

# Politicisation of the European Union in Slovenia in the Twenty Years of its Membership

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**Abstract:** *Ever since Slovenia became independent, the European idea has been viewed fondly by the political elite and the public. The absence of any successful Eurosceptic parties has meant the main goals concerning European integration became national projects. Euroscepticism has remained limited, although in more recent years politicisation has steadily grown through political parties' positions on EU issues. At the same time, the country's political elite has lost sight of the specific strategy Slovenia should play in the EU. Moreover, alignment with other EU member states has begun to vary depending on the ruling party. After twenty years of membership, this has led to Slovenia being seen as one of the more submissive actors in EU policymaking. In the article, by applying an analytical framework of politicisation, we consider the changing attitudes to the EU in Slovenia through the twenty years of its membership. The central research question is: in which ways have European issues become politicised over the last twenty years in Slovenia? The research question is addressed by considering a chronological approach and analysis of events, participation in European elections and public opinion data. We argue that, as a newer member state, Slovenia politicises European issues to a limited extent.*

**Keywords:** EU politics, politicisation, membership, challenges, Slovenia

## Introduction: Politicisation of European integration

European integration literature uses the concept of politicisation in different ways. In general, politicisation means denoting an issue as relevant, naming it as political, an object of politics and debatable (Wiesner 2023), while the 'politicisation of European integration' means the public's stronger interest in

and criticism of European Union (EU) affairs. In other words, politicisation manifests as the polarisation of opinions, as conflict and controversies with respect to EU policymaking and European integration (De Wilde 2015).

The concept of politicisation of the EU remains complex. The analytical framework of politicisation on one side describes the EU's effects on domestic politics, party cleavages, public opinion and representation (*top-down politicisation*), while, on the other, the visibility, polarisation and engagement of domestic actors (*bottom-up politicisation*) with regard to the EU (Bressanelli, Koop & Reh 2020: 330–331). European Union institutions, European integration and European issues started to become politicised in the 1980s with growing awareness, criticism and dissatisfaction with the EU (Kauppi & Wiesner 2018), but has been especially present since the 'polycrisis' period (Zeitlin, Nicoli & Laffan 2019), the sequence of crises facing Europe (economic, migration, Brexit, health, energy, inflation, security – e.g. the war in Ukraine), representing the grounds for different member states and actors to adopt their own positions on European policies and the basis for new political conflicts to arise around European policies (Bressanelli, Koop & Reh 2020). A notable role here is played by national political parties and their leaders, which by way of politicisation try to benefit in elections and avoid internal conflicts (Hooghe & Marks 2009). Apart from them, interest groups and media often act as additional agents and promoters of politicisation by exposing and articulating different positions on the EU (Krašovec & Lajh 2024). They may be seen as 'windows of observation' of the politicisation of European integration (Kriesi 2016: 33) and actors involved in the 'controversiality of decision-making' (Hooghe & Marks 2009: 6).

Neofunctionalists define politicisation as an outcome of further European integration that has also engaged the public, namely, at the micro level (Hooghe & Marks 2009). The EU and European integration are becoming more important and more salient while a rising number of citizens and actors are engaging with the EU (Kauppi & Wiesner 2018). Along these lines, the politicisation of the EU may be observed through three main dimensions: 1) increased *visibility* of the EU and its policies, 2) increased *polarisation* and 3) increased *engagement* with the EU (De Wilde, Leupold & Schmidtke 2016; De Wilde 2015). The majority of scholars detect the greater politicisation of the EU over time (Hutter & Grande 2014; Hoeglinger 2016) due to the EU having stronger exposure in the public and the media (Krašovec & Lajh 2024).

The concept of the politicisation of European integration was previously largely connected with Eurosceptic positions and the change in attitudes, from acknowledging the benefits of European integration to growing opposition and criticism (De Wilde 2015). However, some authors clearly state that politicisation does not necessarily mean Euroscepticism and that it can also derive from pro-European positions (Turnbull & Dugarte 2019). Even Euroscepticism can appear in different forms: From soft Euroscepticism where concerns in certain

policy fields are expressed to hard Euroscepticism that indicates general opposition to European integration; ranging from rejection of the EU, rejection of EU policies, criticism of EU policies to various degrees of criticism (Wiesner 2023). Although politicisation has changed the content of European integration and the content of EU policymaking, this is not directly connected with increased Eurosceptic positions among the public (Hooghe & Marks 2009). Wiesner (2023) warns that criticism should not be understood simply as populism or Euroscepticism. Nevertheless, it remains vital to answer the question of what the increased politicisation means for the future of European integration (De Wilde 2015). It should not be overlooked that even though politicisation can negatively impact the European integration process and governance of the EU it can also raise public discourse, trigger people's interest in the EU and add to the quality of democracy (Wiesner 2023).

