Committee of KU Leuven (case number G- 2017 07 854).

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[1] For more information about the dataset, please see De Coninck et al. (2019).

Measures

Attitudes towards European and Non-European Migrants

To measure attitudes towards towards European and non-European migrants, we used items previously used in in Round 1 (2002) and Round 7 (2014) of the European Social Survey. We asked respondents to indicate to what extent they feel that immigrants from the following groups should be allowed to enter and settle in their country: 'Immigrants of richer countries in Europe', 'Immigrants of poorer countries in Europe', 'Immigrants of richer countries outside of Europe', and 'Immigrants of poorer countries outside of Europe' (European Social Survey 2014). Given the high societal relevance of attitudes towards refugees, we opted to repeat these items but replaced the word 'immigrants' with 'refugees'. Answer options ranged from 1 (allow none) to 4 (allow many). Both scales were reliable, as Cronbach alpha was .89 for attitudes towards European immigrants, and .91 for attitudes towards non-European immigrants. Before completing these items, we presented respondents with the UN-definition of immigrants and refugees so that respondents would have a uniform understanding of these groups when completing the questionnaire. Nonetheless, we acknowledge that the use of certain items in this study (e.g., 'refugees from rich European countries') is somewhat misleading, as refugees from rich European countries are rare. To compare this 'theoretical' group of refugees from rich countries to refugees from poor countries – who are an undeniable reality – may challenge the external validity of some of these concepts (De Coninck 2020).

European and National Identity

To assess European and national identity, we used two additional measures from the European Social Survey. We asked respondents how close they felt to 1) the country they were currently living in, and 2) Europe, on a scale from 1 (not very close at all) to 5 (very close).

Perceived Refugee Threat

Perceived realistic refugee threat was measured through the following items: 1) 'Would you say that refugees who come to live here generally take jobs away from workers in [country],

or generally help to create new jobs?'; 2) 'Would you say it is generally bad or good for [country]'s economy that refugees from other countries come to live here?'; 3) 'Most refugees who come to live here work and pay taxes. They also use health and welfare services. On balance, do you think refugees who come here take out more than they put in or put in more than they take out?'; and 4) 'Have the country's crime problems increased or decreased by refugees coming to live here from other countries?'. For measuring symbolic refugee threat perceptions, we used the item 'Would you say that [country]'s cultural life is generally undermined or enriched by refugees coming to live here from other countries?'. Answer options for all threat items ranged from 1 (low threat perception) to 11 (high threat perception). The mean of these items was calculated to obtain a single indicator on perceived threat. The realistic threat scale had a high reliability, with a Cronbach alpha of .84.

Sociodemographic Indicators

Data on gender (0=female, 1 = male), educational attainment (1 = uneducated, 2 = primary education, 3 = lower secondary education, 4 = higher secondary education, 5 = higher non-university education, 6 = university education), and age were also collected.

Analytic Strategy

We used SPSS to derive descriptives, correlations and reliabilities, and we used proc calis in SAS to fit a structural model with observed variables. In this model, we looked at the total effects of national and European identification, as well as their interaction, on attitudes towards immigrants from inside and outside Europe. We also examined the indirect effects of these independent variables via perceived realistic and symbolic threat. We controlled for gender, educational attainment, age, and we used dummy variables to control for country of residence, with the Netherlands as reference category. The control variables were added to the model as predictors of the mediator (refugee threat perceptions) and the dependent variable (attitudes towards immigrants). In our model, we allowed our predictors to covary, just like our mediators and dependent variables. For ease of interpretation of the interaction effect, we centered national identification and European identification around their means. Full information maximum likelihood was used to deal with missing values on

the mediators and dependent variables, which means that all available data (*N* = 5,567) was considered when fitting the structural model. The reported main effects of national and European identification were interpreted for a separate model in which their interaction-term was excluded. Given the large sample size, we will regard effect sizes as significant at the *p* < .001 level.

