cogitatio

POLITICS AND GOVERNANCE

Debating Europe: Politicization, Contestation, and Democratization

Volume 13

2025

Open Access Journal

ISSN: 2183-2463

Edited by Claudia Wiesner and Meta Novak

Politics and Governance, 2025, Volume 13
Debating Europe: Politicization, Contestation, and Democratization

Published by Cogitatio Press
Rua Fialho de Almeida 14, 2º Esq.,
1070–129 Lisbon
Portugal

Design by Typografia®
http://www.typografia.pt/en/

Cover image: © Elke Wetzig from Wikimedia Commons

Academic Editors
Claudia Wiesner (Fulda University of Applied Sciences)
Meta Novak (University of Ljubljana)

Available online at: www.cogitatiopress.com/politicsandgovernance

Table of Contents

Politics and Governance
2025 • Volume 13 • Article 10905
https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.10905

EDITORIAL

Open Access Journal

Debating Europe: Politicization, Contestation, and Democratization

Claudia Wiesner [1] and Meta Novak [2]

[1] Department of Social and Cultural Sciences, Fulda University of Applied Sciences, Germany
[2] Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia

Correspondence: Claudia Wiesner (Claudia.wiesner@sk.hs-fulda.de)

Submitted: 4 July 2025 **Published:** 9 September 2025

Issue: This editorial is part of the issue "Debating Europe: Politicization, Contestation, and Democratization" edited by Claudia Wiesner (Fulda University of Applied Sciences) and Meta Novak (University of Ljubljana), fully open access at https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.i452

Abstract

This thematic issue focuses on how Europe and the European Union are debated, politicized, and contested. A key focus is set on the question of whether and how these debates and politicizations help to democratize the EU, or not. This rationale is based on the assumption that debate is a key democratic activity, and accordingly, "Debating Europe" is one of the bases for a democratic Europe and a democratic EU. This is also the key assumption of the Jean Monnet Network Debating Europe (DebatEU) that is at the outset of the thematic issue (see www.debating-europe.de; Grant No. 620428-EPP-1–2020-1-DE-EPPJMO-NETWORK). The process of debating enhances the legitimacy of the EU not only as a polity, but also as a policy-making process by regaining citizens' trust in their ability to use political discussions to influence the policy-making process, including a wide range of policy actors.

Keywords

contestation; debate; democratization; Europe; European Union; politicization

This thematic issue is based on the assumption that debate is a key democratic activity and, accordingly, "debating Europe" is one of the bases for a democratic Europe and a democratic EU. Articles in the issue thus focus on how Europe and the European Union in particular are debated, politicized, and contested. In this, it is a crucial question whether and how these debates and politicizations help to democratize the EU.

There are a number of debate-oriented tools and practices that can enhance democracy and that the EU applies. Forums for dialogue and debate can be organized in various forms, following the ideal that citizens and representatives, through well-informed and reasoned discussion, discourse, and communication, are involved in decision-making processes. It can be assumed that this strengthens political trust, counters distrust, and

provides accountability, legitimacy, and effectiveness. The process of debating thus enhances the legitimacy of the EU not only as a polity, but also as a policy-making process by regaining citizens' trust in their ability to use political discussions to influence the policy-making process, including a wide range of policy actors.

However, despite the activities of the EU and national institutions, as well as intermediate institutions and actors, to bring citizens closer to policy-making, research and opinion surveys diagnose a gap between EU elites and EU citizens. Votes for populist, extremist, anti-EU, and anti-democratic parties and movements are on the rise throughout the EU and within EU institutions. At the same time, the Europeanisation of politics and decision-making continues to impact and transform the national democratic systems of the member states and citizens' everyday lives.

Can debates on Europe and the politicization of the EU help to close these gaps and democratize the EU? There are agreements and disagreements in the academic debate on EU politicization in these respects. While there is disagreement as to what extent debate on the EU, i.e., EU politicization, can indeed help democratize the EU, there is some agreement in that the academic discussion of EU politicization is itself rather recent, since the EU for a long time has been considered as not much politicized. Public discourses on EU policies and EU contestation have been rare. There is also some—although not complete—agreement in the academic debate in that the EU, since the 1990s, has become more politicized. The French EU referendum discourse in 2005, in this context, is considered one major instance of politicization, and it led to a "No" vote on the draft Constitutional Treaty (see Wiesner, 2025). A crucial question in the academic debate on EU politicization is thus whether it may be beneficial for the EU, detrimental, or if the truth lies somewhere in between. This debate is often linked to the question of whether politicization is beneficial for EU democratization. In both these respects, academic contributions show decisive disagreement.

This thematic issue dives into the field opened by the puzzle raised above, i.e., it focuses on the various normative and empirical linkages and interrelations between debate as a necessary basis for democracy in the European Union and Europe, politicization, and the consequences debate and politicization entail for the EU, democracy, and democratization. Most contributions focus on the European Union, but are not limited to the EU alone—some consider Europe altogether. Contributions tackle themes, issues, and questions in debates on the EU and Europe, via different media and channels and in different fora—such as citizen debates, parliaments, and (social) media; narratives and images linked to the EU and Europe; and politicization, contestation, and democratization via debates on Europe and the EU. This thematic issue focuses in particular on the following questions:

- How are Europe and the EU, and how is (liberal) democracy defined and contested in debates? How is it conceptualized and debated in various fora and by different actors?
- In what way are the EU and Europe, and in what ways is democracy contested? In which occasions and contexts?
- How are the debates and contestations contextualized, in which occasions do they occur, and are they linked to other issues or other significant concepts like nation, sovereignty, citizenship, representation, participation, autonomy, freedom, or power?
- How is democracy conceptualized in the framework of the European Union and its multilevel system, both by citizens and elites?

The contributions to the thematic issue each tackle these questions from various angles. A number of the contributions focus on *debates* and *rhetorical actions on the EU*, and the ways the EU, in general, democracy, and sovereignty in the EU in particular, are constructed or contested in them. Steuer (2025) focuses on the new controversies opened by the advancement of EU integration. He studies 120 original proposals by political actors from Czechia, Hungary, and Slovakia on how to structure the EU democratically. The analysis finds limited conceptual innovations in references to democracy in the proposals from across the three countries. Moreover, non-democratic actors also aimed to use the concept by presenting non-democratic ideas as embodying the spirit of democracy while accusing democratic actors of anti-democratic conduct. Democratic actors broadly failed to counter these hijacking attempts. In conclusion, Steuer (2025) finds that there are impoverished narratives on democracy in the context of EU integration.

In a similar approach, Beetz et al. (2025) discuss debates in the European Parliament that put forward ideas of EU democratization. They argue that MEPs in their arguments defend a logic of "trickle-down democracy," which entails the belief that the creation of a traditional representative democratic infrastructure at the European level will Europeanise national democracies and citizen identities.

Góra et al. (2025) also discuss how the future of European integration is debated by political actors, how the concept of sovereignty is constructed by them, and how they contest the division of competencies in the EU. To do so, 45 plenary debates on the future of Europe from the national parliaments of Germany and France, from 2015 to 2021, were analysed. The timeframe marks a key phase of intense debate and redefinition of the EU's 24 future.

Another set of articles focuses on *citizen participation* and *citizen views*, which are analyzed based on qualitative and quantitative empirical material. Wenzel (2025) discusses findings from 34 interviews with journalists, EU-correspondents, press-officers of the European Parliament and EUROPE DIRECTs, representatives from civil society, and 18 focus group discussions with Bulgarian, Croatian, Finnish, French, German, and Slovenian students in the project "Debating Europe." The article presents how both groups of actors perceive EU-reporting in the media on local, national, and supranational levels and illustrates possible examples and ideas to improve EU-reporting that were highlighted in the interviews and focus group discussion.

Vidačak et al. (2025) focus on the dynamics of Croatian citizen participation in the European Citizen Initiatives (ECI). Since Croatia joined the EU, the engagement of Croatian citizens is comparatively low. Qualitative insights from focus group discussions with students of political science, journalism, and European studies are explored alongside perspectives from interviews with Croatian members of ECI organizing committees and supporting organizations, providing an insider view of the challenges and opportunities in mobilizing citizen participation in ECIs. The article identifies key barriers and opportunities for increasing Croatian engagement in ECIs. The findings point to a lack of awareness, perceived ineffectiveness, and procedural complexity as major obstacles, while strong NGO involvement and targeted communication strategies emerge as critical for improving participation.

Novak and Lajh (2025) analyse European identity among Slovenian teenagers. The analysis is based on a questionnaire-based research conducted among Slovenian elementary school students who participated in EU-related project activities. The measurements of the students' self-assessment of their European identity

and its associated variables were made before and after these project activities. Their assumption is that students who participated in EU-related activities strengthened their European identity by way of the project activities. The results show that the students already expressed a high level of European identity prior to the project activities, leaving little room for a stronger identity, which nevertheless speaks in favour of placing permanent EU-related topics in the educational process.

EU politicization is in the focus of two other articles: Arens et al. (2025) focus on principled politicization, which they regard as a process of politicization by which regime principles become salient in public debate in a way that also articulates or implies structural alternatives. They argue that, in contrast to other conceptualizations of politicization, principled politicization differs in terms of topic (regime principles) and content (alternatives), and accordingly, principled politicization inherently concerns the concept of democracy. The authors put the notion of principled politicization to test by empirically studying citizen discussions about the EU and examining whether citizens draw on EU regime principles and discuss alternatives. The article is based on a qualitative secondary analysis of four datasets, consisting of interviews and focus groups with participants from different socio-economic backgrounds and political leanings that were collected in Belgium, France, and the United Kingdom at four different points in time (1995–2019). Findings indicate that some citizens do engage with EU regime principles, consider alternatives to the principles they observe being implemented, and that politicization can strengthen EU democratization when debates include and reflect the challenges to democratic principles themselves.

Pennetreau (2025) examines the politicization and framing of employment policies in public debates in France and Belgium. He regards mediatised public debate as a normative infrastructure of democracy. Therefore, he argues, the way employment policies are framed and discussed—in other words, (de)politicized—in the mediatised public debate informs us about the democratic quality of the political systems we live in. This is particularly true in the European context, as EU policies guide and sometimes constrain national employment policies, and they are also strategically used to (de)politicize national debates. The study relies on TV news sequences of public broadcasters as a proxy for the public debates. In total, 506 sequences in France and Belgium are compared in a diachronic perspective (across three periods 1995–1996; 2005–2006; 2019). Results indicate 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. Results reveal that the EU and its policies are neither blamed nor contested, but largely overlooked or depoliticized.

The last set of articles focuses on *how to conceptualise democracy* and *the democratization of the EU*. Wiesner (2025) focuses on European identity construction and EU democratization. Her article is based on the main methodological assumption that the formation of European identity in the sense of a self-identification of an EU demos, is key to EU democratisation, and that European identity, among other means, can be constructed in national EU discourses, as such discourses construct meaning for the EU. Against this backdrop, she presents the core findings of a comparative study on German and French national EU discourses around the ratification of the draft of the Treaty on a Constitution for Europe in 2005. The main part presents core results, finding that the French discourse was very intense and, hence, worked as a means of EU democratization. However, despite its intensity, did not construct identification with the EU but a distance between France and the EU, and it remained a national EU discourse. On the other hand, the German discourse was an EU discourse with a national base, but not very intense. It constructed EU identity, but was less a means of democratization.

Finally, Pusterla and Piccin (2025) investigate the potential responsibility of the EU for its ongoing state of permanent crisis. They argue that this condition is not merely incidental or externally imposed but rather fundamentally woven into the EU's political framework. Situated at the intersection of political philosophy and the conceptual analysis of the idea of Europe, the article reconceptualises crisis not as an exceptional anomaly but as an expression of a deeper moral and symbolic failure, engaging with academic debates on how Europeanness shapes the EU's identity, legitimacy, and integrative tensions, and drawing on the works of thinkers such as Jacques Derrida and Rodolphe Gasché. The article concludes that the EU's recurrent crises reverberate a failure to articulate a form of sovereignty that is adequate to the uniqueness of the European historical and normative trajectory. In this context, the current rise of sovereigntism is read less as a genuine demand for enhanced state power and more as a manifestation of the EU's inability to offer a compelling political and moral alternative.

Acknowledgments

This thematic issue is partially based on the work of the Jean Monnet Network Debating Europe (DebatEU, see www.debating-europe.de; Grant No. 620428-EPP-1–2020-1-DE-EPPJMO-NETWORK), funded by the European Commission in the framework of the Jean Monnet Actions/Erasmus+. The European Commission's support for the production of this publication does not constitute endorsement of the contents, which reflect the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

References

Arens, N., Dupuy, C., & Van Ingelgom, V. (2025). Principled politicization: When citizens debate the EU and its regime principles. *Politics and Governance*, *13*, Article 10073. https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.10073

Beetz, J. P., Pittoors, G., & Wolfs, W. (2025). How trickle-down democracy won the debate, and why it didn't have to. *Politics and Governance*, *13*, Article 9905. https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.9905

Góra, M., Thevenin, E., & Zielińska, K. (2025). Nested, pooled, or exclusively national? Contested sovereignty models in debates on the future of Europe. *Politics and Governance*, *13*, Article 10017. https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.10017

Novak, M., & Lajh, D. (2025). How European do young slovenians feel? *Politics and Governance*, *13*, Article 10077. https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.10077

Pennetreau, D. (2025). Debating employment in national TV news: Depoliticised discourses and overlooked EU policies. *Politics and Governance*, *13*, Article 10120. https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.10120

Pusterla, E. R. G., & Piccin, F. P. (2025). Sovereignty crises and the EU's moral challenge. *Politics and Governance*, *13*, Article 10072. https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.10072

Steuer, M. (2025). Hijacking democracy: Proposals for the future of the EU in Czechia, Hungary, and Slovakia (2015–2022). *Politics and Governance*, *13*, Article 9775. https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.9775

Vidačak, I., Munta, M., & Matan, A. (2025). Too far to reach? Explaining low Croatian participation in the European citizens' initiative. *Politics and Governance*, *13*, Article 10041. https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.10041

Wenzel, M. C. (2025). Reporting EU politics in news venues: An issue of democratic deficit? *Politics and Governance*, *13*, Article 9869. https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.9869

Wiesner, C. (2025). National EU discourses in Germany and France and the construction of European identity. *Politics and Governance*, *13*, Article 10094. https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.10094

About the Authors

Claudia Wiesner is a professor of political science at Fulda University of Applied Sciences. She directs the Jean Monnet Centre of Excellence Europe in the World and the Point Alpha Research Institute (PARI), is PI in several international research projects, and has been a visiting fellow in various international research institutions. For more details, consult: https://wiesnerc.jimdofree.com/english

Meta Novak is an associate professor of policy analysis at the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ljubljana, a researcher at the Centre for Political Science Research and a coordinator of the PhD programme of policy analysis. She has led and participated in several Jean Monnet projects focusing on teaching EU related topics.

Politics and Governance
2025 • Volume 13 • Article 9775
https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.9775

ARTICLE

Open Access Journal

Hijacking Democracy: Proposals on the Future of the European Union in Czechia, Hungary, and Slovakia (2015–2022)

Max Steuer [1,2,3]

[1] CEU Democracy Institute, Hungary
[2] Department of Political Science, Comenius University in Bratislava, Slovakia
[3] Jindal Global Law School, O.P. Jindal Global University, India

Correspondence: Max Steuer (steuerm@ceu.edu / ms2632@cantab.ac.uk)

Submitted: 30 January 2025 **Accepted:** 26 June 2025 **Published:** 13 August 2025

Issue: This article is part of the issue "Debating Europe: Politicization, Contestation, and Democratization" edited by Claudia Wiesner (Fulda University of Applied Sciences) and Meta Novak (University of Ljubljana), fully open access at https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.i452

Abstract

EU integration has opened new controversies in making sense of democracy. This article studies how discourses on democracy in EU integration open spaces to hijack the concept of democracy, using a novel empirical dataset on proposals for reforming EU democracy formulated during the rise of the "EU crisis" rhetoric between 2015–2022. The analysis focuses on 131 proposals from Czechia, Hungary, and Slovakia as sources with the rationale to present forward-looking claims on EU democracy. The three EU member states have struggled with post-1989 democratic consolidation. Between 2015–2022, fundamental tenets of democracy continued to be undermined in Hungary with implications for the decision-making and legitimacy of the EU institutions. The analysis finds limited conceptual innovations in references to democracy in the proposals. Moreover, it shows how illiberal actors, identified by conceptions of democracy reduced to (state-level) majority rule, present conventionally antidemocratic ideas as embodying the spirit of democracy. In all three countries, democratic actors broadly failed to counter these hijacking attempts. The findings underscore the impoverished discourses on democracy in the context of EU integration in the small Visegrad countries. They also call for enhanced public representations of views on the EU in an inclusive manner.

Keywords

Czechia; de-democratisation; democracy; European Union; Hungary; illiberalism; intellectuals; national governments; political parties; Slovakia

1. Introduction

The growth of shared EU competence in the wake of the atmosphere of emergency triggered by the Covid-19 outbreak in 2020 has amplified previously existing critiques of the lack of democracy in the EU (e.g., Follesdal & Hix, 2006; Wiesner, 2020). Even before the Covid-19 pandemic, "crisis talk" had become entrenched in EU thinking, fuelled first by economic and then by security concerns due to the illegal annexation of Crimea and the illiberal weaponisation of asylum (Steuer, 2017). Amidst these worries, two lines of criticism became difficult to distinguish from each other. One was that of anti-EU voices—including those calling for short-term, even unilateral solutions undermining fundamental rights on grounds of "emergencies" (Auer, 2022)—wishing to weaken or entirely diminish the Union's competences (Lorenz & Anders, 2020). The other was stakeholder dissatisfaction with the lack of proportionate democratic safeguards for the EU's capacity to enhance the public good by exercising supranational competences (Weiler, 2018). The difficulty in establishing the distinction between the two critiques carries a double risk of delegitimising critiques of the deficits of democracy in the EU, and delegitimising the EU altogether. Both could stifle EU democratic reform (e.g., Lafont, 2020). Attentiveness to the varieties of discourses of EU democracy is necessary to reduce that risk.

This article scrutinises a segment of discourses on EU democracy during a pivotal period of rising concerns of overlapping (or "poly-") crises, culminating in the Covid-19 pandemic. It analyses proposals on the future of EU democracy from Czechia, Hungary, and Slovakia, Central European countries with shared histories including the 2004 EU accession and with challenges in embedding democratic political regimes (cf. Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2024; Hanley & Cianetti, 2024). This helps shed light on the local debate on EU democracy and understand who "wields" democracy in the EU context as a concept. Furthermore, it allows exploring discursive shifts amidst rising illiberalism (Halmai, 2021). This article, firstly, presents broad fault lines on the discourses of democracy in the EU, demonstrating the gap in studying particular constituencies' contributions (Section 2), and the significance of bridging that gap (Section 3). Secondly, it defends the analysis of original data on reform proposals (Section 4). The Czech, Hungarian, and Slovak proposals were assembled as part of a broader cross-jurisdictional project from official platforms of key actors supplemented by online search (Section 5). Thirdly, the article shows instances of how the concept of democracy was hijacked by illiberal actors, appropriating it with limited contestation or resistance from stakeholders endorsing the EU as a project, albeit at times critical towards the deficits of EU democracy (Section 6). The broadly opposing groups curiously came together in the *absence* of robust and comprehensive demands for advancing more participatory—and in that sense, *political*—processes in the EU and its member states (see Oleart, 2023; Wiesner, 2018; Section 7). The results point to how the diversification of actors and representations in discourses on EU democracy is not only in line with the EU's purported values, but also in the pragmatic interest to sustain the legitimacy of the EU project.

2. Conceptions of Democracy and Reforming the EU

The rise of a permanent crisis mode in the EU post-2010 has amplified concerns about EU democracy (Mavrouli & Van Waeyenberge, 2023, p. 406). The Hungarian government formed amidst the 2010 economic crisis engaged in a systematic deconstruction of democracy (Bozóki & Fleck, 2024; Jakab & Kirchmair, 2025; Szelényi, 2023). Hungary is a pivotal case, due to the governmental capture of public media, the stifling of dissent, and assaults on minority rights. The deterioration of democracy in EU member states

also questions the operation of EU institutions, particularly the Council of the EU (Scheppele & Morijn, 2025). When not all decision-makers are elected in free and fair elections, a deficit of even minimalist readings of democracy (Schedler, 2002) emerges.

Contestations over the meaning of democracy are amplified by the questionable democratic reservoirs of EU institutions independent from member state governments. For example, the direct elections to the EP are coupled with the latter's constrained competences despite its gradual empowerment (Mavrouli & Van Waeyenberge, 2023, p. 407; Ripoll Servent & Costa, 2021). Moreover, strengthening representative democracy via direct elections of the Commission or European Council President is not seen as a panacea. Critiques of representative democracy have multiplied, highlighting its limitations when not combined with avenues for public participation and deliberation (e.g., Borońska-Hryniewiecka & Kinski, 2024, pp. 20–23). Illiberal actors began to use ethnonationalist conceptions of "identity," presenting "national identity" in tension with the EU (Kovács, 2023a). Instead of allowing for a dual "demoicratic" identity (e.g., Nicolaïdis & Liebert, 2023), they have invoked identity to defend extensive powers for member state executives as the "pinnacle of democracy." Thus, the concept of identity can assist in understanding the perspective on EU democratisation.

The prime response to the critique argues that the EU is centred on output legitimacy. Here, the EU is democratically legitimate as long as it delivers (Bellamy & Lord, 2021; see also Schmidt, 2013). However, this response is losing credibility insofar as the EU institutions repeatedly *fail* to live up to the fundamental values, particularly regarding inclusion and openness (Ganty & Kochenov, 2024; Wilkinson, 2021, pp. 178–202). The growing recognition of the absence of coming to terms with the dominating colonial legacies of the EU's founding and the continued repercussions for present EU governance (Eklund, 2023) amplifies the calls for democratic EU reform.

Yet, what "more democracy" would entail remains contested. The Conference on the Future of Europe, as a novel initiative by the EU institutions to advance deliberation with EU citizens, provided a glimpse into the breadth of alternative conceptions of democracy that can materialise in EU politics. These deliberations nevertheless remained largely disconnected from political developments in the member states, and offered limited insights into discourses on EU democracy (Steuer & Organ, 2025). To the extent the member states remain pivotal in shaping EU politics (van Middelaar & Puetter, 2021), there is a dearth of studies that would open the "black box" containing not only governments' but also other actors' views (cf. Lacroix & Nicolaïdis, 2011).

Additionally, understanding the representations of democracy in the EU is particularly important in societies where democracy itself is under threat of deterioration. Here, the discursive space risks closing due to governmental assaults on fundamental rights and their attempts to control the space with narratives that "confuse notions, approaches and perspectives" (Drinóczi, 2018, pp. 88–89). These trends appear in the Visegrad region as well.

3. The Centrality of the Centre of Europe for a Democratic EU

The three small Visegrad countries do not have the benefit of country and population size, but, given their strategic location, especially after the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, and their significance in selected

decision-making procedures in the Council and the EP, they can shape the EU's future in pivotal moments. Moreover, these Visegrad countries have shared considerable similarities in their EU relations after the fall of state socialism in 1989. The "return to Europe" was central here (Ott, 2024). EU membership acted as an "endpoint" for joining fully-fledged independent states after a century of fast-changing political regimes with prevailing authoritarian rule (Bozóki & Simon, 2019; e.g., Heimann, 2009). The 1993 Copenhagen European Council with its substantive criteria for EU accession provided a beacon for these countries' politics to meet the determined yardsticks (Henderson, 2002, pp. 89–92). The "superficially pro-integration orientation of the third Mečiar government" (1994–1998; Henderson, 2002, p. 93), accompanied by Mečiar's semi-authoritarian practices, slowed down Slovakia's EU accession. Still, Slovakia could only accede together with Czechia and Hungary due to the pro-reform government and broader societal commitment towards "catching up" after the 1998 elections.

Even after accession, the positions of the "new member states" towards the EU remained volatile. Reservations against fully committing to deeper EU integration remained the norm, with some stakeholders asking to limit such progress due to "national identity and sovereignty" (Malová & Lisoňová, 2010, pp. 169–170). Before the "illiberal turn" in Hungary (Jenne & Mudde, 2012), Czechia was among the most outspoken critics of further EU integration. The Czech EU discourse after the fall of state socialism was shaped by the contestation between "two Václavs" (Blaive & Maslowski, 2011): former presidents Václav Havel and Václav Klaus. Both professed anti-communist leanings. Klaus' opposition to the EU has shaped Czech EU politics (Rakušanová, 2007). The series of post-2015 challenges, notably with recognising the EU's commitments in relation to people facing political persecution and later the Covid-19 pandemic, have enhanced anti-EU tropes in Hungary relatively more than in Czechia and Slovakia (Drinóczi & Mészáros, 2022; Steuer, 2019). In all three countries, anti-refugee sentiments have spurred and translated into the rejection of the temporary relocation mechanism adopted by the Council in late 2015. This was followed by calls for "flexible solidarity" to allow member states not to commit to hosting any refugees (Braun, 2020, p. 933). With the notable exception of refugee rights, however, the debate supported the belonging to "the EU core" in Czechia and Slovakia. In fact, Slovakia was particularly vocal in the ambition to belong to "the core" (Kazharski, 2019) during its EU Council presidency in 2016.

This difference seems to align with the divergent historical trajectories of entering the EU: Slovakia had to overcome a semi-authoritarian regime episode in the 1990s, unlike Czechia. Yet, Slovak discourse has not overcome the underlying illiberal opposition towards the EU. Robert Fico, the four-time PM of Slovakia (as of 2025) initially pragmatically embraced the EU, but underwent a U-turn after such support had become incompatible with his personal political ambitions (Malová & Dolný, 2016). His change of attitude has aided Slovakia's post-2023 de-democratisation. Despite the differences in trajectories, both Czechia and Slovakia's position vis-à-vis the EU remained indecisive. For example, only a few voices openly rejected the Hungarian PM Orbán's policies, and the Visegrad group did not lose purchase completely despite the de-democratising drifts (Rupnik, 2023).

4. Methodology: Analysis of Reform Proposals from Czechia, Hungary, and Slovakia between 2015–2022

The analysis of EU reform proposals focuses on the concept of democracy during a pivotal period that began with the refugee crisis in 2015 (see Gilbert, 2015; Kazharski, 2022, p. 181). The latter accelerated

existing anti-minority and anti-EU sentiments in the Visegrad region. By 2022, the standards of democracy in the region, put under pressure by the Covid-19 pandemic, further struggled with polarisation caused by the denial of violations of international law committed by Putin's Russia in Ukraine (e.g., Bajomi-Lázár & Horváth, 2025; Wenzel et al., 2024). Thus, the data analysis covers a pivotal period which has facilitated the post-2023 illiberalisation of Slovakia (e.g, Haughton et al., 2025, pp. 9–11; Steuer & Malová, 2023), the cementing of non-democratic practices in Hungary (Enyedi & Mikola, 2024; Scheppele, 2022), and the possibility of illiberal actors to succeed in the 2025 Czech elections.

The analysis of proposals pertaining to the post-2015 development can be situated within existing works examining EU discourses (e.g., Wiesner, 2024). The proposals cannot encompass the entirety of the discourse on EU democracy and democratisation, as not all representations in this discourse need to be presented in a forward-looking format. If the data source only presents an opinion on democracy in the EU, but has no forward-looking element (what ought to be done in the future), it would not qualify as a proposal. The forward-looking element makes the concept of "proposals" capacious enough to avoid confining the sources only to very specific reform plans. It also ensures that the sources remain relevant for better understanding the discourse on the futures of EU democracy, because making proposals signals the intention of the actors to engage with an audience and to receive responses. Indeed, proposals combine the forward-looking element with the demand for engagement and relationality. They are made for some audience, aiming to achieve change, or at least debate potential changes, which makes them important for the discourse on EU democratisation. Even if the proposals respond to a new development or are provoked as a response to a contrasting proposal, their ambition to add ideas to the public space constitutes part of the discourse on EU democracy.

A broader conception of proposals could search for future-oriented claims also in sources not explicitly presented as having this forward-looking element. An example is analyses that critically reinterpret the country's EU integration history, but refrain from deriving future-oriented implications from such reinterpretation. The challenge with such broader conceptions is that the magnitude of sources complicates qualitative analysis. Moreover, the present conception takes seriously the actors' intention to share their vision for the future, rather than trying to impose such intention where it might not have been present. For example, a political party might feel induced to prepare a manifesto for the EP elections, but it is not obliged to do so in either of the countries under study. Even if a manifesto is prepared, the party might opt not to comment on the future of the EU (this also explains why not all manifestos of all parties in the 2019 EP elections were included in the database of proposals).

This approach provides new evidence reviewing the superficiality of EU-related discourses in the Visegrad countries, noted in other reports (Havlík & Smekal, 2020; Janková, 2021; Kyriazi, 2021; for parliamentary debates, see Góra et al., 2023). The proposals were identified as part of a larger project (Góra & Zgaga, 2023), making use of the researchers' country-specific expertise, and their database was disclosed at the end of the project (EU3D, 2023). The search aimed to capture both state and non-state actors (cf. Blokker, 2024) beyond official governmental reports or well-known think tanks. No source that qualified as a proposal and was found during the data collection using online search engines with a focus on the future of the EU was excluded. The possibility that some sources that would qualify as proposals were omitted remains, but similar ideas tend to appear in more than one proposal in the dataset, which indicates certain saturation of the database. Moreover, this approach prevents the need to analyse only a random selection of

proposals: all proposals identified could be included thanks to the relatively high demand placed on classifying a source as a proposal.

The actors were categorised based on their self-presentation and official legal status. This might make the pool of proposals by non-governmental actors larger than it substantively is because some are *de facto* close to particular governments. General and EP elections and the Conference on the Future of Europe were milestones yielding a relatively larger number of proposals, due to the opportunities they offered to stimulate debates on the EU's future. These reasons prevent robust comparative conclusions on the future-oriented discourse on EU democracy in the three countries and do not aspire to exhaust, in a comparative perspective, all representations of that discourse. Still, they do not undermine the categorisation of the sources as proposals to better understand the discourse on the future of EU democracy.

Effort was made to reach beyond the "usual suspects" of state elites. Nevertheless, the proposals might be skewed in favour of governmental actors due to the latter's visibility granted by their institutional status. Some voices might be silenced or neglected due to structural inequalities and exclusions (e.g., Kantola et al., 2023). Alternative research methods (such as interviews) would be more conducive for their further study.

As the logic of searching was equivalent across the three states, the relative number of proposals remains instructive. The numbers from Czechia (46) and Hungary (49) roughly align, while Slovakia has fewer proposals (36). Slovakia is the smallest state of the three and its linguistic closeness to Czechia implies that Slovak actors may engage with—and even contribute to—proposals that are formally produced in Czechia, in Czech language. The opposite trend is much less common. Furthermore, a non-negligible portion of the proposals is published under the auspices of country offices of foundations of other member states (e.g., Konrad Adenauer Foundation policy briefs), or of organisations with broader, even global reach (GLOBSEC press releases or policy briefs). In Slovakia, there are virtually no think tanks or civil society organisations focusing exclusively on EU affairs, resulting in most proposals in the database originating from governmental or partisan opposition actors. The deterioration of academic freedom and open spaces alongside the rise of government-supported NGOs, as observable in Hungary (e.g., Ziegler, 2025), could shrink the spaces for engaging in particular discourses (e.g., defending the enhancement of supranational competences to advance democracy) while magnify others (e.g., those wishing to strengthen the power of member state governments regardless of their accountability). However, no presumptions can be derived as regards the *number* of proposals, as illiberal funding of spaces promoting particular ideas at the expense of others (cf. Gárdos-Orosz & Szente, 2024, pp. 348–350, 355) might rather encourage these spaces to produce proposals with the ambition to shift the discourses in support of their funders' preferences. In addition, there is resistance against the shrinking open spaces (e.g., Polgári & Nagy, 2021), which can even be amplified vis-à-vis ongoing pressures and generate more innovative or impactful ideas. Vice versa, the absence of such pressure is not necessarily conducive to generating more or more innovative proposals, if incentives to do so are missing. More limited traditions of critical inquiry or the lack of motivation to engage with larger audiences, including those across borders, can impede the generation of new proposals regardless of how much surrounding events or controversies might induce reflections in this form.

Czechia and Hungary generated slightly more proposals from non-governmental actors. These include proposals originating from local branches of foundations from abroad (e.g., Friedrich Ebert Foundation). The conservative Polish think tank Sobieski Institute engages with the future of the EU in a report on the

Conference on the Future of Europe, put together by collaborators from all Visegrad countries and translated into Czech, Hungarian, and Slovak, in addition to the Polish version. Czech think tanks such as Association for International Affairs, EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy, or Institute for Politics and Society (the latter associated with Andrej Babiš's party ANO) are represented in the database, as well as a few individual actors. In Hungary, some actors formally identified as think tanks (such as the Századvég Foundation, the Barankovics István Foundation, or the Centre of Fundamental Rights) are considered to be affiliated with the government or the parties it is composed of (Buzogány & Varga, 2023; see also Geva & Santos, 2021). This composition of actors is consistent with the observations on the partial "co-optation" of Hungarian civil society, particularly of organisations defending traditional values. Such co-optation aligns with the illiberal government's narrative (Gerő et al., 2023).

The analysis of the proposals focused on the representations of "democracy" in the EU (including its member states) without embracing a schematic assessment that merely describes the content of the proposals (Wiesner, 2022). All proposals were read and coded via a pre-determined form (a single survey response per proposal; Góra & Zgaga, 2023, pp. 4–7). This study focuses on those questions which provide insights into the discourses on EU democracy. Hence, it does not serve as a full report of the form responses. Moreover, the concept of democracy was left open to be used by the actors invoking it in the proposals, instead of imposing pre-determined conceptions (e.g., Coppedge et al., 2020). Nevertheless, the analysis was particularly sensitive to the potential connections between the deficits of democracy and dominance (Fossum, 2021), as well as different pathways for reforming the EU to overcome shortcomings of democracy.

5. Overview of the Proposals on the Future of the EU

Government or political party manifestos, parliamentary resolutions, transcripts of leaders' speeches, op-eds, policy briefs, or even academic articles comprise a non-exhaustive list of formats in which proposals on EU democratic reform might appear. All three countries have a broadly similar set of public institutions and there are no specific essential actor types that would exist only in some of the countries as opposed to others. The three countries are each relatively small and with a relatively less extensive public sphere and network of actors focusing specifically on the future of the EU. Thus, the few dozen proposals located via search engines, and scrutiny of unitary and visible actors (such as governments, political parties, or most visible think tanks) can offer insights into how the future of EU is related to democracy and what kinds of futures of EU democracy are envisioned by actors who present proposals on EU democratic reform. In all three countries, most proposals were located from member state governments and political parties (Figure 1), the latter mainly via their election manifestos. Individuals drafting proposals on behalf of public institutions such as executives or legislatures, as well as political parties, think tanks, or civil society actors, may yield disproportionate influence (Kelemen, 2017). This article sticks to the formal identification of the authorship of the proposal as it is presented to the public. In case of parliamentary proposals, even a slim majority endorsement of the proposal provides recognition of the collective authority. Individuals (politicians or intellectuals) are formally recognised as authors if they present a proposal in their individual capacity. There is no doubt about the diverse contexts in which the proposals emerged, with some being part of more "official" practices, such as government manifestos or political party programs, while others being raised more spontaneously, such as proposals by individual public figures (either politicians or intellectuals) reflecting on the future of the EU. The comprehensiveness and impact of the proposals might also differ.

Still, even during the occasions which may prompt proposal generation (such as electoral campaigns), actors are not "forced" to formulate such proposals.

At the level of the governmental proposals, Hungary reacted critically to challenges levelled by EU institutions, notably the budgetary conditionality, which it saw as discriminatory and perpetuating inequalities due to the economic consequences of withholding the funding. Hungary also stands out in proposals prompted by the Conference on the Future of Europe, particularly through pro-Orbán articulations of EU future. For example, in one interview, the former Hungarian Minister of Justice, known advocate of cracking down on the judiciary and the civil society (e.g., Coman, 2022), pleaded for the "public opinion" to prevail over conclusions from "various working groups" of the Conference on the Future of Europe, the former presumed less willing to restrict EU funding for Hungary due to rule of law concerns (Judi, 2022).

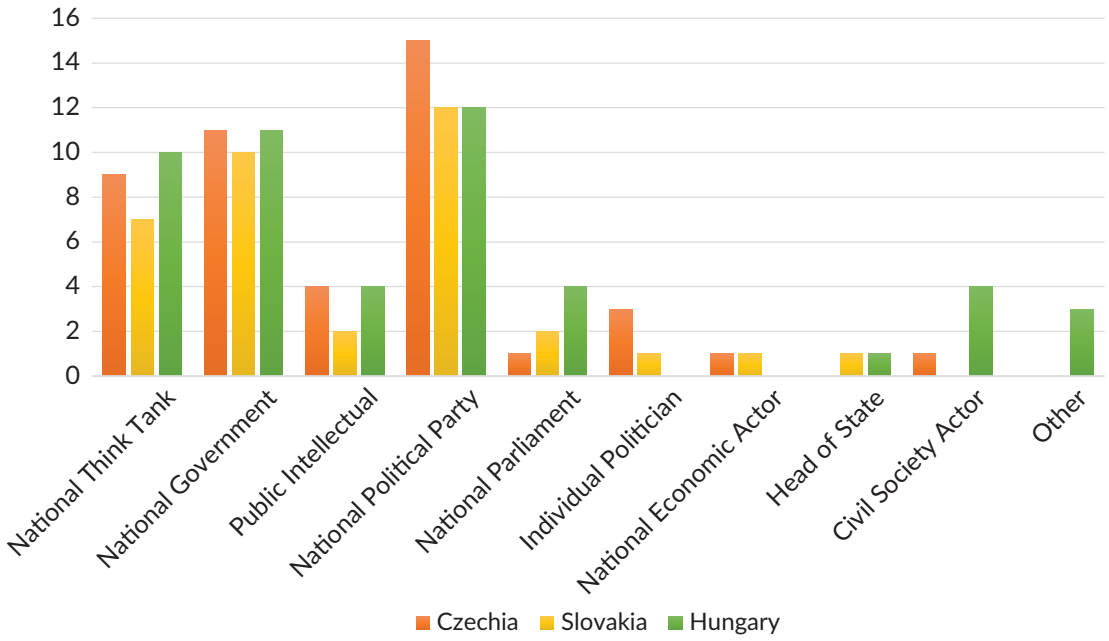

Figure 1. Number of proposals on the future of the EU in Czechia, Hungary, and Slovakia and types of actors authoring them.

The Czech government focused on growth, convergence, and competitiveness with some regard for environmental commitments and energy efficiency. The cabinet of PM Babiš (replaced by PM Fiala in 2021) acknowledged the impact of the pandemic, but was reluctant to accept any extension of supranational competences. In the plans for the 2022 Czech EU Council Presidency, the post-war reconstruction of Ukraine, energy security, and the "refugee crisis" related to the Russian invasion of Ukraine took priority (Government of the Czech Republic, 2022). The Slovak government (2020–2023) supported joint EU action, but was least concrete as regards the nature of such action. The latest entries being from July 2022 preclude comprehensively scrutinising the impact of the open Putinist invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

6. The EU as a Malfunctioning Democracy? Illiberal Concept Hijacks

The logic of hijacking democracy is summarised in a statement of the Renaissance of Europe initiative by the Polish and Hungarian illiberal PMs, supported by Italy's Matteo Salvini (2021). The proposal demands that no

supranational institution can determine the content of being a "democrat" while simultaneously defending national governments' rights unilaterally to do just that. Only EU democracy is portrayed as dysfunctional (Figure 2), due to a "rule of bureaucrats" without sufficient accountability. In Czechia, a similar point is regularly voiced by former President, and ardent critic of EU integration, Václav Klaus. Exceptions occur—for example, the Czech Institute for International Relations in Prague criticised the EU institutions for not doing enough in the context of the Russian invasion, which may undermine the EU's standing as a community as well.

On a few occasions, more participatory instruments or other forms of EU-level democracy (e.g., through the EP) are advocated. Yet, such voices are almost inaudible amidst the majority of the proposals that do not go into detail—in considerable contrast to proposals generated in a more participatory manner (Wiesner & Novak, 2024, pp. 10–13). In one case, that of the 2019 EP election manifesto of the Komunistická strana Čech a Moravy (Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia), both positions were advocated simultaneously regardless of their internal contradiction. This party produced a several dozen-page-long manifesto demanding both more "Europe of states" and "Europe of citizens" (cf. van Middelaar, 2013). Simultaneously, it endorsed a considerable weakening of the Euro-Atlantic collaboration and effectively the EU's foreign policy, by opposing sanctions against Russia. Its proposed solution is the reduction of the powers of the European Commission, in particular. In the 2017 general election manifesto, only the former Klaus-type rhetoric is present in relation to the party's EU policy. The potential of participatory instruments at EU level is not recognised. A few proposals (e.g., by the Česká pirátská strana [Czech Pirate Party]) are keener on strengthening EU competences, but are countered, particularly in Hungary, by several pro-government NGOs. The annual speech by Viktor Orbán (2020) includes demands of nothing less than an "illiberal revolution" at the EU level.

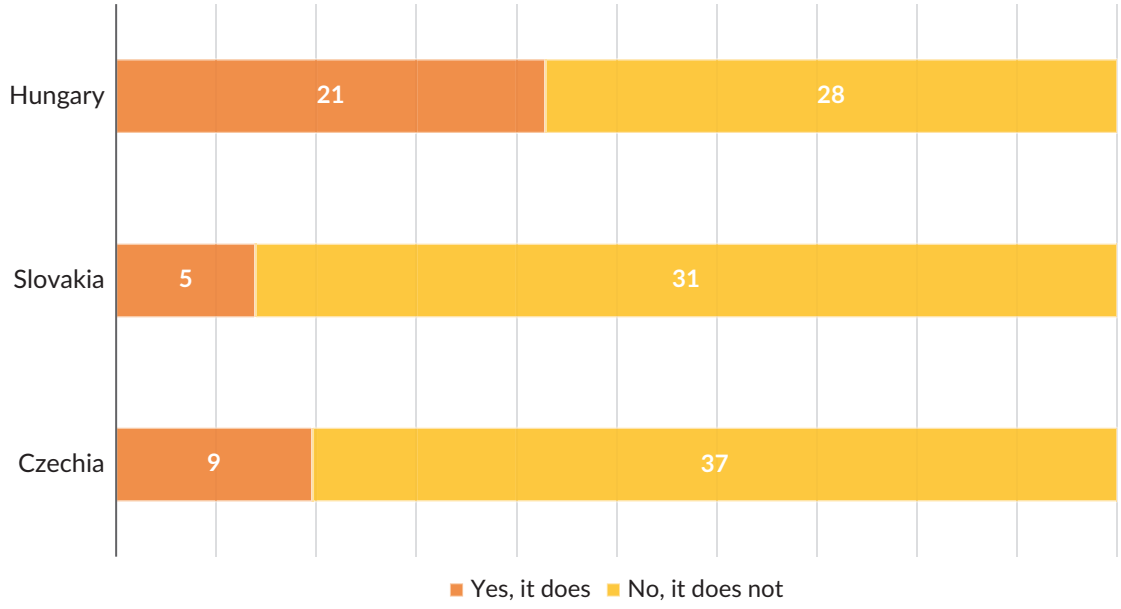

Figure 2. Does the proposal explicitly mention "democratic malfunctioning" of the EU?

References to dominance as an indicator of deficits or failures of democracy remain minimal. Only one proposal, a collaborative output of Visegrad Four think tanks (involved were Institute for Politics and Society—Czechia; F. A. Hayek Foundation—Slovakia; Institute for Foreign Affairs and Trade—Hungary; and the Polish Instytut Sobieskiego as coordinator), makes such a reference. The proposal ties domination to the influence of social media companies and proposes more EU regulation as a solution. In Czechia, a policy brief

by the Czech branch of the German Friedrich Ebert Foundation sees the risk of dominance of large states but considers this also as a potential advantage for Czechia. An academic article published in Slovak in a Czech legal journal argues for the reduction of hierarchy and increased transparency. This is to be achieved by making the EP the sole institution influencing the composition of the Commission (Baraník, 2017).

Most references to dominance appear in the Hungarian proposals. Notably, the resolution of the Hungarian Parliament from July 2022 reacts to the Conference on the Future of Europe, which it perceives as an instance of illicit hierarchy due to the perceived lack of control of the member states. While it appreciates Hungarian citizens' involvement in the Conference on the Future of Europe, it castigates EU bureaucracy and calls for such Treaty revisions that would strengthen the member states, including national parliaments, and "conservative values."

An even more determined judgment comes from the Hungarian government-affiliated Centre of Fundamental Rights, which issued a proposal titled "The European Commission attacked our country in the back!" Here, it condemns the cuts in EU funding against Hungary, which it links to lobbying of political opponents of Hungary. The proposal decries the alleged influence of left-wing actors and the LGBTQ+ movement. These are meant to shape the practices not only of the Commission, but also of the Court of Justice. In this picture, EU leaders wield the law as a source of oppression of Hungarians (and, to a lesser extent, Poles), and a source of punishment for the 2022 victory of PM Orbán. The commentary titled "It's time to start talking about huxit" by Fricz, a self-identified political scientist, presents the EU as a reference point that is "irredeemable" for Hungarians, and floats the idea of leaving it altogether.

There is greater silence of voices critical of the EU's status quo in Slovakia, which may partially be explained by the country's attempt to limit its association with the Visegrad Four in the early 2020s (Bátora, 2021, p. 9). Nevertheless, the lack of critical engagement with the EU gave relatively more space for actors from other countries, particularly those endorsing the Hungarian government (see Petrović et al., 2023).

As discussed in Section 2, references to identity as a salient concept of depicting the state and future of democracy in the EU were scrutinised as well. Proposals raised by Hungarian government actors referred to identity more frequently than in Czechia or Slovakia, with the focus on national identity in a rather exclusionary manner prevailing considerably over the focus on European identity (Figure 3). In Slovakia, references to identity appeared in the context of the Conference on the Future of Europe, with the government hoping to see the enhancement of Slovaks' European identity through this endeavour. Hungarian governmental proposals articulated the ambition to not only build Hungarians' national identity, but also to impact the interpretations of European identity, with some NGOs and think tanks (e.g., the Antall József Knowledge Center) presenting contrasting views. Institutional efforts to build illiberal identities (Kovács, 2023b) are illustrated by the Constitutional Court of Hungary (2020) in a press release.

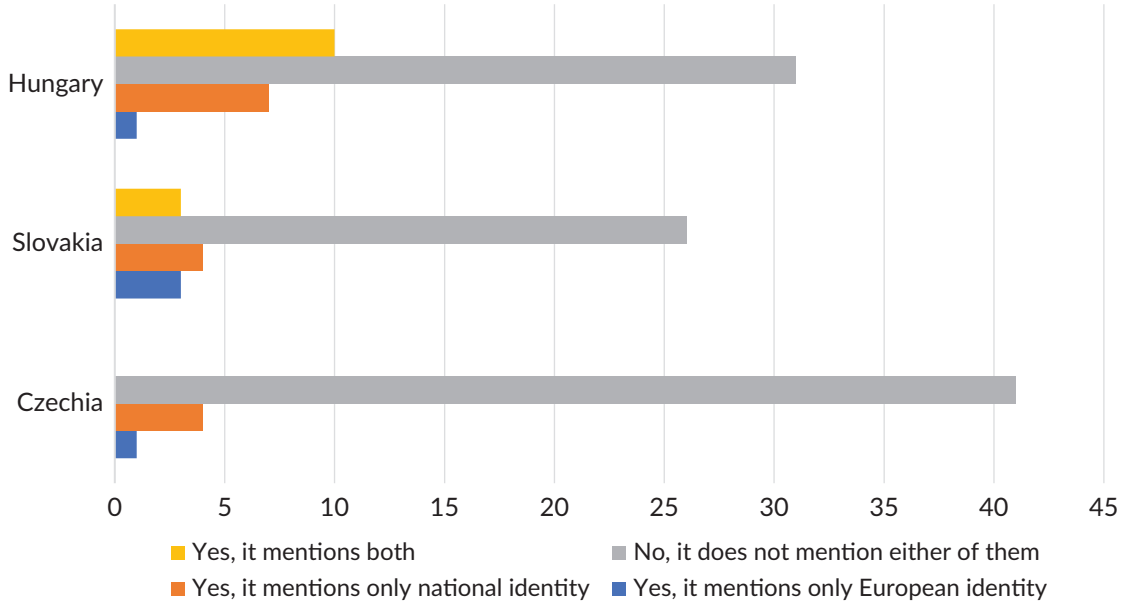

Figure 3. Does the proposal explicitly mention European or national identity?

7. Limited Presence of Proposals for Institutional Reform Strengthening Participatory Democracy

If the EU is the object of the "democracy critique," what is proposed to reform it? This section reviews proposals which engage explicitly with the malfunctioning of democracy in the EU. Here, greater critique appears towards the EU institutions' than member state institutions' status quo (Figure 4). The interest in EU democratisation is accompanied by limited (if any) capacity for self-criticality and humility (cf. Keane, 2018) towards deficits of democracy at the member state level.

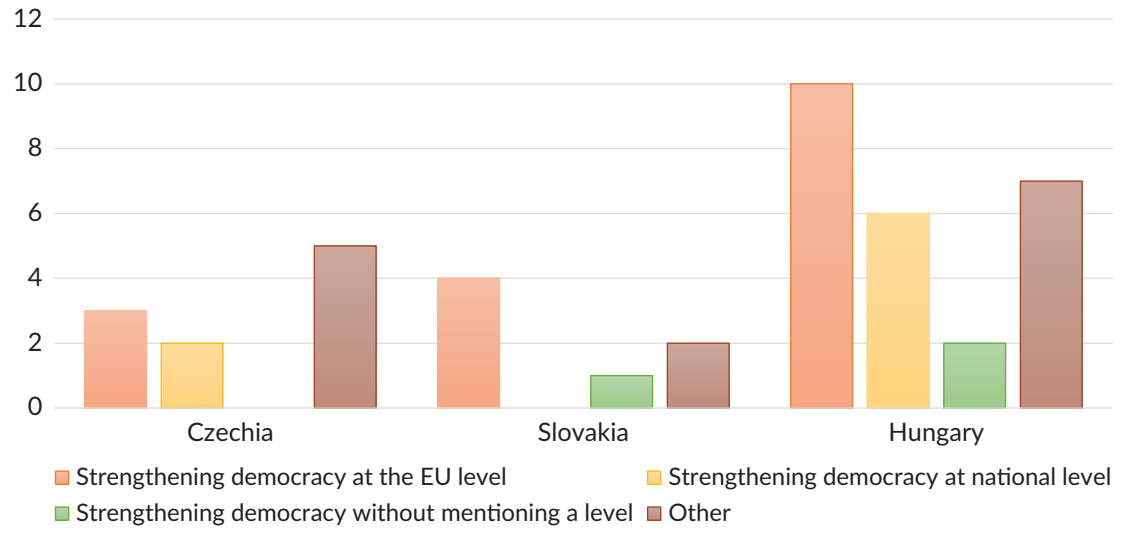

Figure 4. In reference to what level are rectifying measures (improvements) on the functioning of democracy mentioned? Notes: This figure considers only the pool of proposals which did identify "democratic malfunctioning" in the EU (see Figure 2); such proposals could refer to more than one level simultaneously; each such reference was counted once.

This discrepancy becomes visible in the optimal locus of *competences* exercised by democratic decision makers. Here, concept hijacks materialise in the extent to which concrete institutional or policy themes are missing from the proposals. Most proposals offer limited analytical depth and at most ask for clinging to what "belongs" to the member states. They rarely recognise the potential of the member state to *lead* by advancing its policy agenda at the EU level. Figure 5 shows how the tendency to refer to relatively fewer themes is visible in Hungary (111 references) as compared to Czechia (224 references, despite the similar overall number of proposals in the two countries; the 111 references in Slovakia coincide with a smaller overall number of proposals there).

Migration, asylum, and human mobility stand out as a policy area equally across the three countries. In Slovakia, with 15 references, this policy area is represented significantly more than others, while in Czechia (20 references) and Hungary (12 references), it belongs amongst the most prominent ones. The prominence of this area in the collection of proposals between 2015–2022 underscores the linkage between proposals as responses to (perceived or actual) "crises." Issues of the economy are less frequently discussed, indicating that the economic crisis was no longer an immediate concern, prompting (re)thinking of the future of EU democracy. Defence and security-related issues, amplified by the annexation of Crimea, are unequally covered in the three countries, with Czech proposals engaging with them more prominently.

Minimum references are made to improving citizens' participation rights (Figure 6), indicating that the bottom-up, citizen- (and even less so people-)centric view was not a central concern across the spectrum of proposals, despite otherwise sharp disagreements between some of their initiators.

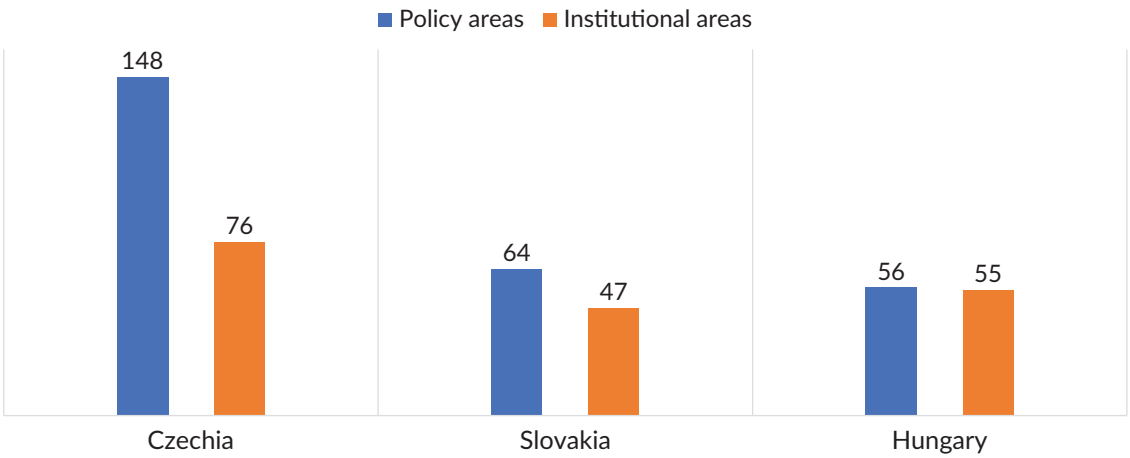

Figure 5. Policy-oriented versus institutional proposals. Notes: Policy areas included were climate and environment protection; defence and security; digital; energy; health and food; migration, asylum, and human mobility; transport; cohesion policy; competitiveness; development policy; multiannual financial framework and EU budget; research and innovation; trade; education and culture; and Common Agricultural Policy. The institutional areas included were institutional issues and reforms; fundamental rights, rule of law, and free press; democracy; enlargement and European Neighbourhood Policy; social issues (Social Europe); taxation; Economic and Monetary Union; internal market; EU's global role; multilateralism; differentiation; EU history and heritage; minority protection; civil society. Some categories (such as civil society) may belong to both groups; in this analysis, these were presented as institutional, as it allows a more conservative estimate of the dominance of policy-oriented themes in the proposals. A single proposal might contain any number of policy or institutional areas. The titles of individual categories are retained according to the codebook in the source project (Góra & Zgaga, 2023).

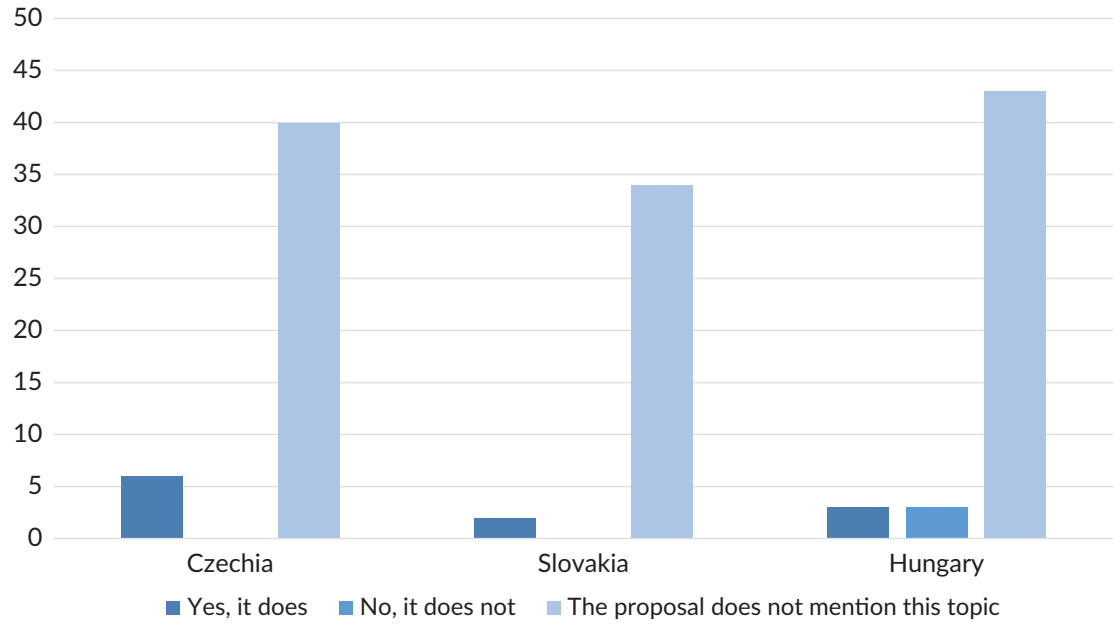

Figure 6. Does the proposal seek to strengthen citizens' participation rights in the EU? Notes: If the proposal "does not" seek to strengthen citizens' participation rights, it means that it makes a reference to the issue, but argues against (an interpretation of) such strengthening, or at least does not recognise this as optimal in the context in which the reference occurs. Such references are very rare.

For instance, in Slovakia, the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs officially committed itself to listening to the proposals from the Conference on the Future of Europe. At the same time, it took a stance against the Spitzenkandidaten process with no suggestion for an alternative democratisation mechanism (Government of the Slovak Republic, 2020, p. 3). Besides the executive, the political party Sloboda a solidarita (Freedom and Solidarity) was among the more vocal actors in the dataset. This party played a historical role in the fall of the pro-EU Slovak cabinet of Iveta Radičová in 2011 due to this party's refusal to support the ratification of the European Stability Mechanism (Gould & Malová, 2019). In its "Manifesto of Slovak Eurorealism," it subscribed to the fourth scenario from Juncker's White Paper ("doing less more efficiently"). Sloboda a solidarita defended the transfer of several competences back to the member states and abolishing the Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, among others. The proposal is in line with the party's generally Eurosceptic position (e.g., Rybář, 2020, pp. 238–239) and shows little regard for the importance of participatory democracy.

A rare example of a more demanding reform proposal is presented by a Slovak diplomat writing on the need for institutional reform as a condition for the EU to succeed (Ivan, 2022). This proposal includes slightly more specific ideas such as the introduction of a second chamber of the EP and the allocation of the right to legislative initiative to the Council. In a similarly demanding manner, the Hungarian Parliament, in the summer of 2022, asked for the introduction of a Treaty amendment that would require the Commission to be "explicitly ideologically neutral." What exactly ideological neutrality means is not specified. A few concrete proposals were presented by political parties, such as the introduction of transnational party lists (manifesto of the Strana zelených (Green Party) in Czechia or the Momentum mozgalom (Momentum Movement) in Hungary) or the fusion of the positions of the Commission President and the European Council President (KDU-ČSL [Christian and Democratic Union—Czechoslovak People's Party]). Others were less concrete, such as former PM Babiš's party ANO2011 demanding, in the 2019 EP elections manifesto

("We Will Protect Czechia"), the reduction of the Commission's competences. Viktor Orbán, in a 2021 speech at the "Thirty Years Free" conference, adopted the same narrative. Neither of the two actors specified which exact competences should be transferred or removed.

A Hungarian political party (Demokratikus Koalíció [Democratic Coalition]) advocated, in 2019, the right to legislative initiative to the EP and the transformation of the European Council and the Council into a second chamber of the EP more specifically. Referencing Elmar Brok's ideas (Arató, 2020, pp. 119–121), the Magyar Szocialista Párt (Hungarian Socialist Party) also proposed a bicameral EP, which would have supervisory competences over a directly elected Commission President. In contrast, the Hungarian Parliament, when reflecting on the Conference on the Future of Europe, floated the idea of transforming the EP into a chamber consisting of representatives from national parliaments. According to this proposal, national parliaments should have the right to initiate and reject EU legislation.

As visible in these examples, the proposals generally do not support enhancing *the EU institutions' competences* as a solution to the problems with democracy. The few that do prefer strengthening intergovernmental EU institutions. Some selectively "upload" their priorities to the EU level, without clarifying how exactly the EU should address them without more competences. An example is protection of religious rights demanded by the Kresťanskodemokratické hnutie (Christian Democratic Movement) in Slovakia, or more action against corruption demanded by the Jobbik party in Hungary.

In Slovakia, not only illiberal parties (such as the Slovenská národná strana [Slovak National Party] or Sme rodina [We Are Family]), but also more mainstream parties (notably Kresťanskodemokratické hnutie and Sloboda a solidarita) are reluctant to transfer more competences to the EU. Instead, they, at least nominally, emphasise the principle of subsidiarity as key for democracy. For example, the manifesto of the Slovenská národná strana (2016) argues for treaty reform to return more competences to national institutions, including through the Council Presidency, that would also slow down the "spread" of multiculturalism in the EU. These results offer a less "optimistic" picture of the support towards EU integration among Slovak political parties than an earlier analysis that included media reports and speeches of party leaders as well (Világi et al., 2021, pp. 40–58). In Czechia, some proposals castigate the alleged high levels of EU spending (journalist and historian known for plagiarism scandal Martin Kovář), while others show more openness towards enhanced EU competences—for example, public intellectual Martin Hančl or Charity Czechia, a branch of an EU-wide civil society organisation, who argued for the introduction of humanitarian visas and extended community financing in relation to migration and asylum.

Some calls for more competences in the area of health can be observed in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. Examples include Radek Špicar, Vice President of the Confederation of Industry and Transport, or even the Statement of the Czech Republic on the process of economic recovery following the pandemic in relation to the European Green Deal. On a few occasions, proposals explicitly comment on competences as a dimension that *ought not* drive the debate (manifesto of Top 09 party, arguing for "doing things better" and adjusting competences to the way the best solutions can be reached). As a whole, the sentiment of "soft Euroscepticism" (Hloušek & Kaniok, 2020) comes across in the Czech proposals.

In Hungary, references to the lack of effectiveness of the European Citizens' Initiative (ECI) occasionally occurred, for example, in a series of blogs by Lomnici Zoltán Jr associated with the Századvég Foundation. The motivation to enhance the impact of these institutions by pro-Orbán voices, however, is tied to

strengthening the member states, which could drive proposals contrary to what the supranational institutions advance. This intertwining between the stronger ECI and stronger competence for member state governments also shows the degree of distrust in the potential for bottom-up mobilisation and activism of both local and transnational civil societies. Member states' competence enhancement was also defended in foreign policy, concretely, in separate energy agreements with third countries, such as Russia or China, proposed by PM Orbán.

The claims to have "equal" voice in the EU structures may operate as an effective slogan for gaining public support, particularly when voiced by political parties. Hence, some Hungarian proposals reject EU-wide rule of law enforcement—for example, Resolution 2/2018. (II. 21.) of the National Assembly on supporting Poland against the "pressure of Brussels." In doing so, they signal a lack of concern for developing a joint reading of democracy in the EU, supporting fragmentation instead (Fossum & Bátora, 2024). Defences of double standards occur as well. The Strana maďarskej komunity (Party of the Hungarian Community) in Slovakia, known for its alignment with Orbán's Fidesz, campaigned in the 2019 elections for "saving the European values." It rejected "two-speed Europe" as based on "liberal and leftist ideology" and undercutting equality and solidarity. Yet, Western Balkan countries wishing to accede to the EU are required to meet the conditionality criteria. This demand is mentioned, for example, in a Slovak government manifesto, despite Slovak PM Fico's increasing neglect towards them at the time. In Czechia, some proposals continue to reject or strictly condition the obligation to accede to the Eurozone or else democracy would be undermined (e.g., ANO2011 and Andrej Babiš as its chairman). Hungary's PM, in 2022, voiced opposition against reducing unanimity voting in foreign policy. A few examples in the opposite direction are the endorsement of the enhancement of the European Neighbourhood Policy by the Czech government in 2015, or the need for Hungary to join the European Public Prosecutor's Office to eliminate rule of law violations (defunct Hungarian party Együtt [Together] in its 2018 general election manifesto).

All in all, the proposals indicate a degree of "cluelessness" in how to remedy any problems with democracy that they formulate. Those which raise ideas rarely indicate thinking beyond formal competences—perhaps because such thinking may require awareness of broader, critical, and participatory conceptions of democracy and the potential they can yield for reform.

8. Conclusion

This article has argued that the discourse in the EU reform proposals in Czechia, Hungary, and Slovakia indicates the prevalent fear of their stakeholders of being "left out" of decision making while de facto still required to adhere to legal obligations (see Eriksen & Fossum, 2015). Beneath references to a reformed, different, more democratic EU articulated in the Visegrad Four, there is ideational emptiness. This seems to be partially triggered by the necessity to stick to impoverished conceptions of democracy that allow the executive to amass extensive powers. Such conceptions are not only pursued by those with illiberal leanings. They are also facilitated by the absence of novel ideas and reforms presented by those opposing illiberal positions. Those carrying the banner of democracy at most defend the status quo, with only occasionally and reluctantly showing openness to debates on EU treaty change (see Bárd et al., 2024). As the frequent references to migration and asylum issues as an incentive to rethink democracy in the EU demonstrate, actual or perceived crises can amplify the generation of proposals, particularly when used as an anchor for a position favourable to the actors' already-existing preferences.

Since 2022, new conceptions of democracy may have appeared in the discourse, particularly in response to the full-scale Putinist invasion of Ukraine. The period studied here cannot capture these developments. Nevertheless, a few illustrations can be offered. Statements of post-2023 Slovak illiberal governing elites have increasingly mimicked the Hungarian ones. In Hungary, the mobilisation of the generously funded illiberal pseudo-academia yields fruits in the more rudimentary conceptions from the Hungarian government's materials, accompanied by reports with a more professional appearance, written by pro-government analysts (e.g., Nézőpont Institute, 2024). The latter weave together critiques of the EU's deficit of democracy present in reports without such governmental linkages as well (Grabowska-Moroz et al., 2024) with proposals contradictory to those of the former, consisting of giving the member state governments even more leeway to relativise EU values due to the failure of EU institutions to uphold them. The idea of gutting the supranational dimension of the EU altogether appeared as well (Panyi, 2025).

To a considerable degree, Czech, Hungarian, and Slovak political actors pretend they are not co-responsible for EU's democratisation. This can be explained by the absence of reflection on EU accession that Slovak academic Miroslav Kusý (1931–2019) decried as "boarding a train" and "letting be carried" (Kusý, 2016b, p. 540):

> We are not too bothered about our destination, nor about our fellow travellers, and we continue to chill ("*vegetujeme*") as before. We even try to strengthen the isolation of our carriage, referring to some sort of sacrosanct and untouchable categories of sovereignty, tradition or identity. (Kusý, 2016b, p. 540)

In another essay, Kusý warned against sovereignty being coupled inherently with borders of nation states and called out the "Europhobes" who oppose its potential to contribute to the advancement of fundamental rights guarantees, pivotal for (EU) democracy (Kusý, 2016a, pp. 181–183).

Words might conceal meaning—verbal claims for unity in the name of democracy blend with the support for "separate readings of values," which allows the obfuscation of the advancement of EU democracy. The representation of opposition towards the EU institutions' deciding on behalf of member state communities spills over to claims of antidemocratic conduct. It also demands to reduce existing EU competences. Here, illiberal actors may capitalise on the absence of a "singular hegemonic story" about the EU (Gellwitzki & Houde, 2024, p. 407). They can attract supporters who do not recognise these contradictions. The limited presence of intellectuals in the proposals alone may be an explanatory factor for the impoverished discourses. Future research could more systematically map local scholarship on EU democracy, which can impact the thinking of local elites.

Particularly missing in the dataset of proposals are more deliberative contributions by "critical friends" of the EU (cf. European University Institute, 2021). Even the platforms for such debates seem to be limited: think tanks tend to pursue analyses on specific policy areas rather than offer space for broader visions. In turn, intellectuals might themselves not make enough effort to break from the "ivory tower," and the broader public may be disinterested in their insights. These tendencies are amplified under the conditions of deficits in education for human rights and democracy and the spread of superficial messages on social media. Further research using stakeholder interviews or ethnographic methods could help understand the attitudes and significance of intellectuals in the debates. Such research could also consider typologies of proposals based on combinations of criteria and reflect on the very concept of the proposal and the work proposals for the future of a polity can do to shape the status quo of discourses in that polity.

Ultimately, the lack of comprehensive, thought-through, constructive, and broadly deliberated proposals on the EU's (democratic) future indicates how the small Visegrad Four countries try to pretend that "business as usual" can continue, or even actively propose to solve the deficits of democracy in the EU by abolishing its supranational dimension. The silence—or absence—of advocates of more robust readings of democracy (cf. Alemanno & Nicolaïdis, 2022) de facto empowers the proponents of weakened majoritarian or even only elite-driven conceptions (cf. Urbinati, 2019), where othering and division flourish.

