# EU–UK relations after Brexit: the emotional (de)politicization of the 'Oxford' COVID-19 vaccine

C. NICOLAI L. GELLWITZKI AND ANNE-MARIE HOUDE*



On 23 March 2020, the United Kingdom government announced that the country would enter its first lockdown in response to the global outbreak of COVID-19. Nine months later, in December, the first British citizen received a dose of the German-developed Pfizer–BioNTech vaccine, signalling the start of the biggest vaccination campaign in the history of the National Health Service (NHS).[1] Meanwhile, UK-based bioscientists were working on a British alternative, the 'Oxford' COVID-19 vaccine—so called because it was co-developed by the University of Oxford with the Swedish–British company AstraZeneca—in the hope that it could soon be administered to the UK population.[2]

The country was to embark on a race against time to vaccinate as many as possible, as quickly as possible. However, this race also played out in competition with the European Union. During the early months of 2021, the UK engaged in what the British press called a 'vaccine war' with the EU, with which it battled to determine which vaccine would be most successful, which country would have the quickest rollout and who would be prioritized when it came to receiving the vaccine doses. In the debates on vaccine exports, a critical point of contention was the decision of some EU member states to stop the use of the AstraZeneca vaccine following some concerns over its safety. Strong outrage ensued from the British population, media and politicians—and especially from those who interpreted this outcome as retribution for the result of the 2016 referendum on continued UK membership of the EU, which led to Brexit. In 2025, nine years after the vote, debates about Brexit remain salient and emotional in Britain, highlighting the acute politicization of the issue—defined as the intensification of the debate or the increase in the issue's visibility and salience, and the polarization of opinions and actors both in intensity and in direction, as well as the expansion of the range of actors and the public resonance.[3] As observed in the case of the COVID-19

* We wish to thank Louis Stockwell for his thoughtful feedback on an earlier version of this article. We are also grateful to the editors and reviewers for their kind, constructive and insightful feedback, from which we have benefited greatly.

[1] NHS England, 'Landmark moment as first NHS patient receives COVID-19 vaccination', 8 Dec. 2020, https://www.england.nhs.uk/2020/12/landmark-moment-as-first-nhs-patient-receives-covid-19-vaccination. (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 7 Jan. 2025.)

[2] It is noteworthy that the UK government and media generally only discussed AstraZeneca as a British company, seldom mentioning that it is in fact a Swedish–British multinational company.

[3] Pieter De Wilde, 'No polity for old politics? A framework for analyzing the politicization of European

*International Affairs* **000**: 0 (2025) 000–000; DOI: 10.1093/ia/iiaf068

vaccine war, the UK's relationship with the EU continues to be affected by the politicization of the referendum and its aftermath.

Two dynamics thus characterized the vaccine war period. On the one hand, the UK government was subject to increasing domestic pressure from its population to vaccinate as many people as possible and return to 'normal' life as quickly as possible. Moreover, as the situation with the EU unfolded and became progressively linked to Brexit, politicians and media began to view its outcome as a litmus test for whether leaving the EU was the right decision for the UK. On the other hand, the country also faced international pressures. In early 2021 it withheld its vaccine supply and was reluctant to export it to its European neighbours, although the EU was sharing doses produced in its territory with Britain. This situation culminated in a threat from the EU to block all vaccine exports to the UK, which would have undermined the Brexit withdrawal agreement and potentially risked the peace process in Northern Ireland.[4] Moreover, the concerns expressed in several EU member states over the Oxford COVID-19 vaccine were threatening Britain's reputation and its 'victory' in the vaccine war, which was contingent on the UK's vaccine rollout being quicker and thus more successful than the EU's. Crucially, these domestic and international issues in the middle of a pandemic were not the subject of rational debates and careful deliberations on the advantages and disadvantages of different courses of action. Public discourse was profoundly emotional, and vaccines and their rollout were treated as existential issues concerning the very life and death of the nation as well as its international prestige and status. Indeed, the British media—and the UK government—warned against 'EU idiots'[5] and 'scaremongers'[6] who were jealous because they were losing the vaccine war.[7] The questions this article aims to answer are: how did the UK government and media navigate such deeply emotional international crises with both domestic and international pressures, and what does that tell us about the politics of emotions more generally?

Research on international politics often assumes that these are questions of *realpolitik* that involve rational actors and the pursuit of state interests. However, a growing body of literature suggests that they are questions of *gefühlspolitik*,

integration', *Journal of European Integration* 33: 5, 2011, pp. 559–75, https://doi.org/10.1080/07036337.2010.546849; Pieter De Wilde, Anna Leupold and Henning Schmidtke, 'Introduction: the differentiated politicization of European governance', *West European Politics* 39: 1, 2016, pp. 3–22, https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2015.1081505; Swen Hutter and Hanspeter Kriesi, 'Politicizing Europe in times of crisis', *Journal of European Public Policy* 26: 7, 2019, pp. 996–1017, https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2019.1619801; Paul Statham and Hans-Jörg Trenz, *The politicization of Europe: contesting the constitution in the mass media* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2013).

[4] Maïa de La Baume and Jillian Deutsch, 'Von der Leyen: "Mistakes were made" on vaccine export ban but "we got it right"', Politico, 10 Feb. 2021, https://www.politico.eu/article/ursula-von-der-leyen-mistakes-were-made-but-we-got-it-right-on-article-16/.

[5] Ben Hill and Nick Gutteridge, '"Will cost lives": EU "idiots" putting "faltering bloc" ahead of people's lives with AstraZeneca jab ban', *Sun*, 16 March 2021, https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/14362343/eu-idiots-ban-astrazeneca-vaccine.

[6] The Rt Hon Alexander Stafford, quoted in Hansard (Commons), 15 July 2020, col. 1583, https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2020-07-15/debates/8FE1AC72-E94D-4D98-862A-2C02A6A72B8B/Covid-19FutureUK-EURelationship.

[7] 'Newspaper headlines: "EU vaccine war explodes", and Macron "attacks" Oxford jab', BBC News, 30 Jan. 2021, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/blogs-the-papers-55866263.

involving the pursuance of policies that resonate emotionally with the public.[8] We consider two aspects of this *gefühlspolitik* to make sense of the vaccine war. First, we focus on the politics of emotions, which concerns 'who can or should feel what and/or whose feelings matter'[9] and 'what emotions are perceived as legitimate or desirable (and conversely which should be repressed or are illegitimate)'[10] and in which actors engage to 'address the emotional needs of [the] population'.[11] The second aspect is how the politics of emotions guides (de)politicization processes that (re)distribute blame and responsibilities, and constrain policy options. More precisely, we argue that looking at the politics of emotions can help us understand how politicization happens domestically and internationally, and with what consequences. In other words, this article synthesizes the literature on the politics of emotions with the literature on EU politicization. Empirically, this translates in our case-study as the *negative* emotionalization and *politicization* of the international dimension of the Oxford COVID-19 vaccine and the *positive* emotionalization and *depolarization* of the domestic dimension.[12] More concretely, negative emotions were directed at and ascribed to the EU and, concomitantly, responsibilities for failures, shortcomings and conflict were attributed to it. This was accompanied by expressions of pride over British success stories and depolarization at the domestic level, as blame was shifted away from the UK government and onto the EU and its member states.

Overall, this article makes three significant contributions to the literature. First, it further develops the literature on the politics of emotions by exploring how the latter influences (de)politicization processes across domestic and international spheres. This expands the literature's explanatory power by allowing for a more nuanced understanding of how the politics of emotions influences the salience of a particular issue and the polarization of opinions and actors, as well as the public resonance. Second, it adds to the emerging research agenda on emotions in politicization processes. It further theorizes and empirically explores the role of emotions as *drivers* in politicization processes, as discursively constructed emotions that guide individuals to relate to certain issues in a particular way. Third, it enhances our understanding of how emotions have affected post-Brexit EU–UK relations in times of crisis.

