Notes on the 'Politics' of EU Politicisation

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Abstract

This paper proposes an understanding of politicisation as the field of contestation about the political. Applied to the contested field of EU governance, the argument is that EU politicisation cannot be understood without analysis of its synergy with EU depoliticised governance. We will start with a discussion of some of the dimensions and modalities of (de)politicisation and follow with analysis of EU (de)politicisation in relation to the political field and public sphere. To understand the 'politics of politicisation', we demarcate the field of political struggle and locate the wider public and societal resonances of such a struggle over the political. The research programme for the analysis of the 'politics of EU-politicisation' then refers to the wider processes of how political conflicts are selectively amplified to create public visibility, how attention among relevant publics is unequally distributed, how opinions of these publics are formed and, ultimately as well, how legitimacy (or de-legitimation) is generated. After delineating possible research directions, we finish with some comments on EU (de)politicisation as a rupture from national politics and the competitive and multi-level merging of political fields and public spheres through the transnational encounter of agents and publics. This chaotic process has unpredictable outcomes for EU-legitimacy, but nevertheless opens a European field where political contestation meets with societal resonance with possibilities of reflexivity and democratic learning for both institutional agents and publics involved. This working paper thus contributes with insights into the conditions for EU democratisation, which is a core concern for EU3D (in particular in Work package 4, which focuses on public opinions, debates and reforms).

Keywords

EU politicisation: From drama to routine[1]

Three understandings of the politicisation of the EU can be distinguished in the literature, which is discussed either as drama, as exceptional or as every-day politics. The first account is delivered by Hooghe and Marks (2009), who in a landmark article argued that politicisation is the driver of deep transformation of European integration. They argue that politicisation has consequences for the substantive character of European integration in the sense that it introduces a new era of 'constraining dissensus' that replaces the old era of 'permissive consensus'. The decisive change takes place at the level of public opinion and partisan contestation. Not only elites and institutions matter, but also the people. Because of this transformation in the politicisation of European integration, the preferences of the public and of the national political parties, until then more or less insignificant, became key issues in European integration. Politicisation as epochal change further calls for a change of paradigm in the study of European integration. As politicisation has changed the rules of the game in fundamental ways, functional integration is no longer viable and a new post-functionalist theory needs to account for the causal impact of 'a new politics of identity' on integration and disintegration. Politicisation is thus studied in the causalities and mechanisms of identity politics. As such, it is not just exceptional or limited to times of crisis but denotes an axial transformation of European integration.

Such a dramatic reading of EU politicisation as epochal change contradicts an understanding of politicisation as something that happens occasionally and breaks the routine of everyday politics (De Wilde and Trenz 2012). According to this second understanding, EU politicisation would be confined to singular events; it would remain exceptional and distinct from 'regular politics', marking a period of heightened attention and mobilisation. In terms of party competition, Kriesi et al. (2016) have emphasised that EU politicisation is not only time-dependent but also varies according to national contexts. Political institutions, governments and parties can at one point decide to politicise certain issues and at other point develop strategies of de-politicisation. As such, EU politicisation can temporarily reach impressive levels, even before Maastricht, but most of the time remains consistently low or even declines (ibid.). Politicisation would thus remain confined in time and space. It would not necessarily encompass the whole of the EU but can be sectorially or territorially differentiated (de Wilde et al. 2016). The fact that European issues and policies are more frequently politicised is still an important indicator for the new salience of the EU in electoral competition and the new first order character of EP elections (De Wilde et al. 2014). Especially the mobilising capacities of Eurosceptic actors has gained importance. These actors can make use of various opportunities such as a referenda to challenge the legitimacy of the EU in fundamental ways, but they lack an encompassing strategy to propose an 'alternative Europe'. Public attention around EU issues therefore remains episodic and focused on particular actors or events. Such moments of heightened attention and mobilisation can nevertheless lead to rupture,

such as Brexit, but this happens almost accidentally and remains open-ended as there are no 'iron rules' that the EU is on the road of integration or disintegration.

A third, minimal account of politicisation is proposed by Michael Zürn, who discusses politicisation as 'agenda-setting': moving something into the field of politics. 'Politicization, in general terms, means the demand for, or the act of, transporting an issue or an institution into the field or sphere of politics—making previously unpolitical matters political' (Zürn 2018). This is a classical political science understanding, which simply turns politics as its object of analysis, meaning the study of the interplay of conflicting powers within any formal or informal institutional setting (a state, an organisation, a group of people, etc.). Politicisation is the triggering of a moment of any politics, when political power enters the game. This presupposes at the same time that there are other non-political spheres that can be politicised. Not everything is political, but everything can become political (Palonen et al. 2016). In the field of international relations or in European integration, for instance, it is often assumed that politicisation has profoundly changed the logics of technocratic decision-making opening it up to a game of power and interests. Technocratic governance has been considered by some to be placed outside the realm of politics and, as such, to be entrusted to experts and regulatory agencies (Majone 1994). For others, technocracy is portrayed as being deeply political, often hiding a game of power, interests and identities (Rauh 2016). Politicisation is then not only triggered by regulatory failure or deficits of output legitimation of the EU (Börzel 2016), but also by a counter-hegemonic struggle against the dominance of functionalism and rebellion against expertocracy (Della Porta 2009; Habermas 2015).

