

TOWARDS A DISINTEGRATED EUROPE: A LITERATURE REVIEW IN AN INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT

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Abstract

The objective of the research is to summarise and present the main visions, notions and attempts for construction of theoretical frames of the contemporary disintegration processes in the European Union which are evident in the pre-Brexit and Brexit periods. The research methods used in the study involve elements of retrospective analysis, induction and deduction, analysis and synthesis, comparative and content analysis, table presentation and generalization of the main ideas of key research works on European disintegration. This is a conceptual study and a posteriori research approach has been followed for its development. The result of the research is an overview of the recent literature sources and major studies on the topic of EU disintegration in a comparative plan. The main conclusion of the research is that there are many different reasons for dissatisfaction from the European Union among its member states. Unquestionably it's difficult to always find the best balance and the right crossing point between all countries economic, political, social and environmental interests. Many authors find the growing dissatisfaction from the EU as the ground for future EU disintegration.

Key words: European disintegration, EU disintegration factors, EU disintegration symptoms.

Introduction

A quarter of a decade after Richard Baldwin published his brilliant book „Towards an integrated Europe“¹ (Baldwin, R., 1994) the time has come to ask ourselves whether European current developments are pushing the Union towards a dis-integrated Europe. The latter has been a long lasting fear of Jacques Delors and seems to have arrived to the contemporary EU agenda.

¹ Baldwin, R. E. (1994), *Towards an integrated Europe* (Vol. 25, No. 234). London: Centre for Economic Policy Research, <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.114.1928&rep=rep1&type=pdf>

In 2004, in an interview on his autobiographical book² (Delors, J., 2004), Delors argued that „We’re at a serious turning-point for Europe.“ Asked if he puts the chances of the effective collapse of the EU as high as 50%, he replied simply: „Yes.“³ (The Economist, 2004).

In January 1970 the Russian dissident historian Andrei Alekseevich Amalrik published his book „Will the Soviet Union Survive until 1984?“ (Amalrik, A., 1970). At that time his book was perceived as a piece of literature rather than a book presenting a real hypothesis by all of its readers, even by western world sovietologists. „If ... one views the present „liberalization“ as the growing decrepitude of the regime..., then the logical result will be its death, which will be followed by anarchy“ is one of Amalrik’s famous thesis⁴. Some of the contemporary fascinating authors building theories of EU disintegration tend to baldly paraphrase Amalrik’s ideas and ask: „Will the European Union survive until 2024?“⁵ (Vollaard, H., 2018). To keep it short and simple in the Jack Delors style, I would argue yes – the EU will survive until 2024, to disintegrate slowly up to two decades later.

1. A wink to recent history: is history repeating itself?

Perceived as hostile by all euro-optimists, the question „Will the European Union follow the fate of the Soviet Union after Brexit?“ could be heard in colloquial debates, superficial political speeches and anecdotes across the Eastern part of the European Union.

Thirty years have passed since the disintegration of the Soviet trade bloc and Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (CMEA). Before it’s fission, for seventy years (1922-1991) the largest country in the world (the Soviet Union) had the strongest say in the Eurasian continent’s economy and trade. Nearly half a billion people lived in the 27 countries of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union in the conditions of a socialist integration. With the fall of the Berlin Wall, the disintegration of the Soviet Union federation, and the breakup of Yugoslavia, CMEA – the basic central planning economic organisation that managed how its’ member states should trade with each other and with third countries for forty years (1949-1991) had no longer any obvious purpose, and was terminated⁶ (Broadman, H. G., 2006).

² Delors, J. (2004), *Mémoires*, Paris.

³ The Economist, 12th February 2004, The return of Jacques Delors: the gloom of a much-lauded ex-president of the European Commission, available online at: <https://www.economist.com/europe/2004/02/12/the-return-of-jacques-delors#footnote1>

⁴ Amalrik, A. (1970), *Will the Soviet Union Survive Until 1984?* New York: Harper & Row, available online: <https://www2.stetson.edu/~psteeves/classes/amalrik1.html>; <https://www2.stetson.edu/~psteeves/classes/amalrik2.html>

⁵ Vollaard, H. (2018), *European disintegration: A search for explanations*. Springer.

