

Battle for the EU in its Periphery: Contestation Dynamics and Domestic Debates

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Abstract

Connected by a shared endeavour to enhance understanding of the forces that shape contestation toward the EU in its peripheries and unprohibited in approach, this special section explores the concepts of contestation and periphery. Using various methodological approaches, the section showcases a series of overlapping and cross-cutting themes which contextually strengthen the phenomenon and experiences of contestation in peripheral states. In aggregating these themes, the authors attribute contestation to the growing 'absence' of the EU's normative interest in peripheral states and the growing transactional/functional features that define peripheral state relationships with the EU. The authors draw attention to the opportunities for regional rivals such as Russia and China to capitalize on the absence of the EU's transformative power in peripheral states, the role of domestic forces in utilizing contestation as a means to preserve regime type and satisfy sovereignty concerns, and the incidences of peripheral states in shaping/reshaping their foreign policy positions in response to the Russia-Ukraine War. Taken together, our special section shows that contestation in Europe's periphery is less an overt normative resistance against the EU and more an absence of EU normative efforts in peripheral states and the increasingly functional features which define peripheral states' relationships with the EU.

Keywords: European Union, Europeanization, contestation, periphery

Introduction

Today, the European Union (EU) faces challenges on several fronts, internally and externally. In this special section, we primarily focus on the contestation of the EU in its periphery; our principal research question is how the EU is contested by and in the periphery. Our contributors aim to address how various contestation dynamics in different countries have affected, interrupted, or frozen the course of Europeanization and sown the seeds for the de-Europeanization process. The conceptual framework delineated in this section will provide a key to understanding the impact of the EU on member and non-member states categorized as being in the EU periphery. This special section is one of the outcomes of the Linking to Europe at the Periphery (LEAP) project (supported under the Erasmus+ Jean Monnet Network scheme).¹

By tracing the obvious challenges to the foundation of the EU and its relations with its environs, LEAP has brought together several scholars from different countries (Turkey, Romania, Georgia, Kosovo and Ukraine) and delved into the very question of how EU integration is taught, learnt, experienced and contested in ‘the periphery’? By focusing on these countries, several workshops, study visits, and network summits have been conducted in order to create a network to see how academics, students, young citizens, civil society, and political actors in ‘the periphery’ are linked to the EU integration from various aspects, and to unfold the educational, performative and political processes whilst teaching, learning, experiencing and contesting ‘Europe’ (for the educational aspect, see, Alpan and Diez 2022). The LEAP has also targeted to create a long-lasting and multiplier impact and international resonance that will act as an example of a novel and integrated approach to EU integration. As a part of this aim, we consider ‘further research’² by extending LEAP’s analytical perspective to explore the challenges/complexities of the EU integration in the EU’s periphery.

This special section will contribute to the literature on Europeanization through contestation by demonstrating that the EU's impact on member and non-member states is uneven, relational, and context-dependent (Coman 2014; Roch 2019; Petri, Thevenin and Liedlbauer 2020; Aydın-Düzgit and Noutcheva 2022; Dandashly and Noutcheva 2022). It will also contribute to the burgeoning literature which addresses the nexus of legitimacy and Europeanization through legitimation strategies (Cianciara 2016; Aydın-Düzgit 2018; Noutcheva 2018). These two trends in the literature are a welcome extension to earlier research on Europeanization as compliance (e.g., Knill and Lehmkuhl 2002), top-down transformation (e.g., Börzel and Risse 2003), policy transfer (e.g., Radaelli 2000), 'permissive consensus'-based integration (e.g., Down and Wilson 2008; Hughes and Marks 2008), and 'progressive norm diffusion' (e.g., Radaelli 2003).

