The Eurozone crisis and citizen engagement in EU affairs

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ABSTRACT
While the Eurozone crisis has contributed to Europeanisation trends in the domestic politics of EU member states, it has not to the same extent triggered citizen mobilisation in EU-level democratic procedures. Theories that treat politicisation as an undifferentiated phenomenon tend to miss this important distinction. This article suggests that the weakness of supranational citizen mobilisation is linked to factors that restrict the citizens’ receptiveness to EU-related messages: limited knowledge of the EU and a weak sense of political efficacy, a discursive framing that conceptualises the EU as a consortium of member states rather than a supranational entity, and attributions of responsibility for the crisis that de-emphasise the role of EU policies. These factors constitute cultural opportunity structures that influence politicisation patterns; they imply that politicisation is, under present conditions, more likely to result in a renationalisation than in a supranationalisation of EU politics.

KEYWORDS Eurozone crisis; citizen engagement; political efficacy; discursive frames; political responsibility

European integration, it is sometimes said, is perpetually in crisis. But rather than stifling the integration process, past crises have, at times, served as catalysts for propelling the European project forward (Kühnhardt 2009). A number of authors have expressed the hope that the Eurozone financial crisis which has preoccupied the European Union since 2010 might have similarly beneficial effects. They have emphasised in particular that the crisis has the potential to accelerate the democratisation of EU decision-making, by highlighting the political relevance of the EU for people’s everyday lives, exposing the interconnections between European societies, and thus motivating the citizens to engage in more widespread practices of active European citizenship (Beck 2013: 66–86; Habermas 2012: 44–53; Statham and Trenz 2015). As Jürgen Habermas has put it:
The more the national populations realize, and the media help them to realize, how profoundly the decisions of the European Union pervade their daily lives, the more their interest in making use of their democratic rights also as EU citizens will increase. … Thus the logic of this development would imply that national citizens who have to accept a redistribution of burdens across national borders would also want to exercise democratic influence in their role as EU citizens over what their heads of government negotiate or agree upon in a legal grey area. (Habermas 2012: 49–50, emphasis in original)

This article examines to what extent the Eurozone crisis has indeed contributed to such a shift towards European citizenship. The scenario sketched by Habermas1 is interpreted here as one (potential) aspect of the politicisation of EU governance discussed in this special issue. Our article probes whether the Eurozone crisis has led to such a form of politicisation; it also seeks to identify factors that play a role in aiding or tempering this development. The analysis is based on a case study of four Eurozone member states – Spain and Ireland as examples of countries that have received Eurozone bailouts and have had to accept the associated conditionality, as well as Germany and Austria as examples of countries that have helped finance the bailouts. It draws on a variety of indicators to examine patterns of crisis-induced political mobilisation, as well as on an original qualitative study of citizen discourses to explore the underlying motivations.

The article is structured as follows: In the next section, we place the Habermasian scenario of more active European citizenship in the context of debates about the politicisation of European integration, and provide empirical evidence on whether such developments have occurred. Our analysis shows that while the crisis led to a greater relevance of European affairs in domestic politics, the shift towards citizen mobilisation in EU-level politics has been relatively limited. In the following section, we raise the question of why this has been the case. The causal models proposed in existing theories of politicisation provide little guidance to answering this question; we therefore outline our own exploratory study, based on focus groups, that seeks to identify factors that shape citizens’ motivations for EU-level participation. We then present the results of this analysis. We propose that the relative weakness of supranational mobilisation can be explained by citizens’ limited knowledge of the EU and the perception that it is not susceptible to citizen influence; by the dominance of discursive frames that conceptualise the EU as a consortium of nation states rather than an integrated policy-making actor; as well as by attributions of responsibility for the Eurozone crisis that downplay the role of EU decision-making. We close by discussing the implications that these patterns of politicisation are likely to have for the future development of European integration.
The diagnosis: patterns of politicisation in the Eurozone crisis

The increased political mobilisation of Europeans as EU citizens, if it has in fact occurred, would constitute one aspect of the politicisation of EU governance as defined by Pieter de Wilde, Anna Leupold and Henning Schmidtke (2015) in the introduction to this special issue. According to this definition, politicisation expresses itself in the growing salience of EU-related issues in decision-making processes, the polarisation of opinion in the resulting political debates, and the expansion of actors and audiences engaged in EU affairs. De Wilde, Leupold and Schmidtke point out that politicisation, thus defined, may express itself in a variety of patterns, which have not always been distinguished clearly enough in existing scholarship.

Studying politicisation: arenas and manifestations

Two distinctions are of particular importance if we want to place the increased political mobilisation of EU citizens, as envisioned by Habermas, within the broader politicisation phenomenon. First, we have to be aware that issues of EU governance may become salient and controversial in different types of political arenas (or settings), inhabited by various groups of political actors. These include (a) institutional arenas at the core of the political system, which are populated by politicians (e.g. the European Parliament or national parliaments); (b) intermediary arenas linking political decision-making processes to the broader citizenry, which are dominated by participants with a professional interest in politics (political parties, interest groups, the media, etc.); and (c) citizen arenas in which laypeople engage in politics (in elections, in discussions with friends, etc.). While a lot of good research on politicisation has focused on intermediary arenas – studying party manifestos, media reporting and the like (Green-Pedersen 2012; Hutter and Grande 2014; Statham and Trenz 2013) – the above-cited prediction of crisis-induced political mobilisation focuses on citizen arenas, which have been examined less systematically in existing politicisation research.

