

Feeling the Heat: Emotions, Politicization, and the European Union

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Abstract

For over a decade, scholars of European studies have been studying a phenomenon referred to as the politicization of the European Union, usually defined as the intensification of a political debate, the polarization of opinions, and public resonance. This article extends existing explanatory models by offering a systematic theorization of the role emotions in EU politicization to establish that emotions are integral to every step of the process. First, they are prerequisites as actors and audiences need to be emotionally invested in an issue to engage in a debate about it. Second, they are drivers since they fuel debates and allow them to get heated and polarized. Third, they are outcomes since politicization will engender new emotional investments and sensitivities. The analytical added value of integrating emotions into explanatory models is illustrated through the case of the Brexit campaign.

Keywords: politicization; European integration; emotions; international relations; Brexit

Introduction

Over the past decade, studies that seek to understand the politicization of the European Union (EU) have flourished. Such scholarship has focused on a broad range of research areas, including how the EU becomes politicized (Hooghe & Marks, 2009; De Wilde & Zürn, 2012; Hutter *et al.*, 2016), how politicization manifests itself in times of crisis (Börzel & Risse, 2018; Hutter & Kriesi, 2019), and with what potential consequences (Hix & Bartolini, 2006). Yet, discussions over how the politicization of the EU should be conceptualized are rare. The ‘definitional consensus’ (Zürn, 2019, p. 977) which undergirds much of the European studies field (Beaudonnet & Mérand, 2019) regards politicization simply as ‘an increase in polarization of opinions, interests or values and the extent to which they are publicly advanced towards the process of policy formulation within the EU’ (De Wilde, 2011, p. 560). The concept of politicization is reduced to three criteria – the intensification of the debate, the polarization of opinions, and the public resonance – but the role played by one crucial aspect in processes of politicization has been largely kept outside of the debate, that is, emotions.

The bracketing out of how emotions are implicated in processes of politicization is surprising considering that *arguing* and *contesting* are not only fundamental aspects of politics but also inherently emotive (Crawford, 2009, 2014). Indeed, whilst the disciplinary field of EU studies continues to be dominated by quantitative approaches, scholars working on EU politicization habitually refer to emotions. For example, mentions of *frustration* (Mair, 2007; Palonen *et al.*, 2019), *fear* (Hooghe & Marks, 2012; Hutter *et al.*, 2016; Zürn, 2016; Hegemann & Schneckener, 2019; Jabko & Luhman, 2019), *anxiety* (Hegemann & Schneckener, 2019), *love* (Hooghe & Marks, 2012),

hope (Zürn, 2016; Palonen *et al.*, 2019; Zeitlin *et al.*, 2019), *anger* (Schmidt, 2019), *passion* (Jabko & Luhman, 2019), *worries* (Schmidt, 2019) and *emotions* (Hurrelmann *et al.*, 2015; Hegemann & Schneckener, 2019) can all be found in the literature. These references to emotions in empirical work point to the relevance of emotive aspects in shaping political behaviour and motivation and should therefore not be ignored *a priori* in research on politicization dynamics.

That emotions are crucial to any political process is widely accepted by scholars from diverse fields such as psychology, sociology, international relations (IR), philosophy, anthropology, and feminist theory, who agree ‘to oppose two stereotypical views of emotions: that they are purely private and irrational phenomena’ (Bleiker & Hutchison, 2008, p. 123). This article seeks to offer a first step towards a systematic theorization of emotions for the specific study of EU politicization, as well as to further an explicit engagement with the phenomenon of emotions in the field of European studies, which is slowly emerging but remains underdeveloped (see Capelos & Exadaktylos, 2015, 2017; Garry, 2014; Salgado, 2021; Smith, 2021; Terzi *et al.*, 2021 for some notable exceptions). Its aim is thus not to be prescriptive or to suggest that there is only one legitimate way to approach emotions, but rather to start a conversation about their inclusion in EU politicization research. In that sense, we propose various ways in which emotions can be conceptualized and studied in politicization processes and outline a range of avenues for future research. To do so, we integrate insights from literatures on emotion research in IR and psychology to translate the ‘emotional turn’ into research on EU politicization. We argue that a focus on *emotional politicization* adds to our understanding of how and why some issues become politicized whereas others do not, and with what political consequences.

Engaging with emotion research is crucial for EU studies as it provides an analytical added value to tackling questions about politicization that ‘rationalist’ approaches struggle to answer by themselves. As we will show, political behaviour is not only motivated by rational cost–benefit analyses but also guided by emotions. Cognitive variables such as values, interests, beliefs, or attitudes are often conflicting and contradictory (see Ajzen, 2005), and emotional dynamics can help explain why some become prioritized and salient in a specific context whilst others do not. Emotions are also a major source of creativity, facilitating seemingly inexplicable discontinuity, radical change, and extreme, ‘irrational’ behaviour, and as such they are vital to understanding politicization – which frequently spikes in times of crisis (De Wilde & Zürn, 2012). Crises coincide with emotional upheaval and turmoil (Bleiker and Hutchison, 2008) and they generate a heightened sense of uncertainty that provokes affective reactions from actors and audiences, such as fear, anger, and anxiety as well as feelings of humiliation, frustration, and shame. Put differently, emotions are what render a conflict of interest, values, preferences, or opinions a *political* crisis. Moving away from studying purely cognitive variables towards capturing the influence of emotive dynamics will thus increase our ability to understand and explain politicization processes, including those related to the EU.

