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ABSTRACT

In the compound EU polity, the escalation potential of policy politicisation into polity politicisation is high. However, this very challenge induces key actors to focus their attention on the de-escalation of policy politicisation and polity maintenance. Based on quantitative and qualitative data documenting the public debate on EU policymaking and secondary literature, this study analyzes the dynamics of policy politicisation in the EU during the COVID-19 crisis. It traces the policy-specific dynamics in the domains of border closure, public health, economic and fiscal policy, and vaccination. The analysis shows that the member states mainly drove the escalation of politicisation and that a variety of de-escalation or polity maintenance mechanisms allowed policy-specific settlements, which prevented the spillover of policy politicisation to polity politicisation.

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KEYWORDS Politicisation; policymaking; polity maintenance; escalation; de-escalation of politicisation

Introduction

Ferrera et al. (2024a) argue that in the compound EU polity, the escalation potential of policy politicisation into polity politicisation is high. In other words, intense policy-specific politicisation in the EU easily provokes a major challenge to the polity as such. However, this very challenge induces key actors to focus their attention on polity maintenance and the de-escalation of policy politicisation. More often than not, policymakers succeed in containing the threat to the polity by resorting to a set of de-escalation measures. Based on data documenting the public debate on EU policymaking

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and secondary literature, this study analyzes the dynamics of policy politicisation in the EU during the COVID-19 crisis. Even if policymaking during this crisis was less contested than in the refugee crisis (Kriesi et al., 2024) and the crisis enlarged the scope of solidarity between member states (Genschel & Jachtenfuchs, 2021), it was characterised by policy-specific escalation of politicisation processes that might have put the polity in danger. However, as this study attempts to show, the combination of polity maintenance mechanisms available in the EU polity contributed to the de-escalation of policy-specific conflicts and, by implication, to the maintenance of the EU polity in the COVID-19 crisis.

The paper first presents the theoretical framework, which builds on the polity approach. The argument starts with the assumption that the dynamics of policymaking in the EU are policy-specific and the expectation that these dynamics are driven by the transnational conflicts between member states and cross-level conflicts opposing them to EU authorities. We then claim that the extent to which policymakers resort to de-escalating countermeasures depends on the general characteristics of the crisis situation. Third, we posit that the escalation of conflicts is counteracted by various polity maintenance mechanisms that often operate informally, involve a complex network of actors, and are highly contingent on the crisis-specific context conditions. After the presentation of the empirical design, the following sections present the results for six different policy domains – border closures and reopening, public health, economic and fiscal policy, vaccine procurement, and a residual category mainly including institutional measures using a mixed-method approach. The final section concludes.

The paper builds on existing analyses of the EU's management of the COVID-19 crisis, but makes a contribution by integrating them into a more encompassing analytical framework that is more generally applicable to the analysis of EU integration processes, in crisis times.

Theoretical framework

The escalation potential of politicisation in EU crisis policymaking

The starting point of the polity approach is the essential fragility of the EU compound polity, which leaves it open to polity politicisation. The contestability of the EU polity and the fear of losing sovereignty on the part of the member states imply a constant tension between centripetal and centrifugal forces, and, in addition to the substantive policy-specific issues, the presence of a latent second dimension of conflict focused on the issue of sovereignty in all policymaking processes. The politicisation of EU policymaking results from the trans- and supranational interdependencies in which member states with diverse interests and each with a different political and cultural heritage are

embedded in the EU polity. Such a configuration inevitably leads to conflicts among the member states and between various subsets of member states and supranational authorities. In ordinary times, the EU legal order maintains the ability to elicit institutionalised compliance (integration through law). In the hard times of crises, however, this order may suddenly become the object of contention and be accused of undermining national sovereignty. Under crisis conditions, which introduce an extraordinary combination of urgency and uncertainty, policy-specific politicisation is likely to be exacerbated, and the likelihood of spillovers to polity politicisation increases. When this happens, conflict turns into conflict centred on the very rules and norms that ought to regulate socio-political interactions. The possibility of unilateral exit from the common rules or indeterminate disloyalty can give rise to escalating political dynamics, as no formal or factual authoritative political centre is acknowledged.

European integration has become increasingly politicised, not only at the bottom, in the domestic public spheres, but also, as Schmidt (2019) observes, at the top, in the increasingly politicised interrelationships of major EU-level actors. 'Policy without politics' is increasingly being replaced by 'policy with politics'. In contrast to the post-functionalist literature, which focuses on the politicisation of the public, this paper emphasises the politicisation processes in the institutional sphere, i.e., among the political elites involved in the policymaking process. To be sure, this kind of politicisation involves the expansion of conflict into the public sphere (where we capture it empirically), but it does not necessarily involve the mobilisation of the public itself. However, even if contained to the institutional sphere, the 'expansion of conflict' (Schattschneider, 1975) may take into account the 'constraining dissensus' in the public, as governments 'try to anticipate the effect of their decisions on domestic publics' (Hooghe and Marks, 2009, p. 9). The claim defended here is that politicisation first occurs in the institutional arena among the political elites, who may or may not mobilise the public in their support.[1] In the institutional arena, politicisation refers to an intensification of conflict between states and supranational authorities, as well as an extension of its targets from domain-specific and substantive policies to more fundamental questions related to the exclusivity and validity of the EU legal order as such.

The politicisation of the EU policymaking process is, first of all, policy-specific. However, given the always-present connection to questions of sovereignty, it may extend to a politicisation of the polity as such. This is illustrated by the rule-of-law crisis, which has more recently opposed the governments of Poland and Hungary to the EU and the other member states.

In the two-level polity, given the strength of the territorial channel of representation and the importance of institutional coordination as the key decision-making mode that attributes a pivotal role to member state

governments, conflicts between member states and the supranational agencies are expected to drive policy-specific politicisation processes. In these processes, member state governments form coalitions with the governments of other member states who share their policy-specific positions in a given EU-level conflict and their overall vision of EU integration. The series of crises has exacerbated the conflicts between member states and contributed to the creation and stabilisation of coalitions between member states. As a result, a set of transnational coalitions have emerged, which structure the conflict configurations in policy domain-specific ways (Fabbrini, 2023; Kriesi et al., 2024; Truchlewski et al., 2025) – the German-French joint leadership coalition, the so-called 'solidarity coalition,' consisting of the southern member states and France, the 'sovereigntist' Visegrad 4 coalition (V4), composed of Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia, and the 'Frugal 4' coalition, composed of the Netherlands, Austria, Denmark, Sweden, and, at times, Finland.

In a given crisis situation, the conflicts between these coalitions may escalate. The escalation potential is enhanced by the fact that member states are nation-states with a high level of internal solidarity, which relies on a powerful ideology – nationalism – that has been increasingly mobilised by the radical right against the European integration process, constraining EU problem-solving (Hooghe and Marks 2009; Kriesi et al., 2008). In addition, the results of conflicts in previous crises – in the case of the COVID-19 crisis, the result of conflicts in the EA and the 2015–16 refugee crisis – serve to fuel contemporary conflicts. As has been argued by conflict sociology more generally, '[c]onflict and solidarity cause each other to rise, creating the familiar spiral of conflict escalation' (Collins, 2012, p. 2). As conflicts escalate among member states and supranational authorities, not only national solidarity increases, but also idealised symbols of membership and high emotional energy are produced, the number of participants (sympathisers and allies) and the number of resources mobilised increases, with potentially dire consequences for the EU polity. Critical for the escalation of conflict in the COVID-19 crisis was, above all, the resistance against joint solutions by two coalitions – the V4 and the Frugal4.

Our first hypothesis summarises this discussion:

> H1: The escalation of the politicization of EU policymaking is driven by coalitions of member states.

De-escalation or polity maintenance mechanisms

Integration theory suggests that the weak authority of the Commission does not have the capacity to come to terms with policy-specific escalation processes. As argued by the failing forward literature (Jones et al., 2021),

incomplete solutions are the best we can hope for, temporary solutions, which then lead to the next iteration of escalation and de-escalation. As a result of institutionalised blockages in decision-making, the EU is likely to be trapped in a doom loop – Scharpf's (1988) 'joint decision trap' or Zeitlin et al.'s (2019) 'politics trap' – or a disequilibrium of sorts (Hodson & Puetter, 2019). However, as Nicoli and Zeitlin (2024) point out, such traps are not inevitable; policy-specific politicisation may also lead to positive results, as is illustrated by what they call the 'second polycrisis', which includes the COVID-19 and the Ukraine crisis.