We contend that the impact of the EU waxes and wanes as it is contested throughout the process. We also argue that being completely Europeanized, understood as the transformation of all existing rules, institutions, and culture, is rare since transformation in one policy domain does not necessarily denote the same kind of transformation in other policy domains. Thus, the extent of Europeanization in different policy domains varies. Variations of outcomes in policy domains may be caused by the very nature of the policy domain. For instance, the Europeanization of the foreign policies of member and non-member states exemplifies the uneven and inconsistent outcome of the EU's impact. Alongside the nature of the policy domain, we suggest that variation depends on the scope and range of contestation, i.e., what is contested by whom and why and how it is contested. Moreover, there may even be a reversal of the process. Negating adopted rules and norms, annulling ratified agreements, and nullifying decisions taken during the process of Europeanization may culminate in de-Europeanization (see, Ágh 2015; Aydın-Düzgit 2016; Aydın-Düzgit and Kaliber 2016; Copeland 2016; Saatçioğlu 2016; Yılmaz 2016; Castaldo and Pinna 2018; Bodur-Ün and Arıkan 2022).

Europeanization through contestation may help researchers to comprehend not only the variation in outcomes of Europeanization but also the possibility of de-Europeanization in member and non-member states.

Ultimately, we posit that in order to answer the question of how Europeanization ‘matters, to what degree, in what direction, at what pace, and at what point of time’ (Börzel and Risse 2003, 60), we have to ask how the EU, as well as its norms and policies, are contested before they are adopted or resisted. With this objective in mind, our contributors aim to explore the contestatory practices of national actors at the domestic level when they encounter demands and political pressures emanating from the EU. In the following section, we provide an overview of research on Europeanization. Specifically, our review concentrates on research concerning the effects of worldwide and regional crises on the transformative power of the EU. Then, the analytical framework for this special section will be outlined with a particular focus on normative, policy, and polity contestations.

Europeanization in times of crises

The world has been going through profound changes in terms of economic, security, political, and normative foundations of the liberal order, particularly since the economic crisis of 2008 (Ikenberry 2018; Mearsheimer 2019; Fukuyama 2020). These changes include the rise of new identity politics, far-right populism, the retreat of economic globalization following the United States (US)/China trade war, Brexit, the transition from openness to isolationism, tightness on migration-related policies, and a broader rise in anti-liberal activities across the Western world, suggesting that ‘the core ideals of liberalism are now threatened or at variance with globalization’ (Amadi 2020, 2). The continuing power struggles among the US, China, Russia, and the EU have not only paved the way for a newborn multipolar system characterized by a pursuit of hard power but also have underlined the importance of geopolitics in contemporary world affairs (Mead 2014; Heisbourg 2020). The rivalry among great powers is not only

confined to *realpolitik* concerning economic and geopolitical interests; the deep-seated competition among those powers also has a normative dimension, allowing us to comprehend how the great powers of the 21st century see the world differently.

Projecting liberal norms and values and being the main transmitter of the world liberal order since its foundation, the EU has not been an exception to this obvious challenge the world has been going through in the last decade. The Eurozone crisis of 2009 has not only tarnished the EU's respected image externally but also led to a harsh internal dispute among its members, harming the integrity of the Union. Subsequent events followed by the Eurozone crisis, such as the Arab Spring, a vast migration flux to the EU, a shift towards authoritarianism in some member states (e.g., Hungary and Poland), the protracted Brexit process, the effects of Covid-19, and the war in Ukraine are some internally and externally interconnected developments that have distorted the EU's visions for a more integrated, more harmonious, and more united global actor. Jean-Claude Juncker (2016) described these multifaceted and protracted disturbances as a 'polycrisis,' which has aroused suspicion about the future trajectory of European integration. In this respect, the EU, which claims to be a global actor, has been struggling to project its normative and, to some extent, transformative power not only in world affairs but also within its borders (Diez 2021).

The impact of the EU on its member states has been the focal point of the literature on Europeanization for nearly three decades (see, inter alia, Landrech 1994; Cowles, Caporaso, and Risse 2001; Graziano and Vink 2007; Börzel 2010). The most encompassing definition, despite its abundance in defining the concept, comes from Radaelli (2003) as he argues that Europeanization entails:

(...) processes of (a) construction, (b) diffusion, and (c) institutionalization of formal and informal rules, procedures, policy paradigms, styles 'ways of doing things', and shared beliefs and norms which are first defined and

consolidated in the making of EU policy and politics and then incorporated in the logic of domestic discourse, identities, political structures and public policies (30).