The second distinction important for our analysis is between various manifestations of politicisation – in other words, types of expression in which it becomes evident, and researchable for social scientists. These manifestations include (a) political attitudes that can be tapped via public opinion research; (b) political communication that can be studied with methods of discourse analysis; and (c) political activities at different political levels, such as participation in elections or protest activities that are susceptible to direct or indirect observation. The majority of recent research contributions examine politicisation as a communicative phenomenon, by examining parliamentary debates (Wendler 2014), media reporting (Hutter and Grande 2014; Statham and Trenz 2013), or laypeople’s discourses (Duchesne et al. 2013; Van Ingelgom 2014). However,
the political mobilisation scenario formulated by Habermas puts the spotlight on political activities as manifestations of politicisation. To be more precise, we take Habermas’ (2012: 49) emphasis on Europeans ‘making use of their democratic rights also as EU citizens’ to mean that citizens engage in activities related to supranational decision-making, rather than the national political process in the member states.

Indicators of citizen mobilisation

Based on these conceptual clarifications, we can formulate our first, diagnostic research objective in a more precise fashion. We are interested in finding out whether the Eurozone crisis has, within citizen arenas, led to an increase in political activities directed at EU-level political processes. In this section, we want to examine three indicators that might demonstrate such a development: (1) the (self-reported) frequency with which Europeans discuss EU affairs in their personal communication, (2) their participation in European Parliament (EP) elections, and (3) the occurrence of EU-related political protests or demonstrations in the context of the crisis.

Discussions of European political affairs represent a relatively low level of political engagement, but they may be interpreted as a precondition of other, more substantial forms of participation. The opinion polls of the Eurobarometer regularly ask Europeans how frequently they discuss politics at the European and national level with friends or relatives. They show that in all EU member states, national issues tend to be discussed more frequently than European ones. As Figure 1 shows, the gap between both kinds of issues has remained relatively stable in spite of the attention that the Eurozone crisis has brought to issues of EU governance. Among the countries examined here, it has narrowed somewhat in Spain and Ireland since 2012, while it has not changed much in Germany and Austria. This suggests that the effect of the crisis on EU-related interest among the citizenry, which in turn might trigger political participation, has remained limited, and seems to be restricted to the countries most affected by the crisis.

![Figure 1. Discussion of European affairs (frequent or occasional): gap compared to discussion of national affairs (percentage points).](image_url)

Source: Authors’ calculations based on Eurobarometer 65, 73–82.
The second indicator, participation in EP elections, measures political engagement more directly. As is well known, voter turnout in the May 2014 EP election dropped to an all-time low – in spite of the media attention generated by the crisis and regardless of the attempts by EU-level parties to personalise the election by naming candidates for the office of Commission President (Hobolt 2014). However, there was considerable variation between member states – Germany, for instance, saw turnout increase by almost five percentage points. What is more, turnout in national elections in Western democracies, if viewed in a long-term perspective, is also on a downward trajectory. Figure 2 therefore compares voter turnout in EP elections to turnout in the preceding national parliamentary elections. It shows substantially higher levels of political participation at the national level, but also indicates that the turnout gap is slowly narrowing (Ireland being the exception). Yet Germany is the only country where there is evidence that this narrowing of the turnout gap might be accelerated by the Eurozone crisis; elsewhere the developments between 2009 and 2014 appear as a continuation of previous trends.

Finally, we measured the occurrence of political protests or demonstrations related to the crisis between January 2010 and December 2014, drawing on reports in two quality newspapers per country. We classified media reports according to the focus of the news items in question, assessing whether the issues and grievances raised by the protestors referred to domestic politics, politics at the European level, or a combination of both (see the online appendix for details of this analysis). The analysis shows that a significant number of protests and demonstrations related to the crisis occurred in Spain and Ireland, while the crisis did not result in much protest activity in Germany and Austria. What is most relevant for our analysis is that the clear majority of Spanish and Irish protests focused on national politics. Figure 3 shows our results for Spain, the country with the most active anti-austerity movement (results for the other countries are included in the online appendix). It shows that, in the years that witnessed the most intense protest activity (2011 to 2013), protests aimed at national-level decision-making clearly outnumbered protests with an explicit EU reference.
Taking all these indicators together, we can conclude that, national variations notwithstanding, the mobilisation of Europeans in relation to issues of EU-level politics has been less far-reaching than could have been expected. This is noteworthy particularly in light of the fact that the crisis has resonated quite strongly in the domestic politics of some member states: Crisis-related decisions by national governments have been controversially discussed in national public spheres (Closa and Maatsch 2014; Crespy and Schmidt 2013; Pianta 2013), the crisis has been a prominent theme in national elections (Belot et al. 2013; Hutter and Kerscher 2014), and incumbent governments have become targets of electoral punishment (Kriesi 2012; LeDuc and Pammett 2013). Yet in contrast to this Europeanisation of domestic politics, the mobilisation of European citizens at the supranational level has been much weaker. As Philip Genschel and Markus Jachtenfuchs (2014: 12) have put it, the crisis-induced politicisation of EU affairs has ‘proceeded mostly in nationally segmented domestic publics instead of a transnationally integrated European public sphere’; it seems to have engaged Europeans primarily in their role as national rather than EU citizens.

