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Depoliticizing Transnational Cleavage-Related Issues Through Social Media Advertising: The 2022 Danish Defense Referendum Campaign

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Abstract

Denmark has an extensive but troubled experience when it comes to referendums related to the EU, with the Danes rejecting the pro-integration options in three votes up to 2022. As Denmark is the "home of issue voting," these outcomes are symbolic of the transnational cleavage permeating its society, which has been argued to make the abolition of Denmark's opt-outs impossible. Nevertheless, the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 resulted in an apparent shift in the balance between the sides of this cleavage as Denmark subsequently voted overwhelmingly in favor of abolishing its EU defense opt-out. Scholarly work has argued that voters responded to efforts from the pro-abolition camp to depoliticize the issue of European integration, which raises the question of how the campaigning actors were able to achieve this. This contribution examines the role of social media advertising in this regard. Prior studies have focused primarily on social media discourse and its impact on voter behavior in referendum contexts, portraying it as a site for polarization and politicization, rather than depoliticization. We map the advertising expenditures of campaigning actors in the run-up to the referendum using data from the Meta Ad Library, and analyze their messaging using structured framing analysis to show how both sides in the campaign deal with the issue of European integration. Results show the pro-side being much more present than the contra-side, and offer empirical evidence for passive and active depoliticization strategies by the former vis-à-vis the transnational cleavage-related issue of European defense cooperation.

Keywords

cleavage referendums; Denmark; digital advertising; European integration; social media

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1. Introduction

The two most recent EU-related referendums have had wildly different outcomes. The watershed vote on EU membership in the UK in 2016 has left strong marks on British society that reverberate to this day. The politicization that was present throughout the campaign and its immediate aftermath made Brexit the most dominant cleavage in the country, becoming "the receptacle for broader political, cultural and identity-based divides" (Brändle et al., 2022, p. 235). Only recently have there been signs that the all-encompassing influence of Brexit on British politics and public opinion has been waning, having been a key issue in the 2017 and 2019 general elections (see for instance Fieldhouse & Bailey, 2023). This is confirmed by the fact that despite the change from Conservative to Labour leadership after the July 2024 general elections, the new government expressed that it will not reverse Brexit (Morton, 2024). In other words, the referendum had as its immediate outcome the cultivation and exacerbation of a deep divide within British society centering around EU membership that only recently has found somewhat of a resolution, even though its wider impact regarding the contestation of other European integration issues still lingers to this day (Morton, 2024).

Six years after the internal shock of this referendum, the Union had to deal with new pressures from outside its territory following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. In this context, Denmark decided to abolish its opt-out concerning the EU's Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP), thus triggering the first EU-related referendum since the British decided to terminate their membership of the Union. From a historical perspective, chances for success seemed slim: Much like the UK, Denmark has mostly been an outlier when it comes to their political positioning to the EU (Favell & Reimer, 2021). On three earlier occasions, the Danes had rejected the pro-integration options in EU-related referendums, and since the Danes were generally considered to be opposed to more integration, abolishing the defense opt-out should have been a "mission impossible" (Beach, 2021, p. 551). However, the decision ultimately found large support among voters, with 66.9% voting in favor of removing the opt-out.

As such, Denmark's vote was seemingly able to (at least temporarily) shift the balance between the two sides of its transnational cleavage (Hooghe & Marks, 2018), i.e., its historical and societal divide concerning European integration, resulting in the apparent resolution of the cleavage-related issue of closer European cooperation regarding defense policy. This is especially noteworthy considering that the UK referendum saw this cleavage being deepened into the most dominant division of its contemporary society as a result of heavy politicization and polarization, both during the campaign (Del Vicario et al., 2017; Tolson, 2018; Zappettini, 2021) and in its immediate aftermath (Brändle et al., 2022; North et al., 2021). One could argue that in the Danish referendum, voters responded to the pressures of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, but research on voter behavior by Brun Pedersen et al. (2023) suggests that this was not the case. Instead, the pro-abolition-side was seemingly able to resonate with voters by emphasizing normative values and strategic benefits, thus *de*politicizing the opt-out and effectively steering the debate away from the topic of European integration. Theoretically, this is surprising, as both referendums, while different in scope, can be categorized as dealing with "constitutive issues" or the widening/deepening of the EU based on the typology of Hoeglinger (2016), meaning that both referendums would be expected to see high politicization (Grande & Hutter, 2016, p. 68).

Considering the above, this study looks to uncover how exactly the pro-abolition-side was able to depoliticize the defense opt-out in the Danish 2022 referendum campaign. Our central argument postulates that, presumably under the pressure of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, a large coalition of political actors was able to present a strong and cohesive message that successfully framed the opt-out in a way that decoupled it from European integration. We test this argument by examining the political advertisements of these actors during the referendum campaign, specifically on social media. Several studies have shown that this medium was instrumental in creating the polarization and politicization that characterized the Brexit referendum's campaign and its aftermath (such as Brändle et al., 2022; Del Vicario et al., 2017; North et al., 2021). These works, like most that discuss social media as an arena for politicization in referendum contexts (see Buchanan, 2016; Morisi & Plescia, 2018; Munir, 2018), focus on the *discourse* surrounding referendums, i.e., the discussions and interactions between users as well as specific engagement through comments, likes, and shares. However, much less attention has been paid to social media *advertising*, even though it offers campaigning actors much greater control over who sees their messages and how prominently these are being shown to those users (see for instance Baviera et al., 2022), including when compared to more traditional campaigning avenues such as television or newspaper ads. Considering also the high level of internet penetration (99%) and social media adoption (85.3%) in Denmark at the time (Kemp, 2022), and that the 2022 vote was arguably the first fully mediatized referendum in the country's experience, we argue that social media advertising offered plenty of depoliticizing potential to campaigning actors in its campaign. This would be especially true if they were able to cultivate a strong and united presence, which has been shown to affect referendum outcomes (De Vreese & Semetko, 2004; McAllister & Biddle, 2024; Silagadze & Gherghina, 2018; Szczerbiak & Taggart, 2004).

