Outside-in Politicization of EU–Western Africa Relations: What Role for Civil Society Organizations?

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Abstract

This article explores the empirical relevance of researching outside-in politicization processes in European studies. To this end, it examines to what extent and how civil society organizations (CSOs) have contributed to the politicization of EU policies towards Western Africa in two cases: the negotiation of Economic Partnership Agreements and the EU's engagement with the G5 Sahel. CSOs were strongly engaged in the trade negotiations, while they were largely excluded from the G5 Sahel process. In both cases this was due to CSOs' own initiatives, or the absence thereof, with these strongly linked to being either invited or discouraged by official actors. The article argues that authority transfer and the domestic context – including state fragility and state–society relations – are relevant to explaining the (non-)involvement of CSOs in outside-in politicization.

Introduction

Today's political reality of populist movements, geopolitical competition and disinformation has inspired an emerging scholarship on politicization in EU external policy (Costa, 2018; Moerland and Weinhardt, 2020; Voltolini, 2020; Hackenesch *et al.*, 2021). These follow a broader stream of publications that have produced rich findings on politicization in relation to European integration in general (de Wilde, 2011; Hutter and Grande, 2014; Grande and Hutter, 2016), the effects of domestic elections (Hoeglinger, 2016), or the role of the political leadership in EU member states (de Wilde *et al.*, 2016). These contributions inform the scholarly debate on (f)actors enabling politicization processes, and enrich our understanding about the relevance of the concept to European studies.

Recent contributions on EU external policy primarily focus on politicization processes *within* the EU. Comparatively little research has been done on the extent to which actors based in and/or representing third countries contribute to politicizing EU policy processes from the outside-in. An exclusive focus on EU actors in studies on politicization of EU external policies may unintentionally misconstrue third country actors as passive recipients of the EU's policy whims rather than active shapers of these processes. Outside-in politicization is understood as the process whereby the politicization of EU external policies in third countries influences (de-)politicization dynamics in the EU (Hackenesch *et al.*, 2021). The introduction to this special issue notes that the pertinence of researching outside-in politicization is underlined in recent scholarship questioning Eurocentric

perspectives in European Studies (Keukeleire and Lecocq, 2018) and post-development critiques of EU development policy (Delputte and Orbie, 2020).

This article explores the empirical relevance of researching outside-in politicization processes in European studies. It argues that in order to really understand politicization processes in relation to the EU's external policy, there is a need to further theorize on and assess when and how external actors engage in these processes. The article particularly explores the assumption that civil society organizations (CSOs), namely stakeholders beyond the group of official actors involved in policy processes, play a key role in promoting outside-in politicization, and explores the conditions under which they can do so. In view of its formative and explorative purpose, the article focuses on the EU's relationship with Western Africa for being its earliest external relationship and for its prominence on the EU's political agenda in recent years.[1] While initially declining in prominence following the fall of the Soviet Union and the Union's subsequent enlargement, in recent years the EU's relationship with Western Africa has re-intensified. The EU's engagement today mainly stems from its migration policy, as well as in relation to perceived trans-regional challenges such as terrorism in the Sahel region. Moreover, Western African states such as Nigeria constitute important emerging markets for EU exports.

This article specifically focuses on the conditions under which CSOs become involved in and contribute to politicization processes. In the field of development policy, CSOs face the challenge of reconciling their roles in influencing and monitoring policy with effective project implementation (Carbone, 2008; Banks *et al.*, 2015). As regards the first role, recent research assesses European CSOs' various approaches to engaging in Brussels-based development policy discussions (Rozbicka and Szent-Iványi, 2018). The engagement of CSOs based in Europe and Africa in relation to EU–Western Africa relations more specifically remains underexplored, including how they influence EU policy processes by interfacing with official actors.

This article focuses on the following research question: to what extent and how have CSOs contributed to the politicization of EU policies towards Western Africa? Applying a comparative perspective, we analyse the role of CSOs in politicization processes in two specific cases: the negotiations of a European Partnership Agreement (EPA) between Western African states and the EU, and the EU´s engagement with the G5 Sahel. Unless specified otherwise, the findings presented in the cases refer to European and African CSOs jointly. In view of the methodological challenges associated to assessing outside-in politicization and in line with the article's objective, these cases serve as plausibility probes to inform future research on the outside-in politicization of EU development policy and its nexuses. Based on a targeted media search conducted with the database Nexis, an assessment of data from the Varieties of Democracy (C-Dem) project, a review of official documents and literature, and semi-structured interviews, the article presents verifiable observations on politicization trends over time in each case, and seeks to inform future research on outside-in politicization of EU external policies. An appendix to this article presents the search queries and interview data, a link can be found at the end of the bibliography.

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[1]In this study, the term 'Western Africa' is considered socially constructed and refers to actors associating themselves to the geographic West of Africa. Relations between Western Africa and the EU encompass several actors, ranging from regional initiatives in Western Africa to governmental and non-governmental actors.

The article proceeds as follows. The first section defines key terms and provides some conceptual underpinning with regard to politicization and the roles of European and African CSOs in the context of EU–Western Africa relations. Section II analyses the politicization of EU–Western Africa relations across two cases. Finally, we develop conclusions across our cases.