⁶ Broadman, H. G. (Ed.). (2006), *From disintegration to reintegration: Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union in international trade*. The World Bank.

In the end of the 80's and in the beginning of the 90's of the previous century, when disintegration of the former socialist block lead to its total and final fission and division, its member countries quickly run into another integration block. While different economic order and political factors undoubtedly matter, the EU after Brexit needs to throw an eye on the fission of the former socialist block and the disintegration of the largest then federation in the world⁷ (Linn, J.F., 2004).

„There is a race in Europe today“, writes Hassner⁸ in 1990, „between integration in the West, disintegration in the East, and rapprochement between East and West. In this situation the key to the decline or revival of Europe as a whole is the opening of Western Europe to Eastern Europe.“ Hassner traces three phases in European and Russian developments – from the end of the Cold War to all-European collaboration, followed by disillusion, supervened by new differentiation and frustrations in East and West (Hassner, P., 1990).

In the years after the Second World War the western European countries had different international alternatives to recover their economy. Six of them decided to construct the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), while the United Kingdom and the Scandinavian countries remained out, preferring other alternatives and less continental loyalty at this stage of their development⁹ (Urwin, D. W., 2014). Later on the formation of a European Defence Community didn't succeed because its potential members countries found better alternatives for themselves. The ECSC however offered worthy benefits to its members and led to the creation of the European Economic Community¹⁰ (Dinan, D., 2005). For many decades the European Economic Community developed and integration deepened passing through periods of crisis¹¹ (Ludlow, N. P., 2006), partial exit, use of voice, but never full exit (before Brexit) because full exit would bring rather high costs of leaving. In a situation of a lack of better alternatives the internal construction of the European Union went on, European policies developed (formulated and proclaimed by Brussels – the European power centre) and the Union didn't succeed to become a true federation but created a unique political and law system.

While the objective of this paper is not to provide a comparison between the factors for and symptoms of disintegration in the above mentioned

⁷ Linn, J.F. (2004), Economic (Dis)Integration Matters: The Soviet Collapse Revisited. Paper for a conference on „Transition in the CIS: Achievements and Challenges“, the Academy for National Economy, Moscow, September 13-14, 2004.

⁸ Hassner, P. (1990), Europe beyond partition and unity: disintegration or reconstitution?. *International Affairs*, 66(3), 461-475.

⁹ Urwin, D. W. (2014), *The community of Europe: A history of European integration since 1945*. Routledge.

¹⁰ Dinan, D. (2005), *Ever closer union: an introduction to European integration*. Palgrave Macmillan.

¹¹ Ludlow, N. P. (2006), *The European Community and the crises of the 1960s: Negotiating the Gaullist challenge* (pp. 174-98). London: Routledge.

federation (Soviet Union), integration community (CMEA) and the ones already evident in the European Union, the analysis in this research aims to summarise and present the main visions, notions and first attempts to construct theoretical frames of the contemporary EU disintegration processes which is evident in the pre- and post- Brexit periods.

2. Intrinsic factors, procedures and preconditions paving the road to disintegration in the EU

One of the most logical approaches to define disintegration is to explain it as the reverse process of integration. Ever since its' existence the EU strived to build an „*ever closer union*“ among the peoples of Europe¹² (Article 1 of the Treaty on European Union) thus creating integration in practice. The development of this „*ever closer union*“ has been usually explained by two concepts – the „*deepening*“ and „*widening*“ of the Union, showing how it evolved over time.

The concept of „*deepening*“ explains the development of this „*ever closer union*“ that triggered processes leading to such significant results as the establishment of the Economic and monetary union and the launch of the single European currency (the European most recognizable means of exchange), the Energy union which brought the launch of the pan-European electricity and gas markets and energy exchanges (the common energy sources marketplace), the Internal Market of the EU (the common European marketplace for goods and services), the Capital Markets Union¹³ (Simeonov, K., 2015) and a portfolio of common European policies evolving into a wide range of thematical „unions“ within the EU.

The concept of „*widening*“ refers to the EU expansion in terms of membership – the Union widened from 15 member countries in 2004 to 28 in 2013. At each „*widening*“ the integration between the old Union's member states and its' newcomers has been weaker than the integration between the existing (old) members and this trend has been most clearly expressed during the last three EU enlargements to the East that took place in 2004, 2007 and 2013.