In line with this idea, we argue that the politicisation of policymaking in the EU does not necessarily escalate to threaten the EU polity as such. Specific de-escalation mechanisms facilitate the bargaining process by rendering it less salient and less polarised. Nicoli and Zeitlin (2024, pp. 3019–27) present a similar argument. Their list of what we would call de-escalation or polity maintenance mechanisms includes a) an alignment of national public debates across member states (which is facilitated by a symmetric and existential crisis like the COVID-19 crisis and which reduces the potential for partisan exploitation); b) strategic responses by political leaders in terms of framing of the crisis as a collective problem and in terms of intensive cooperation between national leaders and the complex institutional ecology of the EU; and c) the fragility of member state coalitions (especially of the Frugal4 and the V4 coalitions), which reduces their threat potential. There is no doubt that the characteristics of the *crisis situation* play an important role in the determination of escalation and de-escalation processes in EU policymaking. Thus, the COVID-19 crisis – a symmetric crisis that posed an existential, exogenous threat to all member states equally – generally facilitated de-escalating measures as compared to, for example, the refugee crisis (Kriesi et al., 2024). We would like to add that the multifaceted character of this crisis implied that the configuration of the adversarial coalitions varied from one escalation process to the other, which made for cross-cutting conflicts, i.e., a condition that serves to moderate each one of them.

We posit this as our second hypothesis:

> H2: The characteristics of the COVID-19 crisis – a multifaceted, symmetrical, and existential exogenous threat – facilitated de-escalation processes.

Others have also stressed the importance of framing, or what they called *rhetorical action* (Ferrera et al., 2024a). Such action may either signal general confidence in the polity or, more specifically, aim to reconcile the adversarial camps. Doubtlessly, the most striking example in the more recent EU crisis period is Draghi's whatever-it-takes speech. Other examples include Merkel's speeches in the decisive phases of the negotiations of the Recovery and Resilience Fund (RRF) (Ferrera et al., 2021), or national leaders directly addressing the public of other member states during the COVID-19 crisis

(Schelkle, 2021, pp. 45–47). Traditional intergovernmental literature, in turn, stressed the mechanism of strategic issue *linkages*, package deals, and side payments, which provide instrumental incentives for de-escalation, even if Moravcsik (1998, p. 483) claimed that, in the EU, issue linkages have been used sparingly. For example, in their study of Eurozone reforms, Lundgren et al. (2019) find that, contrary to the conventional narrative, this was not a process dictated by Germany but one characterised by compromise and reciprocity. Member states traded gains and concessions both within and across policy domains. Finally, there are signs of coalition fragmentation: as we shall see, the Frugal4 coalition, indeed, lost the support of Germany during the COVID-19 crisis, but the V4 coalition held firm during this crisis and only fell apart during the Ukraine war, which followed upon the COVID-19 crisis.

The present account emphasises two types of mechanisms, which have received some attention from previous studies as well, but which we combine in a novel way. The present account highlights the mechanisms of institutional coordination that facilitate the negotiation process among the conflicting coalitions, and the capacity of the conflicting coalitions to develop and settle for second-best compromise solutions. This may sound very much like the failing-forward framework, which insists that 'a large number of agreements do point toward deeper integration in ways that the policymakers who negotiate them recognize are likely to come up short' (Jones et al., 2021, p. 1524). The present argument, however, puts a more positive accent on these agreements: first of all, such agreements are not unique to the EU but typical of polities with high consensus thresholds, such as consensus democracies (Lijphart, 1999), and, we might add, of policymaking in general. It is rare for policymaking to result in a masterstroke, a great reform. Usually, policymaking is an exercise in muddling through, even in less complex polities than the EU. Moreover, even if they are of only limited scope, such agreements tend to be successful in de-escalating policymaking processes in the EU and in preventing them from spilling over to threaten the polity as such.

Mechanisms of institutional coordination

Based on the integration literature, it is possible to distinguish at least four institutional coordination mechanisms in EU crisis policymaking: three forms of centralised coordination plus transnational coordination. Together, this set of institutional coordination mechanisms cannot just be reduced to instances of 'intergovernmental bargaining'. They systematically involve actors from the two levels of the multi-level polity of the EU and form a structure that is unique to this polity. First, there is the *coordination among top leaders* (which is also included in the list of polity maintenance mechanisms of Nicoli and Zeitlin (2024)). In a crisis situation, policymaking can no longer be confined to the policy-specific subsystem but becomes the object of

macro-politics or 'Chefsache,' to be taken over by the political leaders who focus on the issue in question. In the terminology of the punctuated equilibrium model of policymaking, coordination among top leaders occurs due to 'serial shifts' from parallel to serial processing (Baumgartner & Jones, 2002). In line with this argument, many EU scholars have argued that, because of a series of major crises, the centre of gravity in the EU has shifted systematically toward the Heads of State or Government (the top leaders), with a primary focus on the German Chancellor (e.g., Van Middelaar, 2019; Laffan, 2024; Hodson, 2023). Hodson (2023, p. 13) claims that these leaders 'stuck with the EU after Maastricht not because they shared an ideological commitment to ever closer union but because they believed that their countries could manage global crises more effectively by working together.'

Second, and complementarily, there is *interinstitutional coordination*. Smeets and Beach (2023) distinguish between the control room (involving the top leaders) and the machine room (involving collaborative networks of EU institutional actors). The top leaders informally delegate to the machine room to get the job done. In the process, EU actors cooperate across institutional levels and boundaries within the 'EUCO system,' which becomes an important part of the solution to a crisis, even where member states and the Commission are deeply divided, and substantive agreement is difficult to reach (Smeets, 2024, p. 3024). Smeets and Beach's (2020) case studies of reform steps undertaken during the Eurozone, the refugee, and Brexit crises confirm their ideas. In each case, an interinstitutional network was able to bridge the intergovernmental (European Council) and supranational (Commission) divide as well as to link the different levels of the negotiation (control room and machine room) and to provide the outline of a solution.

Third, there is also *cross-level coordination*. The collaborative networks Smeets and Beach focus on are networks linking EU institutions. However, coordination networks may also involve member state governments together with EU authorities. As Ladi and Wolff (2021:, p. 35) have argued, on the initiative of the European Council, coordination initiatives bring national ministries and Directorate Generals together in 'Commission-Capital networks' (see also Russack & Fenner, 2020). Ferrera et al. (2024b), who have studied the reform of the EHU also stress that the authoritative centre of the EU has not only become more important but also more crowded, formally incorporating representatives of the member states in virtually all phases of the policy process. They label this mode of integration 'expansive unification,' a peculiar pattern of authority centralisation, in which the powers of the constituent units and those of the supranational centre are virtually 'fused' together to produce binding decisions. Let us add that, depending on the policy domain and the crisis situation, specific coalitions of member states are particularly apt at cooperating in cross-level networks.

In addition to these centralised networks, there is a fourth type of coordination, *transnational coordination*, i.e., decentralised, policy-specific coordination between member states without the intervention of EU authorities.

Arguably, these institutional coordination mechanisms are most relevant in policy domains where the EU centre has only limited competences. But even in a domain like economic policy, where the EU authorities have a dominant position, they are likely to rely on such coordination mechanisms in order to facilitate policymaking. Institutional coordination benefits from the fact that, as a result of the weakness of the EU's centre, *partisan competition* at the EU level is generally weak, which serves to limit politicisation in general (Alexander-Shaw et al., 2023). Escalating conflicts are focused on territorial tensions between supranational authorities and member states. However, partisan mobilisation at the domestic level of the member states may spill over to the EU level, reinforcing trans – or supranational conflicts, creating a 'constraining dissensus' or a 'politics trap.' But, in the case of COVID-19, such spill-overs are expected to be rare given the facilitating conditions of the crisis situation.

To summarise:

> H3: De-escalation requires the member state coalitions and EU authorities to rely on institutional coordination.

Binding agreements

Ultimately, de-escalation is brought about by *binding agreements* (see Collins, 2012), after which all sides tend to lose interest in sustaining the conflict, at least temporarily. This may strike the reader as somewhat tautological. Indeed, if policymakers arrive at binding agreements, this means that they are able to end the conflict in question. The claim, however, is less tautological than it may appear at first sight: as already pointed out, we suggest that EU policymakers are able to arrive at binding agreements in crisis situations that are generally accepted by all parties to the conflict (as opposed to polities where such agreements are out of reach), and that these agreements trigger de-escalation processes (as opposed to agreements that are immediately violated and do not stop conflicts) even if they tend to provide second-best compromise solutions to the EU's policymaking problems that may only hold in the not too long run.

