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Depoliticising EU migration policies: the EUTF Africa and the politicisation of development aid

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ABSTRACT

The EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa was created in 2015 to alleviate migratory pressures resulting from crisis situations in Africa. However, the crisis in Africa was largely a construct of the EU, which in 2015 faced pressure from Member States to react to increased migration flows to Europe. Drawing on the (de)politicisation literature and 23 original expert interviews, we show that the creation of the EUTF enabled the Commission to depoliticise the 'refugee crisis' by reframing migration as a technocratic problem requiring the use of development aid to address its root causes in Africa. This approach, however, reintroduced strategic considerations at the heart of development aid, evidencing a horizontal transfer of politicisation from the migration policy domain to the development policy area. Our findings extend recent debates on the internal-external nexus in EU policymaking by revealing how political constraints and blockages in the internal dimension motivate EU external engagement. We also contribute to the strategic politicisation management literature by highlighting the role of three facilitating (or inhibiting) factors behind the success (or failure) of (de)politicisation strategies, namely, the type of actors involved, the locale where the policy is implemented, and the salience and polarisation of the policy-domains involved.

Introduction

On 11–12 November 2015, European and African leaders gathered in Valletta in response to the European 'refugee crisis', which dominated headlines in 2015 and gave rise to heated political debates. The main deliverable of the Valletta summit was the *EU Emergency Trust Fund for stability and addressing the root causes of irregular migration and displaced persons in Africa* (hereafter the 'EUTF'), which was formally launched publicly by the European Commission (Niemann and Zaun 2023).

In a press conference, Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker announced the creation of the EUTF by noting that

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> Through its long-standing development cooperation over the years, the EU has been sub-
> stantially contributing to tackling the root causes of poverty and migration. Today, we
> are taking a step further. This Emergency Trust Fund for Africa, set up at record speed,
> shows once more the EU's commitment to swiftly reply to the large challenges we are
> facing in the region (European Commission 2015c).

Instead of presenting the EUTF as a response to the EU 'refugee crisis' and the ensuing tensions within and among Member States, Juncker emphasised continuity, and located the origins of the 'crisis' in Africa. By portraying the EUTF as a continuation of EU development policy, the Commission was able to reframe a political problem – how to deal with unmanaged and unwanted migratory flows to Europe – as a technocratic problem, that of addressing the 'root causes' of poverty and migration in Africa. In so doing, the political salience and existing polarisation around the EU refugee crisis were downplayed – in other words, migration became depoliticised.

In this paper, *we investigate how depoliticisation has been used strategically by the EU in the EUTF, and we reflect on the implications this has for development policy.*[1] We ask three interrelated questions: *Why* did the Commission seek to depoliticise migration? *How and how successfully* was this depoliticisation strategy implemented through the EUTF? Finally, *what effects* did the depoliticisation of migration have on other policy domains, notably development policy?

Drawing on Bressanelli, Koop, and Reh's (2020) conceptualisation of bottom-up politicisation in the EU, we show that the creation of the EUTF enabled the European Commission to depoliticise the 'refugee crisis' by redirecting attention towards Africa and framing migration as a technocratic problem best addressed through development aid. Thus, the Commission introduced political and strategic concerns into development policy, evidencing a horizontal transfer of politicisation from the migration policy domain to the development domain (Hackenesch, Bergmann, and Orbie 2021). Although politicising and securitising development aid is nothing new (Brown and Grävingholt 2016; Duffield 2001; Gazzotti 2019), such an overt and explicit recognition of the role of political and strategic considerations in the design and implementation of EUTF projects is particularly striking: the traditional objectives of EU development policy (poverty alleviation, job creation and sustainable development) are no longer end goals in themselves but rather *means* to a broader objective: reducing migration flows towards Europe.

Our paper makes three contributions to the literature on (de)politicisation. Firstly, while much has been written on the politicisation of migration and of the refugee crisis within EU Member States (Beinhorn and Glorius 2018; Dimitriadi and Sarantaki 2018; Koß and Séville 2020; Hutter and Kriesi 2021), our paper enquires into how *EU institutions* have sought to *depoliticise* the issue. Shifting the emphasis to the EU level enables us to see how EU institutions (and Member States) are not passive victims of politicisation trends originating at the domestic level, but that they are able to capitalise on, or counter, these dynamics (Bressanelli, Koop, and Reh 2020). Through the case of the EUTF, we demonstrate how the European Commission, at the instigation of the Member States, could depoliticise the migration 'crisis' by reframing the terms of the debate and externalising solutions.

Secondly, we show that politicisation and depoliticisation are not mutually exclusive phenomena but can co-exist in the same temporal and institutional context. Hackenesch, Bergmann, and Orbie (2021, 9) have recently introduced the term 'horizontal politici

[s]ation' to illustrate how politicisation can diffuse horizontally from one policy field to another and drive politicisation dynamics in previously less politicised domains. Whilst Hackenesch et al. are interested in the 'contagion' or reproduction of politicisation dynamics across policy domains, we suggest that *transfers* of politicisation are equally possible. The example of the EUTF reveals that a depoliticisation of migration has gone hand in hand with a politicisation of development. The previously politicised issue of migration to Europe has been depoliticised by making it an issue whose 'root causes' can be addressed through development aid. This results in a 'migratisation of development' (Alba 2010), whereby the design, implementation (and at times evaluation) of development policies operate through a 'migration lens'.

