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Politicization and Crises of European Integration: For a Re-Politicization of the European Union -Jean F. Crombois (American University in Bulgaria)

Abstract

Since the late 1980s, the European integration process if facing a growing politicization that also challenges its very theoretical bases as envisaged by neo-functionalism and the liberal-intergovernmentalism. According the authors, Liesbeth Hooghes and Gary Marks, such politicization reflects a post-functionalist moment in the European integration process. Our paper seeks to assess Hooghes and Mark's thesis through two case studies: the Euro crisis and the migrant crisis. In conclusion, our paper argues that the negative impact of such politicization has been over-estimated by Hooghes and Marks while its positive impact has been under-estimated. In other words, the possibility of a re-politicization of the EU integration project. The condition, however, to capitalize on its positive impact lies in the need for the EU to change its approach, from technocratic one to what we call a more pragmatist one.

Keywords

Draft Paper

Since the late 1980s, the European integration is facing a growing politicization that put in question its theoretical foundations as envisaged by both neo-functionalism and liberal-intergovernmentalism. According Liesbet Gary Hooghes and Marks, such growing politicization reflects a post-functionalist moment in European integration which is to be characterized by the resurgence of identity politics. As a consequence, such identity politics, according to the two authors, is capable of undermining European integration both in scope and in depth.

Our contribution seeks to analyze such claim by looking at the two crises that have challenged and continue to challenge the EU, namely: the Euro crisis and the so –called refugee crisis.

Our main argument lies in the fact that Hooghes and Marks arguments only focus on the negative form of politicization as far as European integration is concerned and overlooks the possibility of a more positive politicization that could contribute instead of re-politicizing European integration.

The main condition, however, for such situation to happen resides in the need for the European Union to change its approach in the formulation of its policies. More concretely, to substitute its technocratic approach by what we call a more pragmatist approach. The latter would be based on three key features: pluralist engagement, acceptation of failure and more practical and less legalistic approach of problems.

1. Politicization and Post-Functionalist Moment in European Integration

According Hooghes and Marks, the European integration has entered, since the Maastricht Treaty referendum in a post-functionalist moment. By this, the two authors argued that the politicization - defined as the "mobilization of national identities"[1] - of the European integration process, had not only contributed to slow it down but could also lead to its reversal. Indeed, according to them, that politicization challenges the European integration process in two main ways. First, it questions its economic rationality as shared by both neo-functionalists and liberal intergovernmentalists. Second, it highlights the impact of public opinion on political

governmental elites when negotiating at the EU level. Indeed, until the early 1990s, those elites were able to strike deals at the EU level without taking too much notice on their impact at home, reflecting a situation of "permissive consensus". This changed towards to a situation where the same elites were getting growingly concerned with the impact of those deals on their domestic politics leading them to find it increasingly difficult to agree at the EU level or a situation of "constraining dissensus".[2]

That politicization of European integration, as put forward by Hooghes and Maks, is different from the one suggested by the neo-functionalists. According the latter, such politicization was meant to contribute to a shifting of demands and loyalties to a new regional center. In other words, it was seen as contributing to the deepening of European integration.[3]

That being said, it would be wrong to assume that the danger of politicization as suggested by Hooghes and Marks was ignored by the neo-functionalists. Indeed, Ernst Haas already mentioned in the second edition in his seminal work –*The Uniting of Europe*- the fact that De Gaulle had proved him wrong as he had underestimated the ideological dimensions in his neo-functionalist approach.[4]

There is no doubt that neo-functionalists had misjudged the impact of politicization on European integration. Not only that politicization came much later than anticipated and revealed itself more opposed that supportive of European integration. Instead of contributing to the strengthening of the role of European pan-political parties, it has led to their weakening while having a disintegrative impact upon national party systems.[5]

That being said, there is no consensus on the impact of politicization on European integration. For some authors, such politicization should not only be welcome but should also be sought. According Michael Zurn, if it is true that such politicization leads to a growing resistance to the EU and its policies, it also reflects a greater awareness of the importance of the EU level beyond the nation state.[6] For Jan-Werner Muller, such politicization would imply the existence of a common political space where majority decisions are accepted without the possibility of seceding in case of disagreement.[7]

In any case, the debate about the impact of politicization on European integration is far from over. In this contribution, we will argue that such politicization calls for a new approach in the development of the EU policies, from a technocratic approach to a what we will call a 'pragmatist approach'. Indeed, such an approach will contribute to undermine the links between technocracy and populism while contributing to reviving a new form of politicization supportive of European integration.