This article offers a systematic theorization of emotions and their role in EU politicization, and it proceeds as follows. We first explore the literature on emotion research in IR more generally before connecting it to EU politicization, especially in light of De Wilde’s seminal conceptualization. We then propose a framework for every step of the politicization process based on three functions of emotions: prerequisite, driver, and outcome, by

arguing that for politicization to happen, some actors and audiences must be *emotionally invested* in an issue and engage in *emotional dynamics* to produce new *investments and sensitivities*. We demonstrate the added value of the *emotional politicization* framework by applying it to the case study of Brexit. To paraphrase Ross (2006), we conclude that studies on EU politicization need to ‘come in from the cold’ to theorize, conceptualize, and empirically explore the role of emotions in processes of EU politicization and the political outcomes emerging from them.

I. Emotions! What Do you Mean?

The role of emotions in studies on EU politicization is largely under-researched. Prior to the recent emotional turn in the study of international politics, IR scholars and political scientists more broadly had likewise shied away from a thorough engagement with the emotive level in political analysis. This neglect is rooted in a broad range of reasons, including the almost ubiquitous assumption of rational actors, the focus on cognition rather than emotion in decision-making processes, methodological concerns over how to study emotions, and the unreflective treatment of fundamental concepts such as rationality and fear that pervade political theory (Crawford, 2000). These longstanding obstacles to meaningful engagement with emotions are inherently problematic, especially because emotions are not distinct from cognitions (Barrett, 2017) and essential for the possibility of rationality (Damasio, 2006). Emotions are neither temporary diversions from rationality nor do they merely complement cognition; they are instead integral to it. This refutes the widespread but misplaced assumption that emotions are consequences rather than causes (Mercer, 2006). Emotions, however, ‘cannot be defined [as] a unitary concept’ (Izard, 2010), and one of the key theoretical debates in IR emotion research (Clément & Sangar, 2018) has centred on the question of the ontology of emotions in politics.

In IR, whilst ‘emotion(s)’ is used as an umbrella term to refer to anything ‘passionate’ about politics, scholarship tends to differentiate between three related concepts: affect, emotions, and feelings. Van Rythoven and Sucharov (2020b, p. 2) concisely define affect as a ‘range of diffuse and often unconscious embodied experience and processes, including moods, sentiments, and attachments’. In psychological terms, affect is the ‘representation of sensations from inside the body that can be experienced as a bodily symptom or as feelings of pleasure–displeasure [valence] with some degree of arousal’ (Lindquist & Barrett, 2012, p.533). Valence and arousal can both vary in intensity and psychologists place emotions on these two axes to measure their distinctiveness (Lench *et al.*, 2011) or the lack thereof (Lindquist *et al.*, 2013). More generally, affective states should be seen as ‘subconscious factors that can frame and influence our more conscious emotional evaluations of the social world’ (Hutchison & Bleiker, 2014, p. 502). Conversely, emotions are ‘structured and socially recognized embodied experiences’ or responses (such as fear and anger) whereas feelings are the ‘conscious experience of an emotion’ (Van Rythoven & Sucharov, 2020b, p. 2). This suggests that all feelings are emotions but not all emotions are translated into conscious feelings. This distinction has mainly methodological implications; surveys, for example, rely on self-reports of emotions and therefore can only measure feelings whereas other methods such as discourse analysis can claim to study emotions because they study what is not consciously felt. Importantly, methodological differences have produced varied results which will also have implications for studies

of emotional politicization (see Van Rythoven & Sucharov, 2020a and Clément & Sangar, 2018 for detailed accounts of methodology in emotion research), and more generally, the boundaries between those concepts are also contested. Affect, emotions, and feelings are better understood as a continuum rather than distinct categories, which is why in this article we use ‘emotion(s)’ as a broad umbrella term for the felt dimension of human experience.

When it comes to specific emotions, which we have here termed ‘emotion categories’ to avoid confusion with ‘emotion(s)’ as an umbrella term, constructionist approaches in psychology have demonstrated that these vary within and between individuals (Barrett, 2017). As Lindquist *et al.* (2013, p. 6) underscored, not ‘all instances of an emotion referred to by the same word (for example ‘anger’) look alike, feel alike’. Indeed, after a century of emotion research, psychology as an academic field ‘has yet to identify the discrete bodily [...], facial [...], behavioral [...], or neural [...] basis of English emotion categories such as “anger”’ (Lindquist, 2013, p. 360). From a constructionist perspective, ‘emotions are *made*, not triggered; emotions are highly variable, [and] without fingerprints’ (Barrett, 2017, p. 34). Despite their otherwise significant areas of disagreement, social, biological, and psychological constructionist approaches to emotions all reject any notion of essentialism (Averill, 2012a; see also Averill, 2012b). Perhaps unsurprisingly, it is difficult to find only one coherent emotion category at work in empirical studies on politics and it is often recommended to study the interplay of different emotion categories (Solomon, 2013; Ross, 2014; Hall, 2015).

