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DOI : 10.14746/rie.2023.17.23

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Towards the Politicization of Artificial Intelligence in the EU? External Influences and Internal Dynamics

Introduction: Key Concepts for AI Politicization

Artificial Intelligence (AI) has become a central element in the geopolitical tensions between major powers, notably the United States, China, and the European Union, due to its strategic importance (Ulnicane, 2022, p. 265). In addition to the urgent scientific reflection on the role of AI in the international order (Moldicz, 2022), the topic of social consequences of the AI is flourishing not only in the academic environment (Kalpokas, Kalpokienė, 2023), but above all in the legislation, such as EU AI Act (the world's first comprehensive AI law) being developed (European Commission, 2021a).

Scientists warned against reducing the debate on AI to a race rhetoric (Roff, 2019). These warnings lost their momentum when, in November 2022, ChatGPT (developed by *OpenAI*) was released, disrupting ideas about the role of AI in the modern economy (Council of the European Union, 2023, p. 2).

Due to this centrifugal pressure and the topic's growing popularity in the media, AI may become politicized, especially in democratic countries. In this paper, I adopt the understanding of politicization described as a three-dimensional process involving "increasing salience, polarization of opinion, and the expansion of actors and audiences involved in EU issues" (De Wilde, Leupold, Schmitke, 2016, p. 3).

Politicization prompts elites to prioritize public interests, especially when issues resonate strongly with EU citizens and involve active civil society (De Bruycker, 2017). This concept captures the substantial influence on EU affairs, integrating political demands into the EU political system and extending beyond rhetorical expression.

Manifestations of politicization can be categorized into three groups: institutions, decision-making processes, and issues (De Wilde, 2011, p. 560). Given the novelty of AI as an issue, geopolitical stakes, societal implications of digital transformation and the lobbying from Big Tech, there is a compelling need to address the literature gap in the area of AI politicization.

AI policy, which is integral to the intra-European debate, unfolds against a markedly international backdrop. The major market players are American Big Tech firms, and the only truly global competition for them are Chinese companies, which presents a geopolitical and normative challenge for the broadly understood West in face of US-China

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tensions (Poseliuzhna, 2023, pp. 61–62). European AI initiatives are developing within the framework of international standards, like the OECD AI Principles and G20 AI Guidelines. The United Nations' engagement with AI governance proposals underscores the relevance of this discourse (United Nations Secretary-General, 2023, p. 2).

There remains an underexplored area of how these dynamics manifest in the politicization of AI within the EU. This issue presents a novel case for the expansive literature on politicization, prompting the question:

Are there any indications that AI in the EU is undergoing a process of politicization?

Considering the ongoing concerns about Europe's position behind the US and China, I put forward the following hypothesis: Public debate on AI in the EU is undergoing a process of politicization, which is being shaped both by internal dynamics as well as in response to the AI policy models of external powers, particularly those of the United States and China.

This paper aims to examine the early signals of politicization of AI debate in the EU as well as to compare the EU's AI model with the American and Chinese AI policy models. Politicization is characterized by the mutual influence between public opinion and the evolution of AI policy ideas. Not only does public opinion inform policy formation, but it is also molded by these evolving policies, a process particularly evident in democratic countries.

In order to verify the hypothesis, comparative policy analysis and content analysis of political debates were used. This involved the review of policy documents, white papers, and legislative texts, through which the stances of actors were mapped out. Primary data sources included reports and press releases from EU institutions, US officials, and AI policy experts. Recent empirical findings, newspaper coverage and relevant literature comprised the secondary data sources.

AI Policy International Context: the U.S. Approach

The U.S. has been a leader in AI research and development. Its approach emphasizes a market-based strategy, prioritizing innovation, and technological advancement, with minimal government intervention. The American model is based on the belief in the tech sector's ability to self-regulate, with the government's role being primarily to enable innovation and limited supervisory actions. This approach is consistent with the US ideological standpoint. Filgueiras (2022, p. 6) categorized it as 'AI business coalitions' political regime. It aligns with the U.S.'s liberal democracy tradition, emphasizing democratic procedures and pluralism. Underpinning this approach is a liberal political regime, guiding AI policy with a focus on network-based governance.