Acknowledgments

The data collection process benefitted from the input of the coordinators and members of Work Package 5 of the EU3D Horizon 2020 project. All online sources were accessible as of 1 January 2023. Aarish Alam (Rajiv Gandhi National University of Law) provided research and proofreading assistance at the stage of finalisation of the manuscript. The usual disclaimer applies.

Funding

The data collection for this research and initial analysis was supported by the EU3D project funded by the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement no. 822419 (2019–2023), while the manuscript writing was partially supported by The Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic under the grant number VEGA-1/0658/23 and the Slovak Research and Development Agency under the grant number APVV-21–0237.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

All translations from Czech, Hungarian, and Slovak are the authors', unless indicated otherwise. Some primary sources are accessible via the EU3D database (Góra & Zgaga, 2023).

References

Alemanno, A., & Nicolaïdis, K. (2022). Citizen power Europe. *Revue Européenne Du Droit*, *3*, 7–16.

Arató, K. (2020). Hungary. In V. Hloušek & P. Kaniok (Eds.), *The European Parliament election of 2019 in East-Central Europe: Second-order euroscepticism* (pp. 107–130). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-40858-9_6

Auer, S. (2022). *European disunion: Democracy, sovereignty and the politics of emergency*. Hurst.

Bajomi-Lázár, P., & Horváth, K. (2025). Two journalistic cultures in one country. The case of Hungary in the light of journalists' discourses on fake news. *Journalism Practice*, *19*(5), 1055–1073. https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2023.2223173

Baraník, K. (2017). Demokracia a jej budúcnosť v Európskej únii. *Právník. Teoretický časopis pro otázky státu a práva*, *156*(3), 235–256.

Bárd, P., Kochenov, D. V., Pech, L., & Wouters, J. (2024). Treaty changes for the better protection of EU values in the member states. *European Law Journal*, *30*(4), 499–514. https://doi.org/10.1111/eulj.12534

Bátora, J. (2021). *Uznanie v Európskej únii: Zápasy o obvyklosť, spravodlivosť a identitu*. Univerzita Komenského.

Bellamy, R., & Lord, C. (2021). How democratic is the EU? In H. Zimmermann & A. Dür (Eds.), *Key controversies in European integration* (3rd edition, pp. 36–49). Red Globe Press.

Bertelsmann Stiftung. (2024). *Index (2003–2024)* [Data set]. https://www.bti-project.org/en/index

Blaive, M., & Maslowski, N. (2011). The world of the two Václavs: European-minded vs. national(ist) intellectuals in Czechia. In J. Lacroix & K. Nicolaïdis (Eds.), *European stories: Intellectual debates on Europe in national contexts*. Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199594627.003.0014

Blokker, P. (2024). Populism, human rights, and (un-)civil society. In L. Antoniolli & C. Ruzza (Eds.), *The rule of law in the EU: Challenges, actors and strategies* (pp. 73–90). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-55322-6_5

Borońska-Hryniewiecka, K., & Kinski, L. (2024). When parliamentary representation meets citizen participation: Analysing the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE). In K. Borońska-Hryniewiecka & L. Kinski (Eds.), *The parliamentary dimension of the Conference on the Future of Europe* (pp. 18–35). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003470793-2

Bozóki, A., & Fleck, Z. (2024). *Embedded autocracy: Hungary in the European Union*. Lexington Books.

Bozóki, A., & Simon, E. (2019). Two faces of Hungary: From democratization to democratic backsliding. In S. P. Ramet & C. M. Hassenstab (Eds.), *Central and Southeast European politics since 1989* (pp. 221–247). Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108752466.010

Braun, M. (2020). Postfunctionalism, identity and the Visegrad Group. *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, *58*(4), 925–940. https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.12994

Buzogány, A., & Varga, M. (2023). Illiberal thought collectives and policy networks in Hungary and Poland. *European Politics and Society*, *24*(1), 40–58. https://doi.org/10.1080/23745118.2021.1956238

Coman, R. (2022). *The politics of the rule of law in the EU polity: Actors, tools and challenges*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Constitutional Court of Hungary. (2020, May 21). *Applicability of EU law in domestic cases* [Press release]. https://hunconcourt.hu/press-releases/applicability-of-eu-law-in-domestic-cases

Coppedge, M., Gerring, J., Glynn, A., Knutsen, C. H., Lindberg, S. I., Pemstein, D., Seim, B., Skaaning, S.-E., & Teorell, J. (2020). *Varieties of democracy: Measuring two centuries of political change*. Cambridge University Press.

Drinóczi, T. (2018). Does the constitutional review breach the principle of separation of powers? A shifting perspective. In I. Motoc, P. P. de Albuquerque, & K. Wojtyczek (Eds.), *New developments in constitutional law: Essays in honour of András Sajó* (pp. 75–96). Eleven International Publishing.

Drinóczi, T., & Mészáros, G. (2022). Hungary: An abusive neo-militant democracy. In J. Rak & R. Bäcker (Eds.), *Neo-militant democracies in post-communist member states of the European Union* (pp. 98–114). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003245162-8

Eklund, H. (2023). Peoples, inhabitants and workers: Colonialism in the Treaty of Rome. *European Journal of International Law*, *34*(4), 831–854. https://doi.org/10.1093/ejil/chad060

Enyedi, Z., & Mikola, B. (2024). Legislative capture in Hungary: Well-managed autocratization. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, *712*(1), 34–46. https://doi.org/10.1177/00027162241307778

Eriksen, E. O., & Fossum, J. E. (2015). Hegemony by association. In E. O. Eriksen & J. E. Fossum (Eds.), *The European Union's non-members: Independence under hegemony?* (pp. 230–242). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315751030-13

EU3D. (2023). *EU3D database of EU reform proposals*. https://www.eu3d.uio.no/publications/eu3d-data/database-reform-proposals.html

European University Institute. (2021, August 12). *Democracy forum sets the stage for European citizens' panel in Florence*. https://www.eui.eu/news-hub?id=democracy-forum-sets-the-stage-for-european-citizens-panel-in-florence

Follesdal, A., & Hix, S. (2006). Why there is a democratic deficit in the EU: A response to Majone and Moravcsik. *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, *44*(3), 533–562. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-5965.2006.00650.x

Fossum, J. E. (2021). *EU constitutional models in 3D: Differentiation, dominance and democracy* (EU3D research paper No. 15). EU3D. https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3900382

Fossum, J. E., & Bátora, J. (2024). Conceptualising differentiation and dominance. In J. Bátora & J. E. Fossum (Eds.), *Differentiation and dominance in Europe's poly-crises* (pp. 12–36). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003291190-2

Ganty, S., & Kochenov, D. V. (2024). EU lawlessness law. *Columbia Journal of European Law*, *30*(1), 78–156.

Gárdos-Orosz, F., & Szente, Z. (2024). The role of populist NGOs in building a populist democracy in Hungary. *International Journal of Law in Context*, *20*(3), 346–359. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1744552324000259

Gellwitzki, N. L. C, & Houde, A.-M. (2024). From realpolitik to Gefühlspolitik: Strategically narrating the European Union at the national level. *Journal of European Public Policy*, *31*(2), 403–427. https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2022.2139402

Gerő, M., Fejős, A., Kerényi, S., & Szikra, D. (2023). From exclusion to co-optation: Political opportunity structures and civil society responses in de-democratising Hungary. *Politics and Governance*, *11*(1), 16–27. https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v11i1.5883

Geva, D., & Santos, F. G. (2021). Europe's far-right educational projects and their vision for the international order. *International Affairs*, *97*(5), 1395–1414. https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiab112

Gilbert, G. (2015). Why Europe does not have a refugee crisis. *International Journal of Refugee Law*, *27*(4), 531–535. https://doi.org/10.1093/ijrl/eev049

Góra, M., Thevenin, E., & Zielińska, K. (Eds.). (2023). *What future for Europe? Political actors' narratives on European integration and democracy in national parliaments (2015-2021)*. ARENA Centre for European Studies.

Góra, M., & Zgaga, T. (Eds.). (2023). *Reform proposals for the future European Union (2015-2022)*. Arena—Centre for European Studies. https://www.eu3d.uio.no/publications/eu3d-reports/eu3d-report-14-gora-zgaga.html

Gould, J. A., & Malová, D. (2019). Toxic ordoliberalism on the EU's periphery: Slovakia, the Euro and the migrant crisis. In J. Bátora & J. E. Fossum (Eds.), *Towards a segmented European political order* (pp. 112–131). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351024341-6

Government of the Czech Republic. (2022). *Programme of the Czech presidency*. Czech Presidency of the Council of the European Union. https://wayback.archive-it.org/12090/20230320162222/https://czech-presidency.consilium.europa.eu/en/programme/programme-of-the-presidency

Government of the Slovak Republic. (2020). *Koncepcia Konferencie o budúcnosti Európy v Slovenskej republike* (LP/2020/568). https://web.archive.org/web/20210227162347/https://www.slov-lex.sk/legislativne-procesy/-/SK/dokumenty/LP-2020-568

Grabowska-Moroz, B., Grogan, J., Bard, P., Basheska, E., Begadze, M., De Capitani, E., Ganty, S., Kochenov, D., Pech, L., Raimondo, G., Shatz, O., Veraldi, J. D., & Wojcik, A. (2024). *Rule of law beyond the EU member states: Assessing the Union's performance* (UCD Working Papers in Law, Criminology & Socio-Legal Studies research paper No. 03/2025). CEU Democracy Institute. https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.5000511

Halmai, G. (2021). Illiberalism in East-Central Europe. In A. Sajó, R. Uitz, & S. Holmes (Eds.), *Routledge handbook of illiberalism* (pp. 813–821). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780367260569-58

Hanley, S., & Cianetti, L. (2024). Central and Eastern Europe. In A. Croissant & L. Tomini (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of autocratization* (pp. 473–489). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003306900-38

Haughton, T., Cutts, D., & Rybář, M. (2025). A narrow path to victory: Robert Fico, Smer-SD, and the 2023 elections in Slovakia. *East European Politics and Societies*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1177/08883254251324191

Havlík, V., & Smekal, H. (2020). *The politics of differentiated integration: What do governments want? Country report—Czechia* (Working paper RSCAS 2020/102). European University Institute. https://cadmus.eui.eu/handle/1814/69375

Heimann, M. (2009). *Czechoslovakia: The state that failed*. Yale University Press.

Henderson, K. (2002). *Slovakia: The escape from invisibility*. Routledge.

Hloušek, V., & Kaniok, P. (2020). Czech Republic. In V. Hloušek & P. Kaniok (Eds.), *The European Parliament election of 2019 in East-Central Europe: Second-order euroscepticism* (pp. 61–82). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-40858-9_4

Ivan, M. (2022, January 4). Ak chce byť úspešnejšia, Únia musí prejsť reformou inštitúcií. *Euractiv*. https://euractiv.sk/section/europska-politika/opinion/ak-chce-byt-uspesnejsia-unia-musi-prejst-reformou-institucii

Jakab, A., & Kirchmair, L. (2025). *Saving the European Union from its illiberal member states*. Oxford University Press.

Janková, K. (2021). *The politics of differentiated integration: What do governments want? Country report—Slovakia* (Working paper RSC 2021/26). European University Institute. https://cadmus.eui.eu/handle/1814/70357

Jenne, E. K., & Mudde, C. (2012). Hungary's illiberal turn: Can outsiders help? *Journal of Democracy*, *23*(3), 147–155. https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2012.0057

Judi, T. (2022, January 25). Varga Judit: Ne legyen az ideológia túsza az EU jövőjéről szóló konferencia! *Magyar Nemzet*. https://magyarnemzet.hu/kulfold/2022/01/varga-judit-ne-legyen-az-ideologia-tusza-az-eu-jovojerol-szolo-konferencia

Kantola, J., Elomäki, A., Gaweda, B., Miller, C., Ahrens, P., & Berthet, V. (2023). "It's like shouting to a brick wall": Normative whiteness and racism in the European Parliament. *American Political Science Review*, *117*(1), 184–199. https://doi.org/10.1017/S000305542200065X

Kazharski, A. (2019). Two kinds of small? The 'EU core' in Slovak and Czech geopolitical imagination. *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, *27*(4), 424–438. https://doi.org/10.1080/14782804.2019.1598340

Kazharski, A. (2022). *Central Europe thirty years after the fall of communism: A return to the margin?* Lexington Books.

Keane, J. (2018). *Power and humility: The future of monitory democracy*. Cambridge University Press.

Kelemen, K. (2017). The new Hungarian constitution: Legal critiques from Europe. *Review of Central and East European Law*, *42*(1), 1–49. https://doi.org/10.1163/15730352-04201001

Kovács, K. (2023a). Introduction: Identity, the jurisprudence of particularism and possible constitutional challenges. In K. Kovács (Ed.), *The jurisprudence of particularism: National identity claims in Central Europe* (pp. 1–29). Bloomsbury. https://doi.org/10.5040/9781509960156.0006

Kovács, K. (2023b). Reconceptualising constitutional identity: The case of Hungary. In K. Kovács (Ed.), *The jurisprudence of particularism: National identity claims in Central Europe* (pp. 149–170). Bloomsbury. https://doi.org/10.5040/9781509960156.ch-006

Kusý, M. (2016a). *Politika a menšiny (druhý zväzok)*. Kalligram.

Kusý, M. (2016b). *Politika a menšiny (prvý zväzok)*. Kalligram.

Kyriazi, A. (2021). *The politics of differentiated integration: What do governments want? Country report—Hungary* (Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies research paper No. RSCAS 2021/05). EUI Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies. https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3796857

Lacroix, J., & Nicolaïdis, K. (Eds.). (2011). *European stories: Intellectual debates on Europe in national contexts*. Oxford University Press.

Lafont, C. (2020). *Democracy without shortcuts: A participatory conception of deliberative democracy*. Oxford University Press.

Lorenz, A., & Anders, L. H. (2020). Examining illiberal trends and anti-EU politics in East Central Europe from a domestic perspective: State of research and outline of the book. In A. Lorenz & L. H. Anders (Eds.), *Illiberal trends and anti-EU politics in East Central Europe* (pp. 1–25). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-54674-8_1

Malová, D., & Dolný, B. (2016). Economy and democracy in Slovakia during the crisis: From a Laggard to the EU core. *Problems of Post-Communism*, *63*(5/6), 300–312. https://doi.org/10.1080/10758216.2016.1200952

Malová, D., & Lisoňová, Z. (2010). Conclusion: Political culture and style in the new member states. In D. Malová (Ed.), *From listening to action? New member states in the European Union* (pp. 167–179). Devin.

Mavrouli, R., & Van Waeyenberge, A. (2023). EU responses to the democratic deficit and the rule of law crisis: Is it time for a (new) European exceptionalism? *Hague Journal on the Rule of Law*, *15*(3), 405–439. https://doi.org/10.1007/s40803-023-00198-w

Nézőpont Institute. (2024). *The rule of law situation in the institutions of the EU* [Press release]. https://www.nezopont.hu/en/what-we-do/press-releases/nezopont-institute-event-the-rule-of-law-situation-in-the-institutions-of-the-eu

Nicolaïdis, K., & Liebert, U. (2023). Demoicratic theory: Bridging positive, critical and normative approaches to European studies. In S. B. H. Faure & C. Lequesne (Eds.), *The Elgar companion to the European Union* (pp. 48–66). Edward Elgar. https://doi.org/10.4337/9781800883437.00012

Oleart, A. (2023). *Democracy without politics in EU citizen participation: From European demoi to decolonial multitude*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Orbán, V. (2020, September 21). Együtt újra sikerülni fog. *Magyar Nemzet*. https://magyarnemzet.hu/belfold/2020/09/egyutt-ujra-sikerulni-fog

Ott, A. (2024). 20 years of the EU's big bang enlargement: From the return to Europe to the escape from Europe? *Maastricht Journal of European and Comparative Law*, *31*(5), 553–558. https://doi.org/10.1177/1023263X251318611

Panyi, S. (2025, March 9). *Renaming the EU, dismantling the Commission: For what Polish and Hungarian illiberals seek U.S. backing*. VSquare.Org. https://vsquare.org/heritage-foundation-mcc-ordo-iuris-russia-european-union-european-court-of-justice

Petrović, N., Raos, V., & Fila, F. (2023). Centrist and radical right populists in Central and Eastern Europe: Divergent visions of history and the EU. *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, *31*(2), 268–290. https://doi.org/10.1080/14782804.2022.2051000

Polgári, E., & Nagy, B. (2021). The chances of observing human rights in an illiberal state: Diagnosis of Hungary. In R. Grote, M. Morales Antoniazzi, & D. Paris (Eds.), *Research handbook on compliance in international human rights law* (pp. 95–120). Edward Elgar. https://doi.org/10.4337/9781788971126.00013

Rakušanová, P. (2007). The constitutional debate: A one man show? Vaclav Klaus and the constitutional discourse in the Czech Republic. *Perspectives on European Politics and Society*, *8*(3), 342–373. https://doi.org/10.1080/15705850701433041

Ripoll Servent, A., & Costa, O. (2021). The European Parliament: Powerful but fragmented. In D. Hodson, U. Puetter, S. Saurugger, & J. Peterson (Eds.), *The institutions of the European Union* (5th Edition, pp. 128–148). Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/hepl/9780198862222.003.0006

Rupnik, J. (2023). "Move forward to the back": The illiberal turn in East-Central Europe. In R. Fücks & R. Manthe

(Eds.), *Update liberalism: Liberal answers to the challenges of our time* (pp. 51–58). Transcript Verlag. https://doi.org/10.1515/9783839469958-008

Rybář, M. (2020). Slovakia. In V. Hloušek & P. Kaniok (Eds.), *The European Parliament election of 2019 in East-Central Europe: Second-order euroscepticism* (pp. 229–251). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-40858-9_11

Schedler, A. (2002). Elections without democracy: The menu of manipulation. *Journal of Democracy*, *13*(2), 36–50. https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2002.0031

Scheppele, K. L. (2022). How Viktor Orbán wins. *Journal of Democracy*, *33*(3), 45–61. https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2022.0039

Scheppele, K. L., & Morijn, J. (2025). Money for nothing? EU institutions' uneven record of freezing EU funds to enforce EU values. *Journal of European Public Policy*, *32*(2), 474–497. https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2024.2406275

Schmidt, V. A. (2013). Democracy and legitimacy in the European Union revisited: Input, output and 'throughput.' *Political Studies*, *61*(1), 2–22. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9248.2012.00962.x

Slovenská národná strana. (2016). *Pre silný štát (volebný program)*. http://sns.sk/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/volebny_program_2016.pdf

Steuer, M. (2017). *Why the EU needs 'de-crisising*.' Crossroads Europe. https://crossroads.ideasoneurope.eu/2017/10/02/article-18

Steuer, M. (2019). Newspaper portrayal of the EU in crises in the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary: The Union's imagined linearity. In J. Bátora & J. E. Fossum (Eds.), *Towards a segmented European political order: The European Union's post-crises conundrum* (pp. 199–224). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351024341-10

Steuer, M., & Malová, D. (2023, October 26). *To hell, on a white horse: Governing in Slovakia after the 2023 early elections*. Verfassungsblog. https://verfassungsblog.de/to-hell-on-a-white-horse

Steuer, M., & Organ, J. (2025). *Reductionism and holism in European Union "value talk": The case of the Conference on the Future of Europe* (iCourts Working paper series no. 360). iCourts. https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.5118872

Szelényi, Z. (2023). *Tainted democracy: Viktor Orbán and the subversion of Hungary*. Hurst.

Urbinati, N. (2019). *Me the people: How populism transforms democracy*. Harvard University Press.

van Middelaar, L. (2013). *The passage to Europe: How a continent became a Union*. Yale University Press.

van Middelaar, L., & Puetter, U. (2021). The European Council: The Union's supreme decision-maker. In D. Hodson, U. Puetter, S. Saurugger, & J. Peterson (Eds.), *The institutions of the European Union* (5th Edition, pp. 51–77). Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/hepl/9780198862222.003.0003

Világi, A., Baboš, P., & Králiková, M. (2021). *Politizácia európskej integrácie na Slovensku: Postoje politických strán*. Univerzita Komenského.

Weiler, J. H. H. (2018). The crumbling of European democracy. In M. A. Graber, S. Levinson, & M. Tushnet (Eds.), *Constitutional democracy in crisis?* (pp. 629–648). Oxford University Press.

Wenzel, M., Stasiuk-Krajewska, K., Macková, V., & Turková, K. (2024). The penetration of Russian disinformation related to the war in Ukraine: Evidence from Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia. *International Political Science Review*, *45*(2), 192–208. https://doi.org/10.1177/01925121231205259

Wiesner, C. (2018). *Inventing the EU as a democratic polity: Concepts, actors and controversies*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Wiesner, C. (2020). The European Union and its chances for democratic revitalization. In B. Vormann & M. D. Weinman (Eds.), *The emergence of illiberalism* (pp. 140–156). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429347368-11

Wiesner, C. (2022). Doing qualitative and interpretative research: Reflecting principles and principled challenges. *Political Research Exchange*, *4*(1), Article 2127372. https://doi.org/10.1080/2474736X.2022.2127372

Wiesner, C. (2024). *Politicisation, democratisation and EU identity: National EU discourses in Germany and France*. Routledge.

Wiesner, C., & Novak, M. (2024). *Jean Monnet Network Debating Europe 2020–2024 (key findings)*. Debat EU. https://www.debating-europe.de/publications/project-publications

Wilkinson, M. A. (2021). *Authoritarian liberalism and the transformation of modern Europe*. Oxford University Press.

Ziegler, T. D. (2025). Authoritarian governance of academia in Central and Eastern Europe: Chances of a European counter-culture. *Global Constitutionalism*, *14*(1), 159–181. https://doi.org/10.1017/S2045381724000078

About the Author

Max Steuer studies democracy beyond disciplines, as a principal investigator of the HARVEST project at the Comenius University in Bratislava (Department of Political Science), Slovakia; an associate professor at the O.P. Jindal Global University (Jindal Global Law School), India; and a visiting researcher (re:constitution fellow) at the CEU Democracy Institute, Hungary.

Politics and Governance
2025 • Volume 13 • Article 9905
https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.9905

ARTICLE

Open Access Journal

How Trickle-Down Democracy Won the Debate, and Why It Didn't Have To

Jan Pieter Beetz [1], Gilles Pittoors [2], and Wouter Wolfs [3]

[1] Utrecht School of Governance, Utrecht University, The Netherlands
[2] Department of Political Science, KU Leuven, Belgium
[3] Centre for European Studies, KU Leuven, Belgium

Correspondence: Gilles Pittoors (gilles.pittoors@kuleuven.be)

Submitted: 22 January 2025 **Accepted:** 18 June 2025 **Published:** 7 August 2025

Issue: This article is part of the issue "Debating Europe: Politicization, Contestation, and Democratisation" edited by Claudia Wiesner (Fulda University of Applied Sciences) and Meta Novak (University of Ljubljana), fully open access at https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.i452

Abstract

Pro-EU MEPs pursue a strategy to further democratise EU governance through initiatives such as the *Spitzenkandidaten* and transnational lists. Doing so, they seem to follow a logic of what we call "trickle-down democracy," which entails the belief that the reproduction of domestic representative democracy at the EU level will increase popular support for the EU. However, despite extensive increases in power and authority for Parliament, popular support has not significantly increased, while Euroscepticism has become a mainstream phenomenon. When did pro-EU MEPs commit to a "trickle-down" logic of democratisation? And did they remain wedded to this logic despite strong counterindications? In this article, we adopt a historical institutionalist perspective to answer these questions. Based on a qualitative, interpretive thematic analysis of European Parliament (EP) debates and resolutions, we demonstrate that in the 1970s, when in anticipation of the first direct EP elections the blueprint of European democracy was debated, pro-EU MEPs debated different models and ultimately decided to follow the path of trickle-down democracy. We then show that this choice was reinstated rather than revisited following Maastricht, as growing Euroscepticism in EU politics did not trigger the critical juncture historical institutionalism could expect.

Keywords

elections; EU democracy; European Parliament; historical analysis; political parties

1. Introduction

In contemporary debates, pro-EU MEPs generally propose a reproduction of domestic representative democracy at the European level. Examples include the introduction of a *Spitzenkandidaten* system, the

(direct) election of the Commission president, and transnational party lists. They argue that this strategy will increase popular support for the EU. We refer to this logic as "trickle-down democracy," meaning the top-down development of institutional features at the European level that resemble democratic configurations at the national level in an attempt to strengthen public support for the EU.

Trickle-down democracy is a metaphor borrowed from economics. A core idea of trickle-down economics is that tax cuts, especially for the rich, would increase overall prosperity, because the wealth at the top would trickle down to the bottom. Many have come to doubt the soundness of this logic because it has resulted in greater inequality between the wealthy and the poor. The metaphor has thus gained negative connotations. We are not implying that trickle-down democracy is normatively undesirable. The label merely captures a similarity in logic: More EU democracy "at the top" will trickle down to citizens "at the bottom."

However, in the past, successful calls for a stronger European Parliament (EP) have seemingly not resulted in more popular support. For example, while the Maastricht Treaty strengthened the position of the EP, it also signified an end to the so-called "permissive consensus": Implicit support for far-reaching cooperation turned into explicit resistance to a loss of national sovereignty (e.g., Hooghe & Marks, 2009). Since then, Euroscepticism has become a persistent mainstream phenomenon with electoral success, such as the failed referenda on the European Constitution or Brexit (e.g., Leconte, 2015). Eurosceptic politicians commit to the logic of democratic fatalism, i.e., that EU democracy without a people is doomed to fail. As the latter does not exist, they oppose the transfer of power to the EU—let alone its "parliament" (Beetz, 2019)—or the further institutional development of EU democracy. Yet, recent proposals by MEPs for democratising the EU *seem* to remain attached to the trickle-down logic despite Eurosceptic contestation. When did pro-European MEPs commit to this logic of EU democratisation? And did they remain wedded to its paradigm despite the success of Eurosceptic movements? In this article, we look at these questions from the perspective of historical institutionalism. We show that the "trickle-down democracy" logic won the battle of ideas in the run up to the first EP elections. At this point in time, alternative proposals were still debated. Yet, we demonstrate that this initial ideational crossroads ended up being a critical junction. MEPs have become "locked in" by the ideal picture of democratisation as the reproduction of national democracy at the EU level. Other innovative ideas were no longer seriously considered, even in times when public contestation of the EU became more prevalent. Ideas from before this juncture, such as the stronger involvement of national parliamentary institutions, could be considered to bolster EU democracy. Nevertheless, the trickle-down democracy logic seems to have won the day.

In this article, we first introduce historical institutionalism and develop our expectations for the trickle-down democracy logic. To guide our analysis of MEP debates, we then flesh out models for institutionalising representative democracy. Subsequently, we analyse the debates in the run up to the first election of Parliament in 1979 in depth, when the trickle-down logic became a paradigm. We then undertake an analysis of Parliament resolutions and debates of the subsequent European elections and treaty changes. These moments could have been critical junctures at which the trickle-down democracy paradigm might have become contested due to successful Eurosceptic contestation. However, we show that the paradigm continues to underpin proposals in the EP while viable alternatives are not meaningfully considered. Finally, we reflect on the upshot for future research.

2. A Historical Institutionalist Perspective on Trickle-Down Democracy

The central objective of this article is to explore when trickle-down democracy became and whether it remained dominant in pro-EU parliamentary discourse on the democratisation of the EU. To address this question, we take a historical institutionalist perspective, which forms the theoretical backbone for the broader argument we are making: The trickle-down logic has been set as the foundational paradigm for democratising the EU in the 1970s and has been reinforced throughout the decades, even in the face of increasing pressure for change.

Historical institutionalism is part of the "new institutionalist school," a collection of theoretical approaches that emerged in response to behaviouralism and rational choice theories (Hall & Taylor, 1996; Lowndes & Roberts, 2013). Rather than viewing institutions merely as arenas for individual action, new institutionalists consider them as collections of rules, norms, and practices—both formal and informal—that structure and constrain political agency (Hysing & Olsson, 2018).

Within this school of thought, historical institutionalism particularly underscores how the long-term evolution of institutions moulds political behaviour and outcomes, treating institutions as enduring features that steer development along particular paths (Hall & Taylor, 1996; Thelen, 2000). A core principle is thus the logic of path dependence, wherein initial choices establish trajectories that "close off alternative options and lead to the establishment of institutions that generate self-reinforcing path-dependent processes" (Capoccia & Kelemen, 2007, p. 341) and potentially lead to a "lock-in." As Thelen (2000) discusses, diverging from a path requires either incremental change or a critical juncture, i.e., a pivotal moment in time of significant change where all options are on the table again. Although Pierson (2000) rightfully argues that path dependence does not necessarily imply a permanent freeze, "identifying such self-reinforcing processes does help us to understand why organisational and institutional practices are often extremely persistent" (pp. 75–76).

Though questions about the role of ideas and norms are commonly connected to other strands of new institutionalism, in particular normative institutionalism, it is also embedded in historical institutionalist thinking (Hall & Taylor, 1996). As Peters (2019) argues, "change within historical institutionalism can be understood in terms of one idea replacing another, whether gradually or as a punctuation" (p. 128). Analogous to normative institutionalism's logic of appropriateness, historical institutionalists argue that "locked-in" ideas "constrain the limits of acceptable action…[and] provide a set of ready solutions for policy problems that arise within their domain" (Peters, 2019, p. 86). Sociological institutionalism's emphasis on cultural norms and entrepreneurship finds its translation in historical institutionalism's notion that ideas can be seen as key in the formative stage of institutions, and "new" ideas need to be advocated by creative actors during critical junctures to challenge a dominant paradigm (Hysing & Olsson, 2018; Pierson, 2000).

Applied to this article, a historical institutionalist perspective entails that the establishment of a paradigm about what European democracy *should* look like at an early stage of European integration generates reinforcement of that idea over time, and makes it difficult for later actors to change or diverge from this paradigm. We argue that the trickle-down logic became a paradigm. In this respect, two questions emerge. When did the idea become dominant among MEPs, i.e., what was the critical junction? And secondly, were there no critical junctions afterwards to unsettle this paradigm? We argue that trickle-down democracy—advocated for by a group of federalist MEPs, particularly in the run-up to the first European elections in

1979—became gradually embedded in the institutional rationale of the EP, and subsequently locked in at every major juncture of the European integration process.

The embeddedness of this paradigm is particularly relevant in the context of rising Euroscepticism. More supranational democracy arguably should have resulted in more popular support for integration (Schimmelfennig, 2010). The EP increasingly started to resemble a "normal" national parliament—with institutional features such as direct elections and increased decision-making powers, and classic representative claims referring to European citizens. Yet, this evolution coincided with Euroscepticism becoming a mainstream phenomenon with arguably Brexit as its high watermark (Leconte, 2015). This development indicates widespread alienation from and resistance to the EU rather than increased support for it. These events could have triggered new critical junctures and pushed pro-EU MEPs to put new options on the table to gain popular support. Indeed, nothing about the idea of supranational democracy mirroring national democracy is inevitable (e.g., Beetz, 2019), nor was it the only option on the table in debates before the 1979 EP elections. So were there moments where pro-EU MEPs seriously considered alternatives to breaking open the lock-in?

3. The Possibility of EU Representative Democracy

3.1. Features of Representative Democracy

To answer these questions, we will analyse proposals for the establishment of EU representative democracy by pro-EU MEPs. The institutional core of representative democracy is the chain of legitimate delegation from the people via elections to parliamentary representatives to political executives (Strøm, 2000). Three key features of representative democracy in a polity can thus be distinguished: (a) elections; (b) legislature; and (c) selection of political executives. While these features are interconnected in practice, their separation is analytically useful because it allows us to identify alternative ways of democratising the EU. For instance, regarding legislative organisation, parliamentary representation should translate this electoral mandate into effective legislative decision-making power. The position of the chamber (or chambers) within EU decision-making impacts the power of the democratic legislature. The EP could become the sovereign decision-maker, but national parliaments might also hold authority.

3.2. Four Models of Parliamentary Democracy in the EU Polity

To flesh out these features to guide our interpretive analysis, we distinguish four models of democracy in the EU polity (Beetz, 2019): intergovernmental organisation, democratic confederacy, transnational federation, and federal superstate (Table 1). These models streamline a much richer debate, but they are meant to guide our empirical analysis.

3.2.1. Intergovernmental Organisation

In this model, national democracy is the only legitimate locus of democracy in the EU polity (Offe & Preuss, 2006). Intergovernmental representation in EU governance should democratically legitimize EU governance, which should remain limited in scope and depth (e.g., Grimm, 2009; Moravcsik, 2002). A non-democratic variant is a regulatory—often technocratic—model for the EU (Majone, 2005). These scholars dismiss or at

best tolerate supranational representation; Europe's national governments should have the final say in EU governance.

Turning to the three features, the relevant elections are the national elections. Often these are parliamentary elections, but they can also be presidential elections. Crucially, they are (predominantly) run on purely national agendas. National political parties are active in these elections, but nowadays, especially for (semi-)presidential systems, the candidate can also be an independent. At the EU level, the government party becomes the relevant partisan consideration in articulating the national interests in a two-level game (Moravcsik, 2002). Parliamentary representation at the EU level is a misnomer in this model because an intergovernmental forum makes the decisions. National parliaments can influence government positions, but they have no direct say at the EU level. Decisions are taken by unanimity, with a veto for each state to prevent (larger) democratic states dominating smaller ones. State representatives appoint EU executives who should perform administrative roles. The Commission should act as an international secretariat for the member states.

3.2.2. Democratic Confederacy

In this second model of the EU as a democratic confederacy (e.g., Beetz, 2018; Bellamy, 2016), EU citizens remain primarily part of their national democratic communities, but they share crucial common interests, such as peaceful coexistence, (external) security, and a democratic way of life. These goals require more far-reaching cooperation between European states, for which international organisations lack the required democratic mandate. Transnational representative institutions are necessary to legitimate EU decision-making.

In this model, national elections are crucial, but gain an EU dimension. National parliamentarians as representatives of diverse *demoi* rather than state representatives should legitimate the EU. In contrast to the conceptualisation of a state, a *demos* has a diversity of viewpoints, which can be reflected by multiple seats in a European assembly accorded proportionally to the parties represented in the national parliaments (Beetz, 2018). Crucially, this assembly would have the first and final say on EU legislation, proposing and agreeing upon new legislation. The EP or Council can also play a similar role within these processes (Bellamy, 2016). The European executive is composed of (national) government appointments, proposed as part of the governmental negotiations after the national elections. Consequently, the democratic logic remains the same: National elections result (indirectly) in the appointment of EU executives.

3.2.3. Transnational Federation

In the transnational federation model (e.g., Habermas, 2017; Patberg, 2017), national liberal democracies continue to protect citizens' basic rights, but globalisation creates challenges that can only be effectively and legitimately addressed by a EU democracy. EU citizens are simultaneously part of national people and a pan-EU citizenry.

This model's parliamentary system should consequently give an equal voice to the elected representatives as part of a national people *and* as part of a European citizenry. Neither of these voices should be superior to the other. The EU should become "a transnational democracy without ultimate decision-making authority" (Habermas, 2017, p. 172). The result is a separation of power model, whereby the EP and national

parliaments share authority. At the EU level, the EP should be part of a perfect bicameral system—a frequent feature of federal systems—in which the Council fulfils the role of the upper chamber, representing the territorial interests of the member states. Transnational EP lists of like-minded parties would fit well with this logic, while the assembly would (indirectly) rely on national elections. The current logic of appointment of the European Council president captures the duality of this democratic logic: (S)he is nominated by the heads of state and government in the European Council and subsequently approved—or "elected"—by the EP; the national executives in the European Council represent citizens as nationals, while the EP represents them as a transnational citizenry.

3.2.4. Federal Superstate

In the final model of a federal superstate (e.g., Føllesdal & Hix, 2006; Morgan, 2005), EU citizens constitute a pan-European *demos* with sovereign power over all policy issues in the polity. Political unification is seen as the democratic solution to the new global challenges and supranational democracy is assumed to unify national citizens.

The election of Parliament should take place by a single pan-European *demos*. In this election, European parties should compete for the vote of EU citizens and national parties are normatively irrelevant. Although the exact electoral system can take many forms, the EP would become the sovereign parliament. Nation-states would become regions in a United States of Europe: constitutional units of a European federation that is organised in a hierarchical way. Like any other national parliament, the EP decides with a simple majority on legislative issues. The main points of contention are related to the type of (national) democracy to be institutionalised at the EU level: a presidential system with its separation of powers, versus a parliamentary fusion of powers model (e.g., Fabbrini, 2024; Sonnicksen, 2017). The full development of the latter would mean a political system that mirrors the dominant practice at the national level: a fixed majority and coalition agreement among the majority parties. Elections will decide upon European political executives either directly or indirectly: The Commission president is either elected directly, pace a presidential system, or, following a parliamentary logic, the *Spitzenkandidat* procedure becomes an institutional norm in which the European Council plays no role.

Table 1. Overview of models of parliamentary democracy in the EU and their core features.

Model/Feature	Intergovernmental Organisation	Democratic Confederacy	Transnational Federation	Federal Superstate
Organisation of elections and parties	National election of the executive	National election of national assemblies, partly based on EU issues	Transnational elections of the EP and national procedure for the assembly	A pan-European election
Chamber(s) of the European legislature	Intergovernmental forum	Assembly of national parliamentarians	A supranational and a regional chamber	A sovereign EP
Selection of political executives	National government officials	Appointment by national representatives	Simultaneous appointment by national representatives and EP	Direct election or *Spitzenkandidat*

The EU's current situation is a mixture of the models of intergovernmental organisation (reflected in European Council decisions) and a (flawed) transnational federation (reflected in the community method). The trickle-down logic would push the status quo more towards a federal superstate or at least seek to strengthen the EU's transnational federal dimension. Recent proposals, such as transnational lists and direct election of the Commission, are attempts to (re)gain popular support for the EU through top-down means, thus fitting the trickle-down democracy paradigm because they aim to "perfect" the mirroring of the EU democracy to its domestic counterparts. Proposals did not, for instance, suggest giving national parliamentarians a stronger voice. But has this always been the case? Or is there still a lively debate on alternative possibilities to regain popular support?

4. Methodology

Our analysis traces the development of the trickle-down paradigm from the pre-1979 critical juncture through later parliamentary debates, with particular focus on the post-Maastricht period, when public opposition to European integration became more pronounced. It is important to emphasise that our goal is not to produce a comprehensive, exhaustive mapping of all discourses, divergent viewpoints, or minority positions articulated in the EP since the 1950s. Rather, our primary objective is to identify and elucidate the principal themes and institutional stances that have shaped and characterised the dominant position on European democracy in the EP.

Accordingly, we employ a qualitative, interpretive thematic analysis of archival material and publicly available sources, drawing on established approaches in historical and textual analysis (see, e.g., Gerring, 2012; Capoccia & Kelemen, 2007; Mahoney & Rueschemeyer, 2003; Peterson, 2017). The data was collected and analysed in two steps. First, we identified those EP resolutions and preceding parliamentary debates that focused on (aspects related to) EU democracy in the EP's historical and contemporary archives. We concentrated our analytical attention on a subset of key documents that, in our assessment, best encapsulated and articulated the EP's dominant position on EU democracy. Second, these documents were read closely and interpreted to distill the main themes and positions embedded within them. No additional researchers or external coders participated in this process. This close reading centred on the three guiding themes from the analytical framework: elections and parties, legislative organisation, and executive selection.

In total, the article references 21 documents. It is worth noting, however, that we identified dozens of relevant documents addressing various aspects of democracy within the EU, spanning topics such as voting rights for EU citizens, institutional reforms, and the powers of Parliament. While all of these documents were consulted and informed our broader understanding of the debates, keeping in mind also the constraints of the article format, we referenced only those texts that provided particularly salient insights or illustrative examples and quotations that underpin and substantiate the arguments advanced in the article. The majority of quotations are drawn from official parliamentary reports and resolutions, reflecting our focus on Parliament's institutional position. Occasional statements by individual MEPs were included where they held clear analytical relevance, such as interventions by party leaders. This selective, interpretive engagement aligns with established qualitative research practice, emphasising scholarly discretion in highlighting material most pertinent to our theoretical narrative (Costantino, 2008). Supplementary secondary materials, including academic commentaries and historical studies, support the contextualisation of the findings within broader political and historical developments.

5. Setting the Stage: The 1979 Elections

Prior to the first direct election of the EP in 1979, a decade of debate took place on how to prepare and organise the elections, and how these could be built upon to develop a European democratic system. Different approaches were discussed, but by 1979 MEPs united behind the idea to construct a European representative democracy similar to the national level, mirroring the model of a federal superstate with some features of a transnational federation. Such a democratic set-up was not deemed a reflection of the existence of European *demos* but, conversely, as an instrument to achieve this normative objective. Three fundamental characteristics of the elections-to-be were discussed: (a) the organisation of the elections and the nature of the EP as a representative body, (b) the role of (European) political parties, and (c) the powers of the EP. At this stage, Parliament was still fighting for basic powers and recognition, and did not yet push hard for a role in the nomination of a European executive, a theme that featured more strongly in the post-1979 period.

5.1. Elections and Representation

A majority in Parliament pushed for a direct election of *European* MPs, positing democratic representation through *national* parliamentarians as a democratic flaw. For instance, during a debate on direct European elections in 1959, Belgian Christian-democrat Étienne de La Vallée Poussin argued that "the Treaties set up institutions whose accountability is not clearly established and whose parliamentary control is made practically impossible…[for which] the only remedy is to have the EP elected on a general basis" (European Parliament, 1959b).

The main argument was that "the peoples of Europe" needed to be more directly involved in European integration. Parliament's 1960 Draft Convention explicitly stated that "the point is to involve the peoples in the construction of Europe, and thus to strengthen the democratic character of the institutions" (European Parliament, 1960). This call became stronger as member states kept postponing a decision on the organisation of European elections. For instance, the 1963 Furler Report stated that it is Parliament's duty to "express the variety in public opinion and the general interests of the people" (European Parliament, 1963), and in 1975 the EP issued a resolution on European Union (European Parliament, 1975a), arguing that:

> The progressive achievement of the Union must be based on the active and conscious participation of the peoples, whose interests it must reflect, and that the European Parliament will, therefore, have to take at all times, with the assistance of the national Parliaments, all initiatives likely to foster and ensure such participation.

Notably, the mixed use of the terms "people" (singular) and "peoples" (plural) indicates how MEPs were still on the fence about considering the EP as representative of either a multinational sphere or a single European *demos*. Gradually, however, MEPs came to see their representative role in a more unitary way. Throughout the 1970s, Parliament increasingly connected European elections directly to "European citizens" (Pittoors, 2023a). In its 1977 resolution on civil and politics rights, Parliament emphasised "the political importance for the development of the European Community—not least with a view to direct elections in 1978 [sic]—of strengthening the ties of solidarity among its citizens by granting special [civil and political] rights" (European Parliament, 1977a). The goal was not just to grant citizens voting rights, but to create a political community of European citizens to be achieved through their participation in European elections and representation by Parliament, thereby moving beyond the plurality of European peoples.

Importantly, though MEPs often talked of political *participation*, they understood this in a classic *representative* way—that is, participation through electing representatives in Parliament. For instance, the 1975 Bertrand Report equated the "election of [EP] members by direct universal suffrage" with advancing "towards the construction of Europe with the active participation of the peoples" (European Parliament, 1975b). Parliament thus positioned itself as the main representative institution through which citizen participation was to be achieved. This, in turn, justified the call for a substantial reinforcement of the Parliament's powers (cf. Section 5.3).

5.2. Role of Political Parties

Throughout these discussions, the initial disagreement about whether transnational European parties should exist prior to holding European elections materialised by 1979 around the dominant idea that holding such elections would bring about the genesis of such parties. From the very beginning, the importance of political parties as main organisations to mobilise and inform the public was recognised, but there was widespread hesitation about whether national parties were up to the task (Pittoors, 2023b).

One of the strongest voices opposing a hasty organisation of European elections came from Belgian Christian Democrat Pierre Wigny. He proposed to postpone the direct elections of Parliament until the proper supporting institutions existed to make the launch of the European elections a success. Notably, he argued strongly in favour of political parties being developed at the European level before embarking on European elections. His main concern was that "voters, largely unfamiliar with European issues, would show little interest in the elections in the absence of European parties and that they would be able to choose their candidates only on the basis of national considerations" (European Parliament, 1958).

However, despite these arguments, strong voices in Parliament opposed any postponement of the European elections. In the same 1958 debate, French MEP Pierre-Henri Teitgen argued strongly in favour of the catalytic qualities of elections, warning against a vicious circle that would indefinitely postpone the direct elections to Parliament: "There will be no European parties as long as no European elections are held. If one were to wait for the former before organising the latter, one could wait forever to organise them" (European Parliament, 1958).

The catalytic quality of Parliament elections became somewhat of a silver bullet argument and was repeated time and again. In his Introductory Report to the 1960 Draft Convention, Dehousse countered the argument that "elections are only justified when the voters first have a better understanding of European questions," by stating that it is "precisely through their participation in public life that [voters] have gradually matured" (European Parliament, 1960). French socialist Maurice Faure likewise expressed the conviction that "the election of the Parliament by general elections will mobilise the electorate of the six member countries."

Consequently, European political parties were somewhat neglected in the debate, which focused on Parliament's powers and the elections as such. It was only when European elections became a tangible possibility in the late 1970s that political parties came back to the fore. Particularly, MEPs became increasingly concerned about the lukewarm interest in and knowledge of European affairs by the public at large. In a 1977 resolution on the (faltering) information campaign for European elections, Parliament highlighted "the need for political parties and movements to step up their activities during the actual electoral campaign by engaging in a democratic contest" (European Parliament, 1977c).

Yet, while ample voices stressed the crucial role of *national* parties—as German MEP Hans-August Lücker, leader of the Christian Democrat Group, said: "They are the ones who in the end will be out in the field" (European Parliament, 1978)—many MEPs also emphasised the importance of *European* coordination of such national campaigns. For instance, the 1975 Patijn Report argued that "not until the parties succeed…in establishing close links between themselves, developing joint programmes and creating supranational party structures can direct elections to the European Parliament become a key factor in the process of political integration" (European Parliament, 1975c). The initial hesitation and adherence to a more transnational or confederal model for party politics thus gave way to a supranational perspective, even though most effort went into convincing member states to actually hold European elections.

5.3. Legislative Organisation and Parliamentary Powers

At the same time, many asked whether it made sense to have direct elections for a parliament that had no powers (Pittoors, 2024). During a meeting of the Working Group on European Elections in 1959, there was wide disagreement on the preferred sequence of events—first elections, or first powers? German socialist Ernst Albrecht Metzger (European Parliament, 1959a) argued that:

> If one wants the future Parliament to be truly effective and representative, one must also include an extension of its powers. A Parliament elected by universal suffrage, which has a significant number of Members but has such limited powers as currently provided for by the Treaties, can only bring discredit to democracy and the parliamentary system because such a large number of Members can only talk and will have nothing to say.

Others considered that "when it comes to the expansion of the Parliament's power, it would be better to wait until after the Parliament is directly elected, because…it will be difficult to acquire both [powers and elections] and the risk exists one achieves nothing at all" (European Parliament, 1959a). Moreover, there was a firm belief that holding European elections would provide the future Parliament with such political authority that it would become impossible to deny it more powers: "The peoples of Europe will become more closely involved in the European ideal, and consequently the elected Parliament will be able to develop a dynamic power that will enable it to expand its own powers." This argument was pointedly captured by the chair of the Working Group, Belgian socialist Fernand Dehousse: "The powers depend on the elections, not the other way around."

Nonetheless, the debate on expanding Parliament's powers, which made limited but tangible progress throughout the 1960s and 1970s, was sodden with references to democracy. For instance, the 1963 Furler Report listed some "necessary changes" for Parliament to become "a real parliament and not just an advisory assembly," including the right of initiative and the right to appoint the European Commission, connecting these to "the parliamentary element of the European Community" (European Parliament, 1963). A decade later, when Parliament was granted (limited) budgetary oversight powers, the 1973 Spénale Report again based its call for more powers on Parliament's crucial role in providing the European Community with a stronger democratic foundation:

> By giving the European Parliament a power of co-decision in the determination of the Communities' own resources…we should be taking a step in the direction of a better democratic balance in the Communities. (European Parliament, 1973)

Similarly, the 1975 Bertrand Report put forward that "the European Union must be conceived as a pluralist and democratic Community" based on "a Parliament having budgetary powers and powers of control, which would participate on at least an equal footing in the legislative process, as is its right as the representative of the peoples of the Union" (European Parliament, 1975b). Though Parliament was granted a limited expansion of its powers—especially in budgetary matters—MEPs became increasingly frustrated with the lack of progress. As Dutch MEP Schelto Patijn lamented in January 1975:

> Opponents of direct elections have been telling us for long enough that the European Parliament must have power before it can be directly elected, while at the same time withholding these powers from Parliament on the hypocritical grounds that we are not directly elected. (European Parliament, 1975c)

This sentiment was echoed by several speakers during that plenary session, and even Commission President Ortoli—a French Gaullist to boot—weighed in, saying that:

> To envisage the direct election of your Assembly amounts effectively to raising the problem of Parliament's legislative powers, given its added political weight and, ultimately, to anticipating developments towards [the] European Union and the general institutional equilibrium it will bring about.

Still, by the late 1970s, these debates had fused in a broadly carried call to "restore the balance of power within the European Community [and] create a more democratic form of supervision" (European Parliament, 1977b). Elections were seen as a necessary step in Parliament's assumption of its democratic role as representative of the people of Europe, expressed through "detailed and careful scrutiny of legislation,…constant questioning of the activities of the executive,…speeches in debates designed to reflect and at the same time to influence the development of public opinion" (European Parliament, 1978). However, at that point in time, none of these aspects were directly linked to the selection of the political executives at the EU level. Parliament sporadically mentioned general notions such as that it "should participate in the appointment of…the Commission" (European Parliament, 1975a), but the focus of the debate lay with (budgetary) oversight and legislative parity with the Council. This element only became part of the narrative in the decades following the 1979 European elections.

6. Reinforcing the Path: 1979 to Present

The dominant idea set in the run-up to 1979, namely that—similar to national democracies—European democracy should be based on a strong EP in line with the model of a federal superstate, became the leitmotif in parliamentary positions and debates in the following decades. At no point did Parliament diverge from this paradigm, or did it suggest the EU should develop features of the intergovernmental or confederal model. In other words, the trickle-down democracy logic remained uncontested, suggesting a "locked-in" paradigm on EU democratisation among pro-EU MEPs.

Granted, apart from the low turnout, pro-EU MEPs had little cause to assume their strategy was not working. European citizens, it was argued, still needed to adapt to the new reality of European integration, and more powers and visibility for the directly elected Parliament would bring that about. It was not until the rise of openly Eurosceptic voices and parties from the 1990s onwards that pro-EU MEPs had serious cause to

reconsider and diverge from their playbook, possibly triggering a new critical juncture or at least an examination of the trickle-down paradigm. However, even when faced with growing indications that the trickle-down strategy was not strengthening popular support, we show the enduring dominance of this logic from the Maastricht Treaty until recent debates on EU democracy. While the theme of legislative organisation was mainly discussed in relation to the nomination of the Commission, the other two themes on "European parties and lists" and the "election of the executive" received more explicit attention. In addition, in the debates since the Lisbon Treaty, a new theme on 'party coalitions and governmental agreements' emerged.

6.1. European Parties and Lists

In their seminal 1980 study of the European elections, Reif and Schmitt (1980) definitively established the image of European elections as "second-order national elections." MEPs similarly recognised the low turnout as an indication that "Europe has still not made a sufficient impression on its people; most of the citizens of Europe do not feel themselves really concerned by the Community" (European Parliament, 1979). Raising awareness thus became a key objective for MEPs—in particular, the questions of political parties and of transnational lists, both of which were aimed at increasing a sense of joint constituency among European citizens.

Introduced formally in Art. 138a of the 1992 Maastricht Treaty, European political parties are seen as the "facilitators of successful European political debate…and should be rendered more visible" (European Parliament, 2020). Their fundamental role in European democracy has not only been recognised in the Maastricht Treaty itself, but has also been repeatedly called out by Parliament. The 1996 Tsatsos Report argued that European political parties not only contribute to "the expression of political will at the level of the Union," but also "provide a unique opportunity for the integration of political culture" and are even "necessary so that a genuine European citizenship may emerge" (European Parliament, 1996). This idea was confirmed several times over, for instance, in the 2000 plenary debate on the statute of European political parties, during which EPP leader Hans-Gert Pöttering argued that "full-blown democracy in the European Union cannot be achieved without solidly-funded European political parties" (Wolfs, 2022).

Also in more recent debates, a stronger role for European political parties was explicitly seen by the EP as a measure to strengthen the European debate and to form a European political awareness among citizens (European Parliament, 2012, 2013). In its resolution evaluating the 2019 elections, the Parliament regretted "that owing to restrictive measures at European and national levels, European political parties cannot fully participate in European election campaigns" (European Parliament, 2020). This was repeated in its resolution on the 2024 European elections: "The restrictions under the current EU and national regulatory frameworks prevent European political parties from fully participating in European election campaigns" (European Parliament, 2023).

A number of measures that have been frequently proposed over time to strengthen their position include strengthening internal party democracy (in particular for nominating the Spitzenkandidaten; cf. Section 6.2), the development of common political Europarty manifestos, more financial and regulatory capabilities to conduct campaigns, and including their names and logos on (national) electoral ballots and (national parties') campaigning material (European Parliament, 2013, 2020, 2023). According to the EP, "European election

rules must promote European party democracy" (European Parliament, 2020): The normative benchmark for democracy at the EU level was thus a federal superstate.

6.2. Executive Election

This increased role for European political parties is often linked to the so-called *Spitzenkandidaten* process as the main instrument to select the political executive. In its resolution leading up to the 2014 elections, the EP called upon the Euro parties to nominate candidates for the Presidency of the Commission and urged those candidates to play a leading role in the electoral campaigns by personally presenting their programme in all EU member states. This was seen as an important way to reinforce "the political legitimacy of both Parliament and the Commission by connecting their respective elections more directly to the choice of the voters" (European Parliament, 2012). In the same resolution, Parliament stressed that as many members of the European Commission as possible should be drawn from the Members of the European Parliament "to reflect the balance between the two chambers of the legislature" (European Parliament, 2012).

The failure of the *Spitzenkandidaten* system in 2019—when Ursula von der Leyen was nominated and elected as Commission president—could be explained, according to the EP's resolution evaluating the 2019 European elections, by a "lack of explanation and understanding of the process among EU citizens" (European Parliament, 2020). In the same resolution, Parliament regretted that:

> Only some of the EU citizens who took part in the European elections believed that their vote could make a difference when it came to the election of the President of the Commission, highlighting the need to raise awareness of the process among EU citizens.

Parliament highlighted that only 8 percent of the respondents of an electoral Eurobarometer survey voted to influence the choice of the next Commission President, which highlighted, according to Parliament the need to clarify the system, and that "all European voters should be allowed to vote for their preferred candidate for the President of the Commission" (European Parliament, 2020).

In its resolution in preparation to the 2024 European elections, the EP recalled how the "lead candidate system could foster the European public debate and empower European political parties" and that "failure to implement the lead candidate system has led to disappointment among many voters and reduced trust in the process" (European Parliament, 2023). The lead candidate system is often opposed to the system as stipulated in the treaties, in which the European Council plays the pivotal role through untransparent "deals behind closed doors" (European Parliament, 2023).

This system is also often linked to the need for transnational lists and, consequently, a joint constituency. In its resolution evaluating the 2020 elections, Parliament emphasised that the system requires "the *Spitzenkandidaten* [to] be able to stand as official candidates at the next elections in *all* member states, elected by a European political party and standing for a unified European electoral programme" (European Parliament, 2020, own emphasis). Moreover, in Parliament's view, such transnational lists would place Euro parties more at the centre of European elections (European Parliament, 2020). Parliament thus embraced a view that moves elections and executive (s)election procedure in the direction of a transnational federation and arguably even at points a federal state.

6.3. Party Coalitions and Government Agreements

In the run-up to the Maastricht Treaty, the European Parliament laid out several proposals that unambiguously posited it as the main representative institution providing the Union with its democratic legitimacy. For instance, the 1990 Colombo Report stated that:

> It seems increasingly clear that only the European Parliament, the representative of the will of the people, on the basis of a mandate which it claims for itself once again, can determine the objectives and institutions of the Union. (European Parliament, 1990)

In that same year, the first Martin Report explicitly stated that:

> fundamental democratic principles require that Community legislation should only enter into force with the explicit approval…of the European Parliament representing the electorate as a whole" and that "the appointment of the European Commission and in particular its President should be subject to the scrutiny and consent of the [EP]. (European Parliament, 1990)

These proposals thus involved bolstering Parliament's role in Community/Union decision-making and granting it greater supervisory authority over the European executive. Member states, to a certain degree, met Parliament's demands and not only created the co-decision procedure in Article 189b, but also formalised the practice of parliamentary consultation for the nomination of the Commission president and extended the Commission's term of office to five years, thereby aligning it with the Parliament's term.

However, while MEPs overall supported the Maastricht Treaty, they were far from satisfied. Parliament's 1992 resolution on the Maastricht IGC stated that the institutional structure developed at Maastricht "has not eliminated the parliamentary democratic deficit" (European Parliament, 1992). Note how Parliament speaks here specifically of the parliamentary democratic deficit, highlighting how it directly connects democratisation to the development of a (supranational) parliamentary system. Tellingly, the Resolution goes on to conclude with Parliament expressing "its determination…to pursue its endeavours to obtain a democratic and effective European Union of federal type." In the plenary debate following the Maastricht IGC, MEP David Martin, as rapporteur of the report, unambiguously condemned the Treaty's provisions regarding European democracy:

> We have to express our deep dissatisfaction that both the scope and the nature of co-decision have been so curtailed by the Maastricht Treaty. It is certainly not so that this Parliament can claim to be living and working within a democratic Community….The European Parliament, of course, has a duty to press for more powers for itself, not just for its own sake but in order to satisfy and safeguard the rights of the European citizens.

Yet, despite these protestations, it would take until the 2007 Lisbon Treaty for the next major steps to be taken in this regard. The changes in the Treaty of Lisbon, which explicitly stipulated that the president of the European Commission is "elected" by the EP, were used by Parliament to call for new developments. In its resolution on the 2014 European elections, Parliament stated that:

> In view of the new arrangements for the election of the European Commission introduced by the Treaty of Lisbon and the changing relationship between Parliament and the Commission which will

> stem from them as from the elections in 2014, that reliable majorities in Parliament will be of paramount importance for the stability of the Union's legislative procedures and the good functioning of its executive. (European Parliament, 2012)

The idea of a "legislature agreement" that should be agreed by the main European political groups in the EP and the (president of the) European Commission in the aftermath of the European elections is a more recent element in this respect. In 2020, the Parliament called for the introduction of the possibility for European political parties and movements "to form pre-electoral coalitions" to transform the European elections into a single European election instead of 27 separate national elections, and stated that the formation of a coalition or programmatic agreement was required because the election of the Commission President depends on a majority of MEPs (European Parliament, 2020). The idea put forward by the EP has been that such a legislature agreement is negotiated among the main groups and functions as the basis for the work programme of the European Commission to "guarantee, to European voters, [a] coherent follow-up to the elections." Each candidate to the European Commission is expected to abide by this agreement (European Parliament, 2023). This call is the latest proposal of pro-EU MEPs towards a federal superstate.

7. Conclusion

Pro-EU MEPs' ideas on democratisation became and remain wedded to a trickle-down logic, despite Eurosceptic contestation. This logic became the dominant paradigm in the run-up to the first direct EP elections in 1979, and was locked in in the decades after. We did not find proposals associated with an intergovernmental organisation or democratic confederacy. A transnational federation is also often not endorsed full-heartedly, but seen as a stepping stone or practical compromise. Federation features are justified with reference to a single people or European citizenry. The mirroring of the EU to domestic forms of representative democracy became and remained the dominant paradigm in EP debates, indicating the pervasiveness of the trickle-down democracy logic.

In earlier debates, MEPs did consider grounding EU democracy in its national constituent parts. They explored a "bottom-up" logic of democratisation, entailing that the European decision-making should further incorporate national parliamentary institutions to ensure popular support. The inclusion of national parliaments has increased over time, but it remains limited to scrutinizing proposals. The Early Warning System, or "yellow card procedure," is arguably the most far-reaching role. Yet, the initiative for these proposals did not come from MEPs, but it was an intergovernmental decision (Van Gruisen & Huysmans, 2020). Ideas for a more concrete institutionalisation of national representation into EU legislative procedures exist, such as a European Senate (Beetz, 2018), a third (virtual) chamber (Cooper, 2005), and a green card (Bellamy, 2016) or red card procedure (Van Gruisen & Huysmans, 2020, p. 469). Yet, these bottom-up proposals did not feature prominently in the contemporary debates.

This explorative analysis points toward an additional explanation for the type of proposals considered by pro-EU MEPs for Europe's democratisation. Analyses that focus on interinstitutional power struggles are not fully equipped to explain the MEPs' particular choice, since bottom-up logics also offer space for more powers and support for the EP. Our historical institutionalist analysis yields an alternative hypothesis: ideational lock-in. But what is the mechanism behind this lock-in? Do MEPs believe that this ideal remains in their interest? Maybe a self-reinforcing effect of trickle-down democracy is at work here: Failure invites

more of the same. In other words, there is no support because the EU does not resemble domestic democracy enough. Yet, another possibility is that there is simply a poverty of ideas. MEPs are also socialised in national arenas; hence, they transpose national ideas to the supranational context. This hypothesis might also have some force in explaining Eurosceptics' continued commitment to national democracy. On this note, the research does not explain why Euroscepticism did not trigger a critical juncture, and maybe the recent success of the far-right will trigger such a juncture. These questions and hypotheses will require further empirical inquiries.

Acknowledgments

We would like to sincerely thank the reviewers and editors, who have greatly contributed to the quality of this publication. Our thanks also go out to the participants of the 12th Biennial Conference of the ECPR Standing Group on European Union in Lisbon, whose feedback has greatly informed us in our writing and interpretation.

Funding

Wouter Wolfs wishes to acknowledge the financial support of the Postgraduate Research Grant on Christian Democracy and European Integration (EPP Group and the European University Institute). Publication of this article in open access was made possible through the institutional membership agreement between KU Leuven and Cogitatio Press.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

This research is based on publicly available resources, which can be accessed through the (historical) archives of the European Parliament.

References

Beetz, J. P. (2018). From practice to principle and back. Applying a new realist method to the European Union's democratic deficit. *Political Studies*, *66*(2), 339–355. https://doi.org/10.1177/0032321717722355

Beetz, J. P. (2019). Safeguarding, shifting, splitting or sharing? Conflicting conceptions of popular sovereignty in the EU-polity. *Journal of European integration*, *41*(7), 937–953. https://doi.org/10.1080/07036337.2019.1665662

Bellamy, R. (2016). A European republic of sovereign states: Sovereignty, republicanism and the European Union. *European Journal of Political Theory*, *16*(2), 188–209. https://doi.org/10.1177/1474885116654389

Capoccia, G., & Kelemen, R. D. (2007). The study of critical junctures: Theory, narrative, and counterfactuals in historical institutionalism. *World Politics*, *59*, 341–369. https://doi.org/10.1353/wp.2007.0025

Cooper, I. (2005). Bicameral or tricameral? National parliaments and representative democracy in the European Union. *Journal of European Integration*, *35*(5), 531–546. http://doi.org/10.1080/07036337.2013.799939

Costantino, T. E. (2008). Constructivism. In L. M. Given (Ed.), *The Sage encyclopedia of qualitative research methods* (pp. 116–120). Sage.

European Parliament. (1958). *Review of the work of the ad hoc Assembly and of the Constitutional Committee on the appointment by direct universal suffrage of the members of a European Parliament* (Doc. APE 954).

European Parliament. (1959a). *Working Group on the European elections. Summary report of the meeting of Thursday 17 and Friday 18 September 1959 held at the Binnenhof in The Hague* (Doc. APE 2485).

European Parliament. (1959b). *Working Group on the European elections. Summary Report of the meeting of Thursday 17 and Friday 18 September 1959 held at the Senate in Brussels* (Doc. APE 1474).
European Parliament. (1960). *Draft Convention on the election of the European Parliament by direct universal suffrage* (Doc. APE 3242).
European Parliament. (1963). *Report on the tasks and powers of the European Parliament* (Doc. PE 9214).
European Parliament. (1973). *Interim report on the proposals from the Commission of the European Communities to the Council on the strengthening of the budgetary powers of the European Parliament* (Doc. 131/73).
European Parliament. (1975a). *Resolution on European Union* (Doc. C 179/28-30).
European Parliament. (1975b). *Report on European Union* (Doc. 174/75).
European Parliament. (1975c). *Report on the adoption of a Draft Convention introducing elections to the European Parliament by direct universal suffrage* (Doc. 368/74).
European Parliament. (1977a). *Resolution on the granting of special rights to be citizens of the European Community in implementation of the decision of the Paris Summit of December 1974 (point 11 of the final communique)* (Doc. C 299/26-27).
European Parliament. (1977b). *Debate on the date of direct elections to the European Parliament*.
European Parliament. (1977c). *Resolution on the European Community's information policy with particular reference to the Commission information programme in preparation for direct elections to the European Parliament* (Doc. C 133/36-37).
European Parliament. (1978). *Debate on the date of European elections*.
European Parliament. (1979). *Solemn sitting*.
European Parliament. (1990). *Interim report drawn up on behalf of the Committee on Institutional Affairs on the European Parliament's guidelines for a draft Constitution for the European Union* (PE 141.140/A/fin).
European Parliament. (1992). *Resolution on the results of the intergovernmental conferences* (A3-0123/92).
European Parliament. (1996). *Report on the constitutional status of the European political parties* (A4-0342/96).
European Parliament. (2012). *Resolution on the elections to the European Parliament in 2014* (2012/2829(RSP)).
European Parliament. (2013). *Resolution on improving the practical arrangements for the holding of the European elections in 2014* (2013/2102(INI)).
European Parliament. (2020). *Resolution on stocktaking of European elections* (2020/2088(INI)).
European Parliament. (2023). *Resolution on the European Elections 2024* (P9_TA(2023)0455).
Fabbrini, S. (2024). The rise and fall of the Spitzenkandidaten? The inner logic of Parliamentary Federation. In M. Ceron, T. Christiansen, & D. G. Dimitrakopoulos (Eds.), *The politicisation of the European Commission's presidency: Spitzenkandidaten and beyond* (pp. 63–82). Springer Nature.
Føllesdal, A., & Hix, S. (2006). Why there is a democratic deficit in the EU: A response to Majone and Moravcsik. *Journal of Common Market Studies*, *44*(3), 533–562. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-5965.2006.00650.x
Gerring, J. (2012). *Social science methodology: A unified framework* (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press.
Grimm, D. (2009). Defending sovereign statehood against transforming the European Union into a state. *European Constitutional Law Review*, *5*, 353–373. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1574019609003538
Habermas, J. (2017). Citizen and state equality in a supranational political community: Degressive proportionality and the pouvoir constituant mixte. *Journal of Common Market Studies*, *55*(2), 171–182. https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.12517
Hall, P. A., & Taylor, R. C. (1996). Political science and the three new institutionalisms. *Political Studies*, *44*, 936–957. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9248.1996.tb00343.x
Hooghe, L., & Marks, G. (2009). A postfunctionalist theory of European integration: From permissive consensus to constraining dissensus. *British Journal of Political Science*, *39*(1), 1–23. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123408000409

Hysing, E., & Olsson, J. (2018). New political institutionalism. In E. Hysing & J. Olsson (Eds.), *Green inside activism for sustainable development* (pp. 23–45). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-56723-5_2

Leconte, C. (2015). From pathology to mainstream phenomenon: Reviewing the Euroscepticism debate in research and theory. *International Political Science Review/Revue internationale de science politique*, *36*(3), 250–263. http://doi.org/10.1177/0192512115576236

Lowndes, V., & Roberts, M. (2013). *Why institutions matter: The new institutionalism in political science*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Mahoney, J., & Rueschemeyer, D. (Eds.). (2003). *Comparative historical analysis in the social sciences*. Cambridge University Press.

Majone, G. (2005). *Dilemmas of European integration: The ambiguities and pitfalls of integration by stealth*. Oxford University Press.

Moravcsik, A. (2002). In defence of the 'democratic deficit': Reassessing legitimacy in the European Union. *Journal of Common Market Studies*, *40*(4), 603–624. https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-5965.00390

Morgan, G. (2005). *The idea of a European superstate: Public justification and European integration*. Princeton University Press.

Offe, C., & Preuss, U. K. (2006). The problem of legitimacy in the European polity: Is democratisation the answer? In C. Crouch & W. Streeck (Eds.), *The diversity of democracy: Corporatism, social order and political conflict* (pp. 175–204). Edward Elgar Publishing.

Patberg, M. (2017). A systematic justification for the EU's pouvoir constituant mixte: Principles of constitutional politics in supranational polities. *European Law Journal*, *23*(6), 441–453. https://doi.org/10.1111/eulj.12262

Peters, B. G. (2019). *Institutional theory in political science: The new institutionalism*. Edward Elgar Publishing.

Peterson, B. L. (2017). Thematic analysis/interpretive thematic analysis. In J. Matthes, C. S. Davis, & R. F. Potter (Eds.), *The international encyclopedia of communication research methods* (pp. 1–9). Wiley.

