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**The EP Elections of 2014 – the
impact of the
Spitzenkandidaten on
politicisation.**

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1. Introduction - "This time it's different"?

"The elections to the EP fail as instruments of democracy as they do not adequately connect people's policy preferences to the decision making processes in the EP and to the public policy of the European Union"
(Franklin and Hobolt 2011: 72).

Criticism such as the one brought forward by Franklin and Hobolt (2011) regarding the functioning and role of the European Parliament (EP) is not rare. European elections are second-order elections and thus less important than national elections because there is less at stake (Reif, Schmitt 1980)[1]. Several scholars have asked to put the office of the Commission President to election to raise the stakes (Føllesdal, Hix, 2006; Hobolt and Tilley 2014; Hix 1998, 2008, 2009). Having candidates compete for the presidency would be a first step to open politics of the European Union (EU) to politicisation (Hix 2008). Politicisation can be understood as the increase of salience of an issue in the public debate and increasing polarisation of the positions concerning the issue (Hutter, Grande, Kriesi 2016). This politicisation would alleviate the perceived democratic deficit of the EU in two ways. First, the personalised competition of different visions about European integration would finally give the elections a more European character. It would better inform and mobilise citizens and thus create a real mandate for policy change (Føllesdal, Hix 2006: 534). Second, it would enable citizens to hold their representatives accountable (Hobolt, Tilley 2014: 126). In the 2014 elections this suggestion was implemented. "This time it's different", claimed the EP before the 2014 EP elections (EP 2014). The institutional innovation of the introduction of the lead candidates - "Spitzenkandidaten" was next to the Euro-crisis a development that promised to change the nature of the 2014 European elections fundamentally.

This is why this text seeks to analyse the following: Did the introduction of the Spitzenkandidaten lead to a politicisation of public debate during the 2014 EP election campaigns in comparison to the preceding EP elections of 2009? This shall be done by analysing the to date unpublished media content analysis data set "EuroPol" of Braun and Grande. Politicisation shall be measured in terms of salience and polarisation of public debate in four West-European member states: United Kingdom, France, Germany, Austria. The dataset consists of the content

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[1] For an overview of the second-order literature see also: Corbett 2014, Franklin, van der Eijk 1996, Hix and Marsh 2007, 2011, Hobolt and Wittrock 2010, Marsh, 1998, Marsh and Mikhaylov 2010, Niedermayer 2014, Schmitt 2005, Schmitt, Teperoglou 2015, Schmitt, Toygür 2017, Träger 2016.

analysis of two qualitative newspapers in each country (e.g. Süddeutsche Zeitung and Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung in Germany) analysed by the core-sentence method.

The Spitzenkandidaten were an important attempt to cope with the second-order character of European elections and to contribute to higher legitimising potential of the European institutions and policy-outcomes. Therefore, it is of a high social importance to evaluate their performance. This has already been done in a broad variety of aspects. This work provides some new insights by evaluating in a comparative manner the impact of the Spitzenkandidaten on public debate in several countries. Furthermore, it measures the impact on politicisation of the public debate concerning the EU. Being of great importance to further legitimise the EU, the impact on public debate is usually assessed as a prerequisite for the future of European Integration (Hix 2008).

This text is structured as follows. First, the current state of research that has evaluated the Spitzenkandidaten's success will be presented (Chapter 2). The next section seeks to provide a theoretical framework for the analysis. The theory of second-order elections will be presented in more detail and an initial analysis will be provided about whether the 2014 EP elections followed these second-order effects (Chapter 3.1). Afterwards recent critique to the EU's democratic deficit, its accountability deficit (Chapter 3.2) and some suggestions what should be done to cope with it (Chapter 3.3), will be formulated. Evolving politicisation as one mode of reducing a democratic deficit on the input side, shall be defined and operationalised (Chapter 4). Afterwards, the research design will be explained, and the control variables will be presented. Finally, the results will be presented (Chapter 5) and interpreted in light of a democratic deficit and the future of the European Union's politicisation (Chapter 6).

The overall results show that the effects of the Spitzenkandidaten had no influence on the politicisation of the public sphere in 2014. Against all theoretical assumptions, there was no increase in politicisation from 2009 to 2014. Salience of EU issues decreased and even though there was a slight increase in polarisation none of the tested factors (Spitzenkandidaten, EU-sceptic parties or the Euro crisis) had any major impact on this. This leads to the conclusion that even though there might be a growing politicisation of concerning European integration in general (Hutter, Grande, Kriesi 2016), this did not result in a spill-over effect into political contest by the Spitzenkandidaten during the 2014 European elections and thus had no impact on the general nature of the European elections.

2. State of the Art – The Spitzenkandidaten's (non-)impact

When the Spitzenkandidaten were introduced, hopes were high that this would be the first step to democratic politics in the EU (Hix 2008: 164). A change in the formulation of the Lisbon treaty now connected the European Council's right to nominate the President of the Commission with the requirement to "[t]ak[e] into account the elections to the EP" (TEU 17:7) before nominating a candidate. Hence the EP used the opportunity to ask the European party families to nominate lead candidates and to ask the "candidates to play a leading role in the parliamentary electoral campaign, in particular by personally presenting their programme in all Member states" (EP 2012: 2). This reinterpretation of the EP, which was legally questionable (Christiansen 2016: 995), has been finally accepted by the Council and created a precedent.

In consequence each pan-European party family nominated one or two candidates to compete for the Presidency of the Commission: Jean Claude Juncker for the European People's Party, Martin Schulz for the Party of European Socialists, Guy Verhofstadt as candidate of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe, ALDE, Ska Keller and José Bové for the European Green Party, and Alexis Tsipras for the Party of the European Left. They all together held a budget of €4.5 million. Regarding this rather low amount they managed a considerable presence on the ground, visiting EU countries, and online, with Schulz as the altogether most engaged (Schmitt et al. 2015: 5f). The candidates also participated in TV debates between April 9 and May 20 2014 which were broadcasted on Euronews, the internet and selected national TV channels, reaching 15% of European citizens who saw at least one of them (ibid.).

The hope was that the Spitzenkandidaten would create a better electoral connection and thus an increase in the legitimacy of "Parliament and the Commission by connecting their respective elections more directly to the choice of the voters" (EP 2012: 2). This was supported by the European Commission in the hope that "this [would] increase the legitimacy of the President of the Commission, the accountability of the Commission to the EP and the European electorate and, more generally, increase the democratic legitimacy of the whole decision-making process in the Union" (COM 2013: 17).

There is a range of literature evaluating the performance of the Spitzenkandidaten. In summary, the effects of the Spitzenkandidaten are evaluated as being minor in all respects. The turnout remained low at 42.61% and voting still followed the second-order mechanism (Christiansen 2016: 998). Some conclude that this is only due to a missing framework and experience in this first try that will have to be established in the following elections while others doubt that the Spitzenkandidaten have the power to establish such a framework and that this deficit lies in the

nature of the EU (Hobolt, Tilley 2014a: 150ff). The following presentation of the research is structured by the different areas that were hoped to be influenced by the Spitzenkandidaten.

Party Level

Parties are the main political actors at the European level (Hix and Lord 1997). In previous European elections the campaigns were very compartmentalised (Christiansen 2016: 997), varying from member state to member state (Guinaudeau, Persico 2013: 163). So the expectation was that the Spitzenkandidaten would strengthen European wide collaboration of the European parties to make a common and coherent election campaign (Føllesdal, Hix 2006: 556). It was crucial for the success of the Spitzenkandidaten System that "national parties would […] direct voters' attention to the candidates for European Commission President, and to the policies that those candidates propose" (Franklin 2014: 10).

This was not the case. Even though the Euro-parties strengthened their own position at the EU level through the process of the Spitzenkandidaten nomination (Put et al. 2016), there were no signs of a centrally organised European wide campaign. The EP election campaigns were still dominated by national parties and national politicians (Hobolt 2015: 9). Only few parties put emphasis on the Spitzenkandidaten system or the candidates in their manifesto (Braun, Popa forthcoming). Those who did put any emphasis on the Spitzenkandidaten, only dedicated them little space – even if they were part of a European party that nominated a candidate. They were at least more likely to put emphasis on the Spitzenkandidat if he was from their home country but "a political debate on [the Spitzenkandidaten] – initiated by the political parties – simply did not take place" (Braun, Popa forthcoming: 5). An analysis testing the appearance of the Spitzenkandidaten in the online campaign of parties on Facebook – a platform characterised by highly personalised party strategies, come to a similar conclusion. The attention of political parties to the Spitzenkandidaten and their efforts to put them in the spotlight of their campaigns was very low (Braun, Schwarzbözl unpublished). Possible expectations on the national parties to personalise their election campaigns to the Spitzenkandidaten by the strategic consideration of strengthening the relevance of the elections and the electoral connection by making the candidates visible to their voters, are not fulfilled.

Media coverage

"The intermediary role of the mass media is of crucial importance" (Schulz 2016: 24) in a complex system of governance such as the EU, to create a link between the European institutions and the citizens by informing about politics. In European elections, the media covered less extensively (ibid.) and was accused of not providing sufficient information (Hobolt Tilley 2014).

Hix formulates the expectation that the personalisation would encourage the reporting of the media (Hix 2008: 164). There are two aspects of interest here: the mere appearance and visibility of the Spitzenkandidaten in the media and the informing and mobilising effect of the highly praised TV debates through personalisation.

There is a growing visibility of the Spitzenkandidaten after the debates and closer to the elections themselves, with Schulz as the most visible actor followed by Juncker (Gattermann 2015: 219). Leidecker and Wilke (2016a: 228) state that 2014 was, according to their analysis of the German media coverage of the European elections, clearly different from previous election coverage not only in the scope but also in the intensity of the issues concerning Europe. Since the introduction of the European elections in 1979 the coverage has increased significantly and the grade of personalisation of the media coverage has nearly doubled from 2009 to 2014. In a second publication Leidecker and Wilke (2016b: 131) test the model of second rate coverage – the coverage of second-order elections compared to first order elections is less extensive and prominent– in comparing the German federal elections to European elections. Especially in 2014, they find a tendency to convergence. Reports on the EP elections were broader, more intense and personalised than ever before with a high focus on the Spitzenkandidaten. Therefore, even though the 2014 elections to the EP remained second-order, the coverage did not remain second rate. These results point out that the Spitzenkandidaten may have had an influence on media coverage in Germany, but these results cannot be applied to other countries. Another qualitative media content analysis by Schulze (2016: 31) reaches the conclusion that compared to the previous elections the media coverage has increased to an amount that seems sufficiently high to inform and mobilise the voters, but she finds scarcely signs that this was due to the presence of the Spitzenkandidaten as she finds no personalising effects. The Spitzenkandidaten appeared more as a side issue and not as the centre of attention and were most visible in the German press followed by France, while they remained nearly unmentioned in British newspapers (ibid.: 32).

