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Contentious Politics in the Transnational Arena

Political Contention in Europe and its Wider Neighbourhood

Edited by Chiara Milan · Aron Buzogány



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Chiara Milan • Aron Buzogány
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Praise for *Contentious Politics in the Transnational Arena*

“The volume by Chiara Milan and Aron Buzogány marks a timely and original contribution to the literature on civil society and transnational social dynamics within and across the EU. Its selected cases of transnational contention that have taken place both in the EU and neighboring countries provide us with a new understanding of the nature, repertoire of participatory tools and engagement methods employed in the emerging EU political space. This is a must read collection for anyone interested in the role played and bottom up dynamics unleashed by social movements in the process of EU integration and disintegration.”

—Alberto Alemanno, *Jean Monnet Professor of EU Law, HEC Paris and Democracy Fellow, Harvard University*

“This is a wide-ranging collection that gives us insights into the complexity and variation of transnational contention in and around Europe today. The authors tackle that complexity through chapters that focus on the opportunities, resources, frames, and networks that a range of actors use to build their transnational actions in different ways and at different scales. This collection, expertly tied together by the editors, leaves little uncovered, examining movements and civil society actions across issues, space, politics, and scales. A fantastic resource for students and scholars of European politics today.”

—Louisa Parks, *Professor in Sociology, University of Trento*

“This volume provides a valuable addition to an understudied field of contention—that of transnational mobilization and activism. The scope is vast, both in geographical and substantive terms. The attention to both “frontlash” and “backlash” movements is of great importance, not least given the changing political constellation in Europe and elsewhere, which the contributions importantly help to explore from an original, transnational, and non-state angle.”

—Paul Blokker, *Professor in Sociology, University of Bologna*

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ABBREVIATIONS

AMIF	Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund
ARCI	Associazione Ricreativa e Culturale Italiana
BNP	British National Party
CDA	Critical Discourse Analysis
CEAS	Common European Asylum System
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
CoE	Council of Europe
CGT	Confédération générale du travail
CILD	Coalition for Civil Liberties and Rights
CJEU	Court of Justice of the European Union
COP	Conference of the Parties
COSPE	Cooperazione per lo Sviluppo dei Paesi Emergenti
CPA	Croke Park Agreement
CSRs	Country Specific Recommendations
CSCE	Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
EaP	Eastern Partnership
EASA	European Union Aviation Safety Agency
ECB	European Central Bank
ECI	European Citizens' Initiative
ECR	European Conservatives and Reformists Group
ECtHR	European Court of Human Rights
EDP	Excessive Deficit Procedure
EERC	European Employee Representative Committee
EGD	European Green Deal
EIDHR	European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights
EMHRN	Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network

EMP	Euro-Mediterranean Partnership
EPSU	European Federation of Public Service Unions
EU	European Union
ETF	European Transport Workers' Federation
EMU	Economic and Monetary Union
EP	European Parliament
EPSU	European Federation of Public Service Unions
ETUFs	European Trade Union Federations
FFF	Fridays for Future
FSTC	From the Sea to the City
FTL	Flight and Duty Time Limitations
GJM	Global Justice Movement
GONGO	Government-Organised NGO
HSE	Health Service Executive
HR	Human Resources
IAA	Irish Aviation Authority
ICTU	Irish Congress of Trade Unions
ID	Identity and Democracy Group
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IMO	Irish Medical Organisation
INMO	Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation
LFA	Low Fare Airlines
LGBTQ+	Lesbian Gay Bisex Transgender Queer
MeP	Member of European Parliament
MoU	Memoranda of Understanding
MS	Member State
NATO	North-Atlantic Treaty Organisation
NEG	New Economic Governance
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisations
PD	Democratic Party
PoE	Pulse of Europe
POS	Political Opportunity Structure
PP	Partido Popular
PRA	Power Resource Approaches
PSOE	Partido Socialista Obrero Español
Pv	Party for Freedom
SAR	Search and Rescue
SGP	Stability and Growth Pact
SEAM	Single European Aviation Market
SIPTU	Services Industrial Professional and Technical Union
SMO	Social Movement Organisations
STS	Science and Technology Studies

TLA	Transnational Labour Activism
TNCs	Transnational Corporations
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
USA	United States of America
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
XR	Extinction Rebellion

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CHAPTER 1

The Transnationalization of Political Contention in Europe and Its Wider Neighbourhood During the Political Backlash: An Introduction

Chiara Milan 

This volume presents the findings of research conducted within the framework of the Transnational Political Contention in Europe project,¹ a network that brought together a wide range of academic institutions and think tanks to investigate the attempts that have been made to transnationalize contention in the European space. Looking specifically at the period from the mid-2010s onwards, we conceive of transnational mobili-

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zation as a form of political mobilization that takes place across international borders. In this case, we refer to the European space and its neighbourhood, meaning countries involved in the European integration process. For this reason, the research focuses on the European space as an arena where civil society actors (CSOs) mobilize resorting to diverse repertoires and discursive strategies, and on the European Union (EU) as the direct or indirect target of their claims.

Amongst the first scholars to investigate this field of research, Tarrow (2005) defined transnational activism as a form of contentious politics that goes beyond the boundaries of the contemporary nation state, spilling over across borders. Similarly, he portrayed transnational activists as “people and groups who are rooted in specific national contexts, but who engage in contentious political activities that involve them in transnational networks and contacts” (Tarrow, 2005). The contributions that this volume makes to the existing scholarship that built upon Tarrow’s work are manifold. Firstly, it widens the geographical scope of existing research to explore contention in the enlarged space of the EU and its neighbouring countries. Several contributions delve into cases of transnational contention that have taken place in countries geographically located outside of the EU. These include EU candidate or potential candidate countries—located in the Western Balkans, the South Caucasus, and the Mediterranean region, as well as the UK, which become a former member of the EU in 2020. Secondly, it investigates the efforts to transnationalize contention undertaken by a composite set of civil society actors, which encompasses both progressive and regressive actors, such as social movements and political parties, together with trade unions and non-governmental organizations, while it also explores the emergence of new actors—including municipalities and users’ groups, amongst others. Thirdly, the volume collects insights into episodes of transnational contention that have emerged in a wide range of policy sectors, such as labour, climate, environment, migration, human rights, gender violence, and healthcare. Fourthly, the volume explores the use of new tools and mechanisms that are available to CSOs, aside from mainstream means of contention. Delving into these cases study helps us to understand the extent to which the expansion of EU competences into different areas has also had the effect of offering new instruments with which to influence its governance. A fruitful example of this is the mechanism of the European Citizens’ Initiative, which was introduced in 2009 by the Lisbon Treaty and allows for the creation of bottom-up legislative initiatives.

In reading this book, therefore, it is possible to gain new insights into the manner in which the wide range of non-state agents outlined above act transnationally in the European space with the aim of influencing EU governance; the types of mobilization they pursue in a variety of policy fields; the variation and innovation in repertoires of collective action they resort to (such as litigation, protest, lobbying, advocacy campaigns, contestation, strikes, etc.); and the discursive frames and narratives they employ, which also includes how they formulate their imaginaries of Europe. All of these elements will be addressed in what follows, following a brief overview of how the existing scholarship has dealt with the question of the transnationalization of contention to date.

THE ORIGINS OF TRANSNATIONAL CONTENTION

Despite the fact that national governments remain the key political actors in the European arena, civil society organizations have increasingly attempted to influence EU and national policies by mobilizing at the transnational—and at times even at the global—level (Blokker, 2018; Della Porta & Tarrow, 2005). For this reason, political sociologists have looked at Europe as a political space and a source of challenges and multi-level opportunities for the transnationalization of social movements (Della Porta & Tarrow, 2005). In the early 2000s, social movement scholars stressed the fact that, in a globalized world, political protests have also become globalized. Although such protests remain rooted in the domestic context, it has been claimed that transnational activism strives to transcend the local and state level in order to address supranational bodies. Within the global justice movement (GJM), which started to mobilize in the early 2000s, protest organizations and networks became global in their span, while the same could be said for their targets—namely the institutions of global neoliberalism (e.g. the World Bank or the International Monetary Funds)—and the demands of global justice that they posed (Della Porta et al., 2006). Political phenomena like the GJM (also referred to as the movement of the movements) shed light on the shift in political power from the domestic to the global level (Della Porta & Tarrow, 2005). Crucial elements in transnational activism were the travelling activists and actors who were rooted in their locality of origin, but “who engage in contentious political activities that involve them in transnational networks and contacts” (Tarrow, 2005, p. 29).

While the GJM had been considered the sign of a general trend towards the globalization of social movements, the advent of the financial crisis that began in 2008 marked a general decline in organizational resources as well as a narrowing of political opportunities, which made it more difficult to organize transnational protests at a later stage (Della Porta & Parks, 2015). Consequently, repertoires of action mutated: instead of organizing counter-summits at European Council meetings, demonstrators opted to occupy local public squares during protest campaigns that were primarily national in their orientation (Della Porta, 2015, 2017). This repertoire of action was adopted in particular in 2011 by the 15-M movement in Spain, as well as by demonstrators in Greece as part of the wave of anti-austerity protests that swept across Europe (Della Porta & Mattoni, 2014; Portos Garcia, 2016). The propensity to raise global claims also decreased, coupled with a lower capacity to address global targets. Scholarship has identified the fact that in the countries that were hit hardest by the financial crisis, social movements experienced a downward (often locally bounded) turn, as mobilizing efforts began to be directed at the local level. Given the closure towards transnational mobilization, this shift to the local and national level of action translated into a locally or nationally orientated turn in the 2010s, albeit one that was not necessarily localist or nationalist. Acknowledging the obstacles for transnational mobilization, social movement actors subsequently realized the difficulty in enacting an upward scale shift in mobilization (Della Porta, 2020; Fagan & Buzogány, 2022; Milan, 2020). The opportunities open to social movements at the EU level were further reduced by the unfolding of the financial crisis as well as the policies introduced by the EU to address the situation (Della Porta, 2021).

The transformation of political and legal arrangements in the 2010s led to the creation of supranational political and regulatory fields that contested the primacy of the nation state (Zajak, 2017), as well as new transnational actors and regulatory bodies, introducing new global governance arrangements and normative arenas. Consequently, some political activism shifted to the transnational level as a response to globalization, bringing new transnational actors into the contentious arena. In a rapidly digitalizing context, progressive social movements found themselves embedded in a global governance architecture (Zajak, 2017) the multi-layered nature of which provided further opportunities for transnational mobilization (Della Porta & Tarrow, 2005). For instance, digital and platform capitalism increased labour productivity, while at the same time provoking the

acceleration, flexibilization, and internationalization of labour worldwide (Fuchs, 2018). As a consequence, multinational corporations became the new targets of social movement organizations: examples of this include Amazon in relation to the violation of labour rights (Staab & Nachtwey, 2016), or environmental groups' targeting of the British-Australian multinational corporation "Rio Tinto", which is currently attempting to exploit natural resources in the Western Balkans and other countries considered in transition.

The late 2010s brought about a new turn towards transnational campaigns. The discontent with austerity measures continued to mobilize an intense wave of protests of varying scale in several countries. The crisis of political legitimacy as well as social inequalities led to the emergence of strong social movements that, while maintaining a focus on social injustice, also singled out some of the specific consequences it has in relation to violence against women, peripheral economies, global warming, the precarity of young people, and self-determination. Several of these movements quickly spread at an international level through global days of action, which promoted the idea of a global view of the problems faced as well as global solutions. An example of this is violence against women, which was initially addressed by *Ni Una Menos* (Not One [Woman] Less), a protest campaign that began in Argentina in the mid-2010s to denounce gender-based violence before quickly spreading to Southern Europe and mobilizing a new generation of young feminists in the 'Old Continent'. At the same time, large-scale protests staged by the new climate justice movement, through Fridays for Future and Extinction Rebellion, spread rapidly throughout the globe, bridging the contentious politics of the youngest generation with those already active in the fight against climate change (De Moor et al., 2021). Fifty years after the 'Hot Autumn' of 1969, when workers' protests spread across Europe, 2019 marked a new global 'Hot Autumn', characterized by mass protest in which millions took part in marches and civil disobedience (Della Porta, 2020). The 'Hot Autumn' of 2019 took both the mass media and public opinion by surprise, not only due to how these events converged in time but also the spread of massive waves of protest against increasing inequalities and the corruption of political and economic elites, erupted in several countries across the world. Protestors frequently refer to one another through the display of each other's banners and flags from Lebanon to Iraq, Chile and Ecuador, but also Barcelona and London. While there was an apparent lack of a direct connection between these events, the frequent expressions of reciprocal

solidarity that took place triggered a new reflection on transnationalization through learning and emulation at a distance (*ibid.*). These protest campaigns did not completely come to an end as a result of the lockdown period that followed the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the summer of 2020, a large transnational campaign against racism, called for by the Black Lives Matters movement, spread worldwide and has had a significant legacy (Della Porta et al., 2023).

The 2020 COVID-19 pandemic represented a critical juncture that further reduced the opportunities for in-person meetings and assemblies. Nevertheless, at the same time it also opened up the possibility to create transnational spaces in the digital sphere (Zajak et al., 2020) in order to continue raising attention on, amongst other things, the migratory issue. Activities and protests also took place off-line, as demonstrated by the abovementioned Black Lives Matter campaign. During the pandemic, transnational mobilization developed around solidarity campaigns aimed at supporting migrants as well as highlighting the connection between the health and environmental crises, leading to social movement practices that were characteristic of the pre-pandemic period being reshaped and adapted to the changed environment and the restrictions on mobility (Milan, 2025). The post-pandemic period was marked by the Hamas attack on Israel on 7 October 2023, followed by the bombing of the Gaza Strip by Israeli forces, which sparked a worldwide mobilization in solidarity with Palestine. Although these events contributed to strengthening the ties between different groups active in support of Palestine across the world, as elucidated in the Conclusions, the manifestation of this solidarity divided public opinion in Europe.

This historical account of how transnational mobilization has unfolded over the last three decades helps us to understand how civil society actors have navigated different levels over time, from the domestic to the European, while their actions must also be understood in the wider framework of the global phenomena in which they are embedded. In order to shift the focus towards the European space, the following section will delve deeper into the question of civil society actors and their ability to grasp multilevel opportunities in the current context of a political backlash.

THE IMAGINARY STASIS OF THE EU PROJECT AND THE FUTURE OF EUROPEAN INTEGRATION

The civil society actors examined in this volume find themselves operating in the context of a political backlash, which is characterized by the rise of right-wing and conservative actors. This is not only a European phenomenon, but a global one—as demonstrated by the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States in 2016 and its re-election in 2024, Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil in 2018, and Javier Milei in Argentina in 2023, to name but a few examples. Looking more closely at Europe, there is a significant focus in this volume on the resistance and protest movements that emerged as a response to the EU poly-crisis, a term that both Youngs (2018) and Blokker (2022) use to refer to the multiple crises that have threatened the EU since the 2010s. These are crises that the political elites have appeared unable to address, and which have translated into the rising support for right-wing and conservative parties and movements, as reaffirmed by the 2024 European Parliament elections. They include, amongst other things, the withdrawal of the United Kingdom (UK) from the European Union in 2022 as part of the process known as “Brexit” (addressed by Fagan and van Kessel in this volume); welfare retrenchment following the neoliberal restructuring of the health system (the consequences of which are investigated by Naughton); regressive policies in the field of LGBTQI+ rights and the spread of a conservative vision of gender roles and the family (the bottom-up response which is addressed by Chironi); restrictive policies aimed at curbing migration and human rights protection, as shown by the 2015 “refugee” (or better ‘reception’) crisis; and the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. These multiple, intertwining crises have generated a “prolonged critical juncture” that has called into question the future of the European project, but at the same time also sparked supranational opportunities for resistance on the part of the weakest social subjectivities, as Chironi outlines in her chapter investigating the diffusion of transnational contention within feminist movements across the globe and the European space.

The process of European integration also finds itself in “an imaginary stasis” (Blokker, 2022, p. 1): a general incapacity on the part of political elites to not only deal with the multiple crises threatening the EU, but also to eventually move the supranational project forward. Such inertia is also reflected in public opinion. As Fagan and van Kessel illustrate in their contribution, the Brexit referendum unmasked the lack of a wide consensus

on the future of the European project as it was imagined at the beginning. In the view of the authors, this made it difficult for pro-European movements to create a discursive frame that had the potential to mobilize the wider public. The strong showing by right-wing actors at the 2024 European elections would seem to confirm the increase in support for sovereigntist solutions to the European crisis, to the detriment of a stronger engagement with the European project. While social movements have organized transnationally and have become allies of the EU institutions, this has rarely transformed into an openly pro-EU and pro-integration constituency.

Moreover, the very nature of EU integration has been called into question, and not only by the Eurosceptic movements that have long been active and received due attention in social movement research (see for instance Caiani & Guerra, 2017, Caiani & Weisskircher, 2022; Froio & Castelli Gattinara, 2017; De Bruin, 2022). As a matter of fact, the stasis of the European project would appear to have had an impact on neighbouring countries, interested in the process of enlargement. The Europeanization research agenda offers a rich vein of studies focusing on different national contexts, involving old and new EU member states alike, as well as those states that are not in the EU but where its transformative impact is nonetheless felt (Grabbe, 2006). Extending the scope of analysis outside EU member states, the exploration of cases in the wider EU neighbourhood makes it possible to identify recurring patterns. In the Western Balkans, collective action in defence of the environment has increased over the course of the last decade, something that was in part due to the opening of the environmental chapter of the *acquis communautaire* in Serbia, a candidate country for EU membership. The case illustrated by Pešić and Vukelić reveals how efforts at implementing legal harmonization are accompanied by the participation of civil society actors in monitoring the process of accession negotiations and norm implementation, in some cases resorting to contentious repertoires. It also demonstrates the extent to which local actors find it difficult to perceive the EU as an ally in the struggle against the multinational company Rio Tinto.

A similar situation can be found in the countries that are subsumed into the European Neighbourhood Policy in the East and the South. As detailed by Luciani, civil society actors in the South Caucasus are advancing claims to develop their own narratives on human rights protection that differ starkly from those enforced by EU programmes, which are accused of imposing Euro-centric discourses on democracy that do not take local

needs into account. Similarly, in relation to the Mediterranean, Ferré explains how local activists, interested in the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP) macro-regional cooperation scheme, re-appropriated and reshaped the space of the Euro-Mediterranean Civil Forums by reconfiguring them in a way that infused them with political content, thus giving voice to Southern actors. All of these case studies help to examine the influence that the EU exerts on its neighbouring countries, and to shed light on the criticisms that civil society actors raise in order to contest the EU and its policies in countries where EU institutions and local civil societies often enjoy close relationships.

CIVIL SOCIETY ACTORS, POLICY AREAS, AND REPERTOIRES OF ACTION

Against this backdrop, the civil society actors examined in this volume have attempted to create coalitions and search for alliances at the grass-roots level in order to advance their claims at the European level, searching for European solutions to issues that are both sensitive and hotly debated in the public sphere, such as migration governance (see Alagna), anti-discrimination rights (Chiodi et al.), labour rights (Golden et al.), gender violence (Chironi), healthcare (Naughton), human rights (Luciani), as well as environmental governance (Pešić and Vukelić) and climate policy (Buzogány and Scherhauser). The contributions to this volume, therefore, examine how civil society actors organize and act both at the national and at transnational level in order to advance their claims, resorting to and taking advantage of the opportunities presented at the supranational level by the EU multilevel governance. In certain cases, they also take advantage of the spaces of representation and funding opened up by European institutions (such the European Commission in the case of non-state actors in the Mediterranean region, as revealed by Ferré) to address specific issues—like raising human rights claims—and to gain leverage over their domestic elites—a process called *externalization*, which occurs when societal actors target the EU directly in an attempt to place pressure on their own governments (Della Porta & Tarrow, 2005).

However, both the national and global levels also offer opportunities for mobilization, as is demonstrated by the experiences of feminist movements in Southern Europe, which grasped the multilevel opportunities opened up by the Latin American feminist movement since 2015, while

also seizing on the opportunities offered at the national level by the adoption of the Istanbul Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence in 2012—signed by the member states of the Council of Europe—and at the European level by the implementation of European standards of protection of human and civil rights. Given the variety of actors mobilizing at the transnational level in Europe, we have decided to consider both progressive actors—grassroots groups, non-governmental organizations, trade unions—and regressive actors, such as far-right movements and parties. Indeed, the same opportunities available at the EU level have been appropriated by right-wing movements, which have taken advantage of the favourable situation to transnationalize their claims and organize beyond the national level, albeit while still remaining anchored to it and not advocating in favour of European solutions (as the contribution of Caiani blatantly shows).

Amongst progressive actors, left-wing transnationalization is both well-known and widely studied (Della Porta & Caiani, 2009, see also Blokker, 2022), with attention devoted to transnational initiatives attempting to democratize the EU from the bottom-up, making political claims in favour of European solutions. A recent novelty in terms of actors in this scenario is constituted by pro-European activists, who have tended to mobilize in defence of the status quo—as is shown in the chapter by Fagan and van Kessel. Trade unions would also appear to be significant actors: as the chapter by Golden et al. explains, the first successful European Citizens' Initiative for the right to water was initiated by the European Federation of Public Sector Unions, showcasing the political influence of trade unions in the European sphere, as well as their ability to successfully use the instruments available at an EU level and to inspire larger sections of society (Erne & Blaser, 2018). The role of trade unions is also showcased by Chironi, who reveals how the collaboration of feminist movements with trade unions proved pivotal in organizing the successful Women's Strikes in Southern Europe. Among the new actors that have emerged in the last two decades of transnational contention in Europe we also include municipalities, which enter into this analysis with Alagna's exploration of the available resources they mobilize in order to engage in transnational networking with international and domestic NGOs to advocate for change in EU migration policies. Finally, Naughton outlines the remarkable role that has been played by users and workers' associations in leading campaigns in defence of the health system.

Aside from the opportunities that exist, this book also investigates the restrictions and obstacles that the very process of European integration poses to societal actors that wish to act transnationally. This can hamper attempts to organize and mobilize at the transnational level, to form transnational networks and thus to scale contention upwards. As previous studies have repeatedly pointed to the importance of the structural attributes that come with a policy field (Blokker, 2022; Lahusen et al., 2020; Van Kessel & Fagan, 2022), we have decided to address the challenges that stem from the various EU policy areas, and that have been transformed into arenas of contention. A number of policy areas are covered by this analysis, and they involve a substantial amount of European legislation. However, not all of them provide the same set of political opportunities. Many of these policy areas are governed at the territorial (national or local) level, as shown by the case of healthcare in Ireland and Spain. As Naughton explains, the national healthcare systems are increasingly shaped by European integration, but historically governed as a local service: this re-scaling of power has made it challenging for users and workers' groups to scale contention upwards. Similarly, as Alagna outlines, the decision to engage in political mobilization in the field of migration, conducted with a view to promoting a more open EU policy on migration, has been affected by the consideration that national governments are to be held accountable for migration management alongside the EU.

Finally, it should be stressed that all of the actors analysed here resort to a variety of repertoires of action in their attempts to shift the scale upwards and organize across borders: they choose different strategies and repertoires of action to insert their demands into the EU political agenda and to confront EU institutions. From the study presented here, it becomes apparent that collective action varies greatly, from protest to different forms of internal or external lobbying, strikes, litigation, and networking. Aside from more traditional forms of contention, innovative repertoires of action have been adopted in Southern Europe by feminist movements, who have engaged in Womens' Strikes, defined as a kind of "creative demonstration" by Chironi; while trade unions have made use of the mechanism of the European Citizens' Initiative.

FRAMES AND VISIONS OF EUROPE: CAN A FUTURE FOR THE EUROPEAN PROJECT BE IMAGINED?

An important aspect of civil society actors' transnationalization efforts concerns their framing strategies and the narratives they employ to garner support amongst the wider public, as well as their visions for the future of the EU. In exploring how societal actors frame the EU in the national public sphere and with reference to the policy areas at stake, this volume investigates the discourses, narratives, and visions they articulate. When opposing Brexit, for instance, pro-European movements resorted to a discourse that revolved around the protection of the status quo, failing to elaborate a narrative that went beyond this. Despite their efforts to advocate in favour of the UK not leaving the EU, pro-European actors proved unable to elaborate an effective prognostic frame that was capable of offering a solution to Brexit, something that diminished the mobilizing potential of their frames. A deep criticism of the EU emerges from the analysis of the discourses used by actors in the climate justice movement, which is in apparent contradiction with the high level of trust towards the EU exhibited by climate protest participants *vis-à-vis* the general public. Likewise, feminist and LGBTQI+ activists appear to express nuanced opinions about the EU: on the one hand, they criticize the neoliberal policies of the EU, while on the other hand, gender-based activists embrace a critical form of Europeanism, rejecting any solution that involves exiting or breaking away from the European Union. In spite of their scepticism, CSOs engaged in advocating for a more open EU migration policy acknowledge the interest shown in the topic by some members of two EU institutions, namely the European Parliament and the European Committee of the Regions. Finally, CSOs advocating in favour of human rights express trust towards EU institutions, especially when the domestic institutions appear incapable of addressing their concerns. In this struggle, Italian CSOs approach the EU in a pragmatic manner, considering it as a potential ally especially when EU institutions are perceived to be more receptive to their grievances than domestic ones. Similarly, gender-based activists adopt a pragmatic approach towards the EU and its institutions. In this scenario, EU institutions may become both the target of contention for the policies they enact, and potential allies, especially when civil society actors address them to exert leverage on their national elites and as a means to make their demands visible in the public discourse.

The case of countries affected by EU enlargement and the European Neighbourhood Policy is somewhat different. Environmental protesters in Serbia have opted to use an eco-nationalist framing that, in criticizing the EU Green Agenda from the periphery, has led some organizations to refrain from developing transnational ties with similar groups from the EU core countries, and instead devote their efforts to looking for allies from other ‘peripheral’ states. Moreover, a broad criticism of environmental extractivism and the unequal distribution of environmental risks at the global level emerges from the actors engaged in the struggle against lithium mining in the country, which is discursively framed to a significant extent as anti-capitalist and anti-colonial. Along similar lines, civil society organizations in the South Caucasus criticize what they deem to be an EU-centric discursive construction of democracy and human rights promotion enforced by the EU in the region.

In summary, this volume shows that support for the EU and its policies differs according to the policy area addressed and the type of civil society organization attempting to transnationalize contention. For instance, the EU is seen as both a shield to protect basic human and civil rights in EU member states by CSOs advocating in favour of these issues, and a field of struggle where different subjectivities must keep fighting to defend and uphold their rights. Furthermore, the European space is perceived as a place of transnational solidarity from below, where civil society actors are provided the opportunity to connect with each other to strive to overcome an unjust social order. In this space ideas can spread, and forms of action can be shared. To conclude, the analysis of the narratives and visions expressed from below by CSOs reveals a tendency to pursue a discourse that is critical of European institutions and its policies, and in which the prominence of the domestic level remains salient, despite the efforts at transnationalization. While political elites have proved unable to imagine a future for the European project, it would appear that from the grassroots it is also difficult to conceive of a different future for the European project and to embrace an approach that moves beyond a Euro-critical vision.

OVERVIEW OF THE VOLUME

The chapters collected in this volume address three main themes in particular related to the transnationalization of contention: first, the opportunities that civil society actors seize to foster it, and the resources they mobilize; second, the frames and discourses they adopt to widen

consensus, and the visions of Europe they put forward; third, the networks that these actors, previously engaged at the domestic level, attempt to create in order to scale contention upwards. Based on empirical studies of contemporary cases of transnationalization of contention, the first part of the volume gathers together three chapters devoted to the analysis of the opportunities and challenges that EU multilevel governance offers to civil society actors willing to engage at the transnational level, and the resources they put in place.

The cases show that CSOs seize the opportunities offered by EU multilevel governance as a strategy to pursue transnationalization. However, these opportunities differ according to the policy sector concerned: it is more difficult to scale up contention in the field of healthcare, for instance, which is primarily managed at the national level. In contrast, there would appear to be greater opportunities for mobilizing in defence of human rights, as is outlined in the first chapter of the book. The chapter by Chiodi, Mat and Schmidtke demonstrates that transnationalization of contention is a strategy that CSOs resort to in order to overcome the limited impact that they can have at the domestic level—a path defined in literature as *externalization*, which emerges when social movements directly target the EU in order to put pressure on their national governments (Della Porta & Tarrow, 2005). By looking at Italian CSOs advocating against racism, discrimination and in favour of human rights in a context dominated by conservative and regressive actors, the authors explore the reasons that motivate CSOs to pursue their political goals transnationally in the EU space, choosing to build advocacy networks across different member states. Faced with a hostile domestic political environment, which since the 2010s has witnessed the resurgence of populist and nationalist forces, and therefore the curtailment of domestic political opportunities, CSOs decided to explore the opportunities available at the supranational level in order to sustain their political campaigns. The authors point out that the EU multilevel polity makes a set of opportunities and resources accessible to CSOs: as EU competences in the field of fundamental rights expanded, opportunities opened up in terms of European legal provisions, such as the participatory mechanism of the European Citizens' Initiative; as well as possibilities for networking, and availability of funds. Nevertheless, CSOs require both technical skills and an investment of time and resources—something that is not available to all domestic CSOs—to be able to seize these opportunities and, for example, to access the EU funds necessary to instigate political change at the national level.

The contribution by Alagna delves into the reasons that drive CSOs advocating for a change in EU migration policies to shift scale and thus to organize at the EU level, with the aim of leveraging change in EU migration policy. An important question here relates to the specific factors that induced civil society actors to form a transnational migrant solidarity coalition. Alagna's research looks at the internal dynamics of a number of CSOs, disentangling five internal dynamics that played a role in the decision of CSOs to participate in the transnational network: the organizations' propensity towards transnationalization; the level of professionalization within the organization; and their strategic vision. Two other factors considered are the perceived resources available to be mobilized and how the overall network objectives fit with the expectations of each organization, which push them to adopt transnationalization as a strategy.

Looking at the processes of transnationalization of feminist movements in Europe, Chironi outlines how the choice to transnationalize contention was the result of contextual and agential factors that influenced the rise and sustained levels of feminist mobilization. Looking at cases in Italy, Spain and Greece as paradigmatic instances, Chironi explains that these movements hold conceptual and symbolic connections with social movements abroad, although these were developed at the national level. Therefore, they can be considered as instances of a fourth feminist wave with transnational ramifications. Chironi highlights the fact that the European level of governance offered both challenges and opportunities for the transnationalization of feminist movements. National feminist movements also grasped the multilevel opportunities offered by the global mobilization against gender-based violence that, beginning in Latin America in 2015, inspired massive contentious protests and online activism in Southern Europe. Indeed, these campaigns launched messages that could be adapted to the Southern European context. The perceived opening of discursive opportunities, sparked by both protests abroad and the adoption of the Istanbul Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence in 2012, was exploited and transnationalization occurred through the diffusion and adaptation of ideas developed in Latin America. Activists thus proved capable of grasping the opportunities that opened up at both the national and supranational level, advancing transformative aims by using gender violence as a unifying frame.

The second part of the volume discusses political action on the transnational level in terms of the frames and narratives employed by civil society actors, looking at how the actors' meaning work hampered or fostered the potential for the transnationalization of contention. Furthermore, the contributions contained in this section delve into the content of the discourses adopted, disentangling the ways in which they imagine and frame the EU.

This section starts with a chapter by Pešić and Vukelić, who investigate the case of local protests against the lithium mining in the Jadar Valley in Serbia, devoting particular attention to the discursive framing used by the mobilizing actors. Based on a critical discourse analysis of the content published on the social media accounts and media outlets of the main environmental organizations engaged in the protests, the authors explain that the potential for the transnationalization of environmental struggles was hindered by the adoption of an "eco-nationalist" framing, accompanied by a critique of the EU Green Agenda, which limited the creation of alliances with organizations from the "core" countries. This type of frame failed to garner support from other EU advocacy groups and thus externalize local environmental issues. As a result, protesters in Serbia were not able to engage with EU institutions in order to exert pressure on their national government. The discursive framing of the environmental mobilization, thus, hindered the possibility for its transnationalization.

Along similar lines, Buzogány and Scherhauser analyse the frames used by the new transnational climate movement, focusing on the way it addresses the EU as a global climate leader, and explore its imaginaries as potential producers of a transnational field of discourse. Their findings underline the fact that although climate protest participants in the EU have more trust in the supranational institution than the general public in their respective countries, protesters express limited attention to the EU as a significant actor in climate and energy policies. Behaving thus as a "weak public sphere", to use the definition coined by Fraser, the new climate movement ends up lacking substantial influence on EU political decision-making, influence that must be channelled through traditional means, such as political parties or influencing public opinion. Despite the fact that they display more trust in the EU than their fellow citizens, the climate movement's discourse remains deeply sceptical of the EU as a polity and climate policy actor. In their discourses, therefore, trust can be seen to go hand in hand with elements of Euroscepticism.

The contribution by Fagan and van Kessel provides an analysis of the visions of Europe and frames used by actors mobilizing in the context of the UK referendum on European Union membership (Brexit). In particular, the authors delve into those civil society actors active in defence of the status quo, namely the UK's membership of the EU, against forces that desire radical change, that is to say those advocating in favour of the 2016 Brexit referendum. These actors, engaged in what the authors call pro-EU mobilization, which is quite a new phenomenon, advocated for the UK to remain in the EU after the referendum vote that decided its departure in June 2016. By defending the 'liberal' order against the rise of culturally conservative and nationalist forces, pro-European activists, which the authors deem to belong to "liberal counter-movements", resorted to frames related to matters such as the economy, immigration and identity, peace and security, as well as democracy and freedom. In their quest to gain support, pro-European activists emphasized travel and free movement, while in certain cases they even celebrated the tolerance and diversity supposedly connected with EU membership, voicing a pragmatic message. Nevertheless, the anti-Brexit movement refrained from developing concrete ideas about the future of the EU, as it was primarily concerned with halting the process of Brexit. In the absence of a diagnostic frame capable of pointing to the more fundamental reasons why citizens did not support the EU, the authors argue that the prognostic frame employed by anti-Brexit, pro-European activists appeared vague and unspecific, thus limiting the scope for galvanizing additional support.

In the same section, Luciani examines transnational cooperation between the EU and civil society actors in the South Caucasus, with the latter considered as partners in the promotion of human rights in the region under the Eastern Partnership framework. She stresses how the norms sponsored by the EU have become deeply contested by CSOs, and the very notion of human rights promotion criticized from below. The chapter reveals how local CSOs envision different social orders beyond EU-centric ones, therefore contesting the neoliberal, discursive construction of democracy and human rights promotion enforced by the EU in the region, which revolves around the value-laden binaries of "EU vs Russia". Luciani highlights the fact that local CSOs deem this narrative to depoliticize the debate, and advocate in favour of a human rights politics that is intended as transformative political action. They thus call for more radical actions and for the status quo to be challenged by questioning EU project frameworks and procedures. CSOs in the South Caucasus claim that the

legalistic understanding of human rights, as promoted by the EU, requires neighbouring countries to adopt laws and create institutions to uphold them, but it is not conducive to real change in societal attitudes. Hence, Luciani shows how CSOs in the South Caucasus strive to reframe human rights promotion and prefigure alternative modes of activism beyond the neoliberal civil society, advocating for a more radical, leftist, and feminist future. The battle over framing also involves LGBTQI+ equality, framed as the organization of Pride events in order to attract Western solidarity and European values, but which have the effect of reproducing cultural cleavages. Alternative narratives are thus voiced by activists, who challenge the human rights promotion as envisioned and framed by the EU.

Finally, part III looks at the diverse attempts of civil society actors to create transnational networks to scale contention upwards, and at the role played by the process of European integration in triggering the Europeanization of contentious politics. It, therefore, explores cases of civil society actors that, having initiated their mobilization at the domestic level, have striven to build alliances at the transnational level, with the EU and its policies as the target of protest.

This part starts with a contribution by Naughton, who explores the attempts to create networks at both the national and transnational level to protest against the curtailment of funding and the adoption of structural reforms within health systems imposed by the EU institutions in Ireland and Spain. This path is known in the literature as *domestication* (Imig & Tarrow, 2001) and occurs when domestic actors mobilize at the national level to convince their governments to take action at the EU level. The EU policies, in this case the New Economic Governance regime adopted in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, facilitated the marketization of service provision in the domestic healthcare systems of EU member states, requiring MS to adopt reforms to reduce public expenditure on healthcare. The supranational intervention of the EU created grievances for both users and workers in the public healthcare systems of Ireland and Spain, who organized in trade unions and user groups. In spite of the attempts to scale mobilization upwards, the localized nature of health services acted as a barrier to the emergence of transnational cooperation. Moreover, while in Madrid user groups and unions resorted to solidaristic, broad frames of the issue at stake, in Ireland campaigners employed a narrow frame, which did not refer to the processes of commodification, but rather to local and communitarian interests. The chapter reveals the difficulties involved in attempting to create transnational networks to mobilize

in the field of healthcare. However, it is revealed how actors in Madrid managed to join the European Network and form transnational networks and relationships with fellow activists from across the EU, a process that did not take place in Ireland.

This is followed by the chapter written by Caiani, which sets out to analyse the emergence of transnational networks in the far-right arena, developed in response to the processes of transnationalization, whose European integration can be considered a regional case. Despite opposing a supranational system, since internationalization processes contradict the myths peddled by the Right such as racism, nationalism, and national identity, far-right movements and parties deemed it necessary to engage in politics on a transnational level and to engage with the transnational level of political contention. Caiani explains that they did so by developing cross-national far-right links and cooperation, building temporary coalitions on specific campaigns and topics, and also through the diffusion of shared frames and identities, which also refer to a common European identity, which are mobilized to call for the “defence of Europe” and against alleged attempts at the Islamization of the continent.

Another attempt to scale up contention from the national to the EU level is presented in the chapter by Ferré, who looks at the dynamics of transnational activism within the framework of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP), a macro-regional cooperation scheme, and the European Commission. The former catalysed the organization of a series of non-state actors, including NGOs, foundations, and similar organizations into transnational networks focused on political and cultural dimensions. Within this framework, non-state actors strove to organize across borders and scale up contention from the national to the EU level, raising claims to reform EU policies while at the same time trying to influence their national governments in the field of human rights—a pivotal element in challenging authoritarian regimes in the late 1970s. In this context, Ferré discovers, supranational bureaucracies such as the European Commission played a prominent role in scaling up contention from the local to the EU level through the creation of spaces such as the Euro-Mediterranean Civil Forums that, organized in parallel with the Euro-Mediterranean ministerial summits, provided opportunities for civil society actors to gather, thus stimulating the internationalization of activist movements addressing the EU. However, the chapter concludes by indicating that regular interactions with public officials made the transnational networks dependent on public funding, which impacted on the choice of

action repertoires employed. Indeed, NGOs opted to prioritize consensus over more contentious action repertoires.

Finally, the contribution of Golden, Szabó and Erne calls attention to transnational activism against labour right violations. To that end, the authors analyse how actors advocating for union recognition within the airline Ryanair seized the opportunities offered by the EU multilevel governance framework. Despite the fact that the national level remained the dominant locus of industrial relations, the authors show how coalitional power resources in transnational social spaces helped in particular to build transnational collective action and contribute to explaining the success of union initiatives against the Ryanair air company. Their findings highlight the fact that supranational power resources proved critical in explaining the airline's decision to recognize unions, whereas national power resources failed. "Following this, the authors compare two European Citizens' Initiatives with different degrees of success, the *Right2Water* and the *Fair Transport* campaigns, outlining that the mobilization of networks that overlap with coalitional power resources in the *Right2Water* campaign provides an explanation for why it proved successful, unlike the *Fair Transport* campaign, which lacked a social movement component.

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PART I

Seizing the Opportunities of the EU
Multilevel Governance Framework



CHAPTER 2

Seizing Transnational Opportunities in Times of Political Backlash: The Transformation of Civil Society Organizations' Activism in Italy

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INTRODUCTION

Civil society is widely considered to be the bedrock of democracy (Halpin, 2010; Warren, 2011). The community of citizens and their organizations facilitate democratic participation and provide critical resources for

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holding those in power to account in liberal democracies. In a similar vein, civil society actors can take on an important role in policy advocacy, acting as intermediaries between citizens and policymakers, articulating societal preferences, and providing legitimacy to political agendas. However, just as democracy is a historically evolving practice, the role of civil society also changes in response to new opportunities and constraints in how citizens can articulate their political preferences and choose to do so.

Italian civil society organizations (CSOs) are a fascinating case with which to study the transformation that this form of political activism is undergoing in response to the complex multilevel polity of the European Union (EU), which is gradually favouring the transnational mobilization of CSOs. Traditionally, CSOs in Italy were heavily affected by ideological divisions between Catholicism and Communism, which represented the dominant political forces in the post-war decades. The dominant parties in the country created a form of “political and economic dependency” for CSOs (Bagnasco, 1994, p. 326) that, in turn, acted as a vehicle to popularize the political agendas of these parties. Yet, over the past two or three decades, these close ties between political parties and CSOs have diminished in strength and meaning for Italy’s polity. This development provided CSOs with a greater degree of independence and autonomy when, in the wake of the corruption scandals of the 1990s, trust in and ties to political parties became dramatically weakened. At the same time, the rise of populist parties that claim to represent the direct “voice of the people” (most notably the League and the Five Star Movement; see: Caiani & Graziano, 2016; Fella & Ruzza, 2009; Chiodi, 2021; Schmidtke, 2021) has further constrained the political space in which CSOs can operate, instigate political change, and find the resources to sustain their engagement.

This chapter explores the challenges and opportunities that CSOs face in contemporary Italian society, drawing on 28 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with representatives of selected CSOs, activists and lawyers between July–September 2021 and July–November 2022. In addition, we use documentary evidence from campaigns in the form of press releases, reports, media coverage, judicial decisions, and academic sources. Our selection encompasses CSOs of varying sizes, histories, and compositions. A few of the selected organizations are the Italian branches of broader European or international organizations, while others represent large networks of national associations. A third and fourth group comprise small grassroots initiatives and medium-sized organizations, some of which are

formed by professionals who dedicate their time to foster the cause of their association on a voluntary basis. However, the common denominator of the organizations selected for this research is their dedication to anti-racism, anti-discrimination, and human rights. Some of the CSOs have a specific focus on migration issues, others attempt to foster economic and social justice, as well as citizenship rights and grassroots participation.

The first objective of this chapter is to reconstruct how the social and political environment for more institutionalized forms of civil society activism has changed at the national level in Italy and is primarily focussed on the second part of the 2010s. Here the focus is on how these organizations, who are engaged in advocacy for human rights and migration, reacted to an increasingly adverse domestic political arena. Secondly, we look at a distinct and increasingly significant dimension of the political activism of CSOs, which focuses on exploring the viability and effectiveness of engagement at the transnational, EU level. Considering the fact that the EU has altered the wider landscape of opportunities (Tarrow, 1995; della Porta & Parks, 2018) available for CSOs, we shift our analysis to an investigation of how and to what extent CSOs in Italy have started to explore transnational opportunities by “exploiting” European legal provisions, but also through networking and funding opportunities.

We address these objectives with the following research questions: How has the political context for civil society advocacy groups in Italy changed with the profound transformation of party politics in the country? What kind of venues have Italian CSOs explored at the EU level to make their voice heard and to sustain their political campaigns? What are the opportunities, constraints, and resources that could make transnationalization or Europeanization a relevant dimension of the advocacy of CSOs?

The conceptual toolbox of the “political opportunity structure” (POS) approach in studying social movements provides a fruitful analytical lens with which to consider the fate of CSOs in Italy. In their campaigns and strategies, civil society actors react to conditions that are beyond their control. While the “political opportunity structure” (POS) approach has been legitimately criticized for being used too broadly in explaining the mobilization and outcomes of social movements since it gained popularity in the 1990s (Meyer & Minkoff, 2004), it still provides an instructive perspective on the interaction of civil society actors and mainstream politics. From a conceptual perspective, Tarrow (1991, pp. 34–36) has described political opportunities as being shaped by the “openness or closedness of the polity, stability or instability of political alignments, presence

or absence of allies or support groups, divisions within the elite and tolerance or intolerance of protest". This analytical perspective allows us to situate civil society actors in an evolving arena of competitive party politics, changing state institutions, and political discourses that shape public debate in the Italian political system.

THE NARROWING "POLITICAL OPPORTUNITY STRUCTURE" FOR CSOs IN ITALY

In the democratic transformation that followed the Second World War, Italian civil society organizations found an influential role in their close alliance with the main political forces that shaped post-war politics (Ruzza, 2011). As Ginsborg (2013, p. 288) notes, during the first two decades of the Italian Republic (1948–1968), Italian society was strongly divided along ideological lines and related political affiliations in the polarizing environment of the Cold War. As a result, it was the main mass parties—represented by the Italian Communist Party (*Partito Comunista Italiano*, PCI) and the Christian Democratic Party (*Democrazia Cristiana*, DC)—that predominantly channelled and shaped political participation in civil society, which "extended" some of the functions of these parties (Biorcio & Vitale, 2016, p. 23). While the grassroots protests of the 1960s and 1970s had begun to challenge this dynamic, the relationship between the CSOs and the political elites underwent a profound transformation following the end of the Cold War. CSOs organizations have gradually liberated themselves from being the "transmission belts" of political parties or state institutions and gained greater independence (Albareda, 2018; Albareda & Braun, 2019). The experience of ARCI, an association that has a long history of entanglement with some of the dominant parties of the post-war period, exemplifies this type of relationship. As recalled by one of our interlocutors:

Until the 1980s, the president and the secretary were decided by the Communist Party and the Socialist Party, each could choose one. From the end of the 1980s onwards this no longer happened, they - luckily - abandoned us. (Int. 5)

This increasing autonomy from the weakened political parties opened up a new political space for Italian CSOs (Bagnasco, 1994; Biorcio & Vitale, 2016). While it transformed pre-existing organizations like ARCI,

it also fostered the creation of new ones. A recurrent theme in our interviews indicates that the changes in the Italian political landscape—significantly driven by the legitimacy crisis faced by established political parties in the early 1990s—have provided vigour to civil society and opened up new spaces for political advocacy.

Nevertheless, the picture that emerged from our interviews underlines a paradox for CSOs in promoting democratic participation and the engagement of citizens. On the one hand, Italian civil society emerged as an independent voice in public debates and policy discussions. The empowerment of CSOs has partly been driven by a weakening of political parties as the main agents of liberal democracy, as well as new challenges to the democratic process as a whole. On the other hand, over time, CSOs have found themselves without an institutional counterpart that is capable of transforming their requests into political decisions and policy processes. A representative from COSPE, a medium-sized association active in the field of human rights since the 1980s, stresses the fact that this situation has only worsened over the past few years: “We find it increasingly difficult to identify allies in the political field” (Int. 11).

The structural transformation of the relationship between CSOs and political parties that has occurred over the last decades was the topic of a debate initiated by *Vita*, the main magazine dedicated to the third sector in the country. In this publication, Giuliano Amato, a former vice president of the Constitutional Court and long-time politician, argued that third sector organizations should take over the responsibility of feeding into the parties, and provide them with the lifeblood that they have lost by moving away from their electoral bases. His argument was that parties depend on civil society organizations for their viability. According to Amato, this trend is dangerous for democracy, and he advocates civil society returning to its traditional role of the “transmission belt” of political parties (Amato, 2021).

While pride in their newly gained autonomy was a dominant theme for our interlocutors, there was also a recognition of the negative consequences that the weakening of the political parties entails in terms of democratic institutions. Key actors and procedures of established politics suffered a momentous process of delegitimization during the 2010s. The 2013 general elections marked the political decline of the mainstream centre-left and centre-right parties (Donà, 2022). On the Left of the spectrum, support for the Democratic Party (*Partito Democratico*, PD)—which had already been weakened by its decision to endorse the

technocratic government of Mario Monti (2011–2012)—became further eroded after it entered into governing coalitions with the centre-right. On the Right, Silvio Berlusconi’s *Forza Italia* (FI) also lost consensus to new (or reinvigorated) right-leaning and populist parties (della Porta et al., 2022). In particular, the rise of the right-wing, xenophobic party the League (*Lega*)—defined as “an early political manifestation” of “the wave of populist politics that would become a momentous disruptive force in party politics across Europe” (Schmidtke, 2021, p. 5)—and the Five Star Movement (Movimento 5 Stelle, M5S)—which represented the most intense form of “anti-politics” in Italian politics (Mete, 2023, p. 123)—led to the end of the 2010s being marked by anti-immigrant policies.

Despite not having a governmental role, The Brothers of Italy (*Fratelli d’Italia*, FDI), also had an important role in informing the political culture of the period, by constantly drawing attention to “security, defence of Christian values and traditions, and opposition to civil partnerships for homosexual couples” (De Giorgi & Tronconi, 2018, p. 336). Indeed, this is a period that is defined in the literature as being “dominated by anti-immigrant and anti-gender discourses, and lacking left-wing alternatives in the institutional sphere” (della Porta et al., 2022, p. 4). This transformation—that is to say, the narrowing of the domestic political opportunities where human-rights oriented CSOs could rely less on political parties as interlocutors—significantly curtailed the action repertoire of CSOs that had previously had a far more pronounced voice in the political system.

THE DELEGITIMIZATION AND MARGINALIZATION OF CSOs FROM ACROSS THE POLITICAL SPECTRUM

One critical dimension in the transformation of the political landscape in Italy has been the delegitimization of CSOs themselves. In particular, the rise of anti-immigrant and populist parties and their growing influence within the Italian public opinion have dramatically altered the environment in which CSOs operate. The turning point was the so-called migration crisis in 2015–2016. Responding to the spread of public feelings of vulnerability and frustration over the lack of support from—and burden sharing among—other EU member states, the political elite in Italy began to attack a number of NGOs engaged in Search and Rescue (SAR) operations at sea, blaming them for the increasing influx of migrants (Krzyżanowski et al., 2018).

This trend reached a critical turning point with the Code of Conduct for NGOs, introduced in the summer of 2017 by the Minister of the Interior, Marco Minniti, a Democratic Party member of the centre-left government led by Paolo Gentiloni. While the Conduct was heavily criticized by the interested parties for criminalizing solidarity, its primary goal was to “dissuade” NGOs from helping migrants. By contrast, the subsequent centre-right government (June 2018–August 2019), formed as an alliance between the Five Star Movement and Matteo Salvini’s League, “transformed solidarity into a crime punishable by law” (Pusterla, 2021, p. 79). However, it should be added that the first criminal investigations against CSOs helping migrants in transit (Tazzioli, 2018) from Italy to other European countries date back to 2016, during the centre-left government of Gentiloni. As one interviewee from Amnesty Italy vividly put it:

We had a baptism in the left, with a continuation in the right and the public opinion was eventually convinced on both sides. (Int. 10)

In the words of an interviewee from *A Buon Diritto*, a CSO engaged in the defence of migrants’ rights:

The constant use of force and the continuous multiplication of tools designed to intimidate and frighten the people who wanted to deal with these issues, far from the public eye of course, represented a strong psychological and intimidating pressure on NGOs and individuals who decided to take action. (Int. 1)

The political and legal measures taken against NGOs were accompanied by the criminalization of humanitarian assistance in the media across Europe (Carrera et al., 2018, pp. 125–164). In Italy, this trend was epitomized by the transformation of the label used by the press to refer to NGOs carrying out SAR operations, which shifted from “angels of the sea” to “sea taxis” (Barretta et al., 2018) over a short period of time. Similar narratives were being pushed by a number of commentators, particularly on TV shows aired on the national channels owned by former Prime Minister, Silvio Berlusconi, a key ally of the League at the time (Amnesty, 2020). However, as one interviewee noted, even the more progressive press outlets contributed to this hostile atmosphere that helped to erode the trust of Italian citizens towards CSOs:

I remember the code of conduct for NGOs, the editorials of progressive newspapers were excited about it. I still remember the headline from the Summer of 2017: “Doctors Without Borders must say where they stand”. (Int. 10)

Among the consequences of such defamatory campaigns, CSOs dealing with migration also experienced various forms of political marginalization. Some of our interviewees mentioned the fact that even the few political interlocutors with whom they had normally interacted began to distance themselves. A representative of a CSO whose main activity is to conduct research and carry out advocacy on migration issues illustrates their experience in these words:

In recent times, to be honest, there has been a certain reluctance that has been somewhat revealing; a sort of hesitancy from politicians to accept our invitations. We do keep inviting them to take part, but in recent years there has sometimes been a sort of rejection. (Int. 3)

In general, there was a significant shift in the public perception of civil society and its organizations; they morphed from being a well-regarded sector with considerable political capital to one perceived with suspicion, if not disdain. While this trend mostly concerned organizations working on migration, it also affected others engaged in human rights issues, as suggested by one interviewee from ARCI:

The world of associations has always been well-considered by Italians; I believe that the campaign carried out by Minniti, starting from the NGO Code, has created a distance between a large part of public opinion and the associations, and I don't know if we will ever bridge that gap. (Int. 7)

In summary, the 2015/2016 “refugee crisis” and its political ramifications contributed to a political environment in which CSOs dealing with migration were criminalized or marginalized, while human-rights oriented CSOs felt increasingly isolated and deprived of some of the avenues through which they had previously channelled their advocacy. With the narrowing of political opportunities domestically, it was essential for Italian CSOs to find new avenues to regain their political relevance and influence.

THE EUROPEAN MULTILEVEL FRAMEWORK AS A POLITICAL OPPORTUNITY

While there have been increasing constraints on political opportunities for civil society at the domestic level in recent decades, at the same time opportunities have gradually opened up at the EU level, enabling domestic CSOs to act at a transnational, European level. Between the end of the 1990s and the early 2000s, the Amsterdam (1999), Nice (2003) and Lisbon (2009) Treaties, gradually expanded the EU competences in the field of fundamental rights, and provided CSOs in Europe with an opportunity to transform their strategies and pursue transnationalization, both via coordinated actions and through the diffusion of ideas and action repertoires (Tarrow & McAdam, 2005; Keck & Sikkink, 1998; Holzhaecker, 2009; Princen & Kerremans, 2008; Cichowski, 2013). As della Porta and Caiani (2007, p. 3) stress: “If Europeanization is seen as producing more layers of decision-making, protest action tends to adapt itself to a multi-level governance that includes variable networks of both territorial and functional actors”.

