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# Vaccine Nationalism or 'Brexit Dividend'? Strategies of Legitimation in the EU-UK Post-Brexit Debate on COVID-19 Vaccination Campaigns

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**Abstract:** The initial stage of the COVID-19 vaccine rollout has been slow-moving and marred by supply disruptions in the EU. These problems have triggered severe criticism toward the institutions and highlighted a stark contrast compared to Britain's vaccination campaign, which, at the beginning of 2021, was one of the fastest in the continent. In the ensuing debate between the EU and the UK on their uneven vaccination rates, the Brexit argument has been repeatedly invoked: Some political commentators have argued that the reason why COVID-19 vaccination campaign could run so smoothly in Britain is that the country was not held back by the EU's slow approval process. This paper observes the way in which Britain emphasized its blistering vaccination pace to deflect criticism against Brexit. From a discursive perspective, Britain's vaccine success was used to vindicate the Brexit project, providing a new argument in favour of its indispensable and timely nature. At the other end of a binary rhetoric, the EU officials attempted to shatter confidence in the 'British vaccine', while also depositing blame on other factors triggering the EU's delay, such as the shortage of pharmaceutical supplies. The analytical part of this paper foregrounds strategies of discursive legitimation to observe how, and to what extent, the Brexit debate is being reshaped in UK and EU media by looking at a corpus of political tweets. The rhetorical strategies adopted by UK political leaders and EU officials to (de)legitimise national and supranational choices with reference to the COVID-19 vaccination campaign are observed through the lens of Critical Discourse Analysis as it embraces the idea that discursive acts are in dialectical relation to the social and institutional structures in which they are framed.

**Keywords:** discourse studies; EU-UK debate on COVID-19 vaccination campaign; discursive articulations of Brexit; political and institutional tweets; legitimation strategies

## 1. Introduction

This paper seeks to observe the discursive strategies used in the UK-EU debate to represent the (supra)national choices made at the onset of the COVID-19 vaccination campaign, and the way these strategies affect the political imaginary attached to the concept of Brexit and its discursive articulation/legitimation. The theoretical idea behind this analysis is that critical moments of history, such as the pandemic, have a tremendous impact on the way social reality is articulated through discourse [1], and on the way the different visions of this social reality are ideologically constructed and legitimated.

The first stage of the COVID-19 vaccine rollout was slow-moving and marred by supply disruptions in most of the European Union. The EU was allegedly slow in ordering vaccine doses, while distribution throughout the bloc was hampered by production problems and mixed messages from EU political leaders about the efficacy of the AstraZeneca vaccine. These issues triggered severe criticism toward the EU[1] and highlighted a stark contrast compared to Britain's vaccination campaign, one of the fastest and most efficient in the continent[2]. In the ensuing debate between the EU and the UK on their uneven vaccination rates, the Brexit argument was also invoked: Some British political commentators

argued that the reason why COVID-19 vaccination campaign could run so smoothly and quickly in Britain was that the country was no longer held back by the EU's slow approval process, making the conclusion that the UK is "better off outside the EU"[3] look increasingly credible.

This paper observes the way in which Britain has emphasized its blistering vaccination pace to deflect criticism against Brexit. This historical opportunity has been swiftly grasped by Leavers, who have always had a hard time spelling out the actual benefits of Brexit, as their claims about sovereignty would sound more abstract than the undeniable economic costs of leaving the EU[4]. From a discursive perspective, Britain's vaccine success is thus used to vindicate the Brexit project, providing a new argument in favour of its indispensable and timely nature. At the other end of a binary rhetoric, EU officials have been attempting to deposit blame on other factors causing their vaccine distribution delays (such as the shortage of pharmaceutical supplies from the UK) and discursively justify their political decisions on COVID-19 on the basis of moral values.

The rhetorical strategies adopted by UK political leaders and EU officials to endorse (or not) national and supranational choices in response to the COVID-19 pandemic are observed through a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach, which places discursive acts in dialectical relation to social and institutional structures. For the purpose of this qualitative and argumentation-oriented critical study, a corpus of political and institutional tweets was selected from the social networking site Twitter and scrutinised in the analytical part of this paper to detect linguistic strategies of (supra)national identity construction, blame shift and discursive legitimation. In so doing, the study is informed by the following research questions: What are the rhetorical strategies adopted by UK political leaders and EU officials to (de)legitimise national and supranational choices with reference to vaccination campaigns? How do these social actors avoid blame and trade off credibility? Which specific values and ideals are appealed to by political actors when validating argumentative positions at the opposite ends of the Channel?

