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Shadowboxing in silence: balancing with European Semester guidelines in national parliamentary debates on economic policies

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ABSTRACT

This article examines national responses to the introduction of a strong policy coordination tool by the European Commission: the European Semester. The tool was introduced in 2012 in reaction to the economic crisis to prevent unsustainable policy choices within EMU. It sets annual country-specific recommendations for economic policies, which the Member States are expected to implement when drafting national budgets. We study the uptake of the policy tool in three disparate Member States: Finland, Spain and France in 2013. The article explores how national parliaments tackle the challenge imposed on national sovereignty by the powerful tool. We investigate the discursive practices and justifications evinced by national politicians on policy proposal in the parliamentary debate on annual state budget. Politicians balance between contrastive normative frameworks by operating on evasive discursive formulations and performative silences, which point to a deafened legitimization work and double commitment within the multilevel polity of the EU.

KEYWORDS

Discursive institutionalism; Europeanization; legitimization work; national sovereignty; parliamentary debate

Introduction

Policy-making takes part in steering the direction of social change in modern societies (Meyer et al. 1997b). It is known to be guided by the cultural norms of rationalization and development in the framework of evolutionarily progressing states (Boli and Thomas 1999; Alasutari and Qadir 2016). Ideally, policies are to provide ever improving solutions to perceived societal problems. Much political research concentrates on the instrumental aspects of policies, evaluating the goals and the gains, the plans and their execution, the premises and practical outcomes of policies (eg. Darvas and Leandro 2015; Haas et al. 2020; Hallerberg, Marzinotto, and Wolff 2011). The instrumental cause-effect scheme of a policy tool, however, does not tell the whole story about the life span of policies. This research takes a sociological institutionalistic approach to policy-making and highlights the relevance of policy processes in understanding the complex dynamics of policy-making (Woll and Jacquot 2010; Saurugger 2016; Schmidt 2013). Besides

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economic rational calculations, policies involve complicated processes embedded in particular social, political and economic contexts (Saurugger 2013). The implementation of policies involves procedures, fenced by institutional expectations and legitimacies (March and Olsen 1998; Surel 2000). Aside from the rationalized goals, the trajectory of policies is guided by normative frameworks, driven by mutual agreements and commitments rather than mere functional gains (Rautajoki, *in review*). This means that aside from input and output aspects, it is important to investigate the *throughput process* of a policy (Schmidt 2013).

The implementation of any policy entails a chain of local activities. Viewing implementation as an on-off matter of mere compliance is inadequate in terms of the theoretical understanding of the phenomenon (Saurugger 2014). Understanding a process necessitates the investigation of situated action and discursive practices in local contexts, enacted by situated actors under the expectations of institutionally proper action (Schmidt 2008). Proper actor identities are to be constituted and enforced along with policy processes, requiring an actor-centered analytic eye on the strategic acts of implementation (Saurugger 2013). Our article concurs with this view and takes a constructionist perspective on legitimation work, approaching institutional legitimacy as a continuous effort actors need to scan and manage – and act out – locally and observably in their intersubjective activities (Schmidt 2013; Carstensen and Schmidt 2018b; Seabrooke 2006). Both normative expectations and rationalized goals are present in the setting. Sociologically tuned contextualization of policy processes makes it possible to overcome the dichotomy between the logic of consequentiality and the logic of appropriateness (Saurugger 2013). This intrinsically complex and many-sided aspect of policy-making becomes particularly interesting in the complicated context of a multi-level governance structure (Heinkelmann-Wild, Kriegmair, and Rittberger 2020).

The European Union is an agreement-based union of 27 diverse nation states which have signed away a substantial degree of their political power to an external supranational rule in exchange for co-ordinated integration and centrally governed co-operation for efficiency, progress and economic trade-offs. In a functional perspective, the setting appears rational and well justified. However, the elements of external rule and binding membership responsibilities undermine the earlier constellation of premises and principles characterizing a nation state. The multilevel governance structure of the EU requires active balancing, maintenance work and strategic justifications on the part of state actors (Thomann and Sager 2017). While functional interest may pervade the setting, the old structural arenas along with their actor identities and normative frameworks persists and must adjust themselves to new circumstances which gradually begin to shape the political entity. Christopher Bickerton (2012) has labeled the transformation of states within the EU as a new kind of 'member statehood', under which they can no longer function upon the same principles of legitimacy as in a nation-state. The external frameworks of rules tying the hands of national politicians compromises the idea of popular sovereignty while new principled obligations and exogenous expectations start to influence politics in the Union. To govern their states legitimately, Member State actors have to balance simultaneously with diverse normative frameworks. The assimilative practices emerging in this setting have been referred to as *Europeanization* (e.g. Beyer 2018; Knill and Lehmkuhl

2002; Mastenbroek and Kaeding 2006; Thomann and Sager 2017). Our article contributes to unraveling the local dynamic of Europeanization from the viewpoint of national state actors.