Three types of agreements are of particular interest for achieving the de-escalation of conflicts between member states and EU authorities. First, the EU has a *tradition of accommodation* to deal with internal differences and diversity in the shadow of the high consensus requirements of its decision-making rules. As outlined by Fossum (2024), accommodation refers to the whole range of formal and informal efforts that are bent on finding ways of co-existing amidst (formally or tacitly) recognised differences and diversity.

Under such conditions, all sides need to contribute to the successful conclusion of binding agreements. In line with this accommodating tradition, a first set of second-best solutions refers to policy-specific exemptions from the common rules. Among others, such exemptions have taken the form of *internal differentiation* as a result of *policy-specific opt-outs* of member states (Schimmelfennig et al., 2015). The Eurozone and the Schengen Area illustrate this mechanism. In addition, the EU allows for temporary exemptions from the common rules in case of emergencies, such as the possibility of suspending the Schengen rules and proceeding to internal re-bordering as occurred during the refugee crisis (Freudlsperger et al., 2023; Kriesi et al., 2024) or, even more massively, as we shall see, in the COVID-19 crisis. The EU also tolerates, to a certain extent, national deviations from existing rules. This kind of *forbearance* refers to 'the deliberate and revocable underenforcement of law' (Kelemen & Pavone, 2023, p. 782) in the implementation of joint policies, which allows for avoiding the politicisation of policy-specific conflicts.

Second, in the critical circumstances of crises, the second-best solutions may take the form of *capacity building* at the centre, i.e., the *delegation of unprecedented powers to a supranational authority* to coordinate and monitor joint action. Such delegation would be what European integration is all about. But in crisis management, it typically takes two second-best forms – *conditional* federalisation, as in the case of the ECB's Outright Monetary Transactions (OMT) and the European Stability Mechanism (ESM) during the Eurozone crisis (Altiparmakis, 2024), and *temporary* federalisation, as in the case of the application of the Temporary Protection Directive to the Ukrainian refugees in 2022 (Kriesi & Moise, 2024). Conditional federalisation has proven to be a dead end in the case of ESM. However, as we shall see, temporary federalisation has played a key role in fiscal policymaking during the COVID-19 crisis. Both types of second-best federalisation may open the door for the real thing. But nothing guarantees that they will do so, which is typical for the open-ended integration process that is characteristic of the EU.

A third option to contain escalation processes is to resort to *externalizing* the policy problem that is too hard to solve internally. Externalisation is the second-best solution that is sought if internal solutions are not available. In the COVID-19 crisis, it played a minor role, except for the fact that in the case of vaccination, the EU was dependent on the cooperation of a third party, the pharmaceutical industry, for the eventual solution. In this case, however, externalisation was not the second-best solution, since there was just no other solution available.

These considerations can be summarised by the following general hypothesis:

> H4: De-escalation is always policy-specific and is triggered by a second-best, temporarily binding agreement.

Design and data

To capture the policy-specific escalation and de-escalation processes and identify policy-specific turning points, where escalation peaks and turns into de-escalation, we analyze the development of the politicisation of policy-specific policymaking processes using Policy Process Analysis (PPA) (Bojar et al., 2023; Kriesi et al., 2024, Chapter 3), a comprehensive method for the data collection and analysis of public policymaking debates. In its design, PPA draws upon protest event analysis (PEA) (Hutter, 2014), contentious episode analysis (CEA) (Bojar et al., 2021), and political claims analysis (PCA) (Koopmans & Statham, 1999) but broadens its focus beyond contention to policymaking debates more generally. Similar to these other methods, PPA is an event-based methodology that focuses on identifying distinct *policy actions* in the media undertaken by various actors and describing how they unfold over time. The unit of analysis is an action, i.e., 'an act or a claim by an actor with a prominent role in the political world that has a direct or indirect relevance for the policy debate' (Bojar et al., 2023). First, all relevant actions covering the policy-specific debates during the COVID-19 crisis are identified using the Factiva platform. For the EU-level debates, the identification in Factiva is based on large news agencies and the international press, where one searches for the relevant actions using keywords.[2] Next, the selected articles are coded based on a common core of variables characterising each action, among which are the actor undertaking the action, the action type, issue addressed, direction of action, and target actors (Bojar et al., 2023). The coded data includes quantitative indicators and action strings, which allow for the analysis of the data in more detail. The dataset used here for the analysis of the development of politicisation at the EU level during COVID-19 includes 3'355 actions for the period from March 10, 2020, to December 31, 2021. We closely supervised the coders, noted down any grey-area situations, and tried to solve them together with the coders. Online Appendix B provides more details of PPA.

To gauge the escalation and de-escalation of policymaking processes, the concept of politicisation will be used, relying on a broadly shared understanding (e.g., Hutter & Grande, 2014) that builds on Schattschneider's (1975) notion of the 'expansion of the scope of conflict within a political system.' For the present purposes, we distinguish between two conceptual dimensions that jointly operationalise this concept: salience (visibility) and actor polarisation (conflict, direction). Salience corresponds to the number of actions in a given period, in our case, a week. Polarisation is defined as the product of the weekly share of actions supportive of and opposing the policy proposal in question. This product reaches a maximum of .25 if both shares are equal. A minimum of 0 is obtained if all actions are either supportive or opposing. To re-scale this product to the 0–1 range, it is divided by

.25.[3] The politicisation score for a given policy domain in each week corresponds to the respective product of weekly salience and polarisation. Politicisation and polarisation are system-level measures characterising the entire (policy-specific) system of action. This is why, for actor-specific analyses, polarisation is replaced as an indicator of conflict intensity by the actors' support for the policy proposals and target actors. The two types of support are combined in an overall indicator of support that ranges from –1 (opposition to proposal and target) to +1 (support of proposal and target).

For each policy domain, it is possible to identify the relevant coordination mechanisms based on the actors and target actors involved. For the coordination by top leaders, we coded the eight most influential leaders associated with the main coalitions – van der Leyen and Michel (EU), Merkel and Macron (the French-German couple), Conte and Sanchez (solidarity), Kurz and Rutte (Frugal4), and Orban and Morawieczki (V4). Coordination by these top leaders is indicated by their actions and by actions targeting them. The other types of coordination can only be identified for actions for which we have information on target actors, i.e., for roughly half of the actions (54 percent). Coordination by interinstitutional EU networks is indicated by actions where both actors and targets belong to EU authorities. Actions involving cross-level networks are coded as actions where EU authorities address national leaders/governments or where the latter address the former. These binary indicators are rather rough, since they do not capture the quality of the interaction. However, they are practical since they are easy to code and do not require information that is often not present in the sources used for PPA. The results based on these indicators will err on the side of caution, since more detailed indicators will likely be stronger and more precise. Finally, transnational networks are actions where member state governments address each other. For the identification of strategic mechanisms (such as rhetorical action) and the characteristics of the binding agreements, we rely on the action strings included in the dataset, the original articles that were used for the construction of the dataset, as well as the secondary literature dealing with the various policymaking processes during the COVID-19 crisis.

Overall dynamics of politicisation

Figure 1 presents the overall politicisation of policymaking at the EU level during the COVID-19 crisis based on three-weekly moving averages. The vertical lines in the figure separate the three waves of the pandemic from each other. The overall dynamics clearly differ between the waves. The politicisation of policymaking reaches its peak right at the beginning of the crisis. Then it de-escalates throughout wave 1. In wave 2, policymaking escalates once again, but much less than at the outset of the pandemic, and it

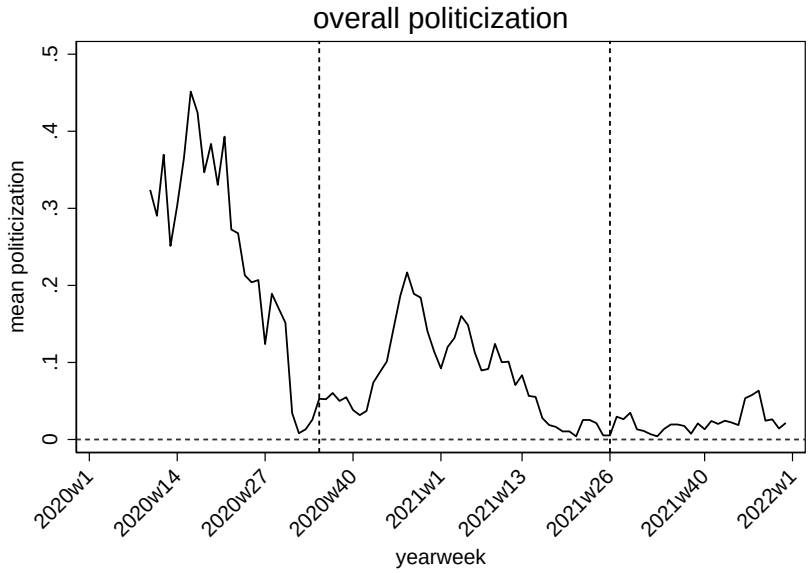

Figure 1. Dynamics of politicisation at the EU level during the COVID-19 crisis: three-weekly moving averages.

