Mobilising around Europe: a conceptual framework and introduction to the special section

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Title

Mobilising around Europe: a conceptual framework and introduction to the special section

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Abstract

This article provides a conceptual framework and introduction to the special section 'Mobilising around Europe: pro and anti-EU politics in an era of populism and nationalism'. By means of its four articles, the collection seeks to address the 'politicisation of Europe' outside of the conventional party-political arena. Whilst the future of European integration has become increasingly contested, not least due to the rise of Eurosceptic political parties of the populist radical right, we observe that politicisation has also occurred in the protest arena through grassroots activism. The contributions in this special section analyse these mobilisations, which have thus far received limited scholarly attention, and the positions and frames activists and various social movement organisations (SMOs) adopt concerning the future of European integration. By doing this, the collection reveals the often complex and context-dependent stances towards 'Europe' amongst actors across the ideological spectrum, which extend beyond dichotomous pro-/anti-EU positions.

Key words: *social movements; protest; politicisation; European Union; European integration; Euroscepticism*

Word Count: 5,256

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Introduction

The European Union (EU) has faced various significant shocks over the past decades. The Eurozone and migrant crises, as well as the UK's departure, have raised questions about the EU's ability to maintain cohesion in the face of rising nationalist and populist challenges. Mainstream politicians supporting further integration can no longer rely on a 'permissive consensus' amongst European citizens (Hooghe & Marks, 2009; 2018). In addition, populist parties, which claim to speak for the 'ordinary people' and lament the unresponsiveness or corruption of the (political) elites, have gained popular support. They are typically characterised by a Eurosceptic agenda, criticising the undemocratic and complex nature of EU decision-making (Pirro et al., 2018; Rooduijn & van Kessel, 2019). Populists on the left further tend to see the EU as a neoliberal project, which primarily panders to markets and business interests. Populist parties with a radical right ideology, which pose the greatest challenge to mainstream parties in many European countries, present themselves as guardians of their native cultures and national sovereignty, and dislike the EU's drive towards further integration and open borders.

In light of these developments, academic and public debates tend to focus on what is presented as a Eurosceptic backlash in the conventional political arena. This special section recognises, however, that public contestation around issues related to European integration and EU politics is increasingly taking place beyond the party-political arena. Euroscepticism is namely also voiced at the grassroots level. Left-wing social movement organisations (SMOs) have been known to voice 'critical Europeanist' arguments (della Porta & Caiani, 2009), and recent research has also focused on far right social movements, bringing attention to the societal roots and activist elements of nativist, and also Eurosceptic, politics (Castelli Gattinara & Pirro, 2019; Caiani & Císař, 2019; Berntzen, 2020). The Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the Occident (PEGIDA) and the European Identitarian Movement are examples of cross-national movements espousing critical positions about the current state of the EU (Caiani & Weisskircher, 2020).

Yet mobilisation has not only occurred on the Eurosceptic side. Across Europe, a clear majority of citizens remain supportive of their country's EU membership, and a considerable number have come out to defend the EU more explicitly though rallies, marches and other forms of protest activism. In the UK, a plethora of local organisations aiming to halt the UK's departure from the EU has emerged after the Brexit vote, with regular mass demonstrations in London attracting tens of thousands of people in a show of 'pro-Remain' support. The *Pulse of Europe*, founded at the end of 2016, is another example of a pro-European movement particularly notable for its street demonstrations. It mobilised citizens, mainly in German towns and cities, celebrating the 'European idea' and seeking to confront nationalistic tendencies. More recently, in October 2021, tens of thousands of Poles took to the streets in Warsaw to show their support for EU membership after the country's constitutional court rejected the core principle that EU law has primacy over national legislation. Thus far, only a small and emerging academic literature exists focusing on the discourse and activism of 'pro-Europeans' (e.g. Brändle et al., 2018). Scholars have only just started to highlight the extent to which such activists are challenging Eurosceptic and radical right narratives. The degree to which these grassroots mobilisations are indeed leading to a (re)politicisation of Europe and European identity has yet to be systematically studied.

