

Debating Employment in National TV News: Depoliticised Discourses and Overlooked EU Policies

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Abstract

This article examines the framing of employment policies in public debates within European Union (EU) member states. (Mediatized) public debate is not merely a medium for discussing employment policy; it constitutes a normative infrastructure of democracy. Therefore, the way employment policies are framed and discussed (in other words: [de]politicised) in the mediatized public debate informs us about the democratic quality of the political systems we live in. This is particularly true in the European context. EU policies guide and sometimes constrain national employment policies and are strategically used to (de)politicise national debate. The study relies on TV news broadcasts (TNBs) of public broadcasters as a proxy for the public debates. In total, 576 TNBs in France and Belgium are compared in a diachronic perspective (1995–1996; 2005–2006; 2019). Qualitative frame analysis enables to identify how people intervening in the public debate speak about employment policies and whether they frame them as contingent and controversial. Results identify three framings of employment policies through which the EU is discussed in the Belgian and French broadcast public debates: labour market, social rights, and individual factors. In general, results reveal that the EU and its policies are neither blamed nor contested, but are largely overlooked in both countries’ national public debates. When this is not the case, the EU and its policies are mostly depoliticised. The depoliticisation in the media is partly explained by a consensual conception of the economy across time, country, and the political spectrum.

Keywords

employment policies; European Union; framing; media; politicisation

1. Introduction

Employment policies are central to the political and economic systems that structure modern societies. As instruments that shape labour markets, economic stability, and social welfare, their framing in public debate offers crucial insights into the democratic quality of political systems. Such discourses reflect both political priorities and the capacity of public arenas to generate meaningful, politicised engagement.

(Mediatised) public debate is not merely a medium for discussing employment policy; it constitutes a normative infrastructure of democracy. As Trenz (2024) argues, the public sphere is both *an observatory and a constitutive space* of democratic legitimacy, wherein “critique is the fuel that keeps the motor of the public sphere running” (Trenz, 2024, p. viii). From this perspective, public discourse is foundational to democracy, enabling societal actors to articulate grievances, propose alternatives, and reaffirm shared norms.

In the EU, the multilevel governance framework adds complexity, as EU institutions influence national employment policies through economic and employment frameworks, such as the Lisbon Strategy, or through the open method of coordination (Pochet, 2019). Although formally limited in its competences, the EU shapes national employment policies through economic governance, monetary constraints, and internal market rules (Crespy, 2016; Hassel & Palier, 2021).

Studying the (de)politicisation of employment policy debates must therefore account for the EU’s role. Tensions between EU integration and national sovereignty, particularly since integration moved beyond market logic, have made this a politically sensitive area (Corti, 2022). This article thus asks: Are the EU, its frameworks, and economic policies debated and politicised in national employment discourses?

Employment policy debates serve here as a test case for exploring (de)politicisation. This research pursues two objectives: first, to determine whether EU frameworks are discussed in national debates; and second, to assess whether the EU fosters or hinders political debate—whether it enables controversies or contributes to depoliticisation. The visibility and discussions of EU influence in these debates reveal how (de)politicisation shapes democratic quality in national public spheres.

Politicisation, as approached through its choice perspective (Beveridge, 2017), involves recognition of the contingency and controversy inherent in political issues. Conversely, depoliticisation can be defined as the presentation of policies as neutral, technical, or inevitable, thereby limiting public contestation and reducing democratic vibrancy (Hay, 2007; Wiesner, 2021). For employment policies to be politicised within public debate, it is thus imperative to recognise two factors. First, that action is possible (contingency). Second, that competing solutions exist (controversy).

Analysing how EU influence is framed in national public discourse thus allows us to evaluate EU politicisation beyond moments of crisis or explicit institutional focus (Kauppi & Trenz, 2021). This approach reveals how the EU is (de)politicised in everyday political communication and whether it sustains democratic deliberation.

In this context, politicisation signals democratic vitality by rendering political choices visible and contestable. Depoliticisation, conversely, reflects technocratic drift, shielding policy from deliberation and weakening collective will-formation. Understanding how the EU is made visible, contested, or naturalised in

employment debates sheds light on the democratic functioning of national public spheres in multilevel governance settings.

The choice-based approach to (de)politicisation is consistent with liberal democratic theory (Habermas, 1996; Rawls, 1993), offering a normative lens for assessing public debate. For such debate to be democratic, it must permit both the recognition of contingency and the articulation of alternatives. When this occurs, public discourse can foster informed deliberation and enable citizens to influence decisions affecting their lives.

As context influences (de)politicisation (Wood, 2016), two levels of comparison—diachronic and cross-national—are used to facilitate the integration of contextual factors. Three points in time (1995–1996; 2005–2006; and 2019) are analysed to account for the evolution of employment towards activation policies (Graziano, 2012; Van Hootegem et al., 2024). The national comparison between Belgium and France highlights how differences in social mobilisation, economic orientation, and media systems shape the (de)politicisation of discourses. The media, particularly TV news broadcasts (TNBs), serve as a proxy to study the public debate. They are analysed through qualitative frame analysis (Kitzinger, 2007; Van Gorp, 2010).

The analysis reveals that EU institutions, rules, and policies are overlooked in employment policies in the French and Francophone Belgian public debates. Very few discourses refer to the EU issues and frameworks. When they do, the EU and its policies are predominantly depoliticised. Rather than serving as a focal point for political debates, these debates frame employment as a technical issue dictated by economic necessity, thereby precluding discussions on EU policies and guidelines. The omission or technocratic framing of EU influence in national debates raises concerns for democratic legitimacy in multilevel governance systems. Politicisation is not inherently beneficial, but its absence—particularly in public arenas—can hinder the EU's responsiveness and democratic accountability (Mercenier et al., 2023).