As this short overview demonstrates, the politicisation of the EU can mean quite different things: it can be considered exceptional or normal, it can denote deep rupture and system change or it can contribute to the constitution of the EU as a political system that is open to politics. In the following, our notes on a politics of politicisation are not so much intended to formulate a genuine theory of politicisation, but are rather informed by our interest as political sociologists in the broader dynamics of European integration/disintegration. Investigating politicisation – de-politicisation dynamics is important for understanding the conditions for democracy in an increasingly differentiated EU, which is a key concern for EU3D (Fossum 2019).

The 'politics' of politicisation

How to make sense of politicisation within the political theory of European integration? The purpose of this paper is to demarcate the field of research on politicisation and the way it contributes to our understanding of the specifics of the EU as a political order in search of legitimacy through analysis of political action. For this purpose, the distinction between the political and the non-political (implicit but not explicit in the definition of Zürn 2018; Kauppi et al. 2016a) is a good starting point to reflect about politicisation as the field of contestation about the political. To talk about politicisation assumes, first of all, that the meaning or the character of issues to be political can be contested (Anders, forthcoming; Palonen, forthcoming; Wiesner, forthcoming).

Politicisation as the field of contestation about the political presupposes a conflicting understanding about the character and scope of the political. This means further that politicisation as the force or the dynamic of turning something political can only be understood in relation to the countervailing force or dynamic that something should not be considered political. Politics can only be situated in a world in which not everything is political. But in what sense can something be considered political and non-political? Answering this question requires unpacking the relationships between the (non)political and (de)politicisation from a historical, agent-centred perspective (cf. for instance Kauppi et al. 2016b).

(De)politicisation makes sense in relation to social contexts, cognitive structures and political strategies. Something is (de)politicised for someone in a specific structural and situational configuration. The visibility of certain issues is directly dependent on the knowledge individuals have of these issues, on the mind's eye so to speak, and on the interests of the protagonists of (de)politicisation processes. For instance, for a long time, the carbon footprint was not politicised for the public. Scientists talked about it among themselves. It was an issue that raised debate in professional circles and was politicised in those milieus, but not for the public. The scientists' interventions in the media politicised the issue for the public. The same could be said about EU-integration. It was meant, on purpose, to be an area of 'low politics' invisible to the general public. If we do not know anything about an issue, it cannot be politicised for us. And if (de)politicising the issue is in nobody's interest, then it will not be (de)politicised. Some objects or events are more prone to be politicised than others. Certain groups try to monopolise the politicisation of certain objects, such as the environment or climate change. In other words, different groups specialise in different kinds of politicising actions.

While knowledge and interests give us clues on the limits of the (de)politicised, cultural conventions and codes also play a role. Some objects are more protected from politicisation than others. For instance, in Thailand the King as an institution is a cultural taboo, in Russia the presidency is, for the moment, sheltered from direct politicisation strategies.

The various dimensions of (de)politicisation include then transformations of issues from non-politicised to politicised and vice versa, as well as the involvement of various groups that seek influence and power. The following simplified table represents the relevant dimensions of (de)politicisation.

Table 1: Dimensions of (de)politicisation

	Politicisation	**Depoliticisation**
Public	'Official' politics, anti-system	Consensus, TINA
Private	Turf wars, 'cabinet politics'	Legalese, technocracy

Politicisation cannot be discussed in any depth without a deeper thinking of politics. The current literature unduly separates the two. Mair, for instance, distinguishes between regular party politics and system opposition (Mair 2007). The first sustains the political system, while the second is potentially disruptive. Opposition *within* the

system is ideologically driven and decides about the distribution of power and positions in politics. Opposition *of* the system questions the polity and its constitutive identity in more fundamental terms, for instance in the form of a separatist movement or the *Gilets jaunes* movement in France. Politicisation as 'polity contestation' would in this sense be dramatically different from 'politics' in the sense of triggering a dynamic of 'identity politics' or other form of system critique or politicisation that does not seek reconciliation or compromise but fundamental rupture. Such an understanding of politicisation as 'identity driven' in contrast to traditional partisan party contestation as 'ideology-driven' has become dominant in the literature on EU-politicisation (de Wilde et al. 2013; Hooghe and Marks 2009; Kriesi 2016; Statham and Trenz 2012). It is put in a nutshell by the call for a new grand-theory of integration, which is 'post-functionalist' but, at the same time, meant to be 'post-ideological' putting at focus, instead, the fundamental identitarian conflicts and cleavages that divide the EU in light of current challenges such as economic and financial crisis, Brexit or illiberalism (Hooghe and Marks 2019).