According to Lucas Schramm, integration has three dimensions: „first, *deepening* is when policy competences are transferred from the national to the European level; second, *broadening* depicts EU competence gains in new policy fields; and third, *widening* is when the number of the EU member states increases through enlargement“¹⁴ (L. Schramm, 2019). Disintegration takes place when supranational EU institutions lose power and authority, formerly common policy fields are renationalized and a member State withdraws from the European Union

¹² Consolidated version of the Treaty on European Union - TITLE I: COMMON PROVISIONS - Article 1 (ex Article 1 TEU), *OJ C 115, 9.5.2008, p. 16*, http://data.europa.eu/eli/treaty/teu_2008/art_1/oj

¹³ Simeonov, K. (2015), EU capital markets initiatives for better financing SMEs. *Modelling the New Europe. An On-line Journal* (16), 43-67.

¹⁴ Schramm, L. (2019), European disintegration: a new feature of EU politics, *College of Europe Policy Brief*, May 2019.

membership (Brexit). European integration and European disintegration represent a dichotomous concept. Again according to Schramm, these two concepts are „placed on a continuum with two extreme ends: full-scale integration at the one end and full-scale disintegration at the other end“ (L. Schramm, 2019).

Pretending to be democratic, „*Europe a la carte*“ emerged and forced its’ way through the European Union evolution, offering a non-uniform approach to integration allowing member states to select policies, as if from a menu, and involve themselves fully in those policies.

The EU kept a number of polices compulsory for all member states and defined them as „common polices“. The member states however integrated at different levels working on the objectives of these „common polices“ („*variable geometry Europe*“) thus forming „different speeds“ of integration or a „*multi-speed Europe*“.. „*Europe a la carte*“ is best depicted by the Eurozone – some of the member states are in, while others are in the lobby and a third group is definitely out for various reasons (Simeonov, K., 2018 a,b)¹⁵.

The concept „variable-geometry Europe“ means that the EU integration is a *differentiated integration*. It acknowledges that, since the number of the EU member states almost doubled for a decade (2004-2013), there are substantial differences among the member states and there should be a means to overcome them and to proceed with the integration process. Thus „variable-geometry Europe“ has enabled groups of countries wishing to pursue a given goal to do so, while allowing the opposing ones to restrain from participation.

The idea to launch a „multi-speed Union“ has directly paved the road to disintegration. „Multi-speed“ EU is a method of *differentiated integration* where common objectives are pursued by a group of EU countries both able and willing to advance, while it is supposed that the others will follow later.

The „*enhanced cooperation procedure*“ has been the major instrument that contributed to the rise of the „multi-speed“ EU. „Enhanced cooperation“ allows a minimum of nine EU countries to start an advanced integration in any area falling within the EU general fields of action, but without the rest of the member states to be involved. Thus a group of member states moves at different speeds and towards different goals than those who are outside of the „enhanced cooperation procedure“ group. The procedure has been initially designed to overcome deadlocks, in cases when a proposal is blocked by an individual country or a small group of countries who do not wish to be a part of a certain initiative or policy.

„Enhanced cooperation“ does not allow an extension of powers outside of the powers permitted by the EU Treaties. Authorisation to proceed with „enhanced cooperation“ is granted by the Council, on a proposal from the Commission and

¹⁵ Simeonov, K. D. (2018 a), The future of the Economic and Monetary Union to 2025 and beyond: the need for convergence. *European View*, 17(2), 116-125.

Simeonov, K.D. (2018 b), Which is the 6th Eurozone scenario?. *Journal Diplomacy*, 20/2018, 214-330.

after obtaining the consent of the European Parliament. Since 2013, this procedure has been used in fields such as divorce law, patents and financial transaction tax.

Therefore the first signs, symptoms, procedures and instruments of evident disintegration in the EU are not quite new and have appeared long before the notion of „Brexit“ came to the agenda. Different ideas of collaboration, cooperation and integration developed in the EU over time, all of them leading to controversial societal reactions and economic and political results (Table 1, Figure 1). Often the debate concomitant voluntary deepening of the integration between the participating countries has been focused on the costs and benefits stemming from them. Similar debates accompanied the geographical enlargements of the Union estimating their costs and benefits, especially those of the last three enlargements to the East. The periods of „euro-sclerosis“ had been replaced by „euro-euphoria“, when the Delors commission came to power, followed by new waves of „euro-scepticism“, „euro-pessimism“ and even occasional appeals for denial of any further integration.