In what follows, we first focus on the empirics of the Danish EU referendums and link them to the transnational cleavage theory by Hooghe and Marks (2018). We also discuss the role of social media in referendum campaigns and formulate several hypotheses on how campaigning actors might have achieved depoliticization of the European integration issue through advertisements on this medium in the 2022 referendum. Note that for readability purposes, we will use "pro-side" and "pro-abolition-side" interchangeably throughout the rest of this study as designations for the side that was in favor of abolishing the opt-out, while "contra-side" and "contra-abolition-side" indicate those against the abolition. The subsequent methodological section sets out how we attempt to test our hypotheses using data from the Meta Ad Library. We focus specifically on advertisement expenditure as a proxy for the extent to which both sides are present in the campaign. We then examine the different communication strategies used by both sides through content analysis of their campaign messaging. Specifically, we use structured framing analysis, where the macro-frames are derived from the modes of justification for mentioning the EU/European integration as distinguished by Brändle et al. (2022), and the sub-frames are distinguished inductively from the content of the advertisements. After discussing our findings, the article concludes with reflections on the wider relevance of this Danish case-study, as well as its limitations and avenues for future research.

2. Background and Theory

2.1. Danish EU Referendum Experience, Issue Voting, and the Transnational Cleavage

The Danish experience with EU-related referendums spans 50 years and nine votes in total, starting in 1972 with the vote to accede to the EU. This relatively large number stems mostly from the constitutional

requirement that transfers of sovereignty to international organizations have to be ratified by a binding popular vote if there is a majority in the Danish parliament (*Folketing*) that does not constitute a 5/6th majority (Danmarks Riges Grundlov, 1953, S. 20). In 1992, the Danes surprisingly voted against the ratification of the Treaty of Maastricht, which eventually resulted in the Edinburgh Agreement, granting Denmark four opt-outs from the Maastricht Treaty: for the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU), for the CSDP, for Justice and Home Affairs (JHA), and for citizenship of the EU. This renegotiated relationship between Denmark and the EU was approved in a second referendum in 1993, but the opt-outs would become the subject of two subsequent votes before 2022. However, attempts to abolish the EMU (2000) and JHA (2015) opt-outs ended up being unsuccessful.

As such, Denmark has seen three occasions in which an EU referendum was considered unsuccessful by the pro-integration side, and all were with relatively slim margins (49.3% yes-votes for Maastricht I, 46.8% for abolishing the EMU opt-out, and 46.9% for abolishing the JHA opt-out). Scholars have questioned what could have determined these outcomes. One strand of literature argues that EU referendums at large are effectively second-order electoral contests, in which voter behavior reflects sentiments towards national politics rather than European integration (see for instance Franklin, 2002; Ivaldi, 2006). By contrast, research from Hobolt (2009, pp. 65–83) and Svensson (2002) offers evidence based on post-vote surveys that in Danish EU referendums up to 2000, voters based their choices on EU attitudes, which was also shown to be the case in the 2015 vote (Beach, 2020). Denmark has therefore been dubbed "the home of issue voting" (Beach, 2021, p. 550), where voters see the referendum issue as important enough to exclusively base their vote on, instead of other considerations such as government satisfaction (Hobolt, 2009, pp. 65–83).

Historical evidence prior to 2022 thus points to the existence of a long-term and polarized political conflict, or "cleavage" (Flora et al., 1999), vis-à-vis European integration in Danish society. Cleavage theory has historically conceptualized such societal divides along a set of dimensions related to, amongst others, religion and class (Lipset & Rokkan, 1967) based on "closed social milieus that bonded voters to parties" (Marks et al., 2021, p. 174). As time passed, and these social milieus and their institutions declined, political conflict became more value and culture-driven, aligning with issues such as immigration, lifestyle choices, and multiculturalism, effectively pitting the "new middle-class winners of the transformation of Western European societies [against] the group of losers of the very same process" (Kriesi, 1998, p. 180). More recently, Hooghe and Marks (2018) identified the rise of transnationalism as the key driver of the contemporary cultural divide, with phenomena such as immigration, international trade, and European integration increasingly transcending national borders (Hooghe et al., 2019). These developments have created a "transnational" cleavage (Hooghe & Marks, 2018) between transnationalism's losers, who see their national citizenship and way of life being devalued in the face of increasingly divergent belief and norm systems while simultaneously facing greater competition for jobs and housing, and its winners, who are left with the benefits of these processes.

2.2. The 2022 Defense Opt-Out Referendum Campaign

The existence of this transnational cleavage in Denmark was recently argued by Beach (2021, p. 550) to make removing opt-outs "very difficult" and a "mission impossible," as European integration was likely to remain highly salient and thus more susceptible to issue voting than second-order dynamics (Svensson, 2002). Nevertheless, on 6 March 2022, two weeks after Russia invaded Ukraine, the Social Democratic

government announced that a defense agreement had been reached with several other parties, which stipulated an increase of defense spending to 2% of GDP and the organization of a referendum on the CSDP opt-out. The referendum had widespread support amongst parties as the Liberal Party, the Socialist People's Party, the Social Liberal Party, and the Conservative People's Party all co-signed the defense agreement, while the Liberal Alliance, the Christian Democrats, and the Independent Greens recommended a yes-vote. As such, the pro-side represented a large parliamentary majority, with the aforementioned parties making up 81% of seats in the *Folketing* (see also Brun Pedersen et al., 2023). In addition, several large associations representing Danish business (Dansk Erhverv, 2022), industry (Dansk Metal, 2022), and trade unions ("FH anbefaler et ja," 2022) campaigned for abolition, as well as other political organizations such as the European Movement ("Væk med forsvarsforbeholdet," 2022), with support from most major media outlets. In contrast, the side campaigning against abolishing the opt-out consisted solely of The Danish People's Party, the New Right Party, and the Red-Green Alliance, with limited media outlet support. As such, there was a clear discrepancy in representation between the two sides in the campaign, and Denmark's regulatory framework surrounding referendum campaign financing did not mitigate this imbalance. Referendum campaign spending is not limited in any way, and Denmark does not provide public funding to campaigning actors besides the general subsidies to parties (Ministry of the Interior and Health of Denmark, 2024), giving the pro-side full reign to use their superiority in resources to their advantage.

Initial polls after the referendum's announcement suggested that public opinion was also in favor of abolition with about 40% of the population indicating they would vote for the opt-out to be removed, as opposed to 25 to 30% against and around 30% undecided. However, this did not fully reflect the aforementioned overwhelming majority amongst political and civil society actors, and evidence from the 2015 referendum suggested that this could be cause for concern for the pro-side. Here, a similar initial level of support for the pro-integration-option eroded as the campaign progressed, since the large proportion of undecided voters broke towards the contra-side of the vote (Brun Pedersen et al., 2023). However, such developments did not unfold during the 2022 campaign, which, despite four television debates, was considered largely underwhelming by observers and analysts when compared to general elections and previous EU-related referendums: Besides a slightly narrower gap between the pro- and contra-sides in public opinion by the beginning of May, polls showed a comfortable lead for the pro-abolition-side throughout the campaign that did not wane when the roughly 35–40% of voters that was still undecided made up their mind late in the campaign (Brun Pedersen et al., 2023). A turnout of 65.8%, compared to 72% in 2015 and 87.6% in 2000, further illustrates that the referendum was less salient in the public sphere than previous EU referendums in Denmark, and in the end, over 66% of voters decided in favor of abolishing the opt-out.