To re-open this debate, we propose an understanding of politicisation that is not based on a distinction within the field of political contestation, but focuses, instead, on the field of contestation about the political. 'Turning something political' does not only mean 'making an issue political'. It also opens the field of struggle about the political. In this sense, politicisation is not issue-specific or limited to a particular kind of debate such as 'crisis' or 'Brexit', but concerns the whole constellations of agents, institutions, affected parties and audiences that are involved in the political game. By 'claiming to be political', politicisation is at the same time perceived as an intrusion of the political into the autonomy of other sectors of society, which so far have claimed to be 'non-political'. This regards broader distinctions like the one between 'private' and 'public' or 'politics' and 'market' that become subject to political contestation. Politicisation affects the set-up of broader societal relationships. More often than adaptation, politicisation is also an imposition of political logics. It is a colonising force, which claims that the political should rule over other sectors of society, for instance, that family life should be regulated or that the market should be steered. Everything is political (Bourdieu 2001), but in the sense that everything is potentially political and everything can be politicised in the sense of applying political logics to something that is or was not considered political (Wiesner, forthcoming). As such, politicisation typically faces opposition of those who resist being or becoming political. This tension already points to the constitutive link between politicisation and de-politicisation as countervailing forces - an idea we are going to develop in further detail at the end of our paper.

The transformation of something not political into something political can assume two distinct, but interrelated meanings: (1) making something publicly salient, and (2) making something debatable and open to conflict. In the first case, politics operates in a sphere of public visibility and 'turning something political' basically implies any effort of creating visibility (Nassehi 2002). An issue is visible to someone when this person is aware of the issue and understands its meaning. An issue and its meaning are highlighted over other issues, which means that particular technics are applied to increase its visibility making it salient but also relevant for others. Someone might

assert, for instance, that an issue should be considered being of public interest or affecting a wider public. In the second case, politics is essentially about conflicts and the political move consists in turning something a priori not contested, politically unmarked, devoid of struggle and disagreement, into something disputable or at least discussable, involving different perspectives and interests (Kauppi et al. 2016a).

Neither one of these two different meanings of 'turning something political' is sufficient to describe politicisation. Politics as the process of creating visibility is usually described as 'agenda-setting' (McCombs 1981). As such, it does not need to be controversial. In case everybody agrees that an issue should be raised on the public agenda, we would not talk of politicisation. Politicisation further needs to build on the visibility of political issues, it cannot set the agenda, but only build on it. Politicisation is triggered when agenda-setting has been successful and when issues that have become salient are debated further in the public realm of politics. This needs to be distinguished from conflicting interests that can be fought in the private realm or from political struggles that do not reach the threshold of publicness. We can enter debate and controversies with our political adversaries but be unsuccessful to raise the public agenda and gain attention for our concerns, or we can fight our conflicts backstage. In EU decision-making, the frequent power and interest politics between governments and member states behind closed doors might be a case in point. Such forms of non-public contestation would thus unfold below the threshold of what is commonly defined as politicisation.

Politicisation as we shall argue is the special case of 'turning something political' that combines the visible and the contested dynamics of the political. Conflicts of interests among governments, EU institutions, stakeholders and experts behind closed doors in the protected area of Brussels has been one of the main characteristics of European integration (cf. Olivi 1998). Making such conflicts and debates publicly visible would be one modality of politicisation. We thus talk of politicisation if politics unfolds as a competition for the attention of the public. The 'politics of politicisation' are distinguished by the strive to contest the distinction between the 'political' and the 'non-political, to expand such conflicts and to make them publicly salient. To understand these 'politics of politicisation', we do not only need to demarcate the field of political struggle: where and by whom such contestation of the political is carried forward? We also need to locate the wider public and societal resonances of such a struggle over the political: how is such contestation selectively amplified to create public visibility, how is attention among relevant publics unequally distributed, how are opinions of these publics formed and, ultimately as well, how is legitimacy (or de-legitimation) generated? It is here that the 'empiricism' of the politics of politicisation is theoretically embedded. What is needed then, is not a 'theory of politicisation', but simply the bridging of two existing theory traditions: the theory of the political field and the theory of the public sphere.