## 2. Key Elements of the Linguistic Analysis: A Critical Approach

This study is couched within the framework of CDA, an approach to discourse analysis informed by different epistemological traditions, ranging from Foucauldian poststructuralism to Habermas, and from Gramsci to the Frankfurt School [2,3]. Primarily positioned in the linguistic milieu of pragmatics and discourse analysis [4] (p. 447), CDA attempts to explore language as a medium that constructs our experiences, identities and ways of viewing the world [5,6]. As anticipated in the introduction, CDA scholars also embrace the idea that discursive acts are in dialectical relation to the social and institutional structures in which they are framed [5,7–9], in the sense that social life is considered to be constitutive of, and in turn constituted by, discourse. The focus of this study is thus on political discursive practices that are "constitutive—rather than simply descriptive—of social reality and social action" [10,11] (p. 144).

CDA has inspired a number of scholarly research works on discursive acts of EU representation and construal, with specific reference to the relation between the EU, its Member States and neighbouring countries. These studies have sought to detect processes of identity construction within Europe and at its boundaries at specific transformative junctures, mainly focusing on European public sphere in/through the media [12–14], identity construction within Europe and at its boundaries [15,16], the role of discourse in the construction of social and political transformations in Europe [17], and discourses of Euroscepticism [18].

This contribution also joins an existing body of recent argumentation-oriented critical studies on the discursive articulation and legitimation of Brexit [1,11,19–23]. According to the authors of [24], the legitimation of Brexit has been fuelled by various discursive shifts at the institutional level and in public discourses. The present contribution seeks to look at the broader framework of the UK-EU public debate on the COVID-19 vaccination campaign as a micro-discursive site where discourses of Brexit are rearticulated. For this

purpose, the analytical part of this study, based on a corpus of political tweets, foregrounds the investigation of the following linguistic aspects:

- discursive strategies of identity construction [25]. Based on the underlying assumption that it is through discursive acts that social/institutional actors build their identity, this paper investigates the linguistic means involved in the construction of a sense of (supra)national belonging by the UK and the EU on the basis of the *topoi*/key argumentative frames involved in their out-group and in-group representations.

- rhetorical mechanisms of blame avoidance and blame shift [21,26]. This paper explores the discursive practices put in place to deflect blame, evade accountability and reduce the likelihood of blame attacks on (supra)national policy choices during the early stages of the 'vaccine fight' between the UK and the EU. As Hansson [26] describes, blame avoidance behaviour is particularly salient when officeholders initiate loss-imposing policies that hurt the interests of some groups (e.g., slower vaccine rollout because of the EU's deliberative system), or when facing a crisis (e.g., the COVID-19 pandemic).

- strategies of discursive legitimation [27,28]. Categories of values and ideals used to validate (political) actions are explored in this paper with a focus on highlighting the linguistic elements that are prioritised in the UK-EU debate to construct political entities as accountable and legitimate. More specifically, this paper looks at the strategies used in legitimising the (supra)national actions undertaken by the UK and the EU to fight off the COVID-19 pandemic (especially when these have been subject to criticism) and the way this may play into the broader Brexit debate.

The analysis of legitimation strategies used in the corpus under scrutiny also draws upon a recent study by Zappettini [11] on the discursive representation of Brexit, in which the author propounds that "Global Britain" has been one of the key argumentative schemes used by the UK to legitimise Brexit political debate. The Leave campaign in the UK was renowned based on the prominent argument that Britain had been held back by the EU's slow deliberative system, which prevented the UK from taking full advantage of worldwide opportunities. The Leavers' "take back control" slogan was thus motivated by a logic of global acceleration advocating further liberalisation [1] (p. 383). This study hypotheses that the trope of Global Britain, a new global economic and political role for Britain after its EU 'divorce', emerges as central during the first phase of the COVID-19 vaccination campaign in 2021. The incredibly different speed in the vaccine rollout between the UK and the EU, and the fact that Britain was the fastest and most efficient country in the continent in terms of inoculations, were discursively portrayed as the first concrete Brexit payoff. As illustrated in the analytical part of this study, the vaccination campaign success was presented as a 'Brexit dividend' and used by the British government to hone a new argument in favour of its decision to leave the EU.

### 3. Corpus Selection and Method

The corpus under scrutiny was selected with a view to examining the UK-EU media debate on the COVID-19 vaccination campaign following a specific transformative moment: the signature of the Brexit withdrawal agreement by the UK and the EU at the end of January 2021. The data were collected from the social networking site Twitter, using the accounts of key political actors in the UK government and EU institutions over a period of 14 months (1 February 2020–31 March 2021) to create the *UK-EU-DEBATE-20-21* corpus, which is illustrated in Table 1 below.