[1)]Vertical lines indicate the start of a new wave/phase.

slowly de-escalates until it peters out, never to rise again in wave 3. This overall pattern is important because it documents that EU policymaking initially reacted very rapidly to the threat of the pandemic, took on the renewed, but lesser challenge during wave 2, and was no longer relevant during wave 3.

However, as observed previously, crises are multifaceted phenomena. Thus, the COVID-19 crisis was a double crisis: a public health and an economic crisis. In analyzing the policymaking processes during this crisis, we distinguish between six policy domains: border closures and reopening, public health (excluding vaccination), economic and fiscal issues, vaccination, and a residual category which includes mainly institutional issues. These categories, respectively, account for 16.0, 9.1, 14.8, 25.7, 20.3, and 5.8 percent of the actions involved. Figure 2 presents the *policy-domain-specific escalation and de-escalation* processes of politicisation during the COVID-19 crisis across domains. The figure confirms that the politicisation of policymaking, its timing and intensity, is, indeed, policy-domain-specific. However, all processes have in common that, at a given moment, they de-escalate rather rapidly, which suggests that they all benefited from some de-escalation mechanism and policy settlement.

In three policy domains – border control, public health, and economic policy – politicisation escalates right at the beginning of the pandemic and

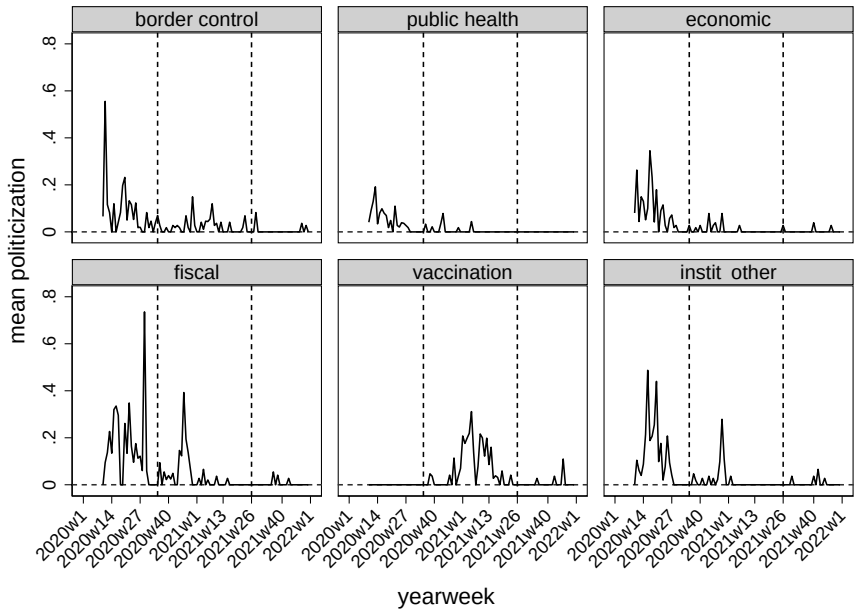

Figure 2. Dynamics of politicisation during the COVID-19 crisis at the EU level, by policy domain[1)].

[1)]Vertical lines indicate the start of a new wave/phase.

then rapidly de-escalates throughout the remainder of the first wave. The early escalation is most impressive in the case of border control. In this policy domain, politicisation immediately peaks in the first half of March 2020, and equally rapidly de-escalates, followed by a minor peak in late May-early June. Subsequently, border closures are hardly politicised anymore. In public health, in contrast, we generally see little politicisation. Only at the very outset of the crisis, similar to border closures but much less intensely, did public health policies lead to a limited politicisation that rapidly de-escalated after the early peak. In economic policy, the early peak is somewhat more sustained, but after mid-May, politicisation also declined, never to rise again. As we shall see, these three policy domains have in common that they all benefited from accommodating agreements allowing for opt-outs and forbearance. In addition, public health and economic policy also saw some temporary capacity building.

The other three domains present different processes of escalation and de-escalation. Fiscal policymaking is also concentrated in the first wave, but it escalates until the end of the first wave and culminates in the second half of July, when the long EU summit of the European Council adopted the Recovery and Resilience Fund (RRF). After this summit, de-escalation is immediate. However, politicisation resumed once again in November and

December 2020, when the RRF and the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) had to be ratified by the EU authorities. Only after these decisions had been taken did the EU politicisation of fiscal issues die down. The fifth sub-graph referring to vaccination shows that the decision-making about joint procurement during the first wave did not give rise to any politicisation in public at all. It was only during the roll-out of vaccinations in the second wave that the corresponding policymaking escalated, reaching a final turning point in March 2021, after which politicisation de-escalated more slowly than in other policy domains to reach an insignificant level in April 2021. Finally, other issues (mainly institutional issues) present a pattern of politicisation that resembles that of the fiscal issues, which is not so surprising after all, because institutional issues were partly related to fiscal policy. These three policy domains have in common that they involve centralised capacity building, and some opting out and forbearance, which, however, backfired.

Figure 3 presents the distribution of the *four types of coordination* overall and per policy domain. The first result to note is the predominance of cross-level coordination, which is the most important form of coordination overall and in each policy domain, except for public health, where interinstitutional coordination is most frequent. Overall, the four forms of coordination distinguished here are involved in no less than two-thirds of all the actions for which we could identify a target actor. In fiscal policy and public health policy, two domains where the EU has rather limited competence, the corresponding share is highest with 78.2 and 74.3 percent. This corresponds to what we might have expected, but the differences with the other domains are not very pronounced. Coordination by top leaders has been most important in fiscal policy, where it is the top leaders who made up for the lack of EU

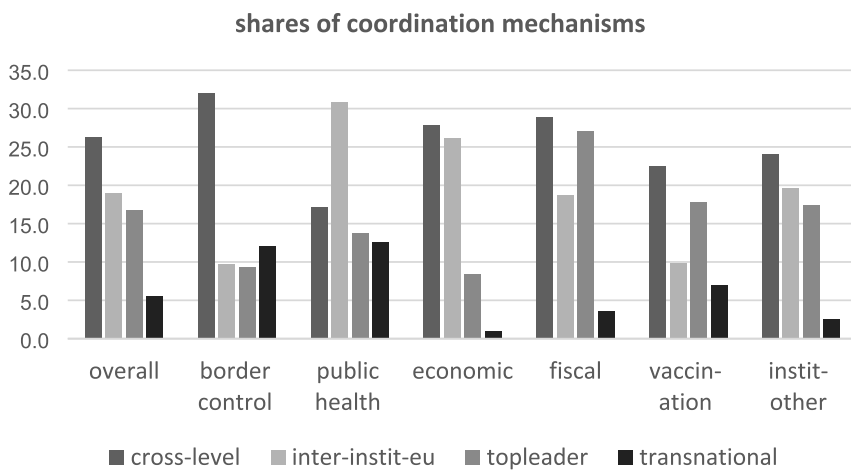

Figure 3. Distribution of coordination types by policy domain: percentages (only actions with known target actor).

competence. Compared to the other two forms of coordination, transnational coordination is generally much less important (with an overall share of only 5.6 percent). Relatively speaking, it is most prevalent in public health (12.6 percent) and border control (12.0 percent).

In the following sections, we shall focus on border control, economic and fiscal policy, and vaccination, given that public health hardly gave rise to escalation at all and that the residual category is of a somewhat heterogenous composition. We first describe the escalation and de-escalation processes in the specific policy episodes in more detail, presenting in each case the dynamics of actor-specific weekly salience and support for the two types of actors that dominated EU policymaking in the public debate during the COVID-19 crisis – member state governments and EU actors, who account respectively for 44.8 and 39.9 percent of the policymaking actions at the EU level. All remaining actors together make up only 14.7 percent of the respective actions. Parties, in line with the notion that COVID-19 did not lend itself to partisan mobilisation, played virtually no role at all.