We study the on-site management of legitimacies in the illuminating case of the European Semester (ES). Upon its arrival, ES altered the chain of command in deciding about national economic policies, thus transgressing the former boundaries of institutional territories. We study the normative challenges imposed on policy making in the new setting. Indeed, the introduction of ES in 2012, signalled the advent of a powerful policy co-ordination tool, issuing recommendations in the domain of national budgetary policies. The tool, developed in response to the Eurozone crisis to control and govern national economic policies country by country, was ratified by the Member States and the European Parliament (EP). It entailed a regulative force unprecedented in the history of the EU. ES was exceptional, firstly, by encroaching on the area of economic policies, which had previously fallen under the purview of national sovereignty, and secondly, by granting the European Commission (COM) direct control without being overseen by the EP (Scharpf 2014). The aim was to prevent national authorities from adopting unsustainable policy choices threatening the stability of EMU (Costamagna 2013). For Member States the entrance of these annually circulating guidelines, posed a challenge to institutional integrity. This article investigates the discursive legitimation work of national state actors operating at the interface of the national parliamentary context and the newly introduced ES guidelines in three diverse Member States: Finland, France and Spain in 2013. We investigate how national politicians adjust to the external rules at the level of political justifications in actual policy-making debates on the state budget.

Contextualizing the European Semester tool

ES is an interesting policy tool which has given rise to much research. In historical scrutiny the policy tool itself has gradually changed since its early introduction. It was subsequently extended to cover social policies as well, and the exhortatory tone has been mitigated toward a more flexible list of optional recommendations (Carstensen and Schmidt 2018a). We have chosen to analyze the early phase of the policy in 2013, to comprehend the regulation of legitimacies at the juncture when the procedural setting had just recently changed and the tool still retained its relatively forceful character. For a broader view of the legitimation challenges we chose to study these processes in three diverse Member States (Finland, France and Spain), each of these differing in terms of their size, membership history, geographical location, integration aspirations and economic situation.

As outlined, we trace and analyze actors' strategies to manage institutional appropriateness in the course of policy-making action at the advent of the ES. In this article we are not interested in measuring the degree of compliance to recommendations in these countries. Neither do we investigate the choice and outcome of actual policy decisions. Nor do we assess the functionality or efficiency of this coordinative policy tool. And finally, we do not aspire to capture the whole trajectory of the ES tool since its launch, but only the challenging setting immediately after its introduction. Our analytic focus is on observable situated action in the institutional framework of national parliaments. In the rough division between backstage and frontstage processes, we are interested in the

frontstage management of recommendations in a public debate. The emergence of recommendation items or the ideological underpinnings motivating the establishment and content of the tool as a whole likewise fall outside the scope of article (cf. D'Ermann et al. 2019; Ryner 2015).

The ES practices start their annual circulation in the autumn when the COM sets out the EU priorities for the coming year in the Annual Growth Survey and in the alert mechanism report. In January the Council of the EU discusses the annual growth survey, sets general policy guidelines and draws conclusions. In spring, the Member States are invited to take these into account when preparing their National Stability or Convergence Programmes and National Reforms Programmes. By April both plans are to be submitted (*ex ante*). The Council and the COM discuss these and present country-specific recommendations (CSRs) based on the national policy plans, after which the Member States are guided to implement them when drawing up national budgets for the following year (*ex post*).

Research on the establishment of the ES in the Member States has already characterized the Semester's objectives as ambitious and complicated to execute (Hallerberg, Marzintotto, and Wolff 2011). Crum (2018) has argued that the supranational sphere of ES pushed governments into a reactive and defensive mode, in which the eventual right to adopt the budget is presented at the national level, yet, governments' economic decisions became increasingly constrained, positioning parliaments on the losing side of a reinforced two-level game. The observed inefficiency of implementation highlights the fundamental problem of policy co-ordination in the EU: national policymaking is accountable to national parliaments and focuses on national interests, which in many cases differ widely in different Member States (Darvas and Leandro 2015).

The strong role of EU institutions is crucial to understand in the intergovernmental sphere of the ES. Even though it involves no legal transfer of sovereignty from the Member States to the EU level, it has given the EU institutions a more visible and authoritative role than ever before in monitoring, scrutinizing and guiding national economic, fiscal and social policies (Verdun and Zeitlin 2018). Through country-specific recommendations (CSRs), the European institutions have exerted huge influence on Member States by framing the structural reforms needed to overcome the impact of the economic crisis (Clauwaert 2016). This extended influence is at the heart of our research interest.

Research question

We scrutinize the ES from a perspective so far overlooked in research. Instead of studying the instrumentality, procedural failures or power balance of the policy tool, or the factual policy choices in Member States, we study the throughput process of the ES tool. We investigate how the political recommendations from the EU are met with and discursively justified in the national parliaments of Finland, Spain and France after the introduction of the tool in 2013. As the research on national implementation of EU policies increasingly takes a quantitative perspective (e.g. Zhelyazkova 2014), our study focuses on the qualitative aspects of political rhetoric, analyzing references to the EU guidelines in national parliamentary debates. We approach the institutional balancing work around ES from a constructivist perspective (Risse 2018), exploring how actor

identities and the surrounding polity itself are normatively monitored and constituted in the policy-making process. We ask how the Member State actors discursively relate to a tool that potentially compromises their code of proper conduct at the site of national parliamentary action, that is, how the encroachment of EU rule into the sphere of national economic planning is manifested and managed in the discursive practices of national actors. How are the guidelines discussed and justified in national parliamentary debates on state budgets? What kind of strategies do actors adopt to regulate institutional legitimacy in the course of economic policy-making?

Our study focuses on the active management of legitimacy in institutional discourse (Carstensen and Schmidt 2018b), highlighting that political action is not only about promoting and debating instrumental solutions to current problems. Actors need to accomplish the institutional framework, the foundation of political activities and their ‘appropriateness’ (March and Olsen 1998), along those processes. The discursive management of ES procedure sheds light on the national strategies to regulate expectations related to the governance structure, political actorship, and accountability in national parliaments. Our analysis of the strategies to argue about guidelines in three different nation-states contributes to the discussion on the local management of institutional appropriateness within the complex multi-level governance structure of the EU. As it turns out, in this legitimation work performative practices and strategic silences play an important role on the side of explicit verbal justifications.