The second important aspect concerning media coverage are the highly-praised TV debates. Maier, Faas, Rittberger et al. (2017: 17) find that the debate had an informing character that increased the awareness of the importance of the EU. Unfortunately, range of the debates was low as only 15% of the European citizens were watching at least once (Schmitt, Hobolt and Popa 2015: 5).

Information of the citizens and turnout

Personalisation was hoped to create identifiable leaders (Schmitt et al. 2015: 5) and that their competition would bring distant Brussel's bureaucracy (Hobolt 2015: 8) closer to the citizens

and that it would mobilise voters to take a higher interest in European elections and increase their probability to turn out (Schmitt et al. 2015: 2; Schulz 2016: 24).

Candidate recognition indeed positively affected the likelihood of citizens to participate. Citizens who knew the candidates were more likely to turnout (Schmitt et al. 2015: 17). But this finding is a fairly minor effect as only a minority of the voters were able to identify the Spitzenkandidaten correctly (19% Juncker, 17% Schulz, 9% Verhofstadt). Furthermore, the Spitzenkandidaten led not to a personalisation of voting behaviour (Gattermann, de Vreese 2017). Spitzenkandidaten were found to have a polarising effect: to those citizens opposed to European integration the awareness of the Spitzenkandidaten only reinforced their opposition while those who are in favour of European integration also support the introduction of the Spitzenkandidaten as an increase in democratisation (Rohrschneider, Schmitt, Popa 2015: 476). In sum: "The majority of Europeans did not vote in these elections, let alone take an interest in the choice between the specific candidates" (Hobolt 2014: 1536).

Politicisation and Europeanisation of the debate

By competing with their political programmes, the Spitzenkandidaten were firstly expected to raise the degree of politicisation and secondly set European issues on the agenda. This increase of salience and polarisation of the European Integration's issue would reinforce the public sphere and thus fulfil the claims of the input-side legitimacy theories. The European issue might override national borders and traditional cleavages to create a coherent pan-European debate. This Europeanisation of European elections would finally give them their own character and relieve them from their second-order character.

"'Europe' was more salient than in previous elections albeit for reasons that were entirely unconnected to the treaty modification of the commission president" (Hobolt 2014: 1534). Despite the efforts of the Spitzenkandidaten to run a campaign that was "distinctively European in its outlook", the details of their policy programmes played hardly any role in the elections (ibid.: 1538).

The new procedure of appointment had no impact on politicisation of the EP elections and did not bear the potential of "party-political competition or a genuine choice between rival political programmes" (Christiansen 2016: 1007). It rather led to an institutional politicisation as it reallocated the inter-institutional balance of power positively for the parliament in regard to the Council (Christiansen 2016) than a party-ideological politicisation (Heidbreder, Auracher 2014: 230). The transformation of the European elections ensuring the choice between alternative visions for Europe and hold the executive to account has not taken place in the elections

and might be a process that takes some time, as the Spitzenkandidaten system still is in its infancy (Hobolt 2014: 1538).

Relevance

However, there is a core question that has not been answered sufficiently in the literature by now, namely whether the introduction of the Spitzenkandidaten in fact led to the goal formulated by Hix (2008) – the politicisation of EU politics through electoral contest of different candidates competing for the voters with their different visions of the EU. This leads to the research question this thesis seeks to answer:

> *Did the introduction of the Spitzenkandidaten lead to a politicisation of public debate during the 2014 EP election campaigns in comparison to the preceding EP elections of 2009?*

In the aforementioned literature, there has been media content analysis about the visibility of the Spitzenkandidaten in the media coverage, their impact on changing and increasing media coverage by personalisation. But e.g. Leidecker and Wilke (2016 a, b) only explore Germany, Gattermann (2015) only had an overall case volume of 470 articles and neither Gattermann (2015) nor Schulze (2016) have collected any cases to compare e.g. lead candidates in national campaigns. This is where this work can contribute, as the data set analysed enables it to compare to previous elections, to analyse the mere presence of the Spitzenkandidaten in the electoral campaign, to get a deeper insight about the character of appearance of the Spitzenkandidaten in the public debate. The Spitzenkandidaten were an important attempt to cope with the second-order character of European elections and to procure higher legitimising potential of the European institutions and policy-outcomes. Therefore, it is of a high social relevance to evaluate their performance.

In the following, the theoretical framework on which the hypothesis is based will be introduced.

3. Theory – Spitzenkandidaten to increase politicisation

3.1 The EP elections: a solution to the democratic deficit?

The literature on legitimisation of the EU is divided in the camps of input (Hix 2008; Hobolt Tilley 2014; Habermas 2012) and output legitimisation (Scharpf 1999; Majone 1998; Moravcsik 2002). The output-oriented camp adheres to the elite-driven technocratic character of the foundation days with independent supra-national institutions, legitimising themselves by their ability to produce the best possible policy output, free from ideological ideals (Moravcsik, Scharpf). They argue that the EU already is as democratic as possible and that any further inclusion of the citizens would lead to a politicisation blocking the anyhow fragile and complex process of legislature (Føllesdal, Hix 2006: 533).

Against this position, input-based theorists argue that this would be "benevolent authoritarianism" (Føllesdal, Hix 2006: 534). The EU has a democratic deficit since it lacks the most important aspect of a democracy "contestation for political leadership and argument over the direction of the policy agenda" (Føllesdal, Hix 2006: 534). The EU produces policies without a political debate or a political choice on these policies taking place. Therefore, Hix asks for opening the EU gradually to political competition (Hix 2009: 100).

The introduction of direct elections to the EP and the successive strengthening of the EP as an institution were attempts to cope with the perceived democratic deficit of the EU. Following the first EP elections in 1979, Reif and Schmitt (1980) evaluated that in fact, European elections are so called "second-order elections". According to second-order theory, European Elections (second-order elections) are treated as less important than national elections (first-order elections) by the parties, the media and the voters because the "representative body which is elected has very little real power thus even less is at stake" (Reif, Schmitt 1980: 12). European elections as second-order elections are thereby characterised by a low level of politicisation and electoral mobilisation, which leads to a small turn-out rate (Schmitt 2005: 651).[2] In addition to this, voters use the second-order-elections to express their dissatisfaction with governing parties and to blame them following the regular order of national electoral cycles (Reif, Schmitt 1980: 10). Moreover, it has been demonstrated that in second-order elections, when there is no government at stake, people tend to vote more "sincerely" for a small or new party that is closer to their own ideological position which they could not vote for in their national first-order election. This is especially important in absolute majority voting systems, where voters have to support a large, established party and vote "strategically". This leads to a loss in vote share for bigger parties in second-order elections (Reif, Schmitt 1980: 9). As parties, political actors, activists, and the media do not attribute high significance to European elections the "generally subdued campaign means that fewer voters might even learn that elections are being held" (Reif, Schmitt 1980: 9). Reasons for this seem to be multiple and interrelated, because the coverage of the media and by this the "contribution […] to the electoral mobilisations" is dependent on the intensity and investment of first-order politicians to second-order campaigns (Reif, Schmitt 1980: 14). But again, the voter's intention to turn out to vote correlates with whether they are aware of the campaign activities (Reif, Schmitt 1980: 28). Especially as the European electoral arena is

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[2] As Franklin has shown the "low voter turnout is not a symptom of disaffection from the regime within which elections are held but rather an indication that the elections themselves were less than compelling" (Franklin 2014: 2). The often named decline of turnout is due to the EU eastern enlargement and the behaviour of voters in post-communist EU member countries that have no such tradition of voting but high rates of affection for the EU (Franklin 2014: 1)

complex and far from easy to understand for the voters. Reif and Schmitt already suggest that "regionalisation and personalisation […] could increase turnout" (Reif, Schmitt 1980: 13).

As the EU has grown and its impact has increased one might ask if this has diminished the second-order effects. But the literature testing and contesting second-order criteria on European elections still confirms them (Franklin, van der Eijk 1996; Hix and Marsh 2007, 2011; Hobolt and Wittrock 2010; Marsh, 1998; Schmitt 2005). In addition, the elections of 2014 were still second-order elections. Turnout was still low, governing parties lost respective to smaller more ideological parties, electoral cycles still were relevant (Corbett 2014, Niedermayer 2014, Träger 2016). Neither the ongoing politicisation of the EU nor the introduction of the Spitzenkandidaten nor the economic crisis changed the second-order character of the 2014 EP elections (Schmitt and Teperoglou 2015; Schmitt, Toygür 2017). High discontent with the austerity measures and the surge of Euroscepticism did not trigger lasting political change and lead to "critical elections" that would have reshaped the relation between social groups and their political agents profoundly (Schmitt, Teperoglou 2015: 292).

3.2 Criticism on the legitimising potential of European elections

There are two functions that elections should to some extent fulfil in a democracy to have a legitimising effect (Marsh, Mikhaylov 2010: 17). Firstly, the function to create a mandate. The agenda of a party is presented and discussed during the electoral campaign and the voters get informed about the issues and directions in the policy a party stands for. By this they make their vote choice and give thus the party the mandate to realize these (information function). Second, elections have to allow the citizens to hold their governments responsible for what they have and have not done during their time of office (sanction function). In representative democracies, where voters as principals delegate their powers to governing agents, it is a fundamental element that the voters may also hold these elected agents accountable for their performance and sanction them by the mechanism of elections (Hobolt, Tilley 2014a: 143). Are these criteria met by European elections? The second-order literature comes to a crushing conclusion in their findings as both criteria are not met.

The information function is not fulfilled, because in the campaign of EP elections the voters are not sufficiently informed about the different political agendas. This is due to the fact that parties made low efforts in campaign spending (Franklin, Van der Eijk 1996). EU elections are still rather about national than about European issues (Hix, Marsh 2007: 496; Reif, Schmitt 1980: 3). Additionally, they are treated by the parties as "mid-term contests" in which parties search for approval regarding their national policy (Hix, Marsh 2007: 495; Franklin, Van der Eijk 1996: 367). Furthermore, the voters' knowledge of the party positions on EU issues is low

because parties avoid to position clearly on EU issues.[3] There is only a weak electoral connection between the citizens and the MEP's, not sufficient to create a real democratic mandate for governance (Hix, Marsh 2007: 507; Van der Eijk, Franklin 1996: 368). "Without a real mandate the democratic deficit will persist" (Van der Eijk, Franklin 1996: 377).