Escalation and de-escalation

Border closures and reopening

Border closures constitute a paradigmatic case of opting out and forbearance. Figure 4 presents the corresponding dynamics of policymaking – salience on the left and support on the right. The vertical dashed lines indicate the peak weeks of policy-specific politicisation. There were two highly salient moments with regard to border closures during the first wave – an initial scramble of unilateral border closures by the member states right at the outset of the pandemic, and a later moment of reopening of the borders by the member states. The second (twin) peak, when borders were opened up again, was much less visible in the previous Figure 2 because, although highly salient, it was hardly polarised at all.

As the crisis hit, escalation was immediate: member states acted fast to contain the new, unknown threat by *closing their borders*. On March 7, Austria was the first country to close its borders to Italy. Slovenia followed right away. After the WHO had declared Europe the new epicentre of the pandemic and the US government had shut its borders for travellers from the Schengen area on March 13, the dam broke (Genschel & Jachtenfuchs, 2021, p. 6): Following the security logic, one member state after the other shut its borders by imposing entry bans and temporary border controls, temporarily opting out of the Schengen and single market rules. Even compared to the refugee crises, the speed and scale of internal border closures during the first phase of COVID-19 were of an unprecedented magnitude (Wolff et al., 2020; Blauberger et al., 2023). By the end of March, the Single Market and the

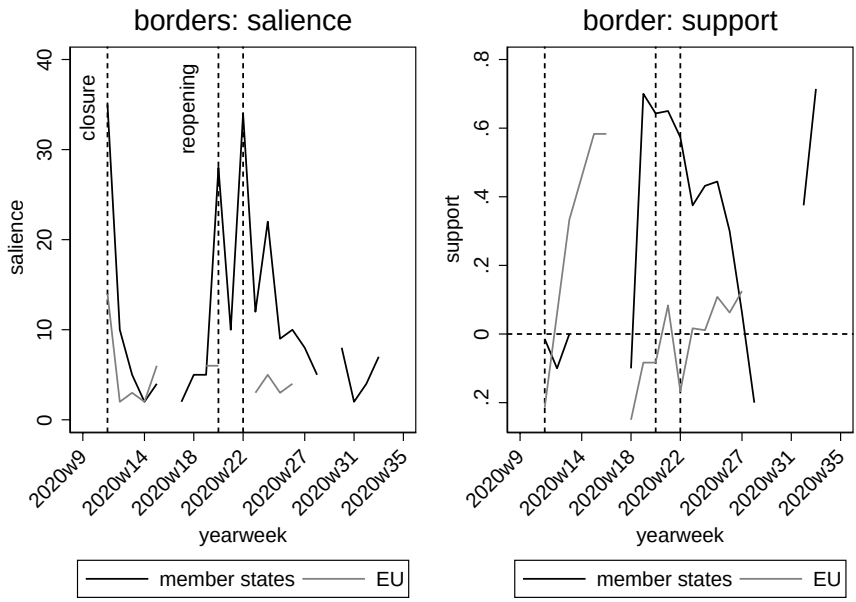

Figure 4. Escalation and de-escalation of politicisation (among member states during the first wave) of border restrictions and reopening[1)].

[1)]Vertical lines indicate the peaks or turning points – salience = weekly raw number of actions; support = three-weekly moving averages. Breaks in the lines indicate that there was no more than one weekly action for the respective actor.

Schengen Area were rigidly re-bordered. The distinction between external and internal borders lost meaning as governments refused entry to all non-nationals.

The EU authorities were unable to coordinate the stampede of border closures. The Commission initially opposed the closures. As is shown in the right-hand graph of Figure 4, EU authorities were not at all supportive of these measures. The Commission argued that any border restrictions imposed inside the European Union's zone of free travel to contain the spread of the coronavirus needed to be coordinated to ensure they were not counter-productive (e.g., threatening supply chains) – to no avail. After having defended open borders during the first weeks of March, the Commission changed course and recognised their legitimacy, both internally and externally (Thym & Bornemann, 2021, p. 1155).

In an act of damage control, the Commission then tried to coordinate internal transborder issues as much as possible. Thus, it backed a proposal to set up 'green lanes' for trucks and other priority vehicles (on March 16 and 23), aiming at coming to terms with the traffic jams that had formed around crossing points on internal borders. It urged member states to simplify paperwork for lorry drivers and to streamline any health screening to

ensure that supply chains to European businesses survive. The Commission also released a list of 'critical workers' (on March 30) that ought to be allowed continued freedom of movement across internal borders despite emergency measures. The issue of these cross-border workers was primarily solved by cross-level networks – pre-existing (Coreper, IPCR (the EU's Integrated Political Crisis Response)) or newly established ones (the DG Home Group), as well as by horizontal transnational (regional) networks (Blauberger et al., 2023). As these cross-level and transnational networks took care of the practical problems, the politicisation of the border restrictions de-escalated both in terms of salience and polarisation.

The double peak in late May or early June refers to the *reopening of the borders* across the member states. Again, one country after the other decided to reopen, and once everybody had reopened, the issue disappeared from the scene. The return to normality was surprisingly swift, facilitated by a network of *transnational cooperation* (Thym & Bornemann, 2021, p. 1151). Both the Commission and the Council supported the transnational coordination, the Council adopting a series of recommendations from June onwards (Freudlsperger et al., 2023, p. 14). The success of the transnational approach explains the rapid de-escalation. Some conflicts remained, but they were no longer salient.

In the second wave in autumn 2020 (not shown in Figure 4 because of too few actions), a relapse to sweeping border controls did not occur. As the second wave took off in August 2020, some member states issued warnings and travel restrictions with regard to 'high-risk' countries such as Spain. However, in spite of their polarising thrust, these reactions were few compared to the first wave and did not develop an escalation momentum. In their response to the second wave, most member states cautiously refrained from reintroducing sweeping internal border controls. Instead, they resorted to alternative measures, particularly the obligation to go into quarantine or to get a negative test result before departure. Such measures genuinely pursued public health objectives distinct from those of border controls (Thym & Bornemann, 2021, p. 1150).

Let us add that a different form of border closure led to the initial, limited conflict in the *public health* domain. At the very beginning of the pandemic, several member states, among which were France and Germany, decreed an export ban for protective medical equipment to avoid shortages at home. This ban struck Italy above all, which needed such equipment. Instead, on March 11, Italy obtained a highly publicised shipment of face masks and ventilators from China. On the same day, the EU reacted by rhetorical action: Commission President van der Leyen publicly declared that 'at this moment in Europe we are all Italians.'[4] Subsequently, under pressure from the Commission, the bans were rapidly lifted – e.g., by Germany on March 19, which led to the de-escalation of the episode.

Economic policy

Faced with the economic catastrophe induced by the pandemic – the most severe global economic contraction since at least the 1930s (Gopinath, 2020), the first to react were again the national governments (see Truchlewski et al., 2025, Chapter 7). The swift unilateral responses of the member states to save their national economies put into question the very fundamentals of the Single Market, i.e., of the EU's core domain. In economic policy, the EU has vast competencies, as the Commission is the guardian of the single market, and the ECB is responsible for the EU's monetary policy. As is shown in the left-hand graph of Figure 5, this implies that the EU authorities were much more present in the respective policymaking processes than in the previous domain and, in particular, more present than member states throughout the first wave. The salience curve for the EU authorities in economic policymaking peaks right at the beginning of the pandemic as they immediately followed up on the member states' reactions. The Commission passed two key accommodation measures to protect the Single Market: First, on March 19, it adopted the State Aid Temporary Framework (SATF) to enable member states to use the full flexibility foreseen under state aid rules to support their economy, allowing them to rush through support to companies while preserving the integrity of the internal market and ensuring a level playing

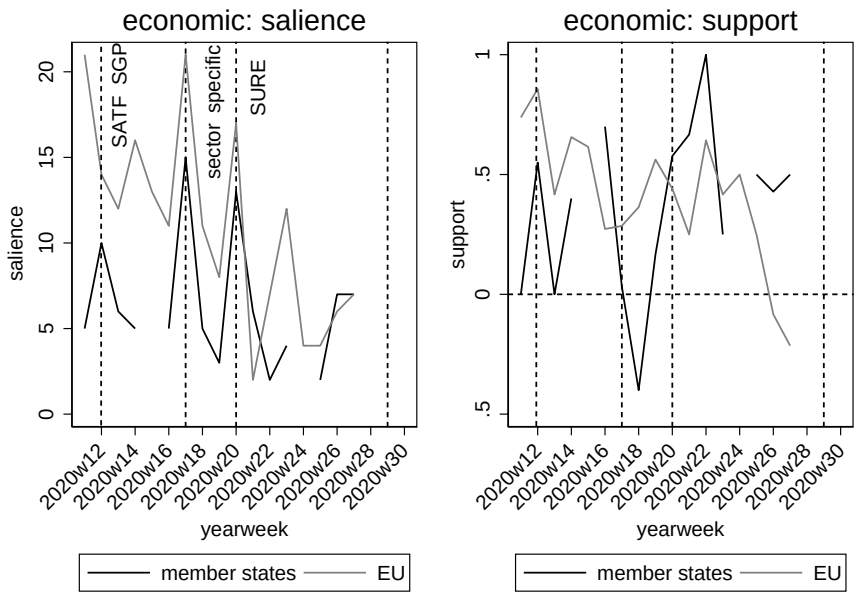

Figure 5. Escalation and de-escalation of politicisation of economic policy[1)].