Theorizing European integration, institutionalism and legitimacy

The mainstream theories explaining European integration as a political endeavor (inter-governmentalism, neofunctionalism, and more recently postfunctionalism) are mostly based on the ideas of rational choice and the promotion of national interests (Macartney 2014; Vilpišauskas 2013; Wiener, Börzel and Risse 2018). According to intergovernmentalism, nation-states sign over political authority to the EU so that they can take decisions to resolve their common problems, the states being in control of imposing their national preferences through intergovernmental bargaining. Neofunctionalism holds that the fundamental force underlying integration is the economic gains and other policy sectors follow along as the co-operation spills over into other domains, strengthening the supranational institution (Wiener, Börzel and Risse 2018). In postfunctionalism, the emphasis is on Euroscepticism and the losses connected to EU membership (Hooghe and Marks 2009).

Indeed, European integration has for long been accused of having negative effects on national democracy because the important decisions can no longer be made at the national level where the conflict occurs resulting in ‘politics without policy’ at the national level and ‘policy without politics’ at the European level (De Wilde, Leupold, and Schmidtke 2016). Instead of taking a top-down view on policy-making, our study delves into the grassroots level, into the policy processes evolving locally bottom-up. We are interested in how an EU regulation lives on institutionally at the level of national political discourse. This interest affiliates with ‘constructivist neoinstitutionalism’ (Risse 2018), which was placed as an alternative to challenge prior theories on European integration and contemporary EU governance and put more emphasis on national level (e.g. Bulmer and Joseph 2016; Börzel and Risse 2018; Dandashly and Verdun 2018).

In constructivist approach, institutional structures are maintained in processes ascribing and deploying identities to the actors involved (Risse 2018; Saurugger 2013). Membership in the EU merges various political actorships with differing expectations, which at times makes it challenging for the local actors to balance in the dual role (Pi Ferrer and Rautajoki 2020). We analyze the turns in the political debate through the perspective of discursive institutionalism emphasizing the role of local actors' and the relevance of discursive practices in political decision-making (Alasuutari 2015; Schmidt 2008). In parliamentary debates, politicians (MPs) aim to construct convincing arguments to gain credibility and support for their claims (Alasuutari and Qadir 2014), while monitoring the 'logic of appropriateness' in the setting (March and Olsen 1998). Ideas are to be discussed, pursued and justified in accordance with specific normative settings, institutional identities and related expectations (Rautajoki, *in review*). The multilevel nature of the EU complicates legitimacy procedures because policy processes are often split between the European and the national sphere (Schmidt 2013).

Earlier research on discursive legitimation work in the Eurozone crisis has suggested a division between legitimating policies (output), politics (input) and processes (throughput) (Schmidt 2013). In this paper we explore the 'throughput process' of the newly established ES guidelines, referring to the accountability, transparency, inclusiveness and openness of the interactional space between the political input and the policy output (*ibid.* 6). The setting of EU policies has been called a two-level game in which national politicians need to operate in two normative frameworks, being *responsive* to citizens' expectations nationally and acting *responsibly* to commitments internationally (Savage and Weale 2009; Weale 2017). This balancing requires strategic maneuvers in multiple vertical and horizontal settings (Heidbreder 2013). Politicians in national parliaments, faced with procedurally intrusive EU guidelines, need to manage a 'double standard of appropriateness' on the site of local activities: membership responsibilities must be balanced with the integrity of the nation-state.

Data and methods

To examine how national politicians work on the guidelines discursively, we present a cross-national comparison of three European Member States: Finland, France and Spain, during the ES of 2013, a year after the introduction of the tool. The data used in this study consist of two text corpora. The first corpus consists of official EU reports launched at the ES (guidance on EU priorities, country reports, country-specific recommendations) making altogether nine documents. The second corpus consists of national parliamentary debates in which the ES guidelines are to be considered and implemented – that is all debates on the stability programme and debates on annual state budgets, forming a dataset of 22 full debates.¹ The first corpus is used to get a grasp of the recommendations made to the Member States, whereas the second corpus is used to analyze how those issues proposed in the ES are discussed and justified in the national parliaments. All the material analyzed is public and easily accessible through the national parliamentary online data archives and the COM webpages. The three countries in focus were selected according to the criteria of being disparate countries within the Eurozone in terms of their populations and power within the EU, the duration of their EU membership and their economic situations. We included two of the biggest countries

(France and Spain), one of them a founder member and an important pillar within the EU (France), and one smaller country (Finland). Moreover, these three represent different economic situations within the European financial crisis, Spain receiving rescue loans from the euro area funds in 2012, the two others operating on the side of creditors. These three countries have also been found to differ in their integration aspirations (Auel and Christiansen 2015).

Our analysis focuses on the year 2013 as it sheds light on the introduction of the policy tool encroaching on national spheres at a juncture where the backlash of the economic crisis was still distinctly felt. We acknowledge that 2013 represents the time before the turning point in the Eurozone crisis from the fast-burning phase characterized by a demand for rapid political action to pacify markets and prevent disintegration, to the slow-burning phase, characterized by a sequence of contestations about the rules and decisions in the preceding phase (Coman 2018). Our research is intended to highlight how different countries tackled the challenge discursively at a point when the crisis was still ‘burning’, before it cooled down and changed direction toward more flexible command by the Commission (Carstensen and Schmidt 2018a; Bekker 2021).

