Electronic nematicity can emerge out of the fluctuations of an electronic phase characterized by a multicomponent order parameter, such as those encountered in, e.g., unconventional superconductors or density-wave materials [1]. This notion has been central in uncovering the physical properties of iron-based superconductors, in which the metallic parent compounds exhibit a doubly degenerate spin density wave (SDW), hosted on a square lattice. Electronic nematicity can, in principle, also emerge close to charge-density-wave (CDW) states, which are also routinely observed close to superconducting phases as in, e.g., the high-temperature superconducting cuprates [5,6]. In contrast to its Fe-based cousin, no magnetic ordering has been reported in BaNi$_2$As$_2$, in which a series of structural and CDW instabilities is observed [7–9]. Moreover, while in nonsuperconducting BaFe$_2$As$_2$ electronic nematicity induces a tetragonal-to-orthorhombic transition at \( T_c \approx 137 \) K [10], BaNi$_2$As$_2$ undergoes a first-order phase transition into a triclinic structure (space group \( P\bar{1} \)) at \( T_{\text{cool}} = 135 \) K (upon cooling) [11–13]. Superconductivity appears below \( T_c = 0.7 \) K, already without chemical doping or substitutions, and thermodynamic measurements indicate a fully gapped superconducting state [14]. An incommensurate CDW (I-CDW) at the ordering wave vectors \( q_{\text{I-CDW}} = (0.28 \ 0.0) \) and \( (0 \ 0.28 \ 0) \) has been reported by x-ray diffraction (XRD) [7–9]. Throughout this Letter, the momentum transfers are quoted in reciprocal lattice units (r.l.u.) of the tetragonal crystal structure [15]. The corresponding superstructure reflections were observed below \( T_{\text{I-CDW}} = 155 \) K > \( T_{\text{I-CDW}} \). Below \( T_{\text{I-CDW}} \), the I-CDW is replaced by a commensurate modulation (C-CDW) with an ordering vector \( q_{\text{C-CDW}} = (1/3 \ 0.1 \ 1/3) \) [7–9]. Although the relation between the I-CDW and the C-CDW is currently debated, a recent time-resolved optical spectroscopy study suggests that the C-CDW evolves from the I-CDW by gaining additional periodicity along the c-axis [27]. The I-CDW therefore appears to be the primary instability of the high-temperature tetragonal phase of BaNi$_2$As$_2$ and could play a role similar to that of magnetism in the iron-based superconductors and, in particular, yield a form of charge-order-induced electronic nematicity.

Along these lines, a large \( B_{1g} \) nematic susceptibility and a strain–hysteretic behavior in the presence of the I-CDW order have been reported in a recent series of elasto-resistivity measurements on BaNi$_2$As$_2$ [5,28]. These observations have been interpreted as tetragonal symmetry breaking in the \( B_{1g} \) symmetry channel above \( T_{\text{I-CDW}} \) and suggested a link between the I-CDW and nematicity.
Additionally, high-resolution dilatometry revealed that, at $T_{\text{orth}} = 142$ K (i.e., below the reported appearance temperature of the I-CDW satellites but above $T_{\text{int}}$), a small orthorhombic distortion of the lattice occurs [9,29]. Moreover, based on the absence of a precursor response in the electronic nematic susceptibility, a lattice-driven (rather than electronic) origin of the nematicity in BaNi$_2$As$_2$ was suggested [5]. This conclusion was later challenged by the unsettled issue of the I-CDW unidirectionality [8].

These observations emphasize a tight connection between I-CDW, nematicity, and structural transitions in BaNi$_2$As$_2$. As these phenomena have recently proven ubiquitous in many quantum materials [1–4], gaining understanding of the mechanism underpinning their formation is of central importance. Even though an earlier theoretical calculation did not reveal lattice instabilities in this system [30], the study of the lattice dynamics through the dispersion of phonons is most relevant. In the case of BaNi$_2$As$_2$, however, it has only been limited to zone center Raman active phonons [31] and no information is available on the phononic behavior around $q_{1-CDW}$. Here, we address this issue by studying the low-energy lattice dynamics of BaNi$_2$As$_2$, using a combination of diffuse and inelastic x-ray scattering with ab initio calculations. We observe an intense temperature-dependent CDW-related diffuse scattering signal and a pronounced anomaly of a transverse phonon branch predicted to be unstable by our density-functional perturbation theory (DFPT) calculations, in sharp contrast to, e.g., the case of cuprates [32]. This anomaly deepens upon cooling toward the I-CDW long-range ordering temperature, unambiguously establishing a soft-phonon-driven condensation. The transverse character of the mode further provides a natural explanation for the onset temperature of the long-range order, as defined below. This relates to the recently reported shrinking of the $c/a$ ratio upon cooling in this system [29]. A fitting of the $T$ dependence $\xi_l(T) = \xi_0(T/T_{1-CDW} - 1)^{-\nu}$ yields a value of $\nu = 0.36 \pm 0.01$ and $T_{1-CDW} = 146 \pm 1$ K [dashed line in Figs. 1(i) and 1(j)]. This indicates the formation of a true long-range order at $T_{1-CDW}$. This temperature also corresponds [Fig. 1(j)] to a maximum of the $B_{1y}$ elastoresistance coefficient [28] and to a jump of the thermal expansion coefficient $\alpha$ [corresponding to the shaded area centered around 145 K in Figs. 1(i) and 1(j)], typical of a second-order phase transition, hereby confirming that the small orthorhombic distortion at $T_{\text{orth}}$ is a by-product of the formation of the long-range I-CDW [9,29]. Finally, below $T_{1-CDW}$, we note the appearance of a much weaker and sharp feature at (4.28 1 1), i.e., in the longitudinal direction [red arrow in Fig. 1(c)].