Similarly, over the last few years, some pioneering Italian CSOs have attempted to engage with EU institutions and the EU’s legal framework, taking advantage of the European multilevel framework, which is perceived as an opportunity. As one ARCI representative told us: “We use all the tools at hand to put pressure on the European Parliaments and the Commission” (Int. 7). Some of the interviewed CSOs pointed out that many domestic challenges could only be addressed by working on legislative files at the European level. In this sense, the “refugee crisis” from 2015 to 2016 encouraged several CSOs to find a shared European solution to migratory pressure, and in particular, to reform the common asylum system. Italian CSOs tested a number of advocacy strategies that contributed, for instance, to the European Citizens’ Initiatives (ECI), a tool introduced by the Lisbon Treaty to allow for the creation of legislative initiatives from the bottom up (European Commission, 2016). In 2018, for instance, a network of CSOs of different sizes, backgrounds and focus took part in the “We are a Welcoming Europe” ECI, with the core request to amend article 1(2) of the EU Facilitations Directive (2002/90/EC) “to prevent Member States from imposing sanctions on individuals or NGOs that provide humanitarian assistance” (Welcoming Europe, n.d.). Italy had a successful campaign and was one of the countries where the set goal was reached, but overall, it was not possible to collect the required

one million signatures across seven member states. Despite the limited outcomes of the campaign, the initiative is another exemplary case that demonstrates the dynamics behind the attempts of Italian CSOs to extend their political action at the transnational level. As one interviewee put it:

The ECI showed us that certain civil struggles cannot be carried out without - at least - an international solidarity network or some degree of international attention. It is hard to succeed alone. (Int. 24a)

A number of CSOs from Italy also contributed to drafting the reform of the Common European Asylum System (CEAS), presented by the European Parliament (EP) in 2018, by establishing a direct link with Members of the EP involved in the process. However, the initial high expectations were deeply frustrated by the fact that the Council of the EU did not examine the text (Chiodi, 2021, pp. 253–254). Such experiences were accompanied by a degree of disillusionment with the possibilities offered by the European political space, as noted by a representative of Lunaria: “We tend to forget that the Council of the EU is made up of our governments. Therefore, thinking that we can affect the actions of the governments with petitions and campaigns is not a viable option in my opinion” (Int. 2).

CSOs have less margin of manoeuvre in their advocacy work when faced with loopholes in the EU or national provisions, or when they are confronted with political elites that are hostile to the protection or expansion of fundamental rights. In particular, CSOs working in the field of migration are highly sceptical about the EU’s claim to champion human rights: “We are sceptical of our possibilities, but we continue. (...) We are always hopeful. But sometimes we also find it hard to be hopeful” (Int. 20). In other words, CSOs deal with the EU in quite a pragmatic fashion; it is seen as a potential ally when EU positions are more open to their demands than the national actors, and a potential adversary when they are not.

Against this backdrop, working with strategic litigation began to be seen as “the new frontier of civil society” (Int. 10). With the populist turn and the difficulties faced by progressive political forces, various Italian CSOs gradually realized that new avenues for mobilization via legal means had emerged at the EU level (Lombardo & Del Giorgio, 2013; Hilson, 2002) and started to perceive legal tools as more effective than simply campaigning. As stressed by a volume that brought together the main

initial experiences of this legal turn, the “self-conscious strategic use of law” by civil society actors has often become the only viable solution “under conditions where social or political actions were absent” (Barbera, 2012, p. 21; own translation).

The number of associations that use strategic litigation is still relatively low, most of those that do are CSOs that are mainly composed of lawyers, such as the ASGI (*Associazione Studi Giuridici sull’Immigrazione*), *Avvocati per Niente*, and *Rete Lenford*—to name but a few. Nevertheless, the use of legal avenues for advocacy has become increasingly significant. Over the last few years, strategic litigation has resulted in the extension of several social benefits and access to goods and services to migrants previously excluded from them. Indeed, as was stressed by one lawyer from the association *Avvocati per Niente*, which together with the ASGI, took on the majority of these litigations, “until recently, nearly 45% of the 3,300,000 non-EU citizens were excluded from all social security benefits in Italy” (Int. 19).

Another recent case that gained attention in the international media after a strong national contention was that of the League-led municipality of Lodi, which introduced discriminatory provisions for foreign children accessing school canteens in 2017 (Chiodi et al., 2021, pp. 52–53). The CSO *Coordinamento Uguali Doveri*, a broad grassroots coalition that emerged with the goal of challenging this regulation, brought the case to the Court of Milan with the legal support of the ASGI and NAGA. The court referred to European law in issuing a ruling against the local administration. As one member of the *Coordinamento* summarized, this result was possible because the Italian legal system “recognizes the discriminatory nature of provisions that introduce differential treatment in the access to services on an individual basis between Italian, EU and non-EU citizens” (Int. 15).

Some CSOs actively took up the role of fundamental rights defendants and, in a context in which the populist political drift questions the democratic order, realized that due to the multilevel European legal framework they could act without direct political party support and even go against the tide of hostility they have encountered in the domestic arena.

A similar dynamic also characterized forms of mobilization and multi-level legal contestation led by some associations in the field of LGBTQ+ rights. These initiatives took place in the European space as a reaction to the openly anti-gender, antifeminist, and anti-LGBTQ+ domestic political agenda that gained ground thanks to its promotion by populist right-wing

parties (Donà, 2022; Shvanyukova, 2022). For example, it was possible for the Cirinnà Bill—Italy’s very first Act on Civil Unions, which was approved in 2016 by the government led by Matteo Renzi’s centre-left Democratic Party (PD)—to come into effect “because the European court [The European Court of Human Rights-ECtHR] condemned Italy” (Int. 21). However, this law is still considered by LGBTQ+ organizations to be a “downgraded” version of same-sex union, since the term “marriage” was replaced by “civil partnership” and the ruling on adoption (including that of step-children) excluded same-sex couples (Ozzano, 2020). Nevertheless, the problems generated by this “downgrading” have had the paradoxical effect of further expanding Italy’s “jurisprudential terrain”, as explained by a member of the *Rete Lenford* lawyers’ association, which had a primary role in the ECtHR’s ruling. For instance, when same-sex parents, their reproductive, family and welfare rights are recognized abroad but not in Italy, this incongruence sets the context for a new front in the struggle by CSOs in Italy and—eventually—the expansion of the LGBTQ+ community’s rights. In the words of our interviewee: “All incongruences between domestic provisions and those adopted in other member states need be recognized at the national level” (Int. 21).

Working in a democratic system, regulated by the rule of law, the leading CSOs realized that they could make substantive steps towards protecting and even broadening fundamental rights, not only in Italy but in the EU as a whole. As noted by the same interviewee, obtaining a ruling from the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) has implications for the EU as a whole: “It enshrines a right at the European level. So, the fact that other states cannot discriminate tomorrow, this arises precisely from the Italian experience” (Int. 21).

While it is apparent that court rulings could not bypass the parliamentary law-making role, it is also clear that they contributed substantially to advancing the cause of CSOs. Therefore, beyond the specific battles that were won in the courts, what is important to highlight is that they derive from and contribute to the existence and deepening of a transnational polity.

However, as the political climate at the European level has been transforming due to the increasing influence of populist and Eurosceptic parties, some of our interlocutors fear the loss of this transnational support: “I don’t know how long this egalitarian thrust of European Union law will last. But so far in Italy it has had an absolutely important equalizing effect” (Int.19).

EUROPEAN RESOURCES FOR TRANSNATIONAL CONTENTION

As noted by several scholars, there are intrinsic difficulties in creating initiatives among citizens of diverse cultural, political, institutional, and historical backgrounds (Longo, 2019; Blokker, 2021). The degree to which CSOs can successfully pursue their agenda at a European level depends on a host of factors: resources to pursue coordination and collaboration at a European scale; knowledge about legal, financial, and political opportunities at an EU level; and a long-term commitment to building networks and exploring relations in a relatively new transnational environment (Sanchez Salgado, 2014).

The availability of material resources has been cited to explain the greater capacity of business interest groups to intervene at the EU level (della Porta, 2003). Similarly, della Porta and Caiani (2007) have noted that a lack of material resources is also responsible for the weakness of public interest groups and social movement organizations (such as environmentalist, women's rights, and migrant rights associations). All CSOs with aspirations regarding the European domain need resources to sustain their activities, even when they rely on pro bono support, such as in the case of lawyers and strategic litigation. Some depend on private donations, but for most of our interlocutors, the EU emerged as the source of critical material support. The financial opportunities offered by the EU are "a driving force for them to engage in structured joint European and transnational projects and more long-lasting collaborations with partners from abroad" (Zschache & Lahusen, 2021, p. 288).

As confirmed by our interlocutors, financial constraints influence the formation of lasting and well-structured networks, limiting CSOs to project-based initiatives:

In the end there is no one who can deal specifically with a campaign at the European level, unless a project is approved, which very often, however, is a project and therefore has a beginning and an end, builds networks that fail to consolidate over time. There are obviously specific advocacy actions for which networking is easier; if you write an appeal, if you write an open letter, it is clear that you can easily network, but more structured initiatives are much more complex. (Int. 2)

Accessing EU funds is easier for medium- and large-sized organizations, whereas smaller CSOs find it difficult to cope with the competitive

project adjudication system. As noted by the representative of a medium-sized organization, there needs to be a considerable investment of human and financial resources in project writing, fundraising, and communication: “Presenting EU funded projects has become overly complicated, there is lots of bureaucracy, lots of competition... You need to consider that compared to other countries Italy does not provide relevant funding to support CSOs’ functions. (...) To secure our sustainability we need to make a huge effort in project writing” (Int. 2). The fact that Italian CSOs are mostly small organizations constitutes a significant obstacle to fundraising at an EU level: “this is a huge problem in a country like Italy where the real problems are at the local level and where only small NGOs are able to grasp them” (Int. 6).

Since 2016, opportunities concerning services for immigrants and refugees have augmented due to a significant increase in EU funding (Darvas et al., 2018). One interlocutor from a CSO working on migration stressed how the new geopolitical centrality of Italy in the field of migration contributed to their capacity to “scale up” their work to the European level:

It is due to Italy’s strategic role in the Mediterranean region and the development of the events surrounding rescue operations at sea, as well as to the requests of the umbrella organizations to receive our inputs, combined with an organizational effort from our side and the commitment of the members of our association. (Int. 20)

One of the major EU funds in the field is the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF), which is administered by the Italian Interior Ministry’s Department for Civil Liberties and Immigration. The Ministry of Labour and Social Policies’ Directorate General for Immigration and Integration Policies is its delegated authority. However, when national authorities indirectly manage European funds in the field of migration (such as AMIF), civil society actors run the risk of losing their autonomy and therefore their capacity for effective advocacy and contention: As emphasized by a representative of IDOS:

The problem is that these EU funds have been increasingly entrusted to the national government (...). This means that whoever wants to present a project and have access to EU funds is subject to the judgment and the evaluation of a governmental body. This has surely contributed to reducing the third sector’s traditional role of advocacy and the denouncement of

governmental policies. This is because nobody wants to create hostility, or put themselves in a critical stance towards the people that manage the money that you need to survive. (Int. 3)

According to our interlocutors, this situation also helps to explain the difficulty in responding to the increasing constraints on the space and political engagement by civil society in Italy. When the smear campaign began in 2015–2016, some CSOs dealing with migration could not freely criticize the same authorities that they depended on to access the resources they needed. In turn, their financial dependence on the national authorities:

has indirectly contributed, of course, to ensuring that the xenophobic and anti-immigrant narratives have taken hold without a strong reaction on the part of the third sector itself. (Int. 3)

The presence of EU funding, therefore, is particularly appreciated by CSOs when it strengthens their independence from domestic authorities. As such, the transnational polity not only manifests itself as an additional legal layer but also as an institutional one when it directly manages the resources and thus grants civil society the opportunity to fully express itself in its watchdog role.

Generally speaking, CSOs need to acquire considerable know-how in order to seize the opportunities provided at the EU level: linguistic skills, networks, knowledge of the EU decision-making process, etc. However, it is not only a question of accessing EU resources that requires CSOs to professionalize. For advocacy groups, it is necessary to have a host of technical and political know-how to deal with EU legislative proposals. These barriers are even more pronounced when the political strategy includes litigation or when the target is the EU decision-making process itself. One entryway to being included in transnational networks and gaining the necessary know-how is the EU-based umbrella organizations that domestic CSOs belong to. These transnational connections often generate their own dynamic, where the local organizations provide inputs to their pan-European counterparts through reports and papers.

As stressed by one interviewee, the new generations of activists are better equipped and more inclined to move into the European space: “we have this generational turnover that allows us to have people who also have a different approach than in the past. These are associates who also have had experiences abroad and their standpoint is more European. So,

there is this very prolific internal exchange of knowledge and skills between those who have been in the association for some time, perhaps with a more Italian view, and those who were born in the '90s and have a different way of seeing things" (Int. 20).

Some CSOs are given a consultative role in the EU decision-making process. However, this is frequently seen as not fully satisfactory (Int. 19), considering the amount of energy and time that needs to be invested in initiatives that often do not translate into "efficacy", as noted by a representative of *A Buon Diritto*:

It seems so hard to understand how to make a difference though, (...) it requires lots of work and it is very complicated. You do not end up seeing results easily. This is why this is a frustrating moment. When we consider the time we spend and the energy we invest compared to the results that we see. (Int. 1)

In sum, Italian organizations working on fundamental rights rely mainly on European funding, which requires a commitment that is hardly sustainable for many CSOs. In contrast, European funds managed by national institutions do not always guarantee the necessary political autonomy. These resource challenges, combined with non-material constraints, strongly affect the ability of CSOs to engage more consistently and effectively at the European/transnational level.

CONCLUSIONS

The transformation of Italian politics over the last few decades has produced a gradual narrowing of domestic political opportunities for civil society groups. Although Italian CSOs greatly appreciated the increased autonomy from party dominance that they gained after the 1990s, the crisis that affected Italian political parties gradually left them without interlocutors at the political-institutional level. This situation was further exacerbated by the subsequent backlash that dominated the Italian political scene towards the end of the 2010s. As a result, CSOs have found themselves in a political environment that is increasingly averse to expanding the protection of fundamental rights, dominated by anti-immigrant policies and even attempts to criminalize them for their engagement in support of migrants and in favour of the protection of human rights. The in-depth interviews with representatives of civil society groups presented

here highlight how various forms of political marginalization and the growing political pressure from populist parties encouraged Italian CSOs to explore transnational modes of advocacy and political engagement as a more systematic element of their action repertoire. CSOs have embarked on pursuing new political opportunities by relating their campaigns to legal provisions, action strategies, and resources beyond the confines of the nation-state.

The deepening of the EU integration process has allowed CSOs to take advantage of new political channels through which they can exert influence and instigate political change at the national level by exploiting opportunities at the transnational level. In this manner, the EU has gradually become a fundamental source of normative, financial, and networking resources for civil society groups. Over the past 15 years, some CSOs have resorted to litigation, exploiting EU legal norms and tools in order to instigate change in the domestic arena. Most crucially, the binding EU legal provisions have become a fundamental reference point for the promotion and protection of fundamental rights in the country.

Italian CSOs face many obstacles in exploring transnational opportunities in the European space, which are organizational, financial, and cultural in nature. They include the scarcity of linguistic and technological skills among civil society activists, a gap that newer generations have only recently started to fill. As a matter of fact, a notable number of Italian CSOs have increasingly engaged in building advocacy networks across Europe, as well as forms of transnational collaboration, mutual learning and resource pooling. However, given the limited resources at their disposal, they often see basic advocacy activities, such as the consultative role or the monitoring of fundamental rights protection, as less satisfactory or effective.

As long as the country operates based on a functioning democratic system that offers the guarantees of the rule of law, CSOs can confront the discriminatory policies of populist parties by exploiting the binding transnational legal framework of the EU. Indeed, this is also one of the reasons why sovereigntists question the European project. However, for the moment, CSOs benefit from participating in a larger heterogeneous polity in their struggle for fundamental rights promotion and protection.

Exploiting the complex EU multilevel system requires a notable investment of time, skills, and resources that many domestic CSOs cannot afford. Nevertheless, the pressing need to find solutions at the domestic level—as for instance in the case of the protection of migrants' rights—has

forced some CSOs to become political entrepreneurs in the transnational political arena. A number of transnational initiatives were stimulated by the emergence of shared challenges at the European level that could not be solved solely at a domestic level, such as the handling of the waves of migration or the criminalization of solidarity. Furthermore, the expansion of fundamental rights in other member states, as in the case of the same-sex unions, has created incentives to take advantage of the opportunities associated with a wider transnational polity.

From the perspective of CSOs, the EU is neither an idealized interlocutor nor an intrinsically political ally, as over time they have experienced disappointments and been let down by the European polity. However, in a pragmatic fashion, they realize the importance of what European institutions offer in terms of practical responses to concrete needs, with provisions that are more advanced compared to the domestic ones or with resources to operate.

While there are considerable organizational and political obstacles to using the transnational arena successfully, Italian CSOs demonstrate that Europeanizing activities, intended as a form of transnationalization, can be an effective tool to address an adverse domestic political landscape. Our findings point to a layer of political opportunities at the European level that is likely to become integral to the action repertoire of civil society groups, in particular those concerned with the deepening and protection of fundamental rights.

In terms of their broader impact, our analysis points to an emerging form of political advocacy in the European public sphere that is instrumental to sustaining democratic processes both in the domestic arenas of EU member states and the European Union itself. By exploiting the EU's system of multilevel governance, CSOs in Italy have successfully deepened democracy at home as they have succeeded in protecting minorities and disadvantaged groups from discrimination. In turn, the EU has established a transnational governance layer that fosters participatory democracy and discussions about fundamental rights and empowers civil society groups in Europe's evolving system of multilevel governance. The Italian context demonstrates how the transnational arena can become an indispensable dimension in protecting democracy and granting a voice to minorities at the domestic level in times of crisis.

APPENDIX

List of CSOs Interviewed

- Int. 1: A Buon Diritto, 07/13/2021
 Int. 2: Lunaria, 07/15/2021
 Int. 3: Idos, 07/15/2021
 Int. 4: Rete in difesa di, 07/16/2021
 Int. 5: Antigone, 07/19/2021
 Int. 6: Libera, 07/19/2021
 Int. 7: Arci, 07/20/2021
 Int. 8: Forum disuguaglianze diversità, 07/21/2021
 Int. 9: Focsiv, 07/26/2021
 Int. 10: Amnesty Italia, 07/16/2021
 Int. 11: Cospe, 07/29/2021
 Int. 12: Cittadinanzattiva, 08/03/2021
 Int. 13: Punto Sud, 08/05/2021
 Int. 14: Dire, 08/05/2021
 Int. 15: Coordinamento Uguali Doveri, 08/05/2021
 Int. 16: Legambiente, 08/24/2021
 Int. 17: Reccommon, 09/01/2021
 Int. 18: Baobab experience, 07/05/2022
 Int. 19: Avvocati per Niente/Asgi, 07/18/2022
 Int. 20: Asgi, 08/10/2022
 Int. 21: Rete Lenford, 09/02/2022
 Int. 22: Ero Straniero, 10/05/2022
 Int. 23a: Asgi, 10/18/2022
 Int. 23b: Asgi, 10/18/2022
 Int. 24a: Action Aid, 10/20/2022
 Int. 24b: Action Aid, 10/20/2022
 Int. 27: Terre des Hommes, 11/11/2022
 Int. 28: Osservatorio Solidarietà, 11/22/2022

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The Contentious Politics of Migration in the EU: The Effects of Organisations' Internal Dynamics on Transnational Networking

Federico Alagna 

INTRODUCTION

Literature on the role played by civil society organisations (CSOs) in European Union (EU) migration governance has been increasing in quantity over the last few years (Agustín & Jørgensen, 2019; Cuttitta, 2018, 2022; della Porta, 2018; della Porta & Steinhilper, 2022; Strik, 2019, among others). Within this context, several scholars have specifically adopted a multi-scale perspective, such as considering how CSOs aim to influence EU (supranational) migration governance by establishing connections with local actors and institutions (Alcalde & Portos, 2018; Bazurli, 2019; Caponio, 2022; Lacroix & Spencer, 2022; Panebianco,

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2022). In a similar fashion, it has been noted that the transnational scale has also become a key arena for political contention (Alagna, 2024).

In this contribution, I build on the existing scholarship by focusing on the decision-making aspects of those civil society actors who are engaged in the field of migration on a transnational level. Namely, I disentangle the factors that have informed the decision of CSOs to engage in transnational migrant solidarity activism, with a view to explaining why civil society organisations engage in different ways in transnational political contention around the topic of migration in the EU.

Such an approach, which centres on the existing differences among CSOs, contributes to the literature on political contention around migration. More specifically, it engages with dynamics of scale shift (McAdam et al., 2001), in the context of a process of Europeanisation from below (della Porta & Caiani, 2011). While several studies have addressed the transnationalisation of migrant solidarity initiatives, they have often only done so in aggregated terms, considering the transnationalisation process as a whole and devoting less attention to the internal differences between and within CSOs (Monforte, 2014 is one of the most notable exceptions in this regard).

In my approach, I distinguish between horizontal and vertical dynamics of transnationalisation—both of which will be considered in this study. Horizontal transnationalisation is defined as the emergence of a political arena of coordination of collective actions that transcends national boundaries. On the other hand, vertical dynamics of transnationalisation entail a shift in the operational and/or target scale of political activism, from national to upper governance levels. In this case, it will be a synonym of supranationalisation, considering vertical transnationalisation as a shift from the national to the EU level.

In order to make my argument, I will focus on the network From the Sea to the City (FSTC), which includes a range of different organisations from across Europe (see Table 3.1). FSTC was launched in 2020, in the context of the increasing criminalisation of civil society actors and restrictive migration policy. Overall, the network seeks to work with municipalities that are members of the International Alliance of Safe Harbours in order to promote ‘a radical change in EU migration policies, including the creation of safe corridors and legal pathways to Europe; the safeguard of migrant people’s fundamental rights; an active role of [CSOs]/cities in the management of EU funds; the strengthening of solidarity, also including the possibility of transnational municipal relocation’ (Alagna, 2024,

Table 3.1 From the sea to the city – member organisations

<i>Organisation</i>	<i>Country & main operational scale (migration-related)</i>	<i>Main target scale</i>
Emergency	Italy	EU, Italy
Europe Must Act	EU-wide, Greece	EU
European Alternatives	EU-wide, Italy	EU
Humboldt-Viadrina Governance Platform	Germany	EU, Germany
Inura	EU-wide	EU
Inter Alia	EU-wide, Greece	EU
Mediterranea Saving Humans	Italy, Mediterranean Sea	EU, Italy
Open Arms	Spain, Mediterranean Sea	EU, Spain, Italy
Sea-Watch	Germany, Mediterranean Sea	EU, Germany, Italy
Seebrücke	Germany	(EU), Germany
Tesserae	Germany	EU
Watch the Med – Alarm Phone	Germany, Mediterranean Sea	EU
W2EU	EU-wide	EU
Zagreb Solidarity City	Croatia	(EU), Croatia

Source: <https://fromseacity.eu/> (accessed 8 April 2022) and interviews

p. 1248). This case study is not only empirically rich, but also analytically sound, as it incorporates an intrinsic multi-scale approach, aimed at changing EU policy by working with local actors such as municipalities.

Previous research has very much focused on the external conditions that made the emergence of this network possible and on its external projection and relationships (Alagna, 2024; Lacroix et al., 2022; Liebscher, 2024). By contrast, in this chapter I will focus on the internal dimension of the CSOs, by addressing the way in which the internal dynamics of the civil society organisations influence their decision to engage in a transnational network, and the extent of said engagement. However, I fully acknowledge the close correlation that exists between internal and external dynamics—such as in terms of political opportunity structures (Tarrow, 1983, 1989)—which is taken into account in my research.

My study is informed by the broad scholarship on contentious politics that looks at the internal dynamics of social movement and civil society organisations. Within this extensive field, two prominent approaches have been particularly relevant in the case at hand, namely those exploring the concepts of collective identity (Polletta & Jasper, 2001; Whittier, 2002)

and resource mobilisation (Jenkins, 1983). The former helps us to explore the role played by the construction (and interaction) of different identities and the impact of aspects of internal culture—such as attitudes, beliefs and values—on CSO participation in the transnational network. The latter casts light on how and why differences in material, human and social-organisational resources can explain variations in the process under scrutiny.

The next section will address the methodology of the study. Following this, I will present the empirical findings of the research, namely the influence that internal dynamics have on the decision of a CSO to engage in a transnational network. In the concluding section, I will discuss these findings, assessing whether the influence of such factors can explain the different levels of transnational engagement (within FSTC) of civil society actors, and why this might be the case.

METHODS

This chapter presents the results of ethnographic research conducted within a transnational migrant solidarity activist network, namely, *From the Sea to the City*. It mostly considers meso- and micro-level dynamics, by focusing on organisations and individual actors.

The research adopts a comparative approach: whilst internal factors are firstly discussed with regard to broad tendencies within the network, the analysis then moves on to focus mainly on four civil society organisations. These have been selected because they reveal significantly different levels of engagement in FSTC in terms of their participation in internal meetings, the support they provide to the planning and fulfilment of activities, and, more broadly, their overall contribution to the network. Moreover, whereas two of these organisations are mostly engaged in activism at sea, the other two are mainly associated with city-oriented activism. Hence, they present interesting heuristic strengths, displaying significant differences on two different dimensions (level of engagement and type of activism). These four organisations are anonymised throughout the chapter for research ethics reasons and will be referred to simply as SEA 1 (sea-oriented activism, relatively high level of engagement), CITY 1 (city-oriented activism, high level of engagement), SEA 2 (sea-oriented activism, low level of engagement) and CITY 2 (city-oriented activism, relatively low level of engagement) (see Table 3.2).

Table 3.2 The four selected organisations: A typology

	<i>Sea-oriented activism</i>	<i>City-oriented activism</i>
High engagement	SEA 1 (+)	CITY 1 (++)
Low engagement	SEA 2 (--)	CITY 2 (-)

Source: Designed by the author

My work is based on original empirical research, which is rooted in the triangulation of different methods of data collection. The first of these is participant observation, which was conducted systematically over a period of six months (December 2021–May 2022) and, following this period, during significant events and meetings—namely the festival organised by *Mediterranea—Saving Humans* in Naples (1–4 September 2022) and the FSTC internal coordination meeting that took place in Barcelona (28–29 October 2022). Participant observation involved both in-presence and remote/digital activities, such as participation in instant messaging chats, emails, physical and virtual meetings, and personal conversations. I carried out this observation from an insider position, insofar as I was delegated by one of the participating CSOs (*Mediterranea—Saving Humans*) to participate in FSTC activities. Participant observation was overt: I disclosed my twofold role as activist/researcher from the outset and I made every effort throughout the process to constantly remind fellow activists of the situation (on insider/outsider and covert/overt positions in participant observation in social movement studies, see Uldam & McCurdy, 2013).

Secondly, I conducted fourteen semi-structured interviews with FSTC activists (mostly), policy-makers, researchers and practitioners (see *List of interviews*). Interviewees were selected on the grounds of their expertise and through snowball sampling.

Thirdly, I relied on documentary sources (e.g. official documents, statements and press releases, EU and national policy documents, secondary literature), with a view to integrating specific aspects and corroborating information acquired through the interviews. Data were analysed following an inductive qualitative content analysis technique.

HOW INTERNAL FACTORS SHAPE CSO PARTICIPATION IN TRANSNATIONAL MIGRANT SOLIDARITY NETWORKS

In this section I inductively consider five key internal dynamics that emerged during my fieldwork, assessing whether they had an impact on the participation of civil society organisations in FSTC, how this manifested itself and why it might have been the case. The first dynamic relates to the political approach of the organisations towards transnationalisation in general, and is considered in the first subsection. Three more dynamics are considered together in the central subsection and relate to differences: (a) in the main focus of their political contention (sea vs. city); (b) between actors that are more social movement organisation (SMO)-like and those that instead are more non-governmental organisation (NGO)-like (cf. della Porta, 2020); (c) in their objectives and strategic vision. Last but not least, a fifth dynamic is considered in the final subsection, and relates to the capacity of the CSOs to mobilise resources.

Horizontal and Vertical Transnationalisation

The first dynamic relates to aspects of collective identity and internal culture and strategy. It consists of the different attitudes that the CSOs have in relation to the EU, Europeanisation and the development of a transnational approach. Therefore, its importance for understanding patterns of transnationalisation comes as no surprise.

All of the member organisations of FSTC were evidently open to a transnationalisation of migrant solidarity activism in Europe. This clearly emerged throughout participant observation, in the interviews and in internal documents. This process was facilitated by the fact that other transnational networks of civil society organisations already existed, in which some FSTC members had participated, such as those active in search and rescue at sea. (Interviews I03, I09, I13). A further significant element was the existence of individual and collective actors actively engaged in the promotion of transnationalisation (Interviews I07, I13).

Interestingly, this transnational orientation combined different perspectives, associated with either normative or rational choice approaches. In other words, some collective actors endorsed transnationalisation because of an ideological preference towards a pan-EU, de-nationalised form of activism (Interviews I07, I10), whereas others considered this transnational approach as a way to achieve concrete results in the field

(Interview I05). The differences on this stance allow us to understand the distance between the approaches that actors take that are more influenced by internal culture and collective identity and others that appear more strategic (cf. above).

Some elements of tension, which were partly connected to the above differentiation, emerged with regard to the specific meaning attributed to the process of transnationalisation—either as a horizontal or vertical process. A number of organisations considered the EU as a crucial operational and target arena for their activism, and aimed to bring their issues to the EU scale in the form of vertical transnationalisation/supranationalisation (Interview I01, I04). A significantly greater number of organisations displayed an approach that was more oriented towards horizontal transnationalisation, considering national governments as their main target and privileging transnational cooperation with other organisations, rather than a stable engagement at the EU level (Interviews I08, I10, I14). Some organisations presented a more nuanced, in-between approach (Interviews I02, I07, I12).

The patterns that were discussed above can also be identified in the four organisations selected for this study.

SEA 1 strongly adheres to a transnational approach to migrant solidarity activism, based not only on the specific nature of their main scale of action—the sea, which is transnational *per se* (cf. Fischer & Jørgensen, 2022, p. 172)—but also on the political trajectory of their core members and on the period in which it was launched. Their approach to transnationalisation combines both horizontal and vertical elements: it strongly pursues a coordination of contentious actions in the field of migration, while, at the same time, also specifically engaging with certain EU-targeted campaigns (Field notes Naples, September 2022; Interview I13).

CITY 1 presents a more marked decoupling between horizontal and vertical transnationalisation. From an operational point of view, they have had a transnational approach to migrant solidarity activism since the organisation was founded, which has been based on the need to ‘engag[e] on the European level with other progressive civil society networks working in the same direction’, which ‘would help [them] develop [an] alternative discourse’ (Interview I08). Some of the leaders of the group were involved in another transnational network working on the issue of migration—the Palermo Charter Platform Process, from which FSTC arose (Interviews I08, I14; see also Maffei, 2021, pp. 34–35)—and found it important to address the misalignment between the transnational nature

of the issue and nation-based activism (Interview I08). However, the approach taken by CITY 1 is significantly different when it comes to vertical transnationalisation/supranationalisation. They are somewhat sceptical, although they do recognise the interest shown to the issue by members of the European Parliament and the European Committee of the Regions (Interview I08). Overall, there is an explicit preference towards campaigning that targets the national level, which is deemed more effective (Interview I14). A more stable engagement with the EU policy arena is thus considered not necessarily useful, as its potential usefulness depends on the direction of the advocacy (Interview I08).

SEA 2 has also had a strong horizontal transnational approach since its foundation, something that is linked not only to the specific dynamics that led to its establishment (Interview I13), but also to the political agency of the organisation outside From the Sea to the City (Interviews I04, I08, I09). In contrast to the previous examples, SEA 2 also tends to be slightly sympathetic towards vertical forms of transnationalisation/supranationalisation, as it is convinced of the ‘possibility of a dialogue at an EU level’ and working in close cooperation with those organisations that have advocacy offices in Brussels (Interview I04).

Finally, CITY 2 also agrees on the importance of working horizontally at a transnational scale, primarily based on the understanding that ‘the migration regime is Europe-wide’ and, therefore, there is ‘a need to address this well beyond national boundaries’ (Interview I11). Even though this viewpoint is not inherently connected to the strategic approach that the organisation had when it was founded, there is no doubt that it is currently present, regardless of the difficulties that it can entail (Interview I11). Insofar as vertical, supranational dynamics are concerned, CITY 2 does not have a specific preference towards EU or national targets and, like SEA 1 and SEA 2, displays a certain amount of openness towards political contention at different scales (Field notes internal meetings).

Overall, the above empirical results highlight the fact that while the propensity towards transnationalisation was indeed a key aspect, it was definitely not a divisive one. Notwithstanding the many differences among actors in this regard, it did not play any significant role in the decision of CSOs to enter into a transnational network, nor in the emergence of differential approaches to transnationalisation. On the contrary, it eventually became a homogenous driver of transnationalisation among all the actors involved.

The Divisive Potential of Other Internal Dynamics

Aside from transnationalisation, other important cultural, identity-related and strategic internal dynamics did play a significant role. This is the case, in particular, of those elements that caused certain tensions to emerge between the CSOs: these mostly involved the way in which pre-existing aspects of internal culture, identity and strategy within each civil society organisation interacted with one another in the construction of a collective transnational identity for FSTC. This interaction did create different degrees of alignment (and misalignment) between organisational and network-wide dynamics, which had the potential to influence the engagement of CSOs in this transnational network.

Empirical research in the case at hand suggests that a number of significant differences emerged around three internal dynamics—both within the network and with regard to the four organisations considered in this chapter, in particular. However, as we shall see below, these differences did not automatically lead to tensions or to potential indirect effects on transnationalisation.

The first difference relates to what one activist defined as the ‘sea rescue vs. city rescue’ confrontation (Interview I01). A key element of the transnational network is to bring together two of the most important dimensions of migration governance—the sea and the city. This is reflected in the name of the consortium, in its stated goals (cf. above. See also *From the Sea to the City*, 2021) and in the perspectives and expectations of its member organisations (Field notes Barcelona, October 2022). They believed that the involvement of migrant solidarity organisations that were primarily engaged in either of these two dimensions was not only viable, but also, to a certain extent, necessary. However, this also had the potential to create a certain amount of tension with regard to the forms that this type of integration between said perspectives should have—in turn influencing their eagerness to actively participate in the transnational network.

Internal meetings reveal a recurring preoccupation with the integration of these two perspectives and *ways of doing things* (Field notes internal meetings)—something that also demonstrates the empirical connection between identity/cultural aspects and the strategic organisation of activities. One FSTC activist, for example, explained that after the important convention organised by the network in Palermo in 2021, they felt that it was extremely important to create two different groups—one focusing on the sea, the other on cities—given that the existing cultural diversity would

create problems in working together (Interview I02). Even though this suggestion was not followed—and the internal organisation after Palermo 2021 convention revolved around two working groups focused on cities committed to becoming safe harbours and on the definition of political priorities and campaigns, respectively—the sea/city cleavage did not bring about any significant element of disruption.

Looking at SEA 1 and SEA 2, which are both essentially engaged in sea-related activities, what clearly emerges is that well before the emergence of *From the Sea to the City* both organisations were interested in and committed to working at a city level (Interviews I01, I03, I06, I09). This openness towards city-focused activities is central to the political action of these organisations, and is further reinforced by the political history and thought of some of their leaders, who even played an important brokerage role in certain key moments (Interviews I03, I13). Rather than constituting an impediment to working with cities, their experience in sea-related migration activism actually created the conditions for a more thorough form of transnational networking—also with cities—building on the experience of their activities at sea and in search and rescue (SAR) networking (see above. Interviews I04, I09).

CITY 1 and CITY 2, on the other hand, had been active in city-oriented activism for a considerable period of time, which entailed both in-depth cooperation with particular municipalities and efforts at networking (Field notes internal meetings; Interviews I01, I12). This focus, however, did not preclude the development of a specific interest towards sea-based activities, both within and outside *From the Sea to the City* (Field notes internal meetings, chats, emails). In summary, their approach appears to mirror that of SEA 1 and SEA 2.

In spite of a number of remarks suggesting the potential for the sea/city cleavage to create conflict, the empirical evidence offers no concrete indication that differences in these dimensions created any noticeable tensions capable of shaping different processes of transnationalisation.

A second, significant element of difference related to the heterogeneity of the civil society initiatives involved, ranging from SMO-like to NGO-like actors (see above; cf. della Porta, 2020). Whereas this, albeit acknowledged, heterogeneity did not constitute an issue for SEA 1, and did so only marginally for CITY 1 (Field notes internal meetings, Interview I14), it was found to have created significant tensions within the two organisations that showed lower levels of engagement in the transnational network.

SEA 2 considered the lack of professionalisation of the network a critical issue: ‘for us this is work [...]. If we don’t consider this work ourselves, [...] we won’t ever be treated as professionals from the outside’ (Interview I04). This is connected to significant cultural and strategic aspects, and in particular to ‘an anti-institutional attitude, [which] is penalising’ and ‘increases one’s self-referentiality’. There is also a need for flexibility: in order to engage in institutional dialogue and advocacy, it is of paramount importance to find a common language (Interview I04).

CITY 2 very much shares these concerns, explaining that activists and non-governmental organisations ‘are sometimes in conflict’, primarily because NGOs ‘have a slightly more constructive approach’, whereas ‘the world of activism is a little bit more disruptive’. Furthermore, ‘since many people are engaged on a voluntary basis, carrying on with the work is a difficult task’ (Interview I11).

Even though the differences between the organisations in FSTC in relation to this aspect may not be particularly significant on paper, they do seem to be perceived as extremely powerful by various members—and even more so by those who engaged to a lesser extent in the network. This tension is ultimately connected with internal culture and its effects on how activities are planned. Unlike the sea/city tension, this aspect would appear to be very concrete and capable of having a significant impact.

However, the SMO/NGO issue largely remained latent: a topic that was known and acknowledged by the different organisations involved, but rarely addressed in concrete (Field notes internal meetings). A significant exception to this, however, can be seen in the Barcelona meeting in October 2022, where these aspects were extensively discussed and a working group on internal care was established, to some extent acknowledging the need to reconcile these different perspectives. The purpose of this was to have a number of members in charge of reaching out to those organisations that were expressing unhappiness or showing signs of disengagement due to internal tensions, such as those related to the SMO/NGO issue.

A third and final aspect in which the existing differences in the cultural and identity dynamics of the CSOs were potential drivers of tensions relates to the objectives and strategic vision of individual organisations and of the network as a whole.

Overall, members of From the Sea to the City agree that significant differences exist in their objectives and strategic visions—issues that are considered to require some work and care, in order to avoid them becoming a problem (Interviews I02, I04). As one expert points out, ‘a problem of

political objectives exists’ and it is key to find a common point among the many instances involved (Interview I06). This lack of clarity was strengthened by the inclusion of new members following the 2021 Palermo convention (Interview I01). Consistently, the network ‘decided to not accept any new member organisations’, privileging instead ‘the development of internal organisation’ and shared strategies (Interview I01). While this is considered a positive step by some members (Interview I02), others believe it is time ‘to open up to new organisations and stakeholders’ and to widen the geographical scope of action (Interview I07).

Both SEA 1 and CITY 1 acknowledged the existence of differences and tried to find common ground and coordinate as much as possible—also aware of the fact that these were potential sources of tension (Field notes internal meetings, chats, emails). One activist from CITY 1, in particular, explained that there are ‘differences in how we envision strategy’ across the EU (Interview I08). However, research on the examples at hand did not reveal any significant impact of such differences on the engagement of these organisations.

The lack of shared objectives and strategic vision, however, were considered by members of other organisations as key drivers in reducing the engagement of SEA 2 (Interviews I08, I11). In particular, as another activist explained, one extremely significant point of friction related to the proposal of focusing on internal work with municipalities, rather than promoting external events, which was put forward by SEA 2, but barely followed by other network members (Interview I01). The overall misalignment between these proposals and the approach eventually followed by From the Sea to the City is considered the main explanation for the decreasing engagement of SEA 2 in the transnational network (Interview I08, I11). The difficulty in finding a common approach, shared by all FSTC members—including SEA 2—is considered by a representative of this organisation as a sign that ‘each and every organisation strives to protect parts of itself’: they continued prioritising their own identity, instead of ‘finding a compromise solution’ (Interview I04).

A very similar process took place in the case of CITY 2, albeit to a lesser extent (Field notes internal meetings; Interview I08). Also in this case, an important component of this approach was the priority given to a number of internal, off-stage activities, with a view to strengthening the network of civil society organisations and cities (Interview I01). In the words of a representative of CITY 2, if an agreed pathway is missing, ‘I can approach a city [...] but to propose what?’ (Interview I11).

One activist with CITY 2 believed that important internal ‘constitutional steps were missing’ and this was even more problematic given the uneven geographical distribution of the organisations and their different ways of doing things: ‘you can fine-tune the approach in the different national contexts, but you can’t do two completely different things!’ (Interview I11; Field notes internal meetings). These differences, which are associated with elements of national background and internal culture, not only undermined the engagement of CITY 2, but further challenged, from the perspective of this organisation, the effectiveness of the network at a transnational level. As one member reported, ‘in order to have talks at the EU level, you need to have some ideas: you can’t [...] knock at the door of the Commission or Parliament and just say “we want a more human right-based migration policy”’ (Interview I11).

The opinions expressed by activists strongly support the existence of a nexus between internal culture and strategy, highlighting the identity-related and political component of the latter.

In concluding this subsection, it is important to note that, while I have explored three different internal dynamics (and the tension related to them), only two of these—namely those related to the SMO/NGO cleavage and network objectives and strategic visions—appear to be instrumental in explaining the different levels of engagement by the various organisations in the FSTC network.

The Mobilisation of Different Material, Human and Social-Organisational Resources

In exploring the internal meso- and micro-dynamics of the network that may have had a bearing on the varying levels of transnational engagement by the CSOs involved, resource availability also is an element that became heavily apparent during the fieldwork. Although it is difficult—and arguably unproductive—to draw clear-cut lines between different internal factors, this type of dynamic shifts attention away from the cultural and identity-related component of the internal debate.

The member organisations of From the Sea to the City had a significantly varied level of access to material, human and social-organisational resources (cf. Edwards et al., 2018, pp. 80–81). Resource availability and management were key issues in the internal debate, not only with a view to ensuring the sustainability and effectiveness of the network—mainly by securing sufficient funds and dedicated coordination tasks—but also in

order to mediate between different interests and free up network activities from uneven resource distribution between members (Field notes internal meetings).

Focusing in particular on material resources—and most specifically money—one concern that emerged was that such an uneven distribution could create power imbalances, where organisations with more resources would end up acquiring a leading role in the network (Interview I04). Remarkably, even though it was widely acknowledged that some organisations had more financial capacity and resources than others, the concern relating to power relationships was not shared by all of the members. On the contrary, several of them mentioned that organisations with greater resources seemed keen to make such capacities and resources available to the wider network (Interviews I01, I12). This applied not only in the case of material resources, but also human and social-organisational resources more broadly.

From a human resources perspective, the first thing that one might notice is the fact that there are significant differences between the member organisations with regard to the existence of professional and paid personnel, as well as the experience and know-how of working with municipalities (Interview I01. See also the previous section). Secondly, the number and profile of the organisation representatives who participated in *From the Sea to the City* also varied greatly. Some organisations only delegated one person, whereas others participated more actively and committed several representatives to the network. A further point that differed greatly across the organisations was the amount of freedom for manoeuvre that the representatives enjoyed as well as their role within their respective organisations.

Significant differences also emerged with regard to social-organisational resources, given the fact that the network members range from large-sized, multi-sited, complex organisations to smaller, local associations, run by a few members (Field notes internal meetings, chats, emails. See also *From the Sea to the City*, 2021). This difference is also reflected in the existing network structures and capacity of individual organisations, especially at a transnational level—such as the presence of field offices in Brussels and/or forms of structural collaboration with those organisations that have such offices (Interview I05).

In turning our attention to the four organisations that constitute our narrower focus, it is possible to disentangle the impact of such differences on their engagement in the FSTC network.

Beginning with the two most heavily engaged actors, SEA 1 could mainly deploy two types of resources for the activities of From the Sea to the City: human and social-organisational resources. Human resources consisted in active members, who were highly engaged in the network activities and had a significant level of know-how in relation to the connection between sea-oriented and city-oriented migrant solidarity activism. Their social-organisational resources were associated with the fact that the organisation boasted a wide network of pre-existing relations and key contacts and was able to share this with the rest of the network in order to advance its activities (Field notes internal meetings; Interviews I06, I08).

CITY 1 also shared the same sort of social-organisational resources, in terms of relations and contacts. Similarly, it had in-depth know-how in working with municipalities on migration-related issues, which was a crucial human resource for the development of the activities of the network. Furthermore, CITY 1 also brought with it significant material resources, in the form of monetary contributions that directly supported the funding and sustainability of the network (Field notes internal meetings and emails; Interviews I01, I02, I08, I12, I13). In terms of human resources, it is also noticeable that CITY 1 had both paid and professional staff that could contribute to FSTC activities, since this allowed it to be constantly involved in the activities of the network, in addition to the voluntary efforts of its activists.

The existence of these resources meant that SEA 1 and CITY 1 were able to contribute substantively to the network and to influence a number of important strategic choices. Examples of this are the decision concerning which cities to focus on in the expansion of the network or the definition of activities that required monetary funds—such as the establishment of a coordination role or the organisation of a network meeting (Field notes internal meetings). From the information that was either disclosed in the interviews or directly observed during field work, neither of these two organisations had any particular complaint in relation to the allocation or use of said resources within the wider network.

SEA 2 and CITY 2 were both characterised by the availability of significant levels of human resources—these being, first and foremost, the paid and professional personnel of the organisations. This element brought an important contribution to the network, by offering the skills, expertise and working hours of professional staff, as was the case with CITY 1. Unlike that example, however, the possibility of offering this type of

contribution created significant tensions, which related to the lack of a broadly shared, professional approach across the network (see above).

Finally, SEA 2 also had important social-relational resources, in terms of connections with a wide network of civil society organisations and municipalities working on migration. These resources were used on some occasions to contribute to the network (Field notes internal meetings).

Looking at the whole picture, it would seem that rather than the mere existence and availability of resources, what really affected the engagement of organisations in the transnational network was their strategic use and how they aligned with the overall objectives of the network and the expectations of each organisation. These aspects will be given due attention in the next, concluding section. However, as a final example of the socially construed relevance of available resources, one might consider the extreme case of those organisations within *From the Sea to the City* that decided to engage heavily in the transnational network in spite of the fact that they had few resources to share. In particular, the limited availability of resources as such created important incentives to actively participate in joint transnational activities, allowing the individual organisations to gain both prestige and visibility (Interview I02).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The analysis of five important internal aspects and dynamics within *From the Sea to the City* clearly demonstrates that they contributed significantly to the decision of civil society organisations to participate in the transnational network.

At the same time, however, a closer look—including a narrower focus on four of these organisations with different focuses (sea/city) and different levels of engagement in the network—further highlights a significant difference. Some of these aspects and dynamics contributed to the emergence of varied forms of transnationalisation, especially in the case of particularly divisive issues, whereas other simply encouraged the engagement of CSOs in the network, without creating or fuelling any differences.

More specifically, I firstly considered the way in which transnationalisation was perceived and addressed by the various organisations. It can be said that, while this was a key element, it did not produce any major tension—or consequently any difference—between the CSOs, insofar as it was present in each of them in a reasonably similar manner.

Other key issues emerged and had an indirect influence on transnationalisation. Among these, differences in the level of professionalisation did create some major tensions and led to organisations engaging in the network to a greater or lesser degree, depending on the extent to which elements pertaining to the internal culture, the collective identity and the strategic vision of the single organisation were aligned with those dominant in the network. Similarly, differences between the CSOs in terms of their objectives and strategic vision also produced significant tension, which eventually influenced the level of participation in *From the Sea to the City*.

On the contrary, other important—and, to a certain extent, contentious—issues, such as the difference between ‘sea rescue’ and ‘city rescue’, did not cause any major difference in the CSOs’ decision to participate in the transnational network.

Important differences also existed in the material, human and social-organisational resources that each organisation could mobilise within the network. In this regard, it can firstly be noted that the availability of a greater or a lesser amount of resources was not a driver of higher or lower levels of participation in FSTC as such. Differentiated transnationalisation, rather, reflected the *perception* of resource-related unbalances as a driver of different capacities to orientate network activities. Ultimately, this leads us back to the tensions that resulted from the different and, at times, contrasting cultural and identity-related aspects that were explored above. Indeed, resources were perceived as a way of more successfully promoting certain aspects rather than others, even though this was not necessarily the case. Once again, this speaks to the deep interconnection between elements of culture, identity, resources and structure (Polletta & Jasper, 2001; Jenkins, 1983; Whittier, 2002).

In summary, this piece of research indicates that different internal dynamics substantively impact on the decision of migrant solidarity civil society organisations to engage in a transnational migrant solidarity network. These internal dynamics further explain some of the significant differences in the reasons why CSOs engaged in the network to a greater or a lesser extent: in a context in which all organisations share some sort of transnationalisation culture, the extent to which single organisational aspects of culture and identity are aligned with dominant ones—that is, those of the network—is the primary element that determined a greater or a lesser level of engagement. Remarkably, not all culture-related differences become divisive: in the case at hand, an example of that is the ‘sea

vs. city' difference. Lastly, differences in the possibility of mobilising resources further reinforced divergences and tensions that were grounded in cultural and identity-related aspects, rather than being an element of differentiated transnationalisation per se.

LIST OF INTERVIEWS

- I01, Activist, From the sea to the city, 20 January 2022
- I02, Activist, From the sea to the city, 21 January 2022
- I03, Activist, From the sea to the city, 26 January 2022
- I04, Activist, From the sea to the city, 27 January 2022
- I05, Activist, From the sea to the city, 27 January 2022
- I06, Researcher, 28 January 2022
- I07, Activist, From the sea to the city, 31 January 2022
- I08, Activist, From the sea to the city, 3 February
- I09, Researcher, 16 February 2022
- I10, Activist, From the sea to the city, 17 February 2022
- I11, Activist, From the sea to the city, 17 February 2022
- I12, Activist, From the sea to the city, 22 March 2022
- I13, Activist, From the sea to the city, 31 March 2022
- I14, Activist, From the sea to the city, 1 April 2022

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CHAPTER 4

Contemporary Feminism as a Transnational Wave: Multilevel Opportunities, Processes of Diffusion and Common Challenges

Daniela Chironi 

INTRODUCTION: FEMINIST MOVEMENTS IN THE MULTILEVEL CRITICAL JUNCTURE

This chapter investigates the processes of transnationalization in recent feminist movements with reference to Europe, taking a number of cases in Southern Europe as paradigmatic instances. Research carried out on both social movements and gender politics has highlighted an increasing growth in feminist mobilizations in a number of countries since the mid-2010s. The return of feminists to direct action in the streets has coincided with a context of widespread economic and political crises that began in 2008: they have participated in the massive social mobilizations against harsh austerity policies imposed (to different degrees) in Southern European countries especially, supposedly as a solution to reduce public debt. Greece, Italy, and Spain have been the stage for intense social protest in opposition

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to growing social inequality and democratic exclusion, which both activists and critical thinkers have associated with harsh neoliberalism (della Porta et al., 2017).

Austerity policies have hit the lower middle classes and disadvantaged social groups especially hard, including women, sexual and gender minorities, and migrants. The public welfare state has further retrenched, and unemployment and labour precarity have increased, leading to a worsening of material conditions, which has particularly affected female workers (Federici, 2012; Fraser, 2013; Mies, 2014). At a political level, the economic crisis has been accompanied by the rise of challenger parties. In some cases (such as Greece and Spain) these have been located on the left of the political spectrum, however, they have more often than not originated on the right, and even the far right. Most right-wing parties—particularly since the so-called migration summer of 2015—have increasingly adopted an ultranationalist and nativist discourse, coupled with a conservative vision of gender roles and the family, targeting migrants, LGBTQI+ people and feminists as enemies (Caiani & Graziano, 2021; Scrinzi, 2023). At a cultural level, the mobilization of deeply conservative, religious milieus against acquired rights—such as abortion—and against the extension of civic rights promoted by the European Union (EU)—such as same-sex marriage and adoption, and the protection of LGBTQI+ people from discrimination and abuse—contributed to configure a prolonged period of backlash in which the push for regressive policies was strong (Alter & Zürn, 2020; della Porta et al., 2022).

The contraction of public services, the neoliberal reform of labour markets and the challenge deriving from backlash politics are all factors that have negatively impacted on the living condition of women, especially those from weaker social groups, such as the working class and ethnic minorities (Brenner & Holmstrom, 2013). They have reacted to the economic, social and political transformations associated with late neoliberalism by increasing their level of engagement. Initially they joined the anti-austerity movement; subsequently, they have fought against gender-based violence, sparking a widespread wave of protest throughout the continent. More recently, during the Covid-19 pandemic, feminists have engaged in actions of solidarity with vulnerable groups, but have also denounced the difficulties experienced by women and transgender people, both in the job market and in the home (Chironi, [Forthcoming](#)). Not only are women employed in sectors that have been severely impacted by the health crisis, but they have also experienced a sharp increase in the

domestic and care work load. Cases of domestic violence also increased during the lockdowns, and more generally throughout the period of the pandemic as a whole.

In analysing the feminist movements of the last 15 years in several locations throughout the world, a number of scholars have suggested the global rise of a *fourth wave of feminism*, which presents new characteristics and possesses an innovative repertoire of action (Peroni & Rodak, 2020). In the vast corpus of literature that analyses feminism(s), one can find reference to four feminist waves: the first wave, from the mid-nineteenth century to the 1920s, focussed on rights of citizenship; the second wave, from the mid-1960s to the end of the 1980s, focussed on gender equality, patriarchy, capitalism, and body-related issues; the third wave, from the end of the 1980s to the beginning of the 2000s, supposedly coincided with an emphasis on diversity among women, sex positivity, body alteration and a shift from organized mass action to cultural activities and lifestyle centred action; the fourth wave, from the mid-2010s onwards, is characterized by emphasis on gender violence, the inclusion of transgender people, online activism and the engagement of a younger generation. Empirical studies have also stressed the organization, at a quasi-global scale, of mass demonstrations in conjunction with the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women and International Women's Day, which has now developed into the Women's Strike (Munro, 2013; Chironi, 2019; Bonu, 2022). In light of this previous evidence, in this chapter I will use the concept of a "feminist wave" to claim that while recent feminist movements in Europe were well developed at a national level, they also have strong ideological and symbolic connections with similar movements abroad, so that they can be understood as instances of a fourth wave of feminism with transnational ramifications. Therefore, I understand transnationalization not so much as transnational activism, but rather as a process of diffusion of ideas, symbols and forms of action as well as an expression of transnational solidarity, both online and offline.

While I am aware of, and indeed share, the critiques that have addressed the concept of "feminist waves" (Hemmings, 2005), as suggested by Evans and Chamberlain (2015), I will adopt a critical perspective that underlines not only the new elements present in the fourth wave of feminism, but also the continuities it shares with previous feminist movements. In order to overcome an overly Eurocentric point of view, I will emphasize the role of black feminist theories, particularly intersectional theory, and of feminist mobilizations in Latin America as sources of inspiration for

feminist movements elsewhere. Indeed, the growth of feminist movements in Europe cannot be understood without referring to this wider international context. Feminist activists themselves describe their movements as part of a global and transnational struggle, and the factors—both structural and agential—that have influenced the rise and sustained levels of mobilization can be seen as the consequences of global dynamics, even though direct transnational contact might be limited.

The first of these factors that has had widespread consequences is the financial crises, as evidenced by the subprime mortgage crisis that began in the United States in 2008. The second factor is austerity policies, which have been aimed at reducing public spending, de-structuring the labour market, and privatizing public services, and have spread globally since the 1980s, triggering both homogenization and resistance. The third factor, backlash politics, is certainly not a solely European phenomenon, as demonstrated by the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States in 2016 and that of Jair Bolsonaro as President of Brazil in 2018. The fourth factor is the Covid-19 health crisis, which quickly became a pandemic the effects of which were felt everywhere, albeit to different degrees; during this period protests spread to demand #VaccinesForAll, resulting in transnational campaigns and transnational expressions of solidarity with the Global South.