[1)]Vertical lines indicate the peaks or turning points – salience = weekly raw number of actions; support = three-weekly moving averages.

field. Then, on March 20, it proposed the activation, for the first time, of the general escape clause under the Stability and Growth Pact (SGP). Both of these measures offered opt-out opportunities for member states to come to terms with the economic challenge that they seized right away. Thus, only two days after having adopted the temporary framework, the Commission approved a proposal by France to guarantee up to EUR 300 bn in state aid to ease the economic burden of the coronavirus, and on March 22 and 24, it approved two voluminous German state aid schemes. The twin peaks in Figure 5 result from conflicts over the support of specific sectors – air transport, agriculture, tourism, and some capacity building. The sectoral conflicts pitted richer against poorer member states, with the latter complaining that the former unjustly benefited from the suspension of state aid rules. The capacity building concerned SURE – temporary Support to mitigate Unemployment Risks in an Emergency, a credit instrument to help set up national job retention schemes, which was adopted by the European Council on May 19 (the second of the twin peaks) and proved to be a considerable success (European Commission, 2023: 1).

Fiscal policy

Fiscal policy is the paradigmatic case of temporary capacity building. Again, the EU authorities reacted rapidly and decisively, as shown in Figure 6. Finance ministers met on March 9 to discuss the first fiscal response of the EU, and the Eurogroup met on March 16 to coordinate a common fiscal response. Then the member state governments took over. On March 25, the debate on the RRF, the most important measure in this policy domain, was seriously launched by a *letter from nine southern European member states* led by France (the solidarity coalition) that called upon the Commission to adopt a common debt instrument. Initially, this proposal was opposed by the Frugal 4 and Germany, who clashed for the first time with the members of the solidarity coalition at the 14-hour all-night teleconference of the Eurogroup on April 8–9 (Schelkle, 2021, p. 48). On 15 April, the European Parliament sided with the solidarity coalition by passing a resolution with the votes of the four mainstream party groups. In the week of April 22-28, the policymaking process peaked as the EU leaders took a *decisive step towards the RRF*. The lines of conflict were still the same, but Germany started to change sides in an attempt to de-escalate the conflict and prepare for a settlement. While it continued to oppose Coronabonds, it was now ready to endorse the recovery plan. Macron and Merkel pressured the ministers to agree, and on April 23, the heads of state and governments concurred to back an 'EU Recovery Fund,' which had still to be worked out in terms of financing, size, and governance. The Commission President and the Council President also endorsed such a plan. After this basic agreement, the debate on the RRF

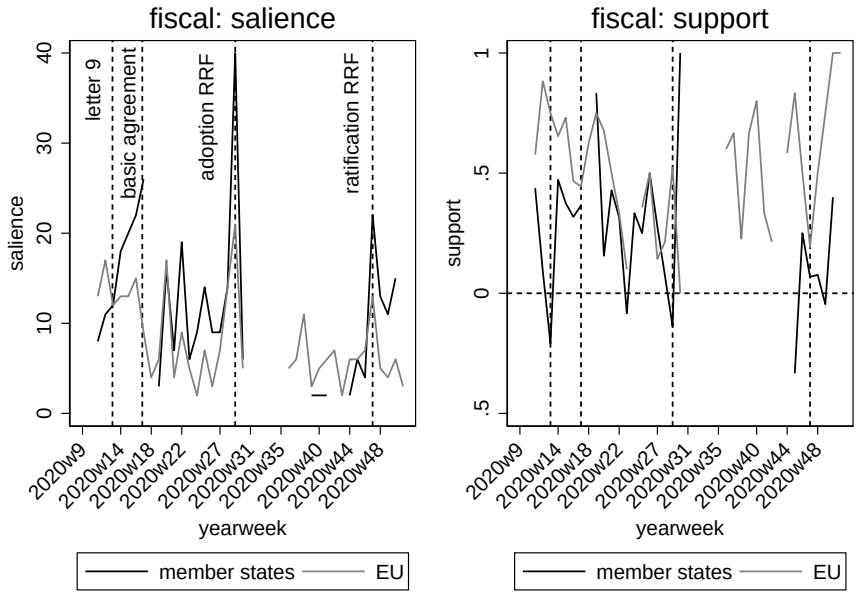

Figure 6. Escalation and de-escalation of politicisation of fiscal policy[1)].

[1)]Vertical lines indicate the peaks or turning points – salience = weekly raw number of actions; support = three-weekly moving averages.

immediately de-escalated temporarily. Three weeks later, activities related to the planned RRF culminated in the German-French proposal of a one-off EUR 500 bn fund, which was generally supported by the EU authorities and the member states.

The dramatic final negotiations of the RRF at the very long summit in the week of July 13–21 mark the second peak in the series, where the Frugal 4 clashed for the last time with the other member states. The Frugal 4 had accepted the principle of allowing the Commission to borrow within the multi-annual budget, which created an issue linkage between negotiations of the recovery fund with the MFF that they could turn to their advantage (Schelkle, 2021, p. 49). However, they still strove to limit the share of grants and pushed for a larger share of loans. The linkage to the MFF also allowed the German government to explicitly avoid long-term lock-in effects. The findings of Waas and Rittberger (2024, p. 659) lend support to the claim that the German U-turn in these negotiations 'does not signify a larger shift towards fiscal integration but will likely remain a temporary U-turn instead.' The settlement with respect to the RRF at this summit led to an immediate de-escalation of conflicts and to a large temporary consensus.

However, after the adoption of the RRF by the European Council on July 21, it still had to be ratified together with the MFF by the European Council and the European Parliament. The last peak refers to the politicisation

of the ratification process in November-December 2020. Support among member states reached a low point in mid-November as Hungary and Poland threatened to veto the EU budget and the RRF over plans to tie funding to the respect for the rule of law. Eventually, the EP and the EC reached an agreement on the rule of law conditionality, negotiated by Germany, then holder of the presidency of the Council of the EU. Under the deal, a watered-down version of the Rule of Law Conditionality Regulation was adopted and entered into force on January 1, 2021, but would not be applied until the Commission had consulted with the member states on a set of guidelines on how the regulation would be implemented and Hungary and Poland had had the chance to challenge its legality in the ECJ (Kelemen, 2024, p. 12). With this solution, a clear case of forbearance, the RRF, and the MFF were finally adopted, and fiscal policymaking was no longer salient.

However, the highly polarising issue of rule-of-law conditionality was not definitely settled with the adoption of the RRF and the MFF. If the EU authorities had long been reluctant to apply sanctions to the increasingly illiberal democracies in Hungary and Poland, in the aftermath of the adoption of the RRF, the tolerant mood in the EU changed as a result of the increasing public salience of rule-of-law issues, the increasing threat to EU core policies posed by the illiberal governments of Poland and Hungary, and the increasing implausibility of excuses for inaction (Blauberger & Sedelmeier, 2024; Kelemen, 2024, p. 12). By the end of 2022, the EU was withholding over EUR 28 bn from Hungary. However, even after this change of policy, the EU did not stick to its line; instead, it fell back on forbearance, deciding to release EUR 10.2 bn, roughly one-third of the EU funds having been withheld from Hungary (Kelemen, 2024, p. 17).

Vaccination

This is another showcase of politicisation by member states. We shall present it just briefly. The coordination between member states in the negotiation of joint vaccine procurement and an 'à la carte' arrangement adopted in these negotiations in the summer of 2020 secured their support for joint procurement (Becker & Gehring, 2023). However, the tight intergovernmental oversight over the Commission restricted the efficiency of the vaccine rollout later on, which led to the escalation of conflict over the rollout. The opt-outs that were agreed upon in the joint procurement decisions backfired in the rollout phase. In this case, de-escalation succeeded as a result of a lack of credibility of the opposing coalition, informal coordination, and, above all, the eventual delivery of the vaccines by the pharmaceutical industry.