At the same time, we should not assume that parties and movements can always be easily placed in 'pro-' and 'anti-European' camps. Public evaluations of European integration are often complex and context-dependent (de Vries, 2018), and political actors and activists are likely to reflect the diversity of opinions that exist amongst citizens. Mainstream parties remain broadly supportive of the central tenets of the European integration project, but most of them shy away from celebrating the EU in its current form. Whilst the EU is a convenient punching bag for populist parties on the right as well as the left, few advocate the dissolution of the bloc or a termination of their country's membership (van Kessel et al., 2020; Heinisch et al., 2021). As will be discussed in more detail below, SMOs, too, are often characterised by positions that are neither completely anti- nor pro-EU. Therefore, it is necessary to look more closely at the frames and arguments political actors use when they discuss 'Europe'.

The objective of the special section is to address these themes. More specifically, the key questions to be considered across the contributions are:

- To what extent are we witnessing a politicisation of European integration amplified by grassroots activism and SMOs?
- What is the potential for the mobilisation of (pan-European) social movements that specifically address deficiencies of as well as potential for European integration?
- How are current debates about European integration framed in the protest arena?

In the sections below, we expand on these questions, providing a conceptual framework for the individual contributions, which we introduce towards the end of the article.

Politicising 'Europe'

Recent academic contributions have focused on the politicisation of European integration and EU governance (e.g. Hutter et al., 2016). Whilst the conceptualisations of this phenomenon vary, scholars generally refer to 'the process through which European integration has become the subject of public discussion, debate, and contestation' (Schmidt, 2019, p. 1018). We follow Hutter and Grande (2014, p. 1003), who identify three main conceptual dimensions of politicisation: issue salience (visibility), actor expansion (scope) and actor polarisation (intensity and direction). Whilst only the first is considered a necessary condition, a full-scale politicisation of 'Europe' would imply a) increasing *salience* of the theme in terms of, for example, media coverage, public awareness and the actions of politicians; b) *expansion of actors and audiences* involved in EU issues; and c) *polarisation* of attitudes in favour and against different aspects of EU governance.

Many scholars have observed an increasing politicisation of European integration along these or similar lines (e.g. Statham & Trenz, 2015; Börzel & Risse, 2018; Zürn, 2019). This trend has been related to the EU's increasing political authority, in combination with a variety of intermediating variables (such as national narratives, competitive party politics and crises or external shocks), which together form the political opportunity structure for EU politicisation (de Wilde & Zürn, 2012). Recent studies nevertheless indicated that EU politicisation tends to vary considerably across countries and time (Hutter et al., 2016; Hutter & Kriesi, 2019). Grande and Kriesi (2016, p. 283) speak of 'a patchwork of politicising moments across European countries', and a general process of '*punctuated politicisation*, in which a

significant but limited number of singular events produce high levels of political conflicts for shorter periods of time'.

Politicisation of European integration has mainly been discussed with reference to actors resisting further European integration, not least political parties of the radical right (e.g. Hutter & Grande, 2014; Kriesi, 2016; Dolezal & Hellström, 2016). According to de Wilde, Leupold and Schmidtke (2016, p. 6), the mounting electoral success of such parties and the more general public criticism of the EU 'indicate that politicisation is driven primarily by those critical of the integration process rather than by those who are supportive' (see also Schmidt, 2019). In line with the postfunctionalist theory of European integration, which identifies the shift from a 'permissive consensus' to a 'constraining dissensus' (Hooghe and Marks, 2009), many scholars thus perceive politicisation to indirectly act as a brake on the European project, certainly at a time when the EU has been facing a multitude of crises (Zeitlin et al., 2019).

As noted above, however, genuine politicisation either requires polarisation of attitudes and positions (and thus an expression of pro-European views as well), or an expansion of actors, which can come in the form of political mobilisation in the protest arena. With this in mind, there is evidence that citizens supportive of the EU have been mobilised in the protest arena – Börzel and Risse (2018) cite the pro-European *Pulse of Europe* demonstrations across mainly German cities and towns as an example. So far, however, there has only been limited attention to the mobilisation of pro-European citizens (e.g. Brändle et al., 2018). Furthermore, as the next section outlines, whilst there are various studies that consider the way the EU and its institutions are perceived, accessed and approached by a variety of SMOs (e.g. Marks & McAdam, 1996; Imig & Tarrow, 2001; della Porta & Parks, 2018), the key focus is rarely on the way social movements mobilise around the *issue* of European integration.

