

Smart Politicization via Key Policies: How to Strengthen the Sense of Belonging to the EU

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I. Key Hypothesis

The more the EU institutions conceive the phenomenon of politicization as an influenceable process, the more EU citizens will feel a sense of belonging to supranational decision-making. Occasional academic attempts to investigate whether the politicization of European integration can be reversed² should be not be translated into the daily political practice as they would consume a lot of political resources. This paper by contrast starts from the assumption that supranational EU institutions can shape political attitudes in member states to varying degrees, ultimately contributing to a deeper European solidarity inter and intra EU policymakers and citizens. The key challenge is to set the agenda. Under which conditions can EU institutions accomplish this?

A key problem is that EU institutions struggle to respond to the demands voiced in the process of politicization.³ This disconnect between citizens and decision-makers highlights the need for deliberation of how to intervene in this process, as politicization can have a divisive impact on the problem-solving capacity of the EU decision-making machinery.

II. Ideal Types of EU-related Politicization

The minimalist Oxford dictionary definition sets out that politicization is a process, an activity or event which becomes political in character or is being made politically aware. This political character mainly consists of the mobilising potential of an individual topic. With regards to the EU, politicization - according to Phillip Schmitter -

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² see e.g. de Wilde, Pieter and Zürn, Michael (2012) Can the Politicization of European Integration be Reversed?, *Journal of Common Market Studies*, Vol. 50, Iss.1, p.137-153.

³ see de Wilde, Pieter / Leupold, Anna / Schmidtke, Henning (2016) Introduction: the differentiated politicisation of European governance, in: *West European Politics*, Vol. 39, Iss. 1, p. 3-22, 15.

leads to an increasing "controversiality of issues" and a "widening of the audience or clientele interested and active".⁴

At least two types of EU-related politicization need to be differentiated. The first concerns the *question of membership*. If put to a vote as in the case of Brexit, public controversy arises about the consequences of membership and the costs of exiting the Union. Repercussions of politicizing membership are often hard to contain, let alone predictable, as recent empirical evidence from the campaign prior to the Brexit-vote and the Dutch referendum on Ukraine's association to the EU underline. Referenda tend to be tricky as they can cause a crisis of integration which pose a risk to the existence or at least the rationale of the EU.⁵

The second type refers to the *politicization of individual policy areas*.⁶ Issue-related controversies occasionally set off crises in integration which imply difficulty or temporary delay. They have repeatedly been an engine for deeper integration.⁷

III. General Determinants of EU-related Politicization

Apart from these ideal types, it is not entirely clear why European issues get politicized. Does a *single underlying cause* exist? A widespread assumption is that the increasing authority of the EU fuels politicization.⁸ The fact that member states have transferred more competences to supranational bodies via a number of treaty reforms should indeed be viewed as a precondition for politicizing an EU public space. Political mobilization can only take place if national voters find their country's EU membership and resulting debates on issues of relevance to EU governance to be sufficiently controversial. This assessment should nevertheless not keep anyone from looking at a *plurality of causes*. As De Wilde, Leupold & Schmidtke point out, the concept of "*the politicization of European governance*" in the singular is hard to maintain. Instead, the phenomenon encompasses differentiated degrees and

⁴ Schmitter, Philippe C. (1969) Three neo-functionalist hypotheses about international integration, in: *International Organization*, Vol. 23, Iss. 1, p. 161–166, 166.

⁵ see Kühnhardt, Ludger (2016) *Managing the Forces of European Populism*, ZEI Insight No. 40, retrieved from https://www.zei.uni-bonn.de/dateien/zei-insights/kuehnhardt_40; For the differentiation between "crises in integration and of integration" see Kühnhardt, Ludger (2009) *Crises in European Integration: Challenges and Responses, 1945-2005*, Berghahn: New York & Oxford, p.1f.

⁶ see de Wilde / Leupold / Schmidtke (2016), p. 15.

⁷ see Kühnhardt (2009), p.1f.