The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 presents the theoretical framework. Section 3 details the research design and methods. Section 4 identifies and discusses the three discursive frames. The conclusion reflects on the democratic implications of the findings.

2. (De)Politicisation: A Discursive Phenomenon

Liberal democratic theory (Habermas, 1996; Rawls, 1993) posits a fundamental principle: The consent of the governed is a *sine qua non* condition of democracy (Rudolph, 2022). Consequently, one of the primary concerns of liberal democratic theory is the effective possibility for anyone to participate in determining their conditions of existence. For a political system to be genuinely democratic, individuals must be able to contribute to shaping the rules governing their daily lives. This means, at a minimum, that they must have the opportunity to participate in public debate to propose solutions to emerging problems. In this regard, the manner in which public policies are discussed and justified in public debate is as crucial to their legitimacy as their content itself (Wood, 2016).

2.1. Defining Politics and (De)Politicisation

Theoretical approaches to (de)politicisation enable this fundamental democratic and normative principle to be operationalised. More specifically, among the different perspectives, the one that can be described as the choice and contingency approach to (de)politicisation is best suited to discursive analysis (Beveridge, 2017).

The definition of (de)politicisation depends on one's conception of politics (Hay, 2007; Wiesner et al., 2019). Two conceptions of politics can be distinguished (Wiesner, 2021). The first defines politics as a specific domain encompassing political institutions and the individuals working within them. From this perspective, politicisation involves the expansion of the political domain: Issues initially outside the remit of political institutions are taken up by these institutions and regulated through public policies. The second conception defines politics as an activity. In this sense, politics constitutes a repertoire of actions that can be mobilised by businesses, stakeholders, or citizens advocating for the implementation of new policies or alternative solutions to those currently in place. From this viewpoint, politicisation is understood as a process.

In general, politicisation tends to be regarded as desirable when politics is understood as an activity and, consequently, politicisation is perceived as a form of political or civic engagement. Conversely, it tends to be viewed as neutral or undesirable when politics is conceptualised as a specific domain distinct from other spheres and politicisation is, therefore, considered an unwarranted extension of this domain (Wiesner et al., 2019). This article adopts the first conception, which views politics as an activity and (de)politicisation as a process engaging citizens to participate in democracy. Conceiving politics as a form of activity offers the advantage of enabling the analysis of politicisation within discourses.

Politicisation conceived as a process constitutes primarily a discursive phenomenon (Wood & Flinders, 2014). Politicisation is thus understood as a process of political input: "an action that constitutes something as political through an act of speech, marking, or designation" (Kauppi et al., 2016, p. 281). In the words of Wiesner (2021, p. 21), politicisation refers to "any action that marks an issue as political, drives political processes, builds a polity (e.g., a political system and its institutions), changes a polity or policy, or shapes policy." Such a definition of politics and politicisation makes it possible to observe whether citizens or the media discuss employment policies and, if so, to analyse whether they identify them as political. This conception is therefore the most appropriate for the objective of this research: to analyse and interpret discourse.

This political conception of politicisation allows for consideration of the mediatised nature of politics and public debates. The mediatisation of politics refers to the increasing extent to which politics depends on and takes place through the media (Esser & Strömbäck, 2014). Political decision-makers and, more broadly, those involved in public debate rely on the media to disseminate or access information (Pfetsch, 2023). Most of the time, it is through the media that those involved, as well as the public, become aware of the worldviews being promoted, the political objectives set, and the measures implemented to achieve them.

In the media-saturated societies of Western Europe, the discourses conveyed in the mediatised public debate concerning employment policies are therefore crucial, as they provide public justifications that either legitimise or delegitimise these policies or the solutions they propose. By discussing employment policies and making them visible, the media enable democracy to function on a large scale (Trenz, 2024).

2.2. Contingency, Controversy, and Democratic Politicisation

Politicisation, as a discursive political activity, is considered one of the foundations of democracy. The confrontation of political ideas and visions, debates on demands for political recognition of issues, and deliberation on possible solutions—i.e., the dialectic between politicisation and depoliticisation (Smilova & Schmidt-Gleim, 2022)—constitute the essence of the democratic process as conceived in Western

democracies (Habermas, 1996; Rawls, 1993). However, this does not necessarily imply that politicisation should always be evaluated positively.

Politicised discourse may, in some cases, be regarded as anti-democratic. Certain processes of politicisation may seek to minimise rather than foster political engagement and social cohesion (Schmidt-Gleim, 2021). Behind many discourses advocating the restoration of popular will and the (re)politicisation of political choices lies the risk of establishing a “democracy without rights,” which could replace the “rights without democracy” characteristic of liberal systems (Mounk, 2018).

Politicisation is therefore normatively and theoretically desirable, but is not automatically positive from an empirical perspective. While it signals a certain vitality in political debate and civic engagement (Habermas, 2023; Trenz, 2023), it may ultimately serve to suppress debate if those who participate in the debate hold anti-democratic preferences or objectives, as politicisation reflects the political sensibilities of actors and the foundations upon which they act (Kauppi et al., 2016). In this sense, although politicisation as civic engagement is, in principle, desirable, not all objectives pursued through such engagement are democratically desirable.

Against this backdrop, the two criteria for identifying discursive politicisation are contingency and controversy (Hay, 2007; Wiesner, 2021). Politicisation, in this sense, involves signalling that employment policies are contingent—that is, recognising the possibility of taking action to influence the course of events. However, merely recognising the necessity of action is not sufficient; for politicisation to be effective, alternative solutions must also exist. In other words, it must be possible to propose and deliberate on alternative public policy solutions. Consequently, controversy can only emerge when there is an initial recognition of contingency—there cannot be controversy without contingency.