The second function, namely the sanctioning function is also not met. The electorate can only hold governments or politicians accountable, if it is able to attribute responsibility for a certain policy to the right level of government, the national or the European level, the right European institution and then identify a certain political actor (Hobolt, Tilley 2014a: 144). In a system of multi-level governance as the EU this is highly complicated for voters (ibid.: 124). The EP elections apparently do not serve as a mechanism to hold those accountable who are responsible, because it appears to be nearly impossible for voters to identify the party or politician actually responsible (ibid.: 131). This has implications on the legitimacy of the EU. A solely output-based legitimisation becomes problematic if the institutions fail to deliver. If the EU is found responsible for poor performance but cannot be held accountable for it, trust in the institutions and confidence with the system as a whole will decline (ibid.: 147).

„Elections are at the very heart of democracy "(Franklin, Hobolt 2011: 75). This is why European elections have been introduced. But these elections couldn't hold what was promised because of their second-order character. This suggests that there is a need to strengthen the electoral connection somehow, so EP elections may fulfil the information and sanction function. The next chapter shall give an overview over the concept of politicisation and how the Spitzenkandidaten System could help contribute to the strengthening of electoral connection, hereby alleviating the democratic deficit.

3.3 The democratic deficit and the impact of politicisation

"Politicisation of European integration is defined as an increase in polarisation of opinions, interests or values and the extent to which they are publicly advanced towards the process of policy formulation within the EU"
(De Wilde 2011: 560).

This definition is misleading in the case of politicisation of European integration where issues have already been decided at governmental level and are only recognized and publicly discussed afterwards. This explains the claim that there should be more public debate about the European Commission's agenda from the outset before governmental decision.

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[3] As van der Eijk and Franklin show (1996: 370) parties avoid to become clear on their stance on European integration because it would show their (often high) inner divisiveness on the issue. Parties that are divided on the EU issue have worse chances in competition.

For an issue to be politicised Hutter, Grande and Kriesi (2016) define three dimensions. Politicising an issue means that it is made subject of public discussion and regulation (De Wilde, Zürn 2012: 139). For this purpose, it has to be transferred from the private sphere to become salient in public sphere and then become subject in the sphere of governmental decision-making (ibid.: 140). Salience describes the increased visibility of an issue in public debate. It captures how often and how long an issue is discussed by the relevant actors. An issue can only become politicised if it is articulated and discussed in public. Furthermore, the opinions expressed on the concerned issue are increasingly diverse. Polarisation describes the intensity of conflict related to an issue among the different actors involved. A high level of politicisation must involve strong opposing camps (Grande, Hutter 2016: 8). This is manifested by societal actors like politicians, interest groups or the mass media and by voters at the ballot box contesting certain public policy, which Grande et al. call actor expansion (Grande, Hutter 2016: 8).

A politicisation of an issue might entail a politicisation of the concerning decision-making process and by this of the deciding institution (De Wilde 2011: 563). Institutions as the Commission, the EP and Council as well as national governments and parliaments (De Wilde 2011: 560) become "politicised when party politicians gain a tighter grip on their operations leading to increasing prominence of party political conflict" (De Wilde 2011: 561). Decision-making processes may be politicised when politicians gain more influence "at the expense of professionals, like bureaucrats, experts and lawyers" (De Wilde 2011: 561).

Politicisation has three functions. Firstly, the function of structuring political conflict. As political parties at national and supra-national level articulate opinions that may be found in society related to the EU, preferences are being aggregated. The politicisation of the European elections would create a link between policies, the elected officials and the preferences of citizens as they force the political elites to develop rival policy visions and programmes presented by rival candidates competing for office. By this competition a mandate for political change is produced (Hix, Marsh 2011: 136).

Secondly, politicisation raises the question of legitimacy as raising salience and the controversial character indicate the discontent of citizens about their lack of influence on European issues compared to the impact that European integration indeed has on their lives (De Wilde 2011: 564). The increase of partisan conflict and debate on European issues would provide the electorate with a meaningful choice during the elections, as real alternatives would crystallise, which can lead to more deliberation and participation. Thereby, "politicisation can contribute to alleviating the EU's democratic deficit" (De Wilde 2011: 565).

The third function is the politicisation's potential of altering the course of integration. European integration has not been politicised at all for a long time as there was no big debate or interest in the topic and there was a quiet consent that 'European integration was a good thing' (De Wilde 2011: 565). The increase in authority of the EU has led to a transformation of the EU from an international organisation to a political system (De Wilde, Zürn 2012: 138; Zürn 2006: 244), as it is no longer market-making but policy-making (Marks 2004: 258). This politicisation of the EU politics cannot be reversed as its policies create winners and losers of the political process (Hix 2009: 100). In their "post-functionalist theory of European integration" Hooghe and Marks (2008) state that the 'sleeping giant'[4] has been awoken. This means, that EU policies, polities and politics have become contentious. In their analysis of the politicisation of national public spheres concerning European integration Hutter, Grande and Kriesi find that there is a gradually growing politicisation (Grande, Kriesi 2016: 279 ff.). However, and in contrast to Hooghe and Marks, they find "a 'negative relationship' between politicisation and European integration" (ibid. 2016: 282).

3.4 Hypotheses

This theoretical derivation leads to the assumption that the Spitzenkandidaten could have helped to alleviate the legitimacy and accountability deficit. They were expected to introduce political competition by their presentation of rival policy visions and programmes presented in their campaign competing for office. It was expected that due to the personalising effects of the Spitzenkandidaten there would be a politicised public debate about European, thus creating a real mandate for the elected president. By now responsibility could be attributed more easily. There would finally be some electoral modus for the citizens to hold the government to account. And by giving the citizens something real to vote about, the executive office, the head of the European Commission, there would finally be something at stake, which would in turn lead to giving the elections real importance, motivating the media to coverage, informing the citizens and the electorate to turn out, and finally limit the second-order character of EP elections. However, this analysis seeks to test whether this introduction of the Spitzenkandidaten system really led to a politicisation of the European public sphere.

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[4] As the authority of European Integration grew, Checkel and Katzenstein (2009: 2) observed a 'politicization of European identity' since the late 1980s and Van der Eijk and Franklin (2004: 34) found that there was in fact a huge potential of politicization and contestation on the European Union in the citizen's opinion which they call "sleeping giant". They stated that this giant potential was still sleeping as there is no possibility for voters to articulate their position on European integration as it was not thematised by political parties, the issue was polarized but not salient, but that it would be only a question of time until policy entrepreneurs would start to derive their benefit from it (Franklin, Van der Eijk 2004: 48).

This leads to the following hypotheses:

> H 1: The introduction of the Spitzenkandidaten to the European elections led to an increase in politicisation of the public debate during the election campaign in 2014 compared to 2009.

This Hypothesis shall be tested with help of two sub-hypotheses.

> H 1.1: The issue of Europe in the general public debate of the campaign was more salient due to the Spitzenkandidaten in 2014 than it was in 2009.

This only is a necessary but not a sufficient precondition to politicisation. Therefore. another sub-hypothesis H 1.2. is necessary:

> H 1.2: The polarisation of public debate on the Europe issue was higher due to the Spitzenkandidaten in 2014 than it was in 2009.

Hypothesis H 1 will be evaluated in the affirmative if both of the sub-hypothesis are supported by the results.

4. Concept of analysis and methods

Data foundation

To analyse the question a (yet unpublished) data set of relational content analysis is used that has been gathered as part of the DFG- funded project "European elections and structuring of political conflict" by Edgar Grande and Daniela Braun. The project seeks to analyse whether European elections are characterised by an own potential to structure political conflict and thus create a close electoral connection between the citizens and the institutions of the European Union. This would be crucial for them to reach any mobilising and legitimising impact. Therefore, a close connection between the programmes of the parties, the preferences of the voters and their public discussion is necessary.

The centre of analysis are the national debates of electoral campaigns. These are coded with help of the core-sentence method. A core sentence is the smallest analytical unit of a sentence and always includes an actor and his/her position on a subject and thus combines a subject and an object via a predicate. This method is highly suitable for quantitative media content analysis as they include information about the position of an actor and the salience of an issue. There are two different kinds of core-sentences: the actor-issue sentence, including the statement of an actor about an issue, and the actor-actor sentence, describing the relation between two actors. To describe the general position of the actor to an issue or another actor they use a scale from -1 to 1, in which -1 indicates criticism or rejection, 0 indicates a neutral position and 1 stands for agreement or affirmation. The values of -0.5 and 0.5 capture probabilities or conditional statements (Grande et al. 2014: 49).

	Subject	Quality	Object	Issue	Core Sentence
Actor-issue					
	Merkel, Angela CDU	1	-	europ. Integra-tion gen-eral	"Nie wieder Krieg in Europa", fasst die CDU Vorsitzende deren Versprechen zusammen.
Actor-actor					
	Merkel, Angela CDU	1	Schulz, Martin S&D	european union (eu)	„Sie schätzt seine europäische Überzeu-gung."

Figure 1: Core sentence

Case selection

The data set by now includes four EU member states and four European elections: 1999, 2004, 2009 and 2014. The analysed countries are Austria, France, Germany and the UK. This sample ensures that representativeness is as high as possible regarding the grade of consolidation of their democratic systems, the length of their time as member states, the depth of the integration and the citizen's attitudes to European integration. As France and Germany were founding members, Great Britain joined the EU in 1973 and Austria in 1995. While Germany, France and Austria are deeply integrated in the European Union, Great Britain is neither member of Schengen nor the Euro-zone.

The medium of analysis are national quality newspapers as "quality newspapers not only report more frequently but also more comprehensively on the EP elections than tabloid media, which rarely cover the elections at all" (Schulze 2016: 24 f.). These were in Germany: "Süddeutsche Zeitung", "Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung"; in France: "Le Monde", "Le Figaro"; in Great Britain: "The Times", "The Guardian"; in Austria: "Die Presse", "Der Standard". Braun and Grande defined the last four weeks before the election day as the critical period of the campaign. The selection of articles proceeded as follows: in a first step, articles to all relevant issues in the survey period are evaluated (NPW dataset). In the second step, only articles with reference to the European Union are selected and coded (PolEU dataset). The NPW data will be used to analyse the salience, the PolEU data for the polarisation and to take the appearance of the Spitzenkandidaten in the public debate under scrutiny.

Operationalisation

This analysis is based on the operationalisation and method of measurement by Hutter, Grande and Kriesi (2016) in their previous work on "Politicizing Europe", where they analyse the

"long-term structural effects of politicisation on political conflict in Europe" (Grande, Hutter 2016: 26). They define Politicisation "as an expansion of the scope of conflict within the political system" (Grande, Hutter 2016: 7). To measure this scope of conflict they distinguish "three conceptual dimensions of politicisation: issue salience (visibility), actor expansion (range) and actor polarisation (intensity and direction)" (Kriesi 2016: 33). For an issue to be politicised they expect it to fulfil all three dimensions. However, this analysis focusses on salience and polarisation and neglects actor expansion as it is difficult to conceptualise and does not have a significant impact on the value of politicisation in the end.

