The Europeanisation of political involvement: Examining the role of individual transnationalism

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ABSTRACT

In this paper we investigate the association between transnationalism, that is, interactions and cultural competences that cut across European Union (EU) member states, and supranational political engagement. Generally, it is thought that EU citizens' participation in EU politics is hampered by the perception that the EU is too distant and too technocratic. Against this backdrop, we propose that transnationalism contributes to reducing this perception, as transnational individuals feel part of a supranational community and are thus more likely to get involved in EU politics than if their cross-border experience is absent or poor. Generalised structural equation models with a latent variable of EU-level political involvement (based on cognitive mobilisation, efficacy, and self-reported voting in European Parliament elections) return significant associations with transnational experiences and practices.

1. Introduction

After the Maastricht Treaty and the 2004–2007 European Union (EU) enlargement, EU citizens engaged in an increased level of cross-border mobility. While labour migration, largely from the eastern and southern periphery towards richer countries in the west and north, is the dominant form of more permanent intra-EU movement, short-term and virtual forms of mobility are also proliferating (at least until these were abruptly disrupted during the travel restrictions related to the COVID-19 pandemic). Interactions, consumption patterns and cultural competences are more and more frequently cutting across national borders in Europe. Individuals who have direct and indirect connections with other European citizens and cultures have been viewed as a key social category for EU integration 'from below'. They are among the so-called 'winners' of globalisation and EU integration, because they benefit from the opening of borders and the possibility of working and travelling in the Single Market. Indeed, research has shown, time and time again, that such individuals are less Eurosceptic and identify more as 'European' (Kuhn 2015), and that they support solidarity with fellow member states (Ciornei and Recchi 2017) and generosity towards other Europeans (Kuhn et al., 2018). However, we know little about whether such positive attitudes translate into Europeanised political practice, which is the focus of this study.

When talking about supranational political engagement, one immediately confronts the debate on the EU's so-called democratic deficit. While this critique exists in many variants, one of the most intractable shortcomings that is routinely mentioned is that the EU is too far removed from ordinary citizens: ordinary citizens do not understand how it works and cannot identify with it (Follesdal and Hix 2006). The persistently low turnout rates in the elections for the European Parliament (EP) are taken as emblematic of citizens' indifference or even disaffection. This is also by far the most commonly studied aspect of citizen (non-)participation in the EU (Clark and Rohrschneider 2009; Hobolt et al. 2009; Clark 2014). Against this backdrop, we propose that individual transnationalism can act as a (partial) remedy to the EU's democratic problem: cross-border experiences have the potential to make people more aware of their status as European citizens, as well as alerting them to the relevance of the supranational scope of the political process (Recchi 2015).

The few existing studies that examine the possible links between transnationalism and political involvement focus on EU 'movers' (that is, citizens who are mobile within the EU), and find the kernels of a transnational political potential: 'movers' view EP elections as more important than national elections, and participate in them in larger numbers than 'stayers' back home (where 'stayers' means the general population) (Muxel 2009; Recchi 2015). Note, however, that this should not necessarily be taken to reflect greater enthusiasm for the European dimension, but rather should be seen as a symptom of a decline in

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interest in national politics (Recchi 2015: 115). While these findings are certainly suggestive, transnational individuals and EU 'movers' exhibit significant differences. The most relevant is that, unlike transnationalism which encompasses virtual forms of mobility, intra-EU movement is a form of geographic migration, which complicates political participation, even within the facilitating context of the EU. Conversely, transnational individuals in the EU are in a unique position: they can take advantage of increased opportunities for the exercise of both (partial) exit and voice.

To probe the link between EU-level political participation and transnationalism, we build on and advance a growing line of research that examines the political sociology of transnationalism in the EU (e.g., Kuhn 2011; Mau and Mewes 2012; Ciornei and Recchi 2017; Pellegata and Visconti 2020). We draw on original public opinion survey data collected by the 'Reconciling Economic and Social Europe: The Role of Values, Ideas and Politics' (REScEU) project just after the 2019 EP elections in ten EU countries (Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Hungary, Poland, the Netherlands, Spain, and Sweden) (Donati et al., 2021). Following established practice in the literature we classify the survey respondents according to the position they occupy on a transnationalism scale, ranging from experiences with virtual and physical mobility to transnational background and intercultural competence.

Our basic intuition is that transnational individuals are more likely to partake in EU politics than those whose cross-border experience is absent or poor. We begin by examining the link between transnationalism and the propensity to participate in EU politics, operationalised as a latent variable of individual 'EU-level political involvement' that includes cognitive–affective as well as behavioural components. Structural equation models confirm a significant and positive relationship between transnationalism (and its sub-dimensions) and increased EU-level political involvement. These results hold even when controlling for socioeconomic status, cosmopolitan attitudes, and national level political involvement. This leads us to conclude that transnationalism, by boosting popular engagement in supranational politics and, hence, democratic legitimacy, constitutes a potential remedy for the EU's democratic deficit. However, like similar studies in this field, we also note a potentially adverse externality of this pattern of expansion of EU politics, namely social selectivity, which constitutes a stubborn impediment to broadening public engagement in EU affairs (see e.g., Wilson 2011; Kandyla and Gherghina 2018; Kuhn 2019). We also detect limits of transnationalism in boosting supranational political participation:

voting in national elections remains the strongest predictor of EU-level political involvement, which suggests an additive effect of transnationalism to a broader predisposition to participate in politics.

The paper is structured as follows. The next two sections describe how supranational political participation and efficacy are related to Europe's emerging transnational divide, by introducing the theoretical arguments and hypotheses that relate transnationalism and dimensions of EU-level political involvement. In the fourth section we present the data and methods used in the analyses. The final section concludes.

2. Political involvement in a system of multi-level governance

The cornerstone of the EU's democratic critique is that the transnationalisation of governance has not gone hand in hand with the transnationalisation of citizen participation in politics (Recchi 2015). Despite decades of European integration, 'the democratic political inclusion of citizens is still mainly a national affair', and therefore 'nation-states still constitute the major arenas for political mobilization' (Kriesi et al., 2006: 922). A low level of interest in European elections (Fig. 1), in particular, is generally taken to signal citizen apathy at best, and dissatisfaction at worst. As conventional wisdom has it, EP elections are second-order elections: turnout is low, parties run on issues that are irrelevant for the specific offices that are being contested, and citizens cast sincere and protest votes, which means that opposition and smaller parties perform better than usual, while the results are heavily influenced by the domestic electoral cycle (Reif and Schmitt 1980; Hix and Marsh 2007, 2011).