This suggests that emotion categories should not be treated as self-evident and self-explanatory phenomena with simple underlying cause-effect mechanisms and specific behavioural outputs that are removed from context, sociality, culture, and political agency. How individuals experience fear – be it of an economic crisis, of migrants, or of spiders – differs, which in turn leads to variations in both the mobilization potential of such fears and their behavioural and political implications. We argue, therefore, that a framework for theorizing emotions in the study of politicization that conceives only a limited range of basic emotion categories linked to universal behavioural outcomes ultimately downplays agency and is unable to capture the dynamics at play. This does not mean that emotion should be either disregarded or understood as a mere empty signifier in EU politicization research – on the contrary. Emotions matter especially because they are complex social phenomena that cannot be confined to biological, neural, and physical dimensions. They are malleable through social interaction and political agency, and this renders them important for the study not only of politicization but also of its outcomes.

II. Coming in from the Cold: Emotions in Politicization Processes

Recent research in IR has made the convincing case that emotions are simultaneously drivers and consequences of political processes (see Clément and Sangar, 2018; Van Rythoven & Sucharov, 2020a; Koschut, 2020a for overviews). Importantly, since emotions are social phenomena (see, for example, Van Rythoven & Sucharov, 2020b), a clear distinction between individual bodies such as government officials, governmental discourse, citizens, and societies cannot be drawn. Scholars might choose to focus on different arenas, but emotional experiences and articulations do not exist in a vacuum and will reverberate and impact on other spheres as well through ‘emotional contagion’

(see Ross, 2014). This includes the process of how EU politicization travels between actors and audiences and nurtures polarization.

In what follows, we show how the three criteria central to De Wilde's (2011) seminal definition of EU politicization – intensification of the debate, polarization of opinions, and public resonance – have limited conceptual and empirical purchase without considering the emotional experiences of actors and audiences. This is because the emotional investment of actors and audiences in the spectacle of EU politics is entwined with the salience of debates, whilst in turn driving the intensity with which issues are responded to and influencing whether they become polarized and resonate with broader audiences. We argue that emotions are essential to fully understand politicization and that they can be comprehended and studied in three distinct ways: (1) as a prerequisite for politicization, (2) as a driving force behind politicization, and (3) as an outcome of politicization. These points are analytically distinct and of heuristic utility, however they are likely to overlap in practice. For example, even if emotional investment is a prerequisite for politicization, emotions can foster the process of politicization in a self-reinforcing manner, and as an outcome they can activate a broader range of emotions, or intensify existing emotive responses, which in turn might override pre-existing concerns and create new emotional investments and sensitivities. In the following paragraphs, we review the different functions of emotions in the politicization process before using Brexit as a case study to better illustrate our theoretical argument.

Emotions as Prerequisite of Politicization

It is noteworthy that the question of why some issues become politicized when others do not remains largely underexplored (see for some exceptions Hooghe & Marks, 2009; Kriesi, 2016). In this section, we argue that the politicization of an issue boils down to prior *emotional investments*, that is, that actors or audiences are incited to generate or engage in a debate when they are emotionally invested in the issue at stake – or in other issues affected by it – either consciously or not. Put differently, for an issue to become politicized, some groups or individuals must care enough to raise it in the first place. Because emotions are underlying any choice, they are responsible for ranking individuals' preferences and influence people's decisions by directing their attention (Mercer, 2005). This means that emotions do not negate the importance of individuals' array of beliefs and interests, but rather indicate which ones become most salient in the respective context.

Neuroscientist Damasio (2006) argues that without emotions, decision-making is altogether impossible because their absence makes prioritization impossible; emotions are the source and fuel of action as they determine if enough importance is assigned to an issue to initiate or engage in a debate over it. This is not to say that the appreciation of emotions is irreconcilable with the notion of sophisticated, strategic, and nuanced political actors who pragmatically rationalize and legitimize policy agendas and programmes. Some actors can become emotionally invested in the EU as a proxy for their investment in a different issue: they can care for European politics because, for instance, of a fear of the consequences of a crisis, of their interest in other political issues like immigration or economy, or simply of their desire to fulfil individual professional ambitions. This investment in the EU can thus stem from emotions about other issues, and ultimately become connected to

the European issue. Being a priori extremely passionate about the EU itself is thus not an essential condition to politicization. However, for such politicization to take place, actors have to care enough about the EU – or the issue they connect to the EU – to bring it up, initiate a debate about it, and try to engage the public in it. Emotions ‘tell’ actors which of their manifold interests, beliefs, and preferences is most salient in a specific context; ideas and knowledge, or other forms of cognition, do not possess a motivational force of their own and thus do not motivate actors to behave in a certain way (Koschut, 2018). Actors’ capacity for reason, reflection, and strategic behaviour is inevitably guided by emotions, and high intensity emotional reactions can drastically reorient priorities and preferences (Hall & Ross, 2015).