Salience (H1.1) shall be measured by the "share of core sentences related to European integration as a percentage of all core sentences related to any political issue" (Grande et al. 2016: 301). The more an issue is discussed the more in can become politicised (De Wilde 2011: 567). This is why Grande et al. conceptualise salience as the necessary but not sufficient, most basic dimension for politicisation (Grande, Hutter 2016: 8). Polarisation occurs if multiple, conflicting demands for collective goods are put forward purposive and the diversity of opinions increases: "The more opinions of involved parties diverge and crystallise into opposing groups, the stronger polarisation of opinion contributing to increasing politicisation" (De Wilde 2011: 567). In this analysis, the mean of the variance of the general direction of the different parties on an issue is used to measure polarisation (H2.2).

Method of Analysis

This work wants to check whether the introduction of the Spitzenkandidaten had any effect on the politicisation of the European elections. So, the introduction of the Spitzenkandidaten is regarded as a treatment factor in a quasi-experimental design to a setting where all the other factors stay the same or are controlled for with help of the control variables.[5] By this, the effect of the Spitzenkandidaten can be extracted. The analysis of the empirical findings shall proceed in a descriptive way as the four cases of countries are not sufficient to make any statistical calculations on correlating effects.

Variables

The model of analysis is an x-based one checking the influence of the independent variable on the dependent one. In this case to answer the question of the influence of the Spitzenkandidaten

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[5] Already Maier, Rittberger et al. (2017) described "the 2014 EP election campaign [as an] ideal quasi-experimental setting" in their analysis of the impact of the TV debates on citizens information and perception "to explore whether the expectation that increased political competition improves the electoral connection and hence the quality of democracy is borne out in reality" (Maier et al. 2017: 4).

on the politicisation, the dependent variable is the politicisation of the public debate and the independent one the introduction of the Spitzenkandidaten.

"'Europe' was more salient than in previous elections albeit for reasons that were entirely unconnected to the treaty modification of the commission president" (Hobolt 2014: 1534). Assuming that there were other factors favouring the politicisation of the 2014 EP elections and distorting the impact of the Spitzenkandidaten on public debate, the following factors shall get included into the analysis: EU-sceptic parties, the Euro-crisis, "Home-game effects" and the effect of how friendly on European Integration a country is.

EU-sceptic parties: Eurosceptic parties were the clear winners of these elections (UKIP with 26.6% winner of the UK, Front National in France won the elections with 25,4%) (Hobolt 2015: 6; Schmitt et al. 2015: 17). "Rather than jumping on the train of the Spitzenkandidaten, EU citizens voted a record number of candidates from Eurosceptic parties into the European Parliament" (Treib 2014: 1542). But it cannot be dismissed as a mere protest vote, by those, who feel left behind by the mainstream parties and who have suffered the most from the crisis, against the establishment. The electorate is deeply worried about the domestic effects of EU membership and "Eurosceptic parties are here to stay" (Treib 2014: 1551).

Euroscepticism can be defined as "disapproval to European integration" (Hobolt 2015: 12). There is a differentiation between hard and soft Euroscepticism (Taggart Szczerbiak 2004) and right and left Euroscepticism. Hard Eurosceptics reject European integration as a whole and ask for withdrawal, soft Eurosceptics accept integration but oppose specific policies or institutional aspects. Right Euroscepticism, where the majority of Eurosceptic parties can be found, addresses national sovereignty and speaks out against immigration (Hobolt 2015: 12). Left Euroscepticism asks for more redistributive measures from an anti-capitalist stance. There is a well-founded presumption that EU-sceptic parties had an influence on the public debate as well in 2014 compared to 2009. Eurosceptic parties are drivers of politicisation as they take a clear opposing stance on the general pro-EU stance of the mainstream parties, who tend to de-emphasise Europe (Grande, Hutter 2016: 24). So, one might expect that they increased the salience and polarisation on European integration significantly. The categorisation of Eurosceptic parties includes both, left and right and soft and hard Eurosceptic parties. There are all the Eurosceptic parties included that that have been coded in the data set.

	Austria	France	Germany	UK
Right Eurosceptic parties	- FPÖ: freedom party	- FN : Front National - DLR : Debout la République	- AfD: Alternative für Deutschland - NPD: Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands - FW: Freie Wähler	- UKIP: United Kingdom Independence Party - Conservatives - BNP – The British National Party - Sinn Fein - DUP – Democratic Unionist Party
Left Eurosceptic parties		- PCF : Parti communiste français - LO: Liste ouvrière	- die Linke	- no2eu

Table 2: EU-sceptic Parties

Euro-crisis: The European Elections of 2014 took place in the worst economic crisis in post-war Europe (Hobolt 2015: 6). This economic crisis had brutally brought to light the huge redistributive consequences of the common market to the daily life of each European citizen. The premise of European legitimacy – as the EU as bringer of greater prosperity to all the member states – was no longer valid. This led to a decline in trust in the EU (Hobolt 2015: 10), deepening divisions between south, north, east and west, and politicised and polarised the opinions about the direction of European integration across member states (Christiansen 2016: 992). Grande and Kriesi found in their analysis of the politicisation of European integration by the Euro-crisis that it did not lead to a quantum leap in politicisation but was nevertheless one of the events increasing the politicisation of European integration over time (Grande, Kriesi 2016 479), not changing the patterns of politicisation but strengthening nationalist trends (Grande, Hutter 2016: 28). Hobolt states that in contrary to the Spitzenkandidaten (Hobolt 2015: 10) it was the euro zone crisis that was the decisive factor turning the European election 2014 to "the most "European" electoral contests to date" (Hobolt 2015: 19). This leads to the assumption, that the Euro-crisis may have made the issue of European integration more salient in the 2014 campaign. The data include a whole issue that has been coded for the Euro-crisis with several sub-issues to capture all the facets of public discussion of Euro-crisis. This issue shall be used to analyse the effect of the Euro-crisis.

"Home game"-effects: The Spitzenkandidaten were to a high degree unknown outside their home countries before their nominations (Hobolt 2014: 1535). They were the most cited, visible, known and successful in their countries of origin. This is true respective the TV debates e.g. in Luxembourg the home country of Juncker 36% of the population watched the debates (Schmitt et al. 2015: 5), as for the newspaper coverage, e.g. Schulz concentrates in Germany the half of all the coverage about the Spitzenkandidaten on him, Verhofstadt dominated the coverage in the Netherlands (Gattermann 2015). Moreover, the rates of recognition were the highest in their country of origin or one of the neighbouring (Schmitt et al. 2015: 11): in Germany, 25% percent recognised without help at least one candidate, in Luxembourg it was even 55%. The data, including only four countries, three of them (at least close) neighbours, does not allow to control these effects for all the Spitzenkandidaten but at least for Schulz and Keller in Germany and Bové in France the "home-game" effect shall be checked.

Effect of pro-European attitudes: Another factor distorting the coverage of the Spitzenkandidaten is whether a country is friendly on European integration. As differences in the Spitzenkandidaten visibility across the countries were not due to the different media systems and their receptiveness to personalisation there must be another explaining factor: the friendliness towards European integration of the elites and the public sphere of a country (Gattermann 2015). For example, in the UK all three parties did not invite the lead candidates to their campaign events. Next to Hungary the UK was the only country the Spitzenkandidaten did not visit. David Cameron, the British Prime Minister voted against the appointment of Juncker in the council (Christiansen 2016: 998).
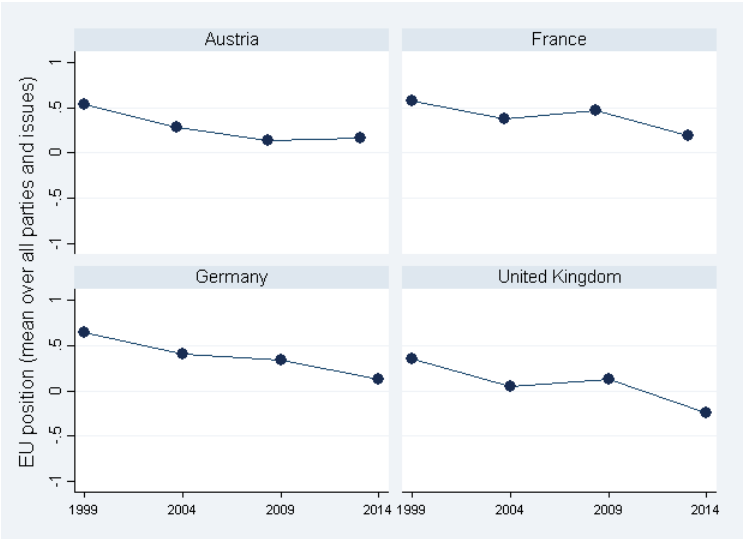

Figure 3: Mean position on European Integration by all parties per country.

This is categorisation of the countries is evaluated in figure 4 that shows the overall quality of how it was spoken about European integration in each country. The downward trend is obvious

and, in all countries, the public opinion on European integration seems to be less positive in 2014 than it was in 1999, but yet the UK is the only country with negative values. The UK is categorised as critical to the EU, whereas the other three countries are classified as pro-EU. It shall be tested if the country more opposed to European integration neglected the Spitzenkandidaten in their coverage or if the coverage was more negatively.

5. Results

The Analysis of the results proceeds as follows. First, the general position of the Spitzenkandidaten in the dataset shall be evaluated. This gives us information about whether the Spitzenkandidaten were able to dominate the debate with their electoral programmes, making European actors and issues more visible and creating a real debate about the future of the European Union. There the control variables of "home-game effects" and the impact of the EU integration friendliness of a country shall be considered. Afterwards, it shall be tested whether there was a politicisation of the European elections at all in 2014 compared to 2009. In the last section the impact of the Spitzenkandidaten and the other two control variables – the impact of the Euro-crisis and the success of the EU-sceptic parties – on the politicisation shall come under scrutiny.