In the analysis we explore the ways of justifying the proposals and recommendations contained in the ES within the national parliaments. Our analysis is divided into three phases. In the *first phase* we studied the reports and recommendations to identify the various themes issued as recommendations for each country examined – that is, the issues each country is expected to change according to the new policies. In the *second phase* we conducted word searches in the transcripts of the parliamentary debates, 1) using search terms connected to the CSRs or hits on the policy tool of the ES and 2) using search terms about the EU and its related functions or institutions. However, instead of filtering the numbers of references to the EU and its policies in parliamentary debates, we scrutinized in detail the qualitative contents of political argumentation (cf. Rauh and De Wilde 2018). This second phase enabled us to identify the parts of the debates where national politicians invoke the EU and where they discuss and justify the recommendations. In the *third phase*, we coded and analyzed the parts making reference to the recommendations or the EU in general.

We coded two aspects of the data extracts. First, we coded the role of the politician making the statement – that is whether they were from the government or the opposition, to contextualize the statement in the political sphere. Second, we analyzed and coded the various arguments and modes of justifications put forward in the discourses when referring to recommendations or invoking the EU and its institutions. We used ATLAS.ti to assist and organize our analysis. The different forms of justifications were identified inductively in the data through qualitative discourse analysis (DA) (Fairclough 2003; Wood and Kroger 2000) and membership categorization analysis (MCA) (Housley and Fitzgerald 2007; Rautajoki 2012; Sacks 1972). In a discourse analytic framework, we analyzed purposeful meaning-making associated with the EU and its recommendations. With the tools provided by MCA, we traced the kinds of actor identities, expectations and accountabilities speakers mobilize in their signification practices in relation to the wider unit of the EU. It turns out that members are adept at reinforcing two parallel actor categories simultaneously: one in deeds and the other in words. Combining this set of methods allows us to illustrate how the EU and its guidelines are employed in terms of appropriate institutional actorship in national parliaments.

Balancing within the European Union: discursive defense moves and evasive practices in political debate

Next we present our findings on the parliamentary debates case by case in each country, starting from Finland, continuing with Spain, and concluding with France. The data was translated into English. The discursive responses to the country-specific recommendations in these nation-states reveals many similarities but also considerable variation. In the institutional balancing work of the Member States we found ingenious practices we call ‘membership acts’ which simultaneously safeguard national sovereignty while also supporting membership responsibilities. The analysis of justifications shows that the three countries end up outlining quite a different picture of their belonging and position in the EU.

Finland

“In practice, we will be cast from being the model student in the EU, to being in the observation class of the Eurozone under the term of this government.” (Ari Torniainen, Opposition, Center Party, 24.9.13, D4, pg. 26)

The Finnish parliamentary debates on budgetary planning in 2013 are lively and contentious in general, and yet mostly characterized by surprisingly silent acquiescence to the list of recommendations. The ES has presented five main goals for Finnish economic policy. In short, it has encouraged Finland to pay attention to 1) promoting growth and the sustainability of public finance in the face of an aging population, 2) taking structural measures to renew public service provision and efficiency, 3) increasing employment and improving the labor market position of young people, 4) enhancing competition in product and service markets, 5) strengthening competitiveness and broadening the innovation base for new businesses, products and services.² The largely unanimous acceptance of the recommendation items creates an aura of unquestionable rationality around them, distanced from any ideological undertones of the proposals. Yet the origin of the policy ideas remains mostly unexplained. From the perspective of functionalism, it is noteworthy that a fully rationalized and tailor-made pre-structured list like this is passed over without comment in the argumentation. Were the primary motivation for European integration in the functional benefits, one might expect such a list to merit more attention.

Silent compliance with the recommendations: discursive evasion

Our initial task was to ascertain how the external economic recommendations were discussed in the budgetary debate. An important observation is that they are not really discussed at all. There were no hits using European Semester as a search term. No MP questioned the binding instructions as such nor did they ever explicitly articulate them in formulating their justifications for policies. Yet the economic policies and suggestions are very much in line with the recommendations. There seems to be an implicit tacit compliance with the recommendations across all parties. Below, the Minister of Finance opens the debate by introducing the budget proposal. The formulations

presented in bold face are actually verbatim repetitions of the guidelines (emphases added by authors).

Extract 1: Finland – Introducing policies

To the weak economic situation, to **the sustainability of public finance and to structural changes in economy** the government responds with a comprehensive economic policy strategy. This package of economic policies consists of **a set of structural measures** decided by the government, a budget and a supplementary budget that **increase employment and growth, and** of course **the labor market** settlement. These four pillars are those the government will build the rise of Finland as well as the future of the welfare state. The budget proposal for next year is 53.9 billion in total. Although it is one billion less than the budget for this year, the proposal shows a deficit of 6.7 billion euros. We have lived beyond our means in Finland for a long time, and this government has the painful task of making up that deficit. The amount of debt is now increasing up to nearly 100 billion. We all know that incurring a debt is not a sustainable path. Proposals to take significant extra debt are no more responsible than those that propose extreme cuts. The government will opt for the golden mean. We shall hold on to the goals of turning the debt ratio, but we do not want to take actions which exacerbate the recession. We will continue by **supporting employment and economic growth**. (Jutta Urpilainen, Minister of Finance, Social Democrats, 17.9.13, pg. 1).