**Table 1.** The *UK-EU-DEBATE-20-21* corpus of political tweets.

| Political Actor | Role | Account | Tweets |
|---|---|---|---|
| Boris Johnson (UK PM) | UK Prime Minister | @BorisJohnson | 1186 |
| Dominic R. Raab | UK Foreign Secretary | @DominicRaab | 1468 |
| Priti Patel | UK Home Secretary | @pritipatel | 941 |
| Ursula von der Leyen | President of the European Commission | @vonderleyen | 1338 |
| David Sassoli | President of the European Parliament | @EP_President | 554 |
| Charles Michel | President of the Council of the European Union | @eucopresident | 675 |

Twitter political tweets, whose main textual traits are thoroughly described and investigated in the scholarly work of Julien Longhi [29,30], were selected for the purpose of this analysis as they are aimed at communicating the stance of political entities on topical issues and at gaining public support for the relevant actions undertaken. More specifically, as convincingly argued by Longhi [29] (p. 25), a Twitter tweet is not to be considered as a mere auxiliary information channel, but a special form of expression representing a discursive genre per se. Unlike other genres in political discourse, tweets display a significantly high degree of spontaneity that is particularly conducive to the construction of a discursive ethos [29] (p. 25).

This *UK-EU-DEBATE-20-21* corpus was collected within the framework of the collaborative research project OLiNDiNUM (*Observatoire LINguistique du DIscours NUMérique/* Linguistic Observatory of Online Debate)[5] to be part of a shared research archive of shared corpora and resources. From a methodological perspective, the analysis has benefitted from the use of the Twitter Application Programming Interface (API)[6], which enables programmatic access to Twitter via a URL page in advanced ways so that Twitter data can be easily retrieved and analysed. Twitter API provides straightforward access to the text of the searched tweet, as well as to an identifying code that enables swift retrieval of the original tweet for a better contextualisation of the text, also in relation to its metadata (videos and photographs complementing the tweet). This aspect has been particularly important given the qualitative nature of this study, aimed at identifying the main argumentative schemes being invoked by the EU and by the UK to legitimise their economic and political actions.

The beginning of the timespan selected for our corpus (1 February 2020) coincides with a rather intense period in the relations between the UK and the European Union. As already anticipated, at the end of January 2020, the European Union (Withdrawal Agreement) Act 2020 received Royal Assent. On 31 January 2020, the UK officially left the EU and entered into a transition period that would last until the end of the same year. Chance had it that on the same day, 31 January, Britain recorded its first two coronavirus cases.

The end of March 2021, which concludes our timespan, marks a crucial time in the 'vaccine war' between the EU and the UK. At the time, the EU vaccination campaign was experiencing serious delays because of shortages in vaccine supplies, namely from the biopharmaceutical company AstraZeneca, which developed its jab with Oxford University. The EU complained that AstraZeneca had only supplied half of the doses of what was initially expected[7]. The situation was so tense that by the end of March 2021, the Commission attempted to block exports of vaccine ingredient supplies produced in the EU and destined for non-EU countries that already had their own vaccine production capabilities and a vaccine rollout considerably ahead of the EU (such as the UK). Some EU leaders, including French President Macron, declared themselves in favour of stricter export controls on vaccines for drug companies that had not honoured their contractual obligations with the EU. This period of crisis was also exacerbated by some attempt on the part of some EU leaders to undermine the Oxford-AstraZeneca jab, which, at some point, was defined as "quasi-ineffective" on people over 65[8], or even considered threatening for public health because of alleged risks of blood clots. Some political commentators saw this frustration with AstraZeneca as an attempt on the part of the EU to undermine Britain's

speedy and successful vaccine rollout[9], and as a consequence of a feeling of bitterness over the Brexit withdrawal negotiations.

The EU was also allegedly late in ramping up vaccine production and inoculation because it had exported a big part of its production, unlike other countries displaying signs of 'vaccine nationalism', such as the UK, which tended to protect their vaccine production by not exporting many doses ("Actually, none", as Macron suggested on 25 March 2021). The French President called this period at the end of March 2021 "the end of naivety"/"*la fin de la naïveté*"[10]: a time when the EU started to expect reciprocity if they had to continue exporting vaccines, especially to countries that were refusing to do so in favour of the bloc.

The above dynamic applied only until March–April 2021, and this is the reason why the corpus under scrutiny consists of tweets posted up until that period. The situation quickly reversed afterward: Whereas the UK infections rates started to rise, EU Member States' vaccination campaigns became fast and effective. Before the summer of the same year, several EU states had already overtaken the UK in terms of percentages of population receiving the first two doses of the vaccine.

## 4. EU-UK Post-Brexit Debate on COVID-19 Vaccination Campaigns: Analytical Part

The analytical part of this study focuses on the main argumentative frames invoked at the opposite ends of the Channel in the debate on the COVID-19 vaccination campaign, which inevitably intertwines with the notions of nationalism, sovereignty and (supra)national values. The analysis of the political tweets constituting the corpus aims at highlighting differences in the discursive representations of the national/institutional choices related to the vaccination policy in the EU and the UK, and this is done through the observation of the linguistic aspects outlined in §2.

As previously hinted at, the EU's delays in the first stages of the vaccine rollout were attributed to the consequences of the Union's deliberative and cooperative approach to regulatory approval[11]. The EU was accused of being held off by its slow process of joint decisions and of lacking the necessary sense of urgency in vaccine procurement, since a "normal, bureaucratic EU procedure"[12] seemed to have been followed at a time when delays were counted in lost lives.