Protest mobilisation around European integration

Literature that concentrates on the general course of European integration as the *subject* of politicisation in the protest arena remains scarce (e.g. Balme & Chabanet, 2008; FitzGibbon, 2013). This is in large part due to the fact that such protests have remained relatively uncommon: the issue of 'Europe' has been more salient in the electoral arena than in the

protest arena (Hutter, 2012). Protest mobilisation around European integration has remained far less frequent in comparison with other issues and, as Dolezal, Hutter and Becker (2016) conclude, also did not increase between the mid-1990s and late 2000s (see also Uba & Uggla, 2011). The scholars furthermore find that 'the Eurosceptics from the right (…) were hardly ever seen on the streets protesting against European integration' (Dolezal et al., 2016, p. 129). The 'Europeanised' protest behaviour that occurred has thus predominantly been driven by the 'left'.

Such left-wing activism dates back to the 1990s and the signing of the Maastricht and Amsterdam Treaties (della Porta & Caiani, 2009). It also played a role in the French and Dutch rejection by referendum of the Treaty for the European Constitution in 2005, and opposition to the so-called 'Bolkestein Directive' that sought to remove obstacles from the common market in the area of services. What was fuelling such opposition was a sense that the Maastricht treaty of 1992 had shifted European integration from a project of solidarity to one of austerity and neo-liberal economics. Similar mobilisations against the EU from the left accompanied the signing and ratification of the Lisbon Treaty (2007-9), with large demonstrations and counter-summits accompanying all the major EU summits that took place. In addition, the European Social Forum (ESF), a rolling conference organised by the Global Justice Movement between 2002 and 2010, provided a platform and opportunity for left-wing mobilisation and critique of the EU. The activists' critique of the EU has thus been part of a broader mobilisation against neoliberal globalisation and international financial institutions, which became even more pronounced in the context of the financial and Eurozone crisis in the first decade of the 21st century (Diani & Kousis, 2014; della Porta, 2020).

In general terms, however, left-wing SMOs have not rejected the principle of European integration, and in fact often endorsed cross-national solidarity. Yet support for 'Europe' amongst these actors has been tacit rather than overt (Marks & McAdam, 1996). The relationship between Europe's SMOs and the EU both as *issue* and as *political entity* is perhaps most accurately portrayed as somewhat functionalist, or an uneasy truce. Indeed, in the decades prior to the crisis, left-liberal social movements across Europe adopted a pragmatic stance to the EU, petitioning its institutions alongside or counter to national governments. In other words, insofar as European integration and the EU had extended the political opportunity structure for civil society and social movement actors across member

states, Europeanisation became accepted as broadly positive and there was very little mobilisation criticising the EU directly. What was articulated through the various counter-summits and protests was a 'critical Europeanism' and a recognition of the opportunities that EU institutions provided for cross-national grassroots activism against a neo-liberal form of globalisation.

However, such a perspective needs to be subjected to closer critical inspection. First, the embedded assumption that social movements and civil society organisations are the ubiquitous hallmark of left-liberal identity-based politics runs the risk of under-playing the developed and enmeshed networks of far-right Eurosceptic activists (Castelli Gattinara & Pirro, 2019), and thus the genuine political contestation around European integration that may well exist. Far-right movements such as PEGIDA and the Identitarians have indeed taken stances on the future of European integration, typically expressing a critical 'Europe of sovereign nations' vision (e.g. Caiani & Císař, 2019; Caiani & Weisskircher, 2020). Second, we need to consider more carefully the extent to which discourses on the EU and European integration are changing amongst contemporary activists – a decade or more since the financial crisis, in light of Brexit, and in response to Extinction Rebellion and other forms of 'green'/urban activism. The contributions in this section thus focus on social movements as potential drivers of increased politicisation, highlighting the emergent discourses and the interaction with political parties that is taking place.