Directions and modalities of (de)politicisation

Instead of transforming the not political into the political, politicisation can also, in a more concealed way, transform something political into something not political, depoliticising an issue. In this sense, de-politicisation is a form of reversal of politicisation. As the prefix indicates, de-politicisation transforms something already politicised into something not political, something contested as being not contested, defusing its political character. In other words, de-politicisation tries to erase the political, leaving only the nonpolitical visible. Erasing is also an act of political marking that presents the result as being something nonpolitical, the result of an act of deliverance from constant struggle or disagreement. It is a way of disconnecting it from one modality of existence to another. De-politicisation can occur by temporalisation that is by postponing something, even ad infinitum, or by spatialisation, by removing it from the repertoire of potential politicisable objects. A political issue can be synchronised with another issue that is considered as not being political, thus attempting to depoliticise the political issue through proximity or contagion. A political agent can transport an issue, a person, an institution or other object of contention that is potentially politically explosive into a more controllable milieu such as an expert group or committee that meets behind closed doors. Making something technical or discussing it using technical jargon, that is transforming a political issue into a technical, legal or scientific one is a familiar depoliticising move (Liste, forthcoming; Robert, forthcoming). This is in essence the Jean Monnet method of European integration canonised by neofunctionalism and theorists like Ernst Haas and Leon Lindberg. Another de-politicisation strategy is to invoke the state secret or the public interest to remove an issue from the purview of the public. This strategy can leave to executives, such as presidents and prime ministers, politics and politicisation as their *domaine reservé* or monopoly. This process has been canonised by the intergovernmentalist theory of European integration developed by Stanley Hoffmann and his students. According to this perspective, European integration depends in the last instance on the political strategies of these executives and the 'high politics' they manage. If successful, the result of de-politicisation is that some issues will not be discussed as political, that is contestable issues. From a broader perspective, politicisation then involves actions that politicise either by transforming something from unpolitical to political or, in a more concealed way, something political unpolitical.

An important addition has to do with the question of potentially political issues. Politicisation requires pre-politicisation (cf. Kauppi et al. 2016b), that is objects that have the potential of or are amenable to being politicised by some agents and their strategies or interests. The infinity of potential objects has to be somehow restricted. The politicisable or potential political objects might be discussed in the media or in more closed, expert or technocratic groups. Unmarked objects can include any kinds of objects, from broad social and natural developments, sand or clean water, dormant or 'inanimate' social issues that have been left to oblivion, or individuals for instance. To be successful political marking or politicisation requires from the agents creative political action and sometimes risk-taking, a sense of the opportune moment that provides the momentum or leverage for politicisation, or depoliticisation.

In the literature, scholars take politicisation as being something active, involving action in time (Anders, forthcoming; Palonen, forthcoming; Wiesner, forthcoming). However, it could also be thought of as necessarily involving passivity. In Finnish, the distinction between passive and active modes is clear: *politisoiminen* for the active, *politisoituminen* for the passive. In English, the distinction is not linguistically marked. A way to linguistically mark this political distinction would be to use politisation for the passive modality and politicisation for the active modality (cf. Kauppi et al. 2016b). The object of politicisation can be a variety of 'things'. Issues such as the right economic policy, persons like Jose Manuel Barroso when he switched from the presidency of the European Commission to Goldman Sachs, institutions such as the European Parliament, aspects of things like the colour of the European flag, events like anniversaries celebrating European treaties, etc. In theory, anybody can decide to politicise an issue that had previously been politically unmarked, introducing into the political game a new stake. Anybody means anybody, not just a legitimate agent of the political field (Wiesner, forthcoming). In reality, the impact of the act, its performative and political effect depends a great deal on who the instigator is.

The current literature adopts an objectivist conception of politicisation, the object of (de)politicisation being inanimate and prone to being shaped and moulded, which overall leads to a differentiated pattern with regard to the question what is politicised and by whom (de Wilde et al. 2015; Rauh 2016; Zürn 2018). More nuance has to be introduced. The objects of politicisation can be more or less active, willingly or unwillingly politicised, devising resistance or avoidance strategies. What has to be taken into account are the perceptions and knowledge, or the reflexivity of the agents, subjects and objects, involved in (de)politicisation processes. Objects are (de)politicised not in the abstract but for certain individuals or groups. Technicisation is not just an act of de-politicisation. It is a move by which certain political agents reflexively de-politicise an issue, removing it from the horizon of consciousness and action of some groups, for instance the general public, attempting to place it into the horizon of consciousness and action of some other, more restricted groups, making it available for them for reflection and action provided they have the knowledge necessary to decipher the issue. For these latter groups, technicisation is akin to a process of empowerment and potentially of politicisation.

The result of technicisation is that for the excluded the issue might present itself as not political while for the included it might become highly politicised. At the same time, the included might present to the excluded the issue as being depoliticised, in order to keep the issue under their control and power. For instance, in relation to European integration discussions between politicians and civil servants in the corridors of Paris, London and Washington were certainly, from the beginning, highly politicised discussions. Historical reconstructions of events confirm this (cf. for instance Olivi 1998). But the majority of the public in France or Germany were either not aware of these or then if they were the issues were despite them mostly marked as nonpolitical, except at some key historical moments like the empty chair policy or the various referenda. The average citizen remained on European integration a relatively unreflective passive object of de-politicisation processes that Hooghe and Marks have described using the term 'permissive consensus'. But this de-politicisation was a

reflexive strategy of certain groups and elite configurations. This example illustrates the seeming contradiction that an issue can be simultaneously politicised for certain groups and depoliticised for other groups. The scope of politicisation of an issue depends on who has the power or capacity at a certain point in time to define the issues that are legitimately considered as being politicised or political or not and of being of public relevance or not.