As a blame shift mechanism to counter accusations of alleged incompetence, the EU institutions tended to ascribe delays to external factors, namely to the lack of reliability on the part of vaccine suppliers that did not live up to their contractual expectations for the 2021 first-quarter deliveries. In January 2021, for instance, AstraZeneca informed the EU that it would fall short of its pledges to deliver vaccines by tens of millions of doses[13].

As can be seen from Charles Michel's tweets in Examples (1) and (2) below, when presenting its vaccine agenda, the EU's strategy of blame deflection is based on implicit references to transactions with vaccine suppliers that are described as not sufficiently swift, to the point that they need to be urgently sped up. In the utterances "And we want more predictability & transparency from the pharmaceutical companies [ ... ]" (example (1) below) and "[ ... ] we want more transparency and to make sure that contracts are fulfilled" (2), the use of *more* presupposes that until then, the degree of predictability and transparency of pharmaceutical companies' supply procedure had not been satisfactory. Similarly, the use of the verb *make sure* in (2) suggests the semantic possibility that contracts are not/have not been honoured and the future intentionality to steer in a different direction.

(1)   Our #1 priority is speeding up the production & delivery of #COVID19 vaccines and vaccinations across the EU. This includes working with industry to scale up production. And we want more predictability & transparency from pharmaceutical companies. #EUCO (*UK-EU-DEBATE-20-21* CMichel250221).

(2)   On vaccines, there is a strong consensus among Member States: we want to guarantee supply chains & keep our economy open. But at the same time, we want more transparency and to make sure that contracts are fulfilled. This is the goal of the mechanism proposed by @EU_Commission. (*UK-EU-DEBATE-20-21* CMichel260321.

In a similar vein, Ursula von der Leyen also describes vaccine procurement as the root cause of the problem in her tweet in Example (3) below. Here, the indirect accusation is introduced using the temporal deictic *now* (in "Now the companies must deliver & honour their obligations"), a presupposition trigger that discursively reports on a past history of unpredictability and malpractice that ought to be redressed. A number of expectations, summarised in the directive speech act "Now the companies must deliver and honour their obligations", are legitimised by the opening statement, a representative speech act that gives factuality to the EU's (monetary) contribution to the fight against COVID-19 ("Europe invested billions to help develop the world's first COVID's vaccines").

(3)     Europe invested billions to help develop the world's 1st COVID vaccines & create a global common good. Now the companies must deliver & honour their obligations. We will set up a vaccine export transparency mechanism. EU is committed to contribute. But we also mean business. (*UK-EU-DEBATE-20-21* UvonderLeyen260121).

The EU consistently hints at the fact that a deal was not honoured as a blame shift mechanism for its alleged procedural shortcomings. An interesting implicature can be found in von der Leyen's tweet below (Figure 1) when she engages on the EU's commitment to "[ . . . ] ensure long-term supply, with trusted companies", inferring that some pharmaceutical companies involved in the transactions do not classify as "trusted".



**Figure 1.** *UK-EU-DEBATE-20-21* UvonderLeyen170321.

Her implicit message is intratextually[14] complemented by a video message accompanying von der Leyen's tweet in which the President declares before the Commission:

(4)     The good news is that we have made progress. BioNTech-Pfizer and Moderna are delivering on their contracts. *But we also know that AstraZeneca has unfortunately under-produced and under-delivered.* We know that we can achieve our target to have 70% of the adult population fully vaccinated by the end of this summer. And we know that deliveries will increase in the second quarter. One more vaccine is approved and will kick-in, that is Johnson & Johnson. It will start in April. Now, if we have a look at the epidemiological situation, it is getting worse. *And we know we need to accelerate vaccination rates* [ . . . ]. (*UK-EU-DEBATE-20-21* UvonderLeyen170321) [emphasis added].

The statement in Example (4) above ("But we also know that AstraZeneca has unfortunately under-produced and under-delivered"), in association with the implicature generated by von der Leyen's tweet (Figure 1 above: "And we will ensure long-term supply, with *trusted companies*"), leads to the logical conclusion that AstraZeneca is *not* a company to be trusted. Collaboration and reciprocity (or, better say, the lack thereof) are at stake here. The EU's argumentative frame is indeed based on the discontinuation/dissimilation [25] (p. 32) between, on the one hand, a past experience of suppliers' underproduction and noncompliance and, on the other, the need for future transparency and reliability to pursue the EU's key priority: accelerate the vaccine rollout to counter accusations of distribution delays.