The return of feminist movements to direct action has occurred in a context of multiple, severe and prolonged crises that—due to the social, economic, cultural and political interrelation that is typical of globalization (Parekh & Wilcox, 2020)—has impacted on several countries around the globe, particularly those in the so-called West, but also countries with less affluent economies, such as Argentina, India and Northern African countries. It is in this *critical juncture* that this new cycle of contention initially re-emerged, assuming anti-austerity and pro-democracy stances, and adopting the occupation of public squares as its main form of action (della Porta et al., 2017). In the early 2010s, the Occupy and Indignados movements developed in the United States, Southern Europe and Northern Africa, providing a space for feminist movements to come together and reorganize. Scholars who have reflected on the reasons behind the emergence of feminist movements have noted that they develop in periods of broader social upheaval, such as the European revolutions of 1848, the movement to abolish slavery in both the United States and Brazil, the “new social movements” of the 1960s and the 1970s, and anti-imperialist struggles (Rupp & Taylor, 2013). However, others have also

underlined how feminist claims have tended to be disregarded and their goals put on hold by male movement leaders (Smith, 1984; Tong & Botts, 2017). From this point of view, the anti-austerity cycle of contention was no different, with feminists being part of the anti-austerity protests from the very beginning in all national contexts, but also initially facing isolation and patronizing behaviour (Roth & Saunders, 2020).

In this austerity-ridden scenario, feminist mobilizations built on grievances related to the economic and political crises, material and symbolic deprivation, and anxiety deriving from increased precarity, activating processes of cross-fertilization within feminist milieus, but also between feminist and anti-austerity activists and claims (Chironi & Portos, 2021). Since then, feminist activities have continued to have an important role and have been sustained throughout the whole decade, up to the present, in conjunction with the subsequent social, ecological and health crises.

Throughout this prolonged critical juncture, contextual *challenges* and *opportunities* have motivated feminists to direct action within a broader cycle of contention, and to subsequently continue their mobilization, becoming a stable presence within contemporary politics from below. Among the challenges faced by feminist movements, the most notable are those that derive from neoliberal policies, the right-wing and conservative political backlashes, and gender violence. The most significant opportunities include those deriving from large social protests, the interconnectedness of global phenomena, and online communication and social media, which allows for mechanisms of international solidarity and processes of cross-national “movement diffusion” to take place. The term diffusion is used by scholars of social movements to refer to the spread of ideas, symbols and forms of action from one country to another, and even from one continent to another (della Porta & Mattoni, 2014). The transnationalization of feminist movements itself is built on these challenges, opportunities and processes. This chapter will consider the specific challenges and opportunities that derive from the European level of governance, looking at Europe as a supranational political space, but also as a field of common (feminist) struggles. As a political space, political sociologists have examined Europe as a source of challenges and multilevel opportunities for the transnationalization of social movements (della Porta & Tarrow, 2005). Institutional challenges derive from austerity policies, which typically precede ascension to the EU and are subsequently necessary to meet the strict budgetary rules imposed on member states. Political challenges relate to the growing international connections between right-wing populist

parties and conservative social actors, such as the conservative Catholic organization *La Manif Pour Tous* (Lavizzari & Siročić, 2023). Nevertheless, the EU, and Europe as a continent more broadly, is also a field of struggle, action and resistance for progressive social movements. Institutional opportunities descend from both the EU, which tends to push for progressive policies in the field of reproductive rights and civil rights (albeit not always successfully), and other supranational entities, such as the Council of Europe (CoE), which is the leading organization on the continent devoted to the defence of human rights. Offering a paradigmatic example of supranational opportunity, in 2012 the member states of the Council of Europe signed the Istanbul Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, which introduced a broad conception of gender violence, moving beyond physical violence to include forms of symbolic, psychological and material violence. The Convention also provided for a series of actions and policies to contrast it. Although the Convention was adopted by the national parliaments of the member states, it has generally been overlooked, leading to feminists to call for its proper implementation (Chironi, 2020).

The chapter is organized as follows: in the next section I will introduce the case studies that have been analysed, namely the Spanish, Greek and Italian feminist movements, outlining the reasons that I consider them to be linked to global and transnational dynamics. I will then describe the characteristics of each movement, linking them to contextual and agentic processes. The following section will provide a description of feminist movements as coalitional, intersectional and transgenerational. After this I will explore their focus on gender violence, which derives from processes of adaption of ideas and frames that have been developed abroad. I will then review the consequences of backlash politics, emphasizing the passage from feminism to transfeminism and the construction of coalitions with LGBTQI+ actors. In the conclusion, I will provide a broad picture of contemporary feminist activism in Southern Europe as an instance of the global fourth wave of feminism, which has resulted from the transnationalization of movement frames, symbols and repertoires of action.

FOURTH WAVE FEMINISM IN CONTEXT: EXPLORING CASES IN SOUTHERN EUROPE

Societies in Southern countries are often described as more traditional and conservative than the European average; the lack of policies to balance work and family life developed by the so-called Mediterranean welfare states, as well as gendered salary inequality have discouraged women with children from entering the labour market, something that is further perpetuated by an unequal division of family work and has contributed to reproducing a cultural model of family and gender roles based on traditional gender stereotypes (Gal, 2010; Moreno, 2010). Traditional visions of the family and gender roles are also sustained by the intertwining between religious and political institutions, something that remains stronger in Southern Europe than in Northern and Central Europe (Avdela, 2008; Giorgi & Itçaina, 2016). Moreover, the increase in secularization, both with regard to the state and society as a whole, has been interpreted as one of the causes for the recent renewed intervention of religious actors in the political sphere (Giorgi & Itçaina, 2016). When the pandemic broke out, these inequalities were further exacerbated by the weakening of the health systems in Southern European countries, due to years of harsh austerity policies, a factor that was particularly evident in Greece.

Against this background, it is notable that even after the anti-austerity movements had begun to wane feminist groups continued to protest. Inspired by the global feminist protests against structural male violence, which began in 2015 and are still ongoing (Cavallero & Gago, 2019), they have become collective actors with high mobilization capacity in Spain, Italy and Greece. Within this Southern European scenario, Spain stands out as somewhat of an exception, given that in the wake of the 2008 crisis it saw a restructuring of the political left, with the emergence of the progressive, Podemos party in 2014 and the subsequent formation of two leftist coalition governments in 2019 and 2023, both of which made attempts to correct the most significant distortions caused by late neoliberalism, including in the field of gender equality. Greece, on the other hand, lies at the opposite side of the spectrum, and is the country where the effects of these multiple crises were most harshly felt. The sudden rise of the left-wing SYRIZA party after 2012 led to the formation of a four-year leftist government (2015–2019), which although elected on a clear anti-austerity programme was not able to fully implement its policies due to hard-handed supranational constraints. In Italy, although the

centre-left Democratic Party (PD) was undergoing a period of political crisis, it continued to attract the greatest number of votes on the left, and the radical left never managed to reorganize and expand, causing it to remain weak and fragmented. As the PD is a centrist, neoliberal party, feminist and LGBTQI+ movements did not consider it to be an institutional ally, and instead criticized it for its policies (Chironi, 2020).

Despite the fact that the countries considered here have similar economic and welfare structures, the feminist movements in each state have experienced different levels of mobilizations over the last 15 years (with the Italian and the Spanish cases attracting greater numbers of protesters), and have also employed (slightly) different frames and repertoires of action. Indeed, each of the national movements has taken inspiration from two different types of feminist movements that have emerged outside of Europe, borrowing ideas, styles, and forms of actions and re-elaborating them through creative processes of learning, resignification, and adaptation. The first of these is the “*Ni Una Menos*” (Not One [Woman] Less) movement, a protest campaign that began in Argentina in the mid-2010s to denounce gender-based violence, feminicides, and the mistreatment of women and LGBTQI+ people as a structural condition of capitalist and patriarchal societies (Gago, 2019). From Argentina, the movement spread to surrounding countries in Latin America, and then on to Southern Europe and Asia. The second movement is the #MeToo social media campaign, which began in the United States in 2017 and saw women use the hashtag #MeToo to share their own personal experiences with the aim of denouncing sexual abuse, sexual harassment and rape culture. In Spain and Italy, a “*Ni Una Menos*” type of movement prevailed, focusing on structural male violence, based on national (offline) networks, large demonstrations and large-scale women’s strikes, which were particularly successful in Spain. In Greece, on the other hand, a #MeToo type of protest became more prevalent, denouncing individual cases of sexual violence and abuse, and exploiting the opportunities provided by social media to organize online and enter the public discourse.

These differences notwithstanding, a number of common traits have also emerged. The first of these is the fact that the revitalization of feminism in Europe is linked to the context of multiple crises, in which feminist materialist claims have regained importance. Secondly, taking inspiration from Latin American feminism, the firm denunciation of violence as a patriarchal phenomenon that derives from structural gender inequality and oppression has become an umbrella frame under which

processes of reunification have taken place. Thirdly, youth activism has played a major role, contributing to the renewal of action repertoires and the diffusion of intersectional theory and practices. Fourthly, in line with the emphasis placed on the intersection between different forms of oppression (such as gender, class, race, and disability), contemporary feminist movements in Southern Europe are *coalitional* (though not without internal tensions, and even conflicts, on strategies), and tend to build alliances with other types of social movements, particularly LGBTQI+ movements. They are also *inclusive*, as they have largely abandoned the “separatism” that characterized the movement in the 1970s and instead place solidarity at the core of feminist action, especially during and after the pandemic. The chapter reviews the similarities between examples of “fourth wave” feminism by focusing on three dimensions: the content of the mobilization, its organizational form and its repertoire of action.

FEMINISM AND THE ECONOMIC CRISIS: COALITIONAL, INTERSECTIONAL AND INTERGENERATIONAL MOVEMENTS

Feminist movements in Southern Europe became revitalized in the 2010s in the broader context of the anti-austerity movements. Feminists joined the mass demonstrations that were being staged to contest austerity measures and voice discontent about representative democracy. They subsequently participated in the occupation of public squares and in large assemblies, forging independent spaces for reflection and action, such as the Commission of Feminism in Sol (Plaza de Sol in Madrid) and the queer feminist Purple Bench-Gender Group at Syntagma Square in Athens, with the aim of promoting a feminist agenda within the broader movement (Gaitanou, 2017; Chironi & Portos, 2021). In Italy, anti-austerity social movements did not unify under a single Indignados/Occupy identity. In a context of fragmented struggles, a number of feminist collectives allied with trade unionists and members of radical left-wing parties to form the Women in the Crisis network, which focused on the effects of austerity policies and particularly the deregulation of the labour market and the retrenchment of the public system of social protection (Pirota, 2015).

As often happens with the participation of feminists in larger movements (Tong & Botts, 2017; Smith, 1984), the efforts of feminists in these anti-austerity movements were initially met with internal resistance,

leading to the dismissal of women's demands, patronizing and sexist behaviour, and an underrepresentation of women on the committees directing the movements (Taibo, 2013; Gámez Fuentes, 2015). According to one Spanish academic and activist interviewed by Brenner and Holmstrom (2013, p. 280), "Feminism clashed with prejudices and misunderstanding of a significant part of those in the squares". Despite these initial problems, the squares became a point of connection for feminists from different backgrounds (radical feminists, socialist feminists, LGBTQI+ activists, union feminists, migrant women), and provided a physical space in which conflicts could be overcome through horizontal participation in the assemblies (VVAA, 2012; Athanasiou, 2014).

Following the retrenchment of mass street mobilization, solidarity grassroots groups flourished in the countries under consideration, working to tackle the problems of those strata of the population who had become impoverished by the crisis as well as migrants. Often based in squats, they provided healthcare services and medicines, food, toys for children and other basic goods and services. At the same time, they reconfigured themselves as spaces for self-organization and emancipation, based on solidarity and an alternative culture (Marugán et al., 2013; Milan, 2019; Kouki & Chatzidakis, 2020). The peak of the economic crisis was also a moment of large-scale, cross-national contact between activists. Exchanges between feminist collectives in Italy and Greece resulted in a broad campaign of solidarity organized by the Women in the Crisis network in 2013, aimed at raising funds for self-managed clinics in Greece. At the same time, they also spread information about the risks entailed in the undergoing retrenchment of the public health service in Italy. Health also became an issue of major concern in Spain, where the *Marea Blanca* (White Tide) movement coalition mobilized to defend the public health system against the austerity measures implemented by the conservative Popular Party government (2011–2018), in parallel with a Green Tide aimed at defending public education, and a Purple Tide in response to conservative gender policies.

In the wake of the 2015 "summer of migration", women and feminists participated in pro-refugee initiatives and self-organized hosting centres, gaining a majority and influencing the emergence of shared feminist discourse and practices in relation to the question of care and social reproduction (Papageorgiou & Petousi, 2018; Gaitanou, 2017). While bottom-up mobilizations did not focus specifically on gender, the presence of women foregrounded social reproductive practices; challenged

traditional divisions of labour in social movements as well as the temporalities and spatialities of traditional movement organization; and highlighted the value of building intersectional coalitions and of embracing affect and radical care. In their analysis of these processes, Kouki and Chatzidakis (2020) concluded that many social movements during the crisis implicitly cultivated modes of feminist solidarity.

From a generational point of view, scholars have underlined the fact that feminist spaces within anti-austerity movements not only attracted young women who had no previous record of activism or particular affiliation, but also older activists who had long-standing experience in pre-existing feminist organizations or the internal committees of unions and left-wing parties, and who had been involved in previous movement cycles (particularly, the pro-democratization movements in Spain and Greece during the transition from authoritarian regimes to democracy, the radical feminist movements of the 1970s in Italy, and the Global Justice Movement during the 2000s in all the three countries) (Chironi & Portos, 2021). In Southern Europe, women and young people experienced higher levels of labour precarity and unemployment compared to the general population. Austerity, the increasing precariousness of employment, and the re-privatization of caring labour had a greater effect on women than men, particularly those in their twenties and female migrants (Brenner & Holmstrom, 2013). In 2015, the general unemployment figure in Greece reached 25%, while youth unemployment skyrocketed to over 50% (Kouki & Chatzidakis, 2020). As young women are located at the intersection between multiple structural inequalities, they have participated in feminist movements in high numbers and have played an active role as both initiators and organizers (see della Porta et al., 2022, chapter three).

Processes of interaction between different types of feminism and different generations also took place online, especially through social networking sites that allow activists to recognize their respective differences and to work across ethnic, national and gender divides (Fernández et al., 2011; Núñez Puente & García Jiménez, 2011).

In summary, the neoliberal scenario not only made it possible for veteran and postmodern feminists to recognize the similarities they shared, but it also facilitated the formation of alliances within the broader anti-austerity movement (Gámez Fuentes, 2015; Chironi & Portos, 2021) as feminists realized that it was necessary to prioritize issues linked to the economic crisis, such as female job insecurity and the intersection of different forms of oppression (based on race, class, sexuality, disability,

generation). Mutual knowledge sharing and a consciousness of the interlocking character of oppression were facilitated by the relationships built up through protest experiences and, in the Greek and Spanish cases, the physical occupation of public squares alongside citizens from a wide range of backgrounds and social movements (ecologists, neighbourhood-based, anti-eviction, etc.) (Marugán et al., 2013). In turn, feminists successfully provided a gender perspective to the discourse and practices of the anti-austerity movements, eventually imposing the motto “the revolution will be feminist or will not happen” (*La revolución será feminista o no será*) and contributed to repositioning the very conception of social justice defended by progressive movements during crisis periods. As we shall see, the basic characteristics that feminist movements assumed during this phase—coalitional, intersectional and intergenerational trends—remained constant throughout the period under consideration, becoming ever more conscious and more explicit.

FEMINISM AND THE POLITICAL CRISIS: TRANSFEMINISM AGAINST THE BACKLASH

The transnationalization process within the feminist movements took place in a context characterized not only by the economic crisis and the related neoliberal policies, but also by a crisis of liberal democracy. This crisis was caused by a lack of responsiveness by the major political parties and the consequent search for alternatives, which often resulted in the rise of right-wing populist challengers and the increased visibility of their societal conservative allies (Caiani & Graziano, 2021). Activists have reacted to backlash politics by increasing their level of political participation (della Porta et al., 2022). Backlash politics is defined as “a particular form of political contestation with a retrograde objective as well as extraordinary goals or tactics that have reached the threshold level of entering public discourse” (Alter & Zürn, 2020, p. 576). In backlash politics, ultranationalist and authoritarian discourses are complemented by neo-conservative concerns, leading to an attack on gender and women’s rights, as well as a defence of traditional family and gender roles. Within this context, political actors tend to ally with politicized religious groups, such as the Standing Watchmen (*Sentinelle in Piedi*) in Italy and *La Manif Pour Tous* in France, who have mobilized against sexual and reproductive rights, same-sex marriage, adoption by same-sex parents and the teaching of sexual education

in schools (Lavizzari, 2019). Since 2015, fundamentalist religious actors and their political partners have organized Family Days in Italy and in Spain to celebrate the traditional heterosexual nuclear family. At an economic level, while right-wing governments often declare anti-European sentiments, they have never questioned the austerity policies that benefit powerful private investors, at the expense of workers' rights and the welfare of citizens.

Over this period, feminists have mobilized to defend and restore the acquired rights that they have perceived to be under threat. They have stressed the negative consequences of austerity in terms of increasing gender inequalities, including the heavy cuts to the public healthcare system (particularly in funding for the women's health centres), and job market deregulation (Chironi & Portos, 2021). At the same time, they have opposed the conservative proposals advanced by right-wing groups, as well as their traditional vision of society and gender roles.

In Spain, the right-wing government of the Popular Party (2011–2018) was the first to implement both harsh austerity measures and to attack the fundamental rights that women had obtained under democracy (Caravantes González, 2012). In 2012, feminist mobilization targeted the regressive reform to the Abortion Law proposed by the Minister of Justice. More than 100 organizations linked to the public health system in various ways created the nationwide Platform in Defence of Sexual and Reproductive Rights "Deciding Makes Us Free" to denounce the attacks on the rights and liberties of women in relation to reproduction (*ibid.*). In 2014, the "Liberty Train", a broad campaign in favour of women's sexual and reproductive rights was launched to protest against the recently approved law. The campaign gained solidarity in other Southern European countries, particularly in Italy, which contributed to the transnationalization of feminist claims (Chironi, 2019). This feminist contestation was considered to be the key reason for the reform being withdrawn by Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy and the resignation of the Minister of Justice (Chironi & Portos, 2021).

In Greece, the most significant push towards a political backlash came from the troubling rise of the far-right Golden Dawn party, which gained support in the context of the crisis and violently attacked gay people, leftists and migrants, both verbally and in the streets. Major components of Golden Dawn's discourse include antifeminism, racism and a rejection of homosexuality, and it conceives of Greek women as the mothers of the nation. The party has now been reduced to a tiny extra-parliamentary

organization, after its leaders were given severe sentences in 2020 for a range of serious crimes, including murder. However, for several years, the worrying growth of the party represented a threat for both social movements and progressive cultural activities, while at the same time it helped to strengthen the patriarchal culture and structures of Greek society (Glyniadaki, 2018). The cultural and political backlash promoted a return of women to their place in the home and traditional maternal duties, implicitly viewing them as a source of unpaid caring labour for children, ill people and the elderly in a context that was characterized by an increased privatization of care due to the neoliberal agenda. The combination of harsh austerity policies implemented by the centrist grand coalition government and the presence of Golden Dawn favoured a strengthening of relationships between feminists and LGBTQ+ subjectivities. Gender-based movements challenged the common idea that gay rights and homophobia are secondary issues and a distraction from the truly political anti-austerity agenda. It is in this vein that the Athens Pride parade in 2011 marched to Syntagma Square and converged with the progressive protesters in the square (Athanasίου, 2014).

One can argue that the right-wing backlash serves to support the neoliberal agenda, as the division of labour by gender compensates for the shortcomings of the weak welfare state. This is the reason that the right-wing government in Spain strongly opposed the first Women's Strike in 2018; one year later, the second Women's Strike faced harsh attacks from the ultra-right party, Vox (Cabezas, 2022), but also gained the support of the newly formed leftist government and was able to take advantage of the increased engagement of young people (Araúna et al., 2019).

In a similar fashion, society in Italy has progressively moved towards the right since the outbreak of the economic crisis. In both 2010 and 2011 feminists heavily challenged the behaviour of then Prime Minister, Silvio Berlusconi, who embodied a subaltern conception of women as sexual objects. This was expressed through his repeated use of sexist jokes and inappropriate behaviour, such as his relationships with minors and his soliciting of sexual favours, often in exchange for money, expensive presents and even political positions. Since that point, the Italian right has become even more radicalized: in 2018, as Berlusconi's Forza Italia party faced a deep crisis, the populist Northern League party took on the mantle of the major right-wing party in the country, only to itself be supplanted in 2022 by the radical right-wing party Brothers of Italy. Both organizations succeeded in entering into government while promoting

ultranationalist, anti-gender and anti-migrant rhetoric. In contrast to Spain, and also somewhat Greece, no political party in Italy was perceived by feminist movements as a credible institutional ally. The major party on the centre left, the PD, was considered too far removed from their positions as it had fully embraced the neoliberal agenda and taken an ambiguous stance on the matter of both reproductive and civil rights, while the radical left continued to be divided into small, niche parties (Chironi, 2020). In Spain, the creation of a genuine leftist government formed by the centre-left PSOE (*Partido Socialista Obrero Español*) and the more leftist *Unidas Podemos* facilitated the approval of four (much debated) laws aimed at enhancing gender equality in Spain (Lousada, 2023) during the period between 2022 and 2023, which can be viewed as the outcomes of the preceding period of mobilization.¹

In each of these countries, resistance against backlash politics and neoliberalism has facilitated processes of coalition building with LGBTQI+ movements, albeit not without tensions. It has also led to a surge in a new type of trans-inclusive feminism, which includes queer perspectives and rejects separatism as an organizational principle. Contextual factors have also contributed to encourage younger activists to become engaged, due to the fact that the younger generations—in addition to being more heavily affected by difficult economic circumstances and labour precarity—also hold a more inclusive and tolerant value system. Finally, as a result of an increasingly intersectional approach, the struggle for gender justice has become inextricably linked to the fight against racism and racial discrimination, as is well summarized by the words of one young queer activist:

We need to be involved in all social struggles [and] find broad alliances between the oppressed, including racialised and disabled bodies, to move towards an anti-capitalist and anti-patriarchy transformation [...]. In the past, they shot at us [LGBT people], now they shoot at them [the immigrants]. What side are you on? With the white people who govern in Europe

¹The debate around the Guarantee of Sexual Freedom law, also known as the “only yes means yes” law, has been particularly heated. It introduced a broader understanding of sexual violence, aimed at removing the obstacles that had forced victims to prove that they had suffered violence and intimidation. However, the new law inadvertently enabled sentence reduction for convicted and future sexual offenders, provoking a government crisis, and forcing the Prime Minister to declare that the law needs “technical adjustments” (Wade, 2023).

or with the black people who are being shot? (Quoted in Chironi, 2020, p. 329)

Multilevel Opportunities: Europe as a Field of Struggle

In response to the right-wing wind blowing through Europe at both a national and supranational level, feminist and LGBTQI+ activists have expressed nuanced opinions about the EU. On the one hand, studies show that they are critical of the imposition of neoliberal policies, which are seen as responsible for the rise in inequality and poverty in indebted member states (Chironi, 2020; della Porta et al., 2022). In their understanding of male violence as a structural problem, feminists have denounced increasing impoverishment and social disintegration as major causes of persisting male violence, a phenomenon for which they consider the EU to be co-responsible. Moreover, they criticize European migration policies as having created an exclusionary, xenophobic “fortress”. The recently adopted Recovery Plan, which was designed to tackle the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic, has led to a partial trend reversal in the economic and social policies of the EU, however, without taking into account the specific needs of women (Klatzer & Rinaldi, 2020). Nevertheless, both qualitative and quantitative research confirms that gender-based activists embrace a critical form of Europeanism, rejecting any solution that involves exiting or breaking away from the European Union (Chironi, 2020; della Porta et al., 2022). Indeed, the EU is seen as a shield to protect basic human and civil rights in member states, and potentially across the continent as a whole, thanks to its frequent admonishments of national governments that do not comply with European standards and fundamental principles. Italy, for instance, has been pressured into introducing legislation allowing for same-sex civil unions, and admonished for its poor implementation of the national abortion law (Chironi, 2020).

It must be said that the national dimension is often considered to be an insufficient means of promoting social change. From this point of view, Europe is seen as a *field of struggle* rather than a set of institutions: a space in which campaigns of solidarity can be built with women and queer subjectivities fighting for their rights and to overcome an unjust social order (ibid.).

THE FIGHT AGAINST GENDER VIOLENCE AS A UNIFYING FRAME

Other opportunities for mobilization have also opened up at the global level, thanks to the interplay between the agential capacities of feminist movements, namely processes of transnational diffusion and discursive opportunities at a domestic level. The global mobilization against gender-based violence that started in Latin America in 2015 has inspired massive contentious protests as well as online feminist activism in Southern Europe. Both the *Ni Una Menos* movement and the later #MeToo campaign launched clear messages that could be easily adapted to contexts with high levels of femicide and other forms of gender-based violence. Feminist mobilizations were able to politicize the issues of male violence and femicide, which consequently gained renewed attention within the public debate in Europe. This has opened up new *discursive opportunities* for feminists to react against the dominant narrative that often describes gender-based crimes as being the result of an excess of love on the side of the male partner, rather denouncing violence as a structural feature of the capitalist and patriarchal society that is rooted in gender inequality and power disparity.

This issue had been adopted by the Spanish feminist movement as early 2015. On 7 November 2015, they organized the first National March against Male Chauvinist Violence, also known as 7N, which brought together hundreds of feminist organizations to demand that the fight against gender violence become a state matter. The same groups joined together to form the Feminist Platform against Sexist Violence, with the aim of collaborating in the fulfilment of the objectives established in the 7N manifesto that had been prepared before the march. Feminists denounced violence as a structural problem requiring a collective (rather than individualistic) answer, with tweets like “together and strong, feminists forever”, and hashtags such as #ForThem, #NiUnaMenos and #ViolenciaMachista (Núñez Puente & Gámez Fuentes, 2017). In 2016, in the wake of an infamous case of gang-rape perpetrated by a group who styled themselves “La manada” (The Wolf Pack), hundreds of thousands of women took to the street challenging rape culture. Again, protest was accompanied by online and hashtag activism, which provided social media users with a new framework to conceive of and express themselves about sexual violence (García-Mingo & Blanco, 2023). In digital spaces, hashtags such as #SisterIdobelieveyou, #WeAreYourPack, #NoMeansNo and

#PatriarchalJustice were adopted to express solidarity and rage towards victim-blaming in cases of sexual violence, which ultimately resulted in actual legal change in Spain (ibid.).

The dynamic that led to the formation of the *Non Una Di Meno* feminist movement in Italy is very similar. In 2016, following the brutal murder of a young female student in Rome, Italian feminists called for a national mobilization, which was answered by historical collectives, recently formed groups, assemblies based in squatted social centres, women managing public anti-violence centres, as well as LGBTQI+ and queer collectives. The march and subsequent assembly were the beginning of the *Non Una Di Meno* movement, the very name of which emphasized its connection with Latin American feminist struggles. Exploiting the opportunities opened up at the national level by the adoption of the Istanbul Convention, activists drew up a “plan” in which they advanced concrete proposals to implement its prescriptions and to overcome discrimination and gender-based violence in the workplace, language, education and the health system (NUDM, 2017). Since 2016, the movement has organized large demonstrations coinciding with the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women, and the Women’s Strikes, but has also established local roots throughout the country through city assemblies. In doing so it has transformed into an informal and horizontal organization, which supports intersectional theory and practices, rejects separatism and has made the inclusion of transgender subjectivities in feminist movements an undisputable point.

In 2017, the developments in neighbouring Italy convinced Greek feminists to form a common assembly to organize a demonstration for the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, on 25 November, an initiative which later transformed into a permanent platform named *Kamia Anochi* (No Tolerance). For the first time, this platform succeeded in unifying activists and groups from different political traditions into a single front. Aside from the process of re-composition that took place internally within the feminist movement, feminists continued to collaborate with LGBTQI+ collectives, which they had been engaged in on a constant basis since the occupation of Syntagma square. Processes of coalition building between feminist and LGBTQI+ movements resulted in the participation of feminists in a self-organized, independent Pride event in June, which joined the official Pride event, thus not only avoiding sectarianism, but also bringing a critique of the

perceived normalization of the parade due to institutional and corporate support.

The mobilization capacity and the repertoire of action of feminist movements in Southern Europe expanded in the following years, in response to the call for a global Women's Strike, launched in 2017 by Argentinian feminists and inspired by the Polish Women's Strike. Activists in more than 50 countries, connected online through the Facebook group "International Women's Strike", responded to the call (Salvatori, 2023). In Spain, the Women's Strike obtained the support of mainstream trade unions, which even became involved in the 8M Commission that had been formed to coordinate the day of action. This led to the organization of major events on 8 March 2018 and a year later in 2019, which helped the Spanish feminist movement to stand out as one of the strongest movements in the international panorama (García et al., 2018; Campillo, 2019).

Under the slogan "If we stop, the world stops", Women's Strikes all over the world not only asked women not to go to work, but also to refrain from carrying out other unpaid activities, such as care work or consumption, anchoring the action in a growing consciousness of a broad set of gender inequalities. In contrast to Spain, the Women's Strikes that took place in Italy and in Greece consisted of creative demonstrations rather than actual labour strikes. This is in line with the disinterest of mainstream trade unions in both countries in adopting a gender perspective and tackling problems such as the gender pay gap, the "gendered division of labour", as well as the intersection between gender, age, class and race, which institutional actors in Europe have still not problematized sufficiently. Rank-and-file trade unions have, however, displayed a greater ability to unionize female migrant workers employed in the care sector, as is testified by the successful struggle of the All Attica Union of Cleaners and Domestic Workers. This is the first union of cleaners and domestic workers in Greece, and in 2014 its members, practically all of whom are women, fought against mass redundancies in the public sector caused by austerity policies and won, thanks in part to the support of feminist and anti-austerity activists.

Feminists and LGBTQI+ activists in Greece once again came together in 2018, following the transphobic murder of a queer activist, drag artist and campaigner for HIV-positive people in Athens, as well as a series of high-profile femicides, which shocked a large section of the public and gave rise to a dynamic expression of collective anger and grief (Maraboutaki, 2023). However, a *Ni Una Menos* type of movement failed to develop in

the country and the protests against male violence mostly took on the form of a mass media phenomenon accompanied by an online feminist campaign, which has nevertheless succeeded in influencing decision-making.

The Greek #MeToo movement erupted belatedly during the pandemic, at a time when the right-wing New Democracy party had returned to government (2019–2023). The movement started between the end of 2020 and the beginning of 2021 when the athlete Sofia Bekatorou publicly accused a sports official of rape. Her statements, which were dismissed by the Sports Federation, were followed by the publication, in both the mass media and on social media, of numerous cases of sexual abuse and harassment that had taken place in sport, universities and show-business (particularly in theatres), prompting a wave of denunciation and support. Considering the fact that calls to the helpline for female victims of violence had increased dramatically during the first lockdown in 2020, Bekatorou's revelations had a snowball effect, leading many women to tell their stories of sexual violence and other types of abuse, including verbal and psychological violence. The victims were mainly women (with only a few men and gender fluid individuals), while the accused were often people in powerful positions, such as film and theatre directors and actors who were well known at a national level. TV broadcasts and magazines were the channels chosen to launch the accusations, with social media platforms working in a complementary way, as places where people could comment on the stories and express solidarity. Consequently, the #MeToo campaign took the form of a series of paradigmatic stories, which had taken place in specific fields, with feminist groups performing the role of raising awareness on the roots of gender violence, and demanding change (Maraboutaki, 2023). In the world of theatre, which was deeply shaken by the scandals, the protests helped to return focus to the working conditions, hierarchical structures, remuneration, codes of behaviour and lack of accessibility for marginalized groups. This led to some institutional efforts to redress gender imbalances in appointing directors, a greater involvement of actors with disabilities, and far less tolerance towards abusive behaviour (Fragkou, 2022).

While the #MeToo hashtag had a greater resonance in Greece than in Italy and Spain, as underlined above, online feminist activism has become a widespread phenomenon. Researchers concur that the discourse on social networks has become a key factor in feminist social mobilizations in Spain (Mondragon et al., 2022; Reverter & Medina-Vicent, 2022), and

have noted how similar “femitags” (i.e., feminist hashtags) that spread throughout the Spanish-speaking region make it possible to virtually connect crowds in Latin America and Spain (Rovira-Sancho & Morales-i-Gras, 2022). Similarly, in Italy, digital connectivity played a central role in facilitating the expression of solidarity and processes of exchange and contamination between movements across borders (Salvatori, 2023), with the sharing of materials, slogans, hashtags, symbols and songs revolving around similar claims contributing to the construction of a transnational political subject. In this genetic process, south American feminist movements have often been the source for ideas, symbols—such as the purple *pañuelos* in memory of the victims of feminicides—and songs — such as *Un violador en tu camino* (A rapist in your path), which came to Europe thanks to a provocative street performance staged by feminist activists in several countries.

Online activism became even more important during the pandemic, but when containing measures were loosened, feminists—together with a range of other movements—took part in offline solidarity activities in their neighbourhoods. The campaign attempted to protect the most vulnerable sectors of society—the elderly, disabled people, workers in precarious jobs (including female and transgender sex workers), migrants employed in the care sector, children, homeless people, undocumented and poor migrants—and expressed concerns for women at risk of domestic gender violence or psychological pressure (Martínez, 2020). Overall, the solidarity movement has enhanced a conception of solidarity as mutual aid and care, typical of the labour and feminist movements of the past, rather than as charity from above.

In summary, the period has seen a revival of feminist resistance to patriarchy and capitalism, highlighting continuities with the radical feminism of the 1970s, but also significant novelties. Indeed, the discourse on patriarchy and capitalism re-emerged through the lens of structural gender-based violence, an overarching frame that derives from processes of diffusion and adaptation of ideas developed in Latin America, as well as by the ability of activists to grasp multilevel opportunities: discourse opportunities at the national level and institutional opportunities opened up by the Istanbul Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence that was voted through by members of the CoE but not fully implemented, as well as EU gender policies more generally (which were also criticized for being too tame). The adoption of gender violence as a unifying frame has resulted in organizational

transformations, with the creation of national structures in all of the countries examined here (the 7N Platform against Sexist Violence and the 8M Commission in Spain, *Kamia Anochi* in Greece, and *Non Una Di Meno* in Italy); and has influenced the adoption of innovative action repertoires, most notably the Women’s Strike and online activism.

CONCLUSIONS: *DEFENSIVE* AND *TRANSFORMATIVE* FEMINIST MOVEMENTS

This chapter has analysed the processes of transnationalization of feminist movements in contemporary Europe, from the beginning of the 2010s up to the present. The cases presented in the chapter share enough similarities to confirm the rise of a transnational “fourth wave” of feminism with specific claims and repertoires of action, that also displays important continuities with the previous feminist movements, ensured by intergenerational interactions. Confirming assumptions in social movement studies relating to the embeddedness of mass feminist mobilization in coeval moments of political upheaval, I have shown that the emergence of feminist movements in Southern Europe is linked to the broader cycle of contention that began with the anti-austerity protests that took place following the outbreak of the global economic crisis and continued with other forms of protests performed in the wake of the so-called refugee crisis and the pandemic. Borrowing the concept of critical juncture from neo-institutional approaches (Roberts, 2017), I have considered the context of multiple intertwining crises as a prolonged critical juncture that has not only shaped sociopolitical institutions, but has also encouraged sustained mobilization on the part of more fragile social sectors, including women. However, contemporary feminist movements cannot be understood as a mere *reaction* to challenges, such as right-wing conservative populism, neoliberal retrenchment of the welfare state, deregulation of the labour market and patriarchal violence. While fourth wave feminist movements have undoubtedly mobilized to “defend” previously achieved rights, which they perceive to be under attack, they have also been able to grasp the opportunities that have opened up at a national and a supranational level to advance *transformative* aims. Responding to contextual opportunities has implied activating *processes of appropriation and adaptation* of movement ideas, symbols and forms of action developed abroad; building *coalitions* with other vulnerable subjectivities, in particular migrants and LGBTQI+

people; and proposing actual *policies* to overcome gender violence by *implementing international agreements*, such as the Istanbul Convention, and European standards of protection of human and civil rights.

The analysis presented in this chapter also highlights how sustained mobilization in a context of multiple crises has fuelled solidarity processes among mobilized citizens and beyond, so that contemporary feminist movements have adopted a coalitional and inclusive form of organizing that allows for the concept of intersectionality, borrowed from black feminist theory, to gradually become an actual practice. The influence of black and other non-white feminist theories is, in fact, reflected in the attention towards the needs of migrant female workers and anti-racist solidarity. Coalitions include LGBTQ+ subjectivities in an alliance driven by theories of gender de-construction and the need for resisting regressive backlash politics together. In contemporary feminism, a broad variety of issues—labour inequalities, unpaid domestic work, the effects of cuts in health, education and social services, care and social reproduction, gender discrimination and violence—are understood as systemic dynamics deriving from patriarchal, (late-)neoliberal capitalism. Processes of “movement diffusion” and the ability of activists to grasp multilevel opportunities have allowed them to adopt gender violence as a unifying frame. In all of the countries analysed here, umbrella organizations have been created to coordinate the actions of feminist movements. These structures have assumed the shape of national committees or movement networks with local nodes, and have adopted horizontal procedures, making it possible to create a dialogue with a vast array of movements, activating processes of cross-fertilization while also pushing progressive social movements to adopt a gender perspective and strategies of care. Internally, the principle of gender separatism has been rejected and transfeminism has prevailed. Women’s self-determination continues to be valued as an important component in the struggle for social justice, albeit in connection with other vulnerable and oppressed subjectivities.

The action repertoire has returned to direct action, both online and offline, claiming autonomy from political institutions and political parties. Collaboration with trade unions, on the other hand, has been pivotal to organizing successful Women’s Strikes, which can be considered to be a major historical innovation in the feminist repertoire of action (Campillo, 2019). Confirming previous observations, online feminist activism has also proved of paramount importance (Peroni & Rodak, 2020). Generally speaking, the context of the political backlash has facilitated the spread of

critical Europeanism, with the EU and the CoE perceived as sources of both challenges and opportunities, while Europe is considered a “field of struggle” and a place for expressing internationalist solidarity. However, it must be said that the Italian political system has proved less permeable to feminist and gender-based movements, due in particular to the lack of renewed leftist parties. For this reason, the outcomes of feminist struggles have been more visible in Spain and partially in Greece.

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PART II

Framing Europe



Transnationalization vs. Eco-Nationalism: Discursive Framing of Environmental Struggles in Serbia

Jelena Pešić  and *Jelisaveta Vukelić* 

INTRODUCTION

In order to solve environmental problems, it is often necessary to reach beyond the confines of national borders, and demand regional and sometimes transnational cooperation and mobilization. Although environmental organizations generally benefit from developing cross-border alliances, the discursive framing of environmental struggles in terms of eco-nationalism can reduce their overall mobilization potential.

In this chapter, we seek to understand how the emergence of eco-nationalism has shaped the transnationalization of environmental struggles in Serbia. To this end, we will investigate whether (and how) the discursive strategies of environmental activists influence their actions and how this affects the overall mobilization and the success of the initiative. For this purpose, we will use the example of the fight against lithium mining in the Jadar River basin in Western Serbia, which took place in the period from 2019 to 2022. This particular case has been selected as it

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Sociology, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-86209-0_5

reveals the development of eco-nationalist discourses and several impediments to effective transnationalization at the European level. Transnationalization is understood as the process of establishing horizontal networks with organizations from the EU, garnering support from EU advocacy groups in order to externalize local environmental issues, and engaging with EU institutions to exert pressure on national governments.

This chapter aims to understand how the emergence of eco-nationalist discourses impacts transnationalization from below. We will begin by presenting the definitions of the concepts used in the analysis and theoretically explain the linkages between eco-nationalism, environmentalism of the poor/dispossessed, and transnationalization. We will then move on to empirically explore the relationship between eco-nationalism and transnationalization from below in the case of mobilization against the “Jadar” lithium mining project in Western Serbia. The research is based on a critical discourse analysis of the content (posts and comments) found on the Facebook pages, Twitter accounts, official websites, and media outlets of the environmental organizations that participated in the protests against lithium mining: “Let’s Protect Jadar and Rađevina”, “March from the Drina”, and “EKO Social Action”, covering the period from 2019 until early 2022.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Transnational collective action involves “coordinated international campaigns on the part of networks of activists against international actors, other states, or international institutions” (della Porta & Tarrow, 2005, pp. 2–3). Although these actions target supranational bodies, they remain rooted in local contexts (Tarrow, 2005). Therefore, transnational alliances may sometimes be instrumental in exerting pressure on national governments or corporations, creating a so-called boomerang effect (Keck & Sikkink, 1998). Following the earlier works of della Porta and Kriesi (1999), della Porta and Tarrow (2005), and Tarrow (2005), we can distinguish three different paths of transnationalization: diffusion, domestication, and externalization. In recent years, a fourth form—transnationalization in a narrow sense—has been added to the original classification (della Porta, 2020). While diffusion (the international circulation of ideas, tactics, and repertoires of action), domestication (the internalization of international goals, ideas, and practices at the national level), and

transnationalization in a narrow sense (the transnational coordination of protests and other activities against international organizations and transnational corporations) usually imply transnationalization from above, through coordinated activities of “transnational advocacy networks” (Keck & Sikkink, 1998) or “transnational social movement organisations” (Smith et al., 1997), externalization (addressing international actors with the intention of influencing national governments) may lead to transnationalization from below, when the discontent of various groups or organizations with national policies is transferred to the international arena in order to attract allies and exert pressure on national decision-makers (della Porta & Caiani, 2009; Bostrom et al., 2015; della Porta, 2020; Pešić & Vukelić, 2022). It is precisely this last aspect that is particularly interesting in researching the oscillating framing between transnationalization and nationalization observed in recent environmental struggles in Serbia.

With this in mind, we should also recall Torgerson’s (2006) warning that the transnationalization of environmental activism can include various initiatives, even those that are critically oriented towards green policies that come from core capitalist countries and contribute to the reproduction of global inequalities. The conditions in which environmental initiatives are launched, the available resources, and the political opportunity structures, etc., differ in developed and developing countries. Given the fact that our research is focussed on grassroots environmental initiatives in Serbia, which were initially started by marginalized local communities that were affected by potential environmental hazards from externally imposed projects (such as lithium mines), we propose linking them with similar initiatives by marginalized communities that have emerged in the countries of the capitalist periphery, recognized under the umbrella terms of environmentalism of the poor or dispossessed.

Although environmental movements and initiatives have a fairly long tradition in Western Europe and the USA, dating back to the period of intense industrialization and urbanization in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Ollitrault, 2022), a whole series of (contemporary) environmental conflicts were also initiated in the Global South, pointing to the fact that environmental risks are not only unevenly distributed within individual countries, but also across the globe (Martinez-Alier, 2002; Martinez-Alier et al., 2016). Extensive industrialization and the expansion of the global capitalist system, which created unequal development, were accompanied by specific forms of environmental activism, which Martinez-Alier has termed “environmentalism of the poor”

(Martinez-Alier, 2002). This concept encompasses environmental initiatives around the world that arose as a result of the unequal distribution of environmental risks, unequal ecological exchange, and the loss of political sovereignty in decision-making on projects that could lead to potential environmental damage (Martinez-Alier et al., 2016). In this sense, Temper (2014) expands this term to the “environmentalism of the dispossessed”, indicating that it does not necessarily have to be related to poor indigenous communities but rather to a whole range of initiatives resulting from clashes between the needs of capitalist accumulation at a global level and local resistance to such moves (Martinez-Alier et al., 2016).

Environmentalism of the poor/dispossessed appears as a reaction to ecological imperialism, i.e., to what is perceived as environmental injustice, accumulation by dispossession, ecological debt, or ecologically unequal exchange (Frame, 2021). Although ecological imperialism has previously been associated with the dependency of Third World countries, the breakdown of socialism in Europe also subjected some former socialist countries to the process of inclusion into the global capitalist system on unfavourable grounds. Aside from the structural adjustments of (semi-) peripheral countries, which were supported or even enforced by supranational institutions according to the needs of capital accumulation, the implementation of neoliberal policies brought about the “neoliberalisation of nature” through trade treaties, foreign direct investment, and export-intensive development plans (Heynen, 2007; Frame, 2021). The outcome of this process was not only the commodification of nature, but also the subjugation of the natural environment to the needs of multinational corporations, followed by resistance or, more often, the acquiescence of the state to external pressure (Frame, 2021). As a response, different counter-movements may appear, including environmental movements that combine environmental grievances and pleas for environmental justice with anti-imperialism, anti-capitalism, and ecological nationalism.

The global context is crucial for understanding the causes of a range of environmental initiatives from below that emerge on the (semi-)periphery; however, it also represents the framework that generates opportunities to act beyond local contexts, through the expansion of alliances and networks (Haynes, 1999). It is this local-global nexus and the connections between issues and actors (Dwivedi, 2001, p. 240; Torgerson, 2006) that can point to a number of specificities that occur in different forms of environmental rebellions, as well as to the whole set of possibilities open to

local movements to scale up on a national, regional, and global level (Torgerson, 2006).

Environmentalism of the poor/dispossessed, therefore, represents a form of ecological distribution conflict, the number of which is constantly increasing around the world, to the extent that one can also speak of a global environmental justice movement (Martinez-Alier et al., 2016) or an expanding (global) green public sphere (Torgerson, 2006). At the same time, these movements represent the intersection of local environmental grievances and their global causes, where the local-global nexus manifests itself through the actions of local (national) elites and their links with the economic-political structures of advanced industrial countries (Torgerson, 2006). Precisely because of this, they have the potential to become transnationalized as part of movements that connect different initiatives around the world by addressing similar environmental problems (and their causes), or by creating global networks and alliances that operate not only locally, but also globally (Martinez-Alier et al., 2016).

Environmentalism of the poor/dispossessed often implies rebellion against the logic of capital accumulation, referring to values that are alien to the market, such as the sacredness of pristine nature, the value of the ecosystem, the dignity of human life, the demand for environmental or food security, the importance of livelihoods, but also to the defence of cultural identity (Martinez-Alier, 2002). The tension between the demands of various multinational companies or policies imposed by supranational political bodies and the pleas over the protection of environment and local communities often produces a discursive framing of environmental struggles in terms of a rebellion against the imperialist tendencies of international actors and the *comprador* character of the national elites that support them, as well as in terms of the preservation of national or local sovereignty in making economic decisions and accessing natural resources. If those responsible for environmental threats are perceived as outsiders, environmental struggles are susceptible to a framing that blends environmental concerns and nationalist discourses. In this way, the same global context that represents the basis for the transnationalization of local environmental grievances also generates nationalist, anti-imperialist, or anti-capitalist discourses.

As Dawson (2000) has noted, the recognition of environmental injustice has led to the intertwining of environmentalism with demands for the protection of the rights of different racial, ethnic, regional, or gender-based groups affected by environmental hazards. Eco-nationalism

represents a specific form of environmental mobilization that consists of bridging ideologically congruent but structurally unrelated elements—nationalism and environmentalism—in order to form a new master frame (Dawson, 2000; Conversi & Hau, 2021). Eco-nationalism rests on the fusion of nationalist values, such as territory, soil and a sense of belonging, with progressive independence movements (Conversi & Hau, 2021; Marguiles, 2021). And it is precisely in this, as Hamilton (2002) points out, that the elements of congruence between the two ideologies lies, since they both imply a certain appeal to self-determination and sovereignty in decision-making.

Although new forms of eco-nationalism are emerging, we focus here on the specific type of eco-nationalism that has appeared as a reaction to what is perceived as ecological imperialism, and has been blended with anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist attitudes. Such eco-nationalism, as Lubarda (2019) points out, is situated between nativist and patriotic impulses, between an inward-oriented pride in nature (understood in national terms) and external pressures on the control of local resources. In this sense, the concept of eco-nationalism is similar to the concept of environmental populism (Buzogány & Mohamad-Klotzbach, 2021a). As such, it is prone to appropriation from both left-wing and right-wing populist parties (Buzogány & Mohamad-Klotzbach, 2021a, 2021b). From this point of view, eco-nationalism may appear to be a progressive movement that calls for autonomy and political representation within non-democratic systems through grassroots organizing (Lubarda, 2019). Its distinctive characteristic is the physical attachment to land or nature and the formation of solidarity with the environment (Cederlöf & Sivaramakrishnan, 2006). However, it can also be framed through pleas over the protection of land or nature conceived of as the territory fenced by the borders of the nation-state against “polluting outsiders” (Lubarda, 2019) or external intruders (Marguiles, 2021), thus taking an ethnic eco-nationalist form (Dawson, 2000; Lieven, 2020). As such, it can refer to “tradition”, understood in reactionary terms through a yearning for the golden past (where nature is claimed in the service of collective history).

Taking this into account, it is clear that certain movements can be transformed from progressive grassroots initiatives mobilizing local inhabitants to protect the environment against the interests of international capital into initiatives that can gain broader social significance and as such be subject to appropriation by left- or right-wing political organizations. However, as Marguiles (2021) has noted, eco-nationalism, even as the

progressive movement of marginalized dispossessed, has some disadvantages in fighting environmental problems, since it presumes local (national) responses to global challenges. In this way, global or transnational actions and networking may be subordinated to “national” interests.

DATA AND METHODS

This chapter draws on the qualitative analysis of discourses formed around the initiative against lithium mining in the Jadar Valley on social media (primarily Facebook, but also Twitter). The two aspects that we aim to explore are discourses on transnationalization (particularly the aspect of externalization) and the (eco)nationalization of the environmental struggle.

In order to carry out this analysis, we selected the Facebook pages and Twitter accounts of several environmental organizations that have been actively engaged in the protests: “Let’s Protect Jadar and Rađevina”, “March from the Drina”, and “EKO Social Action”. The decision to analyse social media content stems from the fact that these organizations rely heavily on social media to make their actions and claims visible to the wider public, both nationally and internationally. Aside from posts from the leaders of the organizations, these social media outlets also feature information sharing and discussion among supporters, who voice various perspectives. Posts published from 2019 (when the protests began) to 2022 were analysed as part of the research. This analysis is supplemented by secondary data (news articles, reports, and declarations) from the online media and official websites of the abovementioned organizations. The selected corpus was analysed using the method of critical discourse analysis. Critical discourse analysis (CDA) relies on the assumption that language is not a neutral means of communication and that it shapes one’s view of reality and consequent actions. Therefore, CDA enables researchers to investigate hidden power relations and ideologies systematically embedded in discourse and to examine the social and material consequences of discourse (Fairclough, 2001).

CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

The initiative against lithium mining in the Jadar Valley in Western Serbia by Rio Sava Exploration (the local branch of the multinational company Rio Tinto) began in 2019. The multinational company Rio Tinto has

been operating in Serbia for a number of years, researching mineral deposits. In 2004, the company discovered a unique jadarite ore (named after the Jadar River), which contains lithium, borate, and sodium.¹ It turned out that it was a relatively rich deposit of lithium, an ore that is in increasingly high demand at a global level as a result of the transition to renewable energy sources.

A series of changes in the legal framework adopted by the governments of the Republic of Serbia in the period from 2001 to 2021 set the groundwork for the commencement of the exploitation process, which was initially planned for 2023.² In 2017, the Government of Serbia signed the Memorandum of Understanding with the Rio Sava Exploration company, in which it pledged to work on creating a stable environment so that the company could continue its investment.³

In addition to the Rio Tinto company and the Serbian government, numerous other foreign actors also expressed interest in the implementation of the “Jadar” project. For example, in 2023, the Government of Serbia signed a Letter of Agreement with the European Commission on strategic partnership in the exploitation of critical resources, including lithium.⁴

In early 2020, the Government of Serbia adopted the Spatial Plan, which was aimed at facilitating the implementation of the “Jadar” project. Subsequently, Rio Sava Exploration began acquiring land parcels designated for the construction of the mine. These activities caused a series of protests. At first, the protests were locally based outbursts of discontent, mainly mobilizing local residents and the associations they established (e.g., “Let’s Protect Jadar and Rađevina”), who were mainly concerned about the displacement of thousands of inhabitants and forced expropriation.⁵ As the “Jadar” project gained momentum, the locals were joined by various environmental experts, and a number of non-governmental and

¹<https://riotintosrbia.com/projekat-jadar/> (accessed 06/09/2022).

²<https://bankwatch.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Jadar-Lithium-Mine-A-Raw-Deal-ICT-metal-mining-case-study.pdf> (accessed 06/03/2024).

³<https://riotintosrbia.com/mediji/saopstenja-za-javnost/2017/2017-07-24> (accessed 08/08/2022).

⁴<https://www.euronews.rs/biznis/biznis-vesti/103760/sta-znaci-stratesko-partnerstvo-sa-ek-u-oblasti-baterija-i-kriticnih-sirovina-od-velikih-projekata-do-brige-za-okolinu/vest> (accessed 13/03/2024).

⁵<https://balkangreenenergynews.com/rs/ratko-ristic-niko-nam-nece-zastiti-zivotnu-sredinu-ako-to-ne-uradimo-sami/> (accessed 10/08/2022).

political organizations from Serbia (e.g., “We Don’t Give Jadar – Loznica Against Rio Tinto”, “March from the Drina”, “Podrinje Anti-corruption Team”, “EKO Social Action”, “Ecological Uprising”, “Go-Change”, etc.). The mass dissatisfaction of citizens spilled over into the streets of major cities in Serbia in December 2021, followed by the blockade of the most important roads in the country.

In late 2021 and early 2022, the construction of the lithium mine(s) became one of the most important political questions in Serbia. The protests lasted for several weeks, before finally in February 2022, under public pressure, the Government of Serbia temporarily suspended the Spatial Plan and other documents that would have allowed lithium exploitation to begin.⁶ Although it is not certain that this move has brought the exploitation of lithium in Serbia to an end, it seems that the protests have at least temporarily delayed the implementation of the project.

Unlike earlier initiatives against the construction of small hydroelectric power plants that took place in a context marked by similar initiatives in the Western Balkan region, supported by the work of international environmental civic organizations that specialize in the protection of rivers and who directed their activities towards EU institutions (Pešić & Vukelić, 2022), the issue of lithium exploitation was localized to Serbia. Existing transnational networks, which had been utilized in previous environmental initiatives, were used as a platform for the internalization of the mining issue in a limited form, challenging activists to make new transnational ties and to look for new allies in initiatives and organizations that were already engaged in struggles against similar projects in Europe and other (semi-) peripheral countries.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

1) *The discursive framing of the struggle: anti-imperialism and eco-nationalism*

The discourse analysis of the social media posts of the grassroots and professional organizations involved in the fight against lithium

⁶<https://balkangreenenergynews.com/rs/brnabic-vlada-srbije-ponistila-prostorni-plan-za-rio-tintov-projekat-jadar-sve-do-zvole/> (accessed 10/08/2022).

exploitation reveals several discursive strategies that were used by the activists to mobilize supporters.