Locating politicisation: The political field and the public sphere

If politicisation demarcates the 'empiricism' of a field of the struggle over legitimacy and public attention, it follows from this that we do not need a theory of politicisation, we need a theory that describes the contradicting forces of raising attention and its contingent effects on the shaping of public opinion and political legitimacy in the relationship between political representatives and their constituents. Such theories exist and do not need to be reinvented. As political sociologists, we rely here on insights from two interrelated theory traditions: (1) the Bourdieusian theory of the political field, which contextualises how contestation over political issues is related to legitimising practices of collective agents, and (2) the Habermasian public sphere theory, which focuses on the mediating infrastructure for the unfolding of political debates and the validation of competing claims for political legitimacy through external publics.

A political field emerges as a result of the institutionalised and stratified relationship of collective agents, who have entered a game of power that is not only guided by strategic choices and interests but also by collective representations about the meaning of the political. Political competition unfolds through established routines and practices, which decides about the positioning of competing agents within the field and about their status that empowers or disempowers them to represent or act in the name of others. As a form of status politics, the political field regulates the relationship between dominant and dominated groups, the rules of entry into the field and the agents' positional strategies (Bourdieu 1993; Kauppi 2003, 2005; Swartz 2013). The distribution of primary (political) and secondary (economic, epistemic…) resources or capital has an impact on the agents' potential actions. As we are going to elaborate further, such a theory of the political field as a socially regulated struggle about the distribution of social status adapts well to the situation of the EU, which does not know a centralised power or a firmly established hierarchy but is an unevenly structured space of political action, more or less open to competitive gain. It sharpens the view on the logics of such a competition game of agents who undergo processes of what could be called European socialisation (Favell 2006).

In modern societies, the public sphere denotes the intermediary realm of communication where opinions are expressed, exchanged and made publicly salient (Trenz 2015b). 'To make things public' implies the discovery of problems that need to be dealt with collectively, the channelling of these problems through the filter of the media and political institutions and the realisation of the collective will of the people in the act of democratic self-government (Habermas 1996). The public sphere is

however only insufficiently described in terms of a rational consensus about the issues and problem that deserve to be raised on the public agenda and to be dealt with collectively. Issue-agendas remain contested as much as different solutions are debatable in light of underlying interests and normative choices. The public sphere is in this sense best conceived as a place for the struggle over public attention, which in our media landscapes is considered to be a scarce resource (Wessler 2019). At the same time, the salience of political issues remains tied to the expression of public concerns that need to be normatively justified to be of 'public relevance'. In this process of competing for public attention and claiming for 'public relevance', the public sphere increasingly transnationalises, for instance, through the mobilisation of social movements and their promotion of issue agendas that need to be dealt with at a global scale (della Porta and Tarrow 2005). A distinct European public sphere can be conceived along the same lines as a detector of shared problems that are brought to the attention of European publics (Trenz 2015a).

In relation to these two grand theory traditions, the 'politics of politicisation' fuses together status politics and attention politics. Politicisation as status politics is about the positioning of particular agents as competitors in the political game. It can however also be about the status of particular issues as political or as non-political and their ranking on the public agenda. Politicisation as attention politics goes beyond the interplay of competing agents or issue agendas and calls for the attention of a third party (the public) as a mediator in the dispute between competing agents. As such, politicisation expands the field of politics by opening up another tension between those who call for attention for political issues and those who pay attention to (not necessarily the same) issues.

Politicisation as attention politics is only insufficiently described as a strategic game between competing agents as it is intrinsically normative in the way the struggle over public attention is linked to particular norms that justify why an issue deserves to be of public interest. To the extent that politicisation triggers debates about the status of political issues to be of 'public interest', these debates also need to adjust to the normative constraints of the public sphere and the demands for justification that distinguish public reasoning from private interest negotiation (Eriksen 2014).

The distinctiveness of EU politicisation

In the attempt to formulate a political sociology for the European Union, scholars have controversially discussed whether Bourdieusian, Habermasian and Foucaultian grand theories of the political still apply to the case of the EU (Guiraudon and Favell 2011; Zimmermann and Favell 2011). Scholars have applied both the notion of the 'political field' and the notion of the 'public sphere' mainly within a national framework of politics, where legitimacy is derived from a constitutive state-society relationship. Falling into the trap of 'methodological nationalism' (Beck 2003), most political scientists have conceptualised national politics and EU politics as constituted by distinct political fields and distinct public spheres that obey different logics and also underlie different constraints of legitimacy.

The recent scholarly emphasis on the dynamics of EU politicisation reminds us of an ongoing process of convergence of 'policies' and 'politics' that goes beyond the increasingly artificial delimitation of 'political fields' and 'public spheres' in the plural. EU politicisation is precisely an indicator of the competitive process of a multi-level merging of political fields and spheres through the transnational encounter of different agents, institutions and audiences. EU politicisation is a rupture from the established modes and logics of national politics, but it is also renewal with a potential to open up democratic legitimacy. As such, it understandably creates uncertainty for the positioning of various agents and institutions as well as the salience of political issues that are to be dealt with collectively. Paradoxically such an uncertainty can itself become a driver of further politicisation.