In such a definition, Europeanization not only emphasizes the more formal, observable consequences of membership (or the prospect of membership), what Kaliber (2013) calls 'EU-ization,' but also covers less formal and less observable changes (Bache and Jordan 2006, 25).

Europeanization literature has gone beyond the member states, enabling researchers to include the candidate countries and, to some extent, certain non-member countries of the EU (Grabbe 2001, 2003; Hughes et al. 2004; Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2005; Sedelmeier 2011; Bache et al. 2011). Analyzing any possible changes in these countries has been captured by two different research agendas: the 'external governance model' (Lavenex 2004; Lavenex, Lehmkuhl and Wichmann 2009; Lavenex and Schimmelfennig 2011) and the 'transformative power of the EU' (Börzel and Risse 2009). Both imply that the impact of the EU extends beyond its member states, attributing a new perspective on the EU's international role and suggesting the extension of the legal boundary of authority beyond institutional integration.

Although there have been several disputes in EU studies over the definition, mechanism, and outcome of Europeanization, the general understanding is that the impact of the EU on the transformation of the member, candidate, and non-member states may vary significantly (Cowles, Caporaso, and Risse 2001; Heritier and Knill 2001; Knill and Lehmkuhl 2002). Such a differential impact may be explained in terms of factors at both EU and national levels (i.e., domestic conditions and actors) (Kassim 2005, 286). Another possible consensus in the extant literature may be the non-linear and/or regressive nature of the Europeanization process, which is largely subject to the changing political atmosphere both at the national as well as the EU level. Prior to Brexit, by taking the UK's employment policy as an empirical example, Copeland (2016, 1126) rightly argues that there is a covert assumption that Europeanization is a

continuous ‘positive’ process, but it has little to say when a government change results in a de-prioritization of EU objectives at the national level. What this tells us is that in such circumstances, the process of Europeanization either slows down or stalls.

Following this trend research on the de-Europeanization process in several members and non-member states have provided fertile ground to examine the contestation dynamics in a given country (Ágh 2015; Aydın-Düzgit 2016; Kaliber 2016; Saatçioğlu 2016; Yılmaz 2016; Copeland 2019; Castaldo and Pinna 2018; Kaliber and Kaliber 2019; Bodur-Ün 2021; MacMillan 2021). Aydın-Düzgit and Kaliber (2016, 5) provide an encompassing definition for de-Europeanization, which goes as ‘the loss or weakening of the EU/Europe as a normative/political context and as a reference point in domestic settings and national public debates.’

There is also a vast literature on analyzing liberal vs illiberal democracies in order to shed light on how the West and East compete with each other, particularly in some peripheral regions, e.g., the Middle East (Hamid 2014), Central and East Europe (Lorenz and Anders 2021), Western Balkans and Southeast Europe (Kapidžić 2021) and a comparative analysis of a relatively recent member (Hungary) and candidate country (Turkey) (Soyaltın-Colella 2022). What those studies commonly outline is that there is a trend toward declining democracy, increasing authoritarian regimes, and populism fueled by the rise of far-right parties in those peripheral regions.

Those external events and disturbances have not only provided a ground for encouraging contestation but also harmed the ‘halo’ of the EU, reducing the transformative power of Brussels and the attractions of its policies, practices, and norms. Either through changes in domestic factors or external situations, the result is that member and/or non-member states may start contesting the EU in a way that they may probably engage in ‘de-Europeanization to de-construct previous advancements made through the process of Europeanization’ (Copeland

2016, 1126). In the following part of this article, the theoretical framework of this special section will be explained in detail. Contributors to this special section utilize the theoretical framework in order to shed light on how and why the EU and its policies, practices, and norms have been contested by domestic actors in the periphery.

