War and Taxes: The European Commission and the Politicisation of Core State Powers Integration

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Depending on political tradition, core state powers may refer to the king's sovereign privileges transferred to the modern state (justice, currency, diplomacy, and defence - "*pouvoirs régaliens*") or to the institutional infrastructure of sovereignty (coercion, taxation, public administration). Since the failure of the European Defence Community in the 1950s, the academic consensus has been that there will not be a European integration of core state powers unless (1) national leaders agree to it for their own reasons, as in the case of the single currency; (2) integration occurs almost by stealth, as in the case of fiscal surveillance and migration through emergency politics (Genschel and Jachtenfuchs 2018; Kreuder-Sonnen and White 2021)(Kreuder-Sonnen and White 2021). There is widespread belief that the Commission, originally thought by federalists to be the "engine of European integration", is not well-positioned to take on sovereign initiative and should therefore stay clear of high politics (Middelaar 2019). Literatures on European integration (Hooghe and Marks 2009), core state power integration (Genschel and Jachtenfuchs 2013) and international bureaucracies (Louis and Maertens 2021) have reflected this belief, with the idea that international bureaucrats try to avoid politicisation.

The two most recent colleges of commissioners have, however, challenged this belief. In 2014, Jean-Claude Juncker became the first Commission president who drew his legitimacy from a pan-European campaign, the *Spitzenkandidat* process. After his nomination, he promised to lead a "political Commission": responsive to political forces, ambitious, and willing to challenge member states. This ran against the standard interpretation of the Commission as a non-majoritarian, international organization designed to serve member state interests. When she came to office, Ursula von der Leyen upped the ante by promising to lead a "geopolitical Commission", thus emphasizing the Commission's role in global power politics. Recent scholarship has made sense of these developments by analysing how, against all odds, non-elected officials can participate in issue politicisation as a way to deal with bottom-up pressure, be it politicisation (political pressure) or a crisis (functional pressure) "travelling up from member states" (Bressanelli, Koop, and Reh 2020:329). Politicisation can be a way to manage these pressures, in order to protect or extend their competences and legitimacy, and more generally shield the European project from disintegration threats. Why they choose politicisation over depoliticisation is linked to actors (how they depend on electoral success and are close to elections) and to policy characteristics (core state powers lead to higher politicisation, risk of policy failure to depoliticisation) (Schimmelfennig 2020).

In this paper, we explore why and how the Commission has ventured further into core state powers. Taxation and defence are two prominent ones tied up with national sovereignty, where Council unanimity is the rule. Yet, under Juncker's presidency, on defence and taxation, just like in migration and arguably finance and justice, the Commission made bold proposals that went against the vision of a market actor at the

behest of the member states. The legal basis for doing so was weak and, in the Council, there was resolute opposition to the Commission getting too close to core state powers: there was a dedicated camp of "resistants" (to use Hoffmann's term) in the Council that were in principle opposed to any sharing of sovereignty on war and taxes. The Commission has adopted quite comparable politicisation strategies to push for integration in these two policy areas. In the inter-institutional game, it has pushed for less consensus-based decision-making, making grandiose political declarations, and even tried to corner member states. It has sought coalition-building with other actors such as the European Parliament. It has also widened its communication towards the greater public through more political communication.

