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## Much ado about nothing? The (non-) politicisation of the European Union in social media debates on migration

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**Much ado about nothing?**  
**The (non-) politicisation of the European Union in social media debates on migration**

*Preprint accepted for publication by European Union Politics*

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**Abstract**

The widespread view that the refugee crisis has sparked unprecedented levels of European Union politicisation has rarely been backed by systematic empirical evidence. We investigate this claim using a novel dataset of several thousand user comments posted below articles of German regional media outlets on Facebook. Despite considerable EU authority in the policy area, extensive media coverage of the crisis, and the rise of a populist party in Germany, our results suggest that the politicisation of Europe remains low among social media users, especially when compared to national and subnational levels of governance. When talking about Europe, users hardly refer to EU institutions or policies. Instead, other member states and notions of the geographic or cultural space dominate the debate.

**Keywords:**

Migration, politicisation, public opinion, social media

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## **Introduction**

In the course of the financial and debt crises, scholars have argued that ‘politics is back’ in the European Union (EU) (Risse, 2015) and that politicisation cannot be reversed (De Wilde and Zürn, 2012). There was hope for a more democratic European integration process due to a greater public competition of ideas and political programmes replacing or at least complementing the technocratic European integration process of the past. Since the refugee crisis of 2015, the public seems to vividly debate European asylum policies and the common Schengen borders. On one side of the political spectrum, right-wing populist parties that campaigned on anti-immigration and Eurosceptic positions gained electoral attraction. On the other side, pro-European forces, such as Pulse of Europe, mobilised. So, did the refugee crisis indeed politicise citizens in the EU? Did it facilitate a larger public debate on the way European integration should continue? And does it hence pave the way for a more democratic exchange of ideas?

Such questions have been traditionally addressed under the label of politicisation research in EU studies. In this domain, three dimensions are used to characterise the level to which EU-led regional integration is politicised: the salience of the EU in public debates, the polarisation of opinions within these debates, and the number of people actually talking about Europe, named actor expansion (De Wilde, Leupold, and Schmidtke, 2016). Students of politicisation usually hypothesise that the more authority the EU possesses in certain areas, the more likely it is to be politicised. Politicisation in such areas is further facilitated by crisis situations and the presence of right-wing parties. The refugee crisis and the recent rise of right-wing parties thus represent a likely case for the EU to get politicised amongst its citizens.

Another established tradition in politicisation studies is its focus on newspapers, mostly the quality press (for some notable exception, cf. Baglioni & Hurrelmann, 2016, studying focus groups). Over the last years, however, social media has gained importance for citizens

consuming news and debating politics. Yet, social media debates have received little attention from scholars dealing with politicisation. As migration is the topic that inspires most comments by Facebook users (see e.g. Larsson, 2018) and citizens who use social media as an important source of information followed user comments on the refugee crisis on Facebook closely (Arlt and Wolling, 2017), knowledge about an important facet of the politicisation of Europe is hence still missing.

In this article, we contribute to closing this gap and ask whether and to what extent Europe has been politicised in social media debates. Based on a unique dataset of over 600,000 Facebook user comments under over 30,000 articles ('posts') and a manually coded subsample of around 5,000 comments below articles on the topic of migration and asylum published in regional newspapers in Germany, we provide quantitative evidence about the politicisation of Europe during the refugee crisis. Unlike previous analyses, this dataset allows us to analyse politicisation over time, as well as across local, national and European governance levels.

We provide evidence on the salience of debates about Europe during the refugee crisis among users of regional newspapers' Facebook sites. We show that Europe has been increasingly debated, but that the salience of issues linked to Europe, the EU, or its member states has not increased relative to local or national levels. We provide new insights on actor expansion, showing that a few users comment heavily on European themes, while the typical user comments on local themes and is active less frequently – a pattern that has remained largely unchanged during the refugee crisis. In addition, we show that in the rare cases in which social media users refer to Europe, the EU is hardly mentioned. Rather, they debate the politics of other member states or put forward a diffuse notion of Europe, which is used to set Europe apart from other world regions, such as the Muslim countries in the Middle East. Our findings hence suggest that among social media users, Europe and especially the EU have not

been increasingly politicised in the refugee crisis when compared to other governance levels and over time.

This pattern emerges despite the fact that we pick a most likely case for politicisation when analysing Facebook comments posted from 2010 to the end of October 2016 in Germany: The EU's authority in the field of asylum and migration policy increased during this time and attracted a substantial amount of media attention and public counter reactions. The crisis also provides a discursive opportunity for politicisation, in particular for the new German radical right party *Alternative für Deutschland (AfD)* that should manifest itself especially on social media. In addition, Germany was disproportionally affected by the crisis due to the very large inflow of migrants and its central political role in European policy-making and crisis management.

In sum – and for the part of the citizen arena under scrutiny here – we put a question mark behind recent claims in the literature that the refugee crisis has led to an increase in politicisation of the EU. While scholars find ample evidence in favour of EU politicisation when analysing elite and institutional actors on the basis of newspaper articles and parliamentary speeches, these findings do not seem to travel easily to the arena of citizens actively commenting on the social media outlets of German regional newspapers.

### **Citizens, institutions, and the politicisation of the EU**

Regional integration in Europe has for a long time shielded issues from being politicised within member states (Börzel and Risse, 2018) without providing for an EU-level substitute. This was made possible by the fact that the levels of policy making and democratic public spheres hardly coincide in the EU: debates about policies remain confined to the national level, while a substantial amount of policies are made at the EU level. Since the most recent crises and the increasing contestation of European integration in various national referendums

after the Maastricht Treaty, however, the EU has arguably become an issue in national public spheres (Risse, 2015).

Politicisation is commonly defined as

‘a discursive phenomenon: it is not sufficient that actors are aware of an issue, or able to form opinions about it; what is required is rather that an issue becomes salient in political communication that seeks to influence – or responds to – collective decision making’ (Hurrelmann et al., 2015:45).

Empirically, politicisation is usually conceived of as a three-dimensional concept (De Wilde et al., 2016), whereby salience, i.e. the extent to which people talk about Europe, constitutes a basic prerequisite for politicisation. Comprehensive forms of politicisation are characterised additionally by polarisation and the expansion of actors and audiences that talk about Europe.

The academic debate about whether, how, and with which implications the EU has been politicised in this regard is far from being settled, though. Some argue that politicisation can help to foster European collective identities as people engage in transnational political debates (Risse, 2010). Others argue instead that high levels of politicisation increase political conflict and thus inhibit or at least further differentiate integration outcomes (Schimmelfennig et al., 2015:772).

The inconclusiveness of the literature is partly driven by a lack of differentiation of arenas of politicisation. Scholars have analysed the institutional arena (e.g. De Wilde, 2014; Rauh and De Wilde, 2017), investigating, for instance, manifestos of or expert surveys about political parties (e.g. Hooghe and Marks, 2018; Spoon, 2012), or parliamentary debates (Rauh, 2015). Studies using mass media content clearly dominate the field (cf. Baglioni and Hurrelmann, 2016). They usually focus on nation-wide quality newspapers and collective (political) actors who commonly have a say in media debates (Grande and Hutter, 2016; Leupold, 2016; Schmidtke, 2016). The dominant finding of studies based on mass media is that the EU has

become politicised in cycles with increasing intensity since the Maastricht Treaty. The EU's recent crises have further fuelled the increasing politicisation of European governance dominated by nationalist, Eurosceptic and illiberal forces (Börzel, 2016).

Such studies, however, have rarely taken public resonance into account (Baglioni and Hurrelmann, 2016; Zürn, 2016). The citizen arena, or what Zürn (2016) calls the micro-level of politicisation, has received surprisingly little attention so far (Hurrelmann et al., 2015: 46). Analyses of focus groups (Baglioni and Hurrelmann, 2016; Hurrelmann et al., 2015) and blog entries (De Wilde et al., 2013) are notable exceptions. In their study, Baglioni and Hurrelmann (2016) question the dominant findings for the institutional arena with respect to the citizen arena: they show that there is a lack of knowledge about responsibilities of the EU and low levels of political efficacy among their study participants. Coupled with the perception of the EU as a club of interest-driven countries, they find overall low levels of EU politicisation (see also Hurrelmann et al., 2015). Barisione and Ceron (2017) study the contestation of austerity politics on Twitter in the run up to the 2014 elections of the European Parliament (EP). The authors show that there is no increase in the mentioning of the EU, EU-level actors or other member states during the election campaign, contrary to their expectation. These studies provide first insights into the politicisation of the EU among citizens and on social media, but their generalisability to a larger citizen population is limited. The focus group study provides in-depth insights into a very limited number of individuals. Hurrelmann et al. (2015: 47) hence conclude that there is 'a significant need for further research that focuses on politicisation in citizen arenas'. Twitter data has usually been associated with political or elite actors instead of average citizens. As a result, we still know relatively little about whether social media fulfils the 'transnational promise' (Bossetta et al., 2017) and promotes debates about and the politicisation of EU politics among citizens.