Table 1. Major events of EU integration and EU disintegration

Year	Positive events in EU Integration	Years	EU Disintegration major events
1946	Churchill's idea for „United states of Europe“	1950 - 1954	Failed European Defence community
1948	Marshall plan and OEEC	1966	Luxembourg Compromise
1952	European coal and steel community	1999	UKIP enters European Parliament and participates in a Eurosceptic group of MPs
1957	Rome treaties for Euratom and EEC	2002 - 2003	Failed Constitutional treaty
1971	Werner plan for monetary integration	2004	Eurosceptic MPs again form coalition (IND/DEM) in European Parliament (UK, Denmark, Poland, Hungary, Sweden)
1973	EFTA countries given access to EEC market	2009	Eurosceptic UKIP increases presence to 13 seats in European Parliament
1978	European monetary system	2010 - 2015	Migration influx to EU borders
1979	First European Parliament elections	2014	Soaring anti-EU support: Marine Le Pen secures 24 seats in European Parliament with the far-right National Rally party; Far-right Danish People's Party gets 26.6% of the votes in Denmark. Greece's Syriza and Italy's Five Star Movement demonstrated strong presence.

1986	Single European Act pursued by Delor's commission	2015	Peak of the migration crisis involving anti-EU sentiments in Italy and especially Hungary
1992	European Economic Area	Autumn 2015	Eurobarometer observes strong distrust in EU (55%)
1993	Maastricht treaty	2016	UK puts Brexit on national referendum
1993	Copenhagen criteria for membership	2017	Far-right government is formed in Austria between FPÖ and ÖVP
1997	Amsterdam treaty	2018	EU rises concerns against Poland and Hungary about rule of law and democracy
1999	Euro is introduced	2019	European Parliament elections: Anti-establishment parties reaffirm presence. The right-wing Identity and Democracy (ID) group secures 73 seats. European Conservatives and Reformists Group has 62 MPs.
2002	Euro becomes physical currency	31- Jan- 2020	Brexit
2004	Nice treaty	Spring 2020	COVID 19 world pandemics hits Europe. The four freedoms of movement endure severe trials.
2009	Lisbon treaty	6 May 2020	The Wester Balkans candidate countries are still not given an accession date and future EU enlargement is put under question
2010	European Stability Mechanism (ESM) in response to the crisis		
2013	Fiscal Compact adopted; Banking union established		
2015	The Five Presidents' Report: Completing Europe's Economic and Monetary Union		
2015	EU signs the Paris Agreement to fight climate change		
2017	White paper on the future of Europe presented by the European Commission		