Beyond pro and anti-EU

Finally, we need to interrogate the alleged Europhile-Eurosceptic dichotomy. The current literature typically makes a distinction between those supportive of European integration, and those who oppose the process: the Eurosceptics. Following Taggart (1998, p. 366), 'Euroscepticism expresses the idea of contingent or qualified opposition, as well as incorporating outright and unqualified opposition to the process of European integration'. Later studies have built on this conceptualisation, and distinguished between different types and degrees of opposition to European integration and the EU (e.g. Kopecký & Mudde, 2002; Vasilopoulou, 2018). Taggart and Szcerbiak (2004) broke down the concept into 'hard' and 'soft' Euroscepticism. Irrespective of the added nuance, however, the distinction between 'pro-Europeans' and 'anti-Europeans' can be very blurred in practice. The shift towards a

'constraining consensus' has gone hand in hand with more critical attitudes towards the EU on the political 'supply side'. Euroscepticism, it has been argued, has become part of mainstream European politics (Taggart & Szczerbiak, 2013; Brack & Startin, 2015).

At the same time, the levels of Euroscepticism amongst those actors typically critical of the process of European integration should not be overstated. Even the most vocal opponents of the EU, parties on the radical right, rarely reject EU membership and European integration outright (Heinisch et al., 2021; van Kessel et al., 2020). Furthermore, it is important to recognise that the radical left and right express distinctive arguments against the EU, and use different 'frames' in expressing their views on European integration (Helbling et al., 2010; Conti & Memoli, 2012; Pirro et al., 2018). The radical right typically portrays the EU as a project that threatens the sovereignty of the native people and, through the opening of borders, the cultural homogeneity of nations. Radical left actors tend to describe European integration as a neo-liberal project that encourages a 'race to the bottom' in terms of welfare entitlements and working conditions. Criticism of the EU and the process of European integration is thus multifaceted and mediated by political ideology.

In the protest arena, these nuanced and complex position on 'Europe' are reflected as well. Radical right movements may despise the current institutional set-up of the EU that, they argue, threatens national sovereignty, but their 'Europe of nations' vision does not rule out all forms of European cooperation (Caiani & Weisskircher, 2020). Radical left activism may even welcome far-reaching European integration in the form of a 'Europe from below', a reimagining of Europeanisation that prioritises economic and social justice, as well as democratisation (Chabanet, 2002; della Porta & Mosca, 2005). Whilst this is not an iteration of pro-EU activism as such, it is not an entirely Eurosceptic position either. Organisations of this kind have typically shunned nationalistic arguments and welcomed European cooperation in principle, or even perceived protest campaigns as 'occasions to build a European identity' (della Porta & Caiani, 2009, p. 124).

Positions on the EU – whether and how it should be reformed – may thus not easily be mapped onto a pro-EU/anti-EU dichotomy. Bearing this complex reality in mind, our contributions consider the specific frames of actors and citizens who involve themselves in the politics of European integration. When parties or citizens mobilise around Europe, what

do they argue, what strategies and language do they employ, and how do they imagine their ideal Europe?

Contributions to this Special Section

The first article in the collection is authored by Donatella della Porta (YEAR), who considers how left-wing social movements have engaged with the EU since the late 1990s and interrogates one of the covert assumptions of the social movement and Europeanisation literatures, namely that the left is fundamentally supportive of European integration and the EU. Drawing on extensive empirical data on the Global Justice Movement, the European Social Forum, and progressive social movements in Italy, Spain, Poland and the UK, the article illustrates how a more nuanced and fluctuating vision of Europe has evolved. As diagnostic frames have evolved in response to political events and crises, so too has the perception of the EU held by activists. The analysis reveals the extent to which such movements have faced multiple dilemmas: how to critique the EU for austerity, for the treatment of migrants, and (the lack of) democratic accountability whilst simultaneously engaging with the political opportunities that a transnational governance structure provides. Also, how to articulate a prognostic vision of the EU as it exists without implying a return of power to the national level; to lambast the Eurosceptic radical right without appearing to endorse the status quo? The conclusion reached is that progressive movements have indeed shown a pragmatic stance towards the EU and have adapted their rhetoric and stance accordingly. However, overall there appears to be a consensus amongst progressive movements that the ultimate 'solution' is the transformation of European institutions, rather than in their demise.