The most recent example of a cyclical politicisation seems to be the refugee crisis. Despite the widespread conviction that the public and arguably citizens politicised the EU at unprecedented levels during this time period, there has so far been a lack of data to empirically measure the degree of politicisation of EU policies and politics with respect to migration (Börzel, 2016). Research on EU politicisation in other policy fields has been growing, but most of it focuses on the integration process per se or (highly) integrated areas, including in the field of taxation (Schmidtke, 2016), Europe's economic and monetary union (Leupold, 2016; Wonka, 2016), consumer policy (Rauh, 2016) and EU budget policy (De Wilde, 2012). A study covering the period from 1990 to 2002 shows the EU to be a lot less politicised in the policy field of immigration than in monetary or agricultural policy (Koopmans and Statham, 2010).

In addition, comparative benchmarks to make inferences about the level of EU politicisation are difficult to establish. Many studies use cross-country and time-series designs to infer on levels of politicisation of the EU in a comparative fashion (e.g. Grande and Hutter, 2016; Leupold, 2016; Schmidtke, 2016). Yet, few studies compare politicisation across governance levels (Höglinger, 2016; Hurrelmann et al., 2015; Kriesi, 2016). These comparisons are pivotal, however, if we want to understand whether and how the politicisation of European governance differs from national politics (Risse, 2010).

In this article, we contribute to the emerging debate about the politicisation of the EU in the citizen arena by creating a novel dataset to measure the politicisation of Europe among social media users and in comparison to other governance levels during the refugee crisis. We analyse whether and to what extent social media users refer to Europe when commenting below regional newspaper articles that are posted on Facebook on issues of migration and asylum. To our knowledge, our study is the first one that investigates the recent politicisation



of asylum and migration policy empirically among social media users with a particular focus on the European dimension of this policy.

### **The politicisation of Europe and the refugee crisis**

We expect in line with the literature that the developments surrounding the refugee crisis should have unleashed substantial politicisation among social media users in Germany. Such politicisation should manifest itself in an increase in both the salience of the EU in comments of social media users and in the number of actors commenting on EU themes. This hypothesis is inspired by the prominent association in politicisation research with regard to the institutional arena, namely that

‘rising politicisation of European integration is primarily a reaction to the increasing authority of the EU over time. [...] the more influential the EU and its institutions become, the more they attract public attention and provoke both utilization and support, on the one hand, and counter reactions to the EU policies and the polity, on the other’ (De Wilde and Zürn, 2012:140).

What is the theoretical underpinning of this hypothesis? Any international institution which aims at exercising power over a state, a private institution or individual citizens requires both authority and legitimacy at the same time. If it possesses the former but lacks the latter, this will provoke politicisation on the national level if certain conditions for politicisation are in place. Such politicisation usually means resistance in national democracies (Zürn et al., 2012).

We posit that the discussion of the refugee crisis among social media users in Germany would theoretically be a most likely case for politicisation from this perspective. Why so? In the case of migration and asylum policy both the necessary and sufficient condition for politicisation are in place.

First, the refugee crisis was linked to a previous rise in the authority of the EU in the area of asylum and migration (the necessary condition). The establishment of a Common European Asylum System (CEAS) had been debated since the late 1990s against the background of the abolition of internal border controls, and the related set of EU asylum laws, including the Dublin Regulations, was first passed in the early 2000s, defining minimum standards and procedures among member states. It was the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty in 2009 that then shifted further authority from member states to the EU level. The Lisbon Treaty allowed to work towards harmonisation instead of minimum standards only in this policy area, empowered the European Parliament and the Court of Justice, and established qualified majority voting in the Council (Kaunert and Leonard, 2012). The Commission, the Council and the European Parliament then revisited EU asylum legislation and supporting institutions. The European Asylum Support Office (EASO) was established in 2011. The recast of the main asylum legislation was finalised in 2013 and reduced the flexibility of member states in favour of greater harmonisation, even if not to the extent that the EP and the Commission had initially hoped for (Servent and Trauner, 2014). When the new directives entered into force, the refugee crisis hit the EU. The inflow of a large number of migrants over the Balkan route and the Mediterranean Sea made obvious the gain of competencies of the EU and the loss of authority of individual member states in this area. Eastern European member states were outvoted in the Council on the issue of mandatory refugee quotas, which raised a huge EU-wide controversy. Other crisis responses after 2015 were also European in kind (Laurentsyevea and Ludolph, 2017): Frontex was turned into the European Border and Coast Guard, and the sea border operations Poseidon and Triton were expanded. The internal redistribution system for refugees proved dysfunctional, but did not result in a decrease in EU authority in this area. Instead, the Commission tabled reform proposals for the CEAS, and other EU-wide solutions, such as the closure of the Balkan route and the EU-Turkey agreement, were advanced.

Second, Germany experienced times of crises, the rise of a radical right wing party and German mass media extensively covered EU affairs – conditions that are frequently considered to be sufficient for the EU to get politicised (De Wilde and Zürn, 2012). Germany has been, along with the countries of the Balkan route and Scandinavian countries, disproportionally affected by the refugee crisis. While government actors might have an interest in de-politicising European affairs in such situations, opposition actors as well as radical right parties are prone to use such windows of opportunity to attack national governments or the EU as a ‘foreign force’ (De Wilde and Zürn, 2012:144).

Recently, Germany saw the rise of the radical right party *AfD*. Founded in 2013, the party gained parliamentary seats in every post-2014 election – an exceptional development given Germany’s parliamentary 5-percent threshold. The strong rise of the party is often attributed to its attraction to Eurosceptic and xenophobic voters who did not have representation among Germany’s Europhile mainstream parties before (Arzheimer, 2015; Schmitt-Beck, 2017). The refugee crisis provided a unique opportunity for the party to gain attention and forced the other parties to comment on the crisis and potential solutions, making strategies of de-politicisation impossible (cf. Kriesi, 2016, making this argument for the radical right in Europe in general).

In addition, the refugee crisis of 2015/16 and the EU gained widespread media attention in Germany. From August 2015 to May 2016, the refugee crisis was by far the most important topic in national evening news (Institut für empirische Medienforschung, 2015). Print media also used considerable space to cover the crisis at levels well above the Euro crisis. The *Süddeutsche Zeitung*<sup>1</sup>, for instance, published 277 articles on the Euro crisis at its height in 2010, while 1360 articles were found for the refugee crisis in 2016. Importantly, the EU and Europe were covered at the same time: Almost two thirds of the articles about the refugee crisis in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* in 2016, for instance, made reference to the EU or Europe.

Boomgaarden and Vliegenthart (2009) have shown for Germany that the effect of media coverage on individual attitudes concerning migration is conditional on the number of migrants and asylum seekers at the time of coverage. Social media users may thus be expected to comment in a similar fashion during the refugee crisis.

In sum, both necessary and sufficient condition for EU politicisation in the area of migration and asylum are present in Germany. The formal authority shift occurred in 2009, resulted in concrete legislative change in 2013, and displayed its consequences from 2015 onwards. We would thus expect a steady increase of EU politicisation over time, reaching its peak with the onset of the refugee crisis. With authority shifting from lower to higher levels of governance, the literature on politicisation in the institutional arena would lead us to expect that politicisation patterns shift accordingly.

*H1:* The increase in the salience of Europe-related comments in the field of migration and asylum policy is stronger than the increase in salience of comments related to lower levels of governance.

*H2:* The widening of the user base commenting on Europe-related articles is stronger than on articles addressing lower levels of governance.