First of all, there was a significant presence of anti-imperialist, anti-colonialist, and anti-capitalist discourses. Discreet pressure from external actors, who spoke on behalf of multinational capital in favour of the continued exploitation of lithium, had a significant effect in directing the dissatisfaction of local activists towards an anti-imperialist and anti-colonialist framing of their discontent. These discourses were usually accompanied by strong expressions of intent to oppose the “colonial” aspirations of more powerful nations and multinational corporations, such as Rio Tinto. Examples of this discursive strategy can be found in posts and comments on the Facebook page of the organization “Let’s Protect Jadar and Rađevina”:

There are no nations anymore. Corporations have destroyed them. States have turned into companies. Corrupt leaders have pushed them into bankruptcy, in which the assets are sold off for nothing. Natural resources and cheap slave labour go for a pittance; there is not even a strike, no rebellion.⁷

We have become a dumping ground for rich countries. We are serving as a colony for different world economic interests.⁸

Interestingly enough, the EU was perceived to be one of the actors who had eco-imperialist and extractive intentions regarding Serbian natural resources, which encouraged Serbian authorities to act on behalf of the interests of Rio Tinto. From the point of view of the activists, this resulted from the EU’s interest in securing easy access to the resources that are necessary for the energy transition in close proximity to the bloc and of their (purposefully) relaxed implementation of environmental standards in non-EU countries. The following examples represent an illustration of the anti-imperialist discursive framing of the role of the EU:

⁷ <https://www.facebook.com/groups/584849888902129/permalink/1047562309297549/> (accessed 03/09/2022).

⁸ <https://www.facebook.com/groups/584849888902129/permalink/946157612771353/> (accessed 03/09/2022).

Low-cost exploitation is only possible without meeting the environmental protection standards. We've realized that Europe sees Serbia as a cheap resource base.⁹

This is how Europe has conditioned the process of European integration of Serbia, intending to colonize it. The European Union wants Serbian lithium to produce batteries for electric cars on European soil.¹⁰

Furthermore, the “imperialist” and “extractivist” agendas were also understood among environmental activists as being the result of the unjust nature of the energy transition. In June 2022, the organizations “March from the Drina” and “EKO Social Action” initiated the signing of the Jadar Declaration on International Solidarity in the Struggle Against Lithium Exploitation and in Environmental Protection together with several other organizations from Portugal, Germany, Serbia, Chile, Spain, and Bosnia and Herzegovina (including several activists from “Fridays for Future”).¹¹ The Jadar Declaration starts with the following statement:

We, the undersigned organisations from Serbia, Chile, Portugal, Spain, Germany and Bosnia and Herzegovina,

1. oppose ecological imperialism and the subjugation of one state or people by another,
2. consider ourselves as part of social and natural environments that will be sacrificed for an unjust energy transition, suffering damages incurred by such transition,
3. believe that environmental degradation at international level demands international cooperation with an aim of long-term opposition to extractivism,
4. oppose the international environmental degradation brought forth by an unjust ‘energy transition’ which in reality utilises a capitalist agenda, hence upholding and reproducing unequal relations between peoples and states.
5. will seek to expose the damage that has been done or is about to be inflicted upon people and environments by extractivist industries while

⁹ <https://www.facebook.com/page/102311091881273/search/?q=EU> (accessed 03/09/2022).

¹⁰ <https://www.facebook.com/page/102311091881273/search/?q=EU> (accessed 08/09/2020).

¹¹ <https://marssadrine.org/en/signing-jadar-declaration/> (accessed 12/08/2022).

utilising ‘green’ rhetoric in creating ‘green’ policy on local, national and international levels.¹²

Among the activist organizations, the anti-imperialist agenda is framed in two ways: either as a part of a discourse on universal civil rights, or in an ethnic injustice and group identity discourse. These framings have different ideological underpinnings (Left and Right) that are embedded within profound divisions in Serbian society, making it difficult for environmental organizations on opposite sides of the ideological spectrum to cooperate.

In the case of the right-wing, eco-nationalist framing, calls for the protection of the land and nature were formulated in terms of the protection of the borders of the nation-state against “colonialists” and “polluting outsiders” (Lubarda, 2019). This framing is present in the Facebook posts published by the grassroots organization “Let’s Protect Jadar and Rađevina”:

One of the biggest lies on which colonialism still endures is the so-called idea of ‘development’, where developed countries grant themselves the right to destroy the lives of those they consider less developed, valuable, intelligent, less human in every sense. That’s how foreigners see us, and the greedy [local comprador elite] subjugates us to foreigners for money and position (...). This idea is not new at all; it has been successfully operating in Africa and other countries of the Global South since the post-war period (...) We wouldn’t starve to death if we threw out all the so-called investors, world banks, monetary funds and other exploiters and thieves (...).¹³

On the other hand, within the leftist framing of anti-imperialist discourses, which is present, for example, in the Jadar Declaration, the struggle against environmental degradation is understood in terms of universal human rights, which can transcend national borders:

No single country or people should be made to bear the consequences of another one’s unjust energy transition, and so no single individual should be

¹² <https://drustvenaakcija.com/jadarska-deklaracija-the-jadar-declaration/> (accessed 04/09/2022).

¹³ <https://www.facebook.com/100007594007006/videos/536436001549197/> (accessed 03/09/2022).

exempt from exercising their universal human right to live free from environmental degradation or left undefended when faced with ecocide (...).¹⁴

Alongside the anti-imperialist discourse, it was possible to observe the significant presence of a discourse relating to “foreign mercenaries (traitors) vs true patriots”, especially in the posts on the Facebook page of the grassroots organization “Let’s Protect Jadar and Rađevina”. This discourse was directed against the ruling party and the government (understood as the “*comprador* elite”). For instance, in addressing the president of Serbia, one of the Facebook posts made by this organization argued as follows:

You think you’re a slave master, but you’re just the saddest slave of all who has the task of subjecting the citizens of this country and nature to the one who offers more. That’s our problem, not [Angela] Merkel. She came to take what she needed for her people, who live in prosperity - the lithium, because of which the Serbs will remain hungry, thirsty and sick.¹⁵

Similar framing, with a solid eco-nationalist component, was present in the perceptions of the role of the pro-European professional environmental organizations, who local activists perceived as “traitors of the national interest”. Addressing the professional environmental NGOs, who also opposed the “Jadar” project, the following was said on the Facebook page of the “Let’s Protect Jadar and Rađevina” organization:

For decades, you have been roaming around Serbia promoting Euro-Nazi-colonial-NATO ‘values’; you spit on everything Serbian, you have worked on Serbian identity crises at all levels (...) you are disgusted by the Cyrillic alphabet, (...) you are disgusted by Serbian tradition (...). There is no single foreign nonsense left that you have not tried to push through under the green or democratic agenda, from manipulation in the eco sector to Euro Pride (...). If this is not direct evidence of the true purpose of the existence of NGOs in Serbia, I do not know what is.¹⁶

¹⁴ <https://drustvenaakcija.com/jadarska-deklaracija-the-jadar-declaration/> (accessed 04/09/2022).

¹⁵ <https://www.facebook.com/groups/584849888902129/permalink/856391978414584/> (accessed 03/09/2022).

¹⁶ <https://www.facebook.com/groups/584849888902129/permalink/1038378346882612/> (accessed 03/09/2022).

Another discursive strategy being utilized in shaping opposition to lithium mining by the activists was eco-nativism. However, unlike recent struggles against the construction of small hydroelectric power plants in Serbia (Pešić & Vukelić, 2022), the presence of eco-nativism was slightly less frequent in this case. Eco-nativist discourses were intertwined with imaginaries of a “golden” past, in which nature is perceived and symbolically glorified as an inseparable part of the national territory and collective history. Therefore, pristine nature was appreciated as the most significant national asset, often closely linked with an ethnic eco-nationalist perspective and the protection of the ancestral legacy of the nation (“the fatherland”). This can be seen in the following quotes from the Facebook page of “Let’s Protect Jadar and Rađevina”, referring to the purchase of plots of land by Rio Sava Exploration in the Jadar region:

No normal person can think of selling their green pastures, fields and orchards in order to work on that same land as a slave in someone else’s mine.¹⁷

You must have heard about the old custom of burials in fields or even yards (...). The reason for this seemingly strange custom is to prevent descendants from selling the land. (...). I must admit that today I am grateful to my ancestors that they were buried in Rađevina (...).¹⁸

A great evil is hanging over our Serbia, which threatens to destroy it for good and wipe the life out of it. Everything is threatened, primarily nature, land, water and air, without which there is no life for humans and all other living beings. This evil is embodied in the form of foreign, criminal companies that have sunk their paws and teeth into our fertile soil, into our rivers and intend to ‘devour’ it until they subdue and destroy us all for the sake of their profits (...).¹⁹

2) *Potentials and Obstacles for Transnationalization*

In addition to mapping discursive strategies, we were also interested in how grassroots and professional activists and organizations positioned

¹⁷ <https://www.facebook.com/groups/584849888902129/permalink/626324861421298/> (accessed 03/09/2022).

¹⁸ <https://www.facebook.com/groups/584849888902129/permalink/797822150938234/> (accessed 03/09/2022).

¹⁹ <https://www.facebook.com/groups/584849888902129/permalink/910899592963822/> (accessed 03/09/2022).

themselves with regard to the possibilities for cooperation with international organizations and activist networks.

Firstly, it was clear that the significant presence of an anti-imperialist discourse among both grassroots and professional activist groups reduced the space for cooperation with institutions that were perceived as having extractivist agendas. Secondly, the strong presence of eco-nationalist positions, which were mostly characteristic of some of the grassroots organizations, further weakened the potential for internationalization and pushed the framing of potential actions towards the response of “ordinary people” (understood either as citizens of Serbia or as ethnic Serbs) to external threats.

Furthermore, the perception of the EU and its Green Agenda as unfair and detrimental to non-EU countries restricted certain actors from addressing the issue of lithium exploitation directly with European institutions. While activists from both grassroots and professional organizations expressed critical stances towards the Green Agenda, cooperation with EU institutions was only deemed unacceptable by grassroots groups. Conversely, professional organizations viewed environmental organizations and institutions within the EU as potential allies.

As an example of this negative attitude and unwillingness to collaborate with the EU we can take the Facebook post of the “Let’s Protect Jadar and Rađevina” grassroots organization:

In late summer 2020, the European Union declared lithium essential for the ‘green’ transition. A year earlier, in 2019, the European Commission published its European Green Deal, which is nothing more than a colourful lie in favour of a ‘green’ transition. It only encourages further mining, consumerism and, ultimately, the survival of capitalism, colonialism, and unabated greed. This kind of European Green Agreement will cause more harm than good, and all the benefits are for large companies and a few individuals. (...).²⁰

On the other hand, despite being critical of the EU’s energy transition, professional organizations were still willing to participate in activities related to the creation of networks between environmental organizations in the European Union. For example, members of the “March from the Drina” team participated in a youth festival for activists in Germany, where

²⁰ <https://www.facebook.com/groups/584849888902129/permalink/1033530470700733/> (accessed 03/09/2022).

they spoke about the problems caused by lithium mining in the Republic of Serbia and how to fight the phenomenon. Moreover, their criticism of the EU institutions and policies did not prevent them from accepting some positive aspects of the Green Agenda and the possibility of cooperating with other civic organizations from the EU. In response to the accusations made by the Head of the Ministry of Mining and Energy that activists reject European environmental policies, members of the “March from the Drina” organization publicly expressed their concern about the labelling of the Serbian public as “resistant” to the energy transition. They considered this label to be fundamentally untrue and ultimately divisive. Therefore, the organization published a letter signed by several other civil society organizations and experts from Serbia, which addressed various European and Serbian institutions. This letter states the following:

We support and promote the rule of law and environmental protection (...). Those topics were the basis for the beginning of the protests that later turned into historic blockades at the end of 2021, as well as an indication that the Serbian people are not against the green transition, but express resistance to the dirty mining, multinational occupation, the threat of expropriation, as well as the destruction of land, air and water, which any ‘green’ transition should not bring to any nation. Therefore, the term ‘resistance’ can only be used when talking about the fight against the destruction of nature and the environment. We stood alongside the people precisely because we stand for a just energy transition.²¹

Bearing in mind the predominantly anti-imperialist and to some extent eco-nationalist discursive framings of the protests against Rio Tinto and the various standpoints of grassroots and professional NGOs regarding the possibility for cooperation with EU institutions or with organizations supported by EU funding, it was clear that externalization understood in terms of “Europeanisation from below” has been far less present in these struggles than in the protests that had previously taken place against the construction of small hydroelectric power plants (Pešić & Vukelić, 2022). The fact that lithium exploitation is of key importance to the European Green transition and that European institutions have provided discreet

²¹ <https://nova.rs/vesti/drustvo/ekoloske-organizacije-uputile-otvoreno-pismo-zoranimihajlovic/?fbclid=IwAR2xb4JltirIDk-8vWLOv-3ZNw7Mis4K7MStNdUN97UjlPuJJ-pZCrY5EOF4> (accessed 05/09/2022).

support for the implementation of the “Jadar” project²² have both undoubtedly contributed to this situation. In addition, the weak regional presence of European civic environmental organizations, who specialize in tackling the consequences of “dirty mining”, made it difficult for local organizations to transnationalize their local grievances and to find external allies who would provide support in putting pressure on national decision-makers by turning to European institutions and by mobilizing public opinion in European countries.

However, this does not mean there were no attempts to externalize the mining issue. For example, in spite of their scathing anti-EU agenda, the “Let’s Protect Jadar and Rađevina” organization, together with several other organizations, filed an official complaint against the Government of the Republic of Serbia with the Bureau of the Bern Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats regarding the “Jadar” project, using support provided by international environmental networks. Although the complaint was put on standby after the Government superseded the “Jadar” project, the indications that the project may possibly be re-launched led the Bureau to announce that further developments would be closely monitored and that the complaint may be re-activated.

The very circumstances that led to the weak presence of “Europeanisation from below” also opened up possibilities to find alternative forms of internationalization of local environmental struggles and transnational networking. In general, the ambivalent attitude towards the EU institutions has even forced professional NGOs to seek allies outside of the core countries or EU-sponsored networks, such as with peripheral marginalized communities worldwide who have shared the same fate. A good example of this was the signing of the previously mentioned Jadar Declaration, initiated by professional NGOs from Serbia. This is not only an international document expressing solidarity between countries affected by lithium exploitation, but is also an example of horizontal transnationalization initiated by local activists:

The Jadar Declaration aims to include the general public, activists and other organisations in an international solidarity network to support each individual in achieving their universal human rights, including the right to a healthy living environment. The Declaration was written to internationalize

²² <https://nova.rs/vesti/drustvo/sastanak-rio-tinto-eu/> (accessed 03/09/2022).

our local struggles and expand a solidarity network for mutual support, cooperation, information exchange and substantial assistance to stop the profit-motivated and extractivist approach of mining lithium and other minerals.²³

We're asking journalists worldwide to challenge lawmakers about narratives that justify the annihilation of sacred and fertile land in the name of a 'green' transition. This affects indigenous communities from Chile, Australia or USA to farmers in Serbia, Portugal, Spain or Germany.²⁴

Similarly, the refusal to participate in EU-sponsored networks did not prevent some grassroots organizations from joining alternative networks that have opposed European policies. For example, "Let's Protect Jadar and Rađevina" joined the international solidarity network "Yes to Life - No to Mining", which specializes in protecting marginalized and indigenous communities around the globe from the expansion of mining extractivism. The organization signed the statement,²⁵ launched by the network, opposing the European Green Deal and blaming it for the expansion of "dirty mining" in Europe and in the Global South:

A certain number of organisations and individuals, academics and experts, condemned this Green European Deal and decided to rebel against it. More precisely, more than 180 signatories supported the statement of the international network 'Yes to Life - No to Mining', in which such attempts to encourage mining are condemned. 'Let's Protect Jadar and Rađevina' signed this statement over a year ago. This is one act in a series of international actions in which we have participated, which treat the problem of mining and the 'Green' agenda professionally and comprehensively.²⁶

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, we have analysed the case of a local environmental initiative against lithium mining in the Jadar Valley. This initiative managed to scale up and gain national importance, and at the time of writing, has

²³ <https://www.facebook.com/drustvenaakcija021> (accessed 03/09/2022)

²⁴ <https://twitter.com/bojnovak/status/1558512974247170050?s=20&t=fFAU0QerixTV8n0uFZeaqw> (accessed 04/09/2022).

²⁵ <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1BV72huAZBga1Rk2BdWuIWttgAJhrh-N-/view> (accessed 04/09/2022).

²⁶ <https://www.facebook.com/groups/584849888902129/permalink/1033530470700733/> (accessed 03/09/2022).

succeeded in impeding further construction of the lithium mine. This case is also important as it raises the question of the implications of the increasingly eco-nationalist discourse that formed around the struggle against the extractivist agenda of multinational companies and their allies from developed countries in a (semi-)peripheral context. This chapter has aimed to explore the influence of eco-nationalist discourse on mobilization potential and the transnationalization of environmental actions. As demonstrated in the results section, the eco-nationalist framing of the fight against lithium mining in Serbia and accompanying critique of the EU Green Agenda, have prevented some environmental organizations from creating transnational ties with organizations from core EU countries. This was not the case in previous environmental initiatives, which relied heavily on the support of EU institutions and environmental networks (Pešić & Vukelić, 2022; Petrović, 2020). However, it has also encouraged activists to forge alliances with activists from (semi-)peripheral and peripheral countries engaged in similar environmental struggles.

We consider this to be an important case as it illustrates several key points regarding the transnationalization potential of environmentalism of the poor/dispossessed in a (semi-)peripheral context.

Firstly, this case demonstrates the new opportunities available for the internationalization of environmental challenges in terms of establishing contacts and networking with organizations outside the European core and EU-sponsored networks. The critique of the EU Green Agenda reduced the possibility for grassroots environmental initiatives to cooperate with organizations and networks operating within the EU arena. It also made it challenging, though not impossible, to convey their demands to EU institutions.

Secondly, the discursive framing of the protests as anti-imperialist was largely a consequence of the influence that came from transnational networks that are critical of EU policies. Most of these networks, situated either on the periphery of the world capitalist system or at its core, advocate for the rights of subaltern groups and communities. Establishing contacts and engaging in joint actions within these networks, activists from Serbia adopted their narratives, terminology, and explanations of the problem.

Thirdly, it is interesting that although Rio Tinto appeared to be the main instigator of the “Jadar” project, protest and dissatisfaction were rarely directed exclusively towards this multinational company, but instead tended to generalize in terms of its targets. Consequently, Rio Tinto was

perceived as the personification of both capitalist extractivism and Western imperialism. The discourses transcended Rio Tinto itself to critically focus on the role of the EU and its green policies.

Finally, although environmental initiatives have emerged, to a significant extent, from civil and left-wing activism, the fact that new ecological challenges were related either to the agenda that was part of the (still insufficiently successful) process of Serbia's accession to the European Union and its implementation of green policies, or with the influx of foreign capital (often associated with the exploitation of resources, the commodification of nature, cheap labour and the fact that environmental legislation is not sufficiently developed), represented fertile ground for the various appropriations of environmental struggles by right-wing political movements and organizations, but also for a nationalization of the ecological discourses. In line with this, the eco-nationalization of the protests against lithium mining within part of the activist network reduced the potential for closer cooperation between some local grassroots and professional environmental organizations, despite the fact that they shared an anti-imperialist agenda and had critical stances towards the actions of different agents of the green energy transition. However, one should be careful in dealing with this topic and emphasize the fact that although these appropriations of environmental initiatives represent a phenomenon that is present, it is not predominant, given the still strong civic foundation of the environmental movement.

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Towards a Transnational Public Sphere? The New Climate Movement and the European Union

Aron Buzogány  and *Patrick Scherhauser* 

INTRODUCTION

There has been a long-standing debate about the ‘democratic deficit’ in the European Union as a result of, among other things, the difficulty in establishing a shared public sphere (Follesdal & Hix, 2006). Establishing a common public sphere in Europe is rendered particularly cumbersome due to the lack of a collective European identity, a common language, the prevalence of national (media) cultures, as well as the absence of transnational parties, interest groups, or social movements. At the same time, studies focusing on the development of issue-specific public spheres, such as

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security, austerity, or the health crisis, show that coordinated transnational discourses and collective identity building can occur in spite of language differences (e.g., Risse, 2015). In this context, a great deal of attention has been devoted to transnational communication through the elite media, mass media, or social media and their contribution to a European public sphere. While research on public spheres often focuses on reactions to exogenous events, it has also been argued that progressive social movements might help craft transnational public spheres (della Porta, 2022b). This chapter asks whether the new climate movement can play such a role by (co-)creating an issue-specific transnational European public sphere.

Since its emergence in the late 2010s, the new climate movement can claim to have the transformative power needed to enact large-scale historical change. Climate change and its consequences are among the issues with the highest mobilization capacity across Europe (Wahlström et al., 2019). The new climate movement has mobilized the masses and brought protest and acts of civil disobedience as relevant forms of resistance back into the public space (Buzogány & Scherhauser, 2023; Pollex & Soßdorf, 2023). At the same time, the new wave of climate protest that has occurred since 2019 has also made it clear that the conflicts around a sustainable transformation are not only about the ecological, economic, and social consequences of climate change, but also about democracy and how democratic decision-making should develop in the future (Smith, 2021; Scherhauser et al., 2023).

Climate protests have resulted in important reactions at the EU level. Following the 2019 European Parliament (EP) election campaign, under the influence of massive mobilization on the streets of Europe, the new European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen made the environment and climate change a key part of her mandate. The European Green Deal (EGD) gained momentum not only because of its envisaged policy content but also because it emphasized the importance of citizen participation (Buzogány et al. 2025; Torney, 2021). While it remains notoriously difficult to measure the influence of the climate movement on public policies (see Buzogány & Scherhauser, 2023), some of the demands of the “Fridays for Future” movement are indeed reflected in the EGD, which was also framed as a response to grassroots demands. Such concrete policy measures include introducing a Carbon Border Tax on imports into the EU, a European Climate Law, or the Fit for 55 Package, a regulatory framework aimed at reducing greenhouse gases within the EU by 55 percent compared to their 1990 values (Bongardt & Torres, 2022). Even though the European New Green Deal has been criticized as “less a

pathbreaking vision for an ecological future than a historic effort to green-wash Europe's political and economic status quo" (Adler & Wargan, 2023), the influence of the new climate movement on both the public and political debate remains remarkable (Parks 2025; Parks et al., 2024).

This chapter assesses the development of the 'green public sphere' in the EU and asks whether the new climate movement can act as a facilitator for it. Using Nancy Fraser's differentiation between 'weak' and 'strong' publics (Fraser, 1990), we discuss how the new climate movement can challenge the power and social orders and create new 'imaginaries' (Jasanoff & Kim, 2015). Strong publics are spaces where discussion takes place and decisions are made. In contrast, weak publics are publics who discuss issues but have little chance of influencing decision-making. We find indications that the new climate movement is critical of the dominant innovation-oriented green growth discourse relating to the 'environmental modernisation' of the EU (Hajer, 1995; Krüger, 2013; Machin, 2019) as part of its critique of political and economic orders. The EU is not an important target in the climate movement's "rage against the machine" (Machin, 2022). References to the EU and its policies are virtually absent from the climate movement's discourse, which has either a national or a global focus. From this, it would seem that rather than representing the avant-garde of a European green public sphere, the new climate movement is a weak public sphere that seeks influence at a national level and enters into the European public sphere through traditional channels of influence, such as political parties. These findings do not contradict the newly emerging discussion about the recent focus on the nation-state within the climate movement (Lieven, 2020; Hallam, 2021; Lieven, 2021). It is only that the EU is not regarded as a relevant factor on its own.

We have chosen to focus our analysis on two emblematic groups, Fridays for Future (FFF) and Extinction Rebellion (XR), their "repertoires of knowledge practices" (della Porta & Pavan, 2017) and the "imaginaries" they produce (Buzogány & Scherhauffer, 2022; Machin, 2022). We analyse the political communication of the climate movement, which we assess using movement-produced material (see also Caiani, 2023) and press reports, which we combine with data obtained from surveys of climate protest participants (Wahlström et al., 2019). For this chapter, we reuse data that was first presented in previous contributions, including Daniel et al. (2020), Buzogány and Scherhauffer (2022), Buzogány and Scherhauffer et al. (2023), and Wahlström et al. (2019).

These empirical choices are also reflected in the structure of the chapter. We will begin by introducing our central concepts, such as framing

approaches from the social movement literature, sociotechnical imaginaries, the European public sphere and social movement strategies facing the EU. Section “Public Spheres, Political Imaginaries, and Transnational Activism” compares the attitudes of climate protest participants towards the EU with the attitudes of the wider population. In Section “Is the New Climate Movement Eurosceptic?”, we discuss the imaginaries of the climate movement and highlight how imaginaries related to climate justice and the political and economic order relate to the movement’s perception of the EU. We close by discussing examples, potentials, and pitfalls of transnationalization related to the climate movement in Europe.

PUBLIC SPHERES, POLITICAL IMAGINARIES, AND TRANSNATIONAL ACTIVISM

This section introduces the three central concepts in this chapter: public spheres, imaginaries, and the transnationalization of social movements. A public sphere can be broadly defined as the space of communication of ideas emerging from society (Castells, 2008, p. 78). Nancy Fraser distinguishes between *strong publics*, referring to institutionalized deliberations “whose discourse encompasses both opinion formation and decision making...”, and *weak publics*, which refer to public spheres “whose deliberative practice consists exclusively in opinion formation and does not also encompass decision making” (Fraser, 1990, p. 134). Weak publics focus on deliberation outside the political system, and their deliberations result in opinion formation but not in outright decision-making (Fraser, 1990). Strong publics refer to deliberation both with and within institutions that possess real decision-making power. While weak publics use communicative power and the Habermasian logic of discovery, strong publics are based on Weberian *Handlungsmacht* and the logic of rational debate. This distinction between strong and weak publics has been used in the EU context by Eriksen and Fossum (2002) to argue that deliberations in EU comitology or the European Parliament bear features of strong publics. Though not explicitly mentioned in the literature, one can regard social movements as facilitating transnational deliberation directly but also indirectly through their capacity to mobilize public opinion across borders. Concerning the transnational climate movement, the question is whether it constitutes a ‘weak public’ or can become a strong public at the European

level, as its influence on EU climate policies mentioned in the introduction would suggest.

Transnational public spheres are often produced by transnational movements and emerge as a result of conflicts and crises (della Porta, 2022b). Some argue that the environmental movement has been particularly successful in creating a global (Torgerson, 1999; Doyle & Doherty, 2006) or a European public sphere (Van Der Heijden, 2010). Biodiversity loss or climate justice became robust master frames, unifying the movement (Almeida, 2019; Bjork-James et al., 2022), even if divisions along language or geographical lines have prevailed (Olausson, 2010; Neff & Jemielniak, 2024; Parks & Bertuzzi, 2022). For instance, Conference of the Parties (COP) meetings under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change can be seen as a moment when the public sphere materializes (Soneryd & Cassegård, 2017).

Transnational public spheres do not materialize in an institutional void: “ideas do not float freely” (Risse-Kappen, 1994). With its tightly networked institutional structure, the EU is a key example of institutional structures that have the potential to facilitate, if not a global level, then at least at the European level (Marks & Mcadam, 1996). The development of a green European public sphere has been enabled by the establishment of multilevel opportunity structures by EU-level political institutions and policies. Such structures offer opportunities to harmonize the discourses and strategies of social movements around similar goals, however, they do not necessarily result in convergence (Van Der Heijden, 2010; Wenkel et al., 2023).

Shared values and worldviews are important elements underpinning public spheres. The link between the public sphere and social movement practices can be made through the concept of imaginaries. ‘Sociotechnical imaginaries’ are a central concept in Science-Technology Studies (STS) and describe the nexus of technology, science, and democracy by focusing on the production of power and social order. Sociotechnical imaginaries are “animated by shared understandings of forms of social life and social order attainable through, and supportive of, advances in science and technology” (Jasanoff & Kim, 2015, p. 4). These imaginaries are political in the sense that they enable practices, inform decisions and determine what is politically legitimate, feasible, and valuable (Machin, 2022). They can be explicitly propagated by actors as diverse as corporations or organized groups, including local communities or social movements (Jasanoff & Kim, 2015).

While the transnational dimension of such imaginaries has received little attention in the field of STS, we find little reason to limit the imaginaries of social movements to the national level. Using a different vocabulary, social movement studies have repeatedly argued that frames can become transnational and that common “visions” (della Porta, 2022a) can serve as a “glue” that unites them. Research on the Europeanization of social movements shows that European integration has greatly extended the political opportunity structure for civil society and social movement actors across member states, and this has led to the establishment of constituencies that are usually relatively pro-EU, while more radical forces have remained sceptical of the EU (della Porta & Caiani, 2007, 2011; Parks et al., 2023; della Porta et al., 2024).

Following della Porta and Caiani (2011), the attempts made by social movements to deal with multilevel opportunity structures can be conceptually differentiated along three strategies. *Domestication* occurs when social movements mobilize at the national level to influence their government to take action at the EU level. *Externalization* emerges when social movements directly target the EU to put pressure on their national governments. *Transnationalization* happens when networks of social movements work together to target domestic or EU-level decision-makers collectively. Manifold examples from the environmental field illustrate this dynamic, showing that the social movement actors have carefully weighed the benefits offered by the EU, often resulting in critical but supportive positions during the 2000s (Börzel & Buzogány, 2010). The austerity crises of the late 2000s and 2010s have tempered this enthusiasm and altered the profile of transnational action (della Porta & Parks, 2015; della Porta et al., 2024). Far-right groups have shifted from scepticism to outright rejection of the EU, which is in contrast to left-wing groups’ persistent critique within a European framework (della Porta et al., 2024). These differences go back to the ideologies prevalent in the left and far-right movements, which influence their perceptions of EU accountability. On the political Right, these differences can be summarized as holding sovereigntist positions that oppose the siphoning away of national competencies by the EU (Lorimer, 2023), while the Left typically calls for broader global responsibility (Milan, 2020).

IS THE NEW CLIMATE MOVEMENT EUROSCEPTIC?

In the first step of our analysis, we are interested in the attitudes of the climate movement towards the European Union. One way to assess how the climate movement regards the EU is to rely on a survey of participants in climate protests. We draw on a 2019 survey conducted across nine European countries in 13 cities, focussing on the Fridays for Future (FFF) movement (Wahlström et al., 2019). This unprecedented youth-led movement has mobilized predominantly pupils and students worldwide in support of climate action. It has garnered significant public attention and media coverage, with iconic figures like Greta Thunberg leading the coverage. The protest survey offers the possibility to delve into the demographic and political profiles of FFF participants, the mobilization networks behind the movement, and the motivations driving these activists in the early years of climate mobilization. Conducted by a transnational team of scientists, the survey collected responses from over 1900 protesters, which provide valuable insights into the nature of the climate movement.

One of the questions asked in the survey was about “Trust in the EU” among the 2019 FFF participants. The same question was asked as part of a regular Eurobarometer survey. As Fig. 6.1 shows, the levels of trust in the EU are much higher among FFF protest participants than among the average population, measured using the Eurobarometer Standard survey that was closest in time to the FFF Survey. In two cases—Italy and the Czech Republic—the difference between the two figures is even close to

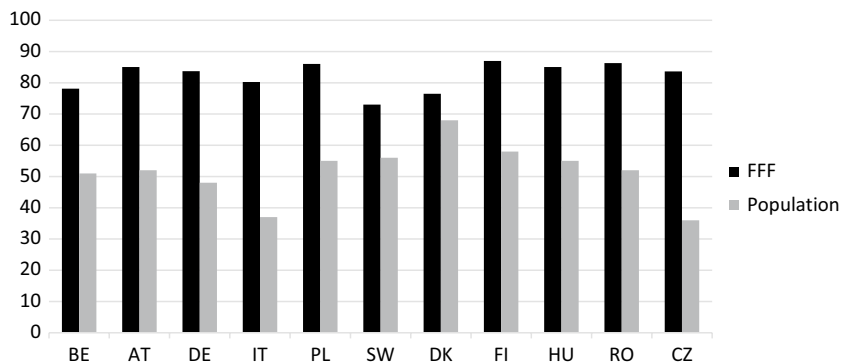


Fig. 6.1 Trust in the European Union. (Source: FFF Survey 2019, Trust in the European Union 2019, Source: Standard Eurobarometer 91)

50 percent. These are the two countries where trust in the EU is below 40 percent. Sweden, where the FFF movement began, has the most balanced attitudes towards the EU. Here, trust in the EU among FFF participants and the average population are at relatively similar levels, the difference between the two groups being merely 9 percent. Sweden also has the lowest overall level of trust in the EU among all FFF participants.

When interpreting protest surveys, caution is warranted as protest participants are a specific subset of the population. They are often younger, more politically active, more highly educated, and better off (della Porta & Portos, 2023). These are also the attributes for high levels of support for the EU. In the case of the FFF protestors, some of these indicators might only be indirectly valid, as most of those on the streets had yet to complete their formal education. They were also much younger than those who were surveyed among the average population, which makes them less likely to be Eurosceptic (Chironi et al., 2024); partly because older generations tend to be more attached to national identities and feel that the EU has brought about changes that they perceive as unfavourable, such as a loss of sovereignty. Nevertheless, the figures provide an initial indication that those who participated in climate protests at an early stage have a greater level of trust in the EU than the average population of the societies they live in.

FRAMES OF THE NEW CLIMATE MOVEMENT¹

Is this positive predisposition of climate protest participants towards the EU reflected in how the climate movement frames the EU? To answer this question, the second step of our analysis involves operationalizing the imaginaries of two social movement organizations belonging to the new climate movement using the concept of framing. In the empirical section below the imaginaries of FFF and XR in Germany will be described by differentiating them into diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational frames. Diagnostic framing defines problems and identifies responsibilities; prognostic framing proposes solutions or strategies to address the identified problems by defining solutions. Motivational framing involves mobilizing and inspiring collective action by emphasizing values, emotions, or

¹This section partially draws on Buzogány, A. & Scherhauser, P., 2022. Framing different energy futures? Comparing Fridays for Future and Extinction Rebellion in Germany. *Futures*, 137, 102904.

identities (Benford & Snow, 2000). We focus on three main themes in the climate movements' discourse: climate justice, democracy, and capitalism.

Climate Justice

Climate justice refers to the notion that humans, irrespective of age, gender, class, or race, have the same rights to use the environment and that the burden and responsibility for acting against climate change must be equally distributed. The “diagnostic framing” in the climate justice frame conjures up the dramatic consequences of irreversible climate change, which would result in the loss of a secure future: “The climate crisis deprives us the right to home and security, weakening democracies and intensifying existing causes of refugee migration and resource conflicts” (FFF).²

Both FFF and XR argue that the long-term survival of humanity is at stake. FFF focuses on the generational aspect of climate justice and argues that climate change is the greatest challenge of the present and the future. In addition, they claim that human life is increasingly endangered by extreme weather events, such as forest fires, floods, and heat waves.³ The imaginary of climate change employed by XR is more radical because they argue that the ‘climate catastrophe’ is already taking place.

The prognostic framing, namely the discourse that identifies a solution to the issue at stake, is directed towards new and ambitious climate policies. The pleas made by the movements begin with reducing (FFF) or stopping (XR) greenhouse gas emissions and the use of non-sustainable technologies, such as fossil fuel power generation, while also fostering renewable energy sources. In addition, FFF and XR demand a socially responsible and just Carbon Tax, which means that revenues will be used to avoid and even reduce social injustice. A further concrete proposal made by FFF on achieving climate justice is a mandatory renovation quota for buildings, the funding of sustainable transport and mobility behaviour, or the consistent and rapid establishment of a circular economy (Wuppertal Institute, 2020). On the other hand, XR demands the introduction of a carbon import tariff, the promotion of carbon-storage technologies, the

²<https://fridaysforfuture.de/zeit-fuer-klimagerechtigkeit-keingradweiter-teil-iv-eine-gerechtere-zukunft/>

³<https://fridaysforfuture.de/vftage-bis-zum-globalen-klimastreik-keingradweiter/>

activation of natural carbon sinks through reforestation and peatland restoration, and individual behavioural change.⁴

The motivational framing emphasizes the role and responsibility of the individual to act as agents for change. While the two organizations differ fundamentally in the size of their protest mobilization (FFF can mobilize the masses as part of their Global Earth Strikes, whereas the protests organized by XR tend to be carried out by small groups of a few hundred people at most), what they share in common is participation in peaceful protests and forms of civil disobedience. XR deliberately and frequently crosses the line of legality to draw attention to the urgency of policy action, whereas FFF relies on public pressure triggered by a broad protest and mass movement. XR strives to make protests and acts of civil disobedience for activists as pleasant as possible, e.g., by singing, taking care of each other and fostering solidarity among protesters or providing alternative actions for those who feel uncomfortable, insecure, or physically or mentally unable to participate.

Democracy

Both movements agree that climate change poses a risk to democracy. In its diagnostic framing, XR argues that governments do not speak truthfully about the impacts and consequences of climate change and biodiversity loss. In addition, XR claims that the public “has the right to be fully and honestly informed about the risks and their extent” and “this disregard must be called criminal in light of the real threat to our extinction”.⁵ Although XR argues that we live in a “toxic system” (Extinction Rebellion, n.d.), activists are more reluctant to openly shame state and private actors or individual politicians than FFF (De Moor et al., 2020). Instead, they speak of governments, politics in general, apolitical terms, or various sectors of industry (livestock, fish, or fashion). In contrast, FFF blames more directly and concretely firms such as Siemens or RWE and state representatives like the Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Energy. Research also shows that FFF protesters are disappointed but are not disenchanted by politics or inclined to turn away from it. They believe that ambitious political decision-making in representative democracies can curb climate

⁴ https://extinctionrebellion.de/documents/334/Klimagase_Ma%C3%9Fnahmen_V10_04_05_2020_RC.pdf

⁵ <https://extinctionrebellion.de/wer-wir-sind/unsere-forderungen/>

change (Pollex & Soßdorf, 2023). In contrast, XR seems more disillusioned about traditional political steering capacities and demands more grassroots deliberations and increased possibilities for democratic co-determination and participation. The movement calls for grassroots democratic participation to be strengthened, for example, through citizens' assemblies, which would consult the public on climate justice issues and make binding decisions for politics (Buzogány & Scherhauser, 2022).

FFF, by contrast, supports rather classical elements of representative democracy, which are seen as a suitable means of implementing its demands. This also became obvious during the 2021 election campaign, when several FFF activists took up the offer from established parties to join their electoral lists. Compared to XR, FFF's position is reminiscent of a traditional intermediary organization performing checks and balances.

Capitalism

As is evident from the discussion on the climate justice and political order framing, on a diagnostic level, both FFF and XR regard the (capitalist) economic system and the growth paradigm as problematic, especially as powerful economic interests are hindering the transition towards sustainability. Many references express solidarity with the fight carried out by other groups of the German climate movement, such as *Ende Gelände*, which was engaged in blockading coal mining sites (Scherhauser et al., 2021). Another aspect that both organizations uphold is the framing of 'capitalism' as deeply interrelated not only with carbon-based production modes but also with colonialism and racism, often in reference to the 'Black Lives Matter' movement. Both FFF and XR refer to 'fossil capitalism' and to the interests of the incumbent 'old industry', such as gas infrastructure and coal mining, rather than pointing a finger at 'capitalism'. At the same time, the heterogeneity of FFF, which includes platforms such as 'Entrepreneurs for Future', ensures that the problem framing of FFF is well-balanced between moderate approaches that rely on the narrative of "ecological modernisation and more radical ones which can be linked to the degrowth perspective" (Marquardt, 2020).

Due to these rather heterogeneous positions, it is necessary to clarify the prognostic framing in relation to the reform of the 'economic order'. In the case of FFF, prognostic frames reference both the degrowth perspective and the typical strategies geared towards green growth, with largely implicit trust placed in market-based solutions. FFF has often

voiced a position on concrete policy measures like the Carbon Tax. These positions are rarely radical and include many standard textbook cases of neoclassical environmental economics, such as creating a level playing field through the internalization of external effects and slashing subsidies that have adverse environmental effects. While XR also comments on concrete policy issues and formulates prognostic positions, the emphasis here is more on radical changes in everyday lifestyle and consumer behaviour.

There is reason to suspect that the rhetorical restraint concerning the economic order results from the heterogeneity of supporter groups such as “Scientist for Future” and relates to how FFF and XR use motivational framings. Case studies of decision-making within local FFF chapters show that potential internal conflicts are bypassed to avoid the ‘capitalism debate’ (Döninghaus et al., 2020; Mucha et al., 2023). The heterogeneity regarding economic solutions is also confirmed in surveys of protest participants and reflects the middle-class bias found among the participants (Wahlström et al., 2019). This suggests that motivating supporters by putting forward more divisive solutions would be challenging. Instead, the motivational framing often evokes emotions and, particularly in the case of XR, emphasizes fear, anger, awareness, and self-empowerment.

THE NEW CLIMATE MOVEMENT AND THE EUROPEAN UNION

How does the new climate movement frame EU integration and the European Union as a political actor? The EU framing complements the three themes mentioned above: climate justice, democracy, and capitalism, adding a transnational dimension. However, only a tiny fraction of documents focus on strategies related to the EU, approximately 3 percent to be precise. As also mentioned by della Porta et al. (2024): “Most of these groups do not often refer to Europe, indeed Europe is very far from central to their global framing”.

Regarding diagnostic framing, the EU is perceived as being closely related to capitalist market rationality and far from the democratic processes that were mentioned above. The paradigm of ecological modernization and green growth, which are close to the EU’s definitional core (Machin, 2019), are perceived to be at odds with the problem framing of the climate movement, which places climate justice at the centre. Despite stating that climate is a priority, European policies are not regarded as

being more effective in stopping the climate and ecological crisis. The climate movement contends that the EU must show solidarity globally, considering its involvement in colonialism, both in the past and the present. FFF emphasizes this point by highlighting the importance of the European Green Deal addressing climate issues without shifting them to other regions. While the EU is mainly depicted as a source of negative developments in climate policy regarding agriculture or industrial policy, it is recognized that it needs to act globally as a force for progressive climate policy. The organization also expresses some optimistic views concerning the EU in comparing it to the even more negative practices of member states—suggesting that alignment on issues such as climate change and science-based policy-making is something the climate movement and the EU highly value.

The climate movement's prognostic frames concerning the EU are contradictory. Decentralization, inclusion, participation, and passion are all mentioned by Amanda Machin (2022) as aspects of an idealized political order envisioned by the climate movement. This is contrasted with protest and rupture concerning the incumbent system, which is regarded as being profoundly influenced by fossil fuel interests. At the same time, the activities of the climate movement are more diverse than the general critique suggests. They include targeting EU institutions physically—such as the media savvy action of XR activists to glue themselves to the headquarters of the European Commission.⁶ They also include concrete policy-related demands, comments and criticism, albeit these are produced more by FFF than XR. The list of demands that FFF Germany presented to the EU includes in-depth reforms of agricultural subsidies and the inclusion of climate-related issues into EU trade negotiations⁷ in a manner that is not significantly different nor more radical from what established environmental civil society organizations ask for. Another prognostic framing they have employed focuses on democracy in the EU, with a focus on the European Citizen Initiative and on Citizen Assemblies,⁸ showing at least theoretically a willingness to act within the system. EU-targeted campaigns⁹ and open letters addressed to the EU level are another sign of

⁶<https://www.politico.eu/article/extinction-rebellion-activists-glue-themselves-to-european-commission-hq/>

⁷<https://fridaysforfuture.de/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Forderungen-EU.pdf>

⁸<https://eci.fridaysforfuture.org/en/>

⁹<https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/sophia-marie-pott-fridays-for-future-keine-unterstuetzung-100.html>

criticism, but also of the acceptance of the need for common, EU- or global level action in the field of climate policy.¹⁰

Transnational action, such as strikes, is used as motivational framing. For both XR and FFF, the widespread mobilization of supporters and the wider public is essential. Climate justice hinges on integrating critical perspectives, including those of individuals that have been marginalized by EU institutions, such as the victims of historic colonialism. Much of the political communication of the climate movement focuses on climate strikes, climate camps, and the number of people participating in street protests. This widespread popular support is repeatedly used to underscore the potential for collective action to influence decision-making processes at the European level, highlighting avenues for fostering a more participatory and responsive EU governance framework of which the European Citizen Initiative or the Conference on the Future of Europe might be the first steps. These include initiatives like the European Climate Pact (Tosun et al., 2023; Celik, 2025), which emerged within the context of the Conference on the Future of Europe framework, and established methods like public consultations and grassroots participatory approaches such as citizen assemblies or panels.

What strategic options can be seen in the strategies of the climate movement? As mentioned in Section “Public Spheres, Political Imaginaries, and Transnational Activism”, social movements address multilevel opportunity structures through three strategies: domestication, externalization, and transnationalization, as conceptualized by della Porta and Caiani (2011). Domestication involves mobilizing nationally to influence EU-level actions, externalization calls on the EU to put pressure on national governments, and transnationalization entails collaborative networks aimed at domestic or EU decision-makers. In the data collected on political communication, the predominant focus of the climate movement is the national level, which reflects the discussion about the nation-state focus within the climate movement (Lieven, 2020, 2021; Hallam, 2021). In the subset of statements focusing on the EU, the predominant strategy of the climate movement is transnationalization, which emerges when networks of social movements collaborate to influence decision-makers either at a domestic or an EU level collectively. There are few indications of domestication (when social movements mobilize nationally to influence their

¹⁰<https://www.carbonbrief.org/climate-strikers-open-letter-to-eu-leaders-on-why-their-new-climate-law-is-surrender/>

government to act at the EU level) or externalization (targeting the EU directly to pressure national governments).

Transnationalization is reflected not only in the positions of climate protestors or the frames used but also in the activities of the climate movement, even if this is still mainly organized on a national level. Attention to the EU level came relatively late: it was only in May 2020 that XR formed a European-level group (Parks et al., 2023). Greta Thunberg was invited to speak to the Environment Committee of the European Parliament in 2019. In the case of XR, protests targeted towards the European Commission have called for the environmental crisis to be prioritized and for more to be done than merely recognizing the climate emergency—which is one of XR’s founding axioms. Other activities were more decentralized but synchronized, as activists from several European countries joined protests organized by Extinction Rebellion Europe under the banner ‘Bail Out The Planet’, aimed at challenging the European Commission’s economic policies that favour business. Interestingly, the weak targeting of the EU by the climate movement is not reciprocal. As Pollex and Berker (2024) show, most party groups in the European Parliament have reacted positively to the climate movement.

While multiscale protest can be considered a classic EU-focused social movement strategy, another strategy that has been discussed is participation in European Parliament elections, which the German climate movement ‘Last Generation’ (*Letzte Generation*) announced in 2023.¹¹ ‘Last Generation’ and its national iterations in Germany, Austria, Italy, or Poland represent a further iteration of the new climate movement, which is not discussed here but has developed transnational ties mostly in the form of the A22 network, which is funded via the Climate Emergency Fund, a US-based, non-profit organization that supports civil disobedience.

While these examples show the opportunities for transnationalization that are open to the new climate movement, other examples point to negative consequences and relate to the gradual institutionalization of groups like FFF. The intersection of climate activism and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that erupted following the Hamas terrorist attack in 2023 show how transnational ties might not only strengthen but also weaken the climate movement. After Roger Hallams and Greta Thunberg’s support for

¹¹<https://www.euractiv.com/section/elections/news/german-climate-activists-enter-eu-elections-last-generation-aims-to-shake-up-parliament/>

the Palestinian cause had already caused damage to the reputation of the movement in some of the member states, FFF's Europe Twitter posts were criticized for repeatedly expressing a position that was critical of Israel. Closer scrutiny revealed that pro-Palestinian members had taken control of the Twitter handle and that no communication strategy was in place to coordinate an EU-wide position-taking (taz 28. 10, 2023).

CONCLUSION

We have argued in this chapter that although climate protest participants have much more trust in the EU than the general public in their respective countries, the discourse of the climate movement remains deeply sceptical of the EU as a polity and as a climate policy actor (Milan, 2020). At the national level, Fridays for Future (FFF) has embraced progressive and reformist solutions within the existing political and economic framework, while the critique put forward by Extinction Rebellion (XR) is more radical but less concrete.

We have also found that participants in climate protests are generally much younger than the average population, making them less likely to be Eurosceptic (Chironi et al., 2024). Older generations tend to be more attached to national identities and perceive the changes brought about by the EU as unfavourable, such as a loss of sovereignty. Nevertheless, participants in climate protests demonstrate significantly higher levels of trust in the EU compared to the average population in their societies. At the same time, our analysis of the political communication of FFF and XR reveals that little attention is paid to the EU as an actor in its own right. When the EU is mentioned, the climate movement primarily employs a strategy of transnationalization, fostering alliances among social movements to shape policymaking at both the domestic and EU levels. By contrast, there is little evidence of domestication—mobilizing nationally to influence governments to act within the EU—or externalization, where activists directly target the EU to exert pressure on national governments.

The ultimate aim of this chapter was to assess the development of the 'green public sphere' in the EU by analysing the imaginaries of the climate movement as potential producers of a transnational field of discourse. Using Nancy Fraser's differentiation between 'weak' and 'strong' public spheres (Fraser, 1990), it is clear that the climate movement constitutes a 'weak public', both on a national and on a European level. This does not

mean it lacks influence on political decision-making, but rather that its influence must be channelled through traditional means, such as political parties or by influencing public opinion. To strengthen its influence, the climate movement must navigate these multilevel opportunity structures effectively, potentially fostering stronger public spheres capable of shaping meaningful climate policy at both the national and the EU level.

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Defending the Status Quo: The Dilemmas of Anti-Brexit Activism after the 2016 Referendum

Adam Fagan  and *Stijn van Kessel* 

INTRODUCTION

A social movement, following Gamson and Meyer (1996, p. 283), can be seen as “a sustained and self-conscious challenge to authorities or cultural codes by a field of actors”, and share a collective identity and have dense informal networks (della Porta & Caiani, 2009). Movements ‘frame’ a particular issue in a way that they believe is likely to mobilize bystanders. In this way they can create an opportunity to make their grievance resonant, or make best use of an opportunity that has arisen due to the occurrence of a particular incident. In order to create (or ‘frame’) a political opportunity for themselves, they often need to rely on an ‘optimistic

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rhetoric of change’: “[t]heir job is to convince potential challengers that action leading to change is possible and desirable” (Gamson & Meyer, 1996, p. 286). How do movements formulate their message, however, when they essentially exist to defend long-established political institutions *against* forces that desire radical change? We ask this question with reference to the grass-roots movement that emerged in the weeks and months after the June 2016 ‘Brexit’ referendum to defend the UK’s membership of the EU, and to stop the country’s departure; a pro-EU mobilization established to resist change and preserve the status quo.

For a long time, there was little need for social movements defending the EEC/EC/EU. Citizens lacked genuine interest in the presumed technocratic process of European integration, and passively trusted their political elites to proceed (Lindberg & Scheingold, 1970). Only in the past few decades has this ‘permissive consensus’ started to weaken, being replaced with a ‘constraining dissensus’ (Hooghe & Marks, 2009). The financial and migrant crises after the turn of the twenty first century, as well as the UK’s Brexit referendum vote 2016, placed the EU yet higher on several countries’ political agendas—even if only temporarily (Hutter & Kriesi, 2019).

This ‘politicization of Europe’ has mainly been discussed with reference to Eurosceptic forces in the ‘conventional’ party-political arena, not least those on the radical right (see Hutter et al., 2016). More recently, however, citizens have started to come out to defend the EU, or at least the broader principle of European integration. Although this movement is concentrated in a few countries, pro-European citizens are forming local grass-roots organizations as well as cross-national networks. In our study we assess how, in the case of the UK after the Brexit vote, such activists and organizations interpreted and problematized the current situation (‘diagnostic’ framing), but also how, if at all, they sought to sway Eurosceptic citizens by providing alternative solutions and visions of ‘Europe’ (‘prognostic framing’) (see Benford & Snow, 2000).

This article focuses on the grass-roots anti-Brexit movement in the UK that emerged in the aftermath of the 2016 referendum. Whilst the pro-Remain movement that existed in the period from the announcement of the referendum up until the vote in June 2016 was an elite-level, London-based initiative that lacked efficacious local branches and networks (van Kessel & Fagan, 2022), the mobilization that emerged immediately after the vote was very different indeed. Local activists, often with little or no previous experience of political campaigning, took to social media and

town centres across the UK to resist Brexit and defend the EU. From a social movement perspective this mobilization is of interest both in terms of its scale (no such popular mobilization in support of Europe had occurred previously in the UK, even during the 1975 referendum), and in terms of the context in which it operated (defending the *status quo ante* in the aftermath of a decisive referendum decision to leave the EU, endorsed by the centre-right government and not formally opposed by the main opposition Labour Party). Other pro-EU movements, such as *Pulse of Europe* in Germany, are not ‘counter-movements’; they exist to defend the status quo against far-right Eurosceptic populists and anti-liberal counter-movements.

Our contribution is twofold. First, we add to the broader social movement literature by linking our study to the still limited research on the phenomenon of ‘counter-movements’¹ (e.g. Mottl, 1980; Lo, 1982; Meyer & Staggenborg, 1996). Studies in this field focus mostly on conservative or far-right movements that emerged to oppose the agenda of left-liberal organizations, for instance in the areas of civil rights (Mottl, 1980), LGBT rights (Ayoub & Chetaille, 2020), abortion law (McCaffrey & Keys, 2000; Meyer & Staggenborg, 2015), environmental protection (Hess & Brown, 2017) and the politics of immigration and race (Blee & Creasap, 2010; Blee & Yates, 2015; Smith, 2020). This literature focuses on the dynamic interaction between movements and counter-movements, whereby the latter is almost invariably a conservative or right-wing response to a progressive liberal reform. In this study, on the other hand, the anti-Brexit ‘counter-movement’ emerged to defend the existing ‘liberal’ order against the rise of culturally conservative and nationalist forces.

Whilst frame construction presents a challenge for all social movements, this is particularly difficult for a movement which has emerged to defend established political institutions. A balance needs to be struck between critiquing aspects of **what currently exists (the liberal order), defending key aspects of it, whilst proposing an alternative vision that is not significantly different from the *status quo ante***. Drawing on the work of Snow and Benford (1988), we observe that problem articulation and the formulation of alternative visions are intrinsically linked. More specifically, we argue that diagnostic framing that is overly skewed towards

¹Understood here as movements that emerge to resist or oppose a (usually) progressive change. Indeed, most such movements have arisen to counter liberal reforms such as abortion and LGBT rights.

apportioning blame or identifying enemies, as opposed to identifying the underlying roots of the problem, hampers the formulation of cogent prognostic frames.

