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The centrality of political parties

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Introduction: the Europezanization approach

The ‘politics’ of European integration were largely non-existent until the twenty-first century, outside isolated events in a few EU member states. The exceptions were countries that held referenda on EU issues, either because they were constitutionally required to do so (e.g. Denmark) or because they were motivated by domestic political reasons (the UK and France). In some of these cases (for example Denmark at the time of the referendum on the Maastricht Treaty or Sweden in 2003 on monetary union), the content of a treaty was the main focus of contestation; in other cases (such as France and the Netherlands in 2005), the referendum campaigns represented an opportunity for a variety of issues to come to the fore (Carbone 2010). In general, apart from the small number of referenda held over the decades, the European Union (as a political issue or a specific EU policy) rarely entered into the discourse of mainstream political parties in national or even in European Parliament campaigns. Therefore, pre-2000, the ‘politics of the European Union’ more accurately described the nature of intergovernmental bargaining at the European level, whether over specific policies within the Council of Ministers (and later in its inter-institutional relationship with the European Parliament) or over more strategic questions of policy and integration initiatives in the European Council. However, by the turn of the twenty-first century, in many EU member states, the EU itself had become a politicized issue within domestic political arenas.

To explain why the EU became a politicized issue in member-state politics, we must address the wider phenomenon of the EU’s impact on its member states — that is, Europeanization. This chapter presents an overview of Europeanization, applying the concept to domestic political dynamics, in particular competitive party politics. In the first section, the concept of Europeanization is briefly addressed. We then consider how the Europeanization approach has been utilized to interpret changes in domestic politics. The following sections present evidence of EU impacts in the following political areas: party politics, the differences between older and newer (post-Communist) member states and party politics at the European level.
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Europeanization and politics

Europeanization and EU member states

Europeanization is an analytical concept that defines the manner in which the EU influences domestic change within its member states, as well as in countries that are candidates for accession (Ladrech 2010). Essentially, being or becoming an EU member state introduces both a formal and an informal channel between supranational decision-making and policy development (i.e. the EU institutional architecture and policies) and the diffusion of its outputs in domestic or member-state policy fields. With regard to the process of negotiating with other national governments and supranational actors and then implementing agreed-upon policies, the Europeanization approach posits that two types of ‘mechanisms of change’ are responsible – wholly or in part – for subsequent changes in domestic institutions, policies and even politics. To be clear, the domestic changes that are the focus of the Europeanization approach are consequences of policy implementation and the process of interacting in EU policy and decision-making processes, not the substance of the EU policy that is legally implemented.

These two mechanisms of change, which have been labelled ‘misfit’ and ‘learning’ (Bulmer 2007: 51–3), are defined by the type of relationship that exists between member states and EU legislation. ‘Misfit’ denotes the divergence between domestic and EU policy and institutions, where a continued ‘gap’ can generate pressure to adapt, in order either to ensure a gain in resources through improved negotiating at the EU level or to improve the efficiency of implementation at the domestic level. The legal position of the EU (exemplified by the role of the European Commission) is such that member states are obliged to implement EU policy, thus potentially triggering pressure to adapt where any misfit becomes apparent. This legislation can be understood as ‘hard law’. Here, we are explicitly referring to an EU-to-member-state causal path, which the literature has come to describe as ‘top down’. Domestic institutions and policy direction at the domestic level may therefore become subject to adaptational pressure. In the second mechanism of change, ‘learning’, the pressure to adapt does not derive from the hierarchically dominant position of the EU (as in the misfit scenario); this mechanism is found instead in policy areas where the EU (through the actions of the Commission) can only promote voluntary acceptance of EU proposals, which the member states are free to accept or reject. However, because some member states will adopt such proposals, a process of policy diffusion through promotional activities by the Commission (by encouraging best practices, benchmarking and even peer pressure) may at times result in other member states adopting these measures; this is known as ‘soft law’ (Bulmer and Radaelli 2005: 345–51).