The same topos of discontinuation can be consistently found in EU discursive practices, as well as when tensions escalated to a point where the EU started to threaten to block exports in March 2021. As anticipated in Section 3 above, the EU lamented the lack of the reciprocity and bidirectionality of exchanges to legitimise its intention to curb vaccine exports toward countries that already had high vaccination rates and that did not 'open their doors' to the EU, as it was supposedly the case with the UK. As illustrated in Example (5) below, the EU's message to improve bilateral collaboration is formulated off-record. The implicature derived from the indirect speech act "But open roads run in both directions" is used to convey the propositional value of a warning, or a threat: Exports will be blocked if transactions remain unidirectional. This new awareness and willingness to put an end to a long series of irregularities discursively reflects what Macron referred to as "*la fin de la naïveté*" (§3 above).

(5)    The EU has been exporting vaccines in support of global cooperation. But open roads run in both directions. If needed we'll reflect on how to adjust our exports based on reciprocity and, in the case of countries with higher vaccination rates than us, proportionality. (*UK-EU-DEBATE-20-21* UvonderLeyen170321).

The EU defends its position against accusations of alleged incompetence to meet the challenge of vaccine procurement through implicit mechanisms of blame shift that point a finger at pharmaceutical companies, namely AstraZeneca, or to the lack of proportionality in international transactions. The EU discursively asserts its identity through a recurrent topos of dissimilation that highlights a disconnect between, on the one hand, the EU's significant engagements for the COVID-19 vaccine cause and, on the other, a scenario of noncompliance with both pre-existing contractual obligations and the reciprocity principle.

Let us now look at the way the EU deflects criticism for having held back the coronavirus response on grounds of seeking to follow a leading moral principle: working together with its 27 Member States to procure medical supplies for all. It is widely known that the EU adopted and followed a strategy of joint vaccine procurement, with a decision to prioritise concerted action over speed and "to put solidarity between EU countries ahead of giving individual governments more room to maneuver"[15]. After all, the COVID-19 vaccination campaign had been heralded as the flagship of EU solidarity, against a rationale of vaccine nationalism *à la* Trump.

The EU discursively compensates for having failed to deliver COVID-19 vaccines at pace by foregrounding a number of key values and virtuous principles that have been embraced within the framework of its vaccine policy: solidarity, fairness, equitable distribution/vaccine access to all, reciprocity and, last but not least, unity as opposed to unilateral action. So, while it was true that in the first quarter of 2021 the EU had been lagging behind the United Kingdom (and the US) in terms of number of inoculations, it is also the case that the EU had prioritised solidarity and fought to guarantee a number of common assets to its citizens, such as supplies at lower prices, liability/higher accountability for drugmakers (who would bear legal responsibility in case of problems), safety and simultaneous distribution in the whole of the EU. This vaccine strategy was also intended to help smaller Member States, such as Malta, get shots faster than they would have been able to otherwise. These aspects are consistently hinted at in EU rhetoric when the institutions voice their

intention to stand in ideological opposition to other world actors and their vaccine policy choices.

In Figure 2 below, the late David Sassoli invokes togetherness and unity to vindicate the EU's policy actions ("Let's start distributing the vaccine simultaneously in all European countries!"), as opposed to acting unilaterally, as countries such as the UK and the US seemed to be doing at the time. The simultaneous distribution of the vaccine in all Member States is a decision that comes at a cost in terms of timing for deliveries, but Sassoli also legitimates his stance by means of "personal authorization" [27] (p. 94), that is, by referring to a person invested by institutional authority who shares the same vision. His tweet verbally and multimodally quotes the President of the European Commission von der Leyen, who backs up Sassoli's claim by (rather emphatically) stipulating for a vaccination campaign that all EU Member States should start "together, as 27, on the same day".



**Figure 2.** *UK-EU-DEBATE-20-21* DSassoli160120.

The same deliberative principles based on the united approach adopted by Sassoli and von der Leyen also animate the tweets in Examples (6)–(8) below, in which the EU insists on fair distribution and universal access to vaccines, as opposed to mechanisms of profitability and to the bilateral agreements that might govern the decision-making process in other national settings. The reference to the EU's equitable distribution system has clear moral grounds and enables the institutions to set themselves apart from the (nationalistic) individualism of other world players by placing the community, not just the individual, at the very heart of the matter: "no one will be safe until everyone is safe" (see Example (6) below). Once again, these argumentative constructions find validity both in moral evaluation [27] (p. 97) and in the vouching of external authorities [27] (p. 94) that embrace the same set of beliefs and priorities as the EU (e.g., the Gavi Vaccine Alliance in Example (6), and Canada and the WHO in (7)).

(6)  Fruitful exchange with @GaviSeth. Happy to hear that @gavi is on track and ready to deliver vaccines all over the world through #COVAX. We need a *fair distribution system*,

as *no one will be safe until everyone is safe.* (*UK-EU-DEBATE-20-21* DSassoli030221) [emphasis added].

(7)　The EU & Canada are close allies, who share the view that cooperation and multilateralism are essential for tackling today's challenges. We are both committed to *fair and universal access to COVID-19 vaccines*. And we work hand in hand with @WHO towards this goal. (*UK-EU-DEBATE-20-21* UvonderLeyen291020) [emphasis added].

