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Punctuated politics: the rise and fall of politicization in the EU's refugee crisis

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ABSTRACT

The refugee crisis of 2015–2019 exposed deep tensions within the EU's compound polity, generating episodic bursts of political conflict and contestation over policy issues. This paper, drawing on punctuated politicization, conceptualizes politicization as an episodic feedback system linking three demand-side forces, namely problem pressure, public salience, and political pressure to the politicization of policy issues inside the EU's policy process, specifying the mechanisms that generate punctuated patterns observed in prior research. With an innovative dataset based on Policy Process Analysis, a Bayesian vector error-correction model traces both short-run shocks and long-run equilibria among the four variables. Results show that in the refugee crisis, public salience operates as a key enabling condition, as asylum surges politicize EU decision-making only when they trigger parallel surges in public attention; politicization itself cannot self-perpetuate, failing to affect public attention or asylum inflows absent continued external reinforcement; and political pressure activates countervailing forces, as gains for radical-right parties are followed by lower salience and fewer asylum applications, revealing a self-limiting feedback loop that drives the system back toward equilibrium.

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Introduction

The refugee crisis triggered episodic bursts of political conflict within the European Union, making deep-rooted tensions in its 'compound polity' (Ferrera *et al.*, 2024) starkly visible. Scholarly views on the temporal dynamics of this politicization diverge. Postfunctionalist theory holds that as EU

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governance extends into identity-sensitive and sovereignty-laden domains, the conditions for politicization deepen (Hooghe & Marks, 2009), a process that unfolds unevenly across arenas and issues (De Wilde *et al.*, 2016). Yet whether this growing potential translates into continuous intensification or episodic flare-ups remains contested. Hutter *et al.* (2016) argue that politicization follows punctuated patterns of conflict and de-escalation driven by events and strategic opportunities rather than a secular trend.

This paper substantiates the latter perspective by specifying the mechanisms that produce these punctuations: what triggers episodes, through what pathways they escalate, and what self-limiting dynamics cause them to subside. We rely on the concept of punctuated politicization to theorize politicization as an episodic and interactive process, identifying three interconnected mechanisms linking problem pressure, public salience, and political pressure to the politicization of policy issues at the EU level, explaining not only how conflicts ignite but also why they prove temporary. Building on punctuated-equilibrium (Baumgartner & Jones, 2002), we argue that a surge in problem pressure elevates public salience, which triggers elite contestation and the politicization of policy issues; radical right gains activate restrictive policy responses while simultaneously exhausting public attention through issue saturation; and politicization itself proves reactive, unable to sustain engagement or influence flows absent continued external reinforcement. These mechanisms help explain why the refugee crisis generated intense but temporary integration conflict, subsiding once external conditions stabilized despite ongoing elite disagreements. Whether these dynamics generalize to other integration conflicts remains an important question for comparative research.

To test these dynamics, we utilize an innovative dataset of coded policy actions at the EU level during the refugee crisis based on Policy Process Analysis (PPA) (Bojar *et al.*, 2023), combined with high-frequency indicators of asylum inflows, public salience, and radical right support. A Bayesian vector error-correction model allows us to model the dynamics of this four-variable system, estimating both short-term interactions (how shocks to one factor immediately impact others) and long-run equilibrium relationships that reveal sustained interdependencies.

Our findings specify the feedback mechanisms generating punctuated politicization. First, public salience operates as a key enabling condition: asylum surges politicize EU decision-making primarily when they capture mass attention, with objective problem pressure proving insufficient absent public engagement. Second, politicization itself cannot self-perpetuate: it fails to sustain public attention or meaningfully influence asylum flows without continued external reinforcement, revealing its fundamentally reactive nature. Third, political pressure activates countervailing forces: radical right electoral success can temporarily reduce asylum pressure marginally

while simultaneously exhausting public attention through issue saturation and ownership monopolization, creating self-limiting dynamics that drive de-escalation. Together, these mechanisms explain why politicization proves episodic with sharp peaks followed by natural subsidence.

Theoretical considerations

We rely on the broadly shared understanding of the concept of politicization (e.g., De Wilde *et al.*, 2016; Hoeglinger, 2016; Hutter & Grande, 2014; Rauh, 2016; Statham & Trenz, 2013), which builds on Schattschneider's (1975) notion of the 'expansion of the scope of conflict within a political system' (see Hutter & Grande, 2014, p. 1003). Following the emerging consensus, we distinguish three conceptual dimensions: salience (visibility), actor expansion (range) and actor polarization (conflict, direction) (see also Grande *et al.*, 2019; Van der Brug *et al.*, 2016). We focus specifically on the politicization of policy issues at the EU level, i.e., the process through which specific policy questions gain salience, attract a wider range of actors, and generate polarization within the EU's decision-making arena. All policymaking is inherently political in the sense that it involves authoritative decisions within a polity. However, policy issues vary enormously in the degree to which they become visible, contested, and actor-expanded. Politicization, as we use the term, captures this variation in degree: the shift from low-visibility, technocratic processing of policy issues toward high-salience, polarized, multi-actor contestation. Many EU policy domains remain at the low end of this continuum for extended periods; our interest is in understanding what causes and limits movement toward the high end. This is conceptually distinct from public salience: the politicization of policy issues captures conflict and visibility within the elite policy arena, whereas public salience captures broader societal attention. A central assumption of our framework is that public salience operates at a different level than elite-arena politicization. There is no single, unified European public sphere (Koopmans & Statham, 2010); rather, public salience emerges from attention dynamics across distinct national publics, each filtered through domestic media systems and political contexts. Our theoretical interest lies at the macro-temporal level: whether and how fluctuations in aggregate problem pressure couple with aggregate public attention and, in turn, with elite contestation over EU policy issues.

For much of the pre-crisis period, EU asylum policymaking exhibited relatively low levels of politicization at the European level, even though migration had already become highly politicized within many member states (Mudde, 2013). This configuration reflected what has been called an 'organized hypocrisy' (Krasner, 1999; Lavenex, 2001): frontline states were expected to control external borders but often lacked the capacity to do so, while northern states turned a blind eye since they had imposed these obligations in the

first place. The result was a fragile equilibrium maintained through mutual blockage rather than genuine consensus. National interior ministers engaged in venue shopping to shift sensitive migration issues to the European level to bypass domestic constraints (Guiraudon, 2000), and major decisions were made ‘in closed circles, outside the spotlight of public scrutiny’ (Lindberg & Scheingold, 1970). In sum, the pre-2015 situation was characterized by technocratic policymaking that masked underlying political tensions and a latent reservoir of conflict.

This equilibrium, however, concealed a latent potential for explosive politicization. Postfunctionalist integration theory warns that as EU governance extends into what Genschel and Jachtenfuchs (2018) term core state powers and value-laden domains, it increasingly collides with questions of national sovereignty and identity that can mobilize mass politics (Hooghe & Marks, 2009). This collision is recently evident when sudden geopolitical threats activate functionalist pressures to integrate other core state powers, such as foreign and security policy (Genschel, 2025; Moise & Wang, 2025b; Moise *et al.*, 2025; Wang & Moise, 2023). Migration and border control are quintessential sovereignty issues, deeply linked to conceptions of community, security, and cultural identity. Decades of European integration have eroded the old permissive consensus and led to a ‘constraining dissensus’ in which EU policies face active public scrutiny once they impinge on citizens’ core values (De Wilde *et al.*, 2016; Hooghe & Marks, 2009). The EU’s move into asylum policy taps into what some scholars call a new transnational cleavage pitting cosmopolitan openness against national closure (Hooghe & Marks, 2019), invoking questions of sovereignty, solidarity and identity (Ferrera *et al.*, 2024). In normal times this divide may lie dormant, but it can be activated when the policy domain becomes salient. In this sense, and echoing Grande and Kriesi (2016), postfunctionalists are ‘almost’ right: the politicization potential is real, but it is typically *episodically activated* rather than continuously rising.

Crisis as catalyst: from depoliticization to politicization

The EU refugee crisis was the focussing event that shattered this technocratic calm. Between 2014 and 2015, first-time asylum applications more than doubled, from approximately 627,000 to over 1.3 million (Eurostat, 2016), with highly uneven distribution across member states. We theorize these dynamics as akin to a punctuated equilibrium (Baumgartner & Jones, 2002): for years, asylum policy was dominated by a closed policy monopoly of interior ministries and EU officials, but this unprecedented inflow upset the equilibrium. When problem pressures mount and capture public attention, previously insulated policy subsystems can break open, allowing new actors and ideas to flood the agenda (Schimmelfennig, 2018). The dramatic

spike in arrivals and a series of humanitarian flashpoints served as focussing events that propelled EU asylum policy to the top of European political agendas. A key early decision that crystallized EU-level conflict was the *Emergency Relocation Scheme* adopted by qualified majority in September 2015, a visible distributive choice that punctured the pre-existing policy monopoly and forced governments to take public positions.