Thirdly, we build on Bressanelli, Koop, and Reh's (2020) ideal type of assertive depoliticisation, expanding it in two directions. We argue for the necessity of examining not only *why* or *how* EU actors seek to (de)politicise a given issue-area, but also the *factors behind the success (or failure)* of these (de)politicisation strategies. We show that the identity of the actor, the locale(s) where the policy issue and response are situated, and the levels of salience and polarisation of the policy domain(s) involved are all crucial in this regard. We also argue that, in a context where transparency and communication are vital, assertive depoliticisation strategies are not necessarily limited to secluded areas but may promote controlled transparency.

Beyond the politicisation literature, our paper contributes to a more nuanced understanding of recent debates on the internal-external nexus in EU policymaking. Schunz and Damro have shown that the emergence of EU external action in a policy area is based on three factors: 1) a perceived opportunity for EU external action, 2) an EU presence (competence and previous policy) in the area, and 3) policy entrepreneurs mobilising in favour of external policy engagement (Schunz and Damro 2020, 125–131; see also Damro, Gstöhl, and Schunz 2018). Yet, we show through the case of the EUTF that externalisation is not only driven by perceived opportunities in the external domain, but also based on political constraints and blockages in the internal dimension. We also confirm the importance of the other two factors in facilitating the turn towards external engagement.

Methodologically, we conduct a qualitative text analysis (Kuckartz 2014) of official EU documents, press releases, research and project reports related to the EUTF as well as 23 interviews conducted in May 2019 and February 2020 with officials working in EU institutions, in the Permanent Representations of Member States, and in civil society organisations.

The paper is structured as follows: We start by presenting our theoretical framework, which conceptualises (de)politicisation as a strategic response to domestic dissensus, and briefly review previous initiatives taken by the Commission to address the refugee crisis in 2015. We then show that the EUTF was the product of an assertive depoliticisation strategy relying on five tenets: the externalisation of the crisis to Africa; the reframing of a political controversy in technical terms; the consensus-building character of the 'root causes' frame; a strong control exercised by the Commission over the governance of the EUTF; and a controlled transparency and visibility strategy. Finally, we examine how the EUTF has reconfigured EU development policy through a more explicit politicisation of development aid and a modification of the panorama of implementers.

Conceptualising (de)politicisation: (de)politicisation as strategic response

If the process of European integration was once described as 'policy without politics' (Schmidt 2006, ix), politicisation has become a key issue in EU scholarship (Bressanelli, Koop, and Reh 2020; de Wilde, Leupold, and Schmidtke 2016; Hooghe and Marks 2009; Schimmelfennig 2020). Per de Wilde et al.'s (2016) definition, politicisation is a three-dimensional process involving a growing salience of debates (more importance and visibility), a polarisation of opinions (more contention), and the expansion of actors and audiences involved in EU policies (broader participation) (de Wilde, Leupold, and Schmidtke 2016, 4; Hackenesch, Bergmann, and Orbie 2021). The politicisation of the EU has mainly been interpreted as a series of instances of bottom-up pressure arising from the national level to produce a 'constraining dissensus' (Hooghe and Marks 2009) on EU actors, limiting their room to manoeuvre and restraining the scope of European integration (Schimmelfennig 2020, 343).

More recently, Bressanelli, Koop, and Reh (2020) and Schimmelfennig (2020) have contested the vision of EU actors as inevitably constrained by domestic politicisation processes. They have argued that domestic dissensus can have enabling effects, and that EU actors adopt different (de)politicisation strategies depending on how they perceive and process bottom-up pressures. Through 'strategic politicisation management' (Schimmelfennig 2020), EU actors may take advantage of pressure to pursue their own substantive goals, broaden the scope of their competences, and sustain their long-term survival (Bressanelli, Koop, and Reh 2020, 331). Domestic pressures can empower EU actors to take a broad interpretation of their mandate, exercise stronger institutional competence and/or allow them to expand the set of policy instruments. The perception of an 'enabling dissensus' will lead to an assertive response, which can in turn be accompanied by politicising or depoliticising strategies, depending on whether the actors involved wish to explicitly intervene in the political conflict or prefer to 'reclaim the shadow'. Hence by '(re-)framing and (re-)packaging policies, selecting and changing decision-making processes and (re-)designing institutions, EU actors can prevent or deflect politicisation that would limit their room to manoeuvre' (Schimmelfennig 2020, 343).

We argue that the creation of the EUTF is evidence of a strategy of 'assertive depoliticisation' by the Commission. In Bressanelli, Koop, and Reh's (2020, 337) conceptualisation, assertive depoliticisation strategies exhibit six features: they are found in secluded areas (through either the expansion or creation of these areas); they actively restrict participation; they promote consensus when conflict occurs; they (re)frame controversy in technical terms; they promote problem-solving responsibility; and they focus on output as (re)legitimation. Whilst drawing on this framework, we qualify and further Bressanelli et al.'s framework in two respects.

First, Bressanelli et al.'s framework helps explain why and how actors may use (de)politicisation strategies but makes no mention of important facilitating (or inhibiting) factors behind the success (or failure) of these strategies. By success or failure, we mean the extent to which politicisation and depoliticisation strategies reach or fail to reach their objectives. Following Bressanelli, Koop, and Reh (2020, 335), depoliticisation strategies succeed when they make political conflict 'deliberately and explicitly less visible, less polarising and less salient'. In contrast, politicisation strategies succeed

when they manage to intervene in political conflict, making it more visible, reinforcing polarisation and/or widening engagement (Ibid, p. 336). We highlight three important factors to consider in this respect, summarised in Figure 1: the types of actor(s) involved, the locale where the policy is dealt with, and the level of salience and polarisation of the policy domain(s) involved.