The use of these two criteria offers three advantages. First, they allow for an interpretative analysis of discourse content: Beyond revealing contingency and controversy, they highlight the political conceptions and ideologies of those articulating them. Second, relying on contingency and controversy helps to avoid the risk of conflating the competitive or adversarial nature of discourse with more substantive opposition (Pennetreau, 2024). Two arguments can contribute to public assent without necessarily opposing the advocated political solution. Conversely, it is also possible to agree on the diagnosis while proposing different solutions.

Third, employing contingency and controversy markers facilitates the articulation of politicisation and depoliticisation (Wood, 2016). As argued by Claire Dupuy and Virginie Van Ingelgom, defining the latter is essential for empirically studying politicisation as a process (Wiesner et al., 2019). Conceptualising politicisation as a process implies that it is necessarily linked to depoliticisation, which entails denying the existence of alternative solutions or even the possibility of action. Depoliticisation thus arises when controversy is absent from discourse.

3. Methods

The research presents a diachronic comparison of qualitative data. The comparison is structured around two axes: the temporal period, and two countries. The analysis is interpretative in nature. The results and interpretation of the frame analysis are derived from the examination of (dis)similarities across the two levels of comparison (Dupuy et al., 2022; Kreuzer, 2019): the two countries and the three periods.

3.1. Cross-Country and Diachronic Comparison

The (de)politicisation of policy discourses is highly influenced by the context (Wood, 2016). The two levels of comparison, diachronic and cross-national, thus enable the integration of the contextual factors that are most likely to influence the (de)politicisation of discourses about employment policies. First, the diachronic comparison across three periods (1995–1996; 2005–2006; and 2019) takes into account both the evolution of employment policies towards activation policies and broader societal changes. Since the turn of the 1990s, the evolution of employment policies has been characterised by the gradual implementation of activation policies (Graziano, 2012; Van Hooteigem et al., 2024). These policies are marked by the contractualisation and individualisation of workers' rights, as well as the introduction of sanctions. In other words, rights have become subject to greater conditionality, which de facto reduces them, when they are not reduced de jure.

These developments have been endorsed and promoted at the European level, first through the Lisbon Strategy (2000–2010), which aimed to make the EU the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, and subsequently through the Europe 2020 strategy (2010–2020), which sought to transform the EU into a sustainable social market economy while enhancing its competitiveness. These strategies aimed to foster innovation through policies encouraging research, with the objective of increasing employment rates and promoting greener growth.

The three selected points in time were chosen because they represent critical junctures: moments when European objectives and strategies were translated into legislation and implemented at the national level. During the winter of 1995–1996, Belgium and France were engaged in reforms aimed at adjusting their economies to what was beginning to be referred to as globalisation, as well as to the implementation of the European market (Hassel & Palier, 2021). The objective was to establish the necessary conditions for a market that would, among other things, facilitate the free movement of workers.

Ten years later (2005–2006), this objective materialised through the Services Directive, which generated significant debate among member states (Crespy, 2016). In 2019, both countries implemented various policies, including reforms to the pension and unemployment systems, justified in part by the need to comply with European objectives regarding public deficits and budgetary constraints.

These three periods therefore serve as critical junctures for analysing how European issues are integrated (or not) into national political debates and whether they contribute to the politicisation or depoliticisation of these discussions.

The national comparison between Belgium and France enables consideration of other key dimensions likely to influence the (de)politicisation of discourses. Specifically, the two countries differ in terms of the degree of social mobilisation (higher in France) and the organisation of social dialogue, which is more routinised in Belgium (Deschouwer, 2012). Furthermore, France has a consumption-driven economy that requires high wages, whereas Belgium has an export-oriented economy that necessitates low wages, competitive vis-à-vis foreign competitors and trade partners (Hassel & Palier, 2021). Finally, France is characterised by a *polarised pluralist* media system, which fosters a style of reporting centred on conflict and opinion and marked by negativity. By contrast, Belgium has a *democratic corporatist* media system that produces both facts and opinions while distinguishing between them, resulting in less negative reporting (Umbricht & Esser, 2016).

3.2. Coding and Interpretation of Data

A total of 576 TV news broadcasts were analysed over the three time periods, comprising 313 from France and 263 from Belgium. TNBs are used as a proxy for public debate. Three reasons justify this choice. First, the comparability of qualitative empirical materials is a complex matter (Abramson & Gong, 2020). One of the major advantages of media content is that it ensures comparative validity across countries when the same type of media is analysed and, even more so, when the same type of programme is considered (Kitzinger, 2007).

Second, TNBs remain one of the primary sources of political information for citizens, despite the advent of the internet and social media (Dejean et al., 2021). This is particularly true given that a significant proportion of internet traffic is directed towards the websites of established news media outlets (Firmstone, 2024).

Third, TNBs are not programmes where frames are debated or contested. They rather summarise the day's news (Firmstone, 2024). This is not to suggest that TNBs are entirely lacking (de)politicisation, but rather that they do not serve as arenas of deliberation where the frames they present are critically examined. In this respect, there is an absence of substantive engagement with the meaning of competing frames or with the causal logics underpinning them. Nonetheless, the frames are themselves politicising or depoliticising, insofar as they promote or suppress notions of contingency and controversy. Thus, elements of politicisation or depoliticisation are present within TNB content, even in the absence of explicit debate. Crucially, this form of (de)politicisation is arguably more reflective of how the EU is constructed within public discourse on employment policy, precisely because it does not occur within a debate directly focused on the EU, but rather through the routine, everyday representations of its role within TNBs.