Second, our study makes a significant empirical contribution by studying a relatively new phenomenon: pro-EU/European activism. Whilst there exist many studies concentrating on ‘Euroscepticism’, both as an attitude amongst citizens (e.g. de Vries, 2018) as well as a position of political parties (e.g. Taggart, 1998), very little has been written on *pro-European* activism (Roth, 2018; Brändle et al., 2018; della Porta, 2020). Incipient grass-roots pro-European activism thus remains an underexplored topic in both the social movement literature and the literature on the ‘politicization’ of European integration (Hutter et al., 2016).

We begin by introducing the notion of ‘framing’ and how it has been used within social movement studies to understand the efficacy and salience of movements’ discourse. We then introduce our analytical approach, which is followed by the presentation of our case study findings. We first consider how the movement deployed diagnostic frames, followed by a consideration of their prognostic framing.

In our analysis we fully acknowledge that the anti-Brexit activists were primarily mobilizing *against Brexit, instead of for the EU*, and therefore represent a particular manifestation of pro-EU activism. Indeed, it is perhaps quite understandable as to why activists faced with the UK’s imminent departure from the EU would perhaps be more inclined to focus their energies on defending the status quo (the UK remaining in the EU) than to articulate a vision of a future EU. However, we contend that the limited efforts of the movement to identify and address the underlying causes of increased Euroscepticism—other than blaming established politicians—as the basis for then developing a cogent prognostic frame seriously limited the scope for galvanizing additional support.

SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND IDEATIONAL FRAMING

Whilst the early social movement literature emphasized political processes and the mobilization of resources to explain the emergence of societal activism, later scholarship has focused on the concept of ‘framing’ to describe the ‘process of negotiating shared meaning’ that movements undertake in order to articulate their grievances and galvanize support (Gamson, 1992). The focus on framing is part of a more fundamental cultural turn in the social movement literature and a shift away from more

structurally deterministic analyses (Morris, 2000). Following Snow and Benford (1992, p. 137), we understand ‘a frame’ as an “interpretative schemata that simplifies and condenses the ‘world out there’ by selectively punctuating and encoding objects, situations, events, experiences and sequences of action within one’s present or past environment”. We define ‘framing’ as “the conscious strategic efforts by groups of people to fashion shared understandings of the world and of themselves that legitimate and motivate collective action” (McAdam et al., 1996, p. 6).

Most importantly, in terms of how we evaluate the role of movements and activism generally, we focus on the “ideational elements of persuasive communication” that are essential to the framing process (Steinberg, 1999, p. 737). Some scholars have gone as far as to contend that “(t)he quality of the frames is one of the crucial factors which determine the success of the mobilisation of social movements” (Gerhards & Rucht, 1992, p. 226). Whilst frames are seen as an ideational construct and the product of a dialogic process, to be successful they must resonate with “the life world of potential participants” (Snow & Benford, 1988, p. 205). That is, they must be “believable, palatable, and compatible with prevailing beliefs and assumptions” (Smith, 2020, p. 8).

In general, framing is about ‘meaning making’, a key function that scholars attribute to social movements (McAdam, 1982). In other words, frames are not simply a reflection of grievance but are the mechanisms for articulating and developing understanding of the issues at stake. A distinction is made throughout the literature between ‘diagnostic’ and ‘prognostic’ frames (Benford & Snow, 2000).² The former refers to social movements identifying “a problem that deserves to be changed (...) and an assertion of its cause (or causes) that warrants a response” (Smith, 2020, p. 4); the latter is understood as the articulation of solutions and the course of action to be taken to remedy the identified problem. Prognostic framing involves social movement supporters proposing “a plan of attack, and the strategies for carrying out the plan” (Benford & Snow, 2000, p. 616).

Whilst framing explains why different campaigns and actions experience variable levels of success within the same domestic opportunity structure and with the same resource availability, the approach it is still underpinned

²In our study, we are primarily interested in the public messages of social movements, and less so in how they sought to mobilize participants in their activities, and therefore refrain from taking into consideration their so-called motivational framing.

by the positivist and rationalist notion that ‘meaning’ can be articulated and communicated so as to deliver certain mobilizing effects or outcomes. Frames “are depicted as relatively stable referential modes of representation” (Steinberg, 1999, p. 739), with insufficient attention paid to how movements produce frames and the dialogic, contested and fluid process involved. Indeed, it is assumed that once movements establish frames, strike a certain balance between diagnostic and prognostic frames, they then deploy these in a consistent and coherent manner.

Although studies have sought to differentiate between strategic processes involved in frame production (e.g. bridging, amplification, extension and transformation) (Snow et al., 1986), the inter-connectedness of identifying the problem, apportioning blame and devising solutions has not been fully considered (Gerhards & Rucht, 1992; Nepstad, 1997). Indeed, Benford and Snow (2000, p. 616) merely observe that “some research suggests that there tends to be a correspondence between an SMO’s diagnostic and prognostic framings (...) [and] the identification of specific problems and causes tends to constrain the range of possible ‘reasonable’ solutions and strategies advocated”. Put simply, if the diagnostic frame only partially articulates the problem and its culprits, the prognostic frame will not be able to comprehensively map the way ahead. How the two frames are intrinsically linked has recently been discussed and illustrated in the context of anti-racist activism (Smith, 2020): if racism is depicted and diagnosed (framed) narrowly in terms of *racist* individuals (rather than institutional or systemic *racism*), or the extent of the problem denied, then the emergent solutions will likely be ineffective.

Whilst further understanding of the interconnectedness between the two framing components is important for all social movement campaigns, we deem it particularly critical for movements that exist primarily to defend established institutions. Even though they respond largely to developments in the conventional political arena (either at home or abroad), pro-European movements can in many ways be considered as *counter-movements*: “a particular kind of protest movement which is a response to the social change advocated by an initial movement” (Mottl, 1980, p. 620). However, as we previously outlined, studies of counter-movements have tended to focus on conservative activism, whereas our focus is on actors defending European integration, which is typically seen, not least by right-wing Eurosceptics, as a project of liberal cosmopolitanism.

For ‘pro-change movements’ the framing task primarily involves envisioning an alternative future. In the case of conservative counter-movements, the primary focus is to defend the status quo and critique reforms. However, for pro-European movements that seek to defend *aspects* of the status quo whilst also offering a ‘progressive’ vision—but one that is not dissimilar from what currently exists—frame construction is far more complex. How much criticism of the current situation can be articulated without calling into question the merits of the status quo? To what extent can a vision of the future be promoted without sowing the seeds of discontent with the current state of affairs? What seems to be the best option is to apportion blame—to focus on lambasting those who have enabled the current adversarial situation to happen.

It is our assertion that diagnostic and prognostic frame development are intrinsically connected, with both emerging via a process of constructing and then communicating ‘a perceived reality’ that informs the notion of ‘the problem’, ‘the culprit’ and ‘the solution’ (Entman, 1993). The process of frame construction involves consideration of how a movement “chang(es) old understandings and generates new meanings” (Benford & Snow, 2000, p. 625). These meanings, then, determine not just its vision of the future, but also how it articulates its critique of the status quo and the apportioning of blame.

ANALYSING THE FRAMES OF PRO-EUROPEAN SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

There are various studies that consider the way the EU and its institutions are perceived and approached by a variety of social movement organizations (SMOs) (e.g. Imig & Tarrow, 2001; Balme & Chabanet, 2008). Yet studies concentrating on the general course of European integration as the *subject* of politicization in the protest arena remain scarce (e.g. Brändle et al., 2018). The fact that such protests have remained relatively uncommon is one obvious explanation; the issue of European integration has been more salient in the electoral arena than in the protest arena (e.g. Dolezal et al., 2016). A limited number of studies have nevertheless described the ‘critical Europeanist’ positions of radical left SMOs (della Porta & Caiani, 2009) or the EU-sceptic ‘Europe of sovereign nations’ vision of far-right movements (Caiani & Weisskircher, 2020).

Explicitly pro-European social movements are still relatively rare, and as of yet understudied. Whilst a labyrinth of organizations and movements such as the European Movement existed across the continent from the late 1940s onwards, these were more akin to professional lobbying organizations and interest groups than protest movements as such. Apart from when citizens came out in favour of the ratification of particular EU treaties, pro-EU activism has been largely conspicuous by its absence. One possible exception is VOLT,³ a pan-European initiative established in 2017 which, however, remained critical of the current institutional setup of the bloc and has essentially entered the conventional political arena as a pan-European political party.

Two grassroots pro-European movements stand out as exceptional and therefore also crucial cases in terms of their ability to mobilize a considerable number of citizens to come out in defence of ‘Europe’ on a regular basis. The first is the anti-Brexit movement, the focus of this article, which mobilized after the UK’s referendum vote on 23 June 2016. The second is the Pulse of Europe (PoE), which was founded in Frankfurt am Main, November 2016. Although the latter organization has activists in various European countries, its activities have been primarily concentrated in towns and cities across Germany.

Our analysis is based on original data from 29 semi-structured interviews with activists from across the UK. Some interviews were held with more than one interviewee or as a larger focus group (see Appendix for list of interviews). Most interviews were with activists affiliated with local branches of *Britain for Europe* and the *European Movement*, but also with key members of various other groups.

In addition to interview material, we rely on information on the local organizations’ websites and a content analysis of (online) campaign materials (545 in total). For the purpose of this study, we consider which themes were central to the movement’s messages. We use pre-defined frame categories similar to those used in other studies on political actors’ framing of ‘Europe’ (Helbling et al., 2010; Pirro et al., 2018): socio-economic frames (‘economy’); socio-cultural frames (‘immigration, culture & identity’); frames related to the issues of ‘peace & security’; and those related to ‘democracy, freedom & legitimacy’. The latter category includes messages concerning sovereignty, quality of democracy and rule

³<https://volteuropa.org/about>

of law, but also statements about the integrity and responsiveness of domestic political actors.

PROBLEM IDENTIFICATION AND BLAME ATTRIBUTION: DIAGNOSTIC FRAMING

The anti-Brexit movement has been continuously evolving over the last few years into a complex network of various affiliated groups. Most individuals involved only became active *after* the referendum returned the ‘Leave’ result. The plethora of small local grass-roots organizations typically associated themselves with the nationwide *Britain for Europe* network or the *European Movement*, and later, upon its launch in April 2018, the *People’s Vote* campaign. The latter organization coordinated several large marches in London from late 2018 onwards that attracted hundreds of thousands of people (Brändle et al., 2018).

Throughout our interviews, it was abundantly clear that the key issue that concerned pro-European activists was stopping or challenging Brexit; this was ‘the problem’ and the driver of activism. Indeed, there was no discussion about wider challenges the EU faced (e.g. the migrant crisis). In other words, the anti-Brexit movement was essentially focused on the domestic context and the immediate challenge of remaining within the EU. In terms of identifying the source of the problem (i.e. why the referendum vote was lost), activists invariably highlighted a sustained negative campaign about the EU that was not properly countered either in political discourse, or as part of the education system. In terms of identifying perpetrators, this was typically the media, and local or national politicians. In the words of one activist from London for Europe:

I just foresaw this [Brexit] happening. I was one of the few people around who felt that we’re going to lose this, you know, because I could just see the drip, drip, drip of 40 years of propaganda from the tabloids and the growth and activism of the UK Independence Party. (Interview UK 1, London for Europe)

Many activists felt the EU was used as a scapegoat for social problems for which domestic politicians were to blame. At the same time, several activists claimed that the Brexit vote could partly be interpreted as a vote against the British political establishment. For example, when asked to explain why people backed Brexit in a city that has benefited greatly from

EU Structural Funds, activists from Liverpool identified the impact of austerity and people wishing ‘to kick the Tory government’.

Several activists also highlighted the failure of supporters of EU membership to speak out and to counter the insidious Euroscepticism within the media and in politics. As an activist from Wales for Europe observed:

I think it's safe to say now that when you look back at the decades before the referendum, when even pro-European people in Britain largely took it for granted...they took the EU for granted and generally kept their heads down when the London press and the Mail were savaging the EU; there was an assumption that it [Euroscepticism] would all go away. (Interview UK 16, Wales for Europe)

Alongside the role of the media and Eurosceptic politicians, high levels of support for Brexit in the Northeast of England were explained in terms of the local economy, and understood as a reaction to years of economic decline and a sense of the region being forgotten by successive governments:

These areas are run down. [There's] high unemployment and economic problems (...) [people] tend to think it's getting worse and worse. (Interview UK 10, North East for Europe)

In many of the interviews, it was stated that people had voted for Brexit because they were either unaware of the economic and cultural benefits of being part of the EU, or because this had not been made clear to them:

I was obviously always aware of the benefits of being part of Europe. I think others are not aware of the benefits the EU has given to us: no wars and it's kept people together. (Interview UK 25, Falkirk for Europe)

In all cases interviewees thought the status quo (membership) was better than any alternative, because of the multitude of benefits the EU was deemed to provide to the UK and its citizens. Activists did not link the Brexit vote to any presumed flaws in the institutional set-up of the Union or to its policies (even though most would concede the EU was not perfect). Continued UK membership was typically defended from the perspective of correcting misinformation from the press and Brexit-supporting politicians, and misapprehensions regarding the jurisdiction of the EU.

These messages were also dominant in public messages as conveyed in campaign materials distributed and publicized by a variety of anti-Brexit organizations. In Fig. 7.1, two categories stand out in the UK case: frames related to socio-economic matters and those related to the legitimacy of the Brexit outcome and process. A clear majority of the former referred to the presumed adverse socio-economic consequences of Brexit (damage to the UK's economy in general, job losses, threats to local businesses, etc.). The 'democracy, freedom & legitimacy' category included many claims alluding to the alleged shift in public opinion against the current direction of Brexit, or in favour of a second referendum or staying in the EU altogether. More often, messages expressed explicit criticism of UK politicians. Some messages criticized the government for acting irresponsibly or against the interest of the British people, others were more aggressive and explicitly *ad hominem*. Upon becoming prime minister in July 2019, Boris Johnson became a prominent target. "He's lying to you", the youth-led organization For Future's Sake claimed, "Johnson's deal won't 'get Brexit done'—it'll keep us stuck in chaotic negotiations for years". Diagnostic

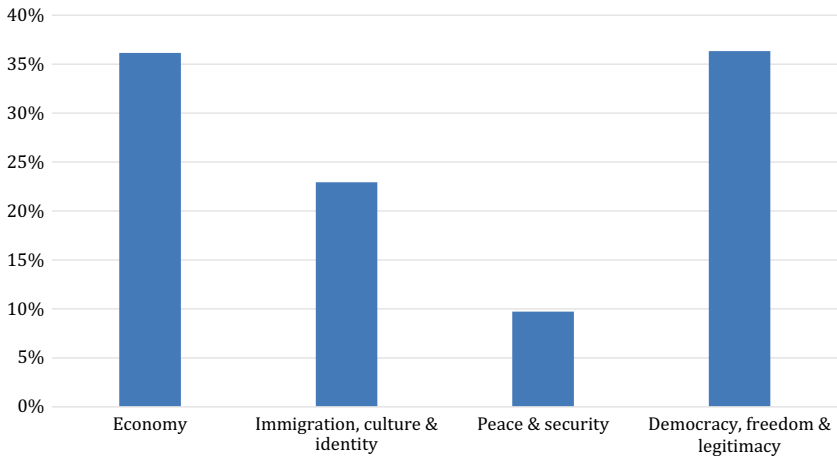


Fig. 7.1 Frames used in anti-Brexit campaign materials. (Notes: *frame analysis on the basis of 545 anti-Brexit movement materials. These materials include leaflets, posters and edited photos/memes that were posted on publicly accessible social media (Facebook and Twitter). The materials were posted online between the date of the referendum, 23 June 2016, and the general election of 12 December 2019*)

frames were thus reflected very often in messages that emphasized the adverse consequences of Brexit as well as the dishonest and unresponsive character of British (Conservative) politicians.

AIMS AND VISION OF EUROPE: PROGNOSTIC FRAMING

How did activists in the UK seek to convince the wider public of the merits of the EU, and EU membership in particular? Perhaps the one thing that all local activists agreed upon was that telling those who had voted for Brexit that they had been wrong did not constitute an appropriate campaign strategy. Local activists described how they challenged pro-Brexit viewpoints carefully and somewhat indirectly:

*You know, you've got to grasp where they're coming from and agree with their problems: 'yeah, the state of the roads is dreadful, you're right, it's dreadful that you can't get a GP appointment. But have you considered that actually, you know, Europe doesn't decide how much money gets spent on your local GP' (...)
You point out the fact that it's nothing to do with Europe. (Interview UK 13, Lincolnshire for Europe)*

In terms of what arguments activists deployed in their quest to gain support, there was considerable variation across the UK. Support for Brexit was often highest in areas that, due to high levels of social deprivation, received considerable EU subsidy. Local activists did broach the issue directly, and tried to challenge the belief that the money saved through Brexit would be deployed locally (e.g. Interview UK 16, Wales for Europe). Unsurprisingly, given the proximity to mainland Europe and the number of EU citizens living and working in the capital, London activists tended to **emphasize travel and free movement** more than elsewhere. Yet also here, messages were strategically tailored depending on the audience. This London activist explained:

Different audiences will obviously have different buttons that will appeal to them (...) I mean, you obviously have to argue why the EU is beneficial on so many different angles and levels. And you try and appeal to people according to their concerns and try to tailor it according to the audience. (Interview UK 1, London for Europe)

Despite the prevalence of controlling borders and limiting immigration within the Leave campaign, the vast majority of local activists interviewed did not seem confident about trying to explicitly frame the issue of immigration in a positive manner. Whilst privately convinced about the merits of open borders and free movement, most expressed reservations about raising it as a strategic part of their campaigning. One of North East for Europe's leaflet messages was telling in this regard: "Brexit will not stop immigration". The underlying assumption seemed to be that immigration was generally perceived as a problem rather than something widely celebrated. Nevertheless, in locations with a stronger left-liberal character, such as Bristol, occasional positive messages about immigration could be found. Among the campaign materials expressing a 'cultural' frame, there were certainly some that **celebrated the tolerance and diversity that is supposedly connected to EU membership** (see Fig. 7.1). Often, however, materials in this category voiced a more **pragmatic message**, for instance, arguing that Brexit would deter **much-needed EU healthcare workers coming to the UK**—the supposedly 'useful' immigrants.

In general, messages of UK activists seemed primarily chosen strategically, in order to convince people it was best to 'keep Britain in the EU', which seemed to equate with the status quo. When we asked about ideas and messages related to the functioning of the EU and possible reforms, the comment below reflects how many activists across the UK responded:

We tend not to have those discussions. I was involved with a London-based group that talked about European democracy and citizenship. I think it's a bit too abstract to have traction in the debates we're going to have in the next 90 days to twelve months. (Interview UK 4, Liverpool for Europe)

When prompted to express their own or collective ideal vision of the EU in the future, the majority of interviewees were reluctant to be drawn on these issues. The words of this activist from London for Europe capture a widely voiced sentiment:

I don't think now's the time [to discuss reforming the EU]. (...) I think it's absolutely right that the EU should be reformed and it will [be] reformed. (...) but there is a danger in going down that road. (Interview UK 11, London for Europe)

Plans to improve its performance and legitimacy were thus neither part of internal discussions nor of strategic messages directed at the wider public. Crucially, the timing also seemed unripe for debating visions of Europe. As one respondent from Liverpool for Europe put it, discussing reforming the EU is for later, when we are “out of the trenches”.

The launch of the *People’s Vote* campaign in April 2018, with which most local organizations affiliated themselves, hardly contributed to the formulation of a clear prognostic vision of ‘Europe’. The over-arching focus on a ‘People’s Vote’, i.e. a second referendum, as the aim of all local anti-Brexit movements somewhat obfuscated the fundamental and strong ‘Remain’ commitment of these activists. The *People’s Vote* objective further removed the incentive to really think about positive arguments for continued EU membership, as the focus was placed so much on the means (a new referendum), rather than the end (staying in the EU).

CONCLUSION

What our case study reveals is a) the difficulty involved in constructing both diagnostic and prognostic frames when a movement exists not to challenge but to defend established institutions; and b) how the two frame types are intrinsically linked. For what we can describe as ‘liberal counter-movements’, diagnostic framing involves attempting to strike a balance between criticizing the status quo just enough to acknowledge that there is a problem requiring a solution, whilst at the same time bolstering support for the existing arrangements and not further weakening public support. Prognostic frame-construction is no less challenging: it involves articulating a vision for the way ahead which cannot veer too far from the status quo lest it inadvertently conjures further discontent. Our data would suggest that such a balance was not struck. The anti-Brexit movement was primarily occupied with halting the essentially domestic process of Brexit, and consciously shied away from developing concrete ideas about the future of the EU, or indeed addressing the concerns about the democratic deficit and sovereignty that had not just pervaded the pro-Leave campaign but had also been expressed by those on the Left who were critical of the EU but not necessarily pro-Brexit, and amongst ‘floating’ voters.

Our findings further reveal that in cases where the movement is essentially a non-conservative counter-movement that exists to defend rather than oppose the status quo, diagnostic frames appear to be skewed towards

apportioning blame or identifying antagonists, with little or no clear identification or articulation of underlying societal problems to be solved. For example, the lack of popular support for Europe was explained in terms of the failure of elites to defend the EU in its current form, deliberate misinformation, and/or a lack of understanding of the benefits of European integration. Our analysis of public messages did not reveal any identification of the more fundamental reasons why citizens do not support the EU. In the absence of a more precise diagnosis of underlying problems, it is hardly surprising that the prognostic frames that the movement created were vague and unspecific, and therefore did not help to reach the goal of further mobilization. Indeed, the over-arching message was that the alternative (leaving the EU) was a Leviathan that had to be avoided at all costs.

It is important to acknowledge that presenting a plan for Europe's future was neither an immediate goal of the anti-Brexit movement—that fought a domestic political fire. Yet our case study offers important implications for the future of any pro-EU activism and the prospects for such movements in countering Euroscepticism. Defending the EU without directly addressing citizen concerns is seriously limiting in terms of agenda-setting and broadening support. The conscious choice to campaign on the basis of a broad, and to a certain extent non-ideological, anti-Brexit or pro-European message may be effective in terms of mobilizing activists and supporters with diverging political allegiances (see Aslanidis, 2018). However, if pro-European social movements wish to effectively counter Euroscepticism as well as to set the agenda on European integration, it seems imperative that a more cogent vision of a future Europe that at least addresses Eurosceptic concerns is articulated.

APPENDIX: LIST OF INTERVIEWS

UK interviews

<i>Interview #</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Organisation</i>	<i># of interviewees</i>
1	04/02/2019	London for Europe	1
2	25/02/2019	Liverpool for Europe	5
3	26/02/2019	<i>Anonymous</i>	1
4	26/02/2019	Liverpool for Europe	1
5	26/02/2019	<i>Anonymous</i>	1
6	28/02/2019	European Movement Northern Ireland	2

(continued)

(continued)

<i>Interview #</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Organisation</i>	<i># of interviewees</i>
7	28/02/2019	European Movement Northern Ireland	1
8	01/03/2019	Our Future Our Choice Northern Ireland	2
9	07/03/2019	North East/Angels for Europe	2
10	08/03/2019	North East for Europe	1
11	12/03/2019	London/Watford for Europe	3
12	26/03/2019	Our Future Our Choice	1
13	15/04/2019	Lincolnshire for Europe*	1
14	17/04/2019	Stockport for Europe*	1
15	06/06/2019	Bristol for Europe	2
16	25/07/2019	Wales for Europe*	1
17	25/07/2019	SODEM (Stand of Defiance European Movement)	2
18	15/07/2019	Determined to Rejoin the EU Facebook Group*	1
19	30/08/2019	Ethnic Minorities for a PV; LGBT+ for a PV	1
20	30/08/2019	Our Future Our Choice	1
21	09/09/2019	For our Future's Sake (FFS)	1
22	22/10/2019	Glasgow Loves EU	1
23	23/10/2019	Glasgow for Europe	1
24	25/10/2019	Stirling4Europe*	1
25	25/11/2019	Falkirk for Europe*	1
26	28/05/2020	Lincolnshire for Europe*	1
27	28/05/2020	Liverpool for Europe*	3
28	05/06/2020	Grassroots for Europe*	1
29	22/06/2020	Scientists for EU*	1

Notes: * via Skype/Zoom, all others face-to-face

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CHAPTER 8

The EU's Promotion of Human Rights in the South Caucasus: Underpinning Logics and Alternative Imaginations

Laura Luciani 

INTRODUCTION

In early March 2023, thousands of protesters took to the streets in Tbilisi, the capital city of Georgia, in an attempt to prevent the passage of a controversial draft law on ‘Agents of Foreign Influence’. Under the proposed bill, any Georgian-language media or non-governmental organization (NGO) registered in Georgia that receives over 20% of their annual income from abroad—that is, almost the entirety of Georgian NGOs—would be forced to register on a ‘Foreign Influence Agents Registry’. While the ruling Georgian Dream party stressed the importance of following Western transparency standards, opposers of the draft bill denounced the attack on

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critical media and independent civil society organizations, including the people who benefit from their services (Women's Fund in Georgia, 2023). Protesters opposing what they dubbed the 'Russian law' discursively linked the proposed bill with the 'Foreign Agents Law' introduced in Russia in 2012: through legislative restrictions to undercut the transnational ties between Western donors and foreign-funded NGOs, coupled with a stigmatizing rhetoric, this had effectively turned "civil society into a geopolitical battleground" between the Russian conception of 'sovereign democracy' and Western democracy promotion agendas (Stuvøy, 2020). Brussels repeatedly warned that adoption of the law would undermine Georgia's prospects of joining the European Union (EU). In one video from the protests that went viral, a woman continues waving the EU flag even while being blasted by a water cannon. Popular mobilization in March 2023 had successfully halted adoption of the law, as the government withdrew the bill. However, the 'Foreign Agents' bill (and mass protests aimed at fighting it) made a comeback in Spring 2024, months after the European Commission had recommended granting candidate status to Georgia, and was eventually adopted in May 2024.

These ongoing developments highlight the need to examine not only the financial, but also the discursive and geopolitical entanglements between 'civil society' and 'Europe', as they are manifested and contested in the Eastern neighbourhood of the EU. Since the early 2010s, under the Eastern Partnership (EaP) framework, the EU has been engaging with civil society actors in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus, considering them important partners in the bottom-up promotion of human rights, democracy and development (Buzogány, 2018; Luciani, 2021). However, in a context of waning global consensus concerning liberal democracy, the norms promoted by the EU and the very idea of an 'enabling' space for civil society have become deeply contested. The adoption of the 'Foreign Agents Law' in Georgia is another iteration of attempts by hybrid and authoritarian regimes in the Eurasian region to contest the role played by transnational civil society and its ties with Western donors (Cooley, 2019). In the South Caucasus, these trends intertwine with protracted conflicts and heightened EU-Russia competition over their neighbourhood—with the 2022 Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine marking a major geopolitical turning point. This conjuncture has resulted in increased insecurity for rights-based civil society groups, who are labelled as agents of foreign powers and often targeted as proxies of what is perceived as Western cultural imperialism. Human rights NGOs in the region find themselves

caught between EU-sponsored standards of 'development' that they are expected to further promote and increased domestic and regional resistance to these very paradigms.

In this chapter, I propose a transnational and relational analysis of the EU's human rights promotion in the South Caucasus region. I will outline how the multi-scalar combination of EU interventions, post-socialist domestic conditions and grassroots agency creates particular challenges and tensions for local civil society. To do so, I will unpack three logics underpinning the EU's normative interventions in the South Caucasus—namely: depoliticization, homogenization and geopoliticization—and provide illustrations of how they play out on the ground in Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan. Bringing together theoretical and empirical engagements, I will argue that local civil society actors are able to negotiate, subvert and resist these EU logics in multiple ways, which also make it possible to envision alternative social orders beyond EU-centric ones. The analysis draws on a combination of qualitative methods, including multi-sited participant observations, over 90 in-depth interviews and informal conversations (involving research participants from local civil societies, EU institutions, the scholarly and expert community, international donor organizations and governmental agencies), which were conducted between 2018–2022 in Armenia, Georgia, Azerbaijan and Brussels in the framework of doctoral research (Luciani, 2022). An initial list of civil society organizations (CSOs) and experts collaborating with the EU was compiled from publicly available sources and personal contacts, and was subsequently further expanded by 'snowballing' a diverse range of respondents, from formal NGOs to grassroots initiatives and independent activists, which may or may not be engaged with the EU. The fieldwork data were supplemented by a discourse analysis performed on key EU policy documents, relevant statements, as well as media and social media sources.

This chapter is structured as follows. Firstly, I will review the literature on civil society developments in the South Caucasus, focusing on the interplay between post-socialist conditions and international interventions. Following this, I will unpack the three dominant logics underpinning the EU's promotion of human rights, as they are mainstreamed and enacted in EU transnational cooperation with civil society in Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan. Thirdly, I will consider ongoing attempts by activist groups in the South Caucasus to articulate alternatives beyond these dominant logics and their conditions of possibility in the current

geo-political context. Finally, I will discuss the prospects of critically reappraising the EU's promotion of human rights in the South Caucasus.

CIVIL SOCIETY 'BUILDING' AND TRANSFORMATIONS IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS

During the latter years of the Soviet era, various networks dedicated to human rights and democracy, such as the Helsinki Citizens Assembly committees, were active in the South Caucasus and across Central and Eastern Europe. Some of these had roots tracing back to the 1975 Helsinki Accords or were affiliated with dissident movements from the perestroika era (Mendelson & Glenn, 2002). In the decade following the collapse of the Soviet Union, these networks experienced significant expansion, facilitated by the financial support provided to civil society initiatives by Western donors, which led to the establishment of the region's first human rights NGOs (Babajanian et al., 2005; Matveeva, 2008). The emergence of a 'civil society' must be placed in the context of the 'transition' programme in post-socialist Eastern Europe, the South Caucasus and Central Asia, which was influenced by neoliberal ideologies and the Washington consensus (Ishkanian, 2014). As an alternative to the totalitarian rule of the communist state, an independent civil society was considered to be a necessary precondition for democracy. Aside from this, it was also a means for creating a free market economy, by dismantling the social state and outsourcing its responsibilities to non-state actors (Baća, 2022; Matveeva, 2008; Ishkanian, 2014). Around the same period, optimistic scholarship praised the emerging role played by NGOs, as entities (allegedly) guided by activist—rather than power- or profit-driven—principles (Keck & Sikkink, 1998). Transnational advocacy networks gained attention for their perceived ability to pressure “even repressive governments to enact progressive change by mobilizing outside allies in likeminded international organizations, states, and large NGOs” (Cooley, 2019 598). Along these lines, donors viewed the presence of civil society in the post-socialist region as an indicator of development and progress in the transition towards liberal democracy. Although numerous NGOs were formally established, the practical landscape demonstrated low levels of trust and public engagement, which combined with government suspicion and a widespread structural reliance on donor funding. The 'weakness' of post-socialist civil society evoked by Howard (2003) became an explanation for

its limited role in democratization and a defining feature of the region, one that was perceived as almost pathological.

While some scholars have argued that the historical legacies of the Soviet period weakened the ability of civil society to facilitate democratization in the South Caucasus (Aliyev, 2015; Paturyan & Gevorgyan, 2021), a number of accounts critiqued the dominant normative view and the (unintended) consequences of external civil society-building, whereby institutional designs and economic resources from Europe and North America were ‘transplanted’ to the post-socialist region (Atlani-Duault, 2007; Hann & Dunn, 1996; Vetta, 2009). Ishkanian (2014, p. 152) describes this phenomenon as a “genetically engineered” civil society: by this, she means that, thanks to the injection of external funding, it “experienced spectacularly rapid growth, which would have not occurred organically”. She shows how, within one year of the establishment of a local NGO Resource and Training Centre funded by USAID in Yerevan, the number of NGOs registered in Armenia went up from 44 to more than 1500 in 1996. In a post-communist context, where many people had lost their jobs or did not have the financial means to survive, NGOs essentially became a business or a source of income. The resulting ‘civil society’ was characterized by a professionalized structure and donor-driven agenda, which lacked a grassroots constituency and was unable to mobilize society “or contentiously address the most pressing issues brought about by rapid socioeconomic transformation” (Baća, 2022, p. 8). At the same time, in an NGO-ized context, the civic sector crafted effective strategies to influence the state by advocating for improved governance and reforms, while also assuming the role of the state in delivering essential services (Baća, 2022; Hahn-Fuhr & Worschech, 2014). Nevertheless, even the ‘colour revolutions’ in Georgia (2003) or Ukraine (2004), where civil society played a pivotal role, came to be understood as democratic “moments” rather than enduring movements (Hahn-Fuhr & Worschech, 2014, p. 11).

In recent years, scholars have emphasized the diversity of post-socialist civil society, pointing to the emergence of new actors, claims and forms of engagement—together with a recognition that illiberal actors, as well as CSOs closely related to governments, “populate civic space” as much as pro-Western and pro-democracy CSOs and activists (Balfour et al., 2020, p. 15; see also Ishkanian & Manusyan, 2019). Various explanations have been given for these transformations, which were also visible in the South Caucasus. Firstly, they could be read as a response to the perceived disconnect of the NGOs from concerns that the citizenry considered as pressing

(Balfour et al., 2020; Dilanyan et al., 2018). In Armenia, small grassroots ‘civic initiatives’ and left-leaning groups that emerged around the 2010s have critiqued neoliberal policies, and their impact on socio-economic inequalities and the environment (Ishkanian, 2016). Similarly, the recent anti-dam movement in Western Georgia, spearheaded by the ‘Save Rioni Valley’ activists, has been described as a subaltern attempt to fight for development paths that offer an alternative to the neoliberal capitalist option (Rekhviashvili, 2021). Secondly, these transformations reflect shifts in state-civil society relations, such as in the aftermath of Euromaidan in Ukraine and the Velvet Revolution in Armenia (Ishkanian & Manusyan, 2019; Shapovalova & Burlyuk, 2018). Last but not least, they constitute coping strategies in response to mounting authoritarian repression of Western-funded NGOs (Chiarvesio & Di Puppò, 2022; Stuvøy, 2020). In Azerbaijan, the progressive curtailment of freedoms for organized civil society between 2013 and 2015 resulted in the strengthening of the state-led civil society, through government funding and attempts at co-opting independent activists. At the same time, however, it also led to the emergence of non-formalized, youth civic initiatives based on volunteering, crowd-funding and social media engagement (Luciani, 2023b; Kamilsoy, 2023).

Considering this fluidity and ambiguity, new analytical paradigms have also emerged. Baća (2022, p. 16) advocates for a departure from normative notions centred on “the region’s Westernisation through ‘catching up’”, to focus instead on empirical realities and the diversity of compliant and contentious practices “through which postsocialist civil societies are manifested, enacted, and actualized”. Drawing on Gramscian insights, other contributions have made the case for viewing post-socialist civil society as a battleground for hegemonic struggles related to democratization, neoliberal restructuring and European integration (Khelaia & Chivadze, 2022; Mikuš, 2018; Shirinov, 2015). Diverging from the tendency to focus on large-scale, political upheavals (e.g.: revolutions) in the study of post-socialist civil societies, anthropologists have suggested looking at the everyday work of activists with a focus on ‘prefigurative politics’: a commitment to fight different forms of domination while seeking to construct alternative futures in the aftermath of state socialism, neoliberal reforms and the professionalization of civil society (Kurtović & Sargsyan, 2019; Milan, 2021). This chapter is inspired by these types of critical perspectives, which have not yet found appropriate consideration in the study of the EU’s external engagements with post-socialist civil society—a topic

that is mainly characterized by debates related to (in)effectiveness in the diffusion of norms or ‘Europeanization’ (Luciani, 2021). Although this chapter examines civil society developments in the South Caucasus in the transnational context of the EU’s policies aimed at promoting human rights, it does not approach civil society as a means for the EU to pursue its pre-defined democratization and development goals, but rather as an arena of struggle and diversity—wherein hegemonic orders can be reproduced, negotiated as well as contested.

EU HUMAN RIGHTS PROMOTION VIA CIVIL SOCIETY: UNPACKING THE LOGICS

Published a few months after the beginning of the Arab Spring, the 2011 Joint Communication ‘Human Rights and Democracy at the Heart of EU External Action: Towards a more effective approach’ addressed the need for a more enhanced engagement with civil society in the EU’s external relations. This ‘local turn’ was subsequently reflected in the conclusions produced by the Council in 2012 on ‘The Roots of Democracy and Sustainable Development’: in this document, civil society is acknowledged as a key component of any democracy, contributing to “more effective policies, equitable development and inclusive growth” and playing a crucial role in the promotion of human rights (Council of the European Union, 2012). Five years later, the Council reaffirmed this commitment to a “more strategic engagement with CSOs [which] should be mainstreamed in all external instruments and programmes and in all areas of cooperation”, including in the European Neighbourhood Policy (Council of the European Union, 2017). From 2016 onwards, the idea of ‘resilience’ gained a prominent role in the EU’s agenda, something that was most clearly seen with the 2020 Joint Communication ‘Eastern Partnership Policy Beyond 2020’: in this, resilience was intended to foster local ownership by further shifting responsibility from the EU to the domestic level, with an emphasis placed on the ability of partner countries to come up with their own solutions to deal with crises (Petrova & Delcour, 2020). In this context, human rights groups in the South Caucasus have benefited from EU financial assistance, strengthened cooperation and consultations and have also had opportunities to participate in policy developments, both multilaterally and bilaterally. However, despite the rhetoric of ‘local ownership’, governments in the region have met EU efforts with

suspicion. Moreover, the historical disconnect between the public and organized civil society has persisted, together with the dependency of the latter on donor funding.

In the remainder of this section, I will propose a three-fold typology to unpack the three main logics that underpin the promotion of human rights by the EU, and the effects they produce on the ground, based on the findings of my doctoral research (Luciani, 2022). The logic of *depoliticization* entails the reframing of human rights from a radical political action into a technical-legal process, whereby CSOs are intended to play the role of neutral mediators. *Homogenization*, in turn, suggests that human rights struggles abroad are measured against the EU's own experience and models, foreseeing the approximation of South Caucasus countries and societies to EU standards, which are purported as universal. Finally, *geopoliticization* involves the discursive construction of human rights, particularly in the realm of gender and sexuality, through the civilizational and value-laden binaries of 'the EU versus Russia'. Each logic will be examined in a separate subsection, weaving together theoretical engagements with existing literature that has problematized the normative interventions of the EU, as well as original empirical evidence from Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia. Although they will be disentangled for analytical clarity, these three logics should be understood as interrelated and mutually reinforcing. As I will show, they are co-constituted within the encounter between EU policies and grassroots agency: they can be actively reproduced or appropriated by civil society actors on the ground for particular purposes or challenged in more or less overt ways (Luciani, 2022).

Depoliticization

'The Coalition to Stop Violence Against Women' emerged as a grassroots movement in Armenia in 2010, following the brutal murder of Zaruhi Petrosyan by her husband. The Coalition subsequently institutionalized and registered as an NGO; it has received financial support under the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR), among other sources, to implement awareness-raising activities, lobby for improved state policies and provide services to support survivors of gender-based violence. What emerged from the interviews conducted as part of this research is that Coalition members often struggled to find a balance between a radical commitment to fighting patriarchal violence, including through disruptive actions held against state institutions, and

the more reformist, advocacy and service-provision role they were obligated to fulfil as ‘beneficiaries’ of EU funding (Luciani, [forthcoming](#)). As EU funding schemes require CSOs to deal with cumbersome bureaucratic procedures, this reduces the amount of time activists can dedicate to grassroots mobilization—which, according to the interviewees, had at times proved more effective in achieving change than lobbying government officials (*ibidem*). These findings echo the arguments made by scholars who conceptualize the EU’s promotion of civil society in its external relations as a form of neoliberal governmentality (Kurki, 2011; Muehlenhoff, 2019). Accordingly, the EU facilitates a neoliberal conception of democracy and human rights (promotion)—one that extends the free market ideas of entrepreneurship and competition into all spheres of social life. EU funding practices *depoliticize* CSOs, encouraging them to become service providers substituting the state and bearers of rational, efficient and apolitical solutions for deeply political questions. Thus, human rights politics is reframed from transformative political action into a series of visible, measurable and controllable activities. CSOs navigate such neoliberal rationalities and depoliticizing logics in different ways: while interviewees from the Coalition were required to conform to the EU’s ‘rules of the game’ in order to financially sustain their activities and provide essential services such as shelters, which would otherwise not be available to women in Armenia, they also stressed the need to carry out “more radical actions”, including disruptions held against the state, and to challenge the status quo by continuously questioning EU project frameworks and procedures (Luciani, [forthcoming](#)).

The depoliticizing logic is also manifested in a legalistic understanding of human rights—as the EU requires neighbouring countries to adopt specific laws and create institutions that are meant to uphold them, assuming that social change will follow from ‘approximation’ to and compliance with particular legal standards. For 10 years, the ‘Coalition to stop Violence against Women’ had been advocating for the adoption of a national law to prevent and combat domestic and gender-based violence. After being rejected in 2013, the bill was eventually adopted in late 2017, only after the EU had attached conditionality to its passing, namely the disbursement of €12 million in aid under the Human Rights Budget Support programme. However, when human rights reforms are adopted from a list of pre-established EU requirements in exchange for particular incentives (visa liberalization, a budget-support programme or eventual EU membership), their implementation may remain elusive (Dilanyan

et al., 2018; Sloomaeckers, 2023). The Armenian domestic violence law adopted in 2017 thanks to EU conditionality contained highly problematic wording, affirming the primacy of ‘family reconciliation’ over the protection of victims’ rights, and lacked implementation mechanisms.¹ This, in turn, is not conducive to real change in societal attitudes: laws meant to protect marginalized communities remain on paper only if these people do not seek justice for fear of the further social exclusion that follows from speaking up for one’s rights, in a context where legal norms do not resonate with societal attitudes (Sloomaeckers, 2023). Finally, while both governments and NGOs receive EU funding to pursue their implementation, this technocratic manner of developing human rights legislation may fuel opposition against ‘foreign interventions’ (Rawłuszko, 2021): in the Armenian context—marked as it is by the Russian rhetoric of ‘traditional values’ as well as societal perceptions of a contradiction between the Western-sponsored human rights agenda and ‘local traditions’—feminist activists found themselves caught under the ‘double pressure’ of Western conditionality and local anti-gender groups, who discredited EU interventions as promoting ‘values from outside’ (Luciani, *forthcoming*).

Homogenization

The EU’s promotion of human rights is sustained by a complex system of project- and country-reports, European integration indexes and roadmaps, through which South Caucasus countries and their (civil) societies are permanently categorized and evaluated vis-à-vis international standards, EU expectations and benchmarks of ‘success’. This system relies on particular regimes of visibility, allowing the ‘knower’ to transmit specific information and transform particular subjects into a whole field of knowledge (Luciani, 2023b). In the authoritarian context of Azerbaijan, the EU tends to classify civil society groups based on their attitudes vis-à-vis the government, distinguishing between ‘independent’ and ‘government-organized’ NGOs (GONGOs) (Luciani, 2023b). This posits a liberal understanding of civil society, articulated as autonomous from and opposed to the state, as the ‘normal’—overlooking the complex experiences and struggles that civil society groups face on the ground (Stuvø,

¹ Following the 2018 Velvet revolution, the Armenian domestic violence law was amended multiple times to improve its enforcement and support for survivors, most significantly in April 2024.

2020). In a repressive environment, Azerbaijani CSOs have developed pragmatic and ambiguous coping strategies in order to perform human rights work without exposing themselves to government repression (Luciani, 2023b). Some interviewees regretted that, in the years leading up to the crackdown, Western support of civil society focused on topics that are antagonized by the government, such as the issue of political prisoners, while overlooking ‘softer’ issues (such as domestic violence, labour rights or water management) that are also political—as “the rest of the population is not in prison but still repressed” (Azerbaijani women’s rights defender, cited in Luciani, 2023b). At the same time, the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war exposed the vacuity of these binary categorizations, as the views of many civil society representatives that had benefited from EU grants for the promotion of democracy and peacebuilding converged with the position of ‘GONGOS’ in supporting the military actions and Armenophobic rhetoric of President Ilham Aliyev.

Rutazibwa (2013, p. 94) has described the “homogenizing effect” of ethical agendas in Western foreign policy, which “mirrors, or is inspired by, western experiences and achievements”. Due to a changing consensus in Western societies about what a ‘good life’ entails, and since the proposed agenda “often does not match the needs or priorities of the receivers and therefore fails to take root, the need for western interventions is moreover consolidated in time” (*ibidem*). This logic of homogenization, which is also evident in the EU’s mode of knowledge production about the countries and (civil) societies in its neighbourhood, has two consequences that are worth considering. Firstly, as the EU’s contingent models and categories are purported to be universally applicable and neutral, the promotion of human rights serves to re-produce the cultural superiority of Europe,² while strengthening the representation of post-socialist South Caucasus countries as permanently ‘catching up’ (Kunz & Maisenbacher, 2017). In this context, civil society becomes an “agent in a geopolitical ordering of state-civil society relations”, which should be restructured following the EU blueprint (Stuvøy, 2020, p. 14). Secondly, local struggles for emancipation are measured against the EU’s own standards and expectations regarding democratization. This conceals the fact that post-socialist countries find themselves in different historical, social and political

²The term ‘Europe’ indicates a hegemonic position of the EU in influencing and defining the notion of Europe/European, and the fact that the two notions are often conflated in EU discourse.

conditions, requiring a different approach to the promotion of human rights than a mere copying and pasting of Western models. In Azerbaijan, EU interventions generate particular imaginaries of state-civil society relations that reduce local complexities but reinforce the self-understanding of Brussels as a ‘normative power’. However, these practices may have the unintentional consequence of reinforcing the regime’s grip over civil society, by creating a strong aid addiction that makes any crackdowns by governments easier to enact—as the money comes from abroad and domestic support for NGOs is not strong—and by exacerbating competition for external funding among civic groups (Luciani, 2023b). At the same time, discourses, practices or aspirations that deviate from the EU-centric canon are ignored. Donor-centric accounts of Azerbaijani civic space as simply ‘shrinking’ obscure subtler shifts and transformations: notably, the emergence of groups that intentionally position themselves outside of the ‘donor-recipient’ chain, prefiguring alternative modes of activism beyond the neoliberal civil society, rejecting “the notion that from authoritarianism [Azerbaijani society] should go to liberalism” and advocating for more radical, leftist and feminist futures (Kluczevska & Luciani, 2023).

Geopoliticization

The fact that Western agendas that promote democracy and civil society are skewed by geopolitics is not a novel argument: donors tend to reward NGOs whose pro-Western, English-speaking leaders ‘think and act’ like them (Ishkanian, 2014), while geopolitical interests determine the level of financial aid and democratic conditionality in resource-rich, authoritarian countries like Azerbaijan (Aliyev, 2016). Moreover, normative agendas can be appropriated by domestic socio-political actors to signal belonging to a Euro-Atlantic imagined community or contested to strengthen authoritarian arrangements in the name of resistance to Western cultural imperialism—as the struggles around the Georgian ‘Foreign Agent Law’ evoked above suggest. Here, I consider the logic of geopoliticization as an outcome of EU-Russia competition over their so-called shared neighbourhood (Cadier, 2019): this crystallizes the idea of a value-based divide between so-called ‘pro-European’ constituencies—equated with ‘liberal’ and ‘modern’ values—and ‘pro-Russian’ constituencies—equated with ‘illiberal’ and ‘backward’ values (Luciani, 2023a). One example of this is the framing of LGBTQ+ equality, epitomized by the safe holding of Pride marches, as a test for a country’s commitment to ‘European values’, a

practice that has been scrutinized in the literature on the Eastern enlargement of the EU (Slootmaeckers, 2023). In non-candidate EaP countries, located in the EU-Russia ‘neighbourhood’, commitment to LGBTQ+ equality has also come to discursively mark a country’s differentiation from Russia and the Soviet past—a strategy that was noticeable in the debates that surrounded the holding of the Tbilisi Pride event in 2019 (Luciani, 2023a). By framing the holding of a ‘March for Dignity’ in geopolitical terms, the Pride organizers managed to attract Western political and financial solidarity, while shaming the Georgian government for not upholding the ‘European values’ of freedom of expression and assembly for queer people. However, this framing also reproduced cultural cleavages between so-called progressive and backward parts of Georgian society, exacerbating already polarized political and public debates. Part of the Georgian queer community contested the relevance of Pride as an internationally sanctioned, one-day recognition of LGBTQ+ equality, pointing instead to the everyday socio-economic exclusion faced by queer people. However, these views were sidelined from the debate because they did not fit into the dominant geopolitical dichotomies (Luciani, 2023a).

Although such deconstructions of geopolitical binaries may seem misplaced at a time when LGBTQ+ rights are openly weaponized by Russia to justify its war of aggression in Ukraine, it is important to underline how the geopoliticization of gender and sexuality resulting from EU foreign policy practices is also constraining in specific ways. As critical scholarship has shown, civilizational framings of LGBTQ+ rights may have outcomes that backfire or are outright harmful: on the one hand, they may provide activists with a strategic framework to advance rights claims and push governments to adopt pro-human rights policies. However, while such ‘progress’ can be showcased internationally by governments who aspire to have their claims to ‘Europeanness’ recognized, they can also be domestically undermined by homophobic rhetoric and practices (Slootmaeckers, 2023). On the other hand, civilizational framings of homophobia—as something the ‘West’ has already left behind but that is still culturally present in the ‘East’—can foster the consolidation of anti-LGBTQ+ forces (Kahlina, 2015). In Georgia, the geopoliticization of LGBTQ+ rights has resulted in an overwhelming focus on queer visibility, which is increasingly instrumentalized by domestic political elites and met with violence by the Far Right, to the detriment of socio-economic challenges that are perceived as the most pressing for the queer community *and* the broader population—such as unemployment, poverty, protection from

homelessness and access to education (Jalagania, 2020, p. 152). The logic of geopoliticization also works to obscure the political-economic realities, such as neoliberal deregulation and dispossession, which both generate suspicion vis-à-vis the ‘West’ and reproduce the societal insecurities for which queer communities are scapegoated (see, Rao, 2020).

ALTERNATIVE IMAGINATIONS

In a recent contribution on the decolonial critique of knowledge production and activism in Eastern Europe, Popovici (2023) described the “post-socialist activist condition” as a subaltern agency, meaning that civic and activist struggles in the region are acknowledged “only if they contribute to development as catching up” with their Western counterparts. Furthermore, this condition results in the marginalization of any emancipatory narratives “seeking liberation from labour exploitation, patriarchal dominance, or state authoritarianism”, as they do not fit into the dominant binaries of ‘westernization’ versus nationalism, coated in anti-imperialist language (*ibidem*). In the South Caucasus, such alternative narratives are mostly voiced by activists operating on the margins of funding schemes operated by Western donors and, more rarely, within formally established NGOs that characterize themselves as oriented towards social justice. In a post-socialist context where neoliberalism has assumed ‘gospel’ status among the political elites and liberal civil society alike (Ishkanian, 2016), these voices remain small-scale and unlikely to pose a fundamental challenge to the current hegemonies. Nevertheless, as I will suggest in the remainder of this section, they prefigure forms of autonomy, solidarity and resistance that challenge the promotion of human rights as it is currently envisioned by the EU—revealing decolonial alternatives from a more grounded, as opposed to a theoretical, point of view.

My research shows that human rights groups in the South Caucasus are critically reconsidering the outcomes that dependence on donors’ funding and priorities produce. To prevent co-optation by donors and governments, and the depoliticization of radical struggles, groups such as the ‘MiL Network’ or ‘Feminist Peace Collective’ in Azerbaijan, ‘Left Resistance’ in Armenia and the ‘Khma’ movement in Georgia refuse to take part in the EU grants economy and the rationalities that come attached to it. They may instead choose to rely on crowdfunding, donations or engage with alternative donors (such as feminist funds) that are seen as less top-down, hierarchical and bureaucratic. At the same time, it

remains challenging for groups and organizations in the South Caucasus to be completely independent in the face of structural, political and cultural realities (Dilanyan et al., 2018). As the Georgian protests against the 'Foreign Agents Law' suggest, cutting oneself off from the international lifeline of external funding is not a desirable outcome—especially for CSOs representing the interests of vulnerable communities. Moreover, the extent to which these independent initiatives are sustainable in authoritarian contexts where they are marginalized or repressed, such as in post-war Azerbaijan, remains questionable. Nevertheless, there is a need to envision alternative forms of organizing and sustaining socio-political activism beyond the NGO model: by repositioning civil society further away from donors and governments and closer to the public, gearing resources towards grassroots mobilization and long-term social and cultural transformations. Indeed, while human rights remain the frame of reference for the EU and CSOs in the region, more radical claims for dignity and justice also deserve a hearing. The disjuncture between EU-sponsored legislative frameworks or institutionalized recognitions of rights and the lived experience of everyday oppression calls for the liberal rights-based frameworks to be transcended, to instead pursue transformative agendas aimed at systemic change and redistributive interventions.

Related to this, some civil society groups attempt to eschew the various regimes of visibility that result in homogenizing outcomes: these include the production of knowledge on civil society, aimed at evaluating its activities in conformity with the EU's expectations regarding democratization, but also forms of recognition and 'progress' that are intelligible to Western audiences, such as Pride marches. This is also linked to a critique of 'European values' as a colonial construct that de-historicizes and delegitimizes the development path of countries in the South Caucasus—as some activists struggle to recast the post-socialist experience not as a 'deviation' from European modernity, but as a ground from which to draw lessons and on which to build alternative futures. For instance, feminists in Armenia challenge the rhetoric of gender equality as a European characteristic or 'value', pointing to the existence of and the need to retrieve local feminist histories and thinkers (Luciani, 2022). However, 'authenticity' is not always a possible alternative in the so-called Global East, as "indigenous forms of life and knowledge that ground decolonial projects in the Americas, Africa, and Asia" are not easily identifiable or have not been sufficiently explored in the region (Kušić et al., 2019, p. 28). Although particular models of activism are inevitably shaped by the

experience of Western countries, some of the research participants still insisted on the need for external human rights promoters and the domestic civil society to acknowledge that their country and society “is in different conditions” (Georgian human rights NGO worker, cited in Luciani, 2022, p. 162).

Against the shrinking of knowledge production in the South Caucasus to a binary space of EU-Russia competition, global neoliberal hegemonies, as they take root in competing geopolitical alliances, also need to be re-centred in activism (Shirinian, 2021). One interviewee noted that “many people see the geopolitical competition, one empire playing against the other”, while simultaneously considering themselves “outside of the human rights that are being promoted [by the EU]” (Armenian scholar, cited in Luciani, 2022, p. 162): this is because poverty, economic violence and the devastating consequences of capitalism are not addressed in human rights programming, besides being further exacerbated by the macro-economic policies and market-based criteria that drive the development agenda of the EU in the region (see, Debusscher, 2012). A potential alternative strategy would involve re-focusing human rights agendas on local needs, while delinking them from geopolitics. This approach could alleviate cultural cleavages within society and foster intersectional, progressive coalitions among allied groups. Still, implementing such an approach remains challenging, especially in contexts where contentious issues like LGBTQ+ rights are manipulated for geo-political purposes. For instance, the ‘Save Rioni Valley’ grassroots environmental movement had managed to bring together protesters from very different segments of Georgian society, including rural communities, Tbilisi-based human rights NGOs and queer activists, around demands for economic and environmental justice (Rekhviashvili, 2021). However, this unity collapsed in July 2021, when its leaders participated in an anti-Pride rally under pressure from the Georgian Orthodox Church and far-right groups, leading the Georgian CSOs ‘Social Justice Center’ and ‘Green Alternative’ to cut ties with the movement (Schiffers, 2021).