The theoretical and empirical rationale of the special section

In the extant EU studies literature, several mechanisms have been offered to comprehend the EU-induced political change in domestic politics. This special section contributes to this existing literature by exploring the effects of contestation over the Europeanization of member and non-member states. Our understanding of Europeanization through contestation is a key to addressing the differential domestic effects of Europeanization (see, Heritier and Knill 2001 for policies; Bache et al. 2011 for politics; Ladrech 2010 for politics). Europeanization is not a smooth process and does not always result in full adaptation to the EU, even in the case of member states. For instance, Cowles, Caporaso, and Risse (2001, 1) conclude that ‘Europeanization affects every country, but domestic adaptation with national colours and national features continues to play a role in shaping outcomes.’ As a result of a differential impact on the domestic arena, the responses and outcomes to ‘the Europeanization process lead to clustered convergence’ (Radaelli 2004). The presence of intermediating factors explains the variations among member, candidate, and non-member states. The acceptance and adoption of policies, practices, and norms are accordingly confronted with domestic reaction and resistance. EU policies, practices, and norms have been questioned and challenged by a myriad of actors inside and/or outside of the EU. Given this fact, in this special section, exploring the contestation of EU policies, practices, and norms in the periphery is our focal point. Prior to unveiling contestation as a theoretical framework, we need to define the periphery.

What is periphery?

The concepts of core and periphery are ambiguous in the context of the international relations literature (for the most recent and extensive analysis, see, Bilgin 2021; Risse, Wemheuer-Vogelaar, and Havemann 2022), and so are they in the European integration debate. To avoid any confusion and make a clear understanding of the concept of the periphery, we have some caveats. First, this special section avoids bogging down in the epistemological and philosophical discussions of what is European/Europeanness and/or Europe vs. Others, which have been done successfully elsewhere (e.g., Case 2009; Checkel and Katzenstein 2009). We then also do not take the concept of the periphery as having a static meaning, as the countries in the periphery may have been included or excluded from the core throughout the history of Europe, depending on the context. A good example of this can be read in the writings of Hungarian writer Péter Esterházy (2005, as quoted in Case 2009, 112–3):

Once I was an Eastern European; then I was promoted to the rank of Central European. (...) Then a few months ago, I became a New European. But before I had the chance to get used to this status – even before I could have refused it – I have now become a non-core European. [W]hile I see no serious reason for not translating this new division (core/non-core) with the terms ‘first class’ and ‘second-class,’ still, I’d rather not speak in that habitual Eastern European, forever insulted way.

We nonetheless acknowledge that the meaning of periphery has several connotations in terms of geographical, economic, culturalist/ideational, and political aspects. Firstly, geographically speaking, the periphery includes close neighbours of the EU, such as North African and Middle Eastern countries, the Western Balkans, and Eastern Partnership countries. These countries are in the sphere of the EU’s influence because of their geographical proximity. In other words, they are geopolitically attached to the EU either due to their common borders with EU member

states or due to their geographical position as buffer zones between Europe and other distant regions. Thanks to the enlargement policy, the EU's geographical periphery has been changing since the first enlargement. Therefore, as noted above, the EU's geographical periphery is not fixed and can further change with the accession of new states or even with the exit of member states.

Secondly, from an economic perspective, the periphery refers to non-European countries (candidates and non-candidates) that share an asymmetrical economic relationship with the EU via forms of 'differentiated integration' (Schimmelfennig 2014). Although integration is predominantly economic in essence, the asymmetrical dynamics of the relationship enable the EU as a normative power to link economic opportunities with normative conditions that peripheral states are expected to download domestically. This political economy approach resembles Immanuel Wallerstein and Gunter Frank's conceptualization of semi-periphery and periphery. In this sense, peripheral countries are not only economically connected to but also economically dependent on the EU. By proxy, they become subject to the EU's economic and normative influence. Depending on the range of economic relations with the EU and the level of industrialization, these economically dependent countries can be classified as semi-periphery or periphery. Alternative explanations are also possible. From the political economy perspective, the usual differentiation inside the EU is made between those member states belonging to the Eurozone and those not. However, the Eurozone crisis has underscored the increasing divide and potential discord between the central and peripheral member states of the Union (Magone, Laffan, and Schweiger 2016, 1). In this respect, the crisis has not only aggravated the already established tensions in the centre-periphery relations within and outside the Eurozone but also demonstrated how some states within the dualist contextualization of the core-periphery seemed to be more fragile.