5.1 Exploring the Spitzenkandidaten in the Data

In this step the advantages of the data shall be used to explore a bit the actual appearance of the Spitzenkandidaten in the public debate: of how, to which extent, in which quality, by which actors and to which issues the Spitzenkandidaten have been discussed or have contributed to the discussion.
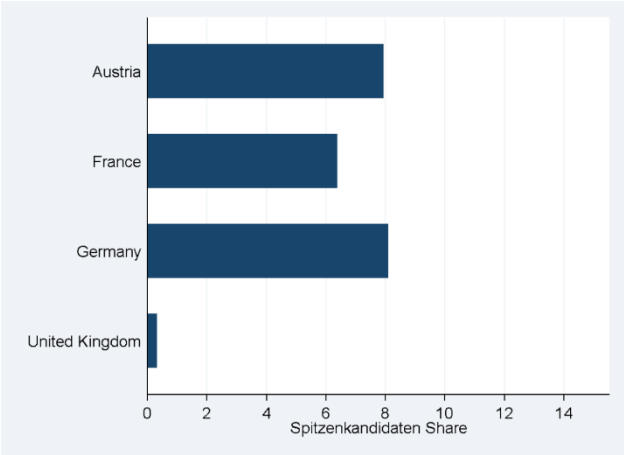
Visibility

Figure 4: Share of core sentences by the Spitzenkandidaten in 2014 by country
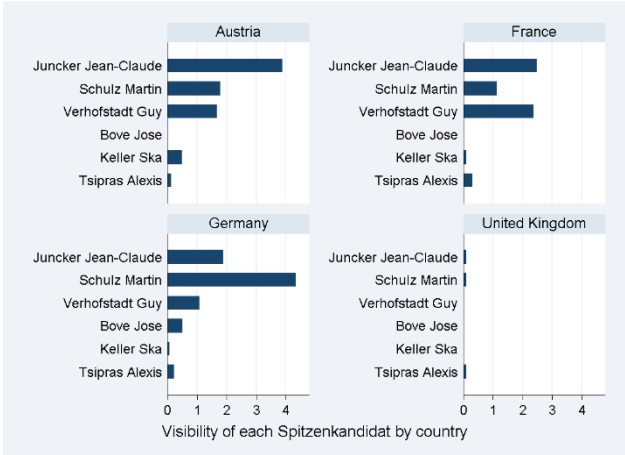
Figure 5: Share of core sentences of the Spitzenkandidaten in 2014 by country

The Spitzenkandidaten were coded in the dataset both – in the function of subjects and objects, i.e. in their function as subject actors taking positions on issues and as object actors being discussed by other actors. In the 4.887 core sentences of 2014, the Spitzenkandidaten appeared as subject 306 times and as object 231 times. This means they amounted around 11% of the debate. The considerably high rate of object mentions compared to subject mentions indicates that other actors indeed have discussed the Spitzenkandidaten system.

Figure 4 shows the share of the Spitzenkandidaten in the individual countries. They were most visible in the German and Austrian press followed by France, while they remained nearly unmentioned in British newspapers. This is in line with the observations of other media content analysis such as Schulze (2016) and Gattermann (2015: 219) and the results of Hix and Wilks-Heeg (2014) about the generally lower coverage in the UK about the Spitzenkandidaten.

Figure 5 shows the share of core sentences of each Spitzenkandidat by country. The observations of this cannot verify the assumption of "home-game effects" finally as only two of the five home countries are included in the data set, but they do also not completely falsify them. The assumption that the Spitzenkandidaten were the most visible in their home country is true for Martin Schulz and Ska Keller in Germany but not for José Bové in France. The thesis that they might be more visible in a neighbouring country, because there the chance that they are known and being recognised is the highest, is difficult to answer with this data because Germany, France and Austria are neighbours or at least very nearby. There would be needed other comparative cases. So, Jean Claude Juncker was the most visible actor in Austria and France, which are both not far away from Luxembourg but this does not explain why he was more visible than Martin Schulz, whose direct neighbours are France and Austria. As Schulz was the most engaged in campaigning, this relatively higher visibility can only be explained by the relative higher chance of Jean Claude Juncker to win (Hobolt 2014). Nevertheless, the number of cases including the Spitzenkandidaten is not high enough to guarantee reliability that these observations might be due to coincidence and completely arbitrary.

At least the assumption that the Spitzenkandidaten were less visible in countries that are less friendly to European integration is mirrored by the fact that the Spitzenkandidaten were less visible in the UK compared to the other three countries.

Figure 6 supports the observation of Schulze (2016: 25) that national actors were still reported on more frequently than European actors. Even though Schulz was the most visible actor in Germany and Juncker the most visible in Austria and Guy Verhofstadt was at least in France and Austria, there are still in relation much more national politicians that were as visible. In the UK there were no Spitzenkandidaten but Cameron, Farage, Wilders and Le Pen under the most

visible actors, indicating a highly Eurosceptic media coverage. Marine Le Pen was also the most visible actor in France and directly after Schulz in Germany and as visible as Merkel in Austria indicating a strong campaign impact of the Eurosceptic parties.
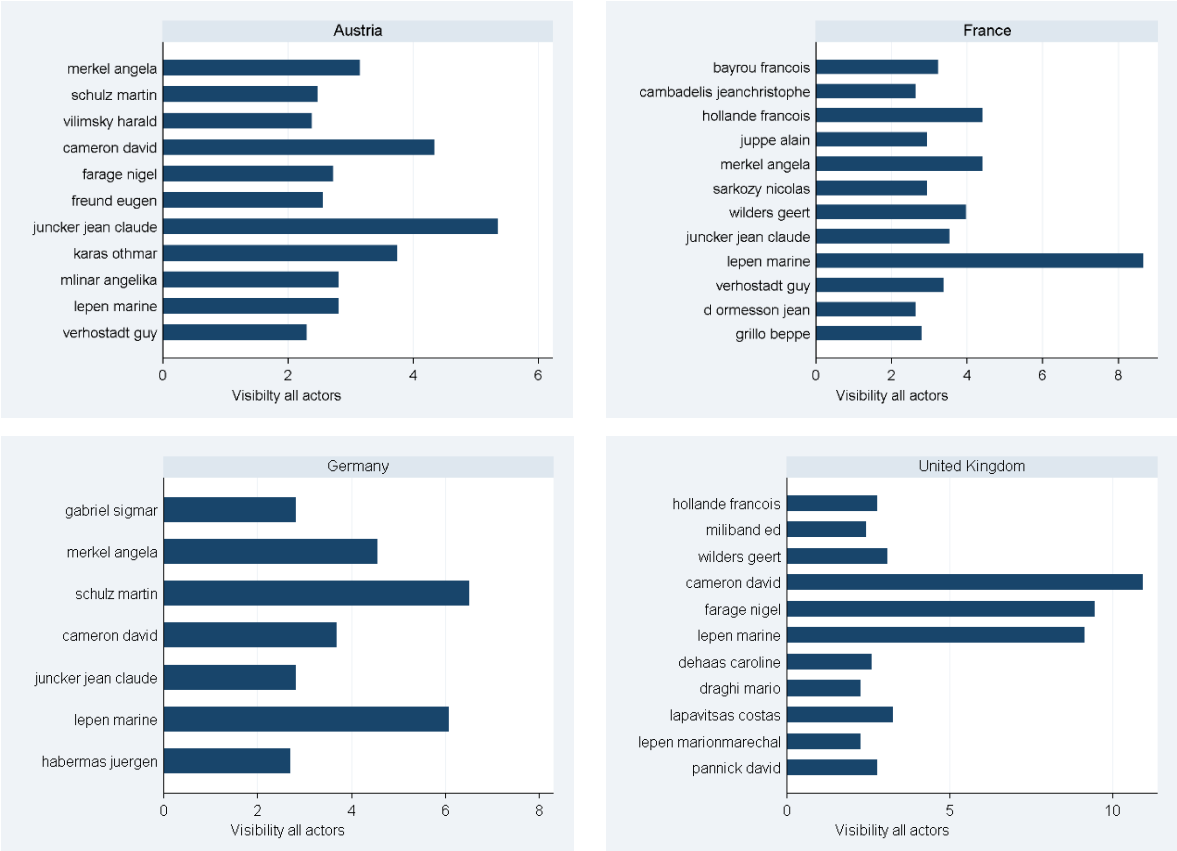

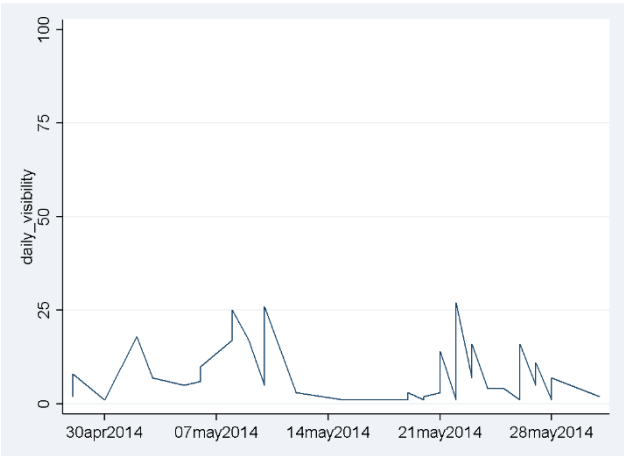**Figure 6:** Most visible actors per country, 2014

Visibility over time

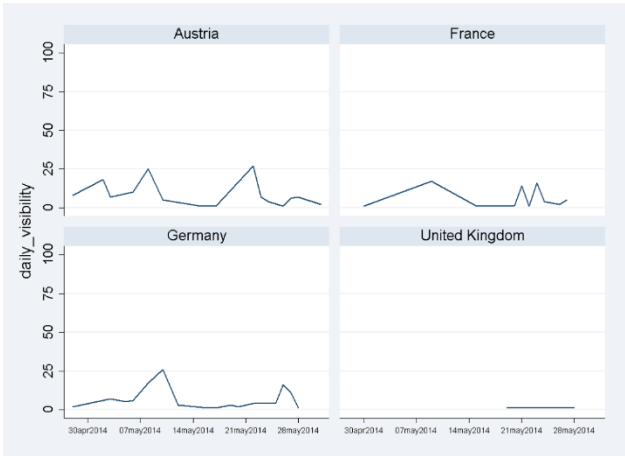**Figure 7:** Visibility of the Spitzenkandi-daten over time of the campaign

Figure 8: Visibility of the Spitzenkandi-daten over time of the campaign by country