Recent developments suggest, nonetheless, that these dynamics may be gradually shifting, as EU politics are becoming more participatory. For instance, the European Citizens' Initiative, through which EU citizens can call on the European Commission to propose laws, seems to be a step in this direction, even if its democracy-enhancing record is mixed at best (Kandyla 2020). The increasing visibility of European citizens in a developing European public sphere is another democratic inroad (again, with important limitations) (Walter 2017). Even though aggregate turnout remains comparatively low, it increased in 2019 compared to 2014 (50.7% vs. 42.6%). At the same time, some degree of transnationalisation has also been detected in the representative sphere, as EP elections are no longer fought fully under the shadow of national elections, but increasingly revolve around genuinely European issues (Flickinger and Studlar 2007; Hobolt and Wittrock 2011; Van Spanje
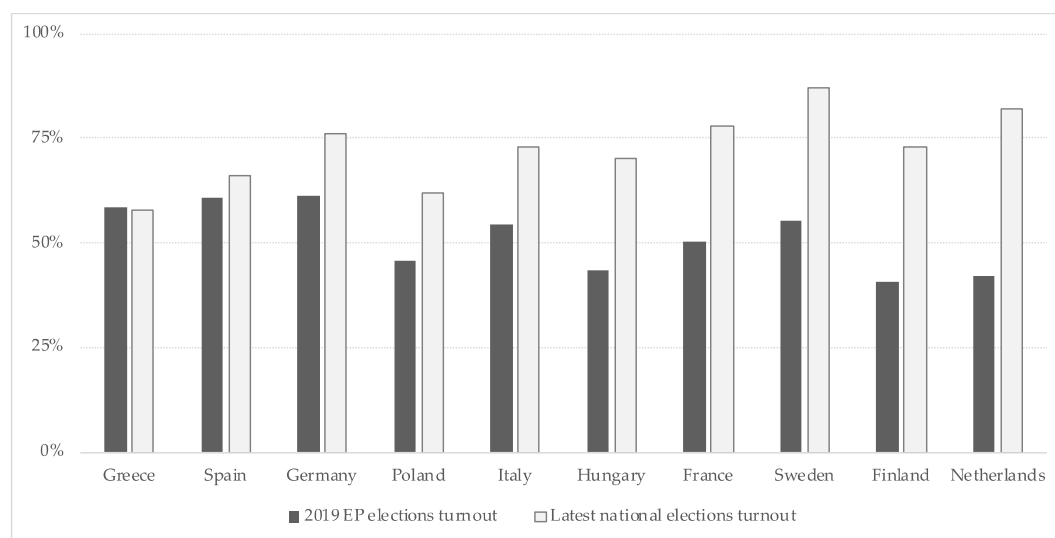

Fig. 1. Turnout in the 2019 EP elections and in the latest national elections prior to 2019 in selected EU member states. *Note*: Countries ordered by differences between national and EP election turnouts.
Source: EP turnout from https://www.europarl.europa.eu/election-results-2019/en/turnout/; national elections turnout from https://www.politicaldatayearbook.com. See Table A1 in the Appendix for national election years.

and De Vreese 2011; Clark 2014; Angelucci et al., 2020). In particular, the recent electoral gains for the green, the liberal, and the radical-right party families that hold clear-cut stances on the EU suggest a growing degree of transnationalisation across the political spectrum. Moreover, and perhaps counter-intuitively, 'the introduction of politics into the polity' appears to be driven mainly by Eurosceptic voters (Hernández and Kriesi 2016: 524), because they seek to punish governing parties which tend to support the EU far more than the typical voter does (Hobolt et al. 2009). This pattern is consistent with the observation that, since the EU lacks institutionalised channels for organising opposition to its policies, discontent finds its articulation in the contestation of the polity writ large (Mair 2007).

Even so, if one takes turnout as a measure of Europeanised political involvement, it is still the case that the opponents of European integration are considerably more likely to abstain in EP elections than in national elections. For example, Schmitt and collaborators found that those opposing EU integration were significantly more likely to have abstained in the EP election while having voted in the preceding first-order election (Schmitt et al., 2020: 15). The authors attribute this result primarily to lack of supply-side mobilisation. Against this backdrop, we want to suggest that another road to the supranationalisation of politics runs through citizens who embrace the project of EU integration and seek out opportunities to get involved in various sorts of EU-level political activities, including elections. In doing so, we focus on a key constituency for the EU: transnational individuals.

3. Transnational individuals as a key constituency for Europe

European integration is a 'political and cultural project that systematically privileges Europe as a single geographical space' (Berezin and Díez-Medrano 2008: 2). The elimination of barriers to movement epitomised by the Schengen area, the promotion of mobility through the Erasmus and other schemes, and the liberalisation of the transport and telecommunications sectors, among many other factors, contribute to producing social relationships that increasingly cut across national borders on a scale that is unprecedented (Mau and Mewes 2012: 8), although they are far from operating on a mass level (Kuhn 2011: 815). 'Transnationalism' is the broad concept that is used to describe the ways in which people's backgrounds, interactions and practices go beyond national borders in the EU (Recchi and Favell 2019). This includes forms of physical mobility, but people do not need to leave their country of origin for their realm to be 'transnationalised'; transnationalism may take place, for example, through the exercise of virtual mobility, through personal connections with people from other member states, and/or through intercultural competences and consumption patterns (Kuhn 2011). Unsurprisingly, then, transnationalism and EU integration are mutually reinforcing: on the one hand, EU integration boosts cross-border interactions and mobility while, on the other hand, those engaging in such practices are expected to welcome EU integration as a source of opportunities and/or because they are more likely to subscribe to cosmopolitan attitudes (Kuhn 2011, 2015). Studies examining this positive link go back to the 'transactionalist' thesis, whose central insight is that cross-border exchanges (i.e., 'transactions') promote the development of a common identity and build trust among the populations of different national societies, leading individuals to support the formation of a new political community beyond the nation state (Deutsch et al., 1957; Deutsch 1969; for a succinct discussion, see Kuhn 2011).