The Minister's account abounds in words and slogans from the recommendation list in almost in recipe type of repetition. However, the linkage to the recommendations or their origin is not mentioned. Rather, the proposal is presented as the government's solution. The justification manifests tacit obedience to the instructions on the level of substance but avoids any explicit suggestion as to the procedure in which an external supranational actor interferes in the national economy. 'Muting' the connection to an external source in national policy-making serves to boost the agency of the government and downplay the threat posed to national sovereignty. The tendency seems to follow the logic of 'compliance in the subject matter', yet 'integrity in the outward performance'.

Interestingly, the accounts of the opposition manifest similar tacit compliance with recommendations. Only in the use of the opposition, the goals themselves are perceived as good but the present government is accused of being unable to meet them with their policy solutions. Thus, instead of blaming the government for losing its integrity and acquiescing to external instructions, there rather seems to be a competition between the biggest parties in the Finnish parliament as to who follows the guidelines most faithfully. This is a pervasive feature of the Finnish debates and the orientations of Finnish parliamentarians to the EU: the thrust of the justifications is in pragmatic concerns. No mention is made of the changed setting and more hierarchical structure of command regarding economic policies.

2. Europe as a regulative framework remote from recommendations

One aspect naturalized in talk is the framework within which the country operates. The absence of references to the EU recommendations is even more obvious for the self-evident economic scene and referential arena is prominently Europe. Besides offering a framework for comparison, Europe is signified as a competitive and hierarchically controlled regulative arena, consisting of entities under surveillance and in competition with each other. Yet none of this is regulative force is associated with economic policy

proposals. Instead, an opposition MP below criticizes the government for weak solutions to achieve a set of abstracted goals echoing items in the recommendations.

Extract 2: Finland – Abstracted goals

I am of the opinion that not a single cent must be taken in more debt in this situation. Not a single cent more debt, unless radical measures can be agreed on to **increase work input, lengthen work careers and increase the employment rate**. Not a single cent more, unless **concrete structural reforms** can be agreed on. Now what you have decided is mere rhetoric. It lacks substance. (Mauri Pekkarinen, Opposition, Centre Party, 17.9.2013, D1, pg.16)

There is marked concern in the Finnish debate about the amounting public debt, potentially resulting in a lowered credit rating for the country in the EU. The opposition politician lists goals which need to be attained before any more debt can be taken. The goals are the same as in the list of recommendations. Arguing that the government has not introduced adequate solutions to achieve these goals, comes closest to implying that an external source has drafted the goals. However, no reference is made to their EU origin.

What is noteworthy overall is that hardly any criticism of the EU is voiced on the margins of Finnish debates. Two individual MPs comment on certain regulations on Eurobonds as being detrimental to Finland and suggest that Finland should therefore exit the union. None of the MPs consider the possibility of not complying with regulations. Besides displaying a compliant and pragmatic orientation, attitudes toward the EU appear to be quite plain at the level of words. Commitment manifests in actions rather than in ceremonial rhetoric. Co-actors need not be convinced of the benefits of membership and any constrictions in the frame of EU are part of contemporary political reality which must be coped with.

3. *Reattributing the origin of recommendations*

In terms of economic performance within the given context, Finland is involved in a struggle for credibility, in particular to maintain its credit rating. Under constant surveillance, the sanctions for failure are real and entail lasting material consequences. The biggest threat to Finland in the debate seems to be exceeding the reference values set by the EU and loss of reputation as an obedient model student, which, in turn, may lead to a new credit rating and higher interest costs.

Extract 3: Finland – Ascribing ownership to the government

The budgetary proposal by the government, and especially the structural programme approved in connection to it, signify a change of direction in economic policies in Finland. There has been a shift from regulating economic trends by reflation and stabilization to **fixing structural weaknesses and increasing work supply**. It is good to change the medicine once the symptoms have changed as well. I want to congratulate the Minister of Finance for this. (Osmo Soininvaara, Government, Green Party, 17.9.2013, pg. 8)

This extract demonstrates that even those who support the EU and are in favor of the functionality of the solutions prescribed do not mention the origin of such recommendations. Interestingly, the novelty of the procedures suggested is emphasized, characterizing

the current budgetary proposals as a turn in Finland's economic policies. This again implies the presence of a third party in their origin. Yet, the thanks for them are given to the national Minister of Finance.

To sum up, critical remarks are recurrent in the Finnish parliamentary debate, but they do not rebel against the overall framework of EU. Regarding the ES recommendations, the Finnish parliament pursues a strategy of 'silent compliance'. The items on the list of recommendations are framed as solutions rather than as obligations. Across all party lines there is a unanimous aspiration to adhere to them. The country's own uniqueness or sovereignty is not over-emphasized in the accounts but nor is there any eagerness to shed light on the procedural interference of the EU.