A symbol of this techno-optimistic approach was President Joe Biden's meeting with representatives from seven of the world's most influential AI companies, resulting in their voluntary commitments to "manage the risks posed by AI" (The White House, 2023a). However, this reliance on voluntarism has been criticized by civil society as insufficient oversight of tech companies and a failure to protect users' rights.

Recently, criticism has intensified, leading to shifts away from the traditional American AI model. In September 2023, US senators introduced a bipartisan AI regu-

lation framework (Blumenthal, 2023), reflecting a growing consensus on the need for AI oversight. This policy shift could influence global AI governance, especially given the international presence of US tech firms. The bipartisan nature of this cooperation is notable, particularly against the backdrop of American political polarization.

President Biden's Executive Order sets new AI safety and security standards, emphasizing privacy, equity, civil rights, consumer and worker protection, and innovation (The White House, 2023b). The President emphasized the need for transparency in the sector, requiring developers of powerful AI systems to share safety test results with the U.S. government. He also called for bipartisan legislative support to ensure the security of Americans' privacy amid AI advancements. The order instructs federal agencies to address algorithmic bias, focusing on equity and civil rights concerns.

Nevertheless, one should refrain from drawing conclusions based on the recent policy developments. There appears to be a pivot from free-market rhetoric towards a more protective stance on consumer rights and a securitization of AI-related threats. At the same time, while the EU AI Act enters into force, a regulatory equivalent in the US is still at the initial stage.

AI Policy International Context: China's Approach

In 2017, the Chinese government released a strategy called "A Next Generation Artificial Intelligence Development Plan" detailing its plan to take the lead in AI by 2030 (Sayler, 2020, p. 1). From China's perspective, advancing AI represents an opportunity to reduce its vulnerable dependence on imports of technology, a concern that has become a national priority.

Another goal of China's approach to AI is to strengthen the Communist Party's power and political control using new technologies. "The Chinese state-driven regulatory model seeks to harness technology in strengthening government control as opposed to protecting individual freedom" (Bradford, 2023, p. 80). AI offers a broad spectrum of applications for political purposes, ranging from decision-making optimization to citizen surveillance, censorship, and digital propaganda. This approach has been characterized by a focus on control, surveillance, and political stability, maintained through restrictions. Generative AI models has sparked ambivalent opinions, as highlighted in Welch and Schneider's (2023) 'Foreign Policy' article, "China's Censors Are Afraid of What Chatbots Might Say." At the same time, a model based on extreme control may hinder AI innovation, which relies on the openness of data.

From the perspective of ideological standpoints, the Chinese model is influenced by an internal political regime that merges bureaucratic hierarchies with authoritarianism, impacting the autonomy of its lower governance levels. This approach can be termed as an 'AI National Enterprise,' focusing on global AI competitiveness, internet governance, and nationalizing data control (Filgueiras, 2022, pp. 8–9). Driven by authoritative ideas from the State Council, it aims for precise AI deployment in industry as national objective, incorporating regulatory norms.

Although the presented characteristics remain central to the Chinese model, China's approach to AI is currently in flux. The era of unregulated market activity for start-

ups has ended, with the state now advocating for proactive regulation. The Chinese regulatory proposals have adopted well-known principles from AI ethics debates, such as labeling AI-generated content, ensuring non-discrimination, protecting privacy, and safeguarding intellectual property rights.² Still, these proposals require generative AI service providers to register with a government registry (MacCarthy, 2023).

AI Policy International Context: EU's Approach

Research has long focused on the US-China AI competition, emphasizing their contrasting models (Allison, Schmidt, 2020). The European approach, often misread as less market-oriented than America's, drew criticism for its precautionary principle, seen as impeding innovation. Contrarily, some, like Mazzucato et al. (2022, pp. 11–13), argue that regulation and public engagement are vital for developing citizen-centric innovation.

The European Commission (EC) highlights that “[to] address the opportunities and challenges of AI, the EU must [...] define its own way, based on European values” (European Commission, 2020, p. 1). The EC affirms the Union's aspiration to preserve ‘the EU's technological leadership’ and to secure its position as a shaper of ‘global norms and standards’, with an emphasis on the advancement of ‘trustworthy AI that is consistent with Union values and interests’ (European Commission, 2021a, pp. 1–5).