Focusing on the same actor (the Commission), the same type of policy (core state power) on the same period, our comparison allows us to consider the role of pre-existing problem pressure as necessary condition for non-elected bureaucratic strategies of politicisation. Do these strategies in both policy domains reflect a reaction to domestic pressures? Building on existing literature on EU actors' politicisation, we argue that functional pressures do not sufficiently account for politicisation. First, contrary to taxation, no such pressure existed in security and defence, where the Commission initiated politicisation. Second, even in taxation, where there was prior national politicisation, the European Commission had already tried to get more influence before. In that sense, the crisis does not trigger the Commission's involvement: rather, it is the Commission that uses the crisis to further its agenda. To make sense of these contrasting cases, we argue that rather than a response to external pressure, politicisation is best explained by the Commission's "political work" (Mérand 2021). Political work, we argue, is "the practice of enlarging the space for agency in an environment that is heavily constrained by institutional rules and intergovernmental power structures" (Mérand 2021:3), i.e. from bureaucratic rules, international norms, and intergovernmental power structures. Political work can be done through politicisation or depoliticisation strategies. Political work is close but different from other accounts stressing bureaucratic agency (Bressanelli et al. 2020). This concept emphasizes the willingness of bureaucratic actors to "do politics". First, politicisation is not only a reaction to problem pressure: if there is political or functional pressure, bureaucrats do not only react to it but use it as an opportunity. In that sense, agency is not restricted to the management of politicisation but also to its initiation and the forms it takes. Second, politicisation is not about blame avoidance (Schimmelfennig 2020) but credit claiming: the Commission's proposals are found in both policies to be more ambitious than necessary if competence extension was the goal, as they confront directly member states. The European Commission's propension to engage in political work depends on various factors. This contribution sheds light on the role of the individuals involved, at the top of EC leadership but also in Commissioners' cabinets, are willing to do politics through their office. These characteristics are important if and when these actors can build on a crisis, that can trigger a process of institutional change.

To illustrate our claims, we describe the strategies deployed by the Commission to politicize economic and defence files in a way that would likely expand its role in core state powers. In two particularly challenging policy areas, we show that the Commission was able to promote its own ideas in two steps. First, construct a crisis as an opportunity for political change: the crisis can (in taxation) but does not need (defence) to pre-exist the

process. Second, politicise the decision-making process by setting bold and non consensus-based proposals, developing public communication and engaging in coalition building.

Our paper relies on the analysis of a diversified empirical material, including ethnographic work in the case of taxation, and for both policies, numerous interviews with policymakers at the EU Commission, member states, European Parliament and Council, as well as media content (national and EU-level news outlets). This material allows us to identify and assess in an interpretive manner (Guzzini 2017) the implication of the Commission in these two core state powers, as well as the interplay with other factors over time.

The remainder of this article is organized as follows. The first section sets out the theoretical debate about the EU Commission and de-politicisation. We argue that the concept of political work encapsulates best what the Commission is doing when politicizing an issue: rather than reacting to pressure, it creates space for political action. In that sense, politicisation strategies do not depend on but build upon the construction of crises. The second and third section present respectively our two cases: taxation and CSDP respectively. In each case we show the Commission's political work. We demonstrate how the politicisation strategies (non consensus-based proposals, intense public communication and coalition building) are linked to the construction of the crisis as necessity for change. Politicisation is therefore not only reactive, but also proactive, even when there was indeed prior politicisation at domestic level. We shed light on this by the political DNA of the Commission's president as well as of some of its commissioners and their cabinet members.

1. **The integration of core state powers and political work.**

This section presents the discussion about international bureaucrats and de/politicisation. While various strands of literature have pointed to the bureaucratic preference towards depoliticisation for a long time, newer scholarship emerged to make sense of bureaucrats' politicisation strategies. These accounts however limit their explanation to reactive politicisation, understood as a reaction to external pressure, either political (domestic politicisation) or functional (crisis). We argue that the concept of domestic work is a heuristic lens to make sense of cases of proactive politicisation.

1.1. **Towards bureaucratic politicisation**

There is growing interest in the politicisation of the European Union. Most of the scholarship analyzes domestic public opinion, with a focus on the rise of Euroscepticism (De Wilde 2011; Kriesi 2016). In their synthesis, de Wilde, Leupold and Schmidtke (de Wilde, Leupold, and Schmidtke 2016:4)(provide a consensual definition of EU politicisation as "(a) the growing *salience* of European governance, involving (b) a *polarisation of opinion*, and (c) an *expansion of actors and audiences* engaged in monitoring EU affairs".