Spain

"Europe is the solution. That is our project as a country: Europe. And Europe is not failing Spain, Europe is supporting Spain, is facilitating the exit from the crisis in Spain." (Montoro Romero, Minister of Finance, Popular Party, 22.10.2013, pg. 7)

The Spanish parliamentary debates take place in different economic circumstances. Yet they likewise manifest the conformity and naturalization of the recommendations. ES has suggested nine main goals for Spain. In short, it has encouraged Spain to pay attention to 1) delivering the structural fiscal effort to ensure correction of the excessive deficit; 2) conducting a systematic review of the taxation system, considering further limiting the application of reduced VAT rates; 3) implementing the financial sector programme for the recapitalization of financial institutions; 4) finalizing the evaluation of the labor market reforms; 5) implementing and monitoring the effectiveness of the measures to combat youth unemployment; 6) adopting and implementing measures to reduce the number of people at risk of poverty and/or social exclusion; 7) adopting and implementing the draft law on market unity and speeding up all complementary actions needed for its implementation; 8) tackling the electricity deficit by adopting and implementing a structural reform of the electricity sector; 9) initiating local government reform and enhancing the efficiency of the overall public administration.³ No MP questions the recommendations; rather it seems that there is a solid acceptance of these in the discourse on the government and the opposition sites. As in the case of the Finnish debates, Spanish actors do not reveal the origins of the recommendations. Rather they opt for framing these as their *own* ideas and solutions (see also Alasuutari and Qadir 2013). Government actors legitimate these measures by national functionalities, by invoking necessity, urgency, as well as explaining and showing the benefits to the nation. However, the sense of belonging to the EU is also strongly present and articulated. In the Spanish case it seems that there is a necessity to explicitly emphasize the benefits of being a Member State.

1. Silent consensus on the recommendations: discursive evasion

In the Spanish data we found how in the majority of cases MPs justify the CSRs without noting that they are in line with the suggestions from the EU, nor that they must be taken into account because they are part of the commitments to the EU. Rather, Spanish actors justify the recommendations as part of the national interest or national diagnosis. As was

the case in Finland, the Spanish debates abound in items from the recommendation list. In that sense, government MPs present the issues from the list accurately and faithfully. The actors emphasize the importance of taking certain matters into account without divulging that these ideas derive from the list of recommendations.

Extract 4: Spain – Introducing policies

Indeed, this section has presented three amendments of totality, and almost all of them refer to the need to increase the budget of the State Agency for Tax Administration because it seems insufficient to all groups to meet the objectives assigned to them; Nothing is further from reality. We absolutely disagree with that perception because if we analyze the budget of the Tax Agency we will see that, in a context of reduction of the expenditure of all the ministries superior to 4%, this year for the first time the budget of the agency increases in a small amount, but it increases, which shows the interest and the priority that constitute for this Government; the **fight against fiscal fraud** and the underground economy. (Madrazo Díaz, Government, Popular Party, 5.11.2013, pg. 41)

The government politician addresses the need to review the taxation system and correct the structural biases leading to excessive deficit. This is from the top of the list in the recommendations for Spain. Instead of mentioning this, however, the item is labeled as ‘the interest and the priority of this government’, causing the government to appear as the driving force in the matter. This discursive evasion of the guidelines also prevails in the formulations of the opposition. An opposition MP may address a topic by suggesting an amendment to the government proposal that engages properly with the item in the guidelines. However, instead of mentioning the recommendations, they choose to construct their accounts by alluding to the functionality and significance of the reform for the nation. The substance is obeyed, but the origin is obscured.

2. *Economic proposals as benefits*

In the Spanish debates we can find explicit talk on European solidarity. MPs are keen to stress the importance of being part of the Union, saying that the obligations are part of the deal of being an EU Member State, but at the same time, these bring some rewards and support for the nation. The Spanish debates also included accounts of the economic inferiority of the country *vis-à-vis* other Member States. Politicians emphasized the struggles of Spain in economic terms, contextualizing and situating the country on the European scale to work on solutions and improvements. For example, the quote below is an example of a statement in which an opposition MP agrees with the Minister of Finance by highlighting that Spain needs Europe and cannot survive the crisis without it.

Extract 5: Spain – Instrumental benefits

We have a pact here in this House of all the parliamentary groups to continue advancing in this change in European politics, and I want to reiterate the validity of that pact. Everything we sign here, everything that we agree here, makes full sense, and in this moment more than ever: growth, social policies, reforms in the European Union. That is the way, because I agree with you, Mr. Montoro (Minister of Finance), in which either Europe helps us, or we get out of Europe, or there is no way out for the Spanish economy. (Pérez Rubalcaba, Opposition, Spanish Socialist Workers' Party, 22.10.2013, pg. 11).

The opposition politician compliments the pact for the very sensible solutions the government is suggesting. European framework is mentioned and it is presented in an instrumentally beneficial light: The Spanish economy is portrayed as being dependent on Europe while there is also a reference to a joint effort to change European politics. Yet again, ownership of the proposals is not directly linked to the EU.

Overall, in the Spanish debates MPs recurrently work to justify and explicate the importance of being a loyal Member State and working with and within the EU. It seems that the benefits of membership are not self-evident to everyone in the audience. What assumes prominence is the vulnerability and the economic problems prevailing in Spain. Political actors work on capturing the motivation and importance of hanging on to the EU to preserve the economic and political support in finding their way out of the crisis.

France

“Finally, and perhaps most importantly, France is the only country in Europe able to influence European politics: it is, therefore, its responsibility to make its voice heard against widespread austerity.” (Eva Sas, Opposition, Europe Ecology – The Greens, 23.4.2013, pg. 22)

The French parliamentary debates are characterized by expressions of compliance with the Union. However, in contrast to the other two countries, the French actors do disclose the co-ordination by ES and its functionality at the level of words. ES has proposed six main goals for France. In short, it has encouraged the country to pay attention to 1) enhancing the credibility of the adjustment and implementing measures to ensure a correction of the excessive deficit; 2) ensuring the reduction in labor costs; 3) taking further measures to improve the business environment and to developing the innovation and export capacity of firms; 4) taking actions to enhance competition in services; 5) making efforts to simplify the taxation system and to improving its efficiency, while ensuring the evaluation of taxation rules over time; 6) implementing in consultation with its social partners the inter-professional agreement.⁴ French actors from the government as well as from the opposition acknowledge their responsibility to the Union. Moreover, the way they construct arguments on the recommendations and the EU in general emphasizes the crucial role and responsibilities of France in European processes.

