

Proposal 1: The enforcement of EU fundamental values – institutional and societal pre-conditions

1) Topic, relevance and fit with research framework: EU member state violations against EU fundamental values are among the most critical instances of the EU's commitment-compliance gap. By joining the EU, all member states have committed themselves to respect for democracy and rule of law, but the EU's efforts to counter "democratic backsliding" in countries such as Hungary or Poland have had only very limited success so far (Kelemen 2020). Whereas existing enforcement instruments are ineffective and most proposals for new instruments or institutions appear politically unfeasible, this doctoral project will investigate the prospects for enforcing EU fundamental values through (conditional) EU funding.

2) Research question(s) and hypotheses: The Commission's proposal to make EU funding conditional upon respect for rule of law (Blauberger and Van Hüllen 2020) was amended and adopted by the European Parliament and the Council after intense negotiations in December 2020 and is currently challenged before the Court of Justice. Two interrelated sets of questions arise: first, at an institutional level, what explains the varying support for rule of law conditionality by different EU institutions, governments and party groups? This enforcement mechanism may be supported for symbolic reasons (e.g. demonstrating the EU's capacity to act) or substantive concerns (i.e. remedying violations of EU fundamental values), which affects to what extent its application will be credible and consistent. Second, at a societal level, under what conditions is rule of law conditionality most likely to contribute to greater respect for EU fundamental values? A broad range of expectations derived from literatures e.g. on sanctions, responsibility attributions and legitimacy beliefs will be tested to understand what measures are likely to be perceived as rule-based, fair and legitimate as opposed to ad hoc, denouncing a specific government or an entire nation (Schlipphak and Treib 2017).

3) Research design and methods: This project comprises two major empirical parts, which require a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. To answer the first research question, elite interviews (cf. Closa 2018) and qualitative text analysis will allow for tracing the negotiation process on the introduction of rule of law conditionality at the EU institutional level. With respect to the societal level, survey experiments (Hainmueller et al. 2014) will serve to evaluate the likely effects of different institutional design features on public support for EU conditionality. Taking these two parts together, the project evaluates the chances that the EU's new rule of law conditionality is likely to be effective and societally accepted.

Should you have any specific questions regarding this doctoral project,
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Proposal 2: Anti gender movements as a backlash against EU values

1) Topic, relevance and fit with research framework: Women's rights and gender equality stand out as fundamental values of the EU enshrined in its treaties as well as in several key pieces of EU legislation. Yet, in recent years, the EU has witnessed several 'anti gender' movements in its Member States. For instance, the ratification of the Istanbul Convention bringing legally binding standards for the elimination of violence against women—which should have been a consensual common denominator—encountered vocal opposition in several EU Member States. These developments in social movements and public opinion at large have considerable policy hindering potential, which could spill over in other policy domains such as social and labor policies, as well as equal opportunity measures in many other domains, what recent scholarship has coined 'Backlash Politics' (Alter and Zürn, forthcoming). So far, the literature has focused on what explains the adoption of gender equality measures from grassroots movements to Europeanization, largely conceived as interactions between the EU and national governments (Montoya 2013; van der Vleuten 2016), but have not yet looked at the potential for resentment against these very forces. Nor has research scratched the surface of the potential for backlash against other fundamental rights and democratic values that underpin the EU project amongst the wider public.

2) Research Questions & Hypotheses: Since little is known about the dynamics that underpin backlashes against women's rights and gender equality at the societal level, a doctoral dissertation exploring these dynamics could engage in a series of key questions: What explains that previously consensual ideas of gender equality face a backlash? How broad is this backlash and where does it find its source? For instance, does the increased visibility of women as political leaders induce a backlash (Brescoll, Okimoto, and Vial 2018; Rudman et al. 2012)? Are perceived changes in the balance between group privilege and disadvantage shaping group resentment (Townsend-Bell 2020)? Or is the rising electoral success of radical right parties that have espoused a reactionary view of women's position in society also at work in shaping attitudes towards gender equality (Wodak 2015)?

3) Research design, methods and data: The project will predominantly make use of survey data from both the public and elites, as well as political parties position data. In order to examine these research questions the primary source of data will be public opinion surveys which integrate questions pertaining to position taking about gender, but also about different policy fields such as the European Values Survey, ISSP, Gender and Generation Survey, the World Values Survey.