Among the TV channels broadcasting such programmes in Belgium and France, the flagship news broadcasts of public service operators have been selected: the 19:30 TNB on La Une (RTBF, Belgium) and the 20:00 TNB on France 2 (France Télévisions, France). This selection is explained by the necessity to analyse channels that were active throughout the entire period (1995–1996; 2005–2006; 2019). The choice therefore rests between public channels and private operators who have been active since the early 1990s (TF1 and Canal+ in France; RTL in Belgium).

As a result, public service broadcasters were selected because they fulfil a central function according to democratic principles, as they are expected to provide neutral and high-quality information (Firmstone, 2024; Habermas, 1996; Trenz, 2024). Public broadcasters have a positive influence on public knowledge of current affairs, and the information they disseminate tends to be more comprehensive and less negative, compared to private channels (Albæk et al., 2014; Cushion, 2022; Soroka et al., 2013). In summary, the frames expressed in TNB segments from public broadcasters are more likely to reflect the state of public debate, as they convey information that is less biased.

For each point in time, a six-month period was analysed. The TNBs were accessed via broadcast archive services (INA Médiapro for the French data and Sonuma for the Belgian data). As with scientific journal databases, relevant segments were identified by searching for keywords in the titles, summaries, and descriptors of the TNBs. Four French-language keywords were employed: *emploi* (employment), *travail* (work), *chômage* (unemployment), and *chômeur* (unemployed person). The use of keywords to refine search results in databases is a well-established practice in the social sciences, particularly in relation to digitalised

media archives and databases (Wiesner, 2022). The four keywords chosen here aimed to produce a broad selection, ensuring that as many relevant sequences as possible are included in the results. The sequences were subsequently viewed and coded. The strategy adopted for identifying relevant segments in citizens' discourses differs and is explained below. Table 1 presents the number of TNBs constituting the media corpus for Belgium and France for each of the periods under study.

Table 1. Number of TNBs analysed.

	1995–1996	2005–2006	2019	Total
La Une (BE)	105	72	86	263
France 2 (FR)	99	110	104	313
Total	204	182	190	576

These data were analysed using a qualitative frame analysis (van Hulst et al., 2024). The strength of frame analysis lies in its structural similarity to policy discourses and justifications: Both involve a causal narrative that identifies the causes and consequences of a given situation or policy problem, and include characters—such as target groups and beneficiaries—to convey a particular interpretation or perspective on the issue or policy (Schneider & Ingram, 1993; Stone, 1988; Van Gorp, 2010).

While there is broad consensus around the general definition of frames, more specific understandings vary considerably both across disciplines and within disciplines from one study to another. The same variability applies to the operationalisation of frames. Given the objective of this analysis, media frames are defined as coherent packages of information containing “a central organising idea or story line that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events” (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989, p. 143). This definition has the advantage of foregrounding the content and political meaning of frames, and is thus particularly well-suited to political science analysis.

The identification of frames was conducted through a two-step manual coding process: (a) the development of a framing matrix and (b) the subsequent analysis of the frames identified. In the first step, a framing matrix was constructed. This approach entails coding the constituent elements of a frame individually, rather than coding the frame as a holistic unit (Van Gorp, 2010). Such a method is designed to reduce interpretive bias in the identification of frames—one of the principal methodological challenges in qualitative frame analysis (Matthes & Kohring, 2008). Coding for the various constitutive elements enables a more objective identification of the components to be coded, thereby facilitating a more systematic analysis. It is the repetition of specific patterns in the articulation of these elements that leads to the identification of distinct frames.

Drawing upon the framing literature (Kitzinger, 2007; Van Gorp, 2010; van Hulst et al., 2024), the causes and consequences articulated in the causal stories were coded. In addition, drawing on the policy literature, the portrayal of target groups and/or beneficiaries was also coded, as these figures are known to play a central role in public discourse and policy justification (Schneider & Ingram, 1993; Stone, 1988). The coding grid for each frame thus comprised six elements: the cause of the problem, the consequences of the problem, and the identification and characterisation of target groups and policy beneficiaries (for further detail, see Pennetreau, 2024).

The aim and outcomes of this method are to construct a typology of the identified frames, along with the possible variations or subtypes of each (Van Gorp, 2010). Such typology accounts for the content of the identified frames and serves to interpret them. Table 2 shows the four frames that have been identified. Three of them occasionally refer to the EU (see analysis below). In total, 974 frames were identified in the TNBs, with 557 from France and 417 from Belgium. Table 3 presents the number of frames identified in Belgium and France for each of the periods under study.

Table 2. Framing matrix.

Frames	Cause of the problem	Consequences of the problem	Target groups	Description of target groups	Policy beneficiaries	Description of policy beneficiaries
Market	Economic	Job creation OR Distortion of labour market	Workers	Disadvantaged	Employers	Disadvantaged
Social rights	Legislation	Enhanced rights OR Reduced rights	Workers OR Employers	Rewarded OR Punished	Workers OR Employers	Punished OR Rewarded
Individual factors	Individual behaviours	Difficulty in finding a job/worker	Unemployed OR Workers	Advantaged	Employers OR Collectivity	Disadvantaged
Conflicts and strategy	Political disagreement	Political deadlock	Social partners	Unable	Social partners	Unable

Table 3. Number of frames identified in the TNBs.