Domestic policies and institutions may therefore change over time as they adapt to their embeddedness in the EU system. Graziano and Vink succinctly characterize the theoretical underpinnings of the Europeanization approach: ‘Europeanization studies have mobilized all strands of the “new institutionalist approaches” – historical, rational choice, and sociological’ (Graziano and Vink 2013: 40). The institutions of the EU (including rules and policies) and their interactions with domestic governments have an impact on the shape and functioning of the domestic institutions and policies, though usually in an indirect manner; this is captured by the term ‘adaptational response’. Whether by means of legislation imposed from a legally superior position (i.e. hard policy) or by promoting change through soft policy methods, the causal lines of engagement can be identified (Exadactylos and Radaelli 2012). However, when we turn from institutional and policy change to Europeanization and domestic politics, the nature of the influence of the EU and the manner in which it is manifested in national political systems differ in significant ways.
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**Europeanization and domestic politics**

The claim that domestic politics may be influenced by the EU is based on at least three assumptions: first, that the EU actually asserts influence in the domestic political arena; second, that the mechanism(s) by which this influence is channelled can be isolated; and, third, that we can define what exactly is influenced. Let us examine each of these assumptions in turn. First, assuming from the Europeanization perspective that the EU *causes* change, we would need to understand exactly what kind of influence it is that the EU exerts. On this issue, there are substantial differences between politics and institutional and policy change. In cases of institutional and policy change, there is a direct connection between the outputs of agreed-upon EU policy and the engagement of national governments with the decision-making processes of EU institutions. This type of formal relationship through which domestic institutional and policy change (Europeanization) occurs differs from that of domestic political change due to the lack of a direct or formal relationship between the EU and domestic political arenas. For one thing, the EU has no legal mandate to affect the issue basis of domestic politics, its organizations (i.e. political parties) or rules of elections. Thus, at first glance, ‘misfit’ as a mechanism of change would seem not to be a relevant concept, as ‘EU ways of doing things’ (Radaelli 2000) are not formally imposed on competitive politics. That being said, it is undeniable that in some member-state political systems questions concerning EU membership (expressed in pro- and anti-EU discourse) and opposition to specific EU policy or policies have emerged (Hix 1999: 83–91). Has the EU politicized itself? In order to answer this question, the Europeanization approach must be modified to reflect the EU’s lack of direct impact on domestic politics. It may be the case that there is a relationship between the increasing policy scope of the EU and the domestic perceptions of party actors and public opinion. Given that such a relationship exists, it is reasonable to assume that domestic perceptions of partisan policy positions and national interests may become mobilized if they clash with EU policy positions. This relates to the second assumption regarding *how* the EU causes change; in this specific understanding, we may state that ‘misfits’ between perceived domestic positions and that of the EU that can be viewed as threatening may become politicized. Objectively, policy positions of the EU (hard policy, such as in the area of competition policy with regard to state aid) may very well impact the interests of public-sector trade unions, for example. The issue to be explored in this chapter is what happens when this clash of rival interests spills over into competitive politics. The EU thus exerts an indirect influence on domestic political systems. However, it is the exact composition of domestic political actors and factors – party policies, interest group dynamics, media reports, the presence of Eurosceptic parties, etc. – that explains the activation of EU-influenced political activity.

The final assumption concerns what exactly is changed or influenced. Here, the definition and delineation of politics and political actors comes into play. Certainly, the extensive list of relevant domestic political actors can be daunting: political parties (major/minor, mainstream/extreme), interest groups (producer, consumer, ascriptive, resource rich/poor), social movements, media and public opinion, among others. For each of these actors, there is a well-developed research literature supporting continuing analyses. The research agenda addressing the question of Europeanization, or the impact of the EU on the organization and/or performance of each of these actors, is relatively recent, beginning only around the year 2000. Additionally, in many studies the research question has been posed such that the emergent literature has concentrated on describing the overlap between the EU and the actor in question; as a result, studies from the late 1990s and early 2000s focused on the EU *and* interest groups, the EU *and* public opinion, the EU *and* political parties, etc. (Ladrech 2009). Scholars following the Europeanization
approach, on the other hand, have been engaged in determining the causal weight of the EU in the observed empirical changes in these actors, usually by means of process tracing (Haverland 2007: 62–3). Thus, accounting for the mechanism of change facilitates an understanding of how the EU has influenced organizational change within certain political parties and lobbying strategies within major interest groups. From a Europeanization approach thus defined, most studies since 2000 in the realm of domestic politics have focused primarily on political parties, with far less attention devoted to interest groups and social movements. This is not too surprising, as parties are indispensable for competitive politics, and party government is, after all, the ‘official’ interlocutor between a member state and the EU. The fact that the Europeanization research agenda began to focus on political parties in the early 2000s is indicative of the increase in reactions by national parties to the EU – and in particular to its policy agenda. It is to this understanding of Europeanization in relation to political parties that we now turn.