I. Operationalizing Outside-in Politicization and the Roles of CSOs

Politicization has been defined as a process 'making collectively binding decisions a matter or an object of public discussion' (Zürn, 2014, p. 50). In line with the introduction to this SI, we understand politicization as a matter of degree and a process that unfolds over time. It is not a dichotomous concept with clearly defined thresholds, but rather a continuum ranging from lower to higher degrees across cases, arenas and actors. Politicization is driven by three dimensions of salience, polarization, and the expansion of actors and audiences (de Wilde *et al.*, 2016). Salience is understood as the frequency of discussion in relation to EU external action and development policy within different (for example public or parliamentary) arenas. Polarization concerns the degree of opposition as well as the distance between key actors' positions as articulated in these debates. Finally, actor expansion reflects an increased number and diversity of actors engaged in relevant discussions, which may also move to different (potentially more public) arenas.

The key focus of this article is on a specific form of politicization, namely outside-in politicization, which is defined as the process whereby 'the politicization of EU external policies in third countries influences (de-)politicization dynamics in the EU' (Hackenesch *et al.*, 2021, p. 14). As per this definition, the politicization of EU policy processes by third country actors may encompass feedback that can inform changes in the EU's external preferences and approach. Compared to studying politicization within the EU, researching outside-in politicization entails a number of methodological challenges that should be acknowledged upfront. Whereas the EU is a considerably transparent political system, as characterized by a multilingual parliament and executive and the availability of key documents produced throughout the policy cycle, this is less so the case for its Western African counterparts that differ in terms of the public availability of documents as well as the languages in which these are available. Differences between third countries in this respect may result in selection bias. Moreover, while reference is made here to EU–Western Africa relations as if they were a single collective of states, the reality is that there are various sub-groups of Western African states with whom the EU seeks to engage in cooperation, which complicates comparison across specific cases and topics.

Official actors involved in policy processes are guided by formally described roles and responsibilities. Outside this arena of public actors are various actors that are directly affected by the policy issue concerned. The article focuses on one of these non-public actors, namely CSOs. European law defines a CSO as 'an organizational structure whose members serve the general interest through a democratic process, and which plays the role of mediator between public authorities and citizens'.[2] In the field of development policy, CSOs face the challenge of reconciling the pursuit of their own long-term goals with the short-term goals prioritized by their funders, which in operational terms translates to a

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[2]https://eur-lex.europa.eu/summary/glossary/civil_society_organisation.html

challenge of balancing policy influence and monitoring with project implementation (Carbone, 2008; Banks *et al*., 2015). We consider that particularly in country contexts characterized by high levels of state fragility, CSOs are implicitly or explicitly encouraged to concentrate on their role of project implementers to the detriment of the space given to exercise a policy influencing or monitoring role.

Despite the growing importance of CSOs with regard to agenda-setting and contestation of EU policies (Koopmans and Statham, 2010; Risse, 2010), only few studies have so far assessed their role as potential drivers of processes of (de)politicization in EU external policy. Research on global governance processes questions the assumption that more CSO participation is always better, and describes how increasingly institutionalized participation of CSOs has both positive and negative effects on their policy influence (Dany, 2012). In general, CSOs as interest groups can approach policy-makers either directly or indirectly through the use of media or public pressure, and through both verbal and written communication (Rozbicka and Szent-Iványi, 2018). Their engagement may result through own initiatives, or on the invitation of official actors. Scholars have pointed to highly politicized policy fields leading to civil society actors looking for mass public alignment in order to gather supporters (Klüver, 2011). We assume that the substantial involvement of CSOs in the examined political processes leads to increased politicization through two attributes that distinguish them from the official (institutional) actors involved in EU–Western Africa relations: their ability to seek direct participation in or operate independently from official processes on a case-by-case basis, as well as their open networking with the media and political actors.

The engagement of Western-African actors in outside-in politicization processes is influenced by several structural factors, including authority transfers such as an agreement to allow external intervention or legal and administrative reform (e.g. leading to changes in interlocutors), or critical events such as a coup d'état or regional conflict (for both factors, see Hackenesch et al., 2021). Previous research has explored the links between authority transfer and politicization (Zürn *et al*., 2012; de Wilde *et al*., 2016). Our analysis specifically focuses on institutional factors related to transfers of authority, for instance through revised treaties of organizations or the distribution of policy competencies within these. The latter change may lead to differences in both the approach and emphasis by the EU in long-standing aspects of EU–Western Africa relations, which may in turn lead to prompt reactions from the EU's interlocutors. This article explores an additional structural factor considered particularly relevant to CSOs, namely the domestic country context in which they are embedded. This domestic context includes overall levels of political freedom, government control over CSOs and broader state-society relations that influence CSO role expectations. This domestic context interacts with CSOs' own existing and prior involvement in relation to the policy process concerned, which could include projects designed to promote the objectives pursued by these (public services, job creation, public awareness and so on).