One could assume that the shift in behavior of undecided voters described above is related to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia, second-order effects, and/or a sudden repositioning of the Danish electorate regarding European integration. However, panel survey data from Brun Pedersen et al. (2023) shows that voters did not take Russia's invasion into account, that issue voting remained dominant, and that the transnational cleavage endured. Instead, they resonated with arguments of the pro-side that emphasized solidarity with and responsibility towards EU-neighboring countries, as well as strategic benefits that could result from the abolition in terms of geopolitics and international cooperation regarding defense policy. As such, it seems more likely that the Russian invasion of Ukraine impacted campaigning actors, rather than voters, resulting in a strong and unified pro-abolition-side in the campaign. The actors in this camp were then able to effectively depoliticize the transnational cleavage and convince voters of the aforementioned arguments through strong and clear messaging.

2.3. Social Media Advertising and Referendum Campaigns: A Site of (De)Politicization?

Voter behavior in the Danish 2022 opt-out referendum was thus likely influenced by campaigning effects, which have been argued to be larger in referendum than in traditional electoral processes (De Vreese, 2016). This is because complex issues are often reduced to a single, binary question (De Vreese & Semetko, 2004, p. 3), while voters deal with insecurity about "which actors will campaign or who will take which position" (Udris & Eisenegger, 2023, p. 1). In such a context, research has shown that elite cues can influence referendum outcomes, especially when they are strong and clear (De Vreese & Semetko, 2004; McAllister & Biddle, 2024; Szczerbiak & Taggart, 2004) and when there is a large parliamentary majority backing a specific side in a referendum (Silagadze & Gherghina, 2018). As noted by Beach (2021, p. 544), "how issues are framed by media and political elites can be very important, shifting public opinion on the issue in the short term in ways that can affect the final outcome." However, research from Hobolt (2006, pp. 641–642) indicates that Danish voters, because of their "well-informed and stable opinions about European integration," are generally less susceptible to partisan cues when it comes to EU referendums. This can offer an explanation for why undecided voters tended to end up voting against abolishing the opt-out in 2015. As the polling date drew nearer, they fell back on their preconceived notion towards the EU, instead of falling victim to persuasion attempts from campaigning actors.

This raises the question of why this did not materialize in the 2022 referendum, especially because in 2015, distribution along the campaigning sides in terms of political and civil society actors was similar. A key difference between 2015 and 2022 might have been that the latter was the first Danish vote that was fully mediatized through social media. As mentioned in the introduction, internet penetration (99%) and social media use (85.3%) were high in Denmark in 2022 (Kemp, 2022), whereas the latter was a lot lower even in 2017 (67%; see Kemp, 2017). Scholarly attention to the role of social media in referendum campaigns has proliferated dramatically in recent years, with studies clustering around cleavage referendums since the 2014 Scottish independence referendum (Baxter & Marcella, 2017; Buchanan, 2016; Langer et al., 2019; Munir, 2018; Tickell, 2014). Other cases include the aforementioned Brexit referendum (Bossetta et al., 2023; Brändle et al., 2022; Dobreva et al., 2020; Heft et al., 2017) and the Irish marriage equality (Gray, 2019) and abortion referendums (Reidy & Suiter, 2023; Statham & Ringrow, 2022). While none of these studies have distinguished a clear campaign effect in these votes (see particularly Reidy & Suiter, 2023), social media as a whole has been shown to be influential in opinion formation (Bernhard & Kübler, 2023), turnout (Morisi & Plescia, 2018), and even vote choice (Munir, 2018).

As such, social media provide a potential avenue for campaigning actors to pursue the depoliticization of the transnational cleavage-related issue of European defense cooperation in the referendum campaign, but discussing the medium in such a context might seem counterintuitive. After all, referendum campaigns are characterized by two centralized camps that are often diametrically opposed to one another, while there also exists a general belief that social media creates polarizing echo chambers in these contexts "as people purchase or follow those sources that most closely reflect their pre-existing views" (Smith, 2021, p. 20; see also Del Vicario et al., 2017). Brändle et al. (2022) even characterized social media as a site for politicization in the aftermath of the Brexit referendum, specifically for (online) social movements. Where traditional mainstream parties attempted to depoliticize the issue, these movements instead used social media as a way to bypass partisan politics and create continued and even intensified politicization of the transnational cleavage in British society. Nevertheless, we still have reason to believe that social media could also work in

the opposite direction. For one, the debate surrounding the existence of echo chambers in referendum contexts is still ongoing, with studies showing that social media can also cultivate lively exchanges within and between online communities (see for instance Arlt et al., 2019; Balcells & Padró-Solanet, 2020). More importantly, many of these studies focus specifically on social media *discourse*, i.e., engagement between users through comments, likes, and shares, but another, lesser-explored avenue arguably offers more depoliticization potential, namely social media *advertising*. Political advertising, particularly through newspaper and television ads, has a lengthy tradition in campaigns for elections (Franz & Ridout, 2007; Kaid, 2004) and referendums (Bowler & Donovan, 2002; De Vreese & Semetko, 2004). With the rise of the so-called hypermedia landscape (Lilleker et al., 2015), however, political elites increasingly turn to social media for advertising in elections (see for instance Fowler et al., 2021). While research has not yet adequately explored whether this is true in referendum contexts as well (Udris & Eisenegger, 2023), we argue that it is a relevant avenue for attempting to explain how the pro-abolition-side in the 2022 Danish opt-out referendum was able to depoliticize a cleavage-related issue. This is because it offers campaigning actors more control over the receptors of their messaging and how prominently these are being shown to them (see for instance Baviera et al., 2022) than social media discourse or television and newspaper ads.