Pierson, P. (2000). Not just what, but when: Timing and sequence in political processes. *Studies in American Political Development*, *14*(1), 72–92. https://doi.org/10.1017/s0898588x00003011

Pittoors, G. (2023a, December 12). *The European Parliament and the European citizen as voter* [Briefing]. European Parliament. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_BRI(2023)757569

Pittoors, G. (2023b, June 7). *Political parties, voter mobilisation and the 1979 European elections* [Briefing]. European Parliament. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_BRI(2023)749769

Pittoors, G. (2024, February 26). *The European Parliament, its powers, and the 1979 European elections* [Briefing]. European Parliament. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_BRI(2024)759605

Reif, K., & Schmitt, H. (1980). Nine second-order national elections—A conceptual framework for the analysis of European election results. *European Journal of Political Research*, *8*(1), 3–44. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6765.1980.tb00737.x

Schimmelfennig, F. (2010). The normative origins of democracy in the European Union: Towards a transformationalist theory of democratisation. *European Political Science Review*, *2*(2), 211–233. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755773910000068

Sonnicksen, J. (2017). Democratising the separation of powers in EU government: The case for presidentialism. *European Law Journal*, *23*(6), 509–522. https://doi.org/10.1111/eulj.12264

Strøm, K. (2000). Delegation and accountability in parliamentary democracies. *European Journal of Political Research*, 37, 261–289. https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.00513

Thelen, K. (2000). Timing and temporality in the analysis of institutional evolution and change. *Studies in Amercian Political Development*, *14*, 101-108. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0898588X00213035

Van Gruisen, P., & Huysmans, M. (2020). The early warning system and policymaking in the European Union. *European Union Politics*, *21*(3), 451–473. https://doi.org/10.1177/1465116520923752
Wolfs, W. (2022). *European political parties and party finance reform: Funding democracy?* Palgrave Macmillan.

About the Authors

Jan Pieter Beetz (he/him) is an assistant professor in political theory and European integration at the Utrecht University School of Governance. His research focuses on democratic theories of the EU, legitimate action against democratic backsliding in member states, and the integration of empirical and normative reflection in political theory.

Gilles Pittoors (he/him) is a lecturer in political science at the University of Leuven. His research addresses questions of EU democracy from a multilevel and transnational (party) politics perspective, with particular attention to the Europeanisation of national democratic institutions and practices across EU Member States.

Wouter Wolfs (he/him) is a lecturer of European studies at the University of Leuven. His research focuses on the history of European integration, European democracy, interinstitutional relations in the EU, parliamentary capacity-building, political finance, and the organisation of European political parties.

Politics and Governance
2025 • Volume 13 • Article 10017
https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.10017

cogitatio

ARTICLE

Open Access Journal

Nested, Pooled, or Exclusively National? Contested Sovereignty Models in Debates on the Future of Europe

Magdalena Góra [1], Elodie Thevenin [1], and Katarzyna Zielińska [2]

[1] Institute of European Studies, Jagiellonian University, Poland
[2] Institute of Sociology, Jagiellonian University, Poland

Correspondence: Magdalena Góra (mm.gora@uj.edu.pl)

Submitted: 31 January 2025 **Accepted:** 3 June 2025 **Published:** 19 August 2025

Issue: This article is part of the issue "Debating Europe: Politicization, Contestation, and Democratization" edited by Claudia Wiesner (Fulda University of Applied Sciences) and Meta Novak (University of Ljubljana), fully open access at https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.i452

Abstract

The increasing electoral support for right-wing and far-right parties in Europe has brought the question of sovereignty back to the forefront of debates on European integration. These parties often challenge the transfer of national powers to the EU, making sovereignty a central point of contention. The main axis of the dispute on the shape and future of the EU lies between views calling for deeper integration and those advocating the protection of national competencies. Exemplified by the calls of French President Emmanuel Macron, the notion of "European sovereignty" contradicts sovereign claims centred on the preservation of national sovereignty and even on repatriating parts of national competencies back to member states. At the theoretical level, we reveal how the notion of sovereignty intersects with and transforms the existing constitutional democratic visions of the EU. This article focuses on how political actors contest the division of competencies in the EU. We analyse this by mapping how political actors use the notion(s) of sovereignty in their discourses on European integration. The plenary debates on the future of Europe from the national parliaments of Germany, France, and Poland serve as our empirical material. We conducted a qualitative analysis of 45 plenary debates from the German Bundestag, the French Assemblée nationale, and the Polish Sejm, from 2015 to 2021. This timeframe marks a key phase of intense debate and redefinition of the EU's future. Through our comparative analysis, we identified three models of sovereignty related to key constitutional visions of the EU and demonstrated how they are constructed and understood by partisan actors in the three countries and where the key controversies lie. We also show that politicians instrumentally use models of sovereignty corresponding to the domestic political dynamics.

Keywords

European Union; France; future of Europe; Germany; national parliaments; Poland; sovereignty

1. Introduction

The main axis of the debates on the EU's *finalité politique* lies between views calling for deepening integration within the Union and those advocating the protection of national competencies. The resulting proposals on how to steer the EU vary significantly, constituting a core dimension of contestation in European politics (Góra et al., in press). The key concept underlying the discussions on the nature of the European polity and its relationship to the nation–state is sovereignty, which demarcates the scope of political authority.

Despite becoming a buzzword of EU integration in recent years, the meanings of sovereignty are contested, and it is used for legitimising different positions on European integration. Sovereignty serves as an empty signifier—it allows political actors to fill it with a meaning that implies certain visions of European integration and to capture collective imaginaries. Therefore, untangling these competing meanings of sovereignty can serve as a key to analyse the current narratives on the EU's future. Against this context, the main aim of this article is to provide a comparative analysis of discursive articulations of sovereignty in the context of debates on the future of Europe in three key EU member states: Germany, France, and Poland. By locating the empirical analysis in national parliaments, we can observe how key political parties articulate sovereignty and where the conflictual lines lie.

The empirical material used for this article covers the period between 2015 and the early 2020s. This was a time of intensive discussions on sovereignty and its relations to EU integration, when major rearticulations of the European integration visions took place. President Emmanuel Macron's Sorbonne speech (on 26 September 2017), his notion of European sovereignty, and the heated discussion it triggered illustrate the case. The emergence of the concept of European strategic autonomy marks the end of the initial phase of the debate.

This article is structured in the following manner: Sections 2 and 3 present theoretical debates on sovereignty and elaborate an analytical approach for the analysis of sovereignty models in the context of the narratives on the future of European integration. This is followed by Section 4, which presents the position of national parliaments in our selected cases, an overview of the empirical material, and the way the research was conducted. In Sections 5, 6, and 7, we identify and analyse in a comparative manner the theoretical models of sovereignty in three parliaments, focusing on the party positions in each country underpinning the concrete visions.

2. From National to European? Understanding Sovereignty in the European Context

Sovereignty relates to the core internal and external powers of a state. As Bellamy defines it: "[S]overeignty implies being subject to no other authority at home and the equal of other sovereigns abroad" (Bellamy, 2019, p. 74). The notion and its meaning have been debated for centuries and intertwined with nation, independence, and nationalism. As it frequently symbolises exclusive national identity formation patterns, it is specifically relevant in the vocabulary of nationalists, nativists, and Eurosceptics, even if its meaning often remains ambiguous (Borriello & Brack, 2019; Brack et al., 2019; Fabbrini & Zgaga, 2024; Góra & Zielińska, 2024).

Domestically, sovereignty is understood as the supreme authority of a polity that indicates an ability to control the Weberian trio of people, territory, and borders. The key dynamic of competing visions on sovereignty in contemporary Europe is between those promoting the zero-sum exclusivist vision of sovereignty in the Bodinian sense and those who perceive it as a commodity to be shared and pooled, especially in the deeply interdependent reality of late globalisation. Hence, domestically, sovereignty has become a key currency of the new Rokkanian cleavage between communitarianism and cosmopolitanism (De Wilde et al., 2019; Zürn & De Wilde, 2016). It speaks to the previously known divide, the so-called "sovereignty dimension" (Hutter et al., 2016) that demarcates supranationalists from more nationalistic views on the course of further integration. With the rise of populists, scholars also noted new calls for popular or parliamentary sovereignty (Borriello & Brack, 2019).

Externally, sovereignty means that there is no power above the sovereign entity—it is equal to other sovereign units. In a globalised world, however, such an ideal is essentially unachievable. International organisations, primarily the EU, are developing features that pool sovereignty from the member states and create a political system that competes with nation–states in terms of their competencies. Pooled sovereignty at the supranational level has created a novel theoretical challenge of how it can coincide with the established meaning of (national) sovereignty understood in indivisible terms (Fossum et al., 2020).

The notion of European sovereignty illustrates a key attempt to address this challenge and develop the concept of supranational sovereignty and European strategic culture. The proposal resonated in the EU and provoked intensive debate (Roch & Oleart, 2024). Nonetheless, scholars note that this concept is contested and has a blurred definition, linked primarily to strategic autonomy understood as a means to achieve European sovereignty, and to a fully fledged power Europe (Dumoulin, 2020; Lefebvre & Simon, 2021). The concept has already entered the official EU discourse (European Commission, 2021) and scholars are measuring how it is used to legitimise the EU project against populist right-wing sovereignism (Roch & Oleart, 2024).

3. Sovereignty and the Constitutional–Democratic Visions of the EU

The current debate on the future of Europe as pursued by partisan actors tends to follow the main distinctive visions of European integration: federal, intergovernmental, and sovereignist (Bellamy, 2019; Eriksen & Fossum, 2012; Fabbrini, 2019; Fossum, 2021). The federal model foresees the creation over time of a system with a division of powers, with a clear separation between executive and legislative powers at the supranational level. The EU will not only develop a single and coherent decision-making system, but also possess autonomous budgetary and fiscal power. It will have separate sovereignty accommodated with member states' sovereignty (Fossum, 2021). Accordingly, the ultimate feature of this model is that the EU decides how to divide competences between national and European levels. The idea of shifting sovereignty to a higher level of a larger unit is functionally motivated, as its proponents see it as a functional response to globalisation and growing interdependence. Sovereignty intrinsically links with the populace, which serves as a sovereign in democratic systems. Hence, the complication for this European distinctive federal sovereignty is (so far) a lack of (and remote prospects for creation of) a European nation or people defined as "possessing the capacity to deliberate in a public way about the public interest" (Bellamy, 2019, p. 84). Drawing an analogy with studies on collective identification in the EU (Checkel & Katzenstein, 2009; Góra & Zielińska, 2019; Risse, 2010), the model of sovereignty that we derived from the federal vision of European

integration is not zero-sum European sovereignty, but rather a model of multilevel sovereignty where the national component is nested in European sovereignty, that we named "nested (European) sovereignty." Its main characteristic is that the EU obtains sovereignty from member states as a distinctive unit, but not at their complete expense. It is rather a dynamic model that indicates the direction of change of continuous pooling of sovereignty to the EU, at the same time limiting the national reservoir. The choice of the areas of governance in which sovereignty is to be relocated to the EU level is often based on functional needs. It is guided by the principle of subsidiarity, aiming to deliver solutions that cannot be effectively achieved at a lower level of governance.

On the other hand, republican intergovernmentalism stresses the central role of member states in the EU integration and polity, with the EU as:

> A republican association of sovereign states that is designed to overcome the possibility for their mutual domination while providing a mechanism for their securing certain global goods and avoiding various global bads, not least through their reciprocal recognition of rights to citizenship. (Bellamy, 2019, p. 72)

Member states are vessels carrying sovereignty and in control of all functions in a given territory. Moreover, within that narrative, the key notion is that democracy is based on popular sovereignty, which is embodied by national structures and strongly advocates safeguarding national democracy. The EU, by contrast, can develop its competencies, but its actions need to be clearly indicated in the treaties of which member states are masters and determiners. Legitimacy is vested in the states, which may delegate it to the EU.

A model that has acquired prominence recently is a sovereignist vision deriving from the intergovernmental position but putting national sovereignty and its defence at its heart (Fabbrini & Zgaga, 2024). Contemporary sovereignists preach "a holy alliance between nationalism and populism" (Fabbrini, 2019, p. 62) and, therefore, "new sovereignism refers to the belief in the primacy of the nation-state, governed according to the principle of popular sovereignty, over inter—and supranational governance structures and the 'transnational' sphere of economic and social activity" (De Spiegeleire et al., 2017, p. 34). For sovereignists, in contrast to republican intergovernmentalism, sovereignty is not a feature of the national democratic origin of European integration, but it is a key asset that should be promoted against supranational enemies. It is clearly an "exclusively national sovereignty" model.

The key element differentiating republican intergovernmentalism from sovereignism is the approach to the consequences of the way sovereignty is constructed in the context of European integration. Sovereignism assumes only zero-sum national sovereignty that is primarily exclusive and accepts sharing sovereignty to very limited (mostly economic) areas. Similarly to identity, sovereignty can be vested in one vessel—the nation–state (Checkel & Katzenstein, 2009). However, Bellamy's (2019) republican component nuances this set-up into a more positive-sum segmented sovereignty approach. The model that we refer to as "pooled sovereignty" assumes that there is:

> A double form of delegation, whereby citizens exercising popular sovereignty at the domestic level delegate their respective representatives to make agreements with each other at the inter-polity level, including delegating and devolving authority upwards to appropriate regulatory bodies, so long as these remain under their joint and equal control. (Bellamy, 2019, p. 90)

In this model, pooling sovereignty is possible (similarly to models of collective identification where national and European elements coexist), but needs to be authorised by states which cede it not to another entity but to a common unit that they build and govern. This model mostly assumes that it is desirable to pool sovereignty, but the scope/extent of this pooling depends on the policy areas. Table 1 below summarises the different sovereignty models with their specific characteristics, used as indicators of discursive practices.

Table 1. Conceptualisation of sovereignty models in constitutional-democratic visions of the EU.

	Constitutional–democratic visions of the EU	Key indicators of discursive practices
Nested (European) sovereignty	Federal(ising) Union	• The EU can develop sovereignty independently from member states (in time); • Assumes ceding sovereignty to the EU by member states (even if only in certain areas); • European sovereignty embraces national sovereignty and strengthens it; • In some instances, the EU can be sovereign at the (almost complete) expense of member states.
Pooled sovereignty	Republican intergovernmentalism	• Member states cede sovereignty to a common unit in which they all participate directly; • Pooling is accepted in some areas (functional) and is less likely in core state competences; • Restricted areas where sovereignty is pooled and guided by subsidiarity; • Member states and their institutions control common units (i.e., national parliaments and governments).
Exclusively national sovereignty	Sovereignist intergovernmentalism (focusing on economic integration)	• Nation–state as the sole possessor of sovereignty; • Sharing sovereignty is either limited and reversible or rejected; • Demands to repatriate competences back to the nation–state (specifically from the European Commission in areas other than the economy).

The presented models of sovereignty are derived from broader theoretical frameworks that demonstrate the possible paths of development of different scenarios for European integration. We argue that focusing on sovereignty helps to capture the internal reconfiguration of power, institutional settings, divisions of competences, and rearticulation of legitimacy that are entangled in such frameworks. In the following sections, we test that claim. By analysing how different models of sovereignty are articulated by political actors in different national settings and how they link with the broader models of European integration, we test the usefulness of these models. Additionally, we aim to capture the rearticulations of visions of the future of European integration and democracy during the intensive debates on the future of the EU. The empirical findings presented in the following parts of this article help to nuance the necessary rendering of the models of sovereignty and map the key tensions as visible in political discourse.

4. Methodological Remarks

Recent scholarship stresses the significance of contestation (conflicts over meanings) of key concepts ordering our contemporary democratic systems. The contestation takes the form of "conceptual flipsiding" that involves "the strategic reversal of notions" embedded with a specific system of meaning and reversing it, as documented by Krzyżanowski and Krzyżanowska (2024) in the case of constructing illiberal imagination. The strategy of flipsiding is used to reconceptualise and normalise new understandings of key political concepts. Following such logic, our study focuses on identifying the partisan actors in the selected parliaments who use the concept of sovereignty, what meanings it is associated with and how it links and/or modifies constitutional-democratic visions of the EU.

The research focus on parliamentarian arenas that we treat as "discursive fields" (Keller, 2011), "social arenas constituted around contested issues, truth claims, and problematisations, in which discourses compete with one another, attempting to impose the dominant interpretation of an issue in question" (Góra & Zielińska, 2019, p. 339). The transcripts of plenary debates collected in the lower chambers of the parliaments—the German Bundestag, the French Assemblée nationale, and the Polish Sejm—serve as our empirical materials. The focus on national parliaments results from their growing role in European integration. They hold oversight functions but also provide an important venue for deliberation on EU policies (De Wilde & Raunio, 2018) and play the role of informing citizens on policy issues (Auel & Raunio, 2014, p. 13). All three countries belong to the EU's "Big Five" in terms of population. However, they follow different dynamics regarding the current debate on the future of Europe. Germany's role in the EU has become more critical with the succession of crises the EU has faced, but in the analysed period also witnessed the growth of the radical right-wing party, Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), which contested the foundations of Germany's European stance. Considered an "indispensable policy broker," Germany and its strong economy have increasingly been able to set a vision for the EU (Krotz & Maher, 2016, p. 1055). With the election of the Euro-enthusiastic French President Emmanuel Macron in 2017, France expanded its leadership role in the EU, pushing for deeper integration in several policy areas, notably defence. The European security and defence policy has long been the core of discussions on the prospects of deepening European integration. Germany's position on this matter remains ambivalent: while retaining a position of "good European" aiming at strengthening European integration, its commitment to European defence remains mostly symbolic (Bunde, 2021, p. 255), despite the challenges of taming the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine. In spite of this slight divergence, the close cooperation between France and Germany has operated as a push towards more integration in the EU. Poland, on the other hand, is a newer member state. It shifted in 2015 from the position of a poster child of EU enlargement and a success story of democratisation to an EU challenger ruled by right-wing and Eurosceptic parties. Moreover, growing illiberal tendencies and strong Euroscepticism in Poland coexisted until 2023 with high support for European integration, making an interesting case for studying how political actors were using sovereignty to justify their political choices.

A total of 45 parliamentary debates in the three parliaments were selected from 2015 to 2021. We established a specific protocol for selecting debates across the three national contexts. To have an overview of the discussion on the EU in national parliaments, we collected debates related to the future of Europe and diverse (institutional) reforms requested by MPs. Furthermore, we also selected debates on specific issues and crises touching upon the EU's future integration, i.e., Eurozone and migration (see Table 2). We pinpointed key European events and Council meetings related to integration issues and, based on this, we

primarily selected discussions following governments' information on EU affairs (see the list of selected debates in Annex 1 in the Supplementary File). Hence, despite differences as to how these themes were debated in the respective parliaments, the selection makes comparison possible. Once debates were selected, we used a set of keywords, identified in the pilot study and based on a review of the literature on the subject matter (see Annex 2 in the Supplementary File), to pinpoint the discursive events actualising the discourses on sovereignty. Our main units of analysis are individual speeches by MPs, which we treat as articulations of discourse on European integration. All identified speeches were described with variables specifying the party affiliations and manually coded with a codebook derived from the models presented in the Section 3. The qualitative analysis of the coded fragments allowed us to identify how sovereignty is discursively constructed in the debates on the future of Europe in the three parliaments in question and how it relates to the discussed models of European integration. To illustrate the specific models and the key tensions, we provided the quotes that were most representative of the observed patterns of discursive constructions.

Table 2. Overview of analysed empirical material in three parliaments (2015–2021).

	French Assemblée nationale	German Bundestag	Polish Sejm
Number of debates	16	16	13
• Future of Europe	6	6	6
• Migration	5	5	6
• Eurozone	5	5	1
Number of speeches by MPs	500	200	252
Number of analysed speeches identified by keywords	344	180	141

Notes: We exclude speeches related to technical interventions in organising the plenary. The analysed speeches include only speeches that contain one or more of the selected keywords (see Annex 2 in the Supplementary File). The parliamentary debates also include speeches of executive actors; however, our analysis only covered the speeches by MPs.

The existing research reveals that partisan divisions are crucial in promoting models of sovereignty and related constitutional–democratic visions of the EU. The ideological divisions of left and right, as well as positions on the pro- and anti-European scale, determine political parties' stances in such debates (Leruth & Lord, 2015). Against this background, we expect parties favouring European integration to advocate for more EU competencies. Hence, such parties will be more likely to extend the meaning of the concept of sovereignty (i.e., nested or pooled model) to justify European integration and reconfiguration of power relations between supranational and national levels. On the contrary, Eurosceptic parties would rather stick to an exclusively national sovereignty and, therefore, advocate for repatriation of national competencies or keep the current EU institutional status quo. In addition, we assume that the pooled model is useful for parties in government as it allows them, through a mechanism of restricted areas of pooling sovereignty, to argue for the advancement of European integration while claiming at the same time that national sovereignty is protected. We are aware that individual MPs' speeches are not always identical to the party positions. However, for our research aims, analysing the individual articulations of sovereignty in relation to European integration was crucial both for identifying the patterns and for exploring and understanding the possible tensions that exist in partisan discourse on sovereignty.

These assumptions are strengthened by the observed dynamics of the debates on sovereignty in our case studies. Scholars note a renewed discussion about sovereignty on the French political scene in the context of

the Covid-19 pandemic, where all parties and even trade unions mention and interpret sovereignty in different ways (Andréani, 2020). In Germany, traditionally, we observe a complicated relationship with the notion of sovereignty, not in the Grundgesetz but mostly developed through jurisprudence (Bieber, 2013). In Poland, due to historical developments, sovereignty is rather sacrosanct, and any idea of sharing it is perceived by many as a political cost of European integration (Góra & Mach, 2010).

5. Nested (European) Sovereignty: Unclear Meanings and Rare Proponents

In reference to Macron's Sorbonne speech, the concept of European sovereignty was extensively debated in the Assemblée nationale. While during Macron's address, this concept was developed alongside six core elements, European sovereignty was only broadly defined in French parliamentary debates. Seen as a "complementarity between what belongs to the nation and what belongs to Europe" (N. Loiseau, 2017–11-27; all citations from MPs' contributions are drawn from the debates selected for analysis and the list of these debates is provided in Annex 1 of the Supplementary File), European sovereignty—as framed especially by MPs from the governing La République En Marche! (REM) party—bridged national and European interests. Therefore, national and European sovereignty were not seen as conflicting, but rather as supporting each other. The concept of European sovereignty as framed by REM MPs and government representatives included an inside and outside EU perspective, i.e., the protection of the EU and its citizens, as well as the EU's capacity to act on the global stage:

> This sovereign Europe is itself based on three conditions: the unity of Europe, the protection of its citizens and its interests, and what I call the projection capacity of the European Union, that is to say its capacity to act as a global player, to really weigh on international issues and to disseminate its model and its values. (J.-Y. Le Drian, 2017–10-10)

A sovereign EU consequently implied European interests to be protected and a European citizenry. These two core elements were deemed non-existent by the parliamentary opposition, which criticised the concept of European sovereignty.

Some nuances of this nested (European) sovereignty can be detected in the MPs' discourse, especially on the prioritisation and weight given to the two types of sovereignty. On the one hand, several MPs highlighted the shared links and reciprocity between national and European sovereignty in the prospect of contributing to strengthening the EU. The EU's (perceived) role, power, and capacity in the global arena were considered as important elements of European sovereignty, in the aim of building a:

> Geopolitical unit which inspires the world in both respect for the law and the authority of the power; a Europe which protects as much as a Europe which exchanges, a Europe which shines as much as a Europe which trades, a Europe of realities as much as a Europe of principles. (J.-L. Bourlanges, 2017–10-10)

On the other hand, several MPs depicted European sovereignty as contributing to the nation–state's power and protection of interests. The EU and its subsequent yet-to-be-implemented European sovereignty were thus rather perceived as a booster to promote and protect EU member states' interests in a nested way:

> The sovereignty of France today passes through that of Europe. This sovereignty, which is the opposite of an identarian withdrawal, is a concrete, real notion that allows our country to be heard by the great world powers. Today, it cannot be conceived outside the European Union. (J.-F. Mbaye, 2018–04-18)

Hence, although the term coined by Macron, "European sovereignty," was present in French debates, its meaning and implications remained vague in several MPs' speeches, sometimes blending elements of both the nested and pooled sovereignty models.

A comparable conception of European sovereignty was not detected in German parliamentary debates. MPs indeed tended to always specify particular policy areas in which sovereignty might be shared—characteristic of the pooled sovereignty model. Nonetheless, AfD MPs criticised Macron's idea of European sovereignty and his vision of Europe where "Germany pays, France decides" (N. Kleinwächter, 2019–01-17).

The conceptualisation of national sovereignty as nested in the European one occurred in the debates in the Polish parliament triggered by the increased politicisation of European affairs on the Polish political scene. Such views were mostly represented by MPs from liberal and pro-European parties, e.g., Platforma Obywatelska (PO) and Nowoczesna. However, similarly to the German case, the proponents rarely referred to "European sovereignty." In addition, they often mixed the nested and pooled sovereignty models—both shared between national and European, but lacking detail as to whether the sharing is limited to restricted areas (as in the pooled model) or is nested within European sovereignty. They conceptualised the EU as a solidarity union, composed of states overcoming their particularistic national interests. Belonging to such a union constitutes a condition for sustaining Poland's sovereignty and for fulfilling its national interests. Such views also envisaged a desired position of Poland within the EU—actively involved in EU issues, responsible for shaping the bloc's agenda and policies as well as taking responsibility for the future of the community—"One cannot be an EU member selectively" (M. Golbik, 2016–12-01). Such involvement and central position were seen as a guarantee of the reflection of Polish interests in the broader EU agenda and as offering Poland a better and more powerful position, achievable only through "shared sovereignty":

> We gained a historic opportunity to place Poland in the centre of Europe, so Poland could decide on Europe's future, be one of the main European players…..There is a shared sovereignty in Europe. As long as we are in this Union, at any moment we can decide if we are in the middle or not, we can entrust certain competences to European institutions, by common decisions. We have it guaranteed in our Constitution, and we did it by accepting this arrangement in our decision about accession to the EU. (M. Święcicki, 2017–03-23)

The framing of national sovereignty as being strengthened by embedding it within European sovereignty was prompted by the politics of the Zjednoczona Prawica (ZP) government—a political alliance of the Polish right-wing and conservative parties Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (PiS), Solidarna Polska, and Porozumienie in power from 2015 to 2023. This alliance was perceived by liberal MPs as contributing to the marginalisation of Poland's position in the EU and was framed as a threat to national sovereignty. The concept of nested (European) sovereignty is articulated in a way that, for its proponents, strengthens national sovereignty, locating it within the broader and stronger unit. In such discursive articulations, there is a specific conceptual flipside that assures the protection of national sovereignty by inserting it in the broader unit rather than diluting it.

6. Pooled Sovereignty: A Solution to Political Problems

While "European sovereignty" was used and discussed at length in the French parliament, German MPs were more sparing in their use of the term "sovereignty." References to some sort of supranational sovereignty were found in a more implicit form. Supranational sovereignty as discussed by German MPs in the Bundestag also took a different shape and (institutional) arrangement from the nested (European) sovereignty debated in the Assemblée nationale, and to some extent in the Sejm. Supranational sovereignty was mostly supported by the ruling coalition, made up of the Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands/Christlich-Soziale Union in Bayern (CDU/CSU) and the Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (SPD) parties. While supranational authority and sovereignty were considered as needed, the extent and area of this supranational sovereignty were, nonetheless, restricted, clearly following the pooled model. MPs from the governing coalition were in favour, especially of strengthening European integration in those restricted policy areas that would be profitable for national interests:

> Rather, we need an attractive Europe that people run into out of hope and conviction, a Europe that has concrete benefits. The abolition of national sovereignty alone cannot be that benefit. Rather, it must be a Europe that continues to ensure peace and freedom on the continent, that ensures prosperity for the majority of the people and, above all, ensures the security of our citizens. (F. Hahn, 2017–12-12)

Subsidiarity is mentioned on several occasions and perceived as key for the (future) functioning of the EU (e.g., T. Frei, 2016–04-28). Defence, migration, and the Economic Monetary Union (EMU) were in this respect regarded as areas where sovereignty can be shared, as it goes beyond the nation–state, exemplifying the "need to articulate several levels of sovereignty": "More than ever, we need to come together to talk about a political Europe, a Europe of solidarity or a Europe of defence, and to put these ideas into practice" (Y. Favennec-Bécot, 2021–03-03). Nevertheless, defence and security policy triggered a heated discussion in the Bundestag, exemplifying Germany's ambivalent position towards European defence (Bunde, 2021). The debate on security and defence policy also reflected a conflictual conception of Germany's global role. MPs from the governing coalition and parliamentary majority pictured Germany as a great player in Europe and on the global stage more generally. Nonetheless, this vision of a powerful and militarised Germany is not supported by all MPs, especially from the fringe political parties. Die Linke opposed the development of a Defence Union, regarded as "a Europe of war and armaments" (H. Hänsel, 2017–12-12). Critical of France's military operations in Africa, the AfD also opposed deepening cooperation on security and military matters (R. Lucassen, 2017–12-12).

All reflections on supranational—as well as European—sovereignty in the Bundestag and the Assemblée nationale depicted the Franco-German cooperation as central to the future of Europe. This increased cooperation between France and Germany was therefore seen as a driver of deepening EU integration, although the views on supranational sovereignty differed slightly from nested to pooled in specific policy areas. The close cooperation between the two neighbouring countries triggered contestation from fringe parties, especially the AfD and La France Insoumise (FI). In the wake of the Aachen Treaty and the establishment of the Franco-German Parliamentary Assembly, the bilateral cooperation was indeed considered too deep, endangering national interests and autonomy:

> It has always been the line of our party [AfD] that we do not want to interfere in the internal affairs of other countries, but we are dealing with a partner [France] with whom the government not only wants to deepen cooperation, but with whom it wants to become practically one. (A. Gauland, 2019–01-17)

In the Sejm, the references to pooled sovereignty occurred mostly in the speeches of MPs from ZP, then-ruling coalition. They emerged especially in the debates about the future of Europe, but we also traced references to this model in the debates on migration. In the MPs' interventions, the involvement of EU institutions (especially the European Commission) in certain areas was often criticised as threatening national sovereignty (which is more in line with exclusivist national sovereignty, demanding repatriation of competences back to nation-states). At the same time, they demanded more EU involvement in other areas, i.e., security issues and the internal market. The latter was clearly visible during the migration crisis, when proposed mechanisms of refugee relocation among EU member states or quotas stirred very negative reactions and accusations of the EU breaching the sovereignty principle or challenging subsidiarity rules. The former, the acceptance of EU responsibility/leading role in certain policy areas, occurred in the debates on the future of Europe, especially in references to the security issues and global challenges, but also in discussions on the internal market. This clearly demonstrates the conflicts between the pooled model, useful for ensuring some of the national interest, and the ideological (populist) stance of the party, positioning itself as the protector of national sovereignty. In addition, in contrast to the debates in the Bundestag and Assemblée nationale, in the Polish parliament, the acceptance of the EU's leading role in particular policies was relayed and built on national sovereignty. Hence, the then-ruling party MPs expressed a very pragmatic approach. While accepting the leading role of the EU in certain policy areas, they also emphasised the sovereignty of nation-states and their primary role in overseeing the EU. This also shows that political actors strategically refer to contrasting models of sovereignty when they see it as useful for their political gains.

7. Exclusively National Sovereignty: A Populist Ideal

In the French parliament, references strictly to national sovereignty were especially made by MPs from conservative and right-wing political parties, e.g., Rassemblement national (RN), Les Républicains (LR), and Debout la France (DLF). This stress on national sovereignty generally went hand in hand with a critique of the EU and of the supranational sovereignty established at the European level:

> [Y]es, we are European, but we will never accept that European integration is done to the detriment of the peoples, by accepting a stronger federalism in which the only future proposed would be that of the dilution of the prerogatives of the states and therefore of their sovereignty. (P. Dumont, 2017–10-10)

Supranational sovereignty was, in this respect, seen as diminishing national sovereignty and conflicting with the protection of national interests. The EU in this regard was regarded as a "prison European Union, which hinders the freedom of countries and which, for its part, is almost exclusively at the service of an ideology: ultraliberal globalism" (M. Le Pen, 2018–02-13). A return to exclusive sovereignty at the nation-state level was therefore called for.

Similar criticism of supranational sovereignty can be observed in the German parliament, especially from AfD MPs: "this autonomy [over budgetary matters] is an inalienable core element of our national sovereignty" (P. Boehringer, 2121–02-25). While explicit references to national sovereignty were limited in

the Bundestag, AfD MPs made numerous references to the protection of national interests. They contested decisions taken at the supranational level, which were seen as endangering Germany's interests: "Of course, we share a common set of values with our European neighbours. But that does not replace national interests" (A. Gauland, 2018–06-28).

In the Sejm, references to exclusively national sovereignty occurred almost solely in the contributions of MPs from the far-right Ruch Narodowy (RN). Such references emerged especially in the context of the debates on migration, and to a lesser extent in those on the future of Europe. RN MP Winnicki referred to the EU as a "super state" that strips nation–states of their sovereignty. He therefore expressed his hope that the EU would disintegrate soon as a result of the political success of nationalistic forces in various EU member states (R. Winnicki, 2016–09-02). Sovereignty was also defined in cultural terms. The EU, because of its proposed policies, including relocation of migrants, was presented as a threat to a state or nation's cultural integrity by representatives of the Ruch Narodowy as well as MPs from the ZP. For these actors, assigning an indivisible and sacrosanct character to national sovereignty allowed them to expand the strong Eurosceptic positions without denouncing European integration.

8. Conclusions

This article has argued that the notion of sovereignty is a useful resource for partisan actors to envision the future of the EU as well as to protect their political agenda. In the nested (European) sovereignty model as it occurred in the analysed debates, national sovereignty does not disappear, nor is it located in any specific policy field. It rests on the assumption that all nation–states in the EU mutually benefit. This is a way in which the federalised vision of European integration accommodates the potential conflict between the European and national levels. Furthermore, such European belonging was seen as reinforcing the various dimensions on which national sovereignty rests, i.e., values, identities, borders, democracy, and the rule of law. The nested sovereignty model was widely debated in France following Macron's initiative, demonstrating a certain disposition toward federal solutions. Nonetheless, while the concept attracted the support of French liberal-centrist MPs (REM and Mouvement démocrate [MD]), the somewhat blurred definition and undefined paths towards concrete implementation were criticised by parties from the opposition on both sides of the political spectrum. In Germany, the model was rather absent, and if mentioned, it was by actors rejecting such an idea. The key proponents of European integration, such as CDU/CSU and SPD, were much more inclined to use the pooled model. In contrast to the French case, where the references to this model of sovereignty aimed at opening a new discussion on the future of the EU, in the Polish case, the nested sovereignty model mostly seemed to serve the internal political dynamics and the politicisation of the EU in the domestic context. It was used to criticise the ruling ZP coalition (2015–2023) for its Eurosceptic views.

The pooled model of sovereignty was favoured by partisan actors in all three analysed contexts and by ideologically diverse parties. In the German and Polish context, this model was invoked by the then-ruling parties as it is useful for arguing for cooperation in selected areas within the EU, while at the same time allowing an indication of some extent of protection for national sovereignty. German MPs distinctly mentioned different policy areas in which supranational pooled sovereignty was seen as beneficial or, in some cases, necessary. Pooled sovereignty was thus limited to issues that cannot be dealt with at the EU member-state level alone, notably in the areas of defence and security, migration policy, and within the

EMU. Similarly, for French MPs, the pooled model was mostly seen as a way to have a stronger voice in the international arena (notably in diplomatic and defence matters), while keeping a firm grip on national affairs without EU interference. The references to pooled sovereignty in the Polish Sejm demonstrate how the ZP needed to present itself as pro-EU and at the same time accommodating its Eurosceptic stance, in that way responding to both the divergences within the coalition as well as different constituencies. They thus made extensive use of the sovereignty argument, but attempted to add to this a European dimension, controlled and shaped by EU member states. However, this was clearly an instrumental way of approaching sovereignty, specifically as some prominent PiS politicians were evidently radicalising discourse on the EU and sovereignty after they moved to the opposition in 2023.

The exclusively national model of sovereignty was advocated in all three contexts by far-right populist parties. It was built on presenting the supranational pooling of sovereignty (even in limited areas) as an unavoidable threat to national sovereignty that is of ultimate value. For these actors, stressing the indivisible and sacrosanct character of national sovereignty was strategically used to solidify the strongly Eurosceptic position (previously Euroreject) without entirely denouncing European integration, a position that many of these partisan actors were struggling to achieve after Brexit. This strategy was characteristic of a sovereignist vision of the EU.

This article has contributed to the literature on European integration and sovereignty by mapping how sovereignty centres the discussions on the development of the EU polity and how political actors choose certain models of sovereignty according to their strategic needs in domestic contexts. Pro-European parties—as expected—favoured both the nested and pooled model, and the more Eurosceptic the party, the more likely it was to refer to the exclusively national model. Interestingly, while liberal and centrist parties opted for nested and pooled models, leftist parties were either less vocal on these issues (the Polish case) or rather supported other dimensions of sovereignty, such as popular sovereignty (specifically French leftist parties). Ultimately, the parties in government—even if Eurosceptic and right-wing, such as the Polish ZP—argued strategically for a pooled model, allowing them to cast themselves as protectors of national sovereignty. However, at the same time, they accept the pooling of sovereignty in specific areas (mostly justified by security arguments). Therefore, the conceptual flipsiding of the notion of sovereignty, its (re)configuration with broader ideas about the future of European integration, and the power relations between national and supranational levels and institutions serve as a useful tool to manoeuvre between the demands of the constituencies and the need to legitimise the party's agenda.

Funding

This article is based on empirical data gathered within the EU3D. *Differentiation. Dominance. Democracy* project funded by the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement no. 822419 (2019–2023). The article was supported by the Future Democracy Lab, a flagship project of the Priority Research Area "Society of the Future," under the programme "Excellence Initiative—Research University" at the Jagiellonian University in Kraków.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The data supporting the findings of this study are available upon request to the corresponding author.

Supplementary Material

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

References

Andréani, G. (2020, June 12). Vous avez dit souveraineté? *Telos*. https://www.telos-eu.com/fr/politique-francaise-et-internationale/vous-avez-dit-souverainete.html?fbclid=IwAR1Ti23xdr8mfgMY2mp8cPas63xmsCzOIo2l9sPZB-Ki2ED9yBtEH-w_lAQ

Auel, K., & Raunio, T. (2014). Debating the state of the Union? Comparing parliamentary debates on EU issues in Finland, France, Germany and the United Kingdom. *The Journal of Legislative Studies*, *20*(1), 13–28. https://doi.org/10.1080/13572334.2013.871482

Bellamy, R. (2019). *A republican Europe of states. Cosmopolitanism, intergovernmentalism and democracy in the EU*. Cambridge University Press.

Bieber, R. (2013). La perception allemande de la notion de souveraineté. *L'Europe en Formation*, *368*, 61–77. https://doi.org/10.3917/eufor.368.0061

Borriello, A., & Brack, N. (2019). "I want my sovereignty back!" A comparative analysis of the populist discourses of Podemos, the 5 Star Movement, the FN and UKIP during the economic and migration crises. *Journal of European Integration*, *41*(7), 833–853. https://doi.org/10.1080/07036337.2019.1665658

Brack, N., Coman, R., & Crespy, A. (2019). Unpacking old and new conflicts of sovereignty in the European polity. *Journal of European Integration*, *41*(7), 817–832. https://doi.org/10.1080/07036337.2019.1665657

Bunde, T. (2021). Defending European integration by (symbolically) integrating European defence? Germany and its ambivalent role in European security and defence policy. *Journal of European Integration*, *43*(2), 243–259. https://doi.org/10.1080/07036337.2021.1877693

Checkel, J. T., & Katzenstein, P. J. (Eds.). (2009). *European identity*. Cambridge University Press.

De Spiegeleire, S., Skinner, C., & Sweijs, T. (2017). *The rise of populist sovereignism: What it is, where it comes from, and what it means for international security and defense*. Hague Centre for Strategic Studies. https://hcss.nl/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/The-rise-of-Popular-Sovereignism-what-it-is-where-it-comes-from-and-what-it-means-for-international-security-and-defense.pdf

De Wilde, P., & Raunio, T. (2018). Redirecting national parliaments: Setting priorities for involvement in EU affairs. *Comparative European Politics*, *16*, 310–329. https://doi.org/10.1057/cep.2015.28

De Wilde, P., Koopmans, R., Merkel, W., Strijbis, O., & Zürn, M. (Eds.). (2019). *The struggle over borders: Cosmopolitanism and communitarianism*. Cambridge University Press.

Dumoulin, A. (2020). Souveraineté et autonomie stratégique européenne: Une quête difficile. *Revue Défence Nationale*, *1211*, 1–7.

Eriksen, E. O., & Fossum, J. E. (2012). *Rethinking democracy and the European Union*. Routledge.

European Commission. (2021). *Horizon Europe strategic plan 2021—2024*. https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/research_and_innovation/funding/documents/ec_rtd_horizon-europe-strategic-plan-2021-24.pdf

Fabbrini, S. (2019). *Europe's future: Decoupling and reforming*. Cambridge University Press.

Fabbrini, S., & Zgaga, T. (2024). Right-wing sovereignism in the European Union: Definition, features and implications. *Journal of Common Market Studies*, *62*(2), 341–359. https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.13497

Fossum, J. E. (2021). *EU constitutional models in 3D: Differentiation, dominance and democracy* (EU3D research paper 15). EU3D. https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3900382

Fossum, J. E., Garcia Quesada, M., & Zgaga, T. (2020). *The EU's non-members: The key principles, underlying*

logic(s) and types of affiliation for EU non-members, including post-Brexit UK (EU3D report 1). EU3D. https://www.eu3d.uio.no/publications/eu3d-reports/eu3d-report-1-20.html

Góra, M., & Mach, Z. (2010). Between old fears and new challenges: The Polish debate on Europe. In K. Nicolaïdis & J. Lacroix (Eds), *European stories: Intellectual debates on Europe in national contexts* (pp. 221–240). Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199594627.003.0012

Góra, M., & Zielińska, K. (2019). Competing visions: Discursive articulations of Polish and European identity after the Eastern Enlargement of the EU. *East European Politics and Societies: And Cultures*, *33*(2), 331–356. https://doi.org/10.1177/0888325418791021

Góra, M., & Zielińska, K. (2024). The role of religion in sovereignist narratives of European integration: Symbolic thickening and identity marking. *East European Politics*, *40*(2), 197–218. https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2023.2225030

Góra, M., Thevenin, E., & Zielińska, K. (in press). *Political Actors' Narratives on the Reforms of the European Union: Future Visions of Europe?* Routledge.

Hutter, S., Grande, E., & Kriesi, H. (2016). (Eds.). *Politicising Europe: Integration and mass politics*. Cambridge University Press.

Keller, R. (2011). The sociology of knowledge approach to discourse (SKAD). *Human Studies*, *34*(1), 43–65. https://doi.org/10.1007/S10746-011-9175-Z

Krotz, U., & Maher, R. (2016). Europe's crises and the EU's 'big three.' *West European Politics*, *39*(5), 1053–1072. https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2016.1181872

Krzyżanowski, M., & Krzyżanowska, N. (2024). Conceptual flipsiding in/and illiberal imagination: Towards a discourse-conceptual analysis. *The Journal of Illiberalism Studies*, *4*(2), 33–46. https://doi.org/10.53483/XCPU3574

Lefebvre, M., & Simon, É. (2021). L'autonomie stratégique européenne, nouveau projet commun ? *Revue internationale et stratégique*, *122*, 95–103. https://doi.org/10.3917/ris.122.0095

Leruth, B., & Lord, C. (2015). Differentiated integration in the European Union: A concept, a process, a system or a theory? *Journal of European Public Policy*, *22*(6), 754–763. https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2015.1021196

Risse, T. (2010). *A community of Europeans?: Transnational identities and public spheres*. Cornell University Press.

Roch, J., & Oleart, A. (2024). How 'European sovereignty' became mainstream: The geopoliticisation of the EU's 'sovereign turn' by pro-EU executive actors. *Journal of European Integration*, *46*(4), 545–565. https://doi.org/10.1080/07036337.2024.2326831

Zürn, M., & De Wilde, P. (2016). Debating globalization: Cosmopolitanism and communitarianism as political ideologies. *Journal of Political Ideologies*, *21*(3), 280–301. https://doi.org/10.1080/13569317.2016.1207741

About the Authors

Magdalena Góra is an associate professor of political science and European studies at the Institute of European Studies of the Jagiellonian University. Her research deals with democratic challenges in the EU and legitimacy and contestation in the external relations of the European Union.

Elodie Thevenin is a postdoctoral researcher at the Institute of European Studies of the Jagiellonian University in Kraków. Her academic interests encompass topics related to European integration, migration, and political discourse.

Katarzyna Zielińska is an associate professor at the Institute of Sociology of the Jagiellonian University in Kraków. Her academic interests focus on a few areas: gender and democracy in Central Eastern European societies, (post)secular European societies, as well as transformations of collective identities in CEE in the context of European integration.

Politics and Governance
2025 • Volume 13 • Article 9869
https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.9869

ARTICLE

Open Access Journal

Reporting EU Politics in News Venues: An Issue of Democratic Deficit?

Muriel Cathérine Wenzel

Department of Social and Cultural Sciences, Fulda University of Applied Sciences, Germany

Correspondence: Muriel Cathérine Wenzel (muriel.wenzel@sk.hs-fulda.de)

Submitted: 14 January 2025 **Accepted:** 17 June 2025 **Published:** 13 August 2025

Issue: This article is part of the issue "Debating Europe: Politicization, Contestation, and Democratization" edited by Claudia Wiesner (Fulda University of Applied Sciences) and Meta Novak (University of Ljubljana), fully open access at https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.i452

Abstract

In a qualitative research design comprising 34 expert interviews and 18 focus groups from two distinct research projects, interviewees and participants discussed the status of EU reporting as well as its impact on and importance for the alleged democratic deficit of the EU. This article subsumes their views and attempts to answer the following questions: Can EU reporting positively influence European democracy? What are the obstacles and possibilities to strengthen EU reporting? The article first lays out the theoretical foundation of the impact of EU reporting and the role of the media in European democracy. Based on a qualitative analysis, it then shows the current perceived status of EU reporting in the media on local, national, and supranational levels. Lastly, the article illustrates possible examples and ideas to improve EU reporting—e.g., by demonstrating EU topics' concrete relevance for daily life.

Keywords

communication; democracy; democratic deficit; European public sphere; European Union; interviews; (local) journalism; media

1. Introduction

To understand the politics of the EU, it is imperative to possess a comprehensive understanding of the arguments that are presented, the dynamics that govern decision-making, and the specific decisions that are made. Given that the majority of EU politics is conducted in Brussels, this information is more difficult to obtain than for local politics. Therefore, the media plays a pivotal role in disseminating information that is crucial for citizens to actively participate in the political processes and in forming a European public sphere (EPS). The media is found to be "central to any debate about a European public sphere" (Statham, 2010a,

p. 4), and the public communication happening in and through it is found to be "a sine qua non of a European public sphere" (Pfetsch & Heft, 2014, p. 31). Furthermore, studies show that the citizens' support for the EU can be affected by the media exposure in indirect or direct ways (Marquart et al., 2019, p. 642; Mendez et al., 2020, p. 1034) and that the reception of political news affects "opinions, attitudes and identifications in the EU" (Biel et al., 2023, p. 5). As the complexity and distance of EU affairs often render them inaccessible to citizens residing in member states, local newspapers assume a special role among the media outlets. They do not only represent the most significant source of political news, but also frequently solely execute a variety of other functions within their respective regions, including the dissemination of information, the formulation of public opinion, the expression of criticism, and the exercise of control (Jenkins & Nielsen, 2020, p. 474; Vonbun-Feldbauer et al., 2020, pp. 13–14).

Simultaneously, though, there is a standing consensus that the EU suffers from a democratic deficit (Føllesdal & Hix, 2006, pp. 534–537; John, 2013, p. 189). Intertwined with it is a publicity deficit. It exists because political decisions are made at the EU level, but little to no coverage is given to many of these decisions in the media (Gerhards, 2000, p. 292; Gerhards et al., 2009, p. 538; Rivas-de-Roca & García-Gordillo, 2022, p. 383; Rohrer, 2010, p. 69). Hereby, Risse (2010, pp. 15, 227) speaks of an "insulation of EU policymaking from mass politics and political mobilization." EU citizens are not sufficiently informed with regard to the processes occurring at the EU level and the decisions taken therein. The level of transparency is inadequate and information is often inaccessible. However, an EPS based on EU reporting, communication, and publicity is found to be a prerequisite for democracy in the EU and regarded as the basis of the EU's legitimacy (Benert & Pfetsch, 2022, p. 365), "providing a space where supranational institutions and their leaders can be made more transparent and accountable" (Nitoiu, 2013, p. 27).

Turning to research, most studies looking at EU reporting and an EPS are quantitative. Cross-sectional analyses that cover a wide range of topics and are limited in time and longitudinal or cross-sectional analyses that are restricted to specific topics dominate (Latzer & Saurwein, 2006, pp. 20–21; Machill et al., 2006; Peters & Wessler, 2006; van de Steeg, 2010). The participation and appropriation practices of the audience are rarely analyzed (Lingenberg, 2010, p. 118). Furthermore, regional news, explicitly included here, is mostly excluded from research (see Mendez et al., 2020, pp. 1034–1036). Overall, the available studies are very heterogeneous and therefore difficult to compare, sometimes even contradictory (Berkel, 2006, p. 25; Latzer & Saurwein, 2006, p. 21; Lingenberg, 2010, p. 106). This article, by including participants from eight countries and two distinct research projects, taking local newspapers into account—specifically through the integration of local journalists and actors in expert interviews—looking at individuals' perceptions and actions, and proceeding with a qualitative research design, tackles some of these shortcomings and adds new perspectives to research that has been ongoing for several decades. Following from there, this article seeks to address the following questions: Can EU reporting positively influence European democracy? What are the obstacles and possibilities to strengthen EU reporting?

This article first lays out briefly the theoretical foundation of the impact of EU reporting on and the role of the media in European democracy, which builds the background for the analysis. Based on a qualitative analysis of interviews and focus group discussions, it then shows the current perceived status of EU reporting in the media on local, national, and supranational levels. Lastly, the article illustrates possible examples and ideas to improve EU reporting that were highlighted by interviewees and participants.

2. Theoretical Considerations

In the literature, there is consensus that an EPS did not form or develop at the same time as economic and political integration of the EU (Gerhards, 1993, p. 99; Tobler, 2010, p. 11). But with each transfer of further competences to the EU level, its need for legitimacy, democracy, and publicity increases, and the democratic gap between national democracy and decisions at the EU level widens (Brüggemann, 2008, p. 24; Kantner, 2004, p. 65). A publicity deficit thus emerged as a "side-effect of European integration," as supranational decision-making was not accompanied by the parallel formation of transnational forums for the formation of European will and opinion (Conrad, 2014, p. 36). As stressed before, citizens are not sufficiently informed about EU policies and transnational debates on EU issues are lacking. However, authors such as de la Porte and van Dalen (2016, p. 280) stress that EU politics that have an impact on the national policymaking must "be part of the public debate in national media." And Splichal (2022, p. 204) points out that "the public, publicity, publicness, and the public sphere are essential for a collective self-understanding process and constitutive to democratically organized societies." It is imperative that EU citizens possess a comprehensive understanding of EU politics to participate effectively in supranational political processes and to make well-informed decisions, e.g., in European elections.

This article follows the liberal-representative approach to the formation of an EPS, which is based on systems theory (Luhmann, 1984, 1997, 2017), and liberal-representative theories of democracy (Ackerman, 1989; Berkel, 2006, p. 17; Latzer & Saurwein, 2006, p. 13; Rawls, 1993). Here, the public sphere (PS) forms an observation system accessible to all subsystems, whose most important goal is the creation of transparency (Berkel, 2006, p. 18; Lingenberg, 2010, p. 31). This transparency consists of a passive right to access information and an active obligation to make political information from institutions accessible (Rohrer, 2010, p. 71). Additionally, the public as an intermediary and communication system fulfils functions of information collection (input), processing (throughput), and application (output; Gerhards & Neidhardt, 1990, pp. 12–13; Schulz, 2011, p. 117). It thus contributes to the aforementioned transparency of EU affairs, enables validation and orientation, and has functions of control and legitimation (Berkel, 2006, p. 18; Lingenberg, 2010, p. 36; Seeliger & Sevignani, 2021, p. 12; Trenz, 2005, p. 191). Gerhards (1997, p. 11), therefore, describes the PS as a mirror of the communicated contributions of a pluralistic society. Mutual respect and the acceptance of the opinions of others are assumed in the discourse (Gerhards, 1997, p. 11). Public opinion is thus produced as a majority opinion through the aggregation of individual communications and not, as in the deliberative approach (see Habermas, 1990, 2006, 2022), through consensus or argumentation (Gerhards, 1997, pp. 11–12; Martinsen, 2009, p. 60; Schulz, 2011, p. 116). In sum, the EPS and Europeanization can help to bring EU issues out of the confined circle of policy-makers to the citizens, who are unable to participate directly in EU politics, mostly taking place in Brussels. They can then make informed choices and actively discuss and contribute to EU policies, which can be seen as contributing to the democratization of the EU. Trenz (2010, p. 28) highlights this by stating that Europeanization, contributing to an EPS, "is ultimately measured as the developing of a potential for integration. It is thus perceived as a principal positive, in some cases even a civilizing force in the sense of unifying european societies and enhancing their regulative and communicative capacities."

Researchers differentiate between a supranational EPS, vertical Europeanization between the national and European level, and horizontal Europeanization between member states (Koopmans & Erbe, 2004, p. 101). However, the existence of the first form is deemed as unlikely and not necessary because "the already

existing infrastructure of the existing national PS is sufficient for Europe-wide communication" (Habermas, 2014, p. 9; Koopmans & Statham, 2010, p. 36; Trenz, 2010, p. 18). Furthermore, there is a consensus that a singular EPS is only theoretically and normatively conceivable (Latzer & Saurwein, 2006, p. 11; Saxer, 2006, p. 62). The audience of supranational news media—e.g., Financial Times or Euronews—remains limited and attempts to build pan-European media have failed in the past (Antoniazzi & Bengesser, 2023, p. 371; Baisnée, 2007, p. 500). This leads to vertical and horizontal Europeanization that take place in national PS. There, the national media include more European topics and actors as well as other member states in their reporting. Therefore, the Europeanization of national PS can be understood as the discussion of the same themes "at the same time under similar criteria of relevance" (Eder & Kantner, 2000, p. 306; Koopmans & Erbe, 2004, p. 100). Whereby, following the mirror metaphor, the same criteria of relevance do not encompass a universally valid European perspective, but rather refer to mutual awareness and reciprocal observation (Risse, 2010, p. 117). In addition, three dimensions of Europeanization can be distinguished and operationalized for analysis: (a) the visibility of European actors, issues, and policies as issue salience; (b) the presence of European actors as speakers and audiences as the actor dimension; and (c) the use of "similar frames of reference" or claims-making across member states (Risse, 2014a, pp. 10–11, 2014b, pp. 152–153). An increase in Europeanization would result in a greater number of EU-related issues and actors being visible in local and national media, potentially leading to a more uniform framing of these issues across member states. This could have a positive impact on EU democracy by increasing transparency and a shared understanding of EU affairs, and by providing the information necessary for the functioning of and participating in democratic processes at the EU level, thereby alleviating the alleged democratic deficit.

In the context of the liberal-representative approach to the formation of an EPS, the mass media can be regarded as an "infrastructural requirement of EU democracy" (Trenz, 2008, p. 298). Huber (2012, p. 22) describes the fact that adequate reporting on European politics is essential for a functioning European democracy as "common sense." News about the EU should be available to an extent that provides EU citizens with the minimum amount of information necessary for democratic control (Trenz, 2008, p. 298). This is in line with the public service role of the media, which includes that they "devote time and space to the public policy agenda in order to reveal to political leaders and citizens the strengths and weaknesses of various policy proposals" (Graber et al., 1998, p. 3). Local newspapers can make EU decisions accessible and show their effects on one's own life on the ground (Liebetruth, 2012, p. 43). They can reduce the complexity of EU affairs and provide offers of factual and interactional as well as identity-forming orientation (Liebetruth, 2012, pp. 20–23). Such offers of local and EU-related orientation can arise through the local observation of EU actors (vertical Europeanization), the observation of actors from other EU member states from a local perspective (horizontal Europeanization), or a local discursive exchange with either of them (Liebetruth, 2012, pp. 24–27, 42–44).

While looking at the media, their "dual role" described by Koopmans and Statham (2010, p. 47) as an "institutionalized forum for carrying mediated politics resulting from collective actors' claim making and as a 'political actor' who advances positions in the public sphere" must be kept in mind.

3. Methods and Materials

Before delving deeper into the empirical section, the methods and materials will be explained. The qualitative analysis is based on data from two distinct research projects. First, 34 interviews of 45 to 90 minutes with

local journalists, EU correspondents based in Brussels, MEPs, and press officers of the EP, press officers from EUROPE DIRECTs (EDIC), which are information centers of the EU that are based in the member states and work closely with the European Commission, and representatives from civil society and national ministries are included. Those 34 interviews were conducted by the author between June 2022 and January 2023 in three countries (Germany, France, and Austria). The interviews were part of the author's PhD project, which has a specific focus on EU democracy and local newspapers. Second, the analysis also includes 18 focus groups of around 90 minutes with master and bachelor students in the field of European studies and/or political science, that were conducted between December 2021 and April 2024 in six countries (Slovenia, Germany, France, Croatia, Finland, and Bulgaria) by members, and as part, of the Jean Monnet Network "Debating Europe." Participants were selected among the students of the researchers in the project based on varying criteria and as part of research seminars. The goal of the focus groups was to explore sources of contemporary EU-criticism and to describe the character of the gap between EU elites and citizens. Regarding the case countries, Slovenia, Germany, France, Croatia, Finland, Bulgaria, and Austria, large and older as well as smaller and newer member states and countries from the North, West, South, and East of the EU were integrated. Furthermore, some of the participants were international students who were from outside Europe. This allows for the inclusion of various perspectives from Europe and beyond.

Both interviews and focus groups are based on lead questionnaires. The questionnaires for the interviews were handled flexibly and adapted to the position and profession, e.g., slightly different questions when speaking with an MEP than with a journalist. Whilst the focus groups used pictures for some of their questions, this was not part of the interviews. However, there are similarities in the questionnaires as questions about democracy, an EPS, transparency, the role of the media, and how to get information on EU topics were included in the interviews and in the focus groups. This means that they relate to one another insofar as the topics discussed were similar and many aspects overlap, although seen from different perspectives and individual positions. Therefore, they allow for comparison, complement, or contrast with one another and provide answers to similar questions. Regarding the analysis, the students represent the perspective of well-educated EU citizens who know not only the basic facts about the EU but, depending on their level of study (bachelor's or master's), possess knowledge of more detailed EU processes and actions. They can also be seen in a position as consumers of (local) news. In contrast, the interviewees can be regarded as EU communication experts, because it is their daily task and particular interest to communicate EU information. Doing so, they step into the role of producers of news, and they deliver the information that is necessary to inform about the EU. Taken together, interviewees and focus group participants contribute two different perspectives and provide answers from two points of view on the topic at hand. However, all participants and interviewees were generally pro-European, aware of and interested in the EU as they were either studying in the field of political science and/or European studies, working or volunteering, or personally interested in the EU.

The qualitative analysis was done using MAXQDA. The focus groups were first coded deductively and inductively by the project members in various rounds of coding. They constantly discussed the material and specified codes based on their readings of the material and theoretical as well as personal knowledge. This process ended with a detailed coding system that was then applied to all focus groups. However, the author applied parts of her own coding system, which was developed in the interview analysis during the PhD project, to the focus groups' transcripts to extract the necessary information. This coding system was developed deductively, inductively, and in various rounds to not overlook anything. For the interviews, the

coding done beforehand for the PhD project was sufficient. Applying the same coding system to all the available data enabled us to compare and synthesize along specific issues, e.g., transparency. In addition, regular talks and discussions of the findings among researchers working on analyzing the focus groups and the author were part of the process. However, it must be noted that the coding was subjective in both projects. The knowledge and perspectives, as well as the researcher's individual focus on specific topics, became naturally a part of the coding system. This means that the findings could have been slightly different if other researchers had done the coding. Still, the coding system was developed in such a way that it is comprehensible to and replicable for outsiders, and the various in-depth discussions of the researchers helped to not overlook important aspects and avoid too subjective interpretations.

For the analysis in Sections 4 through 7, the findings from the interviews and the focus groups were integrated. The statements below serve as examples of bigger themes or categories. They are extracted from the focus groups whenever students are speaking. All other actors were interviewed within the other project. The quotes used in this article were edited insofar as to make them understandable, e.g., by deleting "hm" or "äh." Quotes from interviews conducted in German or in French were translated by the author herself. Statements by focus group participants were translated into English by the Network members when conducted in a specific national language.

4. On Democracy and the Role of the Media

Proceeding with the empirical section, in the interviews and the focus groups, questions about the status of EU democracy or the EPS were asked. Answers and statements on these, which are connected to the role of the media, journalists, transparency, and the EPS, will be discussed in the following Sections 4 through 7 and connected to the theoretical considerations in Section 2.

On democracy, in the interviews, a volunteer from Germany (pos. 376–378) highlighted that the EU "must have a certain more direct link between the citizens and the Parliament." This hints at possible improvements of EU democracy by enabling vertical Europeanization and by reforming the EP. Such reforms have often been proposed, e.g., transnational lists for EP elections. They (pos. 400–402) stated that: "we will have to do something about European democracy," stressing that "the work of journalists would also be important here, so that people actually know: What is in the treaties? What is actually provided for? What is in the Parliament's decision?" Thereby pointing to the public service role and orientation function of (local) journalism that entails informing the citizen and explaining ongoing processes not only of local or national but also of European politics. An Austrian MEP (pos. 264–266) similarly pointed out that there is "a need for information," because "ultimately it's not just about the Member of the European Parliament trying to find out how I can be present in the media and how I have to make my statement." This hints again at an expected responsibility that journalists should take on and a certain level of information on EU affairs that should be available in the national and local news to enable factual and interactional orientation.

In the focus groups, the students discussed the status of EU democracy at length. By doing this, the important role of the media, the necessity to inform EU citizens, and a lack of transparency came up. A German student (2nd FG, pos. 231) explained: "democracy is a lot about being able to vote and if you have more information on the impact….Yes, if you know more about that, that will also improve democracy, in my opinion." This shows that the students connected voting to being informed, which does not directly point to the media or

any communication policy, but to the need for well-informed citizens to be able to be active in EU politics. The latter becomes explicit in Dahl's (1989) concept of "enlightened understanding," which highlights that citizens need to be properly informed to cast a vote (Gerhards, 2000, p. 287, 2002, p. 3). Similarly, a student from France (1st FG, pos. 111) found it necessary "to inform people more about what the European Union is." They explained that such better information could lead to higher interest in EU elections that usually have a lower turnout than national elections: "When we understand what the European Union is, when we are informed about what it does, we are aware that there is an election and then we want to take part in it."

Another student from France (3rd FG, pos. 107) directly referred to the role of the media as a fourth estate. The student advanced that "the media have a lot of work to do," because there is a "distancing between the citizen and the EU institutions" which they regarded as being connected to not enough "reporting on what is actually being said, and not necessarily on what the EU says about itself but on what other players might say about the EU." This statement hints at a perception that the media is not reporting critically enough and should include different perspectives in its EU reporting. Such a responsibility is stressed by Schulz (2011, p. 44), who finds that critique and control of political power belong to the media's tasks. In this regard, local media, especially, has been the subject of considerable criticism for its perceived lack of critical scrutiny and its tendency to passively reproduce press material (Kretzschmar et al., 2009, pp. 82–115).

Furthermore, a Croatian student (3rd FG, pos. 103) raised the question about the freedom of the press and the communication and information systems in the member states by referring to "the availability of information" and to the possibility to speak freely. A look at the ranking of press freedom for 180 countries, which is found to have deteriorated significantly in 2025, in a global comparison, shows that, among the case countries, Finland is best off on fifth position, which means that it is in a good position regarding the protection of free journalism by the state, authorities, and laws. Germany (11th), France (25th), Austria (22nd), and Slovenia (33rd) are in positions that are still described as satisfactory. However, problems are visible in these countries, e.g., increasing verbal abuse, threats, insults, or fear of physical violence, as well as decreasing media diversity. Meanwhile, Croatia is ranked 60th and Bulgaria 70th, which means there are recognizable problems, e.g., danger of prosecution or intimidation for journalists in Croatia (Free Press Unlimited, 2025; Reporter ohne Grenzen, 2024, 2025). Altogether, journalists in the case countries work mostly independently and freely, but various problems can complicate or even hinder critical and investigative reporting.

5. No European Public Sphere

Asked about the existence of an EPS in the interviews, a German correspondent (II, pos. 34) answered that it "is not possible at the moment." Similarly, a German press officer (pos. 264) spoke about a "fragmented, non-existent" EPS. Such a segmented EPS has been a finding of certain studies, such as from Peters and Wessler (2006, p. 141), or Sifft et al. (2007, pp. 148–150), and Kleinen von Königslöw (2012, p. 458) and seems to persist until today. The press officer of a German EDIC (I, pos. 160–162) said: "The European public in so far as it is truly cross-border, probably not. Or only to a very small extent," thereby stressing the low level of horizontal Europeanization across member states that becomes visible in local newspapers, e.g., when they report on neighboring boarder regions in other member states. A French press officer (pos. 278–282), who was unsure about the existence of an EPS today, argued:

> I think, despite the world being more and more open, we having fewer boundaries, and we can reach out to anybody at any time, I'm not sure that the mentalities are that open. I think people are more and more, I mean in France, closing in on themselves.

This hints at a general perception that nationalism and individualism are on the rise worldwide. In contrast, a French journalist (pos. 42) was convinced "that there is a European political space." But he narrowed down: "Political, that is, at the level of politics. It hasn't yet completely descended to the level of the citizen, but there is already a European political space in effect. This is obviously very important." This perception of an elite PS was seen by a German press officer (pos. 270–276), too, but only connected to the English language:

> There are, of course, these English-language media or Twitter conversations in such a political bubble, which is definitely European. The different interests and people are there, but it's limited to English. And then on TV and radio, it's very dependent on the national language. It exists much less there.

Likewise, studies show that an (elite) EPS forms around specific topics, such as football (Biel et al., 2023) or economics (Hubé et al., 2016), among MEPs and a European political elite on Twitter (Tuñón-Navarro & Carral-Vilar, 2021, pp. 145–146), among political elites in general (Koopmans, 2007), or among readers of a specific medium, such as the Financial Times (Corcoran & Fahy, 2009). A transnational EPS, however, is found to be highly unlikely, as previously explained.

In the focus groups, an EPS was only mentioned once explicitly. However, this one mention is quite similar to the statements made in the interviews. A French student (3rd FG, pos. 107) argued that "there is no European public space being created," which results in there being "no awareness of what Europe is doing for us when there is no communication about it." Local newspapers could contribute to this specifically by showing the local impact of EU politics and explaining which areas of citizens' daily life are directly affected by the EU, thereby enhancing vertical Europeanization.

6. The Current Perceived Status of EU Reporting

Looking at how interviewees and focus group participants saw the status of EU reporting, three findings stand out particularly and will be discussed here: The EU reporting was perceived as being not much, as being too negative, and EU topics were found to be too complex and complicated to understand.

6.1. Not Much

"Europe plays no role at all in these local sections," the press officer of a German MEP (I, pos. 284) advanced about local newspapers specifically. A feeling that was mirrored by most of the other interviewees for local and national media. For example, a German volunteer (pos. 244–248) complained about missing EU reporting, stating that "people don't realize what's happening." And a press officer in Brussels (II, pos. 250–252) explained that when the EP was talking about the increased cost of living, "a lot of media they refused to report about that [increased cost of living], because they saw no interest for their readers or their news." This missing interest of the reader was acknowledged by the journalists, too. "Not relevant are many processes in the European Parliament. I think it's always very difficult to get that into the newspapers," stated a German correspondent (I, pos. 22–24), who found the EP to be "the big loser of the perception"

(I, pos. 36–38) and spoke about the perceived lack of interest and the resulting lack of reporting. Such a marginalization and underrepresentation of parliaments and parliamentary actors, such as the EP and MEPs, in media coverage has been confirmed in various studies (Marschall, 2009, pp. 216–217; Trenz, 2004, pp. 300–301). Furthermore, empirical studies find that EU reporting is dominated by national political and economic actors, while civil society is underrepresented, which further contributes to the elite-perception of EU politics (Adam & Pfetsch, 2009; Grande & Kriesi, 2016; Koopmans, 2007, 2010; Koopmans et al., 2007; Liebert, 2012; Statham, 2007, 2010b; Statham & Trenz, 2013).

Among the focus group participants, a Croatian student (2nd FG, pos. 49) found the citizens not to be "aware of the way in which decisions are made, nor how they are made." Another student pointed out that "the EU citizens should be, like better informed about what the EU are doing" (Finland, 3rd FG, pos. 362–364), thereby hinting at a lack of information on EU politics in the media in general. This was likewise done by a German student (2nd FG, pos. 130), who stated that the EU "would be more transparent if the citizens feel more included in the decision making." Thereby, as already shown in Section 4, connecting the need for information to transparency and citizens' active participation in EU politics. This was similarly stressed by a student from France (2nd FG, pos. 109): "We don't know, and many people don't necessarily know, what is going on, and what's more, we don't know how it's happening, and we don't know how to intervene in it." A Finnish student (1st FG, pos. 383) complained that they would like to know more about the processes: "How did we get there? How did the discussions look between the different countries, between the different representatives, who said what? Who came up with this? How did we reach this goal?" Altogether, these statements show that the students' interests in EU politics and details of decision-making on the supranational level are high, while at the same time they lack access to information on the EU. Some of the interviewees, who worked on EU topics voluntarily, stressed similarly that the citizens have a high interest in EU politics. However, this is in contrast to the journalists interviewed, who perceived a generally low interest in EU politics among their readers, which shows a gap between the perceptions of the different actors in this analysis.