(8)　Today I discussed the #EUVaccinesStrategy with @Europarl_EN political groups. The vaccination rollout is based on two core principles:

- *Safety & efficacy of vaccines*, authorised through our robust EMA process.
- *Fair access to vaccines for all Member States*. (*UK-EU-DEBATE-20-21* Uvonder Leyen020221) [emphasis added].

As evinced from Example (8) above, safety is also a key value foregrounded in the discursive construction of the EU during the vaccine debate, while this very same value was allegedly overlooked by the UK when it remained determinedly reliant upon AstraZeneca[16] in spite of the numerous concerns raised by EU national leaders over its possible side effects.

In Tweet (9) below, further values are attached to the EU principles regulating vaccine distribution, which correspond to the goals that have historically justified the foundation and the role of the Union from the onset, such as unity and reciprocity. Making direct reference to these founding values is a form of legitimating strategy [27] in EU discourse. This means that processes and actions are assessed according to a set of beliefs that members of a community can identify themselves with [21] (p. 17). In addition, legitimation by values becomes increasingly plausible, and therefore salient, in times of crisis such as the pandemic, "when social groups and organisations often retreat into and rely on more essentialised frames of self-identification" [21] (p. 17).

(9)　We cannot afford to waste a single vaccine. We need *trust and unity*. The vaccine distribution and organisation must be guided by the principles of *proportionality and reciprocity*. #EUCO (*UK-EU-DEBATE-20-21* DSassoli250321) [emphasis added].

(10)　We cannot go backwards. We need to develop a truly European health policy, with clearly defined competences for the EU institutions. *We cannot allow bilateral agreements and vaccine nationalism. It would be scandalous if we were to revert to the logic of the strongest, or the most powerful.* Modifying the Treaties can no longer be a taboo. #EUCO (*UK-EU-DEBATE-20-21* DSassoli250221) [emphasis added].

In Example (10) above, the EU is still introducing values as building blocks of its identity, this time by antonymy. Here, vaccine nationalism and profitability are argumentatively framed by David Sassoli as a reprehensible conduct that cannot—and should not—be *allowed* by the EU, the guardian of fair practices. In an attempt of self-legitimation, the EU represents itself as the authority that can prevent bilateral agreements and vaccine nationalism from happening again. The verb *revert to* presupposes a time when the strongest had the upper hand in vaccine distribution and procurement, notably in the case of the UK and the US[17]. Discursive practices of polarization can thus be identified here between 'us', the EU Member States, and 'them', those nations that are inclined to sign deplorable bilateral agreements with pharmaceutical companies. The declared unacceptability of this "scandalous behaviour" semantically entails the rightfulness of EU action and of its joint deliberative process in the eyes of the readers. Inevitably, having to find the agreement of 27 nations does mean slowing down vaccine delivery, but the values underpinning the overall institutional telos increase the rhetorical effectiveness of the EU message [31] in Reference [11] (p. 145).

The nationalism that the EU laments is hardly ever missing from UK rhetoric in the COVID-19 vaccine debate. We shall now look at the argumentative positions adopted by the UK to validate their stance, with a focus on understanding the (novel or more traditional) imaginaries attached to Brexit in its discursive articulation and legitimation.

The fact that the UK was exceptionally ahead of schedule compared to continental Europe at a very critical time in the world history led the British government to harness the

public's enthusiasm about the vaccination campaign and discursively frame the latter as one of the first tangible and successful results of a long-awaited Brexit.

In Figure 3 below, Johnson's tweet addresses the Nation on New Year's Eve. The end of the year speech that the tweet is drawn upon, and whose partial transcription follows in Example (11), also temporally coincides with a key moment in the history of Brexit: 31 December 2020 is the date the transition period ends and the United Kingdom officially leaves the EU single market. As evidenced in Example (11), the UK still displays rhetorical traits typical of the 2016 Brexit campaign, which was based on the "let's take back control" vision and on the dichotomic logic of "control vs. freedom" [21] (p. 27). As aptly argued by Zappettini and Krzyżanowski [1], "the understanding of Brexit as a restoration of British freedom" was one of the original discursive drivers for Leavers, and it can still be found in the corpus under scrutiny. References to the newly acquired freedom that the UK is now finally experiencing also indirectly imply that Britain has been so-far controlled from above and impeded upon by the EU' system of joint decisions, whereas "In 2021 we have our freedom in our hands and it is up to us to make the most of it". The repetition of exclusive possessive *our* and object pronoun *us* in this utterance expresses self-centeredness and a more unilateral/individualistic slant when compared to the EU's discursive frames thus far scrutinised.