Indeed, existing research finds that the direct impact of individual transnationalism on European integration is clearly favourable (Kuhn 2015), although the extent to which individual transnationalism is linked to the Europeanisation of political involvement remains an open question. We suggest that, by shaping perceptions and emotions related to space, individual transnationalism has the potential to increase the level of connectedness the person feels to the supranational political unit and, with it, their engagement in EU politics. That the EU is

'psychologically' and/or 'institutionally' distant from citizens is a key argument in the debate over the potential development of democratic politics in the EU (Follesdal and Hix 2006: 536). The extension of the 'chains of responsiveness and accountability to additional layers of (supranational) government' is said to diminish the democratic qualities of the political process (Kriesi 2013). This, ultimately, poses a challenge to the EU's legitimacy because it 'remains in the "far mode" and requires a lot of intermediations by national leaders, i.e., the depositories of popular support' (Ferrera 2020). Moreover, low levels of political participation impair the EU's fundamental legitimacy more than they do that of national political systems, because the EU's institutional structure is comparatively much weaker (Decker 2002). The empirical literature on ethno-regionalism and local democracy offers important insights into the relevance of spatial distance for political legitimacy: people tend to identify more with smaller rather than larger territorial units, to prefer local governance to distant rule, and to become more politically engaged as the political unit becomes smaller – all of which suggests that there is a 'perceptual barrier' hindering the development of the EU polity (Berezin and Díez-Medrano 2008: 6). Indeed, support for EU integration depends quite literally on physical distance, that is, on how far away individuals are located from the EU's centre of power, Brussels (Berezin and Díez-Medrano 2008).

Against this backdrop we argue that cross-border interconnectedness and social exchange facilitate EU political involvement by shaping individuals' perceptions about space and, even more specifically, by altering mental representations about the appropriate scale of the political unit. As Ulrich Beck wrote two decades ago, '"[t]ransnational" implies that forms of life and actions emerge whose inner logic comes from the inventiveness with which people create and maintain social lifeworlds and action contexts where distance is not a factor' (Beck 2000: 32). Transnationalism alerts individuals to their status as EU citizens, since EU citizenship is activated by free movement for leisure, study and/or work. Through these mobilities 'an increasing number of Europeans are appropriating Europe's space' which, in turn, strengthens their beliefs in the EU's legitimacy (Kuhn and Recchi 2013: 215), but even in the absence of the actual exercise of physical movement, 'imagined mobilities' open up the prospect of cognitive and future migration (Koikkalainen and Kyle 2015). Additionally, physical and virtual interconnectedness expand the boundaries of belonging to include places and people beyond one's state of origin, and these start to feel familiar. Intergroup contact theory (Allport 1954; Pettigrew 1998) provides insights into the psychological micro-foundations of this dynamic, asserting that contact between individuals and groups tends to reduce prejudice and antagonism. A key mechanism of this is 'self-expansion', that is, the inclusion of 'the other' in the self (Aron et al., 1998). Significantly, forms of indirect contact (through the mass media) or vicarious contact (having a friend who has an outgroup friend) also foster more positive inter-group relations (Pettigrew et al., 2011).

Another link between transnationalism and EU-level political engagement involves a utilitarian rationale. European integration (together with globalisation) reduces the transaction costs arising from cross-border interactions. The freedom of movement of goods, services, capital, and citizens within the Single Market has had a great impact on the everyday lives of Europeans who interact regularly across borders. Highly transnational individuals benefit directly from the opportunities generated by the European integration process, by socialising with foreign people and cultures. We therefore expect individuals who interact across the borders of EU member states to emerge as supporters of a European project that facilitates cross-border experiences and practices (Kuhn 2015), to feel represented by the EU, and to have an incentive to get involved in EU politics, when compared to their counterparts who do not interact in this way.

A different but related route between transnationalism and EU political involvement runs through the development of competences, as cross-border interactions provide opportunities for information gathering and learning, aid the development of foreign language skills, and

enable the development of familiarity with various cultural and political contexts in the EU's member states separately and/or with its administrative centre. Considering that citizens who are more informed about the European integration dimension are also more likely to vote on this basis rather than on the basis of 'domestic preferences' (Hobolt and Wittrock 2011), we expect a greater EU-level political involvement among individuals who share higher levels of transnationalism. These cognitive–affective factors jointly contribute to raising the profile of European politics, thereby lending meaning to and motivating supranational political participation. Our baseline expectation is therefore that transnational interconnectedness and social exchange are positively linked to engagement with EU politics (**H1**).

4. Dimensions of Europeanised political involvement

There is no doubt that voting in elections is the most obvious way in which citizens can become involved in politics and is a major source of democratic legitimacy, but nevertheless there are other important forms of political inclusion (Kaase 2011; on participation 'beyond the ballot box' see also Portos et al., 2020). In fact, mundane and everyday practices can play an important role, either in their own right, or because they constitute the cognitive and affective rudiments of electoral participation. Accordingly, to investigate the link between transnationalism and EU political involvement we consider three different dimensions: cognitive mobilisation, political efficacy, and electoral turnout, all with reference to the EU level.[1] We treat each analytical component as an indicator of a general unobserved concept of supranational political engagement. Therefore, we now present each dimension separately, and specify the direct mechanisms that link transnationalism to each of them.[2]

4.1. Cognitive mobilisation

A standard indicator of political engagement is political discussion, that is, the frequency with which individuals discuss politics (Inglehart 1970). How often people engage in political discussion is highly correlated with variables such as interest in politics and political sophistication (Cancela 2020). Transnationalism can be expected to increase individuals' 'intellectual capacity to grasp the complexities of a remote political system such as the EU' (Kuhn and Recchi 2013: 208). This could come from personal cross-border experiences or through contacts with family, friends, or colleagues 'on the move'. A higher likelihood of a transnational individual being engaged in discussions about the EU can be rooted in the individual's motivation (since people talk more about issues of relevance to them), and/or their patterns of consumption of political information, such as through foreign language media and transnational social networks. Additionally, it is our intuition that transnational individuals will not only be more engaged in discussions about the EU and EU-related issues, but will also have a more positive assessment of it, mirroring the generally pro-integration attitudes they tend to hold. Transnationals are indeed on the 'winning' side of the

European integration project – favouring the sharing of experiences and practices across countries through the freedom of movement principle – and should therefore express more enthusiasm about the EU project that should translate into greater political involvement.

H2a. *the more transnational an individual, the more he/she will be involved in discussions about the EU.*

H2b. *the more transnational an individual, the more he/she will talk positively about the EU.*

4.2. Political efficacy

The next indicator for the concept of political participation is supranational political efficacy. Political efficacy refers to 'the citizen's self-perception as a knowledgeable, active, and self-confident participant in political life' (Gabriel 2011: 716). Scholars generally distinguish between internal and external political efficacy. The former refers to individual self-perception, that is, the perception that one has the ability and competence to understand and influence politics; the latter denotes the conviction that political institutions and leaders are responsive to the participation of individuals (Karp and Banducci 2008: 318) and is our focus in this article. In the context of European politics, efficacy is, again, a key dimension, given the prevailing perceptions that the EU is 'distant' and 'technocratic' (Sánchez-Cuenca 2017). In fact, political efficacy is itself positively linked to support for the EU (Mößner 2009; Mcevoy, 2016). Moreover, existing research suggests that a weak sense of political efficacy, inter alia, stands in the way of effective citizen mobilisation at the supranational level (Baglioni and Hurrelmann, 2016). We hypothesise that transnationalism expands people's perceptions about how effective they can be in influencing the political process at the supranational level. There is also a utilitarian rationale at work: transnationals are a segment of the population who stand to gain from European integration, including the possibility of studying, working, and living freely across European member states. Thus they may feel that they are better represented by the current EU institutions, and that their interests are pursued effectively at the EU level.