Furthermore, a German student (1st FG, pos. 66) found that "the focus is not so much on the European level, not in the media coverage." And a French student (3rd FG, pos. 88) added that "the debate in the media remains very much in the national sphere," both hinting at national glasses. Such a focus on national issues could, on the one side, lead to a risk of distortions in the reader's perception of the EU, but, on the other side, facilitate EU news and make them easier to understand, e.g., when adding a local point of view in local newspapers (Liebetruth, 2012, pp. 68–71; Plavec, 2020, p. 19).

6.2. Too Negative

In the interviews, it was often mentioned that Brussels serves as a scapegoat. A press officer from Brussels (I, pos. 146–150) explained that "when there is something that is not so popular in the country, they [the politicians] are going to say: 'This comes from Europe!' " This points to politicians concealing that they participated in EU decisions themselves while portraying the EU as the only responsible party. Such scapegoating could affect the EU's image negatively. The blaming of unpopular decisions on the EU by national politicians has been described as ultimately undermining EU legitimacy (de Wilde, 2023, p. 239; Plavec, 2020, p. 25). The leader of a German EDIC (pos. 144) had the impression that "there is really an EU bashing." That this feeling is also shared in editorial teams was pointed out by a German journalist

(II, pos. 244–246) who explained: "When it's negative, it's actually more noticeable. So, the EU is a bureaucracy monster and that doesn't just affect the readership, but the EU doesn't always have the best image in the editorial team either." In this sense, interviewees highlighted that negative stories often work better than positive ones. For example, a public institution officer from Germany (pos. 38–40) advanced that: "You have to try to get someone interested and the experience is simply that they are not particularly interested in such positive stories." This was similarly supported by a German MEP (pos. 351–353) who mentioned the phrases "Good news are no news" and "Bad news are good news" and added that often people will be known better through scandals than through their political work. This is supported by findings from Boomgaarden et al. (2013, p. 623) and Galpin and Trenz (2018, p. 155), who find that often reporting on the EU happens more when there is disagreement, negativity, or scandals.

Likewise, the focus group participants criticized the overwhelmingly negative reporting. For example, a Bulgarian student (2nd FG, pos. 125) stated: "What reaches you through the information channels that you are used to are actually only negatives, and this transparency is being used in some way that is not beneficial for the EU." Similarly, a German student (2nd FG, pos. 60) criticized that "a lot of things you hear in the news are just always bad and you don't really think about that it's nice to have the EU." A French student (2nd FG, pos. 106) pointed to the abovementioned scapegoat issue, finding that the media is unable to convince the public "that Brussels is something other than a scapegoat that will make sure that you have less food in your fridge at the end of the month." This was similarly addressed by a Bulgarian student (2nd FG, pos. 125) who claimed that "all that reaches you about the EU is the rather negative stuff. You don't know what benefits there would be from it."

All these statements and perceptions are related to the news factor "negativity" and the negativity bias, which studies have shown to be influential and present in the media (Mendez et al., 2020, p. 1038). However, if there is only negative coverage, it can affect the image and perception of the EU. It appears only as a scapegoat, while its achievements and positive aspects remain invisible. In general, reporting should be critical, questioning, and explanatory of decision-making, but it should not exclusively focus on negative aspects of EU politics.

6.3. Too Complicated

Among the interviewees, the EU, EU politics, and decision-making were seen as complex, complicated, and difficult to understand. The EU was described as a "very complex machine" by a German press officer (pos. 60). A French press officer (pos. 306–308) said that: "the European affairs are said to be complicated, and few journalists have the background and the trainings necessary to understand everything." This shows that it is not only the readers but also the journalists themselves who have problems in understanding EU affairs. Such a high level of complexity of EU policy is at odds with the logic of the media (Balčytienė & Vinciūnienė, 2010, pp. 146–148; Nesti & Valentini, 2010, p. 401), making EU coverage more difficult. Journalists would have to take more time to learn about the EU to report accurately and explain details. However, time is a limited factor, especially in local journalism.

Looking at the readers, a German journalist (III, pos. 112–114) said: "I bet that most of my readers are not familiar with the legislative process in the European Union, i.e., this interplay between Council, Commission and Parliament." And a German correspondent (II, pos. 304) recommended that "complex topics are presented in an understandable way," but pointed out that "for that you simply have to pay the price of

brutal simplification." Such simplification could lead to lost detail, distorted, and oversimplified reporting. Likewise, an Austrian correspondent (pos. 88–96) explained that: "often the basic knowledge about the functioning of the European institutions is worse than the basic knowledge about the functioning of the national political institutions." This suggests that, compared to national or local reporting, EU reporting cannot take as much knowledge for granted and therefore needs to be approached differently, including more explanations and clarifications.

The students in the focus groups similarly highlighted the high complexity and their own difficulties in understanding EU politics and decision-making. The students stated that even though they were studying EU subjects, they had problems understanding the complex processes of EU decision making: "I've studied this for the past two years, and it doesn't get easier, the more you learn, it just doesn't get easier. And it gets more and more confusing" (Bulgaria, 3rd FG, pos. 77). Likewise, a Finish student (1st FG, pos. 261–263) advanced: "I mean, we've been studying this, and I cannot say I still understand it completely." Education and the provision of more accessible knowledge about EU affairs seem even more important when even students in the field are unable to fully understand the EU's decision-making and European policy.

7. Two Ideas to Improve EU Reporting

At various points in the interviews and during the focus group discussions, possible solutions, recommendations, or suggestions were mentioned that could improve EU reporting and, in consequence, lead to a better-informed public and more EU democracy. Two of them will be explained in more detail below.

7.1. Facilitate Access

The facilitation of access to EU information for citizens was mentioned by various actors in the interviews. A German volunteer (pos. 70) explained that they had worked together with journalists previously in the way "that a journalist thought about the questions, I answered them myself in writing beforehand and then we shortened it down together." This helped to facilitate access and ended up getting more EU stories into the articles. It is connected to the lack of time and resources that prevails, especially in local journalism, and often hinders detailed EU reporting. A German correspondent (II, pos. 96–100) had the idea to create a glossary online "so that readers can perhaps refer back to it if they are interested, in order to understand more of this complexity," which would then make it easier for them to understand EU news. Such glossaries already exist, but are often not directly linked to the articles or not linked to the newspaper websites at all. The importance of a "low threshold" in EU reporting to reduce complexity, as mentioned in Section 6.3, was highlighted by a public institution officer in Germany (pos. 242). An Austrian head of unit (II, pos. 49–51) stressed that "if you don't prepare it for them in a bite-sized format, then there's nothing there," which similarly points to the need for short pieces of information that are quick and easy to understand, conveying information without the need for extensive background knowledge.

"I would love for maybe once a day or once a week you could have like a special segment for EU news," said a Finish student (3rd FG, pos. 396) and a French student (2nd FG, pos. 80) proposed an insert "on public service television, at prime time, for five minutes" that explains in detail how the EU works. Both students suggested proposals for a special format for EU news in the media. Such formats already exist, but they are not usually

broadcast as part of the main news on television, but rather as a niche offering. Another student from France (1st FG, pos. 399) proposed a "European Union section" in the daily news. Some local newspapers have such a page dedicated to the EU, while others include the EU in their (international) politics pages. A Croatian student (2nd FG, pos. 39) spoke about Hrvatska radiotelevizija (HRT), where "the EU has a minute in the morning which gives out the most important story of the day." And a French student (2nd FG, pos. 81) spoke of "programs specializing in European issues, such as 'L'Europe dans le monde' or 'Une semaine dans l'UE' " to learn more about the EU. They also mentioned "Toute l'Europe," which they found "incredible, the way they do newsletters with daily press reviews. There, we can have access to the different opinions, the small differences, which I think is cool." Such programs, websites, or newsletters could be used as a model for other local or national media. Furthermore, a Finnish student (1st FG, pos. 405–410) suggested installing a "media platform that's somehow independent of the EU" that would lead to more transparency, "so that you know as an EU citizen how you can affect things if you want to." The EU has two such websites that facilitate direct participation: the first, What Europe Does for Me (https://what-europe-does-for-me.europarl.europa.eu), shows the concrete impact of EU politics; the second, Have Your Say (https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/have-your-say_en), is a public portal for consultations and feedback. However, it appears that these channels are not widely known among EU citizens.

As most of the students used social media as their main source of information, this can be seen as a possible way to inform, especially younger citizens, with ease. A Bulgarian student (2nd FG, pos. 246) pointed to the need for short and concrete information on social media: "[Y]ou need a very quick presentation of the information." And a German student (1st FG, pos. 181) found similarly: "There should be a directness and the goal to be communicated immediately. Not with many words, but to the point, straightforward." This was also highlighted by another German student (2nd FG, pos. 72) who found that we should be "bringing the terminology in the words we use back to the basics, so the people understand it." All in line with the general request to reduce complexity and lower the threshold of EU reporting. One Finish student (2nd FG, pos. 139) mentioned the use of ads on Instagram with which "the EU is definitely trying to educate maybe younger audience through social media," but criticized that "it's too superficial, and it's also very much biased because it only comes from the EU talking about itself." Using memes was another suggestion made by Bulgarian and Croatian students (Bulgaria, 2nd FG, pos. 71; Croatia, 3rd FG, pos. 33) who argued that memes would leave "some impression that works on a subconscious level much stronger than reading a 400-page regulation."

7.2. Demonstrate Concrete Relevance

To demonstrate the concrete relevance of an EU topic to the citizens was considered particularly important. A hook to arouse interest was seen as necessary to convey EU news, especially in local newspapers. A German journalist (III, pos. 453) stressed: "But that means, of course, that we [journalists] have all the more responsibility and duty to make things…as interesting as possible." They underlined, referring to the topic of the harmonization of phone chargers, which likely affects everyone to a certain extent, that they assumed "that the more concretely the EU is perceived by people, the greater the interest" (III, pos. 457). A French press officer (pos. 160–162) pointed out: "I mean, usually it has to be obvious. If it's not obvious, it won't work, you know?" They explained: "Always finding a hook within the national interest/inside the national country where you're trying to sell your information," stressing that the journalist will ask: "Why are we concerned? Why are my readers, my viewers, my listeners concerned about this?" (French press officer, pos. 330–334). Such a focus on issues of concrete relevance can be found in some studies on regional news,

which "tend to focus on content that has a regional significance and impact on the everyday lives of readers" (Mendez et al., 2020, p. 1037). Liebetruth (2012, pp. 38–40) finds the local impact to be a prerequisite for EU reporting in local news, as topics must appear relevant to the readers. Vetters (2007, pp. 364–368) stresses, too, that regional newspapers take greater account of local and regional aspects and make use of local relevance. Hook and relevance, therefore, appear to be crucial factors for local coverage of EU affairs.

A student from Germany (2nd FG, pos. 144) highlighted that "it's like super important to bring to the people what the benefits of the European Union are," explaining that many "don't have any connection points with the European Union it's like so far away somewhere in Brussels." This refers to the in Section 6.2 mentioned positive coverage. It also underscores the need to dispel the misconception of Brussels as an isolated entity, emphasizing its tangible impact on citizens. Likewise, a Bulgarian student (1st FG, pos. 112) pointed out that "things should be presented more clearly and in a way that is both understood but also engaging. That is to say, both to explain what is being done and why it is important to me."

8. Conclusion

It can be concluded that EU reporting can positively influence European democracy under certain conditions. Interviewees and students pointed to the role and responsibility of the media and journalists in conveying information on EU politics and actors in their reporting. As in the liberal-representative approach, more information and more EU reporting were connected to a better-informed citizenship, more knowledge on EU politics, and higher turnout in European elections. However, they did miss the existence of an EPS, except for smaller elite PS confined to the English language and a specific public. The present findings are consistent with earlier research in this field, indicating that the development of an EPS has not advanced significantly in recent years, but rather persists at a low, relatively stable level.

Looking further at the obstacles and possibilities to strengthen EU reporting, first, the perception of there being too little EU reporting was highlighted. This goes along with a high complexity and a negativity bias that hinder understanding and do not necessarily provide a good impression of the EU. Readers' interest, however, was controversially perceived as either present or almost absent. Interviewees and focus group participants had various ideas to strengthen the EU reporting, two of which were to facilitate access and demonstrate the concrete relevance of a specific EU topic. This could be done, for example, by using new formats, by reducing complexity and explaining more details of EU decision-making, by showing local relevance and impact, or by linking European issues to local concerns in local newspapers. Local newspapers could play a leading role here, as they are usually closer to their readers and can break down big EU issues more locally, showing the specific local impact of EU policies on the daily lives of their readers.

Furthermore, social media is by now used extensively in election campaigns and was underlined to be the most used source for news by an overwhelming majority of focus group participants. Studies focusing on platforms, such as Twitter/X, showed that social media is mostly used to disseminate information during campaigns (Rivas-de-Roca & García-Gordillo, 2022, p. 385). Social media is less mediated, the journalist's role as gatekeepers is less important, and, therefore, allows for participation of more citizens and promotion of transnational networking (Benert & Pfetsch, 2022, p. 367). Finding out how journalists and the media could make use of social media to strengthen the EPS would make an interesting field of future research.

Acknowledgments

Parts of the research were conducted within the Jean-Monnet Network "Debating Europe" (Project Number: 620428-EPP-1-2020-1-DE-EPPJMO-NETWORK). The European Commission's support for the production of this publication does not constitute an endorsement of the contents, which reflect the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

Funding

I acknowledge support from the Open Access Publishing Fund of Hochschule Fulda—University of Applied Sciences.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

References

Ackerman, B. (1989). Why dialogue? *Journal of Philosophy*, *LXXXVI*(1), 5–22.

Adam, S., & Pfetsch, B. (2009). Europa als Konflikt in nationalen Medien—Zur Politisierung der Positionen in der Integrationsdebatte. In F. Marcinkowski & B. Pfetsch (Eds.), *Politik in der Mediendemokratie* (pp. 559–584). VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften.

Antoniazzi, L., & Bengesser, C. H. (2023). Media-political inroads for Europeanising national cultural public spheres: EU-level obstacles and national public service perspectives. *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, *29*(3), 360–376. https://doi.org/10.1080/10286632.2022.2043288

Baisnée, O. (2007). The European public sphere does not exist (at least it's worth wondering…). *European Journal of Communication*, *22*(4), 493–503. https://doi.org/10.1177/0267323107083065

Balčytienė, A., & Vinciūnienė, A. (2010). Assessing conditions for the homogenisation of the European public sphere: How journalists report, and could report, on Europe. In C. Bee & E. Bozzini (Eds.), *Mapping the European public sphere: Institutions, media and civil society* (pp. 141–158). Ashgate Publishing.

Benert, V., & Pfetsch, B. (2022). Europäische Öffentlichkeit unter dem Einfluss von Digitalisierung und Politisierung. In I. Borucki, K. Kleinen von Königslöw, S. Marschall, & T. Zerback (Eds.), *Handbuch Politische Kommunikation* (pp. 363–379). Springer.

Berkel, B. (2006). *Konflikt als Motor europäischer Öffentlichkeit: Eine Inhaltsanalyse von Tageszeitungen in Deutschland, Frankreich, Großbritannien und Österreich*. VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften. http://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-531-90009-4

Biel, J., Finger, T., Niemann, A., Reinke, V., Kossakowski, R., Jungblut, J., Mańkowski, D., & Llopis-Goig, R. (2023). A European public sphere united by football: A comparative quantitative text analysis of German, Norwegian, Polish and Spanish football media. *Journal of Common Market Studies*, *63*(1), Article jcms.13559. https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.13559

Boomgaarden, H. G., de Vreese, C. H., Schuck, A. R., Azrout, R., Elenbaas, M., van Spanje, J. H., & Vliegenthart, R. (2013). Across time and space: Explaining variation in news coverage of the European Union. *European Journal of Political Research*, *52*(5), 608–629. https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12009

Brüggemann, M. (2008). *Europäische Öffentlichkeit durch Öffentlichkeitsarbeit? Die Informationspolitik der Europäischen Kommission*. *Medien—Kultur—Kommunikation*. VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-531-91058-1

Conrad, M. (2014). *Europeans and the public sphere: Communication without community?* Ibidem Verlag. https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/kxp/detail.action?docID=5782735

Corcoran, F., & Fahy, D. (2009). Exploring the European elite sphere. The role of the Financial Times. *Journalism Studies*, *10*(1), 100–113. https://doi.org/10.1080/14616700802560575

Dahl, R. A. (1989). *Democracy and its critics*. Yale University Press.

de la Porte, C., & van Dalen, A. (2016). Europeanization of national public spheres? Cross-national media debates about the European Union's socio-economic strategy. *European Politics and Society*, *17*(3), 279–293. https://doi.org/10.1080/23745118.2015.1091171

de Wilde, P. (2023). More power, less influence: European union actors in media debates on fiscal policy after the eurocrisis. *Journal of European Integration*, *45*(2), 239–255. https://doi.org/10.1080/07036337.2022.2115485

Eder, K., & Kantner, C. (2000). Transnationale Resonanzstrukturen in Europa. Eine Kritik der Rede vom Öffentlichkeitsdefizit. In M. Bach (Ed.), *Die Europäisierung nationaler Gesellschaften* (pp. 306–331). Westdeutscher Verlag.

Føllesdal, A., & Hix, S. (2006). Why there is a democratic deficit in the EU: A response to Majone and Moravcsik. *Journal of Common Market Studies*, *44*(3), 533–562. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-5965.2006.00650.x

Free Press Unlimited. (2025). *Croatia*. https://www.freepressunlimited.org/en/countries/croatia

Galpin, C., & Trenz, H.-J. (2018). Die Euroskeptizismus-Spirale: EU-Berichterstattung und Medien-Negativität. *Österreichische Zeitschrift Für Soziologie*, *43*(S1), 147–172. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11614-018-0294-x

Gerhards, J. (1993). Westeuropäische Integration und die Schwierigkeiten der Entstehung einer europäischen Öffentlichkeit. *Zeitschrift Für Soziologie*, *22*(2), 96–110. https://doi.org/10.1515/zfsoz-1993-0202

Gerhards, J. (1997). Diskursive versus liberale Öffentlichkeit: Eine empirische Auseinandersetzung mit Jürgen Habermas. *Kölner Zeitschrift Für Soziologie Und Sozialpsychologie*, *49*(1), 1–34.

Gerhards, J. (2000). Europäisierung von Ökonomie und Politik und die Trägheit der Entstehung einer europäischen Öffentlichkeit. In M. Bach (Ed.), *Die Europäisierung nationaler Gesellschaften* (pp. 277–305). Westdeutscher Verlag.

Gerhards, J. (2002). *Das Öffentlichkeitsdefizit der EU im Horizont normativer Öffentlichkeitstheorien*. https://www.polsoz.fu-berlin.de/soziologie/arbeitsbereiche/seniorprofessur/mitarbeiter/lehrstuhlinhaber/dateien/2002-Gerhards-Oeffentlichkeitsdefizit-der-EU-im-Horizont-normativer-Oeffentlichkeitstheorien.pdf

Gerhards, J., & Neidhardt, F. (1990). *Strukturen und Funktionen moderner Öffentlichkeit: Fragestellungen und Ansätze* (FS III 90–101). Abteilung Öffentlichkeit und soziale Bewegung des Forschungsschwerpunkts Sozialer Wandel, Institutionen und Vermittlungsprozesse des Wissenschaftszentrums Berlin für Sozialforschung. https://bibliothek.wzb.eu/pdf/1990/iii90-101.pdf

Gerhards, J., Offerhaus, A., & Roose, J. (2009). Wer ist verantwortlich? Die Europäische Union, ihre Nationalstaaten und die massenmediale Attribution von Verantwortung für Erfolge und Misserfolge. In F. Marcinkowski & B. Pfetsch (Eds.), *Politik in der Mediendemokratie* (pp. 529–558). VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften.

Graber, D. A., McQuail, D., & Norris, P. (1998). Introduction: Political communication in a democracy. In D. A. Graber, D. McQuail, & P. Norris (Eds.), *The politics of news. The news of politics* (pp. 1–16). Congressional Quarterly.

Grande, E., & Kriesi, H. (2016). Conclusions: The postfunctionalists were (almost) right. In S. Hutter, E. Grande, & H. Kriesi (Eds.), *Politicising Europe: Integration and mass politics* (pp. 279–300). Cambridge University Press.

Habermas, J. (1990). *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit: Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft. Mit einem Vorwort zur Neuauflage 1990* (Vol. 891). Suhrkamp Verlag.

Habermas, J. (2006). Political communication in media society: Does democracy still enjoy an epistemic

dimension? The impact of normative theory on empirical research. *Communication Theory*, *16*(4), 411–426. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2885.2006.00280.x

Habermas, J. (2014). *Democracy in Europe. Why the development of the European Union into a transnational democracy is necessary and how it is possible* (ARENA Working Paper 13). ARENA. https://www.sv.uio.no/arena/english/research/publications/arena-working-papers/2014/wp13-14.pdf

Habermas, J. (2022). Reflections and hypotheses on a further structural transformation of the political public sphere. *Theory, Culture & Society*, *39*(4), 145–171. https://doi.org/10.1177/02632764221112341

Hubé, N., Salgado, S., & Puustinen, L. (2016). The euro crisis' actors and their roles. *Politique Européenne*, *52*(2), 84–113. https://doi.org/10.3917/poeu.052.0084

Huber, C. K. (2012). *Zwischen Routine, Ratspräsidentschaft und Gipfel: Interaktionen von Medien und Politik in der Europäischen Union*. VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften; Springer Fachmedien Wiesbaden.

Jenkins, J., & Nielsen, R. K. (2020). Preservation and evolution: Local newspapers as ambidextrous organizations. *Journalism*, *21*(4), 472–488. https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884919886421

John, S. (2013). Demokratie in Europa—Realität oder Illusion? In D. Doering, C. Eckner, S. Hentrich, S. Liermann, & D. Schuster (Eds.), *Demokratie in Europa: Liberale Perspektiven* (pp. 189–214). Tectum-Verlag.

Kantner, C. (2004). *Kein modernes Babel: Kommunikative Voraussetzungen europäischer Öffentlichkeit* (Vol. 21). VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften.

Kleinen von Königslöw, K. (2012). Europe in crisis? Testing the stability and explanatory factors of the Europeanization of national public spheres. *International Communication Gazette*, *74*(5), 443–463. https://doi.org/10.1177/1748048512445153

Koopmans, R. (2007). Who inhabits the European public sphere? Winners and losers, supporters and opponents in Europeanised political debates. *European Journal of Political Research*, *46*(2), 183–210. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6765.2006.00691.x

Koopmans, R. (2010). Winners and losers, supporters and opponents in Europeanized public debates. In P. Statham & R. Koopmans (Eds.), *Communication, society, and politics. The making of a European public sphere: Media discourse and political contention* (pp. 97–122). Cambridge University Press.

Koopmans, R., de Beus, J., Della Porta, D., Kriesi, H., Pfetsch, B., Statham, P., & Zimmermann, A. (2007). *The transformation of political mobilisation and communication in European public spheres* (EUROPUB.COM: Final report HPSE-CT-2001-00046). European Commission. https://cordis.europa.eu/docs/projects/files/HPSE/HPSE-CT-2001-00046/100124201-6_en.pdf

Koopmans, R., & Erbe, J. (2004). Towards a European public sphere? *Innovation: The European Journal of Social Science Research*, *17*(2), 97–118. https://doi.org/10.1080/1351161042000238643

Koopmans, R., & Statham, P. (2010). Theoretical framework, research design, and methods. In P. Statham & R. Koopmans (Eds.), *Communication, society, and politics. The making of a European public sphere: Media discourse and political contention* (pp. 34–60). Cambridge University Press.

Kretzschmar, S., Möhring, W., & Timmermann, L. (Eds.). (2009). *Kompaktwissen Journalismus. Lokaljournalismus* (1. Aufl.). VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften.

Latzer, M., & Saurwein, F. (2006). Europäisierung durch Medien: Ansätze und Erkenntnisse der Öffentlichkeitsforschung. In W. R. Langenbucher & M. Latzer (Eds.), *Europäische Öffentlichkeit und medialer Wandel: Eine transdisziplinäre Perspektive* (pp. 10–44). VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften.

Liebert, U. (2012). Civil society, public sphere and democracy in the EU. In E. O. Eriksen & J. E. Fossum (Eds.), *Routledge studies on democratizing Europe. Rethinking democracy and the European Union* (Vol. 7, pp. 112–142). Routledge.

Liebetruth, D. (2012). *Europa vor Ort verankern: Potenzial und journalistische Gestaltungsmöglichkeiten lokaler*

EU-Nachrichten in der regionalen Tagespresse; eine Analyse mit Beispielen niedersächsischer Lokalzeitungen. Mensch und Buch Verlag.

Lingenberg, S. (2010). *Europäische Publikumsöffentlichkeiten*. VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-531-92120-4

Luhmann, N. (1984). *Soziale systeme*. Suhrkamp Verlag.

Luhmann, N. (1997). *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft*. Suhrkamp Verlag.

Luhmann, N. (2017). *Die Realität der Massenmedien*. Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-17738-6

Machill, M., Beiler, M., & Fischer, C. (2006). Europa-Themen in Europas Medien—die Debatte urn die europäische Öffentlichkeit.: Eine Metaanalyse medieninhaltsanalytischer Studien. In W. R. Langenbucher & M. Latzer (Eds.), *Europäische Öffentlichkeit und medialer Wandel: Eine transdisziplinäre Perspektive* (pp. 132–155). VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften.

Marquart, F., Goldberg, A. C., van Elsas, E. J., Brosius, A., & de Vreese, C. H. (2019). Knowing is not loving: Media effects on knowledge about and attitudes toward the EU. *Journal of European Integration*, *41*(5), 641–655. https://doi.org/10.1080/07036337.2018.1546302

Marschall, S. (2009). Medialisierung komplexer politischer Akteure—Indikatoren und Hypothesen am Beispiel von Parlamenten. In F. Marcinkowski & B. Pfetsch (Eds.), *Politik in der Mediendemokratie* (pp. 205–223). VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften.

Martinsen, R. (2009). Öffentlichkeit in der „Mediendemokratie" aus der Perspektive konkurrierender Demokratietheorien. In F. Marcinkowski & B. Pfetsch (Eds.), *Politik in der Mediendemokratie* (pp. 37–69). VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften.

Mendez, C., Mendez, F., Triga, V., & Carrascosa, J. M. (2020). EU cohesion policy under the media spotlight: Exploring territorial and temporal patterns in news coverage and tone. *Journal of Common Market Studies*, *58*(4), 1034–1055. https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.13016

Nesti, G., & Valentini, C. (2010). Conclusions. In C. Valentini & G. Nesti (Eds.), *Public communication in the European Union: History, perspectives and challenges* (pp. 389–408). Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Nitoiu, C. (2013). The European public sphere: Myth, reality or aspiration? *Political Studies Review*, *11*(1), 26–38. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1478-9302.2012.00287.x

Peters, B., & Wessler, H. (2006). Transnationale Öffentlichkeiten—analytische Dimensionen, normative Standards, sozialkulturelle Produktionsstrukturen. In K. Imhof, R. Blum, H. Bonfadelli, & O. Jarren (Eds.), *Demokratie in der Mediengesellschaft* (Vol. 9, pp. 125–144). VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften.

Pfetsch, B., & Heft, A. (2014). Theorizing communication flows within a European public sphere. In T. Risse (Ed.), *Contemporary European politics. European public spheres: Politics is back* (pp. 29–52). Cambridge University Press.

Plavec, J. G. (2020). *Babylon oder Blase? Die Brüsseler EU-Kommunikationskultur: Einstellungen von Politikern und Journalisten im Vergleich* (Vol. 20). Nomos.

Rawls, J. (1993). *Political liberalism*. Columbia University Press.

Reporter ohne Grenzen. (2024). *Rangliste der Pressefreiheit 2024*. https://www.reporter-ohne-grenzen.de/rangliste/rangliste-2024

Reporter ohne Grenzen. (2025). *Rangliste der Pressefreiheit 2025*. https://www.reporter-ohne-grenzen.de/rangliste/rangliste-2025

Risse, T. (2010). *A community of Europeans? Transnational identities and public spheres*. Cornell University Press. https://doi.org/10.7591/9780801459184

Risse, T. (2014a). Introduction. In T. Risse (Ed.), *Contemporary European politics. European public spheres: Politics is back* (pp. 1–26). Cambridge University Press.

Risse, T. (2014b). European public spheres, the politicization of EU affairs, and its consequences. In T. Risse (Ed.), *Contemporary European politics. European public spheres: Politics is back* (pp. 141–164). Cambridge University Press.

Rivas-de-Roca, R., & García-Gordillo, M. (2022). Understanding the European public sphere: A review of pending challenges in research. *European Politics and Society*, *23*(3), 380–394. https://doi.org/10.1080/23745118.2021.1884965

Rohrer, M. (2010). Von der Konstruktion europäischer Öffentlichkeiten. Eine theoretische Einordnung der Kommunikationspolitik von Parlament und Kommission. In E. Klaus, C. Sedmak, R. Drüeke, & G. Schweiger (Eds.), *Identität und Inklusion im europäischen Sozialraum* (pp. 69–84). VS Research.

Saxer, U. (2006). Europäischer Gesellschafts-, Medien—und Öffentlichkeitswandel—eine kommunikationssoziologische Perspektive. In W. R. Langenbucher & M. Latzer (Eds.), *Europäische Öffentlichkeit und medialer Wandel: Eine transdisziplinäre Perspektive* (pp. 62–92). VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften.

Schulz, W. (2011). *Politische Kommunikation: Theoretische Ansätze und Ergebnisse empirischer Forschung*. VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften; Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-531-93094-7

Seeliger, M., & Sevignani, S. (2021). Zum Verhältnis von Öffentlichkeit und Demokratie. Ein neuer Strukturwandel? In M. Seeliger & S. Sevignani (Eds.), *Ein neuer Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit?* (Vol. 37, pp. 9–39). Nomos.

Sifft, S., Brüggemann, M., Kleinen von Königslöw, K., Peters, B., & Wimmel, A. (2007). Segmented Europeanization: Exploring the legitimacy of the European Union from a public discourse perspective. *Journal of Common Market Studies*, *45*(1), 127–155. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-5965.2007.00706.x

Splichal, S. (2022). The public sphere in the twilight zone of publicness. *European Journal of Communication*, *37*(2), 198–215. https://doi.org/10.1177/02673231211061490

Statham, P. (2007). Political communication, European integration and the transformation of national public spheres: A comparison of Britain and France. In J. E. Fossum & P. Schlesinger (Eds.), *The European Union and the Public Sphere: A communicative space in the making?* (pp. 110–134). Routledge.

Statham, P. (2010a). Introduction: Europe's search for a public. In P. Statham & R. Koopmans (Eds.), *The making of a European public sphere: Media discourse and political contention* (pp. 1–10). Cambridge University Press.

Statham, P. (2010b). What kind of Europeanized public politics? In P. Statham & R. Koopmans (Eds.), *The making of a European public sphere: Media discourse and political contention* (pp. 277–306). Cambridge University Press.

Statham, P., & Trenz, H.-J. (2013). *The politicization of Europe: Contesting the constitution in the mass media* (Vol. 8). Routledge.

Tobler, S. (2010). *Transnationalisierung nationaler Öffentlichkeit: Konfliktinduzierte Kommunikationsverdichtungen und kollektive Identitätsbildung in Europa*. VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-531-92000-9

Trenz, H.-J. (2004). Media coverage on European governance: Exploring the European public sphere in national quality newspapers. *European Journal of Communication*, *19*(3), 291–319. https://doi.org/10.1177/0267323104045257

Trenz, H.-J. (2005). Die mediale Ordnung des politischen Europas: Formen und Dynamiken der Europäisierung politischer Kommunikation in der Qualitätspresse. *Zeitschrift Für Soziologie*, *34*(3), 188–206.

Trenz, H.-J. (2008). Understanding media impact on European integration: Enhancing or restricting the scope of legitimacy of the EU? *Journal of European Integration*, *30*(2), 291–309. https://doi.org/10.1080/07036330802005516

Trenz, H.-J. (2010). The Europeanisation of political communication: Conceptual clarifications and empirical measurements. In C. Bee & E. Bozzini (Eds.), *Mapping the European public sphere: Institutions, media and civil society* (pp. 15–29). Ashgate.

Tuñón-Navarro, J., & Carral-Vilar, U. (2021). Has Covid-19 promoted or discouraged a European public sphere? Comparative analysis of the Twitter interactions of German, French, Italian and Spanish MEPSs during the pandemic. *Communication & Society*, *34*(3), 135–151. https://doi.org/10.15581/003.34.3.135-151

van de Steeg, M. (2010). Theoretical reflections on the public sphere in the European Union: A network of communication or a political community? In C. Bee & E. Bozzini (Eds.), *Mapping the European public sphere: Institutions, media and civil society* (pp. 31–45). Ashgate Publishing.

Vetters, R. (2007). Vor Ort in Europa: Ein Vergleich der EU-Berichterstattung deutscher Qualitäts—und Regionalzeitungen. *Medien & Kommunikationswissenschaft*, *55*(3), 355–371. https://doi.org/10.5771/1615-634x-2007-3-355

Vonbun-Feldbauer, R., Grüblbauer, J., Berghofer, S., Krone, J., Beck, K., Steffan, D., & Dogruel, L. (2020). *Regionaler Pressemarkt und Publizistische Vielfalt: Strukturen und Inhalte der Regionalpresse in Deutschland und Österreich 1995–2015*. Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-28965-2

About the Author

Muriel Cathérine Wenzel is a research assistant, especially active in Model United Nations, and a PhD student at the Department of Social and Cultural Sciences, Fulda University of Applied Sciences, Germany. She is currently publishing her PhD project *Top-down und bottom-up: Dynamiken europäischer Öffentlichkeit im Lokalen*.

Politics and Governance
2025 • Volume 13 • Article 10041
https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.10041

cogitatio

ARTICLE

Open Access Journal

Too Far to Reach? Explaining Low Croatian Participation in the European Citizens' Initiative

Igor Vidačak, Mario Munta, and Ana Matan

Faculty of Political Science, University of Zagreb, Croatia

Correspondence: Igor Vidačak (igor.vidacak@fpzg.hr)

Submitted: 31 January 2025 **Accepted:** 22 May 2025 **Published:** 7 August 2025

Issue: This article is part of the issue "Debating Europe: Politicization, Contestation, and Democratization" edited by Claudia Wiesner (Fulda University of Applied Sciences) and Meta Novak (University of Ljubljana), fully open access at https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.i452

Abstract

This article explores the dynamics of Croatian citizen participation in the European Citizens' Initiative (ECI), with a particular focus on explaining the notably low level of engagement since Croatia's accession to the EU in 2013. The study establishes a quantitative baseline of Croatian involvement in ECIs and presents qualitative insights from focus group discussions with students of political science, journalism, and European studies, as well as interviews with CSOs who have participated in ECIs. By combining these methods, the article identifies key barriers and opportunities for increasing Croatian engagement in ECIs. The analysis seeks to understand why Croatian citizens participate significantly less in ECIs compared to broader EU trends. The findings point to a lack of awareness, perceived ineffectiveness, and procedural complexity as major obstacles, while strong CSOs' involvement and targeted communication strategies emerge as critical factors for improving participation. This research contributes to the broader discourse on participatory democracy in the EU by addressing the challenges faced by newer member states such as Croatia.

Keywords

citizen participation; Croatia; European Citizens' Initiative; European Union; participatory democracy

1. Introduction

The European Citizens' Initiative (ECI), introduced by the Treaty of Lisbon, was envisioned as a means of enhancing participatory democracy within the EU. As a transnational mechanism that allows EU citizens to directly propose legislative action to the European Commission, the ECI is generally perceived as a unique tool for citizen engagement in the policymaking process. If an initiative garners one million signatures from at least seven different EU member states, the European Commission is requested to consider the proposal,

though it retains discretion over whether to act. As an essential link between EU citizens and supranational decision-making, the ECI offers an important bottom-up participatory mechanism that complements the representative democratic processes within the EU. From the outset, the ECI was met by high expectations, being envisioned as a groundbreaking tool for fostering a vibrant European public sphere and bridging the EU's democratic deficit.

Since its establishment, the ECI has attracted substantial academic interest. A growing body of literature has focused on assessing the effectiveness of the implementation of this instrument (Anglmayer, 2015; Boussaguet, 2016; Bouza García et al., 2012; Sangsari, 2013), identifying its main limitations (Glogowski & Maurer, 2013; Weisskircher, 2020), evaluating the ECI's potential impact on building up a European civil society (Conrad, 2016; De Clerck-Sachsse, 2012; Glogowski & Maurer, 2013; Kaufmann, 2012), strengthening the EU democratic system (Greenwood, 2019; Sangsari, 2013), mobilizing stronger citizens engagement (Monaghan, 2012), or even enhancing a positive image about the EU (Gherghina & Groh, 2016). A somewhat limited number of studies investigated the factors leading to its lower or greater use (Kentmen-Cin, 2014), especially at the level of individual member states.

However, the empirical record of the ECI has been more sobering. Despite its potential to democratize EU policymaking, participation in ECIs has varied significantly across member states (ECI Forum, 2024). While certain initiatives have managed to gather widespread support, many have struggled to meet the signature thresholds. This inconsistency in participation poses questions about the accessibility, visibility, and effectiveness of ECIs as a tool for citizen participation, particularly in newer EU member states such as Croatia, where engagement remains notably low.

Since joining the EU in 2013, Croatia has demonstrated a rather low level of citizen participation in ECIs. Croatia's share of 0,58% of signatures in all successful ECIs from 2013 until 2024 (ECI Forum, 2024) appears low in absolute terms but is better interpreted on a per capita basis, relative to its population share of approximately 0.85% of the EU total. Nonetheless, when considering the ECI's initial promise to act as a catalyst for active European citizenship, such modest participation signals a broader underperformance relative to expectations. The reasons behind this limited involvement among Croatian citizens are complex and multifaceted, potentially tied to a combination of socio-political, cultural, administrative, and institutional factors. This article seeks to address this gap by analyzing the dynamics behind Croatian citizens' low engagement in ECIs and exploring potential pathways to increased participation.

Croatia is selected as a critical case study for several reasons. As a relatively recent EU member state with a post-socialist democratic tradition, Croatia offers a valuable lens to understand the challenges of building participatory democratic practices through supranational instruments such as the ECI. Its persistently low levels of participation, despite formal opportunities for engagement, make it a revealing case for exploring the barriers and limitations of transnational participatory democracy within newer EU member states.

The primary aim of this article is to explain the factors behind the low level of Croatian citizens' participation in ECIs. To this end, the article addresses the following research questions:

> RQ1: How does Croatian citizens' participation in ECIs compare quantitatively to that of other EU member states since Croatia's accession?

RQ2: What are the perceptions of ECIs among civil society organizations (CSOs) and young Croatian citizens, particularly students involved in ECI-supporting projects?

RQ3: Given the limited participation, what barriers to ECI participation are identified by these actors?

RQ4: What structural, cultural, and institutional factors may account for Croatia's comparatively lower engagement in ECIs?

In addressing these questions, the article aims to contribute to the broader discourse on participatory democracy within the EU and provide actionable insights into how ECI participation can be strengthened in Croatia.

The findings identify a lack of awareness, perceived ineffectiveness, and procedural complexity as major obstacles. Strong CSOs' involvement and targeted communication strategies emerge as critical for improving participation.

Thus, while the ECI was designed to democratize EU governance and foster active citizenship, Croatia's persistently low levels of participation illustrate the challenges of translating this normative ambition into tangible political engagement. Understanding this gap between aspiration and reality is crucial for evaluating the ECI's broader effectiveness as an instrument of participatory democracy.

The article is structured as follows. First, a theoretical framework and literature review will provide an overview of existing research on participatory democracy and citizen engagement within the EU, with a particular focus on ECIs. Next, the article will present a descriptive statistical analysis of Croatian citizens' participation in ECIs since the country's accession to the EU. The subsequent section presents qualitative insights from focus group discussions with students of political science, journalism, and European studies, who have been involved in ECI-supporting projects, as well as interviews with Croatian CSOs involved in ECIs. Taking into account the methodological limitations of this research, the findings will then be synthesized to discuss the multifaceted factors influencing Croatian citizens' engagement in ECIs. Finally, the article will conclude with recommendations for improving citizen participation and suggest directions for future research.

2. Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

Participatory democracy refers to a model of democracy where citizens are directly involved in the decision-making process, rather than solely through their elected representatives (Barber, 2004; Pateman, 1970, 2012). This concept emphasizes the inclusion of citizens in governance beyond traditional voting mechanisms, providing platforms through which they can express their preferences and influence policy outputs. Within the EU, participatory democracy is embedded in the legal framework, notably through Article 11 of the Treaty on the EU, which underscores the role of citizens and civil society in shaping EU policy.

As the first transnational participatory tool in the world, the ECI intends to foster a more inclusive and citizen-centred form of governance (Dougan, 2011). As part of the EU's broader strategy to enhance legitimacy and reduce the "democratic deficit" (Føllesdal & Hix, 2006), the ECI is designed to function as an

institutional bridge between EU citizens and supranational decision-making. Despite its innovative nature, the actual impact of ECIs in fostering widespread citizen participation remains contested, with concerns about its complexity and effectiveness (Boussaguet, 2016; Bouza Garcia & Greenwood, 2014; Longo, 2019). In practice, the ECI's promise has often fallen short, particularly in newer member states such as Croatia, where engagement levels remain low. This highlights the relevance of examining how Croatia's specific socio-political context shapes its citizens' participation in ECIs. Understanding why Croatia deviates from the broader EU ambitions requires situating its case within broader theories of political participation and civic engagement, while also identifying Croatia-specific barriers.

Theories of political participation and civic engagement provide a critical lens for understanding the individual-level, organizational, structural, and institutional factors that influence citizen involvement in democratic processes. The civic voluntarism model is one of the most influential frameworks (Verba et al., 1995), proposing that political participation is shaped by three primary factors: resources (time, money, and civic skills), psychological engagement (political interest, efficacy), and recruitment networks (organizations that mobilize citizens). This model offers valuable insights into understanding individual and organizational barriers that may prevent Croatian citizens from participating in ECIs, such as limited awareness, perceptions of low responsiveness of EU institutions to citizens' demands (external political efficacy), and weak mobilization networks. In Croatia, these weaknesses are compounded by historically low civic skills levels and limited recruitment by CSOs for EU-level participatory mechanisms.

Numerous studies have identified structural barriers to participation. Putnam's (2000) work on social capital emphasizes the importance of trust, networks, and civic norms in fostering collective action. According to Putnam, societies with higher levels of social capital are more likely to engage in civic and political activities. This theoretical insight is particularly pertinent to Croatia, where empirical evidence suggests a persistently weak tradition of collective civic action. In the Croatian context, persistently low levels of interpersonal trust and underdeveloped civic traditions—legacies of the post-socialist transition—pose significant barriers to citizen mobilization for transnational participatory mechanisms like the ECI. Empirical studies have documented widespread societal mistrust, including towards CSOs, and a historically weak culture of civic engagement, both of which hinder effective utilization of EU-level participatory instruments (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2024; Bovan & Baketa, 2022).

Similarly, Dalton's (2008) concept of "engaged citizenship" underscores the role of post-materialist values, in which individuals are more likely to engage in non-institutionalized forms of participation, such as signing petitions or participating in initiatives like the ECI, if they value self-expression and individual empowerment. However, Croatian political culture, shaped by economic insecurities and institutional distrust, may limit the prevalence of such post-materialist engagement (Bovan & Baketa, 2022). Thus, Croatia may be less fertile ground for the non-institutionalized forms of political action that ECIs require, compared to older member states.

Recent sociological literature has also explored how perceived cultural distance from political elites and institutions can shape citizens' willingness to participate. Citizens may perceive EU-level actors as socially and culturally distant, reinforcing their belief that "people like them" are not taken seriously in Brussels (Manning & Holmes, 2014; Noordzij et al., 2021; Visser et al., 2023). In newer or less-integrated member states such as Croatia, this emotional distance, often rooted in class, education, or regional divides, can

amplify existing distrust and disengagement from EU participatory mechanisms. These findings offer important conceptual tools for understanding why even informed or politically active citizens may feel alienated from transnational democratic instruments like the ECI.

Fuchs and Klingemann's (1995) theory of "political culture" also provides a useful framework for understanding varying levels of civic engagement across EU member states. Their work suggests that historical, cultural, and institutional legacies shape the degree to which citizens feel connected to and empowered by democratic mechanisms. Given Croatia's relatively short experience with democratic institutions and its relatively recent EU membership, lower engagement with supranational participatory instruments like the ECI aligns with these theoretical expectations.

Other authors have highlighted additional structural challenges contributing to low levels of participation in ECIs in different EU member states. These include limited media coverage, low levels of trust in EU institutions, and a general lack of civic education focused on the EU's participatory mechanisms (Bouza Garcia, 2015). Furthermore, Motti-Stefanidi and Cicognani (2018) note that although young people are generally more inclined towards non-institutional forms of political participation, they remain largely unaware of the ECI as a tool for influencing EU legislation, despite their increasing interest in political issues at the national and EU levels. The case of Croatia, marked by limited civic education on EU participatory tools (Bajkuša & Šarić, 2021), exemplifies these broader structural obstacles.

To address these issues, scholars such as Greenwood (2019) and Alemanno (2020) have proposed reforms to make the ECI more accessible, including simplifying the signature collection process, increasing institutional support for organizing committees, and promoting the ECI more vigorously across member states. While these reforms are yet to be fully implemented, they reflect a growing consensus on the need to adapt the ECI to better serve its intended purpose of enhancing participatory democracy within the EU.

Since the introduction of the ECI, numerous studies have sought to evaluate the effectiveness of its institutional characteristics in promoting citizen participation. According to Bouza Garcia and Greenwood (2014), the ECI has faced significant institutional challenges in achieving its democratic potential. They argue that while the ECI was envisioned as a tool to bridge the gap between EU institutions and citizens, its procedural complexity, legal restrictions, and the high threshold of signatures have limited its accessibility to ordinary citizens. Similarly, Boussaguet (2016) notes that only a small percentage of ECIs have successfully gathered the necessary signatures to trigger a formal response from the European Commission, thus raising questions about the initiative's overall effectiveness.

In Croatia, these general barriers—complexity, procedural hurdles, and lack of visibility—intersect with local factors such as limited media attention to EU affairs, weak civic infrastructures, and citizens' emotional detachment from EU-level governance (Ilišin, 2007).

In terms of participation trends, studies have shown that ECI engagement tends to be higher in older, more established EU member states, particularly those with a stronger tradition of civic activism and participatory politics (Monaghan, 2012). In contrast, participation in newer member states, such as those from Central and Eastern Europe, including Croatia, has remained consistently low. One key reason for this, according to Greenwood and Tuokko (2017), is the lack of visibility and public awareness of the ECI mechanism in these

countries. Additionally, they argue that institutional barriers, such as the lack of support from national governments or CSOs, have further impeded the successful mobilization of citizens in these regions.

Longo (2019) provides additional important insights into the ECI as a tool for enhancing citizen participation within EU governance. His analysis highlights several key challenges associated with the ECI. First, Longo points to e-democracy limitations, emphasizing the difficulties of engaging a diverse European citizenry through digital platforms—a problem also relevant in the Croatian context, where low public awareness and technological barriers exist. He also underscores low civil society participation, noting that significant public and NGOs' involvement is crucial for ECI success, aligning with the role of NGOs identified in Croatian campaigns. Lastly, Longo criticizes the cumbersome role of the European Commission, which complicates the transition from successful ECI campaigns to legislative action, echoing concerns about the perceived ineffectiveness of ECIs. His advocacy for reforming the ECI process to make it a more viable democratic tool complements discussions around the broader democratic deficit and Euroscepticism, offering a foundation for considering reforms that could improve engagement and participatory democracy in both Croatia and the EU at large (Longo, 2019).

Regarding the organizational aspect of ECIs, CSOs are often seen as essential intermediaries between citizens and EU institutions, but their ability to truly represent and mobilize the public is increasingly questioned. Kohler-Koch (2010) introduces the concept of "astroturf representation," where CSOs claim to speak on behalf of citizens but, in reality, lack strong grassroots connections. Many of these organizations, particularly those operating at the EU level, are highly professionalized and well-integrated into policymaking networks, yet remain detached from everyday concerns of ordinary citizens. This creates a paradox: While CSOs are expected to bridge the gap between the public and decision-makers, they often reinforce democratic deficits by engaging in symbolic rather than substantive representation. Instead of broad civic participation, EU funding structures tend to favour established, well-resourced organizations, making it even harder for smaller, more community-driven groups to gain influence. In Croatia, the relative weakness of grassroots-driven CSOs and shrinking space for civic action (Freedom House, 2024; Narsee et al., 2023) further limits their potential to mobilize citizens for ECIs effectively.

Building on this critique, Albareda (2018) examines whether CSOs function as genuine transmission belts that channel citizens' interests into policymaking. His findings suggest that only a small fraction manages to strike a balance between grassroots engagement and policy influence. Many CSOs, while technically well-equipped to interact with decision-makers, struggle to involve their members in shaping their positions. This professionalization trend, reinforced by financial reliance on EU funding, often pushes them away from grassroots activism and towards a more technocratic, elite-driven advocacy model. In the case of ECIs, this raises an important question of whether low participation in Croatia and other member states is purely a result of public disengagement, or it is also a symptom of civil society's limited ability to mobilize citizens in a meaningful way. If CSOs are to truly empower citizens, they must find ways to reconnect with their base and ensure that participation is not just a procedural formality but a driver of real democratic engagement.

Based on the literature review and empirical findings, the analytical framework for examining the low level of Croatian citizen engagement in ECIs is structured across four interconnected levels: individual, organizational, institutional, and structural. This multi-level approach reflects both general barriers identified in existing research and Croatia-specific obstacles revealed through qualitative data.

At the individual level, key determinants include civic literacy (awareness and understanding of ECIs), digital skills, prior experience with political or civic engagement, and perceptions of internal and external political efficacy—that is, beliefs in one's ability to influence politics and in the system's responsiveness. As highlighted in the focus group discussions, low familiarity with ECIs, emotional distance from EU institutions, and perceptions of limited impact collectively hinder citizens' motivation to engage.

At the organizational level, CSOs serve as crucial intermediaries for public mobilization, but their effectiveness depends on financial, administrative, and human resources, as well as their capacity to develop targeted strategies and form coalitions. In the Croatian context, as shown in CSO interviews, many organizations participate in ECI campaigns only passively or as national partners, lacking the resources or transnational networks to take a leading role in mobilization.

At the institutional level, procedural complexity and legal uncertainty remain significant barriers. The European Commission's discretionary power in following up on successful ECIs, combined with limited institutional support at the national level, contributes to perceptions of futility and reduces the incentive for sustained engagement. Croatian CSOs expressed scepticism about the responsiveness of EU institutions and noted the absence of meaningful government support or public co-financing mechanisms.

At the structural level, broader socio-political and cultural conditions—including low levels of trust in institutions, weak traditions of civic activism, minimal civic education on EU participatory tools, and limited media coverage—create systemic obstacles. These factors are particularly pronounced in Croatia's post-socialist context, where social capital remains underdeveloped, and civic engagement is often fragmented or confined to narrow activist circles.

These four levels collectively shape the feasibility and intensity of citizen engagement in ECIs and provide a framework for analyzing Croatia's comparatively low participation (see Table 1).

Table 1. Analytical framework for explaining low Croatian participation in ECIs.

Level	General Dimension	Croatia-Specific Challenges
Individual	Civic literacy, political awareness, efficacy perceptions	Low awareness of ECIs, weak internal/external efficacy, political disengagement
Organizational	CSO capacity and mobilization strategies	Weak CSO–EU linkages, fragmented sector, low mobilization in ECI agenda-setting
Institutional	Procedural rules, legal barriers, EU responsiveness	Complex procedures, Commission's discretionary power, perceived lack of policy impact
Structural	Civic culture, trust, media visibility, civic education	Weak civic traditions, low social capital, limited media coverage, minimal EU-focused curricula

So far, there have been no studies on the scope of engagement of Croatian citizens in ECIs or the factors influencing their engagement. This article aims to contribute to the literature in this field by shedding light on specific challenges of engaging in ECIs in new EU member states, with potential theoretical and practical implications, especially in the context of EU efforts to promote citizen participation and active civil society in candidate countries pursuing EU accession.

3. Methodology

This exploratory study adopts a mixed-methods approach (Creswell & Clark, 2018), combining both quantitative and qualitative data to gain a comprehensive understanding of Croatian citizen participation in ECIs. The quantitative component involves the descriptive analysis of existing statistical data on Croatian engagement in ECIs since the country's accession to the EU. This data provides a baseline for understanding overall participation trends and allows for comparisons with other EU member states.

Concurrently, the qualitative component of the study draws on insights from four interviews with representatives of prominent CSOs in Croatia, complemented by three focus group discussions with 25 students. By integrating both quantitative and qualitative data, the study leverages the strengths of each approach—quantitative analysis ensures broader generalizability, while qualitative methods provide depth and contextual understanding of the findings.

The rationale for combining interviews and focus groups was to examine the four key factors influencing citizen participation. Interviews with CSO representatives primarily focused on organizational factors, whereas focus groups centred on individual-level determinants. Both methods were also employed to explore institutional and structural challenges to citizen participation in ECIs.

CSOs were selected for interviews based on their policy expertise in ECIs that successfully met the EU-level threshold of one million signatures but failed to collect the required minimum of 8,000 signatures in Croatia (see Section 4). By focusing on unsuccessful initiatives, rather than successful cases, the study aims to provide a deeper understanding of the persistent challenges these organizations encounter in mobilizing citizens for ECI signature collection in Croatia. The semi-structured interview protocol included questions on CSOs' experiences with ECIs, their motivations for participation, organizational challenges in citizen mobilization, institutional barriers to engagement, and structural obstacles to broader public involvement.

However, it is important to acknowledge that selecting only CSOs involved in unsuccessful campaigns introduces a potential selection bias. These organizations may be more likely to highlight barriers and limitations rather than enablers of citizen mobilization, which should be taken into account when interpreting the findings.

Moreover, all interviewed CSOs were Croatian-based organizations that participated as national-level partners in larger ECI campaigns initiated primarily by Brussels-based actors. They were not primary agenda-setters but rather supporters at the national level. This distinction suggests that Croatian CSOs, although engaged, have limited strategic influence in shaping or steering ECI campaigns. This national-level positioning may contribute to the relatively low mobilization success observed in Croatia.

Focus group discussions were conducted with students of political science, journalism, and European studies who were involved in projects supporting ECIs. The qualitative data aim to explore the underlying perceptions, motivations, and barriers that influence Croatian citizens' participation in ECIs. These students were selected because of their involvement in projects aimed at supporting ECIs, which positioned them as informed participants capable of offering valuable insights into engagement dynamics. The participants were chosen using a purposive sampling technique, ensuring that each individual had direct experience or

knowledge of ECI-related activities. The final group consisted of 25 students who had participated in ECI-promoting projects in Croatia.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that the focus group participants, as students in political and civic fields, constitute a more politically informed and civically engaged subgroup compared to the general Croatian population. This introduces a sample bias that may limit the generalizability of the findings. Their perspectives are valuable for understanding engagement dynamics among politically aware youth but may not fully capture the broader public's knowledge, attitudes, or motivations towards ECIs.

Key questions and areas of discussion were focused on awareness and understanding of ECIs (how familiar are participants with ECIs, and what do they know about the mechanism's function within the EU's participatory framework?); perceptions of participation (what motivates or discourages participation in ECIs?; how do students view the role of citizen-led initiatives in shaping EU policies?); barriers to engagement (what factors, such as lack of awareness, trust in institutions, or the perceived complexity of ECIs, impede participation?); potential for increased involvement (what solutions do the students suggest for increasing public awareness and participation in ECIs, particularly in Croatia?).

These focus group discussions were semi-structured, allowing for both guided questions and open dialogue. Conversations in interviews and focus groups were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using a theory-driven approach to thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021). This method identified recurring patterns and themes related to the students' perceptions and experiences with ECIs. Factors contributing to varying degrees of citizen engagement with ECIs, as operationalized in the analytical framework of this study, served as a deductive codebook toolkit to categorize interview and focus group data into thematic groups.

Given the limited academic research on ECIs, the purposeful sampling of graduates in political science, journalism, and European studies aligns with the exploratory nature of this study. These students are more likely to offer valuable insights into democratic challenges and barriers associated with ECIs due to their advanced knowledge and interest in political processes compared to the general public. While their perspectives may not be fully representative of the broader population, their specialized academic background enables them to articulate well-informed and coherent opinions on ECIs.

While the mixed-methods approach provides a comprehensive perspective, several methodological limitations must be acknowledged:

1. Limited sample size: The qualitative data are drawn from a relatively small sample of 25 students, which is not fully representative of the broader population of Croatian citizens and civil society. The experiences and views of politically engaged students might differ significantly from not only those of the general public but also from other student cohorts, leading to a potential bias in the findings.
2. Geographical and academic bias: The focus group participants come from academic disciplines that are inherently more likely to engage with political and civic processes. This may result in a skewed understanding of the general public's awareness and engagement with ECIs.
3. Reliance on existing quantitative data: The quantitative analysis relies on available data from European reports on ECI participation. While these data are useful for identifying trends, they may not capture more nuanced or recent developments in Croatian citizens' involvement.

4. Temporal scope: The data and focus groups reflect a snapshot in time, particularly focusing on ECIs up to 2024. Any subsequent initiatives or changes in political dynamics are not covered, limiting the temporal relevance of the findings.

In sum, while the study may offer valuable insights into Croatian citizens' engagement with ECIs, the findings must be interpreted within the context of these limitations and the exploratory nature of this research. Future research with larger and more diverse samples, as well as longitudinal studies, would help to further validate and expand upon the insights presented here.

4. Croatian Citizens and ECIs: Overview of Key Trends and Civil Society Involvement

Since Croatia acceded to the EU in 2013, participation in ECIs has remained relatively low compared to other EU member states. Despite the existence of various ECIs addressing issues relevant to Croatian citizens, overall participation has not reached expected levels. According to recent data from the *2024 European Citizens' Initiative Infographic* (ECI Forum, 2024), Croatia's contribution to ECI campaigns has been minimal, with only a small percentage of the population actively supporting initiatives. This indicates both a lack of awareness and a possible disconnection between Croatian citizens and EU-level participatory processes. While Croatia is relatively new to the EU, these low numbers underscore the need for improved outreach and education about ECIs.

The latest official reports from the European Commission show that the 10 successful ECIs as of 2024 have collectively gathered nearly 13 million signatures, underscoring the growing importance of unified citizen engagement across the EU. This marks an increase from the previous year, reflecting both the relevance and mobilizing power of ECIs. Notably, the initiative One of Us leads the group with 1,695,328 verified signatures, followed closely by Right2Water, which accumulated 1,673,181 signatures. The latest successful initiative, Fur Free Europe, ranks third, amassing 1,502,319 signatures (see Figure 1). These figures reflect broad public support for a variety of causes, ranging from pro-life issues to environmental protection and animal rights (ECI Forum, 2024).

Between 2013 and 2024, Croatia contributed 75,827 signatures to the 10 successful ECIs, which represents 0.58% of the 12,975,370 total signatures collected across all EU member states during this period (see Table 2). The initiative Right2Water is also included in this analysis since the collection of signatures lasted until September 2013, after Croatia's entry to the EU.

When comparing total signatures from ten successful ECIs relative to member state populations (2012–2024), Croatia's share stands at just 2%. This places Croatia among the lowest both in absolute numbers of signatures and in per capita participation. A standout example of high per capita engagement comes from Malta, where 8.9% of the population participated in ECIs, particularly the One of Us initiative. This level of participation suggests that smaller states can mobilize effectively when campaigns are well-targeted. Hungary, with a 7.2% engagement rate, also demonstrates the importance of tailored, national-specific campaigns that resonate with the local populace. By contrast, Croatia's low per capita engagement, combined with its minimal contributions to successful initiatives, highlights the challenges of mobilizing public support for ECIs in the country.

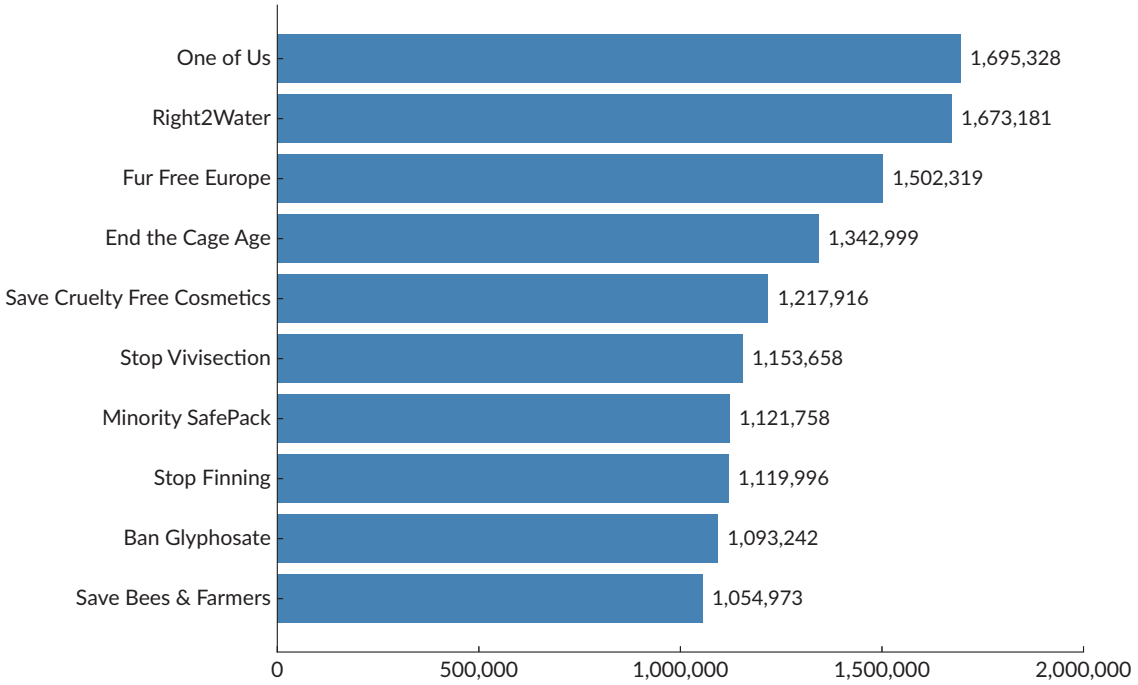

Figure 1. Total number of verified signatures for 10 successful ECIs (2012–2024). Source: ECI Forum (2024).

Table 2. Signatures collected by 10 successful ECIs (2012–2024).

Country	Signatures
Germany	4,473,404
Italy	1,903,618
France	1,052,160
Hungary	691,904
Spain	657,579
Poland	522,145
Romania	480,965
Netherlands	457,262
Belgium	314,761
Austria	253,158
Slovakia	237,730
Sweden	236,074
Czechia	228,771
Finland	207,619
Denmark	195,464
Bulgaria	185,462
Portugal	169,270
Greece	153,522
Latvia	103,982
Croatia	75,827
Ireland	71,416
Slovenia	67,839
Lithuania	64,105
Malta	48,237
Luxembourg	36,616
Estonia	22,368
Cyprus	14,462

Source: ECI Forum (2024).

These comparative figures suggest that Croatian citizens are either less informed or less motivated to engage in ECIs than citizens of other EU member states. Structural challenges, such as a lack of media coverage and civic education on the ECI process, may contribute to this trend. Thus, greater efforts are needed to raise awareness about the ECI as a tool for citizen participation in EU decision-making processes.

When it comes to reaching the signature threshold for successful ECIs between 2012 and 2024, Croatia ranks in the middle among EU member states (see Figure 2).

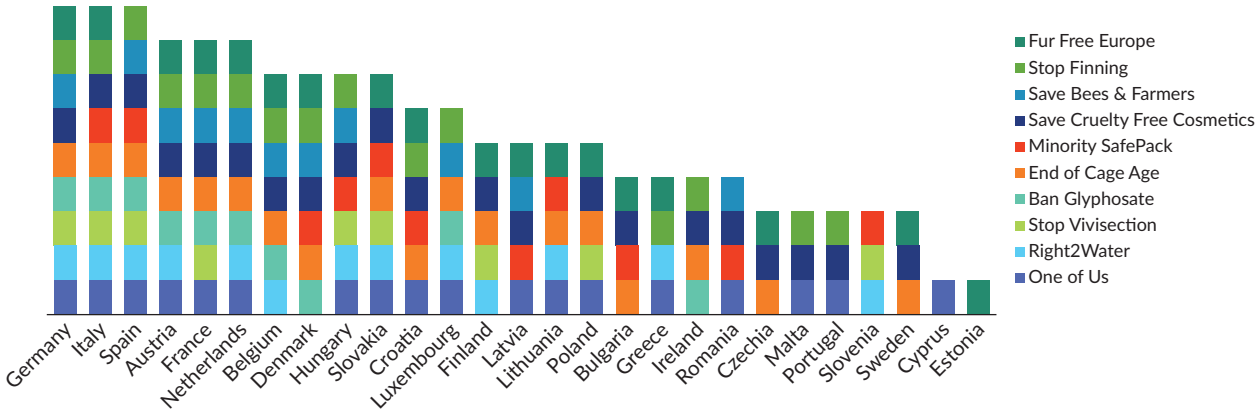

Figure 2. Successful ECIs that reached the signature threshold in each member state (2012–2024). Source: ECI Forum (2024).

In Croatia, the successful ECIs that received significant support reflect a focus on diverse causes, with a particular emphasis on animal protection and minority rights. For example, initiatives like Fur Free Europe, Save Cruelty Free Cosmetics, Stop Finning, and End the Cage Age, all of which are aimed at protecting animals from exploitation and harm, garnered notable support. These initiatives align with broader European trends, where animal rights campaigns have consistently mobilized substantial public backing.

In addition to these animal welfare initiatives, Croatia also saw engagement in campaigns related to minority protection, such as the Minority SafePack initiative, which sought to improve the rights and protections of ethnic minorities across Europe. Another significant, albeit more controversial, initiative that received support was One of Us, which focuses on anti-abortion advocacy and reflects a strong pro-life stance that resonates with certain segments of the population. This diversity in supported causes shows that Croatian citizens are engaged with a wide array of social and ethical issues, from protecting vulnerable groups to addressing moral and religious concerns.

The success of several ECIs in Croatia can be closely linked to the presence and active involvement of well-established NGOs, particularly in the area of animal protection. Initiatives such as Fur Free Europe, Save Cruelty Free Cosmetics, Stop Finning, and End the Cage Age have all benefited from the backing of dedicated animal protection NGOs, which have been instrumental in mobilizing support and raising public awareness about these causes.

These NGOs, through their strong networks, strategic campaigns, and effective use of social media, have played a crucial role in gathering the required number of signatures to pass the threshold in Croatia. Their involvement not only increases the visibility of the initiatives but also provides the necessary organizational

infrastructure to facilitate large-scale participation. This pattern suggests that Croatian citizen engagement in ECIs tends to be more robust when there is strong NGO backing, particularly in areas like animal rights, where these organizations have a long-standing presence and influence.

This reliance on NGOs reflects broader trends seen across Europe, where CSOs often act as key drivers of successful ECIs by channelling public sentiment into coordinated action and ensuring that citizens are informed and motivated to participate.

Based on the latest data from the European Commission, only 18 Croatian citizens took part in organizing committees of ECIs, as key structures tasked to initiate and represent the ECIs, placing it in the middle range compared to other EU member states (Figure 3).

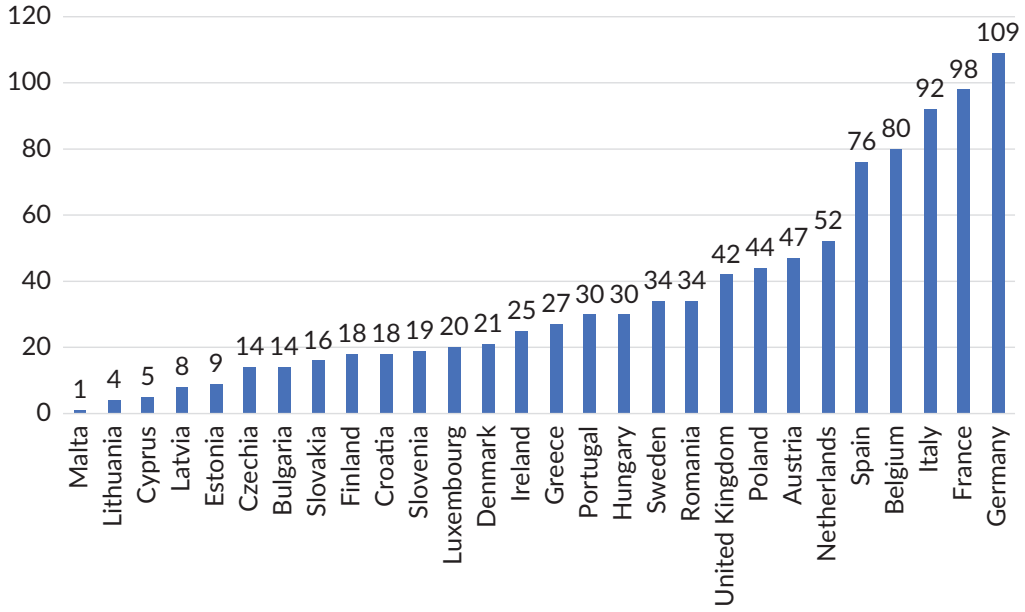

Figure 3. Number of ECI organisers by country of residence. Source: ECI Forum (2024).