Results

Preliminary Results

The descriptive results of the main variables can be found in Table 1 and the correlations in Table 2. On average, respondents scored below the mid-point of the scale for favorable attitudes towards non-European immigrants (*t*(5567)= -4.36, *p* < .001), and above the mid-point of the scale for favorable attitudes towards European immigrants (*t*(5567)= 5.70, *p* < .001). Results from a paired samples T-test further showed that respondents held more favorable attitudes towards immigrants from inside Europe compared to immigrants from outside Europe (*t*(5567)= -22.78, *p* < .001). Furthermore, respondents scored above the mid-point of the scale for realistic threat perceptions (*t*(5567)= 32.33, *p* < .001), and symbolic threat perceptions (*t*(5567)= 9.61, p < .001). A paired samples T-test indicated that realistic threat perceptions were significantly higher than symbolic threat perceptions (*t*(5567)= 23.82, *p* < .001). Respondents strongly identified with their nation, (*t*(5567)= 50.95, *p* < .001), while identification with Europe was much less pronounced (*t*(5567)= -2.13, *p* < .05). A paired samples T-test further suggested that respondents felt closer to their nation than to Europe (*t*(5567)= 50.71, *p* < .001).

Table 1. Descriptive overview of the study sample

	Range	Mean (SD)
Attitudes towards non-European migrants	1 - 4	2.45 (.83)
Attitudes towards European migrants	1 - 4	2.56 (.80)
Perceived realistic refugee threat	1 - 11	6.95 (2.20)
Perceived symbolic refugee threat	1-11	6.37 (2.90)
National identification	1 - 5	3.79 (1.15)
European identification	1 - 5	2.97 (1.14)
Control variables		
Male	0/1	49.7 %
Education	1 - 6	4.27 (1.13)
Age	18 - 65	44.76 (12.55)
Belgium	0/1	25.4%
Sweden	0/1	24.2%
France	0/1	25.9%
The Netherlands	0/1	24.5%

Note: N = 5,567.

Table 2. Pearson correlations of study variables (*N*= 5,567)

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.
1. Attitudes towards non-European immigrants	-					
2. Attitudes towards European immigrants	.90***					
3. Perceived realistic refugee threat	-.60***	-.53***				
4. Perceived symbolic refugee threat	-.61***	-.54***	.78***			
5. National identification	.06***	.08***	.05***	-.02		
6. European identification	.28***	.30***	-.22***	-.26***	.45***	
Controls						
7. Male	−.03*	.00	.00	.03*	.03*	.02
8. Educational attainment	.20***	.22***	-.16***	−.16***	-.01	.12***
9. Age	−.13***	−.11***	.11***	.07***	.12***	.01
10. Belgium	−.01	.03*	.04***	.02	−.17***	-.06***
11. Sweden	.14***	.14***	−.07***	-.13***	.26***	.18***
12. France	−.11***	−.11***	.07***	.13***	−.08***	−.04***
13. The Netherlands	−.02	−.05***	-.04**	−.02	-.01	-.08***

Note: * *p* < .05; ** *p* < .01, ***p<.001.

Structural Model

The results of the structural model can be found in Figure 1 and Table 3. The direct effects on and of the mediators are shown in Figure 1, and the total, indirect and remaining direct associations of our predictors with attitudes towards immigrants can be found in Table 3. Results show that people who felt closer to their nation held more unfavourable attitudes towards immigrants (H1a) because they reported perceiving high realistic (b = .16, p < .001) and symbolic refugee threat (b = .11, p < .001) (H1b). Perceived refugee threat fullly mediated the effect of national identification on attitudes given that the main effect was no longer significant at the p <.001 level after including the perceived refugee threat variables in the model. In contrast to national identification, European identification was positively related to attitudes towards immigrants from inside (b = .30, p < .001) (H2a), and surprisingly also from outside (H3a) Europe (b = .31, p < .001). These positive relationships could be explained by the fact that people who felt closer to Europe reported lower realistic (b = -.32, p < .001) and symbolic refugee threat perceptions (b = -.31, p < .001) (H2b, H3b). Perceived refugee threat partially mediated the effect of European identification on attitudes towards non-European immigrants, as the main effect remained significant after including the perceived refugee threat variables in the model (see Table 3). For attitudes towards European immigrants, perceived refugee threat fully mediated this relation, as the direct effect was no longer significant at the p <.001 level after including refugee threat to the model. Contrary to the CIIM, A Wald test indicated that European identification did not have stronger (positive) association with attitudes towards immigrants from inside compared to those from outside Europe (W(1)=.03, p = .86). We also did not find statistically significant evidence for the expected interaction between European and national identification on attitudes towards European or non-European immigrants.