During an interview conducted with one Armenian eco-feminist activist, she explained that, despite doing “work which is helping humans to enjoy their rights, including political and economic rights”, she does not frame her struggles in the language of human rights, considering her standpoint as being “more radical” (Luciani, 2022, p. 162). She is part of a coalition of grassroots movements named ‘Left Resistance’, which was created in 2020 as a united front to “liberate the people and nature from

the oppression of capital, workers from exploitation, womxn³ from patriarchy, the country from neo-colonial dependence, and our society from xenophobia” (Progressive International, *n.d.*). As stated in their manifesto, ‘Left Resistance’ “rejects authoritarianism, domination, exploitation and subordination, [...] transcends national boundaries and strives for a just, free, solidary and post-capitalist society” (Progressive International, *n.d.*). One way of strengthening this resistance is through alliances with people abroad who are fighting for the same goals, for instance anti-mining movements across the Global South, by spreading information and translations about their campaigns and writing statements in solidarity with them. The 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war and its aftermath heavily affected ‘Left Resistance’, exposing ideological fractures within the group, leaving some members burned-out and further narrowing down the discursive space for critiquing patriarchal and reactionary arrangements in a militarized society. Nevertheless, initiatives like this one testify to the development of decolonial discourse, thinking and agency in the South Caucasus, through the search for means of emancipation that involve “coalitions and dialogues with others on a global scale” (Tlostanova, 2010, p. xx).

CONCLUSIONS

This chapter has proposed a relational and transnational analysis of the EU’s promotion of human rights in the South Caucasus, revealing how the multi-scalar combination of EU interventions, post-socialist domestic conditions and grassroots agency have created particular challenges and tensions for local civil society groups. This chapter has taken a critical stance towards EU human rights promotion; however, other scholars, including a number in this volume, have demonstrated that EU interventions have the positive potential to open up the political and discursive opportunity structure for certain claims (including radical ones) to be put on the domestic agenda (e.g. Buzogány, 2022). While not dismissing such findings, this chapter has aimed to advance problematizations of the EU’s normative interventions in the neighbourhood that have yet to become mainstream, by foregrounding the power relations therein and civil society negotiations thereof.

³The term “womxn” used in the manifesto is an intersectional alternative spelling of “woman”/“women” meant to include transgender and non-white women.

The chapter has made a two-fold contribution. Firstly, it has proposed a three-fold typology to unpack the logics of depoliticization, homogenization and geopoliticization that underpin the EU's promotion of human rights. It suggested that EU policies not only overlook the realities and obstacles human rights NGOs and activists in the South Caucasus face when working on the ground; amid a shifting geopolitical conjuncture, they may even limit these groups' room for manoeuvre in managing domestic resistance. At the same time, the chapter has provided illustrations of how civil society actors are able to negotiate these logics and navigate the contradictions they produce, by interrogating their EU-centric foundations and by prefiguring alternative socio-political orders. Although this chapter has focused on the South Caucasus region, the proposed typology holds relevance for other contexts where similar logics are at play, such as Eastern Europe and the former Yugoslavia. Secondly, while illiberal, conservative and ultra-nationalist forces have been the most vocal in questioning the EU's promotion of norms in the South Caucasus and the role of Western-funded civil society, this chapter has engaged with another, lesser-examined, form of contestation emerging 'from below': that voiced by left-wing, feminist and grassroots groups working for social justice, who contest the legitimacy of the liberal civil society and its donors, their detachment from societal concerns and the neoliberal, Western-centric developmental model they reproduce. Although such political visions and mobilization attempts remain both marginal and marginalized in the current geo-political context in the South Caucasus, I have argued that they constitute grassroots attempts at imagining different futures, beyond the options offered by the EU's development paradigms as well as by nationalist, authoritarian and imperialist agendas that contest the logics of European modernity but propose no true emancipation.

The critiques presented in this chapter call for a reflexive rethinking of EU foreign policy practices, one that would carefully (re)consider the consequences that external interventions have for "the real bodies and lives of people who inhabit the 'subject positions' to which 'democracy' and 'human rights' are then 'applied'" (Kulpa, 2014, p. 434). It is crucial to take this contestation seriously, rather than falling into "the trap of geopolitics" and discrediting it as the outcome of Russian disinformation campaigns (Valenza, 2021). However, in 2020 the EU announced a "geopolitical agenda on human rights and democracy" (European Commission, 2020), while demands for a more geopolitical and security-conscious Union have gained further traction following Russia's full-scale invasion

of Ukraine. This ‘geopolitical turn’ seems to have reinforced already problematic tendencies: on the one hand, there has been a doubling-down on the EU’s *mission civilisatrice* in opposition to the ‘Others’ that it portrays as bad. In a tweet popularized by Georgian media outlets, Member of the European Parliament Viola von Cramon stated that if the EU were to grant candidate status to Georgia (as eventually happened) “it’s not because government & ruling party implemented all the priorities the EU had given to Georgia but because the Georgian people deserve it *and the geopolitical logic demands it*”, followed by the hashtag: #StopRussiaNow.⁴ On the other hand, a *Realpolitik* consideration can be invoked to pursue extractivist policies that disregard human rights altogether. In July 2022, EU Commission president Ursula von der Leyen and Azerbaijani president Ilham Aliyev concluded a memorandum of understanding on an energy strategic partnership, aimed at reducing the EU’s dependency on Russia. Brussels’s willingness to whitewash the authoritarian Azerbaijani regime as a ‘trustworthy partner’ to guarantee gas supplies came at the expense of the Armenian population of Nagorno-Karabakh—as testified by Azerbaijan’s nine-month blockade that preceded the military recapture of the region in 2023—and of Azerbaijani dissident voices who are currently experiencing a second crackdown. If a geopolitical EU is meant to promote the ‘European way of life’ abroad more strongly, the chances the EU will reflexively rethink its role on the global stage seem rather low.

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⁴ See: <https://twitter.com/ViolavonCramon/status/1653046330908876803> (last accessed August 5, 2023).

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PART III

Scaling Contention Upwards Through Transnational Networks



CHAPTER 9

Supranational Pressures and Multilevel Responses: Healthcare Activism in the Era of the EU's New Economic Governance Regime

Mary Naughton 

INTRODUCTION

For much of the twentieth century, healthcare service providers, forming a central component of European welfare states, were sheltered from international competitive pressures. Within health systems, production takes place locally; workers deliver services face-to-face and in-person, limiting employers' capacity to cut labour costs through re-location or labour-saving technologies (Szabó 2022, p. 414). Furthermore, healthcare users generally access these services out of necessity, and are willing to mobilize where their access is threatened, as evidenced by the rise in access-based healthcare movements observed from the 1970s onwards (Brown and Zavestoski 2004). While these elements present a source of structural and societal power for labour in the healthcare sector, the localized nature

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of services may also act as a barrier to the emergence of transnational cooperation. According to Bieler and Erne (2015, p. 166), it is often assumed that transnational solidarity is more likely to emerge in industries where production is transnational—such as car and machinery manufacturing—because the downward pressure on wages and conditions exerted by capitalist competition is more readily visible to workers and their representatives. Organizing across borders and at higher scales is a means to prevent a race to the bottom (*ibid.*).

However, in recent decades, the European Union (EU) institutions' influence over member states' (MS) health systems has increased, perhaps most significantly with the establishment of the EU's new economic governance (NEG) regime in 2010. The NEG regime, created in response to the recession experienced in the EU due to the 2008 global financial crisis, empowers the executive institutions of the EU—the European Commission and the Council of the European Union—to monitor and control the fiscal and economic policies of MS. As the largest area of expenditure within the welfare state, as well as the largest public employer, health systems in the countries worst affected by the crisis, including Ireland and Spain, became the target of policy prescriptions to curtail spending and adopt 'structural reforms', which facilitated the marketization of service provision. Thus, the influence of the European executives over working conditions and services experienced by workers and users increased, raising the question of how these actors have responded to this re-scaling of power.

In this chapter, I address this question by examining the strategies adopted by trade unions and user groups organizing in the health systems of Ireland and the region of Madrid, Spain. I focus on healthcare in one region rather than the entire Spanish state because power over the management and delivery of healthcare was devolved to this scale as part of the establishment of the national health system (Guillén 2002). Thus, Madrid's regional system fulfils comparable functions for users and workers to the national system in Ireland. In section I, I describe how European integration has influenced MS' health systems, up to and including the NEG regime. Section II provides a brief background on the health systems of Madrid and Ireland and introduces some of the actors mobilizing in each site of study. Section III examines mobilizations within these health systems during the era of the NEG regime and into the pandemic period.

EUROPEAN INTEGRATION AND HEALTHCARE

Health systems were not a target of integration at the launch of the European project (Stein 2015) and today the EU's competence to adopt legislation on health remains limited. Stein (2015, p. 8) argues that MS governments sought to protect the plurality of health systems from outside interference as they represented national values and past struggles. But both MS governments and capitals' orientation towards national health systems shifted in step with the rise of neoliberal capitalism (Erne et al., 2024). The conditions of Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) as well as the re-launch of the Single Market have perforated domestic control over the organization and financing of public health services. The convergence criteria for entry to EMU—including the requirement to maintain a maximum public deficit of 3% and debt-to-GDP ratio of 60%—imposed pressure on candidate countries to curtail spending and all MS implemented programme cuts to meet the criteria, with some governments proposing radical welfare reforms in order to do so (Bolukbasi 2006). These criteria continued to apply to MS after they had entered EMU and the Stability and Growth Pact (SGP) provided for financial sanction in case of violation.

In re-launching the Single Market in the 1980s, MS governments created obligations that applied to healthcare, including opening the healthcare sector to competition and circumscribing domestic authorities' ability to control the organization and financing of their systems. In 2004, the potential this created for EU interference in healthcare came into sharp relief when the Commission included healthcare in a new regime for the regulation of services. 'The Bolkestein Directive' as drafted would have facilitated the liberalization of healthcare service markets and facilitated entry into new national markets. However, trade unions and social movement organizations mobilized transnationally to challenge the proposal—organizing protests and lobbying at both domestic and European scales—and the European Parliament and the Council of the EU removed healthcare from the scope of the directive. Instead, the European Commission has applied internal market law to health services through the directive on patients' rights to cross-border healthcare. The directive codifies EU citizens' right to be reimbursed by domestic health authorities for health services they access in another member state without prior authorization. As such, it provides a structure through which patients with the means to travel can bypass public waiting lists in their home system

and lays the foundation for an internal market for health services (Stan and Erne 2021, p. 297).

The NEG regime first took shape as an ad hoc response to the crisis; first the EU and the International Monetary Fund agreed to provide funding to Hungary and Romania, with the terms of funding in each case stated in a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU). In 2010, similar MoUs were agreed between the EU, the IMF and the European Central Bank ('the Troika') and heavily indebted states within the eurozone: namely Greece, Ireland and Portugal. As a condition for funding, each MoU required governments to not only cut public spending, but also to adopt reforms that would facilitate the marketization of services within the welfare state.

The NEG regime was then institutionalized through the Six-Pack and Two-Pack of Laws. These instruments provide for the Commission to monitor MSs' economic and fiscal policies through the cycle known as the European Semester, evaluating those policies in terms of their compatibility with the Maastricht convergence criteria and their potential contribution to macroeconomic imbalances. The Commission also drafts Country Specific Recommendations (CSRs) specifying the actions to be taken by MS governments to remedy any issues the European executive identifies. Where a MS is subject to an excessive deficit procedure (EDP), or where the Commission has found that the MS is experiencing 'excessive macroeconomic imbalances', failure to implement CSRs can trigger financial sanction (Erne et al., 2024).

Between the launch of the NEG regime in 2010 and the outbreak of the pandemic in 2020, when EU executives activated the SGP emergency clause suspending the application of the fiscal convergence criteria, Ireland and Spain were subject to MoU conditionality, and the threat of sanction under an EDP. Through the European Semester and MoU conditions, the Commission promoted the commodification of public services and labour in each health system—ostensibly to control public expenditure. Even after both economies had returned to growth, CSRs and other communications issued by the Commission under the Semester encouraged governments in Spain and Ireland to contain spending on healthcare.

In response to pressure under the NEG regime to achieve fiscal consolidation, governments in Ireland and Spain curtailed healthcare expenditure, workforce numbers and pay, restructured services and introduced new rules and institutions that purport to permanently contain healthcare budgets. Cuts had severe effects on access to services in Ireland and

Madrid; waiting lists increased, some users lost rights to access care free at the point of service and healthcare workers emigrated in high numbers, exacerbating issues of understaffing caused by recruitment embargoes. While both MS have increased spending on healthcare after emerging from acute fiscal crisis, gradual annual increases have not been sufficient to reverse the damage. Workers and users in Madrid and Ireland have mobilized to challenge the continuing underfunding of healthcare. However, as will be seen below, despite the role of EU executives in institutionalizing austerity, campaigns have tended to target domestic authorities.

STRUCTURAL FEATURES AND ACTORS WITHIN THE HEALTH SYSTEMS OF MADRID AND IRELAND

In this section I will describe some structural changes in the delivery of healthcare in Madrid and Ireland and how the history of these systems, as well as their substantive features, shaped the collective actors' preference regarding the scale at which they mobilized in the sites under study.

Madrid's Health System

The Spanish health service in its current form was established partly as a result of popular struggle. Trade unions, regional politicians and political parties had campaigned for a universal health system throughout the 1970s and the right to health was protected in the constitution of the new state. The system was launched in 1986. Access to both acute and primary care is free at the point of service. Responsibility for healthcare was gradually decentralized through the establishment of regional health systems with control over their own finances and staffing (Guillén 2002). Madrid's regional system launched in 2001.

Within two years of establishing Madrid's health system, the government had committed to building 11 hospitals through public private partnership. The companies that won these tenders would build these hospitals and operate them on behalf of the public system for a period of 35 years. Prior to the establishment of the NEG regime, the health system of Madrid was among the regional health systems with the lowest wages and the heaviest reliance on temporary staff, and healthcare workers noted that

even prior to the recession, understaffing was an issue and hospital infrastructure was not being renewed.¹

Representation in Madrid's health system is split between professional unions, social democratic or integrative unions and radical unions (Hyman 2001). The professional unions include: the *Asociación de Médicos y Titulados Superiores de Madrid* (Association of Doctors and Higher Graduates 'AMyTS'), a regional union and member of the national medical union confederation, the *Confederación Estatal de Sindicatos Médicos* (National confederation of doctors' unions); the *Sindicato de Enfermería* (Nursing Union, 'SATSE'), a national union that organizes nurses, midwives and physiotherapists; the *Coalición Sindical Independiente de Trabajadores de Madrid* (Independent Confederation of Workers of Madrid, 'CSIT'), a regional confederation that includes unions organizing doctors and lab technicians; and the *Sindicato de Auxiliares de Enfermería* (Union of Healthcare Assistants, 'SAE'), which organizes healthcare assistants. Both of the regional health federations of Spain's largest national union confederations—the social democratic *Comisiones Obreras* (Workers' Commissions, 'CCOO') and the *Unión General de Trabajadores* ('UGT')—organize all categories of healthcare worker, as do the more radical, anarchist confederations, the *Confederación General de Trabajo* ('CGT'), the *Confederación Nacional de Trabajo* ('CNT') and the *Movimiento Asambleario de Trabajadores-as de Sanidad* (Healthcare Workers' Assembly Movement, 'MATS')—a regionally organized union representing all categories of worker in the healthcare sector.

Prior to the crisis, local platforms in defence of public health services had formed in many neighbourhoods in Madrid to challenge the marketizing policies of the government. These platforms brought together neighbourhood associations, local branches of trade unions and autonomous, horizontally organized groups such as the *Coordinadora Anti Privatización de la Sanidad Madrid* (Madrid Network Against the Privatization of the Health System, 'CAS Madrid'). Neighbourhood associations formed in cities and towns across Spain in the 1960s and 1970s to demand public services for their areas. The neighbourhood movement was active in the struggle for democracy, and, along with the trade union movement, put pressure on the new state to create a universal public health system. CAS Madrid is a region-wide network of healthcare workers, users and radical unions that formed in response to the regional

¹Interview Afem and AMyTS organizer 20/09/2021.

government's plan to build hospitals through public private partnership and whose central demand is repeal of the national laws that allow for the privatization of health services in Spain. From 2003–2008, CAS Madrid organized workshops in neighbourhoods across Madrid to raise awareness of the threat that PPPs and other marketizing policies posed to universal access and the public nature of the system.

Thus, in Madrid, prior to the crisis and the establishment of the NEG regime there were networks of collective actors that were invested in mobilizing not only against immediate threats to access but also against policies that threatened the public nature of the system. Furthermore, Ribera-Almadoz and Clua-Losada (2021) and Kehr (2023) note that public health systems enjoy a positive public image in Spain: there is considerable consensus that the universal service is a public good, embodying shared values of solidarity and universality. These circumstances acted as resources for collective actors challenging privatization. In disputes over the reorganization of local services or changes to working conditions, user groups and unions could rely on widespread public support for the public nature of the system and could justify their conflicts with health authorities as a defence of that system. As such, these actors tended to frame their mobilizations against the immediate threat to access or working conditions to the broader struggle to maintain service quality and to protect the solidaristic nature of the health service by preventing the commodification of services and labour.

When the global financial crisis began to impact Spain's economy, the central government implemented counter-cyclical policies, cutting taxes and increasing spending on services to stimulate demand. This was in line with the approach recommended by the Commission, prior to the crisis in the Euro Zone (Pavolini et al., 2015). But Madrid's government departed from this approach, announcing in its budget for 2009 a 'shock plan' to curtail expenditure, including the re-organization of healthcare staff, in light of the economic crisis and the fall in revenue this had triggered (Sérvulo González 2008, October 08). From 2008–2010, CAS Madrid, local platforms and the CCOO, UGT, CSIT, CGT, CNT and MATS trade unions protested these policies, as well as the ongoing processes of marketization in these systems through demonstrations outside hospitals, marches and petitions.

Ireland's Health System

Ireland's public health system does not offer universal coverage, and for most users, services are not free at the point of delivery. Since the 1950s, successive governments have fostered a two-tier system, influenced by lobbying from the medical profession and the Catholic Church. Universal access to hospital care was extended gradually, and included access to state-owned and religious-owned, not-for-profit hospitals, but hospital stays remain subject to co-payments for most users. Moreover, primary care is provided by private practitioners. Only users below a minimum income threshold are entitled to access acute and primary care services without paying a fee. Long waiting lists and overcrowding in emergency departments were a prominent issue in the public health system in the 2000s, even as Ireland's economy was among the fastest growing in Europe (Mercille, 2018). At the outset of the crisis, around 50% of the population had private health insurance, which mainly functions as a means of circumventing public waiting lists.

While there were actors questioning and criticizing this system, including trade unions and opposition parties, there is no consensus over whether and how it should be overhauled. Trade union membership is split between professional and social democratic unions. Professional unions include the Irish Medical Organisation (IMO), which represents doctors, the Psychiatric Nurses Association and the Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation (INMO). The Services, Industrial and Professional Union (SIPTU) and public services union *Fórsa* are closer to what Hyman (2001) refers to as social democratic or integrative unions as they organize across sectors and occupations. SIPTU organizes all categories of healthcare worker except for doctors, and public services union *Fórsa* represents both clinical and non-clinical healthcare workers and administrators.

Until 2005, regional health boards managed healthcare for their area and enjoyed considerable autonomy (McDaid et al., 2009). Over half of health board members were elected politicians, and this provided a resource for challengers when national plans for the reorganization of services threatened local access to services. Unions and local user groups organized protest and lobbying campaigns pressuring these representatives to abandon such changes. However, due to the regional delivery of healthcare, campaigns mobilized at this level and tended to frame their grievances narrowly, in terms of local, communitarian interest, without reference to the processes of commodification that threatened access on a

system-wide scale, such as the ongoing underfunding of the public health service or state support for private medicine (O'Donovan 2007). In 2005, the government dissolved the regional health boards and centralized control over healthcare in the newly established Health Service Executive (HSE), an administrative agency managed by civil servants. But despite power over healthcare having been scaled upwards, in the years immediately after the establishment of the HSE, the tendency for users to mobilize locally and to emphasize the particular struggles of their communities persisted, including in the initial years of the recession that followed the global financial crisis.

The imposition of austerity in the Madrid health system coincided with increased EU intervention via the NEG regime. But in Ireland, healthcare workers' grievances had already increased considerably with the outbreak of recession. The government guaranteed the debts of the financial sector and cut public sector wages twice in the period between 2008–2010, while the HSE imposed a recruitment embargo. Public sector unions mobilized against the cuts, organizing a one-day strike. Healthcare unions such as the INMO organized an extended work-to-rule to protest the cuts. The ICTU also launched a nationwide advocacy campaign, promoting an alternative plan for responding to the crisis, in which less drastic cuts would be applied over a longer period (Wall 2009, 01 October). But this phase of confrontation ended before the NEG regime was applied to Ireland through a MoU with the Troika. In March 2010, public sector unions accepted a collective agreement, known as the Croke Park Agreement (CPA), which retrospectively approved the previous wage cuts but stipulated that there would be no further pay cuts or compulsory redundancies in the sector if CPA savings targets were met. Though government reduced spending on healthcare from 2008–2010, there was some ringfencing of budgets. Government sought savings in the areas of pharmaceutical and advertising expenditure, while increasing spending on medical cards and other demand-led schemes (Thomas et al., 2013, p. 4). But this approach became increasingly difficult during the period of the MoU, and the HSE's service plan for 2012 stated that frontline services would have to be curtailed to meet budgetary targets (Health Service Executive 2011).

LABOUR AGENCY AND RESISTANCE DURING THE NEG REGIME

As illustrated in the previous section, healthcare was already politicized in both jurisdictions and grassroots organizers and unions were willing to organize discursive and disruptive actions to challenge government policy. The NEG regime increased the European scale's significance in shaping working conditions and services in the health systems under study, but the emergence of transnational actions and the scaling upward of resistance have been gradual and piecemeal; for the most part both unions and grassroots groups have focused their activities on domestic scales.

When the NEG regime was crystallizing through the imposition of MoUs, union confederations in both Ireland and Madrid organized actions as part of the European Day of Action convened by the European Trade Union Confederation to protest EU executives' response to the crisis. Spain's largest union confederations, CCOO and UGT, participated in the European Trade Union Confederation's Day of Action against austerity, though the action in Spain was considerably more significant—the unions convened a general strike and marches across the country, including an in Madrid, where tens of thousands of workers participated. However, relatively few healthcare workers joined these actions due in part to legal requirements to provide a minimum level of service. The Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU) organized a demonstration outside the house of parliament attended by a few hundred people only. In addition, Irish unions SIPTU, Fórsa and the INMO, and Spanish confederations CCOO and UGT, are members of the European Federation of Public Service Unions (EPSU), which has been a vocal critic of the NEG regime and of ongoing austerity in MS' health systems. CCOO and UGT are also part of a 'Mediterranean group', which co-operates within EPSU and includes other countries from Southern Europe that were badly affected by the crisis, including Greece, Portugal, Italy and Cyprus.

Defence of public health systems was also an important theme within the anti-austerity movements that emerged across Europe, themselves partly triggered by the undemocratic nature of the NEG regime and its role in institutionalizing austerity as the EU's response to the crisis (Flesher Fominaya, 2015; Della Porta, 2012). Flesher Fominaya (2015, 2017) and Bourne and Chatzopoulou (2015) note that although actors within the 15-M tended to target domestic institutions, they also recognized the role of supranational institutions such as the EU and the ECB in promoting

austerity in their framing. In largely containing their mobilizations to domestic scales, they did not allow blame to shift from national political actors, emphasizing that despite the constraints imposed by the EU and the Troika, the austerity policies being imposed were a matter of political choice. Nevertheless, the 15-M engaged in some activities with transnational reach, including sending a delegation to meet with members of the German Parliament who wanted to understand why protest was so widespread in Spain. Notably CAS Madrid was one of the grassroots groups represented in the delegation, signalling the importance of defending the health system within the movement's overall aims.

CAS Madrid became involved in the 15-M in 2011, when the movement invited the group to make a presentation to the protest camp at Puerta del Sol, in Madrid, on issues within the health system. This encounter led to over a year of sustained collaboration between with the movement, including multiple rallies politicising cuts to the public health system.² This association helped CAS Madrid to build links with grassroots groups and radical trade unions in other regions and to establish a national network against privatization.

CAS Madrid also scaled its activities upwards by joining the transnational European Network against Privatization and Commercialization of Health and Social Protection ('the European Network'). This network was established in 2012 to defend universal, publicly funded healthcare and social services and to keep market logic out of health and social care systems, by "putting a stop to liberal policies on a regional, national and European level" (European Network against Privatization and Commercialization of Health and Social Protection 2014). The network meets regularly and has established a broader global network, collaborating with the global, horizontal 'People's Health Movement'. Since 2015, the European Network has organized an annual European Day of Action Against Health Commercialization on 7 April, World Health Day.

As of June 2024, no Irish organization has joined the European Network and a mass anti-austerity movement in Ireland did not immediately emerge in response to the imposition of the MoU (though anger regarding austerity was later channelled through mass mobilizations against water charges). However, local user groups and campaigns mobilizing within the health system supported smaller scale actions targeting the Troika during their visits to Dublin, organized by anti-austerity

²Interview, CAS Madrid organizer 1, 27/09/2021.

activists such as Occupy Dublin. Their participation illustrates that health-care activists were aware that power over healthcare had been re-scaled to an extent even though, as noted above, most worker- and user-led mobilizations remained focused on domestic targets.

This may have partly been due to the belief, as expressed by the 15-M, that while governments were under pressure to reduce their debt and deficits and meet EU targets, they had some discretion as to how they would meet these targets and that they could impose their own pressure on government to direct cuts elsewhere. Thus, in Ireland, during much of the bailout period (from the end of 2010 to the end of 2013), unions organizing in the health system engaged in campaigns that although national in scale were narrow in scope and did not challenge the MoU itself but instead targeted the policies government was imposing to comply with the MoU's expenditure targets. Through disruptive action, unions sought to counteract the external pressure from the EU and push the national government to direct cuts elsewhere.

These campaigns had some success, without the need to bring the conflict to the European scale. This was partly due to their targeted nature—cuts could be reversed as long as the broader process of retrenchment proceeded—but another factor in some instances was that while conflict was contained to the national scale, unions relied on pre-existing national or EU law, which invalidated the money-saving practices of the government. For example, when government reduced payments to agency workers³ compared with those received by direct employees, without consulting unions, the INMO, PNA and SIPTU advised members to boycott offers of work from the HSE under the new contract. Within weeks, procedures and appointments had been cancelled in several services and the dispute was referred to the National Implementation Body for the CPA. This body found that the contract was in breach of obligations under the EU directive on agency workers, due to coming into force in December 2011, which requires that agency workers should receive equal treatment to full-time staff, and directed the government and the unions to reach a new agreement for agency workers in compliance with the directive.

In Madrid, though protest targeted national actors, the scope of conflicts tended to be framed more broadly and it was more common for conflicts over labour issues to involve all unions in the sector and for

³Healthcare workers employed by employment agencies and engaged by the HSE to cover absences or meet demand.

healthcare unions and grassroots groups to mobilize together. The greater unity and the broader scope visible in healthcare activism in Madrid partly relate to the networks that preceded the crisis and the imposition of the NEG regime—these groups were already working together in local platforms. Local grassroots groups' pre-existing links to trade unions, which were already organized regionally and nationally, and in some cases part of European confederations, may have helped user groups to scale their activities upwards. Their previous experience mobilizing together also meant that unions and user groups had shared framing strategies around the defence of the system's public nature, which could be drawn upon in new conflicts. For example, when the regional government announced the extension of healthcare workers' working time and the curtailment of sick pay, all six unions represented on the sectoral committee (CCOO, UGT, SATSE, CSIT, SAE and AMyTs) mobilized against these measures, convening a series of marches and demonstrations outside hospitals and framing the changes to working conditions and remuneration as an attack on the public health service and their campaign as resistance to 'cuts in the healthcare sector'.

Though the 15-M was critical of so-called institutional trade unions, such as CCOO and UGT, radical unions that had not been party to collective agreements participated in the movement, as did healthcare workers on an individual basis, and their experience participating in assemblies and occupying squares influenced the emergence and repertoire of contention of the *marea blanca* ('white tide', so called because of the white garments worn by healthcare workers), a movement specifically challenging the commodification of healthcare. In October 2012, the regional government announced that it would cut healthcare spending by 7%, in part by privatizing 6 hospitals and 27 ambulatory clinics and outsourcing laundry and cleaning services in all public hospitals. While the Madrid government had already been privatizing and marketizing parts of the service, the external pressure to achieve fiscal consolidation allowed the government to claim that such measures were necessary to guarantee the system's financial sustainability.

The *marea blanca* began shortly after this announcement when assemblies of users and workers, many of whom had been involved in the 15-M mobilizations, organized sit-in occupations of hospitals across the region. Soon this conflict was system-wide, with healthcare workers in hospitals and ambulatory clinics organizing regular demonstrations and protests in their locality. The *Asociación de Facultativos Especialistas de Madrid*

(Association of Medical Specialists of Madrid, ‘AFEM’), a self-organized group of doctors, constituted themselves as a union to convene an indefinite medical strike. The unions of the sectoral committee also supported the movement by convening several sector-wide strike days. In addition, AFEM, neighbourhood associations, unions and grassroots groups formed the *Mesa en Defensa de la Sanidad Pública de Madrid* (the Committee in Defence of Madrid’s Public Healthcare System, ‘MEDSAP’) to coordinate their activities. MEDSAP regularly convened marches through Madrid city centre with massive attendances.

Despite the “unprecedented unity of purpose” (Sevillano & Calleja, 2012, November 27) visible in the *marea blanca* and the size and frequency of protest, the government passed its proposals into law and began the tendering process for the privatization of hospitals and clinics. The regional government rejected the alternative measures for meeting fiscal targets proposed by the unions of the sectoral bargaining committee and by AFEM and other professional bodies representing doctors, claiming that the quantity of savings that could be achieved from the suggested measures was highly exaggerated. However, just as the INMO and IMO were able to rely on pre-existing law to overcome policies driven by the fiscal consolidation imperative, AFEM and trade unions including UGT challenged the privatization plan through litigation. These actors impugned the legality of the measures on grounds including the violation of the constitutional right to healthcare, misrepresentations regarding the amount of money privatization would save and the terms of the contract specification for the tender. The courts hearing these separate applications held that the privatization process must be suspended as a precautionary measure pending the outcome of the cases, justifying their decision not only on the basis that if the Sustainability Plan were allowed to proceed while the cases were examined it would be very difficult to reverse the process and this could threaten the fundamental rights of citizens and may lead to inequality of treatment but also because the government’s plans did not appear to guarantee the level of savings claimed by the regional Department of Health. The government of Madrid appealed the suspensions to the *Tribunal Superior de Justicia de Madrid* (Higher Court of Justice of Madrid, ‘TSJM’). However, the TSJM affirmed the decisions of the lower courts and the government announced its withdrawal of the plan, while the regional health minister resigned.

During the period of the MoU, user groups in Ireland continued to defend local services, while new grassroots mobilizations emerged when

services at a particular hospital, ambulatory or long-term care facility were threatened. The action logic of these groups was particularistic, focusing on narrow local interests and often implicitly competitive: aiming only to prevent cuts in one area rather than challenging the broader process of austerity meant that in the event of success, curtailment would simply be re-directed elsewhere in the service. However, some grassroots healthcare campaigns adopted a more systemic approach, and a broader framing of issues, as indicated by their attendance at anti-austerity protests targeting the Troika, referred to above. After the bailout period, leaders within some locally focused campaigns, recognizing that frontline services were suffering across the country, sought to scale their activities upwards. From 2014 to 2018, local user groups, patients' groups and unions attempted on three occasions to launch national campaigns. For example, in early 2014, a group mobilizing to retain opening hours at Navan Hospital's accident and emergency department held meetings with similar campaigns from other towns and regions in Ireland in the hopes of organizing a National Hospital Campaign to fight cuts across the system. However, while the National Hospital Campaign and subsequent groups seeking to launch national mobilizations succeeded in organizing some well-attended protest events, these efforts did not coalesce into successful or sustained movements, due in part to difficulties in agreeing common goals.

The increased tendency among healthcare activists to attempt scaling upwards from 2014 onwards may have been due to the fact that the pressure from the EU on government to cut spending was less acute: as Ireland's deficit reduced, the government became less dependent on the Troika's funding. Perhaps healthcare activists felt that with the economic recovery underway, the moment had arrived to address the ongoing crisis in healthcare. Conversely, the Madrid health system witnessed a period of de-mobilization from 2014 to 2020. The *marea blanca* continued to convene monthly marches to politicize processes of marketization within the health system, but these actions drew hundreds, as opposed to tens of thousands of supporters. Nevertheless, networks and organizations established during the *marea blanca*, such as MEDSAP remain active and consolidated their positions as critical voices within the health system, including by scaling upwards. Shortly after the emergence of the movement in Madrid, activists in other regions began rallying under the *marea blanca* moniker while resisting privatization and austerity. In 2016, these regional movements and the *marea blanca* in Madrid established the *Coordinadora Estatal de Mareas Blancas* (the State-wide Alliance of White

Tides, ‘CESM’), which organizes assemblies to enable co-operation between unions and grassroots groups fighting against privatization and marketization in the various regions of Spain. MEDSAP and MATS also became member organizations of the European Network. Thus, by the end of the NEG regime’s first decade, unions and grassroots groups organizing in Madrid’s health system had formed transregional networks and collaborated with activists from across the Spanish state, as well as engaging in transnational co-operation and building relationships with unions and user groups mobilizing in health systems from various EU MS.

CONCLUSION

For much of the EU’s history, the integration of member state health systems—particularly in relation to the organization and financing of services—has been minor relative to other areas of economic activity. Likewise, mobilizations within the health systems under study tended to focus on domestic targets and local issues. Structural transformations such as the re-scaling of power over the financing and organization of public health services that occurred with the establishment of the NEG regime can prompt collective actors to mobilize at new scales. Indeed, the implementation of cuts promoted through NEG prescriptions encouraged user groups in both Ireland and Madrid to attempt to scale their actions upwards. But the varying success of these attempts, and the differences in terms of the scope and goals of campaigns, illustrate that re-scaling is a social process and not something reflexive or automatic. In both health systems, cuts prompted resistance and disruptive actions, however, the similar systemic pressures applying to each system had to interact with local factors and the agency of local activists. The recent history of Ireland and Madrid’s health systems and activists’ existing resources in terms of framing strategies and relationships with other groups influenced how the establishment of the NEG regime re-shaped their strategies. In Ireland, users and unions were critical of the two-tier system as currently organized, acknowledging that it did not meet the needs of service users. Perhaps because of the difficulty of articulating an alternative vision for the health service, workers and users’ demands were often narrow, tackling effect rather than systemic cause. In addition, the scope and scale of mobilizations continued to be influenced by the tendency to engage local, communitarian identities which had prevailed prior to the establishment of the HSE and the centralization of health service delivery (Cox 2006; O’Donovan 2007).

Nevertheless, the experience of austerity during the NEG regime pushed both unions and grassroots groups to attempt to organize at higher scales and to establish relationships beyond their locality or region. Despite the fragmented application of cuts, the breadth and depth of curtailment required during the acute period of the NEG regime pushed user groups in Ireland to accept that their struggles were connected and to consider abandoning the competitive particularistic approach to politicizing curtailment. A system-wide movement did not emerge and, thus far, Irish unions and grassroots groups have not joined the European Network. But activists' demands and framing of conflicts have broadened, while networks created through previous attempts to scale upward were maintained and allowed workers and users to begin organizing a cross-border campaign demanding an all-Ireland, de-commodified health service in the early months of the pandemic. In time, their participation in transnational networks may also increase.

While resistance to policies imposed in Madrid's health system in accordance with NEG regime policy prescriptions also tended to be contained to domestic scales, users and workers managed to scale their activities upwards, from the local to the regional—including a successful system-wide movement in the *marea blanca*—and from the regional to the national, establishing state-wide networks of healthcare activists (Ribera-Almadoz & Clua-Losada 2021). These outcomes were aided by dense networks of unions and user groups that pre-existed the establishment of the NEG regime. These actors were cognisant of the threat curtailment and marketization posed to the integrity of the system and tended to frame even very localized threats to access in terms of these broader processes of commodification. The fact that Madrid and Spain had a universal health service that was well regarded gave these groups a simple goal to unite around: defending the public nature of that system.

The re-scaling of power over health and social policy through the NEG regime also provoked Spanish unions and user groups to join the transnational European Network, as well as to participate in a handful of transnational and domesticated actions targeting EU institutions. While transnational contention involving unions and user groups organizing healthcare workers remains a relatively rare occurrence, building oppositional networks and structures takes time and resources and we may see many more episodic instances of transnational contention involving healthcare unions and user groups before a sustained transnational movement emerges.

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The Transnationalization of the Far Right between Movements and Parties

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*“The time of the patriots has come, in Italy, Finland, Sweden, Poland,
and the Czech Republic, we have shown that we patriots can govern
and contribute to increasing the prosperity of the people. Your victory
can give impetus to the whole of Europe”*

—(Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni at the Vox rally in Spain
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yxj8ACKjuRM>))

For the purposes of this work, we use a broad and inclusive meaning of the ‘far-right’ category, which encompasses other labels commonly used in the literature, such as ‘radical Right’ or ‘populist Far Right’. This is consistent with the increase in internal heterogeneity in far-right parties in the current context of the so-called global ‘fourth wave’ of the Far Right (Wondreys & Mudde, 2022).

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INTRODUCTION

As part of its contemporary fourth wave (Mudde, 2019), far-right politics is increasingly becoming an international phenomenon. Accordingly, scholars emphasize the need to focus on the global dimensions of populist nationalism (Miller-Idriss, 2019).

Indeed, like many other political actors, the Far Right has expanded beyond national borders, creating transnational connections and international cooperation (Caiani, 2018). However, empirical analyses on this topic are still ongoing (e.g. Nissen, 2022; Anievas & Richard, 2023; Caiani 2025; Reem & Pisoiu 2021; Varga & Buzogány 2022; Fominaya, 2022; current European projects such as the AUTHLIB project, <https://www.authlib.eu/>). Although left-wing transnationalization is very well known and has been extensively studied (e.g. della Porta & Caiani, 2009), right-wing and especially extreme responses to processes of transnationalization (whose European integration can be considered a regional case) have so far received relatively less scholarly attention (for exceptions see below). However, there are good reasons to ask how the Far Right has responded to the challenges of transnational politics, not least since internationalization processes of all kinds contradict a number of the central myths of the Right, namely, racism, nationalism and national identity (see also, for a non-Western centric perspective, Pinheiro-Machado & Vargas-Maia, 2023). In addition, several scholars have pointed to internationalization processes as an important explanation for the recent dynamism of right-wing extremism in many Western European democracies. Some scholars interpret contemporary far-right politics as a form of ‘late-modern populism’, while others see it as a reaction to post-materialism or, more precisely, as ‘anti-modernity/globalization’. Despite their opposition to transnationalization processes, far-right forces, including both political parties and movements, increasingly feel the need to establish contacts and crossnational coordination, discuss and frame transnational politics and organize themselves to cope with this level of political contention.

This chapter aims to contribute to this debate by identifying some useful concepts, drawing mainly on social movement studies, which can be used to study the transnationalization of right-wing groups—including both political parties and movements—and providing empirical cases to support the argument. Firstly, we will look at the contextual political opportunities that European integration provides for the transnationalization of the Far Right. It is important to note that nowadays right-wing

activists and movements also positively identify as European. We term these ‘pro-European nativists’ (which differ from the left-wing progressive ‘anti-nationalist Europeans’, Caiani & Weisskircher, 2022), underlining the existence of strong European identities across the political spectrum deeply embedded in the mindset of these groups even when they sharply criticize European integration in its current form. These pro-European stances are culturally exclusive and relate in a specific way to the issue of nationalism or the nation-state. Secondly, we will suggest that frames (for a review on the application of this concept to collective action studies, see Caiani, 2023) are another important lens and mechanism (at the meso-organizational level) for the development of crossnational far-right links and cooperation. Indeed, collective action frames allow us to (symbolically) construct the collective problems to be dealt with and to define the scene of allies and enemies, thus providing organizations and activists with a cognitive reference point within which to locate their activism and motivate their actions. This can be applied to transnational politics. Thirdly, we will consider the initiatives, actions and practices that have the potential to nurture the transnationalization of the current Far Right (including the role of the Internet). The findings presented here reveal that despite the fact that they criticize a supranational system, many far-right actors consider it necessary to engage in politics on a transnational level.

In *social movement studies*, transnationalization is defined as “sustained contentious interactions with opponents—national or non-national—by connected networks of challengers organized across national boundaries” (Tarrow, 2005). The literature distinguishes between transnational issues, targets—namely the subject towards which the claim or the mobilization is directed—and mobilization. Bourne and Chatzopoulou (2015) argue that the collective political Europeanization of actors “occurs when movements collaborate, or make horizontal communicative linkages with movements in other countries, contest authorities beyond the state, frame issues as European and claim a European identity” (2015, p. 34). In this sense, the European Union (EU) arena not only offers new potential targets for protest, but also a shared space of contention for collective actors from across the member states of the EU (Monforte, 2014).

Other scholars identify transnationalization on the Far Right with a shared issue focus among individuals and organizations that have sustained ties of across the borders of multiple nation-states, including interactions that range from low to high levels of institutionalization (Froio & Ganesh, 2019). In this regard, they refer to the far-right transnationalization when

closely interrelated groups and organizations from more than one country place a similar discursive emphasis on particular issues.

Transnationalization is also closely connected to *diffusion*, another concept from social movement studies, which is defined as the adoption of similar frames and strategies of action across distant locations, in two different social movements (della Porta & Mattoni, 2014). Recent developments (on the progressive side of mobilization) have emphasized the importance of cognitive, relational and emotional mechanisms for the diffusion of contention, beyond the more classical considerations (cultural and geographical proximities) (Eren, 2023).

Research on the supranational politics of far-right forces has mainly focused on radical right-wing political parties (and electoral success) and their ‘Europeanization’ (e.g. Conti, 2011). On the other hand, although left-wing transnationalization is very well known and studied in social movement studies (e.g. della Porta & Caiani, 2009; Tarrow, 2005, on ‘scale shift’ of mobilization), so far there has been much less scientific attention paid to right-wing forces (for important exceptions see Caiani et al., 2012; Caiani & Weisskircher, 2022; Nissen, 2022). We must admit that on the ‘regressive’ side there is an increase in studies on anti-gender right-wing social movements—which have been strongly transnational from the very beginning (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017)—while research is still developing on pandemic-related movements (e.g. Caiani et al., 2024). Finally, there is a quite abundant corpus of studies focusing on the use of social media by right-wing actors for the transnationalization of (‘illiberal’) content (e.g. Heft et al., 2023; Ahmed & Pisiou, 2021; Davis, 2019). Yet there has been practically no research carried out on diffusion (of ideas, frames, ideologies and related mechanisms) in relation to regressive actors (for exceptions, Lavizzari & Siročić, 2022).

Since the transnational aspect of the Far Right may refer to different dimensions, drawing on this scholarship, in this chapter we stress that the transnationalization of the Far Right in Europe can take at least three forms (or trajectories), which can also be understood as ‘mechanisms’¹ (McAdam et al., 2001): transnationalization in terms of transnational and cross-country networks and organizations; in terms of common frames

¹We refer here to mechanisms in the terms of Charles Tilly’s definition, as “a delimited class of events that change relations among specified sets of elements in identical or closely similar ways over a variety of situations” that, when frequently occurring, constitute the processes of social life.

and ‘identities’; and in terms of common or coordinated actions/events/practices. In the following sections, we will focus on each of these forms, reflecting on each of them in relation to both far-right social movements and political parties.

POLITICAL OPPORTUNITIES AND THE TRANSNATIONALIZATION OF FAR-RIGHT MOVEMENTS AND PARTIES

European integration is seen as having restructured social and cultural cleavages, creating an opposition between the positions of trans- and supranational integration and those of national demarcation, with far-right parties and movements standing on the side of the defence of positions of ‘demarcation’ through economic and cultural protectionism. As has been noted, “racial-nationalist leaders in both North America and Europe are able to exploit the new political conditions and widespread fears to their advantage (...). Advocating white-European privilege and heritage, racial-nationalists can effectively formulate a troubling but potent transnational message” (Wright, 2009, p. 190).

With regard to the mobilization of the Far Right in the *electoral arena* in Europe, there have been many attempts by far-right parties to create a ‘European’ right-wing group within the European Parliament (Conti, 2011). Since the mid-1980s, European Parliament elections have represented an occasion where Western European far-right parties have tried to coordinate themselves, at least during the political campaign itself (Almeida, 2010, p. 243). The two most recent rounds of European elections have not only seen Europe being targeted by political posters from far-right parties, but it has also become the arena for the transnationalization of the Right, which has increasingly achieved success in European-wide elections.

The 2009 European elections, in particular, marked a clear advance of the Far Right all over Europe. In England, the fascist British National Party (BNP) obtained 6.2% of the votes (electing two deputies for the first time); in the Netherlands, the anti-Islamic *Party for Freedom* (PVV) gained 17% of the votes (and later came third in the 2010 national election, gaining support from more than 15% of voters); in Belgium the *Vlaams Belang* reached 10.9% and in Denmark the *Dansk Folkeparti* (Party of People) took 14.8% of the votes. More recently, having succeeded her father, Jean

Marie Le Pen, Marine Le Pen gained nearly 18% of the ballots cast for the National Front in the first round of the 2012 French presidential election (a success that was repeated in the 2014 local elections). The *Norwegian Progress Party* is represented in the government for the first time after the victory of the right-wing coalition in the 2013 parliamentary elections in Norway. Central and Eastern Europe are no exception. Having received 14.8% of votes in the previous European elections, the ultranationalist, anti-Semitic and neofascist *Jobbik* party (the movement for a Better Hungary) secured 20.2% in the April 2014 parliamentary elections, becoming the third largest party in the Hungarian National Assembly. In Bulgaria, *Ataka* (National Union Attack), which is strongly opposed to the Turkish minority in the country and is against the entry of Bulgaria into the EU and NATO, enjoys 12% of the vote share, while in Slovakia, the National Party (SNS) sits at 5.6%. In summary, if we look at European elections as well as national and local elections since 2009, right-wing, radical, Eurosceptic political parties have gained more than 10% of the votes in 11 member states: Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Denmark, France, Hungary, Italy, Lithuania, Norway, Netherlands and Switzerland.

The 2014 EU elections confirmed the increasing success of nationalist and Eurosceptic far-right actors all over Europe. The French *Front National* (FN, National Front—now rebranded as National Rally: Rassemblement National, RN) and British UK Independence Party (UKIP) performed very strongly, winning twenty-four and twenty-two seats respectively. In Denmark, the far-right *Dansk Folkeparti* (DF, Danish People's Party) triumphed with 27% of the votes, doubling its representatives in the European Parliament (MEPs) from two to four. In Austria, the *Freiheitliche Partei Österreich* (FPÖ, Freedom Party of Austria) increased its vote tally by 7.2% from the previous election. Even the neo-Nazis of the *Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands* (NPD, National Democratic Party) in Germany managed to gain one seat in the European Parliament. On this occasion, the attempt by the Far Right to form a parliamentary group within the European Parliament almost succeeded in the form of the European Alliance for Freedom (EAF), the far-right coalition led by Marine Le Pen of France. The EAF was a pan-European political party made up of far-right Eurosceptics founded in 2010, which initially brought together the delegations from the FN, the Dutch *Partij voor de Vrijheid* (PVV, Party for Freedom), the Belgian *Vlaams Belang* (VB, Flemish Interest), the FPÖ, the Sweden Democrats (SD), the *Slovenská Národná Strana* (SNS, Slovak National Party), and the Italian *Legha Nord* (LN,

Northern League). The DF, UKIP and the *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD, Alternative for Germany) refused to join the new alliance. At the same time, the more radical and anti-Semitic European nationalist parties, such as the NPD in Germany, the British National Party (BNP), Golden Dawn in Greece and Jobbik in Hungary were blocked from entering the party. However, due to internal splintering after the European elections, the proposed EAF group did not reach the EU requirement of representation from seven member states, and as a consequence their MEPs sat as *non-inscrits*, meaning that they were not members of one of the recognized political groups.

In comparison to the 2014 European Parliament elections, the Far Right consolidated itself into two key political groups after the 2019 elections: the Identity and Democracy Group (ID) and the European Conservatives and Reformists Group (ECR), which brought together the majority of the largest far-right parliamentary parties in the 27 EU member states. The ID group was headed by the National Front of Marine Le Pen and the Lega of Matteo Salvini, and held 64 seats in the European Parliament. At the same time, the ECR was dominated by its Polish member, the Law and Justice Party (PiS), and had 63 representatives. Some of the far-right political parties remained independent in the European Parliament, including the Hungarian *Fidesz* party, which abandoned its membership of the European People's Party in 2021. The latest European Elections, in 2024, have seen far-right parties gain a large number of seats in the EU parliament. Indeed, extreme right-wing parties won in many countries in Europe, coming out on top in France, Italy and Austria, while also registering successful results in the Netherlands. The AfD came second in Germany—but still ahead of Chancellor Olaf Scholz's SPD party. Some experts warn against overestimating this success too much, while others point to the possible causes, but also consequences for the future of Europe of the victory of parties that see as their core ideology values of nationalism, or rather ethno-nationalism, conservative values (in particular authoritarianism, and law and order) anti-establishment and in some cases anti-system criticism. In this period of crisis and the ongoing implementation of PNRR, a victory for the Far Right in the next European elections could mean a rise in 'neoliberalism'. In addition to the issue of identity policies, such as the traditional policies on immigration that we tend to focus on when looking at the Right, this 'neoliberalism' combines economic neoliberalism with illiberal politics, economic neoliberalism with illiberal politics (Caiani & Meardi, 2022). The question is

whether in the future the two main far right-wing groups in the Parliament—the newly formed Patriots for Europe (Pfe) and the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR)—might join forces to create a transnational supergroup.

As for the *social movements* that exist outside of the institutional arena, in recent years a far-right network has emerged that extends beyond national borders, made up of “close contacts throughout the EU” and supported by the participation of “like-minded nationals from all around the states at right-wing events, such as White Power Music concerts” (Europol, 2011, p. 29). It has been argued that “transnational processes of exchange and learning play an important role in the success of right-wing extremism and right-wing populism in Europe” (Langenbacher & Schellenberg, 2011, p. 22). Confronted with the ‘global challenges’ of the twenty-first century, right-wing extremists have sought to create a transnational network based on a ‘global white identity’ (Daniels, 2009). Indeed, Nissen has shown that the European Union and its policies are increasingly the target of protest events by far-right movements (2022). However, the relationship between far-right groups, parties and social movements, and transnational politics is far from clear. Despite their opposition to a supranational system, many far-right movements consider it necessary to engage in politics on a transnational level. Transnationalization in terms of mobilization can be further differentiated. On the one hand, we must consider cooperation at the European Union level, looking at both successful and unsuccessful attempts at building electoral alliances and parliamentary groups. In line with previous literature, this dimension focuses mainly on political parties. Tentative case studies for this could be the *European Alliance for Freedom* (populist Far Right), the *Alliance for Peace and Freedom* (Far Right, previously known as the *European National Front*) and the *Alliance of European National Movements*. On the other hand, it is necessary to consider international meetings and occasional gatherings, such as demonstrations, commemorations and meetings marking historical events. This dimension is relevant for all groups: parties, movements and subculture groups. Examples of this type of transnational activities include the Dresden demonstration commemorating the bombing of the city during Second World War, but also the occasional participation of foreign far-right activists in national protests organized by far-right organizations (e.g. Golden Dawn, Casa Pound, and Forza Nuova).

One investigation, based on protest event analysis of far-right mobilization between 2005 and 2009, showed that although right-wing

mobilization primarily focuses on the domestic (or, more precisely, the local) level (e.g. 28% of registered right-wing events have a national scope, 40% are organized by a right-wing national actor and 33% have a national target), there are significant signs of an emerging transnationalization of right-wing action (either in terms of targets, actors and scope of the mobilization) (Figs. 10.1 and 10.2). Moreover, it is not only political parties that appear to be able to transnationalize their mobilization, as this is also the case for not-party organizations (in detail, Fig. 10.2). In this regard, we can point to the emergence of the European-wide, Stop Islamification of Europe movement, which was founded in 2007 in the United Kingdom against “the overt and covert expansion of Islam in Europe”² and is active in several European countries. Another example is the well-known international neo-Nazi organization, Blood and Honour, which is active both in Europe and the United States, with many affiliated groups,³ as well as

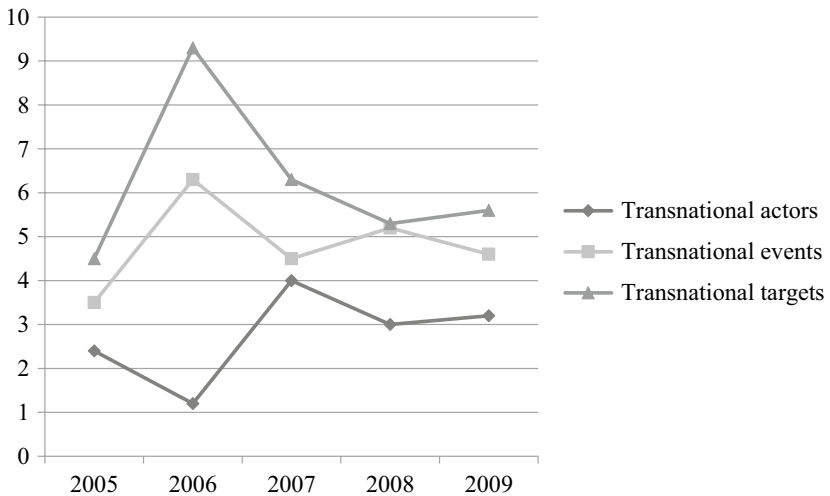


Fig. 10.1 The development of transnational far-right actors, events and targets (2005–2009), all countries (%)

²The Guardian, 24th October 2007.

³E.g. ADL Archive, 30th August 2008 and El País, 27th April 2005.