## Research Puzzle

Slovenia's relationship with the EU is as long as the history of its independence. In fact, in 1991, when Slovenia gained its independence, support for the EU among the Slovenian public was at its highest (Uhan & Hafner Fink 2024). The process of Slovenia's transition was from the start characterised by the ambition to join the EU with the aim of becoming an economically successful and internationally recognised democratic country (Lajh 2012). In this regard, EU membership was defined as a national project even before Slovenia formally became independent (Krašovec & Lajh 2009). Fink-Hafner went so far as to claim that Europeanisation had 'become a kind of substitute for the old ideology' (Fink-Hafner 1999). Before the accession period, a general consensus existed among the country's elite that Slovenia's membership in the EU was a national goal. Eurosceptic positions could hardly be found<sup>1</sup> (Lajh 2012) although some academics, cultural elite and trade unions warned about economic costs of accession (Bojinović Fenko & Svetličič 2017; Svetličič 2015; Uhan & Hafner Fink 2024). Euroscepticism was also absent from media while criticism of Slovenian membership in the EU was addressed mostly by pro-EU media (Bernik & Uhan 2005). The strong support in Slovenia for EU membership was seen in the results of a referendum on EU membership. In March 2003, 60.4% of the electorate participated in a referendum on accession to the EU, with almost 90% of voters supporting it. Such high support was probably also a result of the accession campaign 'Slovenia at Home in Europe' since after the referendum the support failed again (Uhan & Hafner Fink 2024).

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1 The only exception was the Slovenian National Party, which openly expressed (relatively soft) Eurosceptic stances (Lajh 2012).

At the same time, the Europeanisation process underway in national institutions in Slovenia was not radical. Fink-Hafner and Lajh (2005) demonstrated that national institutions, processes, traditions and politico-cultural contexts remained flexible and pragmatic in their adaptations. No radical change ensued; instead, political structures only rearranged their setup to meet the demands arising in the accession process.

The most radical effect of the Europeanisation process was amending the Constitution. In 2003, such constitutional amendments included Article 3.a. to allow the delegation of part of Slovenian sovereignty to the EU, while Article 8 was altered to regulate the relationship between the national and EU political systems. The Constitution saw certain other changes after 1997 to harmonise the national legislation with that of the EU. Article 68 was amended to allow foreigners from EU member states to own property, Article 80 to reflect changes to the electoral procedure and Article 47 to permit the extradition of Slovenian citizens under international agreements (Nations in Transit 2004).

The European integration process was for Slovenia as a newer member state not the same as for the member states that had joined the EU prior to the Treaty of Nice. While older member states experienced the EU's development and expansion from the inside, Slovenia as a newcomer state joined the EU with a status that has remained largely stable until today. This includes the growing powers of European institutions, a larger number of member states and a higher number of policy areas in which member states renounced their sovereignty and the EU expanded its jurisdiction (Börzel 2005). As a newer member state, Slovenia to a lesser extent has experienced the functional spill-over effect (Schmitter 1969) where the EU has increased its collaboration in new policy fields during the period of its membership. Simultaneously, our focus is on a small state within the EU that has witnessed its political and administrative structures being fundamentally altered in the past few decades (Steinmetz & Wivel 2010: 3). Although small states have long been largely neglected, the present world order has at least to some extent led to renewed interest in how small states respond to various challenges. At the same time, the challenges and dilemmas small states have traditionally faced are now to some degree also being encountered by other states in the international system (Steinmetz & Wivel 2010: 8).

In this article, we are concerned with how attitudes to the EU have changed in Slovenia from the accession period over the 20 years of its membership, noting that EU policymaking has undergone relatively minor changes in this period. Even though Slovenian political parties and citizens generally supported EU membership in the accession stage, the membership period has been marked by an increase in soft Euroscepticism, distrust in the EU as well as heightened criticism. For the analytical purpose of understanding these changes, we apply the concept of politicisation. Our thesis is that although the relationship

between Slovenia and the EU has become more politicised, this politicisation remains limited and has not provoked opposition or any threat to the very idea of European integration.

We first provide a quick overview of the politicisation concept and the accession process followed by Slovenia that provides context for understanding the politicisation of European integration in Slovenia. Analysis of the change in attitudes to the EU is then followed by considering four periods of EU membership and by observing four dimensions of politicisation: public opinion on the EU, increased visibility of the EU and its policies, stronger engagement with the EU and greater polarisation. The sources of our data are events, strategic documents related to the EU, level of participation in elections to the European Parliament and public opinion data. In the conclusion, we discuss the observed dimensions of politicisation in a newer member state and summarise the main findings.

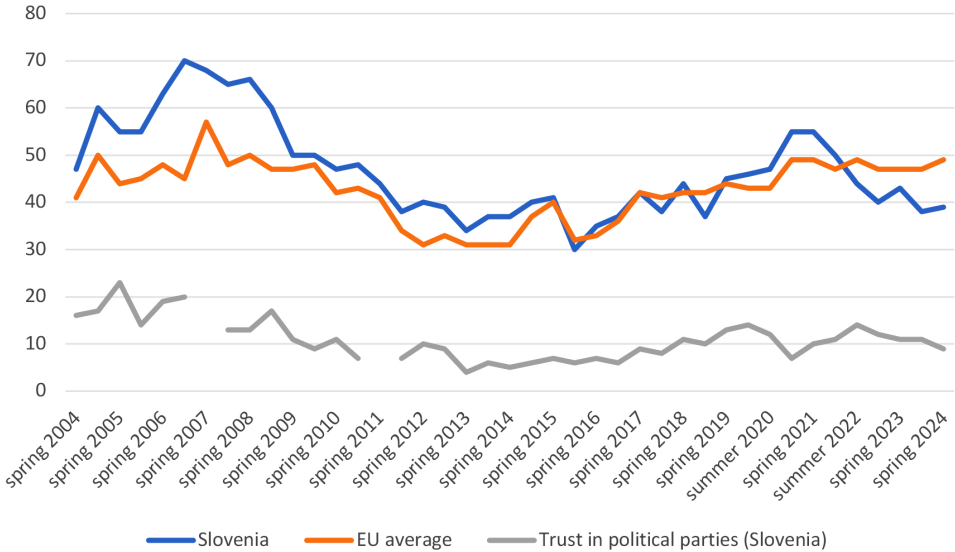
## **A Shining Star Begins to Twinkle (2004–2009)**