Research approach: exploring citizen motivations

This leads us to our second, explanatory research question. We seek to understand what factors have prevented a more pronounced effect of the Eurozone crisis on citizen mobilisation at the supranational level. An obvious starting point is a look at existing theories of politicisation, which we subsequently seek to expand through an exploratory study of citizen motivations for participation in EU-level politics.

Theorising the causes of politicisation

The most comprehensive attempt to develop a causal model that accounts for the emergence of politicisation has been presented by Pieter de Wilde and Michael Zürn (2012). They describe the increasing authority of the EU as the main trigger of politicisation (or independent variable), whose effects are
mediated by political opportunity structures (as intervening variables), including long-standing European integration narratives presented by a country’s political elites (with ‘consistent’ narratives being less likely to lead to politicisation than ‘ambivalent’ ones), media responsiveness to EU issues, political party strategies, as well as the presence or absence of institutional or situational opportunities, such as referendums or crises (de Wilde and Zürn 2012: 139–45).

When applied to the Eurozone crisis, this model would predict a significant boost in politicisation. After all, the crisis has not only highlighted the political importance of the EU’s existing powers, but also resulted in a shift of further responsibilities to the EU (Schimmelfennig 2014). Political opportunity structures have also developed in a way that should have encouraged politicisation: National narratives of European integration have, if anything, become more ambivalent even in traditionally pro-integration states such as Germany, thus creating openings for explicit criticism of the EU. Media responsiveness to EU decision-making has been higher than ever before in the EU’s history. Political parties at the national and European level have found it impossible to avoid taking positions on EU-related issues (for instance, on supporting or opposing the bailouts and associated conditionality). Last but not least, institutional opportunities for political participation have existed in the form of elections both at the national and at the European level.3

None of the factors identified by de Wilde and Zürn, however, can convincingly account for the domestic rather than supranational focus of crisis-induced politicisation, specifically the relative weakness of citizen mobilisation in EU-level politics. One reason for this gap in their model is that it does not differentiate between various arenas of politicisation. When discussing their dependent variable, de Wilde and Zürn cite evidence especially from intermediary and citizen arenas, but they do not draw clear distinctions. All of the intervening variables in their model, on the other hand, seem to relate primarily to politicisation in intermediary arenas, explaining why opinion-leading elites (European integration narratives), political parties (party strategies) or media actors (media receptiveness) might be more or less prone to treat European integration as politically salient. This kind of intervening variable is not presented for the citizens. What is missing, in other words, is attention to factors that affect the citizens’ motivations for engaging with the EU, or – to copy the language that they use for the media – their receptiveness to EU-related messages, which cannot be taken for granted even in a situation in which politicisation in intermediary arenas has already occurred.

An agenda for exploratory research

In multilevel systems that present different types of participation opportunities, it is plausible to expect that such factors of citizen receptiveness account for differentiated forms of political involvement at various political levels. Yet this
variable has not been sufficiently theorised in existing politicisation research. We therefore conducted an exploratory study, based on a qualitative research approach, to identify which factors influence motivations to participate at the EU level, particularly in the light of the Eurozone crisis, and how they matter. The nature of our study is inductive, but it is informed by prior research on political attitudes and participation, in the EU and beyond. This research suggests that three groups of factors deserve our particular attention.

The first relates to the citizens’ *internal and external political efficacy* (Balch 1974). Internal efficacy refers to people’s objective and subjective competence – in other words, their knowledge of a political system and their ability to navigate its institutions and policies. External efficacy refers to the perceived openness of a political system to citizen influence – in other words, people’s sense of their ability to bring about change through participation. Research on political participation has emphasised that citizens are more likely to participate in political contexts about which they feel knowledgeable and where they perceive their participation being influential, while the combination of high internal and low external efficacy might motivate unconventional participation outside regular institutional channels (Norris 2002: 83–100; Pollock 1983). The importance of internal and external political efficacy has also been discussed in EU-related research, particularly in contributions analysing participation in EP elections (de Vries et al. 2011), referendums (Hobolt 2009: 135–60), or the European Citizens’ Initiative (Kentmen-Cin 2014). The Eurozone crisis, however, raises a number of new questions. Has the media attention generated by the crisis increased the citizens’ understanding of EU processes, or has it only enhanced uncertainty and ambivalence towards Europe (Stoeckel 2013)? Have the crisis debates made citizens more aware of EU-related participation opportunities, or have they further solidified the perception that EU decision-making happens behind closed doors?