In this article, we explore the actor expansion dimension of (de-)politicization in relation to the (non-) involvement of CSOs as determined by official actors. These expansion decisions can either be made ex-ante, as the official actors consider CSO participation desired or even required, but could also emerge during the policy process as a result of its increasing salience. The latter type of de-facto expansion could also occur in case CSOs gain informal access to the policy process and seek involvement by

their own initiatives (publications, campaigns or events) or the reporting on these by the media. In the latter case, that expansion would be both a consequence and an indication of increased polarization in the policy process. Recent research shows that CSOs engagement in outside-in politicization frequently focuses on gaps between EU policies and actions, as well as the Union's values and core principles claimed to be underpinning these (Voltolini, 2020). Contrary to the official actors that represent interests from either Europe or the Western-African states concerned, CSOs based in Europe and Western Africa are perceived as pursuing common aims and may explore possibilities for cooperation to this effect.

The remaining dimensions of salience and polarization are operationalized as follows to enable analysing patterns of politicization within our cases. We first hold that a policy is salient when the involved actors discuss it frequently. In order to (further) ascertain the degree of *salience*, we analyse whether the frequency with which actors debate the issue increases or decreases over time. We further consider a policy as polarized when (key) actors have distinctly opposing (that is, irreconcilable) views on it and show no/little room for compromise. In order to (further) establish the degree of *polarization*, we analyse the extent to which positions converge or diverge over time and show more or less room for compromise.

Methodologically, we conduct a comparative case analysis that serves as a plausibility probe of analysing politicization processes and the role of CSOs across two cases: the EPA negotiations between Western African states and the EU, and the EU's Sahel engagement. Comparing the patterns of politicization and structural factors involved in both case studies is likely to provide for more certainty on politicization dynamics and for assessing the plausibility of the proposed conceptualization of its outside-in component and factors that influence CSO engagement. The choice for a plausibility probe case study design, originally defined by Eckstein (1975, pp. 108–113) as attempts to determine the potential validity of hypotheses, is pertinent in view of the overall research aim of informing future empirical research on outside-in politicization in general and the role of CSOs in particular. A plausibility probe allows to assist further theory development and operationalization (Levy, 2008, p. 6). As for case selection, we seek to analyse CSO involvement in two differing contexts, in terms of policy areas, associated groupings of countries and differences in governance in each of these. The cases were analysed by means of a structured analysis of official documents, partnership agreements and CSO reports. These secondary sources were supplemented by a targeted and replicable media search conducted with the database Nexis,[3] a replicable assessment of the CSO environment based on the V-Dem project,[4] as well as by semi-structured expert interviews with decision makers, conducted in Addis Ababa and Brussels (see Online Appendices).

[3]The Nexis database collects international media reports and allows for replicable and systematic searches. We have conducted four distinct searches (a) specifically for parliamentary debates in the EP and Western African parliaments and (b) with regard to the overall reporting in both cases (Online Appendix 2).
[4]V-Dem is a dataset measuring democracy across the world, which includes data on the CSO environment. We assessed three indicators in this regard: (a) CSO control by the government, (b) CSO consultation by public actors, and (c) CSO repression by the government (Online Appendix 3).

II. Case Studies

Negotiating the EU–Western Africa Economic Partnership Agreement (2003–17)

Patterns of Politicization

In 2003 the EU and the African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) states entered into negotiations to conclude Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs), with the aim to replace the unilateral Lomé trade preferences by reciprocal trade agreements. The overall objectives of the EPAs were agreed during the negotiations of the Cotonou Agreement in the late 1990s. Yet, fundamental differences remained between the EU and the ACP states as to whether the EPAs themselves would facilitate development of ACP states or whether accompanying measures and notably additional development finance were necessary to realize these objectives in view of the asymmetric nature of the relationship (Langan and Price, 2015). EU member states had varying viewpoints on this, while also within the European Commission the assumption that liberalization would 'unlock' development was not universally supported (Elgström and Larsén, 2010). The negotiations can be considered as comprising two distinct phases: 2003–07 and 2008–14.

The EU–Western Africa negotiations were characterized by increasing salience during the first phase, particularly during 2007 when DG Trade's negotiators increased pressure to conclude a deal. Our Nexis search shows that this year saw a considerable increase in media coverage in both the EU and Western Africa (Online Appendix 2). This was accompanied by increasingly fundamental discussions on the very idea of the EPA and its economic implications for Western Africa. Whereas initially ECOWAS as a regional bloc constituted the main counterpart of the EU, increasingly other actors in the region engaged in the debate such as the AU Commission Chairperson Konaré (Agence France Presse, 2007b) or political parties in the region such as in Ghana (Africa News, 2007f). Both within ECOWAS and the 16 Western African governments, our analysis indicates an increased frequency of the issue debated. During 2007, it was debated in several meetings within ECOWAS, while its Chairman Chambas also increasingly engaging in the public debate (Agence France Presse, 2007d; Thai News, 2007). Following calls for their engagement across the region, Western African heads of state increasingly participated in the debate, most prominently Senegalese President Wade (Xinhua, 2007c).