Non-majoritarian institutions, which are neither directly elected by citizens nor managed by elected officials, are relatively shielded from political pressures (Thatcher and Sweet 2002, 2), and as institutional venues are therefore conducive to depoliticisation strategies. In contrast, majoritarian institutions are directly accountable to the public and are more prone to politicisation. It is important to note, however, that majoritarian and non-majoritarian institutions are best treated as opposite ends of a continuum rather than as distinct categories (Thielemann and Zaun 2018, 907). For instance, while the European Commission is a non-majoritarian institution, it has been characterised as a 'politicised bureaucracy' (Christiansen 1997, 77) and is able to shift fairly easily from political to technocratic action (Schimmelfennig 2020, 348). Meanwhile, the European Parliament (EP; an elected body and therefore a majoritarian institution by definition) is at a greater distance from the electorate than national parliaments or governments, especially considering the lower voter turnout in European elections. Figure 2 gives an overview over the position that different EU institutions have on this continuum.

The locale where the policy is dealt with is also crucial: in particular, the ability to externalise a problem by redirecting attention away from the EU (in the case of the EUTF, by locating the crisis in Africa) reduces the salience of policy debates. On the contrary, portraying the issue as internal to the EU will tend to result in more politicisation.

	Depoliticisation effect	Politicisation effect
Actor	Non-majoritarian institution	Majoritarian institution
Locale	External dimension	Internal dimension
Salience and polarisation of the policy-domain(s) involved	Low political salience and largely uncontroversial goal(s)	High political salience and contested/controversial goal(s)

Figure 1. Factors explaining the success of (de)politicisation strategies (Source: Own depiction).
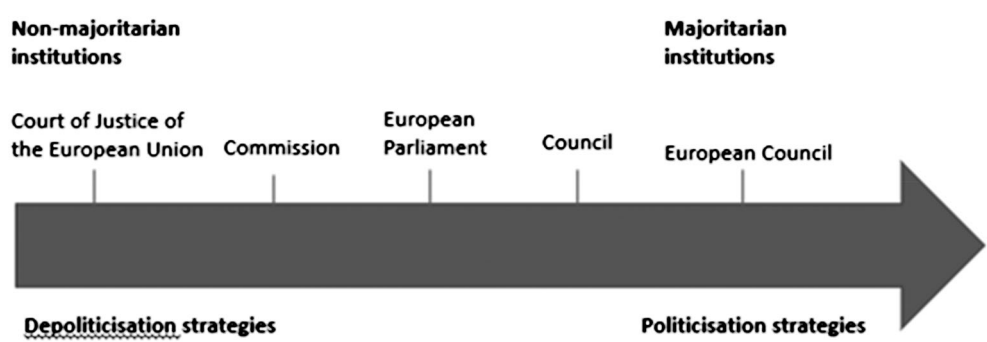

Figure 2. Politicisation management in different EU institutions (Source: Own depiction).

Finally, the level of salience and polarisation of policy domains matters. Whilst Bressanelli, Koop, and Reh (2020) draw attention to changes in levels of salience and polarisation, we argue that certain policy domains are generally more politicised and politicisable than others: policy domains with low political salience and where policy goal(s) are largely perceived as uncontroversial and legitimate will provide a favourable terrain for depoliticisation strategies. In contrast, policy domains with high political salience and where the policy goals to be achieved are contested or controversial will be prone to increased politicisation. For instance, migration is a particularly sensitive and controversial issue with high political salience (Dennison and Geddes 2019), whilst development policy has traditionally been associated with a more positive and apolitical image. By associating a migration issue (the arrival of inflows of migrants on European shores) with a development solution (address the root causes of migration through development aid), the EU was thus able to tap into the desirability and apolitical character of development aid to depoliticise, legitimise and embellish migration control objectives (typically associated with a more controversial or stigmatised image). Thus, an association of migration with development has led to a horizontal transfer of politicisation from the former policy domain to the latter.

Yet the narrative of addressing the root causes of migration through development aid is far from the only instance where migration has been (pseudo-)causally connected with another policy domain. Stabilising a country, whether by peacebuilding and conflict prevention efforts or by improving the national human rights record, is believed to decrease migration propensities (European Parliament 2020). Since associating migration with a less politically salient and largely uncontroversial policy domain favours depoliticisation strategies, we would expect a similar transfer of politicisation in the case of the migration-peace or migration-human rights nexus (with a depoliticisation of migration and a (re)politicisation of the second policy domain). Reversely, we expect that associating migration with a highly salient and sensitive issue area (such as security or even terrorism) would lead to increased politicisation and polarisation on the question of migration – a strategy often used by right-wing populist parties (Grande, Schwarzbözl, and Fatke 2019).

While Bressanelli, Koop, and Reh (2020) see assertive depoliticisation strategies as operating in secluded areas, we argue that controlled transparency best characterises the operation of the EUTF. Given the EU's commitment to transparency (e.g. see art. 15 of the TFEU, 2020 C 202/1) and the pressure placed by Member States on the Commission to demonstrate that the EU was 'doing something' to address the 'refugee crisis', it was crucial for the EUTF to be visible. We show that the Commission privileged transparency on the expertise-based aspects of the EUTF (notably regarding the implementation of projects) but not on its political aspects (such as the criteria used to select projects or determine countries of priority). This further contributed to a depoliticisation logic by creating an apolitical façade for the EUTF.