Thirdly, peripheral countries can also be identified in terms of the essence of their political relationship with the EU. Peripheral countries are, in one way or another, under the political influence of the EU, either due to their status as prospective or current candidate states. These prospective candidate countries are intended to be Europeanized during their accession process, a process known as ‘Accession Europeanization’ (Yılmaz 2014; Ugur and Yankaya 2008; Özkurt 2016). The logic of accession Europeanization is not dissimilar to the process of conditions underpinning the relationships between non-member states and the EU via differential forms of economic integration. In addition to the membership prospects of a peripheral country, member states that are reluctant to political change, resistant to Europeanization, and sceptical about the EU can be particularly identified as peripheral. Euroscepticism, or even Europhobia, is particularly prevalent in countries whose prospects of membership are uncertain and whose relationship will likely remain within the confines of being an EU ‘neighbour’ of sorts. Such politically peripheral countries may challenge the EU with their contradictory policies, norms, and practices influenced by their political cultures and traditions, which impede a smooth adaptation to the EU. Those states that deem adaptation to EU norms and rules as more costly than beneficial for their domestic society and culture may be less inclined to adapt to such foreign and invasive norms (Ugur and Yankaya 2008; Kubicek 2011).

Lastly, and building on the previous point, from a cultural/ideational perspective, the periphery can be identified by looking at differences in identity and culture from a historical perspective that render some countries as peripheral to the EU. Peripherality may be measured by looking at the extent of identity convergence and identity divergence (Subotic 2011, 213–215) between the non-EU states and the EU and exploring the domestic forces in non-EU states (institutions, political parties, social movements, etc.) that are influential in shaping the peripheral states’ direction, i.e., acceptance or rejection of EU values, norms, and policies.

Some scholars working in the EU field also utilize the liminality theory of Norton to demonstrate how ‘Europe’s liminal Others have responded to discourses on European identity through their representational practices and seek to unravel their agency in the construction of European identity’ (Morozov and Rumelili 2012, 29). Accordingly, the periphery may belong to EU politics with different political engagements but ideationally distant from the core European values and cultures.

Although one can define the dichotomy of centre-periphery and/or core-periphery in the EU studies from geographical, economic, cultural/ideational, and political dimensions, this special section has a more straightforward approach to the periphery of the EU depending on the given country’s political relationship with the EU. The different sets of policy-making frameworks have not only connected the EU with its immediate regions but also turned the EU into a more active player that has been involved in the transformation of the politics, policies, and politics of those peripheral countries. We examine cases drawn from a diverse array of EU policy-making frameworks, encompassing member states, candidate countries, potential candidate countries, and states engaged in bilateral relations within the European Neighbourhood framework, where Brussels wields influence over its neighbouring regions. It is worth noting that we exclude southern neighbouring countries from this special section, as they lack prospects for EU membership. The countries under examination include Georgia (Nino Javakhishvili and Nino Butashvili), Hungary (Melek Aylin Özoflu and Krisztina Arató), Serbia (Branislav Radeljić and M. Cüneyt Özşahin), and Turkey (with regard to China/EU, Gözde Yılmaz and Nilgün Eliküçük-Yıldırım; and Russia/EU, Kadri Kaan Renda, Ali Onur Özçelik, and Hüsrev Tabak),

It is pertinent to reiterate that our understanding of periphery also includes EU member states that are not yet fully integrated with the EU or have been resisting the adoption of the EU institutions, norms, and policies (for an early account of the Europeanization of peripheral

members of the EU, see Featherstone and Kazamias 2000). Member states deemed laggards or foot-draggers, and even outliers or reactionaries inside the EU, are categorized as somewhat peripheral. For the purposes of this special section, we prefer to direct our attention to an Eastern European member state, namely Hungary. Hungary may be particularly described as semi-periphery as it has a say in the decision-making processes of the EU and has been partially Europeanized, yet it is reluctant to fully implement European rules, norms, and policies (for the most recent coverage of those countries' relations with the EU, see Lorenz and Andres 2021).