Emotions are also crucial when it comes to societal resonance as ‘the public’ is not generally preoccupied with the motives, beliefs, and interests of political elites, programs, and processes. Indeed, the public only gets involved if it is, too, invested in the issue - or becomes so due to its connection with another issue they care about. Groups and individuals might have certain concerns, such as physical safety, identity preservation, or values, that might spark a variety of emotional responses, and general dispositions such as xenophobia that are linked to specific emotional reactions (Hall & Ross, 2015). In that sense, debates that reach the public and ultimately become politicized are the ones that can capture its attention by tapping into issues it is invested in, even if this takes place subconsciously. The emotional responses these investments trigger when activated through politicization also drive the politicization processes and, as the next section will show, the concomitant emotional dynamics.

Emotions as Driver of Politicization

Analytically, emotions as prerequisite relate to the presence of emotions in the politicization process at T_0 , whereas emotions as driver focus on the intensification of this politicization during the rest of the process. In that sense, the two roles often overlap, making it challenging to empirically observe separately. Politicization can occur if some actors and audiences are emotionally invested enough to raise an issue and engender a debate, but the increase of politicization is also contingent on emotional engagement between actors and audiences. Emotional investments of actors and audiences can exist without attracting any attention until they are activated (Hall & Ross, 2015), leading to greater intensification of a debate and further polarization of opinions that transpire from the reaction to and the mobilization of emotions. A technocratic debate between European bureaucrats on trade regulations *itself* does not drive politicization, emotional reactions to it do. Emotions drive politicization by allowing the debate to get more heated and the issue to become more politicized through *emotional dynamics*.

In other words, emotional responses from individuals generate emotional responses in others, and this dynamic between emotional reactions fuels the debate and reinforces or reshapes the original emotions (Crawford, 2014). For instance, an angry statement from an emotionally invested politician can engender an emotional response in someone else, may it be a colleague who also gets angry, a political opponent who gets offended, or a citizen who becomes worried. In turn, these responses can provoke emotional reactions from others, and so on. In that sense, the investments of actors and audiences and the dynamic between them can drive politicization and elicit emotional responses that can

elevate the salience of a specific issue whilst the salience of others simultaneously fades (Hall & Ross, 2015).

More generally, political agency is often guided by beliefs about what is right or wrong, good or bad, beneficial or detrimental for a specific political entity, and these are constituted and strengthened by emotions that ‘influenc[e] how and what one believes, [add] value to facts, and [capture] a distinctive way of seeing situations’ (Mercer, 2010, p. 6). Debates and polarization are rendered possible and directed only through opposing beliefs that are consolidated by emotions. Beliefs or other cognitive variables that actors are most emotionally invested in not only make them most salient but also resistant to change, being held onto with a ‘certainty beyond evidence’ (Mercer, 2010, p. 2). In short, what matters is not what actors consciously know or believe, but *how they feel about it*, and how strongly. For example, two individuals can share concerns over the eventuality of an economic crisis in Europe, but the implications for their voting behaviour can be completely different depending on whether that concern engendered a response closer to fear or to anger, as one might lead to a choice based on risk aversion and the other to voting for populist parties capitalizing on these emotions. Likewise, the belief that the EU or a national government follow or violate ‘European values’ such as humanitarianism during the migration crisis in itself does not drive politicization, the manifold emotional reactions caused by this evaluation does. The emotion of shame might incite individual citizens and actors to change their behaviour (see Steele, 2008) as observed after the death of Alan Kurdi, pride (see Markwica, 2018) might make them hold onto a specific policy beyond its rational utility as in the case of the ‘open door policy’ in Germany, and anger (see Markwica, 2018) might render them resistant to criticism and hold onto their behaviour as in the case of the erection of the border wall in Hungary. In a nutshell, it is not necessarily values, beliefs, interests, and other cognitive variables in themselves that influence political processes and politicization, but the emotional responses they engender when triggered.

It is in this ‘driving’ aspect of politicization where researchers are most likely to find specific emotion categories such as fear, anger, or shame, as actors will attempt to push for their political agenda by compressing broader emotional dynamics into concrete emotion categories (Van Rythoven & Solomon, 2020). For example, during the migration crisis the anger at Brussels, the fear of migration, and the shame over the treatment of migrants, but also the dynamic interaction between these responses, acted as catalyzers to the politicization process. As an emotional response in one actor can make another react in return, emotional dynamics fuel debates and allow them to get heated and polarized. To summarize, an emotional engagement from political actors can not only explain why the European Union and issues related to it become salient and politicized, but also with what intensity, what direction and what degree of polarization. Emotions are thus both a prerequisite and a driver of EU politicization as the process is unlikely to occur or intensify without them.

Emotions as Outcome of Politicization

This brings us to emotions as outcomes of politicization processes. On a basic level, the mere implementation of a policy regarding a highly politicized issue might cause a mixture of very diverse emotions across the public depending on whether the policy is in line

with individuals' personal beliefs and preferences. Politicization, in such a case, can create emotional responses across actors and audiences that can facilitate manifold political actions, but also lead to collectively and intersubjectively shared emotional experiences with far reaching political implications. These shared emotional experiences can then lead to the emergence of *new emotional investments* and *sensitivities*, as well as to the creation of emotional cleavages and the emergence of group identities that did not initially exist.