In addition, shifts of authority to the EU are usually associated with a politicisation of the EU as a political system (De Wilde and Zürn, 2012). Reference to the EU, its institutions and policies, in this regard are often considered indicative of a form of ‘political identity’ that is based on the perception of the EU as a political system associated with values such as democracy and the rule of law (Habermas, 2004). Research on European identity, however, has shown that references to Europe by citizens are by no means limited to the EU, its institutions and policies. Europe can also be a diffuse geographical reference to the continent to set a Europe of Christian-Jewish heritage apart from other world regions (Risse, 2013).

Likewise, citizens can refer to other EU member or associated states without necessarily referring to EU institutions and policies.

As Hooghe and Marks (2009: 2) state: ‘Citizens care – passionately – about who exercises authority *over* them’ (*emphasis added*). While the EU as such represents an institution that indeed exercises authority *over* citizens, the sharing of authority *with* other individual member states in the EU, or diffuse notions of the European continent are unlikely to make citizens similarly passionate.

H3: Among all Europe related comments, there should be stronger salience with respect to the EU, than with respect to other EU member states or a diffuse idea about Europe.

A lack of politicisation of the EU along those lines in the citizen arena would question the literatures’ claims that European affairs have increasingly penetrated the national public sphere during recent times of crisis – at least for the specific segment of citizens under scrutiny here.

## **Dataset**

We compiled a dataset to observe how social media users talk about Europe during the refugee crisis. Our unit of analysis is an individual user comment posted below an article of regional or local newspapers in Germany that have been published on their respective Facebook sites. This allows us to observe both the number and content of comments that users proactively post online to determine the salience of debates and the number of individual users commenting to address the degree of actor expansion.

Our approach differs from mass media-centred approaches in important ways. Politicisation studies based on mass media data usually justify the focus on quality newspapers in reference

to their function as an important archive of elite speakers' claims (e.g. Grande and Hutter, 2016), or their assumed effects on public will-formation (De Wilde, 2013; Leupold, 2016). Our goal is to study politicisation within a specific segment of the citizen arena. We do not seek to capture the positions of different collective actors, but to gain an overview of the spectrum of political utterances by citizens active on social media. Steinfeld et al. (2016) show in an experimental setup that more than 40% of readers of online newspaper articles also read user comments below. Depending on the personal meaning of an issue to the reader, comments can influence the perception of both, the article's content and public opinion at large (Lee, 2012). These findings underline the necessity to take user comments into account when studying politicisation in the public sphere. If Europe indeed entered domestic debates during the refugee crisis, it should also enter the debates of social media users.

The setup of our analysis is geared towards capturing comments made by a large sample of citizens. While social media as a forum of political debate and activism gained prominence in recent years more generally, we study comments posted on Facebook, which is the network with the largest user base in Europe and which is more representative of the population than other networks such as Twitter (Bossetta et al., 2017:63). This is not to say, however, that Facebook users are generally representative of the population. Only a portion of citizens consumes news via Facebook, and of those users, only a fraction comments on online news. In Germany, roughly half of the population uses the internet for news consumption almost daily, and more than one third regularly uses social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, for this purpose (Bayerischer Rundfunk, 2016, data from 2016). Of those online news users, around 10% also comment on news (Hoelig, 2016; Kalogeropoulos et al., 2017). Springer et al. (2015) find that German users who comment on newspaper articles online aim at engaging with journalistic content and expressing their opinion. This portion of the German population hence represents a relevant part of the (online) public sphere.

Users commenting on online news share a number of characteristics, however, that are not equally spread in the overall population. This may bias our results and impose limitations on their external validity. Younger and male users with higher socio-economic status are supposedly more engaged online, but this pattern changes with the specific type of online activity (Lutz, 2016) and the respective platform (Blank and Lutz, 2017). A recent comparative study of six countries including Germany (Kalogeropoulos et al., 2017) shows that users commenting on news on social media are rather female than male, have stronger partisan convictions, are more interested in hard news, and have strikingly little trust in offline news (see also Bayerischer Rundfunk, 2016; Hoelig, 2016). Political moderates and people less politically interested are less engaged online. Age and education are not significantly related to such commenting activities. EU politicisation, however, has been connected to vocal anti-establishment populist parties campaigning on Eurosceptic and anti-immigration issues, not to the Europhile moderates (Hooghe and Marks, 2009, 2018) who are seemingly not engaged online.<sup>2</sup> Distrust towards the established media has been widespread among supporters of populist, Eurosceptic parties, especially among *AfD* supporters in Germany. With the rise of the *AfD*, social media user engagement has risen dramatically in Germany (Schelter et al., 2016). Taken together, the focus on online user comments is likely to bias our results towards more, rather than less EU politicisation, which we take into account when interpreting the results.

A second bias may emerge from the fact that we analyse comments on Facebook pages of local and regional newspapers in Germany. Users commenting below regional newspaper articles may care more about local issues and less about the EU, which would lead us to expect a lower absolute degree of EU politicization in our sample than among social media users in Germany in general. To the best of our knowledge there is no study that distinguishes users according to their activity on local, national or international news outlets. As we are

interested in relative changes over time in EU politicisation, not in absolute level differences, the following observations make us confident that we capture a relevant public sphere that should also be subject to the hypothesised relative pattern of EU politicisation in the refugee crisis:

First, studies on the characteristics and behaviour of social media users are often based on data by the Reuters Institute (e.g. Kalogeropoulos et al., 2017). These data show that regional and local news outlets feature among the top brands that Germans use for news consumption online, with 15% using them on a weekly basis. By comparison, 19% of Germans use Spiegel Online (SPON) each week and 9% ZEIT online (Newman et al., 2016:36). Second, while a comparison with SPON would have been intriguing, we opted for analysing the similarly frequented regional newspapers. This lowers biases that are due to user self-selection into specific media outlets, as national quality newspapers or weeklies (such as Spiegel or ZEIT) tend to be read by the national, cosmopolitan elites, while the readership of local and regional news outlets in Germany is more representative of the German population.<sup>3</sup> Local and regional newspapers in Germany reach a larger number of readers than nationwide newspapers – both in their print and increasingly in their digital format (Bund Deutscher Zeitungsverleger, 2017) and report on national, European and international events from a local perspective. Unlike international news, European integration frequently exerts effects on the regional and local level; a development that has been especially visible during the refugee crisis. As local and regional newspapers follow trends in their reporting on European issues that are similar to national and even tabloid papers (Offerhaus et al., 2014) and as the refugee crisis would be likely to localise as well as politicise European issues, we would expect to see the theorised pattern of EU politicisation over time and across governance levels, albeit possibly at a lower absolute level.



Our dataset<sup>4</sup> includes Facebook posts (i.e. newspaper articles) by the 81 local and regional newspapers with the largest quarterly print runs in mid-2016 that also have a Facebook page and the user comments that were posted underneath these. From the 81 Facebook pages, we downloaded all 32,702 posts containing at least one word from a list of migration and asylum-related keywords. This yielded a dataset containing 622,621 comments, referred to as the ‘full sample’.

From this, a random sample of 500 posts was drawn without replacement and randomly allocated to two of four research assistants who coded them based on a pre-defined codebook. We then downloaded all first-level comments for each post that coders classified as relevant and drew a random sample of comments, which in total resulted in 5040 comments from 69 newspapers’ Facebook sites (see the Online appendix). These comments were again coded by two randomly selected annotators each.

For each article and each comment, references to governance levels in the form of geographical references were coded: The ‘local’ level captures references in a specific locality or experience from a commenter’s neighbourhood. Comments are coded as ‘regional’ if particular parts of the country such as federal states or large areas (e.g. Ruhr area) are mentioned. The ‘national’ level refers to the German federal level or texts mentioning ‘Germany’ as a whole. ‘Europe’ has initially been coded in a broad sense covering all comments or articles about the EU, Europe as a continent, ‘European identity’, as well as coverage of politicians from or developments in other European countries. All comments that do not refer to at least one of these levels are included in a baseline category. Each level was assigned a binary outcome. Hence, it is theoretically possible that a comment refers, for example, to both the national and European level. The aggregation of these levels affects whether we over- or underestimate the politicisation of Europe. For the results included in the main article, we created a variable that only covers the highest geographical level of each post

or comment that has been coded by at least one coder. A comment which refers to national and European levels will be labelled European by this variable. We report two robustness checks with alternative coding rules in the Online appendix – they leave our central results unaltered.