The impact of the EU in national politics

Political parties

As described above, before the Europeanization research agenda took root in the early 2000s a literature had developed on political parties and the EU. This literature essentially focused on two levels: national and European. In the first case, the research effort concentrated primarily on the policy position regarding European integration on the part of mainstream centre-left and centre-right parties. This was also sub-divided into party families, e.g. social democrats, Christian democrats and liberals. Although primarily descriptive, this literature did uncover debates within parties over the merits of transferring sovereignty as well as over specific EU policy orientations, such as economic policy (especially when monetary union was placed on the EU agenda; for the case of social democratic parties, see Notermans 2001; for Communist parties, see Charalambous 2013). Research on the second case, parties at the European level, began with the decision to hold direct elections to the European Parliament in 1979. In anticipation of these elections, with the idea that a European party system might take shape, the main three party families (again, social democrats, Christian democrats and liberals) launched transnational party federations, essentially a European-level party made up of national party affiliates. Research on the evolution and organizational structure of these so-called ‘Euro-parties’ over the subsequent decades has tracked their organizational development, their relations with member parties and their influence over elections to the European Parliament (Johansson and Zervakis 2002; see Chapters 14 and 33). Also stemming from the first direct EP elections, although not centred on political parties per se, was a research focus on the nature of the elections themselves, specifically the impact they have on domestic politics. Two works from the 1980s and 1990s stand out in this area. The first, an article by Reif and Schmitt (1980), characterized EP elections as ‘second order’, thereby classifying them as minor if not inconsequential for domestic politics. The second, an article by Hix (1999), argued that the issue of European integration was beginning to have an effect on domestic politics in the sense of partisan alignments, with a pro- and anti-EU axis emerging. What both of these landmark articles provided was a framework for linking elections to a European institution, namely the European Parliament, to domestic electoral support.

Where the Europeanization and parties literature differs from the studies cited above is in its attempt to explain changes in domestic political systems that may have been generated in some fashion by the EU. In the first section, we described the impact of the EU on domestic institutions and policies; the mechanism of change in these instances was explained as due to the ‘misfit’ between domestic decision-making and that of the EU. Similarly, policy change
was explained in relation to the changes made to adapt to EU legislation: the greater the difference, the higher the expectation that adaptive changes will occur. With parties, as indicated above, the EU has no direct authority over the national political ‘rules of the game’, and so the EU as a cause of domestic political change would be indirect. That said, however, research has indeed formulated both indirect and direct causes for political party change.

As applied to party research, the Europeanization approach has encouraged a focus that includes arenas and activities such as party organization, party manifestos and programmes, party–government relations, patterns of party competition and relations beyond the national political system – for example relations with Euro-parties and party groups in the European Parliament (see Ladrech 2002 for an early framework for analysis). Within this research area, a distinction is generally made between parties in post-Communist member states and those from the older, pre-2004 enlargement (Lewis 2006). This facet will be considered separately in the following section.

