

What the politicisation of the EU means for the future of Europe

*European integration has become increasingly politicised over recent decades. **Taru Haapala and Alvaro Oleart** argue that while this process is often regarded as a negative development for the integration project, there are also potential benefits. Drawing on a new book, they outline a framework for understanding how politicisation might shape the EU's future.*

In recent years, internal European Union debates on migration, Brexit, the Eurozone, trade, and the rule of law, among others, have focused on the legitimacy of the EU and the dissatisfaction of European citizens vis-à-vis the European project. In this context, the concept of ['politicisation'](#) has become firmly anchored in the [EU studies literature](#).

However, classical approaches to the study of EU politicisation have tended to paint the concept explicitly or implicitly in [negative terms](#), perceiving it as a 'constraining' factor for European integration. These approaches have typically assumed that the politicisation of the EU results in a structural opposition between the 'pro-Europeans' and 'Eurosceptics'. There has been a perception that this revitalisation of political debates around the EU and the increasing number of actors engaging in them constitute a threat to the EU's future.

In contrast to this portrayal of EU politicisation as an obstacle impeding the integration process, we argue that there are potential benefits from EU politicisation. In a [new edited volume](#), we suggest that the predominantly negative view of politicisation in the EU studies literature is partly rooted in the fact that politicisation [remains under-conceptualised](#).

The politicisation of the EU is not a new phenomenon: it is a key feature of European integration that can be traced back to the beginning of the project. Along with our contributors, we use a series of case studies to trace politicisation from these origins. Tracing politicisation in this way makes it possible to appreciate the different dynamics and strategies that have been used by different actors.

When it comes to the relationship between politicisation and European democracy, politicisation can be seen as both a vice and a virtue depending on the way in which it takes place. It is therefore vital that we understand the conditions under which it might have a positive or negative influence on European democracy. One potential benefit from politicisation is that the current debates around the future of Europe could help to bridge the gap between national and EU politics in a democratic way.

Politicisation is not merely something that 'happens' due to changing circumstances around us. It is something that is actively triggered by the interpretations of political actors – including politicians, journalists, think-tankers, scholars, and social media personalities – who challenge the status quo and put forward critical arguments in public debates. We argue that by becoming a part of the EU politicisation playing field, these individuals become political actors. Moreover, these actors can politicise issues via online platforms that not only reach national audiences but also extend across borders, given that polarising views about the EU tend to incorporate the wider European public.

It is also important that scholars are aware of the normative implications of research on politicisation. A better appreciation is needed of the impact that scholarship on EU politicisation itself has on the European project, and under what conditions it makes a positive or negative contribution. Future research that takes into account the conceptual complexity of EU politicisation and is open-minded when it comes to methods and normative assumptions can greatly advance our understanding of how Europe is perceived, debated, and understood.

Europe is approaching a crossroads. One path leads to further fragmentation, with quasi-authoritarian leaders undermining the rules and norms on which Europe is built. Yet there is another path, where new routes to integration may become open as former taboos, such as the mutualisation of debt, erode. For this reason, research on EU politicisation is now more vital than ever.

In this sense, we hope our work can offer a blueprint for conceptually and methodologically rich research on European integration, EU politicisation, transnational politics, and beyond. We appeal to researchers to be mindful of some of the caveats of classical EU politicisation studies and to open up avenues for exciting, new questions concerning how the EU becomes politicised and what the empirical and normative implications are.

For more information, see the authors' new edited volume, [Tracing the Politicisation of the EU: The Future of Europe Debates Before and After the 2019 Elections](#) (Palgrave Macmillan, 2022)

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