Should you have any specific questions regarding this doctoral project,
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Proposal 3: Integration and politicization of EU health policy during the Covid-19 crisis

1) Topic, relevance and fit with research framework: Addressing the Covid-19 pandemic is a central challenge for the European Union and has the potential to widen both, the commitment-compliance and capabilities-expectations gaps characterizing European integration. On the one side, the efforts to coordinate responses to the health crisis underline the need for transferring additional competences to the EU level and lead to raised expectations (e.g. regarding the joint procurement of vaccines). On the other side, the difficulties of EU institutions to provide an effective and rapid response open the door for member state contestation and for further politicization and skepticism towards European integration.

2) Research question(s) and hypotheses: The current response of the EU to the health crisis is a prime example of the tensions affecting European integration. We thus need to better understand: first, to what extent has the Covid-19 crisis reinforced the commitment-compliance and capabilities-expectations gaps? Has the need for coordination led to spillover effects in the areas most affected by the crisis (e.g. health, crisis management, free movement of essential workers)? To what extent do these responses live up to citizens expectations regarding an effective and legitimate EU level response? Second, the efforts to coordinate the EU response have become politicized leading a growing number of member state governments to opt for unilateral solutions (e.g. acquisition of the Russian and Chinese vaccines). Therefore, why have some member states deviated from the coordinated response to the crisis? To what extent is it linked to public support for the European Union? Are particular types of government more likely to defect from coordinated EU responses (e.g. due to ideology, populism and Euroscepticism, polarization of the party system, position in the electoral cycle)? Expectations can be developed based on the literature on public support for integration (e.g. Hooghe and Marks 2005, 2009), political systems support for EU integration (e.g. Norris 2011; de Vries 2007), and bottom-up politicization (Bressanelli et al. 2020; Bremer et al. 2020).

3) Research design and methods: This project will combine the analysis of quantitative and qualitative data. On the one hand, the project can rely on the Eurobarometer survey series (incl. Flash and Special Eurobarometers) that provides frequent data on EU public support across member states. Interview dates can be exploited to identify the effect of certain national and EU-level crisis events and measures on public support (e.g. policy initiatives, lockdown measures). In addition, qualitative data (e.g. press releases, media coverage, social media, interviews) will be used to analyze 1) the EU's response and the extent it has led to strengthening European integration and 2) the response of member states' governments and the grounds behind their decisions to support further integration and a coordinated response or to opt for unilateral solutions.

Should you have any specific questions regarding this doctoral project,
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Proposal 4: New Radical Right Euroscepticism and Transnational Populism? Assessing its impact

1) Topic, relevance and fit with research framework: The surge of Eurosceptical radical right populist and nativist parties in nearly all member states has been one more challenge to the European Union and its institutions. Conceptually, the threat posed has been seen as twofold: First, there are hard Eurosceptics whose rejectionist position resonates with key population segments that regard European integration a threat to their economic and social wellbeing and are permanently lost for European aspirations. Then, there are soft Eurosceptic parties whose advocacy in the national interest has morphed increasingly into advocacy for extensive “reforms” that intend to renationalize EU competencies and are designed to weaken integration. Finally, there is now emerging a distinct group of parties that show evidence of transnational populism: while opposing the EU in its current form, they transcend nationalist projects and offer a different European project (McDonnell & Werner 2019, 2020). The phenomenon of the radical right at the European level is understudied and existing insights are largely derived from studies centered on the national-level.

2) Research question(s) and hypotheses: The main research question asks about the relative effect of the three challenges - hard Euroscepticism, soft Euroscepticism, and transnational populism - on European integration. The research proceeds from the assumption that populist parties will follow to varying degrees the policy/office/vote logic and opt for the strategy offering the greatest benefits first at the national and then at European parliamentary level. It also assumes that parties will adopt a position on Europe that is not only ideologically compatible but also offers an increased ability to influence political change. Thus, previously rejectionist parties may appear to soften in order to form new alliances or work with willing partners in other EP groups. The research also assumes that the interest of transnational populists and radical nationalist will diverge. However, while hard Eurosceptics may self-isolate and lose influence, soft Eurosceptics and radical reformers and their allies may turn out to be more effective change agents.

3) Research design and methods: This project will rely on a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. First, election manifestos, leader’s speeches, and social media messages will be coded to see whether they contain specific references to transnational populism and to see how the European change agenda is constructed (similarities and differences across parties). In a second step students will conduct interviews with key party officials and MEPs in the I&D and ECP EP groups on agenda setting, preferences, and alliance formation. Qualitative findings will be compared with the demand-side and supply-side profile of these parties which will be based on regression analysis of election data (CSES) and expert surveys (CHESS). The goal here is to understand the interaction between party positioning and voter preferences.