1. Explicit reference to the recommendations

In the French debate, the recommendations of ES were actually mentioned by name in parliamentary debates on economic policies. French actors mention explicitly how they are working within the European frame. They expressed what the EU required and named the ES in their justifications to demonstrate the importance of respecting the regulations. This tactic is also used by the opposition to criticize the government if and when they consider that the government is not sticking properly to the recommendations. The quote below shows a government MP arguing about the policies by evoking consistency with what the EU recommends.

Extract 6: France – Introducing policies

We are also very much in favor of **a closer association of trade unions and employers' organizations**, at both European and national level, to define the implementation of the strategic **recommendations during the European Semester**. Beyond this, we continue to work for **social convergence** from above: this would be achieved through the establishment of minimum wages defined at national level, which would guarantee a **high employment rate and fair wages**. (Élisabeth Guigou, Government, Socialist Party, 29.10.2013, pg. 10).

Above, the politician topicalizes some of the recommendations and mentions their origin deriving from ES. What then explains this anomaly of explicit mention in contrast to the other countries under investigation? Does this mean that France is more willing to give up on national sovereignty in relation to the Union? Quite the contrary; in the accounts it is made to appear even more sovereign than the rest.

2. *Downgrading the hierarchical structure*

In the French data invoking recommendations and commitment to the EU is accompanied by a prevalence of discourse on the distinguished role of France as an influential country in Europe. In some debates mention is made of France's leading role in European politics together with that of Germany. In others, this talk serves the purpose of engaging peers in the importance of taking the helm and their responsibility to take a stand when something is not proceeding correctly at the EU level.

Extract 7: France as the collective spokesperson for the EU policies

As Guillaume Duval writes in his latest edition of *Alternatives Économiques* very well: “The widespread austerity in Europe, promoted by Germany in a situation of undisputed leadership, is suicidal for European social cohesion. France must sound the alarm before it is too late. Therefore, France must draw this warning signal, to reorient European economic policies, and to implement real structural reforms: not the reforms that are usually called structural and which are the only liberal - **lowering the cost of labour**, making the labour market more flexible, **lowering public spending** - but social and ecological structural reforms. (Eva Sas, Opposition, Europe Ecology – The Greens, 23.4.2013, pg. 22)

The quote includes an example where a government MP proclaims the status of France in the EU, and the importance of leading and raising its voice on behalf of all Member States to demand change. French actors recognize in the debate that to act as a model and to preserve its high status among Member States, France must maintain credibility in the eyes of other countries. It is not threatened by the guidelines it was itself actively promoting, but it, too, needs to stick to its commitment to maintain its trustworthiness.

To recap, in the French debates MPs evoke and explain the recommendations and commitment to the union, yet persistently highlight their own importance in the EU and their eagerness to maintain that status. They must work on the compliance of the country to avoid losing credibility as a Member State and to preserve their presumed role as an exemplary and frontrunner member.

Summing up observations: processual polity-crafting through evasive discourse

In all the three countries scrutinized we saw compound entanglement of polity, politics and policies. In general, there prevailed an underlying commitment to the EU in government and opposition alike in all national parliaments. The opposition did not criticize the guidelines from the EU, but rather criticized the government if and when it failed to take the appropriate measures to comply with them. Aside from general compliance, actors also acknowledged the threat of noncompliance. Politicians expressed concerns about preserving particular circumstances in their institutional exchanges with the EU. French politicians sought to retain French prestige and France's central role in the EU. Spanish politicians endeavored to preserve commitment and to safeguard the economic support of the EU. Finnish politicians sought to preserve credibility in the eyes of creditors. All three Member States worked on their credibility and institutional double legitimacy from their own perspectives. This is to say that the countries approached the circumstances of integration differently, mindful of their own respective positioning in the union. Thus, beside the country-specific policy solutions, the 'grammar of belonging' to the Union is also differentiated. The Member States all worked on enforcing the Union and its procedures from their own respective angles (Table 1).

Table 1. Discursive strategies to balance double legitimacy.

	Enforcing national integrity	Enforcing the union
Finland	Discursive evasion	EU as the given economic frame of reference
	Obscuring the origin of policies	Pragmatic compliance
	Discreet compliance with the guidelines	
	THREAT of losing credit rating	
Spain	Discursive evasion	Enhancing solidarity toward the EU
	Obscuring the origin of policies	Instrumental reasoning for commitment
	Discreet compliance with the guidelines	
	THREAT of losing financial support	
France	Explicit references	Distinguished role within the EU
	Upgrading own status, downgrading hierarchy	Pledging loyalty to the EU as an active initiator of the policy tool
	Explicit commitment to the policy tool, modeling for other countries	
THREAT of losing credibility as a collaborator		

Discussion

"The goal is not imposed by Europe. It is we who impose it on ourselves." (French Government: *Élisabeth Guigou*, 23.4.2013, pg. 36)

In this paper we examined how ES recommendations were invoked and discussed in national politics by examining parliamentary debates on the state budget in three Member States, Finland, France and Spain in 2013. For national politicians the new

intervention of the ES in economic planning creates a site for balancing between conflicting institutional expectations which need to be regulated in the justifications of policies. Directing our interest to the throughput legitimacy (Schmidt 2013), that is the accountability, transparency, inclusiveness and openness of the policy process, we found out that national politicians managed institutionally proper parliamentary conduct with the help of accountability-evading strategies: performative silences, action-level commitments and discursive distortion of ownership. We found actors monitoring the multitude of categorical expectations by wording out national integrity and acting out membership responsibilities in parallel in the course of the debate. As institutional interaction, our study presents an example of *multiactivity* in the institutional categorization work (Haddington et al. 2014), mobilizing one institutional category in utterances while enacting another in deeds and orientations, as if ‘speaking the words of one while singing the songs of the other’. For throughput legitimacy, it became obvious that the instrumental openness of policy-decisions (what is being decided) was clear but the procedural transparency (how decisions evolved) did not work quite as openly.