2. Politicization and Crises of European Integration: Euro-crisis and Refugee Crisis

Two major internal crises have and continue to impact on the European integration process. The first one is the Euro-crisis and the second one is the so-called refugee crisis. These two crises will be analyzed from the point of view of politicization as suggested by Hooghes and Marks. For the sake of clarity, the two will be dealt with separately.

2.1. Euro-crisis and Politicization

There is no doubt that the Euro Crisis that started as a consequence of the world financial crisis of 2008 constituted a major challenge for the European Union. In many Euro member states, people took down the streets that lead to multiple changes in the governing coalitions and the emergence of political parties openly hostile to the European Union. More concretely, during the high of the Euro crisis that spanned from 2010 to 2013, 15 general elections took place. Out of these 15, only 5 were regular elections whereas the others were
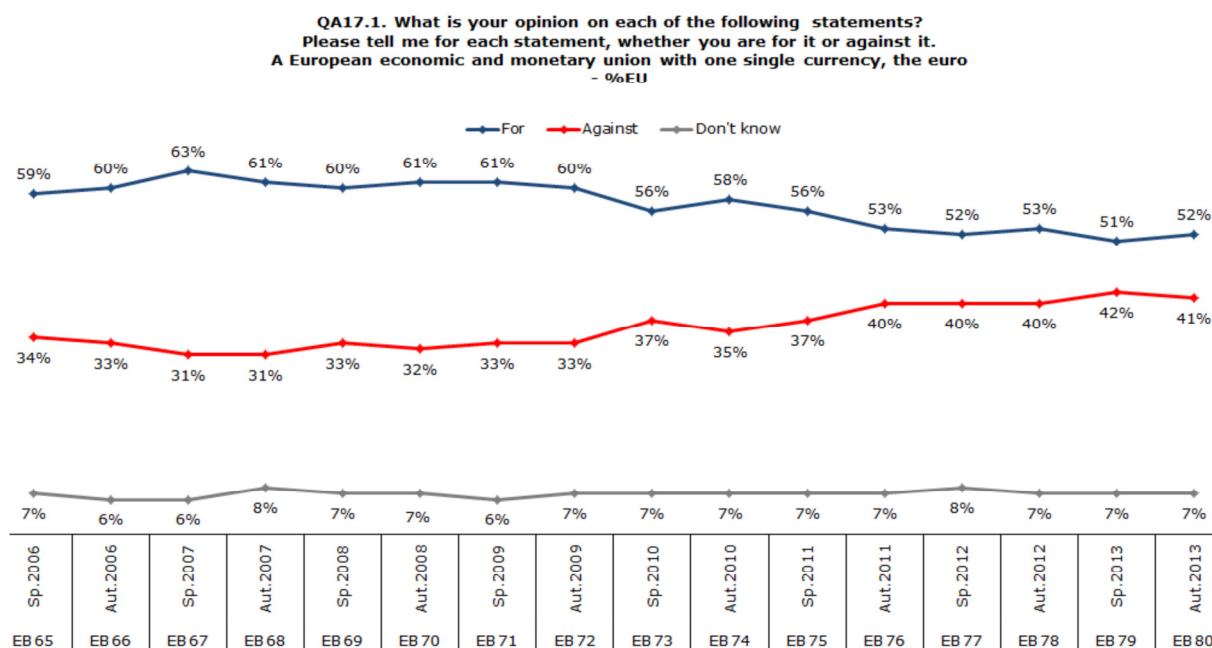
anticipated elections. As result, only in two cases – in the Netherlands in March 2011 and in Estonia 2012, the ruling coalitions were re-conducted.[8]

In this context, the Euro crisis could well validate the thesis of Hooghes and Marks. All the ingredients of the politicization were present: growing contestation of the EU and emergence of anti-EU parties. However, when looking more closely, and this despite of the increasing political instability, both the ruling coalitions and the European Union came out of it rather successfully.