Europeanization through contestation in the periphery

There have been disputes over the definitions, forms, mechanisms, and degrees of contestation in EU politics. For Wiener (2014, 11), contestation is 'a way to voice difference of experience, expectation, and opinion.' Therefore, contestation refers to raising objections and critical engagement with the EU's norms, policies, and practices (Wiener 2018, 2). Even though contestatory practices raise objections and challenges, the result of a contest does not have to be non-compliance. Wiener and Puetter (2009, 7) contend that 'norm contestation is a necessary component in raising the level of acceptance of norms.' Contestation may produce two outcomes. On the one hand, it may result in political divergence and even a clash between the EU and the contesting country. On the other hand, it may create new opportunities for a contesting country to influence the EU's policies, norms and rules if its criticisms are acknowledged by the EU. What is contested, how it is contested, by whom it is contested, and whose contestation matters are the fundamental questions that are asked by the contributors to this special section. Determining the usage and scope of contesting the EU in the periphery largely depends on the subject in question and the country interacting with the EU.

The question of who contests the EU is of great relevance, as contestation can originate from various quarters, including domestic actors who play a pivotal role in influencing EU policies. These domestic actors encompass a broad spectrum of stakeholders, such as policy-

makers, members of the judiciary, the civil and military bureaucracy, non-governmental organizations, and public opinion leaders. These diverse groups collectively contribute to the discourse around EU policies and, in their own unique ways, shape the landscape of policy-making and implementation. Our contributors are also focused on the practices of domestic actors, with a primary interest in the roles played by policy-makers, civil bureaucracy, and non-governmental organizations in the process of contestation within the EU framework. Consequently, our contributors will find out which practices are more dominant and how and why different outcomes of contestation are produced as a result. Some of our contributors, on the other hand, account for the implications of contestation in the public support for the EU. Hence, those contributions give an account of how contesting Europe by domestic actors at the domestic level is manifested in the perceptions of the people.

As for the question of what is contested, our contributors engage with three types of contestation, namely (i) norm contestation, (ii) policy contestation, and (iii) polity contestation. Wiener (2014, 1) defines norm contestation as ‘social practices which discursively express disapproval of norms. Disapproval connotes a dispute over the procedures of making norms, over the content of them, their validity, their application, and their meanings’ (Wiener 2004, 2007, 2014; also see, Zimmerman, Deitelhoff and Lesch, 2017; Deitelhoff and Zimmerman 2020). Wiener (2014, 2), for instance, distinguishes reactive contestation from proactive contestation, as the former refers to objection and dissent, whereas the latter refers to critical engagement with a norm as a mode of critique. The second type of contestation is policy contestation. This implies refusing policy objectives, criticizing the method of implementation, and objecting to the distribution of costs and benefits (de Wilde and Trenz 2012, 542). Polity contestation, lastly, refers to opposition to ‘the competencies and constitutional settlement of the EU’ (542).

Contestation of the EU may happen at three different levels. The first level is domestic contestation, where domestic actors contest the adoption of EU policies, norms, and values. Domestic actors may prefer different venues and forums to raise their objections, either on national or international occasions. At the second level, contestation happens due to disagreement among member states during the policy-making process. This level of contestation hinders the process of European integration. This is known as intra-EU contestation (Petri, Thevenin and Liedlbauer, 2020; Thevenin, Liedlbauer and Petri, 2020: 452–454). At this level, only member states can contest the EU during decision-making and policy-making occasions such as the summits of the European Council or meetings of the Council of the EU. Melek Aylin Özoflu and Krisztina Arató adeptly elucidate the process by which a member state discursively contests the EU response to an external crisis by highlighting national security concerns and economic interests. Employing the war in Ukraine as a case study, they offer a rigorous examination of how the Hungarian government tactically shapes and portrays its policy choices in the context of its engagement with the EU. This scholarly endeavour sheds light on the intricate mechanisms through which a member state negotiates its position within the EU framework, providing valuable insights into the dynamics of EU-member state interactions and crisis management strategies.