The crisis produced a classic case of the ‘issue-attention cycle’ (Downs, 1972). As boats capsized and crowds amassed at EU borders, media across Europe converged on a single urgent crisis narrative, exhibiting the ‘pack journalism’ typical of focussing events (Walgrave & Van Aelst, 2006). This saturation coverage rapidly translated into soaring public salience: by the fall of 2015, immigration had become the top political issue across most EU member states (Hooghe & Marks, 2019). These attention peaks created windows of opportunity for political entrepreneurs to challenge existing policies and promote alternatives (Krzyżanowski *et al.*, 2018), making traditional depoliticization strategies less effective (Genschel & Jachtenfuchs, 2018). However, as emergency measures were implemented and media fatigue set in, public attention began to wane. We do not, therefore, posit ever-accumulating conflict; rather, we expect pronounced peaks followed by declines, conditional on the evolution of problem pressure and elite responses.

As public salience spiked, elite consensus broke down. Some governments advocated collective burden-sharing and humanitarian obligations, while others, most prominently in Central-Eastern Europe, vehemently opposed mandatory refugee quotas and preached national sovereignty. The issue could no longer be managed through quiet intergovernmental deals. Polarization on asylum increased both across and within countries, and actor expansion was evident as voices from the far-right, NGOs, local authorities, and EU institutions all joined the debate (Kriesi *et al.*, 2024). Crucially, not only radical-right parties but also mainstream-right actors contributed to agenda dynamics (Grande *et al.*, 2019; Hobolt & De Vries, 2015). Policymakers at both EU and national levels faced strong political pressure from the radical right, who benefited from clear issue ownership on immigration (Dennison & Goodwin, 2015; Pardos-Prado *et al.*, 2014). The result was a sudden politicization of EU asylum policy along all three dimensions: unprecedented public salience, broad participation, and sharp polarization.

Dynamics in the politicization process

The politicization of European integration has traditionally been understood as a gradual, continuous process driven by the expansion of EU competencies into core state powers (Genschel & Jachtenfuchs, 2018) and the growing salience of European issues in domestic politics (De Wilde *et al.*,

2016; Hooghe & Marks, 2009). Postfunctionalist theory argues that transfers of political authority to the supranational level have intensified politicization and identifies mechanisms driving this process, particularly radical right mobilization (Hooghe & Marks, 2009). However, the specific mechanisms through which politicization exhibits episodic patterns during crises remain underspecified.

Recent research challenges key aspects of postfunctionalist predictions. Grande and Kriesi (2016) conclude that while ‘something like politicization’ occurs in various political arenas, ‘the pattern of contention has been somewhat fragmented and its sources more diverse than assumed by postfunctionalist theory’. Crucially, they find that politicization follows a pattern of ‘dynamics of politicization and de-politicization’, making its consequences for integration highly ambiguous rather than uniformly negative.

These insights suggest that postfunctionalist theory requires extension to account for the temporal and contingent nature of politicization. Integration theory needs ‘a more systematic treatment’ of ‘domestic political conflict, its dynamics and its uncertainties’ (Grande & Kriesi, 2016). While Grande and Kriesi (2016) documented episodic patterns, the specific feedback mechanisms producing these punctuations remained underspecified. What triggers politicization episodes? Through what pathways do they escalate? And critically, what self-limiting dynamics cause them to subside? The refugee crisis provides an ideal case to develop such an extension. Our approach, which is in line with the punctuated equilibrium framework, specifies the short-run and long-run feedbacks that generate these episodes and their dissipation.

We address this gap by outlining a dynamic model of interlinked feedback loops among problem pressure, public salience, political pressure and politicization. While the refugee crisis triggered a peak of politicization, our theoretical framework posits that this politicization is inherently episodic, sustained only so long as certain causal conditions align. This model aims to explain not only the explosive rise of politicization during the crisis, but also why politicization subsides and the system reverts toward lower levels of conflict. The core expectation is that politicization unfolds as problem pressure and public salience mount, which then gives way to self-correcting forces, yielding temporary peaks followed by de-escalation (Schimmelfennig, 2020). Several mechanisms are expected to operate in sequence and loop back on one another.

A first theoretical linkage is between problem pressure and public salience. We build on agenda-setting theory, which establishes that media coverage of events shapes public perceptions of issue importance (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Walgrave & Van Aelst, 2006). Asylum crises satisfy media selection criteria: boat capsizing, border congestion, and humanitarian emergencies are visually dramatic and carry moral urgency (Krzyżanowski *et al.*, 2018). Large-scale arrivals represent policy failures demanding explanation,

making them newsworthy beyond their humanitarian dimension. When media outlets converge on crisis coverage, exhibiting ‘pack journalism’ behaviour typical during focussing events, they create saturation coverage that is difficult for citizens to ignore (Birkland, 1997).

The mechanism linking media coverage to public salience operates through information availability and accessibility. Repeated exposure to asylum-related news reduces the cognitive cost of forming opinions about the issue and increases its perceived personal relevance (Zaller, 1991). Citizens who encounter crisis coverage frequently are more likely to spontaneously think about immigration when asked about national priorities and to actively seek additional information to resolve uncertainty. The salience surge during the crisis was dramatic: Eurobarometer surveys show immigration became the most frequently cited national problem in many countries (Kriesi *et al.*, 2024). Thus, we expect a strong positive relationship between asylum inflows and public salience.

Hypothesis 1: Rising asylum seeker inflows (problem pressure) lead to increased public salience of the immigration issue.

Second, we expect that heightened public attention compels political actors to engage with immigration, thereby politicizing policy issues. This builds on Schattschneider (1975) seminal insight that expanding the scope of conflict fundamentally alters policy dynamics. When issues are confined to specialized subsystems, policy monopolies can maintain stable, incremental decision-making (Baumgartner & Jones, 2002). However, when issues capture mass attention, this equilibrium becomes unstable. The mechanism operates through electoral and reputational incentives: when citizens prioritize an issue, politicians face strong incentives to take visible positions to demonstrate responsiveness (Green-Pedersen, 2012; Rauh, 2019). Remaining silent risks being outflanked by competitors who claim ownership or criticize inaction (Abou-Chadi, 2016; Green-Pedersen & Mortensen, 2015; Meguid, 2005). This logic applies with particular force to sovereignty and identity issues like asylum, where public opinion is often intense and divided (Hooghe & Marks, 2009). High public attention triggers ‘serial shifts’ wherein general publics and macro-politics turn attention to previously insulated policy subsystems (Jones, 1994; True *et al.*, 2019).

Public salience also amplifies polarization. Politicians sharpen their stances under public scrutiny; issues transition from technocratic problem-solving to position-taking (Hutter & Kriesi, 2019; Koop *et al.*, 2022). Additionally, high salience expands the range of actors who participate in debates, further fragmenting consensus and increasing contestation (Kriesi *et al.*, 2024).

Hypothesis 2: Higher public salience of immigration drives greater politicization of policy issues.

While H1–H2 posit a mediated sequence wherein problem pressure affects politicization primarily through public salience, we do not rule out some direct effect of problem pressure on politicization. Severe crises can sometimes spur elite conflict even without broad public awareness, for instance by directly provoking intergovernmental disputes at EU level. Yet in democratic contexts, public salience typically serves as the primary conduit connecting societal problems to wide-ranging political debate (Green-Pedersen, 2019; Kriesi *et al.*, 2008). If asylum spikes went largely unnoticed by the public, politicization would likely remain confined to narrow policy circles rather than expanding to mass politics.