**Direct and indirect impacts of the EU on political parties**

The EU’s influence on domestic political parties is mostly of an indirect nature, although the role played by EU institutions in response to the 2008 financial crisis has introduced a new dimension into domestic political activity. There is no legal obligation for EU institutions and political parties to maintain formal contact. Simply put, for the parties the EU is neither the attractive ‘opportunity structure’ it can represent for certain interest groups or sub-national governmental actors (i.e. there is no financial gain transferred), nor itself useful as an actor providing a competitive edge in party competition (i.e. it is not an ally of any particular political party). It would thus appear that political parties are not ideal candidates for incorporation into the Europeanization research agenda, due to their ‘insularity’ from direct EU influence. Nonetheless, there is evidence that national political parties have experienced changes in several dimensions. Although EU influence can generally be characterized as indirect, Mair (2007: 157) makes an important distinction between the EU’s direct and indirect effects on parties, posing the question of whether ‘Europeanization as penetration has directly led to the formation of new political parties, whether in the national or European arenas’. One direct impact on parties and party systems has been the creation of a new dimension in party competition (Hix 1999), a pro- and anti-EU axis; this is orthogonal to the left–right axis, potentially leading (depending on national electoral rules) to the emergence of new parties. For example, the role played by the German government in managing the European financial crisis has resulted in a backlash, as demonstrated by the emergence of a Eurosceptic party in Germany, the Alternative for Germany (Alternative für Deutschland, AfD). Furthermore, for parties divided over the question of European integration this new dimension confronts party leaderships with the problem of managing dissent without undermining traditional stances on the left–right axis (Gabel and Scheve 2007). The French Socialist Party’s internal referendum just prior to the national referendum on the 2005 EU Constitutional Treaty is a good example of party leadership allowing members to determine the party’s official position. Research in this vein has continued to explore the possible impact of the EU issue on traditional alignments (Hooghe and Marks 2008), as well as how a left or right partisan position might determine parties’ responses to European integration (Marks et al. 2002; Hellström 2008).

As for indirect effects on parties, the literature has focused on explaining changes in the organization and activities of parties, including patterns of competition. In one of the first attempts to systematize the study of Europeanization and national political parties, Ladrech (2002: 393–6) argues that, following Mair (2000: 37–41), the constraints on the range of EU member states’
governmental policy-making reduced the scope of policy proposals that parties could offer at elections. Mair (2007: 159–61) further describes these constraints as manifesting themselves in three ways. The first concerns the limits on the policy space available to competing parties; this constraint is most applicable in party system research. The second involves the reduction in the policy instruments available to national governments (e.g. limits on state aid, central bank independence in Eurozone states, etc.). The third is related to limitations on the policy repertoire of governments. These three constraints represent the impact of the EU on national governments; the effect on parties stems from the overall reduction in or limitation on the ability of member-state governments – in particular the national executive – to offer choices to voters, thereby affecting party competition. Assuming this is the case, Ladrech argues, there may be several dimensions of party organization and activity to investigate if these reduced or narrowed policy fields are reflected in the parties themselves. Ladrech suggests that evidence of such change might be found in five areas: (1) party programmes; (2) party organization; (3) patterns of party competition; (4) party–government relations; and (5) relations beyond the national political system. The impact of this framework has been the introduction of greater analytical rigour in the application of the Europeanization concept to domestic party politics. For example, in the past when the term Europeanization had been employed it was simply used to describe a change in the position of a party with respect to the EU; the contemporary use of the concept is to explain the change. The following items represent areas of party activity in which the EU may be regarded as a cause for change.

Programmatic change

Most mainstream centre-left and centre-right political parties in EU member states make explicit reference to the EU in their party programme (their fundamental document). Most of these parties have been supportive of the European integration project since at least the early 1980s, with some having shifted from opposition to support (e.g. the Danish Social Democrats and the British Labour Party). The Europeanization approach has sought to explain (1) the emergence of EU references and (2) the nature of the actual content (see, inter alia, Kritzinger and Michalowitz 2005; Dorussen and Nanou 2006; Pennings 2006). The growing politicization of the EU in the early 2000s has witnessed the tempering of centre-left pro-EU positions by more explicit national concerns, as well as some limited support for the re-nationalization of certain policies (e.g. in the Dutch Labour Party).