In a second step, we zoom into the 226 comments coded as ‘Europe’. We systematically differentiate comments mentioning the EU, its institutions and policies (‘EU’), comments that refer to other EU member states (MS) or associated states such as Switzerland or Norway (‘Other MS’), or diffuse notions of Europe, the ‘West’, the Christian occident or the continent in distinction to other religions or world regions including Islam and the Arab world (‘Diffuse Europe’). We also include a category on accession countries such as Turkey, for instance (‘Accession Countries’). If comments address two or more of the above categories at the same time, which is the case in 31 cases, we privilege the coding of the comment with arguably higher levels of authority (‘EU’, then ‘Other MS’, then ‘Accession Countries’, then ‘Diffuse Europe’).

## **Empirical results**

### *The salience of Europe in social media debates about migration and asylum*

Our first hypothesis expects the salience of EU-related comments to increase throughout our period of investigation, in particular in comparison with the national and subnational levels. In order to establish salience, i.e. the extent to which people talk about Europe, as the first dimension of politicisation, we compare the number of comments that include references to European issues, broadly defined. We do so first by providing a simple word search of comments that mention the ‘EU, as a stand-alone word or part of a compound noun like ‘EU-Kommission’, or ‘europ\*’ as the stem indicating words such as ‘europäisch, Europa, Europol’ in the full sample of 622,621 comments. Figure 1 shows that the share of comments that refer

to Europe in this way in our entire sample is not increasing, balancing at roughly 2% of all comments. This suggests that there is no increase of salience in comments addressing European themes during the refugee crisis, despite the number of posts under which Europe is mentioned at least once growing dramatically. This development is, however, rather due to increasing comment intensity that is indicative of greater salience of the issue of migration and refugees.

*Figure 1 about here*

Despite the fact that the EU possesses substantial authority in the area of asylum and migration, Facebook users commenting under articles of regional newspapers talk much more about local, regional, and national issues than about Europe. This is illustrated in Figure 2 that shows the development of the number of comments that refer to the specific governance levels over time in our coded sample. Most comments still target the local and national level. The comparative dominance of local comments is unsurprising given our newspaper selection: articles on local issues make up over 50% of our sampled articles under which the analysed comments are posted. Although one might expect lower geographical reference levels to be more often referred to, there is no systematic, monotonic relationship. In fact, there are about twice as many articles on national issues than there are on European issues. By contrast, there are more than six times as many comments referring to the national level than to the European level. Our data hence suggest that the larger representation of European issues in the sampled articles does not translate into a similar representation of user comments on Europe. This is the case even though local articles frequently prompt users to also discuss national issues. These findings suggest that the governance level addressed in the comment is only weakly related to that addressed in the article.

Interestingly, there are smaller spikes in the amount of comments that address Europe during the peak of the refugee crisis in 2015, but in comparison to other governance levels, crisis-related debates about Europe seem to lose intensity relatively swiftly again.

*Figure 2 about here*

Due to our liberal coding of Europe, this conclusion is a conservative one: as we overwrite posts and comments on lower governance levels by higher ones, some posts and comments coded as referring to ‘Europe’ have also been coded as local, regional or national but are not included in the respective charts above. Thus, despite over- rather than underestimating the importance of European codes by design, we do not find an increase in salience of debates about Europe in comparison to local, national, or regional issues. Our data do not support our salience-hypothesis.

#### *Actor expansion in social media debates about migration and asylum*

Actor expansion is another important measurement for increasing politicisation. Our dataset includes unique IDs for users commenting on Facebook and – unlike data composed of newspaper articles – includes information on the number and characteristics of actors engaged in debates about various governance levels. Figure 3 shows a strong increase in the overall number of unique commenters per posted newspaper article over time irrespective of its governance level. It provides evidence for a generally strong politicisation of the issue of migration and asylum at the peak of the refugee crisis in 2015/2016. As Hatton (2017) has argued for salience, our results equally hint at a strong association between actor expansion and short-run changes in migration flows. This increase cannot be explained by mere growth in the number of Facebook users as the same graph shows. The increase in commenters on migration and asylum lagged the large platform growth by about two to three years. Quite to

the contrary, the share of people commenting on news has rather decreased with increased online news consumption in Germany (Newman et al., 2016: 99).

*Figure 3 about here*

Turning to differences by governance levels, our second hypothesis states that, in order to speak of a politicisation of Europe, the number of individual users commenting should increase more strongly for Europe-related articles than for articles related to lower levels of governance. Table 1 shows the average number of comments individual users made below articles that address local, regional, national, or European issues.

*Table 1 about here*

It shows that articles associated with European themes (post-level) attract users that comment more frequently and on more newspapers' Facebook sites than local and national themes. On the comment-level, we find the same pattern: users that refer to Europe in their comments tend to comment more and on more newspapers' Facebook sites. Local and national topics thus attract more, but less widely commenting users. If actor expansion is measured in this way, Europe has hence remained much less politicised than local, regional or national levels of governance; even in the likely case of the refugee crisis.

This absolute comparison, however, may also downplay the increase of actor expansion during the refugee crisis. An expansion of actors commenting on European rather than on local or national issues over time may still be indicative of a relatively greater politicisation of Europe. We therefore ran a regression analysis to understand the extent to which each reference level is associated with unique commenters by post (model 1) or the number of unique comments made (model 2) (see Table 2). We also included interaction effects with a linear time trend  $t$ .

Table 2 suggests that there has been no significant increase of actors commenting on European issues beyond the general trend. However, over time there is a marked increase in both the number of participating commenters and the number of comments under posts that refer to the national level.

While Table 2 shows the coefficient of Europe at  $t_0$  (i.e. 2011), Figure 4 shows the marginal effect of Europe-related posts on the number of unique commenters below a post over time. The coefficient is insignificant and precisely estimated around zero. Thus, and as testified by the strong and statistically significant increase for posts that refer to the national level, it is not merely due to a lack of statistical power that we do not find a significant increase. This suggests that both in terms of salience and in terms of absolute and over time actor expansion, there is little evidence that would back the argument of a politicisation of Europe in social media debates below regional newspaper articles during the refugee crisis. As a consequence, we cannot support our second hypothesis on actor expansion.

*Table 2, Figure 4, about here*

#### *Reference objects in Europe-related comments*

In a final step, we analyse whether those few commenters who make references to Europe do actually target the EU as a political system, whether they focus on other member states or put forward a diffuse notion of Europe as a continent with a common cultural heritage. Figure 5 shows the distribution of ‘Europe’-comments across these categories. The EU is mentioned in a bit more than 20% of all comments in our ‘Europe’-coded sample, despite the fact that we assigned this code for relatively vague references to the EU, such as mentioning the closing of borders within the Schengen area or simply referring to the name ‘EU’ in the comment. In addition, those comments do not exclusively refer to the EU and its politics, but often mention

other categories of Europe along the way. More than half of the comments refer to other member states. Another quarter refers to diffuse notions of Europe or accession countries.

*Figure 5 about here*

The above findings contradict our third hypothesis, which led us to expect that the EU as a political system and its policies should feature more prominently in social media debates than other member states or diffuse notions of the European continent. Instead, we find that commenters on Facebook sites of German newspapers care most about the politics and events in other member states, compared to which the EU plays a minor role. Again, we have coded references to the EU in a most liberal way, making our conclusion a conservative one. It seems that social media users debating asylum and migration policy in the crisis care about interdependencies within Europe, but that the EU does not feature prominently in social media users' perceptions of who is in charge for dealing with these interdependencies. Rather, commenters address national politicians or representatives of other countries individually. Roughly as relevant as debates about the EU as a political system are notions, which refer to Europe as a diffuse idea of common heritage and history to set it apart from other religions than Christianity and other regions in the world.

## **Conclusion**

Despite testing a most likely case for politicisation, we have shown that Europe and the EU have been hardly politicised during the refugee crisis among citizens active on the social media sites of German regional newspapers. Neither has the salience attached to European issues increased more strongly than the one attached to national and local issues, nor has a widening of the commenters' base on European issues taken place. While many people felt the urge to comment on local and national topics, comments on European issues remained in the hands of a few, very active commenters. Moreover, of the few comments on Europe, less

than one quarter mentioned the EU, its institutions or core regulations in the field of migration and asylum policy.

These findings contribute to current debates about the politicisation of the EU, especially during the refugee crisis. First, they further caution against transferring the findings of politicisation in the mass media and institutional arena to other parts of the citizen arena. We show that while almost two thirds of the articles about the refugee crisis in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* in 2016, for instance, made reference to the EU or Europe, merely 2% of the user comments in our sample referred to Europe most broadly defined. For the case of the refugee crisis, we thereby confirm earlier findings by Baglioni and Hurrelmann (2016) who argue that during the Euro crisis EU politicisation in the citizen arena of Germany, Spain, Austria and Ireland has been low.

