

# Arising calls for national sovereignty in times of European crises and the political *Zeitenwende*

Daniela Braun · Ann-Kathrin Reinl

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**Abstract** The recent periods of multiple crises go hand in hand with calls for more national sovereignty. Drawing on data provided by the Manifesto Project, this contribution seeks to study empirically how widespread the wish to ‘take back control’ is reflected through political parties all over Europe. We show that although ‘sovereignist’ issues across EU member states were not among the political top priorities in the past, parties’ issue emphasis has increased in the shadow of the last decade’s multiple crises. On top of that, we argue that sovereignist aspirations have the potential to further increase alongside upcoming international challenges. In particular, events such as the Russian-Ukrainian war and the declared *Zeitenwende* may raise calls for more national sovereignty.

**Keywords** Sovereignty · Political parties · Crises · *Zeitenwende* · Manifesto data

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✉ Daniela Braun

Department of European Social Research, Saarland University, Saarbrücken, Germany  
E-Mail: [d.braun@uni-saarland.de](mailto:d.braun@uni-saarland.de)

Ann-Kathrin Reinl

Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, European University Institute, Fiesole, Italy  
E-Mail: [annkathrin.reinl@eui.eu](mailto:annkathrin.reinl@eui.eu)

## Der Ruf nach nationaler Souveränität in Zeiten europäischer Krisen und der politischen Zeitenwende

**Zusammenfassung** Die jüngsten Krisenzeiten gehen Hand in Hand mit dem Ruf nach mehr nationaler Souveränität. Auf der Grundlage von Daten des Manifesto-Projekts soll in diesem Beitrag empirisch untersucht werden, wie weit verbreitet der Wunsch nach mehr nationalstaatlicher Kontrolle seitens der politischen Parteien in ganz Europa ist. Es wird gezeigt, dass Souveränitäts-bezogene Themen in den EU-Mitgliedsstaaten in der Vergangenheit zwar nicht zu den politischen Prioritäten gehörten, dass die Parteien jedoch im Schatten der zahlreichen Krisen des letzten Jahrzehnts zunehmend Gewicht auf diese Themen legen. Darüber hinaus wird argumentiert, dass Bestrebungen hin zu mehr Souveränität das Potenzial haben, mit den kommenden internationalen Herausforderungen weiter anzusteigen. Insbesondere Ereignisse wie der russisch-ukrainische Krieg und die erklärte Zeitenwende könnten den Ruf nach mehr nationaler Souveränität weiter verstärken.

**Schlüsselwörter** Souveränität · Parteien · Krisen · Zeitenwende · Manifestodaten

### 1 Introduction

The European Union (EU) is the world's most advanced and exemplary case of regional integration. However, after several decades of widening and deepening European integration, "Europe is experiencing a renaissance of national sovereignty" (Conti et al. 2018, p. 232). In the aftermath or even as a consequence of intensifying European integration underpinned by the creation of a paradigm for a system of multi-level governance (Hooghe and Marks 2001), Europe seems to be adapting to an era where calls for more national sovereignty are in many cases becoming louder. This observation is true for western European countries (Heinisch et al. 2020; Mazzoleni and Ivaldi 2020) as well as in areas further east (Pytlas 2021) and south (Halikiopoulou et al. 2012). Although UK voters' narrow majority for Brexit represents the most obvious and radical manifestation of such a desire to 'take back control' (Menon and Wager 2020), there are observations of similar sentiments in other countries and regions, too. Prominent examples are France's *Rassemblement National*, Sweden's *Sverigedemokraterna*, Germany's *Alternative für Deutschland*, Hungary's *Fidesz*, as well as Italy's *Fratelli d'Italia* and *Lega*. All of these parties share a common demand for more national sovereignty. In view of their electoral successes, such parties seem to meet a general discontent with trends towards globalisation, international cooperation, and transnational agreements (Mader et al. 2020; Steiner 2018).