	1995–1996	2005–2006	2019	Total
La Une (BE)	163	123	131	417
France 2 (FR)	177	184	196	557
Total	340	307	327	974

In the second step, once the different frames are identified, the interpretive analysis has two main objectives. The first objective is to determine whether employment policies are (de)politicised, meaning whether they are portrayed as contingent by participants in the public debate, and, if so, whether they are contested. The second objective is to uncover whether the EU and its employment frameworks and strategies are foregrounded or backgrounded (van Hulst et al., 2024) within these frames and whether they contribute to politicise or depoliticise the debate.

4. The Overlooked Role of the EU in National Employment Policy Debates

The general finding of the analysis is that European policies and institutions are largely overlooked. This result confirms that the politicisation of the EU in national debates depends on political crises or major decisions (Capati, 2024; Laloux et al., 2023; Rauh & Parizek, 2024). European policies and institutions are absent from the French and Francophone Belgian debates. Out of the 974 identified frames about employment policies,

only 43 refer to the European Union (19 in Belgium and 24 in France—see Table 4). In other words, the EU is neither debated nor contested in national employment policy debates.

This absence of debate aligns with the observation that politicisation often emerges only when discursive opportunities arise—such as institutional crises or contentious EU-level decisions—rather than from the EU’s structural authority alone (de Wilde & Zürn, 2012). As such, the low salience of the EU in TNBs underscores the extent to which European integration remains depoliticised in the absence of acute conflict or controversy.

This finding thus means that the TNBs analysed here do not meet the standards of the liberal democratic theory of public debate. Such debates should convey the necessary and relevant information for citizens, and society more broadly, to be able to contribute to the debate, to develop informed policy preferences, and to act as citizens or stakeholders. The EU determines the economic and monetary framework within which employment policies are implemented. In that sense, the EU monetary and economic framework influences employment policies (Hassel & Palier, 2021). Through its regulation of the single market, the EU also governs areas crucial to employment, such as the free movement of workers (Crespy, 2016). European employment strategies and frameworks also govern some minimum standards on working hours or minimum wages. This way, the EU also directly influences employment policies (Pochet, 2019). Despite these critical issues, employment policies are addressed only marginally.

The TNBs analysed, therefore, provide only scarce information, even though public operators are generally those who disseminate the most comprehensive information (Albæk et al., 2014; Cushion, 2022; Soroka et al., 2013). This situation reflects a broader pattern highlighted by Statham and Trenz (2015), who argue that politicisation requires not only EU authority but also media structures that translate that authority into frames that resonate publicly. In this case, the absence of European employment policy visibility demonstrates a failure of that resonance mechanism within televised news reporting in France and Belgium.

In addition, this finding also means that, if the politicisation of the EU is understood as its integration—along with its institutions and policies—into daily political debates, then the EU is clearly depoliticised in the TNBs analysed. However, the frequency of such discourses alone is not sufficient to fully understand the (de)politicisation of the EU in employment-related debates (Wiesner et al., 2019). Some discourses may strongly politicise the issue despite being rare. It is therefore crucial to examine in detail how these discourses are framed.

Table 4. Number of frames mentioning EU frameworks and policies.

Frames	1995–1996		2005–2006		2019		Total	
	BE	FR	BE	FR	BE	FR	BE	FR
	La Une	France 2	La Une	France 2	La Une	France 2	La Une	France 2
Labour market	7	4	2	7	4	5	13	16
Social rights	1	0	1	1	1	1	3	2
Individual factors	0	1	1	3	2	2	3	6
Total	13		15		15		43	

The analysis identified three frames through which the EU is discussed in TNBs: the *labour market* frame, the *social rights* frame, and the *individual factors* frame. These frames reflect those commonly used in public

debates on employment (Pennetreau & Laloux, 2025), and they align with other empirical findings that highlight the predominance of economic framing when the EU is discussed in the media (Semetko et al., 2000; Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). This prevalence can, of course, be explained by the fact that the EU's core competences primarily concern trade, economic, and monetary policy.

These three frames persist across all three time periods studied and in both countries. The framing of employment policies in televised public debate is therefore characterised by its continuity over time and its dissemination in both Francophone Belgium and France. The frames relate to the content of the measures themselves, their consequences, or the principles underpinning them.

The three frames have multiple variations. While these variations emphasise different aspects, they follow a common argumentative logic. The *labour market* frame operates on an economic logic; the *social rights* frame follows a legal logic; and the *individual factors* frame is based on the notion of individual responsibility (for more details on the variations, see Pennetreau, 2024).

4.1. Labour Market Frame: Depoliticising EU Constraints

The first and most prevalent frame associating the EU with employment is the *labour market* frame, which tends to depoliticise employment policies:

There is no miracle solution, but we must support and continue to reduce employer contributions to maintain and create jobs. So, this is a government requirement. It must be done with a vision of job creation. And so, the debate we are going to have is how to continue reducing social contributions while increasing employment....Europe considers that Belgium must change the rules of the game today. But I also observe that there is social dumping, that there are competitive devaluations that harm the Belgian economy. And I would also like the European Commission to be just as swift and proactive in addressing this kind of problem. (La Une, Elio Di Rupo, Minister of the economy, 25/02/1996; Excerpt 1)

More than half of the discussions in both Belgium and France adopt this market-oriented perspective. This frame conveys a view of employment as a commodity serving the economy. The causal narrative it promotes is that employment depends on economic performance; therefore, economic performance must be improved to generate jobs. In this sense, employment policy does not exist as a distinct policy area but rather as a secondary effect of broader economic policies. This framing also leads to a focus on (macro)economic indicators and tends to approach employment primarily through quantitative metrics.