As far as domestic politics is concerned, the ruling coalitions were able to avoid the pitfall of the referenda. Indeed, the new progress in terms of European integration such as the Budgetary Treaty and the Banking Union were achieved either without changing the existing Treaties or by changing them on the margin by taking advantage of the so-called simplified procedure that enabled the Member states's governments to keep the issue out of the public debate and by such a way minimizing the risk of having to hold a referendum. The Intergovernmental Treaty on Stability, Coordination and Governance concluded on 2 March outside the existing revision procedures.[9] Its ratification only required the ratification of 12 member states out of the 19 Euro-zone area. The Banking Union, concluded in April 2014, consisted in the consolidation and the development of existing instruments while the its component dealing with the European Stability mechanism that required a change to article 136 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union could enter into force once 90% of its capital had been subscribed.[10]
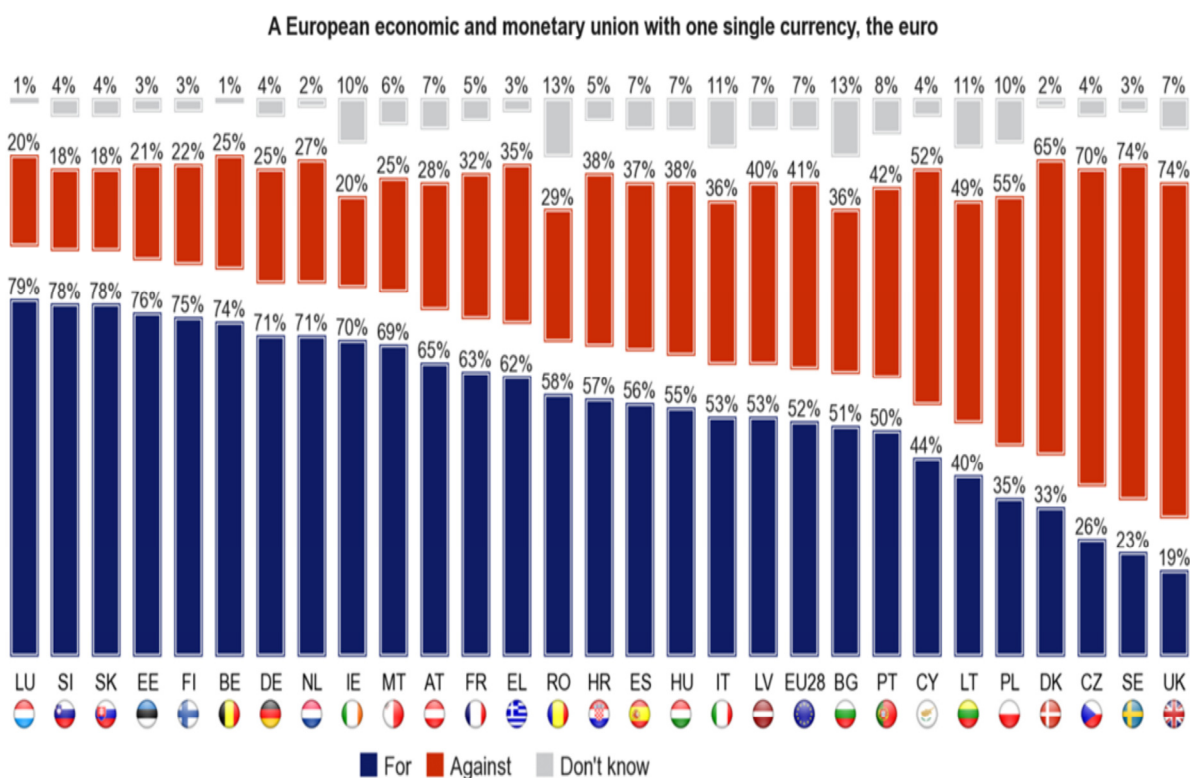
Within the national governments of the Eurozone members, the ruling coalitions included political parties not openly opposed to the European integration process. In Finland, the party of True Finns left the ruling coalition as soon as the decision to approve the financial package aimed at the deficit countries. In The Netherlands, the Prime Minister Mark Rutte succeeded in keeping the eurosceptic party led by Geert Dewilder in the opposition.[11]

Another important point of the Euro-crisis concerns the attitude of the public opinion among the member states. According to the Eurobarometer data, the Euro-crisis led to a decrease of the support for the European Union (graph below).