### ***Public opinion on the EU***

Slovenia became a member of the EU on 1 May 2004. Along with the broad agreement on EU membership, several other EU-related issues from 2004 onwards also enjoyed general support and were viewed as national projects, including introduction of the euro, joining the Schengen Area and the first Slovenian presidency of the Council of the EU (Krašovec & Lajh 2009). The image of the EU held by the public was very positive. Slovenian citizens had high, above-average trust in the EU (see Figure 1). Slovenian citizens (in 2005) also expressed the absolute highest share of knowledge about the EU compared to other EU citizens (Mamić & Strmšek Mamić 2005). This attitude to the EU characterised the first membership period until the country held the presidency of the Council of the EU in 2008, and was also evident among the political parties that had agreed not to take advantage of inter-party competition on EU matters (Krašovec & Lajh 2024).

For comparison we added data on trust in political parties (see Figure 1). In general, Slovenian citizens express lower levels of trust in political institutions, even European institutions (Uhan & Hafner Fink 2024). But trust in political parties is at the lowest level. Slight increases and decreases in trust mostly reflect the changes in trust in the European Union through time, except for the period of the COVID crisis when trust in the EU increased, while trust in political parties further decreased. With the change of government in 2022, trust in parties slightly increased despite a decrease in trust in the EU.

**Figure 1: Trust in the EU ('tend to trust' in percentage)**



Source: Eurobarometer 2004–2023

### **Visibility of the EU and its policies**

In the first elections to the European Parliament in 2004, Slovenia voted for seven members of the EP (MEPs). Parties' programmes were adapted to the EU membership by including more European topics, which revealed the earliest signs of politicisation notwithstanding that they did not take a prominent position in the manifestos. EU topics were more strongly emphasised in the manifestos of parties that had some EU specialists among their leading members (Krašovec & Lajh 2009). The manifestos of their European counterparts were frequently simply copied and translated into the Slovenian language (Lajh & Krašovec 2019). Moreover, like in other countries, EU-related topics and issues generally remained marginal during the electoral campaign (Krašovec & Lajh 2010). Given that the first elections to the EP took place only a few months before the national parliamentary elections (October 2004), they were perceived as preparation and a forecast for the national elections with the politicisation of national topics (Krašovec & Lajh 2020). The politicisation of national issues during European election campaigns became a strategy for national interparty competition. The proximity of national and European elections affected the election results and put the popularity of political parties to the test even in all future European elections (see Table 1). Voter turnout at these elections was 28.35% (DVK 2024).

**Table 1: Overview of European and national elections throughout the period of EU membership**

European elections	Voter turnout	National elections	Voter turnout
June 2004	28.35%	October 2004	60.65%
June 2009	28.37%	September 2008	63.10%
		December 2011	65.60%
May 2014	24.55%	July 2014	51.73%
May 2019	28.89%	June 2018	52.64%
June 2024	41.60%	April 2022	70.97%

Source: DVK 2024

## ***Engagement with the EU***

Soon after Slovenia had joined the EU, the country continued with its aim of presenting itself as a ‘good student’ (a position already established during the accession process) and sought to become part of the core of older EU member states. In January 2007, after having met all the Maastricht convergence criteria, Slovenia was the first new EU member state to adopt the common currency euro and, in December, to enter the Schengen Area.

Accession to the EU coincided with a change in government in autumn 2004, while the central point of political coordination in the hierarchy of the domestic management of European affairs shifted to the prime minister, where it was finally consolidated during Slovenia’s presidency of the Council of the EU (Lajh 2010). Following Slovenia’s formal entry to the EU, European affairs became ‘internalised’ as a domestic matter (Lajh 2010). The lack of ‘European’ cadre became one of the weakest links in managing EU affairs in Slovenia. This shortage of EU specialists was evident during both the phase of Slovenia’s accession to the EU and the period of EU membership. The situation had become acute by the time Slovenia held the presidency of the Council of the EU in 2008 (Lajh 2012).