Especially the interwoven financial, economic and euro currency crises and the (perceived) migration/refugee crisis have already increased sovereignist claims in Europe in the past (Heinisch et al. 2020; Mazzoleni and Ivaldi 2020). Moreover, this could be further fuelled by the current Ukraine war and the associated German *Zeitenwende* (Helwig 2023; Lippert 2023). The latter turning point in Germany's foreign policy was proclaimed by Chancellor Olaf Scholz in his speech to the

parliament on 27 February 2022 and is thus predominantly important for German policy. With regard to a more European dimension, we can see that as “often the case in German European policy, there is still a gap between pro-European rhetoric and implementation” (Puglierin 2023, p. 3). Moreover, the fact that the war and the declared *Zeitenwende* occurs in challenging times with rising Euroscepticism and increasing calls for sovereignty makes such a large-scale policy shift even more difficult than in ordinary times.

In this contribution, we study empirically how widespread the wish to ‘take back control’ is reflected through political parties all over Europe in these challenging times. Drawing on data provided by the Manifesto Project for the period 2004–2021, the primary aim of our paper is to study how much emphasis political parties place on sovereignty-related—what we term ‘sovereignist’—issues across EU member states in the shadow of the last decade’s multiple crises. Moreover, we take these empirical findings as a starting point to discuss whether such sovereignist endeavours in Europe have the potential to even increase in the future and against the background of the current challenges posed by the Russian-Ukrainian war and related policy shifts.

## 2 Sovereignist ambitions of political parties: State of the art

Sovereignist ambitions reflect the wish to take back political control, which was getting lost over increasing international integration. Such a wish can be expressed by the electorate, but also by national political actors who ideally represent the demands of the people (see e.g., Heinisch et al., 2020; Mazzoleni and Ivaldi, 2020). Claims to (re)gain sovereignty lay at the heart of the wave of radical right-wing populism in Europe (Kallis, 2018). But also Eurosceptic parties—both those located at the political left and right—argue that too much power has been transferred to the EU, which in turn means less room to manoeuvre for national politics (Basile and Mazzoleni, 2020, p. 153). Whereas Euroscepticism is exclusively directed towards the EU, “sovereignism explicitly puts forward an alternative proposal for the distribution of authority, and clearly redefines the polity within national boundaries” (Basile and Mazzoleni, 2020, p. 156). What distinguishes sovereignty preferences from the other related concepts, such as Euroscepticism or populism, is therefore the former’s expression in an environment where nation-states have lost or transferred their exclusive authority to another, often higher, level of polity. In the case of EU member states, sovereignist ambitions thus definitely include anti-EU stances, since the EU is the most visible supranational authority in Europe. It is, however, not the only target of sovereignist claims as EU member states are equally involved in other types of international cooperation and organisations. Accordingly, sovereignty in the EU context moves beyond the mere EU critique and considers a more general opposition towards internationalisation.

Altogether, we can act on the assumption that political parties have increasing incentives to put emphasis on sovereignism in polarised and crisis-ridden times. Empirical research shows a clear tendency towards sovereignist claims, at least in those European countries studied so far—e.g., in Austria, France, Italy and Switzerland (Carrieri and Conti 2023; Heinisch et al. 2020; Mazzoleni and Ivaldi 2020).

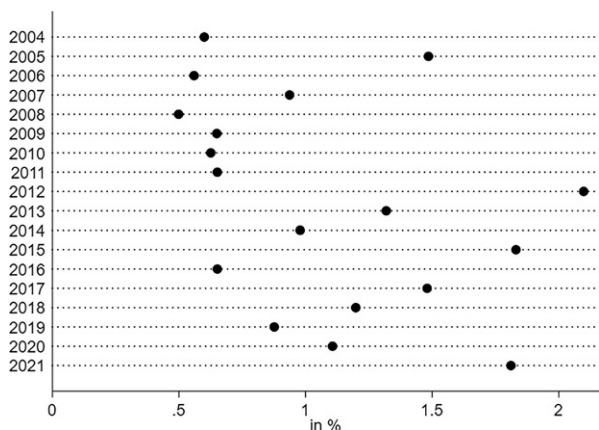
Since we are still lacking geographically broader research, this contribution provides a first empirical EU-wide overview on political parties' emphasis on sovereignty issues for the years 2004–2021. As a follow-up to our empirical analyses, we also derive insights for current political affairs and the sovereignty aspirations of political parties.