The remainder of the article illustrates our argument by first reviewing the literatures on the politics of emotions and on emotional politicization, with

[8] C. Nicolai L. Gellwitzki and Anne-Marie Houde, 'From *realpolitik* to *gefühlspolitik*: strategically narrating the European Union at the national level', *Journal of European Public Policy* 31: 2, 2024, pp. 403–27, https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2022.2139402.

[9] Karl Gustafsson and Todd H. Hall, 'The politics of emotions in International Relations: who gets to feel what, whose emotions matter, and the "history problem" in Sino-Japanese relations', *International Studies Quarterly* 65: 4, 2021, pp. 973–84 at p. 974, https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqab071.

[10] Amanda Russell Beattie, Clara Eroukhmanoff and Naomi Head, 'Introduction: interrogating the "everyday" politics of emotions in International Relations', *Journal of International Political Theory* 15: 2, 2019, pp. 136–47 at p. 138, https://doi.org/10.1177/1755088219830428.

[11] Gellwitzki and Houde, 'From *realpolitik* to *gefühlspolitik*', p. 420.

[12] For reasons of simplicity, we follow psychological research that distinguishes between emotions with negative and positive valence, as the politics of emotions rarely involves singular, discrete emotions. We discuss emotions in more detail below.

special attention to how they can constitute an avenue for studying the interaction between the international and domestic levels. We then introduce our methodology—based on a thematic and emotional discourse analysis—and the data used: 196 articles published by two UK broadsheets and one tabloid during the period between January and April 2021, as well as 71 political speeches by members of the incumbent Conservative government: Prime Minister Boris Johnson, Secretary of State for Health and Social Care Matt Hancock, and Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs and First Secretary of State Dominic Raab. Next, we analyse the data and find that the overwhelmingly positive framing of the AstraZeneca vaccine (the Oxford or 'British' vaccine) is accompanied by expressions of pride and fosters emotional attachments to the vaccine—and, by extension, to the British government. This, in turn, helps depolarize the issue of vaccine accrual and rollouts within the domestic sphere. In parallel, we find that the positive framing of the vaccine is contrasted with the negative framing of the EU and its attitude towards the UK, resulting in the politicization of the vaccine at the European level. Finally, we conclude with some broader reflections on how our findings indicate that EU politicization can remain high even in a country that decides to leave it; and we identify some important policy implications and avenues for further research that stem from those findings.

## The politics of emotions in International Relations

In the last two decades or so, research on emotions in International Relations (IR) has flourished. The field has explored both how emotions drive political processes and outcomes and how actors deliberately try to instrumentalize emotions to achieve political objectives. A substrand of this research agenda has emerged relatively recently on the *politics of emotions*, which is based on 'distributive politics centering on claims to and about emotions'.[13] The politics of emotions consists of discursive efforts to determine whose feelings matter (or not), and to compel others both to feel a certain way that is particularly desirable and to express these desirable rather than illegitimate emotions.[14] When successful, the politics of emotions establishes a form of emotional governance with normative expectations across different levels of analysis that influence behaviour, perception and emotional conduct.

Gustafsson and Hall offer a typology of the politics of emotions that differentiates between three different forms.[15] The first is *obligation*, which refers to the duty imposed on an actor to feel or express themselves a certain way. When successful, the actors concerned might be expected to feel and express particular emotions such as shame, pride, fear or anger.[16] Second, *entitlement* denotes the invocation

[13] Gustafsson and Hall, 'The politics of emotions in IR', p. 974.
[14] Beattie et al., 'Introduction', p. 138; Gustafsson and Hall, 'The politics of emotions in IR', p. 974.
[15] Gustafsson and Hall, 'The politics of emotions in IR'.
[16] See, for example, Sara Ahmed, *The cultural politics of emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014, first publ. in 2004); Brent J. Steele, *Ontological security in International Relations: self-identity and the IR state* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2008); Eric Van Rythoven, 'Learning to feel, learning to fear? Emotions, imaginaries, and limits in the politics of securitization', *Security Dialogue* 46: 5, 2015, pp. 458–75,

of rights to feel or not to feel an emotion in contrast to 'external expectations, norms, or conditions seen as unduly impinging upon emotional freedoms'.[17] This may entail aspirations for freedom from negative emotions or the demand for recognition of certain positive emotions.[18] Pride, for example, always requires the recognition of a witness who acknowledges the self's accomplishments and its success in living up to its own ideals.[19] Third, *deference* concerns whose emotions necessitate consideration, respect and priority, and thus need to be considered before making political decisions.[20] Public policy decisions, for example, might be justified with reference to the emotional needs of the population or the public mood that presumably necessitated a particular course of action.[21]

The politics of emotions is always intensely contested, of course. While actors can actively engage in it, they will also constrain it within broader affective dynamics and feeling rules.[22] Feeling rules are discursive structures that define the repertoire of the appropriate and legitimate practices, expressions and emotions that are available to actors.[23] Indeed, actors who do not comply with the dominant politics of emotions can be castigated, ostracized and delegitimized by others.[24] Consequently, the politics of emotions can significantly narrow down the choice of morally permissible policy options, as they will need to be consistent with established needs and expectations of the population as to which emotions are (il)legitimate and (un)desirable.[25]

Importantly, the politics of emotions is ultimately about the expression of emotions, the rights and obligations to feel certain ways and, consequently, about hierarchies of emotions, rather than the actual embodied experience of emotions. Thus, it is important to emphasize that exploring the politics of emotions is ultimately coterminous with studying public discourse and *representa-*

https://doi.org/10.1177/0967010615574766.

[17] Gustafsson and Hall, 'The politics of emotions in IR', p. 975; see also Ali Bilgic and Athina Gkouti, 'Who is entitled to feel in the age of populism? Women's resistance to migrant detention in Britain', *International Affairs* 97: 2, 2021, pp. 483–502, https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiaa054.

[18] Gustafsson and Hall, 'The politics of emotions in IR', p. 975.

[19] Ahmed, *The cultural politics of emotion*.

[20] Gustafsson and Hall, 'The politics of emotions in IR', p. 976.

[21] C. Nicolai L. Gellwitzki, '*Stimmung* and ontological security: anxiety, euphoria, and emerging political subjectivities during the 2015 "border opening" in Germany', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, vol. 25, 2022, pp. 1101–25, https://doi.org/10.1057/s41268-022-00278-8; Luca Mavelli, 'Governing populations through the humanitarian government of refugees: biopolitical care and racism in the European refugee crisis', *Review of International Studies* 43: 5, 2017, pp. 809–32, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210517000110; Erik Ringmar, 'What are public moods?', *European Journal of Social Theory* 21: 4, 2018, pp. 453–69, https://doi.org/10.1177/1368431017736995.

[22] C. Nicolai L. Gellwitzki and Charlie W. Price, 'Liquid fear, agency and the (un)conscious in securitisation processes: the case of the UK's response to the COVID-19 pandemic', *Millennium* 53: 1, 2024, pp. 31–58, https://doi.org/10.1177/03058298241265264; Jonathan Moss, Emily Robinson and Jake Watts, *The politics of feeling in Brexit Britain: stories from the Mass Observation Project* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2024).

[23] Simon Koschut, 'Emotion, discourse, and power in world politics', in Simon Koschut, ed., *The power of emotions in world politics* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2020), pp. 3–28.