QA17.1. What is your opinion on each of the following statements?
Please tell me for each statement, whether you are for it or against it.
A European economic and monetary union with one single currency, the euro
- %EU

However, these results have to be confronted to the fact that the support in favor of the Euro was still high among most of the Eurozone member states (graph below)

QA17.1. What is your opinion on each of the following statements? Please tell me for each statement, whether you are for it or against it.

A European economic and monetary union with one single currency, the euro

Finally, the Euro-crisis did not lead to a deadlock or a regression in terms of European integration. Breakthroughs were achieved such as the conclusion of the Budgetary Pact and of the Banking Union. These breakthroughs can also be viewed as good examples of spill-over as put forwards by neo-functionalism.[12]

2. 2. The Migrant Crisis and Politicization

The migrant crisis that imposed itself on the EU agenda in the summer of 2015 may be considered as another good case study for testing the arguments of Hooghes and Marks in terms of politicization. Contrary to the Euro crisis, the lack of hindsight does not allow a thorough analysis. In any case, some elements can be pointed out. As far as domestic politics was concerned, three legislative elections took part since then e.g. in Poland, in Slovakia and in Spain. The latter case can be excluded as the Spanish elections held in June 2016 were held to break to deadlock in the aftermath of the elections of 2015.

In Poland, the general election that took place on 25 October 2015 were marked by the clear victory of the conservatives of Party for Law and Justice (PiS) that sent back the ruling government led by the moderates of the Civic Platform to the opposition.[13] Although these elections were held after the EU relocation plan of Syrian refugees (see below), the migrant question did not seem to have played an importance role as far as the result of these elections is concerned.[14] In Slovakia, the general elections were held on 5 March 2016. For this election, the migrant crisis played a more important role than in the Polish case. Nevertheless, the question did not divide the political parties. On the contrary, most of the political parties shared a consensus on their opposition to the EU relocation scheme. [15] However, the issue led the ruling party of the incumbent Prime Minister Robert Fico to lose its absolute majority to the benefit of the extreme right [16]

As far as the positions of the EU elites towards the EU policies addressing the migrant crisis, these reflected an unusual degree of contestation. That contestation focused at the same time on the Schengen system and on the EU decision such as the one adopted on relocation plan of Syrian refugees adopted in September 2015. About 6 of the Schengen member states did not hesitate in the course of the migrant crisis to restore internal
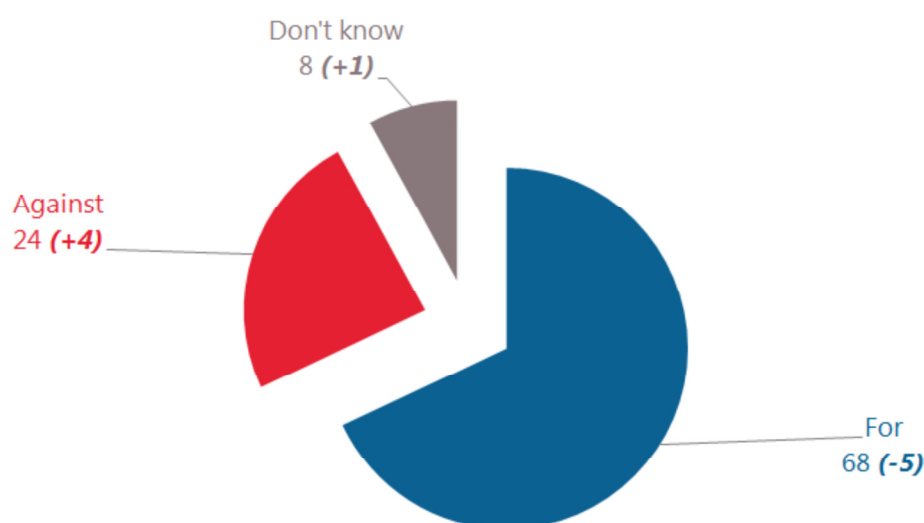
border, albeit on a temporary basis. [17] Other countries, namely some of the Central and Eastern European Member states openly resisted the adoption and the implementation of the EU relocation plan. On 2 December 2015, the Slovak government lodged a case to the European Court of Justice seeking the challenge the legal validity of the plan to be followed by the Hungarian government on 4 December. Moreover, the latter announced its plan to hold a national referendum on the issue scheduled for 2 October 2016. [18]