An important milestone Slovenia reached during the first mandate of EU membership was the forementioned holding of the presidency of the Council of the EU. As the first member state from Central and Eastern Europe, Slovenia took on this important role. Fink-Hafner and Lajh (2008) evaluated that, despite lacking experience in foreign affairs and diplomacy, Slovenia was efficient with the co-ordination and mobilisation of its resources during the presidency. The preparations were largely based on the pre-established structure for managing EU affairs and did not radically change the model of EU coordination in the Slovenian executive (Fink-Hafner & Lajh 2008). At the same time, surveys among civil servants involved in the Slovenian presidency disclosed that Slovenia did

not take advantage of its size which would have contributed to efficiency, but rather showed problems in internal communication and absence of informal contacts between servants (Kajnič & Svetličič 2010).

## ***Polarisation***

At the time, Slovenia's foreign minister Dimitrij Rupel described the Slovenian presidency as a 'new spring' comparable to the achievements of the country's democratisation and independence (Fink-Hafner & Lajh 2008). Still, the Slovenian government was criticised in domestic circles for not having a more visible role of coordinator and persuader on specific issues, and not assuming a more proactive approach to agenda-setting during the presidency to enforce Slovenian initiatives that would have historically marked the country's presidency (Fink-Hafner & Lajh 2008). On one hand, this demonstrated the greater visibility of EU issues in the Slovenian public space yet, and on the other, considerable polarisation with respect to Slovenia's role in the EU. A more accurate evaluation of the presidency would thus be: 'A star pupil playing it safe in the EU', where Slovenia acted very shyly and subordinated its national project of presidency of the EU (Klemenčič 2007) despite acting responsibly and being successful with management of the agenda (Fink-Hafner & Lajh 2008).

After two years of membership, Slovenian citizens had learned to take advantage of the EU's multilevel structure and turned to EU institutions when national institutions had failed them. This points to the stronger EU engagement of policy actors beyond the political elite. The most noticeable was the case of the 'erased'; namely, when inhabitants of Slovenia from the former Yugoslav republics turned to European institutions to resolve their legal status (Nations in Transit 2007).

## **Economic Crisis and a Drop in Trust in the EU (2009–2014)**

### ***Public opinion on the EU***

The next few years of the country's membership in the EU began with the global financial and economic crisis, which not only affected the EU but the relationship between Slovenia and the EU as well. After all, Slovenia was hit harder by the crisis with poor public finance conditions and increasing public borrowing compared to other new members (Svetličič 2024). The economic and financial crisis strengthened Eurosceptic feelings among Slovenians, yet also further politicised EU issues in the Slovenian public space. Additionally, the effect of overly high and naive expectations towards EU membership and the resulting disappointment was also shown. This was revealed by a sharp decrease in trust in the EU among Slovenians. While trust in the EU remained above-average, it moved closer to the EU average (see Figure 1).



## **Visibility of the EU and its policies**

During the 2009 EP elections, criticism levelled at the EU by some Slovenian parties was mostly related to the economic and financial crisis, austerity measures and pressures on small states, as well as the initiative for a more responsible and socially oriented market economy in the EU (Krašovec & Deželan 2014), which brought polarised views on the EU's role to the surface. In general, the campaign remained concentrated on national issues (Krašovec & Lajh 2010) and important topics like the Lisbon Treaty or attitudes regarding further EU enlargement were not debated (Fink-Hafner & Deželan 2016). Nevertheless, the visibility of EU issues remained limited given that, besides the parties, the mass media also did not frame EU topics as important during the election campaign while national themes overshadowed EU topics (Krašovec & Lajh 2009). The election results showed that voters were especially inclined to already established MEPs and voted more for the candidate than for their party. Turnout in European elections remained at 28.37% (DVK 2024).

## **Engagement with the EU**

The effects of the economic crisis became quite noticeable in 2012 when Slovenia began to struggle with rising public debt and a collapsing banking sector. The government was under pressure from the European Commission to accept certain austerity measures and reforms connected with managing the impacts of the financial crisis, which increased the visibility of EU institutions yet also raised further negative attitudes concerning the EU. Predictions started to circulate that Slovenia would be the sixth EU member state to require a bailout (Lajh 2013). Slovenia ultimately managed to avoid an international bailout by adopting a series of austerity measures and structural reforms, with the European Commission finally allowing Slovenia to leave the EU's excessive deficit procedure in June 2015 (Lovec 2017).

## **Polarisation**

The EU was nonetheless perceived as a threat by some political parties during the national electoral campaign in 2011 when parties warned that Slovenia had to solve its fiscal problems or else the European *troika*, made up of the European Commission, the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund, would impose the necessary measures (Krašovec & Haughton 2011). In this way EU affairs became exploited by political parties in their national competition and for their party interests. Although Eurosceptic positions among the public were expressed during the economic crisis, within the EU trust remained higher in Slovenia than in certain other EU member states (see Figure 1). In the next national elections in 2014, the campaign was still characterised by the Slovenia-

-EU relationship. Just prior to the elections, the European Commission issued 'recommendations' for Slovenia such as on the consolidation of public finances, further privatisation and the fight against corruption with deadlines to tackle the national debt and economic burden (Krašovec & Lajh 2020).