While Croatia's participation is higher than several smaller countries like Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, it still trails significantly behind countries such as Germany (109 organizers), France (98), and Italy (92). This suggests that while there is a growing interest in organizing ECIs within Croatia, the level of civic engagement and organizational capacity remains moderate. Croatia's involvement is comparable to countries like Finland and Slovakia, both of which also have a similar number of ECI organizers. Strengthening awareness and building organizational support within civil society could further enhance Croatia's role in initiating EU-wide citizen-led campaigns.

The data indicate that while Croatian citizens are involved in ECI campaigns, mostly due to strong mobilization by relevant CSOs around sensitive and emotional topics, there is still considerable room for growth in terms of public engagement and awareness about these participatory mechanisms.

5. Croatian CSOs and ECI: Mobilization Potential and Structural Barriers

CSOs in Croatia play a complex role in the ECI process, reflecting both their mobilization potential and their structural limitations in acting as transmission belts that channel citizens' interests into policymaking. The findings from the four CSO interviews highlight a recurring challenge: While CSOs recognise the ECI as a theoretically valuable participatory tool, its practical implementation is perceived as burdened with obstacles, leading to limited engagement at the national level.

One of the key insights from the interviews is the widespread scepticism among Croatian CSOs regarding the effectiveness of ECIs in achieving tangible policy change. CSOs expressed strong reservations about the real impact of ECIs, arguing that while these initiatives successfully raise awareness and mobilize citizens across borders, they rarely translate into concrete legislative action at the EU level. The interviewee pointed out that despite meeting the signature thresholds, the European Commission often sidesteps legislative follow-up, undermining the credibility of the instrument in the eyes of both CSOs and citizens. As stated by CSO4: "It is difficult to identify truly successful initiatives if success is defined as achieving actual policy change rather than just collecting signatures….The Commission finds ways to avoid implementing legislative proposals, which sends a particularly bad signal to citizens." This reinforces the notion that procedural success does not necessarily translate into institutional responsiveness, contributing to widespread disengagement. This critique aligns with Kohler-Koch's (2010) argument that EU-level participatory mechanisms often suffer from a democratic paradox: While designed to empower citizens, they ultimately reinforce the dominance of institutional actors, leaving CSOs in an ambiguous position—expected to mobilize public support without promising policy influence.

Furthermore, CSO engagement with ECIs in Croatia appears to be largely passive or incidental rather than strategic. CSO3 described a scenario where ECIs are primarily initiated by large Brussels-based advocacy networks, with national organizations playing a secondary role in implementation rather than in agenda-setting. This dynamic reflects Albareda's (2018) findings that many CSOs operate more as technical intermediaries rather than genuine grassroots mobilizers, limiting their ability to truly connect with citizens and amplify their voices in policymaking. The interviewee from CSO2 also noted that while their organization is structurally capable of supporting ECIs, there is a prevailing passivity in engaging with such initiatives, partly due to limited resources and a lack of prioritization of ECIs in their advocacy work. This passivity is not only institutional but also cultural. CSO2 points out the lack of internalised participatory culture and emotional distance from EU-level issues: "Participation in processes involving European issues is still very weak. I believe that civic awareness and understanding that citizens can influence something that will become a topic in distant Brussels have not truly taken root." This illustrates a deeper emotional and cognitive disconnect between Croatian civil society actors and the supranational political space.

A significant structural constraint identified by all interviewed CSOs is the precarious financial and organizational environment in which Croatian civil society operates. CSO1 emphasized that the shrinking civic space, increasing bureaucratic burdens, and financial precarity of NGOs in Croatia make a long-term commitment to ECIs particularly challenging. This reflects a broader issue in EU civil society participation: While CSOs are expected to function as vital actors in participatory democracy, their capacity to engage in sustained mobilization is often hindered by the very institutional frameworks that claim to support them. The interviewee from CSO3 underscored this dilemma, stating that their organization has to carefully

choose where to invest its limited mobilization capital, as unsuccessful ECIs risk "wasting" public engagement efforts that could be directed towards more impactful advocacy strategies.

Another key barrier to effective CSO mobilization for ECIs in Croatia is the lack of coalition-building and cross-organizational coordination. While the interview from CSO2 acknowledged the existence of thematic networks such as the Green Forum, they noted that collaboration among CSOs in Croatia tends to be project-based rather than focused on sustained policy advocacy. This fragmentation limits the potential for large-scale citizen mobilization, reinforcing the challenges identified by Kohler-Koch (2010) regarding the difficulty of building durable, grassroots-driven advocacy efforts within EU civil society structures.

Despite these limitations, some positive examples of CSO-driven effective ECI mobilization do exist. CSO1 recounted their experience with the People4Soil initiative, in which signature collection was successfully integrated into broader project activities, leveraging existing outreach mechanisms to enhance public engagement. This case highlights that when ECIs are embedded within broader, well-resourced advocacy campaigns, they can serve as effective instruments for citizen mobilization. However, such success stories remain the exception rather than the rule.

Overall, the Croatian CSO experience with ECIs reflects broader theoretical concerns about the role of civil society in EU participatory democracy. While CSOs have the potential to act as transmission belts between citizens and EU institutions, their ability to do so is constrained by structural and institutional limitations. The findings from this study suggest that without stronger institutional support, better financial sustainability, and a clearer link between ECIs and policy outcomes, Croatian CSOs will remain hesitant to invest significant resources in mobilizing citizens for this mechanism. Future efforts to enhance ECI participation in Croatia should focus on addressing these systemic barriers, ensuring that ECIs function not only as symbolic participatory tools but also as meaningful drivers of democratic engagement.

6. Findings From Focus Group Insights: Students' Perceptions of ECIs

The focus group discussions revealed varying levels of awareness and differing attitudes towards ECIs among students of political science, journalism, and European studies involved in supporting ECI projects. While most participants were familiar with the concept of ECIs, there was a general sense that ECIs were perceived as distant or ineffective tools for influencing EU policies. Many students expressed limited awareness of how ECIs function beyond the basic process of collecting signatures. Those who had engaged more deeply with ECIs as part of their projects reported a growing understanding of their potential as democratic mechanisms, particularly in addressing issues of public concern.

While overall scepticism was shared across focus groups, students of political science displayed somewhat higher familiarity with EU participatory mechanisms and perceived ECIs as more accessible, whereas journalism students emphasized the emotional and informational distance from EU-level decision-making. These disciplinary differences suggest varying engagement dynamics even within politically engaged subgroups.

While many students acknowledged the formal democratic potential of ECIs, they questioned their practical impact on policy outcomes. However, there was a clear sense of scepticism about whether these initiatives

can truly lead to legislative action, particularly given the long timeframes and complex processes involved in translating citizen action into policy outcomes (FG1). Overall, participants were divided, with some valuing the opportunities ECIs present for engagement, while others viewed them as largely symbolic efforts with limited practical impact.

Students' perceptions largely reflected a low sense of external political efficacy (belief that EU institutions would not respond to citizen initiatives), whereas their internal political efficacy (belief in their own ability to act) remained relatively higher, especially among those already civically active.

Several barriers to participation in ECIs emerged during the discussions. The most frequently cited challenge was the lack of awareness about ECIs among the general public. Students pointed out that, despite being politically engaged themselves, even they had not encountered sufficient information about ECIs prior to their involvement in specific projects (FG1). This suggests that the broader Croatian public may be even less informed, thus reducing overall participation rates.

Another major issue identified was the perceived ineffectiveness of ECIs. Many students were sceptical about the ability of a single signature or even a collective campaign to bring about substantial change. This scepticism was compounded by the long duration of the ECI process, from collecting signatures to legislative consideration. Students perceived bureaucratic hurdles as discouraging factors, which they associated with reduced motivation to engage, particularly among younger cohorts (FG2).

The complexity of the ECI process was also seen as a barrier. Some students found the technical aspects of registering and supporting ECIs, as well as the legal requirements involved, to be overly complicated, which could deter less-informed citizens from participating. Additionally, students highlighted emotional detachment from EU-level processes, which many people perceive as remote from their daily lives and concerns.

Despite the challenges, students identified several opportunities for increasing Croatian citizens' engagement with ECIs. The most frequently mentioned solution was enhancing communication strategies. Students emphasized the importance of using digital platforms and social media to raise awareness about ECIs, particularly among younger generations. Many believed that more targeted campaigns by CSOs and educational institutions could help bridge the gap in public knowledge about ECIs (FG3).

Students also saw potential in integrating ECIs into civic education curricula. By educating students about the role of ECIs in participatory democracy, schools and universities could foster greater engagement from a young age. Participants suggested that workshops and seminars on ECIs, combined with hands-on involvement in current initiatives, could significantly enhance citizens' understanding and motivation to participate (FG3).

Finally, students recognised the importance of institutional support in mobilizing citizens. They pointed to the role of strong NGOs in successful ECI campaigns, particularly in the realm of animal protection, where organizations had spearheaded efforts to collect signatures and raise awareness. Participants believed that stronger partnerships between the EU, national institutions, and civil society would likely facilitate more sustained advocacy and follow-up on ECI initiatives.

Overall, while students acknowledged the barriers to participation, they were optimistic that with improved communication, education, and organizational support, Croatian citizens could become more actively engaged in ECIs.

7. Concluding Remarks: Understanding of the Factors Affecting Croatian Citizens' Participation in ECIs

This study has examined the low level of Croatian citizens' engagement with the ECI, revealing a complex interplay of factors that influence participation. By employing a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative analysis with qualitative insights from focus groups and CSO interviews, the findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the barriers and opportunities for citizen mobilization in Croatia. The analytical framework employed in this study has highlighted four key dimensions—individual civic capacity, civil society's organizational capabilities, institutional constraints, and structural barriers—which collectively shape the extent and nature of Croatian participation in ECIs.

At the individual level, the findings indicate that Croatian citizens exhibit low levels of civic literacy and political efficacy regarding ECIs. The focus group discussions showed that even among university students, who are expected to be more politically engaged, the awareness of ECIs remains limited. The perceived lack of impact of ECIs further discourages participation, as many citizens doubt that their signatures will lead to substantive policy change. This supports broader theories of political participation, which emphasize that citizens are more likely to engage when they believe their actions can yield tangible results. The findings indicate that enhancing civic education and awareness could strengthen Croatian citizens' ability and willingness to engage with ECIs.

At the organizational level, Croatian CSOs play a critical but constrained role in mobilizing support for ECIs. While they possess the necessary advocacy experience, their engagement with ECIs remains largely incidental rather than strategic. The interviews with CSO representatives highlighted several barriers, including limited financial and human resources, competing organizational priorities, and the low perceived return on investment for ECI-related mobilization. Many CSOs choose to focus on other advocacy mechanisms that offer more direct influence over policy, such as lobbying national governments or engaging with EU institutions through formal consultation processes. This finding aligns with Albareda's (2018) argument that CSOs often struggle to act as effective transmission belts for citizen interests when institutional constraints and resource limitations impede their ability to connect grassroots activism with policymaking.

At the institutional level, the ECI's procedural complexity and non-binding nature emerged as major obstacles to greater citizen and CSO involvement. The interviews highlighted that the European Commission's discretionary power to respond to successful initiatives creates frustration among activists and contributes to public scepticism about the mechanism's efficacy. The lack of an effective follow-up mechanism further discourages participation, as citizens and CSOs alike struggle to see the long-term impact of their engagement. These findings echo broader criticisms of the ECI as a participatory tool, which scholars like Greenwood (2019) and Bouza Garcia (2015) argue often reinforces rather than reduces the EU's democratic deficit. The findings suggest that perceptions of unpredictability and limited institutional responsiveness may deter engagement, highlighting the relevance of ongoing debates about potential reforms of the ECI process.

At the structural level, broader socio-political dynamics in Croatia further constrain participation in ECIs. The findings indicate that weak social capital, low trust in political institutions, and a fragmented civil society sector create an unfavourable environment for transnational civic engagement. As Putnam (2000) suggests, societies with low levels of trust and civic engagement are less likely to mobilize around participatory mechanisms such as ECIs. Additionally, the media's limited coverage of ECIs means that most citizens remain unaware of ongoing initiatives, further compounding the problem. Addressing these structural barriers requires greater investment in civic infrastructure, stronger media engagement, and cross-sectoral collaboration between CSOs, educational institutions, and policymakers to create a more enabling environment for participatory democracy.

While this study has identified several key challenges to Croatian participation in ECIs, it has also highlighted potential pathways for improvement. Strengthening civic education programs, particularly at the university level, could help bridge the awareness gap and empower younger generations to engage more actively with ECIs. CSOs could also play a more proactive role in building coalitions around specific initiatives, leveraging their existing networks to facilitate citizen mobilization. On the institutional side, reforming the ECI's procedural framework to enhance follow-up mechanisms and ensure greater institutional accountability would help restore trust in the mechanism's ability to deliver policy change. Overall, the findings suggest that barriers at individual, organizational, institutional, and structural levels collectively influence Croatian participation in ECIs. These findings resonate with patterns observed in other post-socialist EU member states, where similar legacies of low trust, limited civic engagement, and weak transnational NGO linkages constrain participation in EU-level mechanisms. Croatia thus exemplifies a broader regional trend that highlights the need for tailored, context-sensitive strategies to strengthen participatory democracy across the EU.

Several areas warrant further research to deepen the understanding of factors that influence Croatian participation in ECIs. First, future studies should expand beyond student populations to include a more diverse sample of Croatian citizens across different age groups, educational backgrounds, and geographical regions. This would provide a more representative picture of public attitudes towards ECIs. Second, longitudinal studies could track Croatian engagement with ECIs over time, assessing whether recent public awareness campaigns or institutional reforms lead to increased participation. Third, comparative research with other EU member states, particularly those with similar post-transition political contexts, could identify best practices for enhancing participatory democracy in Croatia. Additionally, further research should explore the role of digital platforms and social media in mobilizing ECI support, examining how online engagement strategies might compensate for limited traditional media coverage of ECIs. Addressing these research gaps will not only inform more effective strategies for increasing ECI participation in Croatia but also contribute to broader discussions on improving participatory democracy at the EU level.

Acknowledgments

Parts of the research were conducted within the Jean-Monnet Network "Debating Europe" (Project Number: 620428-EPP-1-2020-1-DE-EPPJMO-NETWORK). The European Commission's support for the production of this publication does not constitute an endorsement of the contents, which reflect the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein. The author would like to thank the editors and anonymous reviewers for their valuable feedback on early drafts of the manuscript.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

References

Albareda, A. (2018). Connecting society and policymakers? Conceptualizing and measuring the capacity of civil society organizations to act as transmission belts. *VOLUNTAS: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations*, *29*, 1216–1232. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-018-00051-x

Alemanno, A. (2020). Europe's democracy challenge: Citizen participation in and beyond elections. *German Law Journal*, *21*(1), 35–40.

Anglmayer, I. (2015). *Implementation of the European citizens' initiative: The experience of the first three years.*Brussels: European Parliamentary Research Service.

Bajkuša, M., & Šarić, M. (2021). *White paper on challenges of education about Europe in Croatia*. Forum for Freedom in Education.

Barber, B. R. (2004). *Strong democracy: Participatory politics for a new age*. University of California Press.

Bertelsmann Stiftung. (2024). *BTI 2024 country report—Croatia*.

Boussaguet, L. (2016). Participatory mechanisms as symbolic policy instruments? *Comparative European Politics*, *14*(1), 107–124.

Bouza Garcia, L. (2015). *Participatory democracy and civil society in the EU*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Bouza García, L., Cuesta López, V., Mincheva, E., & Szeligowska, D. (2012). *The European citizens' initiative: A first assessment* (Bruges Political Research Papers, No 24). College of Europe.

Bouza Garcia, L., & Greenwood, J. (2014). The European citizens' initiative: A new sphere of EU politics? *Interest Groups & Advocacy*, *3*(3), 246–267.

Bovan, K., & Baketa, N. (2022). Stabilnost i/ili promjene? Povjerenje u institucije u Hrvatskoj od 1999. do 2020. *Revija za sociologiju*, *52*(1), 31–60.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2021). *Thematic analysis: A practical guide*. Sage.

Conrad, M. (2016). The ECI's contribution to the emergence of a European public sphere. In M. Conrad, A. Knaut, & K. Böttger (Eds.), *Bridging the gap? Opportunities and constraints of the European citizens' initiative* (1st ed., Vol. 97, pp. 64–80). Nomos-Verlagsgesellschaft.

Creswell, J. W., & Clark, V. L. P. (2018). *Designing and conducting mixed methods research* (3rd ed.). Sage.

Dalton, R. J. (2008). Citizenship norms and the expansion of political participation. *Political Studies*, *56*(1), 76–98.

De Clerck-Sachsse, J. (2012). Civil society and democracy in the EU: The paradox of the European citizens' initiative. *Perspectives on European Politics and Society*, *13*(3), 299–311.

Dougan, M. (2011). What are we to make of the citizens' initiative? *Common Market Law Review*, *48*(6), 1807–1848.

European Citizen Initiative Forum. (2024). *European Citizen Initiative Forum—Data & figures* [Date set]. https://citizens-initiative-forum.europa.eu/_en

Føllesdal, A., & Hix, S. (2006). Why there is a democratic deficit in the EU: A response to Majone and Moravcsik. *Journal of Common Market Studies*, *44*(3), 533–562.

Freedom House. (2024). *Nations in transit 2024—Croatia*. https://www.ecoi.net/en/document/2115565.html

Fuchs, D., & Klingemann, H. D. (1995). Citizens and the state: A changing relationship. In D. Fuchs & H. D. Klingemann (Eds.), *Citizens and the state* (pp. 1–23). Oxford University Press.

Gherghina, S., & Groh, A. (2016). A poor sales pitch? The European citizens' initiative and attitudes toward the EU in Germany and the UK. *European Politics and Society*, *17*(3), 373–387. https://doi.org/10.1080/23745118.2016.1166875

Glogowski, P., & Maurer, A. (2013). *The European citizens' initiative: Chances, constraints and limits*. Institute for Advanced Studies.

Greenwood, J. (2019). The European citizens' initiative: Bringing the EU closer to its citizens? *Comparative European Politics*, *17*(6), 940–956. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41295-018-0138-x

Greenwood, J., & Tuokko, K. (2017). The European citizens' initiative: The territorial extension of a European political public sphere? *European Politics & Society*, *18*(2), 166–181.

Ilišin, V. (Ed.). (2007). *Croatian youth and European integration*. Institut za društvena istraživanja.

Kaufmann, B. (2012). Transnational 'babystep': The European citizens' initiative. In M. Setälä & T. Schiller (Eds.), *Citizens' initiatives in Europe: Procedures and consequences of agenda-setting by citizens* (pp. 228–242). Palgrave Macmillan.

Kentmen-Cin, C. (2014). Explaining willingness to use the European citizens' initiative: Political cynicism, anti-EU attitudes, and voting weight of member states. *Comparative European Politics*, *12*(3), 301–318.

Kohler-Koch, B. (2010). Civil society and EU democracy: 'Astroturf' representation? *Journal of European Public Policy*, *17*(1), 100–116. https://doi.org/10.1080/13501760903464986

Longo, E. (2019). The European citizens' initiative: Too much democracy for EU polity? *German Law Journal*, *20*(2), 181–200. https://doi.org/10.1017/glj.2019.12

Manning, N., & Holmes, M. (2014). Political emotions: A role for feelings of affinity in citizens' (dis)engagements with electoral politics? *Sociology*, *48*(4), 698–714.

Monaghan, E. (2012). Assessing participation and democracy in the EU: The case of the European Citizens' Initiative. *Perspectives on European Politics and Society*, *13*(3), 285–298.

Motti-Stefanidi, F., & Cicognani, E. (2018). Bringing the European Union closer to its young citizens: Youth active citizenship in Europe and trust in EU institutions. *European Journal of Developmental Psychology*, *15*(3), 243–249.

Narsee, A., Negri, G., Willamo, K., Goodwin, B., Suesser, J. B., & Najmowicz, A. (2023). *Civic space report 2023: Croatia*. European Civic Forum. https://civic-forum.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Civic-Space-Report-2023-CROATIA-European-Civic-Forum.pdf

Noordzij, K., de Koster, W., & van der Waal, J. (2021). A revolt of the deplored? The role of perceived cultural distance in the educational gradient in anti-establishment politics. *The British Journal of Sociology*, *72*(5), 1448–1463.

Pateman, C. (1970). *Participation and democratic theory*. Cambridge University Press.

Pateman, C. (2012). Participatory democracy revisited. *Perspectives on Politics*, *10*(1), 7–19.

Putnam, R. D. (2000). *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community*. Simon & Schuster.

Sangsari, M. (2013). *The European citizens' initiative: An early assessment of the European Union's new participatory democracy instrument* (Policy Paper). Canada-Europe Transatlantic Dialogue.

Verba, S., Schlozman, K. L., & Brady, H. E. (1995). *Voice and equality: Civic voluntarism in American politics*. Harvard University Press.

Visser, V., de Koster, W., & van der Waal, J. (2023). Understanding less-educated citizens' (non-) participation in citizens' initiatives: Feelings of entitlement and a taste for politics. *Current Sociology*, *71*(5), 924–942.

Weisskircher, M. (2020). The European citizens' initiative: Mobilization strategies and consequences. *Political Studies*, *68*(3), 797–815.

About the Authors

Igor Vidačak is a full professor of European Union politics at the Faculty of Political Science of the University of Zagreb, and holder of Jean Monnet chair Active European Democratic Citizenship for Resilient Society, with research interests in civil society, interest groups, lobbying, and EU enlargement.

Mario Munta is an assistant professor of public policy and EU public policy at the Faculty of Political Science, University of Zagreb, Croatia. He is the author of *EU Socio-Economic Governance in Central and Eastern Europe*, published by Routledge (2021).

Ana Matan is an assistant professor at the Faculty of Political Science, University of Zagreb, where she is teaching theories of democracy, as well as theories and policies of peace, with research interests in democratic, deliberative innovations at the local level.

Politics and Governance
2025 • Volume 13 • Article 10077
https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.10077

cogitatio

ARTICLE

Open Access Journal

How European Do Young Slovenians Feel?

Meta Novak and Damjan Lajh

Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia

Correspondence: Meta Novak (meta.novak@fdv.uni-lj.si)

Submitted: 7 February 2025 **Accepted:** 28 May 2025 **Published:** 13 August 2025

Issue: This article is part of the issue "Debating Europe: Politicization, Contestation, and Democratization" edited by Claudia Wiesner (Fulda University of Applied Sciences) and Meta Novak (University of Ljubljana), fully open access at https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.i452

Abstract

The last two decades of European integration have been challenging for European identity for various reasons. First, the 2004 and subsequent enlargement (in 2007 and 2013) of the EU to Central and Eastern Europe have further extended the diversity of the integration. Second, concerns with European identity have become even stronger as the EU has faced a permanent period of crisis. Third, the growing populism and authoritative politics in Europe are responsible for further differentiation and growing instability across the EU. Addressing the problem of European identity is thus inevitable. The goal of the EU is to build a collective European identity that helps reinforce integration via either the cultural dimension coordinated on the EU level, aimed at establishing a common European sense of belonging while complementing national, regional, and local identities, or the activities of various EU projects that support European ideas and values. In this article, we consider the presence and robustness of a European identity as a civic and cultural component among the citizens most directly involved in European projects that seek to add to it: elementary school students. The analysis is based on a survey conducted among Slovenian elementary school students who had participated in EU-related project activities. Students' self-assessment of their European identity and associated variables were measured before and after those activities. Our assumption is that participation in the project activities bolstered the students' European identity. The results show that the students already expressed a high level of European identity prior to the project activities, leaving little room for a stronger identity, which nevertheless speaks in favour of making sure that EU-related topics have a permanent place in the educational process.

Keywords

EU projects; European identity; Slovenia; students

1. Introduction

European integration and the enlargement of the EU to include Southern Europe as well as Central and Eastern Europe have added to the EU's diversity. At the same time as the EU acknowledges its diversity, as among others seen in (a) EU's motto "United in diversity," (b) the recognition of all 24 official languages, and (c) the fact that European cultural policy is intended to create a common European sense of belonging while complementing national, regional, and local identities, the EU aims to build a collective European identity to further strengthen integration and European solidarity. European identity stretches from multiculturalism, where diversity is viewed as a reality given the many cultural identities in existence, to monoculturalism, where a shared set of values is the basis for European identity. As argued by Pinxten et al. (2007), some minimum rules, values, and agreements can provide the basis for a common European identity. This is important due to the democratic deficit in the EU, and the lack of a European demos and common European identity that would boost the political participation of European citizens on the EU level (Novak et al., 2020). The EU still lacks a sufficiently strong collective identity able to reinforce the cohesion of all member states in an effective manner and underpin the political authority and legitimacy of the nation states (Egner et al., 2024; Steffek et al., 2024). The development of a European identity is particularly relevant among young people since in this way they are more likely to overcome biases and acquire a supranational identity (Nic Craith & Taylor, 2024), and because they represent the EU's future (Flanagan, 2018).

With this reasoning, the European Commission started creating programmes that would establish European integration through student mobility in the second half of the 1980s (Mitchell, 2012). As early as 1996, the European Commission adopted the Children's Identity in Europe initiative, which highlighted the importance of developing a stronger sense of European identity among young people (Bezjak, 2012). The EU is supporting the building of a European identity by financially supporting different projects and programmes that promote the European idea and values. Among these, the most recognised is the Erasmus mobility programme.

What actually holds the EU together is an especially pressing issue in times of crisis and instability. And such times have recently not been in short supply: the financial crisis (2008–2011), migration crisis (2015–2016), health crisis (2020–2021), Ukraine crisis (2022), and the upheaval of the geopolitical stage (2025). The global financial crisis, migration, rising authoritarianism in certain member states, Brexit, along with the question of open borders and free movement as cornerstones of the EU during the Covid-19 pandemic have led to greater Euroscepticism (Christiansen, 2020). Amid economic and political turbulence, the question of the nature of European identity, citizens' attachment to the EU, and EU mechanisms have become ever more salient (Mitchell, 2012). With growing populism, notably of right-wing populist parties and authoritative politics in Europe, EU member states have approached these crises with a range of approaches, causing further differentiation in the EU. This means that citizens of various EU member states hold different attitudes to the EU, irrespective of the effects of the crises. Following the economic and financial crises, citizens of newer member states remained more neutral or even positive concerning their EU membership, whereas citizens from older member states held more negative views about the EU (Göncz, 2013). Research has also revealed notable differences in perceptions, attitudes, and expectations of the EU between students in newer and older democracies, with post-communist countries in Europe having among each other different attitudes to Europe (Trunk et al., 2022).

In this article, we are interested in how strong and present a European identity is among those directly involved in European projects intended to strengthen European identity. We follow the definition of

European identity as a civic and cultural component, where the former is understood as cooperation between a shared culture and values and the latter as an individual perception of being part of the political system and polity (Cabada, 2020). Our research question in this regard is: In which way(s) do EU-related project activities concerned with European identity and attitudes to Europe impact adolescents? We present an analysis of data gathered in a self-assessment of European identity and associated variables among Slovenian elementary school students who had participated in EU-related project activities. Our assumption is that participation in the project activities bolstered the students' European identity. Data were collected for Slovenia, a newer member state. In the article, we first review past research and evidence of the development of a European identity. Before outlining the survey results, we illustrate general attitudes to the EU in Slovenia and the presence of EU topics in Slovenian schools. In the conclusion, the results are contrasted with the findings of previous surveys and general public opinion in Slovenia on the EU.

2. Development of a European Identity

The development of a European identity and pro-EU attitudes has been considered in several research studies as multifaceted in nature. While scholars have separately researched the development of a European identity and the development of pro-EU attitudes, some even contend that having a European identity is a predictor for holding positive attitudes to the EU.

A few scholars define European identity as a social construction of Europe based on collective identities, namely, the shared dimensions of individual identities. This includes the cultural component of European identity, which refers to cooperation between the shared culture and values, along with cooperation between different people (Cabada, 2020). A shared European identity in this case is understood as a sense of belonging to a common social group, cultural proximity, or a common history and set of values (Damiani et al., 2024).

The European cultural identity does not include identification with the EU and EU institutions (Van Mol, 2013, 2018) or affinity to the EU (Egner et al., 2024). For instance, the International Civic and Citizenship Education Study defines European identity among students as a construct closely related to attitudes and judgements (Damiani et al., 2024). Identifying with the EU and its institutions is understood as pro-EU attitudes (Öz & Van Praag, 2023). This understanding is close to the definition of European identity as a civic component where one sees oneself as part of the EU's political system, rules, laws, and rights together with support for open borders and mobility (Cabada, 2020) and can be connected with understanding the EU as a polity, political structure, organisation, or community (Damiani et al., 2024). In this article, we consider the definition of European identity as both a cultural and a civic component.

European identity has been investigated through multiple dimensions, such as seeing yourself as European, thinking that you have many things in common with Europeans, considering yourself a European citizen, and considering your country's EU membership as a good thing and European unification as a good thing. The affective dimension of a European identity is also observed as trusting Europeans, feeling close to Europeans, feeling attached to Europe, and having pride in being European (Öz & Van Praag, 2023). In some cases, attitudes to the EU were simply measured with pairs of adjectives like competent/incompetent, efficient/inefficient, warm/cold, friendly/unfriendly, just/unjust, and fair/unfair (Prati et al., 2019).

Pro-European attitudes can even be operationalised in other ways like mental orientations to the EU, beliefs, opinions, emotions, feelings, evaluations, tendencies concerning the EU (Tenenbaum et al., 2019), as well as the perception of benefits of countries' membership in the EU and a sense of belonging to the EU (Méndez García et al., 2021). The distinction between a European identity and pro-EU attitudes is thus not always easily made, and it is hard to distinguish various concepts such as Europeanism, European citizenship, and European identity (Öz & Van Praag, 2023). The concepts are also intertwined; for European citizenship to mean something tangible among EU citizens, it needs to be based on European identity (Trunk et al., 2022).

General education is important for developing pro-European values. Simply put, less well-educated citizens are more Eurosceptic, and this relationship has only strengthened over time (Hakhverdian et al., 2013). The presence of EU topics in education has other effects as well. Integrating the European dimension into education is expected to help students strengthen their European identity, reinforce the values of European citizenship, and foster the principles of democracy, social justice, and human rights (Turk et al., 2015). Scholars who have taken a more utilitarian approach to researching citizens' attitudes to the EU argue that individuals are more likely to express pro-European views if they recognise the advantages of EU membership for themselves or their country. These advantages or opportunities are the removal of mobility limitations, greater opportunities for work, educational opportunities, common market opportunities, recognition of EU funding in the home country, etc. When citizens recognise such advantages, they may also become more supportive of the EU (Hobolt & de Vries, 2016).

While there is a lack of research on the impact of Jean Monnet actions (part of the Erasmus+ programme) on the development of a European identity among youth, more evidence can be found on how mobility programmes have led to changing attitudes towards the EU. Participation in Erasmus exchange programmes, which, among others, aim to enhance pro-European attitudes, stronger ties to the EU, and citizens' support for European integration (Wilson, 2011), leads to mixed results with respect to the strengthening of a European identity. It is believed that the more citizens participate in the mobility programmes, the more the EU would benefit from citizens strengthened European identity, shared European cultural values, and a feeling of both European citizenship and multiculturalism (Rodríguez González et al., 2011). Some empirical research shows that students who participated in a mobility programme developed a stronger interest in Europe and the EU and felt more European than their colleagues who remained at the home university (Jacobone & Moro, 2016; Mitchell, 2012; Oborune, 2015). Specifically, participation in a mobility scheme was related to the likelihood that students would identify as European, with shared historical, economic, and political visions of the EU, along with their intentions to vote at the next EU elections (Mazzoni et al., 2018).

However, some research demonstrated that participating in Erasmus exchange programmes does not necessarily lead to a stronger European identity (Méndez García et al., 2021; Van Mol, 2018), although students demonstrated general awareness of the common characteristics of Europe and a utilitarian outlook on the EU (Méndez García et al., 2021). This does not then mean that participation in the programme has a negative impact or none at all, but that the programme attracts students who already possess pro-European attitudes (Kuhn, 2012). This reflects the fact that students are more pro-European even before they take part in a mobility programme, and remain pro-European also during their time abroad (Wilson, 2011, p. 1135). The effect of an Erasmus exchange is stronger among low-educated citizens (Kuhn, 2012). Nevertheless, individuals with a lower education who could potentially develop positive European attitudes

by participating in Erasmus exchange programmes often do not have an opportunity to participate in such an exchange because they leave school before then (Kuhn, 2012).

In this article, we look at the impact of Erasmus Jean Monnet project activities on elementary schools, namely, at an early age and when students from varying socio-economic backgrounds can benefit from being included in such activities. Developing a European identity at an early age can bring several benefits, reduce intergroup bias, lead to more positive attitudes concerning immigrants and solidarity with other European member states, and help develop a sense of belonging that, in turn, adds to well-being, educational achievement, and civic skills, which are key to sustaining democracy (Nic Craith & Taylor, 2024). Adolescence is a critical age for the formation of a political identity (Jennings & Stoker, 2004) and the emergence of a European identity (Barrett, 1996).

Socio-economic backgrounds can importantly impact attitudes to the EU that students hold prior to being part of Erasmus Jean Monnet project activities and how it is understood. Research on knowledge and competencies shows that students with low socio-economic status report lower perceived self-efficacy in explaining global issues, less awareness of global issues, fewer intercultural communication skills, and weaker responsiveness to global issues. Such competencies are partly related to knowledge and could be systematically strengthened in the educational process (Šterman Ivančič & Štremfel, 2022). However, opportunities for acquiring global competencies in the educational process are not significantly related to self-assessed global competencies, thereby calling into question the educational process's role in obtaining these skills (Štremfel & Šterman Ivančič, 2024).

3. Attitudes to the EU in Slovenia

Slovenia is a special case among EU member states because Euroscepticism has stayed at a low level in the more than 20 years of its EU membership (Lajh & Novak, 2024), which might also hold implications for its citizens' development of European identity.

Slovenia joined the EU on 1 May 2004. Strong support for EU membership peaked in the country when Slovenia gained its independence in 1991 (Uhan & Hafner Fink, 2024) and once again around the referendum on accession to the EU organised in March 2003, at which 60.4% of the electorate participated, with almost 90% of voters supporting the accession. The image of the EU held by the public was very positive. Slovenian citizens held high, above-average trust in the EU (see Figure 1). At the time, Slovenian citizens also expressed the absolute highest share of knowledge about the EU compared to other EU citizens (Mamić & Strmšek Mamić, 2005). Slovenia's membership of the EU was seen as being in the national interest, the political elite agreed to support the EU membership, and the media was also mostly pro-European. For the whole period of Slovenian membership in the EU, there have been no significant differences in attitudes to the EU among Slovenians, regardless of whether they are politically oriented to the left or the right (Uhan & Hafner Fink, 2024).

Immediately after Slovenia joined the EU, strong support for Slovenian membership existed among Slovenians, and there were no noteworthy changes in attitudes to the EU (Uhan & Hafner Fink, 2024). This attitude to the EU characterised the first membership period until the country held the Presidency of the Council of the EU in 2008, and was also detected among the political parties which had agreed not to take advantage of inter-party

competition on EU matters (Lajh & Novak, 2024). A more Eurosceptic position is only found among Slovenian citizens with a lower socio-economic position, a lower education, and from economically disadvantaged areas (Uhan & Hafner Fink, 2024).

Slovenians demonstrate a fairly strong European identity (Uhan & Hafner Fink, 2024) whereby a local and global identity are not mutually exclusive (Hafner Fink, 2006). In addition, Slovenian identity is often understood as part of a European identity (Šimenc, 2011), and the majority of Slovenian citizens view their future as lying in the EU (Uhan & Hafner Fink, 2024). Throughout Slovenia's membership of the EU, the country's citizens have expressed close-to-EU-average attachment to the Union. Still, in some years (2013, 2014, 2017) in the first decade of membership, Slovenian citizens felt less attached to the EU than the EU average citizen. Since 2019, we can observe above-average attachment, and for the last 7 years, over one-half of Slovenians have continuously felt attached to the Union (see Figure 1).

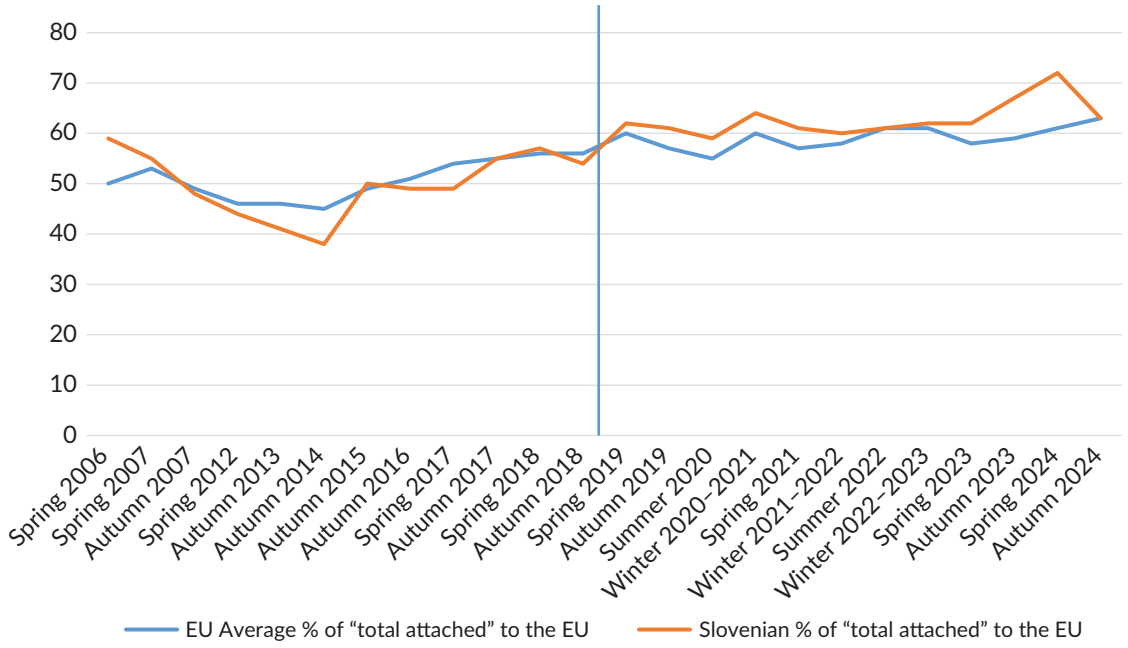

Figure 1. Feeling of attachment to the EU (y = answers with *total attached* in %). Note: The vertical line in the figure marks the starting point of our survey. Source: European Commission (2004–2024).

4. EU Topics in Slovenian Schools

The relatively positive attitudes held by Slovenians to the EU, the absence of strong Euroscepticism, and the presence of a European identity have generally set the baseline for high levels of pro-European attitudes also among adolescents. Data from the European module of the International Civic and Citizenship Education Study carried out in 2016, and 2022 among students aged 14 years show that Slovenian students express a stronger European identity than the average of students in other participating EU member states (17 countries in 2022). Although youth are generally more likely to express positive views about a European identity than the population at large (Damiani et al., 2024), teachers in Slovenian elementary and secondary schools, like Slovenian students, demonstrate a high share of a feeling of European identity (Novak et al., 2020). The national average scale indicating students' sense of being a European citizen increased slightly in Slovenia from 2009 to 2016 and once again from 2016 to 2022. The above-average pro-European attitudes

among Slovenian students might also be an outcome of Slovenian students' exposure to EU-related topics at school. At more than 10 percentage points above the average of the 17 participating EU countries, Slovenian students reported having opportunities to learn about the political and economic systems of other European countries, the political and economic cooperation between European countries, the EU, the role and functions of EU institutions, and significantly above-average opportunities to learn about political and social issues in other European countries. At least average opportunities for students to learn about the EU were also reported by their teachers. At the same time, teachers participated above the average in training courses on civic-related topics and reported average competencies for teaching civic-related topics, including teaching about the EU (Damiani et al., 2024). Teachers who include European content in their lessons agree significantly more with statements about European identity than teachers who do not teach European content (Novak et al., 2020). This reveals that to develop a European identity it is necessary to possess some awareness about the EU and be exposed to EU-related topics.

Slovenian students are considerably exposed to EU-related topics in the framework of the school curricula and school activities. Already in 2009, the majority (92%) of Slovenian schools reported including EU-related topics in their teaching activities (Štremfel et al., 2013). A survey among Slovenian teachers conducted in 2018 also revealed that more than 70% of teachers included EU topics in the content of their courses (Novak et al., 2020). EU content is mainly taught in the last three years of elementary school (ages 12–15 years) in courses of history, geography, civics and ethics, foreign languages, but also in mathematics, biology, and physics. Teachers typically include topics concerning Slovenia's membership in the EU, information about life in the EU, the history of integration, and EU institutions. Half of the elementary schools had been involved in at least one EU programme or initiative (Štremfel et al., 2013). Between 2007 and 2016, 76% of all Slovenian elementary schools participated in at least one EU project (CMEPIUS, 2020, p. 2). Even though EU-financed programmes and projects do not always include topics on the EU, the source of funding for them makes students aware of the EU's everyday presence in their lives.

Pro-European sentiment, a European identity, and involvement in the EU can help motivate young people to participate in European elections (Becewe et al., 2019). Still, at 10 percentage points below the average of the 17 participating countries, Slovenian students do not indicate that they expect to participate in European elections very much. Namely, only 50% of students from Slovenia reported they would definitely or probably attend European elections. On a positive note, the share of those Slovenian students expecting to take part at European elections has increased in comparison to 2009 and 2016 according to the International Civic and Citizenship Education Study, while the share of those expecting to participate in national elections has fallen slightly since 2009 but remains significantly higher than expectations to take part in European elections (Damiani et al., 2024). These results may also reflect the fact that turnout at European elections in Slovenia is regularly one of the lowest across the EU (28.35% in 2004, 28.37% in 2009, 24.55% in 2014, 28.89% in 2019, and 41.80% in 2024; Državna volilna komisija, 2024).

5. Methodology

In the empirical part of the article, we are using data from the survey conducted in classrooms at eight elementary school partners of the Erasmus+ Jean Monnet project EU@Home – Bringing the EU and Youth Closer Together in the 2018/2019 school year. The project forms part of the Erasmus+ programme, originally introduced as the Jean Monnet action of the lifelong learning programme in 2011, which tried to

ensure the more focused and in-depth inclusion of EU topics in formal and informal educational practices in EU member states (Štremfel et al., 2013). EU@Home project activities included one interactive workshop with students where they learned about the EU through games and fun activities. The second activity was a guest lecture delivered by practitioners from Slovenia working in European institutions. Lecturers were able to present the work of EU institutions, the multicultural environment, and above all show the students that all member states have a say in the EU's functioning and anyone can contribute to the common policies. The participating schools came from different statistical regions in Slovenia (Gorenjska, Osrednjeslovenska, Primorsko-notranjska, Savinjska, Podravska, and Pomurska) and from both rural and urban areas. The whole classroom was included in the project irrespective of the students' prior interest in EU topics, socio-economic background, or ethnic background.

The aim of our survey was to analyse the attitudes of elementary school students who are already included or were included in the past in civic education courses as well as in different projects and programmes implemented with the goal of building and strengthening a European identity. We selected schools that have a tradition of participating in different EU projects, which means their students are exposed to EU topics and possess knowledge about the EU, its institutions, and its policies. In addition, we measured their attitudes to the EU before and after they participated in the EU@Home project activities. The aim of conducting the survey among students who were included in project activities is to measure their attitudes to the EU to determine whether these types of projects and programmes, coupled with learning about the EU, lead to more positive attitudes towards the EU and a stronger EU identity.

The survey included 418 pupils who participated at the first measurement time point and 423 pupils at the second time point at the end of the project. The majority of students participated at both time points. The students had similar demographic characteristics. A little over half (50.7%) were girls, and the remainder (49.3%) were boys. The majority of students were attending 8th grade, 14 years of age (52.8%), followed by 7th grade, 13 years (30.6%), 6th grade, 12 years (8.3%), 9th grade, 15 years (4.9%), and 5th grade, 11 years (3.4%). The civic education course that includes topics on the EU is taught in 7th and 8th grade, but in the framework of other courses students are exposed to EU topics in all grades and formally from 5th grade onwards (Novak et al., 2020).

The survey included 39 variables on 5 different dimensions of attitudes to the EU, namely: (a) European identity; (b) labour mobility within the EU—with which a European civic identity is connected (Cabada, 2020); (c) cooperation between European countries—with which European cultural identity is associated, while European identity is also linked with overcoming divisions among different countries (Cabada, 2020); (d) the future of Europe—as adolescents' attitudes provide insight into the EU's future (Flanagan, 2018); and (e) a self-evaluation of one's knowledge about the EU. In the latter, we were interested in whether students themselves felt the project activities had contributed to their knowledge. While students assessed their knowledge on a three-point scale, they expressed their agreement with other statements about the EU on a four-point scale. For all questions, students could also choose not to respond by selecting the answer "I do not understand the question."

While we do not compare demographic differences in the students' attitudes to the EU, we compare the difference in their attitudes at two points in time. Namely, we implemented the survey twice, before and after the project activities. While analysing changes in opinion between these two time points, we were especially

attentive to any increase in positive attitudes, improvement of knowledge, and decrease in answers "I do not understand the question."

To protect the students' personal data and sensitive information, we conducted the analysis completely anonymously and thus could not identify the students' responses given at the first and second time points. The changes are thus identified only on an aggregated level. Students needed about 15 minutes to complete the survey using pencil on paper.

Students included in EU@Home project activities participated in two activities. One involved interactive workshops on the EU, where they learned about the EU's basic characteristics and its influence on the everyday life of citizens. As part of the second activity, students participated in lectures given by practitioners from Slovenia employed in European institutions. In this way, students experienced how citizens from all EU member states (including Slovenia) contribute to building Europe, they learned that working for EU institutions could also be a career path for them, they understood which knowledge and competencies the staff of EU institutions possess, and they became more familiar with work in a multicultural and multilingual environment. All the lecturers had worked for EU institutions in either Brussels or Luxembourg. The lecturers all participated in the project voluntarily, had no political or party links, and thus were more acceptable for schools in Slovenia, where trust in political parties is extremely low (Uhan & Hafner Fink, 2024), but at the same time lecturers expressed high levels of pro-European attitudes.

6. Results and Discussion

Students who participated in the survey were first asked about their attitudes to the EU. Along with the frequency of the answers, we paid attention to the change of attitude from the first time point (before the project activities) to the second time point (after the project activities). Students included in the survey expressed a very high level of European identity, with more than 60% completely agreeing that they consider themselves to be European and a further 35% agreeing that they feel European (see Figure 2). Elementary and secondary education is vital for the development of adolescents' identity (Greischel et al., 2018), which may also be said for identifying as European (Novak et al., 2020). When comparing the results from the two time points, we notice that the share of students who did not understand this question decreased by about 1 percentage point.

A smaller share, when compared to considering themselves as Europeans, feels proud to live in Europe. Around 49% completely agreed that they feel proud to live in Europe, and a further 46% agreed with the statement. Understanding of this question was high at both points in time, but around 4% of students did not agree with the statement. This share even grows with the statement "I feel like a part of Europe," where 10% did not agree with the statement at the first time point and 13% at the second one. Here we also have a substantially bigger share of students who completely agreed with this statement before the project activities (38%) than after the project activities (30%). The project activities actually saw the share of students not agreeing with this statement rise from 50% to 55%. This result was not in line with our expectations, as we expected an increase in positive attitudes to Europe following the project activities.

Also surprising was the higher share of students who felt proud to live in Europe than being proud that Slovenia is a member of the EU (see Figure 2). Nonetheless, around 47% completely agreed that they feel proud of

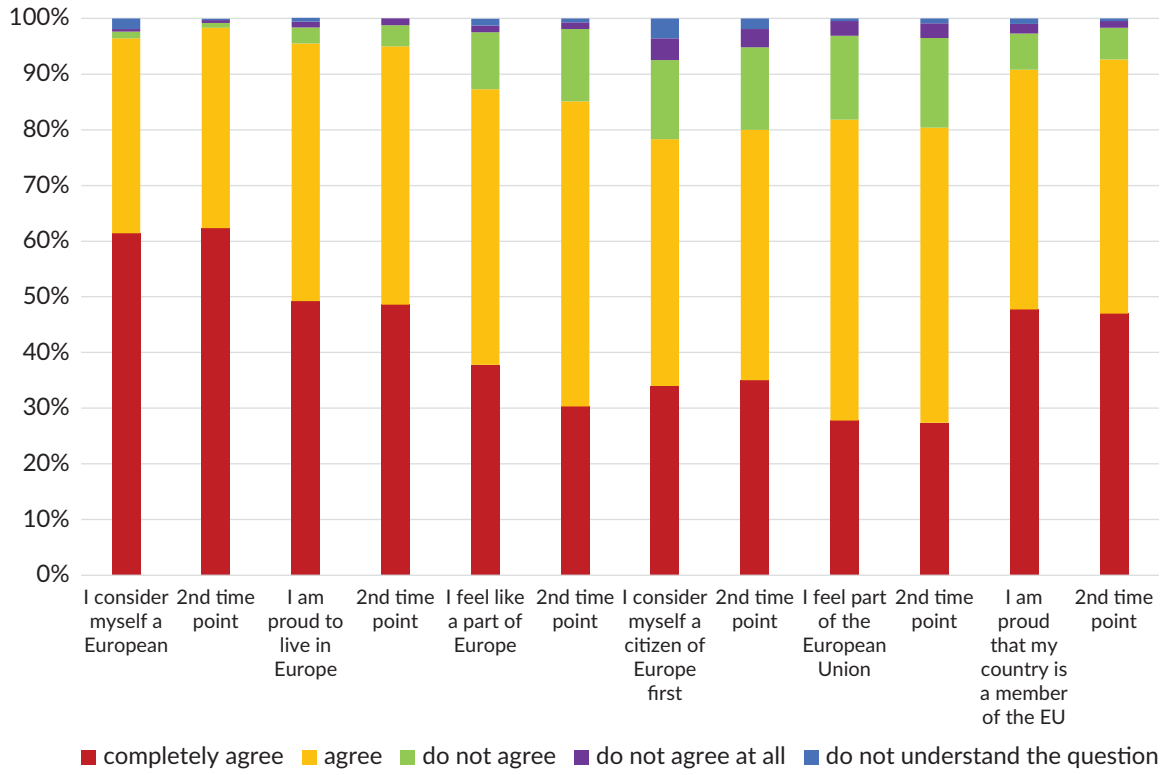

Figure 2. European identity (y = answers in %).

Slovenia's membership in the EU at both time points. At the second time point, the share of students agreeing with this statement slightly increased from 43% to almost 46%, whereas the shares of "do not agree," "do not agree at all," and "do not understand the question" decreased between the two points in time. Around 35% of students completely agreed and a further 45% agreed that they consider themselves first to be citizens of Europe and then citizens of the world. Yet, after the project activities, the share of students who did not understand this statement also decreased. Students showed the least agreement with the statement "I feel part of the European Union," where less than 30% completely agreed with the statement, and around 54% agreed with the statement at both time points.

In the second part of the survey, we asked students about their attitudes to labour mobility. The mobility of workers is one of the most recognisable advantages of the EU, and while young people may search for job opportunities in other EU member states, elementary school students may show fewer positive attitudes regarding such type of mobility especially if we focus on other EU citizens moving to their own country to find career opportunities. Still, the results show high levels of positive attitudes to labour mobility within the EU without discrimination and following equality principles. While before the project activities 49% of students completely agreed with the statement "Allowing citizens of European countries to work anywhere in Europe is good for the European economy," after the project activities were concluded 6 percentage points more completely agreed with the statement. Simultaneously, we can observe a slight decrease in the share of those who only agreed with the statement and those who did not agree. More than 50%, with a slight increase at the second time point, also completely agreed that European citizens should be allowed to work anywhere in Europe. Around 44% also completely agreed with the statement that allowing EU citizens to work anywhere in Europe helps to reduce unemployment (see Figure 3).

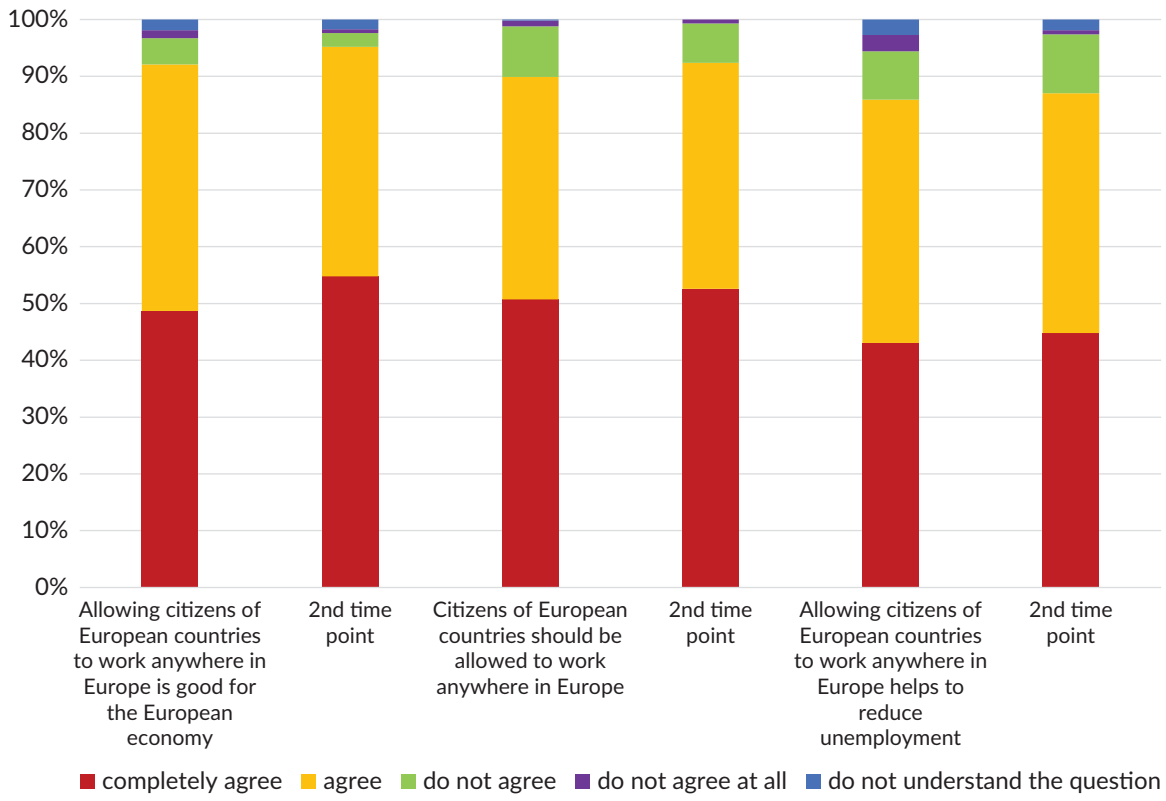

Figure 3. Labour mobility within the EU (y = answers in %).

At the same time, we also noticed low levels of agreement with statements that suggested limitations in labour mobility. Only 14% of students completely agreed with the statement that labour mobility should be only allowed where there is a need for certain skills. This share dropped by 2 percentage points at the second time point. The same change can also be observed when comparing the share of students who agreed with the statement. Still, at the same time, the share of students with difficulties understanding the question also doubled at the second time point. Even fewer students agreed with the statement that labour migrants should be offered exclusively the jobs that the citizens of the member states do not want, and that only a limited number of people should be allowed to move for employment reasons. Yet, the share of students who agreed with both of these two statements increased at the second time point, which was neither expected nor even desired from the perspective of the impact of the project activities. At the same time, the share of those who did not agree with the statement decreased (see Figure 4).

In terms of policy areas where students see a major role for the EU, we may especially mention protection of the environment, concerning which almost everyone completely agreed or at least agreed at both time points that EU member states should closely work together. The second-strongest support was seen in the area of the fight against terrorism. Students also recognise the role of the EU in the area of business and economic policies, where cooperation between countries is particularly noticeable. More than half the students completely agreed that EU member states should work better together to strengthen the economy and to ensure a high level of employment (see Figure 5).

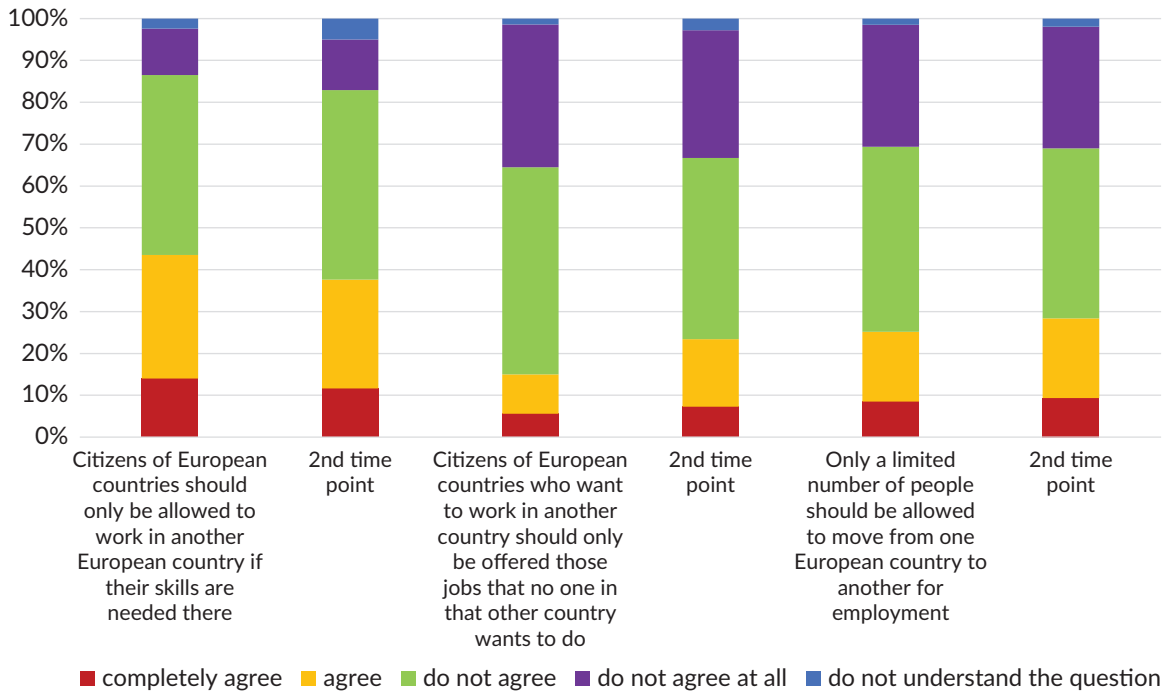

Figure 4. Limitations on labour mobility (y = answers in %).

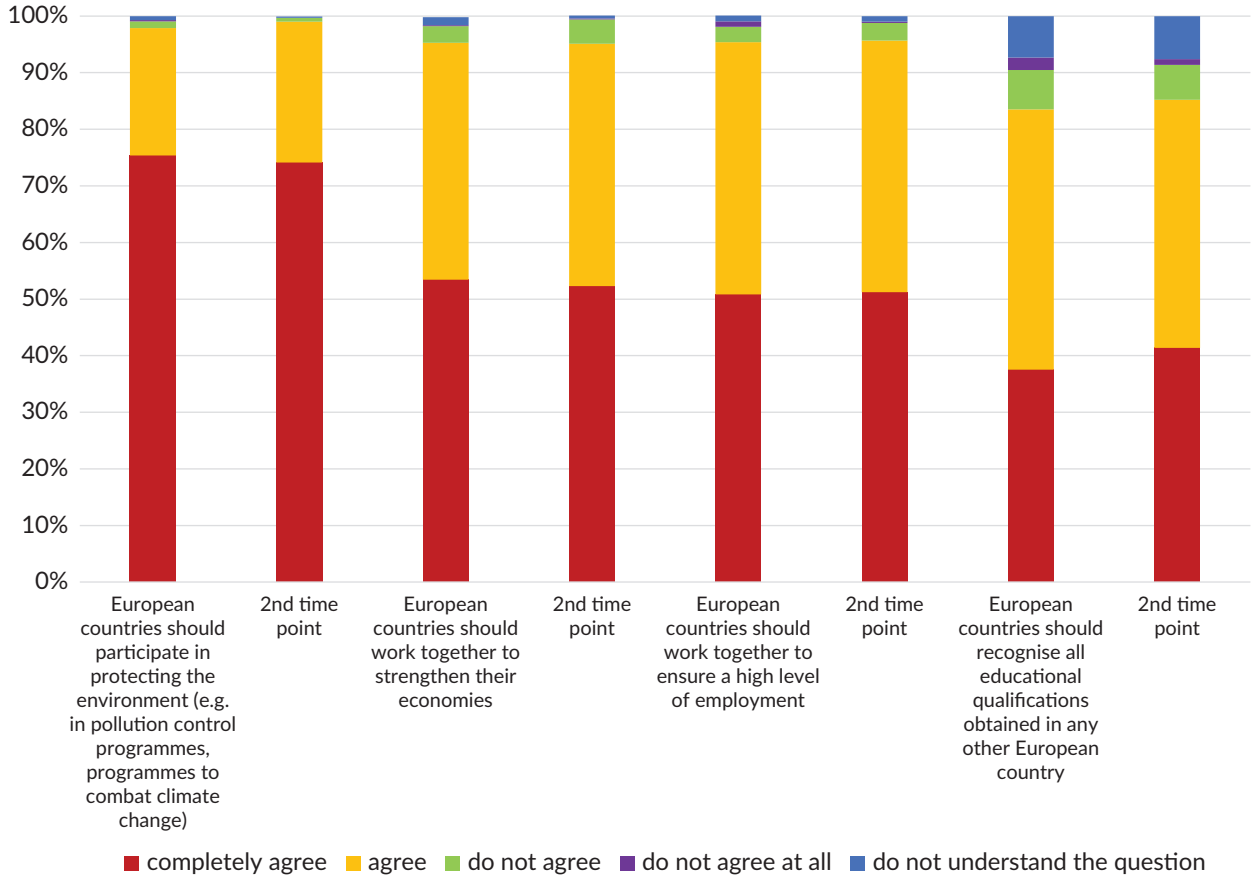

Figure 5. Cooperation of European countries: environment, economy, employment, and education (y = answers in %).

A similar level of agreement was detected for the statement that EU member states should work together in providing protection to asylum seekers (see Figure 6). For other statements regarding cooperation between member states, the students expressed a less strong need for cooperation among the member states. About one-third or more completely agreed with those statements. However, if we also consider agreement with the statements, we can also see with regard to these issues that the majority of students expressed support for cooperation between member states. Less need for cooperation was indicated for the policy areas where nation states are the ones that make decisions and create policies, such as on education. Around 40% completely agreed that EU member states should recognise educational qualifications, with this share even slightly increasing after the project activities (see Figure 5). Two other statements where only one-third of students expressed complete agreement were the establishment of a common European army (an issue under discussion in the EU at the time of the survey) and the fight against illegal immigration where we know that member states have different views on this issue and also Slovenian political actors disagree. For statements where students expressed less agreement, we also detected a bigger share of those who did not understand the question, and thus, this could also explain the weaker support to some extent (see Figure 6).

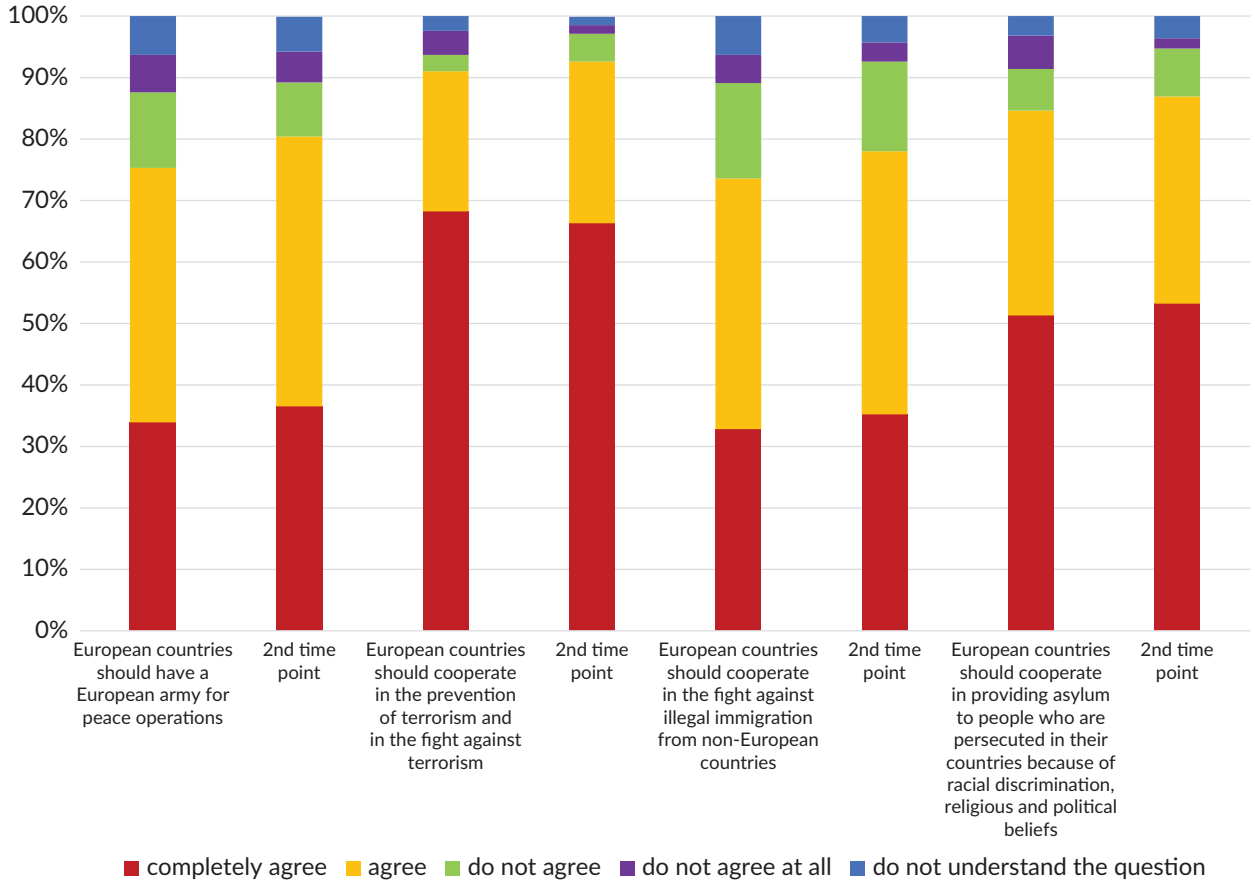

Figure 6. Cooperation of European countries: army, fight against terrorism, illegal migration, and asylum (y = answers in %).

In the third part of our survey, we asked students about their expectations for the future of the EU. In some aspects, like the economy, we can see that students have strong pro-European views and positive expectations about Europe. Thus, the majority of students believe that cooperation between European countries in the area

of the economy will be stronger, while the majority disagrees that the economy will be weaker in all European countries or that poverty and unemployment will rise in 10 years (see Figure 8).

A similar level of agreement is observable with respect to the statements that there will be more peace throughout Europe, but also that terrorism will become a greater threat and that Europe will be more influenced by non-European world power centres. These statements seem to be connected and address the issue of peace and threats to it (see Figure 7).

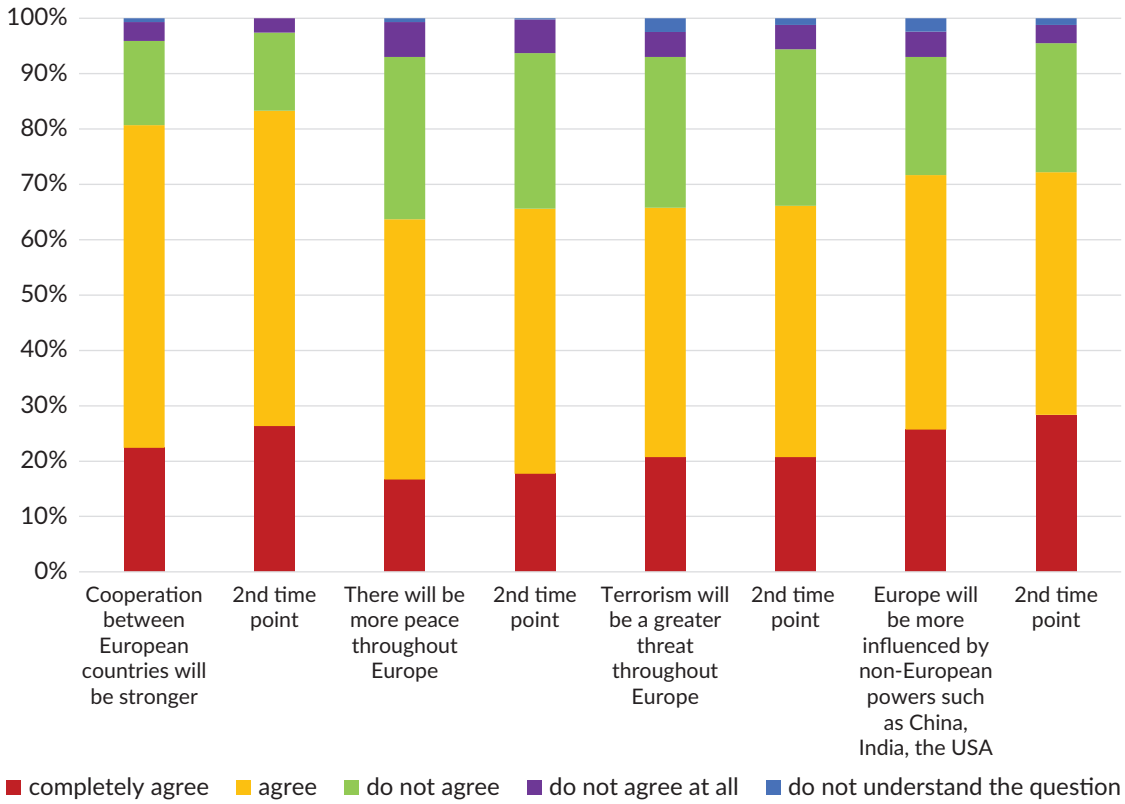

Figure 7. Future of Europe in 10 years: cooperation, peace, terrorism, and geopolitical balance (y = answers in %).

