



Politicisation and contestation in the EU foreign and security policy

Typology, triggers, and actors

Episodes of heightened interest, contestation and ultimately politicisation in EU foreign and security policy seem to be increasing and intensifying. Scholars, pundits and practitioners of foreign policy watch these cases, such as the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) or Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA) with a mixture of distress and concern. Moreover, these cases seem to be increasing and intensifying amid a fertile environment of social media and ‘fake news’ fuelled by EU adversaries’ efforts to spread misinformation and polarise societies. For social actors, however – NGOs, civil society organisations etc. – politicisation is a useful strategy to achieve a desirable change, such as the arms sales embargos. This is done by putting an issue high on the agenda for a society and demanding action from foreign policymakers. Can we then predict if an event or an issue will trigger such increased interest among society? This brief uses a scale of politicisation in EU foreign and security policy to provide a better understanding of the workings of the process.

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Key points

- Increased politicisation of EU foreign and security policy can be better understood with the novel typology of politicisation.
- Politicisation extends on a scale of variants from no change and status quo via expansion, polarisation, elite politicisation to (rare in that area) mass politicisation.
- The key to detect politicisation is observing triggering events as well as specific actors and shifts in narratives employed by them in contestation of EU foreign and security policy.

What is politicisation in foreign policy?

Politicisation has become a handy and fashionable term in recent studies on European integration. It has been used to explain the growing centrality of EU issues to European societies as well as changes in the special area of EU affairs that is its foreign and security policy. Politicisation is essentially explained as the entry of an issue ‘[into the realm of \[much broader\] public choice](#)’ and becoming the subject of public debate concerning citizens. Defined as ‘[transporting an issue or an institution into the sphere of politics – making previously unpolitical matters political](#)’, politicisation is characterised by three elements: the increased salience of an issue, the broadened scope of the actors engaged in debates, and growing polarisation of opinions.

A key characteristic of politicisation is that it overlaps with contestation – another increasingly relevant concept in foreign policy and international relations. Contestation also concerns the political conflict that emerges around the international realm. Contestation, however, is primarily an act of discontent or criticism toward an issue, event or even institution. Its aim is to undermine the dominant intersubjective meanings or established norms and often restructure the debate on a given issue. Contestation is an act often resulting from growing political conflict and is a move by actors. Politicisation is a process that involves contestation and to which contestation can contribute. It is a process outcome.

It is, however, difficult to adapt these indicators to foreign policy, particularly that of the EU. Not only is foreign policy traditionally kept far from ‘the sphere of politics’, but the EU foreign and security policy has rather been characterised by permissive

consensus. That does not mean that there have been no conflicts within EU foreign and security policy. On the contrary, national preferences – so different and oftentimes contradictory among member states – have overlapped with ideological differences among governments on many issues. Yet the institutional structure of EU foreign and security policy (and CFSP for that matter) and centrality of the Council of the EU and European Council and their masters – member states – ensured that the conflicts and delicate system of achieving a consensus remained far from the public eye, at least in most cases.

This has changed recently, for many reasons. Externally, the EU inhabits a currently more hostile international environment, with a growing US-China rivalry and constant Russian acts of sowing chaos and undermining the international liberal order. Domestically, the lines between international and domestic have been increasingly blurred for European societies. Views on globalisation are currently shifting the main political cleavages between cosmopolitan and communitarian views. Finally, the second decade of the 21st century was characterised by a dramatic growth in disinformation and ‘fake news’, which are especially common in the social media environment, bringing growing polarisation to societies. Social media has also become an important tool for non-governmental actors to mobilise citizens.

Typology of politicisation in foreign policy

The phases of politicisation can be explained by a typology specifically built to pinpoint the changes caused along three dimensions of the process in the area of EU foreign and security policy. It extends on a scale of variants from no change and **status quo** to (rare in that area) mass politicisation. In between, on a gradual continuum, there are expansion,

polarisation, and elite politicisation. In the first instance, the change is not detected, and the existing political conflict and contestation remain at the same level (as is usually the case with diverse national interests within the CFSP). This means, however, that any disagreement among member states may be significant, but remains behind the impenetrable doors of intergovernmental institutions of the EU.

Expansion assumes only broadening of the range of participating actors, while salience and polarisation remain intact. These actors might be other EU institutions – frequently the European Parliament – or social actors engaged in debates. **Polarisation** implies increasing political conflict among actors and greater contestation. **Elite politicisation** in turn occurs when the range of actors expands and the increased contestation leads to polarisation of views. Salience can be increased, but it does not pass the threshold of mass engagement (in which case it would be mass politicisation). **Mass politicisation** assumes change in all three dimensions and involves frequent public debate on the issue at hand, which the literature normally measures in terms of the appearance of such issues in newspapers and other mass media.

Various issues in recent years have been studied as examples of the variants described above, leaving almost no foreign policy issues intact. Politicisation has obviously mostly been visible in such areas as trade where it reached the level of mass politicisation and climate with clear elite politicisation. Other issues, including development aid, sanctions, multilateral governance and security, relations with

neighbours, external migration deals, and transatlantic relations have also recently been studied, showing some degree of politicisation (see a selection of topics in the recently published [European Security special issue](#)).

Additionally, [scholars pinpoint the impact of contestation of procedural norms on the functioning of the CFSP](#), demonstrating that recently the procedural norms such as consensus building and consultation reflex were contested specifically by right-wing and populist governments, especially when these norms clashed with domestically relevant norms such as national sovereignty.