Figure 1. Standardized direct effects and covariations
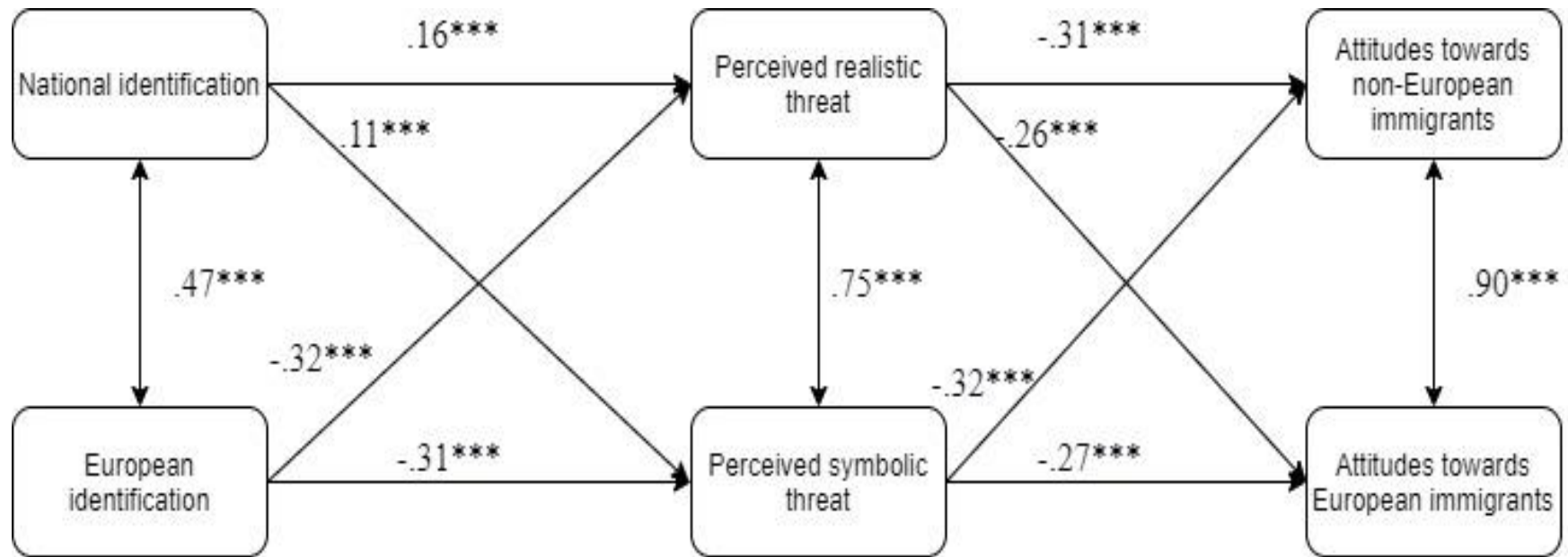
Note: Only significant pathways (*p* < .001) are shown (interaction of national and European identification on both threat variables were insignificant).