[24] Clara Eroukhmanoff, 'Responding to terrorism with peace, love and solidarity: "Je suis Charlie", "Peace" and "I heart MCR"', *Journal of International Political Theory* 15: 2, 2019, pp. 167–87, https://doi.org/10.1177/1755088219829884; C. Nicolai L. Gellwitzki, 'The politics of fear and hate: experience, (de)legitimization, and (de)mobilization', *International Political Sociology* 19: 2, 2025, https://doi.org/10.1093/ips/olaf001; Linus Hagström, 'Disciplinary power: text and body in the Swedish NATO debate', *Cooperation and Conflict* 56: 2, 2021, pp. 141–62, https://doi.org/10.1177/0010836720966376.

[25] Gellwitzki and Houde, 'From *realpolitik* to *gefühlspolitik*'.

*tions* of emotions rather than embodied experiences of emotions.[26] The politics of emotions will nonetheless be conducted against the backdrop of feeling structures and affective dynamics across micro and macro levels of analysis, which it will inevitably also influence.[27] Having discussed the literature on the politics of emotions, the following section will elaborate on the scholarship on EU politicization, in order to synthesize both literatures and enhance their analytical clout.

## Emotional EU (de)politicization

In the field of European Union studies, politicization is conceptualized as 'an increase in polarization of opinions, interests or values and the extent to which they are publicly advanced towards the process of policy formulation' that manifests itself through the *salience*, *polarization* and *resonance* of an issue.[28] These (de)politicization processes are largely shaped by emotions: a debate can become heated, intensify and resonate in the public sphere, and opinions can become polarized when the actors involved are emotionally invested in the issue and mobilize emotions in order to communicate about it.[29] Ultimately, emotions guide how individuals select and interpret information about politics.[30] Moreover, research has found that using emotional rhetoric can help drive opinions towards certain political outcomes and intensify debates and polarization, notably in the case of Brexit.[31]

We argue that the politics of emotions is both integral to and a *driver* of (de)politicization processes. Actors, whether politicians or media outlets, communicate political issues through narratives.[32] The particularly compelling stories are

[26] Roland Bleiker and Emma Hutchison, 'Fear no more: emotions and world politics', *Review of International Studies* 34: S1, 2008, pp. 115–35, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210508007821; Emma Hutchison and Roland Bleiker, 'Theorizing emotions in world politics', *International Theory* 6: 3, 2014, pp. 491–514, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1752971914000232; Koschut, 'Emotion, discourse, and power'.

[27] Linda Åhäll, 'Affect as methodology: feminism and the politics of emotion', *International Political Sociology* 12: 1, 2018, pp. 36–52, https://doi.org/10.1093/ips/olx024; Beattie et al., 'Introduction'; Gellwitzki and Houde, 'From *realpolitik* to *gefühlspolitik*'; Todd H. Hall and Andrew A. G. Ross, 'Affective politics after 9/11', *International Organization* 69: 4, 2015, pp. 847–79, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818315000144; Anne-Marie Houde, 'Emotions, International Relations, and the everyday: individuals' emotional attachments to international organisations', *Review of International Studies*, publ. online 3 Nov. 2023, pp. 1–19, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210523000554; Anne-Marie Houde, 'Navigating anxiety: international politics, identity narratives, and everyday defence mechanisms', *International Political Sociology* 18: 1, 2024, https://doi.org/10.1093/ips/olad028; Van Rythoven, 'Learning to feel, learning to fear?'.

[28] De Wilde, 'No polity for old politics?', p. 560.

[29] C. Nicolai L. Gellwitzki and Anne-Marie Houde, 'Feeling the heat: emotions, politicization, and the European Union', *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 60: 5, 2022, pp. 1470–87, https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.13328.

[30] Jonathan Mercer, 'Rationality and psychology in international politics', *International Organization* 59: 1, 2005, pp. 77–106, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818305050058; Houde, 'Emotions, IR, and the everyday'.

[31] See, for example, Christopher S. Browning, 'Brexit populism and fantasies of fulfilment', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 32: 3, 2019, pp. 222–44, https://doi.org/10.1080/09557571.2019.1567461; Sara B. Hobolt, Thomas J. Leeper and James Tilley, 'Divided by the vote: affective polarization in the wake of the Brexit referendum', *British Journal of Political Science* 51: 4, 2021, pp. 1476–93, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123420000125; Francesca Melhuish, 'Euroscepticism, anti-nostalgic nostalgia and the past perfect post-Brexit future', *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 60: 6, 2022, pp. 1758–776, https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.13345; Jonathan Moss, Emily Robinson and Jake Watts, 'Brexit and the everyday politics of emotion: methodological lessons from history', *Political Studies* 68: 4, 2020, pp. 837–56, https://doi.org/10.1177/0032321720911915.

[32] Molly Andrews, Catarina Kinnvall and Kristen Monroe, 'Narratives of (in)security: nationhood, culture,

those that make an emotional appeal by resonating with national narratives, collective memories and local imaginaries.[33] Consequently, actors tend to use emotional language to justify—and persuade others of—their convictions and to promote policy change.[34] Therefore, emotional rhetoric and language are ingrained in the narratives that communicate political issues. This means that public discourse is ultimately a crucial aspect of both the politics of emotions and EU (de)politicization processes. This article contends that theorizing and studying the relationship between these processes is analytically insightful.

We argue that the politics of emotions influences the salience, polarization and resonance of an issue. The politics of emotions will foster (de)politicization processes—or an increase or decrease in one of the criteria—surrounding particular issues as they implicitly or explicitly stipulate how actors (and eventually audiences) ought to feel about these issues. This, in turn, has far-reaching political implications. We show in the empirical analysis that follows how the politics of emotions may simultaneously lead to the politicization of an issue in the international sphere and its depolarization in the domestic sphere (and potentially vice versa). The politics of emotions can, of course, take many different forms. Invoking the obligation to feel proud about a particular state of affairs can encourage consent, conformity and acceptance of the status quo and contribute to the depolarization of an issue. In turn, promoting the entitlement to feel angry about a particular issue which might be perceived as unfair, undesirable or even actively harming one's interests may further the salience of that issue. Emphasizing the necessity of deference and of respecting particular groups' feelings may be done to stifle or instigate debate and controversy and thus influence public resonance. This is, of course, not an exhaustive list, but rather an illustration of the manifold and often overlapping ways in which the politics of emotions contributes to the (de)politicization of an issue.

Emotions are always relational; they have a subject and an object of feeling.[35] These subjects and objects can be (re)constructed and (re)negotiated through

religion, and gender', *Political Psychology* 36: 2, 2015, pp. 141–9, https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12224; C. Nicolai L. Gellwitzki, Anne-Marie Houde, Lauren Rogers and Ben Rosher, 'Keep calm and carry on? Fissure, perception, and narrative contestation following the demise of the Crown', *International Political Sociology* 18: 4, 2024, https://doi.org/10.1093/ips/olae042; Alister Miskimmon, Ben O'Loughlin and Laura Roselle, *Strategic narratives: communication power and the new world order* (New York and Abingdon; London: Routledge, 2013); Jelena Subotić, 'Narrative, ontological security, and foreign policy change', *Foreign Policy Analysis* 12: 4, 2016, pp. 610–27, https://doi.org/10.1111/fpa.12089.

[33] Laurie Beaudonnet et al., 'Narrating Europe: (re-)constructed and contested visions of the European project in citizens' discourse', *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 61: 1, 2023, pp. 161–78, https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.13364; Jakub Eberle and Jan Daniel, '"Putin, you suck": affective sticking points in the Czech narrative on "Russian hybrid warfare"', *Political Psychology* 40: 6, 2019, pp. 1267–81, https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12609; Gellwitzki and Houde, 'From *realpolitik* to *gefühlspolitik*'; C. Nicolai L. Gellwitzki and Anne-Marie Houde, 'Narratives, ontological security, and unconscious phantasy: Germany and the European myth during the so-called migration crisis', *Political Psychology* 44: 2, 2023, pp. 435–51, https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12869; Ty Solomon, '"I wasn't angry, because I couldn't believe it was happening": affect and discourse in responses to 9/11', *Review of International Studies* 38: 4, 2012, pp. 907–28, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210511000519.