Another driver of politicization dynamics lies in political pressure, particularly the mobilization by radical right parties. At the centre of the EU's policy-making process, which is both enabled and constrained by the EU's compound structure, policymakers must contend with the policy legacies inherited from this structure as well as with immediate political pressures (Ferrera *et al.*, 2024). We focus specifically on radical right parties rather than the broader party spectrum for three reasons. First, these parties hold clear issue ownership on immigration restriction, making them the most relevant partisan actors for asylum politics (Meguid, 2005). They thrive on issues that tap into the new cultural cleavage pitting cosmopolitan values against communitarian ones (Hutter & Kriesi, 2022). Immigration, as an issue of national identity and sovereignty, is a core mobilizing theme for the radical right. Second, their singular focus on immigration and national identity, unlike mainstream right parties who balance multiple issue priorities, gives them distinctive mobilizing potential (Mudde, 2013). Third, existing research on the refugee crisis documents the central role of radical right actors in politicizing asylum policy (Grande *et al.*, 2019). The refugee crisis represented a pivotal moment for radical right movements across Europe. These actors capitalized on public anxieties to advance their opposition to refugee admission and resisted burden-sharing initiatives. This strategic adaptability during focusing events is a hallmark of the radical right, which routinely pivots its communication to exploit new public anxieties across various crises (Miró *et al.*, 2024; Wang & Altiparmakis, 2025). Consequently, decision-makers at both national and EU levels were increasingly compelled to acknowledge these pressures (Kriesi *et al.*, 2024). As the issue owner, radical right parties can force immigration onto the political agenda even when establishment parties prefer to avoid divisive issues (Budge, 1982, 2001; Meguid, 2005). Through media attention, electoral gains, and coalition leverage, they can compel mainstream competitors to respond through accommodative or adversarial strategies, thereby expanding debate and polarization (Hobolt & De Vries, 2015; Hutter & Kriesi, 2019; Williams & Hunger, 2022).

However, substantial evidence questions the primacy of radical right parties in driving politicization. Meyer and Rosenberger (2015) find that

radical right parties play only a subordinate role in immigration politicization in mass media, and that issue politicization is not strongly related to radical right strength in party systems. Crucially, Grande and Kriesi (2016) show that only one pathway to high politicization is dominated by radical right parties, indicating that politicization often unfolds through problem-driven or government-opposition dynamics beyond radical right control, arising more from external pressures and broad public attention than from niche party strategies. Additionally, while radical right parties may amplify politicization in the short term, it is debatable whether this constitutes a sustained feedback loop or more of a one-off boost. The theoretical logic for expecting limited influence builds on two mechanisms. First, saturation effects: once an issue is already highly salient due to objective crisis conditions, additional radical right mobilization yields diminishing returns; the scope of conflict cannot expand indefinitely (Schattschneider, 1975). Second, dependence on underlying conditions: if inflows decline and public attention shifts, radical right actors have limited capacity to maintain high politicization through rhetoric alone. Issue entrepreneurship requires favourable conditions rather than succeeding in a vacuum.

Hypothesis 3: Political pressure from radical right actors has a modest and short-lived effect on politicization compared to problem pressure and public salience.

In turn, a key consequence of politicization may be its impact on radical right party fortunes. Issue ownership theory predicts that politicizing immigration should benefit radical right parties (Bélanger & Meguid, 2008; Meguid, 2005). Indeed, navigating multiple crises requires distinct mobilization strategies, as parties adjust their issue salience and positioning during turbulent times (Wang *et al.*, 2026), and recent aggregate analyses of electoral campaigns confirm this, demonstrating that manipulating issue salience and taking distinct positions, particularly on cultural issues, yields the largest electoral returns for radical right challengers (Kriesi *et al.*, 2026). Historical patterns also support this: when immigration appears on political agendas, radical right parties often improve their electoral fortunes as immigration-concerned voters migrate toward parties perceived as toughest on the issue (Van der Brug *et al.*, 2005). During the refugee crisis, several radical right parties experienced polling surges, e.g., the AfD in Germany, Front National in France, PVV in Netherlands, suggesting that crisis politicization created favourable conditions (Torres, 2023). Cross-national evidence documents positive correlations between immigration levels and far-right vote share (Halla *et al.*, 2017).

However, the relationship is more complex than simple issue ownership suggests. Several considerations point toward limited or temporary effects. First, mainstream parties can blunt radical right advantages through accommodative strategies, recapturing immigration-concerned voters (Gessler &

Hunger, 2022). Second, crisis contexts generate uncertainty about party competence, and voters may credit or blame incumbents rather than automatically supporting niche parties (Hobolt & Tilley, 2014). Third, sustained electoral realignment requires gains be locked in through government participation or organizational consolidation, yet most radical right parties remained in opposition during our study period (2015–2019). We therefore anticipate only a modest and temporary increase in radical right support from politicization.

Hypothesis 4: Politicization of policy issues at the EU-level does not significantly boost, and at most only temporarily increases, public support for radical right parties.

Notably, the causal relationship between problem context and politicization is not one-way. One might expect that intense politicization, characterized by polarization and conflict among decision-makers, impedes effective governance, potentially prolonging asylum pressure. The mechanism would operate through governance friction: when EU member states are deeply divided, reaching coordinated policy responses becomes slower and more difficult (Zaun, 2018). During the refugee crisis, high EU-level polarization did produce governance friction with the breakdown of the proposed permanent relocation mechanism.

This friction could marginally prolong entry windows by delaying restrictive measures. However, several factors limit this effect's magnitude. First, most determinants of asylum flows operate externally to EU political debates (Czaika & Hobolth, 2016). Even highly salient political episodes, such as Merkel's August 2015 'Wir schaffen das' statement and EU-Turkey deal, did not demonstrably affect subsequent inflow patterns, as push factors and route dynamics dominated pull effects (Tjaden & Heidland, 2025; Van Liempt *et al.*, 2017). Second, while politicization can delay EU-level coordination, it simultaneously spurs unilateral national actions that restrict entries regardless of EU consensus.

Hypothesis 5a: Politicization of policy issues at the EU level is largely reactive and has limited effect on inflows.

A second potential feedback concerns whether political conflict itself can maintain public attention even after initial crisis conditions subside. The mechanism would be elite cue-taking: if political leaders continue debating immigration policy, their statements might keep the issue in media headlines and public consciousness (Zaller, 1991). However, substantial theory and evidence suggest this feedback is weak. Downs's (1972) issue-attention cycle posits that after a peak of alarmed attention, mass publics often turn to other issues once initial fervor fades, even if political debates persist. This occurs because audiences experience fatigue with repetitive coverage, other problems compete

for attention, and once citizens feel informed about an issue's basic contours, their motivation to seek additional information declines.

Empirically, media attention to issues often spikes and falls independently of elite activity levels (Walgrave & Van Aelst, 2006). Elite debate can sustain media coverage in the very short term, but cannot manufacture public interest absent new focussing events or problem escalation. Put differently, politicization is more consequence than cause of public attention: elites politicize policy issues in response to public concern, but struggle to maintain that concern through rhetoric alone once objective conditions change.

Hypothesis 5b: Politicization does not generate a constant positive feedback to sustain or elevate public salience on its own.

Our final hypotheses concern whether rising radical right support triggers responses that reduce the very conditions that fueled politicization. This represents the core self-limiting mechanism in punctuated politicization: political mobilization activates corrective forces that drive de-escalation.

The mechanism linking radical right gains to reduced inflows operates through policy responsiveness. As anti-immigration parties gain electoral strength, governments adopt more restrictive asylum policies to recapture immigration-concerned voters (Abou-Chadi & Krause, 2020; Geese, 2025; Schain, 2008). These responses can take multiple forms: administrative tightening, enhanced border enforcement, and diplomatic pressure on origin and transit countries.

The EU-Turkey agreement of March 2016 exemplifies this dynamic. Negotiated as radical right parties gained traction across Europe, the deal externalized asylum processing and returns to Turkey. Sea arrivals subsequently fell dramatically. However, establishing definitive causality is challenging given multiple simultaneous factors: the Western Balkan route closure, changing conditions in Syria and Turkey, and shifts in smuggling networks (Crawley *et al.*, 2016). Moreover, internal burden-sharing mechanisms proved largely ineffective; the Emergency Relocation Scheme relocated only a small fraction of its target, demonstrating the limits of EU internal solidarity (Van Liempt *et al.*, 2017). The theoretical expectation is not that radical right parties directly control asylum flows, but that their electoral success spurs policy responses that, in aggregate, contribute to flow reductions temporarily.

Hypothesis 6a: Increases in radical-right support are followed by a decline in subsequent asylum inflows.