Based on our central argument that social media advertising acted as the channel for explicit depoliticizing efforts by campaigning actors in this context, we formulate several hypotheses on *how* this unfolded. First, for such efforts to have any large-scale impact, the pro-abolition-side had to have had a larger presence in the social media campaign than the contra-side to begin with, especially considering the previously discussed effect of strong and clear elite cues on referendum outcomes. It is likely that their messaging would have resonated less with voters if they had been drowned out by contrarian voices, who we assume were more interested in politicizing European integration in order to persuade voters towards voting no. Our first hypothesis is thus as follows:

> H1: The pro-abolition-side in the 2022 Danish defense opt-out referendum had a larger presence in the social media campaign than the contra-abolition-side.

Additionally, based on the findings from Brun Pedersen et al. (2023), we expect the pro-abolition-side to use two distinct strategies when it comes to depoliticization, a *passive* one and an *active* one. The former simply entails ignoring the EU completely as a topic in their messaging, focusing instead on more universal principles and values such as the aforementioned solidarity with EU-neighboring countries or general strategic benefits that are linked with the abolition of the opt-out. The active strategy, in contrast, will see the pro-side discuss European integration and the EU as an issue, but attempt to "frame" it in a way that avoids centering the debate around "more or less EU," i.e., along the transnational cleavage. "Frames" are symbolically expressed principles or schemes of interpretation that set the context around an issue and help make sense of it (Goffman, 1975). Importantly, "employing framing allows its advocates to create resonance in target audiences" (Kuznetsova, 2018, p. 55). In identifying the frames vis-à-vis the EU, we purposely adapt the modes of justification that were identified by Brändle et al. (2022, p. 245) when examining how social media was used to politicize the transnational cleavage in the aftermath of the Brexit referendum. This distinguishes between three ways of justifying why the EU is discussed on social media posts: "problem-solving (utilitarian/efficiency), collective self-understanding (values-based), and justice/fairness (rights-based)" (Brändle et al., 2022, p. 245). If we adapt this to the issue of European integration in the context of the defense opt-out, *utilitarian* framing will focus on the impact of European integration (or the

lack of it) on, for instance, cybersecurity or defense policy/spending. *Values-based* framing will discuss the EU in terms of universal principles, norms, and/or fairness, such as solidarity, unity, democracy, or freedom, but also trust and honesty. Finally, *rights-based* framing will deal with how European integration affects sovereignty, decision-making power, and veto rights. We expect the pro-side to focus primarily on a values-based approach towards framing the EU issue, while the contra-side will likely focus more on its utility and/or how it affects Danish sovereignty and rights. Notably, these expectations differ from the findings of Brändle et al. (2022) discussed above, even though we use the same modes of justification. This is largely informed by the different outcome of the Danish referendum compared to the Brexit vote, but also the fact that we focus on social media *advertising* rather than its discourse, as the latter is arguably more conducive to polarization and politicization due to increased opportunities for interaction and engagement. Thus, we formulate two additional hypotheses:

> H2a: The pro-abolition-side in the 2022 Danish defense opt-out referendum focused less on the EU and European integration as a topic in its social media campaign messaging than the contra-abolition-side.

> H2b: If they did discuss the EU and European integration, the pro-abolition-side in the 2022 Danish defense opt-out referendum predominantly used a values-based approach to framing the issue, while the contra-abolition-side focused on utility- and rights-based framing.

3. Methods

In order to test our hypotheses and examine whether and how social media campaigning contributed to the depoliticization of a transnational cleavage-related issue in the 2022 Danish referendum, we collect data using the API of the Meta Ad Library (Meta, n.d.), which offers historical information on the level of individual advertisements of Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp in terms of their content, when they ran, who paid for them, and how much was paid. We looked at all 16,673 ads published in the period starting from 6 March 2022, the day the referendum was announced, up to the polling date, i.e., 1 June 2022. Departing from this raw dataset, we checked each ad to see if it was related to the referendum. We only withheld ads that actively campaigned in favor of one of the sides in the referendum; if the advertisement was related to other topics, or was related to the referendum but could be considered neutral (for instance only calling for people to go out and vote), it was excluded from the case selection. We ended up with 853 ads, which were then coded inductively based on what type of actor was responsible for the ad, distinguishing between independent individuals, parties (i.e., the centralized accounts), local branches of parties, youth organizations of parties, politicians, and other political organizations.

We examine the extent to which actors on both sides of the campaign were active, as well as the issues they focused on, by looking at the amount of money that was spent on these advertisements in Danish Kroner (DKK). We elect this approach over examining the absolute number of ads as the latter does not adequately reflect the extent to which a certain message is present on social media. In contrast, actors who spend more on their ad make it decidedly more visible (or at least have an intention to). It is important to note that the Meta Ad Library does not display an exact expenditure amount, but a lower and upper limit within which the true figure lies. This "error margin" scales up as the estimated amount gets higher; for instance, if true spending is around DKK 50, it is reported in the Ad Library as spending between DKK 0 and DKK 99. Then, if spending $\geq$ DKK 500, the distance between the lower and upper limit raises to DKK 500, which further raises

to DKK 1,000 if spending $\geq$ DKK 5,000, and an error margin of DKK 5,000 if spending is between DKK 10,000 and DKK 44,999. While many advertisements fall in the smaller error margins, there exists a severe risk of over- or underestimating the differences between individual expenditure amounts if one were to only take the lower or the upper limit into account. In fact, since the lower limit often includes 0, a lot of expenditure would end up not being captured. To mitigate these risks, we will take into account the average that lies between these limits. While this solution does not completely solve the measurement error here, we follow Scarrow's (2007, p. 206) argument that when it comes to comparing expenditure amounts, "big differences may be more important than details."

We then perform a content analysis to determine whether the advertisements mention the EU, and if not, what other topic they bring forward regarding the defense opt-out, if any. Ads mentioning the EU undergo structured framing analysis, which allows for distilling both the information presented to the audience on a topic-level, but also its method of presentation or meaning-making (Iyengar, 1991). We make a distinction between macro- and sub-frames, and deductively operationalize the former based on the aforementioned modes of justification that were identified by Brändle et al. (2022, p. 245). After an initial review of the content of the ads by two of the authors, we inductively determine a set of sub-frames that make up these macro-frames through a process of continuous reevaluation and in-depth discussions. One of these authors, along with a third author (who was not involved in the initial discussions), then individually coded the advertisements along these sub-frames (intercoder reliability after the initial round of individual coding = 86.16%), which resulted in additional finetuning of the sub-frame scheme. The final overview of sub-frames is discussed in the results section, while the final dataset, including the different codes, can be found in the Supplementary Material.