### 3 An empirical assessment of political parties' sovereigntist ambitions in Europe

**The data base** In the following, we seek to investigate the degree to which parties stress sovereigntist issues and whether this has changed in the shadow of the last decade's multiple crises in Europe. The official assessment of the party is thus crucial, and this cannot be adequately measured by individual social media posts or expert assessments of parties' political positions. For this purpose, we draw on data from the Manifesto Project that systematically codes the content of election manifestos put out by all parties running for national elections in a given country. More precisely, we analyse the Manifesto Project Dataset (version 2021a) (Volkens et al. 2021), which allows tracking all elections in the time period from before the onset of the so-called euro crisis (in 2009) following its path over the (perceived) migration crisis (with its peak in 2015/16) till 2021, the second year of the Covid-19 pandemic. During the phase of the latter challenge, the global pandemic, we unfortunately have far fewer elections available to consider compared to data for the first two crisis situations mentioned.<sup>1</sup>

In our statistical analyses, we have chosen two variables to reflect parties' stances towards national sovereignty, assessing both negative preferences towards EU membership and the rejection of international cooperation in more general terms. To be more precise, we measure claims for sovereignty via two coding categories that are available for all countries covered in the data set: Internationalism (negative)

**Fig. 1** Issue emphasis on national sovereignty over time (all countries in the sample). *Note:* The values shown are mean values for all elections held in that year. The figure reflects the percentage of national sovereignty issues addressed by all relevant political parties (compared to all issues)



<sup>1</sup> Table A1 in the appendix lists all the elections for which we have data during the investigation period.

and European Union (negative). The values of the two variables are added together: the higher the value, the stronger a party's emphasis on national sovereignty in its platform (percentage of space dedicated to it in the overall manifesto text).

**Descriptive findings** Figure 1 illustrates the addressing of sovereignty claims across the entire country sample<sup>2</sup> and over time. On average, across all countries, support for more national control has increased over the years of EU challenges, but the issue still does not feature prominently in electoral campaigns. Interestingly, we find the highest average value for the year 2012, during the peak of the euro crisis, and the second highest value for 2015 during the peak of the (perceived) migration crisis. Another high value is reached for the most recent elections, in 2021, which have taken place during the Covid-19 pandemic.<sup>3</sup>

**Multivariate analyses** After providing an overview of the development of our additive sovereignty index over time, we ran multivariate regression analysis (Prais-Winston technique) with the additive index as our dependent variable (see Tables A2–4 for the independent variables and regression results). The results indicate that national level factors such as GDP or migration figures (taken from Eurostat) do not correlate with parties' sovereignty claims. What we learn, however, is that public opinion (taken from Eurobarometer surveys) shapes party positioning. If voters perceive EU membership negatively, emphasis by political parties on sovereignty issues increases. Thus, crises may not always have a straightforward impact on party positions towards sovereignty. Yet, they can stimulate public rebellion against international associations, which in turn might foster party emphasis in this direction.

#### 4 Claims for national sovereignty in times of the Russian-Ukrainian war and the political *Zeitenwende*

Our empirical findings show that, on average, across all countries, partisan support for more national control has indeed increased over the past decades. Although the emphasis on this topic did not figure prominently in electoral campaigns, yet, it has particularly increased in the midst or in the aftermath of previous EU-wide crises. The period of our data analysis ends in 2021, i.e., one year before the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the *Zeitwende* proclaimed by Olaf Scholz. Given this background, what conclusions can be drawn beyond the years covered in our analysis?

We expect that sovereigntist efforts do have the potential to be even strengthened through the international challenges lying ahead of us. The Russian-Ukrainian war is prompting EU countries to act on several fronts. On the one hand, member states

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<sup>2</sup> The country sample includes all EU member states with the exception of Malta (due to lack of data); moreover, the United Kingdom has been included since it has been EU member for most of the time period under investigation.