## **Loss of Identity and Searching for a New Role in the EU (2014–2019)**

### ***Public opinion on the EU***

Following the economic crisis, the migration crisis further shaped Slovenians' attitudes concerning the EU and polarised both the public and the political parties. Between October 2015 and March 2016, almost 480,000 migrants crossed the Schengen border between Croatia and Slovenia. With the EU's final assistance at the border and provision of additional funds, the situation slowly began to improve and normalise with the closure of the Western Balkans corridor (Haček 2016; Lovec 2017). Civil society, however, remained critical of the EU's asylum and migration policy for being unable to cope with the crisis. Upon establishing control on the inner border between Slovenia and Austria, which continues nowadays due to illegal migration, Slovenia faced another unpleasant experience in the EU. In conversations with the EU, Slovenian politicians and MEPs (especially Tanja Fajon, the current minister of foreign and European affairs) have since been trying to negotiate an end to border control. These efforts have thus far not been successful.

With the migration/refugee wave into the EU in 2015 and the *de facto* decay of the EU's migration policy, Eurosceptic feelings developed once again (Krašovec & Lajh 2020). Trust in the EU fell. It was close to the EU average, and in autumn 2015, autumn 2017 and autumn 2018 even below EU average (see Figure 1). During the electoral campaign for the national elections in 2018, the Slovenian Democratic Party (SDS), a member of the European People's Party (EPP), which had received the most support but was unable to form a coalition, employed anti-migration and refugee rhetoric, aligning itself with the ideas of Hungary's leader Orbán and criticising the EU's policy of quotas and liberal migration policies for their impact on the national culture and security in Slovenia (Krašovec & Lajh 2020). The party's anti-migration rhetoric continues even today.

Alongside the migration crisis, the absence of EU support for implementing the arbitration judgment concerning the border between Slovenia and Croatia (Lovec 2018), and the delegated act of the European Commission that allowed Croatia to produce and sell wine bearing the name 'Teran', even though Slovenia holds a certificate of protected designation of origin in the EU (MMC 2019a), also contributed to disappointment in Slovenia and the rise of Eurosceptic attitudes among the public (Svetličič 2024). Such instances are clear cases of

top-down politicisation (Bressanelli, Koop & Reh 2020) where attitudes held by the EU impact public opinion and national politics.

### ***Visibility of the EU and its policies***

During the campaign for the 2014 EP elections, and contrasting with past EP election campaigns, among others, some European issues were raised that revealed the parties' polarised positions on them. Something similar could also be noticed in other countries. However, EU issues were not addressed in a substantive way (Krašovec & Lajh 2020). Both the public as well as the parties were more focused on the upcoming national parliamentary elections in July 2014. Voter turnout for these elections reached its lowest point at just 24.55% (DVK 2024).

### ***Engagement with the EU***

Despite growing dissatisfaction with the EU, Slovenia continued with its policy of having no clear strategy in the EU except to present itself as being committed to the idea of a united Europe. The third mandate of Slovenia's membership in the EU was characterised by the absence of a clear goal for Slovenia in the European integration. It seems as if Slovenia has become lost in the EU with a lack of visions and ambitions concerning its role. Domestic circles were critical of this lack of political orientation since this has contributed to the passive role played by Slovenia and its political actors in the EU. Participation of Slovenian officials at meetings in Brussels only when necessary speaks against a proactive role of Slovenia in EU affairs (Svetličič 2024). Even today this situation has hardly changed. However, more likely than in previous periods, the Slovenian public and mass media were expressing stronger interest in EU issues and affairs, which also demonstrates the greater visibility of EU issues and the public's higher engagement and mobilisation with respect to the EU.

In the document 'Principal positions of the Republic of Slovenia regarding key substantive areas for discussion on the future of the European Union' (2017), the country declared that: 'The EU is a fundamental development environment for Slovenia. Slovenia has always been committed to a strong, cohesive and unified EU that can effectively address key challenges and threats.' Slovenia believes that the EU and its policies will need to consolidate and deepen in the near future. Meanwhile, Slovenia's strategic interest is to remain anchored to the most closely (geostrategically) connected part of the EU, namely the core EU (UKOM 2017).<sup>2</sup> After Jean Claude Juncker presented five possible scenarios for

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2 Apart from Slovenia's strategic interest in being close to the core of Europe, other preferences were also expressed, such as: 1) striving to continue the enlargement process in the Western Balkans region; 2) supporting the EU's joint response to the migration issue, both externally and internally; 3) the

the EU's development, Slovenia expressed its ambition to remain in the circle of more integrated member states. In early 2017, a few Slovenian intellectuals even wrote and signed the 'Ljubljana initiative' to commence the process of adopting a new EU Constitution with the aim of protecting the European idea and building it in all its dimensions. The initiative was also supported by then Slovenian President Borut Pahor (MMC 2017). Later, Prime Minister Marjan Šarec, who led the government between 2018 and 2020, showed little interest in the EU and in 2019 even rejected the EP when he was invited to give a speech at the plenary session as one of Europe's current leaders. This decision was not well accepted among the Slovenian public and media (MMC 2019b).