Figure 7 shows the visibility of the Spitzenkandidaten over the election campaign time. Schulze (2016: 24) observed that the candidates focused their campaign activities on the last three to four weeks before the elections, resulting in an intensified effort during May, the month of the election. The elections took place on the 22 to 25 May 2014. In this period there is indeed some visibility. But there is a complete gap in the last week before the elections. The Figure shows the number of core sentences each day. So even the peak of 26 sentences in an absolute number of 4887 core sentences, what means around 160 sentences per day, does go under in the noise. Gattermann (2015) finds that the TV debates increased visibility of Spitzenkandidaten. Indeed, there is a peak at the 8th of May when Juncker and Schulz debated in Berlin but already at the 13th of May, the day of Juncker's and Schultz' debate in Paris there is this settled low. The values of the visibility in the individual countries over time in Figure 8 support these observations. Germany as well as Austria and France show a peak around the 8th and then again at the days of election. In the UK the Spitzenkandidaten are nearly invisible. But also here an interpretation is not highly reliable as the values are not enough to guarantee reliability. But already this observation of low observations manifests the one most important: that the Spitzenkandidaten did not play a big role in the public debate.
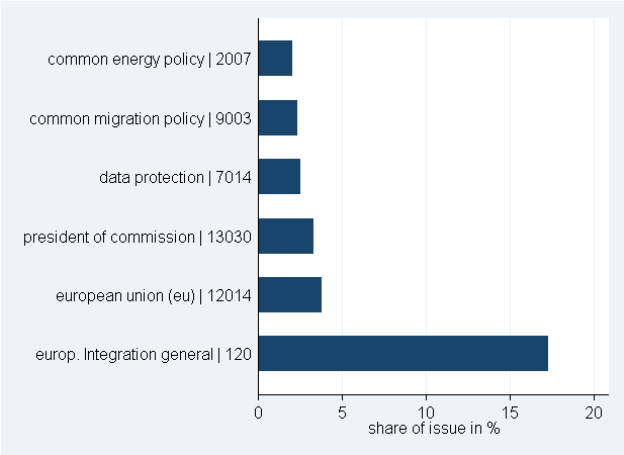
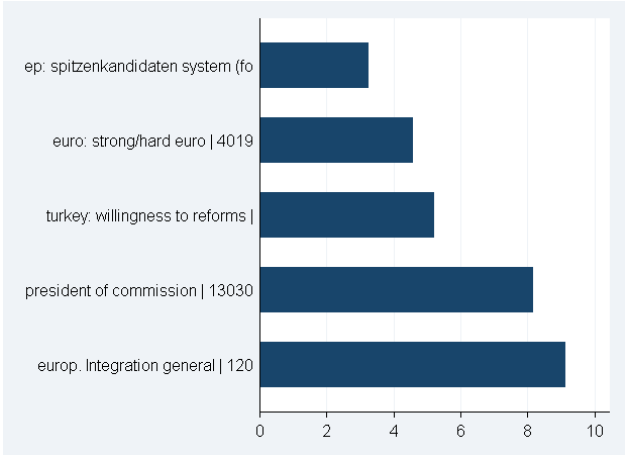**Issues**

Figure 9: Most salient topics overall

Figure 10: Topics the Spitzenkandidaten talked the most about
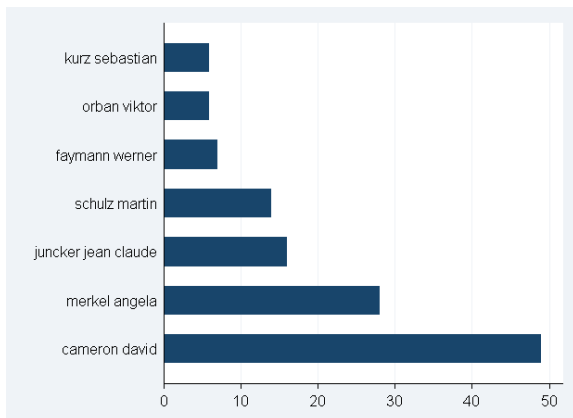
Actors and quality

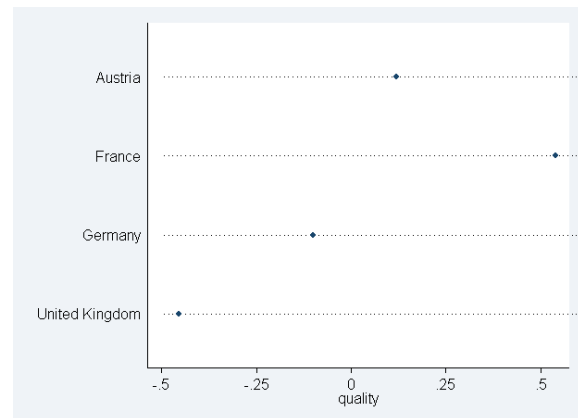**Figure 11**: Actors that mentioned the Spitzenkandidaten most often

Figure 12: General position in average on the Spitzenkandidaten of each country

Comparing the most discussed topics by the Spitzenkandidaten in Figure 10 with the most discussed issues in general, the observation can be made that the issue of the Presidency of the Commission was the third biggest in general. Moreover, they both had European Integration in general as the most salient topic. But as there was a high number of issues coded, the values for each issue are not really high. Top three under the Spitzenkandidaten was 'the willingness of turkey to reforms' even though one might ask himself if this was really the most crucial problem on the agenda of the candidates in 2014 as the debate about the Turkish accession became only lately in 2017 salient after the referendum in Turkey. This suggests a bias produced by the small amount of values. Besides their position on a strong or hard euro it doesn't seem as any efforts of the Spitzenkandidaten to present an electoral programme for their mandate and to discuss their views on the detailed solution on the challenges of European integration and future policy have found their way into news coverage. This indicates that the personalisation did not have an impact on that there finally would be discussed common solutions or competing visions for the future of European integration in European elections.

A look at Figure 10 and 11 about which topics were those most discussed by the Spitzenkandidaten and by which actors the Spitzenkandidaten were the most discussed, shows that in fact the Spitzenkandidaten stayed highly self-referential. Two of the top issues they discussed – next to European integration in general – were the presidency of the commission and the Spitzenkandidaten system. Moreover, next to Angela Merkel and David Cameron, the two actors talking the most about the Spitzenkandidaten were the Spitzenkandidaten themselves. Figure 12 shows the general position in which was spoken about the Spitzenkandidaten in the countries. Not surprisingly the stance of the UK was rather negative whereas in France there seems to have

been a rather positive connotation of the Spitzenkandidaten. Austria and Germany are relatively neutral.

In Figure 22 and 24 (Appendix) the quality in coverage is listed in more detail in the first referring to the quality the other actors evaluated the Spitzenkandidaten and in the latter the positions of the parties per country on the Spitzenkandidaten. These observations show that the thesis of Schmitt, Popa and Rohrschneider (2015), is not only applicable for citizens attitudes but also politicians and parties. The Spitzenkandidaten were evaluated as negatively by those who already have a negative attitude on European integration – David Cameron, Beppe Grillo, Victor Orban and their parties the Conservatives, the Movimento 5 Stelle, Fidesz – and welcomed positively by those who support European integration – Emanuel Barroso, Angela Merkel, Werner Faymann, the EPP (European Peoples Party). By this one could gather that the Spitzenkandidaten indeed had a polarising effect also in this data. It also is symptomatic that Victor Orban and David Cameron the both heads of state voting against Juncker as a President in the Council are some of the loudest opponents in the media. The negative positions of Schulz and Juncker in the Austrian media on the Spitzenkandidaten might have been themselves criticising one another. All in all, this analysis can confirm a big part of the observations of previous literature. The Spitzenkandidaten were not invisible but far from having real structuring influence on the debate.

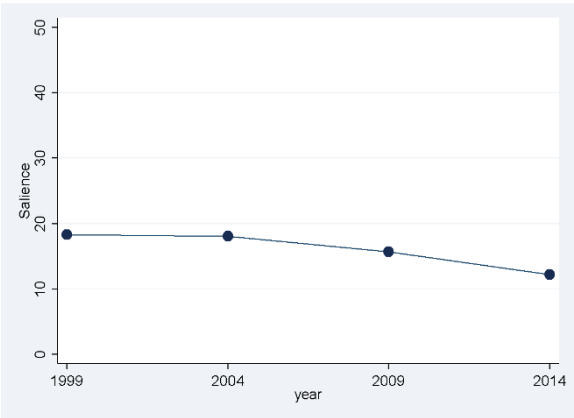## 5.2 Politicisation between 2009 and 2014

Salience

Figure 13: Salience of the issue of European integration in the relation to all other issues in the campaign (NPW)
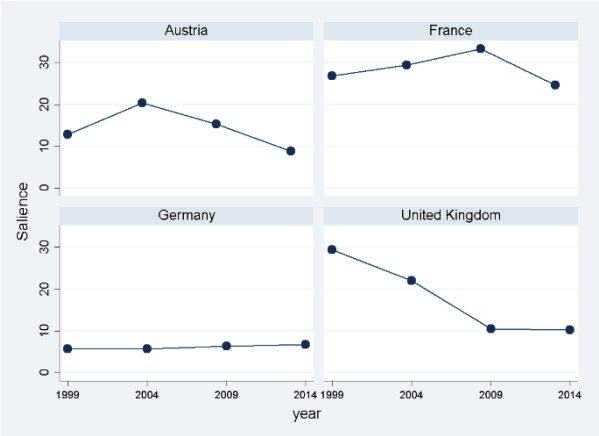
Figure 14: Salience of European Integration in relation to all other issues by country (NPW)

Even though it might have been due to other factors than the introduction of the Spitzenkandidaten System, the state of research showed that in the European elections of 2014, Europe was

more salient than in any previous election before (Hobolt 2015: 7, Hobolt 2014: 1534). Surprisingly this is not mirrored by the salience analysis of this work in the NPW-dataset. The NPW data is the data, in which all issues that appeared during the time of campaign are coded. This allows to calculate the salience of the EU issue in relation to all issues. It is measured by the share of EU-concerning core sentences as a percentage of all core sentences (including every political issue).

As figure 13 shows, salience of European integration has been slightly declining over time and was higher in 1999 than in 2009, the year of the beginning of the Euro-crisis and decreased even more rapidly from 2009 to 2014. While in 2009 European integration had a relatively low salience of 20%, its salience even went down to 12% until 2014. A look into the development of the EU salience in the individual member states shows the same downward trend. In Germany, European integration has never been highly salient, ranging on around 8%, but in France, where the whole political culture and debate is more stimulated, European integration still had a salience of around 30% in 2009. There has been a decrease in 2014 to a value lower than in 1999. The same can be reported for Austria with a peak in 2009 on 20% and a declining share since that date. In the UK, the issue of European integration has had the highest salience of all in the 1990s but has since 2004 decreased to a low level similar to the one of Germany.

Polarisation

Figure 15: Polarisation of all parties per country on the issue of European Integration from 1999-2014 calculated by the mean of the variance of the direction (PolEU)

Looking at polarisation, the second factor of politicisation, there is rather the observation of an increasing curve. The polarisation has been calculated in the PolEU data by the mean of the variance of the direction of all party positions on EU integration in a country. In nearly all of the countries figure 15 shows a constant and not to be underestimated increase of polarisation on European integration. In Germany and the UK, the polarisation decreased a bit or remained stable between 2009 and 2014 but in Austria and France there can be recorded an increase. This partly goes in line with the post functionalist theory that argues that the sleeping giant has been awoken and that now the opposing and challenging stances of the citizens on European integration have finally become salient (Hooghe, Marks 2009). In point three of this analysis it shall be analysed whether the Spitzenkandidaten had indeed a polarising effect (Schmitt, Popa, Rohrschneider 2015) or if it was the Euro-crisis that finally woke up the sleeping giant or the driving factor of was the EU-sceptic parties.