H3. *transnationalism increases supranational external political efficacy.*

4.3. Voting in EP elections

We further posit that transnational experiences and practices not only foster cognitive mobilisation and efficacy, but may also translate into voting in EP elections. Our expectation follows from the previous arguments: if transnational individuals are more engaged in European-level politics and feel better represented, then it seems reasonable to expect them to participate more in EP elections than non-transnational individuals. This is also in line with the empirical record, which shows that EU 'movers' tend to mobilise more in the supranational electoral arena than 'stayers' do (Muxel 2009; Recchi 2015). Previous studies have also found that negative orientations towards the EU are associated with lower turnout in EP elections (Flickinger and Studlar 2007; Hobolt et al. 2009). Since transnationalism is associated, conversely, with positive EU-related attitudes, we should expect the opposite.

H4. *transnationalism fosters participation in EP elections.*

5. Data and methods

Our empirical analyses rely on an original survey conducted by the University of Milan, in the framework of the REScEU project. The survey was administered in ten EU member states (Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Hungary, Poland, the Netherlands, Spain, and Sweden). The choice of these countries followed a logic of maximising variation across different geographic and cultural areas. The responses were collected using the computer aided web interviewing (CAWI) method on a sample of 15,149 respondents. The non-probabilistic sample was based

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[1] Our approach and terminology draw on the work of Muxel (2009), even though her 'politicization index' captures a broader range of indicators of general political involvement (which she uses to compare 'movers' and 'stayers'). We only include indicators of supranational political involvement.

[2] Previous works have shown how the dimensions of involvement in EU politics considered here are interrelated. Cognitive mobilisation affects political efficacy (Mößner 2009), and, in turn, political efficacy is associated with increased electoral turnout (Becker 2004; Karp and Banducci 2008; Clark 2014). However, the association between efficacy and participation has been shown to be more complex and reciprocal (Finkel 1985; Stenner-Day and Fischle, 1992). Therefore, while acknowledging the possibility that transnationalism has indirect effects on efficacy through cognitive mobilisation and on electoral participation through efficacy, we concentrate here on the direct effects of transnationalism on a more general latent concept of EU participation.

on quotas representing each country's proportions for age, gender, education, and area of residence (NUTS-1). The survey was conducted immediately after the most recent EP elections, between June and August 2019.

To test our main hypothesis and its sub-components we apply a generalised structural equation model[3] (GSEM) with an endogenous latent variable of EU-level political involvement regressed on transnationalism and other controls (see Fig. 2 for a summary of the structure of the models fitted).

5.1. Dependent variable

We measure our dependent variable as an unobserved endogenous variable consisting of three dimensions that capture distinct, but related, aspects of an underlying concept of political engagement: EU cognitive mobilisation, EU political efficacy, and individual turnout in EP elections (see Table 1).

We operationalise cognitive mobilisation based on two questions, one related to the frequency with which the respondent talked about the EU and one related to the terms on which these discussions were held. More specifically, we use the following items: '*How often would you say you speak with other people about issues related to the EU?*' and '*In which terms do you usually speak with others about issues related to the EU?*' In both cases the answers are recoded into dichotomous variables: in the first case, 0 if the respondent said they discussed EU issues not very often or never, and 1 if they did it sometimes or very often; in the second case, 0 if they talked about the EU in negative or neutral terms, and 1 if their answer was 'in positive terms'. These are two questions that effectively measure political engagement, which refers to a psychological predisposition of the individual.

Turning to political efficacy, as mentioned above, this can be defined in different ways. The item included in our questionnaire captures external efficacy in its EU-related form. It is worded in the following way: '*The voice of people like me counts in the EU*'. The original available answers are recoded as follows: 0 for 'strongly disagree' and 'somewhat disagree,' and 1 for 'somewhat agree' and 'strongly agree'; 'don't knows' are excluded.

To ascertain whether the respondents participated in national and EU-level elections, we use the following question: '*If you voted, for which party did you vote in the European Parliament elections held on the [COUNTRY DATE]?*'. Those respondents whose answer to this question was that they did not vote are assumed to be non-voters, and we define a dichotomous variable accordingly: 1 if they declared that they voted in the EP elections and 0 otherwise. Measuring turnout using survey questions comes with its own limits. A known shortcoming of this method is that, because of problems of over-reporting (Karp and Banducci 1999), nonresponse bias (Jackman 1999), and social desirability bias (Clausen 1968; Karp and Brockington 2005), respondents tend to claim that they have voted more often than is probable based on actual electoral results. This type of measurement error also affects our survey question, as shown in Table A1 in the Appendix which compares real turnout with the turnout for the sample for each country. Even though social desirability bias is a trait that may affect everyone equally (Brady et al. 1995: 292; Blais 2000), thus constituting a random error, we have to acknowledge that our analyses may also suffer from systematic error. Nevertheless, the conceptualisation of our dependent variable as a latent factor captured by multiple items may somewhat balance out any bias in the electoral turnout component. Furthermore, the results from robustness checks conducted by running analyses in each country separately lend support to our findings (see Tables A6 to A10 in the Appendix for country-specific models).

The latent factor, being related only to binary measurements (see Table 1 for the distributions), has different properties from a latent factor in a model based on continuous measurements. Thus, the errors are presumed to follow a Bernoulli distribution, and the generalised link function is the logit.