The mechanism linking radical right strength to declining public salience operates through multiple channels. First, issue saturation: sustained high-volume discussion of immigration can lead to public weariness and declining marginal interest (Gurr & Metag, 2023). Issues that initially sparked alarmed discovery suffer gradual declines in intense public interest once repetition reduces novelty (Downs, 1972). Second, reduced informational uncertainty:

as publics become familiar with the contours of the asylum debate through repeated exposure, they feel less need to actively seek additional information (Zaller, 1991). Third, issue ownership monopolization: when radical right parties come to dominate immigration discourse, the issue may become politically predictable in ways that reduce broader public engagement. Once clearly associated with one party family, it can lose cross-cutting appeal as other parties avoid emphasizing it. Fourth, problem resolution perception: if asylum inflows decline (per H6a), this removes the ongoing real-world reinforcement that sustained salience initially.

Hypothesis 6b: Rising radical-right support produces a long-run drop in public salience of immigration.

In sum, this framework presents politicization dynamics in the EU's refugee crisis as a feedback system with self-correcting properties. A low-conflict, technocratic equilibrium and low public interest contains a latent reservoir of sovereignty, solidarity and identity conflict. Asylum inflow shocks pierce that insulation, causing a cascade: mounting problem pressure elevates public salience (H1), which in turn broadens and sharpens elite contestation (H2). Radical right parties amplify debates but do not independently sustain politicization (H3), nor do they durably benefit electorally from conflict over policy issues alone (H4). Crucially, politicization itself cannot perpetuate the crisis (H5a/b), as it is mainly reactive and fails to maintain public engagement absent continued problem pressure. Finally, political mobilization activates self-correcting forces: radical right success spurs policy responses that curb inflows (H6a) and, through agenda saturation and reduced problem severity, allows public attention to fade (H6b). The system thus drifts back toward a lower-conflict state. Politicization in EU asylum is expected to follow an episodic pattern with sharp escalation when conditions align, followed by partial de-escalation. This represents the punctuated equilibrium whose hypotheses we seek to evaluate empirically.

Research design

We study the politicization of the refugee crisis through public debates in the international press, as mass media constitute the key public forum for investigating political conflict in today's audience democracies (Dolezal *et al.*, 2016; Manin, 1995; Statham & Trenz, 2013). The paper employs a dataset based on Policy Process Analysis (PPA) (Bojar *et al.*, 2023; Kriesi *et al.*, 2024), an event-centric methodology that identifies discrete policy-related actions by political actors as reported in the media and traces their chronological evolution across all phases of policymaking. The primary unit of observation is a policy-related 'action', meaning any act or claim by a significant political actor relevant to policy discussions (Bojar *et al.*, 2023). Each action is coded

on variables including the arena of action, type of policy engagement, direction toward policy proposals, and organizational features of initiators and targets.¹

In this study, we develop the core policy-related indicator based on the actions identified in the PPA dataset: politicization. Following Hutter & Grande's (2014) approach, politicization is operationalized as the product of salience, the total count of actions within a given month, and polarization, calculated as the proportion of actions coded positively multiplied by the proportion coded negatively, further multiplied by 4 to scale the measure between 0 and 1. Of the three conceptual dimensions, namely salience, actor expansion, and polarization, our index directly captures two. Actor expansion is indirectly reflected in the salience component: because PPA codes actions by diverse actors (governments, EU institutions, NGOs, protest movements), months with higher action counts register broader actor participation. We focus on the salience-polarization product as the primary measure because these two dimensions are most consistently and reliably captured across the PPA corpus, following the established practice in the literature (De Wilde *et al.*, 2016; Hutter & Grande, 2014). We aggregate data monthly, as this time-frame aligns most meaningfully with political cycles and public attention.

Shifting from policy formulation to the factors driving political demand, we propose three demand-side influences. Problem pressure is captured by the number of asylum applications submitted within the EU. Political pressure is operationalized through monthly average polling scores of radical right parties in the EU. For public salience, we utilize Google Trends data tracking the topics 'immigration' and 'refugees', constructing a relative indicator normalized against the highest search volume observed across the EU. This high-frequency behavioural measure overcomes the limitations of biannual Eurobarometer surveys for monthly analysis and mitigates typical survey-related biases (see Bogner & Landrock, 2016). We favour Google Trends over survey-based measures because it is available at monthly frequency, captures actual information-seeking behaviour rather than prompted responses, and does not impose thematic framing on respondents. It thus provides a revealed-preference indicator of public attention that aligns naturally with our theoretical emphasis on the issue-attention cycle. Importantly, Google Trends captures aggregate information-seeking behaviour across national publics rather than presupposing a single European public sphere; the PPA-based politicization measure and Google Trends indicator are analytically and empirically distinct phenomena whose temporal coupling our model evaluates.

Our resulting dataset thus represents a time-series structure with month as the fundamental unit of analysis. The dataset encompasses six pivotal policy episodes central to the EU's migration crisis response from April 2015 to December 2019: the EU-Turkey agreement, the Emergency Relocation Scheme, the EU-Libya deal, the creation of Hotspots for asylum seekers, the

reinforcement and transformation of Frontex into the European Border and Coast Guard, and the reform of the Dublin regulations. Together, these episodes capture the full arc of EU crisis response from emergency reaction to attempted institutional reform. The final EU-level corpus comprises 1,257 coded actions spanning 57 months.

Our theoretical framework implies reciprocal, potentially long-run linkages between *problem pressure* (monthly asylum applications), *public salience* (Google-search trend in migration), *political pressure* (radical-right support), and *politicization of policy issues*. For this reason, we propose to test our theoretical model in a multivariate setting where each variable in the system is treated as endogenous and possibly responding to innovations in other variables in the system either contemporaneously or with lags. Specifically, we put forward a Vector Error Correction Model (VECM) of four variables building on the methodology of Freeman *et al.* (1989); Sims (1980). Some series are highly persistent; Johansen cointegration tests ($r=1$) confirm that they share a single common stochastic trend. We therefore model the vector $\mathbf{y}_t = (\text{asylum, search, politicize, radical})'$ as a vector error-correction process with two lags:

$$\Delta \mathbf{y}_t = \alpha \beta' \mathbf{y}_{t-1} + \Gamma_1 \Delta \mathbf{y}_{t-1} + \mathbf{u}_t, \quad \mathbf{u}_t \sim \mathcal{N}(\mathbf{0}, \Sigma),$$

where $\beta' \mathbf{y}_{t-1} = \mathbf{0}$ defines the long-run equilibrium and α captures the speed of adjustment.

With only $T=57$ monthly observations and $K=4$ endogenous variables, classical maximum-likelihood estimation would yield noisy and biased parameters. Estimating such a system with a small number of observations raises two well-known problems: small-sample bias and overfitting (Kilian & Lütkepohl, 2017), and ill-behaved error covariance. We therefore adopt a Bayesian approach via Markov Chain Monte Carlo (MCMC) simulation, which mitigates both issues while respecting the error-correction structure mandated by cointegration (Karlsson, 2013; Koop *et al.*, 2011).²

Posterior draws are transformed into their level-VAR representation to obtain: (i) posterior Granger-causality probabilities for both short-run and long-run channels; (ii) orthogonal impulse-response functions under the theoretically motivated contemporaneous ordering *asylum* \rightarrow *google search* \rightarrow *politicization* \rightarrow *radical right support*³; and (iii) forecast-error variance decompositions.

Our empirical analysis proceeds in two complementary steps, each addressing different aspects of the dynamic relationships. In the first step, we report Granger Causality tests, i.e., posterior probabilities that lagged changes (short-run effects) and cointegrating relationships (long-run effects) of each variable meaningfully forecast the others.⁴ Specifically, we define a Region of Practical Equivalence (ROPE) of ± 0.03 standard deviations around zero; coefficients smaller than this threshold are considered negligible (Kruschke & Liddell,

2018). In practical terms, we interpret a probability above 0.80 as strong evidence of a predictive effect, 0.60–0.79 as moderate evidence, and anything below 0.60 as indicating little or no support for a predictive relationship. These tests map the network of causal channels but do not reveal effect directions or magnitudes; they answer ‘does X predict Y?’. In the second step, we turn to orthogonalized impulse response functions (OIRFs) which trace the direction, magnitude, and persistence of these relationships over time. An OIRF shows the expected path of a response variable over successive months after a one-standard-deviation shock to a single impulse variable, with shocks orthogonalized via Cholesky decomposition following our theoretical ordering. IRFs thus answer ‘how much and in which direction does X affect Y?’.