The majority of students agreed that democracy will become stronger in EU countries. Less agreement was shown for the improvement of the quality of air and water. Almost 55% of students disagreed with the statement that there will be less air and water pollution in 10 years at the first time point. However, at the second time point, only 50% disagreed, as if trust in EU environmental policies had slightly increased (see Figure 8).

As concerns attitudes to the EU, we asked the students where they see the advantages of the EU. We understand a stronger agreement with EU contributions in different policy areas as a stronger pro-European attitude. Almost 90% of the students completely agreed or agreed that it is good that the EU has common sets of rules and laws, as well as that the EU is beneficial for the economy of the member states (see Figure 9). While the added shares of those who completely agreed and agreed with these two statements grew slightly at the second time point, we could also detect a slight decrease in those who completely agreed with the statements.

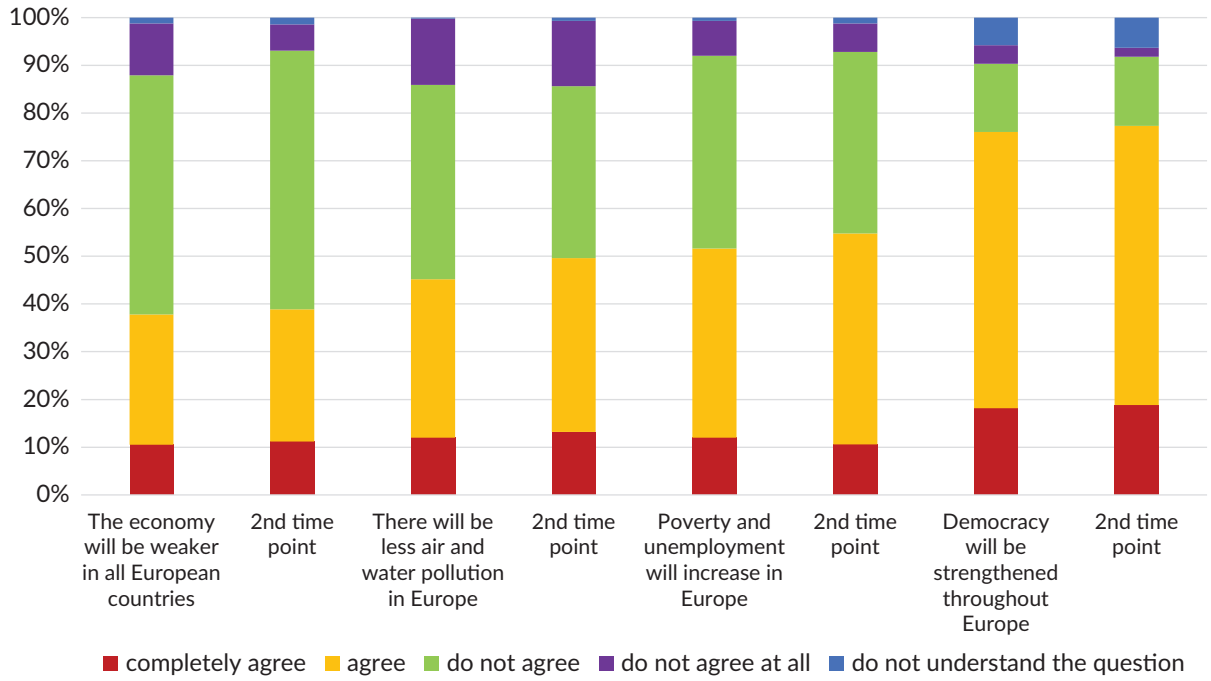

Figure 8. Future of Europe in 10 years: economy, pollution, unemployment, and democracy (y = answers in %).

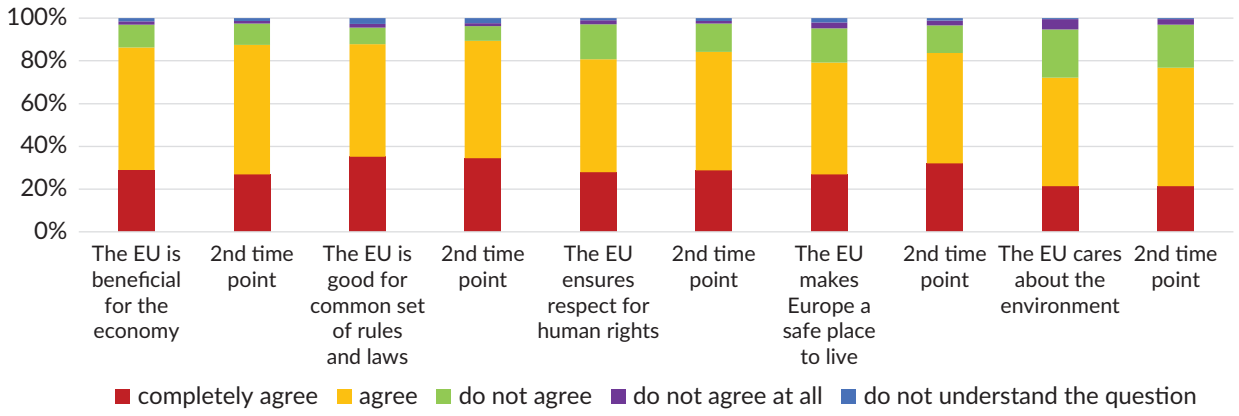

Figure 9. Advantages of the EU (y = answers in %).

Students also recognised other areas of the EU's contribution as advantages. Over 80% of the students completely agreed or agreed that the EU ensures respect for human rights and that the EU makes Europe a safe place to live. For both statements, the cumulative share of those who completely agreed and those who agreed, together with the share of those who completely agreed, increased at the second time point. Although only about 70% of the students recognised the contribution of the EU also in the area of care for the environment, the share of those who agreed with this statement rose at the second time point. When it comes to recognising the advantages of EU membership, we observe the impact of the EU project activities since the share of students who recognised these advantages increased at the second time point (see Figure 9).

Finally, we measured students' self-evaluation of their knowledge about the EU. We were interested in whether students would better assess their knowledge concerning different aspects of the EU after the

project activities. The focus here was on how students perceived the increase in their knowledge, not the *actual* increase in knowledge. They could evaluate their knowledge on a three-point scale: they agree they have knowledge about something, they partially agree they have knowledge, or they do not agree they have knowledge. We understand a decrease in students who say they do not have knowledge about a certain aspect of the EU as a positive impact of project activities. However, increased awareness of an issue may also lead to a self-evaluation that the topic is broader than first imagined and that their knowledge is not complete, in turn leading to an increase among those who claim they do not have knowledge or have partial knowledge.

The results show a clear decrease in the absence of knowledge and an increase in knowledge and partial knowledge for all aspects of the EU between the two time points. Students expressed the highest level of knowledge about the composition of the EU, whereby almost 90% knew something about the topic. A high share of knowledge was also expressed with regard to the history of the EU and even the characteristics of the integration of EU member states (see Figure 10).

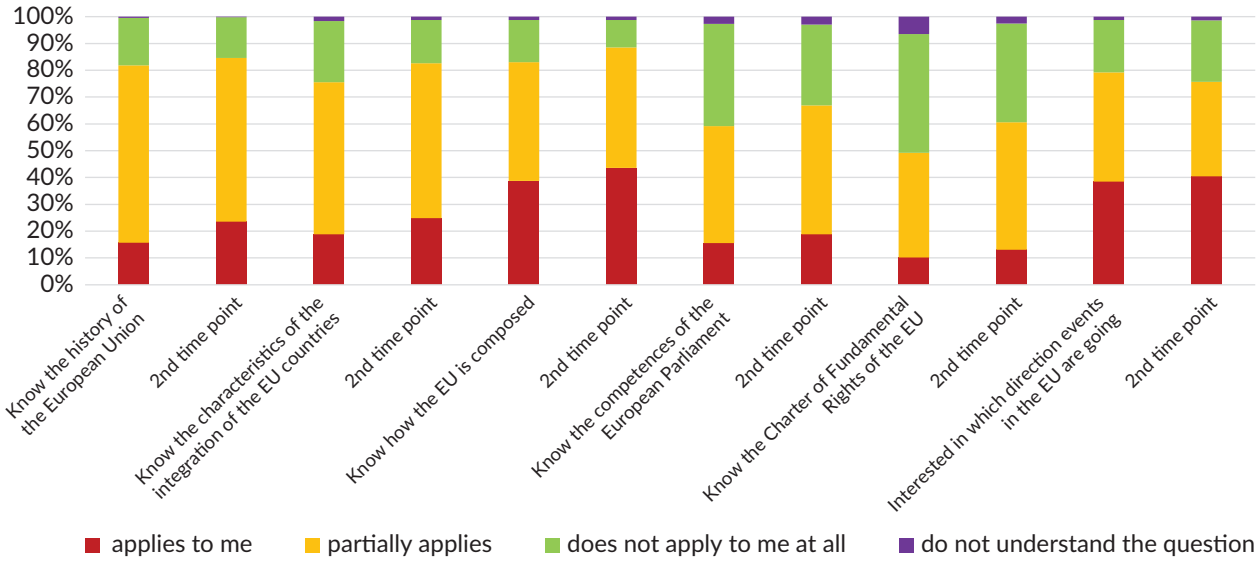

Figure 10. Knowledge of European topics (y = answers in %).

As expected, a smaller share of students expressed knowledge about more complex EU topics such as the competences of the European Parliament or even the Charter of the Fundamental Rights of the EU and international declarations (see Figure 10). Still, we were surprised that the project activities did not also lead to an increase in interest, not just knowledge. While the share of students who agreed they were interested in the future of the EU increased slightly from the first time point to the second one, the share of those who partially agreed with this statement decreased, and the share of those who said they were not interested also grew slightly (see Figure 10). It seems that after the project activities, some students who were partly interested became more interested and others less interested in the future of the EU.

7. Conclusion

Results of our survey show that students express a high level of European identity and positive attitudes to the EU. This share did not change much before and after the project activities. In some cases, such as with

the attitudes to feeling a part of Europe, the share of students who completely agreed with feeling part of Europe even decreased, or in the case of limitations on labour mobility, the agreement increased. Yet, when measuring the recognition of the advantages of EU membership, we observed an increase in second time point compared to the first time point in the share of students who agreed that the EU contributes to improvement in different areas like the protection of human rights, the economy, a safe place to live, and the protection of the environment. The clearest impact was evident with regard to self-evaluation about one's knowledge of EU issues, where the share of students who possessed knowledge about a certain aspect of the EU or had partial knowledge grew at the second time point. Nevertheless, we also note a slight increase among those who were not interested in the future of the EU at the second time point. We find several possible explanations for the survey results:

1. Students from partner schools involved in activities of the EU@Home project were generally more exposed to EU topics and thus already held high levels of pro-European attitudes. Namely, schools were involved in various EU projects and programmes, and the teaching staff were well trained to teach EU topics, even though during their studies most teaching staff did not have an opportunity to take courses on the EU (Novak et al., 2020). Still, schools with positive attitudes to EU projects are more likely to continuously participate in such activities.
2. The modest changes in results between the first and second time points show that our research findings are valid and robust. Although students participated in the survey twice, it is quite unlikely that students would remember the questions and answers from the first time point and repeat the answers in second time point. Further, for several variables we observed an increase of students answering the question and not choosing the option "I do not understand." The impact of project activities might not be one-dimensional. The students' increased knowledge may make them understand the issues better and, in some cases, even lead to a decrease in their pro-European attitudes (about the knowledge–attitudes relationship, see Šterman Ivančič & Štremfel, 2022; Štremfel & Šterman Ivančič, 2024).
3. Moreover, in the framework of the lectures, some topics were better explained to the students than others, and so with respect to particular issues the students' knowledge might not even improve. Here we should mention that the lecturers were different and had the freedom to select the topics they wished to talk about.
4. The project activities' clearest impact concerned the self-evaluation of knowledge about certain aspects of the EU. This shows that the impact of such project activities is stronger on knowledge than on identity or attitudes. To some extent, this was expected because knowledge is normally the most direct output of project activities and the easiest to gain and measure. The changes in identity and attitude represent outcomes or even goals of project activities that are more demanding and harder to achieve just with individual activities. To change identity and attitude, more permanent activities able to be included in civic education as opposed to one-year project activities are thus relevant.
5. Finally, we must not forget that when completing the survey, the students were not in a vacuum. Several political and social events took place, such as national elections in 2018 and European elections in 2019. Plus, students were exposed to different media, varying home environments, and even different school courses in which they might have received additional information that either strengthened or decreased their pro-European views. Accordingly, any changes that happened cannot be attributed to the project activities alone.

While research on elementary school students' attitudes to the EU is under-researched, different results reveal an interesting gap that warrants further investigation, particularly regarding young people's political participation in Europe. The presented results show that even though project activities may have the biggest impact on knowledge, the results are not so clear when it comes to the impact on identity, attitude, and interest. The implementers of future project activities should therefore consider incorporating some of the project activities introduced. The more permanent inclusion of EU-related topics and activities could produce a more noticeable impact on identity and attitudes as well. Our survey also has some limitations: the project activities were held only during a single school year, we had no control group in the survey, and no school included in the project activities was new to EU projects.

Acknowledgments

Parts of the research were conducted within the Jean-Monnet Network "Debating Europe" (Project Number: 620428-EPP-1-2020-1-DE-EPPJMO-NETWORK). The European Commission's support for the production of this publication does not constitute an endorsement of the contents, which reflect the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

The authors acknowledge also the financial support received from the Slovenian Research and Innovation Agency (Research Core Funding Programme No. P5-0136) and from the European Union and European Education and Culture Executive Agency (grant ERASMUS-JMO-2022-MODULE 101085457-BuildEU).

Funding

Publication of this article in open access was made possible through the institutional membership agreement between the University of Ljubljana and Cogitatio Press.

Conflict of Interests

In this article, editorial decisions were undertaken by Claudia Wiesner (Fulda University of Applied Sciences, Germany).

References

Barrett, M. (1996). English children's acquisition of a European identity. In G. Breakell & E. Lyons (Eds.), *Changing European identities: Social psychological analyses of social change* (pp. 349–370). Butterworth-Heinemann.

Becewe, N., Buruian, A., & Zalc, J. (2019). *The 2019 post-electoral survey: Have European elections entered a new dimension?* European Parliament. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/at-your-service/files/be-heard/eurobarometer/2019/post-election-survey-2019-complete-results/report/en-post-election-survey-2019-report.pdf

Bezjak, S. (2012). Od poučevanja o Evropski uniji k poučevanju za evropsko državljanstvo: Analiza diskurza v didaktičnih gradivih za poučevanje Evropske unije. *Šolsko polje*, *23*(3/4), 95–110.

Cabada, L. (2020). Central Europe between the West and East: Independent region, the bridge, buffer zone or 'eternal' semi-periphery? *Politics in Central Europe*, *16*(2), 419–432.

Christiansen, T. (2020). The EU's new normal: Consolidating European integration in an era of populism and geo-economics. *Journal of Common Market Studies*, *58*, 13–27.

CMEPIUS. (2020). *Pozitivni učinki mednarodnega sodelovanja vrtcev v mednarodnih projektih EU* [Brochure].

https://www.cmepius.si/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Pozitivni-u%C4%8Dinki-mednarodnega-sodelovanja-VSA-podro%C4%8Dja.pdf

Damiani, V., Losito, B., Agrusti, G., & Schulz, W. (2024). *Young citizens' views and engagement in a changing Europe: IEA international civic and citizenship education study 2022 European report*. International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement. https://www.iea.nl/publications/study-reports/national-reports-iea-studies/iccs-2022-european-report

Državna volilna komisija. (2024). *Evropski parlament*. https://www.dvk-rs.si/volitve-in-referendumi/evropski-parlament

Egner, B., Heinelt, H., & Steffek, J. (2024). Introduction. In B. Egner, H. Heinelt, & J. Steffek (Eds.), *How Europeans understand solidarity, reciprocity and fairness in the EU: Insights from conversations among citizens* (pp. 1–8). Routledge.

European Commission. (2004–2024). *Standard Eurobarometer*. https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/browse/all/series/4961

Flanagan, C. (2018). Who among European youth are active citizens at the EU level and why? *European Journal of Development Psychology*, *15*(3), 355–359.

Göncz, B. (2013). A persistent East–West divide? The effect of the crisis on people's perceptions of the European Union. In A. Ágh & L. Vass (Eds), *European futures: The perspectives of the new member states in the new Europe* (pp. 171–209). Budapest College of Communication and Business.

Greischel, H., Noack, P., & Neyer, F. J. (2018). Oh, the places you'll go! How international mobility challenges identity development in adolescence. *European Journal of Developmental Psychology*, *54*(11), 2152–2165.

Hafner Fink, M. (2006). Values of the Slovenian population: Local and collective or global and individual? In S. P. Ramet & D. Fink Hafner (Eds.), *Democratic transition in Slovenia: Value transformation, education, and media* (pp. 127–147). Texas A&M University Press.

Hakhverdian, A., van Elsas, E., van der Brug, W., & Kuhn, T. (2013). Euroscepticism and education: A longitudinal study of 12 EU member states, 1973–2010. *European Union Politics*, *14*(4), 522–541.

Hobolt, S. B., & de Vries, C. (2016). Turning against the Union? The impact of the crisis on the Eurosceptic vote in the 2014 European Parliament elections. *Electoral studies*, *44*, 504–514.

Jacobone, V., & Moro, G. (2016). European identity and university students: A comparative study of Italy and Belgium. *Italian Sociological Review*, *6*(3), 309–338.

Jennings, M. K., & Stoker, L. (2004). Social trust and civic engagement across time and generations. *Acta Politica*, *39*, 342–379.

Kuhn, T. (2012). Why educational exchange programmes miss their mark: Cross-border mobility, education and European identity. *Journal of Common Market Studies*, *50*(6), 994–1010.

Lajh, D., & Novak, M. (2024). Politicisation of the European Union in Slovenia in the twenty years of its membership. *Politics in Central Europe*, *20*(3), 331–353.

Mamić, T., & Strmšek Mamić, M. (2005). *Javno mnenje v Evropski uniji, nacionalno poročilo, Slovenija* (Eurobarometer 63.4, Pomlad 2005). European Commission. https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/505

Mazzoni, D., Albanesi, C., Ferreira, P. D., Opermann, S., Pavlopoulos, V., & Cicognani, E. (2018). Cross-border mobility, European identity and participation among European adolescents and young adults. *European Journal of Developmental Psychology*, *15*(3), 324–339.

Méndez García, M. d. C., Cores-Bilbao, E., & Moreno Gámez, L. (2021). Andalusian university students' perception of their European identity: International orientation and experiences. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, *42*(1), 79–96.

Mitchell, K. (2012). Student mobility and European identity: Erasmus study as a civic experience? *Journal of Contemporary European Research*, *8*(4), 490–518.

Nic Craith, I., & Taylor, L. K. (2024). A rapid evidence assessment of European identity among children, adolescents and young adults. *Youth*, *4*(3), 1112–1133.

Novak, M., Štremfel, U., & Lajh, D. (2020). *Poučevanje evropskih vsebin v slovenskih šolah*. Fakulteta za družbene vede.

Oborune, K. (2015). Becoming more European or European after Erasmus? *Politeja*, *37*(5), 75–94.

Öz, Y., & Van Praag, L. (2023). Can participation in learning abroad mobility support pro-European Union attitudes among youth? *European Educational Research Journal*, *22*(4), 538–554.

Pinxten, R., Cornelis, M., & Rubinstein, R. A. (2007). European identity: Diversity in union. *International Journal of Public Administration*, *30*(6/7), 687–698.

Prati, G., Cicognani, E., & Mazzoni, D. (2019). Cross-border friendships and collective European identity: A longitudinal study. *European Union Politics*, *20*(4), 649–669.

Rodríguez González, C., Bustillo Mesanza, R., & Mariel, P. (2011). The determinant of international student mobility flows: An empirical study on the Erasmus programme. *Higher Education*, *62*, 413–430.

Šimenc, M. (2011). Patriotizem in nacionalizem slovenskih učencev iz perspektive Mednarodne raziskave državljanske vzgoje. *Šolsko polje*, *22*(5/6), 139–156.

Steffek, J., Heinekt, H., & Egner, B. (2024). Conclusion. In B. Egner, H. Heinelt, & J. Steffek (Eds.), *How Europeans understand solidarity, reciprocity and fairness in the EU: Insights from conversations among citizens* (pp. 199–208). Routledge.

Šterman Ivančič, K., & Štremfel, U. (2022). Globalne kompetence in trajnostni razvoj: slovenski učenci in učenke v raziskavi PISA. *Sodobna pedagogika*, *139*(2), 41–57.

Štremfel, U., Lajh, D., & Klemenčič, E. (2013). *Učenje evropskih vsebin v podeželskem lokalnem okolju*. Fakulteta za družbene vede.

Štremfel, U., & Šterman Ivančič, K. (2024). Primerjava globalnih kompetenc v gimnazijskem in poklicnem izobraževanju. *Pedagoška obzorja*, *39*(1), 68–82.

Tenenbaum, H. R., Fife-Schaw, C., & Barrett, M. (2019). What predicts British young people's views of Europe? Findings from the Europe 2038 project. In D. Strohmeier & H. R. Tenenbaum (Eds.), *Young people's visions and worries for the future of Europe* (pp. 113–128). Routledge.

Trunk, A., Klemencic-Mirazchiyski, E., Štremfel, U., & Stubelj, I. (2022). Attitudes on (future) EU integration and cooperation among youth: Regional divide? *Human Systems Management*, *42*(3), 305–324.

Turk, M., Miočić, I., Marinović, M., Turković, I., & Ledić, J. (2015). Croatian students' awareness, understanding and attitudes regarding European dimension in education. *Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences*, *174*, 862–869.

Uhan, S., & Hafner Fink, M. (2024). Slovenian public opinion on Europe. In M. Kaeding & B. Udovič (Eds.), *Slovenia and the EU* (pp. 87–93). Springer.

Van Mol, C. (2013). Intra-European student mobility and European identity: A successful marriage? *Population, Space and Place*, *19*(2), 209–222.

Van Mol, C. (2018). Becoming Europeans: The relationship between student exchanges in higher education, European citizenship and a sense of European identity. *Innovation: The European Journal of Social Science Research*, *31*(4), 449–463.

Wilson, I. (2011). What should we expect of 'Erasmus generations'? *Journal of Common Market Studies*, *49*(5), 1113–1140.

About the Authors

Meta Novak is an associate professor of policy analysis at the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ljubljana, a researcher at the Centre for Political Science Research, and a coordinator of the PhD programme of policy analysis at the same faculty. She has led and participated in several Jean Monnet projects focusing on teaching EU-related topics.

Damjan Lajh is a professor of policy analysis at the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ljubljana, and the head of the Centre for Political Science Research at the same faculty. He is the coordinator of the master's programme on comparative public policies and administration and the PhD programme of European studies at the same faculty. His research interests include policy analysis, EU policymaking, cohesion policy, democratic transition, and interest groups. He has led several national and European research and applied projects.

Politics and Governance
2025 • Volume 13 • Article 10073
https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.10073

cogitatio

ARTICLE

Open Access Journal

Principled Politicization: When Citizens Debate the EU and its Regime Principles

Nicolas Arens [1], Claire Dupuy [1], and Virginie Van Ingelgom [1,2]

[1] Institut de Science Politique Louvain-Europe, University of Louvain, Belgium
[2] F.R.S.-FNRS, Belgium

Correspondence: Nicolas Arens (nicolas.arens@uclouvain.be)

Submitted: 7 February 2025 **Accepted:** 26 June 2025 **Published:** 7 August 2025

Issue: This article is part of the issue "Debating Europe: Politicization, Contestation, and Democratization" edited by Claudia Wiesner (Fulda University of Applied Sciences) and Meta Novak (University of Ljubljana), fully open access at https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.i452

Abstract

In this article, building on de Wilde (2011) and Schattschneider (1960), we elaborate on the notion of principled politicization, a process of politicization by which regime principles become salient in public debate in a way that also articulates or implies structural alternatives. First, we argue that in contrast to other conceptualizations of politicization, which focus on policy issues, or "issue-based politicization," principled politicization concerns another type of political conflict that differs in terms of topic (regime principles) and content (alternatives). As such, this type of debate is inherently related to the concept of democracy. Second, adopting an applied political theory approach, we put the notion of principled politicization to the test by empirically studying citizen discussions about the EU. We examine whether citizens draw on EU regime principles and discuss alternatives. To do so, we conduct a qualitative secondary analysis of four datasets, consisting of interviews and focus groups with participants from different socio-economic backgrounds and political leanings. This data was collected in Belgium, France, and the UK at four different points in time (1995–2019). We report that some citizens do engage with EU regime principles and consider alternatives to the principles they observe being implemented. This article suggests that politicization can strengthen EU democratization when debates include and, in fact, reflect the challenges to democratic principles themselves.

Keywords

citizen discourses; democracy; European Union; EU politicization; issue-based politicization; principled politicization; regime principles

1. Introduction

Over the last two decades, European integration has featured many episodes of intense politicization. Notable examples include the controversy surrounding the "Bolkestein Directive" in the early 2000s (Crespy, 2010), the failed attempt to adopt a Constitution for Europe in 2005 (Wiesner, 2024), the austerity measures imposed on some member states in the early 2010s (White, 2015), the recent debates over Eurobonds in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic (Schmidt, 2022), and the debates surrounding the coordinated group purchases of military equipment for Ukraine (Moise et al., 2023). These episodes illustrate that the role and decisions of the EU have consistently sparked public debate. What is equally evident is that such politicised events are not only topic-specific or policy-centred controversies. They also deal with regime principles and their alternatives, namely with what the EU is and what it should do. These episodes of politicization are times when political actors, sometimes including citizens, actively mobilise to challenge existing structures. They propose transformative changes, like a "more social" Europe by integrating alternative economic policies (Balibar, 2016; Tarragoni, 2019); a Europe focused on economic recovery after the pandemic through initiatives like the NextGenerationEU plan (Crespy et al., 2023) or an EU that launches a conference on the future of Europe to solve the democratic deficit (Alemanno & Nicolaïdis, 2022). These discussions point to the existence of debates about the principles that govern the EU.

Debates on the politicization of the EU are far from new. Since Hix and Bartolini (2006) sparked an extensive debate, the scholarship has made significant progress. Much of the literature builds on de Wilde's (2011, p. 560) influential definition of politicization as "an increase in polarization of opinions, interests or values and the extent to which they are publicly advanced towards the process of policy formulation within the EU." Considering the continued relevance of the topic and the advancement of the field, we believe it is timely to re-examine our collective conceptualization of the politicization of the EU. In this article, we thus take stock of key debates on EU politicization (Beaudonnet & Mérand, 2019; de Wilde, 2011; Hoeglinger, 2016; Hutter et al., 2016; Wiesner et al., 2019) and make two contributions to the discussion.

First, building on Schattschneider (1957, 1960) and de Wilde (2011), we elaborate on the notion of "principled politicization." We define principled politicization as a process of politicization by which regime principles become salient in public debate in a way that also articulates or implies structural alternatives. A crucial difference with other conceptualizations of politicization, which focus on policy issues, or "issue-based politicization" as we label it, pertains to the focus on principled politicization, namely, debates over regime principles. This type of debate is directly related to the concept of democracy. As Lefort (1988, p. 39) notes, democracy is an ongoing discussion about policymaking and a discourse about the boundaries of legitimacy itself—what is deemed legitimate and what is not. In other words, democracy truly functions when the debate about regime principles is recognised as an open-ended endeavour with no final answer. Ultimately, in a democracy, it is possible to call into question the principles of the regime and find alternatives to them. Debates on regime principles are associated with a particular kind of politicization which is regime-building, as it taps into the very foundations of the system (see also Müller, 2020). In addition, when citizens debate the EU, even in critical terms, this supports the democratization of the EU (Wiesner, 2024, pp. 297–300). This article aims to clarify our conceptualization of principled politicization and how we distinguish it from issue-based politicization.

Second, the article provides empirical illustrations of EU principled politicization. It adopts an "applied political theory" approach, combining political theory, which concerns ideational resources, with interpretative sociology, which focuses on what citizens consider as reference points (cf. White, 2011, pp. 40–41). Using this approach, the article shows how principled politicization provides a heuristic analysis of the underlying principles that shape political debates. Specifically, our empirical study is designed as a "hard test" of the concept of principled politicization. We study whether ordinary citizens engage with foundational principles and alternatives that shape the EU. Our empirical study rests on a comparative and longitudinal design, devised to probe the existence of shared understandings across national cases, time, and interviewees' socio-economic background, rather than studying the variations in these understandings. To do so, we designed a qualitative secondary analysis of four primary datasets, each focusing on how research participants relate to European integration, and in which, crucially, no discussion on EU regime principles was prompted. Our secondary dataset includes three countries (Belgium, France, and the UK), four points in time (from 1995 to 2019), 31 semi-structured interviews, and 45 focus groups. In total, 268 research participants are included, and were sampled by primary researchers to differ in their socio-economic background and political leanings. Belgium, France, and the UK exhibit variation regarding citizens' support for the EU that is meaningful theoretically. Furthermore, political elites have had distinct strategies when it comes to endorsing EU regime principles or not. We focus on EU policies as a way of grasping how citizens understand EU regime principles and alternatives, in order to improve our comprehension of (de)politicization of the EU.

We report that our conceptualization of principled politicization in the EU passes the test of citizen discourses as research participants debate principles of the EU and alternatives, while emphasizing the gap between these principles and their experiences. Our findings show that discussions about the principles underpinning the EU's political system emerge spontaneously across diverse socio-economic groups and partisan affiliations, in multiple national contexts and over time. The excerpts presented in this article illustrate that such principled debates are not only present but also salient to participants. Far from being abstract or imposed, these discussions arise unprompted and are frequently articulated with striking engagement. This level of involvement contrasts sharply with the commonly observed detachment in citizens' responses to European integration (Duchesne et al., 2013; Van Ingelgom, 2014), thereby stressing the empirical relevance of principled politicization. Our empirical analysis reports that alternatives to the EU's political system emerge in two distinct forms, echoing Schattschneider's insights. First, they may be competing interpretations of foundational principles, for example, divergent understandings of unity. Second, they take the form of proposals that seek to replace existing principles altogether.

In the remainder of the article, Section 2 presents our theoretical approach to politicization and introduces the distinction between issue-based politicization and principled politicization. In Section 3, we discuss our data and methods of data analysis of citizen discourses. Section 4 focuses on our empirical analysis, and Section 5 concludes the article.

2. Theoretical Approach to Politicization

2.1. Issue-Based Politicization and Principled Politicization

There has been extensive debate about the politicization of the EU (Beaudonnet & Mérand, 2019; de Wilde, 2011; Hoeglinger, 2016; Hutter et al., 2016; Wiesner et al., 2019). From the outset, politicization has been conceived of as occurring at two levels: On the one hand, conflict concerns policy issues and political preferences; on the other hand, it concerns the deeper structural boundaries of the EU polity. This distinction was introduced in a famous discussion between Hix and Bartolini (2006) about whether European issues should be politicised. Simon Hix and Andreas Føllesdal (2006) called for political conflict about the EU to be made more visible. Integrating discussions about the EU into a party political cleavage would be instrumental, they suggested, to making the EU more legible by ordinary citizens and, thereby, supporting their interest and engagement with EU politics. In that respect, public discussions about the EU, framed as partisan discussions embedded in a clear cleavage, were deemed able to fix the democratic deficit of EU institutions. However, Peter Mair (2007) pointed out that the very existence of such a partisan cleavage could open up the possibility for some citizens to oppose the EU as a whole, as a matter of principle. Stefano Bartolini (2005) took a further step and argued that such a politicization of EU issues could spill over into discussions on the very nature and legitimacy of European integration, labelled as "constitutional debates." The entire European project could thus be put at risk if the EU were to be politicised to an excessive degree. Consequently, scholars contributing to the normative debate favoured a "moderate" politicization of the EU, focusing on policy and party-political issues.

Whether desirable or not, public discussions about the EU have become more politicised, and constitutional—or structural—debates are part of them, as Bartolini anticipated they would be. In this context, Pieter de Wilde (2011, p. 560) elaborated on "an overarching meaning to the concept of politicization." His definition is now the most widely relied upon definition of the politicization of the EU. It is defined as "an increase in polarization of opinions, interests or values and the extent to which they are publicly advanced towards policy formulation within the EU" (de Wilde, 2011, p. 560). Importantly, this definition has provided an operational starting point for a large body of research on political parties, government communication, and the discussion of European issues in the mainstream media (cf. e.g., de Wilde et al., 2016; Risse, 2014; Staham & Trenz, 2013). Importantly, de Wilde's definition has mostly been treated not as a concept, but as the concept's operationalisation (Wiesner et al., 2019). It was formalised as "politicization = salience × (increase in number of actors + polarisation)" (Grande & Hutter, 2016, p. 10). Thereafter, measures of EU politicization have flourished in the literature, in the form of coverage of EU issues (de Wilde et al., 2016; de Wilde & Zürn, 2012; Staham & Trenz, 2013) and measures of support or opposition to the EU (De Vries, 2018). Crucially, while de Wilde's definition includes "opinions, interests, or values," the literature has primarily focused on the first two, paying less attention to values or the underlying principles of the EU. As a result, the literature has been almost exclusively concerned with issues and interests, largely neglecting the politicization of what de Wilde refers to as "values."

We propose to reassess the conceptualization of the politicization of the EU with a view to incorporating this overlooked dimension into the analysis. To do so, we turn to how the political is theorized. Following de Wilde's elaboration, most of the existing scholarship portrays EU politics as a political arena where visible, "punctuated" debates tackle contentious issues such as crises, elections, and referenda (Hutter et al., 2016; Kriesi, 2016). In that respect, politics is defined as visible conflicts happening within a specific institutional

space, i.e., the political sphere or field (Kauppi et al., 2016), and politicization is understood as a strategic game that political actors play by choosing to initiate or contribute to public discussions about specific issues, that is, to politicise or depoliticise these issues. This conceptualization of politicization can be labelled issue-based politicization.

This conceptualization is supported by Elmer Schattschneider's elaboration of both politics and politicization, which existing research takes inspiration from (for recent references, cf. de Wilde, 2011, p. 568; Grande & Hutter, 2016, p. 8; Wiesner et al., 2019, p. 256). Schattschneider considers that "at the root of all politics is the universal language of conflict" (1960, pp. 2–3). He defines politicization as "the contagiousness of conflict, the elasticity of its scope and the fluidity of involvement of people" (Schattschneider, 1960, p. 17), or in an earlier formulation, "the intensity, visibility, direction and scope of the conflict" (1957, p. 933). In that regard, politics is about choosing one's battles strategically in the "expanding universe of politics" (Schattschneider, 1960, p. 17).

Crucially, however, Schattschneider illuminated another dimension of politicization, that he refers to as the "conflict of conflicts" (1960, p. 68). For him, the political involves not only debating visible issues, but also deciding which issues and principles will be brought to the fore, thereby shaping the nature of the conflict and the actors involved. In the political realm, Schattschneider contends, the battle begins with the struggle to determine which battles are to be fought. In that sense, he suggests that politicization is not only the expansion of the political universe, but also the deliberate shift from one universe to another: it is a "war of worlds" as much as a world of conflicts, since "conflicts compete with each other" (Schattschneider, 1960, p. 65). In this war of worlds, political actors and citizens alike may question the issues that are discussed and imposed, as well as the alternatives that are accepted, tolerated, or suppressed. In other words, the war of worlds is about the principles of the regime.

This second, structural dimension of the political is of a different nature than the first, which focuses on issue-based political conflicts. The main reason is that the "war of worlds" affects the foundations of the regime itself. This is where principled politicization relates to democracy as a type of political regime. In theory, all political regimes are founded on particular principles. The defining feature of democracy is that discussions about principles are its core activity. In other words, principled politicization is an intrinsic part of the definition of democracy. Political activity involves expressing alternatives from a place that is not controlled by institutional power. Democracy is therefore open about its principles and alternatives. Building on Schattschneider's conceptualization of this meta-political process that brings the fundamental principles of a political regime and its alternatives into the public debate, rather than allowing them to remain implicit or taken for granted, we suggest that another politicization of the EU should be theorized. The next section elaborates further on the notion of principled politicization and discusses its broader implications for analysing the politicization of the EU.

2.2. Another Politicization (of the EU) is Possible: A "Schattschneiderian" Perspective

This other politicization, which we label *principled politicization*, can be defined as a process of politicization concerning regime principles and structural alternatives. In such a process, not only are regime principles salient in public debates, but their discussion also articulates or implies alternative principles. Building on Schattschneider (1960) and de Wilde (2011), principled politicization is understood as a type of politicization

that focuses on a *specific topic*, regime principles rather than policy and political issues, and a *specific content*, the alternatives to existing regime principles. Let us examine the defining features of principled politicization in turn.

First, principled politicization is about regime principles and discussions on what they are and what they ought to be. These discussions play a crucial role in *selecting the conflicts* that will be debated publicly. As Schattschneider (1960, p. 66) explains:

> There are billions of potential conflicts in any modern society, but only a few become significant. The reduction of the number of conflicts is an essential part of politics. Politics deals with the domination and subordination of conflicts. A democratic society is able to survive because it manages conflicts by establishing priorities among a multitude of potential conflicts.

This process is inherently democratic as the principles that stand at the foundation of the regime are not to be dictated but rather debated. Regime principles serve as reference points that shape and frame conflicts around EU decisions. In this way, principled politicization sets the boundaries of what is debated.

The crucial point is that this selection process is not based on either strategic considerations or on pre-existing consensus as to the principles to be discussed and their interpretation. It is not merely strategic because power is "multifunctional" (Schattschneider, 1960, p. 77). It cannot be comprehensively controlled by a given political actor, and the more hegemonic an actor may become, the less likely they are to be consistent across all their positions. Furthermore, the conflict of conflicts "is not like an intercollegiate debate in which the opponents agree in advance on a definition of the issues" (Schattschneider, 1960, p. 68). The reason is that power lies in the selection of which issues are to be addressed in public debates. Principled politicization is thus closely associated with the notion that politics is an "essentially contested" concept, that is, "concepts the proper use of which inevitably involves endless disputes about their proper uses on the part of their users" (Gallie, 1985, p. 169). In other words, "the nature of the fight" in a democracy "is not just given; the conflict is partly about how to define conflicts" (Müller, 2020, p. 102).

Second, principled politicization zeroes in on the discussion of alternatives to regime principles. Defining alternatives is a fundamentally conflictual endeavour. It plays a structural role in framing public discussions and shaping the issues that are subsequently debated. And it is, of course, linked to democratic plurality, to the equal expression of everyone's individual views. In fact, alternatives may either transform or legitimise the political world we inhabit. Following Schattschneider, alternatives can be understood in two ways. On the one hand, they may represent *competing interpretations of the principles* underlying the EU's political system as articulated by actors and institutions in public debates. For instance, think of how much the meaning of solidarity in a social Europe, or of sovereignty in a union of states, differs across political preferences. On the other hand, alternatives may entail *the replacement of existing principles* altogether. In this sense, they point to a reimagined political order that does not exist yet, but that is either called for to change current realities, or, conversely, is rejected as a negative vision of what could be. The definition of alternatives is essentially related to power allocation. In Schattschneider's own words:

> As a matter of fact, *the definition of the alternatives is the supreme instrument of power*; the antagonists can rarely agree on what the issues are because power is involved in the definition. He who

> determines what politics is about runs the country, because the definition of the alternatives is the choice of conflicts, and the choice of conflicts allocates power. (Schattschneider, 1960, p. 68, emphasis in the original)

Another perspective on principled politicization is provided by examining what this concept is not (Sartori, 1970). Hence, what is "principled *de*politicization"? Principled depoliticization occurs when the "conflict of conflicts," or the "war of worlds," is virtually absent, that is, when regime principles are so rigid or set that they cannot be discussed or challenged, or when the absence of alternatives results in a sense of fatalism and powerlessness that prevents any collective discussion. In this respect, the politicization of the EU depends on the salience of specific issues, the polarization of opinions about these issues and the extension of actors contributing to these issue-based discussions. Crucially, it also hinges on the malleability of the "war of worlds" and its capacity to accommodate the discussion of alternatives.

Last, we acknowledge that principled politicization and issue-based politicization may unfold at the same time and alongside one another. They refer to two levels of politicization, the former pertaining to the structure of political debates and the latter concerning the issues themselves that are debated. Fundamental discussions of regime principles and alternatives are not confined to highly visible episodes, such as crises, elections, or referenda. Rather, these discussions of regime principles unfold continuously in daily public debates. Actors navigate conflicts fluidly, addressing both issue-specific decisions as well as overarching principles and alternatives. We suggest that accounting for both levels of politicization and their interactions provides the grounding fora more compelling analysis of the processes of politicization in the EU. Table 1 summarizes the main conceptual features of issue-based politicization and principled politicization.

Table 1. Issue-based politicization and principled politicization.

	Issue-based politicization	*Principled politicization*
Politics as	Visible conflicts (Schattschneider, 1960, pp. 2–3, 17)	"Conflict of conflicts" (Schattschneider, 1960, p. 68)
Topics	Policy or political issues	Regime principles
Content	Salience and polarisation (and extension of actors)	Salience and polarisation (and extension of actors): + Alternatives to regime principles: (a) competing interpretations of principles; (b) replacing existing principles altogether
		< – > Fluidity

3. Analytical Approach and Method

3.1. Applied Political Theory as a Test

To advance our analysis of EU politicization, we adopt the perspective of "applied political theory" and put the concept of principled politicization to an empirical test. The "applied political theory" approach combines political theory with interpretative social theory. While the former focuses on the resources of ideas and "the exercise of moral and political evaluation by citizens," the latter considers the specific references people

invoke when discussing politics (White, 2011, pp. 40–41). Our empirical approach aims to support the relevance of the concept of principled politicization for understanding discussions about the EU. Specifically, we have designed and implemented a "hard test." First, our analysis focuses on the type of actors that are the least likely to engage in debates over regime principles, namely ordinary citizens. We study their discussions about EU regime principles, the interpretation of the principles they support, and the alternatives they propose, all in a context where they were not prompted whatsoever to discuss these themes. While one might argue that citizens are especially prone to general, abstract discussions about the EU, because of its perceived distance and their limited policy knowledge, we contend that this would not weaken the strength of our test. Our analysis does not code vague or superficial expressions of discontent as evidence of principled politicization; rather, it identifies instances where citizens substantively engage with core regime-level principles such as democracy, sovereignty, or the rule of law. Importantly, for a contribution to count as evidence of principled politicization, it must not only express the salience of a regime principle but also articulate or imply an alternative principle. This requirement sets a high empirical bar: It ensures that principled claims are not merely rhetorical or abstract. The quotes we cite in the empirical sections illustrate this. Second, because the scholarship on issue-based politicization has primarily focused on policy-related debates, our empirical analysis also zeroes in on how citizens discuss public policies. This empirical focus is instrumental in validating the concept of principled politicization: If there is empirical evidence that ordinary citizens discuss (EU) policies in terms of issues, but at the same time engage in debates about the principles of the EU, then the case can be made that the concept of principled politization captures a different dimension of politicization than its issue-based cousin does. Third, the interviews were all non-directive, allowing participants to speak freely on any topic. Since data collection was structured neither around policy-related questions nor regime principles, the datasets remain free of a priori policy selection or prompted discussions on regime principles. Policy discussions explicitly relating to EU regime principles reflect participants' own ways of engaging with interview questions and focus group discussions rather than the influence of research design.

3.2. Research Design

To test our conceptualization of principled politicization, we conducted a secondary qualitative analysis (Hughes & Tarrant, 2020). This approach involves utilizing pre-existing research data to investigate new questions or verify previous studies (Heaton, 2004, p. 16). Our dataset consists of four studies shared with us by primary researchers (see Table 2 and Appendices 1 and 2 in the Supplementary File for further details). It includes 31 semi-structured interviews and 45 focus groups with a total of 268 participants. As the principal asset of focus groups is to provide a tool for participants to discuss and debate, focus groups have proven useful for studying (de)politicization and, more precisely, to understand how citizens "talk politics" or resist the idea of discussing politics (Conover & Searing, 2005; Gamson, 1992). In this respect, focus groups, when designed appropriately, can generate data on how citizens get involved or not in political discussion (Van Ingelgom, 2020). In this perspective, the three studies that use focus groups to examine public reactions to European integration explicitly treat them as a test of politicization (Duchesne, 2017). In contrast, the interviews conducted by Céline Belot differ in nature. However, their semi-structured format allows for non-directional responses, which also provides a way to test the salience of the topics discussed. A key feature of these studies is their focus on how citizens perceive and understand the process of European integration. They also adopted a qualitative, comparative approach, which ensures sufficient comparability (Hughes et al., 2023).

Given our primary analytical objective, our focus is on identifying commonalities in the data across different national contexts, time periods, and socio-economic characteristics of the participants. The diversity in terms of specific data collection methods and research questions enhances the validity of the findings that emerge from our analysis of this independently conducted research. Therefore, our empirical test aims to document whether participants discuss the principles of the EU regime, and if so, how they do so, considering variations in time, space, and socio-demographic factors, rather than seeking a representative description. The value of our longitudinal and cross-national data lies in its ability to strengthen the robustness of this conceptual test by showing that such engagement is not confined to a specific context or moment in time.

Table 2. Datasets included in our corpus.

Primary dataset	Primary data collection	Research topic	Type/number of interviews and number of participants	Cross-national comparison*	Social composition
Belot (2000)	1995–1996	Citizens' attitudes towards European integration	Semi-structured interviews; 31 participants in individual interviews	France* and the UK*	Young adults (three categories of age) from varying socio-economic backgrounds (different levels of education and coming from different regions of UK and France)
Citizens talking about Europe (CITAE) (Duchesne et al., 2013)	2005–2006	Citizens' reactions towards European integration	Focus groups; 24 focus groups and 133 participants	Belgium*, France*, and the UK*	Participants from varying socio-economic backgrounds (working class, white collar, managers)
Mercenier (2019)	2014	Citizens' perceptions of the EU and their relationships to politics	Focus groups; 7 focus groups and 35 participants	Belgium*	Young adults from different neighbourhoods with distinct socio-demographics
Réseau transatlantique sur l'Europe politique (RESTEP; Beaudonnet et al., 2022)	2019	Citizens' politicization of EU issues	Focus groups; 14 focus groups and 69 participants	Belgium*, France*, Italy, and Portugal	Participants from varying socio-economic backgrounds (high and low education levels), including students

Note: * = Data from these countries are part of our secondary corpus.

3.3. Methods of Data Analysis

Initially, we coded our dataset using a collectively and abductively constructed codebook (Vila-Henninger et al., 2024). To operationalise participants' policy discussions, we used codes describing policy areas as defined in the Comparative Agenda Project. To identify extracts where participants mention and discuss

regime principles, we drew from a code group building on Easton's (1965) analysis of citizens' relations to their political system and, specifically, included the "regime principle" code. This code refers to core regime principles representing the values, virtues, and ideals of the political system as understood and explicated by respondents. The basic principles of democratic regimes are commonly understood to include such values, ideas, ideals, and principles, such as (not exhaustive) freedom, participation, tolerance and moderation, respect for legal-institutional rights, and the rule of law. Finally, we added a code from a group of codes that describe the level at which participants discuss policies, specifically the "Multilevel—EU" code.

Then, we identified extracts where research participants mentioned a regime principle while discussing policies at the European level. To this end, we constructed a code equation, presented in Table 3. This step is instrumental in identifying relevant segments of discussions and performing data reduction.

Table 3. ATLAS.ti query tool abductive code equations.

Code equation: EU regime principles	Public Policy Code—Agriculture | Banking and Finance | Circulation | Culture | Defence | Economy | Education | Employment | Energy | Environment | Euro | Health | Housing | Immigration | International Affairs | Justice | Rights | Sciences and technology | Social policy | Trade | Transportation AND Democratic Linkages Code—Regime principles AND Multilevel code—EU level	386 quotes

In total, we retrieved 386 extracts: 121 from the Belot dataset, 190 from the CITAE dataset, 31 from the Mercenier dataset, and 44 from the RESTEP dataset. Quotes can range from a few sentences to very lengthy discussions. By way of comparison, our corpus includes 413 quotes where political community is mentioned alongside policy experiences and perceptions and the EU level, 286 segments for political institutions, and 140 segments for political actors. Regime principles are thus well represented in our corpus when compared to other political objects. Our operationalisation of political community, regime principles, political institutions, and political actors, anchored in Easton's paradigmatic framework (Easton, 1965), was based on studies attentive to the relationship between citizens and democracy (Norris, 2011).

In a third step, we inductively analysed these 386 quotes to identify what regime principles and alternatives participants discussed, if indeed they did so. Rather than treating regime principles and alternatives as pre-defined categories imposed on participants' discussions, our approach allows regime principles to emerge from the empirical analysis. *Principles* are defined as the values, virtues, and ideals of a political system that participants understand and explicitly mention. In line with Schattschneider's definition, *alternatives* refer to either alternative interpretations of a given principle or alternative principles that challenge what participants consider to be the principles of the EU. To consider a quote as an expression of regime principles, one thus needs more than just a mention of a vague principle related to the EU; it requires a direct engagement with a principle that also articulates or implies an alternative principle.

4. Principled Politicization in Citizen Discourses

Do ordinary citizens engage in debates about principles of the EU when they have not been prompted to do so? To address this question and assess whether the concept of principled politicization has empirical traction,

our analysis investigates the topic and contents outlined in Section 2 (see Table 1) and provides empirical illustrations for each of them: (a) What regime principles of the EU, if any, do research participants engage with in their discussions?; (b) do they develop competing interpretations of these principles?; and (c) do participants discuss alternative principles to replace principles that they deem dominant in the EU? As illustrated by the quotes mentioned in this empirical section, citizens discuss regime principles and consider alternatives. They do so explicitly and sometimes vividly.

4.1. The Regime Principles of the EU in Participant Discussions

Across datasets, participants explicitly debate a range of regime principles they associate with the EU. Some of these principles align closely with those promoted by European institutions, while others have not been explicitly endorsed by institutional actors in the process of European integration. Discussions about the EU as a democratic regime illustrate this point. In the earliest research conducted by Céline Belot in the mid-nineties, shortly after the adoption of the Maastricht Treaty, Claire—a 19-year-old student in technical training who lives in Grenoble—envisions the EU political regime as a group of several countries headed by a pluralist government. We demonstrate this in Extract 1, from Belot's interviews, Grenoble, 1995 (Regime Principles Code—Public Policy Code—Euro), where underlined text segments identify regime principles that participants discuss; segments in italics point at discussions of alternative principles of the EU:

> Researcher: Because can you imagine that Europe, I don't know in how many years, could be a government for the whole of Europe?
>
> Claire: Yeah, I can see it that way. Because for me Europe is both a group of several countries and a country that has its own name, Europe. Like we'd say France, Spain and so on. And I'd see, and I'd see it with a government, that's for sure. A very large government, however. Precisely to avoid *the ultra-dangerous centralization of power by a dictator*. Precisely to make sure that there are enough voices, that there are enough opinions, that there are enough parties that are represented. Something broad, that is broad in terms of the size of the government and also broad in terms of the ambition to succeed. I think that it would be much better to have several people who have a big part to play in this to avoid the fiasco, you know. Because it's the same thing, you can very easily *set up a government that's not very large* in a big country and then well, like *it was in Germany with Hitler or in Italy with Mussolini it's the same*. I think it's the same because well I think that the currency can decline in Germany, I hope not (*laughs*), I hope not but, yeah, that's what I think.

Claire believes that the EU should take the form of a "very large government," "something broad," and she stresses the importance of including a diversity of opinions and political actors in this government. She adds that the latter must have "a big part to play." The reason for this, as she sees it, is the need to avoid a monopoly on decision-making by a select few. Strikingly, she paints a very bleak picture of the situation to be avoided, which would not only be a "fiasco," but which she considers would be comparable to the German and Italian fascist regimes of the 1930s and 1940s. Instead, very much in line with a principle widely promoted by European institutions themselves, Claire supports the principle of a democratic, specifically pluralist, EU which offers a broad representation of a diversity of voices. Her mention of the "ultra-dangerous centralization of power by a dictator" and the institutional design preferences she develops reflect a concern for institutional safeguards against illiberal tendencies and a clear engagement with

democratic principles. This engagement aligns with the notion of principled politicization, as Claire actively reflects on the foundational principles that ought to underpin a European government.

While Claire values inclusivity and collective decision-making, other participants highlight efficiency as a crucial principle for EU governance. This is the case of Christel, a 22-year-old university student, who was interviewed in Grenoble in 1995. Her interpretation of the principle of union in the EU foregrounds the absence of concrete achievements. She vigorously depicts a long-standing historical process that has yet to bear fruit: "It's all very well to have started, to have begun in 57, but if it's only to find ourselves more than thirty years later, still at the same point." She puts the blame squarely on the institutional arrangements and decision-making processes at the European level, clearly underlining their inefficiency: "Well, we're not done yet, if there have to be fifteen institutions combing through all the amendments, opinions, recommendations and so on." She adds that even when agreements are put into practice, "some go back on their decisions. Let's just say that there's no cohesion there either." See the following Extract 2, from Belot's interviews, Grenoble, 1995 (Regime Principles Code—Public Policy Code—Euro):

> **Christel:** I find that it's the slowness, the administrative slowness, which means that the whole process must be put back. And that seeing all the treaties that have been signed and all that, what's the point? To keep coming back to the same point! It's all very well to have started, to have begun in 57, but if it's only to find ourselves more than thirty years later, still at the same point….Let's say it is not a Europe that has really concretized if it takes a century to get to that point. No, I find that the institutions are….And then when you see all the processes involved in passing a law, the shuttle problems, then the Commission must read it, after the Council of Ministers, after the European Council, after this, after that. Well, we're not done yet. If there has to be fifteen institutions going through all the amendments, all the opinions, the recommendations. Well, if that's what it takes, then I think that yes Europe is being held back by all that. I think that in fact we're going round in circles. Because a lot of agreements have been made, but some are not respected, and then when they are put into practice, some go back on their decisions. Let's just say that there's no cohesion there either.

Where Claire emphasizes inclusivity and broad representation as essential to avoiding authoritarianism, Christel's perspective highlights the downsides of extensive procedural hurdles. She interprets the principles of governance through a lens of effectiveness, arguing that excessive institutional complexity hampers Europe's ability to act cohesively and decisively. This interpretation implicitly competes with Claire's vision. Claire advocates for diverse representation and institutional breadth to safeguard democracy, while Christel prioritizes streamlined functionality and questions whether the current institutional framework can deliver meaningful outcomes. This tension reveals a deeper debate: is it more important for the EU to ensure representation and inclusivity or to prioritize efficiency and clear progress? Both perspectives engage deeply with the principles underlying European governance but differ in their prioritization of these principles. Ultimately, their contrasting views enrich the debate on what principles should guide the EU, illustrating how ordinary citizens contribute to discussions about defining EU principles.

When participants discuss specific policies, they may also consider other principles rather than engage in deeper debates on EU core principles. Extract 3, from a RESTEP focus group with highly educated seniors in Grenoble in 2019, coded as Regime Principles Code—Public Policy Code—Agriculture, Environment, and Health, provides an illustration of this. While debating environmental protection and public health within the

EU, and the EU's evolving role in these areas, their discussion sheds light on the tensions between the EU's historical commitments to certain principles and its current practices, contributing to a broader debate about the EU's legitimacy and adherence to its foundational principles:

> Jean-Michel: The losers are the environmentalists, because…
>
> Sophie: Yes.
>
> Roger: Of course.
>
> Jean-Michel: And food safety, because the EU has threatened our food safety by once again authorising the marketing of farmed salmon.
>
> Sophie: Antibiotics.
>
> Jean-Michel: Which are riddled with antibiotics. For a long time, the EU was our environmental shield. It must be said. Most of the regulations on protecting natural areas came from Europe. And Europe was always accused of being overly protective of the environment. And, things have suddenly reversed in the last few terms of office, where on the contrary, they've become crime-pushers with pesticides. The challenges to our food safety, with, also the marketing authorisations for drugs that wouldn't be authorised here, and so on.
>
> Sophie: It's also thanks to England, isn't it? Because it's the UK, it's really the UK, I'm pissed off because it's, it's the UK which has been extremely lax on environmental issues, agriculture and so on, eh?
>
> Roger: Well, as far as fishing is concerned, it's particularly so, isn't it? Fishing is a real scandal.
>
> Sophie: Fishing, yes. So, they've got us into this and then they're off.
>
> Roger: A real scandal.

Jean-Michel begins by lamenting a perceived reversal in the EU's role as a guardian of environmental protection and food safety, describing how its historical function as an "environmental shield" has been undermined. He argues that recent EU policies—such as permitting the marketing of farmed salmon "riddled with antibiotics"—threaten principles like sustainability and public health. This critique goes beyond specific issues to challenge the EU's commitment to upholding its stated principles in practice. Sophie and Roger expand on this by emphasizing the role of the UK in weakening EU environmental standards, suggesting that collective responsibility within the EU has been compromised. Sophie's remark that "they've got us into this and then they're off" critiques not only the UK's influence but also the broader principle of solidarity, which has been destabilized by Brexit and divergent national priorities.

Overall, participant discussions on the principles of the EU cut across socio-economic groups and partisan preferences. They are observed at different points in time and in different countries. These comparative empirical observations, illustrated here by a few extracts, attest to the empirical relevance of principled

politicization: Participants do discuss the principles of the EU's political system without having been prompted to do so. These debates are salient to them, and they engage with them sometimes vividly, as illustrated by the previous quotes. Their comments are also very precise, which contrasts strongly with the distance that often characterizes citizens' reactions towards European integration (Duchesne et al., 2013; Van Ingelgom, 2014). These discussions have something else in common too: Participants stress the tensions between the EU's stated principles and their practical implementation. This suggests a sense of disillusionment with the EU's ability to adhere to its foundational principles, while also showcasing the capacity of ordinary citizens to articulate and debate these principles. In that respect, the empirical illustrations we have provided suggest that in this discrepancy lies the possibility for a richer analysis of EU politicization.

4.2. Competing Interpretations of EU Principles

Another theoretical feature of principled politicization is that citizens discuss alternatives to the EU principles, particularly in the form of competing interpretations of these principles. Indeed, the extracts cited already hint that participants may contest how the EU institutions define their own principles and may argue for a competing understanding of these principles. Extract 3 is a case in point: Jean-Michel and Sophie believe that to be in line with the principle of the protection of the environment, the EU should reaffirm its environmental leadership by returning to stringent environmental and food safety standards.

A focus group conducted in Paris in 2005 with working-class participants offers another compelling illustration, with free movement emerging as a central topic. The discussion quickly moves beyond policy details, revealing divergent interpretations of the principle itself. Jean-Marie's scepticism about the effects of border abolition raises doubts about whether the principle of free movement genuinely delivers meaningful change. In doing so, his critique questions the broader normative justification for removing internal borders within the EU. The following Extract 4 is from a CITAE focus group, in Paris, with participants from the working class (Regime Principles Code—Public Policy Code—Circulation and Employment):

> Jean-Marie (*towards Cédric then Jeannette*): What difference will the abolition of borders make? None. I don't see what the problem is. It's because you're going to change, we're going to change places that *it's going to be better because there are no more borders*.
>
> Jeanette: …(*Laughs*) French people can go and work wherever they like in peace, without too much paperwork and there are French people here who want to go and work in Switzerland, so we give them the [papers] (*mimes papers*).
>
> Jean-Marie: Pff….Try to go and work in Switzerland.
>
> Zahoua (*towards Jean-Marie*): It's not as easy as that to go and work abroad, is it?
>
> Jean-Marie: Yes, yes. In Switzerland.
>
> Cédric: All the formalities.

> Jeanette: If you want to work somewhere else, we must let you work somewhere else if you work here, you work there.
>
> Cédric: The administrative formalities are less complex than before.

Contrary to Jean-Marie, Jeanette, Zahoua, and Cédric endorse the free movement of workers as a principle that improves and facilitates the lives of French people. Jeanette points out that "French people can go and work wherever they like in peace" and compares this situation to the hurdles encountered by those who "want to go and work in Switzerland." Cédric agrees and stresses that in Europe "administrative formalities are less complex than they used to be." However, Jean-Marie questions the very point of the free movement of workers. For him, free movement changes nothing about their actual situation. After all, he points out, "it's [not] because you're going to change places that it's going to be better." Here, we see the development of divergent interpretations of the principle of free movement and whether it does in fact improve citizens' lives.

Extract 5 (Belot's interviews, Grenoble, 1995, Regime Principles Code—Public Policy Code—Euro) illustrates the emergence of competing interpretations of EU principles further, with discussions on the principle of the union of peoples that the EU would embody. This principle is frequently discussed in our secondary corpus (see also Extract 1). However, the meaning given to it differs widely. For instance, Nathalie, a 20-year-old student in technical training, in an interview conducted in Grenoble in the mid-nineties, interprets the principle of union as bringing both external and internal gains:

> Nathalie: Because it's true that if we're always…well if each European country is closed in on itself that can't help trade. It's meant to be. Like that, I don't even know. If Europe unites, it could be stronger with regards to other countries that are bigger than itself, like the United States or the USSR, which is perhaps going to develop and then all the Asian countries too, Japan and all that. No, it's good because I think that each European country has its own problems and if they don't join forces, they won't be able to solve them on their own. We need unity. That I think will help them solve their problems.

The union of countries and peoples of Europe brings clear geopolitical advantages, since "if Europe unites, it could be stronger with regards to other countries bigger than itself, like the United States or the USSR." But the principle of unity, which she is not sure is yet a reality ("if Europe unites"), would also make it possible to overcome the problems faced by individual EU member states. Nathalie does not differentiate between member states, since she considers that "each European country has its own problems," and that unity is a sine qua non condition for solving them ("we need unity").

Nathan, a participant in a 2014 Mercenier's focus group held in a Brussels neighbourhood at the lower end of the socio-economic spectrum (Jette), discusses the principle of the union of the people from a very different perspective. While he suggests unity was initially associated with ideals like peace, democracy, and shared prosperity, he argues that it evolved into economic integration driven by market interests. His interpretation of the principle of unity in the EU is that it no longer exists. Extract 6 is as follows:

> Nathan: That's a bit like what I've just explained. For me, it's the business of Europe. You had the ideal, as they say, of peace and so on. Well, it's the ideal that's always being sold because the reality is that we need a customs union for coal and steel. Well, I'm not going to give a history lesson, but Europe

> is always being sold as something for rose-coloured: *peace*, *democracy*, *development aid*. The European Parliament, which is more the democratic side of things, doesn't have a say. It's always the Commission that decides and it's a Commission that's really labelled very right-wing in its policies. Before Barroso, it was Delors who was a Frenchman who was much more into the *European ideal of uniting peoples*. I could talk for hours about that. I think the problem is that Europe has lost its ideal over the last twenty years or so. I've just broken the mood here (*Laughing*).
>
> Moderator: Excuse me, what?
>
> Nathan: I've just ruined the mood suddenly (*small laugh*).
>
> Catherine: I think that over the years, because of globalisation and all that, Europe isn't what it was at the beginning.
>
> Nathan: Yes, we're levelling downwards. Before, the countries that came in, their standard of living rose and everything. Then now, finally, it's more the standard of living in Europe that's falling.

Nathan identifies the unity of peoples as a foundational principle, embodied in the vision of European leaders like Jacques Delors, who was truly committed to this principle. His comment that "Europe is always being sold as something rose-coloured: peace, democracy, development aid" highlights a disconnect between the stated principle and the EU's perceived focus on economic pragmatic decisions, such as the customs union for coal and steel. Catherine concurs and elaborates on Nathan's interpretation that the principle of unity in the EU is no longer a reality by arguing that globalisation further challenges the notion of a union of peoples at the EU level. Both critique the EU's foundational principle of uniting peoples, contrasting its idealistic origins with its current realities. This contrast echoes the participants' discussion of the freedom of movement principle.

Overall, these discussions underscore the capacity of ordinary citizens, from various socio-economic backgrounds, at different points in time, and in different countries, to engage with EU principles and advocate for alternative interpretations that differ, sometimes sharply, in their understandings.

4.3. Alternative Principles

Schattschneider's conceptualization of alternatives is based on the fact that principles endorsed by the EU, as understood by participants, are replaced by others. Is this theoretical dimension empirically relevant? Extract 7, from a RESTEP focus group conducted with white-collar workers in Grenoble in 2019 (Regime Principles Code—Public Policy Code—Euro), is a discussion between Delta and Golf about compliance with European monetary rules, and suggests that this is indeed the case. While they agree that national governments face institutional constraints stemming from the EU, they disagree on whether there are good reasons to accept them. Their disagreement rests on competing interpretations of the principle of compliance with institutional commitments, but also on Delta's argument that concerns for solidarity and public services should drive decision-making much more than compliance with the growth and stability pact:

> Delta: I have more of a problem with Europe. In particular, the treaties, for example the fact that we can't go into debt beyond 3% of GDP, the fact that we can't modify these treaties, that the European

> Central Bank is independent, a sort of chicken without a political head that dictates all the monetary policies of each country, in fact. And it turns out that these are *the levers that are vital for national public policies which can influence unemployment*, *all the economic activity of a country*, in fact, yes. With the government, well with the governance of Europe mainly, yes.
>
> Moderator: Does everyone agree with that?
>
> Golf: No, because if they do that, it's because there are good reasons. Like the 3% is to prevent countries from getting into too much debt and to avoid that it results in problems for the 27, and that destabilises the EU.
>
> Delta: Well, that's one way of looking at it, but in fact it's mainly to increase competition and, finally, to participate in the dismantling of public services because, *basically*, *if a state can't exceed that amount*, *it can't invest in public spending*.

This quote engages with fundamental questions about the principles underpinning the EU, particularly the principles of governance, solidarity, and economic unity. Delta and Golf articulate competing interpretations of these principles, showcasing a broader debate about the EU's legitimacy. Delta makes the argument that the rules of the Growth and Stability Pact result in national governments' decision-making capacity being hollowed out, turning them into agency-less actors who cannot make appropriate choices to fight unemployment or foster the country's "economic activity." Golf's defence of these rules is grounded in the understanding that complying with them is the right thing to do to avoid "problems for the 27." Delta stresses Golf's common-sensical argument—"it's one way to look at it"—and further elaborates on the negative consequences of the Growth and Stability Pact rules: They hinder national governments' ability to "invest in the public services." He therefore clearly presents an alternative vision of the EU that prioritizes flexible governance and redistributive solidarity that reflects a vision of solidarity based on investment in social welfare and public goods. Golf's perspective, on the other hand, reinforces the existing framework, prioritizing rules-based stability over flexibility. This ability to debate the EU's regime principles demonstrates the dynamic nature of principled politicization.

5. Discussion

Our applied theory approach illustrates the fact that citizens actively engage in discussions about the principles underlying EU political regime, even without being explicitly prompted to do so. They explore alternative visions by either interpreting shared principles in divergent ways or advocating for entirely new principles to be (re)established. This indicates that principled politicization is indeed an aspect of citizen discourse that is worth studying. Principled politicization provides a valuable theoretical lens for understanding the discrepancies between various principles within the EU regime and the gap between these principles and the lived experiences of its citizens.

Through the analysis of quotes from Delta, Nathan, and others, we see that while the EU regime is perceived as being founded on principles of unity, solidarity, or democratic governance, its current practices often reflect a tension between these principles, or with specific policies or issues. For instance, Delta's critique highlights the restrictive nature of fiscal rules that undermine national sovereignty and social investment, contrasting

sharply with Golf's defence of collective economic stability. Similarly, Nathan's reflection on the EU's drift from its original ideals underscores a broader sense of disillusionment among citizens who feel disconnected from processes of decision-making. Jean-Michel, Sophie, and Roger express a similar gap between EU regime principles and concrete policies on yet another issue, here food safety and EU environmental standards.

Furthermore, our empirical observations illuminate that citizens do not engage with principles in abstract terms. Instead, they approach questions of principles through tangible issues in public policy, such as environmental regulations, freedom of movement, and monetary policy. In our analysis, citizen discourses thus intertwine the theoretical with the practical. These discussions shed light on how participants engage with and challenge the EU's regime principles. By engaging with the EU regime principles, citizens can critically evaluate these policies based on regime principles and their experiences, using them as a foundation to imagine and articulate alternative visions of the EU regime. This interplay highlights how the two dimensions of politicization—issue-based and principled—are mutually reinforcing, offering citizens a pathway to actively shape the political landscape. Ultimately, examining these discrepancies through the lens of principled politicization enriches our understanding of EU politicization and the building of its democracy.

On a theoretical level, our analysis thus demonstrates that while principled politicization focuses on the structure of conflicts and is inherently more abstract and theoretical than issue-based politicization, it plays a critical role in pre-selecting the alternatives available in political debates. This aligns with Schattschneider's insight that the supreme instrument of power lies in the definition of alternatives. In this respect, our empirical findings also show that challenges to the EU's political system take shape in two main ways, as Schattschneider theorized. On one hand, they rest on differing interpretations of core principles, such as contrasting views on the meaning of unity. On the other hand, they manifest as calls for fundamentally rethinking or replacing those principles entirely, such as prioritising solidarity over economic efficacy.