<sup>3</sup> Since these first impressions can vary greatly between the individual countries in the sample, we additionally looked at each country separately. Figure A1 in the appendix highlights strong differences in many places and delivers some initial interpretations.

are faced with increasing numbers of asylum seekers from Ukraine and EU citizens and political parties are arguing about a proper way of dealing with them. On the other hand, the EU has been forced to take a military stance. After the *Zeitenwende* has been proclaimed by Olaf Scholz, Germany, for example, is putting more money into its armed forces and is approving arms deliveries to Ukraine. Once again, the population and political parties are arguing about the wisdom of these policies. Even though a majority of the EU population is still backing the political decisions taken and agrees that international crises demand international solutions, critical voices are on the rise, and we see a growing gap between the friends and foes of European integration (and internationalism) manifesting itself through a new political cleavage (Jackson and Jolly 2021). So far, we know from previous research that “the main promoters of sovereigntist issues are (radical) right-wing, TAN (parties placed on the *traditional-authoritarian-nationalist* spectrum of the two-dimensional system of political competition, *note from the authors*) and Eurosceptic parties” (Carrieri and Conti 2023, p. 17)—the obvious foes of European integration. These parties are currently gaining more and more support from voters across different EU member states and on all levels of the polity (e.g., local, regional, national, EU): In Italy (*Fratelli d’Italia*), Sweden (*Sverigedemokraterna*) and Finland (*Perussuomalaiset*), far-right parties have begun to govern; in Spain, the conservative *Partido Popular*, together with the right-wing party *Vox* barely missed the opportunity to govern on the national level, but have formed several coalitions on the regional and local level; in Poland (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*) and Hungary (*Fidesz*) national conservative parties are traditionally strong; in France the far-right *Rassemblement National* is the largest parliamentary opposition group and in Germany the far-right *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) is currently polling high.

Since the elections to the European Parliament will take place in 2024, political parties are slowly starting to discuss their programmatic positions for these elections now. Looking at these debates for the particular case of the German AfD, we can get a better idea of the aforementioned main promoters of sovereignty issues in the aftermath of the *Zeitenwende*. The AfD held its annual summit at the end of July 2023, where its position vis-à-vis the EU was explicitly discussed. The issue of sovereignty—pushed by the ongoing migration to Germany, the German *Zeitenwende* as well as rising energy prices—played a decisive role in the given speeches. The EU and strong international integration are rejected, and the desire for more national control is on the rise. Just to give an example, Alice Weidel, one of the two current party leaders said “[...] ein Kompetenzrückbau und die Kompetenzen dahin zu verlagern, wo die gewählten Volksvertreter in den Parlamenten sitzen, ja und das sind die Nationalstaaten. [...] und wir treten auch dafür ein, dass wir als Deutsche über elementare europäische Fragen, die unsere Souveränität betreffen, natürlich selbst abstimmen dürfen in Volksabstimmungen—das ist unser Ziel [...]” (Weidel 2023).<sup>4</sup> Following from that and given that AfD is currently polling at 20%—and

<sup>4</sup> Translation of Weidel (2023): “a reduction of competences and a transfer of competences to where the elected representatives of the people sit in the parliaments—yes, and these are the national states. [...] and we also advocate that we, as Germans, should of course be allowed to vote ourselves in referendums on elementary European issues that affect our sovereignty—that is our goal.”

would therefore (potentially) rank as the second strongest party in an upcoming national election (Forschungsgruppe Wahlen 2023)—it is no longer possible to label national sovereignty a marginal theme.

These calls are present, and they are getting louder and louder in almost all EU countries. To underline this thesis just a few more examples: the Bulgarian far-right and ultra-nationalist *Vazrazhdane* advocates for more national sovereignty and less responsibility for supranational institutions (AfD 2023); the far-right Estonian *Eesti Konservatiivne Rahvaerakond* claims that national sovereignty will always be more relevant than European sovereignty (EKRE 2023); the Dutch far-right *Partij voor de Vrijheid* stands for taking back control from Brussels (PVV 2023). The Union—i.e., supranational and intergovernmental actors—must now find solutions to respond to these calls in order to pursue a common European course—also in the future and beyond the 2024 European Parliament elections. Upcoming elections at all levels of polity—local elections as well as regional, national, and European elections—will be an ideal testing ground for the question whether more, and maybe also mainstream, parties deal increasingly with issues around sovereignty.

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