Table 3. Total, indirect and direct effects of identification and perceived refugee threat on attitudes, and direct effects of identification on perceived refugee threat (standardized coefficients, *SE*)

	Realistic refugee threat	Symbolic refugee threat	Attitudes towards European immigrants			Attitudes towards non-European immigrants		
	Direct	Direct	Total	Indirect	Direct	Total	Indirect	Direct
National identification	.16*** (.01)	.11*** (.01)	-.08*** (.01)	-.11*** (.01)	.04 (.01)	-.08*** (.01)	-.05*** (.01)	-.03 (.01)
European identification	-.32*** (.01)	-.31*** (.01)	.31*** (.01)	.23*** (.01)	.07* (.01)	.30*** (.01)	.15*** (.01)	.15*** (.01)
Perceived realistic refugee threat			-.31*** (.02)		-.31*** (.02)	-.26*** (.02)		-.26*** (.02)
Perceived symbolic refugee threat			-.32*** (.02)		-.32*** (.02)	-.27*** (.02)		-.27*** (.02)
Interaction national and European identification			.00 (.01)		00 (.01)	-00 (.01)		-00 (.01)

Note: * *p* < .05; ** *p* < .01, *** *p* < .001. Covariances were allowed (but not presented) between all predictors, between mediators (symbolic and realistic refugee threat), and between attitude-indicators. We controlled for age, gender, level of education and country of residence (see Table A1). National and European identification were centered around their means. Model fit indices: X^2(12):747.45, *p* < .000, CFI: .96, TLI: .88, RMSEA: .10 [.09;.11], SRMR: .068.

Robustness Check

Thus far, we have pooled the datasets for all countries together and have made conclusions without taking the national context into account. However, it is possible that some of the relations found, were context-dependent, and can only be found in some of the sampled countries. Therefore, we performed a robustness check by separating the samples of the four countries (Table A2). At the p <.05 level, the effects of European identification were only found in Belgium and the Netherlands, but not in France, whereas this effect was only found on attitudes towards European immigrants in Sweden. Furthermore, we were unable to replicate the effects of national identification in the separate samples, possibly because there was less statistical power in the separate samples to detect significant effects. The null-findings relating to the interaction effects between national and European identification were robust. We did not find an expected interaction effect in our general sample, and this could not be found in the country samples either.

Additionally, we conducted another robustness check by comparing whether the associations that we found change when comparing attitudes towards immigrants to attitudes towards refugees (Table A3). Given that the items used in our attitude measures refer to both outgroups, and a paired samples T-test showed that respondents held more favorable attitudes towards refugees than towards immigrants (t(5567)= -2.35, p < .001, the divergence in attitudes between these outgroups may be more pronounced than between immigrants from within or outside Europe. However, the results of this analysis mirror those in Table 3. Furthermore, we also made separate analyses with attitudes towards refugees from inside Europe and attitudes towards immigrants from inside Europe as separate outcome variables to check if the practical non-existence of refugees from inside Europe affected our conclusions. This was not the case: all relations were similar for both outcome variables.

Discussion

Following the 2014-2016 European refugee crisis, this study investigated the extent to which identification with Europe and identification with the nation were associated with attitudes towards immigrants from inside and outside Europe. Although previous studies had already shown that national identification tends to be negatively related to attitudes towards immigrants (Jackson et al. 2001; Louis, Esses and Lalonde 2013), and that European