Principled politicization, therefore, stresses the essential interplay between principles and policy in democratic debates. This dynamic perspective, or fluidity, enriches our understanding of the relationship between both types of politicization. On the one hand, the "war of worlds" at the core of principled politicization shapes and influences the debates that unfold as part of issue-based politicization. On the other hand, the content of policies accessible to citizens through their experiences or through issue-based politicization enables them to revisit and question the principles underlying principled politicization. This recursive process allows citizens to contribute to the definition of new alternatives and the reconfiguration of the very structure of political conflicts. In that respect, principled politicization structures the debates of issue-based politicization, while issue-based politicization simultaneously informs and redefines the alternatives discussed through principled politicization.

To conclude, elaborating on the definition of politicization has an impact on our understanding of the democratisation of the EU. If alternatives and principles are particularly open to discussion in a democracy and are, therefore, to be found in citizen discourses, it is because the specificity of any democratic regime is to allow debate about the very principles of that regime. Democracy is a polity whose legitimacy is contestable, whose structures and norms could be called into question. This is expressed by the "indeterminacy" of the definition of democracy itself (Lefort, 1988): The meaning of core principles and their alternatives are constantly open to challenge and discussion. The level of politics that engages in this fundamental debate about the structure of democracy, that feeds and makes use of this "indeterminacy," is a

reflection on principles. Principled politicization drives and embodies the debate surrounding the challenge to democratic principles. Therefore, democracy is the precondition for debates on the foundations of the political system (Lacroix, 2024): Principled politicization is possible because democracy is established. Thus, by engaging in principled politicization, citizens set democracy in motion, because to debate about EU politics is also to debate democracy and its principles. The EU is no exception; principled politicization is not a threat to democracy as feared by some scholars in the earliest debates on EU politicization (Bartolini, 2005, 2006; Mair, 2007). Rather, it is evidence of democracy itself. The real threat is when the debate on principles is settled, and dissent is rejected. When the indeterminacy of democracy is not fed but settled in advance, the limits of possible structural conflicts are frozen and democracy declines (Arens, 2024). Political debates can therefore strengthen EU democratization when democracy itself and its principles are at stake.

Acknowledgments

We benefited from very helpful comments from the anonymous reviewers and the editors. We thank Katharine Throssel for the editing of this article. We are grateful to Claudia Wiesner and Meta Novak for their invitation to join the thematic issue. Last, we would like to thank the primary researchers—Céline Belot, Sophie Duchesne and the CITAE team, Heidi Mercenier, and Laurie Beaudonnet and the RESTEP team, for trusting us and giving us access to their data; as well as the QUALIDEM team for coding the data. This article reflects only the authors' views, and the European Research Council is not responsible for any use of the information it contains.

Funding

This research was funded by the project ERC Starting Grant Qualidem and the MIS Grant GLOBPOL. The Qualidem project is supported by the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement 716208). The GLOBPOL project is supported by the F.R.S-FNRS under the MIS programme (grant agreement F.4549.21).

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 author (unedited).

References

Alemanno, A., & Nicolaïdis, K. (2022). Citizen power Europe. In A. Alemanno & P. Sellal (Eds.), *The groundwork of European power* (Vol. 3, pp. 7–15). Revue Européenne du Droit.

Arens, N. (2024). Despotisme démocratique: Écueils classiques et nouveaux défis européens. *Politique européenne*, *83*(1), 66–95.

Balibar, É. (2016). *Europe: Crise et fin ?* Le bord de l'eau.

Bartolini, S. (2005). *Restructuring Europe: Centre formation, system building, and political structuring between the nation state and the European Union*. Oxford University Press.

Bartolini, S. (2006). *Should the union be 'politicised'? Prospects and risks* (Policy Paper). Notre Europe.

Beaudonnet, L., & Mérand, F. (2019). Qu'est-ce que l'Europe politique ? Un agenda de recherche sur la politisation. *Politique européenne*, *64*(2), 6–30.

Beaudonnet, L., Belot, C., Caune, H., Dupuy, C., Houde, A.-M., Le Corre Juratic, M., Pennetreau, D., Silva, T., & Van Ingelgom, V. (2022), Chantier de recherche: Studying (de)-politicization of the EU from a citizens point of view: A new comparative focus group study. *Politique Européenne*, *75*(1), 100–122.

Conover, P. J., & Searing, D. D. (2005). Studying 'everyday political talk' in the deliberative system. *Acta Politica*, *40*(3), 269–283.

Crespy, A. (2010). Contre « Bolkestein ». Le Parlement européen entre idéologie et stratégie institutionnelle. *Revue française de science politique*, *60*(5), 975–996.

Crespy, A., Massart, T., & Schmidt, V. (2023). How the impossible became possible: Evolving frames and narratives on responsibility and responsiveness from the Eurocrisis to NextGenerationEU. *Journal of European Public Policy*, *31*(4), 950–976.

De Vries, C. E. (2018). *Euroscepticism and the Future of European integration*. Oxford University Press.

de Wilde, P. (2011). No polity for old politics? A framework for analyzing politicization of European integration. *Journal of European Integration*, *33*(5), 559–575.

de Wilde, P., Leupold, A., & Schmidtke, H. (2016). Introduction: The differentiated politicisation of European governance. *West European Politics*, *39*(1), 3–22.

de Wilde, P., & Zürn, M. (2012). Can the politicization of European integration be reversed? *Journal of Common Market Studies*, *50*(1), 137–153.

Duchesne, S. (2017). Using focus groups to study the process of (de)politicization. In R. Barbour & D. L. Morgan (Eds.), *A new era in focus group research* (pp. 365–387). Palgrave MacMillan.

Duchesne, S., Frazer, E., Haegel, F., & Van Ingelgom, V. (Eds.). (2013). *Citizens' reactions to European integration compared: Overlooking Europe*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Easton, D. (1965). *A framework for political analysis*. Prentice-Hall.

Gallie, W. (1985). Essentially contested concepts. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, *56*, 167–198.

Gamson, W. A. (1992). *Talking politics*. Cambridge University Press.

Grande, E., & Hutter, S. (2016). Introduction: European integration and the challenge of politicisation. In S. Hutter, E. Grande, & H. Kriesi (Eds.), *Politicising Europe: Integration and mass politics* (pp. 3–31). Cambridge University Press.

Heaton, J. (2004). *Reworking qualitative data*. Sage.

Hix, S., & Bartolini, S. (2006). *Politics: The right or the wrong sort of medicine for the EU?* (Policy Paper No. 19). Notre Europe. https://institutdelors.eu/content/uploads/2025/04/policypaper19-en-1.pdf

Hix, S., & Føllesdal, A. (2006). Why there is a democratic deficit in the EU. *Journal of Common Market Studies*, *44*(3), 533–562.

Hoeglinger, D. (2016). *Politicising European integration: Struggling with the awakening giant*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Hughes, K., Frank, V. A., Herold, M. D., & Houborg, E. (2023). Data reuse across international contexts? Reflections on new methods for international qualitative secondary analysis. *Qualitative Research*, *23*(4), 1155–1168.

Hughes, K., & Tarrant, A. (Eds.). (2020). *Qualitative secondary analysis*. Sage.

Hutter, S., Grande, E., & Kriesi, H. (Eds.). (2016). *Politicising Europe: Integration and mass politics*. Cambridge University Press.

Kauppi, N., Palonen, K., & Wiesner, C. (2016). The politification and politicisation of the EU. *Redescriptions*, *19*(1), 72–90.

Kriesi, H. (2016). The politicization of European integration. *Journal of Common Market Studies*, *54*(S1), 32–47.

Lacroix, J. (2024). *Les valeurs de l'Europe, un enjeu démocratique*. Éditions du Collège de France.

Lefort, C. (1988). Human rights and welfare state. In C. Lefort & D. Macey (Eds.), *Democracy and political theory* (pp. 21–44). Polity Press.

Mair, P. (2007). Political opposition and the European Union. *Government and Opposition*, *42*(1), 1–17.

Moise, A. D., Natili, M., Oana, I.-E., Truchlewski, Z., Visconti, F., & Wang, C. (2023). Introduction: EU polity building after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. *Journal of European Public Policy*, *30*(8), 1657–1661.

Müller, J.-W. (2020). *Democracy rules*. Palgrave Macmillan.
Norris, P. (2011). *Democratic deficit: Critical citizens revisited*. Cambridge University Press.
Risse, T. (2014). No demos? Identities and public spheres in the Euro crisis. *Journal of Common Market Studies*, *52*(6), 1207–1215.
Sartori, G. (1970). Concept misformation in comparative politics. *American Political Science Review*, *64*(4), 1033–1053.
Schattschneider, E. E. (1957). Intensity, visibility, direction and scope. *American Political Science Review*, *51*(4), 933–942.
Schattschneider, E. E. (1960). *The semisovereign people: A realist's view of democracy in America*. Wadsworth.
Schmidt, V. (2022, May 19-21). *Economic crisis management in the EU: From past Eurozone mistakes to future promise beyond the Covid-19 pandemic* [Paper presentation]. EUSA Annual Meeting, Miami, Florida.
Staham, P., & Trenz, H.-J. (2013). *The politicization of Europe: Contesting the constitution in the mass media*. Routledge.
Tarragoni, F. (2019). *L'esprit démocratique du populisme*. La Découverte.
Van Ingelgom, V. (2014). *Integrating indifference*. ECPR Press.
Van Ingelgom, V. (2020). Focus Groups: From Data Generation to Analysis. In Curini, L., Franzese R. J. (Eds.), *Sage Handbook of Research Methods in Political Science and International Relations* (pp. 1190-1210). Sage.
Vila-Henninger, L., Dupuy, C., Van Ingelgom, V., Caprioli, M., Teuber, F., Pennetreau, D., Bussi, M., & Le Gall, C. (2024). Abductive coding: Theory building and qualitative (re)analysis. *Sociological Methods & Research*, *53*(2), 968–1001.
White, J. (2011). *Political allegiance after European integration*. Palgrave Macmillan.
White, J. (2015). Emergency Europe. *Political Studies*, *63*(2), 300–318.
Wiesner, C. (2024). *Politicisation, democratisation and EU identity. National EU discourses in Germany and France*. Routledge.
Wiesner, C., Palonen, K., Selk, V., Kauppi, N., Trenz, H.-J., Dupuy, C., Van Ingelgom, V., & Liste, P. (2019). Rethinking Politicisation. *Contemporary Political Theory*, *18*(2), 248–281.

About the Authors

Nicolas Arens is guest professor and post-doctoral fellow at the University of Louvain—ISPOLE. His research interests include the political philosophy of modern thinkers applied to European integration. His work appeared in *Politique européenne*, *The Tocqueville Review*, *and Law & European Affairs*, among others.

Claire Dupuy is a professor of comparative politics at the University of Louvain—ISPOLE. Her recent research interests include policy feedback on democracy and administrative burdens. Her work appeared in *Sociological Methods and Research*, *Public Management Review*, *Journal of European Public Policy*, *Journal of European Social Policy*, and *Public Administration*, among others.

Virginie Van Ingelgom is a F.R.S.–FNRS research professor of political science at the University of Louvain—ISPOLE. Her recent research interests include multilevel legitimacy and policy feedback on democracy. Her work appeared in *European Journal of Political Research*, *Journal of European integration*, *Journal of European Public Policy*, and *Sociological Methods and Research*, among others.

Politics and Governance
2025 • Volume 13 • Article 10120
https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.10120

cogitatio

ARTICLE

Open Access Journal

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

Damien Pennetreau

Transitions Institute, University of Namur, Belgium

Correspondence: Damien Pennetreau (damien.pennetreau@unamur.be)

Submitted: 13 February 2025 **Accepted:** 26 June 2025 **Published:** 27 August 2025

Issue: This article is part of the issue "Debating Europe: Politicization, Contestation, and Democratization" edited by Claudia Wiesner (Fulda University of Applied Sciences) and Meta Novak (University of Ljubljana), fully open access at https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.i452

Abstract

This article examines the framing of employment policies in public debates within European Union (EU) member states. (Mediatised) 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 mediatised 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 Hootegem 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 La Une	FR France 2	BE La Une	FR France 2	BE La Une	FR France 2	BE La Une	FR 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; Excerpet 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 & Trenz, 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.

Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their comments and suggestions that contributed to improving the article.

Funding

This project has received funding from the Transitions Institute as well as from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement No 716208).

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

Data available upon request from the author.

References

Abramson, C. M., & Gong, N. (Eds.). (2020). *Beyond the case: The logics and practices of comparative ethnography*. Oxford University Press.

Albæk, E., Van Dalen, A., Jebril, N., & De Vreese, C. (2014). *Political journalism in comparative perspective*. Cambridge University Press.

Beveridge, R. (2017). The (ontological) politics in depoliticisation debates: Three lenses on the decline of the political. *Political Studies Review*, *15*(4), 589–600. https://doi.org/10.1177/1478929916664358

Borriello, A. (2017). There is no alternative: How Italian and Spanish leaders' discourse obscured the political nature of austerity. *Discourse & Society*, *28*(3), 241–261. https://doi.org/10.1177/0957926516687419

Bressanelli, E., Koop, C., & Reh, C. (2020). EU actors under pressure: Politicisation and depoliticisation as strategic responses. *Journal of European Public Policy*, *27*(3), 329–341. https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2020.1713193

Buller, J., Dönmez, P. E., Standring, A., & Wood, M. (2019). Depoliticisation, post-politics and the problem of change. In J. Buller, P. E. Dönmez, A. Standring, & M. Wood (Eds.), *Comparing strategies of (de)politicisation in Europe* (pp. 1–24). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-64236-9_1

Capati, A. (2024). The discursive framing of European integration in EU-wide media: Actors, narratives and policies following the Russian invasion of Ukraine. *Comparative European Politics*, *23*, 271–299. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41295-024-00397-1

Corti, F. (2022). *The politicisation of social Europe*. Edward Elgar Publishing.

Crespy, A. (2016). *Welfare markets in Europe*. Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-57104-5

Cushion, S. (2022). Are public service media distinctive from the market? Interpreting the political information environments of BBC and commercial news in the United Kingdom. *European Journal of Communication*, *37*(1), 3–20. https://doi.org/10.1177/02673231211012149

de Wilde, P., Leupold, A., & Schmidtke, H. (2016). Introduction: The differentiated politicisation of European governance. *West European Politics*, *39*(1), 3–22. https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2015.1081505

de Wilde, P., & Zürn, M. (2012). Can the politicization of European integration be reversed? *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, *50*(s1), 137–153. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-5965.2011.02232.x

Dejean, S., Lumeau, M., Peltier, S., & Petters, L. (2021). La consommation d'informations en France. *Reseaux*, *229*(5), 43–74.

Deschouwer, K. (2012). *The politics of Belgium: Governing a divided society* (2nd ed.). Palgrave MacMillan.

Díez Medrano, J. (2003). *Framing Europe: Attitudes to European integration in Germany, Spain, and the United Kingdom*. Princeton University Press.

Duchesne, S., Frazer, E., Haegel, F., & Van Ingelgom, V. (2013). *Citizens' reactions to European integration compared: Overlooking Europe*. Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137297266

Dupuy, C., Teuber, F., & Van Ingelgom, V. (2022). Citizens' experiences of a policy-ridden environment: A methodological contribution to feedback studies based on qualitative secondary analysis. *Bulletin of Sociological Methodology/Bulletin de Méthodologie Sociologique*, *156*(1), 124–157. https://doi.org/10.1177/07591063221132342

Esser, F., & Strömbäck, J. (Eds.). (2014). *Mediatization of politics*. Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137275844

Fawcett, P., Flinders, M., Hay, C., & Wood, M. (Eds.). (2017). *Anti-politics, depoliticization, and governance* (1st ed.). Oxford University Press.

Firmstone, J. (2024). *The shaping of news. A framework for analysis*. Palgrave MacMillan.

Gamson, W., & Modigliani, A. (1989). Media discourse and public opinion on nuclear power: A constructionist approach. *American Journal of Sociology*, *95*(1), 1–37. https://doi.org/10.1086/229213

Gheyle, N. (2020). Huddle up! Exploring domestic coalition formation dynamics in the differentiated politicization of TTIP. *Politics and Governance*, *8*(1), 301–311. https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v8i1.2588

Graziano, P. R. (2012). Converging worlds of activation?: Activation policies and governance in Europe and the role of the EU. *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, *32*(5/6), 312–326. https://doi.org/10.1108/01443331211237014

Habermas, J. (1996). *Between facts and norms: Contributions to a discourse theory of law and democracy*. Polity Press.

Habermas, J. (2023). *Espace public et démocratie délibérative: Un tournant*. Gallimard.

Han, B.-C. (2022). *Infocracy: Digitization and the crisis of democracy*. Polity Press.

Hassel, A., & Palier, B. (2021). Tracking the transformation of growth regimes in advanced capitalist economies. In A. Hassel & B. Palier (Eds.), *Growth and welfare in advanced capitalist economies. How have growth regimes evolved?* (pp. 3–56). Oxford University Press.

Hay, C. (2007). *Why we hate politics*. Polity.

Hobolt, S. B., & Tilley, J. (2014). *Blaming Europe? Responsibility without accountability in the European Union* (1st ed.). Oxford University Press.

Kauppi, N., Palonen, K., & Wiesner, C. (2016). The politification and politicisation of the EU. *Redescriptions: Political Thought, Conceptual History and Feminist Theory*, *19*(1), 72–90. https://doi.org/10.7227/R.19.1.5

Kauppi, N., & Trenz, H.-J. (2021). (De)politicisation: Shifting dynamics in an emerging European political field and public sphere. In C. Wiesner (Ed.), *Rethinking politicisation in politics, sociology and international relations* (pp. 153–174). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-54545-1_8

Kitzinger, J. (2007). Framing and frame analysis. In E. Devereux (Ed.), *Media studies. Key issues and debates* (pp. 134–161). Sage.

Kreuzer, M. (2019). The structure of description: Evaluating descriptive inferences and conceptualizations. *Perspectives on Politics*, *17*(1), 122–139. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592718001068

Laloux, T., Pennetreau, D., & Versailles, A. (2023). Mute under pressure? The domestic politicization of European affairs and the participation of MEPs in plenary debates. In A.-M. Houde, T. Laloux, M. Le Corre Juratic, H. Mercenier, D. Pennetreau, & A. Versailles (Eds.), *The politicization of the European Union: From processes to consequences* (pp. 181–197). Éditions de l'ULB.

Le Gall, C., Van Ingelgom, V., & Dupuy, C. (2025). Perceived constraints from European and international integration: Citizens' feeling of being represented and turnout. *Journal of European Integration*, *47*(4), 535–557. https://doi.org/10.1080/07036337.2024.2386581

Matthes, J., & Kohring, M. (2008). The content analysis of media frames: Toward improving reliability and validity. *Journal of Communication*, *58*(2), 258–279. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2008.00384.x

Mercenier, H., Houde, A.-M., Laloux, T., Le Corre Juratic, M., Pennetreau, D., & Versailles, A. (2023). The consequences of EU politicization: A research agenda. In A.-M. Houde, T. Laloux, M. Le Corre Juratic, H. Mercenier, D. Pennetreau, & A. Versailles (Eds.), *The politicization of the European Union: From processes to consequences* (pp. 9–24). Éditions de l'ULB.

Mounk, Y. (2018). *The people vs. democracy: Why our freedom is in danger and how to save it*. Harvard University Press.

Pennetreau, D. (2024). *Néolibéralisme banal? (Dé)politisation des politiques de l'emploi dans les discours citoyens et médiatiques: Une comparaison diachronique entre la Belgique et la France* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. Université Catholique de Louvain. https://dial.uclouvain.be/pr/boreal/object/boreal:285755

Pennetreau, D., & Laloux, T. (2025). Politicized policies? The cases of employment policies in Belgian and French televised public debates. *Politics & Policy*, *53*(3), Article e70042. https://doi.org/10.1111/polp.70042

Pfetsch, B. (2023). Conditions of campaigning in dissonant public spheres and crisis of democracy. *Political Communication*, *40*(3), 346–350. https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2023.2193554

Pochet, P. (2019). *À la recherche de l'Europe sociale*. PUF.

Rauh, C., & Parizek, M. (2024). Converging on Europe? The European Union in mediatised debates during the Covid-19 and Ukraine shocks. *Journal of European Public Policy*, *31*(10), 3036–3065. https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2024.2344849

Rawls, J. (1993). *Political liberalism*. Columbia University Press.

Risse, T. (Ed.). (2014). *European public spheres. Politics is back*. Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139963343

Rudolph, T. J. (2022). Public opinion and democracy. In T. Rudolph (Ed.), *Handbook on politics and public opinion* (pp. 1–8). Edward Elgar Publishing. https://www.elgaronline.com/display/book/9781800379619/book-part-9781800379619-9.xml

Schmidt-Gleim, M. (2021). Democracy, post-democracy and what came after. In C. Wiesner (Ed.), *Rethinking politicisation in politics, sociology and international relations* (pp. 89–106). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-54545-1_5

Schneider, A., & Ingram, H. (1993). Social construction of target populations: Implications for politics and policy. *American Political Science Review*, *87*(2), 334–347. https://doi.org/10.2307/2939044

Semetko, H. A., de Vreese, C., & Peter, J. (2000). Europeanised politics—Europeanised media? European integration and political communication. *West European Politics*, *23*(4), 121–141. https://doi.org/10.1080/01402380008425403

Semetko, H. A., & Valkenburg, P. (2000). Framing European politics: A content analysis of press and television news. *Journal of Communication*, *50*(2), 93–109.

Smilova, R., & Schmidt-Gleim, M. (2022). Introduction. Liberal democracy in crisis: Diagnosing the sources. In M. Schmidt-Gleim, R. Smilova, & C. Wiesner (Eds.), *Democratic crisis revisited: The dialectics of politicisation and depoliticisation* (pp. 9–31). Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft.

Soroka, S., Andrew, B., Aalberg, T., Iyengar, S., Curran, J., Coen, S., Hayashi, K., Jones, P., Mazzoleni, G., Rhee, J. W., Rowe, D., & Tiffen, R. (2013). Auntie knows best? Public broadcasters and current affairs knowledge. *British Journal of Political Science*, *43*(4), 719–739. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123412000555

Statham, P., & Trenz, H.-J. (2015). Understanding the mechanisms of EU politicization: Lessons from the eurozone crisis. *Comparative European Politics*, *13*(3), 287–306. https://doi.org/10.1057/cep.2013.30

Stone, D. A. (1988). *Policy paradox and political reasons*. Scott, Foresman & Co.

Trenz, H.-J. (2023). Democracy in the digital public sphere: Disruptive or self-corrective? *Communication Theory*, *33*(2/3), 143–152. https://doi.org/10.1093/ct/qtad009

Trenz, H.-J. (2024). *Democracy and the public sphere: From dystopia back to utopia*. Bristol University Press.

Umbricht, A., & Esser, F. (2016). The push to popularize politics. *Journalism Studies*, *17*(1), 100–121. https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2014.963369

Van Gorp, B. (2010). Strategies to take subjectivity out of framing analysis. In P. D'Angelo & J. Kuypers (Eds.), *Doing news framing analysis: Empirical and theoretical perspectives* (pp. 84–109). Routledge.

Van Hootegem, A., Rossetti, F., Abts, K., & Meuleman, B. (2024). The ideological roots of the activation paradigm: How justice preferences and unemployment attributions shape public support for demanding activation policies. *International Journal of Social Welfare*, *33*(3), 617–633. https://doi.org/10.1111/ijsw.12628

van Hulst, M., Metze, T., Dewulf, A., de Vries, J., van Bommel, S., & van Ostaijen, M. (2024). Discourse, framing and narrative: Three ways of doing critical, interpretive policy analysis. *Critical Policy Studies*, *19*(1), 74–96. https://doi.org/10.1080/19460171.2024.2326936

Wiesner, C. (2021). Politicisation, politics and democracy. In C. Wiesner (Ed.), *Rethinking politicisation in politics, sociology and international relations* (pp. 19–42). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-54545-1_2

Wiesner, C. (2022). Doing qualitative and interpretative research: Reflecting principles and principled challenges. *Political Research Exchange*, *4*(1), Article 2127372. https://doi.org/10.1080/2474736X.2022.2127372

Wiesner, C., Palonen, K., Selk, V., Kauppi, N., Dupuy, C., Van Ingelgom, V., & Liste, P. (2019). Rethinking politicisation. *Contemporary Political Theory*, *18*(2), 248–281. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41296-019-00326-y

Wood, M. (2016). Politicisation, depoliticisation and anti-politics: Towards a multilevel research agenda. *Political Studies Review*, *14*(4), 521–533. https://doi.org/10.1111/1478-9302.12074

Wood, M., & Flinders, M. (2014). Rethinking depoliticisation: Beyond the governmental. *Policy & Politics*, *42*(2), 151–170. https://doi.org/10.1332/030557312X655909

About the Author

Damien Pennetreau is a postdoctoral researcher at the Transitions Institute at the University of Namur. His research focuses on discourse analysis, public policy, and media content. He is currently working on media coverage of democratic innovations. He also studies European media regulation and the political dynamics that led to the adoption of the European Media Freedom Act. Previously, he examined citizen and media discourses on employment policies.

Politics and Governance
2025 • Volume 13 • Article 10072
https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.10072

cogitatio

ARTICLE

Open Access Journal

Sovereignty Crises and the EU's Moral Challenge

Elia R. G. Pusterla [1] and **Francesca Pusterla Piccin** [1,2]

[1] Faculty of Economics and Management, Free University of Bozen-Bolzano, Italy
[2] European Institute, London School of Economics and Political Science, UK

Correspondence: Elia R. G. Pusterla (elia.pusterla@icloud.com)

Submitted: 7 February 2025 **Accepted:** 21 May 2025 **Published:** 7 August 2025

Issue: This article is part of the issue "Debating Europe: Politicization, Contestation, and Democratization" edited by Claudia Wiesner (Fulda University of Applied Sciences) and Meta Novak (University of Ljubljana), fully open access at https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.i452

Abstract

This article investigates the potential responsibility of the European Union (EU) for its ongoing state of permanent crisis, contending that this condition is not merely incidental or externally imposed but rather fundamentally woven into the EU's political framework. By situating the analysis at the intersection of political philosophy and the conceptual analysis of the *idea of Europe*, the article reconceptualises *crisis* not as an exceptional anomaly but as an expression of a deeper moral and symbolic failure, engaging with academic debates on how Europeanness shapes the EU's identity, legitimacy, and integrative tensions. Drawing on the works of thinkers such as Jacques Derrida and Rodolphe Gasché, it further explores the idea that the EU's recurrent crises reverberate a failure to articulate a form of sovereignty that is adequate to the uniqueness of the European historical and normative trajectory. In this context, the current rise of sovereignism does not express the need to re-appropriate sovereignty as such but rather the inalienability of the symbolic benefits inherent in such rhetoric. Sovereignism is read less as a genuine demand for enhanced state power and more as a manifestation of the EU's inability to offer a compelling political and moral alternative. Hence, the article advocates for developing a moral sovereignty that can transcend the exhausted logic of state-centric authority. Ultimately, it posits that the EU's most pressing challenge lies in affirming its political legitimacy not through technocratic governance but through a renewed ethical commitment to the European ideal as an infinite, humanist task.

Keywords

crisis; Europe; European Union; Jacques Derrida; morality; Rodolphe Gasché; sovereignty

1. Introduction

The article explores the relationship between the European Union (EU) and the crises characterising its trajectory, investigating its potential responsibility. This purpose highlights the need to assess whether the EU, aside from external actors' challenges to European political integration, shares responsibility for these crises and, if so, how it does so. This investigation is increasingly necessary, as the persistent occurrence of crises themselves appears evident (Nugent et al., 2023; Voltolini et al., 2020) and has even become a condition of "normality" (Rhinard, 2024), assuming this has not always been the case. If this assertion is valid, particularly if the crisis is permanent and indistinguishable from endogeneity within the EU, it is crucial to understand the foundational aspects and the EU's potential role. Hence, is it appropriate to talk about a crisis rather than an "EU way"? This does not entail rehabilitating the value of the crisis through determinist and appreciative lenses. Instead, it raises the question of the extent to which, today, it is legitimate to believe that the EU can and desires to offer (primarily to it*self*) a political alternative regarding the permanent crisis overwhelming it. Indeed, as noted by Le Goff (2005), the concept of crisis—understood as the tension between opposing polarities—has historically been central to Europe and its integrative identity. To comprehend the "permanent crisis" of the EU, it is essential to establish a connection between the EU and Europe, to examine whether the structural conflict inherent in this permanent crisis is an immutable aspect of the EU's identity for its being European, or it represents a political limitation that the EU could potentially transcend, should it choose to pursue that path.

Two premises are necessary. First, the EU should not be misunderstood as a receptacle for all crises. Some, such as pandemics, may affect the EU, regardless of its responsibility, like any other polity. Second, the EU's permanent crisis discussed here is not so much related to the potentially varying nature of the crises it faces but the (varying?) affirmation of its capacity (and possible will) to cope with them. Understanding the EU's current political responsibility is crucial, especially when unforeseen challenges test its agency. Regardless of its institutional competences and legal responsibilities, the hypothesis is that, unlike, for example, sovereign states, there is a permanent crisis regarding the EU's affirmative definition and institutional determination of the political dimension of its *actions* that perhaps emerges particularly evident when it comes to its *reactions* (to crises).

Ulrich Beck and Edgar Grande allow capturing an essential aspect of such a permanent crisis, as rooted in and endogenous to the integration process of the EU and somehow its peculiar expression:

> The basic problem of both the current debate on European integration and of European integration research is that Europe has still not found an answer to two fundamental questions. *What is Europe?* And, closely related to that: *What should Europe be?* (Beck & Grande, 2011, p. 21, emphasis added)

Accordingly, the issue of the EU inherently entails—or is expected to entail—a speculative contemplation that is automatically situated within the conceptual framework of pursuing some *idea of Europe*. Despite the various crises afflicting the former, establishing this idealist connection between the EU and Europe is neither uncommon nor surprising unless one fails to recognise it as a given. That is not the case. As a unique political entity—Jacques Delors, former president of the European Commission, famously coined the acronym "OPNI" (*Objet Politique Non-Identifié*) in 1985—the EU initially rose in 1951 under the name of the European Coal and Steel Community. Since then, it has massively grown but never fully encompassed the

entirety of the European continent from geographical, cultural, political, and various other perspectives. From its inception, the EU has aligned with its European features, fostering a sense of "Europeanness." However, the specifics of what this entails—mainly what a European political institution can or must do—remain unclear. Adopting a deconstructionist posture inquiring into the EU foundations and questioning its taken-for-granted assumptions, what does it imply for the EU—as for other potential actors—to embody some "Europeanness" and/or an idea of Europe (Valéry, 1919), and what specific idea does this encompass? Assuming one wants it, what does it mean for a political entity to be a bearer of Europeanness and perhaps bring about "Europe"? Must the EU embody Europe, and does it aspire to? What are the implications if it both must and wishes to? Could it be that these implications—potentially challenging and perhaps not entirely appealing for a polity like the EU—are linked to the EU's ongoing and permanent crisis, or rather its failure to be what it could, should, and perhaps even wishes to be?

To this day, the connection between the EU's political values and its institutional practices remains ambiguous. The EU was founded on a commendable project committed to peace and the promotion and respect of human rights. However, when examining these values the EU professes to uphold, several crises come to the forefront, such as the recent migration crises and the contentious management of refugee camps in Greece (Achilli, 2022). The EU's response to these critical situations, among other possible examples, pressures the credibility of its commitment to the aforementioned values. The EU's credibility hinges not only on defining its principles but also on the political capacity to uphold them. Therefore, it is essential to differentiate between claims and evidence of political resolution to implement them effectively, particularly in times of crisis. Thus, the permanent crisis of the EU resembles an identity crisis—one that may even precede any subsequent institutional aspects.

Beck and Grande raise two foundational questions about the EU's identity and normativity—topics still largely unresolved today. They present their argumentative diagnosis and methodological corollary as follows:

> In short: *Europe still does not have an idea of itself*. In our opinion, this is primarily because the debate on Europe is dominated by outdated concepts. The possibility of grasping the historical and theoretical novelty of the EU is blocked in particular by the "methodological nationalism" with its fixation on the state. (Beck & Grande, 2011, p. 21, emphasis added)

In the current identity vacuum of the EU—identified with Europe and straightforwardly called "to be Europe"—conceptual poverty prevails, revealing a shortage of diverse ideas to grasp the essence of the European integrative project. This critical oversight primarily stems from reliance on an inadequate, nationalist-informed method of thought. This limits the epistemological scope by curbing heuristic access to European identity. The EU's need for access to its own identity sounds Heideggerian since "the 'letting be' of Being [making] possible its disclosure or truth (*aletheia*) to *Dasein*" occurs as "a self-*discovery* in which the self is dispersed in or returned to the world from which it arose" (Baynes, 2008, pp. 575–576):

> Methodological nationalism narrows the horizon of intellectual perception and diverts attention to false alternatives which is as true of the advocates as of the critics of the European project. The "nation-state" view acknowledges two, and only two, versions of the European project of regional integration—either intergovernmental cooperation in an alliance of sovereign states…or supranational federalism with its aim of establishing a federal state superseding the existing nation-states in Europe. (Beck & Grande, 2011, p. 21)

At this juncture, from a methodological perspective, grasping the permanence of the EU's crisis—characterised by both identity-related and existentialist challenges—imposes an adequate conceptual take (Wiesner, 2023). This methodological practice aids in generating heuristic tools to enhance understanding of the observed event and deepens the investigation of the relationship between the EU and the idea of Europe. The conceptual context of the crisis, which still needs further clarification, is inevitably included. Roberto Esposito emphasises the need for a "philosophy for Europe," where philosophy shifts from being a mere conceptual receptacle to a genuine response to the crisis posed by centrifugal forces that threaten self-identity and its meaning. He explains:

> If it is true, as Hegel wrote, that the need for philosophy arises when "the power of unification disappears from human life and oppositions lose their living relation and interaction … then nothing is more relevant than a philosophy for Europe. What goes by the name of "Union" has never faced a greater risk of coming apart, unless the oppositions that divide it manage to stick together in a meaningful relationship. Rather than relating to each other through their differences, its parts seem to be dispersed in an unrelated multiplicity that lacks even the constitutive force of conflict. The separation affects not just the member countries but something more profound, which pertains to the very incentive for staying together—as if the reality of Europe had become drastically estranged from its purpose, flattening into the bare fact of its geography. In the new order that the world is assuming, when everything calls for a strong European polarity, Europe appears devoid not only of a recognisable body but even of a soul. For this reason it might well be said that, even more than being separated internally, Europe is separated from itself—from what it should mean. The interests of its members, not to mention the values they bear, find no place of composition and not even a clear front over which to divide. They diverge in a lazy manner, which alternates between disorder and indifference. None of the big questions that touch its peoples to the core—from the still festering wound of the economic recession to the growing pressure of migratory flows and to the unprecedented threat of terrorism—produces a shared response, while politics itself is rejected by larger and larger segments of the citizenry. And all this is happening right at a time when only a high-profile political vision—what Nietzsche called "grand politics"—could adequately respond to the economic, social, and military challenges that press upon us. (Esposito, 2018, pp. 1–2)

Our article begins by highlighting the urgent need for philosophical inquiry about Europe and its crises—particularly its permanent and significant crisis that makes the EU a politically inanimate and alienated entity, leading to an endangered Europe "separated from itself" in the current institutional context. First, it underscores the need for an appropriate framework informed by philosophical insights on crisis and Europe. This methodological approach elucidates the complex foundational challenges facing contemporary politics and Western political philosophy, with the project of a European Union positioned at its historical and political core. Second, the article emphasises the need to reckon with the moral dimension central to any possible post-crisis EU politics. It suggests that the crisis is inherent to the EU as an institution, manifested in the absence of ideal political symbols that extend beyond the outdated logic of nation-state sovereignty, within whose antiquated rationale the philosophically necessary audacity of the politics–morality binomial finds little, if any, space for expression. In this context, the rise of sovereignism is addressed as ostensibly suggesting, prima facie, a disintegrative backlash towards greater member states' sovereignty. However, Jacques Derrida's analysis reveals that this rhetoric often conveys symbolic advantages rather than indicating a genuine desire for sovereignty. Consequently, sovereignism emerges as

a clumsy facade that conceals a latent, yet significant, drive for enhanced philosophical conceptuality wherein the political and moral dimensions are considered convergent and operatively pursued. The article argues how the EU confronts the daunting challenge in establishing a qualified form of moral sovereignty that exceeds traditional state sovereignty, requiring a critical reassessment of political expectations, as explored through Rodolphe Gasché's perspective.

2. Crisis and Critique

Several crisis typologies can be identified when examining the EU's relationship with its politico-historical trajectory (F. Pusterla, 2016). Indeed:

> If crises are disruptors to existing orders, the last two decades in Europe have witnessed a fair share of disruptions. Crises have roiled the continent, from ash clouds to Brexit, from bird and swine flues to financial and economic crises, and from migration influxes to, most recently, the Covid-19 pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine. (Nugent et al., 2023, p. 1)

If one considers events of a migratory, economic, and military nature, it is reasonable to anticipate Neill Nugent et al.'s timeline should be pushed back by at least a few decades (one could consider, for example, the implosion of the former Yugoslavia, which reintroduced warfare onto European soil in 1991 for the first time since World War II). Indeed, this consideration is essential when addressing crises that pertain to a more institutional and "internal" nature of the political-economic system of EU governance. Examples include the 2005 Dutch and French rejections and the relative failure of the EU's Constitutional Treaty (Laursen, 2008), Grexit, and Brexit. Indeed, the root of this second kind of crisis—albeit not entirely distinguishable from the first—can be traced back to the "empty chair crisis" of 1965–1966 (Schimmelfennig, 2023). All these crises—and other possible ones—render a legitimate sense of their permanence, as if the EU inherently fosters a structural predisposition to crisis. Regardless of its variety, as mentioned, the permanent nature of the EU crisis is, therefore, widely acknowledged. It is essential to grasp the relationship between the application of the concept of crisis to the EU and its purported vocation for Europeanness. This understanding corresponds to a need to frame the philosophical perimeter of *crisis* and *Europe*. Indeed, it is important to understand whether the concept of crisis applied today to the analysis of the EU and its various political manifestations of Europeanness is influenced, and in what way, by some notion of crisis related to the very idea of Europe. It is, therefore, a question of examining the relationship between the notion of crisis as a potential identity factor for Europe and the EU itself, should it prioritise the operational expression of a certain Europeanness. How characteristic is the notion of crisis—still to be grasped—to identify a certain Europeanness in the EU? And what notion of crisis (permanent or not) would express the Europeanness of the EU?

To better understand the philosophical interplay between crisis and European identity, a preliminary reflection on the EU as a historical-anthropological challenge gains relevance:

> Many years ago, a philosopher who was also a high functionary of the emergent Europe, Alexandre Kojève, maintained that *Homo sapiens* had arrived at the end of its history and at this point had before it only two possibilities: access to a post-historical animality (incarnated by the "American Way of Life") or snobbism (incarnated by the Japanese …). Between a completely reanimalized America and a Japan that remained human solely on condition of renouncing any historical content, Europe could offer the

> alternative of a culture that remains human and vital even after the end of history, because it is capable of confronting itself with its own history in its totality and of drawing from this confrontation a new life. (Agamben, 2019, Chapter 1)

That the identity challenge for the EU qua Europe could be articulated through synthetic logic that opposes polarities that are a priori distant is not a new or exotic fact. On the contrary, it is deeply anchored to the *idea of Europe*:

> How, if at all, should we conceive the cultural identity of the cultural region that we call "Europe"? An observation frequently made about Europe's cultural identity is that it is the bearer of more than one heritage: *from the start everything European is hybrid*. (Glendinning, 2014, p. 30)

Simon Glendinning alludes to the coexistence in the idea of Europe, and since its origin—according to Emmanuel Levinas, as he mentions—of *faith* and *reason*: "Europe is the Bible and the Greeks" (Levinas, 2001, p. 182). Yet, as a gloss on Derrida on the issue, Glendinning explains that "the interplay of these influences is not just one lively 'culture kampf' in our world among others but is originary for our world" (Glendinning, 2014, p. 30). From this perspective, the EU's permanent crisis cannot be seen as merely a result of opposing needs and logics that it must synthesise now more than ever. Conversely, the EU's call for this synthetic exercise appears to be a coherent outcome of its intrinsic European identity and adherence to its historical trajectory.

In the wake of Glendinning's investigation into the crisis of Europe—addressed through explorations of eminent authors such as Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, Emmanuel Levinas, Jacques Derrida, and Rodolphe Gasché, and often in relation to Husserl (1970)—Engin F. Isin delves into a deeper dimension of "crisis." Preliminarily, David Macey displays Husserl's relevance in the debate:

> Husserl's last great work, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* (1936) … was written against the background of the rise of Fascism and speaks pessimistically of the sickness affecting the nations of Europe. Speaking in terms reminiscent of Horkheimer and Adorno's dialectic of Enlightenment, Husserl now describes how the use of reason has been perverted into irrationalism and a perverted rationalism. (Macey, 2001, p. 192)

Given the importance of Husserl's diagnosis of Europe's *sickness*, Isin poses a crucial question: "If in fact the crisis of Europe is more fundamental than the current crisis that engulfs it, then how do we diagnose that fundamental crisis? How do we address the question 'What is called Europe?'" (Isin, 2014, p. 108). This idea of a deeper and more substantial—thus capitalised—"Crisis within crisis" is associated with the latent presence of an unstable synthesis of faith and reason (per Glendinning's polarity), resulting in a precarious equilibrium that remains inefficient to express Europe's inherent identity. However, there still exists the risk of using even this concept of a deeper and "capitalised" crisis by replicating the same epistemological closure Beck and Grande denounced on the nationalist approach to the EU. As per Glendinning on Europe's hybridity, one must critique the concept of "crisis" as a performative limitation of possibilities. In other words, regardless of how permanent and profound it may be, interpreting a crisis as a priori always and inevitably a condition that precedes disaster (albeit one whose arrival and event is as perpetually foretold as it is continually *deferred* [Derrida, 1992]) represents a conception of crisis that arbitrarily restricts its conceptual history and, perhaps most importantly, its connection to that of Europe. Accordingly, Isin quotes Gasché:

> The question of Europe is always "at once a chance and a danger" (Gasché, 2009, p. 287). To capture this aspect of Europe as a concept it is never adequate to recall the question as a question of crisis. To begin with "crisis," Gasché says, would suggest that Europe as a concept and idea was once stable or intact and that now it is destabilised. As a starting point for reflecting on Europe, the trope of crisis is equivalent to the idea that Europe is identical with itself. (Isin, 2014, p. 112)

To precisely avoid falling into easy apriorism regarding the permanence of a crisis as a contingent fact for the EU's identity and/or exogenous interruption of the EU's internal coherence, one must, therefore, resort to a *critique of crisis*, especially within Europe/EU's conceptual framework. Considering the shared etymology of critique and crisis—from the Greek verb κρίνω, *krínō*—this semantically overabundant *critique* becomes functional in establishing the genuinely problematic aspects of crisis (as opposed to those that could also be useful) beyond the pejorative rhetoric about it, sic et simpliciter, and the related summary judgments about it. Precisely, the etymological investigation of crisis (κρίσις, *krísis*) helps to grasp and reiterate these facets, or the logical existence of both positive and negative acceptations of crisis, although the former are elided from the meaning currently in vogue.

The verb *krínō* encompasses five linked and complementary main areas of meaning: (a) to *separate* and *distinguish* between things or concepts; (b) *judging* and *evaluating* a well-considered opinion about something or someone; (c) *decide* and *choosing* to make decisions between alternatives; (d) *condemning* and *praising a verdict* in a legal or moral context to indicate a sentence; and (e) *interpreting* and *understanding* to analyse and assign meaning to something within a given context. To this semantic convergence, one must also add an essential acceptation of crisis as a "state of health," reminiscent of Husserl's words on European pathology:

> For the Greeks the term "crisis" had relatively clearly demarcated meanings in the spheres of law, medicine, and theology. … Since then the concept of crisis … [relates to] the concept of illness itself [which] presupposes a state of health—however conceived—that is either to be restored again or which will, at a specified time, result in death. (Koselleck & Richter, 2006, pp. 358–361)

The concept of crisis is therefore clearly linked to decisions since, as well as within politics and law, in the medical field, the performativity of crisis fundamentally centres on making decisions (which can even imply concerns of bio-ethical order and digging into issues of moral philosophy).

This telling etymology of crisis introducing and forging this critical approach works as a prolepsis to the analysis of the EU's permanent crisis here addressed to show how the notion of crisis, as precisely per its enriching etymology, relates to decision, and in the EU framework, to the issue of the decision-making process within the European institutions where supranational and intergovernmental pressures and relative visions of the EU are opposed (Ludlow, 1999). Whether meaning, for instance, the preference of one alternative over another or the turning point for better or worse (Pickett, 2007), speculatively, a decision-making process transpires along a continuum delineated by contrasting polarities that frame the decision as either a necessity—thus rendering it *imposed* by contingency—or as a possibility, implying it is a matter of preference—more or less *suggested* by contingency. Hence, in the frame of this critique, such an etymology is as stimulating as the use of the term today, also within EU studies.

One frequently encounters the rhetorical assertion that crisis, regardless of its rather negative acceptation, represents an opportunity, a possibility. Accordingly, it is with a similar argument—applicable to the permanence of the European crisis—that Rodolphe Gasché introduces his reading of Jan Patočka's "L'Europe après l'Europe" (Patočka, 2007):

> [I]t is clear that after Europe has come to an end, we are not simply done with Europe. The end of Europe, in the sense of the loss of its economical and political supremacy in the world, presents Europe with an opportunity; with a chance, as the Czech philosopher puts it, to reconceive of itself. (Gasché, 2018, p. 392)

Although this "opportunity/possibility argument" may seem slightly corny, it is not. On the one hand, applying this relatively optimistic interpretation to the term crisis with some superficiality is tempting. On the other hand, understanding the positive acceptation of a crisis requires a more subtle reflection.

Krísis indicates a disease progression's *turning point* or a *critical*, *decisive* point. Accordingly, the mentioned empty chair crisis grasps this nuance very well and applies to the EU's case and to the implications for any quest for a European identity, or what Patočka calls "to reconceive of itself": "The empty chair crisis of 1965, resolved in the Luxembourg Compromise of 1966, forms part of the dramatic past of the European Union, and is for many a turning-point in European political integration" (Ludlow, 2006, p. 79). Although it can be argued that there are original sins in the very project of European integration, the roots of which are said to be rooted in historical logic steeped in nationalism and imperialism (López Bofill, 2023), nobody wants to a priori exclude the above-mentioned "goodwill" of the initial impulse to the EU's project. Yet, whatever the state of health from which the EU set out in 1951 (under the coat-of-arms of the European Coal and Steel Community), the essence of its complexity was revealed through a crisis in which the crisis–decision binomial strengthens and becomes the expressive figure of the EU itself. In this critique, the fundamental feature of the current permanence of the crisis manifests itself as a crisis of the crisis. In other words, we are faced with an inability/not knowing how to decide on deciding. The problem of deciding lies at the core of the crisis critique and relates to the European identity that the EU should—and perhaps even wants—to embody. In this sense, we can say that, on the one hand, the crisis in the strict sense has been resolved and has shown subsequent progress in the health of the EU, which has continued to endure. On the other hand, the emergence of the EU's difficulty in making decisions under these circumstances has marked a worsening state of health from which the EU has yet to emerge.

At this stage, it is time to remember the distinction between necessity and possibility from the perspective of a critique of the crisis. In other words, could the crisis of the empty chair have been resolved in a "more European" way than the EU has been able to do by revealing its crisis of the crisis? The answer to such a question is impossible because it is difficult to determine to what extent contingency imposed such an event. What is possible instead is to determine to what extent such an "in-decision" or decisional impasse is in line with the decisional prerogative of the concept of crisis. The crisis may indicate the turning point towards either deterioration or recovery, but also, foremost, a decision that, in Aristotle, takes the form of a *distinctive force*, a *separation* (Rocci, 1995, p. 1090). Accordingly, the term crisis in this classical sense is a receptacle of juristic notions whose *topos*, the court, becomes the theatrical scene for separations and distinctions (of responsibilities) through trials, judgments, sentences, accusations, decisions, verdicts, determinations, quarrels, lawsuits, disputes, and other judicial acts. Assuming, then, that the EU, in the

context of and stemming from the empty chair crisis, had demonstrated something resembling an indecisive decision (perhaps un-European), what might it be? What separating and distinctive force, presumably European or hopefully European, would have been absent in that circumstance? Comparing two judicial *topoi* that likely represent a hybrid European moment and a distinctly non-hybrid one is beneficial to grasp this point.

On the one hand, there is Socrates's trial, where Plato describes his preceptor as accused of "impiety"—a serious religious offence in Athenian law and Greek thought (E. R. G. Pusterla & Garibay-Petersen, 2024)—specifically for corrupting the Athenian youth by promoting values and beliefs not directed towards the city's gods but to foreign daemons. On the other hand, Josef K's literary trial in Franz Kafka's *The Trial*, in which an alienated accused ignores both the charges against him and his guilt or innocence. The fundamental lessons derived from these two trials carry significant political connotation that merits discussion in relation to the term crisis. Socrates's trial is inherently political due to its stake for the foundational values of the polis and, by extension, the alleged survival of Athens as a political community. Therefore, the institutions of the polis react and favour a crisis, in the sense used by Sophocles in *Philoctetes*, or in making *the choice of just men* (Rocci, 1995, p. 1090). This brings the ethical and moral dimensions underlying the crisis to the forefront: The critical accusation against Socrates revolves around his adherence to the polis's morality. Cicero was among the first to translate the Greek term *ethos* (ἔθος), which encompasses sacred customs, with the Latin word *mores*, referring to the customs, habits, or ways of life within a community from which morality is derived. Ultimately, Socrates remains bound to the values of the polis, choosing the death penalty over exile even though he disagrees with the sentence—a decision that would have compromised his ability to adhere to the sacred laws of the polis itself (E. R. G. Pusterla & Garibay-Petersen, 2024). In contrast, K's process depicts a dystopic scenario where the mechanisms of law operate organically, yet their logical foundation remains accessible. Surprisingly, despite the elusive nature of this for the accused, a moral aspect persists in this second situation. Morality is ascribed to the functioning and service of the law that society has established, rendering K's position regarding this aspect of little consequence.

In tracing the historical-cultural trajectory that delineates the first and second processes, one observes a repositioning of the moral question surrounding the (political) crisis. This shift transitions from a crisis situated within normativity, characterised by the decisive force of a dubious moral judgement, to a crisis utterly detached from such decisiveness, existing beyond the scope of normativity and unable to engage with it. The well-known sentence addressed to K by a judicial character imbued with evident sacred-religious significance aptly describes, using Derrida's term, this resulting "undecidability" (Derrida, 2004, 2010): "That means I belong to the court," said the priest, "so why should I want anything from you? The court does not want anything from you. It receives you when you come and dismisses you when you go" (Kafka, 2009, p. 160).

Now, how do these crises relate to the EU? In what sense does the EU confront dilemmas between at least two clearly defined moral alternatives, as seen in the first scenario? Or, perhaps more troubling, to experience Kafkaesque situations where it is unclear what should be morally decided? To address this question and fully grasp the complexities of an appropriate response, a further step must be taken to explore the crisis in the context of Europe. In his seminal book entitled *Europe, or the Infinite Task*, Gasché delves into this topic through the lenses of Edmund Husserl's aforementioned unfinished work *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*:

> As Husserl suggests at the beginning of *The Crisis*, what "Europe" stands for is the project of reshaping humankind in light of "the questions which are decisive for a genuine humanity" (1970, p. 6), in other words, questions that concern humanity's, and not geographical Europe's, self-understanding. "Europe," then, is the project of a reshaping of the relations among individuals, groups, and nations, in light of what it means to be human rather than in terms of membership in an ethnia, with its particular customs and traditions. (Gasché, 2009, p. 23)

These words masterfully articulate the profound ontological/anthropological significance of the political effort that Europe is called to undertake. Moreover, Gasché connects the causes of this endeavour to its Greek roots:

> With the birth of Greek philosophy, that is, with the idea of a "humanity which seeks to exist, and is only possible, through philosophical reason, moving endlessly from latent to manifest reason and forever seeking its own norms through this, its genuine human nature," a task has been set for Europe—a *telos* with respect to which it is to define itself in order to be properly itself. "Inborn in European humanity," this telos of realization of true humanity, is the end toward which it must stretch in order to be Europe. (Gasché, 2009, p. 33)

Europe, therefore, seems to be invested with a remarkable normativity, characterised by being fully active and accomplished (*en télei ékhein*). It takes on the role of the promoter of a task that is both infinite and universal. This endeavour requires not only the choice of fostering its self-awareness but also self-alienation, all in the interest of fully realising a humanity that, by its very nature, cannot be hindered by minor, and at times trivial, particularisms of any kind (Gasché, 2009, p. 43).

But why should Europe bear all this normativity, especially given its potential to herald crises? Europe is tasked with this heavy and ambitious responsibility under its imbrication—once again highlighting hybridity—originating from Greek philosophy, which first transcended the primitive cognitive stage associated with the diffusion of pre-scientific practices such as orphic and cosmogonist myths. Thus, Husserl's emphasis on reason and rationality emerges as a possible, though non-exclusive, component of a strategy for Europe's full development and/as its task:

> Edmund Husserl, who, in the wake of a long tradition, retraces the idea of Europe to that of philosophy—that is, to the Greek idea of a rational science and a universal truth that not only meets the demand of being able to account for itself, but that also imposes itself without distinction on everybody—Patočka's [idea], by contrast, locates the origin of Europe in the Greek, Platonic conception of the "care of the soul" (*epimeleia tes psyches*) … .For Patočka, this conception of the care of the soul is not an altogether different motif from the Husserlian notion of reason and rationality. On the contrary, the motif of tending to the soul consists only in a recasting and deepening of the foundations of European rationality in order to be able to overcome the crises of Europe. (Gasché, 2018, p. 393)

Husserl's rational-universal approach unequivocally signals a strategy that conforms to valuable and necessary moral criteria for realising Europe and humanity. Patočka outlines the form of morality and moral conformity that is being referenced:

> Ultimately, the gaze into what is, is a gaze into the idea beyond all ideas: the idea of Good (*agathon*) which must not be understood in a narrow moral sense, but which has "ethical" implications in a way that concerns the intelligibility of all that is. It is, therefore, crucial to understand that the notion of the care of the soul is not simply an approach that concerns the life of an individual, but is, from the start, intrinsically tied to the life of a community. (Gasché, 2018, p. 393)

The crisis of Europe, as emphasised by Husserl and Patočka, revolves around the arrived *presence of a lack* of that notion of *good* preceding moral choices in both an individual and collective sense. Thus, the critique of the crisis centres on the moral issue at play. In the context of the permanent crisis of the EU, the question is less about understanding why the European integration project faces setbacks and prolonged periods of decision-making stalemate, and more about whether this integrative and supranational project aligns with the uniquely European legacy of striving, and taking responsibility, for deciding—with all the risks involved—for the *ultimate good*. In this light, the empty chair crisis, often regarded as the symbolic precursor of the EU's subsequent crises, represents more than a turning point that could lead to either positive or negative outcomes. It signifies a deeper state of moral undecidability regarding the implications of choosing one path over another and the distinctions between them. In other words, the crisis of crisis pertains to the very foundation(s) of the EU project; it transcends the mere question of whether the project can evolve and advance. Instead, it raises the critical inquiry of whether, even if the project successfully develops, it would culminate in a full realisation of Europe and humanity, or at least in a genuine, decisive effort to progress in this direction. Given these premises, it is essential to explore the scope of the EU's potential role as a decision-maker and inheritor of a critical, deciding force that is currently somewhat lacking.

3. Crisis and Decision

As discussed, *crisis* pertains to both decisions, understood as the problematic practice of adequate choices (is it justifiable to condemn Socrates to save the polis?), and, more fundamentally and even earlier, to the very possibility of *deciding*, making a choice. The EU's permanent crisis seems to be situated logically between the lack of a possibly sound founding decision and the very capability of deciding (thus determining what is good). However, the situation becomes more complicated since a project like that of the EU may not have the possibility of not deciding, being precisely constrained by the contingent necessity of giving itself the possibility of deciding.

In discussing the challenges posed by the EU's possible in-potentiality (i.e. potentiality not to, in Agamben's jargon) to comply with the necessity of deciding, the reference to Derrida's concept of undecidability—where established, logical *categories* differentiating between opposites are put into crisis—proves significant. The initial crisis emerges as an allegation of non-conformity to good opposed to evil. It necessitates an effort to defend these presumedly well-established categories and elucidate their origin, assuming such origin ever truly existed. Jacques DeVille's connection of Derrida's undecidability with the fundamental issue of justice emphasises this dilemma, framed in moral terms of good (De Ville, 2011, p. 1). Indeed, the accuser, tasked with deciding, ultimately finds himself in the position of the accused, compelled to justify the decision and substantiate the very possibility of rendering a cogent decision. In this circular merging of the roles of accuser and accused, the subject must navigate the transition from a moral decision regarding the good to the political implications of that decision. Consequently, by assuming the undecidable aspects of crises as heuristically pertinent to the understanding and depiction of the crisis of Europe as discussed by Husserl and

Patočka, as well as by Gasché more recently (Gasché, 2016, p. 304), these intertwined roles offer a heuristic bridge between Europe's crisis and the EU's crisis. Indeed, with respect to the latent question of the extent to which the understanding of the European crisis—which may have originated independently of any EU crisis—can illuminate the latter, the hypothesis regarding their substantial juxtaposition hinges on their respective undecidability. To this end, cutting-edge analyses of the EU's normative political theory (Neyer & Wiener, 2011) can be summarised as follows:

> Although highlighting the EU's possibility to become a pioneer of new forms of politics … contributors implicitly signal the substantial pliability of the EU's historical and, perhaps, future trajectory. This is not simply determined by the unpredictability of the future per se, but also by the EU's inability to unambiguously define and illustrate its political plan and identity. (E. R. G. Pusterla, 2012, p. 151)

This position clarifies the issue quite effectively. The juxtaposition of the EU crisis with the European crisis is possible insofar as both show a similar reluctance to confront the need to decide. Without delving into specific historical details, it may be beneficial to distinguish between the varying degrees of hybridity in European phases. In other words, European history, marked by the emergence and affirmation of modern states, does not appear to have preserved the same hybridity that characterised classical and pre-modern Europe.

To this end, Schmitt's theory of secularisation (Schmitt, 2005) on the transition from religious to legal language in modernity does not portray a hybrid—and potentially poietic—condition as depicted by Glendinning in relation to European origins and challenge, but rather its strenuous negation. It reflects a practice that aligns closely with legal positivist "expectations" championed by Bentham, a formidable proponent of this perspective (Bentham, 1988; Kelly, 2009; E. R. G. Pusterla, 2016). In light of this "de-hybridisation" process through modern secularism, Schmitt's assertion holds merit: "All key concepts of the modern doctrine of the state are secularized theological concepts, which suggests that a political theory that continues to use these concepts needs a theological foundation" (Vinx, 2019). This epistemological approach to conceptualisation not only aligns with Beck and Grande's methodological call but also evokes the intricate relationship between decision and sovereignty. Regardless of the judgment one might wish to express about the merits of the question—Schmitt is notoriously critical (Schmitt, 2007/1932, pp. 81–96)—it is undisputed that the legal positivist approach to the emergence of modern states has aimed to redefine sovereignty, thereby "modernising" it and liberating it from aspects considered archaic and outdated. This intent is primarily articulated through exercising sovereignty that focuses on governmental legitimacy, which seeks to fulfil citizens' expectations, particularly in providing public goods (Duguit, 1922, 2005). This "governmental" sovereignty, using the terminology of European studies, hinges on "output legitimacy" (Scharpf, 1999) and positions any given sovereign institution in competition with other potential competitors within the outputs market, however one defines it.

This approach to sovereign legitimacy, in itself, seems neither new nor outrageous. Ultimately, even the ancient forms of thaumaturgical sovereignty—particularly in Greece (Miglio, 2011; Severino, 2011, 2018)—implied the sovereign power to grant the subject the authority to administer life and death (Derrida, 2008). Ultimately, there exists a *logic of responsibility* toward these subjects—not so far from Patočka's care—by no means negligible, especially within the context of European integration and the EU project. Thus, it is unsurprising that European integration theorists have expressed the need to affirm the EU's *responsibility*, particularly in promoting and defending democratic values and solidarity among member states (Habermas,

2012), human rights, migrants, and democratic governance (Benhabib, 2004), in reducing inequalities between member states (Sen, 2009), and social cohesion among them (Balibar, 2016). Such appeals arise from the permanent crisis of the EU and its inefficiencies and are articulated primarily in moral terms. In this context, the aforementioned responsibilities of the EU would be regarded as "moral responsibility."

Regardless of their legitimacy or legitimisation, these moral responsibilities do not appear moral in the classical sense. In essence, they do not diverge from the legal positivism articulated by modern states. What distinguishes European and EU moral responsibility concerning the quality of goods provided to citizens and populations from that already pursued at the state level since modernity? The moral responsibility of the EU is articulated differently, framed in terms of a "right to justification" (Forst, 2014)—a dynamic where the accuser and the accused risk merging—or as a global ethical role for the EU (Held, 2004). In these contexts, one can identify the presence of moral responsibility in deciding to satisfy additional needs not strictly necessary for the survival of "a state" but likely crucial for the survival of another political institution that may otherwise appear redundant as a supplementary state power on a larger scale.

At this stage, the crisis of Europe has the features of a legitimacy crisis regarding its morality with relevant pragmatic premises. These may be exemplified in the topicality of sovereignty associated with the rise of sovereignism. The EU is perceived as a possible obstacle to the priorities of this movement, evoking the intrinsic connection between sovereignty and decision. According to Schmitt, the decision encapsulates and articulates sovereignty (Schmitt, 2005). Historically, the EU has navigated the complex issue of sovereignty, as evidenced by the recent surge of sovereignism. That EU decisions are surreptitious forms of sovereignty limiting and eroding that of individual member states—and may even yield outcomes worse than what those states' sovereign possibilities could achieve—lies at the heart of the sovereigntist narrative. In such a context of profound Euroscepticism, the EU refrains from confronting the sovereignty issue directly and avoids asserting its sovereignty, particularly in a manner that could be seen as competitive with that of its member states. Pragmatically, the EU has, at least in rhetorical terms, effectively *sovereignly banished sovereignty* from its politics.

This prompts an examination of the often-debated inseparability between *politics* and *sovereignty* (Barbour & Pavlich, 2010; Bickerton et al., 2007), particularly given that the EU avoids making formal sovereignty claims (Adler-Nissen & Gammeltoft-Hansen, 2008). Hence, the EU would formally be *political* but not *sovereign*; its presence and integrative process would undoubtedly be political without, in principle, affecting sovereignty (Walker, 2011). Considering that sovereignty is often understood as implying the political decision on the exception to the law and its possible suspension or abrogation (Agamben, 1998; Schmitt, 2005), how can the EU navigate and circumvent sovereignty without relinquishing any decisive prerogatives or possibility for an additive political positioning and, ultimately, its inherent political character? One possible hypothesis is that the EU is, pragmatically, embracing a political in-potentiality. Therefore, it is worthwhile considering how Giorgio Agamben elaborates on the relationship between the potentiality not to be and sovereignty:

> For the sovereign ban, which applies to the exception in no longer applying, corresponds to the structure of potentiality, which maintains itself in relation to actuality precisely through its ability not to be. Potentiality (in its double appearance as potentiality to and as potentiality not to) is that through which Being founds itself sovereignly, which is to say, without anything preceding or determining it (*superiorem non recognoscens*) other than its own ability not to be. (Agamben, 1998, p. 32)

Agamben's analysis suggests that the EU might act as if the relationship between politics and sovereignty can be overlooked, as though EU politics could *not-to-be* associated with sovereignty any longer. In doing so, the EU would effectively decide not to decide, thereby aporetically deciding in the perhaps most absolute, somehow "supreme" way. However, this in-decision—the choice to embrace the potentiality to not decide—does not seem to be without consequences, nor does it guarantee absoluteness. Consequently, the EU's attempt to circumvent the political–sovereignty connection may have instead reproduced the same dynamics that the EU sought to avoid, namely the centrality of sovereignty—marked by its longstanding complexity and "contemporary crisis" (Raschke, 2024)—which could perhaps not be escaped unless one institution also gives up with being political itself:

> Because every decision (by its essence a decision is exceptional and sovereign) must escape the order of the possible, of what is already possible and programmable for the supposed subject of the decision, because every decision worthy of the name must be this exceptional scandal of a passive decision or decision of the other, the difference between the deciding decision and the undecided decision itself becomes undecidable, and then the supposed decision, the exceptionally sovereign decision looks, like two peas in a pod, just like an indecision, an unwilling, a nonliberty, a non intention, an unconsciousness and an irrationality, etc. (Derrida, 2009, p. 33)

Derrida's words are unambiguous. The EU's potential strategy to avoid the sovereignty trap of deciding renders its political project inscrutable, presuming it exists and is inherently rational. Moreover, regarding sovereignism, it is essential to highlight that the urgency to reaffirm state sovereignty is a functional illusion. Regarding Derrida's theory of sovereignty, while this concept is imbued with rhetoric as alluring as improbable (Derrida, 2009, Session II), it fundamentally articulates the political need to interrogate humanity and its possible full expression. This rhetorical sovereignty here expressed holds merit—we have discovered one!—in illuminating the absence and lack within the European project articulated by the EU. Challenging the EU because it threatens the sovereignty of member states exhibits a rather optimistic view of the possibility for states to attain a more substantial sovereignty (Fabbrini & Zgaga, 2022). Thus, the sovereigntist opposition to the EU conceals a deeper discomfort about the lack of ulterior (ideally *superior*, sovereign) foundation for the EU's project, one that requires bold sovereign decisions and normative responsibility to illustrate an idea of how the EU aims and aspires to express the European call to actuate humanity through and within the polis. Ultimately, the sovereigntist hostility towards the EU underscores a palpable *malaise* concerning the incapacity of contemporary politics and political thought to provide such a "vision," a gap the EU appears reluctant to address. This does not merely challenge the authority of the EU due to its possible inefficiencies, but also because it fails to deliver more than what individual states attempt to provide, despite their own blatant failures.

4. Conclusion: The EU's Moral Responsibility

The concluding remarks move along the trajectory from Gasché's reflections on the idea of Europe to Derrida's on sovereignty. Acknowledging Europe's hybrid nature, which is consubstantial with the synthetic exercise of the same as its self-generative practice, it is asserted that, despite the historically rooted distinction between politics and morals, the EU finds itself in the perhaps daunting yet inevitable need to justify its existence as a political authority that transcends the narrow expectations associated with the "only" idea of state sovereignty. Viewing the EU through modern state sovereignty fails to capture its European aspects and does not align

with the normative nature of the "European" determination; the European vocation predates the rationalist pressures of legal positivism.

Instead, the EU must take responsibility for deciding, even at the cost of making mistakes. In this regard, the crisis represents a contingent or permanent situation in which it is necessary to determine itself. However, by failing to do so, primarily, the EU irresponsibly overlooks the fact that a crisis can also present a contingent opportunity for deciding (for the good), rather than merely an unwelcome contingency to escape (to avoid the evil). In any (etymological) sense, crisis and decision are consubstantial. Now, not deciding in a crisis context is also a decision—one that may manifest as a denial of the crisis's existence, an assumption that the crisis will resolve on its own, or even a reluctance to move beyond the state of crisis as the critical status quo may serve to uphold institutional preservation. None of these approaches adequately addresses the responsibilities that the EU, as a politically responsive institution—capable of recognising even the most critical political demands from within or outside—inevitably faces (E. R. G. Pusterla & Pusterla Piccin, 2025).

If a comprehensible apprehension of deciding on the outlawed, violent, and authoritarian state of exception drives the EU to avoid deciding, thereby adhering to a self-imposed—and in these terms—convenient permanence of crisis, then one might find some sympathy for the EU's reluctance to act. However, in not deciding, the EU risks significant consequences, as it undermines its political character. Consequently, the EU would be liable to do politics without being political, or a-political politics, which resembles a market-driven distortion of capitalist economic traction, likely insufficiently focused on human actuation (Everson, 2011; Hardt & Negri, 2000).

Indeed, regarding the permanent EU crisis and the political practice deriving from it, the EU adopts a position of (in-)significant ambiguity, especially about the insoluble relationship between decision and sovereignty. This stance opens the EU to criticism for favouring a modus operandi that leans toward a form of politics devoid of decision, thereby resulting in negative politics by subtraction rather than positive politics by addition. Consequently, the risk is that the EU's action seems more intent on evading wrong political decisions than striving for good ones. The underlying rationale suggests it is better not to decide than to make mistakes. This renunciatory approach, possibly rooted in historical experiences of harsh expression of political sovereignty, at least partially absolves the EU from immediate condemnation of its intentions. However, what is unforgivably flawed about the seemingly good intention to avert conflict is the belief that one can sidestep the errors of decisions through a form of non-sovereignty that only apparently does not decide. Instead, this in-decision still exerts sovereignty, albeit in a very arguable political way that certainly does not express ambitions about the positive and responsible actuation of humanity through and within politics. Indeed, the indecision that the EU may exhibit—stemming from fear, cunning, and a sense of impossibility—articulates a version of sovereignty characterised by in-decision, thereby undermining the moral character of the decision that ought to be reclaimed.