Depoliticising the Eu refugee crisis

This section shows how initial internal responses to the 2015 'refugee crisis' entailed distributive conflict and exacerbated political divisions in the EU. We argue that the creation of the EUTF enabled the Commission to minimise existing disagreements over how to

respond to the refugee crisis, making the conflict less visible, less polarising and less salient (Bressanelli, Koop, and Reh 2020, 335). The EUTF was therefore the product of an 'assertive depoliticisation' strategy relying on five main tenets. Firstly, by characterising the crisis as African rather than European, the Commission was able to divert attention away from internal tensions within the EU towards the external dimension. Secondly, the creation of the EUTF made it possible to reframe a political issue (unwanted immigration) as a technical one stemming from underdevelopment. Thirdly, this 'root causes' frame created a consensus by bringing actors with a strong preference for migration control and those wanting to preserve the traditional core of EU development policy together. Fourthly, the establishment of an 'emergency' Trust Fund put a lot of control in the hands of the Commission (especially DG DEVCO) and EUTF managers, while restricting participation from other political actors (notably the EP). Finally, the visibility strategy of the Commission testified to a preference for controlled transparency, with a focus on the technocratic and expertise-based aspects of the EUTF rather than political considerations, and a reliance on outputs to (re)legitimise EU policies.

Addressing the EU 'refugee crisis': from an internal redistribution of asylum-seekers to a search for external solutions

More than a million migrants crossed into Europe in 2015 – a number not seen since WWII. The uncoordinated responses of Member States created a perception of crisis. The frontline states (notably Greece and Italy) were unable to accommodate the sudden inflow of migrants, which in turn spurred secondary movements and a reaction in the form of unilateral border closures in the Schengen area. Concurrently, there were reports of a rising death toll in the Mediterranean. In response, the Council adopted two relocation schemes to ease the pressure experienced by frontline countries and to prevent uncontrolled secondary movements (Council 2015a, 2015b). The negotiations of these schemes, however, proved highly controversial, ultimately creating a division between Northern top destinations and Southern border countries on the one hand, and the Visegrad Group (Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia: V4) on the other. While the first group received a high share of asylum-seekers and thus supported relocation measures to achieve fairer distribution, the V4 countries wanted to maintain the status quo, as it meant fewer responsibilities for them (Biermann et al. 2019). Subsequent efforts to establish permanent quotas proved highly controversial and were soon deadlocked (Zaun 2018).

With no agreement on the internal dimension in sight, the Commission decided to shift the emphasis to the external dimension of migration policies, which was less politicised among Member States and more amenable to a compromise. The focus shifted towards 'upstream work' (Interview_PermRep_7), i.e. addressing the reasons why migrants were leaving their home countries in the first place. The EUTF was established in this context as an instrument for addressing 'the root causes of destabilisation, forced displacement and irregular migration, by promoting economic and equal opportunities, strengthening the resilience of vulnerable people, security and development' (European Commission 2015). The regulatory approach underpinning the Trust Fund is therefore one combining remote control with a focus on addressing migrants' incentives (Niemann and Zaun 2023).

Under the EUTF, 254 projects worth €4.9 billion have been implemented in 26 African countries which are 'among the most fragile and affected by instability, forced displacement and irregular migration' (European Commission 2021a, 1).

The construction of an African crisis

The EUTF is widely believed to have been established in response to the EU 'refugee crisis', in a context in which the Commission was under political and popular pressure to 'do something' (Interview_EP_1; Interview_PermRep_2; Interview_PermRep_5; Interview_PermRep_6; Interview_PermRep_7; Interview_EEAS_1; Interview_EEAS_2). The formal launch of the EUFT at an international summit on migration convened by European leaders clearly supports this interpretation. Yet, in the Constitutive Agreement establishing the EUTF, the crisis is located not in Europe but in Africa, more precisely 'in the regions Sahel and Lake Chad, the Horn of Africa, and the North of Africa' (corresponding to the three operational windows of the EUTF) (European Commission 2015, art. 2.1). The construct of an African crisis was not without its critics. In its audit performance report, the European Court of Auditors noted that the crises the EUTF aimed to address had not been clearly defined for any of the three regions, leaving undetermined the cause(s) of these crises, their estimated duration, the most pressing needs to be addressed, and the estimated resources required to do so (European Court of Auditors 2018, para. 16). One of our interviewees in the Commission mentioned that the use of a crisis rationale to set up the EUTF was to some extent 'abused', since the real crisis had happened many years ago, notably with the Syrian crisis (Interview_COM_1).

The idea of the EUFT in fact originated in the adoption of the EU Sahel Strategy in 2011, aimed at addressing key issues of security and development in a region that was increasingly torn by destabilisation and jihadist terrorism. In this context, the European Commission advanced the idea of a Trust Fund to enable prompt action and promote stability in the region. Whilst a modest project at first, the idea of creating a Trust Fund gained momentum with the 'refugee crisis' of 2015, this time with an added focus on migration management and root causes (Interview_COM_2) – the EUTF's full name bears the mark of the old project (promoting stability in the region) combined with the more recent one (addressing the root causes of migration). The adaptation of an existing blueprint not only facilitated prompt action in the external dimension (Zaun and Nantermoz 2022), but also ensured support from actors in the Commission who saw the opportunity to implement policies they had been advocating. This confirms that the creation of the EUFT in 2015 was at least partly the result of political convenience rather than an acute African crisis. Nonetheless, the creation of the EUTF enabled the Commission to divert attention away from the perceived EU 'refugee crisis' and the resulting tensions between Member States.