The third level of contestation may exist if EU policies, norms, and values are challenged by rival powers such as the US, Russia, and China (see Aydın-Düzgit and Noutcheva 2022; Dandashly and Noutcheva 2022). Contestation at this level negatively affects the EU's transformative power in its environs due to the clash of norms, policies, and values upheld by rival powers. The extent of such a negative effect depends on the political and economic influence of rival powers in the EU's periphery. Challenger countries may either offer better incentives or may confront the EU in their shared neighbourhoods and at global forums" by questioning the legitimacy of the EU's norms and policies (Aydın-Düzgit and Noutcheva 2022,

2). In their empirical analysis of Serbia, Radeljić and Özşahin illuminate a pronounced competition between the EU and Russia/China. This rivalry prompts Brussels to compromise its extensively publicized norms and standards, thereby inadvertently fostering the consolidation of semi-authoritarianism in the region. According to the authors, Serbia takes advantage of the Russian and Chinese contestation of the EU's economic as well as normative order in the Western Balkans. In their scholarly analysis, Gözde Yılmaz and Nilgün Eliküçük-Yıldırım illustrate the diminishing influence of the EU in its neighbouring regions. Simultaneously, they shed light on the burgeoning collaboration between authoritarian regimes and non-democratic actors, notably China, within countries such as Turkey. This phenomenon underscores the erosion of the EU's transformative capacity and the increasing momentum of autocratic partnerships in the region. Both articles, in fact, elucidate the political survival strategies employed by illiberal regimes, specifically within the contexts of Serbia and Turkey, amidst the growing competition between liberal and illiberal democracies. This competition engenders significant contestation concerning the normative influence wielded by the EU.

The impact of Europeanization on its member, candidate or non-member states loses its legitimization power, paving the way for a contesting atmosphere among the domestic actors. Together with the rising costs of harmonizing with the EU (particularly for the new EU members), the low credibility of the EU membership (particularly for the case of a candidate or potential candidate), the decrease in the EU's attractiveness (particularly for the non-member states), the increasing influence of Eurosceptics as veto players in national policy-making processes, as well as the increasing establishment of the illiberal forces (e.g., China and Russia) have provided a fertile ground for contesting the EU in domestic politics in its periphery.

Next to the possible changes in domestic politics, any change in the international or regional environment can have a reinforcing or constraining effect on the contestation of EU policies and norms. International and regional contexts are part of a bigger framework that also

influences the EU's institutions and norms. Hence, neither the EU nor its member states are immune to the changes in the international system. Several crises around and within Europe for the last decade have impacted not only the trajectory of European integration but also the EU's relations with third countries and hence its influence on neighbours.

Contesting the EU and/or performing anti-EU politics in Europe's periphery has the potential of undermining the transformative power of the EU as well as obstructing theorizing in EU studies. This calls attention to examining those peripheral states' domestic causes, context conditions, processes, and consequences by investigating (i) the internal and external factors that influence the contestation of the EU in peripheral countries, (ii) the ways in which the contestation of the EU is reshaping democratic politics domestically in its periphery, and (iii) the extent to which domestic perceptions related to the EU and the rising EU contestation in national politics undermine European integration and lead to a de-Europeanization process.

Contributions of the special section

This special section seeks to answer the questions above by giving an in-depth empirical contribution to contesting the EU at its periphery. It brings together researchers from different fields and with different theoretical views on contestation in Europe's periphery so that they can make a clear and all-encompassing assessment of contestation. It comprises several case studies and comparative analyses of the perceptions, institutions, and policies. Being rich in their empirical cases and diverse in chosen methodologies, all the contributors to this special section zoom into the domestic process in order to provide a fine-grain analysis for the readers. Analyzing the different sets of institutions, policies, and perceptions in a comparative fashion allows us to compare and contrast the contestation dynamics in several peripheral countries. This comparative perspective also broadens our understanding of whether differences between peripheral countries and those core member states are, in fact, as pronounced as frequently claimed. Allowing for different theoretical perspectives also demonstrates the importance of

domestic conditions and processes as well as the consequences of contesting EU politics within each case country. Taken together all empirical rich studies, we aim to capture the differences and similarities of contestation dynamics in the EU's periphery. In doing so, all the contributions to this special section deepen our understanding of the much-needed area of expertise on Europe's periphery.

The case studies for this special section consist of a member state (Hungary), two candidate countries (Serbia and Turkey), and one neighbour country (Georgia). The diverse country selection is crucial for this special section to understand the way in which the contestation repertoires of these countries resemble any similarities or contrasts in order to make a useful generalization for further research, particularly for those countries located in the EU's periphery. When we consider each case study independently, the contributions of this special section in different theoretical and methodological frameworks are also essential for the existing EU studies literature.