Organizational change

Many political parties, especially large, resource-rich organizations, have created a position of varying importance that acts as the point of reference on EU issues: a liaison between the national party and its delegation in the European Parliament, an advisor to the party leadership on EU matters, or else a specific area policy in the party’s international office. The expenditure of party resources on such positions attests to the degree of party concern over the EU as an issue in their domestic political systems, but research suggests these actors are more bureaucratic in nature than political (Poguntke et al. 2007). The position of national party leader may also have been influenced by the recent focus on transnational party summits (Raunio 2002).

Patterns of party competition

This area of party activities most closely follows Mair’s (2007) discussion of the effect of policy constraints on party competition. The expectation is that there will be indications of convergence among the major centre-left and centre-right parties in general economic policy, especially among the member states in the Eurozone. One consequence of the convergence of mainstream parties...
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on economic policy and their position on European integration is that competitive space opens up on the extremes of the party system. It may be the case that surprising referendum results (such as those in the Netherlands and France in 2005) represent examples of voters released from the usual channels of party cues expressing a reaction to the attenuated spectrum of choice. Another consequence, depending on the political system, might be a strengthening of anti-EU parties on the far left and far right. Although few of these parties have garnered the electoral support necessary to complicate the traditional patterns of mainstream party competition, their presence can influence the debates within the mainstream parties over the impact of the EU on the domestic political economy.

In a similar vein, it is undeniable that the financial crisis has had an effect on party competition, as expected, in the Eurozone countries hardest hit by the fallout (note, however, the emergence of the Alternative for Germany party). Elections in Greece in 2012 nearly wiped out the incumbent party, the centre-left (social democratic) PASOK, due to support for the party to its left, SYRIZA. Anti-EU austerity mobilization has also been a factor in national elections in post-Communist countries, as seen in the Czech Republic and Bulgaria.

In some cases, European Parliament elections, perhaps due to their ‘second-order’ nature, have been viewed as an alternative to national elections in terms of the electoral consequences. The results, on average, are usually disappointing for the incumbent party in national government; the venting of voter frustration in second-order elections has meant that most mainstream parties do not invest much time or extensive resources in these campaigns. In contrast, for smaller, more marginal parties these elections represent an opportunity to establish a foothold in the European Parliament, which can be useful in terms of financial and organizational development. In some countries, including Denmark, there are parties that compete solely in European Parliament elections, such as the People’s Movement Against the EU.

Party–government relations

The party in government (alone or as part of a coalition) is directly engaged with the EU through intergovernmental bargaining in the Council of Ministers and (at a more exalted level) in the European Council. In some parties, the party in central office (i.e. the extra-parliamentary party organization) plays a crucial role in mediating relations and tensions between elected officials and party members. The more unpopular the policy decisions of the government party, the more intra-party tensions and divisions can arise, thus placing pressure on party management; these dynamics can be seen in the French Socialist Party, for example.

Relations beyond the national party system

Although the study of transnational party federations (or Euro-parties) has been discussed in relation to the first broad research area of the EU and political parties, there have also been some studies that take the national party as their starting point – that is, explaining why a national party would promote or become involved in the activities of its respective Euro-party (e.g. Green, social democratic, Christian democratic, liberal, etc.). For some national parties, especially in Eastern Europe, affiliation with a Euro-party has become a symbol of their integration into the wider European partisan family (Hanley 2008).

Very few studies have attempted to combine several or all of the above dimensions into one comparative study; exceptions are Johansson and Raunio (2001) for Swedish and Finnish parties, and Hayward and Murphy (2010) for Irish parties. Two comparative studies have applied some of these dimensions and devoted attention to other factors in order to produce further evidence of the EU’s impact on parties, but these studies are widely disparate in design and primarily focused on individual parties rather than wholesale party system change. Petithomme (2011)
assembled a large team to test the validity of some of the assumptions and dimensions presented by Ladrech (2002), in particular programmatic and organizational change and party competition; Central and Eastern European politics were included, as were the situations in countries on the periphery of the EU (e.g. Turkey). Their findings are confirmed by the comparative work of Külahci (2012), which addresses change in parties but not party systems and the role of elites in managing internal dissension, among other factors. Although Ladrech's list of the potential dimensions of party change may not be comprehensive, there is an ongoing effort to explore the different facets of the EU’s impact on parties in both Western and Eastern Europe. However, it should be noted that the Europeanization of post-Communist parties has its own unique set of factors that must be considered when addressing the impact of the EU on domestic politics.