The EUTF as a technocratic and consensus-building response to increased migration flows

Locating the crisis in Africa rather than in the EU constituted a reframing of a 'thorny problem' – how to deal with irregular and unmanaged migration flows from Africa –

as a technical issue (Interview_PermRep_6): Instead of politically sensitive discussions about redistributions of asylum-seekers in Europe, the focus shifted to how to best address the 'root causes' of migration. This question favoured a technocratic approach, i.e. a policy approach based on expertise rather than personal or political interest (Radaelli 1999). Where technocracy rules, the solution to a problem cannot lie in political debate about the desirability of different policy alternatives, but rather in determining which technical solution(s) will be most effective in a given context. Hence the 'problem' of migration to Europe was to be solved by drawing on scientific expertise to determine and address the root causes of migratory movements. The familiarity of the 'root causes' narrative, which had periodically resurfaced in EU documents and Action plans since 1992, ensured that it would not be politically contested (Zaun and Nantermoz 2022, 517), since the EU could point to its longstanding commitment and activity in the area of 'root cause' prevention (Schunz and Damro 2020). While linking migration to development to depoliticise it was therefore nothing new in EU external policies, the EUTF represented an unprecedented stepping up of resources in service of this goal.

These root causes, from the perspective of the Commission and EU Member States, are multiple, ranging from poverty, unemployment, instability, and insecurity to a lack of access to resources and education, corruption and dissatisfaction with local politics (Interview_ EEAS_1; Interview_PermRep_2; Interview_PermRep_6). These issues have been the traditional bread and butter of EU development policies, but in the EUTF, development and poverty alleviation are no longer considered as ends but as means to an end – reducing unwanted migration flows. This logic is particularly manifest in the first pillar of action of the EUTF, 'greater economic and employment opportunities', which is based on the 'assumption that short and long-term grievances arising from economic and social exclusion, marginalisation and inequality are amongst the most significant drivers of violence, forced displacement and illegal migration' (European Commission n.d.-e).

The emphasis of technocratic policymaking is also reflected by a repeated reference to a commitment to evidence-based policymaking. The EUTF claims to ground its interventions in 'an evidence-based approach in order to understand the drivers, dynamics of migration, and to map out responses' (European Commission n.d.-d). To this end, the Commission has created two Research Facilities – one for the Horn of Africa and one for the Sahel/Lake Chad and North Africa regions. These Research Facilities are meant to enhance the Commission's understanding of the drivers of instability, irregular migration and forced displacement, and to identify best practices and the most effective policies (European Commission n.d.-c). The extent to which this research influences the strategy and programmes adopted under the EUTF is, however, questionable (Zaun and Nantermoz 2022). For the logic underlying the 'root causes' frame is fundamentally flawed, as economic development tends to lead to more (rather than less) migration, at least in the short term (Fratzke and Salant 2018). Yet, what matters is not the veracity of the claim but its ability to ease the field by showing that the EU 'refugee crisis' is the result of some pre-identified 'root causes' that can be addressed through technocratic rather than political means, and that cannot be contested on political grounds.

Avoiding conflict: the 'root causes' approach as consensus-building

The success of the 'root causes' frame further results from its capacity to build consensus among actors with very different preferences, thereby minimising visible conflict – as expected in a depoliticisation strategy (Bressanelli, Koop, and Reh 2020). In 2015, conflict arose between Member States that were strongly affected by the increased inflow of migrants – such as Italy, Austria, Germany – and the V4 countries opposing the relocation of asylum-seekers along with those under pressure from populist parties gaining electoral ground (e.g. France). While the countries in the first and last groups pressured the EU to take action to show to the public that the situation was under control, the V4 countries would only agree to measures that did not involve more responsibilities for them. These three groups therefore favoured external cooperation on migration control to reduce migration to Europe (Interview_PermRep_5). Yet another group of Member States and actors with a long-standing tradition in development aid (including Belgium, Sweden and the German Development Ministry)[2] wanted to preserve the core of EU development policies. The EUTF bridged these multiple demands: its framing as an instrument for addressing migration, and the presence of a migration management pillar, satisfied those actors with migration-control inclinations, whilst the root causes approach was seen by development-minded actors as an opportunity to promote the principles of good development cooperation (Interview_PermRep_7). Czaika, Erdal, and Talleraas (2023) show that such a combination of different types of policies seems to be part of a broader pattern.

Finally, the 'root causes' frame tapped into a more positive image, the desirability of development, as opposed to more controversial policies of border management and control. Our interlocutors in both the Commission and Permanent Representations of Member states insisted that the aim of the EUTF was not to *stop* migration (Interview_-COM_2; Interview_COM_3; Interview_COM_4; Interview_PermRep_5; Interview_-PermRep_6). Instead, 'the mindset is all about helping people stay where they are' (Interview_CSO_1) by creating 'de-incentives to departure' to keep migrants at home (Interview_PermRep_3; Interview_PermRep_5). The use of development policy, a far less stigmatised and politically salient policy domain than migration policy, facilitated a depoliticisation of the EU's refugee crisis, while the emphasis on helping potential migrants through development aid legitimised a concentration of power in the hands of development experts in the Commission, as shown in the next section.