[34] Philippe Beauregard, 'International emotional resonance: explaining transatlantic economic sanctions against Russia', *Cooperation and Conflict* 57: 1, 2022, pp. 25–42, https://doi.org/10.1177/00108367211027609; Andrew A. G. Ross, *Mixed emotions: beyond fear and hatred in international conflict* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013); Van Rythoven, 'Learning to feel, learning to fear?'.

[35] Ahmed, *The cultural politics of emotion*.

public discourse. The politics of emotions is thus, in a way, about creating in-groups (subjects) that perform particular emotions and refrain from expressing others, and the identification of objects of these emotions. Indeed, the shared performance of emotions can engender (novel) (in-)group identities.[36] Anger, for example, requires a subject—an individual or a group—that is experiencing the emotion, and an object—an individual, group, action or issue—that is the target of the emotion. Claims about the subject and object of emotions matter because they ultimately guide behaviour and narrow down the space for discursive manoeuvres. Different emotions have different appraisal patterns, action tendencies and motivational goals, rendering them politically consequential.[37] Anger is usually associated with an object that 'is appraised as immoral, unfair, or unjust' and implies a motivational goal of changing the object.[38] Thus, the distributive politics of emotions is not only a struggle about 'who gets to feel what, when, and how, and whose feelings matter' but also about what object and with what implied consequences.[39] In other words, it is not only about claims about the emotions subjects should feel (such as anger, pride, shame and so on) but also identifying the exact cause of the emotion that subjects are arguably obligated or entitled to feel.

The implicit and explicit identification of emotions' objects in public discourse is thus analytically insightful in at least two respects. First, it distributes political responsibilities. In the case of negative emotions (fear, anger, shame, desire for revenge and so on), this can constitute a form of blame-shifting and scapegoating. Positive emotions (such as pride, happiness, love or trust) can, in turn, constitute a means of allocating credit for political successes. Second, identifying the objects guides action tendencies and motivational goals and thus, ultimately, the direction and implications of politicization processes. Negative emotions are often instrumentalized as a justification to implement otherwise inconceivable policy measures to deal with the objects associated with them; yet the blame for these potentially unpopular policies is shifted onto the object.[40] Positive emotions can lead to (over) confidence, resistance against coercion and persuasion, stronger in-group feelings, and decisive action even in the most uncertain of circumstances.[41]

Crucially, this is not to say that specific emotions will always be associated with a singular specific outcome. On the contrary, their effects will be contingent

[36] Hall and Ross, 'Affective politics after 9/11'; Michelle Pace and Ali Bilgic, 'Studying emotions in security and diplomacy: where we are now and challenges ahead', *Political Psychology* 40: 6, 2019, pp. 1407–17, https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12635; Ty Solomon, 'Ontological security, circulations of affect, and the Arab Spring', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, vol. 21, 2018, pp. 934–58, https://doi.org/10.1057/s41268-017-0089-x.

[37] Agneta Fischer, Eran Halperin, Daphna Canetti and Alba Jasini, 'Why we hate', *Emotion Review* 10: 4, 2018, pp. 309–20 at p. 310, https://doi.org/10.1177/1754073917751229.

[38] Fischer et al., 'Why we hate', p. 310.

[39] Gustafsson and Hall, 'The politics of emotions in IR', p. 973.

[40] Rebecca Adler-Nissen, 'Stigma management in International Relations: transgressive identities, norms, and order in international society', *International Organization* 68: 1, 2014, pp. 143–76, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818313000337; Catarina Kinnvall and Jennifer Mitzen, 'Anxiety, fear, and ontological security in world politics: thinking with and beyond Giddens', *International Theory* 12: 2, 2020, pp. 240–56, https://doi.org/10.1017/S175297192000010X; Van Rythoven, 'Learning to feel, learning to fear?'.

[41] Ahmed, *The cultural politics of emotion*; Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and self-identity: self and society in the late modern age* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991); Robin Markwica, *Emotional choices: how the logic of affect shapes coercive diplomacy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

on how they are being mobilized, and for what political end. In other words, the purposes for which emotions can be invoked are limited only by political actors' imaginations and the constraints stipulated by societal expectations and dominant feeling rules. For example, in securitization processes, governments often construct migrants as threats that the domestic population ought to be afraid of to justify and implement security measures,[42] yet fear may also be instrumentalized to frustrate such securitizing moves.[43] Neither the emotion of fear, its objects, its subject, nor the political objectives for which they are constructed are apolitical or 'natural' responses to specific events, but the result of a particular politics of emotions. Moreover, while emotion research across the natural and social sciences has explored how emotions can be layered, overlap, interact or drive actors' behaviour, the politics of emotions focuses on the tacit and overt social construction, assignment and circulation of emotions in public discourse. Put differently, the politics of emotions may be related to and derivative of broader anxieties or other emotions in actors or the population[44] but ultimately only focuses on how emotions are implicitly and explicitly invoked, and thus observable and traceable, in public discourse.

In sum, we argue that synthesizing the literature on the politics of emotions and EU (de)politicization is analytically insightful and contributes to both literatures. The literature on EU (de)politicization offers crucial insights into the consequences and implications of the politics of emotions. In turn, the scholarship on the politics of emotions illustrates how emotions are instrumentalized and act as drivers of (de)politicization at different levels. As we shall see, in the case of the vaccine war between the UK and the EU in early 2021, the UK media, as well as important political figures, employed an emotional rhetoric invoking an entitlement to pride closely linked to Brexit, but also a dynamic of emotional obligation, as it implied that the EU should be embarrassed and jealous of Britain for the latter's speed in rolling out its vaccine.

## Data and methodology

The analysed dataset comprises speeches made by UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson, Secretary of State for Health and Social Care Matt Hancock, and Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs and First Secretary of State Dominic Raab between 4 January and 7 April 2021 in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and the coronavirus vaccines. The reason for these specific dates is that 4 January was when the first dose of the AstraZeneca vaccine was administered to a member of the public in the UK; and 7 April was when the UK government began to recommend that individuals below the age of 30 should receive a different vaccine following reports of safety concerns. Given that most citizens

[42] Clara Eroukhmanoff, *The securitization of Islam: covert racism and affect in the US post-9/11* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019).

[43] Michael C. Williams, 'Securitization and the liberalism of fear', *Security Dialogue* 42: 4–5, 2011, pp. 453–63, https://doi.org/10.1177/0967010611418717.

[44] See, for example, Kinnvall and Mitzen, 'Anxiety, fear, and ontological security in world politics'.

are not avid followers of politicians' speeches and tend to receive their news (and the politics of emotions) through the filter of the media, we also included articles from two broadsheets, the *Guardian* and *The Times*, and one tabloid, the *Daily Mail/Mail on Sunday*, in the dataset. We chose these outlets because they represent the political spectrum in the UK, ranging from the left (the *Guardian*), conservatism (*The Times*) and right-wing populism (the *Daily Mail/Mail on Sunday*). Using the platform Nexis, we searched for articles published between 4 January and 7 April 2021 with the terms 'EU' in the title and 'vaccine' in the text, resulting in a data set comprising 196 articles.