It was in the rollout phase that politicisation escalated. As in the other episodes, escalation was again driven by the member states, as shown in

Figure 7. Compared to the UK and the US, the rollout in the EU was delayed, especially in the countries that had opted for more flexible and cheaper procurement strategies. By February 2021, it became clear that the member states that had ordered less than they could have, and mostly from AstraZeneca and Johnson & Johnson, had made a mistake (Deters, 2024, p. 7). BioNTech, Pfizer, and Moderna were the first to get the green light from the European Medicines Agency (EMA). Their vaccines turned out to be more efficient. AstraZeneca and Johnson & Johnson not only got EMA authorisation belatedly (by the end of January and in March 2021, respectively), but they also announced severe delays in supplying the vaccines. They would eventually deliver just a third of the agreed volume before the third quarter of 2021 (European Court of Auditors, 2022, p. 34). There were also shortfalls in the supply of BioNTech-Pfizer vaccines in January and February. Still, it was the delays of the cheap vaccines that proved to be most explosive.

The uneven roll-out divided the governments that had followed a risky procurement strategy from those that had hedged their bets. In March 2021, in response to vaccine shortages in their countries, the heads of six governments of the former group, four of them right-wing populists, launched a public campaign in which they alleged having been short-changed in the roll-out. The initiative, which marks the peak salience in Figure 7, was orchestrated by Austrian Chancellor Kurz and supported by Bulgaria, Croatia,

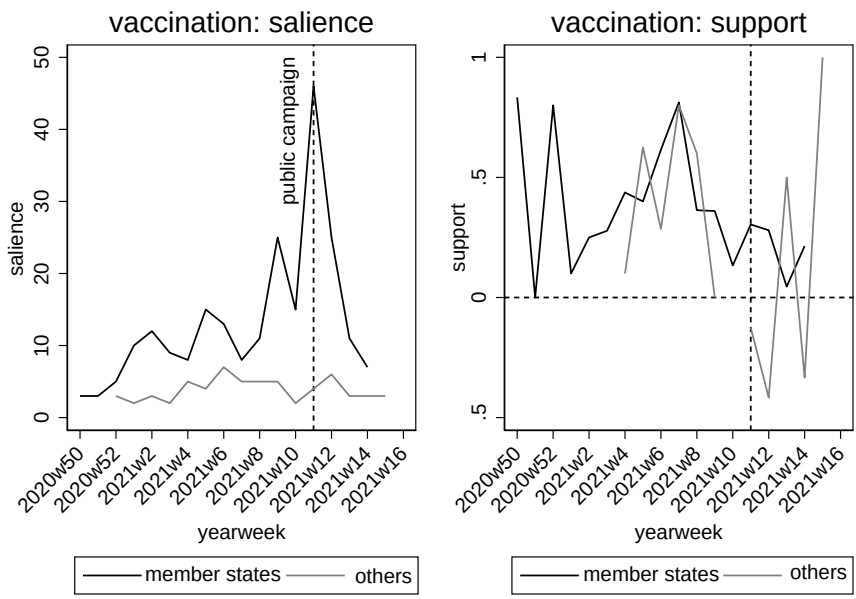

Figure 7. Escalation and de-escalation of politicisation of vaccine procurement[1)].

[1)]Vertical lines indicate the peaks or turning points – salience = weekly raw number of actions; support = three-weekly moving averages.

Czechia, Latvia, and Slovenia. In a joint letter to the Presidents of the Commission and the European Council, the group claimed, in bad faith (Deters, 2024, p. 8), to have 'discovered' only 'in recent days' that deliveries of vaccine doses were not being implemented on an equal basis following the pro rata population key. The Commission, in its reply, rebuffed the false allegations and pointed out that it would be up to the member states to find an agreement if they wanted to return to the pro-rata basis. At the March 25 summit, the European Council delegated the issue to the permanent representatives. The obstruction by the Kurz group ended up backfiring (Deters, 2024, p. 10).

The right-hand graph in Figure 7 shows the support of member states and other actors, in this case mainly pharmaceutical firms. De-escalation was slower and more protracted than in the previous episodes because the implementation of the EU's decision depended on a third party – the pharmaceutical industry – that was hard for policymakers to control at any level. The frenzy eventually died down, and politicisation de-escalated once the vaccination campaign got off the ground in April 2021 (see Figure 2; European Court of Auditors, 2022, p. 10). Supplementary Pfizer/BioNTech deliveries enabled the EU to make up for the shortfall of deliveries from AstraZeneca and Johnson & Johnson and to catch up with the other countries. On May 19, 2021, the President of the Commission signed an additional contract with Pfizer/BioNTech that covered 900 million vaccine doses to be delivered in 2022 and 2023, the biggest COVID-19 vaccine contract of all (European Court of Auditors, 2022, p. 29). Importantly, this was not only the biggest procurement contract, which dominated the EU's vaccine portfolio until the end of 2023, but it was also the only one in which the Joint Negotiation Team (including the member states) was not involved.

Drivers of escalation and coordination of policymaking

It is possible, in a more formal way, to substantiate the claim that the various forms of coordination contributed to joint agreements in policymaking at the EU level, provided we accept the assumption – plausible, we think – that actions supporting the substantive policy-specific proposals and/or other actors involved in the policymaking process contribute to such agreements. For this analysis, we use the indicators for coordination by top leaders, inter-institutional networks, and cross-level networks described in the design section. The question is to what extent these three coordination mechanisms are associated with the substantive support for the issue-specific proposals, with the support of target actors, and with the combined support of proposals and target actors?[5] For the subset of actions with coded target actors, we analyze these associations both at the aggregate level of weekly support and at the level of individual actions to check for the robustness of the results. The pattern of effects turns out to be similar across levels of analysis, but it is more

clear-cut at the level of individual actions, which is why we focus on these results here. The individual-level OLS regression effects for the three types of support are presented in Figure 8. Figure A1 in the Appendix provides a comparison of these individual-level effects with the corresponding aggregate-level effects, and Tables A1-A2 in the Appendix present the detailed results.

First, we observe that the pattern of effects for the three types of support is generally similar. Second, the type of action in the policymaking process makes a difference: actions directly involved in negotiating (agenda-setting or decision-making) are more supportive of proposals and target actors than other types of actions (which mostly consist of verbal claims). This means that the overall debate has been more critical of the proposed measures than the actions involved in the concrete policy steps.

Most importantly, we find that all three types of coordination are associated with support for joint agreements. For interinstitutional coordination, this result applies generally across all issues, confirming the results of Smeets and Beach (2020, 2023) and Smeets (2024). For the coordination by top leaders, it also applies across all issues, in line with expectations. However, the leaders of the V4 and the Frugal4 coalition, i.e., of the coalitions

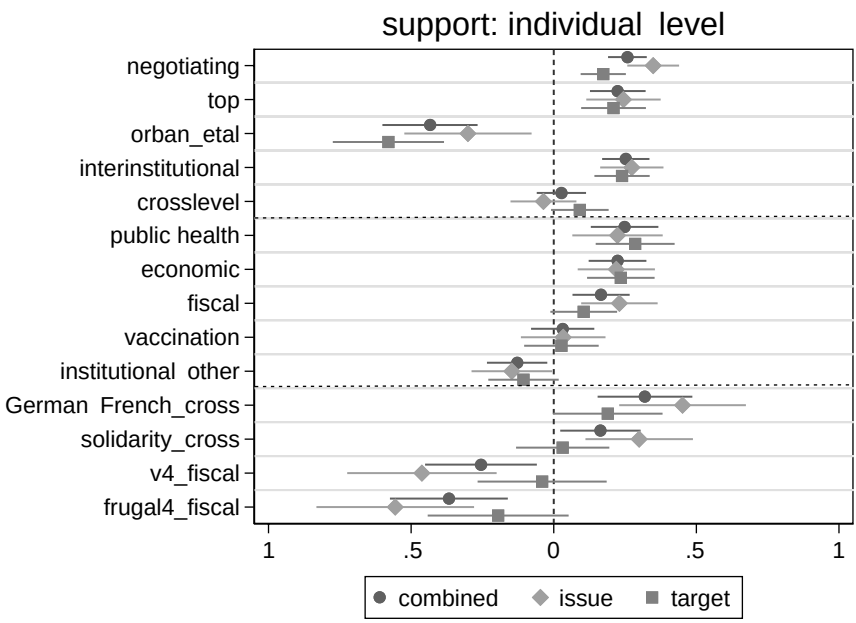

Figure 8. Factors associated with support at the individual level: OLS regression coefficients and standard errors for issue support, target actor support, and combined support[1)].