Since salience is the necessary condition of politicisation, already at this point it is clear that as there is no increase in salience one cannot speak of an increase in politicisation. This is the case independent from any effect of the increased polarisation or the introduction of the Spitzenkandidaten system, because even if they might have been important inside the EU issue, it was not visible in the whole debate as the EU issue was not. Even though H 1.1 and H 1.2 shall be verified in the third point, H1 can already be generally dismissed. This result throws a critical light on predictions of the politicisation literature that suggests a likely increase of politicisation in the future (Hooghe, Marks 2009). Grande et al. looked at the national public sphere and found a rather fluctuating curve of politicisation (Hutter, Grande, Kriesi 2016). If this result is conditioned by the general second-order character of European elections, the high values of salience in France are highly contradictory. This shall be discussed further in the conclusions.

5.3 Influence of Spitzenkandidaten, Eurosceptic parties and the Euro-crisis

The last chapter contextualises the effect of the Spitzenkandidaten by comparing their impact on politicisation to the impact of the control variables for Eurosceptic parties and the Euro-crisis.

To make the effects on polarisation better comparable, see Figure 15.

Figure 15: Polarisation of all parties per country on the issue of European Integration from 1999-2014 calculated by the mean of the variance of the direction (PolEU)
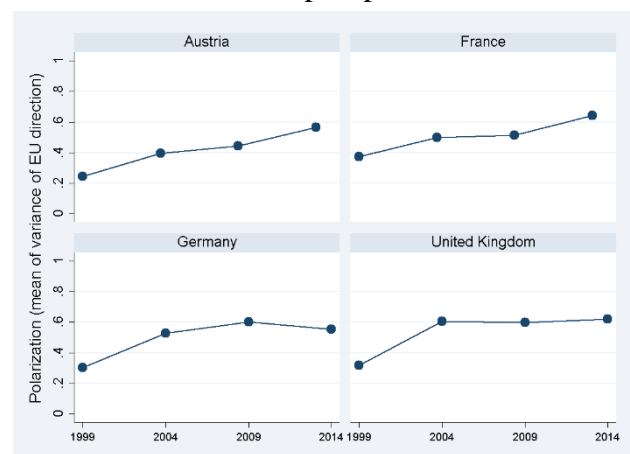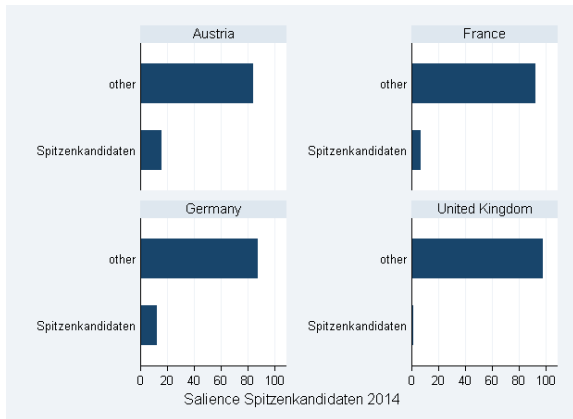
Spitzenkandidaten
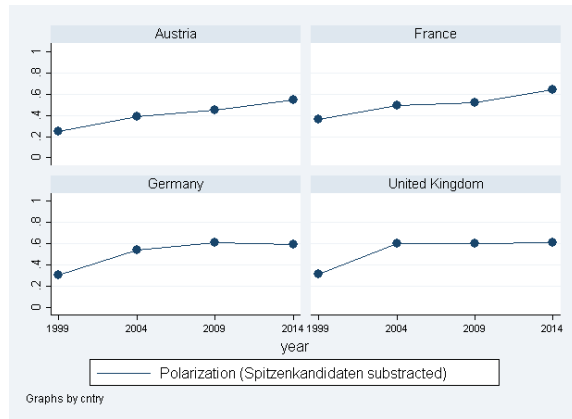

Figure 16: Salience of the Spitzenkandidaten

Figure 17: Influence of the Spitzenkandidaten on Polarisation (value of the overall polarisation, the values of the Spitzenkandidaten subtracted)

The salience of the Spitzenkandidaten (Figure 16) in the PolEU is rather low and as salience sunk from 2009 to 2014 it does not seem that the Spitzenkandidaten had any effect in making European elections more European and raising the salience of the EU issue in the debate. H 1.1 has to be dismissed.

After the prevouis analysis one might have assumed that the Spitzenkandidaten might have increased polarisation. Figure 17 shows the polarisation of the campaign in 2014 without the Spitzenkandidaten. Between the general polarisation graph (Figure 15) and the graph show polarisation of the Spitzenkandidaten (Figure 17) there is nearly no difference to be found. Polarisation was a bit higher without the Spitzenkandidaten in Germany and France but these effects are so minimal that they are almost not worth mentioning. So the Spitzenkandidaten also had no (significant) effect on polarisation, H1.2 has to be dismissed.

The question whether the Spitzenkandidaten had any impact on the politicisation of European integration has been proved wrong.
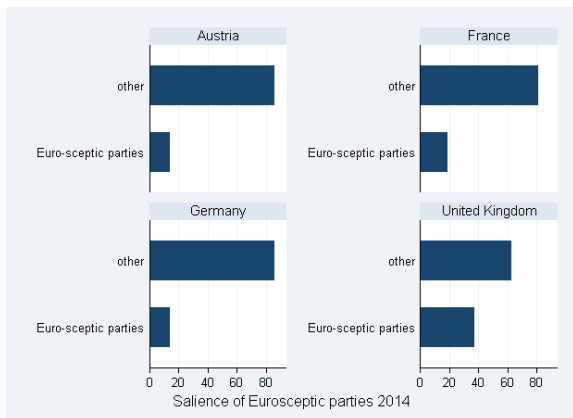
EU-sceptic parties

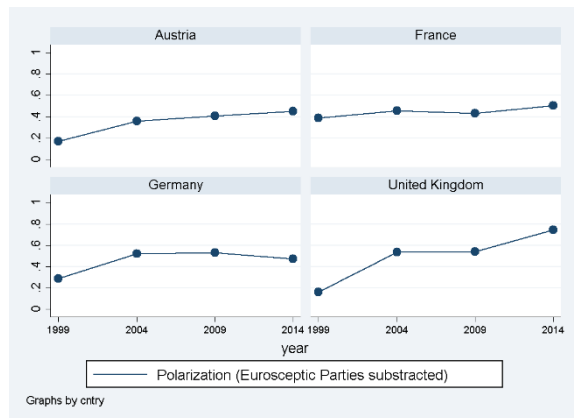**Figure 18:** Salience of the Eurosceptic parties

Figure 19: Influence of the Eurosceptic Parties on Polarisation (value of the overall polarisation, the values of the Eurosceptic Parties subtracted)

The salience of eurosceptic parties with 948 of 4887 core sentences seems to indicate higher salience of Eurosceptic parties than of the Spitzenkandidaten. Unsurprisingly they are most salient in the UK, this is mostly because the Conservative Party has been classified as EU-sceptic. But still also they did not increase the salience of European integration in the campaign although they were the winners of the 2014 EP elections. In Figure 19 the graph indicates again the difference of polarisation without the impact of the Eurosceptic parties. There are minor effects in all the countries. In the United Kingdom the graph rises more without the Euroseptic parties, which means that Polarisation increases. This might be due to the fact that the Conservatives as a large party highly dominate the British debate and distort the mean of variance. In the other countries polarisation is significantly lower without the Eurosceptic parties on a range around 0.2. This is in line with Grande et al. who found that Eurosceptic parties did in some cases indeed contribute to politicisation, but they are "neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for politicising European integration" (Grande Kriesi 2016: 286).
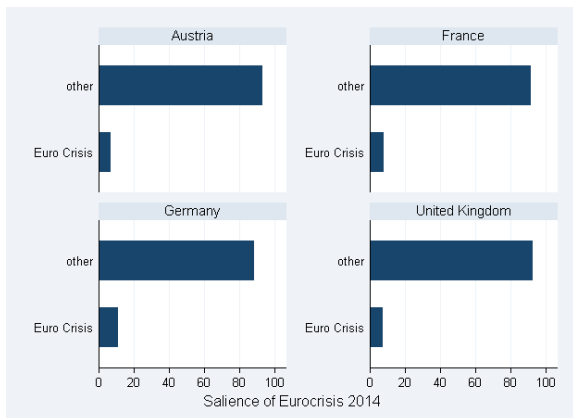
Euro-crisis

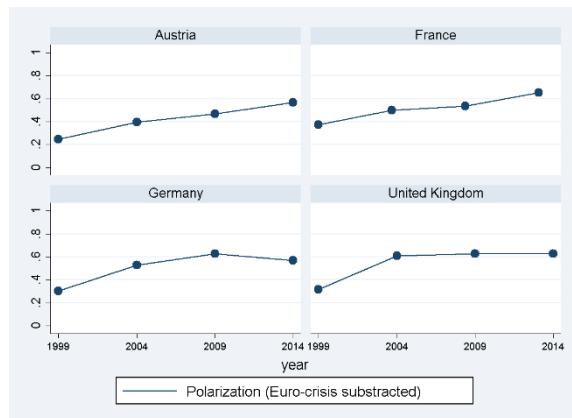**Figure 20:** Salience of the Euro-crisis

Figure 21: Influence of the Euro-crisis on Polarisation (value of the overall polarisation, the values of the Euro-crisis subtracted)

The core sentences on the Euro-crisis issue make a number of 412 out of 4887, which is not this high considering that it was stated that the election would take place in the light of the most severe economic crisis that Europe has seen since world war two (Hobolt 2015: 6). The issue has been slightly more salient in Germany than in the other countries (Figure 22). Figure 21 shows the value of polarisation when the observation of the issue of the Euro-crisis are subtracted. Moreover, the Euro-crisis does not have any major effect on polarisation. So this is in line with Schmitt and Toygür (2017) who found that the politicisation of the Euro-crisis in the south European states did not lead to any sort of critical elections, detaching euopean elections from their second-order character.

6. Conclusion – Still a long way to go

The introduction of the Spitzenkandidaten system was connected with high expectations to generate a politicisation of the European elections, by personalised competition of different visions of the EU, attract the media's coverage and the citizens' interest. The 2014 EP elections still were second-order elections, the Spitzenkandidaten were nearly invisible in media coverage, only a small amount of EU citizens was aware of the Spitzenkandidaten and able to identify them. Moreover, the parties did not include them into their electoral campaigns and the only real influence found is that they changed the inter-institutional balance of power by increasing the influence of the EP. The results of this analysis are in line with these observations.