The EU is called to embody a political idea of sovereignty higher than sovereignty, or *moral supremacy*. The EU's exit from the current crisis certainly depends on the ability, but perhaps even before on its willingness, to build a bridge between the political and the moral. The EU's emphasis on the latter, hitherto unfulfilled or timidly expressed, is fundamental to justify the EU's original contribution to politics. Indeed, by embracing the profound normativity of Europeanness and, consistently with Beck and Grande's call to conceptualise the EU beyond conventional frameworks, the EU must summon the courage to

reconceptualise sovereignty integrating morality, perhaps exploring and expanding upon alternative linguistic expressions akin to its earlier attempts to introduce the concept of supremacy. However, this endeavour can only be meaningful if the EU acknowledges and affirms the substantial, beyond merely formal, distinction between its possible project of moral supremacy and modern states' sovereignty. To achieve this and get rid of its permanent, *decisive* crisis, the EU must bravely reconsider an idea of European morality that, in the spirit of Esposito's insights, could serve as a *moral philosophy for Europe*. Envisioning a different approach to the EU's politics and another sovereignty that is not state-centric, but instead originates from a distinctly European identity, has the potential to reclaim the genuine European origins—perhaps too quickly overlooked (Reale, 2003). Such a reimagining could assert *moral supremacy*—so bold in its vision of the good that it genuinely inspires courageous commitment among its citizens.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank the academic editors of this thematic issue, as well as the blind reviewers, for their valuable comments and suggestions. We extend our gratitude to Dr Cristóbal Garibay-Petersen for our conversations.

Funding

Open access funding is from the Autonomous Province of Bozen/Bolzano under Grant Agreement No 11497/2023 for the Seal of Excellence project PROVVEDA under Marie Skłodowska-Curie action High-Quality Project under HORIZON-MSCA-2022-PF-01-01. The research leading to this article is funded by the Autonomous Province of Bozen/Bolzano under the PROVVEDA and ARIANNA projects.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

References

Achilli, L. (2022). "Protection" on my own terms: Human smuggling and unaccompanied Syrian minors. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, *49*(13), 3289–3307. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2022.2085083

Adler-Nissen, R., & Gammeltoft-Hansen, T. (Eds.). (2008). *Sovereignty games—Instrumentalizing state sovereignty in Europe and beyond*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Agamben, G. (1998). *Homo sacer: Sovereign power and bare life*. Stanford University Press.

Agamben, G. (2019). *Creation and anarchy—The work of art and the religion of capitalism*. Stanford University Press.

Balibar, É. (2016). *Europe: Crisis and end?* Verso Books.

Barbour, C., & Pavlich, G. (Eds.). (2010). *After sovereignty—On the question of political beginnings*. Routledge.

Baynes, K. (2008). Freedom as autonomy. In B. Leiter & M. Rosen (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of continental philosophy* (pp. 551–587). Oxford University Press.

Beck, U., & Grande, E. (2011). Empire Europe: Statehood and political authority in the process of regional integration. In J. Neyer & A. Wiener (Eds.), *Political theory of the European Union* (pp. 21–46). Oxford University Press.

Benhabib, S. (2004). *The rights of others: Aliens, residents, and citizens*. Cambridge University Press.

Bentham, J. (1988). *A fragment on government*. Cambridge University Press. (Original work published 1776)

Bickerton, C. J., Cunliffe, P., & Gourevitch, A. (Eds.). (2007). *Politics without sovereignty—A critique of contemporary international relations*. UCL Press; Taylor & Francis.

De Ville, J. (2011). *Jacques Derrida—Law as absolute hospitality*. Routledge.
Derrida, J. (1992). *The other heading—Reflections on today's Europe*. Indiana University Press.
Derrida, J. (2004). *Dissemination*. Continuum. (Original work published 1981)
Derrida, J. (2008). *The gift of death & literature in secret* (2nd ed.). Chicago University Press.
Derrida, J. (2009). *The beast & the sovereign* (Vol. 1). Chicago University Press.
Derrida, J. (2010). *Specters of Marx*. Routledge. (Original work published 1994)
Duguit, L. (1922). *Souveraineté et liberté—Leçons faites à l'Université Columbia, 1920–1921*. Alcan.
Duguit, L. (2005). *L'état, les gouvernants et les agents*. Dalloz. (Original work published 1903)
Esposito, R. (2018). *A philosophy for Europe: From the outside*. Polity Press.
Everson, M. (2011). Politics, power, and a European law of suspicion. In J. Neyer & A. Wiener (Eds.), *Political theory of the European Union* (pp. 139–168). Oxford University Press.
Fabbrini, S., & Zgaga, T. (2022). *Sovereignism and its implication: The differentiated disintegration of the European Union* (EU3D Research Papers, Issue 22). ARENA Centre for European Studies.
Forst, R. (2014). *The right to justification. Elements of a constructivist theory of justice*. Columbia University Press.
Gasché, R. (2009). *Europe, or the infinite task—A study of a philosophical concept*. Meridian.
Gasché, R. (2016). Europe and the stranger. *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*, *47*(3), 292–305.
Gasché, R. (2018). Patočka on Europe in the aftermath of Europe. *European Journal of Social Theory*, *21*(3), 391–406.
Glendinning, S. (2014). Derrida's Europe: "Greek, Christian and beyond." In A. Czajka & B. Isyar (Eds.), *Europe after Derrida—Crisis and potentiality* (pp. 30–48). Edinburgh University Press.
Habermas, J. (2012). *The crisis of the European Union: A response*. Polity Press.
Hardt, M., & Negri, A. (2000). *Empire*. Harvard University Press.
Held, D. (2004). *Global covenant: The social democratic alternative to the Washington Consensus*. Polity Press.
Husserl, E. (1970). *The crisis of European sciences and transcendental phenomenology*. Northwestern University Press. (Original work published 1936)
Isin, E. F. (2014). We, the non-Europeans: Derrida with Said. In A. Czajka & B. Isyar (Eds.), *Europe after Derrida—Crisis and potentiality* (pp. 108–119). Edinburgh University Press.
Kafka, F. (2009). *The trial*. Oxford University Press. (Original work published 1925)
Kelly, P. (2009). Bentham. In D. Boucher & P. Kelly (Eds.), *Political thinkers—From Socrates to the present* (pp. 344–361). Oxford University Press.
Koselleck, R., & Richter, M. W. (2006). Crisis. *Journal of the History of Ideas*, *67*(2), 357–400.
Laursen, F. (Ed.). (2008). *The rise and fall of the EU's constitutional treaty*. Martinus Nijhoff.
Le Goff, J. (2005). *The birth of Europe*. Blackwell Publishing.
Levinas, E. (2001). *Is it righteous to be?* Stanford University Press.
López Bofill, H. (2023). *Nostalgic empires. The crisis of the European Union related to its original sins*. Lexington Books.
Ludlow, N. P. (1999). Challenging French leadership in Europe: Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and the outbreak of the empty chair crisis of 1965–1966. *Contemporary European History*, *8*(2), 231–248.
Ludlow, N. P. (2006). De-commissioning the empty chair crisis: The community institutions and the crisis of 1965–6. In H. Wallace, P. Winand, & J.-M. Palayret (Eds.), *Visions, votes and vetoes: The empty chair crisis and the Luxembourg Compromise forty years on* (pp. 79–96). Peter Lang.
Macey, D. (2001). *Dictionary of critical theory*. Penguin Reference.
Miglio, G. (2011). *Lezioni di politica—Vol. 1. Storia della dottrine politiche*. Società editrice il Mulino.
Neyer, J., & Wiener, A. (Eds.). (2011). *Political theory of the European Union*. Oxford University Press.

Nugent, N., Paterson, W. E., & Rhinard, M. (2023). Introduction: Moving crises to the centre of the research agenda. In M. Rhinard, N. Nugent, & W. E. Paterson (Eds.), *Crises and challenges for the European Union* (pp. 1–16). Bloomsbury.

Patočka, J. (2007). *L'Europe après l'Europe*. Verdier.

Pickett, J. P. (2007). Crisis. In *The American heritage college dictionary* (4th edition). Houghton Mifflin.

Pusterla, E. R. G. (2012). Political Theory of the European Union edited by Jürgen Neyer and Antje Wiener [Review of the book]. *Millennium Journal of International Studies*, *41*(1), 151–153.

Pusterla, E. R. G. (2016). *The credibility of sovereignty—The political fiction of a concept*. Springer.

Pusterla, E. R. G., & Garibay-Petersen, C. (2024). On the ineffable unity of morality and politics in Kant. *Jus Cogens*, *7*, 175–195. https://doi.org/10.1007/s42439-024-00096-1

Pusterla, E. R. G., & Pusterla Piccin, F. (2025). *A theory of political poverty*. Springer.

Pusterla, F. (2016). *The European Union and humanitarian crises—Patterns of intervention*. Routledge.

Raschke, C. (2024). *Sovereignty in the 21st century—Political theology in an age of neoliberalism and populism*. Bloomsbury.

Reale, G. (2003). *Radici culturali e spirituali dell'Europa. Per una rinascita dell'«uomo europeo»*. Raffaello Cortina Editore.

Rhinard, M. (2024). Permanent crisis governance in the European Union. In S. Lucarelli & J. Sperling (Eds.), *Handbook of European Union governance* (pp. 199–215). Edward Elgar.

Rocci, L. (1995). Krisis. In *Vocabolario Greco—Italiano*. Società editrice Dante Alighieri.

Scharpf, F. W. (1999). *Governing in Europe: Democratic and effective?* Oxford University Press.

Schimmelfennig, F. (2023). European integration theory and crises. In M. Rhinard, N. Nugent, & W. E. Paterson (Eds.), *Crises and challenges for the European Union* (pp. 18–37). Bloomsbury.

Schmitt, C. (2005). *Political theology—Four chapters on the concept of sovereignty*. Chicago University Press. (Original work published 1922)

Schmitt, C. (2007). *The concept of the political*. Chicago University Press. (Original work published 1932)

Sen, A. (2009). *The idea of justice*. Harvard University Press.

Severino, E. (2011). *I presocratici e la nascita della filosofia*. La Biblioteca di Repubblica—L' Espresso.

Severino, E. (2018). *La filosofia dai Greci al nostro tempo—La filosofia antica e medievale*. BUR Rizzoli.

Valéry, P. (1919). *La crise de l'esprit—Suivi de Note ou L'Européen*. Manucius Eds.

Vinx, L. (2019). Carl Schmitt. In E. Zalta (Ed.), *Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy*. https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2019/entries/schmitt

Voltolini, B., Natorski, M., & Hay, C. (2020). Introduction: The politicisation of permanent crisis in Europe. *Journal of European Integration*, *42*(5), 609–624. https://doi.org/10.1080/07036337.2020.1792460

Walker, N. (2011). Surface and depth: The EU's resilient sovereignty question. In J. Neyer & A. Wiener (Eds.), *Political theory of the European Union* (pp. 91–109). Oxford University Press.

Wiesner, C. (2023). Actors, concepts, controversies: The conceptual politics of European integration. *Political Research Exchange*, *5*(1), Article 2258173. https://doi.org/10.1080/2474736X.2023.2258173

About the Authors

Elia R. G. Pusterla is a political theorist doing postdoctoral research at the Free University of Bozen-Bolzano. His work bridges political philosophy, postmodern thought, and international relations, focusing on sovereignty and continental thinkers. He has published widely and serves as associate editor of *Political Research Exchange*.

Francesca Pusterla Piccin is a postdoctoral researcher at the Free University of Bozen-Bolzano. Her research lies at the intersection of political science, international relations, and European studies, with a thematic focus on humanitarian aid, migration, and development. She has published in peer-reviewed journals and authored monographs on these subjects.

Politics and Governance
2025 • Volume 13 • Article 10094
https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.10094

cogitatio

ARTICLE

Open Access Journal

National EU Discourses in Germany and France and the Construction of European Identity

Claudia Wiesner

Faculty of Social and Cultural Sciences, Fulda University of Applied Sciences, Germany

Correspondence: Claudia Wiesner (claudia.wiesner@sk.hs-fulda.de)

Submitted: 10 February 2025 **Accepted:** 3 June 2025 **Published:** 27 August 2025

Issue: This article is part of the issue "Debating Europe: Politicization, Contestation, and Democratization" edited by Claudia Wiesner (Fulda University of Applied Sciences) and Meta Novak (University of Ljubljana), fully open access at https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.i452

Abstract

This article presents the core findings of a comparative study on the German and French national EU discourses around the draft Treaty on a Constitution for Europe in 2005 and on their effect on European identity formation. It is based on the main methodological assumption that European identity, among other means, can be constructed in national EU discourses, as such discourses construct meaning for the EU. The French discourse related to the referendum on the EU draft Constitutional Treaty in 2005, and the German discourse related to the ratification process of the EU Constitutional Treaty in 2005 are analysed in their function as means of European identity construction and in a comparative discourse-analytical design. The leading research question is: In what respect and to what extent do national EU discourses function as a means for the formation of European identity and the democratisation of the EU? The article first conceptualises European identity and collective identity and develops the research heuristics. After that methodology, techniques, cases, and research design of the comparative discourse analysis are developed. The main part presents core results. The article concludes that while the German discourse is an EU discourse with a national base, the French one is a national EU discourse. Both had few chances to serve as means of European identity construction, but for opposed reasons: the French discourse was very intense but constructed an opposition between France and the EU, and the German discourse constructed harmony, but was not intense.

Keywords

EU democratisation; European identity; France; Germany; national EU discourses

1. Introduction

What unites the EU as a polity? In what respect do the EU's citizens form a democratic sovereign, a demos? These questions lead into the field of research around European identity, which is the overarching focus of this article. The leading methodological assumption is that one pathway to construct the European identity is via national EU discourses. Such discourses construct meaning for the EU, and hence they potentially are means of discoursive EU identity construction. The article analyses two such national EU discourses in a comparative perspective, namely the French discourse related to the referendum on the EU draft Constitutional Treaty (TCE) in 2005, and the German discourse related to the ratification process of the EU TCE in 2005. The leading research question is: In what respect and to what extent do national EU discourses function as means for the formation of European identity and the democratisation of the EU? (Wiesner, 2024, p. 1). Analysis is based on an independently developed comparative discourse-analytical research design. The findings are part of a larger study (Wiesner, 2014, 2024).

The article is structured as follows: In Section 2, the key terms European identity and collective identity will be conceptualised, and the research heuristics will be developed. In Section 3, the methodology and procedure of the comparative discourse analysis of national European discourses will be explained, to then present core results in Section 4. Section 5 contains a concluding discussion.

2. European Identity as a Collective and Democratic Identity: Conceptual Clarification and Heuristics

First, what is European identity? The following Sections 2.1 to 2.3 will serve at conceptualising European Identity, giving a brief overview of extant research in the field, and developing the research heuristics.

2.1. Normative-Theoretical Background

The research question of the present article is based on a broader normative-theoretical reflection (see in detail Wiesner, 2014, pp. 22–31, 2024, pp. 22–63) that can be summed up as follows: Chances and limits of EU democratisation are related to the formation of a European identity because democracy, no matter if it is conceptualised following a republican, communitarian, or liberal ideal, needs to consist not only in election or citizenship rights, but also in democratic practice. This means that further EU democratisation has to go along with the development of an EU demos, of a democratic subject in the EU. This is a normative condition since democratic institutions and procedures must be carried out and actively filled by a democratic subject (a demos) that defines itself as such. Democratic identity, in this respect, means the self-identification of a demos. This is what is at stake in asking after a European identity.

This claim is also the normative-theoretical background of the present article. In terms of research heuristics, it works as an ideal type for European identity. The research does not directly analyse the extent to which such a demos has been obtained. This would require a research design focusing on individuals' attitudes in relation to a discourse. What is concretely studied are the discoursive processes that contribute to constructing European identity in that they construct patterns of meaning for the EU. The empirical research thus indicates which patterns of meaning have been constructed, which ones have succeeded in the discourse, and why this has been the case. This allows to draw conclusions on the meanings that are discoursively attributed to European

identity and to answer the question to the extent that they are in accordance with the normative-theoretical ideal type laid out above. In order to assess this, a research heuristics is developed in Sections 2.1 to 2.3.

This article takes on a specific conceptual, methodological, and normative-theoretical perspective on public debates and discourses. On the conceptual level, debates and discourses are analysed as political practice (Wiesner et al., 2017). On the level of methodology and research design, they are analysed in an interpretative and comparative research design (see Section 3). For conceptual clarification, it has to be added that a debate is not identical to a discourse—while a debate is more clearly limited in time and space, e.g., as a parliamentary debate, a discourse (see Section 3) is a setting of language-related practices that constitute meaning. A discourse, thus by definition, can last longer, in the case of this study, over months. On the normative-theoretical level and following the rationale of the Jean Monnet Network, Debating Europe (www.debating-europe.de), debates and discourses are regarded as democratic practice and as a means of potential EU democratisation.

2.2. European Identity as Collective Identity

What has been said so far underlines that the research design aims at an EU-related form of democratic collective identity. But what is collective identity?

First of all, the concept has to be differentiated from individual identity (Mead, 2005), as it relates to human collectives. Human collectives that show a similarity in at least one dimension can be termed to show or have an identity (Niethammer, 2000, pp. 9–11).

Collective identity needs to be further distinguished from social identity, which is often studied in quantitative empirical research. This concept also regards social groups, but describes only the individual components of the individual's identification with the group (Tajfel, 1978, p. 63). Individual orientations are one central part of collective identity, and the patterns of meaning that represent the contents of this identification are another.

As constructivist research on nationalism has shown, people identify with a group, or a developing nation state, not without a reason, but precisely because they link this group or nation state to certain patterns of meaning (Anderson, 2006, p. 53). The crucial point is that human collectives construct collective identities themselves (Anderson, 2006; Gellner, 1983; Habermas, 1976, p. 92; Hobsbawm, 2008), and one of the decisive means to construct them is discourses. This means that collective identities always change, and they are complex—they are influenced by different types and patterns of belonging.

What does extant research tell us with regard to a collective democratic European identity? The academic debate on the matter can largely be differentiated into four main strands (see Wiesner, 2014, pp. 43–67, 2024, pp. 32–52, for more detail) that have been integrated in the research design of the present study: (a) approaches in political theory or philosophy that often have a strong normative background (e.g., Cerutti, 2009; Habermas, 2004; Meyer, 2009); (b) conceptual approaches (e.g., Bruter, 2005, p. XII; Checkel & Katzenstein, 2009; Duchesne, 2008; Giesen, 2008); (c) individually oriented approaches that focus on identification and support of individuals for a political system, analyse EU identity quantitatively and hence focuses primarily on EU citizens (Arts & Halman, 2006; Bergbauer, 2018; Castano, 2004; Górniak et al., 2004; Immerfall & Sobisch, 1997; Kaina, 2009; McLaren, 2004; Opp, 2005; Pichler, 2005; Schmidberger,

1998; Westle, 2003); and (d) macro-oriented approaches that regard identity as a pattern of meaning, these tend to focus on discourses by EU elites (e.g., Banchoff, 1999; Checkel & Katzenstein, 2009; Diez Medrano, 2003, 2009; Kaelble, 2009; Kutter, 2020; Marcussen et al., 2001; Pantel, 1999; Puntscher-Riekmann & Wodak, 2003, pp. 284–286; Schmidt, 2006; Seidendorf, 2007; Waever, 2005; Weiss, 2003).

To sum up the main results with regards to discoursive European identity construction, extant research demonstrates that the contents of European identity—the patterns of meaning associated with the EU—are in flux, adapt to varying contexts and interests, and sometimes are contested. Discourses on the EU, therefore, have a central role in the social construction of EU identity as they are a key means of constructing and transporting meanings for the EU. The main level where these EU discourses take place is the nation state. National EU discourses are a central means of constructing meanings for Europe and the EU, and hence for constructing European identity.

2.3. European Identity: Research Heuristics

Based on the discussion in Section 2.1 and the state of the art in the research fields described in Section 2.2, the following working definition of European identity can be summarised. It works at the same time as thesis 1 of the research heuristics that assembles the conditions for sustainable European identity construction:

1. European identity is to be understood as *a self-definition of the EU demos*, i.e., an awareness of and identification with the EU level to which rights and democratic practice refer, as well as a mutual identification and recognition among the demos' members. (Wiesner, 2024, p. 51, emphasis in the original)

Furthermore, based on research on collective identities and constructivist research on nationalism, the following theses can be summarised that describe the conditions for successful discoursive European identity construction, i.e., for pathways that help to attain the ideal type described in Section 2.1 (see Wiesner, 2014, pp. 65–67, 121–125, 2024, pp. 51–54, 105–108):

2. Micro and macro levels of identity are related and democratic identity includes individual orientations as well as patterns of meaning.
3. European identity is socially constructed and loaded with different meanings in the process.
4. European identity emergence is stimulated by EU-related democratic practice.
5. National and European identity constructions relate to each other in this process.
6. The meaning of collective identities must be compatible with established societal codes.
7. Collective identities must also correspond to the interests, desires, and fears of the population so that they can prevail.
8. Requirements for penetration and acceptance of collective identities are media such as written languages, communications, and the public sphere.

Quantitative-empirical as well as discourse-analytical findings on the emergence of European identity have further shown that national contexts play a central role in this process. Their findings lead to thesis 9 to 14 of the heuristics:

9. Content associated with the EU differs according to national affiliation at both the citizen and elite levels.
10. Only social stratification runs counter to national affiliation: the educated and wealthy identify more strongly with the EU than less educated and poorer people.
11. The emergence of European identity is thus tied to national identity patterns.
12. European identity is thus only sustainable as a multi-level system of different identity levels. Conversely, if there are conflicts between the national and European identifications, they probably negatively influence the formation of a European identity.
13. The emergence and persistence of a European identity is thus also conditioned by a positive relationship between national and European identities.
14. A positive relation between national and European identity levels only seems to be sustainable if the respective, mostly national contexts, support it.

3. The Comparative Discourse Analysis

As explained in Section 2, I chose national EU discourses as a subject of analysis as they are the main media for constructing meanings for the EU. This entailed a methodological choice for a discourse-analytical research design. The label discourse analysis, however, describes a field of various approaches that sometimes differ considerably with regard to methods, techniques, and research perspectives (see Boreus & Bergstrom, 2017; Johnstone, 2008, 2018; Wodak, 2008a; Wood & Kroger, 2000, for overviews). Hence, it is a methodological choice to opt for a discourse analysis, but this does not yet imply a choice of methods and techniques. These need to be explicated in the course of the study. In the present study, the comparative research design has been developed independently based on the following reflections and methodological decisions developed in Sections 3.1 to 3.4.

3.1. Analysing Discourse: Methodological Reflections

Most discourse-analytical approaches share three methodological assumptions. First, a discourse is a setting of practices or events that constitutes meaning and that can be distinguished according to a certain subject, or a special institutional setting or context (Johnstone, 2018, pp. 2–3; Wood & Kroger, 2000, pp. 3–5)—this definition is adopted in the present study. The general aim of discourse analysis is to find out how meaning is constructed in discourse (Johnstone, 2008, pp. 78, 124; van Dijk, 1998, p. 198; Wood & Kroger, 2000, p. 95).

Second, we must acknowledge that language is a social practice and needs to be analysed as such: "When you say something you are doing something" (Johnstone, 2008, p. 230). The choice of words and definitions in discourse always entails an interpretation or evaluation of the events and practices at stake. A discourse hence creates and circulates world views, ideologies, or dominance (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997; van Dijk, 2001).

Third, discourse does not happen by accident, but is structured as according to distinct rules which influence what can be said and which meanings are constructed (Foucault, 1972, p. 27; Johnstone, 2008, pp. 76–78; van Dijk, 1998, p. 198; Wood & Kroger, 2000, p. 95).

Besides these methodological assumptions, discourse-analytical approaches can be differentiated according to (see Wiesner, 2024, pp. 64–82, for more detail):

1. Their *analytical perspectives*: Generally speaking, there is a continuum ranging from conversation analysis—i.e., approaches that rather focus on conversations on the micro level—to critical discourse analysis and post-structuralist approaches—i.e., approaches that are more macro-analytical and concentrate on relations of discourse and society as well as power relations. In between are pragmatic approaches and those of "discourse analysis in social psychology" that work both macro- and micro-analytically (Johnstone, 2018, pp. 1–3; Titscher, 2000; Wodak, 2008b; Wood & Kroger, 2000, 22ff, 96).

Accordingly, there are differences regarding:

2. The *subjects of analysis*, ranging from communication to written text (Wood & Kroger, 2000, pp. 20–22).
3. The *methods* (Titscher, 2000; Wodak, 2001a, 2008b), even if most of them are qualitative (Wood & Kroger, 2000, pp. 20–22)
4. The *definitions of the term "discourse*," as the basic definition of discourse named earlier is interpreted differently (Wodak, 2001b, p. 4).
5. The *role of context*: Some authors underline that aspects outside the discourse must not be analysed (Wood & Kroger, 2000, p. 64). An opposing view is that discourse is shaped by the world outside, language, media, previous and future discourse, and it shapes these vice versa (Johnstone, 2008, p. 10). This has been the approach in the present study.

3.2. The Comparative Discourse-Analytical Research Design: Methodological Theses and Heuristics

The following methodological choices have been at the base of the macro-oriented discourse-analytical research design (see Wiesner, 2014, pp. 85–103, 108–125, 2022, 2024, pp. 82–112):

1. The *analytical perspective is macro-oriented* in the sense that national EU discourses are the object of analysis (and not conversations).
2. The analysis concentrates on *written text* for a number of reasons (see Section 3.3).
3. It is *qualitative and interpretative* (Wiesner, 2022).
4. It follows the *basic definition of discourse* laid out in Section 3.1: A discourse is a setting of practices or events that constitutes meaning and that can be distinguished according to a certain subject, or a special institutional setting or context.
5. The role of *context*: it is assumed that discourses are not only potentially open to external influences, but also that they can always be influenced by socio-economic and political constellations. Therefore, it was an aim of the analysis to lay out the relation of the discourses to their context.
6. In addition, a *comparative research design* was independently developed and adopted.

Based on these theoretical and methodological considerations, I developed a research heuristics that was complemented by the methodological reflections of different authors on discourse analysis (Foucault, 1972, 1981; Laclau & Mouffe, 2001; Titscher, 2000; Wodak, 2008a), the standards of qualitative research (Gläser & Laudel, 2004; Kelle & Kluge, 1999; Mayring, 2008), and grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 2005; Strauss & Corbin, 1996). The following presents its core elements.

3.2.1. How, Why, and What

Analysing the discourses aims at analysing how meaning is constructed, not only at finding out what is part of the discourse. The heuristics of the present study are thus based on three leading questions: What happens in the discourse? How is meaning constructed? Why is meaning constructed in a certain way? To understand not only the "what," but also the "how" and "why" of a discourse, the analysis has to aim at the contents of the discourse and the underlying processes and interrelations between discourse contents, discourse actors, and discourse contexts. It is hence necessary to include the contexts systematically in the analysis and to add further steps after the coding. In this, qualitative text analysis is a useful method, but insufficient for completely answering the questions after the "what," "how," and "why" of a discourse. Qualitative text analysis mainly helps to find out a "what," e.g., the content of arguments or motifs. It does not explain "how" and "why": How is meaning constructed in discourse, and why does this happen? Analysis, hence, needs to be interpretative (Wiesner, 2022). These reflections were operationalised as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Leading questions of the discourse analysis.

What happens in the discourse?	How is meaning constructed?	Why is meaning constructed in a certain way?
Surveying the course: • Overviews (protocols) • Event overviews • Intensity (counting articles) • Actors Surveying discourse content: • Motifs • Arguments • References • Topics • Reference levels	• Which rules of discourse are recognisable/can be deduced? (contextual knowledge, protocols, and results of evaluation) • Which arguments dominate/prevail? Where and how? • What connections can be found between motifs and arguments? • What references to relevant contextual factors can be identified? • Proceeding: According to principles of qualitative research: coding, collecting relevant combinations of characteristics, typifying, categorising, and forming models/theories	• Which rules of discourse are recognisable/can be deduced? • What references to contextual factors can be found in the discourse? • Which combinations of arguments and which references seemed particularly effective? • Proceeding: According to principles of qualitative research: coding, collecting relevant combinations of characteristics, typifying, categorising, and forming models/theories

Source: Wiesner (2024, p. 85).

Quantitative analyses are only marginally helpful as well, since quantities of a "what" do not explain a "why." Changes in quantities of discourse contents (motifs, discourse contributions, etc.) only hint at possible changes and developments in a discourse; they do not tell us what development happened and why. Hence, I only quantified the development of the discourse's intensities by counting the total number of newspaper articles that appeared each day.

3.2.2. Features of a Discourse

Based on the reflections in Sections 3.1 and 3.2, I developed eight features that shape a discourse and that served as key categories of my analysis (Table 2).

Table 2. Key categories of a discourse analysis.

1. Course	The course of the discourse with regard to topics, intensity/number of contributions, and significant events
2. Actors	The central persons or institutional actors shaping the discourse
3. Rules	They structure the course of discourse and the sayability of utterances
4. Reference level	Political levels (EU, foreign, and domestic) or thematic fields to which the discourse relates
5. Topics	Content areas touched upon by the discourse
6. Motifs	Types of attributions of meaning in the sense of attributed characteristics and motives for action
7. Arguments	Typifying the course of meaning attributions or argumentation processes
8. Cross-references	Relationships between conceptions, subject areas, reference levels, rules, actors, or contextual factors constructed in discourse

Source: Wiesner (2024, p. 85).

3.3. Cases and Materials

National EU discourses mostly happen in cases of nation-state-related decision processes with regard to the EU (EP elections, referenda, and decisive votes), and both the discourses and the votes in turn can influence decision-making or even ratification processes on the EU level. Against this background, the research presented here focused on a comparative study of two national EU discourses in their function as vehicles of European identity construction and their national context: The first case is the French discourse before the referendum on the draft Treaty on a Constitution for Europe in spring 2005. It is particularly telling because it preceded a "no" vote in an EU referendum, which laid the base for a non-ratification of the EU TCE. The French 2005 discourse is an example of a national EU discourse with a high impact on EU politics. The second case is the German discourse around the ratification of the EU TCE draft in the Bundestag and Bundesrat, which took place in parallel in the first half of 2005.

The two discourses refer to two country cases that represent states with a similar role in the EU: Germany and France are both founding members, big member states, and situated in Central Western Europe. They are similar regarding their size, the duration of EU membership, and the stability and duration of the political systems. In the last 50 years, Germany and France have often been called the "engines of European integration." These factors influence national EU discourses: governments of big member states often have a bigger influence in EU policy-making than governments of small member states, newer member states do not show as long-lasting effects of EU membership as old member states, and former transition countries often show less stable political and party systems than others.

While similar in their role in the EU, the cases differed with regard to their internal context. Context for the purpose of this research has been operationalised by five dimensions: (a) the political systems, (b) the political parties and their reaction to European integration, (c) the citizens and their views on EU integration, (d) concepts of national identities, and (e) previous discourses on the EU.

The next questions were how to operationalise the discourses, as a full discourse would comprise all discoursive actions and events in a given time and hence cannot be analysed, and how to select a corpus of theoretically relevant material.

The period to be analysed was set from January 1, 2005, onwards. On this date, Jacques Chirac, then French president, announced he would hold a referendum on the EU TCE. The referendum took place on May 29, 2005. Just before, on May 12 and 27, 2005, the German Bundestag and Bundesrat had ratified the TCE. To include as well the discussion on the French referendum and its consequences, the analysis was extended until one week after the meeting of the European Council on June 16–17, 2005. The period of analysis, hence, was set from January 1, 2005, to June 25, 2005.

The research material, for a number of reasons (comparability, text-based strategy of analysis, and theoretical relevance of national elites), was limited to the quality press. To enable a representative view on the discourse, four quality newspapers per country were analysed in each country case, covering a broad range of the political spectrum from conservative-right over the liberal centre and the liberal left to the far left. The newspapers chosen are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Quality press analysed.

	Germany	France
Conservative	*Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*	*Le Figaro*
Liberal centre	*Süddeutsche Zeitung*	*Le Monde*
Liberal left	*Taz*	*Libération*
Far left	*Neues Deutschland*	*L'Humanité*

All articles concerning the referendum and the ratification of the TCE that had appeared during the period of analysis in the eight newspapers were sampled via different web-based search engines. In total, 6,373 articles were sampled for France and 2,152 for Germany. After a control of the material, 8,145 relevant articles were included and analysed in several phases (Section 3.4).

3.4. Phases of Analysis

In the analysis itself, I proceeded in four phases (see Wiesner, 2014, pp. 117–121, 2022, 2024, pp. 98–105).

The first phase consisted of the definition of cases, sampling of material (8,145 relevant articles, France 6,358 and Germany 1,787), and conducting a context analysis.

The second phase involved an overview and analysis of the course of the discourses, i.e., manual sighting and overview of all 8,145 articles sampled; protocol on the impressions and findings regarding: (a) the development of the discourse intensity (daily count of all articles, see Figure 1); (b) an overview on course, actors, rules, levels of reference, topics, motifs, arguments, and cross-references of the discourse; and (c) the manual overview and the protocols built the base for a theoretical sampling of theoretically relevant articles for further analysis.

Next, based on the preselection, the theoretically most relevant articles were coded with regard to the eight discourse dimensions sketched in Section 3.3 (course, actors, rules, levels of reference, topics, motifs,

arguments, and interrelations). The coding was based on a preliminary coding system, which was further developed inductively, i.e., based on the findings. It followed the logic of axial coding in the later steps. Theoretical sampling has been used throughout: based on findings of the previous steps of the analysis and the coding, the next relevant material unit has been determined. The selection process ended when no further theoretically relevant differences and findings could be detected in the material (Glaser & Strauss, 2005, pp. 53–55; Kelle & Kluge, 1999, pp. 44–49).

In total, 2,247 articles were coded (France 1,311 and Germany 936). In sum, I proceeded with the coding as shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Phases of the coding.

Preparation of the coding	1. Definition and sampling of the corpus
Coding	2. Definition of a basic coding system (previous knowledge)
	3. First phases of coding and further development of the coding system (theoretical sampling)
	4. Further selection of texts to be coded (theoretical sampling)
	5. After the first phase, a fully developed code system was in place
	6. Application of a fully developed coding system to the whole coded material
Analysis	7. Interpretation and further analysis of the results

Source: Wiesner (2014, p. 113).

The final phase of the analysis came after the coding, the synthesis phase, in which the results of the first three phases were synthesised and analysed with regard to the "how" and "why." Based on the synthesised findings, the research questions were answered, the results were summed up, the contexts were compared, and the discourses were compared.

4. Main Results

The main results of the comparative discourse analysis will be presented in the following, all of which result from the steps of analysis described in Sections 2 and 3. Where quotes are inserted, they refer in abbreviated form to the quality press journals in Table 3 and the day of publication, as well as the rank of the quoted article in the account of the day. For example, the 13th analysed article in *L'Humanité* of April 24, 2005 will be quoted as H_240425_13. All translations have been carried out by the author.

4.1. The Contexts

It turned out that the contexts, as expected, differed decisively, which had an influence on the respective development of the discourses (Wiesner, 2014, pp. 126–190, 295–336, 2024, pp. 250–275).

France's political system is semi-presidential, showing a traditionally strong role for protest movements and a weak parliament with a majority voting system, which sets other conditions for the discourse than the German system (parliamentary, with a proportional voting system and a strong culture of consensus). Moreover, in France, there was a referendum, which was not the case in Germany. This meant that in France,

the chances for an intense public debate were much increased, and an occasion was created for interaction of elite discourses and opinions and attitudes of the population. For six months, the EU became a central topic of public debate across nearly all social classes and groups. Germany, on the contrary, did not hold a referendum. In consequence, there was little public debate. Moreover, this debate rarely cuts across the limits of the level of political and media elites. Finally, France experienced decisive changes in the political system due to Europeanisation, but Germany less so.

Concerning political parties, France's political parties were strongly influenced by European integration, or more exactly, by the fact that they had to take a stand with regard to it. In particular, following the Maastricht debate in 1992, diverging actors left mainstream parties and founded new, often EU-critical parties or movements, while the official positions of the centre converged. In Germany, most mainstream parties, except the left party (in 2005, PDS), agreed in an elite consensus in favour of EU integration.

The citizens had a different role in both discourses: in France, they voted on the TCE; hence, they were decisively concerned by the referendum discourse, and they also were actors in the discourse. In Germany, the TCE was ratified in both chambers of the parliamentary and federal systems only, and hence, the citizens also intervened much less in the discourse. The citizens' opinions with regard to the EU, on the other hand, are rather similar in both countries—in both, there is an EU-critical potential of up to 50%—but only in France did this play a role in the discourse.

The national identity narratives are also different, in particular concerning EU integration. In Germany, European integration was part of the raison d'état of the new federal republic; it was a means to become sovereign again, and it became an integral base for the new narrative of national identity that the democratic Western German state developed after World War II. The French national identity narrative, on the other hand, is based on specific interpretations of the state, the republic, the nation, and sovereignty (unified, impartible, and special) that are rather contradictory to European integration.

In France, finally, the relation of national elites to the EU is traditionally conflicting, and so were most previous EU discourses. In Germany, both the relationship of political and media elites to the EU and previous EU discourses are much more harmonious. There is a broad elite consensus in favour of the EU, German EU membership, and Germany's role in the EU.

Table 5 summarises the findings with regard to the discoursive impact of the contexts.

Table 5. Contextual factors in Germany and France and their discoursive impact.

	Germany			France		
	Expression of contextual factor in Germany	Discoursive reception in Germany: was it discussed?	Discoursive impact	Expression of contextual factor in France	Discoursive reception in France: was it discussed?	Discoursive Impact
System	Loss of powers of the Bundestag Loss of significance of federalism	Not central	Low	Cutting down *services publiques* (public services)	Central	Strong
Parties	Smaller protest parties—without success	Marginalised	Low	EU as cleavage, major conflicts, and divisions	Central	Strong
Citizens	Critical	Marginalised, silenced, and not asked	Low	Critical	Targeted and successfully addressed by discourse actors with a strategic interest in EU criticism	Strong
National identity	Harmonious, inclusive, raison d'état, and few potential conflicts	Conflicts addressed, no enforcement	Low	Critical	Regularly successfully thematised	Strong
Previous EU discourses	Harmonious to alternating	Conflicts hushed up, do not assert themselves discoursively	Low	Conflictual	Conflicts regularly addressed, linking to old lines of conflict	Strong
a) Government discourses	Harmonious to alternating	Conflicts hushed up, do not assert themselves discoursively	Low	Officially convergent	Rather harmonious	Strong
b) Party discourses	Largely harmonious with alternating	Conflicts hushed up, do not assert themselves discoursively	Low	Officially convergent; in fact, partly conflictual	Conflict potential in parties addressed; potential for division	Strong

Source: Wiesner (2024, p. 271).

4.2. The Course of the Discourses

Key findings on the overview of the discourse development, intensity, and key events are presented in Figure 1. Figure 1 shows that:

1. The key finding is that the German discourse followed the French one. Accordingly, the German peak was not linked to the Bundestag ratification vote, but to the French referendum.
2. The leading function of the French discourse ended after the French referendum: the German discourse continued after the referenda, while the French one ebbed off.
3. The number of articles per day, i.e., the intensity of the discourse, was continually increasing between January and May in both countries.
4. The French discourse was much more intense, at least in terms of output, throughout the whole discourse, many more articles were published than in Germany.
5. Media peaks—i.e., an extraordinarily high number of articles per day—were usually linked to key events in the discourse.

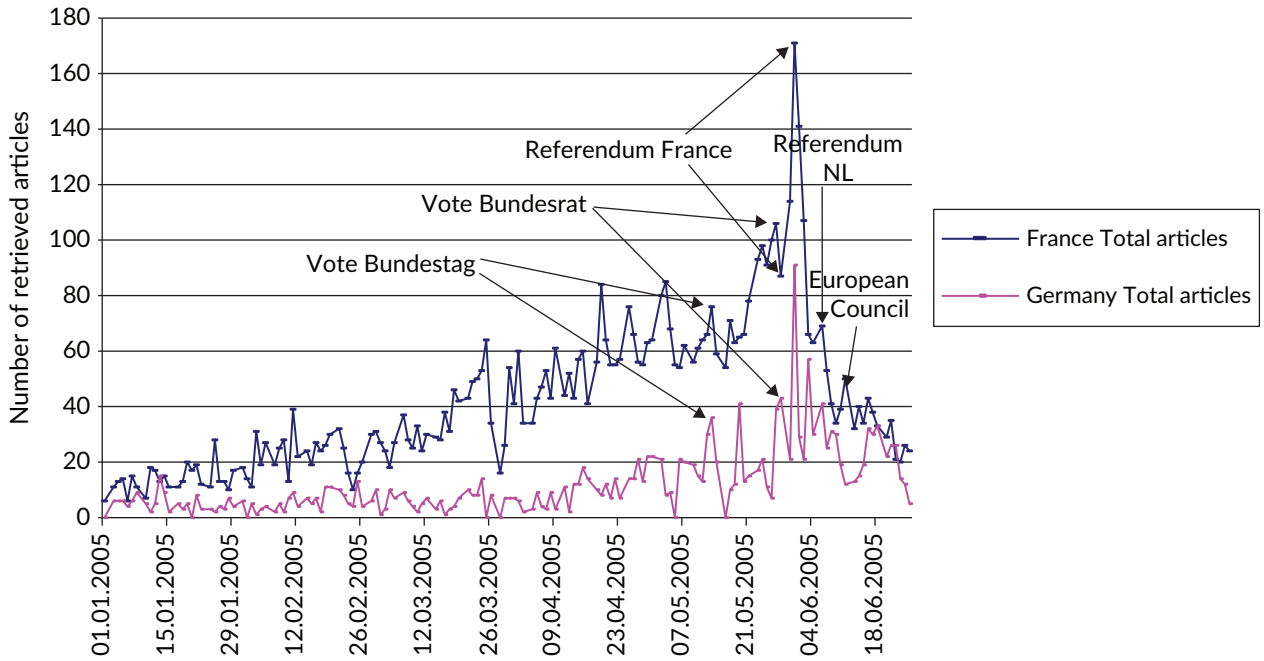

Figure 1. Intensity of the discourse in Germany and France. Source: Wiesner (2014, p. 417).

These findings were supported and further illustrated in the analysis.

4.3. Actors, Rules, and Levels of Reference

A decisive difference appeared with regard to the discourse actors: while in Germany, EU and national politicians as well as journalists and experts were the main discourse actors, the French discourse had a strong bottom–up component. Citizens, as well as NGO activists and trade union representatives, were key actors and also key drivers of the discourse, especially in the Non de Gauche movement that united the French extreme left parties and trade unions, as well as a number of dissenters from the Socialist and

Green parties. Different from Germany, politicians of other EU countries only had a small impact on the French discourse.

Moreover, the dynamism of the discourse was decisively influenced by NGO activities and also by a number of protests and demonstrations that took place. The main and most decisive motif of the French discourse, the "antiliberal motif" (see Section 4.4), originated in these contexts. In sum, the French discourse was decided by this bottom–up dynamics.

The rules of both discourses differed as well. In France, everything could potentially be said and obtain discoursive relevance. The traditional differentiation of a left and a right camp served as a discoursive rule, albeit relativised by the fact that a new divide was constructed, the one between the "yes" camp and the "no" camp.

In Germany, on the other hand, the traditional elite consensus in favour of European integration was at play. It successfully hindered EU-critical motifs from being circulated in the discourse via the silencing strategy (see Section 4.5).

The levels of reference differed as well. The French discourse was mainly oriented towards France. The EU, as well as other member states, were constructed as "others." In Germany, it was the opposite, the EU and also other EU member states were referred to as "us," and the French discourse, as was said above, had a leading role over the German one. Germans debated for a large part because they wanted to know what the French were discussing in preparation for their referendum. The French discourse clearly had a leading function, and the German discourse followed. To put it bluntly, the French discourse was the decisive topic of the German discourse. This also means that both discourses were strongly related.

4.4. Main Motifs and Arguments of the French Discourse

The following will present an overview of the main motifs and arguments of the French discourse (Table 6). They were markedly structured by the difference between the "yes" and the "no" camps. The first part of the motifs on both sides referred to the respective opponents. A second group of motifs referred to the general

Table 6. Main motifs of the French discourse.

Main yes-motifs	Main no-motifs
1. Internal motifs of the discourse	1. Internal motifs of the discourse
Reference to opposing actors	Reference to opposing actors
"Yes, but" arguments	Populist motif
Internal debates in the "yes" camp	Left alliance (Non de Gauche)
2. France's interests	2. EU criticism
Responsibility	Antiliberal motif
Pragmatism	Criticism of TCE
France's role in the EU	Sovereigntist motif
Europe puissance	
3. Normative Europe	

Note: This table was adapted from Wiesner (2016, p. 98, 2022, p. 18).

topic, the draft TCE. But while the "yes" camp underlined motifs that can be termed meta-motifs, underlining a generalised support for the EU as such, the "no" camp argued much more concretely (see Wiesner, 2014, pp. 245–279, 2024, pp. 158–177).

The key motif of the French discourse was the antiliberal motif. It was coined on the political left and mostly used by the Non de Gauche movement and citizen activists, but it became dominant in the discourse. The antiliberal motif, this is a finding of the analysis, can be summed up in an ideal-typical argument as follows: "The EU threatens France's welfare state, and it is ultraliberal—and we are fed up with this!"

In the related arguments, the anti-liberal motif attributed various negatively connoted meanings to the EU. The EU was described as a brutal market-liberal or "ultraliberal" project led by economic leaders only and being only in their interest. The EU was also described as a project of corrupt elites. The concept of "ultraliberalism" was used to mark the EU out as a the "other" against which one must defend oneself with all means; the "no" in the referendum thus appeared as a "no" to "ultraliberalism," and it also appeared as a means of legitimate and almost heroic defence, and as the rationale of the left Non de Gauche movement, which was constructed as a model for Europe. This was expressed by left leader Henri Emmanuelli: "If France protests, Europe moves" (H 250305_12).

In the course of the discourse, the antiliberal motif became a nodal point, i.e., a motif that shaped the discourse because all actors from all political camps, even the ones on the right, referred to it in their arguments. The motif used traditional concepts of the French political culture like *services publiques* (public services), Égalité, a strong state, protest, elite criticism, and France's special role, it was used strategically by left-wing and centre-left actors (Trotzkists, communists, and dissident socialists like Laurent Fabius)—and it met with a mood of the citizens which was shaped by a disenchantment with politics and a strong feeling of social insecurity.

In more detail, the anti-liberal motif used various chains of argumentation.

First, the motif centred around the claim that the TCE was bringing an extreme version of market liberalism: "This Treaty is ultraliberal" (H 230505_11).

Or as the left opponents Francine Bavay, Marc Dolez, Elisabeth Gauthier (director of the left think tank Espaces Marx), and Claude Debons of the left-wing trade union *Conféderation Générale du Travail* (CGT) said: "Europe is in crisis because since a long time it has given primacy to economic liberalisation over social cohesion, to high-level negotiations instead including the peoples. This is because it is reduced to being an organized market" (L 160505_2).

Other sub-motifs of the anti-liberal argumentation were: The EU since Maastricht has been responsible for privatisation and the dismantling of the *services publiques*, it (or the European Central Bank) acts in the interest of the financial markets, the TCE will support their hegemony, and the French right-wing government and French entrepreneurs support them in this. A report on the decision of the French Communist Party's section of the Nord-Pas-de-Calais region in early January 2005 to campaign against the TCE summarises these criticisms:

> Privatisations and destruction of *services publiques* have become…systemic…the triumvirat CRS [Chrica-Raffarin-Seillière]…is anticipating European market-liberal policies under the permanent dictatorship of the European Central Bank that fixes its goals in accordance with the interests of the financial markets…the draft constitution is tailor-made for the hegemony of financialised capitalism. (H 110105_5)

The third argument is that the EU would also facilitate the oft-cited company relocations abroad (*délocalisations*), as Henri Emmanuelli said: "Relocations are not a marginal phenomenon. They will become a key problem, because all activities, be it with high or small added value, can potentially be relocated" (H 030305_5).

Next, is that Laurent Fabius, in particular, coined the sub-motif of "entrenchment": "The decision that you will take on May 29th will fix the European framework for 50 years" (L 030505_8).

Finally, the anti-liberal motif was sharpened and personalised in the criticism of the Services Directive, which was called the Bolkestein Directive after the former Competition Commissioner Frits Bolkestein. The spectre of "ultraliberalism" was thus stereotyped in the name of Bolkestein and very often directly linked to the TCE. Henri Emmanuelli, for example, said: "Bolkestein, délocalisations, TCE: it is the same logic" (H 170205_6).

The opponents actively used Bolkestein as a bogeyman—at the large demonstration in Brussels in March 2005, placards were saying: "Bolkestein = Frankenstein" (LM 220305_12).

A peak in the dispute was reached when activists from the left-wing Conféderation Génerale du Travail (CGT) trade union, working for the French electricity company EDF, cut off Frits Bolkestein's electricity (LM 150405_5).

4.5. Main Motifs and Arguments of the German Discourse

The main motifs, topics, and rules of the German discourse, on the other hand, were divided into motifs related to the outside of Germany and those directed to the inside (Table 7).

The most decisive trait of the German discourse was revealed not only in the analysis of what was said, but also in the analysis of what was not said. This key rule of the German discourse was what I have come to term the "silencing strategy." It was used to silence EU criticism in the German discourse.

The silencing strategy is based on the stable and longstanding German elite EU narrative, as well as the corresponding elite consensus of most parties represented in the Bundestag in support of European integration. In the German discourse, the pro-European majority of the German political elites reacted by silencing opinions that deviated from the elite discourse and minority voices, and by commenting on them in a delimiting, belittling, and pejorative way. The following illustrates how the silencing strategy was applied to inner-party dissenting voices in the mainstream parties.

Table 7. Main motifs of the German discourse.

External to Germany	Internal to Germany
1. Imported discourse	**1. Main rule**
France and its discourse	Silencing strategy
Discourse at the EU-level	**2. Particular German motifs**
Imported criticisms and reactions	EU enlargement (especially Turkey)
Discussion concerning the EU and the contents of the TCE	Assertions regarding EU politics
2. Fundamental debate on the political principles of the EU after the "no" vote	Criticism of the EU and the TCE (anti-militarism)
The citizenry/the demos	Classical motifs of German–EU discourse (Western integration)
European identity	New motifs of support for the EU and the Treaty
What kind of Europe do we want?	

Note: This table was adapted from Wiesner (2016, p. 101, 2022, p. 19).

The way internal critics of the TCE were dealt with in the Christian Democrat (CDU)/Christian Social Union (CSU) group in parliament illustrates that there were three stages of the silencing strategy. In January 2005, several CSU members of the German parliament announced that they would not vote for TCE ratification if certain demands were not met, such as more powers for the Bundestag in European policy matters.

The first stage of the silencing strategy against such dissent is to *downplay* it, as in the following statement by CSU party leader Stoiber: "CSU chairman Edmund Stoiber counts on a broad majority for the TCE in the CSU bundestag group. In the end only "very few" MPs would vote no, Stoiber said" (SZ 070105). Stoiber subsequently adopted the dissenter's claims and negotiated them with the red-green government, which eventually agreed to some of them. However, in the run-up to the ratification vote, when the potential dissenters kept their line, Christian Democrat leaders tried to change the minority representatives' minds.

The second stage of the silencing strategy is *inward courting*. Thus, at the preparatory parliamentary group meeting with a test vote, Edmund Stoiber and Angela Merkel made a plea for an integrated Europe and the TCE:

> Even the catholic church was regarding the Constitution as progress, Stoiber explained to the EU sceptics in his own ranks—some of them had been complaining that a reference to god was missing in the Treaty. Stoiber, as was reported, added that the critics should not be more papal than the pope itself…Using a lot of pathos, the Bavarian minister president recalled how an old warring Europe grew together into a community of peace. CDU chair Merkel explained why the Constitution was a big step ahead. Her presentation was impressive, even EU sceptics said. (SZ 120505_3)

After the first two stages of downplaying and courting had not achieved the desired success, the third stage was introduced. *Threats* against dissenters who intended to vote "no" in the ratification vote were expressed: "MPs report that influential colleagues showed the marter instruments developed in democracies that serve at creating majorities—for instance, the threat that the[ir] career might eventually suffer" (SZ 120505_3).

After it had become clear that in spite of all the above, a minority of the Christian Democrat parliamentary group would vote "no," the party leaders went back to stages one and two, i.e., downplaying and inward courting. The potential "no" votes were immediately downplayed in their significance again, as here by CDU leader Angela Merkel:

> "A vast majority will approve, and this is good news." She said she would recommend a yes vote to her group [the CDU group], but did not expect a unanimous yes vote. It was known for a long time, she said, that there would be some diverging votes. (taz 100505_3)

There were far fewer critics of the TCE in the then red-green government parties than in the opposition, but nevertheless, attempts were made to discipline them. In this, however, the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) was quite dispassionate: "Two SPD MPs have announced they would abstain from the vote. The executive secretary of the SPD group, Wilhelm Schmidt, however, announced he would talk to both of them once again" (SZ 120505_3).

In contrast, there was an intense debate in the green group. The only Treaty critic, Hans-Christian Ströbele, earned severe contradictions:

> In the green group meeting, only Hans-Christian Ströbele expressed his concern—which resulted in a 20-minute exchange with foreign minister Joschka Fischer….Should Ströbele not approve, Fischer said, he needed to be aware that he joined forces with Eurosceptics like the British Conservatives and the French extreme right. By referring to the latter, Fischer reacted to interjections of green chairwoman Claudia Roth, who repeatedly had mentioned the name Le Pen….Green insiders expect that Ströbele will now approve of the TCE. (SZ 120505_3)

5. Concluding Discussion

The main findings of the comparison of the two discourses will now be discussed against the conditions for EU identity construction laid out in the heuristics (see Wiesner, 2014, pp. 398–470, 2016, pp. 103–108, 2024, pp. 276–286, for more details).

5.1. The Discourses and the Context

The result of the analysis can be summed up like this: The German discourse can be characterised as an EU discourse with a national base: its key features were shaped by its openness and the permanent reference to the EU and other member states, and in particular, the French discourse. Both the EU and its member states were constructed as European domestic politics and as "us." The German discourse was not very intense since before May, only several smaller debates followed one another. After May, and in particular from the middle and end of May onwards, the discourse intensified significantly.

The French discourse can be characterised as a national EU discourse: Its key features were shaped by its closedness; it was rather self-referential, EU and EU member states were more rarely referred to than was the case in Germany, and they were discursively constructed as foreign politics or "the other." The French discourse, as opposed to the German one, was very intense. This was due to a high level of public interest, the EU being the most important discussion topic in April and May. Table 8 presents an overview:

Table 8. Comparison of the two discourses.

Germany: An EU discourse with a national base	France: A national EU discourse
Openness	Closedness
Continual references to the EU and its member states	Self-referential
EU and France are both described as "us"	France is "us"
	EU and member states are "the other"
Intensity	Intensity
Two phases: Until May, there was scarcely any discourse and from the end of May onwards it intensified significantly	Very intense
	High level of mobilisation: EU was the most important topic in April/May

Note: This table was adapted from Wiesner (2016, p. 103).

While the discourse context in France had a strong effect on the French discourse, this was not the case in Germany. The referendum, the split of the political parties on the matter, the ambivalences and latent contradictions between established patterns of national identity and European integration, as well as the reference to previous and conflicting EU discourses, fuelled a heated discourse in France.

In Germany, on the other hand, the treaty was ratified in parliament only; most political parties, except for the far left PDS (Party of Democratic Socialism), which today has been followed by the Left Party, were in favour, and the national identity conception as well as previous EU discourses were entirely pro-European.

5.2. National EU Discourses as Means of European Identity Construction?

Based on the heuristics resumed in Section 2.3 in the theses 1 to 14, it can be stated that both national EU discourses analysed could hardly function as means of European identity construction, even if it was for different reasons.

The French EU discourse succeeded in constructing a distinction between a French "us" and the EU as an "other," which counteracts the leading Thesis 1 of the heuristics—there was no demos constructed, but an opposition. The French discourse constructed the EU as something the French precisely did not identify with—things would have been different if it had just been a criticism of certain EU policies while still constructing the EU as "us".

Findings also underline a contradiction to Thesis 6—the meaning of collective identities must be compatible with established societal codes—and Thesis 7—they must also correspond to the interests, desires, and fears of the population so that they can prevail. There were also contradictions of European integration and the French context as expressed in Thesis 12—European identity is only sustainable as a multi-level system of different identity levels; conversely, if there are conflicts here, they probably negatively influence the formation of European identity. Moreover, the French case contradicts Thesis 13—the emergence and persistence of European identity is also conditioned by a positive relationship between national and European identities—and Thesis 14—a positive relation between national and European identity levels only seems to be sustainable if the respective, mostly national contexts, support it.

The German EU discourse, on the other hand, until the end of May, barely constructed any patterns of meaning at all. This is a contradiction to Thesis 3—European identity is socially constructed and loaded with different meanings in the process. However, the German discourse is in accordance with Theses 6, 7, 12, 13, and 14, as it constructed the EU as "us." After late May, the situation changed, and there was an intense EU-related discourse.

These results indicate that in the discoursive construction of EU identity, no simple cause-and-effect model is at work. It is not enough if political elites simply suggest patterns of meaning for the EU (as the French elites did) and expect citizens to follow. In order for European identity construction to happen, a number of factors need to play together constructively:

1. It is necessary that patterns of meaning are constructed and circulated. The German case demonstrates that this is not necessarily the case even when an EU Treaty is awaiting ratification in a leading member state. The French case, in exchange, underlines that this is the case if a discoursive arena is opened up (scheduling a referendum) and used (citizens and political elites actively participate in the discourse).
2. In case a discoursive arena is opened and meanings for the EU are circulated, it is a further condition that they construct a generally supportive identification with the EU as a polity (i.e., the EU as some sort of "us") and not a clear distinction from the EU as a polity, notwithstanding criticism of EU policies.
3. Moreover, as European identity needs to develop in a multilevel system of identities, the discourses should neither construct clear distinctions from other member states.
4. These results also allow some conclusions regarding the question of an EU public space and the Europeanisation of nationally mediated public spaces. They underline that there are two paths for that: as in France, via national interests that are at stake and national actors that debate the EU as a national topic, or as in Germany, via a European opening and orientation of national political elites and actors.

These four conclusions describe four main conditions for a discoursive construction of an EU identity that should be further studied in a broader research covering more country cases.

Acknowledgments

I thank Meta Novak and the two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments.

Funding

Parts of the work on this article were conducted within the Jean-Monnet network Debating Europe (Project Number: 620428-EPP-1-2020-1-DE-EPPJMO-NETWORK). The European Commission's support for the production of this publication does not constitute an endorsement of the contents, which reflect the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

Conflict of Interests

In this article, editorial decisions were undertaken by Meta Novak (University of Ljubljana).

Data Availability

The research data is assembled in a database that is in possession of the author and not publicly available.

References

Anderson, B. (2006). *Imagined communities. Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. Verso.

Arts, W., & Halman, L. (2006). National identity in Europe today: What people feel and think. *International Journal of Sociology*, *35*(4), 69–93.

Banchoff, T. (1999). National identity and EU legitimacy in Germany and France. In T. Banchoff & M. P. Smith (Eds.), *Legitimacy and the European Union: The contested polity* (pp. 180–198). Routledge.

Bergbauer, S. (2018). *Explaining European identity formation: Citizens' attachment from Maastricht Treaty to crisis* (1st ed.). Springer.

Boreus, K., & Bergstrom, G. (2017). *Analyzing text and discourse: Eight approaches for the social sciences*. Sage.

Bruter, M. (2005). *Citizens of Europe? The emergence of a mass European identity*. Palgrave Macmillian.

Castano, M. (2004). European identity: A social-psychological perspective. In R. K. Herrmann, T. Risse, & M. B. Brewer (Eds.), *Transnational identities: Becoming European in the EU* (pp. 40–58). Rowman Littlefield.

Cerutti, F. (2009). Warum sind in der Europäischen Union politische Identität und Legitimität wichtig? In T. Meyer (Ed.), *Europäische Identität als Projekt. Innen—und Außensichten* (pp. 249–267). Springer.

Checkel, J. T., & Katzenstein, P. (2009). The politicization of European Union identities. In J. T. Checkel (Ed.), *European identity* (pp. 1–25). Cambridge Univ. Press.

Diez Medrano, J. (2003). *Framing Europe*. Princeton University Press.

Diez Medrano, J. (2009). The public sphere and the European Union's political identity. In J. T. Checkel (Ed.), *European identity* (pp. 81–107). Cambridge Univ. Press.

Duchesne, S. (2008). Waiting for European identity…preliminary thoughts about the identification process with Europe. *Perspectives on European Politics and Society*, *9*(4), 397–410.

Fairclough, N., & Wodak, R. (1997). Critical discourse analysis. In T. A. van Dijk (Ed.), *Discourse as social interaction* (pp. 258–284). Sage.

Foucault, M. (1972). *The archeology of knowledge and the discours of language*. Pantheon Books.

Foucault, M. (1981). The order of the discourse. In R. Young (Ed.), *Untying the text. A post-structuralist reader* (pp. 51–78). Routledge; Kegan Paul.

Gellner, E. (1983). *Nations and nationalism*. Cornell University Press.

Giesen, B. (2008). Europäische Identität und intellektueller Diskurs/Eine historische Perspektive. In S. Sigmund, G. Albert, A. Bienfait, & M. H. Stachura (Eds.), *Soziale Konstellation und historische Perspektive: Festschrift für M. Rainer Lepsius* (pp. 323–340). Springer.

Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (2005). *Grounded theory: Strategien qualitativer Forschung*. Huber.

Gläser, J., & Laudel, G. (2004). *Experteninterviews und qualitative Inhaltanalyse*. Springer.

Górniak, J. J., Kandulla, M., Kiss, P., Kosic, A., & Jiménez, A. M. R. (2004). European and national identities in EU's old and new member states: Ethnic, civic, instrumental and symbolic components. *European Integration online Papers*, *8*, Article 11. http://eiop.or.at/eiop/texte/2004-011a.htm

Habermas, J. (1976). Können komplexe Gesellschaften eine vernünftige Identität ausbilden? In *Zur Rekonstruktion des historischen Materialismus* (pp. 92–126). Suhrkamp.

Habermas, J. (2004). Ist die Herausbildung einer europäischen Identität nötig, und ist sie möglich? In *Der gespaltene Westen* (pp. 68–82). Suhrkamp.

Hobsbawm, E. J. (2008). *Nations and nationalism since 1780: Programme, myth, reality* (15th ed.). Cambridge University Press.

Immerfall, S., & Sobisch, A. (1997). Europäische Integration und europäische Identität. *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte*, *10*, 25–37.

Johnstone, B. (2008). *Discourse analysis* (2nd ed.). Blackwell.

Johnstone, B. (2018). *Discourse analysis* (3rd ed.). Wiley.

Kaelble, H. (2009). Identification with Europe and politicization of the EU since the 1980s. In J. T. Checkel (Ed.), *European identity* (pp. 193–227). Cambridge Univ. Press.

Kaina, V. (2009). *Wir in Europa. Kollektive Identität und Demokratie in der Europäischen Union*. Springer.

Kelle, U., & Kluge, S. (1999). *Vom Einzelfall zum Typus*. Leske + Budrich.

Kutter, A. (2020). *Legitimation in the European Union: A discourse—and field—theoretical view* (1st ed.). Springer; Palgrave Macmillan.

Laclau, E., & Mouffe, C. (2001). *Hegemony and socialist strategy: Towards a radical democratic politics* (2nd ed.). Verso.

Marcussen, M., Risse, T., Engelmann-Martin, D., Knopf, H.-J., & Roscher, K. (2001). Constructing Europe? The evolution of nation-state identities. In T. Christiansen, K. E. Jorgensen, & A. Wiener (Eds.), *The social construction of Europe* (pp. 101–120). Sage.

Mayring, P. (2008). *Qualitative Inhaltsanalyse: Grundlagen und Techniken* (10th ed.). Beltz.

McLaren, L. M. (2004). Opposition to European integration and fear of loss of national identity: De-bunking a basic assumption regarding hostility to the integration project. *European Journal of Political Research*, *43*(3), 895–911.

Mead, G. H. (2005). *Geist, Identität und Gesellschaft aus der Sicht des Sozialbehaviorismus* (14th ed.). Suhrkamp.

Meyer, T. (2009). Europäische Identität als politisches Projekt. In F. Decker (Ed.), *Die Verfassung Europas. Perspektiven des Integrationsprojekts* (pp. 237–253). Springer.

Niethammer, L. (2000). *Kollektive Identität: Heimliche Quellen einer unheimlichen Konjunktur*. Rowohlt.

Opp, K.-D. (2005). Decline of the nation state? How the European Union creates national and sub-national identifications. *Social Forces*, *84*(2), 653–680.

Pantel, M. (1999). Unity-in-diversity: Cultural policy and EU legitimacy. In T. Banchoff & M. P. Smith (Eds.), *Legitimacy and the European Union: The contested polity* (pp. 46–65). Routledge.

Pichler, F. (2005). *Affection to and exploitation of Europe. European Identity in the EU* (Reihe Soziologie No. 71). Institut für Höhere Studien. https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-220567

Puntscher-Riekmann, S., & Wodak, R. (2003). "Europe for all"—diskursive Konstruktionen europäischer Identitäten. In M. Mokre, G. Weiss, & R. Bauböck (Eds.), *Europas Identitäten. Mythen, Konflikte, Konstruktionen* (pp. 283–303). Campus.

Schmidberger, M. (1998, June 12). EU-Akzeptanz und europäische Identität im deutsch-französischen Grenzgebiet. *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte*, 18–25. https://www.bpb.de/shop/zeitschriften/apuz/archiv/538543/eu-akzeptanz-und-europaeische-identitaet-im-deutsch-franzoesischen-grenzgebiet

Schmidt, V. A. (2006). *Democracy in Europe: The EU and national polities*. Oxford University Press.

Seidendorf, S. (2007). *Europäisierung nationaler Identitätsdiskurse? Ein Vergleich französischer und deutscher Printmedien*. Nomos.

Strauss, A. L., & Corbin, J. M. (1996). *Grounded theory: Grundlagen qualitativer Sozialforschung*. Beltz.

Tajfel, H. (1978). *Differentiations between social groups*. Academic Press.

Titscher, S. (2000). *Methods of text and discourse analysis*. Sage.

van Dijk, T. A. (1998). *Ideology. A multidisciplinary approach*. Sage.

van Dijk, T. A. (2001). Critical discourse analysis. In D. Tannen, D. Schiffrin, & H. Hamilton (Eds.), *The handbook of discourse analysis* (pp. 352–371). Blackwell.

Waever, O. (2005). European integration and security: Analysing French and German discourses on state, nation and Europe. In D. Howarth & J. Torfing (Eds.), *Discourse theory in European politics* (pp. 33–67). Palgrave Macmillan.

Weiss, G. (2003). Die vielen Seelen Europas. In M. Mokre, G. Weiss, & R. Bauböck (Eds.), *Europas Identitäten. Mythen, Konflikte, Konstruktionen* (pp. 183–206). Campus.

Westle, B. (2003). Europäische Identifikation im Spannungsfeld regionaler und nationaler Identitäten. *Politische Vierteljahresschrift*, *44*(4), 453–482.

Wiesner, C. (2014). *Demokratisierung der EU durch nationale Europadiskurse? Strukturen und Prozesse europäischer Identitätsbildung im deutsch-französischen Vergleich*. Nomos.

Wiesner, C. (2016). Nationale Europadiskurse als Medien der Konstruktion europäischer Identität? Eine vergleichende Untersuchung der Pressediskurse zur Ratifikation des EU-Verfassungs vertrages in Frankreich und Deutschland in 2005. *PVS Politische Vierteljahresschrift*, *57*(1), 79–115. https://doi.org/10.5771/0032-3470-2016-1-79

Wiesner, C. (2022). Doing qualitative and interpretative research: Reflecting principles and principled challenges. *Political Research Exchange*, *4*(1), Article 2127372. https://doi.org/10.1080/2474736X.2022.2127372

Wiesner, C. (2024). *Politicisation, democratisation and EU identity: National EU discourses in Germany and France*. Routledge; Taylor & Francis.

Wiesner, C., Haapala, T., & Palonen, K. (2017). *Debates, rhetoric and political action: Practices of textual interpretation and analysis*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Wodak, R. (2001a). *Methods of critical discourse analysis*. Sage.

Wodak, R. (2001b). What CDA is about—A summary of its history, important concepts, and its developments. In R. Wodak (Ed.), *Methods of critical discourse analysis* (pp. 1–13). Sage.

Wodak, R. (2008a). Introduction: Discourse studies—Important Concepts and Terms. In R. Wodak & M. Krzyzanowski (Eds.), *Qualitative discourse analysis in the social sciences* (pp. 1–29). Palgrave Macmillan.

Wodak, R. (2008b). *Qualitative discourse analysis in the social sciences*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Wood, L. A., & Kroger, R. O. (2000). *Doing discourse analysis. Methods for studying action in talk and text*. Sage.

About the Author

Claudia Wiesner is professor of political science at Fulda University of Applied Sciences. She directs the Jean Monnet Centre of Excellence Europe in the World and the Point Alpha Research Institute (PARI), is PI in several international research projects, and has been visiting fellow in various international research Institutions. For more information, visit: https://wiesnerc.jimdofree.com/english

POLITICS AND GOVERNANCE
ISSN: 2183-2463

Politics and Governance is an international, peer-reviewed open access journal that publishes significant and cutting-edge research drawn from all areas of political science.

Its central aim is thereby to enhance the broad scholarly understanding of the range of contemporary political and governing processes, and impact upon of states, political entities, international organisations, communities, societies and individuals, at international, regional, national and local levels.

cogitatio

www.cogitatiopress.com/politicsandgovernance