5.2. Explanatory variable

The main independent variable is an index of transnationalism. This is based on the aggregation of a set of dichotomous variables. We draw on the influential definition of transnationalism by Mau and collaborators as 'the extent to which individuals are involved in cross-border interaction and mobility' (Mau et al., 2008: 2). This extends to all sorts of interactions that go beyond national borders, and includes forms of physical as well as virtual mobility. We build on previous studies, and in particular that of Kuhn (2015), by constructing a transnationalism index based on 14 items. Compared to previous works we differentiate along four dimensions, as listed in Table 2. *Transnational background* refers to the respondent's citizenship, and measures whether the respondent has multiple citizenships or a different citizenship from the country of interview. It also includes whether the respondent has close relatives (partner or parents) born in another member state. Our index breaks down the *transnational practices* dimension defined by Kuhn (2015) into two sub-categories: those involving physical mobility and those involving transnational contacts. In an alternative operationalisation of transnationalism, we separate off forms of actual physical mobility from the rest (similar to the definition of 'direct transnationalism' offered by Ciornei and Recchi 2017) in order to understand the extent to which political participation is dependent on practical obstacles related to mobility such as administrative hurdles or increased costs stemming from travel. The last dimension of our transnationalism scale captures *intercultural competence* (also referred to as transnational human capital), and consists of patterns of cultural consumption. Foreign language competence belongs to this category as it is a crucial precondition for most types of transnational practices.

These dimensions are operationalised through additive indices based on the items listed in Table 2, while the final transnationalism index is the sum of all 14 items. The Cronbach's alpha reliability score equals 0.79 for the transnationalism index of the whole sample (for data on each country separately, refer to Table A2 in the Appendix). The assigned dimension of this concept, background, is less varied across respondents than the other two dimensions, which is due to the different life chances and experiences characterising the respondents.

Fig. 3 reports the average transnationalism level for each country included in the survey. The index was rescaled to vary between 0 and 1. Across the countries included in our sample, the average level of transnationalism is higher in Greece, Sweden, and Finland. Lower levels are found among our French and Italian respondents (Figure A1 in the Appendix reports the distributions for each analytical component of transnationalism for each country).

5.3. Control variables

Both political participation and transnationalism are socially stratified phenomena, highly dependent on education level and socio-economic status (Milbrath and Goel 1977; Blais 2000; Kuhn 2015). Accordingly, we control for the standard socio-economic variables, including gender, marital status, age, education, occupation, and intertemporal material deprivation (which measures whether the respondent at the time of the survey felt that their socio-economic status

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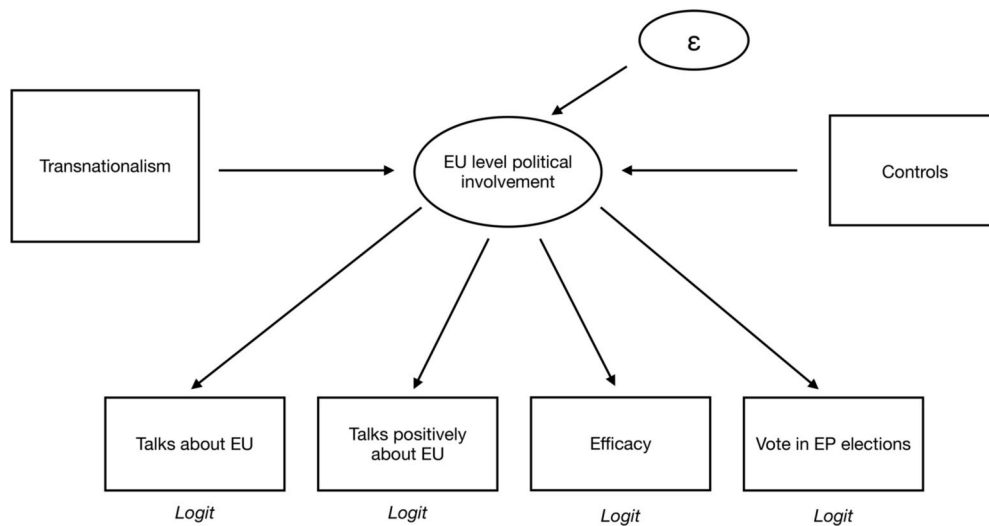[3] Models were fitted using the software Stata 16 with the GSEM command.

Fig. 2. Structure of the generalised structural equation model.

Table 1
Dimensions of EU-level political involvement.

Dimension	Variable	% respondents
Cognitive mobilisation	Talks about the EU	42.6%
	Talks positively about the EU	19.6%
External efficacy	The voice of people like me counts in the EU	30.6%
Electoral participation	Voted in EU elections	81.6%

N = 15,149.
Source: REScEU 2019 mass survey.

had improved or worsened compared to five years earlier).[4] A low level of education, a young age, being a woman and not being married are linked to an increased probability of abstention from politics (e.g., Blais 2007; Hadjar and Beck 2010). Beyond this we control for associational networks, since being a member of a professional organisation, a trade union, an NGO, or a religious organisation could influence the level of engagement with politics (for a similar approach, see Ferrera and Pellegata 2018).

Our models also include political variables to separate out the independent effect of transnationalism on political participation. The most important of these is a general interest in politics, which has consistently been found to increase the frequency of political discussions (Kittilson and Schwindt-Bayer 2010) and the propensity to vote (e.g., De Vreese and Tobiasen, 2007; Hadjar and Beck 2010). Our measure is coded as 1 for respondents who say they are interested in politics to a great deal or to some extent; and 0 (reference category) for those saying they are not much, or not at all, interested in politics. We also control for national level political participation by including a binary control variable coded as 1 if the respondent declared that they voted in the last national general election and 0 otherwise (reference category), according to their

Table 2
Operationalisation of individual transnationalism.