identification tends to be positively related to attitudes towards immigrants (Curtis 2014; Kende, Hadarics and Szabó 2019; Skrobanek 2004), it had not yet been structurally tested whether European identifiers make clear distinctions between immigrants from inside Europe and immigrants from outside Europe (Curtis 2014). Although this would be expected based on the Common In-group Identity Model (CIIM), this study does not find support for the assumption that high European identifiers would be more in favour of immigrants from inside Europe but less in favour of immigrants from outside Europe. Instead, people who strongly identified with Europe were more positive towards all immigrants, irrespective of whether they could be considered in- or outgroup (see Blinder and Markaki 2019 for a similar conclusion), a finding that was not dependent on the country context. This similar relationship can possibly be attributed to the fact that European identifiers tend to attach more importance to values of diversity, openness and cosmopolitanism (Datler 2016; Eriksen 2009; Schlenker 2013) and are more positive towards immigrants in general, irrespective of whether they are part of the European in-group or not. Indeed, we found that perceived threat could only partially explain the relations of European identification on attitudes towards immigrants, suggesting that other factors are indeed in play. Unfortunately, we were not able to take people's values into account in this study. We therefore encourage future research to delve deeper into what, if not group boundaries, does account for European identifiers being more open towards all immigrants. For instance, we recommend that future studies examine which values people associate with Europe. In light of our results, it seems like a realistic possibility that European identification is associated with stronger values of openness and cosmopolitanism than national identification. This could then also explain why we find that the logic of CIIM did not apply to European identification. Indeed, Licata and Klein (2002) found that stronger European identifiers were more likely to embrace values of tolerance and respect, although they also expressed more negative views towards foreigners. However, the authors did not distinguish between European and non-European foreigners, nor was their sample representative for the Belgian context they studied. We thus recommend future studies to not only distinguish between European and non-European immigrants, but to also take the mediating role of values into account

However, we should not totally disregard the importance of group boundaries either. After all, when it comes to national identification, we see a different picture, where the

social identity approach does seem to apply. That is, people who felt closer to their nation, were more likely to perceive out-groups as threatening, which could fully explain why they were more negative towards immigrants from inside and outside Europe (Riek, Mania and Gaertner 2006). Thus, for national identifiers, distinctions between in and out-groups seemed to be more important in their attitudes than for European identifiers, with group boundaries seemingly more salient for high national identifiers than for high European identifiers. An interesting implication of this study is thus that national and European identification seem to follow fundamentally different processes in influencing out-group attitudes.

In addition, we examined whether the effects of national and European identification were interdependent. Just like Licata and Klein (2002), we found limited evidence for an interaction effect between European and national identification. That is, although, the positive relationship of European identification with attitudes towards European immigrants was slightly weaker for high national identifiers, we found no interaction effects for attitudes towards non-European immigrants in our general sample or in individual country samples.

These findings add to the literature on both CIIM and integrated threat theory. However, next to not being able to take values into account, this study also has some other limitations that require further consideration. First, as already pointed to above, our identification measures could be improved. For instance, more items could be added to the scales to create a better instrument for measuring these concepts. In addition, we have not been able to take the content of identification into account, whereas a distinction between more ascriptive or achievable conceptions of national and European identification are likely to have differential influences on threat perceptions (e.g., Hochman, Raijman and Schmidt 2016) and attitudes towards immigrants (e.g. Verkuyten and Martinovic 2015). Furthermore, it has also been shown that a more critical form of national identification that is conditional upon the democratic and moral values of one's country's regime, called patriotism, is actually associated with more positive attitudes towards foreigners. Instead, the less critical variant of national identification, with unconditional support for one's regime, called nationalism, is related to more negative attitudes towards foreigners (Blank and Schmidt 2003). Thus, having a strong bond with one's nation does not have to go hand in hand with unfavorable attitudes towards foreigners, because it also depends on the content of this

bond. The same reasoning likely applies to European identification as well. Our results merely suggest that feeling close to Europe is related to lower refugee threat perceptions and more positive out-group attitudes in general, but it is possible that also here the content of identification matters. We recommend future studies to further examine this possibility and to examine whether European identification is always related to more positive attitudes, or only when European identification is based on achievable criteria and/or a more critical loyalty to the EU, for instance.

Second, longitudinal analyses or experimental designs are necessary before conclusions can be drawn that a causal relationship exists between the variables under investigation. For instance, the questions whether European identification causes more inclusiveness and/or whether favorable attitudes towards immigrants increase an individual's likelihood to view themselves as part of the superordinate European group, remain unresolved. Although earlier experimental evidence for the CIIM seems to support the causal relationship specified in this study (e.g., Dovidio, Gaertner and Validzic 1998), the cross-sectional nature of the present data, in addition to a reliance on strictly attitudinal measures, curbs any concrete conclusions about causality.