The relationship between perceptions and polity contestation is studied by Nino Javakhishvili and Nino Butashvili. The authors query how the strategic values and utilitarian gains can be a remedy for the contestation of the EU in Georgia. Their findings indicate that Georgians hold a positive view of the EU, aspiring to improve their economic and political circumstances with its assistance, with internal and external factors bolstering these aspirations, while concerns about cultural traditions recede in significance amidst political and economic instability, suggesting that realistic threats outweigh symbolic ones and mitigate the development of Euroscepticism in Georgia's current context. The Georgian case sheds light on our question regarding 'the extent to which the domestic perceptions related to the EU and the rising EU contestation in national politics undermine the Europeanization process.'

As for the policy and norm contestations, the discursive construction of the war in Ukraine by the Hungarian government is studied by Melek Aylin Özoflu and Krisztina Arató

from the perspective of Wodak's critical discourse analysis. They aim to demonstrate an exceptional case of the 'European periphery' due to its challenge to the EU's fundamental underpinning and its deepened relations with Russia. The study reveals that Hungary presents itself as a defender of national economic interests against EU-based positions, creating a divergence in policy priorities. Additionally, the government criticizes EU sanctions against Russia and portrays the EU in a Eurosceptic light. Notably, the study highlights a disconnect between government discourse and public sentiment, as it does not reflect the declining sympathy for Russia and strong EU support among the Hungarian public. These findings underscore the importance of analyzing the discursive strategies employed by political actors in justifying their actions, even when they diverge from public opinion.

Taking the war in Ukraine as an empirical case study, Kadri Kaan Renda, Ali Onur Özçelik, and Hüsrev Tabak focus on how the war has generated political divergence between the EU and Turkey on the sanctions upon Russia and how Turkish politicians have contested EU decisions during a regional crisis is the focal point of this contribution. Articles on Hungary and Turkey enable us to compare and contrast the dissenting discourses of a member state and a candidate state during the Ukrainian crisis. These contributions provide answers to our question, 'what are the internal and external factors that influence the contestation of the EU in peripheral countries?' These two articles contribute to the literature on contestation by highlighting the oscillation of contestatory discourses between normative considerations and strategic calculations.

In their scholarly inquiry, Gözde Yılmaz and Nilgün Eliküçük-Yıldırım undertake an examination of external factors that exert influence on the level of domestic contestation. Their study focuses on Turkey as a case study, aiming to address the fundamental question of how Turkey's engagement with authoritarian powers has contributed to the persistence of Turkey's contestation of the EU within the broader context of the liberal-illiberal struggle that

characterizes the dynamics between China and the EU. The authors posit that while the relationship between the EU and Turkey has undergone a deterioration, transitioning into a functional and transactional partnership, this shift has been accompanied by a commensurate decline in the EU's capacity for transformative influence. Conversely, Turkey has strategically embraced collaboration with China, particularly in economic realms, as a means of safeguarding its own survival and advancing its external relations strategy. This nuanced exploration underscores the intricate interplay between external geopolitical alignments and Turkey's domestic contestation dynamics within the EU framework.

Radeljić and Özşahin assert that the proliferation of specific norms is intricately intertwined with the idiosyncratic dynamics of domestic politics within recipient states operating under the framework of a multipolar regional order. This contention stems from their overarching argument that the increasing influence of Russia and China within the Western Balkans has substantially eroded the EU's efficacy in norm promotion, thereby diminishing the appeal of democratization and Europeanization efforts. Consequently, their analysis underscores the complex interplay between normative and material elements in the realm of international politics. Ultimately, these two contributions enhance our understanding of how third countries hinder the transformative power of the EU on candidate countries either by luring them with their rival policies, financial enticements, and authoritarian practices or by obstructing the diffusion of EU norms and adoption of EU policies due to their strong political, historical, and cultural ties with those countries.

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¹ For the details about “the Linking to Europe at the Periphery Project”, please visit:

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² Part of this aim was fulfilled by a workshop organized in Eskişehir on 15-16 October 2022 with the title of Contesting ‘Europe’ at the Periphery, for further details and the program, please visit:

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