Since 2018, the EU has emerged as a regulatory leader in AI, focusing on ethical standards and the protection of fundamental rights (European Commission, 2018). It aims to set global norms through policies like the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the EU AI Act.³ The EU's ‘human-centric’ AI approach, differing from the market-driven US and Chinese models, highlights the geopolitical tensions related to technological governance and digital sovereignty.

In a broader terms, EU approach to AI reflects European identity as understood by EC (von Essen, Ossewaarde, 2023, p. 4), which lies upon the three following branches:

1. Common history or traditions (the shared historical narratives and cultural traditions).
2. Political/constitutive or moral values (the fundamental values such as democracy, human rights, and the rule of law that are seen as core).
3. EU purposes (the goals and objectives that the EU sets for itself, such as peace-keeping, economic benefits from the single market, resilience building, and consumer protection, which help define the collective mission of the EU).

What is the main challenge for the European AI model, as discerned from ongoing regulatory efforts and political communication? The critical question is how to develop an AI policy that balances the support for innovation and digital/technological sover-

² See more on the Chinese regulatory approach in M. Sheehan (2023), *China's AI regulations and how they get made*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 10.07.2023, https://carnegieendowment.org/files/202307-Sheehan_Chinese%20AI%20gov.pdf.

³ The Digital Services Act (DSA) and the Digital Markets Act (DMA), integral components of the EU's regulatory reform, are as crucial as the EU AI Act in shaping the digital landscape. The DSA focuses on content moderation, addressing the complexities of digital information flow, while the DMA targets fair competition, essential for maintaining a balanced digital market (Heidebrecht, 2023). Together, these regulations represent foundational pillars in the EU's effort to reconstruct the Internet.

eignty, while concurrently safeguarding users and creators against rights violations and abuses, and upholding democratic values. This is why AI Act aims to provide a single framework for AI products and services used in the EU, ensuring products placed on the EU market are safe while allowing for innovation (European Parliament, 2023). These three components embody a European rights-based approach, aligning with an anthropocentric vision of AI, consistent with OECD AI policy guidelines. The aim of these regulations is to safeguard fundamental rights and ensure the equitable distribution of digital economy benefits.

There are numerous parallels between American and European AI policy values, including a focus on individual rights and democratic principles. Differences emerge in the implementation of these principles. In the US, a tendency towards free-market principles leads to greater reliance on corporate governance, whereas the EU demonstrates a preference for regulatory interventions at both EU and national government levels. Nevertheless, this landscape is evolving. Recent developments in the US regulatory practices, possibly influenced by increased public awareness and political pressure stemming from the proliferation of large language models and generative AI, appear to be inspiring aspects of the EU AI Act. Consequently, the EU is not only distinguishing itself from the US-China dichotomy in AI policy but is also emerging as an influential model in this domain. It is important to note, however, that despite China's unique regulatory approach, its evolving stance towards AI governance remain distinctly different from those of the EU and the US.

Saliency, actors and polarization in AI

Building upon De Wilde et al. (2016, pp. 6–7) operationalization of main three dimensions of politicization, I understand *saliency* as the importance attributed both to AI as a technological solution and in terms of AI policy. The latter encompasses not only concrete regulatory frameworks, such as EU AI Act, but also broader policy measures, including “European approach to artificial intelligence”, which falls under the umbrella of Europe's Digital Decade until 2030 (Decision 2022/2481). It may be indicated by the number of media articles reporting on AI development, how ‘aware’ citizens are of technology as well as speeches and internet commentaries by politicians and a broad variety of influencers.

The central element of saliency regarding the ‘AI’ topic is its visibility – the extent, duration, and frequency with which this issue is discussed in public forums of contestation. This is linked to the growing number of citizens who invest their time and money to follow and engage with AI policy news. Regarding the forums of contestation, one can expect actors’ participation in parliaments, media, blogs, and social media – all of which collectively intensify politicization.