Should you have any specific questions regarding this doctoral project,
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Proposal 5: Realizing capabilities or staying behind expectations? The EU's strategic trade policy and climate change

1) Topic, relevance and fit with research framework: Beyond doubt the European Union (EU) is a formidable trade power. With about 450 million relatively affluent consumers, innumerable firms in third countries depend on access to the EU market, making the EU a much sought-after trade partner. The EU can and does use its economic power to achieve trade-related goals such as opening foreign markets for European exporters and protecting key sectors of the European economy; one indication that the EU has comparatively strong capabilities in trade policy (Dür and Zimmermann 2007). The EU, however, is also committed, and expected by various actors, such as policy makers or civil society members in the EU, to using trade to pursue wider foreign policy objectives that go beyond a purely economic focus on the flow of goods and services. One particularly topical and prominent example of this is climate change.

2) Research question(s) and hypotheses: The main foreign policy tool for the EU in the realm of trade are preferential trade agreements (PTAs) and all modern EU PTAs address environmental protection and climate change in particular. However, a key question on the matter is still being debated: do these provisions indeed affect actual climate change policies in partner countries? Thus, is the EU able to use its trade power strategically to influence important non-economic foreign policy goals, in this case climate change policy and thus live up to its expectations? An obvious example is the EU-Mercosur trade agreement currently under negotiation, in which the issue of climate change features prominently. The relevant literature suggests that while such non-trade clauses in PTAs can under certain conditions be relevant in influencing domestic outcomes in partner countries this effect is conditional on political factors in the partner country (Postnikov and Bastians 2014; Spilker and Böhmelt 2013). How strategic trade policy can and does look like in the context of climate change has, however, been understudied so far. Based on the extensive literature on the enforcement of and compliance with international treaties (Simmons 2009), this doctoral project will investigate whether and if so how the EU's strategic trade approach towards climate change varies with partner countries domestic political structures and whether the EU is more successful in influencing climate change policy in more democratic countries which have a more vivid civil society.

3) Research design and methods: This project will rely on a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. First, EU PTAs will be coded as to whether they contain specific reference to climate change. Using statistical regression models that can also account for selection effects, the student will first investigate quantitatively the relationship between EU PTAs and partner countries' climate change policies, measured among other things by using countries' nationally determined contributions as part of the Paris Agreement. Secondly, this project will use elite interviews to trace the process of influencing policy makers and civil society members in EU partner countries.

Should you have any specific questions regarding this doctoral project,
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Proposal 6: The Politicization of the EU's Trade Policy: Individual-level Evidence

1) Topic, relevance and fit with research framework: In the past decade, issues of trade policy have become increasingly contentious in the European Union and its member states. While trade could traditionally be described as a technocratic policy field dominated by expert negotiators and industrial lobbyists, recent years have seen far-reaching civil society mobilization and contentious (social) media debates about agreements such as the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP), the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA), and – most recently – the EU-Mercosur Trade Agreement. This growing contestation of international trade at the elite level has also led to a politicization (meaning an increase in the public salience and public contestation) of EU trade policy among the broader public, at least in some EU member states. This development poses a major challenge for the EU in its pursuit of trade policy objectives.

2) Research questions and hypotheses: Several studies have analyzed the recent politicization of EU trade policy. However, existing research has mainly looked at aggregate developments, thus largely ignoring what happens at the individual level. Who are the people that take a position on EU trade policy, that is, who gets politicized? What explains whether someone supports or opposes current EU trade policy? Are specific elite strategies particularly successful in politicizing or de-politicizing EU trade policy? Do we see any variation in how the process of politicization plays out at the individual level across EU member states? These are just some of the questions that remain open with respect to the individual-level processes underlying the politicization of the EU's trade policy. The thesis will draw on the large literature on determinants of public opinion, and an emerging literature on the politicization of trade policy, to develop a theoretical framework that addresses these questions. Key hypotheses can relate to the kind of frames that may increase the salience of trade policy to individuals, socio-economic characteristics of the individuals, or the broader social views of these individuals.

3) Research design and methods: This project can draw on a variety of data sources, among them public opinion surveys and social media data. Some existing public opinion surveys contain data on respondents' assessments of the EU's trade policy. Moreover, social media have become a major source of social science data. In particular, the project could analyze tweets on the topic of EU trade policy. It may also be possible to have some questions on EU trade policy included in academic public opinion surveys that are regularly carried out, or – together with the supervisors – to get funding for a survey on the topic (which then could also feature a survey embedded experiment). The data will be analyzed using state-of-the art methods in public opinion research.

Should you have any specific questions regarding this doctoral project,
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