Granger causality probabilities and impulse responses derive from the same posterior distribution answer complementary questions. High Granger probabilities with flat IRFs may reflect offsetting effects lacking clear directionality, while moderate probabilities with pronounced IRFs can indicate consistent effects narrowly missing the threshold. Together, they provide a complete picture: predictive channels (Granger) and their substantive dynamics (IRF). We supplement these diagnostics with Forecast Error Variance Decomposition (FEVD), which reveals which shocks account for the most variation in each variable over time. This helps identify which mechanisms dominate overall system dynamics.

Results

Chronological evolution of politicization of policy issues

Figures 1 and 2 illustrate the behaviour of politicization of policy issues and the three demand-side variables, namely problem pressure, public salience,

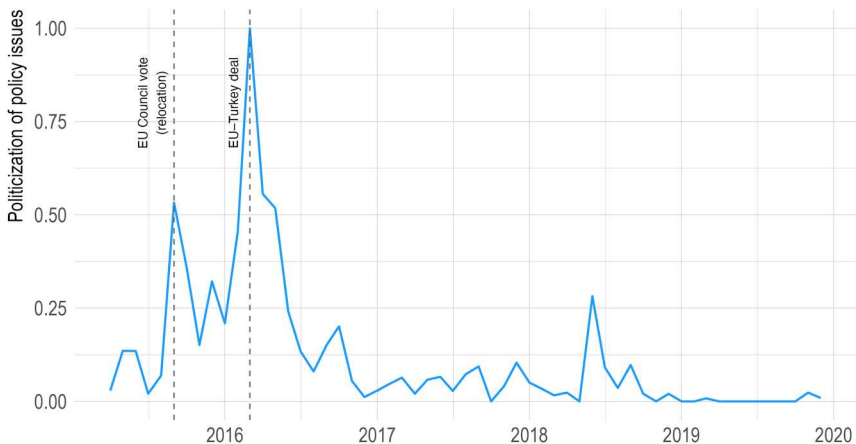


Figure 1. The evolution of politicization during the refugee crisis.

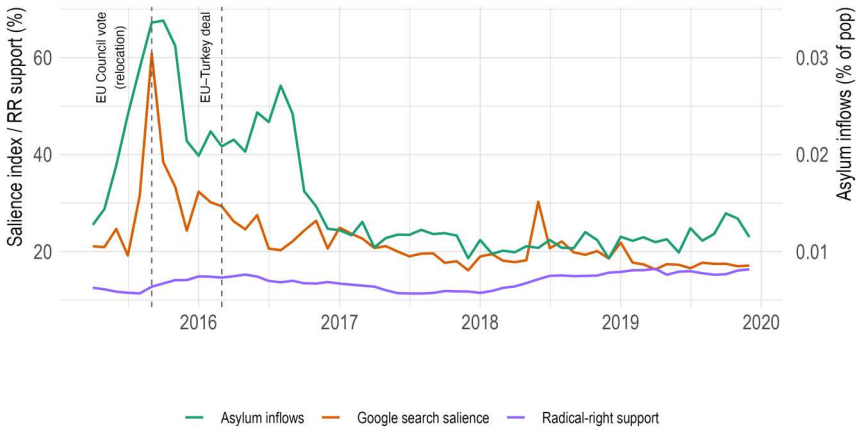


Figure 2. The evolution of the demand-side during the refugee crisis.

and political pressure. In each figure, we added a vertical reference line for the month where the substantive peak of debate occurs: March 2016 for the formal agreement on the EU-Turkey deal and September 2015 for the qualified majority vote in the European Council on the relocation scheme.

The temporal evolution of EU-level politicization follows an escalation-peak-de-escalation trajectory, confirming the punctuated pattern we theorize. In line with the punctuated-politicization thesis (Grande & Kriesi, 2016), the series advances in fits and starts: extended stretches of low contestation are punctuated by brief, explosive bursts. Throughout the first half of 2015 politicization remains marginal because the Common European Asylum System is still treated as a technocratic domain. The picture changes abruptly in September 2015, when the Council forces through the first mandatory relocation scheme by qualified-majority vote. The decision, hailed as a ‘revolutionary’ move in Berlin but rejected by every Visegrad government, triggers an immediate surge in both media saliency and elite polarization, lifting politicization for the first time.

Politicization reaches its single, dramatic apex in March 2016, the month the EU–Turkey statement was concluded, described as ‘the single most politicizing policy decision’ of the entire crisis (Kriesi *et al.*, 2024). The deal coincided with the physical closure of the Western Balkan route and was negotiated in a format that shielded heads of government from supranational scrutiny, accentuating the zero-sum character of the bargain. After this watershed, politicization collapses just as swiftly as it had risen. Sea arrivals fall dramatically, removing the immediate problem pressure. Subsequent dossiers continue to divide member states, yet never regain similar saliency. By 2018–19 politicization hovers near zero even though the Dublin reform remains formally on the agenda, illustrating that conflict can persist institutionally while the broader public and media lose interest.

Figure 2 reveals patterns of co-movement that explain this punctuation. Asylum applications peak in September 2015; the Google-search series mirrors this with a short lag, demonstrating how public attention amplifies the objective shock but also dissipates swiftly once flows recede. In contrast, radical-right vote intention rises more slowly and does not recede after March 2016, providing a ‘sticky floor’ of political pressure. When problem pressure and public salience vanish after the EU-Turkey Statement, politicization deflates even though radical-right mobilization endures. The two plots thus confirm that EU-level politicization was a short, sharp reaction to simultaneous spikes in problem pressure and public salience (Kriesi *et al.*, 2024). Once external numbers were stemmed, the media-public feedback loop that had catapulted migration onto the EU’s macro-political stage fell silent, leaving behind a residual but persistent layer of partisan conflict.

We now assess whether the empirical evidence supports our theoretical model of punctuated politicization. Following our two-step analytical strategy, we first examine the predictive relationships among variables through Granger causality tests (Figures 3 and 4), then tracing the magnitude and temporal dynamics of these relationships through orthogonalized impulse response functions (Figure 5).⁵ Throughout, we connect the statistical findings to our six hypotheses and their theoretical implications.

From problem pressure to politicization of policy issues

Our theoretical framework posits that politicization emerges through a two-stage escalation process. First, asylum inflows must capture public attention, converting objective problem pressure into widespread societal concern (H1).

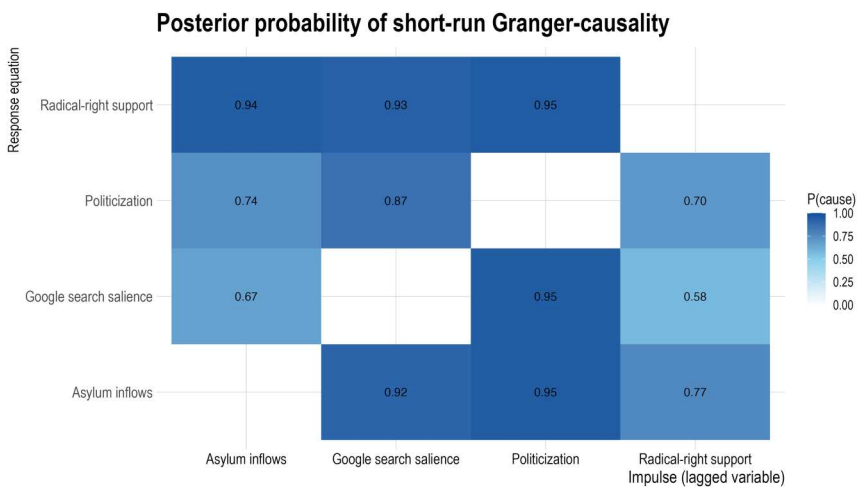


Figure 3. Short-run Granger-causality.

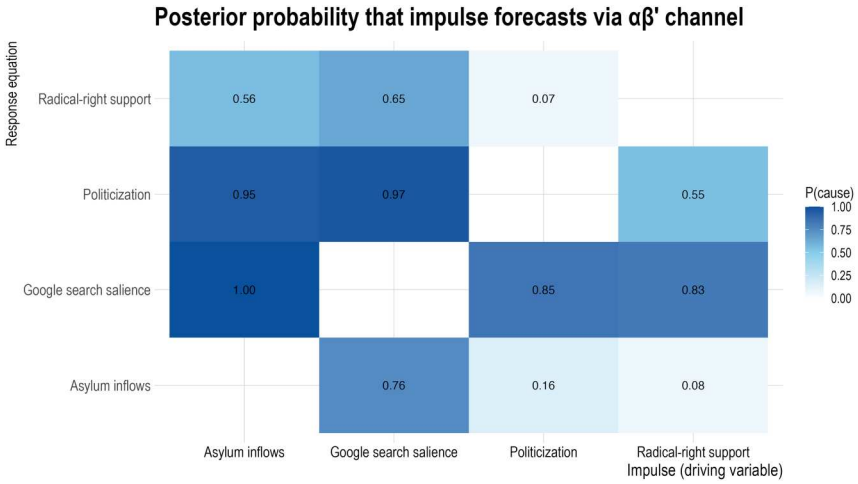


Figure 4. Long-run Granger-causality.