The DS signal can, in principle, arise from static disorder (e.g., pinned CDW domains) or from soft phonons. In order to gain more insights on the origin of the observed signal, we have carried out a series of energy-resolved IXS experiments. In Fig. 2(a), we show a selection of inelastic scans taken at 250 K for various momenta along the [0k0] direction across $Q_{1-CDW} = \Gamma_{411} + q_{1-CDW} = (4.128 \, 1)$. In the investigated energy range, we identify the elastic line centered around 0 meV energy transfer and two phonons at energy transfers $\sim 4$ and $\sim 12.5$ meV, both on the positive (Stokes) and negative (anti-Stokes) sides. The IXS spectra are analyzed by fitting with damped harmonic oscillator (DHO) line shapes, convoluted with the experimental resolution function [15], and a resolution limited elastic
The number of phonons and their frequencies are in good agreement with our DFPT calculations [Fig. 2(d) and Supplemental Material [15]]. The two modes are optical phonons dispersing from doubly degenerate, in-plane polarized, \(E_g\) Raman and \(E_u\) infrared active zone center modes, respectively. The higher energy phonon disperses continuously toward lower energies between the zone center and the zone edge, while the lower energy phonon softens around \(Q_{I-CDW}\) [Fig. 2(d)]. This anomaly is also captured by our calculations, which predict an instability of the lower optical phonon branch at a wave vector very close to \(Q_{I-CDW}\). Most importantly, in the chosen Brillouin zone, the calculated scattering intensity of the unstable phonon is strong, ensuring that the IXS experiment is carried out in the best condition to observe the mode anomaly if it really exists. This instability can be suppressed by simulating qualitatively the effect of a very high temperature on the phonon dispersion using a large Gaussian smearing of the Fermi distribution function in the ab initio calculation [15]. The resulting dispersion of the low-energy optical mode is shown in grey in Fig. 2(d). As seen in Fig. 2(a), the spectrum at \(Q_{I-CDW}\) essentially consists of a quasielastic line, which is, however, much broader than the experimental energy resolution (see also Fig. 3). This broadening is observed at high temperatures strongly grows and narrows upon cooling. This can be better seen in Fig. 3(b), where we plot on a logarithmic intensity scale the normalized intensities recorded between 270 and 160 K. The \(T\) dependencies of the integrated intensity of the spectra as well as the HWHM of the quasielastic line are reported in Fig. 3(c). At 160 K, the spectrum remains slightly broader than the instrumental resolution [Fig. 3(b)]. This observation

FIG. 1. Intensity maps of the HK1 reciprocal lattice plane around the \(\Gamma_{141}\) Brillouin zone center at (a) 293, (b) 154, and (c) 139 K. Intensity maps of the 4KL plane at (d) 293, (e) 154, and (f) 139 K. (g) Cut of the DS maps across \(Q_{I-CDW}\) at 293, 175, 151, and 141 K along the [010] direction. Lines are fit to the data using a Lorentzian model that reproduces the line shape accurately down to \(T_{I-CDW}\). (h) Same as (g) but for cuts along the [001] direction. (i) \(T\) dependence of the normalized intensity of the I-CDW superstructure peak and of the inverse I-CDW correlation length in the in-plane \([010]\) and out-of-plane \([001]\) directions. (j) Thermal expansion coefficient along the \(a\) axis, \(\alpha = 1/LdL/dT\) (\(L\) stands for the length of the sample) and \(B_{1g}\) symmetry-resolved \(m_{12} - m_{11}\) elasto-resistance coefficient from Refs. [28,29].
unambiguously evidences a continuous softening of the lowest energy optical phonon at \( Q_{1\text{CDW}} \) upon cooling. As discussed in the Supplemental Material [15], however, the combination of a very soft energy with a broad linewidth and an intense elastic line did not allow us to extract with sufficient confidence the \( T \) dependence of the soft-mode energy. We note, however, that down to at least 170K, a model with a finite phonon frequency always yields a better fit to the data than a model in which the phonon is completely soft and overdamped [37].