## ***Polarisation***

During the 2014 European elections some soft Euroscepticism was evident among new, more radical left parties that were particularly critical of the policy of austerity (Krašovec & Deželan 2014). One new candidate list that appeared at the elections was 'Dream job' (in Slovene 'Sanjska služba'), organised as a sarcastic response to Slovenian politics and the attitude towards European elections and may be seen as indicating the stronger 'bottom-up politicisation' (Bressanelli, Koop & Reh 2020) of the EU, especially among citizens. The aim of this candidate list was to replace politicians with ordinary people who would advocate for the common good. It was some sort of social experiment that could allow a candidate to be selected in a draw for a dream job in the EP. All candidates on the election list had won their place after being drawn randomly from a set of names. Some candidates admitted they had decided to participate in this experiment just for fun (MMC 2014). Still, voters showed little support for the project, which received only 3.56% of the votes (DVK 2024).

Political affairs further politicised the EU among citizens. The first European commissioner from Slovenia, Janez Potočnik, who held this position for two mandates, was no longer on the government's radar for a third mandate. Instead, Prime Minister Alenka Bratušek saw an opportunity for a new job position and nominated herself as European commissioner, which attracted the disapproval of both the public and her political colleagues. Critics claimed that Bratušek had struck a deal with the president of the European Commission Jean-Claude Juncker who had nominated her as a candidate for vice president of the European Commission. Yet, Bratušek did not receive national support as candidate and did not pass a hearing of the EP. The new government of Miro Cerar, despite the disagreement of other parties making up the government, nominated Violeta Bulc as the commissioner.

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Schengen Area must remain an uncontrolled area along the internal borders; and 4) in the debate on the EU's future priority should be given to the question of how to tackle common challenges effectively over institutional issues.

## **Political Instability and Effects of the Governing Party on the Relationship with the EU (2019–2024)**

### ***Public opinion on the EU***

The last period of EU membership has been denoted by changing governments, stronger polarisation among national political parties and the consequent shifting of Slovenia's position in the Council. In this timeframe, national politics and the results of elections exerted bigger effects on the relationship with the EU than in the earlier periods. Conflictual and polarised attitudes concerning the EU also started to be reflected in public opinion on the EU. After the initial high trust in the EU during the first years of membership, we can observe a further drop in trust in the last period under scrutiny. Since summer 2022, trust in the EU has remained below the EU average. Weaker support to EU membership is expressed by citizens with lower socioeconomic status (Uhan & Hafner Fink 2024).

Nevertheless, the EU's role in eliminating the damage caused by recent natural disasters in Slovenia might again lead to increased trust in the EU. The most devastating were the biggest fire in the history of Slovenia (in the Karst region) in the summer of 2022 and the biggest floods in the history of Slovenia in the summer of 2023. In both cases, Slovenia applied for assistance from the EU Solidarity Fund and help through the European Civil Protection Mechanism. In the summer of 2023, the president of the Commission also visited Slovenia to witness the damage caused by the severe floods, which raised the visibility of the EU. At the same time Slovenian citizens felt close to the EU and express European identity regardless of their left or right political preference (Uhan & Hafner Fink 2024).

### ***Visibility of the EU and its policies***

The last elections to the EP saw an increase in voter turnout compared to the previous elections to the EP. Voter turnout was the highest in 2019 at 28.9%. However, Slovenia remained one of the countries with the lowest voter turnouts, with only Czechia and Slovakia recording a lower result. The campaign for the 2019 EP elections did not feature any clear standpoint of the parties. Issues debated in the media primarily related to migration, Brexit, the arbitration agreement between Slovenia and Croatia, populism and certain other policies such as the environment, food safety, political corruption and the economy (Krašovec & Lajh 2020). The election results reconfirmed that, when it comes to European elections, Slovenians are more likely to support an individual candidate than a political party and ignore the party's position on EU affairs. In this aspect, elections to the EP are, besides the low voter turnout, also perceived very differently by voters than at national or local elections.

The nomination of Janez Lenarčič as the new European commissioner also revealed the greater visibility of EU issues in Slovenia and demonstrated the country's tendencies to become an active part of the EU, not just an observer. Namely, when Lenarčič was assigned with the portfolio of crisis management in the European Commission, which (at the first glance) was not received with enthusiasm since many had wanted 'a more important portfolio', it was shown that the Slovenian public can express stronger interest also in EU politics.

Elections to the EP in 2024 attracted record high voter turnout in Slovenia. However, 41.60% voter turnout could be attributed mainly to the simultaneous implementation of three consultative referendums on euthanasia, preferential vote and hemp. Implementation of these referendums was supposed to attract voters of left political parties to the polls. Slovenians voted for nine members of the European parliament among 11 political parties and lists (record low). Pre-election debates addressed mostly the topics of migration policy, green passage, conflicts in Gaza and Ukraine, EU foreign and defence policy, Slovenian recognition of Palestine and EU enlargement (Novak 2024). The nomination of a new European commissioner again was not without complications. The Freedom Movement party nominated Tomaž Vesel, former president of the Court of Auditors, as a candidate for European commissioner before the European elections. But only in September Vesel resigned as candidate, allegedly due to Ursula von der Leyen's request for a new candidate from Slovenia. The Freedom Movement party quickly found a new, female candidate in Marta Kos, a former vice president of the party. The Slovenian candidate for commissioner was assigned a portfolio of enlargement, which the coalition evaluated as important, but the opposition evaluated as irrelevant (MMC 2024).