The second group of factors that might influence the motivations of citizens to become engaged in EU politics relates to the *discursive frames* applied in discussing the EU. Such frames have been identified especially in qualitative scholarship on citizen attitudes and discourses on European integration (Díez Medrano 2003; Duchesne et al. 2013; Van Ingelgom 2014; White 2011). They might influence, for instance, whether the EU is seen as having an influence on one’s own life or whether one perceives an emotional attachment to Europe. Taking cues from our own previous research, we discuss discursive frames in this article with particular attention to the *aspects of European integration* highlighted in EU-related discourse, as well as to the *assessment criteria* employed (Hurrelmann et al. 2015). The Eurozone crisis again raises a number of relevant questions in this respect. Has the political attention devoted to the crisis increased the political salience of EU-level policy-making, which previous studies have found to be less strongly politicised than aspects like EU membership or enlargement? Have the obvious interdependencies between member states resulted in a stronger discursive focus on EU-wide commonalities, or have they
accentuated national differences? What are the implications of such frames for the citizens’ willingness to become involved in EU-level politics?

The final factor to which we paid special attention in our study concerned *attributions of political responsibility* for the crisis. As recent research on responsibility attributions has emphasised, multilevel political systems like the EU, which are characterised by the sharing of responsibility across levels, pose significant challenges for citizens trying to determine who is to blame for a political problem, and who can provide a solution (Hobolt and Tilley 2014). Other things being equal, citizens can be expected to participate more actively at political levels whose responsibility for political problems, and/or whose ability to fix these problems, they evaluate as more significant. This raises the question of how citizens conceptualise the responsibility of the EU for the crisis. Is it seen as a primary culprit? How much hope do they put in EU policies as devices to address economic problems?

Each of these groups of factors can be classified as belonging to what William Gamson and David Meyer (1996) have called ‘cultural’ – as opposed to institutional – opportunity structures for political participation. In the remainder of this article, we want to explore to what extent they might plausibly account for the weakness of supranational citizen mobilisation in the context of the Eurozone crisis.

**Methodological approach**

In order to conduct this investigation, we organised a total of 16 focus groups in Germany, Austria, Spain and Ireland. While focus groups may in principle be used to directly measure discursive manifestations of politicisation, we employ them here to make sense of intermediary factors that may motivate political activities. As a research tool, focus groups enjoy a growing popularity in EU studies (for recent examples, see Duchesne et al. 2013; Hurrelmann et al. 2015; Van Ingelgom 2014; White 2011). Their main value added, compared to more established methods of survey-based public opinion research, lies in their ability to analyse deliberately triggered, but relatively ‘non-artificial’ communication of ordinary people, thus generating insights into ‘the process of people constructing and negotiating shared meaning, using their natural vocabulary’ (Gamson 1992: 17). Because they expose how the participants’ reality constructions are developed and modified in interactions with others, focus groups are particularly well suited to provide insights into people’s responses to political issues that are not at the forefront of their attention – such as, at least traditionally, the EU – and about which they do not necessarily have ready-made positions, but rather develop these positions in communicative exchange.

For our inquiry into motivations for political participation (or non-participation) in the context of the Eurozone crisis, focus groups were chosen because they provide a platform for an inductive analysis of how people
discursively relate to the EU, which may encompass their conceptions of political efficacy, the frames they employ when talking about the EU, and their assessments of the Eurozone crisis. We conducted four focus groups in the capital cities of each of our four states. The groups were held in December 2013; each was composed of 8–10 participants. Participants were recruited, under our supervision, by local public opinion research firms, drawing on their existing panels. In each country, two groups were composed of citizens with a post-secondary educational qualification, while the other two groups consisted of citizens without such a qualification. All groups were evenly mixed with respect to other demographic characteristics (such as gender and age). In the group discussions, participants were first asked about the political events that had recently excited them; a second question then focused specifically on the economic problems of recent years. These questions were designed to find out whether EU-related issues – or the EU dimension of multilevel issues such as the economic crisis – were mentioned spontaneously. In subsequent rounds of questioning, participants were asked explicitly about their view of the EU, their country’s EU membership, their personal attachment to Europe, EU institutions and policies, opportunities for exercising influence on EU decisions, as well as objectives for the EU’s further development. The full interview guide is included in the online appendix to this article.

As is well known, focus groups do not produce results that are statistically representative. What they can achieve, if a sufficient number are conducted, is typological representativeness, meaning that they capture characteristic patterns of citizen beliefs and perceptions, and the ways in which these are discursively developed. We should also be clear about the fact that our focus groups do not allow for causal inference. We do not know if and how our participants have become engaged in EU-level politics, for instance in the May 2014 EP election. Our ambition in this study is more limited: We seek to probe the plausibility of the hypothesis that cultural opportunity structures, affecting citizen motivations, matter for explaining why the Eurozone crisis has not led to a major mobilisation of citizens at the EU level.