We analysed the dataset with the qualitative software NVivo, using a coding scheme derived from social psychology—Bauer and Gaskell's triangle of mediation.[45] Bauer and Gaskell argue that in communication about an object, its meaning is always negotiated with and through an Other. Accordingly, we were interested in how the subject of communication—here, the UK media and the politicians as quoted therein—talked about the object (the vaccine) *vis-à-vis* the Other (the EU). Because of our interests in the politics of emotions, this step was also crucial because it helps us distinguish between emotional entitlement (one has the *right* to feel a certain way) and obligation (one *should* feel a certain way). For the coding procedure itself, we conducted an emotional discourse analysis, as developed by Simon Koschut.[46] The procedure entails coding for three specific representations of emotions: 1) emotion terms, 2) emotional connotations and 3) emotional metaphors, comparisons and analogies. Emotion terms are explicit invocations of emotions, whether by the use of certain nouns (fear, anger, frustration, etc.), adjectives (afraid, angry, frustrated, etc.), or (ad)verbs (to fear/fearfully, to be angry/angrily, to be frustrated/frustratedly, etc.). An emotional connotation comprises a 'context-invariant value judgment or opinion that conveys the emotional attitude of the speaker';[47] certain words suggest positive or negative undertones which help communicate emotions. Emotional metaphors, comparisons and analogies use highly figurative linguistic images to help disclose emotions. We operationalized these with the concepts of anchors and objectification from social psychology.[48] Anchors refer to incidences when someone refers to a past event to understand the present and thereby taps into pre-existing knowledge and memories and the emotions attached to them.[49] Objectifications are figures of speech, such as metaphors, that condense and reify abstract knowledge and

[45] Martin W. Bauer and George Gaskell, 'Towards a paradigm for research on social representations', *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 29: 2, 1999, pp. 163–86, https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-5914.00096.

[46] Simon Koschut et al., 'Discourse and emotions in International Relations', *International Studies Review* 19: 3, 2017, pp. 481–508, https://doi.org/10.1093/isr/vix033; Simon Koschut, 'The power of (emotion) words: on the importance of emotions for social constructivist discourse analysis in IR', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, vol. 21, 2018, pp. 495–522, https://doi.org/10.1057/s41268-017-0086-0.

[47] Simon Koschut, 'Speaking from the heart: emotion discourse analysis in International Relations', in Maéva Clément and Eric Sangar, eds, *Researching emotions in International Relations* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p. 284.

[48] See Serge Moscovici, *Psychoanalysis: its image and its public* (Cambridge, UK and Malden, MA: Polity, 2008; first publ. in 1961).

[49] See Luke B. Campbell, 'Affect, that old familiar feeling', in Eric Van Rythoven and Mira Sucharov, eds, *Methodology and emotion in International Relations: parsing the passions* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2020), pp. 113–29; Ross, *Mixed emotions*.

emotions into concrete images. One prominent example from our data would be the tendency in the right-wing press to speak of 'vaccine wars' rather than about a political dispute over vaccine supplies. War is, of course, a highly emotional topic and has a very negative connotation. As we will discuss in the empirical analysis, invoking the term 'war' has far-reaching political and emotional implications.

## The politics of emotions as a driver of (de)politicization

The following empirical section is divided into two parts, each of which is characterized by a different dynamic in the UK–EU relationship and different logics of the politics of emotions. The first subsection focuses on how the politics of emotions acts as a driver of depoliticization at the domestic level by framing the UK's vaccination success as a historic moment of national pride. The second subsection examines how this depoliticization at national level was accompanied by a shift in the politicization of the vaccine to the international—mainly European—level, in that the UK's disagreement with the EU over the vaccine issue was framed as a vaccine war and the UK exclusively blamed the EU and European leaders for the dispute. We found that despite some variation in tone and intensity, at its core, the politics of emotions (that is, which emotions were invoked with what implications) was uniform across the dataset. For this reason, we present our findings differentiated by theme rather than by data source or by political affiliation of the respective media outlets. It is also noteworthy that our analysis exclusively focuses on how the government and media discussed the 'Oxford' vaccine, rather than on the audience's reception.

The distinction between domestic and international politicization hinges on the level at which politicians and the media debate and contest the processes of policy formulation and implementation concerning vaccines and related issues. Domestic politicization focuses on the UK's internal political processes, whereas international politicization problematizes the international, specifically European, dimension. We are thus interested in whether the government and media discuss domestic or international issues regarding the vaccine, as well as these issues' respective salience, polarization and resonance. For politicization to occur, all three aspects must be high or increasing; conversely, for depoliticization to occur, one or more needs to be low or decreasing.[50]

### *'Triumph', 'national achievement' and a 'brilliant British success story': depoliticizing the vaccine at the domestic level*

The first dynamic observable in the data was found at the national level. It consisted of a discourse about how well the UK was doing in the vaccine war, implicitly and explicitly suggesting that this success entitled the UK and its citizens to be proud. The 'largest vaccination programme in British history'[51] was variously referred

[50] De Wilde, 'No polity for old politics'.
[51] Conservatives (@Conservatives) via Twitter/X, quoted in Daniel Boffey, 'EU's vaccine supply issues mean

to as 'an unprecedented national achievement',[52] a 'brilliant British success story' that will 'go down in the history books as a truly great Triumph [*sic*]'[53] and a 'mammoth effort'.[54] The COVID-19 vaccination policy was argued to contribute to a 'winning streak' for the country, and the British government was characterized as having 'hit the jackpot (again)'[55] with their management of the situation. An article in the *Daily Mail* claimed that 'the money men have been betting on Britain. They are doing so because the British Government has itself been making winning bets on vaccination'.[56] Through the use of this highly emotional language, the UK government and media contributed to linking the vaccination effort to national pride. This was notably done through an insistence on the genius of the UK in investing and developing 'some of the world's most promising vaccines … demonstrating the strength of our union and what the UK can achieve when it works together'.[57]

At the centre of this effort to promote the UK's contribution to fighting the virus was the AstraZeneca vaccine. By being labelled as the 'Oxford' or the 'British' vaccine by the government and media, and given the systematic neglect of the fact that it was produced by a Swedish–British multinational company, its success was portrayed as a reflection of the UK's international standing and reputation. The vaccine was explicitly presented as having been primarily developed in the UK by the University of Oxford and dubbed 'a testament to British science'.[58] Its low cost and ease of transport were listed as the reasons that the 'Oxford' vaccine would be the best option to counter COVID-19, and hopes were high for it to be a 'game-changer'[59] that would 'secur[e] our freedom'.[60] The media was quick to

light at end of tunnel that much further away', *Guardian*, 27 Jan. 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jan/26/coronavirus-vaccine-supply-problems-could-see-dutch-violence-repeated-in-rest-of-eu.

[52] UK Government, Prime Minister's Office and The Rt Hon Boris Johnson, 'Prime Minister's statement on coronavirus (COVID-19): 15 February 2021', speech, https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/prime-ministers-statement-on-coronavirus-covid-19-15-february-2021.

[53] David Jones and Tim Stewart, 'How we won the vaccine war: heroes recount the true-life thriller behind a gloriously British triumph involving jabs with nuclear submarine codenames, MI5, and a crack team of scientists outflanking the EU at every turn', Mail Online, 20 March 2021, https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-9382393/Heroes-recount-true-life-thriller-gloriously-British-vaccine-triumph.html.

[54] UK Government, Department of Health and Social Care and The Rt Hon Matt Hancock, 'Health and Social Care Secretary's statement on coronavirus (COVID-19): 1 February 2021', speech, https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/health-and-social-care-secretarys-statement-on-coronavirus-covid-19-1-february-2021.

[55] Dominic Lawson, 'We gambled and won on vaccines. Now we must not waste that capital', Mail Online, 22 Feb. 2021, https://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-9285091/dominic-lawson-gambled-won-vaccines-not-waste-capital.html.

[56] Lawson, 'We gambled and won on vaccines'.

[57] Health and Social Care Secretary Matt Hancock, quoted in UK Government, 'UK government secures additional 40 million doses of Valneva vaccine', press release, 1 Feb. 2021, https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-government-secures-additional-40-million-doses-of-valneva-vaccine.