As far a possible progress in terms of European integration to confront the crisis, it is fair to say that the EU member states proved unable to propose new ambitious policies. The most important EU decision was the adoption, on 15 September 2015, of scheme to relocate 120,000 Syrian refugees among 26 EU member states concerned. This decision lead to a vote based on the qualified majority system and revealed the open opposition of Hungary, Romania and Slovakia while Finland chose to abstain.[19] On face value, this vote may not look highly contested. Nevertheless, it reflected a clear division between the EU Member States and their difficulty to forge a "permissive consensus". Indeed, the recourse to voting within the Council of Ministers has been rather rare as the Member states usually prefer to reach consensus among themselves.[20]

Finally, these disagreements should not conceal the fact the EU public opinion remained during the crisis in majority in favour of a EU approach to the migrant crisis even if this support decreased during the yea (see graph below).

QA15.6 What is your opinion on each of the following statements? Please tell me for each statement, whether you are for it or against it.

A common European policy on migration (% - EU)

Don't know
8 (+1)

Against
24 (+4)

For
68 (-5)

(Autumn 2015 - Spring 2015)

2. 3. Main Lessons of the Two Crises.

The main lessons of the two crises seem to be the following. First, in both cases, the consequences of politicization were unequal. In the case of the Euro crisis, the politicization did not directly challenge European integration, even if one should remain cautious at this stage. It is not impossible to imagine that the Euro would hardly resist another major crisis leading to rising unemployment rates across the Euro area member states. In the case of the migrant crisis, the politicization as put forward by Hooghes and Marks appears more clearly. It led both member states to openly challenge the *Acquis Communautaire* in terms of free movement by restoring internal border and to make more difficult the reaching of a consensus among the same Member states. In other words, the migrant crisis led to a situation a "constrained dissensus" as suggested by Hooghes

and Marks. Second, the two crises are more revealing of the positions of the EU elites keen to take opportunistic advantage of some issues vis-à-vis their domestic public opinion. This should not hide the fact that the EU public opinion remains still in majority in favor of European solutions rather than the opposite.

3. Re-Politicization of the EU: For a New Pragmatist Approach .

If these two crises revealed different levels of politicization, they also reflected the relative failure of the technocratic approach.

Indeed, since the beginning of the European integration process, the EU institutions locked themselves in a technocratic approach in the formulation of their policies. This approach was central to the projects of Jean Monnet[21] who sought to subtract the European integration process from politics to the profit of an approach based on the impartiality of experts. It was also based on a neo-functionalist logic making European integration quasi unavoidable leaving no or little space for possible contestation by citizens. [22] Such technocratic approach also reflects the complex nature of the EU institutions and the question of their legitimacy. This is especially true for the European Commission. By representing the general interest of the EU, the Commission has to defend such general interest in a non partisan manner. The hybrid nature of the institution, both as an executive and as participating in the legislative process through its monopoly of proposals, contributes to its technocratic nature. Indeed, as being deprived of democratic legitimacy, or input legitimacy, the European Commission can only rely on a legitimacy of results, or output legitimacy[23]

To define the technocratic approach is not an easy task.[24] It is, however possible to identify its main features which the following: (i) the strong belief in the fact that technics should replace politics; (ii) skepticism if not hostility towards politics and political institutions; (iii) opposition to openness and to the inclusion of citizens's participation into policy making; (iv) the hostility towards negotiating or bargaining as it may undermine the optimal possible decisions and finally (v) the rejection or moralistic approach and preference for practical approach. [25]