4. (De)Politicization in the Danish Defense Opt-Out Referendum: Actors, Justifications, and Framing

In order to first test H1, we examine the extent to which both sides in the campaign were active on social media in terms of expenditure on advertisements on Meta. Figure 1 illustrates the total expenditures of different actor types across the two sides in the referendum campaign, showing that the pro-campaign-side's total expenditure amounts to DKK 1,547,193. This is significantly higher than the contra-side's total of DKK 601,931. The difference seems primarily driven by the large amount of parties and individual politicians campaigning in favor of the abolition, while other actor types such as independent individuals, local parties, and youth organizations show comparatively lower contributions. For instance, individual contributions are minimal for both sides, at around DKK 900 for the contra-side and DKK 800 for the pro-side. Notably, youth organizations campaigned relatively intensely in favor of the abolition (DKK 12,300), but had an insignificant impact on the contra-side. These findings highlight a significant financial advantage for the pro campaign, thus confirming H1.

Figure 2 then shows the extent of *passive* depoliticization regarding the EU issue in the campaign by showing the percentage of the total expenditure of each side on Meta advertisements that is spent on advertisements that mention the EU or European integration. Additionally, for the advertisements that do not deal with this topic, the figure shows the percentage of the total expenditure spent on other issues in those campaign messages. Note that when an ad does not mention the EU, it can be coded as having multiple themes, and while this occurred relatively rarely, this makes the percentages reported in the figure
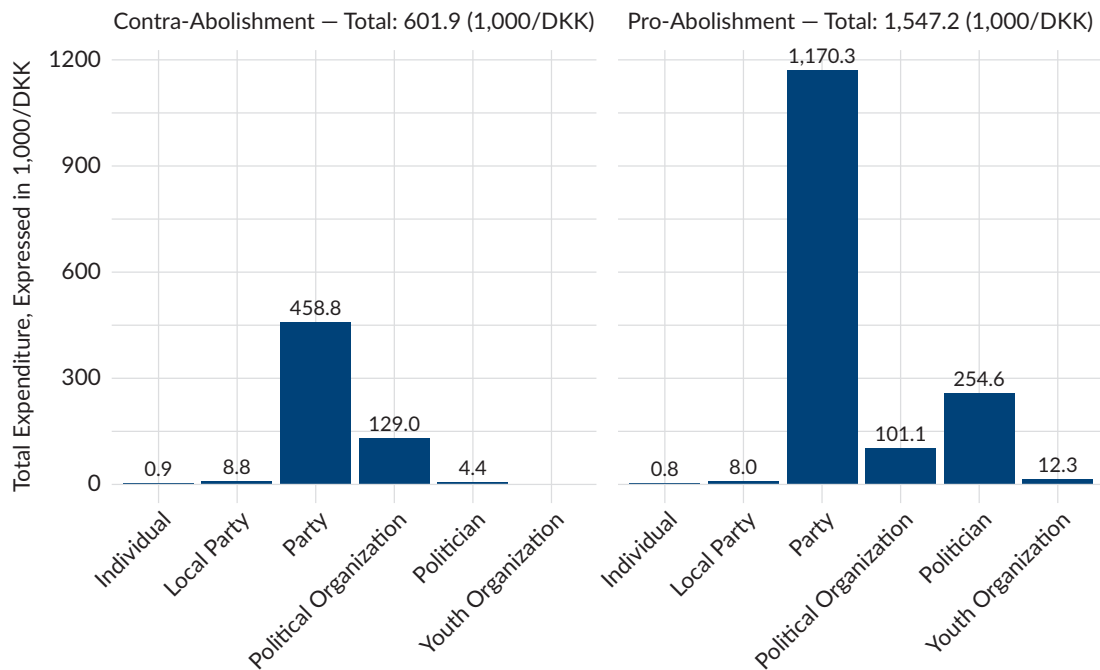
Figure 1. Expenditure on Meta advertising by actor type, expressed in 1,000/DKK.

not add up perfectly to 100%. If no issues/topics were present, and instead the ad was a mere call to action to vote in favor/against the abolition, the ad was coded as "None." The figure shows that both sides often mention the EU and European integration in their messaging, but it nevertheless confirms H2a as the pro-side refrained from mentioning the EU more often than the contra-side. Instead, actors in favor of the opt-out being removed often focused on geopolitics (dependence on the US, the influence of China and Russia, the relationship with and possibilities within NATO), security (the threat of Russia, cybersecurity, protecting citizens), sovereignty and participation (making an active contribution to European defense policy and cooperation, taking responsibility, the *Folketing* staying relatively sovereign when it comes to defense policy), and unity and solidarity (invoking togetherness, standing with other European countries, promoting solidarity with neighboring countries of the EU including Ukraine). In contrast, the side campaigning against the abolition focused their messaging largely on the EU. Only relatively small amounts of funds were spent on campaign messages that instead provided justifications related to finances, geopolitics (the fact that NATO should be the primary channel for international defense cooperation), possibilities that already existed within the opt-out, security, and sovereignty and participation (making the case that Denmark should retain its sovereignty when it comes to defense policy). Most of the non-EU-related ads of the contra-side were mere calls to action (i.e., the "None" category), further suggesting that this camp focused its messaging entirely on European integration.