**Empirical results: factors inhibiting supranational citizen mobilisation**

Our focus groups provide rich evidence on various aspects of European integration, reaching far beyond the topic discussed in this article. In the following sections, we want to concentrate on the three groups of factors identified above as particularly interesting for an examination of opportunity structures for supranational political participation: internal and external political efficacy, the framing of EU-related discussions and attributions of responsibility for the crisis.
Internal and external political efficacy

How familiar are people with the EU, and how do they conceptualise their ability to exercise political influence in EU politics? At the most basic level, our focus groups indicate that participants in all four countries possess a clear awareness of the existence of the EU and its political importance. Nevertheless, most participants’ actual knowledge about the EU was quite limited. This became evident both objectively, in the many factual mistakes that they made when talking about it, and subjectively in admissions, even from well-educated participants, that they perceived the EU as an ‘undistinguished whole’, not clearly understanding its institutions, responsibilities and procedures. The following exchange from one of our Dublin high-education groups illustrates this point:

Moderator: Are you familiar with the specific institutions of the European Union?

Desmond: Okay, how many of them are there?

Clare: Let’s say, when people mention them, I’ll be like: ‘oh yeah, I’ve heard that, oh yeah, I know that’ ...

Seamus: ... the European Parliament ... the Commission ... the European Central Bank is somehow related, isn’t it?

Fiona: The Court of Human Rights.

Desmond: But I’m sure there are loads and loads of kind of subsets of every organisation up there … to dispense of some of this stuff, and doing that and fixing that. I wouldn’t know half of those.

Clare: But I think they interconnect a lot of them with each other. It seems a little bit complex and, you know, it’s not always clear.

In accounting for this lack of knowledge, many participants referred to their own rather weak interest in European affairs. Often, they expressed mixed feelings about this: they recognised that being informed about the EU is important, perhaps even a duty, but also acknowledged that often they do not have the energy or the time to attentively follow EU politics. Yet knowledge deficits were also regularly turned into an argument against the EU, accusing it of deliberate or unintentional opacity, complexity and inaccessibility, which makes it all but impossible for citizens to navigate. In such statements, the lines between internal and external political efficacy were blurred. The following exchange from one of our Berlin high-education groups illustrates this quite nicely:

Werner: I would not be able to say which strings one can pull [to exercise influence in the EU]. Apart from the European Parliament elections, but [in the EP] they only talk, and the decisions are taken elsewhere, that’s well known. That it’s simply a fig leaf, as it were, that it has no real say. But meeting allowances are claimed before taking a flight home ... .

Ulrike: They’re allowed to! That’s the worst, they’re allowed to!

Werner: That’s unbelievable, yes, a true rip-off, but well, the decisions are taken elsewhere. In truly opaque committees, and I don’t know how I could exercise any influence as a citizen.
Not all discussions of citizens’ abilities to influence EU decision-making had such conspiratorial undertones. Negative assessments of (external) political efficacy in EU decision-making were a constant across all of our groups, but they were also justified with reference to other factors. These included the ineffectiveness of the EP and the weakness of national representation channels. The latter was explained by the marginalisation of small and mid-size countries in a union of 28 (an argument made in all countries but Germany), the incompetence of one’s own national government, or even an overly deferential national character. Nevertheless, the EU’s complexity, opacity and remoteness was mentioned in all of our groups – regardless of educational background – as one of the primary obstacles to effective participation. There was a widespread perception that too little is known about politics at the EU level to make an informed contribution, a deficit that is of course exacerbated by the participants’ limited interest in EU politics. For some participants, this lack of information was clearly the most decisive factor; they emphasised that even additional mechanisms for citizen input – such as direct elections for executive posts or referendums on policy issues – would not improve the EU’s democratic qualities as long as the information deficit was not resolved. This exchange from one of our Vienna high-education groups provides an illustration:

**Frank:** I have the feeling that I can’t exercise any influence at all in the EU. That is funny somehow, I always laugh, they have for instance a Commissioner for Currency and then there is the head of the Eurozone – this Mr Dijsselbloem – so there are two different persons, sometimes one talks, sometimes the other. … You know, that is somehow – I am unable to relate to that. And I cannot elect these people, you know, I do not understand that, the connection.

**Christa:** Well, direct elections are missing, and one cannot...

**Frank:** Yes, but even that wouldn’t help, for how should I vote – someone I don’t know, or have never seen?

The citizens’ perceived lack of external efficacy in EU-level politics is hence not exclusively, perhaps not even primarily, a matter of institutional design. This might explain why the nomination of candidates for European Commission President, which should have improved what Hobolt and Tilley (2014: 143–53) call ‘government clarity’ (i.e. transparency regarding how one’s vote affects government composition), does not seem to have had a major effect on boosting voter turnout across the EU. As long as voters do not feel sufficiently informed about the issues at stake in an election, even a clear choice between rival government personnel will not put voters in a position where they feel comfortable making an electoral decision.

Lack of information and political cynicism about one’s own political influence are, of course, by no means restricted to EU-level politics. Citizens’ knowledge of national political affairs is also often limited, and many are cynical about member state politics as well. In fact, in our focus groups, participants in
three of the four countries displayed a strong disenchantment with politics in general, and frequently criticised politicians for corruption, incompetence, or lack of responsiveness. Germany was the only exception. Still, in all countries citizens described themselves as much less knowledgeable about the EU than about national politics, and expressed this self-assessment very clearly, either spontaneously or in response to targeted questions. They also indicated consistently that they viewed their political efficacy as being significantly lower at the European than at the member state level.