[58] Health and Social Care Secretary Matt Hancock, quoted in UK Government, 'First people to receive Oxford University/AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine today', press release, 4 Jan. 2021, https://www.gov.uk/government/news/first-people-to-receive-oxford-universityastrazeneca-covid-19-vaccine-today-4-january-2021.

[59] Rhys Blakely, 'Moderna vaccine approved but EU jumps queue', *The Times*, 9 Jan. 2021, https://www.thetimes.com/uk/politics/article/moderna-vaccine-approved-but-eu-jumps-queue-qvgpqkjcw.

[60] UK Government, Department of Health and Social Care and The Rt Hon Matt Hancock, 'Health and Social Care Secretary's statement on coronavirus (COVID-19): 5 March 2021, speech, https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/health-and-social-care-secretarys-statement-on-coronavirus-covid-19-5-march-2021.

dismantle the concerns that arose over the efficacy and safety of the AstraZeneca vaccine, insisting that the vaccine was safe and that even in other countries such as Germany it was seen as a '"privilege" to be offered … the "safe and effective" British jab'[61] and that ultimately 'it's important that we do keep confidence in Oxford-AstraZeneca as high as possible'.[62] In other words, when government discourse and certain media emotionalized the vaccine and linked it to the UK's image, this acted as a catalyst for the domestic depoliticization of the issue.

Public discourse also insisted on and illustrated the ways in which the UK was outperforming the EU, which further emphasized British citizens' entitlement to positive emotions. Again, this comparison was largely driven by the media and the government: the *Daily Mail* insisted that 'the UK has outstripped the EU',[63] while the *Guardian* stated that there was a 'huge difference' between UK and EU vaccine rates,[64] and the prime minister told the House of Commons that the authorities had 'already vaccinated more people in this country than the rest of Europe combined'.[65] Meanwhile, it was reported that the president of the European Commission had admitted to Britain being 'a speedboat' compared with the slow-moving EU 'tanker'.[66] In other words, by consistently and constantly benchmarking British success against the failure of EU countries, the UK was portrayed as entitled to be proud while pre-empting criticism. Further consolidating this entitlement, the UK media widely cited any European politician or newspaper that could be interpreted as recognizing and acknowledging the UK's success and thus vindicating its pride.

As important as the explicit politics of emotions were its more tacit implications. While the entitlement to be proud was very clearly articulated, as discussed above, there was also an implicit obligation not to spoil these emotions. Criticizing the government for how it dealt with the EU and its member states, the vaccination effort, or the 'Oxford' vaccine—be it for being less effective or potentially dangerous for younger demographics (see below)—was effectively delegitimized for constituting anti-British sentiment. Thus, criticism subverted national pride and jeopardized trust in vaccines and the NHS. While it is perhaps not surprising that the right-wing tabloid and the conservative broadsheet were not voicing any criticism of the Conservative government, neither was the left-wing broadsheet, the *Guardian*. In other words, the politics of emotions effectively depoliticized the

[61] Guy Adams and Rob Hyde, 'Germany is losing the vaccine war … and the EU will pay the price', Mail Online, 27 Feb. 2021, https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-9305945/Germany-losing-vaccine-war-EU-pay-price-says-GUY-ADAMS.html.

[62] 'Suspending AstraZeneca jab is senseless, warns EU regulator', *The Times*, 1 April 2021.

[63] Mail on Sunday, 'The race to vaccinate UK out of lockdown …', Mail Online, 9 Jan. 2021, https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-9130145/The-race-vaccinate-UK-lockdown-need-know-super-vax-centres.html.

[64] Larry Elliott, 'EU Covid incompetence leaves governments wanting vaccines, not excuses', *Guardian*, 31 Jan. 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/business/2021/jan/31/eu-covid-incompetence-vaccines-not-excuses.

[65] The Rt Hon Boris Johnson, quoted in Hansard (Lords), 7 Jan. 2021, col. 291, https://hansard.parliament.uk/lords/2021-01-07/debates/C9EB2152-53C5-417F-8D97-52CD20A7EFF3/Covid-19Update.

[66] Chris Pleasance, 'Ursula von der Leyen accidentally SUPPORTS Brexit as she admits Britain is like a 'speedboat' getting Covid vaccines while she tries to steer an EU 'tanker', Mail Online, 5 Feb. 2021, https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-9227551/Ursula-von-der-Leyen-accidentally-SUPPORTS-Brexit-apologising-EU-vaccine-shambles.html.

domestic level and depolarized public discourse by invoking a moment of national pride surrounding the 'British' vaccine and vaccination effort.

The politics of emotions was also extended to Brexit, another highly politicized event in recent British history which both the government and media linked to the British vaccine development and rollout. Indeed, the right-wing and conservative media sources portrayed the latter as proof that Brexit was a good thing: 'success on vaccines shows how Britain can prosper outside the EU'[67] and 'the British electorate was wise to cut the cord'.[68] Meanwhile, the EU and its member states were described as being envious of the UK, as the *Guardian* noted that 'the German newspaper Die Zeit summed up the anger at bungling that will be costly in lives and livelihoods with a simple statement: "The best advertisement for Brexit"'.[69] The EU and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen were depicted as 'accidentally [making] the case for Brexit'.[70] Stories of regretful 'Remain' voters were frequent in the news, with the *Guardian* reporting that 'Brexiter glee is achingly potent this week, a visceral punch to us remainers, pole-axed to find Boris Johnson right and the European Union behaving outrageously',[71] and with the *Daily Mail* stating that, in response to Boris Johnson's efforts during the pandemic, one Conservative member of parliament (MP), a 'Remainer', had said: 'If this had happened in 2016, I would have voted to Leave without blinking'.[72] Meanwhile, *The Times* insisted that 'Brexit supporters probably will not be gifted a better argument for leaving the European Union than the bloc's botched vaccine rollout [which is] also an example of why the UK should do things differently to the EU'.[73] By implicitly evoking an emotional obligation to feel that Remainers made the wrong choice in voting against Brexit, and portraying the EU as embarrassing, if not shameful, as well as by depicting the government as handling the situation so effectively that its success vindicated Brexit, the UK media contributed to depoliticizing the vaccine issue at the domestic level.

The construction of a proud national subject, in other words, was integral to domestic depoliticization, as pride was constructed as a form of 'communal emotion'—that is, the 'pure, noble, [and] righteous sentiments that ostensibly unify a community'.[74] To paraphrase Ahmed, pride itself became the emotion that glued the nation together, and anyone resisting or contesting this pride and

[67] Alex Dawson, 'Success on vaccines shows how Britain can prosper outside the European Union', *The Times*, 8 Feb. 2021, https://www.thetimes.com/uk/politics/article/success-on-vaccines-shows-how-britain-can-prosper-outside-the-european-union-sdxh5xf90.

[68] Daniel Martin and James Franey, 'Brussels threatens UK over supply of vaccines', *Scottish Daily Mail*, 18 March 2021.

[69] Elliott, 'EU Covid incompetence leaves governments wanting vaccines'.

[70] Pleasance, 'Ursula von der Leyen accidentally SUPPORTS Brexit'.

[71] Polly Toynbee, 'Despite the EU missteps, despite the vaccines, Brexit will still prove a grave error', *Guardian*, 1 Feb. 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/feb/01/eu-missteps-vaccines-brexit-fatal-error.

[72] Glen Owen and Anna Mikhailova, 'Boris's double vaccine victory over the EU', Mail Online, 30 Jan. 2021, https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-9205477/Boriss-double-vaccine-victory-EU.html.

[73] Dawson, 'Success on vaccines shows how Britain can prosper'.