By contrast, there has been a strong presumption that EU institutions, especially non-majoritarian bodies, such as the Commission and the European Central Bank, rather seek to *depoliticize* governance (Robert 2001, Schmidt 2006, Leupold 2016, Börzel and Risse 2018, Schimmelfennig 2018, Kreuder-Sonnen 2018, White 2020). This is mostly due

to the fact, as European integration scholarship has argued, politicisation is a constraint for EU elites, as European integration has proceeded mostly to insulate certain unpopular decisions from popular assent (Hooghe and Marks 2009). The Core State Power literature has confirmed these findings, with the argument that bureaucrats usually prefer integration by stealth against publicity (Genschel and Jachtenfuchs 2013). Another strand of literature focusing on international bureaucracies and expertise also argues that "international oranizations hate politics" (Louis and Maertens 2021). This assumption has become less tenable in the light of Jean-Claude Juncker's explicit ambition to lead a "more political" Commission (Kassim and Laffan 2019; Zeitlin, Nicoli, and Laffan 2019).

These empirical developments triggered interest into when, why and how international bureaucrats do opt for politicisation over their long-assigned preference for depoliticisation. Rauh's (Rauh 2019) work on the Commission's consumer policy constitutes an important exception to the assumption of depoliticisation . It shows that, far from behaving as a neutral technocracy, the Commission is increasingly responsive to public contestation. Van der Veer and Haverland (van der Veer and Haverland 2018) observe similar patterns in the European Semester, where the Brussels bureaucracy adapts its "country-specific recommendations" to the level of domestic politicisation. Looking at the eurozone as a whole, Schmidt's (Schmidt 2020) also argues that the EU dynamic has shifted from making "policy *without* politics" to making "policy *with* politics". Bunea shows how the Commission politicises the negotiation of interinstitutional agreements (Bunea 2020). Overall, this literature has focused on the choice bureaucratic actors make, between depoliticisation and politicisation – the two being political (Bressanelli et al. 2020).

1.2. From reactive to proactive politicisation: political work and the integration of core state powers

Recent scholarship has mostly focused on bureaucratic politicisation as a response to bottom-up pressure, be it from domestic politicisation or functional policy pressure to act (Bressanelli et al. 2020). Domestic politicisation leads non-majoritarian actors to opt for politicisation if they feel national contestation being unfairly targeting themselves or the European integration project overall (Schelkle 2013) or if they are contested by member states (Blauberger and Martinsen 2020). Bureaucratic actors also respond to pressure to act upon policy problems if they face opposition of member states and feel they can lose their competences. Overall, EU actors share two motivations to respond to bottom-up pressures: "the survival or the EU as a system 'under attack' and (…) by the preservation of their own substantive and procedural powers" (Bressanelli et al. 2020:333). This focus on reactive politicisation is also confirmed by Schimmelfennig's focus on politicisation management as blame avoidance (Schimmelfennig 2020).

This article builds on this literature on many accounts but differs on a few ones. First, politicisation is still considered the exception for non-elected officials. They engage in politicisation only within the interinstitutional game, as opposed to engagement with broader public (Schimmelfennig 2020). Second, most importantly, they limit their approach to cases where EU actors react to bottom-up pressure. While this angle is welcome as it complements a top-down view, it leaves aside other origins of politicisation strategies.

To shed light on this, this article makes use of the concept of political work, as developed elsewhere (Mérand 2021). Political work designates "the practice of enlarging the space for agency in an environment that is heavily constrained by institutional rules and intergovernmental power structures" (Mérand 2021:3). Political work creates politicisation by the very fact that it creates and expands space for political disagreement and contestation. What is more, Mérand emphasizes that political work creates politicisation "as an end in and of itself" (idem): While it is "broadly goal-oriented", since actors rarely consciously pursue their own demise, it is not reducible to a strategic response to pressures. Rather, actors engage in political work as a general desire to "do politics", i.e. engage in the contest for the allocation of material and immaterial benefits in a polity. Political work is close but different from other accounts stressing bureaucratic agency (Bressanelli et al. 2020). This concept emphasizes the willingness of bureaucratic actors to "do politics". First, politicisation is not only a reaction to problem pressure: if there is political or functional pressure, bureaucrats do not only react to it but use it as an opportunity. In that sense, agency is not restricted to the management of politicisation but also to its initiation and the forms it takes. Second, politicisation is not about blame avoidance but credit claiming: the Commission's proposals are found in both policies to be more ambitious than necessary if competence extension was the goal, as they confront directly member states.