How do actors engage with the EU and European integration in their campaign messaging if they choose to include the issue? To answer this question and thus test H2b, we coded the EU-related advertisements of these actors using the aforementioned distinction between utilitarian, values-based, and rights-based modes of framing, where multiple codes could be possible. Figure 3 shows for both sides the percentage of their total expenditure on EU-related ads that was spent on each mode of framing. Most notably, in terms of values-based framing, contrary to what was expected, the contra-side actually spends a slightly higher share of their total expenditure on EU-related ads compared to the pro-side. Additionally, the pro-side spends
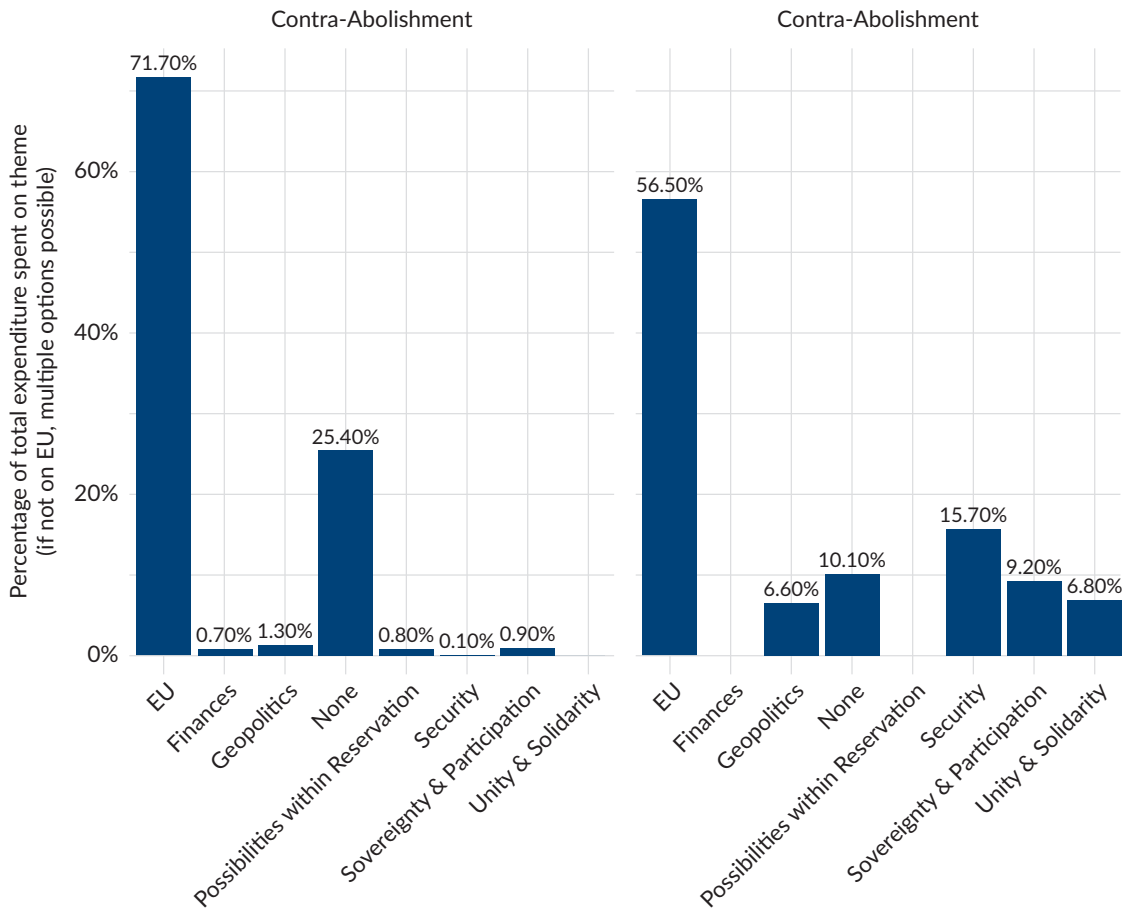
Figure 2. Percentage of total expenditure spent on ads relating to the EU vs. expenditure spent on other campaign messaging topics. Note: for the latter, multiple options are possible.
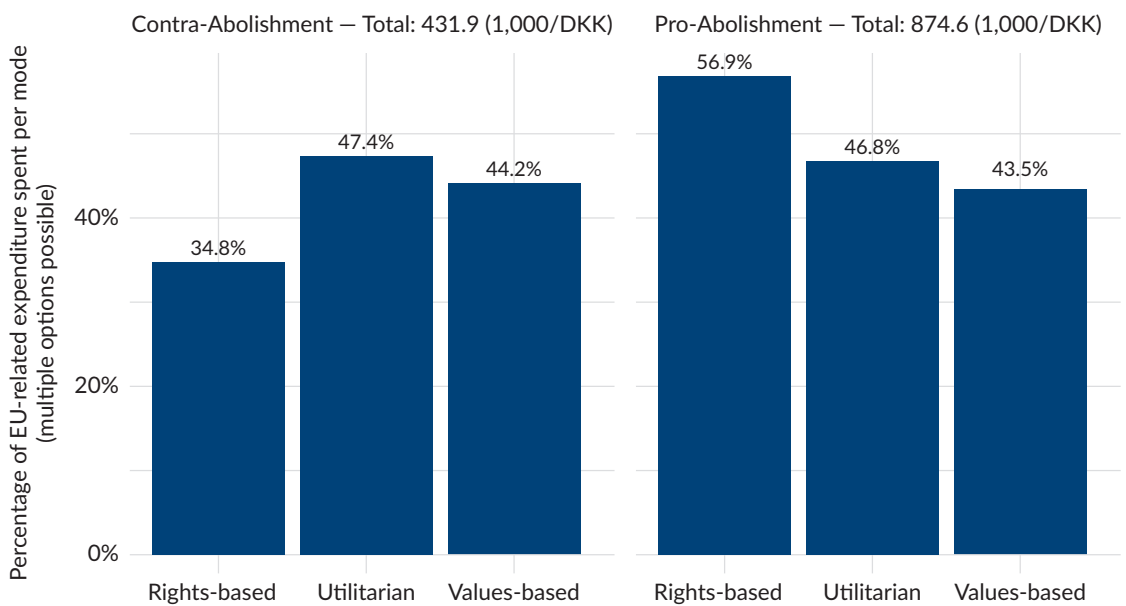

Figure 3. Percentage of EU-related advertisement expenditure spent on different modes of framing the EU (multiple options are possible).

almost 10 percentage points more on rights-based framing compared to the contra-side. This means that, relatively speaking, the contra-side actually seems less preoccupied with issues of sovereignty than the pro-side. At the same time, both sides relatively equally approach the EU from a utilitarian perspective.

These preliminary findings effectively reject H2b, but the sub-frames making up these macro-frames, as presented in Table 1, paint a clearer picture of how campaigning actors went about their messaging. In terms of values-based framing, the pro-side focuses primarily on unity and solidarity, emphasizing that a united Europe is better equipped to protect its core values of democracy, rule of law, and minority rights. At the same time, European collaboration allows for Denmark to take responsibility towards the EU's neighboring countries, which are often depicted as a shield against Russian aggression and other external threats. A sense of solidarity and mutual support towards these countries, as well as fellow member states, is continuously encouraged and supported, and it is emphasized that combatting tyranny and protecting freedoms are best achieved through EU-level cooperation. For the contra-side, on the other hand, their values-based framing of the EU consists mostly of pushing a fundamental distrust in the EU's intentions. The integrity of European-level actors and pro-EU Danish parties is continuously questioned, with these players being accused of lying and creating false narratives in order to "trick" the Danes into voting in favor of the abolition of the defense opt-out. At the same time, the morality and ethics of the defense policy of the EU is questioned, with campaigners often accusing the EU of breaching human rights in their military missions, particularly in Africa, while also arguing that some of these missions aim at protecting goals that

Table 1. Macro- and sub-frames regarding the EU and European integration in campaign messaging on social media.