Excerpt 1 clearly emphasises that the *labour market* frame is depoliticising. It highlights that there is no alternative (“no miracle solution”) to the reduction of employer contributions. In other words, there is no controversy because no alternative course of action is possible. This is further reinforced by the statement that “Europe considers that Belgium must change the rules of the game.” Thus, in the rare instances where the EU appears in the *labour market frame*, it is identified as or associated with a factor that limits the scope of possible political actions. The EU serves to depoliticise the debates by denying alternative policies. However, contrary to what other studies have shown (Hobolt & Tilley, 2014), the EU is not blamed for the policies implemented; rather, it is criticised for a lack of coherence in its policies: It should be “more proactive in addressing” social dumping and competitive devaluations. Such a discourse corresponds to an

executive strategy of depoliticisation (de Wilde & Zürn, 2012; Fawcett et al., 2017; Wood & Flinders, 2014): By framing policy decisions as dictated by necessity or external constraints, decision-makers seek to insulate themselves from contestation. The resulting narratives position the EU not as a contested political actor, but as a technocratic authority beyond dispute.

In certain cases, the EU's constraints and frameworks are explicitly exonerated, despite the fact that they partly shape national employment policies. These policies are then justified by necessity, enabling their advocates to claim freedom from political or ideological commitments by arguing that no alternative exists:

The policy pursued by the French government to reduce deficits is not driven by the Maastricht Treaty or any external constraint imposed upon us. It is a policy motivated solely by the need to adapt our country's structures to effectively combat unemployment and restore social cohesion. (France 2, Jacques Chirac, President of the Republic, 07/02/1996; Excerpt 2)

Justifying the economic and welfare policy after the socially contentious winter of 1995–1996, the then French President Jacques Chirac argued that the reforms were not dictated by the necessity to adjust to the convergence criteria set by the Maastricht Treaty but by the need to adapt French employment policies. This reveals that the discourse of post-politics can be observed both in Belgium and France since the mid-1990s. By invoking the argument of necessity (Excerpts 1 and 2), Belgian and French politicians justify the policies implemented, depoliticising employment policies and avoiding blame, rather than politicising them by shifting responsibility onto the EU.

Excerpts 1 and 2 reveal two strategies that may appear divergent. While the Belgian minister of the economy, a socialist, emphasises that the reforms are carried out within the framework of implementing European rules, the French president, a conservative, denies that the EU has any influence whatsoever. Nevertheless, in both cases, the approach and the outcome are the same. Both political figures invoke the argument of economic necessity to dismiss controversy and justify the chosen solution. In other words, a shared understanding of employment and economic policies can be observed, one that transcends traditional political divides. Such bipartisan reliance on necessity-based narratives also corroborates findings by Rauh and Parizek (2024), who note that politicisation remains contingent and uneven, often confined to moments of exogenous shock or high-stakes negotiation. In this case, employment policy does not appear as a trigger for politicisation, despite the EU's institutional role, due to the lack of a unifying or galvanising event.

Numerous studies have demonstrated that the social and economic policies implemented in the Anglo-Saxon world have been accompanied by depoliticising discourse (Buller et al., 2019; Fawcett et al., 2017). By shifting the analysis from the politicisation of the EU in debates about the EU towards an analysis of how the EU can be politicised in everyday political debates (Kauppi & Trenz, 2021), the current study uncovers that this type of discourse was already prevalent in Europe in the 1990s. European policies and rules are not criticised; instead, they are presented as the only reasonable and, crucially, the only possible options. These rhetorical techniques are also found in the communications of European leaders (Borriello, 2017).

4.2. Social Rights and Individual Factors Frames: Politicising Workers' Competition

Although it is largely dominant, not all discourses are framed through the lens of the labour market. The second frame associating the EU with employment is the *social rights* frame:

Because we are in the European Union, he [the beneficiary of the new employment mobility legislation] continues to contribute to his pension, retains his rights to health insurance or unemployment benefits if he returns to France. And, as a bonus, he can apply for financial assistance from Pôle emploi: €750 to cover his moving costs. The only conditions: being under 35 and securing a contract of at least six months. France is doing everything it can to encourage this mobility, as seen here at the embassy—posters, leaflets, and even a website with 140 job offers available for French speakers right away. (France 2, Laurent Desbonnets, journalist, 04/01/2019; Excerpt 3)

It was the CGT [Confédération générale du travail] that exposed the working and living conditions of the Polish workers. They got hold of a contract stating that the salary was 1,500 zlotys per month—about €390—plus some expatriation allowances. According to the CGT, that's far below the legal minimum....In this case, EDF [Electricité de France] outsourced the refurbishment of the power plant to Alstom, which in turn subcontracted the work to a Polish company. When contacted, Alstom declined to comment, stating that the rules were being followed. The ball is now in the court of the labour inspectorate, which will, for instance, check whether the company is properly paying overtime....The Porcheville case has, in any case, reignited the debate on social dumping just days before the European Parliament's new review of the Bolkestein Directive. (Stéphane Depinoy, journalist, 08/02/2006; Excerpt 4)

The *social rights* frame presents employment as a social phenomenon embedded in a legal framework that determines what is permissible in terms of policy measures, instruments, and tools (Excerpt 3). The causal narrative it promotes is that employment-related measures should primarily ensure working and living conditions that align with established social standards. Employment policies, in this context, are first and foremost policies that define the rights and obligations of both employers and employees. Consequently, this frame focuses on legal frameworks and social entitlements, approaching employment issues from the perspective of moral and philosophical principles underpinning social rights. It promotes a conception in which social rights, as “acquired rights,” form the cornerstone of employment policy.