'A DEVCO show' –Insulating the EUTF from politics

According to Bressanelli, Koop, and Reh (2020), a core feature of depoliticisation strategies is that they limit the number of actors participating in the decision-making process. The decision by the Commission to set up an *Emergency* Trust Fund (as opposed to a thematic one) had direct governance implications. It allowed for quicker procedures and empowered the Commission – notably the Directorate General for International Cooperation and Development (DG DEVCO) (which controlled two of the three operational windows of the EUTF), and excluded other actors, notably the EP.

The strong control of the Commission over the EUTF is manifest at all stages of decision-making, from formulating the EUTF's strategy to identifying needs, and

designing and implementing projects. The Commission chairs the two governing bodies of the EUTF: the Strategic Board, which adopts and revises the Trust Fund's Strategy and amends its internal rules, if needed; and the Operational Committees, which meet separately for the three geographical windows of the EUTF to decide on activities and programmes (European Commission n.d.-a).

The desire for quick results, however, was not always reconcilable with quality checks and discussions about the added value of different projects. The pressure to show quick wins meant that Member States had little time to review projects prior to voting on their adoption in the Operational Committees – sometimes only one week before the projects were due to be approved (European Court of Auditors 2018, para. 31). Member States were thus often presented with 'more of a *fait accompli* kind of projects' (Interview_PermRep_7), whilst the Commission retained a lot of power to dictate the agenda (Interview_PermRep_2; Interview_PermRep_7). Only in very rare cases would a project be voted down during Operational Committee meetings (Interview_PermRep_6; Interview_PermRep_2). One interviewee characterised the process as 'a DEVCO show', i.e. something that the Commission presents as effective and efficient, but that in truth largely expands its own powers (Interview_PermRep_2).

Besides, the speed at which EUTF projects were designed and adopted left some Member States worried about the lack of proper checks and balances associated with good development practice, particularly when operating in volatile environments with a higher political risk (Interview_PermRep_6; Interview_PermRep_7). Following demands from Member States and the European Court of Auditors, in February 2019 the European Commission elaborated a risk register common to the three Operational Windows of the EUTF for every project, to account for reputational, operational and financial risks (European Commission n.d.-a, 2015c; European Court of Auditors 2018, para. 25; Interview_PermRep_6).

In addition, the EP was initially completely excluded from the decision-making processes and was not even informed of the EUTF's creation prior to Valletta. Following criticism from the EP, a semi-informal agreement with the Commission enabled the Parliament to be present during meetings of the Strategic Board (with the status of observer), but not during meetings of the Operational Committees (Interview_EP_1; Interview_COM_2). The exclusion of the EP from Operational Committee meetings was justified by the need to avoid the dangerous 'politicisation of debates' (Interview_COM_2) and the rejection of projects for political reasons. One interviewee in the Commission stressed that, instead, the approval of new programmes was to rely on objective criteria and to be decided by specialists rather than political actors, since the latter could slow down the decision-making process (Interview_COM_2). From the EP's perspective, however, being excluded from the decision-making process was perceived as an attempt to shield the EUTF from democratic checks. Although the EP does not exercise oversight over the European Development Fund (from which most EUTF funds originate), it does have the right to scrutinise other development instruments that contribute to EUTF funding, such as the Development Cooperation Instrument and the European Neighbourhood Instrument (Interview_EP_1; Interview_EP_2). The decision to exclude the EP from EUTF governance was thus interpreted as an attempt to 'fast-track [the] process by making it less democratic' (Interview_EP_2). The Parliament indeed saw the EUTF as a political instrument which should be under democratic scrutiny and

control, rather than as a technocratic object requiring the intervention of experts (Interview_EP_2).

Controlled transparency as a tool of (re)legitimisation

While the Commission was able to retain a strong hold over the governance of the EUTF, the salience of the refugee crisis and the pressure placed on both the Commission and Member States to demonstrate prompt action and deliver results meant that operating in seclusion was not an option. In contrast with Bressanelli, Koop, and Reh's (2020) expectation that depoliticisation strategies operate in secluded areas, we have found that the Commission privileged a controlled form of transparency and publicity – ultimately reproducing the EUTF's apolitical façade and enabling the Commission to (re)legitimise its work through the dissemination and public promotion of its achieved outputs (Scharpf 1970). From the very start, both the Commission and Member States emphasised the importance of transparency and visibility in order to show the concrete results on the ground of EUTF activities (European Commission 2016; Interview_COM_2; Interview_COM_3; Interview_COM_4). The EUTF's website, launched in late 2017 (European Commission 2017), includes detailed information about every project funded, as well as more general information regarding its strategy, governance and financial resources. A 'News and Stories' section also provides regular updates on the disbursement of funds, and showcases successes of projects and their impact on local communities (European Commission n.d.-b). While considerable effort was put into external transparency and visibility, the political decisions regarding how countries of priority were determined, how and by whom projects were devised, and what criteria were used for selecting them remained opaque (European Commission 2018; European Court of Auditors 2018, paras. 29-30; Interview_EP_1; Interview_PermRep_3). Outside of the Commission, the EUTF appeared as 'a bit of a black box' (Interview_EP_1), with Member States struggling 'to see how the … political priorities translated into regional priorities, which in turn translated into programmes, which in turn … came back to actually fulfilling the goals' (interview_PermRep_7). The flexibility built into the EUTF also made it more difficult to trace funds, therefore complicating the exercise of scrutiny over how they were used (Interview_EP_1; Interview_EP_2). The Commission's communication strategy can thus be characterised as one of outward-oriented visibility and controlled transparency internally vis-à-vis other EU institutions. The proliferation of information on the more technocratic aspects of the EUTF contributed to the overall logic of depoliticisation by giving it an apolitical façade.

