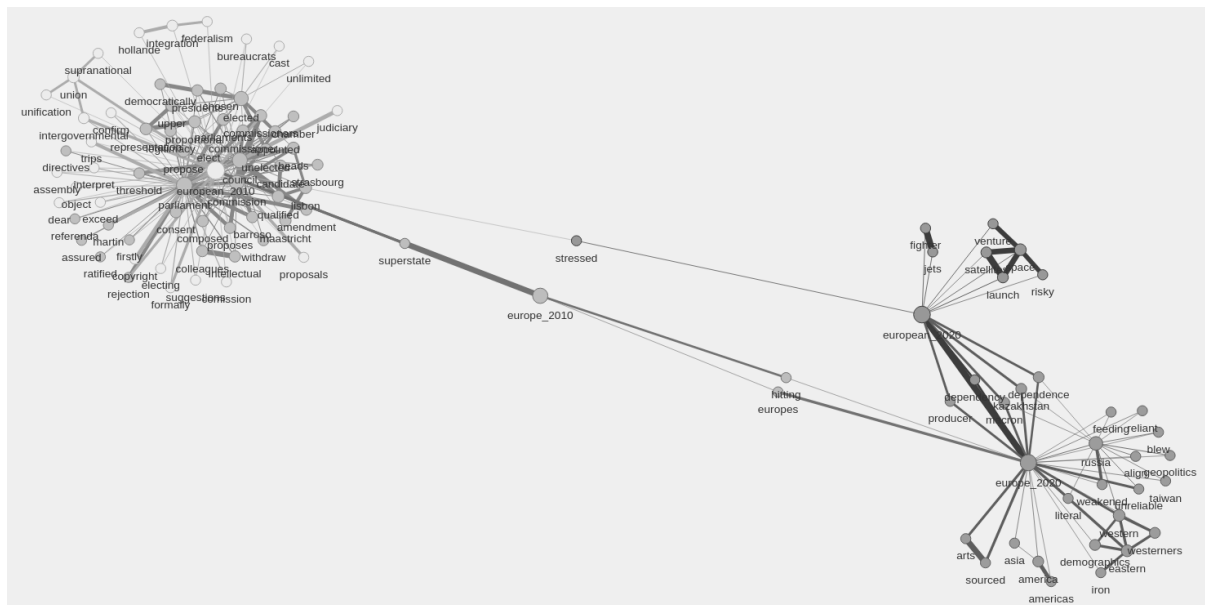## Conceptual shift or continental drift?

Much research has been done on European cultural identity (Sassatelli 2002, 2009), and post-2016 a new wave of literature has tackled its relationship to Brexit with many concluding that Britain has long seen itself as sitting outside of, or distinct from, Europe (Carl et al. 2018; Van Der Zwet et al. 2020). However, these analyses have remained – for good reasons – unidirectional by asking what is distinct about British identity. Few have asked what recent history has done to 'Europe' as a concept. This paper investigates the cultural impact of Brexit on the concept of 'Europe' between 2012 and 2023 by looking at online, English language, public discourse.

The importance of a potential semantic shift here is more than just academic. Words (and the concepts they represent) have power beyond transmitting meaning – at their most profound, they can contribute to ensuring or denying rights, commitments, or obligations (Austin 1975). For a example, in 1963 de Gaulle made reference to 'England' not being a part of Europe due to 'very marked and very original habits and traditions' when vetoing Britain's application to join the EEC. While there are clearly multitudes of complex reasons for geopolitical decisions, concepts are a part of these frameworks, and in the context of 'Europe', who or what is seen as a constituent part may impact future political relations (see discussions around the UK's membership of Horizon Europe).

Figure 1: Neighbourhood network of the terms 'europe' and 'european' within a single semantic network (combined 2012/22 corpora). Nodes created from occurrences of terms and edge weight is PMI scores.

The study of conceptual change and its political implications is not new. Scholars of intellectual history have long recognised the importance of semantic shift in public discourse (Skinner 1969; Koselleck 1979), and investigations are increasingly making use of digital methods (de Bolla 2013; Hill et al. 2019; Tolonen et al. 2021). While most of these investigations have focused on semantic change over very long periods, there is awareness of quick (and ephemeral) changes (Rosenfeld and Erk 2018) (e.g., the change in meaning of 'gay' in the 1960s). This paper brings together these related theoretical approaches to ask two research questions: Has there been a conceptual shift in what is meant by 'Europe' in the past decade? And if so, has 'Europe' come to represent a political affiliation (i.e., the EU) more than a historical, cultural, and geographical concept?

To answer these questions we aim to make both substantive and methodological contributions by measuring semantic change of 'europe' on data taken from Reddit (2012-23) using comparative type-level vector space analyses between datasets (Hamilton et al 2016; de Bolla 2019); contextual embedding models (e.g. BERT); and examinations into sense frequency distributions using graph theory (Nulty and Lillis 2020; Schlechtweg et al. 2020). We will frame results within the best practices highlighted by Tahmasebi and Dubossarky (2023), as well as focusing on topical and contextual data considerations.