The analysis also reveals the gradual emergence of a third frame associating the EU with employment: the *individual factors* frame:

Google is a symbolic worksite for today's anti-social dumping action day because it's a major site where several thousand workers are employed, and for months now, we've seen hundreds of violations of the Posting Directive. So, it was important for us to highlight this site and show that social dumping is a real problem in Belgium. (La Une, Lionel Quelbel, unionist, 08/02/2006; Excerpt 5)

This frame portrays employment as an individual phenomenon dependent on personal behaviour or as a social issue that can be corrected through individual characteristics. The causal narrative it conveys is that an individual's employment situation depends on their own actions or attributes, implying that interventions

should target individuals or their circumstances to facilitate employment. Accordingly, depending on whether individuals are seen as responsible for or victims of their situation, employment policies take the form of either individualised control and sanction mechanisms (in the former case) or collective social measures (in the latter). This frame, therefore, promotes an atomised conception of employment—especially of unemployment—by reducing it to individual behaviour-related issues.

In most uses of these two frames, the EU and its policies primarily serve as a backdrop to national debates and are not discussed in their own right. However, certain European policies have sparked debate and controversy, giving rise to discussions and demands for alternative solutions. This is particularly the case with the Services Directive (referred to as the Bolkestein Directive in Excerpt 4, after the Dutch Commissioner who proposed and oversaw its adoption) and the Posted Workers Directive (referred to as the Posting Directive in Excerpt 5), both of which triggered politicisation as opponents advocated alternative solutions, including the withdrawal of the policies.

These legislative acts thus represent a genuinely politicised policy in the sense that the debates surrounding it were characterised by both controversy and contingency. Some uses of the *social rights* or *individual factors* frames constitute the only identified cases in the analysis where a European policy is integrated into the politicisation of the national debate. The *individual factors* frame is used to invoke the responsibility of employers who exploit the Posted Workers Directive for their own benefit (Excerpt 5). Similar examples, centred on employer responsibility, were observed in France during the same period (2019). The *social rights* frame is used to invoke the responsibility of employers who used the Services Directive for their own benefit (Excerpt 4). Similar examples, centred on employer responsibility, were observed in Belgium during the same period (2005–2006). Such instances clearly constitute deep politicisation (Statham & Trezn, 2015)—when public actors and media simultaneously contest both the policy content and the legitimacy of its governance framework. Yet, such instances remain exceptional in the analysed TNBs, which tends to illustrate the structural limits to sustained EU politicisation in national public spheres.

These discourses are not focused on nor criticise the EU and its frameworks and strategies for employment. Even when they refer to international employers such as Google or EDF, the focus remains on the local situation and its consequences for the country. In both cases, the problem is the unfair competition between workers from different member states due to different social standards, which results in social dumping.

These observations thus reflect a form of politicisation, as trade unions mobilise to denounce the actions of certain employers and call on the national authorities to take action to prevent distortions of competition. National employment regulations are integrated in contingent and controverted discourses in the national debates, within which the Posted Workers and Services Directives are embedded. Notably, this politicisation is primarily driven by trade unions, which reinforces the result identified through the analysis of the uses of the *labour market* frame: There is a common understanding amongst political actors about (EU) employment policies.

This common understanding helps explain why the number of such politicised discourses remains very low (5 out of the 43 identified in relation to the EU). It can thus be concluded that the politicisation of the EU within everyday national political debate remains highly occasional, if not exceptional. It is important to note, however, that some forms of this politicisation may be difficult to identify, particularly when they relate to

phenomena intrinsically linked to globalisation. In such cases, it is globalisation itself that may become politicised, serving as a framework for contesting the competitive dynamics between workers. This phenomenon is also observed in citizens' discourses (Le Gall et al., 2025).

5. Conclusion: Overlooked and Depoliticised EU

In conclusion, this article demonstrates that EU institutions and policies remain largely overlooked and depoliticised in the televised public debates of France and Francophone Belgium when they discuss employment policies. Two main conclusions can be drawn from the analysis.

The first main result indicates that when discussing employment policies, people intervening in the national public debates rarely mention the EU, its rules, or its policies. More than 20 years ago, Díez Medrano (2003) came to the conclusion that the EU is mostly framed according to culture and history. Looking in the opposite direction, this analysis shows that the EU barely emerges in national employment policy debates. In line with studies that have shown that European citizens tend to overlook the EU when discussing politics, despite its influence on their living conditions (Duchesne et al., 2013), this analysis shows that this also holds true in certain debates where the EU likewise plays a key role.

The other main result indicates that employment policies in the French and Francophone Belgian TNBs are framed in a manner that depoliticises the EU. In other words, in the rare cases where the EU is not overlooked, it is predominantly depoliticised. This depoliticisation is primarily driven by a shared conception of the economy, in which the labour market is presented as an unquestionable determinant of policy choices. The *labour market* frame, which dominates discussions, constructs employment policy as a technical matter governed by economic necessity rather than a politically contestable issue that is influenced by EU strategies and frameworks as well as by its economic and monetary policies. This approach marginalises the possibility of alternative policy choices and precludes the recognition of the EU's role in determining employment policies, thereby depoliticising the EU in daily national political debates. When the EU is referenced within this framework, it is not as a site of political contestation but rather as an external constraint that is either accepted as an inevitability or dismissed as irrelevant to national policy choices.