## ***Engagement with the EU***

Throughout the country's membership in the EU, political parties have changed their attitudes to the EU. While especially in the pre-membership phase and the first periods of membership political parties acted united with respect to EU issues, the recent change in political power on the domestic level has also brought about changes in positions on the EU.

While in the early 2010s Slovenia expressed an interest in joining the 'France-German train' and between 2014 and 2018 it more strongly tried to connect with the politics of Benelux, between 2020 and 2022 the governing political elite began to show greater support for the positions of the Visegrad states (Slovakia, Czechia, Hungary, Poland) in the EU especially in relation to migration policy (Krašovec & Novak 2021). This changed again from 2022 onwards (with the win of the Freedom Movement party over SDS at the national elections), when the minister of foreign and European affairs expressed that Slovenia was returning to the core countries of Europe, its alliances with Germany, France

and Italy, as well as strengthening its relationship with countries with which it shares common European values (MMC 2023). The reason for re-orientation towards the core of Europe was also the Visegrad countries' different position on the Ukrainian conflict, where Slovenia declared clear support for Ukraine like most EU member states, while the Visegrad countries (especially Poland and Hungary) took a different stand. The new government also expressed more interest in EU affairs, also visible in renaming the Ministry of Foreign Affairs into the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs, stressing the importance of the EU for Slovenia. In the latter half of 2021, Slovenia held the presidency of the Council of the EU for the second time.

For the first time, 'Declaration on the guidelines for the functioning of the Republic of Slovenia in the institutions of the European Union' was adopted for a longer period, from 2021 to 2024, covering the entire mandate of the European Commission. Previously, declarations were accepted for a period of one to two years. The document is supposed to set political guidelines for easier planning and greater stability and efficiency of the work of line ministries. Six priority areas were defined for Slovenia, which included the sustainable recovery and stability of the economy, the strengthening of economic and social cohesion in the EU, the protection of citizens and freedoms in times of crisis, the promotion of the interests and values of the EU, the strengthening of the common foreign policy, and the more effective functioning of the EU.

## ***Polarisation***

The period of the COVID-19 crisis was predominantly marked in Slovenia by a change in government from a left to a right-wing populist government, which also brought about changes to Slovenia's position in the Council of the EU as well as the communication strategy between Slovenian politicians and EU institutions. The most noteworthy change was that political leaders started to show greater support for the politics of the Visegrad states. In August 2020, the parliamentary group of the opposition Social Democrats (SD) even demanded the convening of an emergency meeting of the parliamentary Committee for European Union Affairs to discuss the positions shared by Prime Minister Janez Janša at the EU summit in Brussels in July 2020. At the summit, Janša supported the positions of Hungary and Poland, which demonstrated a clear departure from the rule of law. The SD believed that the prime minister had represented new foreign policy orientations contrary to the declaration on foreign policy and 'a departure from the core EU countries'.

An example of the evident change in the Slovenian government's orientation in the EU also came in November 2020 when Prime Minister Janša sent a letter to the leaders of the EU where he called for a return to the agreement reached at the July EU summit on the financial framework for tackling the pandemic,

which he said was being undermined by the recent agreement between the Council and the European Parliament on making the use of funds conditional on the rule of law. Individual (almost private) letters from Slovenian politicians to the EU not familiar with the relevant national political institutions became almost a standard government practice between 2020 and 2022. In May 2020, Minister for Foreign Affairs Anže Logar sent a controversial letter to European Commissioner for Justice Didier Reynders in which he drew attention to several decisions by the Constitutional Court that had not been implemented. He also warned that many lawsuits were taking an unreasonably long time.

Further, the prime minister's appearance in the debate on Slovenia within the European Parliament group for monitoring respect for democracy (March 2021) featured a dispute with the leader of the Sophie in 't Veld political group in the European Parliament regarding the broadcast of a video on attacks on journalists in Slovenia. In addition, at the start of Slovenia's presidency of the Council of the EU, Prime Minister Janša started a new conflict when showing a photo of a picnic at which Slovenian judges were present alongside two Slovenian MEPs – Tanja Fajon and Milan Brglez from the Social Democrats. The photo was allegedly used as proof that the national judicial system is connected to the SD party. Vice President of the European Commission Frans Timmermans was deeply offended by this act and refused to appear in the group photo. The situation further deteriorated when Minister of Interior Affairs Aleš Hojs made a comment on pigs in European politics. While it is unclear to whom he was referring with this remark critics all believed that this was a very inappropriate communication by the minister.

Following an accusation of the backsliding of democracy in Slovenia, a delegation of the EP Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs visited Slovenia in October 2021 to establish the facts regarding the state of democracy in Slovenia. The committee delegation expressed its deep concern with the atmosphere of hostility, mistrust and deep polarisation in the country, which had undermined trust in and between various public bodies. According to the report prepared by the committee, many interviewees had expressed concern or described government pressures on public institutions and the media, including through smear campaigns, defamation, criminal investigations and strategic lawsuits against public participation. The delegation also expressed its regret that during its visit to Slovenia it was impossible to exchange opinions with Prime Minister Janša or any of the ministers. It also highlighted the prime minister's social media attacks on the mission (MMC 2021a; 2021b; 2021c; 2021d).