As sui generis, the EU polity may not exactly fit into these features, but as Claudio Radaelli mentioned, it includes characteristics that provide reasons for looking at it from the angle of technocratic governance. These characteristics are as follows: (i) its institutional structure with the presence of a bureaucracy (i.e. the Commission) with important role in policy formation; (ii) the lack of democratically elected government; (iii) the weakness of pan-European parties and (iv) the multiplication of non majoritarian institutions such as the European Central Bank.[26]

Some of the elements of the technocratic approach were reflected in the management of the Euro crisis by the EU institutions. Paradoxically, if the legal initiatives found to resolve the Euro-crisis reflected the growing politicization of the issues at stake, they were also achieved at the expense of the democratization of the EU project. Indeed, the EU leaders chose to privilege, in the name of efficiency, technocratic solutions to the political problems they were facing.[27]The relocation of Syrian refugees was approached as essentially a technical issue to be resolved in an apolitical manner even if that meant to overlook the issue of the protection of fundamental rights. [28]

The dangers and the advantages of the technocratic approach also led a wide debate. On one side of the argument, sociologists and historians such as Pierre Rosanvallon consider that that the growing role taken by experts in our modern societies should be seen as the warrant of a legitimacy of impartiality. This leads those experts to share sovereign power with the national representations.[29] On the other side the argument, Jurgen Habermas warned against the dangers of technocracy that he defines as a new regime and that seems to have sucked our democratic societies.[30]

Without dismissing the interest of such debate, another one seems more important. It is the one of the relationship between technocracy and populism. As Christopher Bickerton and Carlo Invernizzi Acetti explained that two appear as being more complementary than antagonistic. Indeed, both share the same rejection of party democracy as a way to mediate political conflicts and as means to defining the common good through parliamentary deliberation and electoral competition.[31] In more recent piece, Jan Werner Muller identifies possible zone of convergence between the populism (s) and technocracy in their rejection of pluralism. Populists pretend to decide on behalf of what is good for the people. To oppose them would directly consist in a betrayal of the same people. Technocrats claim that their decisions are based on a unique rationality. To oppose them would mean to be irrational. [32]

As a result, there would be urgency for the EU institutions to change their approach in the formulation of their policies. In other words: to substitute their technocratic approach by a more pragmatist one. That approach would be based on the three following elements: pluralist engagement, acceptance of failure and a primacy of practice.

Pluralist engagement would consist of taking more account of the diversity of points of view even if some of these directly challenge the first political intentions. This would enable to open a space for a genuine discussion. The acceptance of failure would imply the possibility to take notice of a possible failure or at least the possibility to revert a course of action instead of being locked in only one logic. Finally an approach based on the primacy of practice that would focus on the practical consequences of EU policies instead of principled and legalistic one.

According to us, the pragmatist approach would present two main advantages. First, it could contribute to counter the rise of anti-EU populists who take advantage of the absence of space for deliberation of EU policies and who feed themselves on the technocratic approach. In other words: to dissociate the opposition to the EU policies and the opposition to European integration as such. Second such an approach would allow to re-politicize the EU integration process by making possible the emergence of more support for the EU policies.

Conclusion

This contribution discussed the concept of politicization as put forward by Hooghes and Marks in their thesis of a possible post-functionalist moment in European integration through the analysis of two crises that challenged and are still challenging the EU project as such. Without underestimating the impact of such politicization, our analysis suggests that its impact was not as strong as predicted. In the two cases, the crises did not undermine significantly the support for the EU integration process and for the adoption of common EU solutions.

That being said, these two crises call for the EU to change its approach, from a technocratic approach to a pragmatist approach. This change would appear, according to us, as a possible means to break the links between populism and technocracy in Europe. It would also enable the emergence of re-politicization capable of strengthening European integration as put forward by the neo-functionalists.

Bio-Note

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Abstract: 123 words; Paper: 3985 words; Bio-Note: 190 words.

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