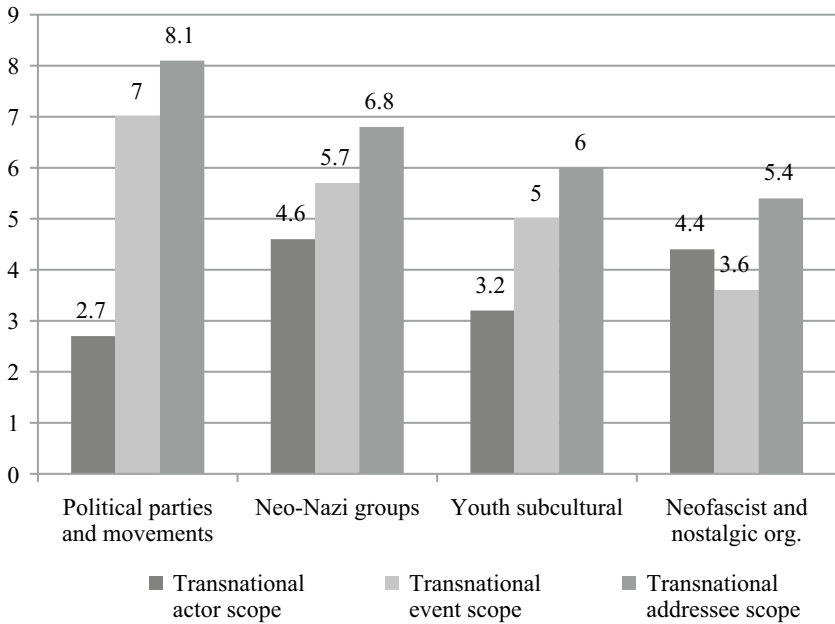


Fig. 10.2 Transnational far-right mobilizations, by type of group (%) (2005–2009)

the extreme right neo-Nazi network, Stormfront.⁴ The types of transnational, right-wing protests include events such as the European campaign to boycott products from American multinational companies entering Europe,⁵ as well as cultural events such as international concerts or gatherings.⁶ As observed in relation to other characteristics of right-wing mobilization, this emerging trend toward a transnationalization of these organizations also seems to be helped by their use of the Internet

⁴ ADL Archive, 13th April 2008.

⁵ As the slogan of the campaign explained, “We are doing consultations among leaders of nationalist movements in Europe, with the aim of extending the boycott campaign against the USA to a transnational level ...” (Forza Nuova, March 2003—our translation).

⁶ Such as the international neo-Nazi gathering, organized by a number of French skinhead groups, involving 300–400 participants coming from different countries, above all Germany (Le Monde, 24th January 2005) or the music festival Hammerfest organized in the USA in 2005, involving extreme right-wing bands from all over the USA and Europe (The Atlanta Journal and Constitution, 1st October 2005).

(something that was evident even prior to the spread of social media). For example, when the German extreme-right group Blood and Honour was banned in 2008, it managed to survive and continue its activities through its website, which was hosted on non-German servers and permitted the group to continue advertising and organizing mobilization events, such as concerts both within the country and abroad.⁷

NETWORKS AND THE TRANSNATIONALIZATION OF THE FAR RIGHT

In this regard, we cannot neglect the key role played by the Internet in the internationalization of the Far Right (Törnberg & Nissen, 2022). As numerous studies have highlighted, far-right organizations in both Europe and America increasingly rely on the Internet for their activities, in order to circumvent national laws and police scrutiny (Bartlett et al., 2011; Caiani & Parenti, 2013; Ramalingam, 2012). The new virtual means of communication offered by the Internet are considered to favor transnational solidarity. As has been observed, “the development of information and communication technologies” and the “easing of Europe’s border” are the “new enablers allowing white supremacists and neo-Nazis to connect and cooperate” (Whine, 2012, p. 317). Furthermore, as a number of social movements scholars have underlined, the Internet can play an important role in facilitating the processes of mobilization by reducing the cost of communication with a large number of individuals, solving the problem of leadership and networking, and allowing for the organization of transnational and even global events.

One example of transnationalization in terms of the development of crossnational links (also online) is the cooperation between far-right actors on specific topics. In this regard, one aspect of transnationalization that we can conceptualize is an issue-based cooperation by political parties and social movements that build temporary coalitions on specific campaigns and topics. Previous examples of this are the networks that were created in solidarity with Russia (against Russophobia), Ukraine, Palestine and, more recently, the *European Solidarity Front for Syria* (www.esfsyria.org). In addition, one could also look at ultra-conservative Catholic networks, such as the Society of St. Pious X (<http://www.fsspx.org/en/>), or similar ultrareligious groups that exist in contexts where the religious dimension

⁷ Sueddeutsche Zeitung, 30th August 2008.

is a crucial element for far-right mobilization (e.g. Hungary, Poland, Slovakia).

In the summer of 2021, populist far-right leaders in several European capitals signed a document calling for a deep reform of the EU, which they framed in exclusivist terms, concerning migration policies and borders. This was followed by networking events in Warsaw (December 2021) and Madrid (January 2022), which were attended by most of the signatories (although the Finns Party and the Danish People's Party were absent). While it is difficult to clearly pinpoint who this initiative was initiated by, the Polish PiS party and the Hungarian Fidesz party—both of whom have been responsible for democratic backsliding within the EU—undeniably played a significant role. However, divisions soon began to emerge between the signatories over the issue of Russia, with parties from different countries disagreeing on crucial matters such as the imposition of sanctions against Russia and the delivery of aid for Ukraine.

It should be noted that there is also a long legacy of 'pan-European' ideas on the Far Right, most visibly in France immediately following the Second World War. The essay 'What is Nationalism?', written by Dominique Venner in the 1960s, still remains influential in far-right intellectual circles, while Alain de Benoist has long advocated the need for European unity—and unity between Germany and France in particular. Even the name of the think tank that he founded, GRECE (Research and Study Group for European Civilization), indicates a positive association with Europe. It is no surprise that Griffin (2000, p. 166) refers to the "Europeanization of fascism" as a "striking feature of the post-1945 fascist far right" (see also Macklin, 2013). In a similar fashion to their left-wing and liberal counterparts, the pro-Europeanism of current far-right groups reflects the heritage of previous waves of activism.

On an EU level, for example, the Brothers of Italy party (*Fratelli di Italia*, FdI), which is one of the most successful far-right parties in Europe in recent years, managed to enter the European Parliament in the 2019 election, where it joined the European Conservatives and Reformists grouping (ECR). The fact that the party decided to join the ECR, which at the time was perceived as less far-right than the ID grouping, can be interpreted as an attempt by Giorgia Meloni to construct a more moderate image for herself on the European level (Vampa, 2023).

At the same time, however, FdI has been vocal on an international level about its support for the Hungarian governing party Fidesz and its leader Viktor Orban. While Fidesz does not currently sit with any group in the

European Parliament, it had previously been a member of the EPP, before it was expelled in 2021 following years of controversies. Giorgia Meloni has maintained a very close relationship with the Hungarian Far Right, and in the Trieste Thesis (a document that sets out the development of a European Right),⁸ FdI describes itself as being partly inspired by Central European countries that have a solid potential for far-right mobilization:

We believe that all the European treaties must be revised and start afresh from a new pact, from a confederation of free and sovereign states that cooperate on major strategic issues, from security to immigration, from the common market to foreign and defence policy, but without the headless tyranny of an anonymous bureaucratic superstructure incapable of representing the needs of the member states and the demands of their citizens. With this in mind, we look with attention to the ‘Visegrad group’, of which Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia are already members, and which could soon be joined by Austria, as a symbol of opposition to the bureaucratic degeneration of the European Union and the defence of real and historical Europe. (Tesi di Trieste 2017)

For a number of years, FdI has also been building a similarly close relationship with Law and Justice (PiS), the far-right party that until recently was governing Poland. Collaboration between the two parties continued even after FdI entered government in Italy. In an interview he gave to the Italian state broadcaster during an official visit to Rome, the Polish president, Andrzej Duda, stated, “I am Andrzej, I am a man, I am a father, I am a Catholic”, echoing the words of a famous speech given by Giorgia Meloni.⁹ Another important international partner of FdI is the Spanish far-right party Vox. Given the strong nationalistic position of Vox, as well as the support that the Lega had expressed for Catalan independence, the Spanish party found a much stronger basis for collaboration with FdI (Pucciarelli, 2022). In the case of both parties, it is possible to trace a refocusing of language, from words such as ‘nationalism’ to terms such as ‘patriotism’ and ‘sovereignism’, as well as a diminishing centrality of religion and religiousness in their strategic framing (Botti, 2022).

⁸ <https://www.giorgiameloni.it/tesitrieste/>

⁹ Rome, 24 January 2020—From the Ravenna stage to support the candidate for the Presidency of the Emilia-Romagna Region Borgonzoni, Giorgia Meloni takes the floor. The leader of the Brothers of Italy relaunches her slogan: “I am Giorgia, I am a woman, I am a mother....” See, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mFYoFOaJvMs>

Beyond institutionalized contacts within the European Parliament, other studies have revealed the presence of crossnational contacts among *far-right social movements* (i.e. political movements, cultural associations, subcultural and neo-Nazi groups. See Table 10.1). A research project that included fifty-four interviews with representatives of the most important far-right organizations in six European countries (Austria, France, Germany, Great Britain, Italy and Spain) and the United States (Caiani & Kröll, 2014) revealed that most of the far-right groups interviewed (71%) have frequent transnational contacts, either with right-wing groups in other countries or at the international level with umbrella federations. For instance, a representative of the English Democrats stressed that they “have been approached by several foreign organisations such as the Flemish Nationalist Party and the Austrian FPÖ in order to find topics of common interest and to work on a common platform” (Caiani & Kröll, 2014, p. 10). Similarly, the German movement *Junge Nationaldemokraten* (JN, Young National Democrats) declared that it was in regular contact with a variety of right-wing youth organizations in Europe, including the *Nordisk Ungdom* (Nordic Freedom), and the NPD claimed links with other European far-right parties, such as the *Falange Española de las JONS* (Spanish Phalanx of the Committees for the National-Syndicalist Offensive), the BNP from the United Kingdom and *Dělnická Strana Sociální Spravedlnosti* (DSSS, Workers’ Party of Social Justice) from the Czech Republic (Caiani & Kröll, 2014, p. 11). A representative from the American Third Position explained that his group had recently had ‘trans-oceanic’ contacts with the French RN, while other American organizations have had contact with the BNP (Caiani & Kröll, 2014, p. 12). This

Table 10.1 International and cross-national ties by type of E.R. organizations

Country	%	Types of groups	%
USA	30.0	Political parties	12.5
ITALY	41.3	Political movements	32.1
SPAIN	29.3	Nostalgic groups	17.9
FRANCE	25.0	Neo-Nazi groups	54.2
UK	36.4	Cultural organizations	36.4
GERMANY	10.0	Subculture groups	37.5
All countries	29.5	All groups	29.5

Source: Caiani and Parenti (2013)

high degree of horizontal ‘transnational embeddedness’ may be related to the weak institutionalization of supranational right-wing actors, which pushes national far-right movement organizations to be directly involved at multiple levels.

INTERNATIONALIZATION OF FAR-RIGHT ‘FRAMES’ AND IDENTITIES

Some scholars look at the internationalization of collective actors as a diffusion of ideas, norms and values and indicate processes of diffusion of ‘frames’ as a precondition for the formation of transnational cooperation and identities, which can function in turn as a basis for the development of crossnational linkages (della Porta & Diani, 2020). As with any political party, networking represents an essential political activity for the Far Right, particularly on an international level, functioning as a crucible for the exchange of ideas and information on policy and praxis (Macklin, 2017, p. 177). This ‘diffusion’ of shared ‘frames’ and common ‘repertoires of protest’ also facilitates the further development of ‘tolerant’ support networks for ‘intolerant’ ideologically inspired action, which can yield logistical and indeed emotional support to activists who are frequently marginalized within the context of their domestic politics. The diffusion of ideas can be analysed by applying fame analysis, focusing on the social construction of problems and solutions and the way organizations spread their vision of society (Caiani, 2023).

An example of transnationalization in terms of identities (i.e. lower level indicators to be looked at) is the transnationalization of identities through online mobilization and web-based channels of socialization, clothing choices and the diffusion of art and musical cultures (White Power, Blood and Honour, Identitaria Rock). This is particularly relevant for social movements and subcultures (such as the neo-Nazi, White music groups).

One recent study has highlighted how the main far-right parties and movements in seven European countries share similar interpretative frameworks on Europe and the process of European integration: these include similar diagnoses of the socio-political reality, similar prognoses and

similar solutions and calls for action (Pavan & Caiani, 2017)¹⁰ (Figs. 10.3 and 10.4).

These similar interpretative schemes on current politics also serve to create what in sociology is called the structure of discursive opportunities, that is, the “political-cultural or symbolic opportunities that determine what kind of ideas become visible for the public, resonate with public opinion and are held to be ‘legitimate’ by the audience” (della Porta & Diani, 2020).

Turning to the *political party side* and returning once again to the example of the Italian far-right party FdI, we can observe that their alternative vision of the European Union frames it as a historical ‘civilizational’ project that exists in spite of foreign influence, and in particular the so-called process of ‘Islamization’. This is a frame that is shared by many right-wing parties across the continent. During a recent wave of criticism,

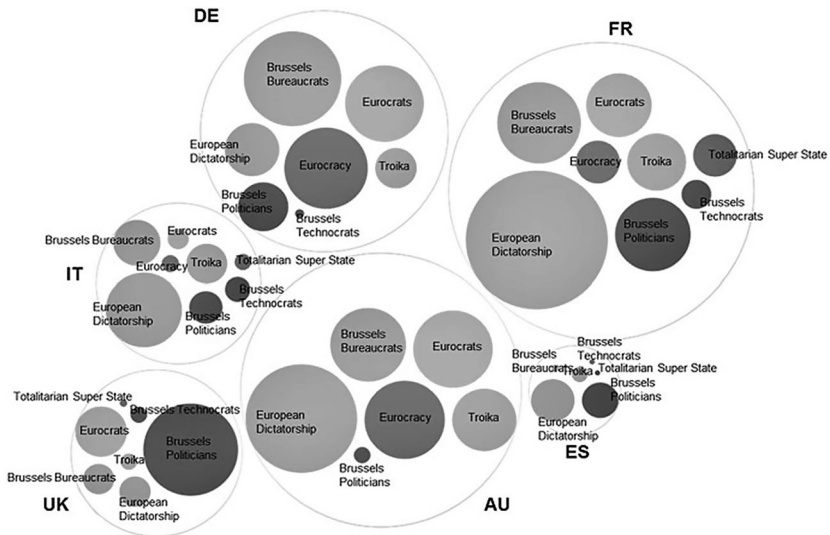


Fig. 10.3 ‘Diffusion’ and ‘Transnationalization’: Common Identities (critical frames on Europe by the RR in 7 countries)

¹⁰ As seen in the figure, for each country, circles with larger diameters correspond to aspects particularly emphasized by programmers through the pages of their sites. Overall, the findings suggest that opposition to current European integration processes is an issue discussed with a wealth of nuances in the online conversations between far-right sites.

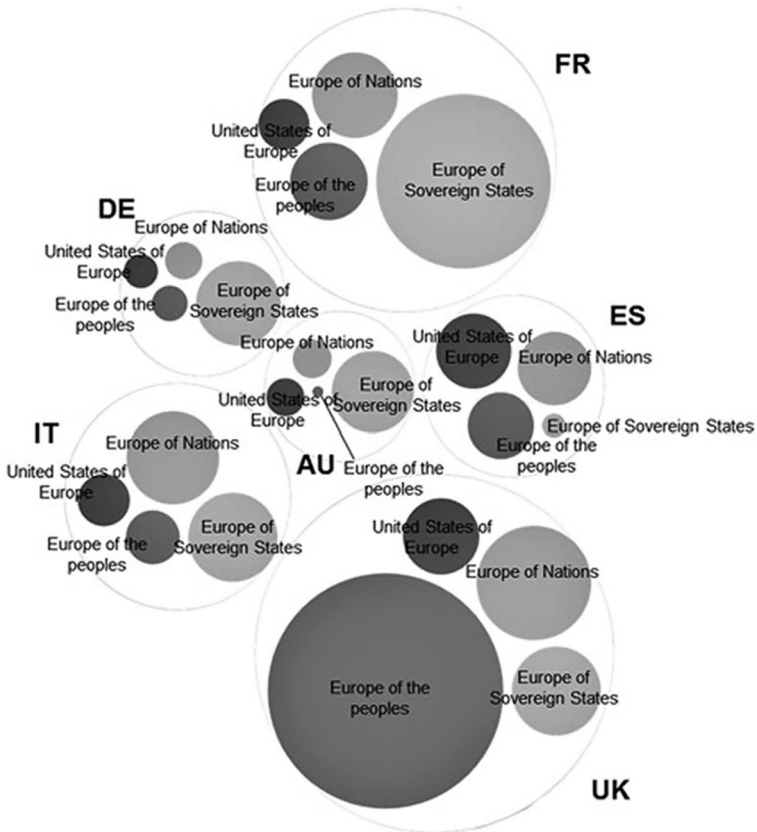


Fig. 10.4 Diffusion' and 'Transnationalization': Common Identities (positive frames for reforming Europe by the RR in 7 countries)

when 15 EU member states and the European Parliament attacked Hungary for its anti-LGBTQ+ legislation, Georgia Meloni took the decision to stay out of the debate (Lancari, 2023). The openly islamophobic and nativist discourse of FdI means that it is closely relatable to identitarian mobilizations in Central Europe.

Looking at *far-right social movements*, one of the key developments in the contemporary European protest arena is the development and the dominance of European identities also on the Far Right, even when activists heavily criticize the existing reality of European integration (Caiani &

Weisskircher, 2022). It has been observed that right-wing movements, having to grapple with the changing structure of discursive opportunities, have moved away from traditional notions of nationalism and race and have adopted a broader language of civilizational struggle, rallying around the nebulous idea of the ‘West’ to create a syncretic assemblage of cultural signifiers (Bergmann et al., 2021). This has been seen to manifest itself in a new trend among populist reactionaries in Western Europe, some of whom have paradoxically declared themselves to be the champions of free speech, human rights, women’s emancipation and LGBTQ+ acceptance, while also simultaneously endorsing Christendom and secular values (Brubaker, 2017). More recently, activists across the political spectrum have also increasingly tended to advance their visions of Europe based on solid European identities (Caiani & Weisskircher, 2022). Far-right groups have organized protests in response to the intensifying ‘refugee crisis’ (Caiani & Císař, 2019). These protesters have also emphasized a European identity, albeit to call for the so-called defence of Europe against the alleged threats of ‘Islamization’ and ‘decay’. One well-known example of this can be seen in the far-right group PEGIDA (Berntzen & Weisskircher, 2016), a group that is predominantly active in Dresden and is opposed to non-European immigration, the mainstream media and has demanded more direct democracy—although without making strong references to European integration. A further group that is active in several European countries and opposes non-European immigration is the Identitarians (Zúquete, 2018) (Table 10.2).

Table 10.2 Key elements of European identities of far-right ‘pro-European nativists’

	<i>‘Pro-European nativists’</i>
Identification with Europe	Strong
Criticism of the existing reality of European integration	Strong
Identification of Europe with culturally inclusive stances	Weak
Identification of Europe with culturally exclusive stances	Strong
Attitude towards nationalism	Positive

Source: Author’s elaboration from Caiani and Weisskircher (2022)

TRANATIONALIZATION OF ACTIONS AND MOBILIZATION

Focussing specifically on *far-right social movements*, the contemporary European Identitarian movement began to develop in France at the beginning of the 2000s, and subsequently inspired the creation of a number of different groups and organizations. The movement spread and created connections with a number of social movements and political parties in various European countries, including Austria, Germany, Italy, Switzerland, Spain, Portugal (Jacquet-Vaillant, 2021). One of the most well-known cases of its transnationalization is the ‘Generation Identity’ network, which spread to thirteen countries in the period between 2012 and 2017 (see Nissen, 2022).

As an example of this spread, we can look at the example of the anti-Islamic PEGIDA movement, which was established in 2014 and initially developed in Germany, before subsequently spreading to Norway and Austria (Berntzen & Weisskircher, 2016). Its development has been based on utilizing the opportunities offered by the refugee crisis (2015–2016), as well as the subsequent pandemic crisis (2020–2022) and the climate crisis (Nam, 2021). Although PEGIDA’s protest mobilization has significantly decreased since its peak in 2014 and 2015, in recent years researchers have noted its persistence in a novel form of symbolic performances (Volk, 2022).

Among the other far-right movements, the anti-gender movement is one of groupings with the greatest success in achieving transnationalization. Motivated by detailed strategic reflections of US and European conservative activists, the ‘Agenda Europe’ organization currently brings together more than 100 groups and organizations mobilizing against human rights, women’s rights and LGBT rights across more than thirty European countries (Datta, 2021). A particularly notable phenomenon over the past decade has been the far-right protest actors developing as complementary support to the strongly authoritarian governments in Poland and Hungary. An example of such activity in Poland is the traditional Independence March, which has become one of the central rallies attended by various far-right actors and is mainly focused on promoting xenophobic and nativist messages. Parliamentary and extra-parliamentary actors often collaborate and share resources. This is especially the case in the context of Hungary, where researchers have observed the extent to which the patient, long-term development of grassroots networks and activities has helped in strengthening the power of far-right parties and

movement parties (see Greskovits, 2020). More recently, in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, far-right movement actors have mobilized around a range of conspiracy theories (Caiani et al., 2024).

With regard to the transnational initiatives and actions of *far-right parties*, party rallies, gatherings and cultural events are on the increase. Far-right party leaders often deliver keynote speeches at each others' conventions, such as the National Conservatism Conference, the first edition of which was organized in Rome in 2020 by the conservative think-tank the Edmund Burke Foundation. For many of the political parties in the current European electoral landscape, transnational collaboration is not simply an addition to their domestic activities but also a source of inspiration as well as resources. A case in point is the personal experience of Giorgia Meloni in organizing the Atreju festival, which was established by the youth branch of FdI's direct predecessor, Alleanza Nazionale (AN), and has hosted high-profile political figures such as Steve Bannon and Viktor Orbán (Vampa, 2023). The Italian party has invested a great deal of time and energy into building up her profile at international far-right events. Examples of this process include the recent gathering of the international sovereignist right in Rome (September 2023): the National Conservatism Conference, held in Italy in 2020 and attended by, among others, Giorgia Meloni, Viktor Orbán, Matteo Salvini and a representative of the Le Pen family; and the meeting between the Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni and the Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki. Given the numerous attempts and failures by European radical right-wing forces to create a single political entity (grouping or party) at this level, this will remain an open question (plausible and desired) for many right-wing political actors (McDonnell & Werner, 2020).

CONCLUSION

As has been shown in this chapter, despite the fact that they criticize supranational systems of governance (as multicultural threats for peoples identities, as superpower dictatorships, even as not socially carrying national citizens), many far-right organizations consider it necessary to engage in politics on a transnational level. This holds true for both social movements and political parties on the right of the political spectrum. Indeed, as has been seen, these actors increasingly co-organize events and mobilizations transnationally, coordinate crossnational networks and use similar framing strategies to frame similar issues in a similar fashion.

Among the explanations for this key trend in European politics, it must be noted that the existence of the European Union and the process of European integration has favoured processes of transnationalization on the Far Right, both with regard to political parties and the extra parliamentary arena. In terms of far-right political parties, although a discussion had already developed after the Second World War around the possibility of a ‘black international’, aimed at bringing together European far-right groups,¹¹ the turning point were the first elections to the European Parliament (in 1979), which offered a new arena for radical right parties in Europe with opportunities for cooperation. Indeed, it was precisely around the Front National that the Group of the European Right (GDE) developed in the EU Parliament in 1984. This is an emblematic case of nationalism prevailing over the drive for international cooperation. In 2007, the ITS (Identity, Tradition, Sovereignty) grouping was created as another attempt to build a European far-right grouping in the EU parliament. However, the ITS also fell apart when members of the Greater Romania Party (PRM) left the group after Alessandra Mussolini (the leader of *Fiamma Tricolore*) made controversial comments about Romanian people. There are currently two large groups representing the radical right in the EU Parliament: the ECR (European Conservatives and Reformists) and the P/E (Patriots for Europe).

With regard to extra-parliamentary far-right organizations, such as the social movement organizations described in this chapter, recent research has pointed to the existence of a ‘hydraulic’ relationship, according to which the stronger the far-right allies in power are (i.e., European far-right parties), the more successful the far-right mobilization is. In relation to this, an additional topic that deserves greater attention in future research looking at the transnationalization of the far-right is the fact that in a context with increasingly hybrid actors (e.g. right-wing ‘movement parties’, Caiani & Císař, 2019), even the transnationalization of the right is becoming more fluid. Consequently, networks of alliances are created that not only involve traditional parties but also foundations, think tanks and movements (e.g. Pegida). We must also note that there are significant differences that make collaboration across Europe quite difficult. These

¹¹ In 1951, the congress of European far-right parties was held in Malmo, where however there was a split between the European Social Movement (MSE) which wanted to promote a neo-fascist international and the New European Order (NOE) which had ‘biological racism’ as its cornerstone.

include the migration issue, as mentioned above, but also economic ideology (Poland and Hungary are ‘anti-neoliberal’, for example; Buzogány & Varga, 2023), as well as ideology more generally (i.e the Western European Far Right vs. the US-based Far Right).

Research on transnational activism frequently reveals the challenges related to reaching beyond national borders, both online and offline. Whether strong European identities contribute to enhanced transnational practices, in the long run, remains to be seen. However, just as is the case on the progressive side of contention, this should not be taken for granted. This will depend, among other things, on the ability of these collective actors to broaden their opportunities (also at the EU level), through framing (Ringe & Rennó, 2023).¹²

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Scaling Up Contention at a Euro-Mediterranean Level: Non-state Actors Navigating between Bureaucratic Alliances and Contentious Strategies

Nathalie Ferré 

INTRODUCTION

When the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership was launched in 1995, numerous non-state actors organized themselves around it. The Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (hereinafter EMP) brought together fifteen European Union member states and twelve countries from the southern and eastern Mediterranean regions and had a significant economic dimension, streamlining various economic agreements that had been signed since the 1970s to adhere to the tenets of neoliberal economic orthodoxy. Additionally, it outlined an institutional agenda for macro-regional cooperation in the political domain and encompassed a social and cultural

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component in which ‘civil society’ was designated as the main actor in fostering interregional cooperation and bridging the gap between the two shores of the Mediterranean (Visier, 1999). Networks of non-state actors organized themselves primarily around the political and cultural dimensions of the EMP. These networks comprised NGOs, foundations, research centres and local authorities. Specific transnational networks and organizations were also created within the framework of the EMP, such as the Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network, which brings together European and Arab Human Rights organizations, or the Euro-Mediterranean Non-governmental Platform, a coalition of various non-state actors based in the EU and Southern Mediterranean countries. These actors also applied for newly available funding from the European Commission or used the Euro-Mediterranean political agenda to raise claims aimed at reforming EU policies, or to try to influence their national governments.

This chapter questions how different non-state actors organize themselves at a transnational level and interact with a supranational bureaucracy, namely the European Commission. How do non-state actors organize across borders around a macro-regional cooperation scheme? How do non-state actors scale up their contention from the local to the EU level? What role did EU institutions play in making this possible? How did regular interactions with institutional actors influence the repertoires of action of non-state actors?

To answer these questions, the chapter focuses on a prominent case study of transnational non-governmental space linked to the EMP, namely the Euro-Mediterranean Civil Forum. This forum, which brought together large numbers of non-state actors from all of the signatory countries of the EMP, was organized in parallel with the Euro-Mediterranean Ministerial Conferences between 1995 and 2006. They played a central role in EU discourse, showcasing the participatory dimension of the EMP (Cheynis, 2008; Jünemann, 2002; Schäfer, 2007; Soler I Lecha, 2003; Visier, 2003). The significance of this case study lies in its ability to provide insights into the dynamics and interactions between public officials and non-state actors over a medium-term period. By analysing the evolution of these Civil Forums, we can gain a comprehensive understanding of how international opportunities, such as the existence of spaces like the Civil Forum, both stimulate and structure the internationalization of activist movements addressing the European Union. This chapter particularly scrutinizes a specific transnational network dedicated to

reconfiguring civil forums by infusing them with political content and raising awareness about issues such as human rights. In 2004, the activities of this informal network resulted in the creation of the *Euro-Mediterranean Non-governmental Platform*, which succeeded in being recognized by the European Commission as the organizers of the Euro-Mediterranean Civil Forum.

This chapter argues that the organization of transnational networks at a Euro-Mediterranean level and the internationalization of national causes is as much the result of the strategies of non-state actors as it is the consequence of the European Commission policies to legitimize and implement its external action through non-state actors. It argues that it is crucial to take into consideration the interplay between non-state actors and the institutions of both the EU and member states when studying the way in which non-state actors organize across borders and scale up contention. Research on transnational activism has shown that “the changing structure of international politics [...] offers activists focal points for collective action, provides them with expanded resources and opportunities, and brings them together in transnational coalitions and campaigns” (Tarrow, 2005, p. 4). Social movements and non-state actors can use access to international organizations, as well as the media and transnational allies, to raise awareness of national issues and concerns in order to put pressure on their national governments (Keck & Sikkink, 1998).

International bureaucracies play a role in organizing transnational contention by opening up spaces of representation such as the Civil Forum, financing activities and recognizing human rights as a means of expressing grievances and claims (Joachim & Locher, 2009; Martens, 2005; Steffek, 2013; Tarrow, 2005). In the case of the European Commission, since in the mid-1990s “civil society” has become a key rhetorical component and the organization of NGOs at an EU-level has been both encouraged and financed (Laurens, 2015; Sanchez Salgado, 2011). This process has been thoroughly studied within the EU (Aldrin & Hube, 2016; Kohler-Koch, 2012; Michel, 2007; Saurugger, 2010) but it also has implications beyond the institutional borders of the EU, as highlighted by a growing body of research (Aliyev, 2016; Boiten, 2015; Buzogány, 2018; Feliu, 2005; Ferré, 2018; Joachim & Dembinski, 2011; Khakee & Weilandt, 2022; Lidén et al., 2016; Shapovalova, 2016). In analysing how these non-state actors organize across borders, this chapter focuses on how regular interactions with public officials, in turn, influence repertoires of action, structure the

power relations within the transnational networks and make them dependent on public funding.

The chapter is organized as follows. The first section will briefly present the methods used. The second section will analyse how the European Commission looked for allies and sought to outsource the implementation of the EMP through the Civil Forum. Following this, the third section will analyse the way in which various non-state actors have internationalized their cause and created transnational networks within the framework of the EMP. Finally, the fourth section will demonstrate how regular interaction with public officials influences action repertoires and structures power relations within Euro-Mediterranean transnational networks.

METHODOLOGY

In order to study this process and the transnational networks involved in the Civil Forum, a combination of document analysis and interviews was employed.¹ Document analysis provided access to internal exchanges and behind-the-scenes aspects of the event. The main documentary source is a collection of private archives belonging to an organization involved in almost every Civil Forum since 1995. These archives contained emails, faxes, minutes from meetings and information about their associative work and interactions with public authorities, something that is difficult to fully reveal in the course of an interview.

The documents held in an archival box may initially represent the most static data in a field investigation. Yet, these materials serve as a valuable witness and provide markers of interactions that unfolded over several years between individuals residing in different countries, rendering them challenging to capture with the same level of precision through alternative sources. This archival material has thus proven to be a valuable resource for tracking mobile individuals, events unfolding across multiple locations and transnational information exchanges.

The chapter is based on 11 interviews that I conducted with participants from various countries (Algeria, Belgium, Denmark, France,

¹This research was conducted as part of a PhD in political science carried out by the author (Ferré, 2021). This research has received support from the Agence Nationale de la Recherche (France, project ANR-21-CE41-0025) and the Österreichischer Wissenschaftsfonds (Austria, project 10.55776/15786).

Germany, Italy, Spain and Tunisia). The interviewees were selected with the aim of providing a range of perspectives on the Civil Forum and the Euro-Mediterranean Non-Governmental Platform, based on their professional roles and country of origin. This included two professional trade unionists, three representatives of cultural and political foundations, a director of a think tank and five employees of associations or non-governmental organizations (NGOs). These interviews reconstructed the subjective perceptions and involvement of participants, while shedding light on the profiles of individuals engaged in this space over the long term.

SEEKING ALLIES AND OUTSOURCING THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE EMP THROUGH CIVIL FORUMS

Since the inception of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership in 1995, the European Commission's directorate in charge of external relations (DG Relex) sought to bring in groups from outside the administration to organize at a European level and to implement Commission policies (Ferré, 2021). This was made possible by equipping the EU bureaucracy with a set of instruments—such as calls for proposals and consultation procedures—to organize the interactions between the administration and its counterparts. As articulated by Claire Visier, this “sector mobilization strategy” (Visier, 2003, p. 168) allows for the integration of actors other than representatives of authoritarian regimes. This process thus legitimizes European external action by opposing the recurrent criticisms of the EU's democratic deficit with a discourse on the democratic virtues of “civil society”.²

The Euro-Mediterranean Civil Forum is a prominent example of outsourcing EU-external action to non-state actors and producing a political narrative on the participation of “civil society”. The events were organized in parallel to the intergovernmental Euro-Mediterranean Ministerial conferences (see Table 11.1 summarizing the Civil Forums organized between 1995 and 2006). These forums have played a pivotal role in making

²I use the term “civil society” within quotation marks as it is part of the EU's institutional discourse but also, as will be demonstrated further in this chapter, of governing elites in authoritarian states. The term can also be used by a wide range of actors, such as voluntary associations, but also business groups, researchers, foundations or GONGOs to apply for public funding or to take part in public consultations. I therefore do not use it as a research concept but rather as an emic category of action.

Table 11.1 Euro-Mediterranean Civil Forums (1995–2006)

<i>Place</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Organizer(s)</i>
Barcelona	November 29–December 1, 1995	Institut Català de la Mediterrània d'Estudis i Cooperació
Valletta	April 11–13, 1997	Foundation for International Studies (Malta), North-South Centre of the Council of Europe, Institut Català de la Mediterrània d'Estudis i Cooperació, Mediterranean Academy of Diplomatic Studies, Mediterranean Universities Union (UNIMED)/ European Cultural Agency (Mediterranean program/UNESCO)
Naples	December 12–14, 1997	Fondazione Laboratorio Mediterraneo, Institut Català de la Mediterrània d'Estudis i Cooperació
Stuttgart	April 13–16, 1999	Heinrich Böll Foundation, WWF, Friends of the Earth (Environment Conference); Friedrich Ebert Foundation, Mediterranean Citizens' Forum, Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network (Human Rights and Citizenship in the Mediterranean Conference); European Trade Union Confederation and Friedrich Ebert Foundation (Economic Development, Industrial Relations, and the Role of Trade Unions Conference)
Marseille	November 10–12, 2000	Hybrid steering committee
Brussels	October 19–20, 2001	Hybrid steering committee
Valencia	April 12–13, 2002	Foundation for Solidarity and Volunteering of the Valencia Community and hybrid steering committee
Chania	May 1–4, 2003	Ad Hoc Committee of Greek NGOs with Euro-Mediterranean Orientation
Naples	December 12–14, 2003	Fondazione Laboratorio Mediterraneo, EuroMed Non-Governmental Platform
Luxembourg	April 1–3, 2005	EuroMed Non-Governmental Platform
Marrakech	November 4–7, 2006	EuroMed Non-Governmental Platform

Source: Author's elaboration (Ferré, 2021)

non-state actor participation visible in parallel to the Ministerial Conferences and creating networks of actors across the countries that form the EMP. The participants, ranging from several hundred to over a thousand, participated in sectoral forums and produced recommendations

for intergovernmental actors and the European Commission. The events brought together staff from NGOs and voluntary associations, business managers, as well as civil servants from national ministries, EU institutions and local governments, academics, professionals from the cultural sector, employers' representatives and trade union members. The first Euromed Civil Forum in 1995 was organized with the support of the *Generalitat de Catalunya*, under the Spanish presidency of the EU, and the European Commission. It was coordinated by the European Institute of the Mediterranean (formerly known as the *Institut Català de la Mediterrània*), an institution closely associated with the *Generalitat* and central to the organization of the two subsequent Forums.

As shown by archival documents regarding the preparation of the first Civil Forum, one of the key criteria in the selection of participants for the European Institute of the Mediterranean was their ability to participate in implementing the policy aims of the EMP. This operational aim deserves emphasis, as it is heavily present in the documents preceding the Civil Forum, repeatedly highlighting the necessity of providing “pragmatic content and immediate and operational cooperation to the conclusions of the Euromediterranean conference”.³ Social, cultural and economic actors were portrayed as instruments in implementing the objectives of the EMP: “The significant role played by civil societies in the European and Mediterranean framework constitutes a basic instrument to stimulate socio-cultural dialogue and an indispensable element for achieving a deeper mutual understanding”.⁴ Selected participants were expected to take part in the thematic sessions with a submission presenting: “One project, one idea, one page”.⁵ They were thus conceived of as allies, capable of translating political objectives into action. As illustrated by this example, the first Civil Forum was designed to outsource fragments of public action to NGOs, which emerge as on-the-ground operators to achieve EU public policy objectives (Aldrin & Ferré, 2022).

The Civil Forum was thus situated at a juncture closely tied to governmental actors and was reliant on public funding. Governmental actors of the host state had a great deal of influence over the format and the content

³ Euromed Civil Forum, Barcelona, August 21, 1995, Letter addressed to a participating organization, private archives.

⁴ Working document, 26/6/95, Euromed Civil Forum, Barcelona, November 29–30 and December 1, 1995, private archives.

⁵ Euromed Civil Forum, Internal document for the organizers, 1995, private archives.

of the Forum, notably by choosing the organization in charge of selecting the participants and the thematic focus (Jünemann, 2002). EU and member state institutions thus played a crucial role in shaping these spaces, which brought together non-governmental actors.

INTERNATIONALIZING NATIONAL CAUSES THROUGH THE EURO-MEDITERRANEAN CIVIL FORUMS

Although the Civil Forum was closely intertwined with the political authorities of the host country, they simultaneously served as platforms for various non-state actors to internationalize their causes and identify the means to develop more long-term transnational networks. Out of the thousands of participants that took part in the Civil Forum, an informal coalition of several organizations recognized the need for a permanent structure to reform the forum and gain control over its organization.

This transnational network initially gained prominence during the 1999 Civil Forum, which took place under the German Presidency of the European Union, following the electoral victory of the Greens (*Die Grünen*) and the Social Democratic Party (*Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands*) in 1998. On that occasion, the organization of the Civil Forum was entrusted to the political foundations of these parties, the Heinrich Böll and Friedrich-Ebert foundations respectively. The foreign policy approach of Germany, in which partisan foundations play a pivotal role (Dakowska, 2004), led to a shift in the thematic focus towards human rights, economic and social rights and environmental concerns, each of which became the subjects of distinct thematic conferences during the Stuttgart Civil Forum. Within this Forum, a coalition of reformers emerged, comprising trade unionists, human rights advocates, some employees of German partisan foundations, international solidarity organizations, NGOs and cultural associations. They collectively recognized the significance of engaging with the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership to influence EU policies, while expressing criticism of the achievements of EU and Southern Mediterranean countries for falling short of the expectations placed in the EMP. The following statement, taken from a letter to the steering committee of the Civil Forum in Valencia, sums up this position:

We are a number of networks, NGOs, intellectuals and social actors who have said yes to the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, because we believe

that cooperation between Europe and the Mediterranean countries is vital for peace, for respect for human rights, for human, social and cultural development. [...] our conviction of the urgency of such cooperation also makes us extremely critical of both the European Union, and of third countries, for the way in which it has been built. Saying yes to the partnership in no way means accepting its framework or content as it stands.⁶

This transnational coalition articulated various critiques of EU foreign policy, including its harsh liberalization measures and their social repercussions in Southern countries, the securitization approach to migration and also the disregard for human rights in authoritarian regimes, among other issues. The Civil Forum was also a space for the internationalization of the “Palestinian cause”. In particular, the recommendations that emerged from the Civil Forum systematically called on the European Union to develop a policy that was independent of the United States on this issue, and to “assume [...] its responsibilities by proposing urgent measures to put an end to Israel’s armed aggression and to protect the Palestinian populations”.⁷ From 2000 onwards, the offensives launched by Israel in the Occupied Palestinian Territory had an even greater impact on the Civil Forum, threatening the very organization of the event on several occasions. Human rights activists and Palestinian NGOs were particularly eager to use the Civil Forum as an internationalization strategy in order to increase European support and solidarity with the Palestinians and denounce the Israeli occupation.

The significant presence of human rights activists, many of whom had direct experience of repression in their home countries, fuelled a collective action to reform the Civil Forum, assume leadership roles in their organization and transform them into spaces for independent expression free from government control. To achieve this, members of the reformist coalition sought recognition as representatives of “Euro-Mediterranean civil society” during and between subsequent civil forums. In the early 2000s, they developed collective strategies aimed at reforming the organization of the Civil Forum. In 2002, in the context of the Valencia Civil Forum, a number of organizers of the previous forums joined together to evaluate the EMP and decided to establish an independent transnational structure

⁶Letter to members of the Valencia Civil Forum Steering Committee, 2002, private archives, author’s translation.

⁷EuroMed Civil Forum, Final Declaration of the EuroMed 2000 NGO Collective.

with different national platforms. Discussions gained momentum within the reformist coalition in relation to the establishment of a sustainable structure for organizing and ensuring continuity between these forums, which led to the creation of the *Euro-Mediterranean Non-Governmental Platform*. Beginning in 2003, this newly formed structure assumed responsibility for the organization of the Civil Forum (see Table 11.1) and aimed to establish networks in the countries that were members of the EMP. The organization's charter was heavily influenced by the principles of human rights, which served to express the claims of the participants.⁸ However, the Platform faced challenges due to financial mismanagement during the 2006 forum in Marrakech, which led to credibility and funding issues that impeded collective action.

The considerable presence of human rights advocates within the *Euro-Mediterranean Non-Governmental Platform* is closely linked to the internationalization strategies of human rights movements that emerged in most Arab countries from the late 1970s onwards.⁹ These movements were characterized by a heavily outward orientation, relying on human rights as a reference due to their “universal” dimension and the support of UN international conventions, which carried significant international legitimacy. Human rights became a pivotal element in challenging authoritarian regimes during this period. In most Arab countries, human rights organizations were established, each with its own unique relationship with the national political and partisan landscape, although often these ties were close. The emergence of these organizations and the emphasis that was placed on human rights as a tool for political reform occurred in an international context that was favourable to this discourse, notably embodied in the foreign policy of the United States during the presidency of Jimmy Carter (1977–1981). As Susan Waltz has demonstrated, the advocacy for human rights in North-African countries was championed by actors who were neither “saints nor revolutionaries” but reformists with the resources and national political clout to protect them from direct repression (Waltz, 1995). Their positions within the national political landscape enabled them to engage in negotiations that minimized the

⁸ Plate-forme non-gouvernementale euro-méditerranéenne, Founding Charter, adopted in Limassol (Cyprus), June 25–26, 2004.

⁹ The aim here is not to give a detailed account of these processes, which have already been the subject of numerous monographs and articles to which the reader can refer (Allen, 2013; Chouikha & Gobe, 2009; Karem, 1991; Rollinde, 2002; Saraya, 2009; Stork, 2011).

direct threat they posed to regimes. They enjoyed effective international support and the discourses they presented had a strong moral dimension.

Human rights-framed claims and human rights activists, supported by the European Commission, were predominant within the *Euro-Mediterranean Non-Governmental Platform*. This is largely due to the fact that from an early stage they perceived the EMP as a political opportunity, leading them to establish their own organization, the Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network (EMHRN). Morten Kjørum and Saïd Essoulami, two of the founding members of the EMHRN, were professionals who were well-versed in UN human rights conventions and aware of the increasing attention that these conventions had been receiving from inter-governmental organizations since the 1970s. Their attempts to pressure Arab authoritarian regimes by lobbying at an EU-level and within transnational networks was a deliberate strategy (Interview with one of the founders of the EMHRN, July 2018, Brussels). Inspired by the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) and the Helsinki Final Act (1975), their goal was to unite human rights organizations in a similar fashion to the Helsinki Committees, in order to oversee the application of the principals outlined. Within the internationalization strategies of human rights movements from Arab countries, it was possible for human rights activists and professionals to perceive the EMP as a political opportunity, as recounted by Marc Schade-Poulsen, one of the founders of the EMHRN and participant in the Civil Forum:

In the eyes of the participants from the South, the Barcelona process, due to the legally binding human rights clauses of the bilateral association agreements, could be seen as a regional human rights instrument that the Arab region was so cruelly missing. It could also be considered as a political instrument where the conditionality card could be played exchanging financial support for human rights commitments. (Schade-Poulsen, 2017)

This perception was due in part to the fact that all member countries of the EMP had signed a declaration that included respect for democratic principles and that the bilateral association agreements with Mediterranean countries included provisions relating to the respect of human rights.¹⁰

¹⁰The association agreements that the EU signed with countries that form part of the EMP included, in Article 2, provisions on the respect for the democratic principles, human rights and fundamental freedoms, as proclaimed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The EMP was seen as an opportunity to denounce human rights violations by authoritarian regimes and to exert international pressure on them to uphold their international commitments. This idea quickly found interested partners and support from human rights organizations that emerged in Arab countries in the 1980s.¹¹ The creation of the EMHRN relied on activists from organizations based in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia. The network also held the secretariat of the *Euro-Mediterranean Non-Governmental Platform*.

The Civil Forum was one of the arenas in which the struggle over the appropriation of the discourse on democratization, civil society and human rights took place between activists and the governing elites of authoritarian regimes. Indeed, in the 1990s and 2000s, governing elites in authoritarian regimes largely developed this form of discourse and ratified major international conventions on human rights. This was the case, for instance, in Tunisia and Morocco, which have been the largest recipients of aid from EMP funds. The regimes in these two states developed a discourse on political modernity and civil society, all while insisting that ‘particularities’ existed in their countries that necessitated a specific approach to state-society relations (Hibou, 1999; Malmvig, 2014). The authoritarian regime of Ben Ali did not hesitate to create an image of the “champion of civil society”, presenting itself as a bulwark against the “Islamist-terrorist threat” (Geisser, 2015). The proliferation of NGOs in all sectors helped maintain the democratic façade of the regime in its dealings with international actors. This discourse on openness was coupled with governmental control of international funding, particularly financing that fell within the Euro-Mediterranean partnership, as well as the repression of political opponents (Hibou, 1999, p. 20). The Algerian regime also foregrounded the progress towards “democratization” by showcasing the growing number of voluntary associations, while at the same time exercising close control over them (Lorch & Bunk, 2017). Making claims in spaces like the Civil Forum was thus aimed at discrediting the discourse of the regime abroad.

¹¹An initial meeting was held on January 10 and 11, 1997 to assess the feasibility of the project with the following organizations: Arab Institute for Human Rights, Al Haq, Danish Center for Human Rights, the Dutch refugee council, The Egyptian Organization for Human Rights, The European Council on Refugees and Exiles, Greek Committee for International Democratic Solidarity, Human Rights Center Essex, Italian Helsinki committee, Ligue des Droits de l’Homme française, Organisation marocaine des droits de l’Homme.

The Civil Forum became one of the spaces that offered privileged access to the international arena in the contestation of authoritarian regimes. It became one of the spaces in which a symbolic struggle between each regime and those seeking to reform or challenge it took place, as illustrated by this excerpt from an interview with a regular participant in the Civil Forum and member of a Franco-Tunisian NGO:

Part of the work needs to be done abroad. Why? Because they're [the Tunisian regime] afraid of foreign scrutiny. Why? Because Ben Ali based his entire policy on claiming, 'I am the champion of human rights, I uphold human rights,' and so on. So, you say, 'You've signed it, but you haven't implemented it, you hypocrite.' So, our job was to demonstrate that he was a dictator. So, what happens here is this: you have two days, with NGOs, 200–300 people, and you draft a document denouncing the lack of freedoms in Tunisia. And this document, if you want, is credible because it will be presented to officials, European and Maghreb ministers. (Interview conducted in 2018 in Brussels, author's translation)

Despite remaining cynical about the genuine commitment of the regime to political liberalization, many participants believed that outspoken denunciations of human rights violations contributed to discrediting the regime and exerting pressure from abroad.

In the contestation of national authoritarian regimes, investment in the Civil Forum was also driven by a struggle to occupy and control space. Several anecdotes recounted by participants illustrate how political opponents and actors close to regimes engaged in a symbolic battle within the Forum to disseminate a vision of the country's political reality as exemplified by the following quote: "[in the Civil Forum of Marseille] there was someone who had brought out papers that they were distributing everywhere about repression in Tunisia and I remember Tunisians, including rectors under Ben Ali, were running through the corridors to collect the papers" (Interview with a Civil Forum participant, February 2018, Marseille, author's translation). Delimiting access to the Civil Forum to independent actors thus became central to freeing speech and formulating claims that clearly denounced the lack of respect for human rights in authoritarian regimes. In particular, during the Civil Forum organized in Marseille in 2000, where representatives of the Algerian and Tunisian consulates in particular sought to exert pressure on their national representatives, the filters for entry were extremely strict: "it was a civil forum that

we policed ourselves to the last detail, meaning we set up a very serious order service” (Interview with an organizer, October 2016, Paris, author’s translations). These dynamics extended the symbolic and discursive battle that human rights activists were waging at the national level to a transnational arena.

THE QUEST FOR INSTITUTIONAL ALLIES AND BUREAUCRATIC SHAPING OF TRANSNATIONAL ACTIVISM

In the context of the Civil Forum, participants looking to bring about change relied on institutional actors, such as public officials from the European Commission or representatives of ministries of foreign affairs, and often sought out bureaucratic allies to support their cause. This section explores how the availability of funding and institutional spaces affected the manner in which non-governmental actors organized themselves across borders. It also shows that the dependency on institutional actors had an impact on the choice of action repertoires and shaped the possibilities for engagement in this realm and the power dynamics within the transnational coalition.

The aspiration to reform the Civil Forum and establish an autonomous Platform was deeply rooted in dependency relations *vis-à-vis* public authorities. Rather than trying to suppress the critiques of actors who positioned themselves as watchdogs, members of the EU Commission and some national diplomatic actors in charge of the EMP selected non-state actors who expressed their claims through expertise and a human rights discourse and actually supported them in doing so. It is, therefore, crucial to consider the material conditions that led to the existence of these critical spaces and analyse the process as an outcome of routine interactions with public authorities (Rambaud, 2009).

In order to become an organizer of the Civil Forum, Platform members aimed to find allies who possessed the authority to designate the organizers of the Civil Forum.¹² In this process, a more discreet approach predominated, involving the search for institutional allies by contacting European Commission officials, participating in private meetings with public officials, and corresponding with the representatives of foreign ministries. Since 1999, the continuous demand to create a lasting

¹²The organizers were appointed by the governments hosting inter-ministerial conferences in the first editions of the Forums.

structure for the Forum was eventually met with support from allies within the European Commission. These allies attended meetings regularly and choose to support Platform members over other non-governmental actors who also put themselves forward to organize the Forum. This support, both financial and political, allowed the non-governmental Platform to become the organizer of the Civil Forum. In return, the claims made by the Platform supported the positions of EU officials overseeing external action regarding human rights, particularly in the securitized post-2001 context.

As a regular forum for interaction between public authorities and their counterparts, the Civil Forum also served as an environment in which to mould repertoires of action and activist claims. Members of the reformist coalition complied with forms of advocacy encouraged by public authorities—such as writing recommendations—while at some Forums they also delivered speeches at the Euro-Mediterranean Ministerial Conference. They refrained from resorting to street demonstrations or occupying public spaces. This compliance was accentuated by the fact that they operated within a framework where they were accountable for how they used public funds and the results they achieved, and many organizations were dependent on public subsidies. For example, during the preparation of the Civil Forum in 2000, concerns arose among the French state officials in charge of organizing the Forum directly before the Marseille conference due to fears of large-scale protests, similar to those carried out by the protest movement during the World Trade Organization summit in Seattle in 1999. During meetings in advance of the Forum, steering committee members presented themselves as actors who were capable of containing mobilizations within the appropriate boundaries of civil society expression and preventing less controllable forms of protest. To maintain the prominence of the Civil Forum prior to the intergovernmental conference, these actors positioned themselves as facilitators that were capable of channeling forms of contention in a controlled and peaceful manner. This configuration of actors, where “civil society” entrepreneurs rely on public funding and must maintain a form of credibility over the long term, contributed to limiting the range of action to less disruptive methods of international negotiations. The Civil Forum thus served as a space that socialized actors into activist practices that are based on the use of legal and political expertise.

The Civil Forum was, therefore, a space that depended on diplomatic actors and public authorities and in which interactions predominantly

took on a negotiated character. These findings align with existing research on how international institutions influence non-governmental group strategies, as well as on the impact of opening these institutions up to transnational activism and NGO tactics (Tallberg, 2013). A comparative analysis of dynamics at the European Union and United Nations levels, as demonstrated by Jutta Joachim and Birgit Locher, reveals that in both institutional contexts NGOs employ comparable strategies (Joachim & Locher, 2009). They primarily deploy a low-key repertoire of action, such as conventional lobbying methods, prioritizing consensus over more contentious action repertoires. Within governance institutional settings, intergovernmental and government institutions define the rules of interaction and choose their counterparts. Being recognized as a legitimate partner is a prerequisite for participation, enabling public authorities to sideline groups that adopt more contentious repertoires of action.

Despite the consistent efforts of the participants in the *Euro-Mediterranean Non-Governmental Platform*, they were unable to subvert the prevailing North-South dominance within European foreign action. The domination dynamics were persistently criticized in the recommendations made by the Civil Forum and the publications issued by Mediterranean cooperation actors.¹³ However, unequal power relations continued to exist, despite the transnational structuring of the Platform. This unchanged state of affairs rests on the fact that resources, whether related to access to funding or symbolic recognition, remain concentrated in Europe. Therefore, members of the Platform were confined by structural and administrative constraints that centralized funding primarily to Europe-based organizations. Southern organizations that were part of the Platform rarely played a direct role in designing projects and their objectives; they often lacked a comprehensive understanding of overall fund distribution.¹⁴ Additionally, with the exception of the 2006 Civil Forum held in

¹³See for instance Barreñada et al. (2005). One of the constant recommendations produced by the participants of the Civil Forum has been to re-establish programs with micro-credits that are less restrictive in terms of administrative procedures and that are adapted to the administrative capacities of small structures, particularly those based in countries outside the European Union.

¹⁴For an example of a project financed by the MEDA Democracy program managed by a European organization in relation to Moroccan associations, which were approached only after conceptualization and without an overview of the overall project budget, see Cheynis (2008, pp. 379–80).

Marrakech, all of the other Civil Forums took place in Europe¹⁵ and were attended by participants primarily selected by European organizations.

This centralization of resources heavily influenced the possibilities for engagement. Most of those involved in organizing and reforming the Forum lived in Europe and mainly met in the Belgian and French capitals. Email exchanges were also conducted in English or French. These organizational aspects determined participation based on the ability to travel to Europe, obtain a visa, possess adequate financial resources and navigate administrative and associative processes. Therefore, NGO professionals who emigrated or were in exile in Europe played a central role in making national campaigns visible and, in some cases, providing financial or legal support. They were key individuals in conducting homeland-directed transnational political action and making claims for national causes. In many networking activities, it was more a question of “giving a voice” to Southern actors, mediated by spokespersons residing in Europe, as illustrated by this extract from a working document of the Civil Forum steering committee:

[...] we really succeeded in giving a voice to participants from the South. [...] The quality of the TANGER-TUNIS-BEYROUTH-RAMALLAH or JERUSALEM meetings was such that new convergences emerged (e.g. with trade unions) and specific networks found support for their approaches (e.g. culture or migration)¹⁶

These material aspects of access to spaces representing “global civil society” are often overlooked in research that idealizes their spontaneous emergence.¹⁷ The representation of Euro-Mediterranean sectoral networks within the Platform by individuals living and working in Europe underscores the significant inequalities between Europe-based

¹⁵ Initially, the Forums were to be held alternately in EU countries and non-EU countries, but after the election of Benjamin Netanyahu, Syria vetoed the idea of holding the interministerial conferences alongside Israeli representatives in an Arab country (Balta, 2000, p. 73).