Political work is embodied in various practices. Mérand focuses mostly on practices in the decision-making process: "the purposeful exercise of discretion vis-à- vis institutional rules; (…) the embrace of partisan and ideological conflict rather than its euphemizing vis-à-vis national interests". These dimensions can be easily complemented by other dimensions developed in the literature: more intense use of political communication towards the public and the wide audience; engaging in coalition-building. While using a slightly different definition of the concept, Andy Smith (Smith 2019) on the other hand focuses on political work as the work of institutionalization, whereby actors construct and legitimize institutional work through three stages: problematization, or the construction of public problems, instrumentation, as the design of policy instruments and last, legitimation of problems and instruments.

Building on these two accounts of political work, we argue that politicisation is not only explained by preexisting domestic pressure. Rather, bureaucratic actors engage in politicisation when they feel a general desire to do politics. This can be heightened by the individuals' profiles and career. We analyze two dynamics pertaining to the Commission's political work. First, political work is performed through the process of institutional change: we argue that external factors played a significant role in legitimizing this political work and turning it into a tangible role for the Commission in high politics. Bureaucratic actors use potential or existing crises as a way to problematize policy areas and challenge the status quo. Second, how they engage is by doing politics: setting "political" proposals against consensus-based ones; using political communication and engaging with a wider audience; engaging in coalition-building. The Commission forged alliances with interest groups, member state governments and parliamentarians to legitimize its role in core state powers in a context of a supportive public opinion.

2. Taxation: how the Commission turned a crisis into an opportunity

Along with foreign affairs and defense, taxation is one of the few policy areas subject to the EU's unanimity rule. Parliament plays a role but qualified majority voting is almost impossible in the Council. According to the treaties, tax harmonization can only be justified by the rules of the internal market. This limits the Commission's intervention to regulating VAT rates (indirect taxation) and cases of unfair competition (Genschel and Jachtenfuchs 2011). On other tax matters, the unanimity requirement forces the Commission to seek the lowest common denominator. Now, a group of six member states opposes European ambitions in this area: the Netherlands, Ireland, Belgium, Luxembourg, Malta, and Cyprus. Because of these governments, which offer global financial flows a home port in the European market, tax competition is fierce in the EU (Wasserfallen 2016). From the 1950s until the Juncker years, these countries, shielded by the framing of taxation as a core state power set in stone in the treaties, were able to block any progress on tax cooperation.

Then an external shock happened. The fight against tax evasion and avoidance topped the global agenda with the 2008 economic and financial crisis, which was soon followed by the LuxLeaks, SwissLeaks, Panama Papers, and Paradise Papers. As soon as 2012, the OECD responded by proposing measures to promote tax transparency and prevent so-called base erosion and profit shifting (BEPS). At the time, the OECD was in the lead. The Paris-based organization took bold steps which, although they were supported by its main principals, the US, the UK and France, clearly reflected a political agenda. Its main contribution to the debate was technocratic expertise. The director of the centre for tax policy relentlessly promoted international cooperation. Compared to the EU, the OECD also had the advantage of covering all the most industrialized nations and being a sort of informal secretariat for the G20.

But a few days after his appointment, Juncker was embroiled in the LuxLeaks scandal, which put his home country on the spot. Taxation, which the Commission had been very reluctant to touch, and even more so after its failed proposal for corporate tax rules in 2011, became a top priority. The Commission went several steps further than the OECD. On the Competition side, several high-profile suits were launched against firms evading their taxes (Google, Fiat, Starbucks…) and countries helping them with "tax rulings". On the policy side, the Commission implemented the OECD's BEPS initiative swiftly, cracked down on tax havens, and pushed for tough new rules on fiscal optimization and digital taxation.