Third, the measure used for perceived threat focused on refugees in the country of residence of the respondents. Although it is significantly related to both types of identification and attitudes in this study, clearly there are some conceptual shortcomings with regards to this measure. For instance, the measure is only targeted at a specific group of immigrants, and therefore less inclusive than our general measure of attitudes, and it is formulated as threat perceptions on the national level instead of the European level, which we assumed to be most important for strong European identifiers. Nevertheless, the fact that perceived threat towards refugees can be extended to relevant findings regarding attitudes towards migrants in general (a group which includes both refugees and immigrants) is also noteworthy. However, to improve upon this measure, we recommend future studies to measure perceived threat toward various immigrant out-groups rather than refugees in the country of residence. We also strongly recommend future studies to examine to which extent refugees are seen as threats to Europe rather than to one's nation, as stronger European identifiers may be more concerned with threats against Europe than threats against the nation, and therefore may perceive more refugee threat if measured this way. Therefore, our finding that European identification is associated with lower refugee threat

perceptions should also be interpreted with some caution as we have not been able to strictly capture threat perceptions towards Europe and we may have underestimated threat perceptions of high European identifiers. Indeed, particularly in the northern European countries that we sampled, it is very well possible that people perceive refugees not so much as a threat to their nation, but more as a threat to Europe, given that most refugees reside in southern European countries. Thus, it is possible that the relation between European identification and refugee threat perceptions would be less negative, or even positive, if we had measured to which extent refugees were perceived as threatening to Europe instead of to one's nation.

Fourth, it should be noted that our dependent variable, attitudes towards immigrants, also has some limitations. First of all, it measured acceptance of immigrants in a specific country, which could be argued to be something different from direct (explicit) prejudice or attitudes. It also focused on two out-groups, not only attitudes towards immigrants in general but also attitudes towards a specific and highly relevant subgroup of immigrants, namely refugees. The downside of this is that attitudes towards refugees tended to be more positive than attitudes towards immigrants in general in our sample, and thus we may have overestimated how positive people were towards immigrants. Nevertheless, our robustness checks suggested that this did not impact the relations with national and European identification (as well as their interaction), or perceived realistic and symbolic refugee threat, as effects were similar, irrespective of whether we only focused on attitudes towards refugees or only on attitudes towards immigrants. Moreover, the question about refugees from inside Europe is mostly a hypothetical concept, as it is hard to think of such a group.

Finally, although we have been able to use large-scale data from four Western European countries, there still remain questions about the generalizability of our findings to other European countries. For instance, as described above, the negative relationship between European identification and refugee threat perceptions may not be replicated in countries like Spain, Italy or Greece which have to bear the bulk of the 'crisis' in terms of the number of refugees they take in. Other factors may also play a role in our results. For instance, the sampled countries are relatively rich, with long histories of migration. It is very well possible that European identification does not have a very strong impact on threat perceptions or attitudes towards immigrants in the more recent European member states.

Thus, we recommend future research to also test the above relationships in countries that have only recently become members of the EU, and that have a lower level of welfare than the countries we sampled.

Aside from these limitations, in the current study, we have confirmed CIIM's prediction that superordinate identification helps everybody to 'get along' by empirically demonstrating that identification with Europe produces the intergroup consequences expected of a superordinate identity, although, in contrast to CIIM, this positive effect could even be extended to European out-groups. Knowing, then, that identification with Europe yields this beneficial tendency, it is all the more important to appreciate why and how only some citizens come to see themselves in this superordinate light, while focusing on the nature of their identification and the relation to their socio-economic status.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interests.