Scholars often analyse EU politicisation as unfolding outside the institutionalised infrastructure of an established party system for political contestation and of a public sphere for the mediation of political debates. As distinguished from 'regular politics' politicisation is seen as 'exceptional', and, as such, often driven by agents from the margins of the political spectrum. Scholarly research considers the political field for contestation and the public sphere for the struggle over attention that distinguish the 'politics of politicisation' to be confined to the realm of national politics. This is also in line with Hooghe and Marks's (2009) understanding of EU politicisation for whom politicisation takes place in national political contexts and inevitably leads to the re-nationalisation of EU politics.

We claim that the case of EU politics cannot simply be grasped by the dynamics of fragmented politicisation within established national politics. It requires a focus on the constituting dynamics of a transnational political field and public sphere (cf. Kauppi 2013). In focusing our attention on the combination of status and attention politics, EU politicisation offers a useful framework for analysing these constituting dynamics of a political field and a public sphere that emerge over the contestation of political issues and the establishment of new relationships between conflicting political agents and their publics. In this sense, EU politicisation is a move to overcome the fragmented European political landscape. As such, it creates mutual dependencies in negotiating the status of political agents and issue agendas that resonate across borders. EU politicisation becomes increasingly important as a form of status politics of prominent Eurosceptic leaders and their attempts to converge issue agendas in European Parliament election campaigns (Galpin and Trenz 2018). Engagement in status and attention politics can also become a normative requirement. EU agents and institutions are increasingly expected to develop appropriate public communication strategies to launch debates about the EU and making issues on the EU agenda publicly salient. Prominent key figures, such as the *Spitzenkandidaten* in European Parliament election campaigns appear in their role as unifiers of political debates, which includes also the possibility of becoming the target of public contestation.

Conceptualising EU politicisation in terms of the constituting dynamics of a European political field and a public sphere does however not mean conceiving politicisation as a unifying force. Politicisation does of course not exclude differentiation in the way the public agenda is raised and shifts across the EU political landscape (de Wilde et al.

2016). We expect EU politicisation to differentiate not only across time and across countries but also across different media formats. In practice, differentiation often results from the scarcity of public attention as a resource for political mobilisation. In EU politics (and not only) visibility and public attention are, despite continuous efforts to politicise EU agents and issues, still to be considered as scarce resources. The realm of politics is already overpopulated with agents and issues that compete for public attention.

In the EU, politicisation remains exceptional, depoliticised governance the rule. On the one hand, the complex technocratic character of the EU administrative apparatus puts a serious constraint on the possibility of politicisation as the opportunities for engagement in status and attention politics are seriously restricted (Robert, forthcoming). On the other hand, EU technocracy has become increasingly the target of politicisation claiming to regain political control over bureaucratic decision-making and thus undermining the trust in expertise. Part of this criticism is healthy: to ensure accountability; part of the criticism is hostile and with an ulterior motive – abolish or weaken the EU. This power constellation opens up another line of conflict between those who wish to neutralise and keep issues private or disclosed from public attention and those who wish to uncover their political character. De-politicisation as driven by bureaucrats and experts is a protective move to shield the realm of governance and the efficiency of decision-making from the perceived illegitimate interferences by partisan political agents. In contrast, politicisation detracts attention from EU policy output and performance and focuses on the system character of the EU, fundamentally questioning the delegation of political authority to a supranational body (de Wilde and Trenz 2012). This form of system or polity contestation is another distinctive marker of EU politicisation we wish to emphasise.

In contrast to institutionalised politics *within* established political systems, the politicisation *of* the system cannot be reduced to a simple competition game between political agents and their positions, the moving targets in contentious politics. The whole EU has been historically constructed as a rather inert target of contestation that requires its defendants and opponents to position themselves in an either-or categorical way, for or against the EU. EU politicisation as a form of system opposition comes then indeed close to the kind of identity politics emphasised by Hooghe and Marks (2009) and Kriesi (2016), where competing agents are pushed to align themselves along a pro- and anti-European cleavage line that does not leave much room for manoeuvre in the political game.

Politicisation and de-politicisation as countervailing forces in EU politics

Some scholars have presented EU-politicisation as a major rupture in European integration. It has been discussed like the *peccato originale*, the 'fall of mankind' that has forever changed the peaceful, consensual and civilized patterns of EU governance that evolved over the last decades to promote the common good and prosperity of Europe (Hooghe and Marks 2009; see also Fossum and Trenz 2006; Statham and Trenz

2012). This interpretation rests on the assumption that de-politicisation is the norm, while politicisation remains exceptional.

We have instead argued for an understanding of politicisation and de-politicisation as two countervailing forces in the contestation about the contours of the political. As such, neither politicisation nor de-politicisation do just happen by themselves, but require the application of tactics and tools by political agents that need to adapt to the logics of the political field and the norms of the public sphere. Political processes always involve variably reflexive political agents (Kauppi 2018). While de-politicisation as the tactics of erasing the political has worked quite well in European integration (for instance Flinders 2006), the political dynamics has changed since its appropriation by nationalist and extreme political groups.