Media plays a pivotal role in shaping public perceptions of AI policy. From 2017 to 2021, there was relatively low public resonance with AI issues, despite this being a formative period driven by the European Commission's proposal for AI legislation. Starting in 2022, the media emerged as a major forum of contestation. This led UNESCO to respond to the so-called AI hype by publishing a handbook for journalists,

which provides recommendations on how to critically think about AI (Jaakkola, 2023). 2023 was named “The Year Policymakers Woke Up to AI” by ‘Foreign Policy.’ However, this notion should primarily be seen as a response to the growing public interest in technology entering the mainstream. It is important to note that many policy efforts in this area began as early as 2017/2018.

Dominant narratives in AI are polarized towards notions of either an existential threat or myopic solutionism. These narratives often understand AI through concepts like ‘paradox’ and ‘polarization’. Negative AI stories typically fall into two categories: (1) existentially spectacular, suggesting AI could take over, or (2) individually threatening, portraying AI as a risk to livelihoods and safety (Chubb et al., p. 4). Positive stories are either (3) overly optimistic or (4) attribute magical qualities to AI. Empirical research, including Roe and Perkins (2023, p. 4), confirms this dichotomy in the context of generative AI, fluctuating between solving almost all social problems and warning of imminent dangers. Journalists, the direct creators of media salience, resort to guesswork and imagination when writing about AI, due to a lack of knowledge (Jones et al., 2022, p. 1747). This leads them to mix personal perceptions of AI, influenced by popular culture, with their conceptions of AI.

In terms of AI policy actors, they include representatives from national, EU, and international institutions and bodies, political parties, private enterprises, law firms, political consultants, NGOs, think tanks, as well as civil society and advocacy groups.

In examining the diversity of opinions among stakeholders regarding AI regulation, it is important to consider the response from European business entities. Concurrent with the trilogues, over 150 representatives from major European companies, including Airbus, Renault, Siemens, Capgemini, and Orange, issued an open letter criticizing the proposed AI Act (Wodecki, 2023). The letter articulated their concerns about the regulations being overly restrictive and hindering innovation.

American companies (e.g. Alphabet, Microsoft and OpenAI), officially declared high ethical standards and a commitment to product reliability (Glukhov, 2023). However, they also leveraged their economic power through extensive lobbying efforts to ensure that the AI Act imposes minimal and less costly requirements on companies, while also aiming to weaken compliance mechanisms (Schyns, 2023). In an open letter to the Czech presidency of the Council, Microsoft saw “no need for the AI Act to have a specific section on [general purpose AI]” (Schyns, Vranken, 2023). In a notable move in September 2022, the US government presented a “non-paper” to the Czech presidency, suggesting that general purpose AI be excluded from the Act and advocating for a more limited definition of AI (Bertuzzi, 2022). These suggestions were in line with the positions held by major technology companies.

Civil society organizations across Europe have countered Big Tech lobbying by emphasizing the need for transparency in AI and by closing loopholes that allow AI developers too much discretion in classifying their systems as high-risk. In this regard, the position paper signed by 118 organizations is particularly noteworthy (Algorithm Watch, 2023). Moreover, 150 civil society organizations have called upon EU institutions to ensure the AI Act protects people’s rights during the AI Act trilogues (EDRI, 2023).

At the same time in national parliaments even in countries known for innovation, such as Germany, AI issues arouse interest belatedly and do not provoke significant

controversy (Stierle, 2023). Indeed, the importance of new technologies for the economy, the aspiration to be a global leader in AI, and the necessity for government programs to support the development of this technology are acknowledged specifically at the governmental level, but not broadly discussed in parliaments (Caunes 2023, pp. 325–329, 344–352). However, these discussions are overshadowed by more immediate concerns, such as migration or the effects of the pandemic. For the time being, parliaments are not the primary forum for AI debates in Europe.

The role of media in the public discourse on AI within EU warrants considerable attention. This stems from the dual function media can play in the understanding of AI politicization: it can create an illusion of influence over political debates or serve as a counterbalance to the influence of economically powerful interest groups such as business lobbyists (especially in tech sphere). Stevens and De Bruycker (2020, p. 745) shed light on this dynamic in their empirical research. They argue that economic resources are a significant factor in determining lobbying influence within EU policy, but crucially, this influence is moderated by the degree of media attention that policy issues attract.