[74] Todd H. Hall and Andrew A. G. Ross, 'Rethinking affective experience and popular emotion: World War I and the construction of group emotion in International Relations', *Political Psychology* 40: 6, 2019, pp. 1357–72 at p. 1358, https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12608.

unity was depicted as a 'killjoy', 'the one who gets in the way of the happiness of others'.[75] The politics of emotions, in other words, was highly successful in patrolling and enforcing which articulations of feelings about the vaccine—and, by extension, the government and Brexit—were acceptable and desirable, and which were not.

Ultimately, at the domestic level, the media and British government emphasized two emotional aspects: the national pride British people feel and should feel about the success of the vaccination and management of the pandemic and the vindication felt with regard to Brexit. Insisting on these emotions contributed to depoliticization at the national level, as feelings of pride and rightfulness foster a decrease in the polarization of opinions and render criticism of the government's actions more difficult. However, as the vaccines remained a contentious issue and were in short supply, depoliticizing them at the domestic level coincided with their politicization at the international level, as we will discuss in the next section. Indeed, in the first few months of 2021, the salience, polarization and resonance of the vaccine at the international level intensified significantly. In the process, blame for failures was shifted onto the EU, with the implication that it should be embarrassed and ashamed.

## *'Vaccine wars', Brexit retaliation and Europe's embarrassment? Politicizing the vaccine at the EU level*

At the international level, the vaccine became politicized as disputes emerged with the EU and European member states over supplies, the safety and the efficacy of the AstraZeneca vaccine. Amid the race for vaccination and the EU's demands for a larger share of the AstraZeneca vaccines that were produced in the EU, Brussels was accused of 'escalating recklessly in an attempt to get more doses (of the vaccine) from the UK'[76] and to have declared a vaccine war on Britain.[77] This behaviour was judged harshly in the UK, as the EU was described by a Conservative MP as being 'overblown, incompetent, wasteful and vindictive'[78] and its 'battle against Britain [ill-judged] and risk[ing] undermining the global fight against the virus'.[79]

The vaccine war peaked in March 2021, as some European countries chose to pause immunizing their populations with the AstraZeneca or 'British' vaccine over safety concerns. To many British citizens, as one commentator put it, the

[75] Ahmed, *The cultural politics of emotion*, pp. 111, 224.

[76] James Robinson, Chris Pleasance, Jason Groves and Daniel Martin, 'EU jabs climbdown', Mail Online, 29 Jan. 2021, https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-9203545/EU-withdraws-plans-vaccine-controls-Northern-Ireland-border-stop-jabs-entering-UK.html.

[77] See, for example, Martin and Franey, 'Brussels threatens UK over supply of vaccines'; Marina Hyde, 'Just what we needed, a new strain of nationalism—the vaccine kind', *Guardian*, 29 Jan. 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/jan/29/nationalism-vaccine-mutation-uk-eu; '*The Times* view on EU threats of a vaccine export ban', *The Times*, 26 March 2021.

[78] Danyal Hussain and Jason Groves, 'Fears of TWO MONTH delay to promised vaccine roll-out for all UK adults … ', Mail Online, 21 March 2021, https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-9386829/Fears-TWO-MONTH-delay-UK-vaccine-roll-amid-EU-export.html.

[79] '*The Times* view on the EU's latest escalation in its battle against Britain: vaccine wars', *The Times*, 30 Jan. 2021, https://www.thetimes.com/uk/politics/article/the-times-view-on-the-eus-latest-escalation-in-its-battle-against-britain-vaccine-wars-k6qn8otlo.

EU 'looks to be driven crazy by envy'; the decision by its member states provoked 'almost universal outrage and indignation'.[80] Indeed, it caused resentment and indignation within the UK public discourse, a large part of which saw in this move a provocation explained by one motive: the EU was jealous of the UK's success and was looking to retaliate against the UK because of Brexit. As reported in *The Times* of 19 March 2021, 'one cabinet minister says of the EU "they're very angry" about Brexit and our successful inoculation programme and "the whole vaccine issue has ripped open that wound"'.[81] This quote is exemplary of two dynamics of the politics of emotions at the time. First, it implies that the UK was 'winning' the vaccine war—and should thus feel proud—by emphasizing how the EU should be feeling angry about Britain's success with both Brexit and the vaccination. The insistence that the UK had won the vaccine war was often also rather explicit: for example, it was characterized as 'Boris's double vaccine victory over the EU' and 'Mr Johnson's "Falklands moment"'.[82] In another example of the use of emotional terms reminiscent of affective topics like war, 'jabs [were] codenamed after our nuclear submarines [and] a crack team of scientists [are] outflanking the EU at every turn: for the first time, our quiet heroes recount the true-life thriller behind a gloriously British triumph'.[83] This triumphant and militaristic discourse relating to the vaccine war taps into affective memories associated with the Second World War and draws on British remembrance practices. Similar discourses had been employed in the early stages of the pandemic, as they are affectively appealing and implicitly invoke the script of a heroic British subject that knows how to relate and act in the phase of an existential crisis.[84] At the same time, 'winning' has a deep emotional and cultural significance in British discourse. It is a source of pride and thus fits neatly in the politics of emotions discussed in the previous section.

Second, the quote attributed to the UK cabinet minister discusses the emotions the EU is/should be feeling by insisting that it is 'very angry' about Brexit. The EU was framed as acting in 'a vengeful spite', as opposed to the UK, which had the 'moral high ground'; even when discussing the vaccination issue, the situation was linked to Brexit. As an article in the *Daily Mail* commented:

> So when the Commission's president, Ursula von der Leyen, over the weekend once again threatened to punish Britain for, in effect, outpacing the EU on vaccine delivery, you might almost think this was Nigel Farage wearing an Ursula von der Leyen latex face mask. Even the former Ukip leader could not have dreamt of a more ingenious way to make the British people grateful that they had voted to leave the European Union.[85]

[80] Tony Hockley, 'The Brexit vaccine war is a failure of empathy', LSE, 25 March 2021, https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/covid19/2021/03/25/the-brexit-vaccine-war-is-a-failure-of-empathy.

[81] James Forsyth, 'Vaccine row shows EU won't respect the rules', *The Times*, 19 March 2021, https://www.thetimes.com/world/us-world/article/eu-will-regret-its-vaccine-brinkmanship-bvttv6080.

[82] Owen and Mikhailova, 'Boris's double vaccine victory over EU'.

[83] Jones and Stewart, 'How we won the vaccine war'.

[84] Christopher S. Browning and Joseph Haigh, 'Hierarchies of heroism: Captain Tom, Spitfires, and the limits of militarized vicarious resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic', *Global Studies Quarterly* 2: 3, 2022, https://doi.org/10.1093/isagsq/ksac026.

[85] Dominic Lawson, 'We're on the moral high ground in the EU vaccine fiasco—so please let's stay there', Mail Online, 22 March 2021, https://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-9387367/DOMINIC-LAWSON-moral-high-ground-EU-vaccine-fiasco-lets-stay-there.html.

According to a senior minister whose words were reported in the same tabloid, '[the EU is] trying to punish us for daring to become a nation state, and dread us succeeding on our own in case it encourages others to follow suit. The triumph of our vaccine programme has led to this petty revenge.'[86] Thus, here again the EU was accused of looking for retaliation for Brexit—a behaviour the UK media considered to be explained by the EU's feelings of jealousy over Britain's implied better choice of leaving the EU.