As we study users actively commenting on Facebook regional news sites in Germany, our study clearly has its limitations. Users commenting on regional news online only represent a small portion of the overall population, and are hence only partially indicative of the moods and views expressed among the population at large. This is especially important, given that the absolute level of interest in the EU may be lower among a locally interested population than nationwide. Much more research is thus needed to understand (a) to what extent our results are generalisable to other countries, time periods and other parts of the online and offline citizen arena; (b) if so, why social media users do not politicise Europe; and (c) whether there is indeed a substantial disconnect between the politicisation of Europe in the elite arena and citizens' attributions of relevance of the EU for their individual lifeworld.

Our results suggest that the alleged increase of politicisation of the EU may thus be much ado about nothing in the part of the citizen arena that has been investigated in this article. Does this imply that the concerns or hopes related to politicisation and the European integration process are unwarranted – at least for this segment of social media users? Indeed, our study



does not show an increase in discursive contestation or support of the EU with the refugee crisis. We find that while there has been a massive increase in the salience of debates on migration and asylum among social media users, these are mostly decoupled from debates about the actual extent of European authority. Yet, our study portrays a debate that is marked by nation-centred views coupled with diffuse notions about Europe or the Christian occident at times in clear distinction to other world regions. This view reminds of a vision of Europe of nation-states as put forward by populist forces across Europe. In that context, Kriesi (2016) argues, that not the (limited) politicisation of the EU is decisive for the future of the integration project, but national electoral gains of populist right-wing parties which win seats in national parliaments, take over government responsibility, and, in the end, negotiate the future of the EU. Further research therefore also has to establish whether this spread of populist and illiberal ideas of Europe and the nation-state is likely to constitute the ‘biggest challenge for EU governance’ (Börzel, 2016: 17) no matter whether citizens openly politicise the EU or not.

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## **Notes**

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<sup>1</sup> Süddeutsche Zeitung is one of two leading quality newspapers in Germany. The reported results stem from a Factiva search. The query used for the comparison between the two crises was: ‘Eurokrise or (Euro w\10 Krise)’ and ‘Flüchtlingskrise or (Flüchtling w\10 Krise)’. The query for the share of articles with references to the EU or Europe was (Flüchtlingskrise or (Flüchtling w\10 Krise)) and (EU or europ\*).

<sup>2</sup> In addition, women have recently been found to be more Eurosceptic (Kuhn et al., 2016) and may thus be more likely to politicise the EU, also online. As some studies find reverse effects (Boomgaarden et al., 2011) or no effect at all (Nielsen, 2016), this bias may not be particularly relevant, however.

<sup>3</sup> Nation-wide (quality) newspapers sold some 1 million copies per day compared to 11.5 million copies of local and regional newspapers (Bund der Zeitungsverleger 2018: 5). Among various social media platforms, Facebook is considered the most important one for local and regional newspapers in Germany to strategically invest into users’ loyalty with their newspaper in the online age (Möhring, 2015).

<sup>4</sup> A detailed description of the content and compilation of the dataset can be found in the Online appendix of this article. The data has been collected in the context of a larger research project, the Mercator Dialogue on Asylum and Migration (MEDAM), jointly with Robert Gold (IfW).

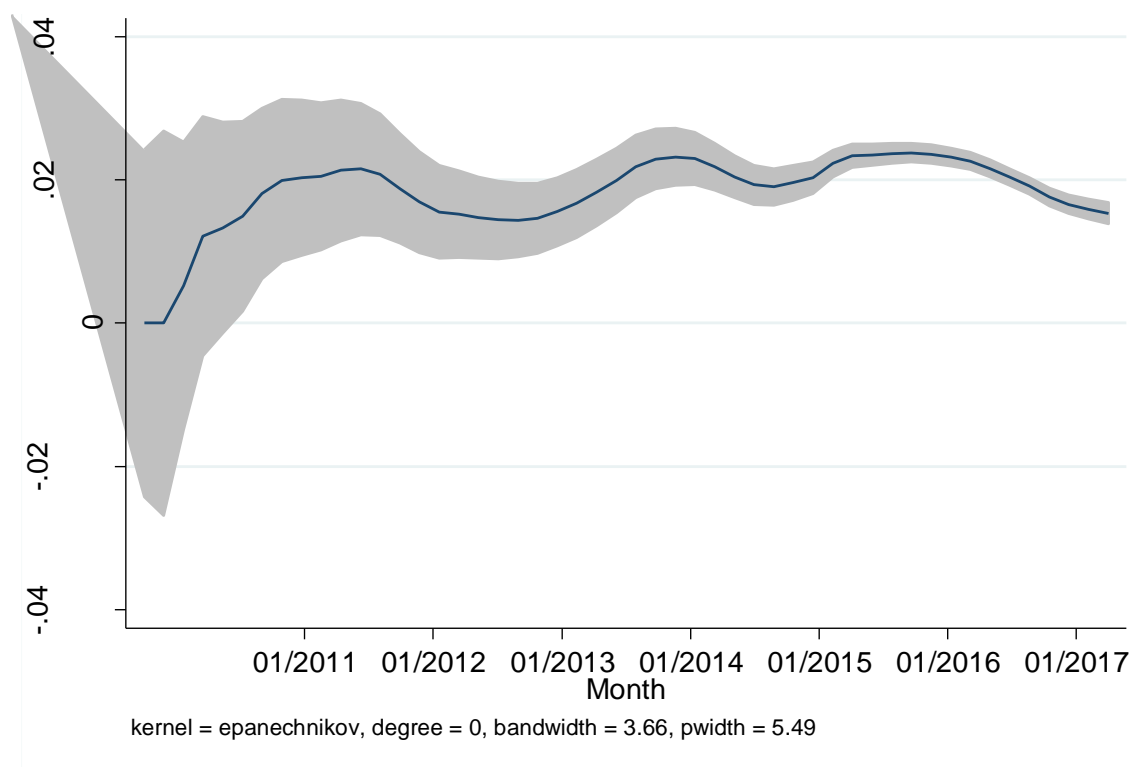
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## Figures and Tables

### Much Ado About Nothing? The (Non-) Politicisation of the European Union in Social Media Debates on Migration

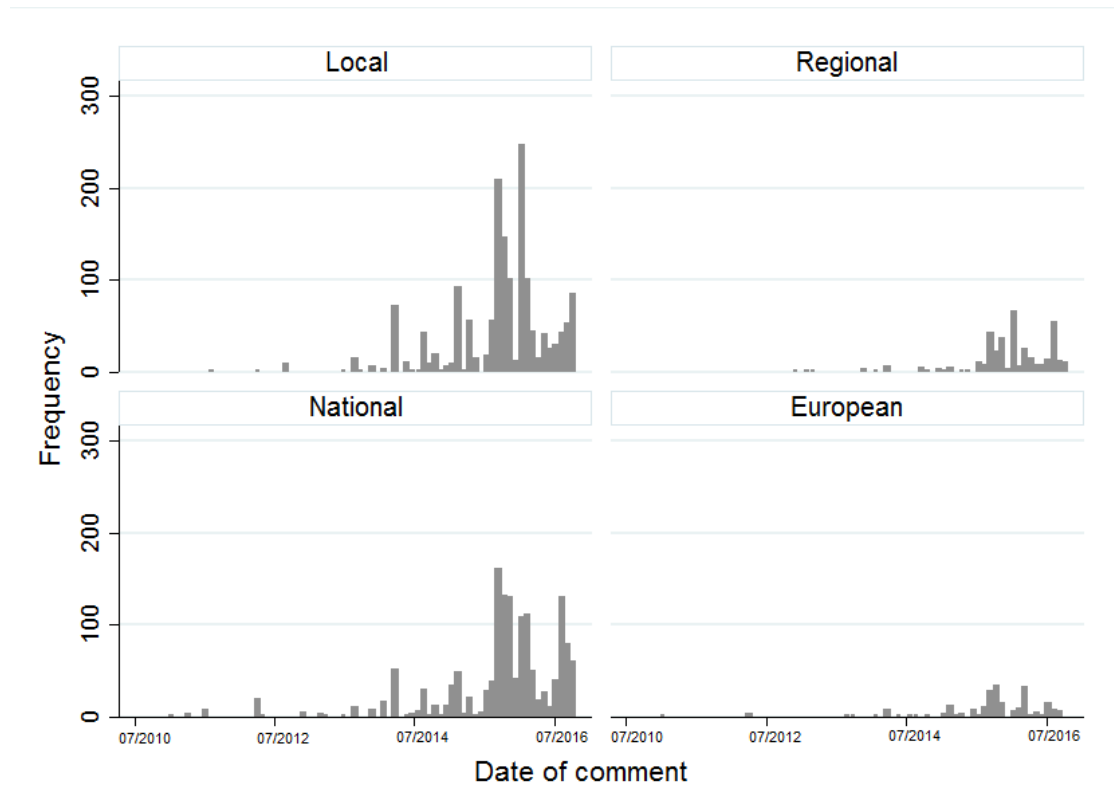
#### Figures:

Figure *Fehler! Nur Hauptdokument:* Average share of comments mentioning „europ\*“ or  
“EU” under articles over time



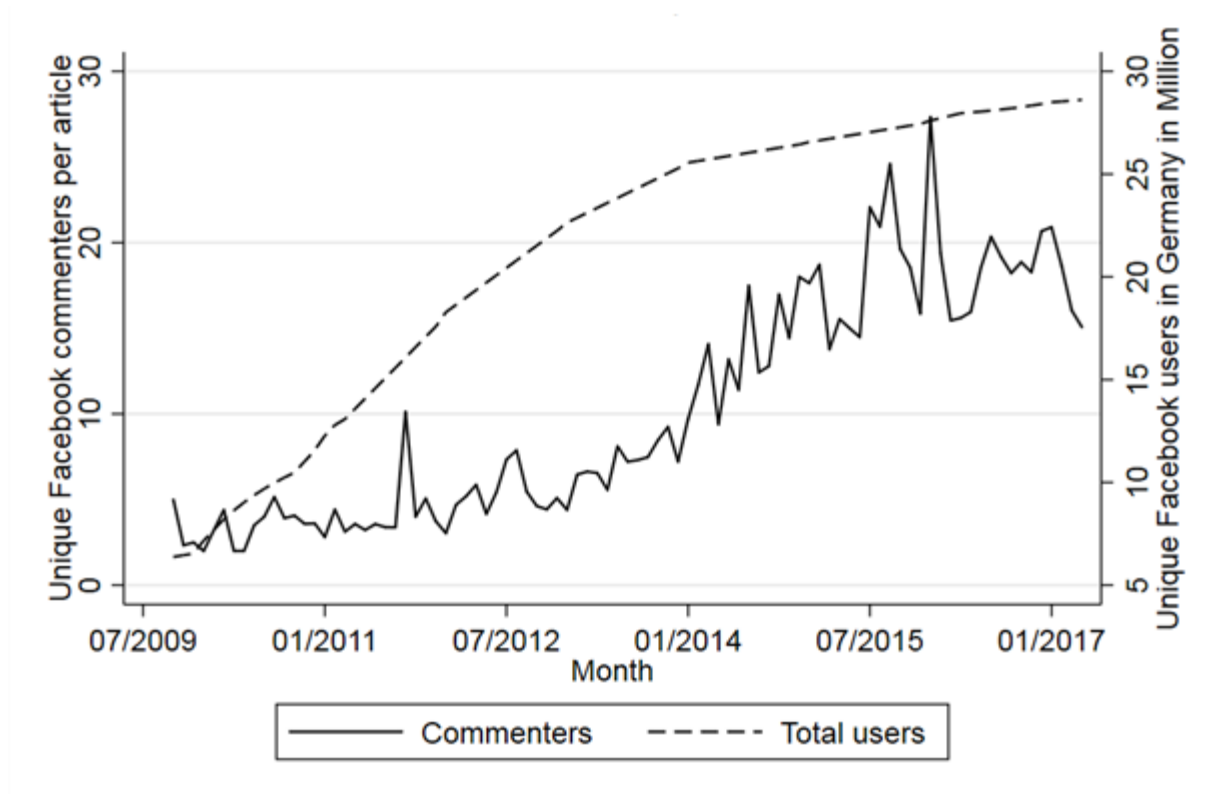
Notes: Local polynomial smooth with 95% confidence band of average of share of comments under articles that mention either “EU” or “europ”. Based on the full sample of 622,621 user comments.

Figure *Fehler! Nur Hauptdokument*: Comments by highest reference level over time, coded sample



Notes: Frequency distribution of highest reference level over time. Based on the coded sample of 5,040 user comments.

Figure 3: Number of unique commenters per article over time (full sample)

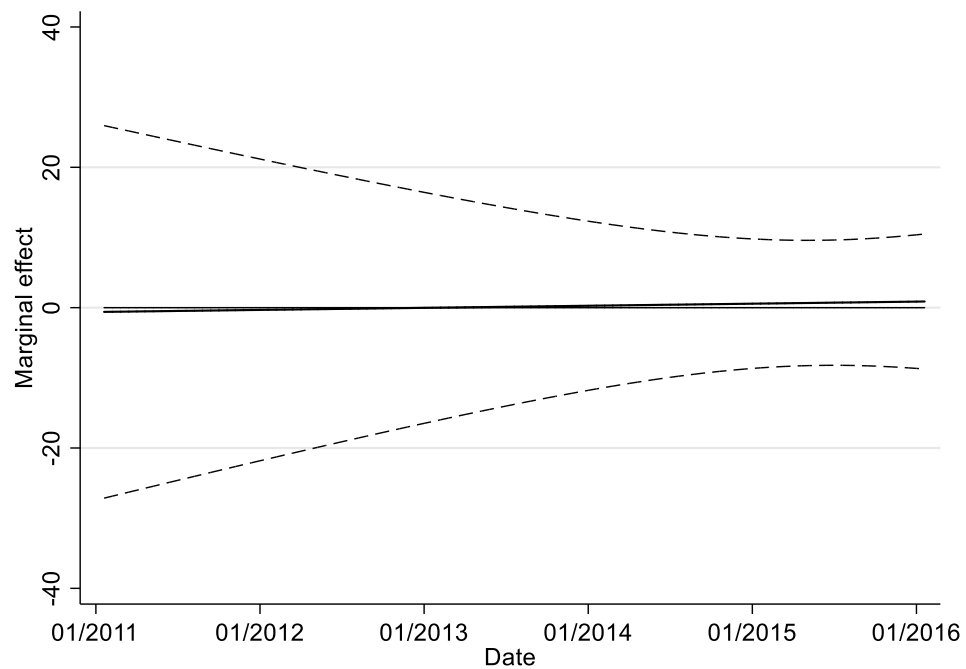


Notes: Time series plot of the number of unique commenters per article over time. Based on the full sample of 622,621 user comments. In total the data cover 32,702 articles, i.e. Facebook post by a newspaper on their Facebook page. Data on unique users from own data and calculations, Facebook users base data from Facebook and Statista.



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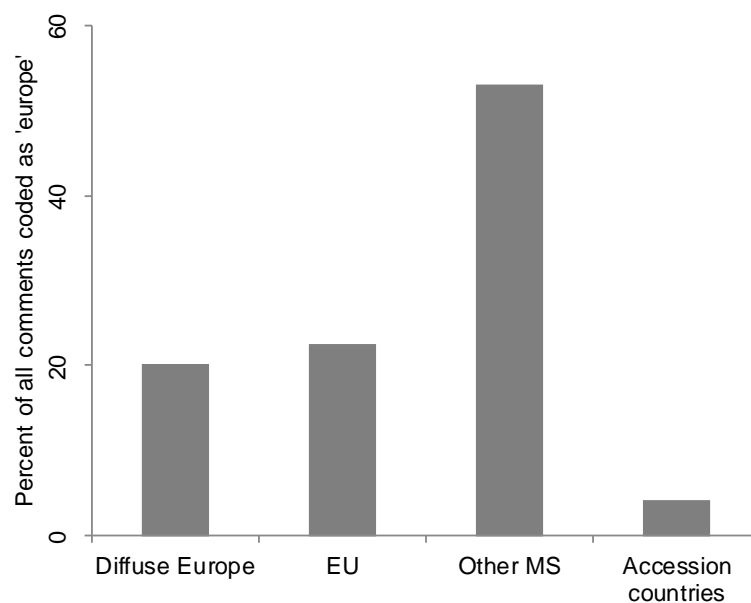
*Figure 4:* Marginal effects plot for effect of post-level Europe on the number of comments under post



*Notes:* The figure plots the marginal effect including the relevant interaction term from Table 3.