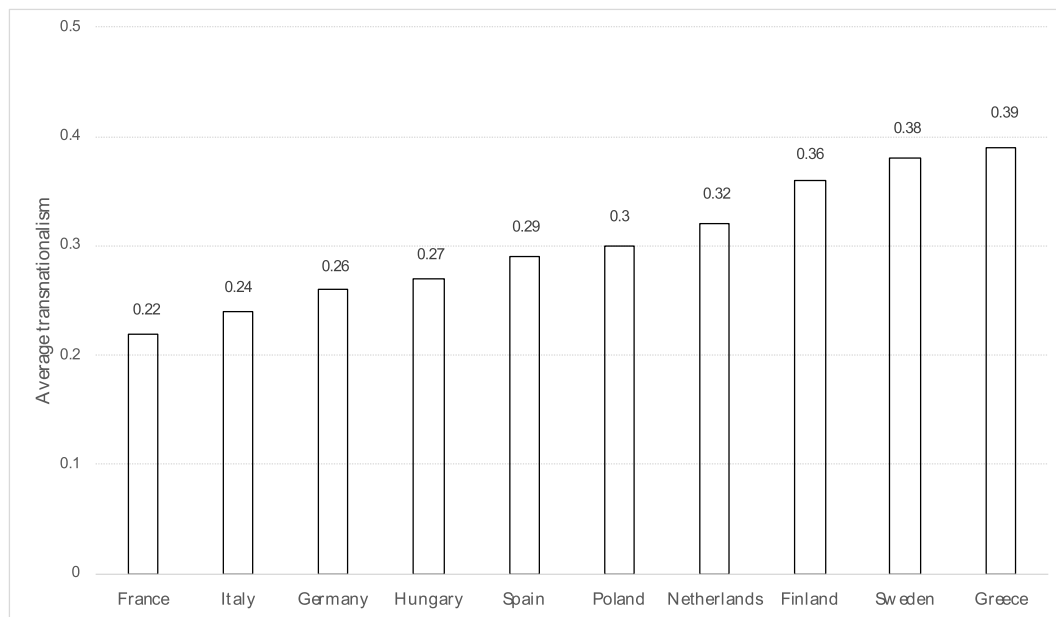| Dimension	Item	% respondents
Transnational background	More than one citizenship.	2.4%
	At least one of your parents was born in another EU member state.	10.4%
	Your spouse/partner was born in another EU member state.	7.7%
Physical mobility	You have lived in another EU member state for at least three months for work, study, or family reasons.	15.8%
	You have visited another EU member state in the last twelve months.	51.9%
Transnational contacts	A member of your family or a close relative lives in another EU member state.	31.0%
	You have friends who are from other EU member states.	50.5%
	You often communicate with foreign people living in other EU member states via the Internet or email.	34.7%
	Your job involves contact with organisations or people who live in other EU member states.	23.1%
	In your workplace you are in contact with people coming from other EU member states.	33.4%
Intercultural competence	You sometimes read newspapers and online journals in a language different from your mother tongue.	40.8%
	You often watch TV programmes, series or movies in foreign languages (also subtitled).	57.9%
	You enjoy reading foreign books in their original language.	25.4%
	You sometimes purchase goods and services using a language different from your mother tongue.	53.0%

N = 14,579.
Source: REScEU 2019 mass survey.

answer to the question: '*If you voted, which party did you vote for in the last national election held on the [COUNTRY DATE]?*'. We further control for national-level participation using traditional heuristics explaining electoral support for government. We use the retrospective evaluation of the national economy (coded as 0 (reference category) if the respondent thought the national economy had improved or stayed about the same in the previous five years and 1 if they thought that it had got worse), and the respondent's trust in the national government coded on an eleven-point scale going from 0 (no trust at all) to 10 (complete trust).

Studies about turnout in European elections also tend to include

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[4] The variable is computed as the difference between the socio-economic self-placement of the respondent at the time of the survey and the socio-economic self-placement five years earlier. The two original items are: *There are people who tend to be towards the top of our society and people who tend to be towards the bottom. Where would you place yourself nowadays on a scale from 0 to 10, where '0' means "at the bottom of our society" and '10' means "at the top of our society"?* And: *And where would you have placed yourself on the same scale 5 years ago?* Available answers to both questions lie on a scale from 0 to 10 scale, from '*0 - At the bottom of our society*' to '*10 – At the top of our society*', and *Don't know*.

Fig. 3. Average transnationalism in the 10 EU countries surveyed.
Source: REScEU 2019 mass survey.

people's stance towards European integration (e.g., Stockemer 2012). This is even more important for our purposes, since transnationalism is strongly linked to EU-related attitudes, ideologies, and identities. Accordingly, to control for the cosmopolitan/parochial attitudes that we expect to mediate the impact of transnationalism on political engagement and participation, we include a measure of support (/opposition) for the European project, that is, whether the respondent believes that EU integration has gone too far (0) or should be pushed further (10) – and whether the respondent felt himself or herself to be exclusively European (1), versus declaring a hyphenated or primarily national identity (0, reference category) (see Kuhn et al. 2018 for a similar strategy). The models also incorporate the respondent's self-placement on the left–right axis. To control for the non-linear effects of ideology and to include those respondents who did not place themselves, we recode the original answers of the self-placement on the left (0) to right (10) eleven-point scale into a categorical variable with six categories: Left (0-1), Centre-left (2–3), Centre (4–6), Centre-right (7–8), Right (9–10), and Not located (the reference category) for those who refused to locate themselves, which we use as a proxy for a lack of general political knowledge (Recchi 2015). Finally, the aggregate models include country dummies (the reference being Germany) to separate out context-specific factors related to political participation such as electoral institutions, and the number and type of competing parties.

6. Empirical results

To test our hypotheses, we fitted a series of generalised structural equation models: one with the general transnationalism index among the exogenous variables (Model 1) and four others, each containing one of the four sub-dimensions of transnationalism (background Model 2, contacts Model 3, physical mobility Model 4, and intercultural competence Model 5). Unpacking the dimensions of transnationalism that affect the components of EU political participation is analytically fruitful because, while transnationalism is as a rule treated as a continuous variable, it has been suggested that the different items used to measure it could cluster into distinct patterns (Salamońska and Recchi 2016) and have different consequences. We begin the test of our hypotheses by presenting the coefficients of the measurement components of these five models in Table 3. In each of them the resulting coefficients for each component of the endogenous latent variable of EU-level participation is

Table 3
Coefficients of measurement components of EU-level political involvement.

Models	Talks about EU	Talks positively about EU	Political efficacy	Voted in EP elections
Transnationalism (Model 1)	1 (constrained)	1.744***	0.842***	1.636***
Background (Model 2)	1 (constrained)	1.960***	0.969***	1.896***
Contacts (Model 3)	1 (constrained)	1.805***	0.864***	1.713***
Physical mobility (Model 4)	1 (constrained)	1.968***	0.961***	1.898***
Intercultural competence (Model 5)	1 (constrained)	1.912***	0.922***	1.786***

$*p < 0.05$, $**p < 0.01$, $***p < 0.001$.
Note: the table reports the coefficients of the measurement components from a generalised structural equation model. The coefficient of 'Talks about EU' is constrained to 1 for estimation purposes.

statistically significant and goes in the expected direction: supranational participation is associated with talking more about the EU and doing so positively, with feeling that one is represented by EU institutions, and with voting in EP elections.

Table 4 displays the results of the structural component of the five structural equation models fitted. For each model, odds ratios are reported (the coefficients are available in Table A5 of the Appendix). Model 1 returns a statistically significant positive association for the transnationalism index. This lends support to the first hypothesis, that transnationalism is positively associated with EU political engagement, net of social stratification and orientations (H1). Sharing (real and/or virtual) experiences and practices across EU member states is associated with increased levels of involvement in EU politics. Our analysis also reveals that the analytical components of transnationalism – background, contacts, physical mobility, and intercultural competence – all exhibit significant and positive associations with the endogenous latent variable (see Models 2 to 5). This implies that EU-level political involvement can run through each of the four dimensions of transnationalism. Moreover, no significant difference in the magnitude of the different effects emerges. Interestingly, physical mobility does not seem

Table 4
Individual-level determinants of EU-level political involvement (odds ratios).