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Table A1. Total effects of control variables on mediators and dependent variables (standardized coefficients, *SE*)

	Realistic threat	Symbolic threat	Attitudes non-European migrants	Attitudes European migrants
Female	-.01 (.01)	-.04*** (.01)	.02 (.01)	-.00 (.01)
Age	.05*** (.01)	.01 (.01)	-.07*** (.01)	−.06*** (.01)
Education	-.13*** (.01)	-.14*** (.01)	.09*** (.01)	.11*** (.01)
Belgium	.08*** (.02)	.09*** (.01)	-.01 (.01)	.03 (.01)
Sweden	-.05 (.01)	-.04 (.01)	.03 (.03)	.07*** (.01)
France	.11*** (.02)	.17*** (.02)	-.04 (.03)	-.02 (.01)

Note: * *p* < .05; ** *p* < .01; *** *p* < .001. All relationships are part of the structural model presented in Figure 1 and Table 3. Reference category for country of residence is the Netherlands, and the reference category for gender is male.

Table A2. Total effects of identification and perceived refugee threat on attitudes towards European and non-European immigrants (standardized coefficients, *SE*) per country

	Attitudes towards European immigrants				Attitudes towards non-European immigrants			
	Belgium	France	Netherlands	Sweden	Belgium	France	Netherlands	Sweden
National identification	.08	-.03	-.10	.07	.07	-.07	-.09	-.01
	(.03)	(.03)	(.04)	(.04)	(.03)	(.03)	(.04)	(.04)
European identification	.24**	.11	.31**	.20*	.15**	.09	.24**	.05
	(.05)	(.05)	(.06)	(.06)	(.04)	(.05)	(.06)	(.06)
Perceived realistic refugee threat	-.23**	-.23**	-.21**	-.34**	-.26**	-.25**	-.24**	-.39**
	(.01)	(.01)	(.01)	(.01)	(.01)	(.01)	(.01)	(.01)
Perceived symbolic refugee threat	-.24**	-.34**	-.24**	-.22**	-.35**	-.38**	-.29**	-.26**
	(.01)	(.01)	(.01)	(.01)	(.01)	(.01)	(.01)	(.01)
Interaction national and European identification	-.17	-.05	.00	-.08	-.12	.07	-.02	.13
	(.01)	(.01)	(.01)	(.01)	(.01)	(.01)	(.01)	(.01)

Note: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$. Analyses control for age, gender, educational attainment.

Table A3. Total, indirect, and direct effects of identification and perceived refugee threat on attitudes towards immigrants and refugees, and direct effects of identification on perceived refugee threat (standardized coefficients, *SE*)

	Realistic refugee threat	Symbolic refugee threat	Attitudes towards immigrants			Attitudes towards refugees		
	Direct	Direct	Total	Indirect	Direct	Total	Indirect	Direct
National identification	.17*** (.01)	.13*** (.01)	-.11***	-.09***	-.02	-.06***	-.07***	.01
			(.03)	(.01)	(.02)	(.02)	(.01)	(.02)
European identification	-.30***	-.28***	.24***	.17***	.07	.30***	.15***	.15***
	(.01)	(.01)	(.04)	(.01)	(.04)	(.04)	(.01)	(.04)
Perceived realistic refugee threat			-.25***		-.25***	-.24***		-.24***
			(.02)		(.02)	(.02)		(.02)
Perceived symbolic refugee threat			-.33***		-.33***	-.28***		-.33***
			(.02)		(.02)	(.02)		(.02)
Interaction national and European identification			.00		00	-00		-00
			(.01)		(.01)	(.01)		(.01)

Note:* p < .05; ** p < .01*** *p* < .001. Covariances were allowed (but not presented) between all predictors, between mediators (symbolic and realistic refugee threat), and between attitude-indicators. We controlled for age, gender, level of education and country of residence (see Table A1). National and European identification were centered around their means. Model fit indices: $X^2(12):728.17$, *p* < .000, CFI: .94, TLI: .89, RMSEA: .07 [.06;.09], SRMR: .052.