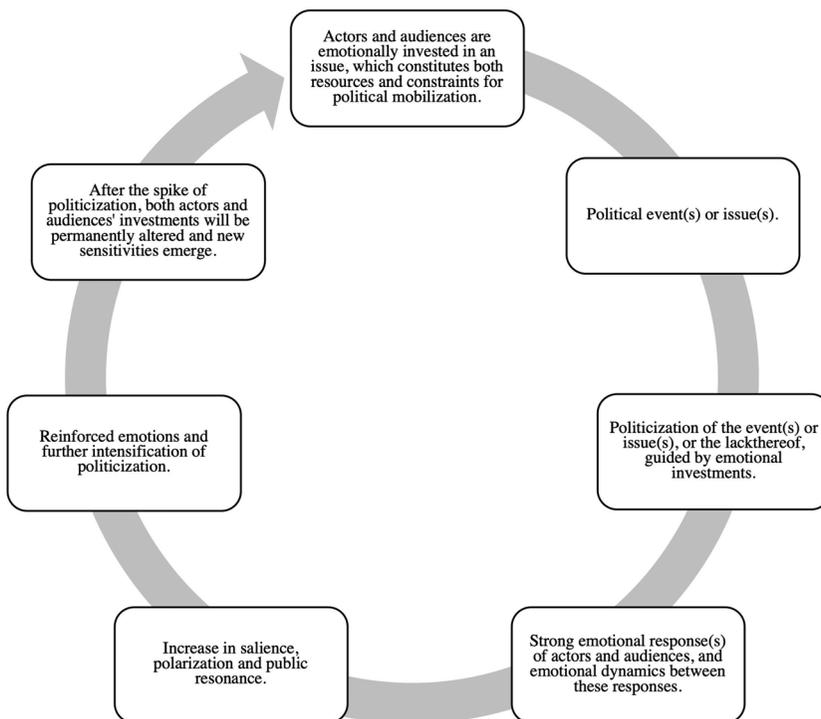
EU politicization can be fueled by crises (Statham & Trenz, 2013, 2015; Hutter & Grande, 2014; Börzel & Risse, 2018), which elicit high-intensity emotions across the public and can result in a 'collective, high-intensity affective response capable of overriding pre-existing goals and concerns' (Hall & Ross, 2015, p. 859). These emotions stemming from politicization are perpetuated, amplified, and potentially synchronized by public discourse, ranging from (social) media reporting to public demonstrations or parliamentary debates (Hall & Ross, 2015). Moreover, they can inspire political change when actors and audiences are able to capitalize on the emotions at stake. This is especially relevant in the context of the politicization of the EU since its different crises in the last decades have been particularly emotional and rich in political implications. Examples include but are not restricted to the reform of the Schengen area after the migration crisis (Jabko & Luhman, 2019), the political response to the death of Alan Kurdi (Adler-Nissen *et al.*, 2020), or, as shown in the next section, the Brexit campaign.

Importantly, once the crisis is over, the political atmosphere does not simply return to the previous status quo (Hall & Ross, 2015) but is instead altered by long lasting changes in the emotional investments and sensitivities of individuals. Such sensitivities can emerge from politicization as certain issues are rendered delicate or controversial topics that actors need to treat carefully or avoid all together as the emotional responses associated with them could be potentially damaging. At the same time, these investments and sensitivities build the basis for future political mobilization. This constitutes a relevant and straightforward area of research as an outcome of politicization that can be studied at the individual level through surveys or interviews. On a macro level, these changes enable and restrict political imaginary and thereby structure political discourse (see Koschut, 2020a for an overview). Crises have already been extensively studied by scholars of EU politicization as they usually coincide with peaks of politicization, but elaborating on the role of emotions would allow these studies to gain a fuller picture of politicization processes in these specific circumstances.

Furthermore, as previously mentioned, new emotional investments and sensitivities that emerge from the politicization process can take the shape of cleavages and group identities that did not yet exist beforehand, as emotional dynamics can engender new political subjectivities (Solomon, 2018). Representations of trauma, for example, can create the emotional attachments required to constitute political communities and identities (Hutchison, 2016), and even the performance of emotions itself can lead to the construction and enactment of particular (institutional) identities or interest groups (Pace and Bilgic, 2018). These groups might reify into more permanent identities or simply implode after the emotional experience subsides. In sum, once politicization engendered wide-ranging emotional responses, audiences and actors might form new groups that re-configure their attachments and sensitivities along their shared emotional experiences vis-à-vis a specific politicized issue.

Politicization might also result in the reification of emotions on the structural level. Crawford (2014) refers to this process as the institutionalization of emotions, through which fleeting emotions are rendered enduring social structures with political implications. This institutionalization can take the shape of ‘hard’ institutions such as international organization, and foreign policy, or ‘soft’, informal institutions that regulated group behaviour and interaction. Similarly, Koschut (2020b, see also Hall, 2015) points out that emotions and power are deeply intertwined, resulting in what he calls ‘feeling rules’ (see also Hochschild, 1989) that govern how emotions are expressed and what emotions are appropriate in which context whilst also (re)producing social identities and hierarchies. In the context of EU politicization in the UK, for example, the British government and the Tory party ‘purged’ parliamentarians who did not follow the party leaderships’ disdain for the EU and push for a no-deal Brexit. Thus, EU politicization ultimately resulted in certain ‘feeling rules’ within the British government and the Tory party which prohibited the public expression of positive emotions towards the EU, underlining the political aspect of emotions. Overall, emotional experiences intensify during crises, creating windows of opportunity for changes in policy whereas this very change can be read as a reification of the emotions that enabled this change in the first place. These reified emotions provide social structures that constitute certain emotionalized knowledge, beliefs, concerns, and dispositions that provide actors situated in these structures with emotional frames through which certain issues are viewed

Figure 1: Emotions in the Politicization Process



(Crawford, 2014; Koschut, 2020b). These structures then constitute the ground for future politicization processes.