These conclusions at first glance suggest that the media's role in covering policy issues could be pivotal in ensuring a more equitable political discourse and higher visibility for AI-related topics. But in fact, the media discourse ultimately focused on being quite critical of new technologies. According to a study by Nguyen and Hekman (2022), while a decade ago the media perceived AI through the prism of hope, they increasingly wrote about threats. AI news reporting has transitioned from being a niche topic to a mainstream, highlighting various risks, including surveillance, data bias, cyber-crime, and information disorder.

Polarization refers to a tendency towards extreme positions on two fronts: (1) whether AI should be regulated at all, and (2) the specific values or challenges within AI that need regulation. Such disputes arise from the calculation of interests and ideological stances of various actors. Polarization inherently involves dividing society, making the specific issue a significant concern for EU citizens. While salience may grow with consensus, polarization implies division. Currently, it is not evident that EU citizens share a consensus on AI and AI policy.⁴

A more radical position on AI is only just beginning to emerge in national parliaments (Guillou, Piquard, 2023). Specific AI policy-related contentious topics have not permeated national mainstream media, which is why polarization has not engulfed public opinion. While NGOs advocating for privacy and media outlets supported by large corporations present opposing narratives, these differences alone are insufficient to constitute polarization within EU society.

Discussion

It could be concluded that the AI case substantiates the idea that salience and polarization do not go hand in hand, but are separate components of politicization. This

⁴ 61% of Europeans expect AI to have a positive effect in the future, but the survey was conducted in 2021 (before the growth of media attention to AI) (European Commission, 2021b).

leads to the contemplation of whether growing salience can stimulate polarization. In other words, will actors from outside the tech community (such as parliamentarians and political parties in member states) take advantage of the possibility of increased media attention to introduce AI into their everyday political narratives?

Public resonance with AI issues has been increasing since 2022, partly due to legislative processes in the EU and the introduction of generative AI systems to the market. Public resonance includes both indirect participation (e.g., through opinion polls, social media posts, comments, blog publications) and direct participation (e.g., voting in elections or referendums). To date, AI policies have not been a focal point in ballot boxes. It remains to be observed whether political actors will employ AI discourse to exacerbate partisan and ideological divisions, and if AI emerges as a pivotal issue in both national and European Parliament elections.

The relatively low public resonance from 2017 to 2021 (despite policy measures being taken) suggests that civil society has not raised concerns regarding the EU's legitimacy in shaping AI policy. Citizens were focused on more visible challenges, such as issues related to migration (Maricut-Akbik, 2019, p. 393) and the energy transition, evident in everyday aspects like electricity bills or emission fees. The energy transition itself showcases a consensus on its necessity but divergences in opinions on how it should be carried out (the debate over nuclear vs. renewable energy.) Analogously, just as emission fees have become a point of polarization within states (between Eurosceptic and pro-European positions), the broader implementation of AI in the EU might trigger more intense debates.

During the salience analysis, it was observed that a knowledge vacuum on AI was responsible for not sufficient media's ability to address AI-policy issues. The media's focus has been more on stimulating discussions about transhumanism than on immediate political and legislative efforts. One limitation of this study is the lack of empirical data on strategies for addressing AI in EU-centric and national media, considering multilingualism.⁵ Future research could explore navigating media hype around AI policy. Cave and Dihal (2019, p. 74) cautioned that "perceptions of AI's possibilities, which may be quite detached from the reality of the technology, can influence how it is developed, deployed and regulated". As previously discussed, extreme approaches in AI narratives may diverge from factual representation, overshadowing critical societal issues.

This is puzzling because, as Stevens and Bruycker (2020, p. 745) note, media attention can help counteract the disproportionate influence of wealthy interest groups, such as business lobbyists in the technology sector. At the heart of the EU's efforts to regulate AI lies the issue of shifting economic and political power, which undermines the oversight of AI by democratic institutions (Jungherr, 2023, p. 6). In order to fulfill their information function in the era of digital transformation, the media should devote more attention to providing solid foundations for understanding new technologies in society.

Although this article focuses on early signs of politicization, this process should be seen as just one of several potential outcomes and is not predetermined. Future

⁵ In Europe, the most complex studies on this topic were conducted so far in the UK (Brennen et al., 2018; Roe, Perkins, 2023).

research could explore whether the AI Act's establishment might reduce politicization, especially if it is perceived as resolving key issues.