DV: EU-level political involvement	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Transnationalism	3.402***	–	–	–	–
Background	–	1.816***	–	–	–
Contacts	–	–	1.963***	–	–
Physical mobility	–	–	–	1.405***	–
Intercultural competence	–	–	–	–	1.589***
Female	0.939**	0.941**	0.939**	0.943**	0.946*
Married	1.026	1.026	1.026	1.027	1.044
Age	1.004***	1.002	1.002*	1.001	1.003**
Education (reference: primary)					
Secondary	0.980	1.004	1.003	1.001	0.979
Tertiary	1.015	1.110**	1.078*	1.082*	1.036
Occupation (reference: unemployed)					
Employer/Self-employed	1.130*	1.175**	1.124	1.166**	1.196**
Salaried middle class	1.023	1.072	1.008	1.058	1.082
Socio-cultural specialist	1.044	1.084	1.045	1.062	1.085
Service and production worker	1.051	1.060	1.026	1.047	1.089
Welfare recipient	1.100	1.079	1.089	1.077	1.111*
Other inactive	1.151*	1.136*	1.146*	1.133*	1.147*
Intertemporal material deprivation	0.989	0.992	0.990	0.990	0.988
Organisational membership					
Professional	1.115**	1.146***	1.124**	1.149***	1.157***
NGO	1.279***	1.305***	1.297***	1.309***	1.313***
Religious	1.192***	1.168***	1.194***	1.204***	1.209***
Trade union	1.015	1.010	1.010	1.016	1.015
Trust in national government	1.035***	1.032***	1.034***	1.033***	1.036***
National economy worsened	0.945*	0.956	0.942*	0.954	0.956
Interested in politics	2.011***	1.922***	1.995***	1.915***	1.933***
Voted in national elections	4.054***	3.623***	3.946***	3.578***	3.724***
Ideology (reference: Not located)					
Left	1.390***	1.401***	1.405***	1.399***	1.380***
Centre-left	1.418***	1.414***	1.430***	1.399***	1.386***
Centre	1.323***	1.323***	1.337***	1.313***	1.317***
Centre-right	1.296***	1.304***	1.313***	1.292***	1.308***
Right	1.479***	1.442***	1.484***	1.431***	1.479***
EU integration	1.105***	1.102***	1.105***	1.102***	1.103***
European identity	1.390***	1.426***	1.439***	1.439***	1.452***
Country (reference: Germany)					
Greece	0.876*	0.977	0.937	0.987	0.883*
Italy	0.901*	0.904*	0.914	0.909*	0.883*
Hungary	1.106	1.082	1.119*	1.100*	1.068
Finland	0.767***	0.878**	0.862**	0.864**	0.748***
France	0.875*	0.858**	0.887*	0.873**	0.865**
Netherlands	0.793***	0.884**	0.882*	0.868**	0.776***
Poland	1.622***	1.555***	1.599***	1.603***	1.606***
Spain	0.726***	0.765***	0.736***	0.772***	0.742***
Sweden	0.944	1.081	1.059	1.094	0.956
Variance EU-level political involvement	0.237***	0.226***	0.238***	0.227***	0.236***
N	*10529*	*10556*	*10556*	*10556*	*10531*
AIC	40565.3	40949.67	40764.04	40956.17	40811.71
BIC	40892.09	41276.57	41090.94	41283.07	41138.51

*p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001.
Note: the table reports odds ratios from the generalised structural equation model with a latent endogenous variable.

to make a difference, even though existing studies suggest that migrant status depresses political participation, especially turnout (Ciornei and Østergaard-Nielsen 2020). Our contrasting finding could depend on the relatively short-term movements captured by our operationalisation of transnationalism. Still, it is worth noting that the country-specific models highlight how transnational physical mobility is not related to EU-level political involvement in three out of the ten sample countries: Italy, France, and Poland (see Table A10 in the Appendix). The only other non-statistically significant coefficient of an analytical component of transnationalism is background in Italy (see Table A7 in the Appendix).
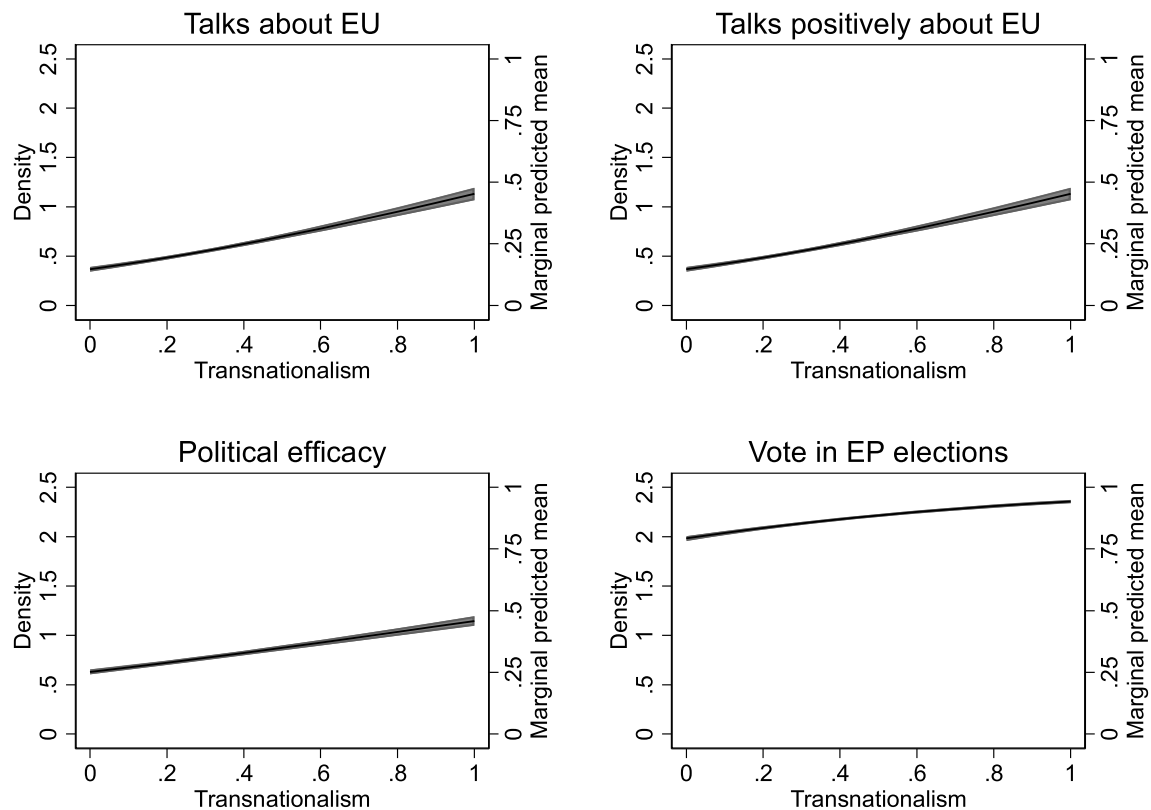
Fig. 4 shows the marginal effects of transnationalism for each component of the EU-level political involvement index, based on the estimations of Model 1 in Table 4 (similar figures for each dimension of transnationalism are reported in Figure A2 in the Appendix). Recall that we measure cognitive mobilisation as the frequency of respondents' discussions related to EU affairs and whether these discussions are conducted in positive terms. In line with what was expected in H2a and H2b, as individual transnationalism increases so does cognitive mobilisation. Moving from the minimum to the maximum level of transnationalism, the marginal predicted mean of each of the two cognitive mobilisation measures increases, respectively, from 0.39 to 0.64 and from 0.14 to 0.45. This implies that transnational individuals not only talk more frequently about the EU, but also tend to talk about the EU in positive terms. Most importantly, this result holds regardless of the individual's structural position, ideological preferences, and cosmopolitan attitudes, and suggests that the EU constitutes part of the everyday experience of transnational individuals, much more so than for the rest of the respondents. Clearly, there is a cognitive and affective foundation of people's involvement in EU political life.