Commissioners Vestager and Moscovici turned fiscal justice into personal battles that would shape their legacy. Before coming to Brussels, they were prominent ministers in their home country. Both were known to be politically savvy and eager for publicity. Even though they supported each other, everybody could see how they competed for public attention. The two commissioners, however, faced very different challenges. While Vestager had, thanks to the EU's treaty-backed competence in competition law, complete autonomy in her decision to sue tax-evading firms, Moscovici dealt with one of the few EU policy-making areas where unanimity is still the rule.

In the Parliament, most MEPs are in favour of tax cooperation because they know public opinion is infuriated with tax evasion. The extreme left is just a bit more ambitious, and some Eurosceptics more… sceptical. The main obstacle is veto power in the Council, which member states with vested interests use and abuse as long as they can find excuses. Against secretive Council deliberations, the Commission's only weapon was public opinion, and the European Parliament in particular. The Commission's strategy was to ally

with parliamentarians and interest groups (such as Transparency International) to "out" reluctant governments (Ireland, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Cyprus, Malta) to the public. They were aided by the fact that, following the LuxLeaks scandal, the Parliament created its own special commissions, TAXE and PANAMA, which launched investigations and kept the pressure on. In four years, the Commission pushed through 14 directives. The first packages, on tax transparency, were quickly adopted during the first year of the mandate. Although watered down, the Anti-Tax Avoidance directives, which includes country-by-country reporting for large firms, were also adopted with wide cross-partisan support that made it easier to overrule some member states' concern in the Council (Christensen 2019).

Around 2017, things became more difficult. Although the Commission hoped to ride the momentum against corporate tax optimization, its flagship project, the Common Consolidated Corporate Tax Base (CCCTB), was half-killed for the second time (it had already been proposed in 2011) when it became clear that Netherlands, Ireland and Luxembourg, which benefit from a fragmented corporate tax system, would not be bullied on the "consolidation" part. Common rules to establish the taxation base were agreed, no more. After Macron's election, the Commission piggybacked on a French proposal to tax digital firms (the so-called GAFAs). This project was also shelved in 2019, this time due to Scandinavia's opposition. As in the case of CCCTB, Berlin's growing scepticism in the fourth Merkel mandate (it had initially been a supporter) lowered the pressure on the veto-wielding minority.

By early 2019, the discussion on adapting tax systems to the 21st Century had moved back to the OECD where one could fear it would die a slow death. The Six used the OECD in the hope that the US would block any substantive progress. Nevertheless, despite the opposition of several member states and the constraints of an unanimity-based decision-making system, the Commission did use a window of opportunity in 2015-2016 to push through several tax proposals in a very short period of time. The only way the Commission could tackle a core state power was by exposing bad practices to a public that was incensed by a series of scandals, cooperating closely with a European Parliament that was fairly powerless but united on this front. Here, political work was about making sure citizens were brought to bear on national interests.

In the end, that was not enough to sway recalcitrant countries such as Ireland. But the huge economic costs of the pandemic led to Next Generation EU, and huge borrowing which will need to be paid back through new "own resources", possibly EU taxation. The election of Joe Biden in November 2020, and his subsequent nomination of Janet Yellen at the treasury, was an even bigger game changer. With their promise of a minimal global corporate tax, they reignited the discussion at the OECD, which now allows the Commission to push its ideas again, and maybe hope for a greater role in the long-shielded field of direct taxation. The von der Leyen Commission is now in a position to implement many of the tax initiatives that were long dreamed of by experts in DG TAXUD and pushed harder than ever before by the Juncker Commission.

3. Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP): how the Commission created politicisation building on an external crisis

Defence and security has long constituted the epitome of non-politicised policies (de Wilde et al. 2016): not politically salient, with political elites usually rallying under the flag and

adopt consensus-based decisions; public opinion usually neither very interested nor polarised; mostly governed by a small circle of public (government, military, bureaucrats) and private (industries, think tanks, etc) actors. In defence, politics is rather associated with "high politics", namely the bargaining and strategizing between states to further national interests. This translated onto the European level. Born out of the ashes of the born-dead European Defence Community in the 1950s, the CSDP (initially called European Security and Defence Policy, ESDP) displays the stigma of drafters' fear regarding the integration of core state powers: defence could only be included in the EU as long as (or even in order to make sure) the Community stays out of member states' business. Defence policy could not become a topic on the Community's agenda, let alone be influenced by supranational actors the likes of the Commission or the Court of Justice.

Since the early days of ESDP/CSDP in the 1990s, the European Commission, spearheaded by its DG GROW, had been very active. Its involvement had been however restricted to a market-making perspective in defence (Mörth 2000): the good functioning of the Single market and firms' competitiveness were all reasons used to justify a supranational supervision of defence markets. But never did it encroach upon Member states' role since it did not initiate any "positive" measures, i.e. did not create and make available new resources. The European Commission's influence in the CSDP through market regulation and business competitiveness has been considered efficient *because* of the low profile it took. This picture neatly fits the integration by stealth model (Genschel and Jachtenfuchs 2013; Meunier 2017).

This low-profile position of the European Commission in CSDP changed with Jean-Claude Juncker coming into office. Juncker had been vocal about the importance of defence already in his campaign for the Commission presidency. He developed the idea of developing a European army in tweets ("in the very long run, we will need a European army", May 2014) and interviews (Keating 2015). Beyond communication strategies for the public, Juncker gave clear priority to Security and Defence issues in his 2014 Political Guidelines (Juncker 2014): "I believe that we need to work on a stronger Europe when it comes to security and defence matters. Yes, Europe is chiefly a 'soft power'. But even the strongest soft powers cannot make do in the long run without at least some integrated defence capacities." (Juncker 2014). In his September 2016 State of the Union, Jean-Claude Juncker stressed anew security and defence concerns and emphasised explicitly the political nature of his call: "Europe needs to toughen up Nowhere is this truer than in our defence policy Europe can no longer afford to piggy-back on the military might of others." (Juncker 2016).

This was interpreted as being purely political: "Juncker was still in his confirmation process, and right away, he announces that defence will be one of his Commission's top 10 priorities. In public, he goes as far as to talk about a European Army. Surely, this does not fall under our competences, but it provides the backbone to our action."[1]. It is interesting to notice that the Commission has not tried to hide the politicisation of CSDP, quite the contrary. The media has commented a lot about how Juncker has prioritized security and defence concerns. But it is not the only one to do so. In its own press release about the Defence Fund in 2016, the Commission itself affirms that "In his 2016 State of the Union speech, Jean-Claude Juncker highlighted the importance of a strong Europe that can defend and protect its citizens at home and abroad" (European Commission 2016). In

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[1] Interview with a senior staff, EU Commission, January 1, 2016.

his 2018 State of the Union speech, Juncker highlights himself the political tensions that his 2014 Political Guidelines had triggered: "This is why – despite great resistance at the time – I reignited the Europe of Defence as early as 2014" (Juncker 2018).

This renewal is clearly linked to internal dynamics as well as to external factors. The Trump presidency and the Brexit had made for narratives of a crisis of the European project. European elites were therefore looking for a success story of integration, namely a policy area that is symbolic enough for public opinion and where integrative steps could be made quite easily. Defence and security was clearly used as a tool to increase confidence and popularity in the EU project.[2]

Putting CSDP forward as a Commission priority was not mere cheap talk. The Commission made clear it ambitioned to play a significant role in security and defence cooperation. In his September 2016 State of the Union, Jean-Claude Juncker announced the launch of the European Defence Fund (see below), made a case in favour of using for defence the Permanent Structured cooperation mechanism the Lisbon Treaty enabled, and laid out a few other notable and controversial suggestions: the creation of single headquarters for CSDP operations, and the acquisition of common military assets among member states, "in some cases owned by the EU" (Juncker 2016).