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*Figure 5: Overview of different concepts of Europe*



*Notes:* The figure plots the distribution of different concepts of Europe used in the user comments that refer to Europe or the EU. Concepts are assigned to the highest level of authority in case of multiple mentions. Out of 213 relevant comments 31 refer to multiple levels; 26 of them are included in the 'EU' category.

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**Tables:**

*Table 1: User activity by highest reference level*

<i>Post-level</i>	Number of newspapers' Facebook sites user is active on		Number of relevant comments on these Facebook sites	
	<i>Mean</i>	<i>95% CI</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>95% CI</i>
Local	1.72	[1.65; 1.78]	14.17	[13.15; 15.19]
Regional	1.52	[1.36; 1.68]	16.75	[14.19; 19.30]
National	1.62	[1.48; 1.76]	14.66	[11.52; 17.80]
Europe	1.86	[1.63; 2.08]	20.98	[16.3; 25.66]
None/other	1.92	[1.79; 2.05]	15.50	[13.5; 17.51]

<i>Comment-level</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>95% CI</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>95% CI</i>
Local	1.70	[1.62; 1.78]	14.37	[13.04; 15.70]
Regional	1.69	[1.47; 1.91]	15.75	[12.82; 18.68]
National	1.78	[1.70; 1.86]	15.12	[13.74; 16.51]
Europe	1.89	[1.66; 2.13]	16.72	[12.89; 20.56]
None/other	1.64	[1.51; 1.79]	15.72	[13.52; 17.91]

*Notes:* The sample includes 81 Facebook sites of newspapers. Statistics only include comments under articles about migration and asylum and are based on the coded sample of 5,040 user comments.

Table 2: Actor expansion by highest reference level, over time

	(1)	(2)
	Number of unique commenters under post	Number of comments under post
Local	3.119 (9.861)	10.84 (13.40)
Regional	7.147 (17.85)	10.03 (20.04)
National	2.391 (6.038)	1.998 (6.607)
Europe	1.070 (12.60)	-0.614 (13.68)
Trend	2.005** (0.813)	1.780* (0.910)
Local * Trend	2.294 (2.522)	0.961 (3.139)
Regional * Trend	0.0376 (4.452)	-0.255 (4.910)
National * Trend	3.091** (1.528)	3.296** (1.641)
Europe * Trend	-0.140 (2.709)	0.296 (2.921)
Constant	4.345 (2.729)	5.920* (3.280)
Observations	422	422
R-squared	0.053	0.046

*Notes:* Heteroskedasticity robust standard errors in parentheses, \*\*\* indicates  $p < 0.01$ . Regional levels are indicator variables taken the values 0 or 1. The baseline outcome relates to comments without or with another geographical reference. The trend variable is 0 in the year 2011 and increases by 1 per year. Based on the coded sample of 5,040 comments.

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## Online Appendix

### Much Ado About Nothing? The (Non-) Politicisation of the European Union in Social Media Debates on Migration

#### Detailed dataset description

Our dataset includes Facebook posts by the 81 local and regional newspapers with the largest quarterly print runs in mid-2016 that also have a Facebook page and the user comments that were posted underneath these. Although the noun “post” is often used differently in everyday speech, on Facebook it indicates content that is posted by an account. Newspapers typically post articles and sometimes related content such as photo galleries or polls. We only focus on articles.

From the 81 Facebook pages of local and regional newspapers, we downloaded all 32,702 posts containing at least one word from a list of migration and asylum-related keywords.<sup>4</sup> This yielded a dataset covering comments from 2010 to April 2017 and containing 622,621 comments. We refer to it as the “full sample” in the article. These information and further descriptive statistics of the sample are summarized in Table A1 below. Data were accessed through Facebook’s “Graph API (Application Programming Interface)”, which allows anyone short-term access to pre-specified Facebook pages and comments on these sites. To download the data, we used code programmed in Python.

We then filtered articles and kept only those that contained any of the specified keywords (see Appendix List A1). From these a random sample of 500 posts was drawn without replacement.<sup>4</sup> Based on a pre-defined codebook, four research assistants were extensively trained in several multi-hour sessions to code Facebook posts and the comments underneath these. After the end of the final training session, the 500 Facebook posts were randomly allocated to two of four research assistants. Articles or comments were coded by them as complete units, i.e. not taking a Facebook comment apart into separate comments on different subjects if more than one argument or reference was made. In this case, the comment or article got multiple labels. Our results are thus robust to different forms of aggregation. The working sample that we analyse is formed by all 412 posts that were classified as relevant by the coders. We then downloaded all first-level comments (i.e. responding to the post, not to other comments) for each of these posts and drew a random sample of comments, which in total resulted in 5,040 comments from 69 newspapers’ Facebook sites (see List A2 below). These 5,040 comments make up approximately 50 percent of the comments for these posts.<sup>4</sup> We drew comments based on articles to avoid a sample that is dominated by those topics or

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articles that received the largest number of comments. Thus, our analyses benefit from lower standard errors across time and across topics.

These comments were again coded by two randomly selected annotators each. Random assignment of two coders from a group of four coders who have received the same training reduces the influence of coder-specific effects on results and was therefore preferred to double coding in fixed pairs. Agreement between coders was always above 77 percent for the governance levels used in this article and over 97 percent for the category “Europe”. The random coder assignment allows rigorous tests of coding quality by calculating individual coder effects for each variable.<sup>4</sup> These analyses show no statistically significant coder specific effects for any of the items used in this article. We also did not find evidence for variation in coding behaviour over time.

As the first step during the coding, the relevance of a comment with respect to the topic of migration and asylum was checked to rule out irrelevant posts such as spam. In fact, this mostly led to the exclusion of those comments that consisted of mere hyperlinks to Facebook friends’ profiles, which is a way of making them aware of these news without commenting explicitly. The remaining comments were then coded based on the codebook and form our working dataset. On average, these comments are 172 characters long<sup>4</sup>. The shortest comments often indicate agreement or disagreement with issues mentioned in newspapers’ posts while longer comments tend to bring up arguments that go beyond the articles.

For each article and each comment, references to governance levels in the form of geographical references were coded. The “local” level for example captures references in a specific locality or experience from a commenter’s neighbourhood.<sup>4</sup> Comments are coded as referring to a “regional” level if, for example, particular parts of the country such as federal states or large areas (e.g. Ruhr area) are mentioned. This can also include references to state-level policies. The “national” level refers to the German federal level or texts mentioning “Germany” as a whole. “Europe” has initially been coded in a broad sense covering all comments or articles about the European Union, Europe as a continent, “European identity”, as well as coverage of politicians from or developments in other European countries.<sup>4</sup> All comments that do not refer to at least one of these levels are included in a baseline category. Each level was assigned a binary outcome.

Hence, it is theoretically possible that a comment refers, for example, to both the national and European level. The aggregation of these levels affects whether we over- or underestimate the politicisation of Europe. For the results included in the main article, we created a variable that only covers the highest geographical level of each post or comment that has been coded by at least one coder. A comment which refers to national and European levels will be labelled European by this variable. We report two robustness checks with alternative coding rules below which leave our central results unaltered. In total, only 24.8 percent (56 out of 226) of comments labelled as ‘European’ by this variable are not also coded as referring to a geographical level below this level, i.e. local, regional, or national level at the same time. Comments that refer to the European level are on average 290 characters long and comments become shorter and considerably less detailed when referring to lower reference levels with an average of 130 characters for local comments.