Turning to political efficacy, we argued that transnationalism may also foster the perception of being able to influence EU institutions (H3). Our analyses also lend support to this hypothesis: transnationalism is linked to a statistically significant increase in people's assessment that their voice counts in the EU. As shown in the third panel of Fig. 4, when the levels of physical or cultural mobility and contacts with fellow Europeans increase, so do the self-perception and confidence of being represented by EU institutions.

We turn now to analysing the association between transnationalism and voter turnout. Hypothesis 4, suggesting that transnational experiences foster participation in EP elections, is supported: transnational traits do indeed increase the probability of voting in EP elections, even if in this case the effect is less pronounced than for other indicators of EU-level participation (the marginal predicted mean shifts from 0.79 for individuals with no experience or practice of transnationalism to 0.94 for respondents with the maximum level). This finding suggests that transnationalism has the potential to increase political participation in EP elections.

Among the alternative explanatory factors included in our models, measures of national-level political engagement and political orientation play the most important roles. By far the strongest predictor of EU political participation is voting in national elections, implying that the bulk of those involved in EU-level politics are also engaged in national politics. Other control variables, too, operate in the expected ways. Political interest is strongly and positively associated with all forms of political participation, as is age, with older individuals participating more in the political process on average. Importantly, the effects of transnationalism hold even after controlling for political ideology, EU integration preferences, and European identity, suggesting that transnationalism cannot be reduced to any one of these factors. Interestingly, also, associational membership represents a statistically significant predictor of EU political involvement overall and of its dimensions separately. Members of professional, religious, and non-governmental organisations (but not trade unions) tend to be more involved in EU politics. Robustness checks included in the Appendix report the results for similar models that include only transnationalism without controls

Fig. 4. Marginal effects of transnationalism on each EU-level political involvement component. *Note:* marginal effects computed based on estimations in Model 1 in Table 4.

(Table A11), or transnationalism and socio-economic controls only (Table A12). The results do not change.

7. Discussion and conclusion

In this article we investigate the association between individual transnationalism and EU political involvement. We hypothesise that people with high levels of transnationalism are more likely to engage in (positive) conversations about the EU and to feel they are better represented by EU institutions. Furthermore, we test empirically whether transnationalism fosters participation in the EP elections. Empirical analyses conducted on original public opinion data collected just after the 2019 EP elections in ten EU countries demonstrate that individual transnationalism is positively associated with EU political participation overall as well as with the individual components of cognitive mobilisation, efficacy, and turnout. This relationship holds even after controlling for socio-economic status and political attitudes.

With cross-sectional data we can only identify correlation; to make stronger claims about the relevance of transnationalism for the development of a European political space and increasing legitimacy, we would require longitudinal data. Future analyses could be extended to institutional factors, including, inter alia, changes related to the electoral cycle. Moreover, we focus on the contribution of transnationalism to political engagement but do not link it to partisan supply. For example, Hernández and Kriesi (2016) have shown that voters who are disaffected with the EU turn out in larger numbers when there is a Eurosceptic party that strongly opposes EU integration (provided, however, that there is also ideological congruence on the left–right dimension).

Despite these limitations, an important insight furnished by our analyses is that European forms of transnationalism – shared practices and experiences across the EU – tend to favour engagement in EU politics. Transnationalism thus offers an avenue towards the politicization of

Europe beyond oppositional Euroscepticism, or, in other words, a form of mass mobilisation that promotes rather than threatens the integration process (see: Schmitter 2009: 211). Transnational individuals could be a not-yet-fully-mobilised social constituency on the integration side of the demarcation/integration cleavage. However, this does not come without caveats. The uneven and socially stratified nature of cross-border interactions undermines the transformative potential of transnationalism, exacerbating conflict between those who benefit from and partake in cross-border interactions and those who do not. This deepening divide feeds into a backlash over EU integration (Bauböck 2019; Kuhn 2019). While the increased participation of citizens in EP elections is a welcome development, if supranational political participation of the 'winners' from globalisation and European integration increases, while 'losers' abstain, this can lead to further polarisation and backlash (Kuhn 2019). In this respect, our findings echo the conclusions of Kandyla and Gherghina in relation to the European Citizens' Initiative, namely that its 'appeal is confined to a group of citizens who already have confidence in the responsiveness of the EU's political system rather than those who feel alienated from EU political processes' (2018: 1235). It seems, therefore, that this type of social selectivity constitutes a stubborn impediment to broadening public engagement in EU affairs more generally.

At the same time, transnationalism may be introducing a different type of imbalance to the EU's multilevel politics: instead of boosting participation at all levels, it could also be accompanying relative disengagement from national politics (Apaydin 2016). Further research is needed to understand the precise relationship between these two. Finally, with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, it has become harder to interact with other European citizens, a factor that our study proves to be important for fostering EU-level participation and awareness. Along with the abrupt reversion to nationalised forms of governance (Favell and Recchi 2020: 884), the pandemic has brought into sharp relief the fragility of the social and cultural underpinnings of

European democracy.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2021.102383.

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