The IXS data associate the temperature-dependent DS signal with the softening of a low-energy optical phonon at \( Q_{1\text{CDW}} \) and the strong increase of the DS intensity below \( T_{1\text{CDW}} \) with its complete condensation. As discussed earlier, above \( T_{1\text{CDW}} \) DS is only observed along the \( K \) direction, at \( Q_{1\text{CDW}} = \{41 \pm 0.28 \} \). In agreement, our IXS measurements along the orthogonal direction \( (4 + h 1 1) \) did not reveal any phonon anomaly at \( (4 \pm 0.28 1 1) \) (see also the Supplemental Material [15]). The IXS data along the two tetragonal directions in combination with the results of our DFPT calculations demonstrate that the soft phonon belongs to a transverse optical phonon branch, which explains the transverse character of the modulation seen in DS and accounts for the “square” pattern formed by the I-CDW reflections [9]. The satellites are consistently the ones in the direction in which the transverse phonon branch is probed and are absent in the longitudinal directions. The distinction between longitudinal and transverse geometries is less clear in reciprocal lattice planes with higher \( L \) indexes, where they mix, as in the \( L = 5 \) case of the data presented in Ref. [8]. However, as previously mentioned, weak satellites along the longitudinal \( (4 + h 1 1) \) direction are seen at low temperatures. Unlike the transverse satellites, these are strictly momentum-resolution limited, are not visible above \( T_{1\text{CDW}} \), nor associated with a soft phonon [15], and therefore rather relate to the long-range CDW order.

Our experimental results unambiguously establish that the I-CDW formation is driven by the softening of a transverse phonon, yet the origin of this phenomenon remains unclear. Recent time-resolved optical spectroscopy data have shown the resilience of the CDW order against optical excitation up to very high fluences, suggesting an unconventional nature [27]. This is in line with previous electronic structure calculations and angle-resolved photoemission spectroscopy (ARPES) experiments, which have not identified nesting features in the FS of BaNi\(_2\)As\(_2\) above \( T_{\text{ui}} \) [30,33,34,38], ruling out weak-coupling mechanisms [39,40]. This is confirmed by the absence of nesting features around \( q_{\text{CDW}} \) in our calculated joint density of states (JDOS) [Fig. 4(a)]. We have evaluated further the \( q \) dependence of the electron-phonon coupling (EPC) matrix elements by calculating the ratio of the total (summed over all branches) phonon linewidth [Fig. 4(b)] over the JDOS [Fig. 4(c)]. If a shallow maximum—best seen in the cuts along the [100] direction presented in Fig. 4(d)—appears around \( q_{\text{CDW}} \) and suggests a local enhancement of the EPC matrix elements, it is neither pronounced nor sharp in momentum space. Furthermore, the soft phonon does not even appear as one of the main contributors to the EPC [15]. Consequently, alternative CDW formation mechanisms based on momentum-dependent EPC akin to what has been reported in, e.g., dichalcogenides [41,42] or more recently in LaAgSb\(_2\), in combination with nesting of a
in-plane orbitals are present already above by near-edge x-ray absorption fine structure experiments from a refinement of low-temperature XRD data, supported ordering vector of BaNi

nounced anomaly of a transverse optical phonon at the I-CDW orbital fluctuations in the stabilization of the I-CDW. This effect can be accounted for by a strong coupling between this mode and an Ising nematic degree of freedom—possibly of orbital nature (given the absence of magnetism)—with the $B_{1g}$ symmetry. Additional insights on the nature of the CDW order come from recent ARPES experiments, which found evidence for orbital-dependent band renormalization at low temperatures related to anisotropic Ni–Ni bond ordering [44]. Along the same lines, the formation of Ni–Ni dimers was recently inferred from a refinement of low-temperature XRD data, supported by near-edge x-ray absorption fine structure experiments showing that charge fluctuations between out-of-plane and in-plane orbitals are present already above $T_{\text{ICDW}}$ [9]. This suggests that mechanisms involving orbital degrees of freedom, encompassing orbital-dependent EPC [45] or orbitally driven Peierls states [46–48], might be at play here. A determination of the orbital texture of the I-CDW order by means of complementary techniques, such as resonant x-ray scattering, would be required in order to clarify the role of orbital fluctuations in the stabilization of the I-CDW.

In summary, our Letter revealed intense DS and a pronounced anomaly of a transverse optical phonon at the I-CDW ordering vector of BaNi$_2$As$_2$. As previously conjectured [9,29], our detailed comparison with thermodynamic data confirms that the small orthorhombic distortion is a direct consequence of the formation of the long-range uniaxial I-CDW state, which is itself driven by the softening of this transverse phonon. Our calculations show that the instability of the mode can neither be associated with FS nesting, nor with local enhancement of the EPC, and supports an unconventional mechanism. We conclude by noting that thermodynamic measurements indicated that the fivefold increase of the superconducting $T_c$ at phosphorus doping higher than 7% is related to a giant phonon softening occurring when the triclinic transition is completely suppressed [13,29]. Future DS and IXS measurements in this doping regime will be valuable in elucidating the relevance of nematicity, the structural transition, and the CDW ordering in the superconducting pairing. More generally, the approach used here, combining first principle calculations, DS, and IXS, is most relevant to address—or revisit—the formation mechanism of recently discovered long-range I-CDW in systems such as overdoped cuprates [49,50] or kagome superconductors [4,51].

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Note added.—Recently, an IXS study of a phonon softening associated with the I-CDW in BaNi$_2$As$_2$ has been reported [37].