In the rare instances where the EU is politicised in employment debates, this occurs through the invocation of *social rights* and *individual factors* frames. Both frames are used to voice concerns about unfair competition and social dumping. These discourses refer to the Posted Workers Directive and the Services Directives, but they underline the necessity for political action and alternative solutions at the national level. Notably, such uses of these frames emerge primarily in the discourse of trade union representatives rather than in the rhetoric of mainstream political figures. However, these instances of politicisation are sporadic and do not constitute a systematic integration of EU policies into national political contestation. Instead, they reflect isolated moments of critique that confirm that the politicisation of the EU is mostly driven by crises (Capati, 2024; Risse, 2014).

These findings thus challenge the notion that the EU is becoming increasingly politicised within domestic public debates (Rauh & Parizek, 2024), or that genuinely "differentiated" patterns of EU politicisation exist (de Wilde et al., 2016). On the contrary, with respect to debates on employment policy in national media, comparable trends of depoliticised discourse—marked by a neglect of EU policies and frameworks—can be observed in France and Belgium. At the same time, the findings support the argument that EU politicisation

is contingent upon the presence of “discursive opportunities” linked to specific European decisions or crises (de Wilde & Zürn, 2012).

The overall absence of EU politicisation in French and Francophone Belgian employment debates has broader implications for the democratic functioning of the European multilevel public sphere (Habermas, 1996; Trenz, 2024). The persistent dominance of depoliticising frames suggests that public debate about employment policies remains constrained within a narrow economic view—although widely shared amongst political actors—that resists substantive political contestation. This limits the potential for democratic engagement with EU policies and prevents meaningful discussion about the EU’s influence on national political processes. Furthermore, the lack of divergence between left- and right-wing political actors in their framing of employment policies underscores the extent to which depoliticisation has become entrenched across ideological divides. This consensus on economic orthodoxy, transcending traditional party lines, further reduces the space for alternative policy proposals and contributes to a post-political environment (Buller et al., 2019; Fawcett et al., 2017) in which the EU disappears within policy controversies.

While this study has focused on televised news debates, its findings resonate with broader discussions on the politicisation of public debates and deliberation in contemporary democracies (Habermas, 2023; Trenz, 2023; Wiesner et al., 2019). From a political perspective, the depoliticisation of employment policies reflects a wider trend in which neoliberal economic principles are naturalised in public discourse, curtailing the scope for political contestation (Beveridge, 2017; Borriello, 2017; Hay, 2007; Wood, 2016). This raises critical questions about the democratic quality of contemporary media debates and their capacity to foster an engaged and informed citizenry. If public discourse systematically excludes the possibility of alternative economic policies and overlooks crucial explanatory and contextual factors such as the EU, it risks undermining the fundamental democratic principle that policy choices should remain open to debate and contestation.

From a theoretical perspective, the results also indirectly suggest that the conditions for a public debate, as conceived by theorists of liberal democracies (Habermas, 1996; Rawls, 1993), do not align with the reality of how a mediatised debate functions. This is even more true given that social media have disrupted this functioning (Habermas, 2023) and led to changes whose full extent we are still far from grasping (Trenz, 2023). These changes also affect the way traditional media operate. Determining the influence of post-truth or the absence of factuality on the functioning of public debates in the age of infocracy (Han, 2022) is crucial both theoretically and philosophically. However, this may not be the primary issue from an empirical standpoint. On the contrary, developing more operational analytical models that take into account the constraints related to the conditions of information production, the economic interests at play, and the ways in which these are concealed within depoliticisation strategies—used to promote specific worldviews and ideologies—would significantly contribute to understanding the dynamics of (de)politicisation in public debate.

Ultimately, these findings suggest that the EU’s role in national political debates remains highly constrained by the overarching depoliticisation of economic and social policies. The marginalisation of EU-related contestation within employment policy debates reflects a broader reluctance to engage with European governance as a political domain subject to democratic deliberation. For the EU to become meaningfully politicised in national debates, it would require a reconfiguration of public discourse that challenges the prevailing assumption of economic inevitability and reinstates the possibility of genuine political choice. Without such a shift, the EU will likely remain an overlooked or neutralised presence in national political

discussions, reinforcing the ongoing depoliticisation of European integration. Thereby, these results also underscore the importance of examining routine political and policy debates at the national level to better understand the extent of EU politicisation and the dynamics that sustain its (de)politicisation (Kauppi & Trenz, 2021).

These findings are consistent with recent research highlighting that the politicisation of EU policies and frameworks tends to occur predominantly in cases of high salience, such as the war in Ukraine, the Covid-19 pandemic (Rauh & Parizek, 2024), or trade agreements like Comprehensive Economic Trade Agreement and Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (Gheyle, 2020). The article demonstrates that, in contrast, when core policies are not associated with politically salient crises, EU policies and frameworks largely remain depoliticised. These results thus confirm the necessity of further investigating the dynamics of depoliticisation in order to deepen our understanding of (de)politicisation processes (Bressanelli et al., 2020).

With regard to the politicisation research agenda, it is important to note that the most recent period examined here covers only the first half of 2019; as such, the trends identified may have evolved since then. Although the consistency of the results over three different decades suggests that they have not fundamentally changed over the course of four or five years, it may nonetheless be useful to update the analysis. To advance our comprehension of how the EU is politicised—or remains depoliticised—within national and everyday political discourse, future research would benefit from focusing on more recent periods, as well as conducting continuous longitudinal studies to assess whether changes have occurred over time. Furthermore, exploring the experiences of member states that acceded to the EU more recently could yield valuable insights into the (de)politicisation of EU policies within national public debates. Finally, the depoliticisation of public discourse in other critical policy domains warrants scholarly attention—particularly in the area of EU media regulation, where the EU is currently legislating to uphold fair competition and the rule of law by promoting media pluralism and freedom.

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Data Availability

Data available upon request from the author.

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