The European Defence Fund represents the most ambitious proposal the EU Commission has made regarding CSDP. This Fund was deemed revolutionary: It is the first time that the European Commission steps so clearly into the realm of military research.[3] It did so by proposing to finance it from the EU budget, i.e. not from ad hoc member states' contributions. The numbers have changed over time, but the final budget agreed and approved by the European Parliament in April 2021 amounted to nearly 8 billion euro for the coming budgetary period. The EDF is set to finance research projects and co-finance with states capabilities development projects presented by consortia of European defence entreprises.

To what extent is the EDF illustrative of the Commission's politicisation of CSDP through it performing political work? Or can its creation be explained by a depoliticised (strategic) use of arguments relative to the application of EU treaties or the reliance on bureaucratic expertise, or else by states' power? Surely, bureaucratic expertise of DG Grow, and its many French officials at the time, came in handy: it had developed since the 2000s different initiatives aiming at regulating indirectly the sector, and its officials had accumulated knowledge on these issues. But bureaucratic expertise was not used as before in an integration by stealth model. Ideas about financing defence projects had been developed within DG Grow: these had been shared with Juncker in the preparation of his Speech of the Union. Juncker presented the EDF in this Speech, laying ahead the ambitious workplan. But at the time, the EDF was at the time just a plan on paper, nothing more. The Commission did not have a precise idea of what it could do. But Juncker had set the political agenda, by announcing that the Commission would make a concrete proposal by the end of the year. This led to a period of intense work in the Elżbieta Bieńkowska's cabinet and in the DG GROW, for they had two months to come up with a concrete

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[2] Interview with a senior official, French permanent representation in Brussels.
[3] It had already encroached upon it through the funding of dual-use goods, i.e. goods that can be used for civil and military purposes.

document. The tempo imposed by Juncker on its own Commission was intense, and senior advisors felt it was clearly a political strategy to go fast and deliver after his speech.

Second, the EDF was the product of political work insofar as the Commission did more than "defend" and implement the treaties: it changed their interpretation and uses. Never the European Union had financed any military activity. This taboo can be seen as a foundational norm, linked to member states' strategic cultures and to the importance of peace in the European integration project. But it is also linked to a very simple and robust factor: the treaties do not allow the EU to do so. The EDF has therefore been controversial, as its core idea is to use EU budget (and not Member states contributions only as is usually the case for CSDP operations) to finance military research and the development of weapons. This idea was controversial among member states (see next paragraph), but also within the Commission itself. There was a legal battle among its legal experts as to the legality of such an initiative. The Commissioner Bieńkowska's strategy was to push for the use of article 173 TFEU on industry, instead of article 41.2 TEU, which is usually the basis for budgeting CSDP. The former article allows the Commission to lead, and the EU to finance, military research and capabilities development as it frames them as industrial policy, and not military-related expenses. The Commission had already been dealing with the question of the legal basis of the taboo of EU involvement in military expenses before. Same questions applied to the financing of regional infrastructures by DG Regio or else in domains of "train and equip": while dual-use infrastructure or items could be financed, purely defence ones could not. Justifying the EDF on the basis of article 173 became consensual within the Commission around 2015, after a long "maturation process" [4]; "with EDF, we reach the frontier of the treaties: some lawyers and budgetary experts within the Commission were unhappy, so were some member states"[5]. As such, DG Grow managed to challenge taken-for-granted interpretation and uses of the EU treaties within and outside of the Commission so as to carve out a space for itself in CSDP.

Last, this initiative was not initiated by or under the coercive influence of some powerful governments. After its announcement through the Speech of the Union, the Commission later developed the EDF in what they titled a European Defence Action Plan, which it laid out late November 2016 (European Commission 2016). But this was not the final version of the document, for negotiations lasted long[6], both with the member states and the European parliament.