**Figure 3.** *UK-EU-DEBATE-20-21* BJohnson311220.

(11)　[ . . . ] But as the sun rises tomorrow on 2021 we have the certainty of those vaccines. Pioneered in a UK that is also free to do things differently, and if necessary better, than our friends in the EU. Free to do trade deals around the world. And free to turbocharge our ambition to be a science superpower. From biosciences to artificial intelligence, and with our world-leading battery and wind technology we will work with partners around the world, not just to tackle climate change but to create the millions of high skilled jobs this country will need not just this year—2021—as we bounce back from COVID, but in the years to come. This is an amazing moment for this country. We have our freedom in our hands and it is up to us to make the most of it [ . . . ]. (UK-EU-DEBATE-20-21 BJohnson311220) [emphasis added].

The two separate events presented in Excerpt (11) above, the successful COVID-19 vaccination campaign on the one hand and Brexit on the other, are inextricably linked to one another and correspond to the two types of freedom that the UK is now bestowed upon:

freedom from the disease (that was believed to be) guaranteed by the COVID-19 vaccine, and freedom from the EU's supranational 'grip'. These two types of freedom are at once confounded and mutually reinforced in Excerpt (11) above. The repeated use of the ADJ *free* ("Pioneered in a UK that is also *free* to do things differently"; "*Free* to do trade deals around the world") also anticipates the legitimating argumentative scheme of "Global Britain" for Brexit [11]: It is thanks to Brexit that Britain can now finally act freely from institutional sovereignty, and win globally and "as a science turbopower", as Johnson reports. The comparison with the EU's performance is far from indirect and simply implied here, if not almost confrontational, as exemplified by the utterance: "Pioneered [those vaccines] in a UK that is also free to do things differently, and if necessarily better, than our friends in the EU". This on-record face-threatening act directed at the EU on vaccine-related matters plays directly into the Brexit debate: We, the UK, are blatantly better off outside of the Union as we are no longer going to be held back by our less-skilled and worse-performing "friends in the EU".

　　　One of the ways in which 'out-of-the-EU Britain' can provide evidence of Brexit payoffs is by promoting the AstraZeneca vaccine, which is also nationalistically referred to in the corpus via the compounds "the Oxford vaccine", "the Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine (Figure 4 below) or the phrase "the one [vaccine] from Oxford" in Example (12) below. The "vaccine being developed by the University of Oxford" swiftly becomes an object of pride and national self-praise by acquiring a strong 'made in Britain' feel, although some of its components come from facilities in different EU countries, such as Belgium and the Netherlands.



**Figure 4.** *UK-EU-DEBATE-20-21* PPatel040121.

(12)　Positive news on the #COVID19 vaccine being developed by @UniofOxford @AstraZeneca in the UK 🇬🇧.
　　　#UKaid is working with @CEPIvaccines and @gavi to make sure vaccines, including the one from Oxford, are accessible to all who need them globally. (*UK-EU-DEBATE-20-21* DRaab191120).

　　　Figure 5 and Example (13) below show how easily nationalism permeates the discourse on COVID-19 vaccine. In Figure 5, when reporting the news that the AstraZeneca vaccine triggered immune response, Boris Johnson discursively appropriates the scientific breakthrough at national level, also through the (potentially patronising) expressive speech act "A huge well done to *our* brilliant, world-leading scientists & researchers at @UniofOxford". The same is true for the tweet in Example (13) below, where Johnson presents a key scientific achievement, the approval of the AstraZeneca vaccine, not just as a triumph for

science in general, but as "a triumph for *British science*": The Oxford vaccine epitomises one of the gifts that post-Brexit Britain is ready to bestow upon the world. In Figure 5, the use of the third-person plural and possessive pronouns ("we're not there yet"; "our brilliant, world-leading scientists") is instrumental to the construction and positive presentation of an in-group, and to discursively position (i) the speaker, (ii) the Oxford researchers and (iii) the audience as members of the same in-group, 'us'—the Nation, which is attributed the same positive traits one should be proud of, such as "brilliant" and "world-leading". In-group loyalty is seen as a significant factor affecting moral judgement [32] in Reference [21] (p. 197), and as having an impact on the rightfulness of political decisions at specific critical junctures.



**Figure 5.** *UK-EU-DEBATE-20-21* BJohnson200720.

(13) It is truly fantastic news—and a triumph for *British science*—that the @UniofOxford /@AstraZeneca vaccine has been approved for use. We will now move to vaccinate as many people as quickly as possible. (*UK-EU-DEBATE-20-21* BJohnson301220). [emphasis added].

The discourse on the COVID-19 vaccine and on Brexit conflate again in Example (14) below, when the British Prime Minister presents the "Oxford vaccine" as evidence of why both the UK and the world need Brexit. Britain being global, and thus finally free from the yoke of EU regulations and restrictions, is not just a whim but an epistemic necessity for the country itself and for the whole world, as expressed by the verb *need*. This directly plays into the debate on Brexit by vindicating Britain's much-debated decision to exit the Union. This form of legitimation in UK rhetoric has already been identified by Zappettini [11], who propounds that the idea of a new 'Global Britain' has been discursively constructed in British political debates to legitimise Brexit and mediatise the decision to leave Brussels as 'the right move'. In example (14) below, the success story of the Oxford vaccine "shows why".