**Europeanization and parties in post-Communist EU member states**

The experience of post-Communist party politics and the European Union, or more specifically the impact of the EU upon the development and activities of political parties in these countries, has been vastly different from that of the established parties in the older EU member states. The impact of the EU on post-Communist political systems has been dramatic, as these new regimes were much more ‘open’ to external influence, and their new political elites viewed EU membership as a strategic priority to be achieved as soon as possible. Consequently, the EU had influence over these states even before they officially became member states, a process one commentator has labelled ‘anticipatory Europeanization’ (Ágh 2003). In general, elite and mass opinion supported joining the EU for political and economic reasons of stability and economic development (NATO membership was similarly desirable for security reasons vis-à-vis Russia). The process of reshaping societies after decades of Communist political and economic rule meant that entrenched institutional barriers were weakened, resulting in an absence of ‘veto players’ to oppose the adaptive pressure of the EU. Uniquely in the case of post-Communist states, the negotiation process on accession – revolving around the various chapters of the EU’s legislative content, the so-called acquis communautaire, in parallel to the restructuring necessary to create a functional, law-based market economy – in a sense downloaded the policy orientation of the EU into the agenda of these countries (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2007). The desire to become an EU member state was so great that, apart from certain minor parties on the fringes of the emergent party system, all parties supported their governments’ efforts to join as soon as possible, even to the extent of placing the negotiations outside normal partisan competition in parliamentary debates. All countries formed either a new ministry or a new section within a foreign ministry or the prime minister’s office to coordinate these efforts. Overall, the impact of the EU during the crucial ten or so years of the transition of these countries to political democracy and a market economy (early 1990s to 2004) has been called ‘transformative’ in the Europeanization literature (Börzel 2005). How did this dramatic impact on policy and institutional development affect politics?

The literature on the impact of the EU on post-Communist transition and consolidation (Sedelmeier 2011) and on parties in particular has concerned itself with questions of democratization, the instilling of EU norms into the new political, legal and economic regimes, party development factors stemming from EU political conditionality and the specific role of transnational party cooperation (Pridham 2005: 164–73). The EU had a strongly attractive influence on party development during the first decade of post-Communism. Three sets of party types that emerged over the first few years can be identified: Communist successor parties, many of which sought to become centre-left or social democratic parties; relatively small organizations
that were essentially a revival of a national inter-war-era party, for example liberal parties; and parties formed after the fall of Communism, some of which had been involved in the popular movements that arose during the last stages of Communist rule. The analysis of their subsequent development and the nature of post-Communist party politics include an EU-related causal link that differs from the experiences of parties in Western Europe. Enyedi and Lewis conclude that

European Union institutions, and the European integration process in general, have been able to strengthen the position of some parties and weaken others. More important, by influencing coalition-making strategies and facilitating the ideological reorientation (mainly towards moderation) of certain parties, EU integration has contributed to changes in the mechanisms of party systems.

(Enyedi and Lewis 2006: 247)

One of the main differences between the EU’s indirect effects on parties in post-Communist member states (particularly during the pre-accession period) and on parties in the West is the role that transnational party federations have played. Pridham (2001, 2005) has argued that in terms of programmatic development, campaign guidance and ideological profiles, these Western party federations significantly contributed to the developmental trajectory followed by the main parties in most Central European countries. Walecki (2007) also suggests that the EU had an additional indirect effect in terms of the regulation of party funding, primarily through its promotion of anti-corruption reforms. Party competition, some claim, was indirectly affected – if not impaired – by the decision of most parties in the centre of the political spectrum to agree to ‘not disagree’ over EU policy content (Grzymała-Busse and Innes 2003). If one interprets this as an indirect EU effect, it should be balanced by additional considerations. First, after accession a soft Eurosceptic argument often arose in party discourses, resisting a particular EU policy or else blaming a domestic policy position on EU influence. This suggests that internal dissent was in fact present, but that party strategic priorities overrode these considerations to avoid slowing the accession process. Second, and somewhat related to the first point, the limited degree of party system institutionalization (apart from Hungary and the Czech Republic) suggests that fluidity of position, or indeed party system instability, has cancelled out the Europeanization concept ‘misfit’ as a key mechanism of change: electoral volatility means that policy space is still open for exploitation by new parties and that ‘established’ parties can adapt more easily in its ideological stance (as well as relatively successful at the polls) is the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KS_M) in the Czech Republic, which won nearly 12 per cent of the vote in the 2006 and 2010 elections.