Many member states were indeed not supportive of the EDF in the first place. They had known for a while that the Commission would make a new proposal, but did not expect it to be of that magnitude. Commission officials from Bieńkowska's and Katainen's cabinets went on a tour of national ministries of defence. Member states' resistances were of different natures, touching upon three core political questions shaping the historical development of CSDP. Some were sceptical of any EU involvement in the development of

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[4] Interview with a senior staff, EU Commission, January 1, 2016.

[5] Interview with senior staff, EU Commission, July 12, 2019.

[6] The Commission issued a first version of the EDF in June 2017, and a formal proposal on 13 June 2018. The European Parliament adopted the Rapporteur's report and the plenary provided the mandate to enter formal negotiations (trilogies) with the Council. The negotiations went on: a provisional agreement was reached in February 2019. The EP formally adopted the provisional agreement in April 2019: P8_TA(2019)0430. The EDF came into force on January 1, 2021, and its budget was finally approved by the EP in April 2021.

military assets, let alone of EU ownership of military assets, such as Germany or Sweden. Another contentious political topic was the link between EDF and non-EU partners, and most importantly the US and NATO. American and Eastern European member states along Sweden expressed discontent at the idea that EDF could promote intra-EU cooperation at the expense of NATO or US-centered armament procurement. A last issue concerned the traditional producing vs non-producing states divide. The European Commission had to convince member states, not only that it was in their own national interest to support the EDF, but it also that it was not a French-in-disguise plan[7]. The EDF could indeed be considered – as most initiatives in that realm – as benefitting "producing states", i.e. the ones with a national defence industrial base which would gain from these initiatives. France on the other hand was supportive of any initiative which could trigger more cooperation at the EU level, i.e. more financial contribution by other member states into defence industrial matters. But at the same time, French officials were reluctant to empower the Commission any further. All in all, while the producing/non-producing states dichotomy always plays a role in CSDP and while power politics among member states remains in the equation as a byproduct, the EDF does not find its creation in power politics among government.

The European Commission also had to convince the European Parliament. While they voiced the same concerns, MEPs had another issue at stake in this matter. Not only had the EDF the potential to not only change EU-member states' power relations in collaboration arms procurement, it also could reinforce the EP's role in CSDP. According to the Commission, because the EDF would be funded by the European budget, the EP would gain authority over it. Negotiators at the European Commission were well aware that this was a massive argument they could use to convince MEPs to back their project. Whether this actually hold true is another question (DG for External Policies of the Union 2019), but it was the selling point the Commission put forward in discussing with MEPs. Actually, it happens that the role of the EP has been lessened throughout the negotiation rounds: MEPs formally abandoned their right to veto future projects financed by the Fund.

The European Defence Fund is a half full-half empty glass kind of story: while some see in in a revolutionary step, other demean its importance as a game-changer in European security and defence. The goal here is not to assess its success but to show how the intrusion of the Commission in core state powers has proceeded through politicisation, i.e. through the Commission's political work, and not through the much expected depoliticised strategies. Contrary to integration by stealth models, the Juncker and von der Leyen Commissions have been owning the political nature of their involvement in the governance of CSDP: their discourses, as much as how their presidents or the DG Grow (and now DEFIS) acted to make the EDF happen, reveal a picture where politics in CSDP is not limited to high politics.

Conclusion

Recent scholarship has mostly studied politicisation by looking at how public opinion and a political leaders talk about the European Union. While this perspective helps us understand how actors politicize issues, it does not look sufficiently at strategies of politicisation by EU actors themselves. Recently, some authors have highlighted the

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[7] Interview with senior staff, EU Commission, July 12, 2019.

political role of the European Commission. This paper brought together these two literatures to better understand how the European Commission pushes the European integration of core state powers. We explored how the Juncker and von der Leyen colleges have set and implemented their agenda in two areas: taxation, and security and defence policy. Going against a 50-year consensus, the Commission managed to find a role to play in these core state powers though a conscious strategy of politicisation, which went through alliances with interest groups, member state governments and parliamentarians. We acknowledge, however, that political work was not enough. In both policy domains, external factors (the pandemic, the US election, Russia) were critical in helping the Commission push its agenda.

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