Will the Eurozone Crisis Lead to a Politicization of European Integration?

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The financial crisis in the Eurozone has focused media attention on questions of EU governance to an unprecedented extent. This mini-paper explores what consequences this will have for the politicization of European integration: Will the crisis induce citizens to follow EU politics more attentively and to become more engaged in the EU’s political processes? If so, which cleavages will come to structure the ensuing political debates? Will national divisions deepen, thus undermining the integration project, or will politicization result in stronger European identities and shared commitments to democratic collaboration? These questions are of crucial importance for the EU’s medium-term political development. Clearly, it is too early to answer them in a reliable fashion, and this is not this paper’s ambition. Rather, after reviewing the existing evidence on the politicization of European integration, the paper will develop a number of scenarios that sketch where various patterns of politicization might take the EU.

Dimensions of politicization

Politics can be defined as the collaborative or conflictive attempt at making collectively binding decisions for a group of people. An issue is politicized, based on this definition, if it is raised by member of this group as a relevant object of – or factor in – the collective decision-making process (Hurrelmann et al. 2012; Zürn et al. 2012). In other words, politicization denotes saliency in political discourse. In applying this understanding of politicization to European integration, we can distinguish three dimensions.

First, politicization may occur in various discursive arenas, each characterized by the presence of specific actors. These include (a) institutional arenas at the core of the political system, populated by full-time politicians (e.g., parliaments); (b) intermediary arenas linking political decision making to the broader citizenry, dominated by participants with a strong – and often professional – interest in politics (e.g., the media); and (c) citizen arenas in which laypeople communicate about politics (e.g., in discussions with friends).

Second, politicized debates may focus on various aspects of European integration. These include (a) membership (Should our country be a member of the EU?), (b) constitutional principles (What should be the objectives and responsibilities of the EU, and how should it exercise its powers?), (c) identities (Does Europe constitute a political community to which one feels attached?); (d) EU policy issues (How should the EU deal with a specific policy problem?), and (e) domesticated policy issues (How should a member state deal with a domestic problem arising from EU membership, such as Eurozone requirements for national budgets?).

Finally, politicization of European integration may create different kinds of political cleavages. At the most basic level, we may distinguish (a) national structures of conflict that pit member states against each other, and (b) transnational structures of conflict in which discursive
coalitions cut across member-state boundaries. In the latter case, the resulting cleavages might either coincide with existing conflicts at the national level, especially the left-right conflict, or result in new, cross-cutting divisions, for instance between winners versus losers of integration.

Assessing the status quo ante

To what extent was European integration politicized before the onset of the financial crisis? Existing assessments in the literature differ significantly, with some authors arguing that the EU was already comprehensively politicized (Hooghe and Marks 2009; de Wilde and Zürn 2012), why others maintain that its political salience remained very limited (Bartolini 2005; Moravscik 2006). The categories developed above can help us make sense of these contradictory positions.

Authors who claim that there has already been far-reaching politicization tend to refer primarily to institutional and intermediary arenas. For institutional arenas at the heart of the EU’s political system, such as the European Commission (Hooghe 2000), the Council (Mattila 2004), and the European Parliament (Hix et al. 2006), it is well established – and not particularly surprising – that EU-related issues enjoy high saliency. Studies of these arenas have also shown that political debates within them are structured largely by transnational cleavages that correspond to ideological conflicts at the member-state level (Hix 2008), particularly the left-right division.

There is also an increasing body of evidence that suggests that EU-related issues have gained political saliency in intermediary arenas. Studies of manifestos and communicated positions of political parties (Hooghe et al. 2004; Kriesi et al. 2008), political claims and mobilization attempts by organized civil society (Imig 2004; Berkhout and Lowery 2010), as well as reporting in the news media (Koopmans and Statham 2010; Risse 2010; Statham and Trenz 2012) have all indicated a growing importance of EU issues. Political cleavages in these debates are described as being structured primarily by transnational cleavages, but in contrast to institutional arenas, it seems that the familiar left-right dimension of political conflict is often overshadowed here by a new division between (self-perceived) winners and losers of European integration.

In contrast to institutional and intermediary arenas, political discourse of laypeople in citizen arenas is characterized by lower politicization levels. Both public opinion research (van der Eijk and Franklin 2004; McLaren 2006) and qualitative studies of citizen attitudes (Duchesne et al. 2010; Gaxie et al. 2011; White 2011; Hurrelmann et al. 2012) reveal low degrees of interest in EU affairs and a weak presence of EU-related issues in citizen discourse. If citizens debate the EU at all – spontaneously or in reaction to explicit triggers – they tend to emphasize fundamental questions of membership or identity, rather than making concrete institutional arguments or taking a position on EU policy issues. Political cleavages remain relatively diffuse in these debates, but some studies suggest that the winner/loser dynamics observed in intermediary arenas might come to play some role here as well.