What this implies for political mobilisation is that many citizens, regardless of educational background, feel that they lack the cognitive preconditions to make informed and confident use of opportunities for participation that relate to EU policy-making. This is different at the domestic level where the (perceived) familiarity with the relevant institutions is greater. This insight, as such, is not new; it supports the findings gained in previous qualitative studies of EU-related attitudes (Duchesne et al. 2013; Van Ingelgom 2014; White 2011). All of these studies, however, are based on data collected before the Eurozone crisis. What is noteworthy is that the crisis, in spite of all the media attention that it has generated, does not seem to have changed this basic picture.

**Discursive frames**

In a second step of our empirical analysis, we want to examine what frames people use to make sense of EU politics. A comprehensive analysis of the frames used in our focus groups is beyond the scope of this article; here we want to focus primarily on those aspects of framing that emerge as relevant for the cultural opportunity structures of political participation in EU-level politics.

It is particularly important in this context how the EU is framed as a political object in our focus groups. This can be examined by studying which aspects of the EU – its very existence and character as a polity, its institutions, its policies or its effects on member state policy-making – tend to be highlighted (Hurrelmann et al. 2015). Our interview guide contained trigger questions that would have allowed participants to discuss all of these aspects. It emerged that the first and the fourth – the EU polity and its effects on member state policy-making – were clearly the most salient ones for our participants. Most participants had fairly consolidated (though often ambivalent) opinions about the EU as a polity. They generally commented favourably on the idea of European integration, but judged the EU itself quite negatively, citing factors such as overregulation, excessive standardisation, self-serving bureaucracy and a lack of respect for national differences. The following excerpt from a Berlin low-education group is typical:
Moderator: When you think of the EU, what comes to mind?

Johanna: Economics.

Karin: Big worries.

Rolf: Endless bureaucracy.

Stefanie: Corruption.

Marcel: Let’s say it this way, the idea is not wrong, but … one can see that it does not work in this form. And that’s because, it is difficult, I mean, the Spanish and the Italians, they have a different philosophy, a different culture, and uniting all of this under one umbrella … … The thing as such is not wrong, but in my view simply difficult to realise in practice.

‘Good idea, but does not work in practice’ – an assessment of this kind was made in almost all of our focus groups, and usually went unopposed. What is also characteristic about the last speaker’s statement is a framing of European integration that emphasises national perspectives or differences. As in the exchange above, these perspectives were often defined culturally, especially in Germany and Austria, but equally important in this context were references to criteria of distributive justice between member states and/or one’s own state’s ability to defend and advance its interests. Evaluative frames emphasising national concerns did not always result in negative assessments of the EU. Many participants were well aware of the positive effects of European integration on their own country, especially economic development (at least up until the crisis) and the boost that EU membership gives a country’s international standing. There were also many assessments that did not evaluate the EU from a national perspective, but emphasised individual effects of membership – free travel, competition for jobs, etc. – from a predominantly instrumental viewpoint, or applied more general normative standards, such as human rights or democracy. For our inquiry, however, the importance of national evaluative frames when talking about the EU is particularly relevant: it implies that the EU polity is seen by many primarily as a (troubled) consortium of nation-states, not an integrated supranational entity to which one would shift the focus of one’s political participation.

Similar tendencies were reflected in discussions about the EU’s effects on domestic policy-making, many of which – unsurprisingly – focused on the Eurozone crisis. In Berlin and Vienna, the financial implications of Eurozone membership, particularly the need to contribute to the bailouts, were prominent themes. The economic state of the Eurozone was evaluated very negatively, and many participants expressed the fear that, in the long run, Germany and Austria would be dragged into crisis by the debtor countries. In Spain and Ireland, the crisis response – especially unpopular austerity – was described as being imposed by the EU (or its other member states) on domestic policy-makers. Yet even outside of discussions about the crisis, which we will examine in more detail in the following section, the perception prevailed that the EU exercised
excessive influence over national affairs. Here is how this topic came up in one of our Madrid high-education groups:

**Carlos:** I would say the EU needs a radical transformation, I mean, a democratisation and [more emphasis on] all the reasons why the EU was created, like solidarity and such. This is a good idea, countries that have been historically at war being geographically so close, they all can stop competing and unite together.

**Manuel:** I’m not sure about that. At the end of the day, the EU keeps receiving more and more power, taking it away from the states ...

**Valeria:** They take away your right to exploit your own resources, agriculture, the sea, for example. They leave you with the small change of tourism and that’s it.

**Beatriz:** In America at least they have a language that unites them, but in the EU everyone has their own language, there are ever more people, with different languages and every time it is more and more diverse and we are more and more distant from each other. Being so different from my own language, education and everything, I have nothing to do with it. Therefore, I hardly feel European.