There are also specific arenas in which politicisation of foreign policy usually takes place. Elite politicisation usually occurs in parliamentary fora, as these are specifically designed to express polarised opinion and increased contestation of issues, as well as being a useful arena for actors that were typically not involved in debates, such as radical, populist or Eurosceptic parties. Parliaments are also useful contact points for civil society actors. In the hitherto relatively rare instances of mass politicisation, a significant role has been played by the latter.

What to watch for?

Recent research demonstrates that there are significant triggers that can be responsible for increased politicisation. Politicisation is often connected with triggering events – trade negotiations, climate summits or, in the case of the EU’s close neighbours, such events as the Arab Spring or the Russian aggression against Ukraine.

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These events lead to increased salience and greater visibility. This can in turn push specific actors to attempt to utilise it for their own agenda.

Scholars stress the role of radical actors that are skilful in increasing polarisation. Deconstruction of the mainstream consensus on foreign policy,

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including the rudimentary principles of the liberal international order, is now visible in many places, not only within the EU and its member states. What certainly helps these efforts is the (often clandestine) support for populist, right-wing and Eurosceptic actors by the EU’s adversaries – most profoundly Russia but increasingly also China. These actors employ useful instruments such as identitarian and cultural frames, which restructure the discourse on a given issue. For instance, they can recall national sovereignty as the prime value that clashes with some EU foreign and security policy norms and demands subjugation of them, as often visible in the Hungarian or Polish cases. This can happen at a national or supranational level.

Civil society actors are also important actors, as they are able to act as agents in politicisation. They use a variety of strategies in order to increase the salience of an issue of their interest, including leaking relevant documents, organising mass demonstrations or even litigation – bringing a questioned legislation to courts etc. However, their success in being able to trigger mass politicisation depends on many aspects, and so far within the area of EU foreign and security policy has been possible in trade negotiations (especially

TTIP and CETA). NGOs are also successful in engaging other institutional actors, especially the European and national parliaments, and contributing to elite politicisation. The use of social media by CSOs requires further study, but already displays the potential to trigger politicisation.

Another interesting aspect is the contagious character of politicisation within EU foreign and security policy, taking the form of horizontal politicisation. Politicisation can diffuse from more politicised areas to those less exposed to public concern and deliberation, and (possibly) vice versa. The key drivers of this politicisation are functional interdependence of policy areas, especially visible in the EU foreign and security policy and characterised by its segmented structure, and overlap with many domestic issues, such as climate change.

Relations with neighbours – a limited politicisation

Despite the growing scholarship on the triggers and agents of politicisation, the favourable circumstances for politicisation are yet to be fully explained. This can be illustrated with a case study of relations with EU neighbours. The EU’s immediate neighbourhood has in recent years been hit by crises, from the Arab Spring in 2011 and its devastating aftermath in many countries of the southern neighbourhood to the Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2015. Both the southern and eastern neighbourhoods have become less stable, less secure and less prosperous,

despite the efforts on the EU side. Yet a comparative study of politicisation in the European and selected national parliaments shows that there are significant differences in how the politicisation process unfolded. In the EP, policies directed towards the EU's neighbours were relative salient, but polarisation of opinions concerned mostly the EU enlargement and particularly Turkey. In the latter case, the triggers were mostly cultural and identitarian frames and the polarising actors were radical right-wing parties, but it did not reach a fully-fledged elite politicisation. Despite the deteriorating security situation in the neighbourhood and perceived threats for the EU, only (very) weak politicisation has occurred in relation to the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), especially in the periods following the triggering events. Security-related events, and especially the perceived threats to the EU, form mechanisms responsible for moving an issue on the politicisation scale into the EU foreign and security policy. At national level, neither enlargement nor the ENP were politicised to a significant extent. This study, however, draws our attention to right-wing, populist and Eurosceptic actors, who have recently gained importance in European and national politics and are increasingly utilising various strategies in order to further polarise debates on EU foreign and security policy. This is because security is closely linked with identity and sovereignty, notions central to right-wing and populist repertoires. It forms a potential for these actors to further utilise identitarian frames to polarise debates on EU foreign and security policy at national and European level.

Conclusion

Politicisation of EU foreign and security policy is occurring more and more frequently and, given its contagious character, we can expect it to proliferate in the future. The presented typology, focusing on three indicators of politicisation – salience, actor range and polarisation – offers a novel tool for scholars and practitioners to map and detect the process in its possible variants and better analyse it. What then helps predicting politicisation in EU foreign and security policy? Firstly, the contestation, forming a key activity of actors that can lead to politicisation, depends on how political actors construct justifications in a given area. Therefore, it is relevant to follow the narrative shifts and actors aiming at such changes. Secondly, the presented studies also show the role of agency. On the one hand, radical political parties are skilful in triggering politicisation. They should be especially monitored when aiming at undermining consensus on foreign policy issues. On the other, CSOs are relevant actors in using mechanisms of politicisation for their aims. Thirdly, triggering events are key factors so it is important how the actors behave, what and how do they contest following significant or turbulent events.

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Further readings

This policy brief draws on the articles Biedenkopf, K., Costa, O. and Góra, M. (2021) 'Introduction: shades of contestation and politicisation of CFSP' (pp. 325-343) and Góra, M. (2021) 'It's security stupid! Politicisation of the EU's relations with its neighbours' (pp. 439-463), both in Special issue of *European Security*, 30(3). DOI: [10.1080/09662839.2021.1964473](https://doi.org/10.1080/09662839.2021.1964473).

Additional readings

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