Contra-Abolition-Side	Pro-Abolition-Side
Values-Based	
Distrust towards EU and pro-EU parties' intentions	Unity, solidarity & responsibility towards EU neighbors & fellow member states in face of Russian aggression
Question morality and ethics of EU defense policy	Protecting freedoms through EU-level cooperation
Utilitarian	
EU interests do not overlap with Danish interests	Danish interests more easily achieved through EU cooperation
Less money available for domestic issues	Decreases dependence on the US
Weaken geopolitical position	Stronger Denmark is better equipped to face global threats
Focus on other already existing defense cooperations (e.g. NATO, UN, Joint Expeditionary Force) instead of EU	Fills gaps that NATO does not cover
Irreversible decision, opt-out as safeguard against unwanted future EU obligations	
Rights-Based	
Vote is about "more or less EU"	Vote not about "more or less EU"
EU as overreaching, diametrically against Danish sovereignty	Abolition results in increased Danish influence in EU decision-making vis-à-vis defense policy
Abolition results in mandatory participation in EU defense missions and creation of EU army	Final control remains with *Folketing*

are detrimental to the climate. As such, some campaigners argue that a vote against the abolition is in fact a vote in favor of the climate.

Considering utilitarian framing, the contra-side focuses primarily on how the EU furthers interests that do not overlap with Danish interests. Furthering integration when it comes to defense will lead to higher military budgets and contributions to EU missions, and therefore less money for domestic issues such as welfare or combatting climate change. The actors argue that cooperation through NATO provides enough security, making it so that European cooperation is not necessary. In addition to NATO, participation in the British Joint Expeditionary Force, the German Framework Nations Concept, and the Nordic Defence Cooperation are also used as arguments why European cooperation would be redundant. Rather, leaning more towards European cooperation is argued to actually deteriorate the relationships Denmark has with strong military powers such as the US, UK, and other allies, along with a diminished participation in UN peacekeeping missions. Finally, the step towards more defense cooperation in the EU is depicted as irreversible, with the opt-out acting as a safeguard against unwanted future obligations. The pro-side, on the other hand, seems to directly interact with a lot of these claims from their opponents, arguing instead that Danish interests are continuously well protected and even easier to strive for through working with the EU. Denmark actively shapes defense initiatives and policies that can directly impact the country and the region. Additionally, a stronger Europe able to handle its own security independently helps decrease the dependence on the US, a country that might see Donald Trump get reelected (at that time). European collaboration makes Denmark stronger and better equipped to face global threats, while also protecting its values and interests. Additionally, proponents of abolishing the opt-out argue that EU defense cooperation complements rather than weakens NATO by addressing gaps that NATO does not cover, such as infrastructure, cybersecurity, and research.

Finally, in terms of rights-based framing, the contra-side focuses heavily on the question of Danish sovereignty and their decision- and veto-rights. The EU is framed as the antithesis to Danish sovereignty, and actors stress the importance of maintaining control over defense policies instead of being subordinate to European-level decisions that are overreaching. Some advertisements explicitly frame the referendum as a choice between "more or less EU": Instead of Denmark making independent decisions considering their defense policy, the EU will gain influence, mandate participation in EU military missions, and create an EU army that will forcefully deploy Danish soldiers far beyond European borders. The pro-side, then, seems to continuously be in a state of "myth-busting" and reassurance. One of the core phrases they use is that of the vote not being about "more or less EU," arguing that the EU will not receive more influence but, instead, Denmark will be able to achieve voting and veto rights in European decision-making on defense policy. Participation in missions will remain a final decision of the *Folketing*, there is no plan for an EU army, and Denmark retains control over its military contributions.

5. Discussion

Our results indicate, first and foremost, that the pro-side cultivated a presence in the social media campaign that was about three times larger than the contra-side, in line with H1. This is not a very surprising result considering the superiority of the former in terms of resources and campaigning actors, as discussed above. However, we can now get a sense of the importance of social media advertising within the overall campaign strategy of political parties by comparing their expenditure with their reported total campaign spending. The latter can be retrieved from the yearly financial reports they have to provide to the Ministry of Social

Affairs (Ministry of the Interior and Health of Denmark, 2019), but the aforementioned laissez-faire referendum campaign finance regulations do not require parties to provide dedicated in-depth reports. As a result, some of the parties which have clearly been actively campaigning on Meta platforms, i.e., the Social Democrats (DKK 296,652), the Danish People's Party (DKK 95,175.5), the Liberals (DKK 268,459), the Conservative People's Party (DKK 397,324.5), and the Liberal Alliance (DKK 43,397.5), do not report any expenditure regarding the referendum in their yearly financial report for 2022. Additionally, the New Right Party reports having spent only DKK 45,370 on the referendum, but their total social media advertising runs up to DKK 182,557.5, over four times as much as they had reportedly spent on the entire campaign. We can therefore not be completely sure that what is reported by the other three parties is fully accurate, but it will give us a rough indication. On the pro-side, the Social Liberal Party spent DKK 156,643.5 of its total expenditure of DKK 1,193,786 on social media advertising, or 13.1%, while the Socialist People's Party spent 30.5% (DKK 268,308 vs 879,903). On the contra-side, the Red-Green alliance spent DKK 195,267 on social media ads, compared to DKK 406,731 in total (i.e., 48%). Based on the fragmented and largely incomplete reporting, it is difficult to make sweeping conclusions regarding the importance of social media advertising within the grand campaigning strategies of political parties. One could argue that parties might not have reported all their expenditure in the official reports, making the actual share spent on these ads even lower. However, we only have data on Meta platforms, while parties could also have campaigned on Twitter (now X), YouTube, or other platforms, which would result in the reverse conclusion. All in all, we can say that social media advertising was far from a negligible aspect of parties' campaign strategy, but its true importance, including to other campaigning actors, remains largely unclear.