Thus, although we can analytically distinguish between three different ‘roles’ of emotions in politicization process, it is noteworthy that those stages are interlinked and, in a way, circular. As illustrated in Figure 1, pre-existing emotions or, in other words, *being emotionally invested* in an issue, is a prerequisite for politicization to occur. Importantly, actors and audiences not only have to be emotionally invested, but they have to be invested enough to be encouraged to bring an issue forward in the first place, or to engage in the debate about it. Thus, not all investments are equally strong, conscious, and directly related to the issue at hand, and in that sense not all investments will necessarily lead to politicization. Nevertheless, the emotional responses they engender also guide and drive this very politicization process through *emotional dynamics*, and an increase of the three components of politicization – intensification, polarization, and public resonance – subsequently further reinforces emotions and potentially facilitates long-lasting alterations in actors and audiences’ *investments* and *sensitivities*. This, eventually, can become a prerequisite for and driving factor of the future (re)politicization of the same or another issue. Moreover, the emotions elicited by politicization processes can guide policymaking and structure the discursive space within which political actors navigate. In the next section, we look at Brexit as a case study to showcase the role of emotions in the politicization of the EU.

III. Politicizing the EU and Taking Back (Emotional) Control

That an appreciation of emotions in politicization processes is beneficial to the study of EU politicization is illustrated by the role of emotions during the Brexit campaign. As Manners (2018, p. 1214) puts it, the ‘era of simply arguing the *rational* or functional basis of support for the EU on grounds of objective self-interest is over’ and the fact that a considerable proportion of UK citizens was unable to answer basic questions about the EU hints at the prominence of emotional arguments over technical or logical ones. Indeed, as many experts had warned British citizens of the economic consequences a Brexit could have, the actual outcome of the vote cannot be fully explained with the assumption of rational actors and of citizens calculating costs and benefits and performing strategic behaviour to maximize their own utility. Instead, emotions facilitated the politicization of the European issue in Britain, the success of the Leave campaign over the Remain campaign’s ‘rational’ arguments, the production of new emotional investments and sensitivities and, of course, the political outcomes and result of the vote. The following paragraphs will explore the three different roles of emotional politicization into more detail.

First, for the question of a potential Brexit to even become part of the broader political agenda in the UK, both actors and parts of the public had to be emotionally invested in the issue and care enough about it to initiate a debate over the EU–UK relationship. Euroscepticism in the UK is not a new phenomenon, and due notably to the nostalgia associated with a pre-European community ‘better’ Britain and the feeling of having ‘lost’ sovereignty with European integration, the EU had been associated with negative emotions for a long time (Startin, 2015). Meanwhile, the strong and salient emotional appeal of a romanticized collective memory of the British empire must also not be understated (see, for example, Manners, 2018; Browning, 2019; Homolar & Löffmann, 2021), as

references to collective memory are emotionally loaded and entail the potential to fuel political debates (Hall and Ross, 2019). Some actors, such as the United Kingdom Independence Party, were therefore emotionally invested in the EU issue, and cared enough about it to prompt a debate about withdrawing from the Union, inciting emotionally invested segments within British society to engage in the discussion that allowed for the EU to become politicized. The EU issue gained salience because of negative emotions towards Europe but also towards (in)directly related issues like immigration, as positive emotions, or indifference, would have most likely not resulted into a discussion about leaving the EU. At the same time, the ‘fantasy’ (Browning, 2019) of a better past provided the Vote Leave campaign with an opportunity to activate some emotional investments in a wider audience, and research has shown that even for voters with low levels of political sophistication emotions are likely to influence political behaviour (Lamprianou & Ellinas, 2019). Indeed, as Moss *et al.* (2020) showed, many British voters ended up relying on their ‘gut feeling’ (that is, their emotions) to position themselves on the Brexit issue. Whilst emotional investments do not automatically lead to politicization, as they must be strong enough to influence political choice, like in the case of Brexit their apparent presence serves as a wakeup call for re-centring the study of why and how issues became politicized in the first place to explicitly include the emotive dimension of political behaviour.