This section has shown how the Commission sought to depoliticise the refugee crisis and convince Member States and their electorates that the EU was in control of the situation. Yet, by subordinating development aid to its usefulness in addressing the root causes of migration, the Commission reinserted political and strategic considerations into development policy. In other words, the bottom-up pressures the Commission faced were not simply contained through a strategy of depoliticising migration, but rather transferred to another issue-area, development policy. The following section examines how the EUTF has politicised development policy, and notably the traditional objectives of poverty alleviation and sustainable development. Rather than being ends in

themselves, these objectives are now portrayed as *means* to reduce future migration flows to Europe, reflecting a tendency towards turning development into a tool for migration management (Alba 2010).

The politicisation of development aid

Arguably, the alignment of development aid with donors' national security and foreign policy objectives is not a new phenomenon. Already two decades ago, Duffield noted that a convergence between the development and security domains had resulted in an 'increasingly overt and accepted politicisation of aid' (2001, 16). A rich body of literature has since developed the notion of securitisation (sometimes associated with 'instrumentalisation' or 'politicisation') to examine how the security priorities and interests of donor countries impact development assistance priorities, policies and practices (Abrahamsen 2005; Brown and Grävingholt 2016, 3; Gazzotti 2019, 2902). Yet the EUTF is an example of European donors' increasingly open and explicit use of development aid to meet domestic strategic objectives (Godfrey 2018).

The politicisation of development policy is especially manifest in its increased salience and visibility (Hackenesch, Bergmann, and Orbie 2021). Whilst the EU has traditionally disbursed the majority of its funds directly to national governments or national agencies in aid-recipient countries, the EUTF has prioritised delegated cooperation with Member States (37% of total funds disbursed) and United Nations agencies and International Organisations (30%) (European Commission n.d.-f). The recourse to Member States as preferred implementing actors was an explicit choice from the start, enshrined in the Constitutive Agreement of the EUTF (European Commission 2015). This choice was motivated by the Commission's desire to ensure EU visibility and to set up the EUTF as a distinctively *European* response (Interview_COM_1; European Commission 2015, art. 10). The use of Member States' expertise, the Commission believed, would ensure that European values were respected and transferred through the EUTF (Interview_COM_1).

The increased salience of development policy is also apparent in the recent interest taken by Central Eastern European Member States in EU development policy – an interest driven, since the 2015 refugee crisis, by the recognition that support to countries of origin, capacity building and border management initiatives may help curb migration flows to Europe (Interview_PermRep_1). These countries have also been actively involved in the EUTF's Strategic Board meetings, and have been important bilateral donors (European Commission 2021b), evidencing their increasing interest in engaging and participating in development policy.

The politicisation of development aid, in turn, had direct implications for the functioning of the EUTF, in terms of both the type of projects funded and the recipient populations. Although local ownership and partnership is one of the core principles of intervention (European Commission n.d.-d), in practice the EUTF is 'EU-led' (Interview_COM_1; Interview_PermRep_2) and stems 'from a European perspective [and] the concerns of the impacts on the European side' (Interview_PermRep_6). In terms of the nature of the programmes implemented, while some are traditional development aid projects (Interview_PermRep_3), the emphasis on migration management and governance is unprecedented compared with previous development instruments and has

become a structuring axis of the EUTF (Interview_PermRep_4; Interview_PermRep_5). A case in point is the funding provided to the Libyan border guard (Cusumano and Riddervold 2023, 13). This is explained by the strong preference of some Member States for funding projects with a migration control focus, and the belief that the two objectives of addressing the root causes of migration and migration management go hand in hand – hence it would make no sense to work on one without the other (Interview_COM_2; Interview_PermRep_3). Finally, contrary to classic development policies that target the poorest populations or those most in need, the EUTF engaged in geolocalisation on the basis of the migratory potential of populations (Interview_COM_2; Interview_-COM_3; Interview_COM_4). The three regional windows of the EUTF represent 'the major African migration routes to Europe'; neighbouring countries may under special circumstances benefit from the EUTF when projects seek to address 'regional migration flows and related cross-border challenges' (European Commission 2015c; Interview_-PermRep_6). As noted by one of our interviewees, 'the EUTF shifts money away from poor countries to poor countries *with a migration issue*' (Interview_EP_2). The EUTF has indeed shifted the balance of priorities 'towards countries that are of strategic importance for the EU, in terms of where the flows are coming from' (Interview_PermRep_2), with the allocation of funds shifting according to the evolution of migration routes (Interview_PermRep_5).