The Eurozone crisis as a trigger for politicization?

Based on this overview, the key questions in assessing the effects of the financial crisis on politicization are (1) whether politicization will spread, in a more comprehensive fashion, from institutional and intermediary to citizen arenas, and (2) whether national or one of the two kinds
of transnational cleavages will come to dominate in these debates. At this point in time, it is too early to make definitive predictions about these developments. What we can say, however, is that the Eurozone crisis clearly has the potential to have a major impact in both of these respects.

Regarding the first question, anecdotal evidence suggests that citizens might be developing a greater interest in EU affairs. The crisis has triggered, for instance, large-scale demonstrations against EU-mandated austerity packages in countries like Greece and Spain. In Germany, civil society organizations managed to sign up 37,000 citizens to support a constitutional challenge against the European Stability Mechanism (ESM). On the other hand, when looking at the population at large (rather than particularly activist subsets), crisis-induced politicization should not be treated as a foregone conclusion. Public opinion figures on the frequency with which citizens discuss European affairs, for instance, do not indicate a spike in EU interest, let alone a convergence between the European and the national level when it comes to political engagement (Figure 1). Against this background, it should be seen as a distinct possibility that the effects of the crisis on politicization remain minimal – or constitute no more than an episodic response to intense media reporting – in the broader population.

Figure 1: Frequency of discussing European and national political affairs with friends and family (source: Eurobarometer, EB 73-77)

Regarding political cleavages, the preliminary evidence is similarly mixed. In contrast to official displays of solidarity from member-state leaders, some populist politicians and the tabloid press have leveled nasty insults at other member states and their citizens (for instance in the German-Greek relationship). This suggests that the crisis might lead to an accentuation of national cleavages. At the same time, when asked in the most recent Eurobarometer survey (EB 77) whether, as a consequence of the crisis, they felt “closer to the citizens in other European countries”, 42% of respondents signaled their agreement, with answers ranging from a low of 27% in Denmark and Latvia to a high of 59% in Greece. There are also indications for the importance of transnational cleavages. For instance, the partisan composition of a national government, and its position on the left-right scale, clearly matters for a member state’s response to the crisis, as could be observed in the shift of France’s position after the May 2012 presidential election. This seems to be particularly true for countries that have not themselves become focal points of the crisis, while governments in the most affected countries face external and internal constraints that severely limit their room for maneuver.
Scenarios for the politicization of the EU

This cursory assessment indicates that it is plausible to expect the Eurozone crisis to have some kind of effect on the politicization of European integration, even though it is by no means certain that such an effect will indeed unfold, let alone how it will look like. Based on the considerations above, four developments appear particularly likely (for a comparable typology, see de Wilde and Lord 2012): (1) Politicization of European integration remains primarily an elite affair, and spreads to citizen arenas only episodically; (2) politicization does develop in citizen arenas, with cleavages running primarily along national lines (member-state versus member-state); (3) politicization occurs in citizen arenas and is structured by transnational cleavages that run alongside familiar partisan divisions (left versus right); and (4) politicization occurs in citizen arenas and results in transnational cleavages, but these cut across existing partisan divisions and crystallize instead around conflicts between winners and losers of integration.

Which of these developments will come to dominate, and what implications this will have for the future of the EU, is impossible to predict at this point. Politicization trajectories will be shaped not only by the further development of the crisis itself and the political response by member-state governments, but also by “opportunity structures” such as the strategies of intermediary actors (political parties, interest groups, etc.) and the presence or absence of mobilizing events like elections or referendums (Hooghe and Marks 2009; de Wilde and Zürn 2012). The implications of politicization for the future of the EU will, in addition, crucially depend on the EU’s medium-term institutional development.