Second, emotional dynamics acted as drivers of the politicization process. As demonstrated by Solomon (2012), affective underpinnings can help to explain why and how some discourses and narratives become more politically efficacious and create a broader resonance than others. Likewise, an emotional framing of the EU resonates more with audiences than a technical one (Atikcan, 2015). In the case of Brexit, the emotional investments that were already present in the different fringes of society were activated by the emotional discourse expressed by elites that resonated with the public (see for example Atikcan *et al.*, 2020). Concretely, part of the success of the Leave campaign relied on its ability to capitalize on pre-existing negative affective dynamics that they channeled into negative emotions and discursively attached to the EU (Van Rythoven & Solomon, 2020). Conversely to the Remain campaign whose arguments were more technical and had to act as counterarguments to the Leave campaign’s emotional populist rhetoric, the latter appealed to the affectively laden desire and fantasy of large parts of the population (Browning, 2019; Moss *et al.*, 2020). As the referendum campaigns carried on, emotions for or against the EU intensified and were polarized, further propelling the politicization of Europe to an extent that indifference became impossible. This emotional dynamic between actors illustrates the importance of studying emotions in the politicization process. The stronger resonance of the Leave arguments, the weight of the nostalgia and ‘fantasy’, and the reactions to the debates can be explained by looking at emotions. Moreover, they also provide insights about which interests, preferences, beliefs, and aspects of identity prevailed as their respective saliences were all contingent on emotional investments. Avenues for future research into emotions as driver of politicization are plenty. For example, do certain emotion categories (fear, anxiety, love, pride, shame, and so on) take on different roles in the process? Research on securitization, an extreme version of politicization, for instance, suggests that there is a ‘tacitly causal’ link between fear and securitization (Van Rythoven, 2015, p. 461). In this context, framing an issue as a (fearsome) existential threat to a referent object of security, may it be sovereignty, the economy or something else, leads to the adaptation of security measures. Is this mechanism also

valid for emotional EU politicization? More generally, is de-emotionalization conterminous with depoliticization or can certain emotions be utilized to depoliticize? And to what degree can these emotions be instrumentalized by actors?

Third, two main outcomes stemmed from the emotional politicization of the EU during the Brexit campaign. On the one hand, emotions helped shaping the political outcomes of the vote. In fact, as we have shown above, without emotions – or with different emotions – it is unlikely that the UK referendum would have taken place and that it would have had the same result if it did. The public discourse in Britain during the campaign was, at the time of the vote, dominated by negative emotions about the EU which coincided with positive emotions in the light of ‘taking back control’ (Browning, 2019). Indeed, the Remain campaign’s defeat has even been explained by the inability of campaigners to engage with the more emotional aspects of the debate (Atikcan *et al.*, 2020). This climate created a window of opportunity for the results of the vote to turn towards the ‘Leave’ option.

On the other hand, even after the referendum, the emotional division between ‘Remainers’ and ‘Leavers’ prevailed and both ‘Remainers’ and EU citizens were plagued by long-lasting anxieties about their future (Browning, 2018), illustrating that highly emotional events can facilitate enduring changes in emotional investments. In fact, even years after the Brexit vote UK politicians and newspapers remain preoccupied with the EU. When the EU raised concerns over the Covid-19 vaccine AstraZeneca (or the so-called ‘Oxford vaccine’) British newspapers and politicians alike initially accused the EU of ‘scaremongering’ and attempting to ‘punish’ the UK for Brexit (see, for example, Hill & Gutteridge, 2021; Withers, 2021), indicating the (still) high emotionality and sensitivity of the European issue in the British public. The politicization of the EU during and after Brexit thus reified group identities that did not exist before the referendum campaigns and brought British citizens to become more polarized and emotionally attached to the pro-EU and pro-Brexit positions (Hobolt *et al.*, 2020). The politicization of such a salient issue undoubtedly reinforced emotions, or generated new ones: for instance, after the Brexit vote, pro-EU demonstrations were organized in many British cities although many of the citizens who participated never felt particularly attached to the EU before. This created a divide between irreconcilable emotional investments and facilitated the emergence of new cleavages. Moreover, Brexit undoubtedly generated new sensitivities, as ‘while many tried to avoid explicit discussion about Brexit, they also found that it pervaded daily life’ and had to treat the issue carefully around others as they became aware of its highly emotional connotation and potential for strong emotional responses to opposing views (Moss *et al.*, 2020, p. 848).

Thus, the politicization of the European Union during the UK referendum activated some emotional concerns in certain citizens, changing their preliminary dispositions. In turn, these emotional investments in the EU became a prerequisite and a driver for the politicization of new issues like the Scotland independence movement, which is of course likely to also elicit emotions as a result. Emotions as outcome of politicization is perhaps the area with the largest potential for future research as its implications are manifold. We would like to reiterate those areas we find especially fruitful: the study of how politicization emotionalizes larger audiences and the effect of this emotionalization on said audiences; the effect of emotionalized audiences on politicization actors; how effective does politicization institutionalize emotions as well as the effects of these institutionalizations; and how do emotions elicited by politicization influence social identities?

As shown with the Brexit example, emotions are present at all steps of the politicization process but also provide valuable insight to understand how it happens and what its political outcomes are. Without first considering the emotional investments and sensitivities of the British population before the vote, understanding Brexit becomes an arduous task as the activation of these emotions by the Leave campaign and their role in swinging the vote to an option that seemed at first unthinkable, withdrawing the UK's EU membership, has been deemed critical. Likewise, most politicization processes and their implications can be better understood by looking at emotions and, considering how many of the most important events and decisions in politics result from politicization, we believe it is crucial to start to take them into account.