This approach of turning development into a tool of migration management has not gone uncriticised, with both EU and civil society actors pointing to the risk of undermining the objectives of development cooperation laid down in EU treaties (Interview_EP_2; Interview_CSO_1; Interview_COM_1). Although arguably going against the EU principles for development policy, the politicisation of aid was made possible by positing a mutual interest between donor and aid-recipient countries (McConnon 2014). The EUTF professes to replace negative conditionality with 'win-win partnerships' (European Commission 2016; Interview_PermRep_3). This notion of 'win-win partnerships' has also been advanced as a justification for the EU-Jordan Compact (Vaagland 2023). The connection between the development needs of African partner countries and the security interests of the EU and its Member States is largely treated as self-evident and unproblematic. According to one of our interviewees, 'the EUTF is the response of the EU to the refugee crisis in Europe, but it is also a response to address the root causes of poverty in Africa, to improve governance and reinforce the capacity of third countries in migration management. So, it's a win-win.' (Interview_PermRep_3). Communication initiatives around the EUTF similarly emphasise the 'spirit of partnership' between the EU and Africa and the desire to 'find common solutions to challenges of mutual interest' (European Council 2015), such as the fight against human trafficking and smuggling (Interview_PermRep_2; Interview_PermRep_6). This assumption of a shared interest and a 'win-win' situation between partner countries in Africa and European donors is questionable, however, since the majority of African countries do not see migration as a threat but as something normal. Whilst migration transit countries (such as Niger) may readily agree to enhanced migration management in exchange for significant investments and aid disbursements, countries with a high rate of emigration have an interest in letting migration continue, since remittances represent an important source of revenue for the country (Interview_PermRep_2; Interview_PermRep_4;

Interview_CSO_1). The five billion euros contributed by the EUTF between 2015 and 2020 seem little when compared with the 33 billion dollars (€29.1 billion) sent to the Sub-Saharan region in 2015 alone (World Bank 2015).

Conclusion

This paper has shown how, through the EUTF, the Commission has sought to depoliticise the EU refugee crisis and transform it into an issue that can be addressed through technocratic means, i.e. by using an alleged 'evidence-based approach' and directing aid to address the 'root causes of migration'. Thus, migration becomes a mere result of underdevelopment, a problem that can be solved through the 'right' policies and projects. The success of this depoliticisation strategy lies in five different tenets. Firstly, by locating the source of the problem in Africa rather than within the EU, the Commission was able to divert attention away from internal tensions, thereby externalising both the policy problem and the solution. Secondly, as a non-majoritarian institution, the Commission was able to shift the debate from political to technical terms, emphasising the importance of research and expertise over political considerations. Thirdly, the 'root causes' frame bridged the gap between the preferences of those actors defending migration control and those wanting to preserve the traditional core of EU development policy, thereby avoiding conflict. Besides, whilst migration management is both a highly salient and highly controversial issue, development policy is associated with a much more positive image and is less politically salient. Tapping into the desirability and apolitical façade of development policy therefore reinforced the depoliticisation of migration policy. Fourthly, the establishment of an 'emergency' Trust Fund both gave the Commission strong control over the governance of the EUTF and limited the participation of other political actors (notably the EP). Finally, the visibility strategy of the EUTF testified to a preference for controlled transparency, with a focus on the technocratic and expertise-based aspects of the EUTF rather than on political considerations. The dissemination and public promotion of EUTF outputs also allowed for the 'output' (re)legitimisation (Scharpf 1970) of the EUTF through concrete results. Yet, by subordinating development aid to its usefulness in addressing the root causes of migration, the Commission reinserted political and strategic considerations into development policy; this entailed a transfer of politicisation from migration to development policy. This politicisation of development policy has impacted both the type of projects funded (as evidenced in the emphasis on migration management) and the recipient populations (EUTF interventions being concentrated in regions along the migration routes to Europe). Hence, through the EUTF, the classical objectives of EU development policy (poverty alleviation, job creation and sustainable development) have become means of reducing migration flows towards Europe.

The integration of migration objectives within development policy reflects the broader rise of 'comprehensive' or 'integrated' approaches in the EU's external engagement, which increasingly unites policy areas and goals that were originally separate and independent – such as migration, peace, security, human rights, climate change and the eradication of poverty (Bergmann and Müller 2023).[3] This has resulted in a vocabulary of different 'nexuses', including migration-development, migration-terrorism and migration-security, to take the example of migration only. Further research could

investigate the effect of these nexuses on (de)politicisation dynamics, especially in light of the theoretical framework outlined in this article. Despite the growing literature on the externalisation of migration policies (Niemann and Zaun 2023), the interplay between (de)politicisation dynamics and the European integration process in migration policy should receive more scholarly attention. On the one hand, the growing politicisation of the European integration process has increasingly led to multi-level 'politics traps' that prevent state leaders from reaching agreement at the EU level and may lead to a paralysis of EU decision-making processes (Zeitlin, Nicoli, and Laffan 2019, 965) – as was the case with the international dimension of migration policies in 2015 (Niemann and Zaun 2018). On the other hand, the EU institutions' strategy of shifting their attention towards the external dimension may (at least partially) be motivated by a desire to depoliticise a given policy area – as we have shown with the case of the EUTF and migration policy. (De)politicisation dynamics may therefore affect not only the scope and speed of European integration, but also the geographical focus of policy interventions. Further research could examine whether similar dynamics can be observed in other heavily politicised areas of EU policymaking.

Notes

1. We use the term (de)politicisation to refer both to politicisation and to depoliticisation.
2. Whilst the German Foreign Office has taken a strong interest in migration control policies since 2015, the Development Ministry is more critical about repurposing genuine development funds (Zaun and Nantermoz 2022, 523).
3. This is evidenced in the establishment of a new Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI), which aims to provide a comprehensive instrument for EU external engagement and replaces several formerly existing instruments.

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