¹⁶ Civil Forum Euromed, Working Document, Steering Committee Meeting, Brussels, December 11, 2001, private archives.

¹⁷ The following article underscores the importance of paying attention to financial and logistical aspects when studying international events such as the World Social Forums (Siméant, 2012). Objectifying data, such as the purchase of plane tickets for African participants at the 2007 Nairobi World Social Forum, all financially supported by organizations from the North, sheds “a very bright light on NGO patronage of African activism” (Ibid., pp. 143–144).

organizations and those in the South.¹⁸ This resulted in patterns of patronage of European organizations over those in non-EU countries. This transnational arrangement, therefore, centralized resources among a small group of individuals who were able to meet in European capitals—the majority of whom were civil society professionals capable of dedicating a considerable amount of time to their commitments.

CONCLUSION

When empirically investigating the emergence and visibility of “Euro-Mediterranean civil society”, it is essential to avoid a spontaneous interpretation of the emergence of a “third force” that would automatically arise as a result of globalization (Visier, 1999). On the contrary, this case study shows that the representation of non-state actors in international arenas involves the joint endeavours of public authorities and non-state actors. This chapter sheds light on how various actors, and in particular human rights activists, made use of the space opened up by the European Commission during a period in which the concept of “civil society” was gradually becoming promoted as a category of public action, not only within the European Union but also in its external activities. Its use as part of the legitimacy registers of the European Commission paved the way for the internationalization strategies of competing non-state actors. Understanding this process thus requires us to consider the forms of political exchange at work between bureaucratic actors and non-state actors and the various invested meanings, including critical ones. These strategies can thus be understood as accumulating access to public funding, visibility and access to decision makers, while simultaneously building a “critical niche” in Euro-Mediterranean politics (Siméant, 2014). By participating in forums and interacting with international bureaucracies, non-state actors internationalized their causes and tapped into international opportunities to raise awareness about national issues. They often used human rights as a common language of grievance and strove to exert pressure on their national governments. These forums provided a platform for these

¹⁸The Euro-Mediterranean networks that were part of the Platform at the time of its creation were the EMHRN, the Euro-Mediterranean Trade Union Forum, the Euro-Mediterranean Environment network, the Euro-Mediterranean Forum of Cultures (FEMEC) network (Platform follow-up group press release, “Civil Forum 2005 to be held in Luxembourg on April 1–2 and 3”, private archives).

actors to amplify their claims addressing both authoritarian regimes in the Mediterranean and EU policies in the region. However, as we have demonstrated, the subdued mode of action and dependence on public actors make it challenging to apply an oppositional grid to analyse these interactions, but rather underline the necessity to take into account the negotiations and alliances between bureaucratic actors and non-state actors.

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Horizontal and Vertical Integration and Transnational Labour Activism: A Power Resource Approach

Darragh Golden , *Imre Szabó* , and *Roland Erne* 

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, we conduct a complementary assessment of two comparative studies, from which we draw inferences regarding transnational labour activism (TLA) and the interplay of power resources under different modes of EU integration. On the one hand, we assess the scope for transnational or coalitional power resources in different sectors by comparing two European Citizens' Initiatives (ECI)—the *Right2Water* ECI,

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coordinated by the European Federation of Public Service Unions (EPSU) in 2012, and the *Fair Transport* ECI coordinated by the European Transport Workers Federation (ETF) in 2015. Whereas the former was successful the latter was not (Szabó et al. 2021). On the other hand, we assess power resources at different scales by comparing the power resources of Ryanair pilots and national aviation unions, which reside primarily at the national level, with their supranational power resources. Whereas the former were largely unsuccessful and readily circumvented by Ryanair, the latter, all too often overlooked by (power resource) scholars, were critical in compelling the union-suppressing airline to recognise unions (Golden and Erne 2022).

Despite taking place in different sectors and at different points in time, both comparisons study successful episodes of TLA, which set important precedents. Trade unions (and social movements) are typically seen as having more robust power resources at the national (and local) level compared to the supranational level. Notwithstanding this, these national power resources did not translate into influence over transnational corporations (TNCs): on the contrary. Hence, relative strength is less important, and this has implications for scholars using the power resource approach. We also need to consider the leverage scale factor afforded by the EU's multilevel governance framework, which is a necessary but not sufficient condition in explaining successful cases of TLA. This is borne out by the unsuccessful *Fair Transport* ECI. Although the ECI provides labour activists with supranational institutional power resources, we must also consider structural conditions, particularly the prevailing mode of EU integration and the attendant pressures faced by unions at a given time. We differentiate between 'vertical' (political) and 'horizontal' (economic) modes of European integration (Erne 2019; Erne et al. 2024) and argue that vertical modes of integration are more visible and, therefore, more tangible and easier to politicize and mobilize around (Erne and Nowak 2022). Conversely, the horizontal mode of market integration is more diffuse and abstract and, therefore, more difficult to mobilize around, as the ETF's *Transport* ECI attests, but not impossible, as the Ryanair case confirms.

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We analyse the two comparisons by deploying the concept of power resources in a transnational context. Traditional power resources—structural, institutional and associational—wielded by organized labour are re-shaped by both horizontal and vertical pressures of European integration, albeit in different ways. As Keune and Marginson (2013, p. 474) note:

Transnationalization has not had the effect of displacing the national level, which remains the dominant locus of industrial relations. Its effect, however, has been to redraw and increase the complexity of the industrial relations map, adding new levels, actors and institutions, and creating new horizontal and vertical relationships and interdependencies among company, sectoral, national and transnational public and private actors. This complexity is not easily captured by traditional industrial relations approaches.

We explain the emergence and the success of the *Right2Water* ECI and the Ryanair pilots victory by highlighting the interplay of power resources existing at different scales. We develop this argument in three steps. First, we re-theorize power resources in a multi-governance framework, integrating insights from industrial relations, EU integration studies and social movements scholarship. Second, we present the two comparisons separately, identifying the interplay of power resources across different scales. The third section concludes and outlines implications for power resource approaches.

RE-THEORIZING THE POWER RESOURCES APPROACH (PRA) IN A MULTILEVEL AND TRANSNATIONAL CONTEXT

In the field of employment relations, the PRA has received considerable scholarly attention (e.g. Refslund and Arnholtz 2022; Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman 2013; Silver 2003). Typically, scholars that use a PRA remain bounded by a national perspective, resulting in methodological nationalism. Consequently, power resources in transnational social spaces remain under-theorized (Brookes 2019). This does not imply that the nation-state as a subject of study is obsolete, on the contrary, but a transnational space must be seen as “the sum of different national trajectories that evolve from the inside out” (Chernilo 2011, p. 101).

A transnational economic space is characterized by horizontal relations and the ‘invisible hand’ of the market. Horizontal integration is not only

difficult to politicize but also entices ‘regime competition’ and pits workers against workers. Nevertheless, the European Union’s transnational space also has a strong multilevel governance aspect and a vertical dimension, inviting organized interests to coalesce at the EU level. Albeit analytically distinct, different modes of European integration—vertical vs. horizontal (Erne 2019)—have implications for how we theorize power resources.

Traditionally, power resource scholars identify three sub-types: structural, institutional and associational (Korpi 1985; Wright 2000). Subsequently, coalitional power resources emerged (Refslund and Arnholtz 2022). Structural power is derived from “the location of workers within the economic system” (Wright 2000, p. 962), however, it is possible to differentiate between workplace and marketplace power resources (Silver 2003, p. 13). The former “accrues to workers who are enmeshed in tightly integrated production processes, where a localized work stoppage in a key node can cause disruptions on a much wider scale than the stoppage itself” (ibid.). Marketplace bargaining power depends on labour market conditions and exists when there is a “possession of rare qualifications and skills demanded by employers” (ibid.). Workers in both the transport and water sectors are seen to wield significant structural power given their capacity to cause disruption in the broader economic sphere (ibid., pp. 97–103).

Institutional power is “the capacity to hold an employer accountable through laws, regulations, and other formal and informal rules” (Brookes 2019, p. 4) and it remains important as it is an enduring constellation that may provide a substitute where structural (or associational) power resources diminish (Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman 2013, p. 31). The institutional context is critical when it comes to conditioning actors’ capacities and expectations.

Associational power, on the other hand, derives from workers uniting to form collective associations that can exist at different levels (Wright 2000, p. 963). Hence, this power resource often requires a collective identity and leadership (Kelly, [2012] 1998). Associational power resources need to be tapped into and mobilized before structural power can be exercised. Conversely, by impeding the establishment of associational power resources the likelihood of structural power resources being exercised, particularly in a transnational space, is diminished.

Whereas structural, institutional and associational power resources have informed much industrial relations scholarship, coalitional power resources

have been theorized more so by social movement scholars (e.g., Della Porta & Parks, 2018). Fostering coalitional power resources involves forging linkages or solidaristic bonds with likeminded actors, such as social movements or NGOs. A shift in the ideational plain has meant that organized labour can no longer rely on their ‘sister’ parties and must establish alliances with others to defend or further their interests. Consequently, following a diminishing return on traditional power resources for reasons outlined below, industrial relations scholars recognize that “coalitional power becomes increasingly important for understanding societal changes” (Reflund & Arnholtz, 2022, p. 1966). We develop this aspect by incorporating the (horizontal) transnational space and the (vertical) multilevel governance into the theoretical framework. Whereas the former hampers the prospect of TLA the more advanced it becomes, the latter offers crystallization points that come and go, but can contribute to maintaining resistance to commodification.

As noted by Bieler et al. (2015, p. 2) “agency can never be studied in isolation of the structural setting, within which it takes place”. Whereas power resources implicitly speak to mobilizations and the agency side of the coin, it is equally essential to theorize in relation to structure. To this end, the study of TLA will benefit from a more direct engagement with concepts borrowed from EU studies. In particular, we take the distinction between different modes of European integration—vertical vs. horizontal (Erne 2019)—as our starting point and theorize how they structurally impact on different dimensions of power resources at the supra-, trans- and national levels. We also draw on the concept of the political opportunity structure (Marks and McAdams 1996) and argue that major institutional changes as part of the EU’s ongoing constitutionalization can provide opportunities for labour to shore-up diminished power resources at the national level (della Porta and Parks 2018).

We focus on EU horizontal and vertical integration as two complementary sources of pressure that must be considered from a power resources point of view. Horizontal integration means increasing interconnectedness through (often market-based) network relations, without direct top-down governance interventions. As the more mobile factor of production, capital benefits more from free movement within the EU’s Single Market than labour. The outcome, however, is by no means predetermined, as class struggle “is the process in which labour identities are formed and transformed. It is the moment when structuring conditions are being confirmed or changed. Whether different labour movements engage in

relations of transnational solidarity is, therefore, the outcome of open-ended class struggle” (Bieler et al. 2015, p. 8).

Capital mobility also implies that governments now have to compete for capital, which in turn can lead to ‘regime competition’ and a race to the bottom in labour standards, including those that secure institutional power resources for workers: strike and collective bargaining rights as well as rights as social partners (Meardi 2002). In sum, our theory identifies the potential negative impact of horizontal integration on the structural marketplace, as well as on the associational and institutional dimensions of organized labour’s transnational power resources. However, horizontal market integration may have a positive impact when it comes to TLA and result not in the unmaking of the working class, but in the emergence of a new working class on a transnational scale (Schmidt 2015). For instance, the longer transnational supply chains are stretched as a result of horizontal integration, the more vulnerable they become to any disruption, including disruption by a small number of workers located at a central position in production networks (Silver 2003). This, however, may take some time as the fostering of transnational solidarity is by no means automatic (Bieler et al. 2015) and may require trial and error involving the use of new information technologies. Hence, workers may develop new forms of power resources resulting from horizontal integration because it is not only networks of capital that increase as a result of market opening, but markets may also create transnational platforms for communication and interaction between workers, consumers and other social movements that work together across borders in pursuit of shared goals.

Vertical integration refers to direct interventions by a “supranational political, legal or corporate authority” (Erne 2019, p. 346). When looking at the supranational level, vertical integration relates to political interventions, which can either go in a market-creating or market-correcting direction. The latter refers to the development of the political opportunity structure mentioned above. Typically, however, vertical interventions from EU executives aim at transnational market creation, meaning that indirectly and over time, vertical interventions lead to horizontal integration and the weakening of trade union power. According to our definition of vertical integration, it also refers to direct interventions by a corporate authority (ibid.). We argue that workplace power is decreasing, as powerful corporate executives are increasingly able to rely on whipsawing tactics whereby employees, in different locations, are played-off against each other (Greer and Hauptmeier 2016). The structure of the EU’s Single

Market creates an uneven landscape between economic rights, which reside at the EU level, and social rights, which remain embedded primarily at the national level. This unevenness facilitates what labour geographers term a spatial fix (Harvey, 2001a, 2001b), which is complemented in the EU by a juridical fix. Here, transnational corporations can exploit the unevenness of the EU to effectively de-territorialize sovereignty and this spatial-juridical fix serves to undermine unions' power resources (Lillie, 2010; Harvey and Turnbull 2015).

Whilst there is a bias for market-creating interventions at the EU level, there is also scope for market-correcting ones. Here, organized interests, such as EU-level labour federations, seek to shape the content of vertical interventions so as to ensure it does not have an overly negative impact on power resources. Whereas market-making interventions have over time decreased labour's institutional power resources (Baccaro and Howell 2017), market-correcting measures can provide workers and unions with a supranational power resource. This vertical dimension is regularly neglected by scholars, who follow the classical methodological nationalism of comparative employment relations research (Erne 2013). Other scholars (Kies and Seeliger 2019; Streeck 1998) acknowledge the important role of supranational EU institutions, but typically dismiss their relevance as a potential power resource. This blind-spot overlooks a potential source of leverage vis-à-vis TNCs as drivers of horizontal integration.

The EU's vertical interventions have less of an impact on associational power as the rules regulating the environment for trade union organizing are still shaped at the national level. The same cannot be said of TNCs, which can seek to undermine workers developing associational power resources. TNCs, as Moen (2017, p. 425) notes, "are using atypical employment not just to compensate for unstable markets, but also as an opportunity to cut costs by bypassing collective agreements and to discipline workers, works councils and unions". Low fare airlines (LFAs), and Ryanair in particular, became pioneers in such strategies (see Bamber et al. 2009). We claim that coalitional and associational power resources *can* increase, particularly in the wake of vertical interventions and regardless of whether these come from supranational authorities, which often have clear political figures associated with them, or corporate entities. This is because EU or corporate authorities provide a clear target for political mobilization as opposed to the faceless pressures of horizontal market integration. For instance, in the mid-2000s Ryanair management introduced a new airplane model, which required the pilots to be re-trained. The latter used

this vertical opportunity to organize and challenge the status quo regarding the airline's employee voice system. Although the pilots' collective endeavour fell afoul of the Irish judiciary, which typically interprets social rights through a (neo-) liberal lens (Murray 2016, Ch. 7), and, true to form, backed management's prerogative to *not* recognize unions, the lesson remains, namely that vertical interventions provide a conduit for the mobilization of power resources.

Often, however, there is a limited timeframe within which the mobilization of power resources can occur. In other words, timing is of the essence (Gillan and Edwards 2020). In short, we argue that horizontal integration constrains TLA, whereas vertical integration acts more as a catalyst for it. Moreover, EU vertical intervention can enhance unions and workers with an additional power resource. The ECI is a case in point. Hence, as we have argued elsewhere, "the politicization of Europeanization is not necessarily a one-way street where pressures come from the transnational level and popular mobilizations are constrained by national silos" (Szabó et al. 2022).

TLA IN RYANAIR: FAILURE AND SUCCESS

The deregulation of civil aviation took place in a piecemeal fashion (see Kassim and Stevens 2010), with three reform packages, between 1987 and 1992, laying the foundations of the single European aviation market (SEAM). Following deregulation and competition from low fares airlines (LFAs), all European flag carriers, which were (and continue to be) heavily unionized, underwent restructuring with many being fully privatized (e.g., British Airways, Lufthansa and Iberia). Such was the strength of pilots' unions that many of them remained outside of the national union confederation. However, the creation of the SEAM was followed by a merger of (competing) pilots' unions in Belgium, France and Italy. Elsewhere (e.g., Norway and Ireland) pilots unions affiliated with the national confederation. Such moves were undertaken to offset power resource losses resulting from the SEAM.

The stellar rise of Ryanair, from a secondary airport in Ireland to European domination, is a multifaceted story. In 2005, the airline had 15 bases across Europe, by 2016 that number had increased to 79. In 2017, the airline achieved an 'industry record', with a passenger load factor of 97

per cent (*Ryanair*¹ 2017). We approach the Ryanair case in a comparative spirit, namely by comparing power resources at the national level and at the supranational level. Generally, the power resources of organized labour are stronger at the national level, and this is particularly the case regarding the power resources of aviation unions. The latter “tend to view transnational activity, by and large, through the lens of challenges facing their national (flag) airline, neglecting to organize the many contract and temporary workers” who work for LFAs (Harvey and Turnbull 2015, p. 322). In the context of horizontal and vertical integration, i.e., the SEAM, these power resources can be ‘easily deflected’ by TNCs, such as Ryanair (*ibid.*). There is scope for rescaling power resources at the supranational level, although this is generally considered to be rather ineffective in reversing the diminished power resources residing primarily at the national level. Consequently, this ‘leverage scale factor’ is often overlooked or dismissed outright.

Ryanair began by defeating the pilots’ unions in Ireland and the UK, before moving on to thwart the national level efforts of aviation unions with even greater institutional power resources. Drawing on institutional power resources often implies invoking legal rights and bringing an employer before the courts. Ryanair is no stranger to courtrooms across the EU. Typically, the courts have ruled in favour of Ryanair on account of its crews being employed on (atypical) Irish contracts (Golden and Erne 2022). In other words, Ryanair has successfully exploited regulatory gaps resulting from horizontal integration. Such is its capacity to exploit such gaps that even where the material outcome of the court ruling favoured labour (i.e., France, 2013; Norway, 2014, and Denmark, 2015), these were merely pyrrhic victories as the structure of the SEAM permitted Ryanair to continue servicing these countries. Data show that between 2010 and 2018 Ryanair increased business in France despite having abandoned French bases in 2013 (*FlightGlobal* 16.09.2018).

Dismayed by successive failures in achieving a foothold over a vehemently anti-union Ryanair, the prospect of developing coalitional power resources gained traction. On various occasions, Irish and British pilots’ unions joined forces and attempted to strengthen pilots’ associational power resources and build transnational solidarity. Ryanair, in turn, reacted aggressively by threatening to fire pilots and bringing trumped-up cases against those involved in TLA. In one case, the Irish High Court saw

¹<https://corporate.ryanair.com/news/h1-results/>

through the tactics of Ryanair management—namely, to intimidate and instil fear into the heart of any would-be ‘agitators’—and observed that its behaviour “bore all the hallmarks of oppression” (cited in O’Sullivan and Gunnigle 2009). This oppression was copper-fastened by Ryanair through the proliferation of atypical employment contracts for pilots, which effectively rendered them self-employed (and responsible for their own tax returns). From a power resource perspective, atypical or (bogus) self-employed workers are in a position of weakness, and this is especially the case in Ireland. Any wonder then that scholars surmised that “there is little prospect” when it comes to “arresting the sky pirates who plunder European skies” (Harvey and Turnbull 2015, p. 322).

In February 2017, the outspoken CEO of Ryanair, Michael O’Leary, told investors that airline unions are a “mob whose day is largely dead” (*Irish Independent* 7/2/2017). For good reason, practitioners and academics remained pessimistic about the prospect of Ryanair’s aggressive union-suppression strategy being reversed (Bamber et al. 2009, p. 59; Harvey and Turnbull 2015). Yet, by the end of the year, O’Leary and Ryanair would perform a U-turn by deciding to recognize trade unions. What explains this volte-face and to what extent are power resources relevant? In short, it could be said that the latter are relevant in explaining the forcing of Ryanair’s hand, however, this requires an understanding of the interplay of power resources at different levels of scale.

Following the creation of a market, the SEAM in this case, there is a need for re-regulation so as to create a level playing field upon which competition can develop. Scope for re-regulation in the EU context is restrictive, not least in the social field where ‘lengthy negotiation’ is required (Kassim and Stevens 2010, p. 119). This was the case with the Flight Time Regulation (FTL; 83/2014), which placed a ceiling on the number of hours a pilot can fly within the arc of a 12-month period and came into effect in 2016. All EU Member States and their airlines complied with this rule with one exception: Ireland, most probably at the behest of Ryanair and its use of ‘quiet’ power (Culpepper 2010). Rather than interpreting the ‘calendar year’ in the intended way, i.e., 1st of January to 31st of December, the Irish Aviation Authority (IAA) permitted Ryanair to interpret the ‘calendar year’ as meaning 1st April to 31st March. This favoured Ryanair’s operations, particularly in the busiest summer months. Whereas all other airlines had to factor in holiday periods over the summer months, over 95% of Ryanair pilots could not take holidays between April and October (RPG 2014). This provided Ryanair with yet another competitive edge over its rivals.

Following vertical pressure from the European Union Aviation Safety Agency (EASA), the IAA was forced to comply with the intended interpretation (1 Jan.–31 Dec.). Consequently, Ryanair (2017) had to “roster all of the extra pilots leave necessary” between October and December to meet the IAA’s requirement to complete a 9-month annual leave transition period (April to Dec ‘17) so that Ryanair could start a new calendar leave year from 1st January 2018 with no backlog. This shift in regime generated a scheduling fiasco, with 700,000 passengers affected by flight cancellations, but also presented Ryanair pilots with a rare window of opportunity, which was not going to be squandered despite management’s best intentions and attempts to buy-off pilots. The latter organized by creating an informal grouping called the European Employee Representative Committee (EERC).

The EERC circulated communications among pilots recognizing the magnitude and significance of the task at hand, which would “require immense force of will, stamina and commitment from every pilot” and that it “is entirely possible that things will get worse before they get any better. Expect management to fight any change by all means available to them. There will be casualties” (Comer, Oct 2017, letter seen by authors). Despite inevitable retribution, Capt. Imelda Comer was prepared to put her head above the parapet by becoming the ‘face’ of the EERC’s demands, which included (i) a collective agreement between the EERC and Ryanair management and “not a unilaterally imposed one-way ‘take-it-or-leave-it’ communication”; and (ii) permanent direct employment contracts (*ibidem*). These demands were backed up with the threat of exercising structural power, namely transnational strike action by pilots, who had by this stage joined national aviation unions in their droves, over the busy Christmas travel period.

This imminent coordinated strike action forced Ryanair into “the first meeting between the airline and a trade union in the company’s 32-year history” (*RTE.ie* 20.12.2017). Although its HR manager noted that the “model doesn’t change” (*Irish Times* 16.12.2017) so as to assuage shareholders’ concerns about Ryanair shares, which were ‘tumbling’ (*Reuters* 16.12.2017). Concretely, this meant non-engagement with the EERC, opting instead to deal with *national* aviation unions, including cabin-crew unions.

To conclude, successive union initiatives to engage Ryanair using institutional power resources at the national level led to effectively pyrrhic victories, as the structure of the SEAM permitted the airline to continue

exploiting spatial-juridical fixes. Whilst this strategy hampered the effectiveness of national unions' power resources, it also motivated the need to find new and novel strategies, which meant taking scale into account and developing associational power across borders. To this end, the EERC was critical in constructing the associational power resources necessary for transnational collective action. Moreover, the willingness and courage of Capt. Comer to become the face of the EERC lent legitimacy to the pilots' demands and promoted group cohesion and collective identity. Were it not for the leverage scale factor, which accrued pilots a supranational institutional power resource, the transnational action would have been less likely to succeed. The FTL Regulation imbued Ryanair pilots with a critical, but often overlooked or dismissed, power resource. Complying with the FTL provided Ryanair pilots with a rare window of opportunity, which was not lost on the pilot body. Not being seduced by extra remuneration, the pilots organized in an organic fashion around the EERC and issued threats of coordinated transnational collective action. Table 12.1 summarizes the use of different power resources of Ryanair pilots at the national and European levels and their effectiveness.

Table 12.1 Power resources used by Ryanair pilots at the national (UK/Irish, French, Danish) and European scales

	<i>National scale</i>			<i>European scale</i>
	<i>British & Irish unions (1990s, 2000s)</i>	<i>French unions (2013)</i>	<i>Norwegian & Danish unions (2014, 2015)</i>	<i>European Employee Representative Committee (2017)</i>
Principal power resources ^a	Associational power	Institutional power (French Court decision)	Institutional power (Norwegian and Danish Court decisions)	Associational & institutional power at the EU scale ^b
Capacity to leverage power across borders	<i>Missing</i>	<i>Missing</i>	<i>Missing</i>	<i>Present</i>
Outcome	Failure	Failure	Failure	(Partial) Success

Source: Golden and Erne (2022)

^aPilots also used their structural power across all four cases. Therefore, structural power cannot explain different outcomes

^bRegulatory Decision to enforce EU Flight Time Limitations Regulation

TWO ECI CAMPAIGNS: SUCCESS AND FAILURE

Already in the run-up to the Amsterdam EU summit of 1996, the Austrian and Italian foreign ministers promoted the idea of a European citizens' movement and proposed an initiative not dissimilar to the ECI (Erne et al. 1995), but the proposal was not adopted. Subsequently, the EU's constitutional convention introduced the ECI into the EU Constitutional Treaty and while the Convention Praesidium rejected its inclusion in the final draft, concerted efforts by civil society organizations ensured the provision survived not only the Constitution's failure, but also made its way into the Lisbon Treaty. In 2012, the ECI Regulation (211/2011) was enacted and sought to address the EU's democratic deficit by providing the possibility for civil society to call upon the Commission to propose legislation on a specific issue. In order to be considered by the Commission, an ECI must gather one million statements of support within 12 months and reach a population-specific threshold of signatures in at least seven member states. Historically, organized labour has campaigned to democratize market relations (Erne 2008) and it is perhaps unsurprising that European trade union federations (ETUFs), which in effect are associations of associations (Müller and Platzer 2018), became crucial players in ECIs. The first successful ECI was coordinated by EPSU in 2012/13. The title of the initiative was 'Water and sanitation are a human right! Water is a public good, not a commodity' (henceforth *Right2Water*). EPSU's successful campaign did not go unnoticed by other ETUFs. In particular, the European Transport Workers' Federation (ETF) followed suit in 2015 and launched its 'Fair Transport Europe – equal treatment for all transport workers' initiative (henceforth *Fair Transport*). Given the ETF's prior experience in coordinating transnational industrial action and having ring-fenced more than double the financial resources for the *Fair Transport* campaign than EPSU's campaign, one might have been forgiven for being optimistic and expecting success. Yet, this turned out not to be the case, begging the question: why so?

Under what conditions can organized labour successfully politicize the European integration process across borders? And what role do power resources play? Above, we have seen that institutional powers residing at the EU level were critical in enabling pilots to shift the balance of power. In this instance, we have two ETUFs—EPSU and the ETF—with access to similar EU-level power resources, namely the ECI, but with different outcomes. In order to explain this outcome it is necessary to not only

focus on agency, but also on the structuring conditions under which agency is executed (Bieler, et al. 2015).

By comparing the two ECI campaigns we are able to assess the drivers of transnational EU politicization processes, which go beyond the distinction between ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ strategies (Dür and Mateo 2016). Drawing on the literature on (transnational) collective action (Tarrow 1994; Kelly 2012 [1998]); Erne 2008; Gajewska 2009), we enlist potential explanatory factors for the puzzle.

Table 12.2 presents the different explanatory factors and underlines the fact that the two ETUFs approached the task of mobilizing support for their ECIs very differently. As we do not have the space here to discuss the power of each of these explanatory factors (see Szabó et al. 2021), we instead focus on factors whose explanatory power is strong from a power resource perspective. The first is mobilizing networks that overlap with coalitional power resources in our framework. The idea for the *Right2Water* ECI came from within the EPSU secretariat in discussions with social movements active in the water sector (e.g., European Water Movement) and committed to the exclusion of water and sanitation services from the European Single Market. The idea of a *Fair Transport* ECI, on the other hand, had a dual origin. Whereas the ETF’s railway section was concerned about liberalization and privatization in the sector, the Scandinavian transport unions were concerned about the proliferation of social dumping practices in the road haulage sector (Rønngren et al. 2008). Bringing these separate goals into a single coherent campaign would prove a bridge too far for the ETF secretariat, which did not define itself as a campaigning organization, a position that was reflected in how the ECI campaign was conducted. As seen from Table 12.2, the ETF benefitted from double the money for its campaign than EPSU, but the latter integrated its resources more effectively into the pre-existing organization. In contrast to the ETF, which brought on board a public relations company, EPSU’s communications and campaigning officer coordinated all aspects of its ECI.

Both EPSU and the EFT are reliant on their national affiliates, over which they have little power (Müller and Platzer 2018). That said, EPSU has long-standing links with water-related social movements. The latter have played an active role in the European water movement’s formative events in the 2000s, such as the European Social Forum and the Alternative World Water Forum (Parks 2015). Social movements and union mobilization networks were closely intertwined in the *Right2Water* campaign. Whereas 47 per cent of the organizations assisting the collection of

Table 12.2 Explaining the different outcomes of the two ECI campaigns

	<i>EPSU Right2water Successful ECI</i>	<i>ETF fair transport Unsuccessful ECI</i>	<i>Explanatory power</i>
<i>Actor-Centred Explanatory Factors</i>			
<i>ECI-specific factors</i>			
Prior experience with ECI	No	No	Low
Financial resources for ECI campaign	€140,000	€322,000	Low
<i>Mobilizing networks</i>			
Inclusive campaigning organization	Yes	No	High
Broad trade union–social movement coalitions	Yes	No	High
<i>Issue framing</i>			
Against privatization and for human rights	Yes	No	High
Against unfair competition	No	Yes	High
<i>Structural Explanatory Factors</i>			
<i>Economic and political structures</i>			
Presence of political opportunity structures	Yes	Yes	Low
Significant structural power of workers in the sector	Yes	Yes	Low
<i>European integration pressures</i>			
Exposure to acute vertical EU integration pressures	Yes	No	High
Exposure to horizontal EU integration pressures	No	Yes	High

Source: Adapted from Szabó, Golden and Erne 2022. The differences that favour the unsuccessful case (ETF) are italicized

signatures in the *Right2Water* campaign were unions, 53 per cent were social movements, including the water movement, the global justice movement and environmental movements (van den Berge et al. 2018, p. 235). Conversely, the ETF's *Fair Transport* campaign lacked a social movement component. Instead, the campaign website only provided a list of MEPs belonging to the groups of the Socialists and Democrats, the European Left, or the Greens as supporters; all of whom, rather tellingly, hailed from old member states.

In terms of narrative frames, the two ECIs adopted different approaches. Whereas the political versatility of the *Right2Water* slogan enabled it to go beyond left–right cleavages, an important factor contributing to its success (van den Berge et al. 2018; Bieler 2021), the ETF’s *Fair Transport* campaign slogan was rather ambivalent. After all, regardless of how fair competition is, it still engenders regime competition and creates inequalities and tensions in the labour market by pitting (East European) workers against (West European) workers (Bernaciak 2015). Deciding to build its campaign around the notion of fair competition implicitly accepts competition as a guiding principle in the European transport sector. This framing alienated the ETF campaign from the more radical unions, such as the French CGT, which abhors competition tout court. It also inhibited the construction of intra-organizational solidarity, never mind establishing alliances, the bedrock of coalitional power, with likeminded social movements. As stated in the full title of the initiative above, EPSU’s ECI combined the message of anti-privatization with human rights, thereby covering at least five dimensions—availability, accessibility, acceptability, affordability and quality (European Parliament 2015)—with each dimension resonating with different groups. This contrasts with the ETF, which framed the *Fair Transport* ECI exclusively in industrial relations terms and failed to highlight how EU liberalization drives can usurp public interests, not least in the public transport sector. The construction of alliances and building of coalitional power, therefore, requires a campaign slogan that is broad enough to encompass diverse interests, including those of employers. The latter was included in the *Right2Water* coalition in contrast to the *Fair Transport* ECI. *Aqua Publica Europea*, the European network of publicly owned water providers, supported the initiative as it identified with the campaign’s anti-privatization goals.

The two campaigns were conditioned by characteristics that were not agency-related, nor were they of EPSU or the ETF’s choosing. Here, the differentiation between EU vertical and horizontal integration in the water and transport sectors is of import. Vertical integration pressures emanate from EU laws. However, the “production of economic landscapes is the result of political conflict, between labour and capital and between different segments of labour and of capital who might have quite different visions for how the landscape should be structured” (Herod 2006, p. 158). On account of the centrality of transport to the creation of a Single Market, vertical pressure appeared as early as the late 1980s and the early 1990s in the aviation, road haulage and rail (freight) sectors. The

vertical pressures in the water sector were more recent and were tied-up with one of the most controversial EU laws to date, namely the 2004 draft of Commissioner Bolkestein's Services Directive. The coalitions forged between EPSU and social movements during the anti-Bolkestein campaign were nurtured and re-energized with the *Right2Water* ECI. This contrasts with the transport sector where horizontal market integration had advanced farther, especially in road transport.

Whereas vertical water integration provides a tangible target ripe for politicization, horizontal transport integration, on the other hand, is a different dynamic whereby different operators and modes of transport compete directly with one another. This combined and uneven dynamic is more abstract and therefore more difficult to politicize along transnational lines. The stronger horizontal market integration pressures in the transport sector are a result of a longer history of commodifying vertical EU interventions (Golden et al. 2021). Whilst the ETF has sought to diminish the commodifying bent of EU liberalization drives, deploying both 'insider' and 'outsider' strategies, the nature of horizontal integration is such that even the less-liberalized modalities (for example railways) face increasing competition from the liberalized modalities (air and road). Consequently, both intra- and inter-modal competition have intensified in transport (Stevens 2004). This has several implications that hinder transnational solidarity between workers, which also had an inhibiting effect on the ETF's ECI campaign. ETF affiliates, from different countries and transport modalities, had different ideas about the meaning of fairness in the sector, depending on their positions in relation to horizontal market pressures. Not only did the ETF have to deal with tensions between railway unions and the social dumping concerns of its Scandinavian affiliates, but the social dumping question also created divisions between ETF affiliates from old and new EU member states (Czarzasty et al. 2020).

CONCLUSION

A power resource approach explicitly acknowledges multiple sources of power. Traditionally, power is seen to be embedded in structural, institutional and associational resources. Since its theorization in the 1970s and 1980s by the likes of Lukes (1974) and Korpi (1985), the world of work and labour politics has undergone significant change on the back of neo-liberal restructuring. This is not to say that their insights are no longer relevant, quite the opposite. For instance, Korpi's distinction between

attaining, applying and maintaining power resources is all the more important in the face of EU vertical and horizontal integration (Reflund and Arnholtz 2022). Of equal importance is the development of new power resources, including those that broaden the social basis for resistance. While the power resources of organized labour have undoubtedly waned in recent decades (Baccaro and Howell 2017), to portray unions, as described by Ryanair's CEO, as a "mob whose day is largely dead" is premature and could result in a humiliating climbdown. It is not necessarily the case that unions' institutional power resources have diminished, but that in a transnational space they are less effective. This is borne out by the ability of Ryanair to thwart the endeavours of aviation unions, which had become overly reliant on their *national* institutional power resources.

As we have demonstrated in this chapter, the circumventing of national power resources, however, does not necessarily prevent TLA, contrary to the expectations of many (Baccaro and Howell 2017). Although limited, there is scope for a leverage scale factor at the supranational level, which relates to vertical EU integration. The FTL Regulation provided aviation unions with a necessary, but not sufficient, power resource, which was used as an institutional lever for TLA. Similarly, the ECI Regulation provided ETUF's engaged in anti-commodification struggles with a supranational institutional power resource, however, as in the Ryanair case, this a necessary, but not sufficient, factor in explaining EPSU's success with the *Right2Water* ECI. In both successful cases presented above, it is the interplay of power resources that explains the outcome. Whereas with EPSU's *Right2Water* it is the interplay between coalitional and associational power resources, the Ryanair pilots drew on supranational institutional and associational power resources.

The options available to organized labour and workers to construct (transnational) alliances are shaped by structural factors, namely vertical and horizontal integration, which can be interrelated but remain analytically distinct (Erne 2019). The scope for transnational political contention is greater with vertical integration, whether it be commodifying EU laws or a corporate decision. This is because EU laws, and corporate decisions, are visible, tangible and contestable and can be identified with a specific target, whether it be EU executives, such as Bolkestein, or a company CEO, such as O'Leary. On account of the broad scope of (some) EU laws, there is an opportunity for organized labour to develop power resources by constructing alliances with social movements or even cross-class alliances. Arguably, the difficulty is maintaining these alliances, particularly

with social movements, which can be ephemeral. That said, EPSU and *Aqua Publica Europea* continue to meet regularly to discuss ongoing cooperation in the face of commodifying pressures from EU executives and TNCs, such as Veolia and Suez.

Horizontal integration, on the other hand, is driven primarily by the invisible hands of competitive market forces and creates spatial-juridical fixes that undermine organized labour's power resources, particularly those of an institutional variant. Although politicizing or mobilizing around abstract market forces is difficult, not least because it pits workers against each other, it is by no means impossible. TLA does, however, require trial and error and a degree of serendipity.

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Transnationalizing Contention: Some Conclusions

Donatella della Porta 

Research on the transnationalization of social movements has been slow to emerge, given the rootedness of contentious politics at a local and a national level. Indeed, the political process approach to social movement studies had repeatedly demonstrated the relevance of domestic political opportunities—including institutional points of access and inclusive versus exclusive political cultures—in affecting the mobilization potential, forms of action and chances of success of social movements; something that is as true of ‘new’ social movements as it was of ‘old’ ones. To a large extent, social movements have even contributed to the creation of nation states, which emerged in parallel to the spread of capitalism, by focusing their struggles on national institutions and building national collective identities (della Porta, 2013).

Notwithstanding its focus on the national level, research has also pointed to dynamics that are emerging as ever more relevant in the development of international politics. The increasing competences of certain international organizations, in particular, have forced social movements to

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address them either as potential allies or, as is more often the case, the targets of various claims. Along with the international financial organizations, such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, these also include the World Trade Organization, informal groupings like the G8, as well as macro-regional multi-state institutions. As the most advanced of these types of international organizations, the European Union has been the focus of much attention aimed at assessing the paths of Europeanization of social movements and the various degrees to which this has taken place.

While much has been written on the limited democratic accountability of the European public sphere, as well as its various weaknesses, many studies have also critically assessed the various ways in which civil society has been brought into the process of EU governance through consultation and participation. According to the institutional narrative, the involvement of civil society should help to overcome the democratic deficit linked to the limits and delays in the building of democratic institutions. However, the consideration of civil society organizations as stake-holders in this process has constrained their potential democratic function. As has been noted, “although European citizenship is a cherished concept in the European Union, it is not linked to the idea of politically active European society” (Kohler-Koch, 2011, p. 71). Even though certain EU treaties have opened up the potential for citizen participation, the selective manner of this inclusion has brought about an organizational bureaucratization as well as a depoliticization of CSOs (Sanchez Salgado, 2014, p. 119). As lobbying around soft regulation prevails over participation, a coherent and transparent regime has yet to emerge, while only a restricted number of well-organized NGOs have managed to gain access to EU institutions. The EU is, therefore, considered to be far removed from the grassroots, so that, despite all the efforts that have been made, increased NGO participation in EU governance did not render political representation in the EU more democratic (Kohler-Koch, 2012, p. 820).

Although research on progressive social movements has noted the challenges involved in organizing at a transnational level, it has also highlighted the efforts such groups have made and their capacity to organize across national borders, with protests increasingly targeting international organizations. In contesting the lack of representative democracy at an international level, they have also proposed participatory and deliberative visions of democracy (della Porta, 2013). While protest event analyses still note the fact that collective action continues to privilege the local and

national level, the organization of transnational protest campaigns is highly consequential in terms of both networking and collective framing.

Indeed, it can be said that social movements have created a public sphere at the transnational level, exploiting or even building specific channels of access to international organizations, which differ greatly in terms of their rules and how they function (Parks, 2015). In particular, the Global Justice Movement (GJM) has been considered to be a sign of the globalization of contentious politics. With the proliferation of international summits and countersummits at the turn of the Millennium, it became particularly evident that social movements were adapting their strategies to target the international organizations that were assuming new powers during this period. This was all the more the case with developments in the European Union, as a result of the creation of the European Monetary Union and the adoption of the Euro, as well as the enlargement of the bloc. From 2002 onwards, the European Social Forum (ESF) constructed important public spaces for various progressive movements from all over the continent and beyond to come together. At the same time, global campaigns on women's rights or indigenous rights were seen to both reflect and fuel the spread of cosmopolitan values and inclusive conceptions of rights. As a consequence, research focussed on transnational countersummits and social forums (such as the European Social Forum and the World Social Forum) as venues for the coordination of protest action and the development of proposals to challenge neoliberal globalization, looking at the organizational forms, action repertoires and collective framing at the transnational level (della Porta, 2009a, 2009b).

Researchers have noted that the Europeanization of social movements involves a number of different paths of action, which can be defined as domestication, externalization and transnationalization (Tarrow, 2005; della Porta & Tarrow, 2005). A path of *domestication* takes place when international organizations have an impact on national politics, triggering forms of protest that particularly target the national governments that are implementing the policies proposed or imposed by international organizations. A path of *externalization*, on the other hand, involves claims against national policies that are put forward at the international level, in an attempt to find allies that can exert pressure on domestic decision makers. *Transnationalization* happens when social movement organizations and protests are mobilized directly at the international level and the claims refer to global changes. Transnationalization has been seen as developing from within the paths of domestication and externalization, as these fuel

the development of visions of a shared destiny as well as horizontal ties between movements that are active in different countries and perceive they are fighting a common global enemy.

Transnationalization was a prominent trend during the Global Justice Movement, and could be observed in the three main dimensions of the movement: action, organization and framing (della Porta, 2007, 2009a, 2009b). During the 2000s, protests increasingly became organized transnationally, challenging the idea that the nation state is the natural arena for contentious politics. Protests moved to the locations where international organizations held their summits, especially the international financial organizations, such as the WTO, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund, which had all played a major role in spreading the neoliberal doctrine; however, they also targeted the most powerful macro-regional organizations. The European Union was particularly criticized for betraying its public mission to create better conditions for citizens, and instead defending the interests of the powerful (della Porta, 2009b). As they grew in number, transnational protests became particularly influential, given their capacity to network activists from different countries during long-lasting preparations and emotionally intense performances.

As far as the Europeanization of contentious politics is concerned, the European Social Forum contributed to the development of alternative knowledge from below, fostering the development of shared diagnostic and prognostic frames as well as collective identities. The organization of transnational action was made possible thanks to intense networking and the construction of long-term trust. During the various editions of the ESF, transnational networks grew both in terms of members and numbers, adopting different organizational formulas—from grassroots to formal association—as well as different forms of action—from European strikes to marches on Brussels, and from petitions to countersummits. While social forums were also active at the local and national levels, the transnational dimension remained the most important element. As part of a global movement calling for global justice and global democracy, activists presented their actions as challenging a Europe that they saw as representing the interests of the market and capitalism, and instead called for the creation of a Social Europe that represented citizens, which in many cases was referred to as ‘another Europe’. In bridging the local and the global (della Porta & Tarrow, 2005), these transnational protests also contributed to the creation of a transnational public sphere, as well as cosmopolitan identities (tarrow, 2005; della Porta & Caiani, 2009).

In the decade that followed, however, the responses to the Great Regression seemed to deviate from what had seemed to be a new trend of transnationalization in social movements. Not only were the hopes of constructing an alternative Europe bitterly dashed, but the European Union increasingly took on the appearance of an economic project based on competition. This was especially the case on the European periphery, where countries that were paying a higher cost for the outbreak of the financial crises, such as Greece, Portugal and Ireland, but also Spain and Italy, were accused of having invested too much in public services and were forced to introduce painful austerity policies. In these countries, the EU was perceived to be part of the problem rather than the solution, as the introduction of the Euro had reduced the number of monetary policy instruments available to national central banks. Although Europe did not initially play a relevant role in the debate, when it was addressed there was more of a tendency to see it as the problem rather than the solution. As the austerity crisis progressed, Europe was increasingly seen as being remote from the average citizen (Kaldor & Selchow, 2015), who perceived it as being hostile rather than supportive. Indeed, although the GJM had been rooted in national politics and social movement infrastructures (della Porta et al., 2006), with the advent of the Eurozone crisis the national level became an ever more relevant target for anti-austerity protests, which were reacting to the various expressions of the financial crisis in each individual country (della Porta, 2013).

However, it must be said that processes of cross-national diffusion of frames and repertoires of action were also at work during the 2010s, facilitated by direct, face-to-face contacts and/or mediated channels. Direct forms of diffusion seem to have been especially important in a number of geopolitical areas, as Tunisian activists inspired their Egyptian counterparts, who in turn influenced the Indignados in Spain, who were in direct contact with Greek activists and played an important role in steering the Occupy movement (Romanos, 2013). Both this movement of activists and the increased use of social media helped to facilitate the rapid diffusion of information and mutual learning across vast geographical areas, as a number of social movement organizations became especially active in the importation of certain ideas (see Roos & Oikonomakis, 2014). Moreover, protests continued to be called at a worldwide level, as was the case with the Global Day of Action, which was launched by the Spanish Indignados on 15 October 2011 and saw protest events taking place in 951 cities across 82 countries. In May 2012, a four-day 'Blockupy' protest was

organized by a transnational network of activists with the aim of blocking the activities of the European Central Bank in Frankfurt in order to contest the European austerity measures implemented in many European countries, which to a certain extent represented some continuity with the countersummit strategy (della Porta, 2020b).

During the anti-austerity protests, therefore, the transnationalization of protest occurred through intense processes involving the diffusion of ideas, practices, and frames (della Porta & Tarrow, 2005), fuelled by the perception of a shared condition of global crisis. Forms of protest such as protest camps thus spread from Tahrir Square in Egypt to Puerta del Sol in Madrid, from there to Syntagma Square in Athens and Zuccotti Park in New York and on to squares and parks in many other countries around the world, including Gezi Park in Turkey and the *Nuit Debout* squares in France (see della Porta & Atak, 2017 and Felicetti & della Porta, 2018 respectively). Although these *acampadas* did not achieve a similar resonance in every country, they did become entrenched in the very identity of a global wave of protest, as the occupied spaces became “vibrant sites of human interaction that modelled alternative communities and generated intense feeling of solidarity” (Juris, 2012, p. 268).

Aimed as they were at the reconstruction of public spaces that had been lost during the neoliberal period, the visions and practices of democracy that characterized the protest camps also spread to a huge variety of countries. One of the most important aspects of these movements was the experimentation with participatory democracy that took place during the informal and formal gatherings in the squares and was perceived as an alternative to representative democracy, which itself was considered to have become increasingly corrupt. During these intense struggles, alternative ideas of democracy were prefigured in the camps, just as they had been—to a certain extent—during the social forums. This attention to deliberation as an important discursive dimension of democracy resonated with the perceived importance of creating multiple public spaces (della Porta, 2015; Felicetti & della Porta, 2018). Indeed, what was valued as democratic was

the possibility to elaborate ideas within discursive, open, and public arenas, where citizens play an active role in identifying problems, but also in elaborating possible solutions... Indeed, this conception of democracy is prefigured by the very same protestors that occupied the squares, transforming them into public spheres made up of ‘normal citizens’. It is an attempt to

create high-quality discursive democracy that recognises the equal rights of all (not only delegates and experts) to speak (and be respected) in a public and plural space, open to discussion and deliberation on themes that range from situations suffered to concrete solutions to specific problems, from the elaboration of proposals on common goods to the formation of collective solidarity and emerging identities. (della Porta & Mattoni, 2014)

The development of a plurality of transnational public spheres is one of the most important outcomes of the anti-austerity protests, along with the construction from below of ‘another Europe’. This was one of the main claims of the European Social Forum, and is still widely called for by progressive movements almost two decades later. Indeed, it could be said that progressive social movements are already constructing a cosmopolitan European public sphere. As Nancy Fraser (1990) suggested in her critique of the ‘liberal public sphere’, under conditions of massive inequality, only social movements that challenge the very basic features of the bourgeois public sphere are capable of reducing such disparities. As opposed to a single, liberal (or bourgeoisie) public sphere, the proliferation of subaltern counterpublics would allow for the participation of those in society who are excluded, giving them the possibility to make their political voice heard. Progressive social movements have played an important role in this process, just as the labour movement had previously done during the twin process of the development of the nation state and capitalism (Tilly, 1975; della Porta & Caiani, 2009). By targeting the EU through supranational protests, they have contributed to developing the organizational structures and a vision of ‘another Europe’, one that is just and democratic. Indeed, through their actions, they have contributed to the creation of public spaces in which Europe can be discussed in public. Furthermore, by contesting European institutions they have not only contributed to making them (more) accountable, but have also developed collective identities at an EU level and, with them, European public spheres.

This does not mean, however, that the construction of a public sphere by progressive social movements has been fully achieved. Research on the Europeanization of social movements has pointed to the challenges faced by progressive social movements in this process, as political opportunities narrow during economic or health emergencies (della Porta, 2021), organizational resources are reduced, and civil society organizations are even criminalized as they oppose the vision of Fortress Europe (della Porta & Steinhilper, 2021). The trend towards a cosmopolitan Europe is also

jeopardized by the fact that the EU is increasingly seen in terms of competition between nation states, as well as the growing perception of a power imbalance at the EU level (della Porta, 2020c). As one crisis follows another in Europe and beyond, it will be all the more important to develop innovative concepts of democracy from below, in order to nurture the growth of multiple public spheres (della Porta, 2020a).

With reference to these observed evolutions, which bring about both challenges and opportunities for the transnationalization of social movements, this volume makes it possible to further develop our understanding of the extent to which European institutions have triggered a Europeanization of contentious politics. Undoubtedly, the research presented in this volume points to the effects of the continuous expansion of EU competences into policy areas that had previously been less influenced by the process of European integration. From health policies to labour policies, the analyses demonstrate how the very control of monetary policies, both during and following the financial crisis, made it possible to strengthen the power of the EU over national welfare states, including in relation to various types of public services, imposing not only budget cuts but also specific structural reforms. As Mary Naughton shows in her chapter, both in Ireland and Spain the imposition of a restructuring of public health services by the EU has brought about a decline in the quality of health rights, with ensuing contentious politics led by the workers but also by the users, i.e., the citizens. While the forms that the contentious politics of public health took during the financial crisis varied, as they were embedded in different broader waves of protests, over time Europeanization developed in the form of international labour campaigns as well as social movements calling for free access to vaccination and a new conception of care and cure.

Similarly, as Daniela Chironi argues in her chapter, the need to address a variety of intertwined crises, including in relation to health rights, has brought about intense exchanges within the fourth wave of (trans)feminist movements. Characterized by a focus on gender violence as well as labour exploitation, these coalitional efforts resonate with the concept of intersectionality, and involve direct action in contentious forms. Through common proposals for alternative policies, feminist social movement organizations have grasped the opportunities that have been created at a supranational level, such as the Istanbul Convention. Sharing a critical form of Europeanism, the feminist mobilization has not only reacted to the neoconservative backlash, but also to the taming of women's demands

through institutional gender mainstreaming. This has contributed to the politicization of claims, which can more easily be connected with the claims of other progressive social movements.

As shown in the chapter by Golden, Szabó and Erne, on the transnationalization of labour, vertical Europeanization—defined as the creation of political institutions—has created some windows of opportunities for workers in their struggle against the effects of horizontal Europeanization, in relation to the market and competition. Faced with a commodification of policies at the EU level, Ryanair pilots mobilized by using the opportunities offered to them by the EU FTL regulation, while also building a certain amount of associational power through coordination at an EU level. In relation to public services, the Right2Water ECI campaign confirmed the importance of coalitional resources. The very framing of the ECI proved successful in its resonance with a language of rights (where the Fair Transport ECI failed to develop, given its reliance on a competitive view of the market). In general, the framing of common conditions and claims proved to be an important resource for transnational labour protests.

The creation of the Euro Mediterranean Partnership, as outlined by Ferré, demonstrated how civil society organizations involved in the Euromed civil forum were able to exploit the space opened up by the European Commission in a contentious fashion. Similarly, the chapter by Luciani notes how the promotion of human rights by the EU in the Caucasus has opened up space for contention, with local civil society organizations promoting alternative visions and practices. Even on the Far Right, the European Parliament has seen several—increasingly successful—attempts to build far-right party coalitions, as demonstrated by Manuela Caiani. At the same time, far-right social movements have converged on the defence of Judeo-Christian Western civilization, which has been placed at the core of an anti-Muslim, racist and exclusive discourse.

Europeanization by contention is also relevant in relation to environmental issues. The EU Green Agenda, which was seen as a victory for environmental social movements, has instead triggered dissatisfaction and protest. On the one hand, EU policies are seen as a form of greenwashing, as outlined in the chapter on Fridays for Future and Extinction Rebellion by Buzogany and Scherhauer. Even though activists from the two organizations demonstrate high levels of identification with Europe, EU institutions are rather absent from their global visions. Additionally, as we learn from the chapter on Serbia by Pešić and Vukelić, the EU Green Agenda

has been used to justify policies that are presented as oriented towards defending the environment through the development of renewable energies, but that in reality have created cleavages within the environmentalist front on the very conception of nature and justice. In particular, in Serbia as in Portugal, the extraction of lithium is opposed as an imperialist practice by activists allying at global level through the development of anticolonial frames.

As the chapter by Federico Alagna demonstrates, transnational alliances are facilitated by the very global nature of the issues at stake. While the territorial commitment to sea rescue and city rescue does not create tensions, varying levels of professionalization, contrasting visions and strategies as well as unequal access to human, social and material resources all pose a challenge for transnational action. As argued by Fagan and van Kessel in the case of the anti-Brexit movement, the failure to develop convincing frames about the diagnostic and prognostic visions of Europe brought about the failure of the anti-Brexit campaign, as activists were unable to convince part of the electorate about how Europe can address existing problems. As Chiodi, Mat and Schmidtke observe, in a period of political backlash, not only is seizing transnational opportunities all the more important, it is also made more difficult.

Therefore, while challenges to transnationalization exist, as this volume has shown, progressive social movements have reacted to the interlocking crises by developing a sense of a shared destiny. Global social movement campaigns are frequent and consequential. During the Summer of 2020, in the middle of the pandemic, a significant wave of global protest mobilized against racism, under the slogan Black Lives Matter (della Porta et al., 2023), in a process that involved a significant amount of importation and adaptation of knowledge and ideas. The fight against both old and new forms of colonialism is also central to the global wave of protest against the Israeli war on Gaza and what the International Court of Justice has defined as the plausible signs of genocide (della Porta, 2024).

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