The exchange, again, reveals the importance of national, and often identity-related, framings of European integration. By contrast, aspects of the EU that would have emphasised its supranational character, such as EU institutions and EU policies, were less prominent themes in our focus groups. Discussions about these issues were not entirely absent, but they remained brief and superficial. Participants appeared uncomfortable debating these issues, perhaps because of their knowledge deficits. Again, these findings confirm results of previous qualitative research, based on pre-crisis data sets. The fact that the crisis has not triggered a change in this respect is relevant for our current question on political mobilisation because the EU’s supranational participation opportunities – especially, of course, EP elections – aim at precisely those aspects of European integration that tend to be excluded from the dominant frames: the behaviour of EU institutions and the way in which the EU exercises its policy competencies. The frames privileged by the participants in our focus groups emphasise different aspects of the EU: its very existence as a multinational polity, distributional questions between member states, and the EU’s role as an ‘Europeanising’ force in domestic politics.

**Attributions of responsibility for the Eurozone crisis**

Such framings of European integration are, of course, not immutable in the longer term. In fact, one of the hopes voiced by the ‘crisis as opportunity’ hypothesis is that the Eurozone crisis, by highlighting the role that EU-level decisions have played in triggering the crisis and in the crisis response, will lead people to become more interested in supranational aspects of integration. Yet such a development would presuppose that Europeans actually hold the EU
responsible for the crisis, whether by blaming it for problematic developments, by praising it for an effective response, or by calling for EU-level activities to solve existing problems.

When examining discussions of the Eurozone crisis in our groups, the first thing to note is that discussions of responsibility for the crisis were the one topic that revealed the most profound differences between the debtor states (Spain and Ireland) and the creditor states (Germany and Austria). Our Madrid and Dublin groups agreed that the austerity measures that were imposed in both countries as a consequence of bailout conditionality had had a very real negative effect on the citizens. Nevertheless, most participants insisted that these measures were to be seen as a consequence of mistakes by domestic actors – governments, banks, society as a whole. The following exchange from one of our Madrid high-education groups can serve as an illustration:

Alberto: It’s a popular thing to say that the crisis has been imposed on us. This reminds me how easy it is to say that it’s Merkel’s fault, which we often hear ... And it turns out that we’re all here with no blame. The ones who are really guilty, you would guess, are the bankers, the big business people, and politicians. This is true, but it is also true that every single one of us has also contributed to the crisis. A person with a house buys a bigger one, without really paying for it; a person with a car buys another one ...

Joaquin: Let’s not forget that some banks were speculating. The politicians and the banking sector are the real ones to blame. We are paying for the decisions of politicians and suffering the recession that banks created; and ... we’ve been bought by the Germans, Mrs Merkel ... and for what?

What is characteristic about this exchange is that when ‘Europe’ was brought up in discussions of the crisis in Madrid and Dublin, it was personified primarily by Germany and its Chancellor, rather than by the EU institutions and their top personnel. EU institutions were criticised occasionally, especially in Dublin, for not sounding the alarm before the crisis, but responsibility for the austerity policies, and their effects, was not allocated there. Rather, many participants expressed the view that the crisis rescue measures were largely engineered by Germany, in an attempt to protect its own interests, while their own government had all but lost control.

In our Berlin and Vienna groups, where the crisis was of course much less painfully felt, the focus on the EU as a culprit was similarly indirect. Participants here were quick to criticise national governments in the Eurozone periphery for incompetent or irresponsible policies, but many also blamed the own government (in Germany or Austria) for spending taxpayers’ money too willingly on bailouts. When the EU was mentioned in the context of the crisis, the focus was not on concrete policy decisions either before or during the crisis, but on the fundamental architecture of Economic and Monetary Union, especially
its overambitious membership. Here is how participants in one Berlin low-
education group discussed the issue:

**Karl-Heinz:** Every idiot could have [handled the crisis] better. You know, if you go and put completely different countries – I am not against European unification, I find it top notch, I’m all for it – but if you put different countries, poor ones and rich ones, into one pot, then this is what is bound to happen, and it can’t be that we [Germans] have to pay all the time. …

**Jürgen:** And it’s getting even worse, you know, we’re taking in more and more poor countries, such as Romania and Bulgaria right now. By God, these are poorhouses! What is supposed to happen there? You know, corruption is a daily occurrence there, there is poverty with no end, and we say, come join us. Who is supposed to pay for all of this? That’s the problem. Well, the Germans, logically, as we’re the main payer. But we can’t – you know, one or two patients can perhaps be carried along in a huge community, but we have other patients as well.

**Ingrid:** That should be considered before accession happens.

**Manuel:** But you can’t deny that Germany is profiting from it. The supposedly poor countries are downgraded by the rating agencies, and as a result, countries like Germany get cheap credit. …

**Karl-Heinz:** Well, the issue is … that we have massive immigration from poor countries, and I don’t understand why the government [gives immigrants] start-up funds and more. It’s not a fortune, I know that, but you can find other solutions – [it’s] just like [in the case of] Greece, where they shoved in money like crazy, but to give some instructions for spending it wisely, that they didn’t manage to do.