Second, this public salience must trigger elite mobilization, transforming a technical policy challenge into contested policy issues (H2). The empirical evidence provides support for both mechanisms.

The Granger causality heatmaps reveal solid predictive power from asylum applications to public salience. With posterior probabilities of 0.67 in the

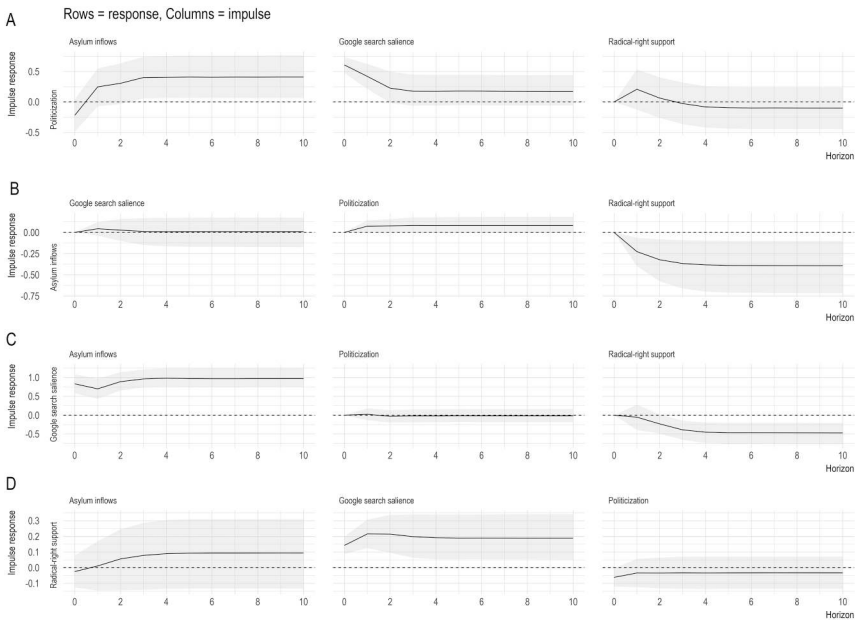


Figure 5. Orthogonal IRFs.

short run and a posterior probability of 1.00 in the long run, a clear majority of posterior draws in the short term and essentially all draws in the long run identified meaningful effects exceeding our negligibility threshold. The moderate short-run probability reflects month-to-month volatility in the relationship, but the perfect long-run probability demonstrates that asylum pressure fundamentally shapes public attention equilibrium. The corresponding impulse response function (Panel C in [Figure 5](#), left) reveals both the magnitude and persistence of this effect. Following a one-standard-deviation surge in applications, Google search activity for immigration topics jumps by 0.8 to 1.0 standard deviations within the first month and remains elevated throughout the ten-month horizon. The persistence demonstrates that real-world migration pressures durably anchor immigration as a top-of-mind public concern.

This public salience, in turn, drives political contestation at the EU level. The Granger tests show strong predictive relationships from public salience to politicization in both the short run (posterior probability = 0.87) and especially the long run (0.97), with the overwhelming majority of posterior draws indicating meaningful predictive power. The impulse response function (Panel A in [Figure 5](#), centre) characterizes this relationship dynamically. A one-standard-deviation increase in public salience produces an immediate spike in politicization of policy issues of approximately 0.55σ . The response peaks in the first month, indicating that once mass publics engage with immigration, politicians cannot avoid the issue. Silence or consensus becomes politically untenable when citizens signal through search behaviour, opinion polls, and media consumption that they care deeply about asylum policy. The subsequent decay of the effect is equally revealing: politicization gradually subsides to a modest 0.15σ by month ten, suggesting that without sustained public engagement, the intensity of elite debate is likely to cool. Together, these findings confirm Schattschneider's (1975) expansion-of-conflict logic: when issues capture mass attention, policy monopolies collapse and contestation erupts. Public salience serves as a central transmission belt connecting societal problems to political conflict.

The empirical support for H1 and H2 establishes the core escalation pathway. Politicization does not emerge spontaneously from elite strategies or party competition alone. Rather, it requires the confluence of objective crisis conditions and their translation into widespread public concern. This two-stage process helps explain why, in the refugee crisis, policy challenges remained depoliticized despite their technical importance: absent public attention, elite consensus can be maintained even on potentially divisive issues. The refugee crisis broke this equilibrium because asylum surges were both large enough and visible enough to force their way onto the public agenda, which in turn compelled political elites to engage.

The limited role of political pressure

While public salience emerges as the dominant driver of politicization, radical right parties, often presumed central to immigration politics, play a more circumscribed role than conventional wisdom suggests. Our third hypothesis predicted that radical right electoral gains would amplify politicization, but with modest and short-lived effects compared to problem pressure and public salience. The evidence supports this expectation.

The Granger evidence shows moderate short-run predictive power (0.70) from radical right support to politicization but weak long-run evidence (0.55). This pattern suggests some temporary predictive capacity that dissipates over time, already hinting at limited sustained influence. The impulse response function (Panel A in [Figure 5](#), right) confirms this interpretation and reveals the substantive weakness of the effect. A one-standard-deviation increase in radical right support raises contestation over policy issues by barely 0.10σ , with wide uncertainty bands indicating substantial heterogeneity across posterior draws. More importantly, this modest effect dissipates within four months, returning to baseline while credible intervals increasingly encompass zero. This modest, short-lived effect suggests that electoral success for anti-immigration parties may briefly increase elite debate, but the data indicate this impulse quickly exhausts itself when not accompanied by continued problem pressure or public engagement. The pattern suggests that while radical right gains can jolt politicians into addressing migration, they cannot independently manufacture sustained political conflict.

These findings support H3 and challenge party-centric accounts of politicization that emphasize radical right entrepreneurship as the primary catalyst for immigration conflict. The evidence indicates clear limits to radical right influence: they amplify debates when objective conditions are favourable but cannot sustain conflict through rhetoric alone. Radical right parties fan flames but do not create fire. Once asylum inflows decline and public attention shifts, radical right actors alone cannot keep immigration highly politicized at the EU level. This finding suggests politicization is fundamentally problem-driven rather than party-driven.

The reverse relationship from politicization to radical right support (H4) proves equally weak, contradicting simplistic issue-ownership expectations. Despite strong short-run Granger causality (0.95), suggesting frequent non-zero coefficients in the posterior draws, the long-run probability drops precipitously to a negligible 0.07. More tellingly, the impulse response (Panel D in [Figure 5](#), right) reveals that pure politicization shocks barely move radical right polling, with mean responses oscillating within $\pm 0.02\sigma$ and credible intervals consistently straddling zero. The disconnect between high short-run Granger probability and negligible IRF magnitude illustrates an important statistical phenomenon. The Granger

test detects that politicization coefficients frequently exceed the negligibility threshold in the short run, but the IRF reveals these effects point in inconsistent directions across posterior draws, sometimes positive, sometimes negative, such that the directionally-averaged effect vanishes. We interpret this as indicating that both politicization and radical right support respond to common drivers (asylum shocks, public salience) without one causing the other.

These findings support H4's prediction that politicization of policy issues alone does not fuel radical right electoral success. The data suggest that voters respond to the crisis itself, with surging asylum flows and omnipresent media coverage, not merely to the fact that politicians debate immigration in Brussels. This pattern helps explain why radical right parties experienced varying fortunes during the crisis despite uniformly high EU-level politicization. The evidence indicates their success depended on country-specific problem pressure and public salience rather than the intensity of European institutional conflict.

Self-limiting dynamics of politicization

Having established how problem pressure and public salience drive politicization of policy issues, we turn to the critical question of whether politicization, once ignited, becomes self-perpetuating. Our theoretical framework predicts self-limiting dynamics: politicization should prove largely reactive, unable to affect asylum inflows or public attention absent continued external pressures. Hypotheses 5a and 5b test these expectations, and both receive strong empirical support.