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## Appendix Tables and Figures

*Table A1: Summary table*

### Articles (full sample)

	Number	Share
Total	32702	100%
Containing term 'europ' or 'Europ'	772	2.4%
Containing term 'EU' or 'eu'	639	2.0%

### Articles (coded sample)

	Number	Share
Total sampled	500	100%
Total relevant	412	82.4%
Coded as relevant, with non-zero number of comments sampled <u>and</u> referring to		
local level	169	54.3%
regional level	43	13.8%
national level	18	5.8%
European level or EU	27	8.7%
other or none	54	17.4%

### Comments (full sample)

	Number	Share
Total	662383	100.0%
Containing 'europ' or 'Europ'	7238	1.1%
Containing 'EU'	6327	1.0%

### Comments (coded sample)

	Number	Share
Total sample	5040	0.8%
Of which containing real content	4442	88.1%
Of which replying to posts referring to European level	231	5.2%

### *Comments referring to*

local level	2452	48.7%
regional level	543	10.8%
national level	1662	33.0%
European level or EU	226	4.5%

### *Distribution of comments after coding only highest reference level*

None or other	621	12.3%
local level	1661	33.0%
regional level	388	7.7%
national level	1546	30.7%
European level or EU	226	4.5%

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*List A1: List of German keywords for online search of Facebook comments*

Keywords (in German)	Keywords (in German)
flüchtling	islam
duldung	balkan-route
dublin-verfahren	rückführung
schengen	zuwander
flucht	einwander
frontex	bamf
migration	schengen
willkommenskultur	visa
obergrenze	grenze
genfer konvention	schlepper
integration	türkei-deal
asyl	silvesternacht
abschiebung	sexuelle übergriffe
ausländer	syrer
migrant	ausländisch
wir schaffen das	



*List A2: List of Facebook sites of newspapers included in the coded sample*

Original name (in German)		Original name (in German)	
1	Hamburger Abendblatt	36	Mitteldeutsche Zeitung
2	Augsburger Allgemeine	37	Neue Osnabrücker Zeitung
3	B.Z. Berlin	38	Neue Presse
4	Badische Zeitung	39	Neue Westfälische
5	Bergedorfer Zeitung	40	Nordseezeitung
6	Berliner Zeitung	41	Nürnberger Nachrichten Online
7	Berliner Kurier	42	Onetz.de
8	Braunschweiger Zeitung	43	Ostseezeitung
9	Donaukurier	44	Passauer Neue Presse
10	Echo Online	45	Pirmasenser Zeitung
11	Express	46	Rheinpfalz.de
12	Frankenpost	47	RP Online
13	Frankfurter Neue Presse	48	Ruhr Nachrichten
14	Freie Presse	49	Könische Rundschau
15	General Anzeiger Online	50	Saarbruecker Zeitung
16	Hamburger Morgenpost	51	Schwäbische Zeitung
17	Hannoversche Allgemeine	52	Schwarzwälder Bote
18	Harz Kurier	53	SHZ Online
19	idowa	54	Stuttgarter Nachrichten
20	inFranken.de	55	Stuttgarter Zeitung
21	Kieler Nachrichten	56	Südkurier News
22	Kreiszeitung.de	57	Südwestpresse
23	Kölner Stadtanzeiger	58	SVZ Online
24	Lausitzer Rundschau	59	Tagesspiegel
25	Lübecker Nachrichten Online	60	Thüringer Allgemeine
26	Leipziger Volkszeitung	61	TZ Muenchen
27	Mainecho	62	Volksfreund
28	Mainpost	63	Waldeckische Landeszeitung
29	Mannheimer Morgen	64	Westdeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung
30	Märkische Allgemeine	65	Weser Kurier
31	Mittelbayerische	66	Westfälischer Anzeiger
32	Morgenpost	67	Westfalenblatt
33	Märkische Oderzeitung	68	Wiesbadener Kurier
34	Münchner Merkur	69	Westdeutsche Zeitung
35	Münsterland Zeitung		

*Table A3.1:* Robustness check: Actor expansion by lowest reference level, over time

	(1)	(2)
	Number of unique commenters under post	Number of comments under post
Local	5.972 (9.555)	13.54 (12.84)
Regional	-5.833 (9.170)	-5.567 (10.48)
National	4.387 (11.41)	4.816 (12.13)
Europe	-12.23 (7.420)	-14.92* (8.159)
Trend	2.005** (0.813)	1.780* (0.910)
Local * Trend	1.608 (2.412)	0.291 (2.999)
Regional * Trend	2.312 (3.132)	2.581 (3.370)
National * Trend	3.436 (2.825)	3.507 (2.972)
Europe * Trend	2.121 (2.223)	2.720 (2.421)
Constant	4.345 (2.729)	5.920* (3.280)
Observations	422	422
R-squared	0.059	0.053

*Notes:* Heteroskedasticity robust standard errors in parentheses, \*\*\* indicates  $p < 0.01$ . Regional levels are indicator variables taking the values 0 or 1. The baseline outcome relates to comments without or with another geographical reference. The coding scheme is exactly opposite to that of Table 3, prioritizing the local level instead of the European. The trend variable is 0 in the year 2011 and increases by 1 per year. Based on the coded sample of 5,040 comments.

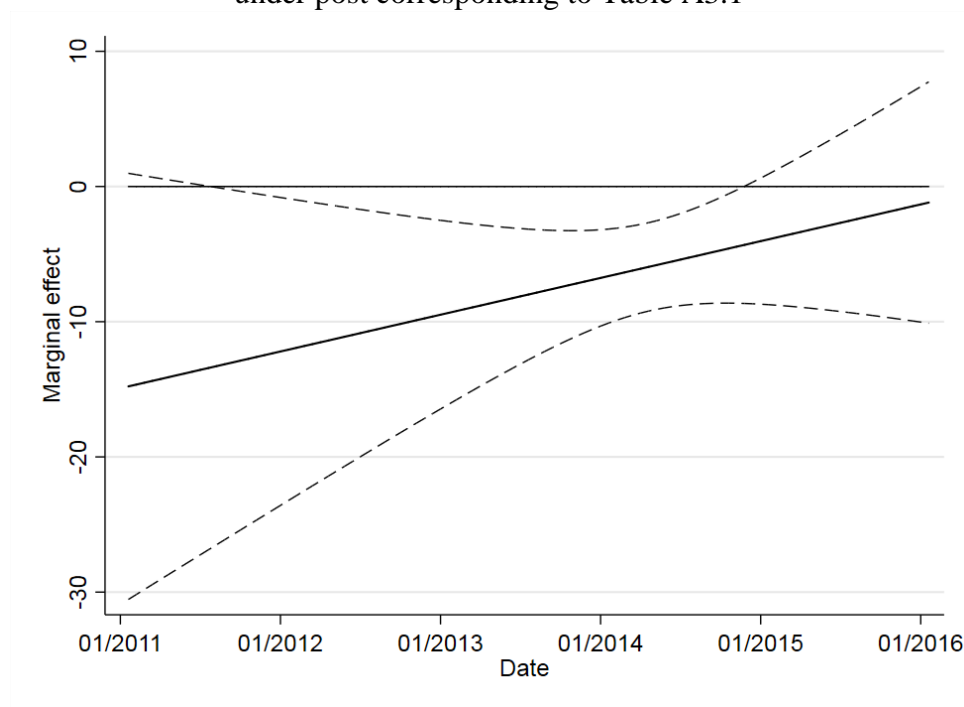
*Table A3.2: Robustness check: Actor expansion by highest reference level if full coder agreement, over time*

	(1)	(2)
	Number of unique commenters under post	Number of comments under post
Local	9.865 (11.80)	16.82 (16.64)
Regional	-74.50 (86.73)	-81.15 (93.73)
Europe	-6.249 (5.215)	-9.463 (6.113)
Trend	3.155*** (1.091)	2.749** (1.261)
Local * Trend	-1.069 (2.739)	-2.451 (3.635)
Regional * Trend	18.67 (21.15)	20.25 (22.86)
National * Trend	2.103 (2.491)	1.838 (2.569)
Europe * Trend	-1.124 (1.704)	-0.687 (1.833)
Constant	4.967 (3.844)	8.150* (4.940)
Observations	422	422
R-squared	0.030	0.023

*Notes:* Heteroskedasticity robust standard errors in parentheses, \*\*\* indicates  $p < 0.01$ . Regional levels are indicator variables taken the values 0 or 1. The baseline outcome relates to comments without or with another geographical reference. The highest level is only counted if coders are in full agreement. No coefficient for “national” in first year, because its estimated coefficient is exactly 0 and it is thus automatically dropped from the regression. The trend variable is 0 in the year 2011 and increases by 1 per year. Based on the coded sample of 5,040 comments.

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*Figure A4.1:* Marginal effects plot for effect of post-level Europe on the number of comments under post corresponding to Table A3.1



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*Figure A4.2:* Marginal effects plot for effect of post-level Europe on the number of comments under post corresponding to Table A3.2