It is interesting in this exchange how discussions about the Eurozone crisis are confounded with issues of EU enlargement and the resulting migration, all of which is perceived as a threat to German resources. While not always quite as explicit, this framing of the crisis, which blames the economic problems on the geographical reach of EU and Eurozone membership rather than any concrete policy decisions, was common in both Berlin and Vienna.

It is not our objective here to assess whether these ways of understanding the crisis are factually appropriate; rather, we are interested in exploring their implications for political mobilisation. In this respect, we can conclude that, even where the members of our focus groups perceived a ‘European’ level of responsibility, this responsibility was understood in a way that was removed from ordinary citizen participation – by locating it either in another member state or at the most fundamental level of membership (which can only be affected by dissolving and re-founding the EU, not by its day-to-day politics). By contrast, EU-level policy decisions, which might be influenced through participation in the EU’s democratic procedures, were not treated as being a major reason for the Eurozone crisis, or as a lever through which one’s own country’s situation could be improved.
Conclusion

The starting point for this article was the observation that, contrary to the ‘crisis as opportunity’ discourse advanced by Jürgen Habermas and others, the Eurozone crisis does not seem to have led to a significant increase in citizen mobilisation in EU politics. This presents a challenge to theories of politicisation, which tend to describe politicisation as a unitary phenomenon and are, at present, not well equipped to describe and explain differences in its manifestations. It is beyond the scope of one journal article to remedy this deficiency in a comprehensive fashion, and this has not been our ambition here. Rather, we focused on the narrower objective of identifying factors that may account for the relative weakness of supranational citizen mobilisation, especially when compared to the remarkable Europeanisation of domestic politics that could be observed during the Eurozone crisis. We have highlighted in particular the need to examine factors that affect the citizens’ motivations for political involvement and their receptiveness to EU-related messages, which – we argue – shape the way in which relevant political developments at the EU level, and communication about them in institutional and intermediary arenas, translate into citizen activities.

The hypothesis advanced in this article, derived from our exploratory focus groups, is that the Eurozone crisis has not had a more noticeable impact on citizen mobilisation at the supranational level for three reasons: (a) while citizens are aware of the EU, they do not feel knowledgeable about its day-to-day activities, and have a pessimistic view of their own ability to bring about policy change through participation in supranational democratic procedures; (b) while citizens have consolidated opinions about EU affairs and are willing and able to discuss these, they tend to frame the EU as a consortium of member states, rather an integrated policy-making actor, and tend to avoid discussions of EU-level institutions and policies; and (c) while the Eurozone crisis has resulted in increased media visibility for EU decision-making, citizens do not tend to consider the EU a primary culprit for the crisis, and when they do blame the EU, they focus on aspects that are removed from the influence of supranational democratic institutions.

When analysing the current politicisation of European integration, it is important to take these factors of limited citizen receptiveness of supranational politics into account. They should be considered part of the cultural opportunity structures that determine whether – and how – developments that trigger politicisation translate into citizen mobilisation. As we have seen, even under conditions that emphasise the political importance of European integration, and even if politicisation has already occurred in institutional and intermediary arenas, it is not self-evident that politicisation will also occur in citizen arenas, let alone in a form that entails supranational political activities. In fact, all of the factors discussed above currently have the effect of de-mobilising
the citizens when it comes to supranational political activities, at least compared to political activities at the member state level. This implies that unless it is possible to increase Europeans’ interest in the day-to-day operations of the EU, to make the effects of EU policies more palpable to the citizens, and to bolster their sense of political efficacy at the EU level, the politicisation of European integration – when and where it occurs – is more likely to lead to a renationalisation than to a supranationalisation of European politics. Such a renationalisation is not necessarily bad for democracy, but it requires different democratisation strategies than ones that emphasise supranational citizenship.

Notes

1. Habermas himself stops short of predicting that this scenario will occur; he mentions national governments’ ‘delaying tactics’ and the appeal of ‘populist sentiment’ as constraining factors (Habermas 2012: 50).

2. The newspapers used were Süddeutsche Zeitung and Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (Germany), Der Standard and Die Presse (Austria), El País and El Mundo (Spain), and Irish Independent and Irish Times (Ireland).

3. All these developments might themselves be interpreted as evidence of politicisation. However, de Wilde and Zürn treat them as pre-conditions of politicisation, distinguishing between ‘readiness’ to treat EU-related issues as politically salient (intermediary variable) and the actual expressions of salience in political discourse or activities, such as media reports or party manifestos (dependent variable) (de Wilde and Zürn 2012: 147). We adopt the same conception in the remainder of this article.

4. The companies we cooperated with were Teleinform Estudios de Mercado in Madrid, The Grafton Suite in Dublin, items Marktforschung in Berlin and meinungsraum.at in Vienna. Our strategy of recruitment resulted in groups whose participants were, for the most part, already familiar with focus group settings. We made sure that they had not participated in groups on similar topics or with similar research objectives. In the excerpts from the group discussions cited below, the names of the participants have been changed.

Acknowledgements

For helpful comments on previous versions of this article, we would like to thank the editors of this special issue, all other contributors, as well as two anonymous reviewers for West European Politics.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

Research for this article was supported by an Insight Grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC).
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