The translation of the EU Treaty's general commitment to liberalizing trade to a group of economically weaker former colonies produced a high degree of polarization both between and among EU and Western African stakeholders, notably within governments, CSOs and both regions' parliaments (Nyomakwa-Obimpeh, 2017). Young and Peterson (2013, p. 504) observed that the uncompromising stance of DG Trade was a key factor in this regard. Western African leaders such as those heading the AUC and ECOWAS repeatedly criticized this pressure (Agence France Presse, 2007b, 2007c) and demanded changes to the EPA (Thai News, 2007), accused the EU of manipulation tactics (Xinhua, 2007c), or identified an aggressive approach more generally (Agence France Presse, 2007a). This progressive polarization culminated in open opposition to the EPAs by some African heads of state during the Africa-EU Summit in Lisbon of December 2007:

> 'It's clear that Africa rejects the EPAs', Senegalese President Abdoulaye Wade angrily told reporters. 'We are not talking any more about EPAs, we've rejected them … we're going to meet to see what we can put in place of the EPAs' (Reuters, 2007).

During this final stage of the first phase of negotiations, the views diverged more and more and room for compromise decreased substantially. Whereas EU Trade Commissioner Mandelson was quoted as referring to Nigeria´s position as 'sitting like an elephant in the middle of the road' (Africa News, 2007g), President Wade claimed 'saying out loud what others are saying quietly' and referred to the EPA as 'New Year's gift to our people [which] is as follows: "Dear compatriots, we have just signed with Europe a new cooperation agreement which slashes 35 percent of our budgets"' (Xinhua, 2007b). This and other interventions by African heads of state expressing distinctly different views from the EU during the summit reflected the high degree of outside-in polarization of the EPA negotiations.

Towards the end of the first phase of negotiations, the European Parliament's development committee increasingly asserted itself in the negotiations. This committee is responsible for relations with ACP countries at large, with its members primarily regarding these relations from a perspective of international solidarity. Its members emphasized that the EPAs must be designed as 'development instruments' and identified a range of changes to make the EPAs more development-friendly. The EPA negotiations were increasingly discussed within the EP; for example, in a debate of November 2007, in which some MEPs such as Caroline Lucas from the Greens accused Commissioner Mandelson of putting pressure on vulnerable countries and suggested a perception of bully-boy-tactics (IPS, 2007b). In December 2007, the deadline for concluding the first phase of negotiations due to the expiring WTO waiver, the development committee adopted an own-initiative report emphasizing that 'a long-term agreement can only be reached if all parties concerned feel committed to it' (European Parliament, 2007). The EP's involvement added to the increasing polarization by stressing that the ACP states' continuing support and consent of the EPA concept would be needed for the successful conclusion of the negotiations.

Western African actors successful contributed to the polarization of the negotiations, to the extent of achieving a rhetorical admission by their counterpart that the scope, ambition and nature of the trade agreements were debatable (Del Felice, 2012). Western African official actors and key intermediaries – principally Western African and European CSOs – were successful in delegitimizing the negotiations by emphasizing the asymmetric nature of the relationship. These engagements contributed to the outside-in politicization of the negotiations, which the EU initially argued were self-standing free trade agreement negotiations. The subsequent failure to conclude a regional trade deal by the end of 2007 reflected an 'agree to disagree' situation as regards the promotion of liberalization in EU–Western African economic and trade cooperation.

Towards the end of the first phase, middle-income countries Ghana and Ivory Coast concluded bilateral 'stepping stone' trade agreements, since unlike Least Developed Countries in the region the EU did not provide duty- and quota-free trade to them under the Everything But Arms (EBA) scheme. The conclusion of these bilateral agreements made the EPAs a reality and, combined with the end of 'active' negotiations, contributed to depoliticizing the negotiations. Young and Peterson (2013) noted that since 2006, the Commission had responded to the internal and external feedback on its conduct of the negotiations. It sought to depoliticize the negotiations by means of a stronger involvement of DG Development and a change in rhetoric that specifically sought to reduce polarization by emphasizing flexibility and potential compromise. During the ensuing second

phase, the European Commission further continued with stressing its willingness to com-promise, with EU Trade Commissioner Ashton noting in 2009 that 'my vision for the ne-gotiation of full EPAs is one where each negotiation reflects and respects the regional specificity of the parties to that Agreement – a flexible process' (Ashton, 2009). Western African leaders were now more prone to compromise such as Nigerien President Issoufou or Ghanaian Foreign Minister Tetteh who no longer principally opposed the EPA (Deutsche Welle, 2013; Ghana News Agency, 2014). A new reality emerged now that the 'hot phase' of negotiations was over. While polarization remained, it was articulated in more passive ways – essentially by Western African actors delaying further negotia-tions or the steps to ratifying their bilateral trade agreements with the EU. This situation persisted for some years, after which the EU set a new deadline for concluding all remain-ing EPA negotiations, with the explicit threat to revoke the market access that the EU had unilaterally granted during the interim period. This second phase of negotiations subse-quently resulted in the conclusion of a regional EPA in 2014, covering a total of 16 West-ern African countries who agreed to liberalize 75 per cent of trade over a 20-year period, a lower figure than the EU initially pushed for (Ramdoo and Bilal, 2014). 13 countries signed the EPA in December that same year, later followed in 2018 by the Gambia and Mauritania, while Nigeria has not signed to date.