Nevertheless, if other avenues of campaigning were more important to these parties than social media advertising, such as newspaper or television ads, they likely offered similar messaging compared to these ads, in particular those from the pro-side. After all, our results indicate that their ads conveyed similar arguments to the ones that ended up resonating with voters (Brun Pedersen et al., 2023), suggesting that parties were effective in, at least momentarily, depoliticizing the transnational cleavage. They did this passively, first and foremost, by mentioning the EU and European integration significantly less than the contra-side, in line with H2a. Yet, the gap between the two sides in this regard (56.5% vs 71.7%), while considerable, is not as high as could be expected. This suggests that while passive depoliticization was an important strategy of the pro-side, more attention was nevertheless paid to actively framing the defense opt-out in a way that decouples it from European integration, as was hypothesized in H2b. However, on a first glance, our results go against this expectation: Both sides relatively equally approached the EU from a utilitarian perspective, but the contra-side surprisingly relied more on values-based framing than the pro-side, whereas the pro-side relied more on a rights-based framing than the contra-side. We argue that this outcome could be the result of an anticipation effect: The pro-campaign might have expected that their opponents were likely to focus heavily on the question of Danish sovereignty and their decision- and veto-rights within the EU. Evidence for this is provided by looking at the sub-frames that made up these modes of framing on the macro-level, as the pro-side adopted a "myth-busting" approach when dealing with the EU from a rights-based perspective. Furthermore, the framing analysis provided additional empirical evidence for active depoliticization efforts by the pro-side, as the sub-frames show a clear desire to refrain from discussing the opt-out in terms of "more or less EU." European integration in itself is hardly discussed in terms of it being positive or negative. Rather, in line with the findings of Brun Pedersen et al. (2023), the pro-side emphasized either the concrete benefits of the opt-outs, or the need for unity and solidarity with EU neighboring countries, as well as the responsibility to protect democratic freedoms and values.

6. Conclusion

Referendums are an integral part of the EU's political history, including the recent era of "polycrisis." Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 spurred Denmark to reconsider its EU defense opt-out, requiring a referendum that ultimately found overwhelming support in favor of its abolition. This was despite previous EU-related referendum experiences in which its societal transnational cleavage led to unsuccessful attempts at removing opt-outs regarding the EMU (2000) and the JHA (2015). This article explored how in the 2022 Danish referendum the pro-abolition-side, presumably under the impetus of Russia's invasion, was seemingly able to shift the balance regarding the two sides of the transnational cleavage in Danish society. More specifically, it set out to uncover whether advertising on social media contributed to a *de*politicization of a specific issue of Denmark's European integration cleavage—European defense cooperation. We hypothesized both a larger presence of the pro-side in the social media campaign, as well as the use of two distinct strategies of depoliticization by these actors: avoiding the topic of European integration (passive depoliticization), and framing the issue in ways that avoid centering the debate around "more or less EU" (active depoliticization). We mapped the advertising expenditure of the campaigning actors using data from the Meta Ad Library and analyzed their messaging through content analysis. For the latter, we used structured framing analysis, where the macro-frames distinguished between three modes of justification for mentioning the EU (Brändle et al., 2022): a utilitarian framing emphasizing the efficiency and problem-solving character of joining the EU's CSDP, a values-based framing focusing on universal principles and norms, and a rights-based framing that linked European integration with Danish sovereignty. Our results show that it is not straightforward to say that social media ads from campaigning were the main vehicle through which depoliticization was achieved, but that it was a non-negligible avenue nonetheless in which the pro-side cultivated a much larger presence than the contra-side, and used both passive and active depoliticization strategies. In the case of the latter, we found additional proof that the pro-side was successful in this regard, as the framing of the defense opt-out overlapped with the arguments that ended up resonating with voters according to research from Brun Pedersen et al. (2023).

Our findings raise questions regarding their generalizability, i.e., whether campaigning sides in other EU-related referendums or votes regarding other cleavages could effectively use similar strategies to overcome cleavage-related issues. As mentioned in the introduction, the Danish referendum, while different in scope and context, is similar to, for instance, the Brexit vote, in that they fall into the category of "constitutive issues" (i.e., the "widening" and "deepening" of the EU), which tend to provoke stronger opposition compared to more policy-related European matters such as market-making and social regulation (see Bartolini, 2005; Hoeglinger, 2016 for further discussion on these subdimensions of European integration). Both referendums should therefore have generated largely the same degree of politicization, especially since Denmark, like the UK, was considered as generally more internally divided on European integration issues compared to other EU member states (Favell & Reimer, 2021), but this was clearly not the case. It seems likely that the existence of a potentially existential threat, i.e., escalating aggression from Russia, played a fundamental role in this regard, not in terms of how voters reacted to it (as shown by the research from Brun Pedersen et al., 2023), but instead regarding the behavior of political actors. Through the prism of securitization, a large and wide coalition was formed of political parties and movements, business interests, and trade unions, all with common strategic priorities and all acutely aware of the potential implications of Russia's invasion of Ukraine for national security and EU cohesion. This strongly represented and united front on one side of the referendum campaign made it easier to convince voters of their

narratives, despite not resolving the underlying transnational cleavage. In turn, similar forces should arguably be able to reach similar outcomes in other referendums.

However, some caution is warranted, as European integration is a highly dynamic, complex, and multifaceted issue that can result in a "pattern of politicization that is more complex and less straightforward than for most other political issues" (Hoeglinger, 2016, p. 29). This observation is particularly relevant for the aforementioned constitutive issues as they "may cut across existing party alliances, while policy-related issues tend to be more firmly embedded along traditional left–right conflict lines" (Hutter et al., 2016, p. 137). An example of this can be found in the fact that in the Danish referendum, green and left-wing parties could be found on the contra-side, whereas the theoretical basis of the transnational cleavage assumes mainly radical right-wing parties mobilizing voters against further EU integration. It is therefore important to consider the specific particularities of each case alongside broader trends that may be extrapolated when future research extends its scope to similar referendums, such as the (non-binding) North-Macedonian (2018) and Moldovan (2024) EU membership referendums. Such perspectives should also take into account a clear limitation of this article, namely that its analysis only takes into account Meta platforms, which include Facebook and Instagram, but misses other popular applications such as Twitter (now X) and TikTok, as well as the Google ecosystem for online advertisements, Google Ads. Additionally, as mentioned before, the exact extent to which campaigning actors used social media advertising as an avenue within their wider campaigning strategy remains uncertain. Nevertheless, our article contributes to the cleavage literature by examining a case where depoliticization is likely to have occurred regarding a highly salient and polarized political conflict, i.e., the transnational cleavage-related issue of European defense cooperation in Danish society. It also contributed to a better understanding of the role of social media in referendums about European integration issues, showing that through political advertising, it can act as an arena of depoliticization, rather than merely as a site of polarization and politicization.

Conflict of Interests
The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Supplementary Material
Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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