No doubt due to the explicitly asymmetric relationship between the EU and post-Communist states in the 1990s and early 2000s, there has been greater academic interest in the question of Europeanization and post-Communist party politics than in parties and the EU in Western Europe (e.g. Lewis and Mansfeldová 2006; special issue of Politics in Central Europe 2007; special issue of the Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics edited by Houghton 2009; Enyedi 2007; Lewis and Markowski 2011). Significant attention has also been devoted to how the EU might impact certain types of parties (not necessarily the ‘party families’), such as Communist successor parties (Ishiyama 2006) and ethnic parties (Spirova 2012). States from the former Yugoslavia either in accession negotiations or negotiating to arrive at the point of candidacy (i.e. Croatia and Serbia) were the subject of the Europeanization approach in a special issue of the Journal of Southern Europe and the Balkans edited by Fink-Hafner and Ladrech (2008). The two edited
collections by Lewis and Mansfeldová (2006) and Houghton (2009) present more nuanced evaluations of the impact of the EU on the parties and party systems of post-Communist states. Certainly, the variety of national experiences encourages caution in labelling all of the countries as Europeanized, as their transition process has been varied. This theme of variation, across both countries and dimensions of Europeanization, is strengthened by the findings of Lewis and Markowski (2011). In this study, a comparative analysis of the influence of the EU on party and party system change is supplemented by an analysis of political representation, voting patterns, the party–state relationship and how these may impact party system competition.

EU party politics

As described above, in the case of post-Communist parties transnational party federations have played a significant role in the development of at least some of their national party affiliates. In the first section, we noted that the literature on the EU and political parties covered the establishment and subsequent evolution of these parties, also referred to as ‘Euro-parties’. From the Europeanization research perspective, the fact that these organizations have had some influence in domestic (post-Communist) party politics attests to the top-down direction of causality that has been the Europeanization approach’s primary focus. In other cases, a national party has emphasized its Euro-party affiliation in a direct attempt to enhance aspects of its own legitimacy. For example, in the case of the restructuring of the Italian party system in the 1990s, Mr Berlusconi’s party, then called Forza Italia, tried to bolster its claim that it was a mainstream centre-right political party by pointing to its membership in (and its MEPs’ affiliation with) the European People’s Party, the chief centre-right transnational party and the largest group in the European Parliament. Similarly, again in Italy but on the centre-left of the political spectrum, the evolution of the former Italian Communist Party (PCI) into a centre-left social-democratic party included pointed references to its new membership in the Party of European Socialists, the main centre-left Euro-party and the second largest group in the European Parliament. In each of these cases, affiliation with a European-level partisan organization was invoked in order to enhance the legitimacy credentials of these national parties, or so the party leaderships hoped. Thus, in a very indirect manner, the EU – through Euro-parties – has had some (limited) influence on national parties (Ladrech 2002).