The changed engagement on the part of the EU contributed to depoliticizing the nego-tiations, notably by reducing polarization. While generally successful in terms of conclud-ing the regional EPA, the unanimity required for it to enter into force and Nigeria's continued opposition has resulted in a no-deal situation between the two entities that per-sists until today.

The Roles and Contribution of CSOs
Ample research evidence confirms that CSOs played both a relevant and visible role dur-ing the EPA negotiations between the EU and Western Africa (Del Felice, 2012; Nyomakwa-Obimpeh, 2017; Moerland and Weinhardt, 2020). As soon as negotiations had started, both European and Western African CSOs began relaying Western African citizen concerns on the proposed EPA. For instance, Aprodev, a European umbrella group for Protestant aid agencies, criticized the EU for trying to pull Western African countries into an unequal relationship (IPS, 2007b). Likewise, Oxfam referred to the EU Commis-sion´s proposals as 'anti-development' (Africa News, 2007e). The early decision by ECOWAS to include a civil society representative in the negotiation team, who was part of a Western African coalition of CSOs, enabled Western African CSOs to engage both internally and externally with the negotiations. The EU's ambitious and persistent nego-tiation approach that denied the viability of any suggested alternatives to EPAs in part fos-tered this politicization, especially so in Western African states that featured many trade-focused CSOs (Del Felice, 2012; Moerland and Weinhardt, 2020).

During the first phase, CSOs intensified their engagement through their joint 'stop EPA campaign' that was initiated by a group of European CSOs and celebrities in 2004 (Elgström and Pilegaard, 2008; Nyomakwa-Obimpeh, 2017). Their wide-ranging engage-ment included public and private events (lobby meetings, debates, rallies, protests), as well as media engagement and own publications ranging from detailed research reports to brochures and posters (Del Felice, 2012). Langan and Price (2015) saw important dif-ferences with the engagement of Western African elites in the negotiation vis-à-vis that of

CSOs based in the region. The heads of state voiced opposition, yet seemed willing to conform to the trade liberalist agendas pursued under the EPAs – as long as adequate accompanying development assistance would be made available. Western African CSOs, on the other hand, regarded the EPAs as fundamentally incompatible with the region's development. Their engagement generally emphasized that the EU's engagement in the trade negotiations was not coherent with the spirit of partnership and commitment to development that was expressed in the Cotonou Agreement (Elgström and Pilegaard, 2008; Del Felice, 2012; Nyomakwa-Obimpeh, 2017). As such, Western African CSOs put pressure on ECOWAS not to sign the EPA, for instance targeting its secretariat (Africa News, 2007e) and regional decision-makers such as the Ghanaian Parliament (Africa News, 2007d), the Nigerian government through the Trade Network Initiative (Africa News, 2007h), or the Ghanaian government at the International Civil Society Day of Action against EPAs (Africa News, 2007a).

CSO campaigns notably focused on questioning the EU's actual commitment to using the EPAs as development instruments by suggesting they were instead mainly used as means to ensure continued EU market domination (Del Felice, 2012). CSOs often referred to the Cotonou Agreement as setting out overall objectives for the EPAs as trade and development agreements. Yet, from DG Trade's point of view their engagement was solely based on the negotiating directives given to them by the EU member states (Elgström and Pilegaard, 2008). This led to substantial CSO involvement in the EU. CSOs such as Christian Aid or Friends of the World opposed the EPA and advocated their position in the UK (Guardian, 2007), organized protests in Brussels and other cities (Associated Press, 2007), or promoted a petition with the support of Spanish rock stars (IPS, 2007a). In addition to separately seeking to influence key actors 'at home', European and Western African CSOs also engaged in joint initiatives and publications (Del Felice, 2012).

Two key factors might explain these patterns of politicization and CSOs involvement. First, it should be noted that the transfer of the responsibility for trade policy from DG Development to DG Trade influenced the EU's assertive negotiating approach. This approach was widely perceived as more 'aggressive' compared to the negotiations of previous ACP–EU trade and development agreements and thus considered to mark a break with the EU's past approach towards the region (Elgström and Pilegaard, 2008; Young and Peterson, 2013). This institutional change contributed to a lack of unity among EU member states as to how the negotiations were conducted, which contributed to creating space for CSOs to engage. Among other approaches, CSOs engaged by means of opinion pieces, media interventions, direct lobbying of parliamentarians in the EP and their national counterparts in EU member states, as well as by commissioning studies (for example on 'alternatives to EPAs', Nyomakwa-Obimpeh, 2017; Rampa and Bilal, 2006). It was further legitimated by the public and critical stance of Western African states to the EPAs, since although the EPA negotiations had de-jure been agreed to by both parties, many regarded them as de-facto imposed by the EU. This critical stance was particularly articulated during the UK's Africa-focused G8 Presidency in 2005 and the subsequent UK general election campaign, during which the trade negotiations featured prominently (Elgström and Pilegaard, 2008).