(14) The Oxford vaccine shows why we and the world *need Britain to be global*. (UK-EU-DEBATE-20-21 BJohnson160321) [emphasis added].

(15) *Global Britain will be a #ForceForGood—at home and across the world*. Today I set out our mission, and our promise, for the years ahead. Thanks to @AspenInstitute for hosting me as I delivered my speech, Global Britain in a competitive age (UK-EU-DEBATE-20-21 DRaab170321) [emphasis added].

(16) PM secured a deal with EU that takes back control over our laws, borders, money, fish & trade. We have a zero-tariff, zero-quota deal with EU & friendly cooperation will

continue. Time to unite, put Brexit divisions behind us & look to 2021 as *a springboard for Global Britain*. (UK-EU-DEBATE-20-21 DRaab241220) [emphasis added].

As previously anticipated, a number of scholars have worked on Britain rebranding its role as 'global' to prepare for/justify the Brexit move. The data clearly show how this topos/legitimising tool also contributes to the identity construction process of post-Brexit Britain. In Examples (15) and (16) above, and across the British section of the corpus under scrutiny (political tweets by Johnson, Raad and Patel), Brexit is made functional to Britain's agenda to further free trade and market liberalisation, thus becoming a global force. This spatial deictic shift signals a political and ideological repositioning of Britain's role, in space (in the world) and therefore in importance (unlimited).

## 5. Conclusions and Future Avenues for Research

The analysis of the argumentative frames used in the UK-EU debate on the policy choices made at the onset of the COVID-19 vaccination campaign is initially focused in this paper on the mechanisms used by the EU to redirect blame for its vaccine inoculation fiasco to defaulting suppliers, and ultimately to legitimise the rationale of its vaccine distribution policy on grounds of moral evaluation [27]. In an attempt to trade off credibility, the EU (i) uses implicit claims and presupposition triggers for scapegoating purposes, and (ii) encapsulates arguments based on traditional EU moral values (cooperation, fairness and reciprocity) into its discursive representations of the vaccination campaign, also to express the stark opposition between the EU's guiding tenets and the vaccine policies implemented outside of the EU.

When it comes to the UK, the discourse on the COVID-19 vaccine campaign displays numerous and deep connections with the narrative of Brexit, following old and new argumentative schemes. Britain's vaccine success story is certainly used strategically by the UK to vindicate its much-criticised Brexit plan. However, on top of the old dichotomic frame of Britain taking back control from a slow and subjugating supranational power, a new legitimising argument emerges in favour of the decision to leave the EU: Recent successes, also in the field of science and health, help portray Brexit as the functional and necessary passage to enter a new 'global' era for the UK, which can finally take full advantage of worldwide political, economic and scientific opportunities. Brexit finds legitimation insofar as it brings to completion an instrumental metamorphosis for Britain, whose political drive is that of a global actor trading freely in a new order of liberal internationalism [11].

As anticipated in the analytical part, this contribution has looked at the UK-EU public debate on the COVID-19 vaccination campaign as a micro-discursive site where discourses of Brexit are rearticulated: The vaccination campaign success was presented as a 'Brexit dividend' and used by the British government to hone a new argument in favour of its decision to leave the EU. As illustrated in the study, this argument was used to vindicate the Brexit project and attach novel political imaginaries to its discursive legitimation. Drawing upon the critical discursive work of Zappettini and Krzyżanowski [1] on the mediatisation of Brexit in political discourse, this paper theorises the breakout of the COVID-19 pandemic as a "critical juncture" in political discourse, in the sense that it is a critical moment of history that entails "acceleration of discursive articulations of various visions of social reality as well as of their ideological foundation and legitimation" [1] (pp. 381–382). By associating the pandemic crisis to discursive shifts [24] that lead to a new discursive trajectory for Brexit, this paper seeks to make an original contribution to the literature in the field and pave the way for studies on the long-term ramifications of the pandemic in the public debate on Brexit. There is reason to believe that the combination/superposition of Brexit and the COVID-19 pandemic, which the UK government has recently used in its narrative to cover up the costs of Brexit, will become a running theme in the UK's strategy to legitimate its decision to leave the EU: Poor economic data are likely to be imputed to the effects of the pandemic rather than to Brexit. In this respect, it will be important to keep a critical eye on the patterns of legitimation of Brexit in relation to the current sanitary crisis[18], to see how these become (or not) normalised in UK political discourse. This venue

for future research will hopefully be explored by future critical discourse studies with reference, but not limited, to the UK's relations with the EU.

## Notes

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13. See footnote 7.
14. In terms of genre analysis, the videos accompanying the tweets under scrutiny are considered to be part of the same text.
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