In general, as stated in the first section, the Europeanization literature suggests that, because the EU has no direct relationship with national parties, any effect will be indirect and result from broader changes (usually policy constraints) in national governments. However, we also noted at the outset that the EU ‘as a politicized issue’ is increasingly becoming woven into the domestic politics of many member states. The financial and economic crisis in the Eurozone member states and beyond (e.g. the UK) since 2008 has meant that the salience of the EU is increasing; however, for the most part, national parties have not developed strategies for manipulating these issues in party competition. Apart from Eurosceptic parties, the mainstream pro-EU parties of the centre-left and centre-right appear to collude in their general avoidance of the issue of EU prominence in domestic affairs; from a Europeanization perspective, they are ‘resisting’ the indirect pressure to adapt. A good example is the British Labour Party, whose response in 2013 to the Conservative-led coalition government’s call for an in/out referendum on UK membership of the EU was simply to state, ‘now is not a good time for such a debate’. Research on this phenomenon can be found in the literature on party management of dissent over the EU (i.e. over EU membership) or else on policy disagreement (left-wing disagreement over economic policy, right-wing disagreement over immigration policy). Hooghe and Marks (2008: 14–18) suggest that as the prominence of the EU and its policy orientation have increased
in member states, the mainstream parties have become more open to dissent over their party’s support for this agenda. Where there are rival parties to the left or right of these mainstream parties that take a more extreme policy stance, tension between left and right wings within parties may increase, causing party leaderships to adjust their strategies (Ladrech 2012: 188–91).

This eruption of the EU into domestic politics outside party control has thus far not been addressed by Europeanization researchers, although it has been studied through the effects of the EU on public opinion, especially around European Parliament elections. In brief, there are two dimensions to this approach. One of these focuses on reasons for voting, turnout and choice of party (Van der Brug and Van der Eijk 2007). Here, the role of the media as an intervening variable is also discussed (De Vreese 2003), as well as the influence of Eurosceptic parties. The second approach, following research suggesting that EP elections have no substantial effect on national politics, argues that the mobilization of public opinion on the EU itself or on EU-related or linked policies may have more significant consequences for national patterns of political competition (the so-called ‘sleeping giant’ thesis; Van der Eijk and Franklin 2007). This has been explored from the perspective of issue salience theory (Steenbergen and Scott 2004) where the potential for political contestation exists. The rise in political mobilization against national budgetary cuts mandated by the EU (as part of the troika of institutions bailing out select Eurozone governments, along with the International Monetary Fund and the European Central Bank) may refocus attention on this area of research. In early 2013, the European Commission recommended that the major Euro-parties each agree to select a common candidate for president of the European Commission for their respective European Parliament campaigns in 2014 (European Commission 2013). The hope was that by introducing a ‘face’ for each Euro-party, interest (and potentially turnout) might rise, thus conferring much-needed legitimacy on the EU. It is too early to evaluate whether this attempt at Europeanizing national contests over positions in EU institutions will accomplish its goal, but it is a sign that EU-level party politics may be on the verge of actually entering domestic politics in something more than a second-order election. However, it is also an explicit sign of the concern of the European Commission and the European Parliament over EU legitimacy in European and national party politics. ‘Soft’ Euroscepticism (e.g. opposition to a particular EU policy by a mainstream party) has been merely an occasional development; in contrast, the more fundamental critiques of the EU’s operations by formerly staunchly pro-EU parties such as the Dutch Labour Party highlight the ‘negative’ aspects of Europeanized party politics, at least from the perspective of pro-EU actors in Brussels.

Conclusion

The European Union is not simply a national political system writ large; rather, in many ways, it is a unique experiment in intergovernmental and supranational forms of governance. The EU is also based on a long history of European conflict and economic reconstruction. As it has evolved over the decades since its founding in the 1950s, the EU has taken on more of the traditional characteristics of a political system, especially since the Single European Act in the late 1980s. But, as it has done so, expanding the scope of its policy competences, its influence has begun to generate domestic political reactions. On the whole, mainstream political parties have expressed a largely undifferentiated support for the European integration process. However, as the twenty-first century has progressed, this position, largely underwritten by business and political elites, has come under pressure from public mobilization in many (but not all) member states. We are in the early stages of the ‘politics of the European Union’, and political parties at both domestic and European levels are adapting, or Europeanizing, but this is a gradual process...
that lacks a roadmap. What this chapter has provided is an overview of the many permutations that are implied in party-political adaption to the influence of the EU. Party adaptation can be oppositional or Eurosceptic; it may be opposed to a certain policy orientation, from a left-wing or right-wing perspective; it might express itself within mainstream parties in terms of dissent; and it can be expressed by voters in elections, both national and European. This multitude of possibilities may represent a new avenue of research in the area of Europeanization and politics.

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