With the contribution of Pietro Castelli Gattinara and Catarina Froio (YEAR) the focus shifts from the left to the radical right. Their article interrogates the linkage between protest and electoral politics. Whilst social movement scholars have studied the linkage in the context of left-liberal issues, there have been few studies of such interaction on the radical right (Pirro et al., 2021). Focusing on three interrelated dimensions (intensity, issue focus, and action repertoire) the authors ask whether far-right mobilisation against the EU has changed over time, and whether there has been a corresponding divergence between the party and non-party sectors. Using a mixed-method approach (quantitative and qualitative analysis of the

content of the press releases posted by far-right parties and movements), they conclude that whilst European integration is increasingly at the core of far-right politics in France, there has occurred a greater degree of politicisation around the issue, with far-right parties and non-party actors inclined to differentiate their respective profiles. In terms of the broader discussion of the politicisation of Europe, the authors conclude that 'the rooting of the far right in society is reconfiguring the structure of political conflict in Europe' (Castelli Gattinara & Froio, YEAR, PAGE), thus endorsing the imperative of a social movement perspective on the politics of the Eurosceptic far right.

The latter two contributions offer comparative analyses of actors with diverging ideological agendas. First, Manuela Caiani and Manès Weisskircher study SMOs and activists with varying visions of Europe in the protest arena (Caiani & Weisskircher, YEAR). On the basis of their cross-national comparative analysis of six organisations on either the (liberal) left or the far right, the authors show that groups and their activists rarely campaign unambiguously for or against the EU, but can better be described as 'anti-nationalist Europeans' and 'pro-European nativists', respectively. Notwithstanding their vast ideological differences, a strong sense of European identity is felt and expressed in all cases – though the conception of such an identity is either inclusive or exclusive. Whilst Eurosceptic arguments are voiced on both sides, the authors find that the existence of the EU as a polity is generally accepted and taken for granted, and calls for dissolution of the bloc are weak.

Finally, Verena Brändle, Charlotte Galpin and Hans-Jörg Trenz not only shift attention beyond the conventional political arena, but also beyond traditional forms of social movement activism (Brändle et al., YEAR). They consider the politicisation of Europe that occurred through social media as an arena of contentious politics, focusing on the case of the United Kingdom and the polarised online debate over Brexit in the post-referendum period. The authors find that mobilisation around the issue of Brexit has extended to the online sphere, and that social media communication also facilitated more traditional forms of social movement activism, albeit primarily amongst pro-European 'Remainers'. They also observe that mainstream and alternative media platforms, as well as wealthy donors, have played an important function in facilitating and stimulating online activism, which is therefore not always genuinely 'grassroots' and driven by citizens. In addition, their findings reveal that mobilisations around Europe may not always primarily be focused on questions of European

integration or the future of the EU. Instead, post-Brexit political contestation tended to be primarily about the nature and legitimacy of British democracy.

Altogether, the contributions reveal that mobilisation around Europe in the online and offline protest arena has progressively taken place and is driven by a wide variety of actors with different ideological agendas. It is often hard to speak of these actors as either 'pro-' or 'anti-European'; these dichotomous categories do little justice to the often nuanced positions SMOs and their activists take on issues concerning European cooperation and integration. It is also clear that mobilisations tend to be strongly impacted by domestic issues and perspectives; although a distinct positioning on Europe is often discernible, the broader theme of European integration is often not the primary focus of protest activism.

What this particular collection of articles endorses is the empirical and theoretical value of the social movement optic in illuminating not just the dynamic interaction between movements and parties, but also the complex and evolving nature of the politicisation of Europe. Future research is likely to seek to disaggregate support or critique of 'Europe' embedded within broader campaigns and movements; to further differentiate between 'Eurosceptic', 'Europhile' and 'Euro-alternativist' perspectives. How, for example, do climate activists encounter the EU? Will activists on the ideological left continue to make an uncomfortable accommodation with an EU that is perceived as an organisation endorsing and promoting neo-liberalism whilst at the same time offering opportunities for influence and policy access? To what extent will support for European integration become an important theme for left-liberal politics in member states where Eurosceptics and/or the radical right are strong? Will radical right actors remain 'equivocally Eurosceptic' (Heinisch et al. 2021), or may future events and societal pressures nudge them towards harder forms of Euroscepticism? And what will be the scope for pan-European transnational practices (FitzGibbon et al., 2017), which, as Caiani and Weisskircher (YEAR) observe, have thus far remained limited in mobilisations around Europe in the protest arena? In the years to come such questions are pertinent for social movement and party scholars alike.

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