In addition to discussing the EU's allegedly negative emotions, public discourse also discussed—and, in some cases, celebrated outright—the EU's difficulties in managing the pandemic and vaccination progress, calling their strategy 'a debacle',[87] referring to 'incompetent … bully-boy tactics'[88] and hypothesizing that 'attempting to discredit the British jab is a cynical bid to distract attention from their own incompetence'.[89] The use of negatively connotated words like 'debacle' and 'incompetence' was pervasive in the discourse on the EU, which was portrayed as having been in decline since Britain left. Indeed, several comparisons with repressive political regimes appeared in the media. For example, the *Daily Mail* compared the EU to Joseph Stalin and Robert Mugabe, suggesting that 'to that list of kleptocrats, we may soon have to add the European Union, which seems to be descending further into madness by the day'.[90] The same newspaper also reported the remarks of politicians such as foreign secretary Dominic Raab and former Conservative Party leader Iain Duncan Smith, who called the EU's position akin to a dictatorship and 'Stalinist', while the *Guardian* compared the EU to the Soviet Union (USSR) and ridiculed EU member states for previously using the term 'plague island' to describe the UK.[91]

By discrediting the EU in such a way, the UK media was participating in the 'obligation' side of the politics of emotions by emphasizing that the EU should feel both jealous of the UK's success and embarrassed by its own lack thereof.[92] The EU's pandemic management was labelled as a 'cautionary tale' about which it should be embarrassed,[93] and it was argued to be the reason why the bloc was resorting to desperate measures: 'It is perhaps not surprising, given the notable difference in immunisation levels between Britain and the European Union, that an embarrassed Brussels should be threatening to block vaccine supplies to Britain.'[94] The EU officials were said to be acting like 'spoiled children' for declining the Oxford vaccine,[95] even though all vaccines 'should be celebrated as a triumph of

[86] Glen Owen, 'EU shellfish war is "petty revenge" for Britain's vaccine victory and "punishment for daring to become a nation state" over Brexit', Mail Online, 13 Feb. 2021, https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-9257663/EU-shellfish-war-petty-revenge-Britains-vaccine-victory.html.
[87] Bruno Waterfield, 'The EU's risk aversion cost thousands of lives', *The Times*, 24 March 2021, https://www.thetimes.com/uk/politics/article/the-eus-risk-aversion-cost-thousands-of-lives-pzfdb9j8r.
[88] Elliott, 'EU Covid incompetence leaves governments wanting vaccines'.
[89] 'Europe must not play politics with vaccines', *Daily Mail*, 16 March 2021.
[90] Martin and Franey, 'Brussels threatens UK over supply of vaccines'.
[91] Elliott, 'EU Covid incompetence leaves governments wanting vaccines'.
[92] Gustafsson and Hall, 'The politics of emotions in IR'.
[93] Waterfield, 'The EU's risk aversion cost thousands of lives'.
[94] 'Vaccine nationalism', *The Times*, 27 Jan. 2021.
[95] Adams and Hyde, 'Germany is losing the vaccine war'.

ingenuity'.[96] In other words, the politics of emotional obligation—for example, the claim that the EU should be angry and jealous—was deeply intertwined with the politics of entitlement—which held that Britons were entitled to be proud. Put differently, the negative emotions and failures of the EU were interpreted as a recognition and acknowledgement of the British entitlement to pride.

## Conclusion

In 2021, the UK and the EU fought a vaccine war—even though much of Europe did not know it at the time and has likely never heard of it since. This was a struggle not only over scarce resources and vaccines, but also over hearts and minds to which the politics of emotions was integral—a discursive struggle over who was supposed to and entitled to feel what, and which emotions were (il)legitimate and (un)desirable. Crucially, the politics of emotions not only drove (de)politicization processes but also structured public discourse according to a particular logic, constraining the discursive space in which actors had to navigate and effectively shifting blame onto the EU. Through the case-study of the vaccine war, we demonstrated the analytical utility of our framework that synthesizes the literatures on the politics of emotions in IR with the literature on emotional EU politicization. This framework offers an account that captures how governments and media invoke emotions, implicitly and explicitly, and interpret the ways in which these invocations develop political implications. Indeed, in the case at hand, the public discourse was so saturated with emotions that it would appear rather problematic to neglect or downplay them as politically inconsequential. Exploring the representations of emotions in public discourse and their discursive function offers a way to qualitatively study emotions in the (de)politicization process without having to make claims about whether they are genuinely felt and, if so, what exactly might be their influence on perception and behaviour.[97] These findings lead to several policy implications and avenues for future research.

First, the vaccine war is indicative of broader tensions that will continue to strain post-Brexit EU–UK relations. Even years after the Brexit referendum, both the government and media persist in politicizing the EU, especially in times of crisis. However, as long as a hegemonic politics of emotion continues to regularly insist that the public ought to view the EU as a malicious, bad-faith actor driven by jealousy, envy and anger, motivated to undermine British achievements, any attempt to (re-)establish closer relationships will inevitably fail. Simply put, as long as British success, status and prestige continue to be benchmarked against European perceived success and failures, positive feelings about Britain will continue to be bound up with negative feelings about Europe.

Second, our research suggests that invoking sentiments of national pride can be linked to efforts to 'rally around the flag', unite the population when faced with

[96] Leo Cendrowicz, 'Why is the EU running into so many difficulties with its Covid vaccine campaign?', *Guardian*, 24 Feb. 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/feb/24/eu-covid-vaccination-difficulties-anti-vaxxers.

[97] See Gustafsson and Hall, 'The politics of emotions in IR'.

a polarizing issue, and ultimately stifle dissent. In the case of the development of COVID-19 vaccines, this was combined with a war rhetoric that identified the EU as a threat and enemy. Paying close attention to how the politics of emotions tied both aspects together is essential to fully grasp the political implications of these discourses. Research has shown that the politics of fear (i.e. a specific form of the politics of emotions) and the processes of extreme politicization can be used to justify taking action outside the rules that govern everyday politics. Yet, the intersection of the politics of emotions and politicization remains understudied despite their potential cumulative (or exponential) influence. The explanatory power of this intersection already shows itself to be a suitable alternative to the traditional understanding of politicization and securitization. The former struggles to grasp why and how certain issues become politically important, as well as the specific form that politicization takes. The latter considers only one emotion—fear—and one outcome—securitization, failing to grasp the different ways in which emotions, including fear, are invoked for various and often contradictory political ends. In other words, not considering both the politics of emotions and politicization when accounting for policy outcomes obscures some crucial nuances of the dynamics at play.

Third, our research also highlights the key role of the media in the politics of emotions. Rather than challenging the government's often inaccurate or unverifiable claims, they were regularly simply perpetuated and circulated, together with the underlying politics of emotions. For example, it was frequently asserted that the triumph in the vaccine war was the first tangible Brexit success because the procurement strategy was only possible outside of the EU, which was demonstrably inaccurate. Criticisms of the AstraZeneca vaccine as being less efficient or even dangerous in certain age groups were constantly denied, downplayed and delegitimized as irrational and motivated by illegitimate emotions. The jingoistic naming of the AstraZeneca vaccine as the Oxford or British vaccine was often uncritically adopted, even though AstraZeneca is a Swedish–British multinational company, universities are inherently international—especially their research staff—and development trials in Brazil and South Africa were instrumental for the success of the vaccine.

Fourth, looking forward, the scapegoating of the EU to assert the entitlement to national pride is a dynamic that is certainly not restricted to the UK and vindicates further investigation into how it plays out in other national contexts. Moreover, the emotional (de)politicization of policy issues is not restricted to the EU context; the framework developed in this article will be equally applicable to other foreign policy issues and thus be relevant for the study of the intersection of domestic politics and international relations more broadly. Indeed, the argument that the politics of emotions drives (de)politicization processes, distributes blame and constrains discursive space offers an analytical perspective that will allow the linking of broader emotional discourses to specific policy outcomes. The implicit and explicit invocation of emotions, along with their sometimes subtle and sometimes overt normative connotations and behavioural implications,

are not merely rhetorical tools but deeply political practices of power that shape public discourse and the foreign policy imaginary. Especially in times of crisis, and even more so in unpredictable ones like the COVID-19 pandemic, government communication becomes particularly difficult, and thus paying attention to how the politics of emotions drives (de)politicization is crucial.