⁸ see de Wilde / Leupold / Schmidtke (2016), p. 5.

manifestations depending on the people, the countries, the setting, the time and even by the same people at different times in which particular policies are politicized.⁹ In order to uphold the initial hypothesis of the possibility to steer politicization, there needs to be a common denominator for comprehending a differentiated phenomenon. A useful instrument for analysis which to a certain extent allows to generalize across countries and institutional settings is the "extent and nature of issue linkages with European affairs".¹⁰ Put simply, a policy needs to be relevant for EU governance so as to trigger politicization. And this relevance does not necessarily imply a value judgement.

IV. Empirical Manifestations

As a consequence, it is not straightforward to establish a scale of desirable forms of politicization which would deserve more or less political support. Despite this difficulty, it is worthwhile to protect certain policy fields from the identity discourse that has repeatedly constrained, if not impaired, functionally compelling decisions by EU leaders.¹¹ Under the (partial) primacy public discourse on identity stretching across European borders, automatic spillover processes between related fields of European integration do less often occur. For example, the pooling of resources in economic policy does not necessarily extend to social affairs. Hooghe and Marks have diagnosed that the *topic of identity under certain circumstances* is causal for the preferences of citizens vis-à-vis European integration.¹² This postfunctionalist idea can develop its own life and infect globalization-friendly measures in general.

In this context, the controversy surrounding TTIP, the planned EU-American trade and investment partnership, serves as a prime example. It is instructive because trade policy links closely with the EU as this domain falls under the exclusive competence of supranational EU institutions - the Commission and the Parliament. TTIP evolved into a highly controversial policy project polarizing political camps, citizens and member states such as Germany and Belgium as a whole. Contrary to

⁹ see *ibid.*, p. 15.

¹⁰ De Wilde, Leupold, Schmidtke, p. 15f.

¹¹ see Hooghe, Liesbeth / Marks, Gary (2009) A Postfunctionalist Theory of European Integration: From Permissive Consensus to Constraining Dissensus, in: *British Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 39, Iss. 1, p. 1-23.

¹² see *ibid.*, p. 13.

previous trade deals, national publics successfully voiced their demand for transparency and for a final say over the agreement, putting the EU Commission under pressure to justify. It became apparent that a coherent EU-strategy for how to handle opposition and negative campaigning was missing. One possible approach would have been to cushion the mobilizing power of TTIP by proactively involving national parliaments. The second option would have been to depoliticize the topic. Splitting TTIP into two components would have been a viable path; a tariff agreement under exclusive EU competence and a second deal on environmental and consumer protection subject to approval by national legislators. This way, member states' parliament could have exerted their role in domesticating and normalizing the politicization.¹³ It would have enabled the Commission and the European Parliament to connect to the prevailing *public sentiment for participation*. Proceeding in such a way would have been more inclusive and could have created an *awareness of common problems* among EU citizens.

Beyond trade, policymakers should focus on *expanding the reach of supranational authority to issue areas in which awareness already exists*, in order to avoid constraining politicization. A special survey by Eurobarometer for instance suggests that three quarters of respondents from 28 member states are in favour of a common defence and security policy among EU countries.¹⁴ 65 per cent on European average support a common foreign policy.¹⁵ At least half of the respondents from ALL member states (except Sweden) would rally behind an EU foreign policy.¹⁶ Supranational institutions should take these survey data as a hint as to where they are expected to take action. Furthermore, the results indicate that common security, defence and external action do not seem to polarize citizens as much as the topic of irregular migration does, which is more often linked to economic, social and identity attitudes.

¹³ see Kröger, Sandra / Bellamy, Richard (2016) Beyond a constraining dissensus: The role of national parliaments in domesticating and normalising the politicization of European integration, in: Comparative European Politics, Vol. 14, Iss.2, p. 131-153.

¹⁴ see European Commission (2017) Special Eurobarometer 461 Report 'Designing Europe's Future: Security and Defence, p. 4.

¹⁵ see *ibid.*, p. 8.

¹⁶ see *ibid.*, p. 9.

V. Conclusion

Taking these empirical manifestations into account, three, sometimes opposing trends that condition politicization can be observed: a rising awareness of common problems, the mobilization of exclusionary identitarian sentiments and the general polarization of opinions. Managing politicization helps escape the trap of national identity politics pedalled by left and right-wing populist forces. Investing political capital on issues with a high level of common awareness as a priority, can produce more unity among European Union citizens, decision-makers and ultimately lead to a reinforced sense of belonging.