EU politicisation and de-politicisation remain ultimately tied together in the struggle over the public agenda about what deserves to be at the focus of public attention in the EU. In this struggle over public attention, politicisation and de-politicisation do not stand in a symmetrical relationship to each other. Once an issue is politicised for a broad group of people through the media, once an issue has been experienced as being a political issue, it will not easily be depoliticised. Attempts to erase the already political are not only often unfeasible, they might be also counterproductive and perceived as illegitimate political moves. In this sense, politicisation does not only leave indelible political traces, but also introduces important normative changes and learning by reflexive political agents. Politicisation can then become indeed the norm in a highly mediatised public sphere, while de-politicisation is suddenly perceived as exceptional or even unwanted. The way politicising agents claim normative superiority in the struggle over democratic legitimacy and its requirement of publicness and inclusion is, in itself, part of the politicising dynamics of European integration. De-politicisation, in turn, remains defensive, but never submissive. It can take its chance from the epistemic requirements of governance and the calls for experts. In more practical terms, new media developments and the diversification of audience attention allow niche publics to proliferate and to practice alternative, often more deliberative ways to debate political issues. In the struggle over the scarce resource of public attention, governments and EU agents will also continue to find their way to escape from the limelight. EU politics will continue to be more backstage than frontstage. EU politicisation will not be reversed (de Wilde and Zürn 2012), but at the same time, it remains difficult and exceptional to focus public attention. Some sometimes prefer de-politicised governance over politicisation. Sometimes, it is unwanted, but it cannot be avoided, and most times, it is still the routine of EU governance.

EU politicisation cannot be understood without analysis of its synergy with EU depoliticised governance. Without de-politicisation as a countervailing force, EU politicisation would lose its distinctive character. It would not be able to collect enough momentum, not be prolonged by actions from others, fade into the background, or else start forming habituation patterns. EU politicisation continues to drive because there are resistances to it. From the vantage point of a political sociology of the EU, we can thus conceive politicisation and de-politicisation as two countervailing forces of EU

politics. At the surface, EU politicisation happens as status and attention politics of new political agents that have entered the EU power game. Once we enter the dynamics of the political field and of the public sphere that set the contours for these status and attention politics, we can see however that politicisation happens because there is a structural constellation of shifting agendas and issue cycles and an unequal distribution of attention across the EU political space. EU politicisation is possible because attention remains such a scarce resource within the system of EU governance and because the status not only of political agents but also of issues on the public agenda remains normatively contested.

Understanding politicisation and de-politicisation as countervailing forces helps avoid falling into the fallacy of ahistorical conflict studies, which postulate an irreconcilable and mutually exclusive positioning of hegemonic and counter-hegemonic agents in conflict. According to such accounts, conflict would be grounded in a fundamental antagonism that divides society and that cannot be overcome by democratic means (Mouffe 2013). While we certainly agree with the claim that conflict needs to be considered as a necessary feature of any politics, we wish to emphasise that politicisation does not simply describe a polarised or antagonistic constellation between competing agents but also a long-term process of political change. There is, in other words, a procedural dimension of conflict that develops over time and that allows for a changing positioning of agents and their opinions. This relates to an old topos of public sphere theory, which understands conflicts as embedded in public opinion formation processes in relation to long-term processes of institutional and societal learning (Trenz and Eder 2004).We therefore call the notion of politicisation as grounded in an antagonistic conflict constellation (as, for instance, based in the Schmittian friend-enemy distinction) ahistorical, precisely because it forecloses the possibility of learning. In the literature on EU politicisation, we encounter such a constellation in the notion of a constraining dissensus that simply blocks political actors or captures them in their identitarian cages, but does not enable them to engage in collective problem-solving. EU politicisation would thus be conceived as an end of history drama, where irreconcilable and never-ending identity conflicts block each other and are an obstacle to any path of future integration. By considering the dynamics of politicisation and de-politicisation, we lay the analytical focus on possible dynamics and procedures of how to overcome such blockages. De-politicisation, for instance, can be useful in a situation of crisis as a management strategy that lays emphasis on expertise. In some situations, de-politicisation can also be explained as a learning outcome of agents and institutions who take more reflexive stances beyond their momentary interests and identities.

Such a procedural and historical perspective of the shifting dynamics between EU-politicisation and de-politicisation as a process of institutional and societal learning is further corroborated by the observation that EU institutions, despite continuous efforts of de-politicisation in response to crisis, have not regained control over politicisation (Trenz et al. 2015). To the contrary, their measures of crisis management have further fuelled politicisation. There is in other words an increasing gap between depoliticised crisis governance as the dominant mode of institutional learning and public perceptions. This is because, even if institutions opt for a largely 'silent' crisis

management style, their actions will be publicly scrutinised and contested. This is the effect of the democratic public sphere, within which processes of politicisation and de-politicisation remain embedded.