The last observed period was also characterised by national elections in 2022 that led to a change in government from a populist right-wing party to the newly established populist Freedom Movement party. In their analysis of electoral programmes at the national elections in 2022, Krašovec and Lajh (2024) showed that positions on the EU had become more polarised while the exposure of EU issues and policies had grown, while they were also increasingly framed in



interparty competition in Slovenia. Such changes were noticed along with the increased Eurosceptic positions on the EU that often remained constructive criticism of the functioning of the EU. Since more polarised and Eurosceptic positions were expressed by oppositional parties, radical and populist parties from the fringes of the party arena (Krašovec & Lajh 2024), these views did not necessarily polarise public opinion.

## Conclusion

In our analysis of the increased politicisation of the EU in Slovenia during the 20 years of its membership, we considered four dimensions: public opinion on the EU; increased *visibility* of the EU and its policies; increased *engagement* with the EU; and the state of *polarisation*. The accession stage and initial period of EU membership were characterised with considerable support for the European integration. While Slovenian parliamentary parties almost unanimously backed the country's membership in the EU, Eurosceptic parties were more the exception than the rule and hardly had any success, while Slovenian citizens were expressing one of the highest levels of trust in the EU. In the following years, Eurosceptic feelings started to appear, the EU membership gradually became more visible although national issues also dominated the European election campaign, the Slovenian public gradually began to express stronger criticism of EU affairs and demanded a more active role for Slovenia in the EU. However, the absence of a clear strategy and role for Slovenia in the EU was very noticeable as well (see Table 2 for an overview). During the latest period, frequent changes of government have led to a further polarisation of attitudes regarding the EU and changes in Slovenia's position in the Council. Slovenia moved from aligning itself with the core EU member states to the low countries, the Visegrad countries and the core EU member states once again. During the populist right-wing government, the Slovenia-EU relationship was the most conflictual. In that period, the European level was used to resolve national conflicts.

After almost 20 years of EU membership, it seems that EU affairs are being more consistently acknowledged as internal affairs. The Slovenian public is primarily interested in Slovenia's role in the EU and demands that it be more active, yet at the same time it is also more critical of the EU. This confirms our thesis that the relationship between the EU and Slovenia has become more politicised, although the level of politicisation has remained limited in that it has not led to hard Euroscepticism or questioning of the country's membership in the EU. One of the reasons for the smaller extent of politicisation is that Slovenia perceives itself as a small and newer member state and hence as not being capable of steering the EU (Kauppi & Wiesner 2018). In the future, Slovenia needs a clear and long-term strategy in the EU if it wants to establish a visible role and position in EU policymaking.

**Table 2: Overview of the politicisation of European issues in Slovenia**

Dimensions of politicisation	2004–2009	2009–2014	2014–2019	2019–2024
Public opinion on the EU	High, above-average trust in the EU	Above-average trust in the EU	Average to below-average trust in the EU	Below-average trust in the EU since 2022
<i>Visibility of the EU and its policies</i>	While EU topics are marginal, the Presidency increases visibility of the EU  Turnout at European elections is low	Visibility of EU topics remains limited, the Lisbon Treaty and EU enlargement are not debated  Turnout at European elections remains low	The Slovenian public and media express stronger interest in EU topics  Lowest turnout at European elections	EU-related topics debated during the European election campaign Considerable media interest in the portfolio given to the commissioner from Slovenia  Turnout at European elections is still low, but slightly increasing
<i>Engagement with the EU</i>	Engagement with the EU concentrated on meeting milestones: entering Schengen, adopting the euro, holding the Presidency of the Council of the EU	Engagement with EU institutions noticeable through attempts to solve the financial crisis	Lack of a clear role for Slovenia in the EU; the passive role of Slovenian and political actors in the EU	Slovenia's position in the Council starts to depend on the governing political party  The Ministry of Foreign Affairs is renamed to the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs, stressing the importance of the EU for Slovenia
<i>Polarisation</i>	Unified support among parties for EU membership, polarised views on Slovenia's role in the EU	The EU perceived as a threat and some parties express Eurosceptic attitudes regarding the EU's financial and monetary policy	New parties express Euroscepticism and criticism of the austerity measures.  Public criticism is noticed concerning the procedure of selecting a new commissioner from Slovenia One political list at European elections sarcastically frames the MEP position as a dream job	Positions on the EU become more polarised and EU issues and policies receive greater exposure  Several instances of conflict between individual Slovenian politicians and individual EU politicians

Source: Author

To sum up, in this article we have shown that despite Slovenia's initial strong support for the EU, the latter has become more politicised over the last 20 years. We observed growing Eurosceptic positions that strengthened especially during the global crisis and conflictual events, but also growing polarisation seen from top-down as well as bottom-up perspectives. The latter were particularly noticed through increased visibility, polarisation and engagement with European issues. This confirms that Slovenian attitudes to the EU have changed in the past 20 years, especially in the direction of increased politicisation. Still, the change in attitude could also be understood as beneficial since 'democracy without criticism is hollow' (Wiesner 2023).

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