Figure 2: Twelve politicization scenarios

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institutional development</th>
<th>No change</th>
<th>Disintegration</th>
<th>Integration</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No change/ episodic</td>
<td>1 – STATUS QUO Multilevel governance</td>
<td>2 Intergovernmentalism</td>
<td>3 Supranationalism</td>
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<tr>
<td>National cleavages</td>
<td>4 Consociationalism</td>
<td>5 Diplomacy</td>
<td>6 Empire</td>
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<tr>
<td>Transnational left/right</td>
<td>7 Joint decision trap</td>
<td>8 Relic</td>
<td>9 Superstate</td>
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<td>Transnational winners/losers</td>
<td>10 Constraining dissensus</td>
<td>11 Contested intergovernmentalism</td>
<td>12 Contested supranationalism</td>
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To get a sense of the scenarios that might unfold, we can cross-tabulate the four politicization trajectories distinguished above with three simplistic options for the EU’s institutional future (Figure 2): (1) retention of the institutional status quo, (2) further integration, for instance
towards fiscal federalism, and (3) disintegration, for instance a collapse of Economic and Monetary Union. The decision between these options might of course be influenced by politicization, but the politics of institutional change in the EU are so highly elite-centered that we should not necessarily assume that processes of politicization and institutional change pull in the same direction. We can hence generate twelve ideal-typical scenarios for the EU’s medium-term development. Each of these has distinct implications for the functioning of the EU as a political entity, including the question of its (empirical) legitimacy in the population.

The first three of these scenarios (1-3) are really scenarios of non-politicization, at least as far as citizen arenas are concerned. The EU’s current system of multilevel governance, combining intergovernmental and supranational elements, either remains unchanged, or develops into a more pure form of intergovernmentalism or supranationalism. Since politicization remains limited (or at best episodic), political elites at the EU and member-state level face few sustained legitimacy challenges from the population at large; the EU is neither legitimate nor illegitimate, but largely “a-legalitimate”.

The following three scenarios (4-6) are characterized by politicization that creates deep national cleavages between the member states. If this kind of politicization coincides with an unchanged institutional structure, this accentuates the EU’s existing features of consociationalism; the EU would turn into a forum in which integration-minded national elites negotiate joint solutions for less integration-minded citizens. This is likely to generate more explicit contestation about the EU’s legitimacy. These legitimacy challenges are exacerbated if politicization along national cleavages coincides with steps towards further institutional integration. In this constellation, the EU could be described as a quasi-colonial empire constantly challenged by demands for “home rule”. If, on the other hand, national patterns of politicization coincide with institutional disintegration, Europe would be thrown back to traditional diplomacy in a competitive state system, but the resulting constellation could expect to enjoy broad societal legitimacy.

The next three scenarios (7-9) assume that politicization in the EU citizenry leads to cleavages that mirror the left-right debates familiar from domestic politics. This form of politicization has the greatest potential to support further steps towards institutional integration. If such integration indeed occurs, the EU develops into a federal superstate with solid political support, as political debates can be expected to focus largely on policy issues, rather than institutional structure. If it stalls, and the EU remains institutionally unchanged, the resulting constellation is best described with Fritz Scharpf’s (1988) concept of joint decision trap, indicating that institutional rigidities prevent the EU from keeping up with societal developments that would call for more integration. This might result in legitimacy challenges. Finally, in the unlikely case that politicization along transnational left-right lines coincides with institutional disintegration, the rump EU institutions would develop into a relic of an earlier era in European politics, and attempts to set up new Europe-wide institutions outside of the EU framework might ensue.

The final three scenarios (10-12) describe a situation in which the EU is politicized in a way that accentuates transnational cleavages between self-perceived winners and losers of European integration. In contrast to transnational left-right cleavages, this implies that, irrespective of the institutional form that the EU takes, there will be conflict about its constitutional structure. If the EU remains unchanged institutionally, the resulting constellation can be described, using a term
coined by Liesbet Hooghe and Gary Marks (2009), as a constraining disensus in which societal disagreements prevent any kind of institutional change, even though few political groups are happy with the status quo. If the EU develops towards more or less integration, this will please political actors on one side of the defining cleavage but upset the others, so that the resulting constellations can be labeled contested intergovernmentalism and contested supranationalism. In other words, if politicization takes a transnational winner/loser form, no conceivable institutional design for the EU would enjoy full legitimacy.

Concluding remarks

What is gained by this typological exercise? First, it indicates that the Eurozone crisis has the potential to take the EU in a number of very different directions. While an affirmation of the status quo, in which politicization remains primarily restricted to political and societal elites, is a realistic possibility, there are multiple – and widely diverging – politicization scenarios that possess at least an initial plausibility. It should be stressed that these scenarios are ideal types; real-world developments may well be characterized by the co-occurrence of more than one of the developments distinguished above, making the outcome greatly more complicated. Second, the mini-paper shows that the majority of politicization scenarios involve new challenges to the legitimacy of the EU. The process of politicization as such is not inherently “good” or “bad” – how it will play out in the EU will depend on the ways in which societal developments interact with the institutional choices made by EU leaders.

References