Conclusion

About ten years ago Pieter De Wilde (2011, p. 571) concluded that the “old politics” of European integration by stealth may have come to an end due to “politicization”. De Wilde's article furthered a vibrant research field to which our article offers another dimension by proposing an analytical framework which allows for an understanding of ‘emotional politicization’. As we have demonstrated, emotions should be understood in the politicization process as having three distinct but overlapping functions: prerequisite, driver, and outcome. This means that for politicization to occur, actors and audiences must be invested enough in an issue to bring it forward and to engage in emotional dynamics to further the process, which, in turn, will change pre-existing or engender new investments and sensitivities. A focus on emotions complements and enhances the established study of ‘purely’ cognate concepts such as interests, norms, values, and preferences in EU studies, offering three key analytical values to understanding politicization processes.

First, they help explain what type of cognition is most relevant in a particular context. Actors and audiences' manifold opinions, preferences, and values, are often conflicting, and, as we suggest, emotions have a prioritizing function that allows individuals to navigate these pressures. Integrating the emotive level enables researchers to better understand which cognitive variable may prevail in shaping political behaviour and why. Moreover, focusing on the emotional aspects of cognitions provides novel insights into situations in which actors and audiences do not follow rational cost–benefit analyses. The framework we developed here encourages an exploration of the emotional appeal of politicization processes to allow a ‘deeper’ explanation of how and why certain issues become salient and exhibit considerable staying power.

Second, emotions explain the ‘creativity’ of actions that fall outside of established social structures and override pre-existing cognitions, resulting in transgressive and excessive behaviour (Ross, 2014). Through emotional dynamics, emotions generate spillover effects that can affect areas unrelated to what originally sparked them. For example, general anxieties can result in the emergence of objects of fear that supposedly threaten the identity of social groups (Kinnvall, 2004), and fear of a specific issue can lead to the implementation of emergency politics and security policies that under other circumstances would be inconceivable (Van Rythoven, 2015). Meanwhile, actors can utilize emotions such as fear (Markwica, 2018) and shame (Steele, 2008) to convince or coerce others to change their behaviour whereas emotions such as anger, humiliation, and pride can render actors resistant to rational arguments and coercion (Markwica, 2018). These insights

encourage a further exploration into how specific emotion categories drive politicization processes and how actors can attempt to utilize them.

Third, intense emotional experiences can facilitate long-lasting changes in individuals' cognition, including attitudes, values, and feelings of attachments to specific identities. The aforementioned examples of anxiety and fear, for instance, will often have long lasting consequences for politics as well as publics, especially for the specific groups that are constructed as fearsome - usually minorities (see, for example, Croft, 2012; Homolar & Scholz, 2019). Fear, here, becomes institutionalized and changes the societal climate, affecting both the fearsome and the fearful, informing their (voting) behaviour and preferences. If politicization studies are to engender a 'more sophisticated understanding of the consequences of politicization' (Zürn, 2019, p. 978) it is thus imperative to consider the emotions invoked by politicization as well as their long-term implications for societal norms; individuals' cognition, values, and interests; political atmosphere and institutions, and, more generally, political *changes* in themselves.

Despite the substantial added value that emotions can represent to our understanding of EU politicization, this article has some (at times deliberate) limitations which we hope can help set a further research agenda. Notably, one crucial limitation to our current framework is that it leaves the door open for researchers to choose which conceptualization and operationalization of emotions would work best for their specific research designs. Whilst this allows and encourages more diversity in terms of approaches, it also raises the question of how one defines and studies emotions, and the repercussions that this has for the findings. A narrow conceptualization of emotions as self-assessed feelings of citizens, for instance, would most likely offer clear-cut and straightforward results on explicit mentions of particular emotion categories. Conversely, a study that defines 'emotion' in a sense closer to affect and pre-supposes that any experience with a positive or negative valence is to be considered an emotional experience might give broader but fuzzier insights on the wider collective emotional dynamics or public moods. In that sense, the approach chosen will strongly influence how clear the distinction between what is emotional, and what is not, is. Besides, the choice of conceptualization also has ramifications on how researchers distinguish between emotions and other cognitive variables like preferences, values, and beliefs, and accordingly how they study the relationship between them. In that sense, we refrain from being prescriptive in suggesting a definitive answer to the question of how to study emotions in politicization. Instead, we aim to further a conversation and outline future avenues of research on 'emotional politicization'.

If studies on politicization, as De Wilde (2011) pointed out, are focusing on the input side of the political system, then an analysis of emotions allows for the exploration of why certain issues are politicized over others. If EU politicization studies focuses on the drivers of politicization, (see, for example, Hutter & Grande, 2014), this makes the study of emotions fruitful to understand dynamics of intensification, polarization, and resonance as each of these concepts is contingent on the emotional involvement of actors and audiences. A research agenda on emotions in politicization processes should include studies on each step of the process and their political outcomes, for which we have given some suggestions throughout the article, but it should also study different actors and arenas. Future research should also take a closer look at the social and political dimensions of emotions by exploring what determines 'feeling rules', or which emotions can or cannot be expressed by actors in terms of social desirability, and how emotions are shaped by

political leaders, (social) media or private actors. What is needed now to fully explore the explanatory potential of emotions are empirical studies that investigate their role in politicization processes.

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