Another aspect to consider is the potential spillover of politicization from the issue level to institutional and decision-making levels, as De Wilde (2011, p. 560) details. However, such a transition might only occur in contexts of extreme politicization, a phenomenon the EU previously experienced during the migration crisis. The likelihood of this scenario depends on the widespread adoption of new technology and its tangible impacts on citizens' daily lives

Regarding external influences, a question arises about the potential for horizontal politicization of the AI issue.⁶ This could be linked with the EU's growing aspirations for digital sovereignty and the redefinition of its role in the international order. Specifically, horizontal politicization of AI might arise in discussions concerning the EU's strategic autonomy and the reform of the Common Security and Defense Policy.⁷

Conclusion

This study confirms AI in the EU is becoming politicized due to internal dynamics. For clear politicization, evidence of societal polarization on AI policy is needed, especially in national parliaments. Presently, early signs of politicization are evident through increased salience and diverse actor involvement. The rate of politicization may vary depending on AI's impact on everyday life, and the link between AI media coverage and parliamentary discussions. The EU's AI policy also reflects a strategic response to the US and China's AI policies, balancing global tech dominance with regional policy adaptation.

Acknowledgements. I would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers for constructive and helpful comments.

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⁶ Politicization can be diffused horizontally from one policy field to another. See more: C. Hackenesch, J. Bergmann, J. Orbic (2021), *Development policy under fire? The politicization of European external relations*, "JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies", no. 59(1), pp. 4–5.

⁷ See more on politicization in the international context: Góra M. (2019), *Legitymizacja i kontestacja polityki zagranicznej Unii Europejskiej na przykładzie polityki rozszerzenia i Europejskiej Polityki Sąsiedztwa*, Kraków, pp. 100–104.

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Summary

This paper explores the politicization of Artificial Intelligence (AI) within the EU, examining the interplay between internal dynamics and external influences, particularly from the United States and China. The study aims to identify early signs of politicization in the EU's AI debate and compare the EU's AI policy model with those of the US and China. The hypothesis posits that EU public debate on AI is politicized, shaped by both internal factors and responses to external AI policy models. The research uses comparative policy analysis and content analysis. Findings indicate a growing salience of AI in public discourse, evidenced by increased media attention and engagement from a wide range of actors. However, significant polarization on AI issues within the EU is not yet evident. The study also highlights the EU's strategic response to external AI models, emphasizing a balance between innovation, digital sovereignty, and the protection of democratic values and fundamental rights.

Key words: artificial intelligence, AI policy, politicization, European Union, AI governance

W kierunku polityzacji sztucznej inteligencji w Unii Europejskiej? Zewnętrzne wpływy i wewnętrzna dynamika

Streszczenie

W artykule zbadano polityzację sztucznej inteligencji (AI) w UE poprzez wzajemne oddziaływanie dynamiki wewnętrznej i wpływów zewnętrznych (USA i Chin). Badanie ma na celu identyfikację wczesnych oznak polityzacji unijnej debaty na temat AI i porównanie modelu polityki UE w zakresie AI z modelami rozwijanymi w USA i Chinach. Hipoteza zakłada, że debata publiczna w UE na temat AI ulega polityzacji, kształtowana zarówno przez czynniki wewnętrzne, jak i reakcje na zewnętrzne modele polityki AI. W badaniu wykorzystano porównawczą analizę polityki i analizę treści. Wyniki wskazują na rosnącą wagę AI w dyskursie publicznym, o czym świadczy zwiększone zainteresowanie mediów i zaangażowanie szerokiego grona podmiotów. Jednakże znaczna polaryzacja w tej kwestii nie jest widoczna. W badaniu podkreślono także strategiczną reakcję UE na zewnętrzne modele polityki AI. UE kładzie nacisk na równowagę między innowacjami, suwerennością cyfrową oraz ochroną wartości demokratycznych i praw podstawowych.

Słowa kluczowe: sztuczna inteligencja, polityka sztucznej inteligencji, polityzacja, Unia Europejska, zarządzanie sztuczną inteligencją