[1)]only actions with target actors: $n = 1670$.

most opposed to the proposed solutions in fiscal policy but also opposed to other policy measures during the pandemic, clearly hampered the policymaking process. Their opposition to joint agreements constitutes the strongest effect at both levels of analysis. At the individual level (but not at the aggregate level where the respective effect is too imprecise to be reported), this adversarial leadership effect is enhanced by the adversarial effects of the actions of the two coalitions in fiscal policymaking. In terms of cross-level coordination, there is no general effect. Cross-level coordination is only associated with the support of joint agreements by two specific coalitions of member states – the German-French couple and the solidarity coalition. It is these two coalitions that effectively cooperated with the EU authorities in the policymaking process during the COVID-19 pandemic across policy domains. As for variation between policy domains, we find that policymaking was more consensual in public health, economic, and even fiscal policy than in border control (the reference category), vaccination policy, and, especially, the residual policy domain (which mainly includes institutional issues, such as rule-of-law issues).

Conclusion

The analysis of the most important policy-specific escalation and de-escalation processes in the politicisation of EU policymaking during the COVID-19 crisis has provided some support for the four hypotheses. First, the escalation of conflicts has, indeed, mainly been driven by the member states. In the border closure episodes, the member states unilaterally closed down their borders, which damaged both the single market and the Schengen area and called for a reaction from EU authorities. In the public health episode, the member states briefly escalated politicisation by introducing an export ban, which also incited the EU authorities to react. In the RRF episode, coalitions of member states opposed each other regarding the detailed arrangements of the fund and its link to the MFF and the rule-of-law conditionality, which threatened to end in an impasse. In the vaccination rollout episode, it was again the member states that clashed. Only in economic policy, where they had the strongest competencies, EU authorities dominated policymaking from the start and succeeded in keeping the initiative.

Second, the crisis characteristics did not prevent the escalation of politicisation in several moments of the crisis, but they facilitated the de-escalation of conflicts across all policy domains. Thus, the multifaceted character of the crisis implied that the configuration of the adversarial coalitions varied from one escalation process to the other, which made for cross-cutting conflicts, i.e., a condition that serves to moderate each one of them. The symmetric, existential, and exogenous character of the crisis enhanced reciprocal

sympathy and accommodation among member states, which generally facilitated settlements. This point is indirectly substantiated by the fact that in none of the policy-specific politicisation processes did we witness a spillover of the escalation processes into an open challenge of the polity.

This suggests that we should be cautious in generalising the results for the COVID-19 crisis to other crises. Indeed, de-escalation proved to be more difficult in the asymmetric crises that the EU experienced more recently, and which provided greater opportunities for party entrepreneurs to exploit the crisis for their own purposes. Thus, in the refugee crisis of 2015-16, the EU was unable to share the burden of accommodating refugees among member states. However, it still did find a second-best solution – the EU-Turkey agreement, which allowed the de-escalation of the intense politicisation. In this case, externalisation was the solution that did the trick (Kriesi et al., 2024).

The de-escalation processes all benefited from four coordination mechanisms. Coordination by top leaders, inter-institutional EU, and cross-level coordination proved to be relevant across policy domains. Coordination among top leaders, arguably, becomes particularly acute in crisis situations, while the other three mechanisms operate more routinely. They are involved in the implementation of policymaking at all times. In crisis policymaking, the coordination among top leaders is complemented by the other three forms of coordination, and it crucially depends on the puzzling and powering that takes place in these other institutional coordination networks. However, in such situations, it takes the engagement of the top leaders to impose the binding agreements that break the escalation of politicisation. More specifically, as we have seen, the contribution of cross-level coordination was selective in the sense that only the German-French couple and the solidarity coalition successfully cooperated with EU authorities. In contrast, the adversarial actions of the V4 and Frugal4 coalitions, as well as an ad hoc coalition in the case of vaccination, and their top leaders undermined the search for joint settlements, especially in fiscal policy. Transnational coordination, supported by EU guidelines, was most relevant in the case of border controls. Let us add that other strategic mechanisms, which we did not analyze in detail in this study, also played a non-negligible role. Rhetorical action was important in the initial public health episode and, as Ferrera et al. (2021) and Schelkle (2021) have documented in more detail in the RRF debate. Issue linkages with the MFF primarily facilitated the adoption of the RRF (see Schelkle, 2021).

As shown in the analysis of the individual policymaking episodes, it was the adoption of second-best policy agreements that stopped the escalation. Thus, in all four domains that we considered in more detail, settlements allowing for opting out and forbearance contributed to de-escalation. Capacity building by mostly temporary federalisation contributed to de-

escalation in all four domains as well, most importantly in fiscal policy (the RRF), but also in public health policy (the reinforcement of the European Health Union (EHU)), economic policy (SURE), and the joint procurement of vaccines. Conditional federalisation was briefly introduced into the debate on fiscal policy. However, after the ESM experience, it proved to be too toxic, and the idea to rely on it was quickly dropped. The ESM serves as a counterfactual example that not all policy-specific agreements work in the expected way. Some prove to be utter failures. The failure of the ESM as a suitable policy solution during the COVID-19 pandemic points to the importance of the sequence of crises and to the role of the impact of policies adopted in previous crises. Policy makers learn from their experience with previous policies, and the solutions they adopt in subsequent crises build on this experience. As (Heclo (2010) [[1974]], p. 315) argued some time ago, the most important manifestation of political learning in policy development is the impact of previous policy itself. Policymaking proceeds incrementally and builds on policy legacies. In this paper, we have focused on the coordination mechanisms that facilitate the search for and adoption of second-best solutions. We have not discussed the 'puzzling' of the policymakers within these coordination settings. But there is no doubt that the various types of coordination allowed for learning processes to contribute to the second-best solutions that triggered the de-escalation of policymaking – e.g., for the policy of the ECB, see Quaglia and Verdun (2023); for the NGEU, see Ladi and Tsarouhas (2020).

Finally, as we also observed, the effect of policy settlements may be only temporary. Escalation may resume as some member states attempt to get specific advantages once again. In the case of the rule-of-law conditionality, we have seen that the agreement reached at the ratification stage of the RRF did not hold, and challenges by Hungary in particular resumed later on. This is a perfect illustration of the major tenet of the polity approach, which has inspired this analysis: the EU's 'experimental mode of policymaking' is open-ended and crisis-prone (Ferrera et al. 2024a, p. 717). But, as the present analysis of the way the EU managed the COVID-19crisis showed, and as Friedrich Hölderlin had observed a long time ago, 'where there is danger, salvation also grows' ('wo Gefahr ist wächst das Rettende auch').

Notes

1. Public opinion is an important factor in the increased politicisation of the policymaking process in crises (Van der Brug et al., 2022, p. 11). However, as argued by Vries and Catherine (2022), the politicisation of public opinion is, to a large extent, the result of its mobilisation by political elites. Political entrepreneurs may not be able to move public preferences, but they may make conflicts linked to EU policymaking more salient in the public and contribute to the polarisation of the national public. Thus, the Greek government succeeded in

mobilising the Greek public against the bailout conditions imposed by the memorandum of the EU in the early summer of 2015, and the British political entrepreneurs from the conservative right succeeded in doing so in the 2016 Brexit referendum.

2. The keyword selection consisted of translated versions of the following string: (coronavirus or covid) and (law* or measure* or decree* or decision*) and (European Union*), where the European Union was replaced with member state names for the coding of policy actions at the member state level.
3. For present purposes, this operationalisation of polarisation has an advantage over distance scores in that it does not rely on pre-defined actor pairs between whom a distance is measured.
4. https://www.ansa.it/english/news/politics/2020/03/11/were-all-italians-von-der-leyen_d1d4067c-c9ed-4b8c-96c9-2dd0f4fcfd5a.html. The Bild-Zeitung followed up her call, on April 1, 2020, by declaring that 'We cry with you for your dead. We feel with you because we are like brothers. Come fratelli' ('Wir weinen mit Euch um Eure Toten. Wir fühlen mit Euch weil wir wie Brüder sind. Come fratelli')
5. We do not analyze transnational coordination here, since there are too few cases to provide clear-cut results.

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Data availability statement

Data is available upon request from the author.

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