National politicians systematically silenced the trajectory and origin of policy proposals, or downplayed the hierarchy involved in them, which evidences the normative sensitivity around EU recommendations stemming from territorial transgression. Silencing postulates the threat that external guidelines impose on the institutional legitimacy of the parliament. The goodness-of-fit argument has conventionally been invoked as a reason for national objection to EU policies (Mastenbroek and Kaeding 2006). In the case of the ES, the carefully grounded country-specific guidelines represent ‘tailormade’ policies from a national perspective. Their primary threat to national interests is not functional, but they threaten the national integrity of the sovereign state on the level of decision-making procedures. It may well be that in the continuum of legitimacies, the procedurally weak throughput legitimacy is a trade-off sacrificed in favor of prioritizing input legitimacy (national involvement in the planning from the perspective of the state) and output legitimacy (the efficient implementation of guidelines from the perspective of the COM). The hidden chain of command might further the functional gains in a crisis situation.

Our comparative findings from three Member States support earlier claims made about weak EU accountability in national parliaments (Rauh and De Wilde 2018; Winzen, de Ruyter, and Rocafort 2018). We did not see the politicians raising the link between the policy proposals and the external recommendations for the purposes of domestic power play (cf. Hoerner 2017). The ‘ownership’ of the policies was rather reclaimed for the nation (see Vanheuverzwijn and Crespy 2018). No speaker addressed the ideological roots of the guidelines (Cozzolino 2020). Neither were there signs of the increasing politicization of the EU governance or ‘de-Europeanization’ in the parliaments at this stage of the economic crises (cf. Müller, Pomorska, and Tonra 2021; Saurugger 2014). Quite the contrary, national politicians adapted to the interference of the ES with systematic performative silences, enhancing the deafened Europeanization of national practices (Hassenteufel and Paljer 2016; Lahusen 2016).

The absence of references to the guidelines shows that drafting economic policies under external command entails careful procedural balancing. It also evidences that the integration process is more complex than chasing joint functional gains or promoting plain national interests. The states cover up for the EU to achieve common goals, yet they

also work hard to maintain their national integrity. The EU membership alters the meaning of national sovereignty, which transforms into *sufficient sovereignty* readjusted to fit the political realities of the EU (Auel and Neuhold 2017). In our comparative analysis we discovered a set of local tactics through which the manifold setting of EU membership can be discursively regulated. Stressing that institutions do not emerge through being but through *acting out and doing* (Butler 1990), our research highlights that the crucial assets in the maintenance of legitimacy are interactive and performative. Silent compliance with the guidelines instantiates an act of appropriate EU membership without compromising the façade of parliamentary sovereignty.

The strategies mobilized in the three diverse national parliaments in parallel elucidate one set of existing and commonly spread repertoires for the Member States to manage ‘appropriateness’ in the face of tightening European integration measures. Discursive evasion is partly made possible by the country-specific differentiation of guidelines, which obscures the *politics* within the polity (Fossum 2015). One can indeed ask what eventually is compromised by obscuring the procedural traces, blocking discursive streams and ignoring the changes in the political setting. From the perspective of legitimation work, the institutional infusion of practices embodied by silent Europeanization comes at a cost. Suppressing open debate about the life span of guidelines and ignoring the chance to politicize them guards parliamentary sovereignty, but it also eliminates accountability, inclusiveness and popular sovereignty, thus cutting the passage to gain democratic legitimacy for the governance procedure and its policies (Barrett 2018; Brack, Coman, and Crespy 2019; Rauh and Zürn 2020). The ideal of the ‘will of the people’ cannot echo in deafened practices. In a complex supranational giant like the EU, political actors should not fear politicization but embrace it (Kauppi, Palonen, and Wiesner 2016). Beneath the facades of political arenas, open debate, procedural transparency and fully-fledged accountability serve to enforce – or erode – the cornerstones of democratic trust.

Notes

1. The parliamentary debates used in this study are available at the parliamentary archives of the National Assembly (France) <http://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/14/cri/2012-2013/>, Congress of Deputies (Spain) <http://www.congreso.es/portal/page/portal/Congreso/Congreso/Publicaciones/DiaSes/Pleno>, and the Parliament of Finland <https://www.edus.kunta.fi/FI/search/hakuohjeet/Sivut/Aineistot.aspx>.
2. The details of the CSRs for Finland can be found in this link: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32013H073007&from=EN>.
3. The details of the CSRs for Spain can be found in this link: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32013H073020&from=EN>.
4. The details of the CSRs for France can be found in this link: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32013H073008&from=EN>.

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Data availability statement

All the material analyzed in the article is public and easily accessible through the national parliamentary online data archives and the European Commission webpages.

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