Beginning with asylum inflows, the Granger tests show strong short-run predictive power (0.95) from politicization to asylum applications, but this drops sharply to weak long-run evidence (0.16). This dramatic asymmetry suggests that any short-term effects quickly vanish in equilibrium. The impulse response function (Panel B in [Figure 5](#), centre) reveals a small upward effect of approximately $+0.07\sigma$, with credible bands staying just above the zero line. While the direction is slightly positive, the magnitude is modest. The variance decomposition ([Figure 6](#)) reinforces this: over 90% of variation in asylum inflows stems from the variable's own shocks, with political dynamics contributing less than 7% jointly. The small positive coefficient suggests politicization may create some governance friction that marginally extends high inflows. However, the magnitude remains modest and the variance decomposition indicates political debates contribute minimally to overall flow dynamics.

These findings are consistent with H5a. The data indicate that asylum flows remain overwhelmingly exogenous to EU-level political debates. External factors, such as violence in Syria, smuggling network evolution, seasonal

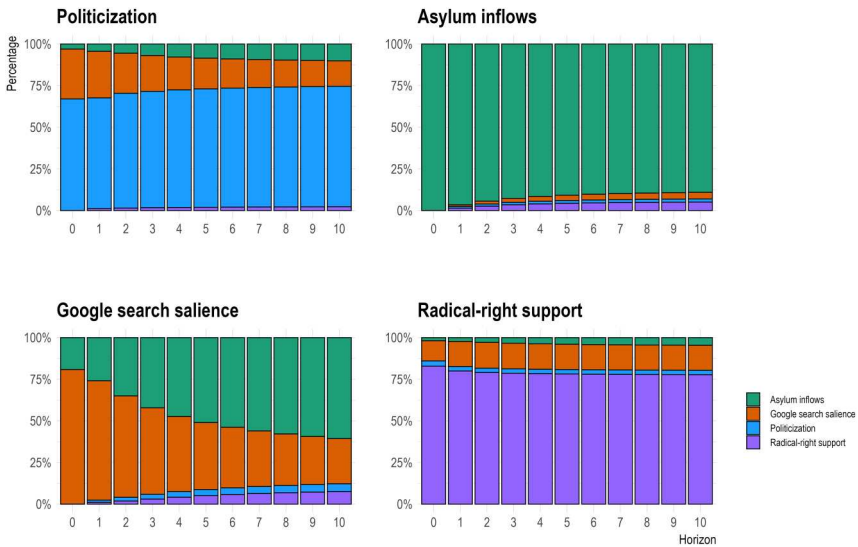


Figure 6. Forecast-error variance decomposition.

weather patterns, and Turkish cooperation, appear to dominate entry dynamics far more than European political processes.

The inability of politicization to sustain public salience proves equally striking. The Granger evidence initially appears contradictory: strong causality probabilities in both short run (0.95) and long run (0.85) suggest frequent non-zero effects. However, the impulse response function (Panel C in Figure 5, centre) reveals a flat trajectory. The mean effect stays near zero while credible intervals consistently encompass zero at all horizons. This apparent contradiction reflects an important statistical phenomenon that justifies our two-step approach. The high Granger probabilities indicate that politicization coefficients frequently exceed our negligibility threshold across posterior draws. However, these coefficients point in inconsistent directions: sometimes positive, sometimes negative, such that when averaged directionally in the IRF, the effect vanishes. Elite debate occasionally correlates with public attention in some periods but shows no stable or consistent influence.

These findings support H5b and validate Downs's (1972) issue-attention cycle: politicians cannot manufacture public attention through rhetoric alone absent new focussing events. After alarmed discovery, mass publics experience fatigue and turn attention elsewhere even as elites continue debating. Citizens update information rapidly during crisis peaks; once sufficiently informed about basic contours and policy options, their motivation to actively seek additional information declines. When objective inflows decrease and media coverage recedes, political conflict in Brussels

cannot recapture mass attention. This challenges elite-centric theories of agenda-setting that emphasize political conflict as the primary force sustaining issue attention.

These findings specify the first set of mechanisms underlying episodic politicization patterns. The evidence indicates that political conflict responds to crisis conditions but cannot perpetuate those conditions or maintain societal engagement absent continued external drivers. Politicization operates as echo rather than engine: the data show it amplifies underlying problems when they exist but fades when problems subside, regardless of whether elite disagreement persists. This pattern explains the episodic nature of EU immigration conflict observed in our data. Between 2000 and 2015, despite ongoing asylum applications and periodic surges, politicization remained limited because none achieved both the magnitude and visibility necessary to trigger sustained public salience. The 2015–2016 crisis broke through these thresholds, but once external circumstances changed, politicization receded even though underlying institutional disagreements, including the deadlocked Dublin reform, remained largely unresolved.

The self-correcting force of political pressure

Our final hypotheses examine whether political pressure itself triggers corrective forces that address the conditions fueling politicization. Specifically, we predicted that radical right electoral gains would spur restrictive policy responses that reduce both asylum inflows (H6a) and public salience (H6b). These expectations receive empirical support, revealing a self-correcting feedback loop at the heart of punctuated politicization.

The Granger evidence linking radical right support to asylum inflows shows moderate short-run (0.76) but negligible long-run (0.08) predictive power. The impulse response function (Panel B in [Figure 5](#), right) reveals clear deterrence dynamics. Following a radical right electoral shock, asylum applications decline steadily and decisively to approximately -0.3σ by month four, remaining at that depressed level through month ten with credible intervals staying entirely below zero throughout.

This pattern supports H6a: radical right gains trigger policy responses that create temporary deterrence, but external push factors ultimately dominate long-run flow dynamics. The weak long-run Granger probability (0.08) reflects that these effects operate through short-run adjustment mechanisms rather than permanently altering the equilibrium cointegrating relationship. During the refugee crisis, such responses took multiple forms: administrative tightening, enhanced border enforcement, bilateral agreements with transit countries, and diplomatic deals like the EU-Turkey accord. The data suggest radical right pressure creates meaningful medium-run deterrence but cannot rewrite the structural forces, such as conflict intensity in origin

countries, route geography, and smuggling networks, that determine the long-term trajectory of asylum flows. The substantive implication is that asylum inflows remain largely exogenous to EU-level political dynamics, though electoral mobilization can exert marginal steering effects.

For public salience, the Granger evidence shows moderate short-run (0.58) but strong long-run (0.83) predictive power, indicating delayed but persistent effects of radical right support. The impulse response function (Panel C in Figure 5, right) shows that public salience exhibits a statistically credible decline beginning within two months and reaching approximately -0.5σ by month ten, with credible intervals remaining fully below zero after month three.

These findings support H6b and reveal an important self-correcting dynamic in politicization processes. The data suggest that radical right parties light the match of political conflict but paradoxically contribute to extinguishing it through the policy and attention dynamics their success triggers. Political mobilization activates forces that address, though rarely solve, underlying problems, allowing the system to drift back toward lower-conflict equilibrium.

The dynamics of punctuated politicization

The variance decomposition results (Figure 6) provide a final lens for understanding which mechanisms dominate overall system dynamics. For politicization itself, the variable's own shocks account for approximately 72% of forecast error variance even at ten-month horizons, underscoring its noisy, agenda-driven character. Among external contributors, public salience is the single largest, with its share stabilizing around 15%, compared to about 10% from asylum shocks and negligible contributions from radical right dynamics (approximately 2%). This confirms public attention as an important driver of EU-level contestation, though politicians and policymakers remain the primary authors of the migration debate through their own strategic interactions.

For public salience, the picture reverses dramatically. At impact, the series is dominated by its own noise (about 81%), but this share falls steadily to 27% by month ten, while the contribution of asylum inflows rises from roughly 19% to over 60%. Politicization contributes modestly (stabilizing around 5%), while radical right shocks account for approximately 8% at longer horizons. This visualizes the transition from short-run attention waves originating in salience itself to medium-run dynamics increasingly rooted in objective migration pressure. Public attention thus gradually anchors itself in the reality of asylum flows.

For radical right support, the variable's own shocks dominate throughout (declining from 83% to 78%), with public salience contributing roughly 15%

at longer horizons, asylum shocks around 5%, and politicization negligible (under 3%). This confirms that anti-immigration party fortunes track public anxiety more than elite conflict, though electoral dynamics remain substantially autonomous.

Finally, for asylum inflows, over 89% of variance at all horizons stems from the variable's own shocks. Public salience contributes approximately 4%, politicization under 2%, and radical right support about 5% at longer horizons. This reinforces the overwhelming exogeneity of migration pressures to European political processes, though electoral dynamics can exert marginal steering effects.