A second factor concerned the domestic environment for CSOs in several of the Western African states involved. CSO participation within the 16 states of Western

Africa benefited from a conducive domestic environment, particularly in Senegal, Nigeria and Ghana, but also in other states that featured prominently in the opposition to the EPA. This was shown by the inclusion of a CSO representative in the ECOWAS negotiating team, but beyond the regional level CSOs particularly contributed at the national level, including in Burkina Faso (Xinhua, 2007a), in Gambia (Africa News, 2007b), as well as also during the second phase in relation to the Nigerian government (This Day, 2013). V-Dem data on the region shows that most Western African countries were characterized by a conducive environment for CSO policy engagement. For instance, with regard to CSO repression, all states except Gambia and Guinea score relatively low. Particularly in Nigeria, Senegal and Ghana as key economic powers of the region, CSO repression is low. Likewise, the control exerted on CSOs by the government was low in a large majority of the Western African states during the EPA debates, whereas CSO consultation is high such as in Nigeria or the Ivory Coast (Online Appendix 3).

The EU´S Sahel Engagement as Embedded in a Security–Development–Migration Nexus

Patterns of Politicization

In response to challenges including extreme poverty, violent conflict and irregular migration, the EU has fostered its engagement in the Sahel region in recent years, more specifically those states located in the western part of the Sahel. Based on its 2011 Sahel strategy that links security and development policy, the EU has increasingly focused on the region since 2014 (Plank, 2020). In addition to the EU Trust Fund for Africa that funds migration-related projects (Lauwers *et al.*, 2021; Youngs and Zihnioğlu, 2021) and three EU missions (EUCAP Sahel Niger, EUCAP Sahel Mali, and EUTM Mali), the EU supports the G5 Sahel, a regional group founded by Burkina Faso, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, and Chad in 2014. With reference to these trends, this section specifically focuses on the period from 2014 to early 2020 and analyses the EU´s approach to the Sahel region generally as well as relations between the EU and the G5 states specifically.

The G5 Sahel has developed into a key priority of the EU's partnership with Africa. The EU supports the G5 force with EUR. 253 million, in addition to supporting the regional group with several dedicated programmes, while it also intensified bilateral cooperation with the G5 countries (EEAS, 2020). Many general debates over the diversion of development aid such as the debate over the European Peace Facility or the debate over the proposal for Capacity Building in Support of Security and Development (CBSD) have coalesced in the Sahel engagement (Bergmann, 2019).

In the EU, the salience of the Sahel engagement has increased over time and specifically after the 2015 asylum crisis when the region was identified as crucial in order to address perceived root causes of irregular migration to Europe (Interview EU 25). With reference to the Sahel, a proposed link between development and migration emerged since the '[p]ublic discourse and policy debates and even international policies addressing migratory flows are often premised on the common-sense idea that less development results in more migration' (Raineri and Rossi, 2017, p. 6). As one interviewee put it, the issue of '[…] migration made people afraid and active, maybe too active: people thought we have to do something and spend resources' (Interview EU 23). Moreover, EU development policy debates towards the region increasingly emphasize security

and migration objectives. Various important official documents refer to this security–development–migration nexus: the 2015 European Agenda on Migration calls for coherent action in development cooperation and security (European Commission, 2015). As an important external actor in Africa, the EU has sought to develop a comprehensive approach to migration policy. The Valletta Political Declaration and Action Plan recognized that 'a comprehensive approach is necessary for boosting sustainable economic, social and environmental development', and sought to 'address the root causes of irregular migration and forced displacement resulting from state fragility and insecurity', also by 'reducing poverty' (Council of the European Union, 2015, p. 2). The majority of the analysed official documents related to the Sahel stated a link between migration, development and security (for example European Commission, 2017, 2018).

Key European actors including the High Representative, the EP President and several Commissioners have repeatedly emphasized the security-development-migration nexus and travelled to the region to enter into dialogue with the G5 states (European Union News, 2017). For instance, ahead of his travel to the region, EP President Tajani referred to Niger's well-functioning model to reduce irregular migration flows to the EU (MENA, 2018):

> Until 2016, 90% of irregular migrants travelled through the Niger to Libya and Europe. In just 2 years, Niger reduced migration flows by 95%, from over 300,000 to about 10,000 in 2018. We need to support this model and extend it to other Sahel countries following the example with Turkey (PR Africa, 2018).

In the debate over the CBSD proposal, High Representative Mogherini emphasized the link between migration, security and development in the Sahel region specifically, a link that was also expressed by Commissioner Mimica (Targeted News Service, 2016). The increased salience attributed by EU actors has not been mirrored in the Sahel. Specifically with regard to Sahelian actors, the salience of the EU´s Sahel engagement and its policy links have been constantly on a low level with little increase and merely described as fostered by external actors such as the EU (Raineri and Strazzari, 2019; Bøås, 2020). African media coverage of the G5 Sahel has been low and shows no increased salience over time (Online Appendix 2). It has been argued that the fusion of development and security policy is clearly linked to the new architecture of migration management that the EU seeks to implement (Bøås, 2020). In this context, Western African governments to some extent instrumentalized the proposed links between security and development in order to gain development aid (Jegen and Zanker, 2019). For instance, several key actors such as the Parliamentary President of Chad emphasized the need for more funds available to manage the threat posed by jihadist groups (Les Dépêches de Brazzaville, 2014). When examining across both regions, the salience of the EU´s Sahel engagement has particularly increased in the EU over time (Venturi, 2017), whereas an increase in the Sahel has not been found.