EU politicisation in times of crisis can be considered as a test case for triggering such learning processes, which can encompass primary perceptions of crisis, its magnitude and negative effects, as well as valuations and assessments of the end of crisis. Politicisation in times of crisis is driven by mediatised public contestation as a crucial element for the attribution of responsibilities, for new political alignments or cleavages (North-South, Nordics vs. the rest of the EU) and the demarcation of new national or transnational spaces of democracy, belonging and solidarity. Politicisation thus can be perceived as a long-term crisis accountability mechanism whereby the more short-term crisis management process and its outcomes are evaluated, setting the basis for learning of the agents and institutions involved or undermining it altogether. In terms of such long-term learning, processes that include EU institutions and society, the effects of crisis seem contradictory. If we take public opinion as one major indicator for long-term changes of attitudes of the European population, we find that Eurocrisis measures are unpopular and perceived as undemocratic, while public discourse surrounding them is highly elite-critical and divisive, often drawing on national stereotypes and prejudices.

In such circumstances, politicisation can indeed become disruptive, in terms of a 'constraining dissensus' and blocking the possibilities of both institutional and societal learning. Political agents and institutions who are driven by politicisation are often concerned with their short-term survival rather than facilitating the accountability process or safeguarding the core functions of democracy and preserving the democratic legitimacy of the system as a whole. Thus, instead of functioning as an accountability mechanism, politicisation in times of crisis would lead to a polarisation of dominantly Eurosceptic publics along national and identitarian lines. Mobilised publics remain an external constraint to institutions and no mechanisms are foreseen to turn their expression of 'constraining dissensus' into democratic empowerment of the EU.

An alternative understanding of EU politicisation as 'empowering dissensus' (Bouza and Oleart 2018) or as 'catalysing dissensus' (Auel et al. 2016) refers to the possibility that conflicts, carried out in the public sphere are an important mechanism of democratic learning (Eriksen 2019; Fossum 2019; Kauppi et al. 2016b). Democratic learning does not only refer to enhanced public accountability of institutional actors, who respond to societal demands, it also entails the awareness of relevant publics that hindrances can be overcome by collective decision-making; by delegation of competences and by changing modes of problem-solving and conflict resolution to ensure that they are legitimate, vis., acceptable for affected parties, which is an important theme that we investigate in EU3D). Thus, while post-functionalist accounts of a 'constraining dissensus' as an effect of politicisation (see Anders, forthcoming; Wiesner, forthcoming) emphasise a 'downward pressure on the level and scope of integration' (Hooghe and Marks 2009: 22), politicisation as a mechanism of democratic learning can fuel integration from 'depoliticised governance' to 'democratic

government'. Democratic learning sets limits to de-politicisation as a strategy to gain long-term legitimacy effects in the form of EU crisis governance for instance. There is a need for all actors involved to recouple de-politicised governance and public resonance (Trenz and Eder 2004). EU-institutions and political actors need to follow democratic procedures, which imply the necessity to make themselves and their counter-crisis decisions available to institutional and public scrutiny. At the same time, affected publics would make legitimate use of the opportunities to raise voice and channel their concerns through the EU system. The re-coupling of de-politicisation and re-politicisation would thus take place from a double perspective of both institutional and societal learning. Ideally, EU-institutions and publics would mutually observe and critically scrutinise each other. Institutional learning would take place as a readiness to recognise past mistakes, seek external expertise, adapt to current situations and pave ways for reform through feedbacks and interactions with affected parties and the public. Public learning would take place as a form of politicisation that alerts citizens to pay attention, exchange their opinions and voice their concerns. Citizens would be enabled to build knowledge, engage in opinion and will formation and collectively mobilise to raise voice vis-à-vis national government and the EU (Michailidou and Trenz 2015). Only under such ideal conditions, politicisation of the EU could be channelled into an 'empowering dissensus' that could claim a higher legitimacy than the old, uninformed permissive consensus, and that would avoid the peril of a constraining dissensus through institutional and public blockages A socio-political theory of politicisation can only outline the dynamics of conflict that can lead to such an 'empowering dissensus' through democratic learning. The normative and empirical challenge remains how to meet these conditions.

Conclusion

The intent of this paper has been to contribute to a socio-political theory of European integration that takes collective action and social groups, not institutional structures (neo- or postfunctionalism and multilevel governance) or nation state's governments (intergovernmentalism) as its key categories. A political sociology of European integration needs to take its starting point with the constituting force of the political at the European or transnational level both in terms of political field and of public sphere. (De)politicisation is the struggle about what is to be included in /excluded from European politics. This is not just simply a question of various strategies of actors to get access to EU politics but a structural problem of unequal access, different positional and situational resources and opportunities for participation in EU politics. We have sought to outline an approach that focuses from a procedural and historical perspective on the shifting dynamics between EU politicisation and de-politicisation as a process of institutional and societal learning As there is no general answer to the question of legitimate government, a constant struggle follows in which actors, academics included as the current boom of politicisation research testifies, attempt to delimit and define European politics, its legitimate attributes, processes and players. A better knowledge of these dynamics will enable the development of ways to overcome the increasingly fragmented European political landscape.

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