Taken together, the results specify the feedback mechanisms producing punctuated politicization. Asylum shocks must translate into widespread public concern before elites mobilize; politicization cannot perpetuate itself absent continued reinforcement; and radical right electoral success activates corrective forces that drive de-escalation. These mechanisms advance beyond prior observations of episodic patterns (Hutter *et al.*, 2016) by identifying the specific pathways that generate punctuations.

Conclusion

The refugee crisis of 2015–2019 tested the EU's asylum governance system as never before. Asylum applications surged to unprecedented levels, public anxiety intensified, radical right parties mobilized, and EU institutions confronted deep fractures over solidarity and sovereignty. Yet by 2019, despite unresolved policy disagreements and persistent institutional weaknesses, politicization had substantially receded. This study has explained this episodic pattern by theorizing politicization as a feedback system with self-correcting properties and testing this framework through Bayesian time-series analysis. Our findings derive from a single, albeit major, crisis episode, and the mechanisms we identify require comparative testing across other integration conflicts before they can be considered general features of EU politicization. With this scope condition in mind, our analysis identifies three core mechanisms.

First, public salience serves as a transmission belt. Asylum surges politicize EU decision-making primarily when they generate parallel surges in public attention. This finding speaks to the debate between crisis-driven (Kriesi, 2024; Kriesi *et al.*, 2024) and crisis-construction accounts (Kreuder-Sonnen, 2019; Rhinard, 2019; White, 2020). Our evidence favours the former: political entrepreneurs cannot manufacture sustained public attention through rhetoric alone but require real-world problem reinforcement. While we cannot definitively refute emergency construction theories, since our design cannot directly observe domestic media framing, the refugee crisis became explosive because unprecedented flows created visible border stress that

captured mass attention, not because elites constructed an emergency from minor pressures. This raises a critical question: under what conditions does problem pressure translate into public salience? Our findings suggest temporal and magnitude dynamics matter. The 2015–2016 crisis broke through attention thresholds because asylum applications reached historically unprecedented levels with high visibility. Earlier spikes triggered limited salience because they remained below public awareness thresholds or lacked comparable visibility. Future research should investigate these attention dynamics systematically.

Second, politicization proves episodic because it cannot self-perpetuate. The results show that politicization exhibits no consistent directional effect on public salience and at most a modest short-run association with asylum flows. This pattern reveals that politicization operates as echo rather than engine: it amplifies underlying problems when they exist but cannot perpetuate crisis conditions or maintain public engagement absent continued external drivers. This validates the issue-attention cycle (Downs, 1972) and challenges elite-centric theories of agenda-setting. Our evidence indicates that mass publics experience fatigue and turn attention elsewhere even as elites continue debating. Citizens update information rapidly during crisis peaks; once sufficiently informed about basic contours and policy options, their motivation to actively seek additional information declines. Moreover, politicization's limited influence on asylum flows confirms that migration pressures remain overwhelmingly exogenous to European political processes.

Third, political mobilization paradoxically activates forces that undermine its own foundations. Radical right electoral success triggers two simultaneous processes. First, it produces deterrence: asylum applications decline over several months following radical right gains through restrictive policy responses. Second, radical right dominance of immigration discourse reduces broader public salience through issue saturation, reduced informational uncertainty, and ownership monopolization. As the issue becomes associated with one party family, it loses cross-cutting appeal and novelty for wider publics. This self-correcting dynamic explains temporary politicization peaks: the radical right lights the match of political conflict but contributes to extinguishing it through the policy and attention dynamics their success triggers.

These findings carry three important implications for integration theory. First, they vindicate postfunctionalist insights that authority transfers into core state powers create politicization potential (Genschel & Jachtenfuchs, 2018), while showing this potential manifests episodically rather than continuously, corroborating Hutter *et al.*'s findings (2016). Authority transfers alone prove insufficient; issues must capture sustained public attention, which requires both objective problem severity and continued reinforcement. This explains why many integration steps proceed quietly despite

touching sovereignty concerns, while others like the refugee crisis explode dramatically.

Second, our findings challenge party-centric accounts: radical right parties cannot independently manufacture sustained political conflict, as voters respond to crisis conditions rather than merely to elite debates. Radical right success depends on country-specific problem pressure and public salience, not EU-level institutional conflict intensity.

Third, our analysis reveals why technocratic governance proves more resilient than crisis episodes might suggest. The self-limiting feedbacks we identify create natural bounds on conflict duration. Once external conditions stabilize, political conflict subsides regardless of whether underlying policy problems remain. This explains an apparent paradox: EU institutions navigate severe crises through muddling compromise while facing intense criticism, yet emerge with policymaking authority largely intact. We distinguish between de-escalation, driven by systemic feedback as external conditions change, and depoliticization as a deliberate institutional strategy (Schimmelfennig, 2020); our findings point primarily to the former.

Several limitations merit acknowledgment. First, our analysis aggregates to EU-level dynamics, abstracting from substantial national variation. Member states experienced vastly different problem pressures: Greece and Italy confronted frontline chaos, Germany absorbed unprecedented applications, while others remained relatively insulated. Future comparative research should examine how national contexts condition the mechanisms we identify, particularly whether public salience operates similarly as a gatekeeper across diverse institutional settings. National media dynamics likely mediate between objective problem pressure and public salience in ways our EU-level analysis cannot directly observe (see Koopmans & Statham, 2010; Risse, 2014). Second, our study focuses on a single issue domain during one crisis period. Comparative analysis across the eurozone crisis, rule-of-law disputes, and energy policy would strengthen confidence in the generalizability of these feedback processes. Furthermore, extending this framework to recent external security shocks, such as investigating the underlying drivers of public solidarity during the Ukraine war (Moise & Wang, 2025a; Oana *et al.*, 2025), could reveal whether these mechanisms operate similarly outside of purely internal EU crises. Third, our analysis ends before COVID-19 and subsequent crises reshaped European politics. While recent research shows that the pandemic similarly triggered dramatic shifts in mass sentiment and emergency politics at the EU level (Wang *et al.*, 2023), it raises questions about whether accumulated crisis experience alters public attention dynamics or produces habituation effects. Finally, we identify public salience as the crucial transmission mechanism but leave questions about salience formation underexplored; the boundary between objective problem pressure and its framing is inherently fluid, and systematic

investigation of media coverage intensity, entrepreneurial framing, and public responsiveness across crisis contexts would further advance understanding of politicization triggers.

To conclude, this study demonstrates that politicization operates through systematic, analyzable feedback processes rather than random fluctuations or inexorable escalation. Understanding these dynamics matters practically and theoretically. Practically, recognizing politicization's episodic nature and self-limiting properties helps explain why EU institutions navigate severe crises without fundamentally abandoning integration despite intense criticism. Crises activate temporary contestation but rarely reshape institutional equilibria permanently. This suggests both resilience and vulnerability: resilience because conflicts subside once external conditions stabilize, vulnerability because institutions cannot rely on sustained public engagement to force comprehensive reforms. Policy problems that politicize episodically often receive muddled compromises rather than systematic solutions. The refugee crisis exposed the fragility of technocratic consensus when mass publics engage, yet also demonstrated the self-limiting nature of political conflict when external conditions stabilize. Understanding both aspects, i.e., the potential for explosive politicization and its inherent impermanence, proves essential for comprehending European integration's contested trajectory.

Notes

1. See Appendix D for discussion of the methodological details.
2. Detailed model setup and output can be found in Appendices A and B.
3. The assumptions for this identification strategy of the structural VECM can be found in Appendix C. Generalized impulse-response functions can be found in Figure A3 in the Appendix which are invariant to ordering. They show virtually similar even stronger trajectories, indicating that the findings are robust to this identification choice.
4. Short-run Granger causality examines whether Δx_{t-1} predicts Δy_t (via short-run coefficient (Γ) in the VECM). Long-run causality examines whether the error-correction term, containing lagged levels, predicts Δy_t (via $\alpha\beta'$ channel).
5. We report the widely used 68% credible interval when plotting IRFs. The choice of a 68% credible band reflects a balance between conveying uncertainty and maintaining visual interpretability given our limited sample size of 57 monthly observations (Cesa-Bianchi & Ferrero, 2021; Sims & Zha, 1999; Uhlig, 2005; Winker *et al.*, 2014). With few data points, the high-credibility bands would be broad, likely encompassing zero at most horizons, which could obscure the patterns of the responses.

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