With regard to polarization, diverging positions between actors have been limited while opposition did not increase over time. This finding applies to both the EU context as well as the Sahel. Instead, the Sahel engagement and its link to intertwining the policy fields of security, development and migration have been quite consensual. The results of the Nexis database search that specifically focused on parliamentary debates (Online Appendix 2) do not indicate an increase in polarization, instead, more specific issues such as human rights standards, funding mechanisms, anti-corruption-policies, or external

actors in the Sahel region have been subject to minor debates with some diverging views. For instance, some MEPs submitted written questions that problematized specific aspects of the approach, and also articulated these in several motions. MEP Lösing asked the Commission on specific funding mechanisms of the G5 joint intervention (European Parliament, 2017). Other MEPs, mainly from the leftist groups within the EP, demanded clarity regarding continued EU funding after war crimes committed by the G5 in the Malian town of Boulkessy (European Parliament, 2018a), focused on human rights violation in Burkina Faso (Impact News, 2019), concentrated on corruption-related reports (European Parliament, 2018b) or asked for more interaction instead of military funding (European Parliament, 2019a). Another example for this emphasis on specific aspects of the engagement without polarizing the engagement as such is the EP debate on human rights violations in Burkina Faso. Instead, a majority of MEPs demanded more EU engagement in the region (European Parliament, 2019b). Overall, only a limited number of MEPs sought to increase polarization, while a majority of MEPs held median positions (Dörrie, 2019). Discussion in the EP thus did endorse the EU´s engagement in the Sahel principally, and only few MEPs from the leftist group engaged in debate which, however, only dealt with specific aspects. Moreover, the Sahel engagement has only been to some extent polarized among think tanks and research (Venturi, 2017) and interviewees perceive limited debate within institutional bodies of the EU (Interviews AU 5, EU 20).

In Western Africa, the intertwining of security and migration contributed to minor polarization in the relations between European and African governments (Interview EU 9) and within African states. For example, the question of returning migrants led to a vote of no confidence against the Malian government pushed forcefully by Malian press and diaspora returns (Zanker *et al.*, 2019), opposition which might be specifically related to overall discontent with the Malian government culminating in a coup in August 2020. However, an examination of opposition dynamics out of the region provides limited results. Only specific aspects of the EU´s Sahel engagement such as the debate about external forces in the country initiated by the parliamentary opposition in Niger (Deutsche Welle, 2019) were found. This media coverage concentrates on the French engagement in the region, rather than the European engagement. As examples of this consensual approach, the parliaments of the G5 states, such as the Malian parliament and the National Assembly of Burkina Faso, strongly supported the G5 approach (Mali Actu, 2017; Sidwaya, 2020). In Niger, a law which criminalized migrant smuggling and had major effects on the population was passed in the parliament without much debate, suggesting only minor opposition within the legislative body (Bøås, 2020). In sum, the limited polarization of the EU´s Sahel engagement characterized by minor diverging views among key actors has not increased over time. Instead, actors in the Sahel agreed with the approach of the EU.

The Contribution of CSOs to the Politicization of EU Policies
The contribution of CSOs to politicization processes in relation to the EU's Sahel approach was reasonably low. Although European CSOs coordinated their positions towards the EU´s policies in the Sahel (CONCORD, 2019), their efforts had limited results on the approach. The engagement of the CSOs focused to some extent on specific aspects of the engagement such as human rights violations against migrants in the Sahel (Proasyl, 2017) or a lack of civilian protection (NRC, 2020), but less on the EU´s support to the G5 more generally. This focus on the CSOs' engagement largely mirrors that of the EP. In addition, many CSOs

chose to interface with national governments such as Germany and France as opposed to engaging at the European level (Proasyl, 2017; Medico, 2019).

The role of Western African CSOs has been also limited as they merely called for inclusion in the initiative (for example One, 2018). Although some Sahelian CSOs initiated first coordination efforts in the Sahel, such as the People's Coalition recently (Africa Report, 2020), their influence has clearly been constrained. So far, CSOs in the region have been merely perceived by government actors as 'supporters to the state' (Venturi, 2019, p. 115) and donors have reportedly confronted them with a 'take it or leave it approach' (CONCORD, 2018a). Overall, 'in the highly opaque decision-making context on security in the Sahel there is an absence of spaces for civil society to directly engage with donors on their needs and the impacts of […] security intervention' (Ahidjo *et al.*, 2020).