A closer look at how and to which extent the Spitzenkandidaten were visible in public debate shows that the Spitzenkandidaten were visible, but to a very limited extent. Their appearance in the data goes parallel with some of the observations of previous media content analysis on

their visibility. They were most visible in Germany, followed by Austria, France and the UK, where they remained almost uncovered. The "home-game" effect was applicable for Martin Schulz in Germany but cannot explain the high dominance of Juncker in Austria. The influence of the overall attitude of a country regarding European integration was true for the UK. In addition, the Spitzenkandidaten seemed to be more visible after the debate on 8th May 2014 but were nearly invisible the last week before the elections. This can only can be explained by the low rate of core sentences and observations, which makes a reliable interpretation very difficult. Additionally, it seems that those who support European integration have welcomed the Spitzenkandidaten while Eurosceptics opposed them. Even though one could have interpreted these as polarising tendencies, they did not have any effect.

By using the NPW and PolEu media content analysis data set of the DFG project, the core of the analysis was whether the introduction of the Spitzenkandidaten had any impact on the politicisation of the public debate in 2014 compared to 2009. There was no evidence that the politicisation of the 2014 elections was higher than in 2009. The basic indicators for a rise in politicisation were the increase of salience of the EU issue compared to the other issues and increased polarisation. The theoretical expectation was that both should indicate that the issue of European integration was discussed in public debate more often and intense. The analysis shows, that compared to 2009, in 2014 there was not only no increase of salience but even a slight decrease. Although there was a slight increase of polarisation of the issue, this does not lead to more politicisation, since salience is a necessary prerequisite. Thus, there is no support for H1. The Spitzenkandidaten not only largely failed in dominating the debate overall, there was no sign at all that their introduction led to distinct debates on European policies entering the public sphere either.

Looking at the control variables, this analysis found that the Eurosceptic parties as well as the Euro-crisis had to some extent a positive effect on polarisation even if this was rather small. They were to some extent salient in the debate in PolEU but they did not contribute to an increase in salience of the EU issue in the general campaign in NPW. In conclusion, this analysis finds that neither the Spitzenkandidaten nor Eurosceptic parties or the Euro-crisis led to a big change that would finally tear down the dam of permissive consensus, hereby bringing to light the real positions on EU issues. It seems that even if the topic of European integration becomes politicised in national public spheres and elections, this was not applicable for the 2014 EP elections. Earlier literature has found evidence that the debate about European integration has been politicised in the last decade especially by events such as the euro crisis (cf. Grande, Kriesi 2016) and that the sleeping giant is now awake (Hooghe, Marks 2009). One could ask why none

of the examined factors could change anything about the character of the European elections or the public debate during their campaign phase.

Grande and Braun formulate in their concept of political structuring three prerequisites that are crucial for European elections to finally create a close electoral connection between the citizens and the institutions of the European Union. These three must be present in order to achieve any mobilising and legitimising impact: a close connection between the programs of the parties, the preferences of the voters and their discussion in public sphere. The success of the Spitzenkandidaten was from the beginning dependent on several aspects that were not given but hoped to be established by them. The problem of the European elections is that there is no Europe-wide party system. The election campaigns of the parties are fragmented, there is no European public sphere, the media does not cover them enough, the elections are not about European issues and there is not much at stake. However, as large parts of the citizens did not know about their existence, their effect was rather small.

"This time it's different" – "next time it is better". Nearly all of the literature concludes with explanations why the Spitzenkandidaten system did not work out perfectly in the first attempt. It is argued that the system was only in its infancy (Hobolt 2014) or the system was too complex to have such a mechanism work at the first try (Van der Brug, Gattermann, De Vreese 2016). Moreover, there are expectations on what will ease their way in the next elections: there will be an incumbent to vote on (Schmitt, Hobolt and Popa 2015: 18), there would be greater competition if also smaller and Eurosceptic parties nominated candidates (Christiansen 2016: 1008), the selection procedure and the campaigns will further professionalise (Put et al. 2016) and lead the EU-wide party collaboration to intensify. Moreover, citizens might know more about the Spitzenkandidaten system by then. There seems to be a consensus that the Spitzenkandidaten system will gain impact over time, and slowly change the character of European elections. As the previous discussion has made clear, this work would argue that, for the Spitzenkandidaten to have any impact on this, it is still a long way to go.

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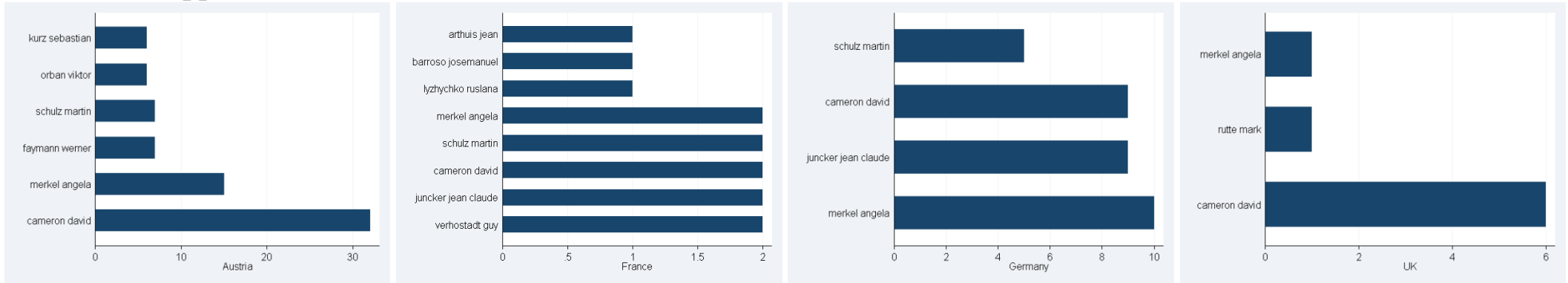
8. Appendix

Figure 22: Actors that mentioned the Spitzenkandidaten most often by country

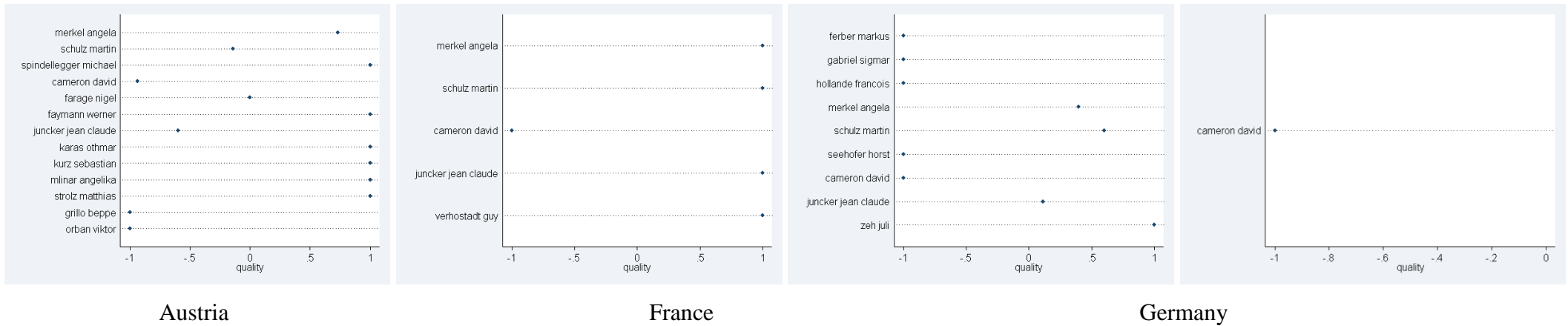Austria   France   Germany

UK

Figure 23: Quality with which the actors mentioned the Spitzenkandidaten by country
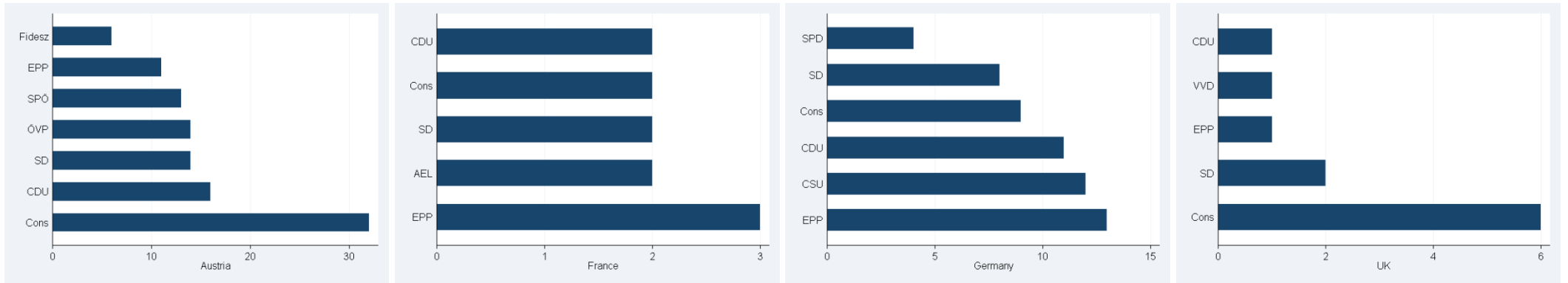
Figure 24: Parties that mentioned the Spitzenkandidaten most often by country

Austria   France   Germany

UK
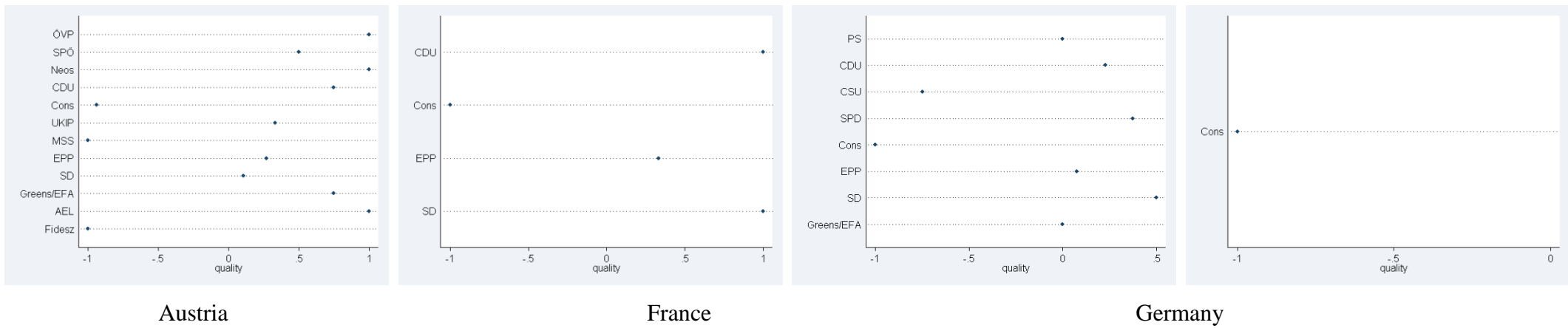
Figure 25: Quality with which the parties mentioned the Spitzenkandidaten by country