Two factors might explain the finding that CSOs in both Europe and the Sahel have politicized the EU´s engagement in the region only to a limited degree. First, the authority transfer as institutional factor in terms of adopting a top-down governance structure for the G5 initiative as the central mode of engagement between the EU and the Sahel states hampered the inclusion of Sahelian local CSOs. It has been stated that the implementation of EU programmes and missions, for instance the EUCAP Sahel, fell short on its aim of including local CSOs and instead followed a top-down model based on European standards (Jayasundara-Smits, 2018). Specifically, various EU programmes dedicate limited attention to local CSO participation in Mali (Venturi, 2019) and Niger (Thiombiano, 2020). As a consequence, CSOs in Mali feel an attributed role as supporters to the state and limited inclusion in the EU programmes (Djiré *et al.*, 2017, p. 53), whereas CSOs in Niger refer to closed-door negotiations without their participation and a lack to express their needs, such as the Nigerien platform of 19 CSOs, Réseau des Organisations pour la Transparence et l'Analyse Budgétaire (ROTAB) (CONCORD 2018b, p. 24). Instead, several European CSOs have been included in the implementation of projects associated with the EU´s Sahel engagement. This includes the EU Trust Fund for Africa through which CSOs such as Action Against Hunger or Terres de Hommes implement specific programmes such as strengthening resilience for the border regions of the G5 countries (European Commission, 2020).

Second, the domestic environment constrains Sahelian CSOs' ability to politicize policies. The countries of the G5 Sahel suffer from authoritarian rule as well as limited civil society engagement more generally. Hence, the environment for CSOs in the five countries of the G5 is challenging. With reference to the V-Dem dataset, all G5 countries show varying degrees of a constraining environment for CSOs in the categories of CSO consultation, CSO repression and CSO control. Particularly in Chad and Mauretania, CSO repression and CSO control is high, whereas CSO consultations scores are low between 2014 and 2019. For Niger, CSO repression has increased in the last years (Online Appendix 3). The environment for Sahelian CSOs constrains them from being active in some countries. In Niger, authorities arrested 26 high-profile civil society activists in June 2018 and their release has been put down by President Issoufou himself (Elischer and Mueller, 2019). In Chad, CSOs have reportedly been confronted with intimidation and manipulation by the government, including false arrests and co-option strategies (Counterpart International, 2011). The domestic context in the Sahel states was thus by and large not conducive to CSO engagement and politicization.

Conclusion

This article has explored outside-in politicization dynamics in the relations between the EU and the Western African region, analysing two cases with a key focus on the role of CSOs from both regions. The case of the EPA with Western Africa showed CSOs playing key intermediary roles that contributed to the increasing politicized nature of the first phase of negotiations (2003–07). Both European and Western African CSOs made important contributions to reframing the negotiations as part and parcel of the broader and historically motivated relations between the EU and Western Africa, in contrast to the EU negotiators who considered them self-standing trade negotiations. In the case of the Sahel, CSOs had a much more limited role in shaping patterns of politicization. Sahelian CSOs played a minor role and were not successful in persuading policy makers to be associated to the initiative. European CSOs in turn focused their engagement on human rights violations and migration standards, while only to a limited degree opposing the overall initiative.

Both case studies confirm the importance of authority transfer as a factor influencing possibilities for outside-in politicization (see also Saltnes and Thiel, 2021): while the transfer of policy competencies within the European Commission promoted polarization and in turn facilitated CSO engagement in the EPA case, the opposite was shown in the Sahel case were imposing a European top-down structure effectively closed the space for CSOs to engage. In a similar manner, both cases suggest the relevance of the domestic country context in the Western African states concerned as a factor influencing CSO involvement. In contexts characterized by low state legitimacy and strong control over CSOs, access of CSOs to policy processes will be constrained and they will instead be promoted to engage in providing services that complement or substitute those provided by the state – with or without external development finance. In the Sahel case, Western African CSOs were constrained by control and repression exerted by the G5 public authorities. In contrast, the Western African CSO campaign against the EPA benefitted from an inclusive approach towards CSO engagement among decision-makers and little control and repression exerted by leading countries.

These findings suggest that CSO engagement in outside-in politicization can particularly be effective in case of prior polarization among the official actors. The critical stance towards the trade liberalization in both Europe and Western Africa enabled CSO engagement in the EPA case, since the CSO campaigns and publications contributed to legitimizing the dissenting official voices. In contrast, when there is consensus among official actors concerning a course of action, such as external intervention in the Sahel, CSOs may have limited room to engage. CSOs themselves may also refrain from engaging in politicization in cases where they are 'part of the solution', in terms of being involved in implementing projects providing services in line with the overall policy aims concerned.

Further research could further probe CSO engagement – and the factors conditioning their ability to politicize EU policy – in different (policy and geographical) contexts of EU external relations. Such research could also enable us to learn about the conditions under which CSO involvement results in a change of EU preferences and/or approach. This would allow us to further specify the functioning and impact of those structural factors as well as the boundaries of CSOs' influence in politicizing the EU's policy-making in the world.

Acknowledgments

Data Appendix

Additional information in relation to this article – namely the list of semi-structured interviews (appendix.1) the Nexis database search on media coverage (appendix.2) and the V-Dem data on the national environment for CSOs (appendix.3), can be downloaded here: https://international.politics.uni-mainz.de/files/2020/10/Appendix-to-JCMS-2020-Article-Plank-et-al.pdf.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of the article.

Data S1. Supporting information