Source: the author, based on facts of the European Union history

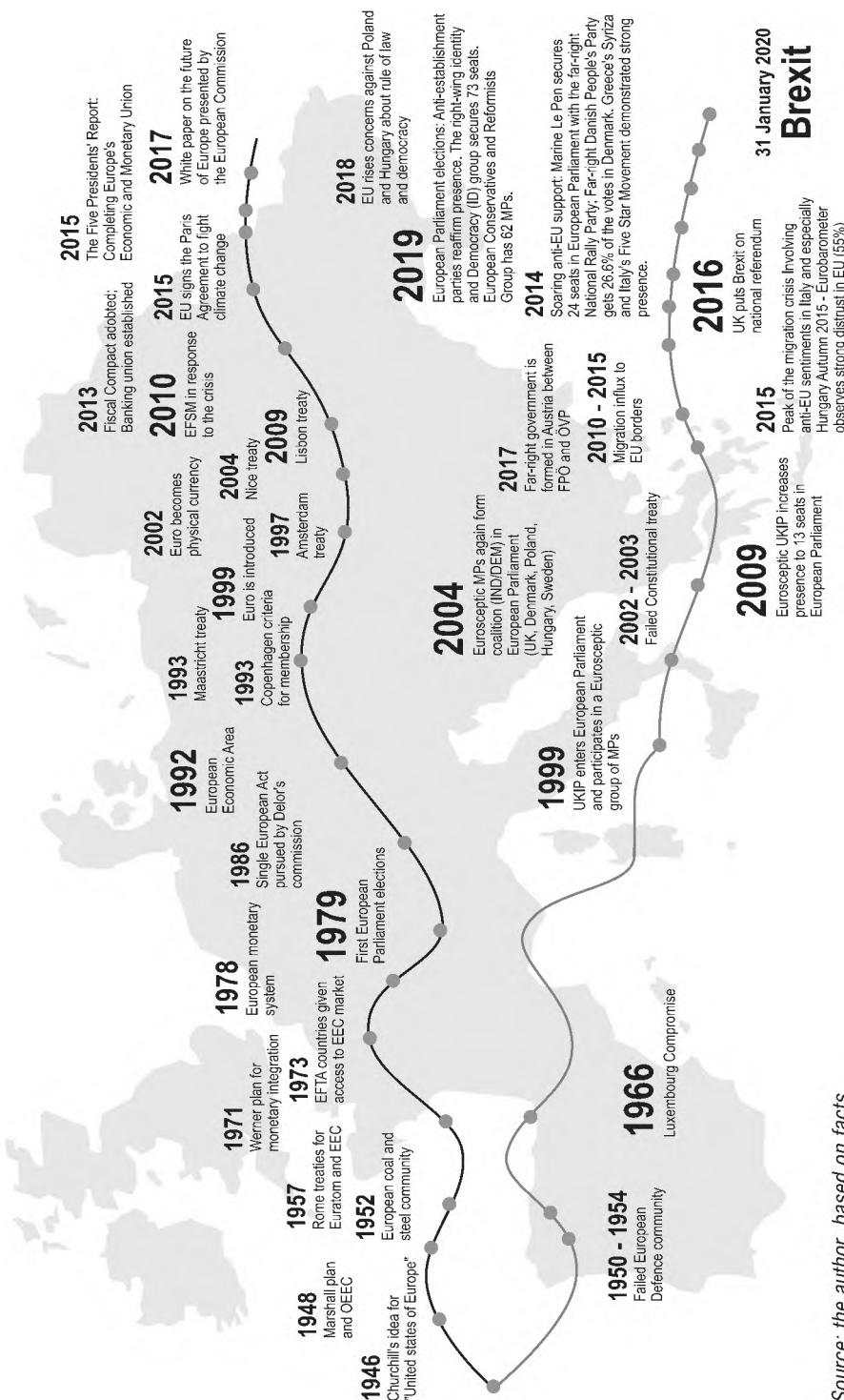


Figure 1. Major events of EU integration and disintegration

Source: the author, based on facts of the European Union history

3. Main contributions to the EU disintegration theory

The interrelated causes and effects of EU widening and deepening have been studied by many authors¹⁶ (G. Umbach and A. Hofmann, 2009; F. Schimmelfenning and U. Sedelmeier, 2002; N. Nugent, M. Egan and W.E. Paterson, 2010) from different angles, all of them seeking to bridge the gap between European integration theory and practice and to analyse the running processes in Europe from both theoretical and empirical points of view. EU deepening and widening have always been intrinsically interconnected and the need to evaluate them has been evident. Some authors came to new notions such as „European disunion“¹⁷ (Hayward, J. and Wurzel, R., 2012), posed new questions such as „Broadening and deepening or broadening versus deepening?“¹⁸ have been evident in the EU (Karp, J. A., & Bowler, S., 2006) and produced extensive research on „differentiated integration“¹⁹ (Dyson, K. and Sepos, A., 2010) as a purely European phenomenon which is difficult to observe in other (less developed) international integration communities between third countries outside the European territory. The major question evident through all these researches and covered by all of them is quite simple but very difficult to answer: *what is the right design for the EU economic and political construction*²⁰ (Laursen, F., 2012) to strengthen integration and to prevent disintegration?

Logically in the years immediately preceding the beginning of Brexit (the pre-Brexit period) as well as during the period from the Brexit referendum to the UK final exit from the EU (the Brexit period) a lot of studies on disintegration have been published. To put the purely UK-themed ones aside, there are enough worthy considerations related to the disintegration processes at EU level to make us thoughtful about the EU future.

¹⁶ Umbach, G., & Hofmann, A. (2009), Towards a theoretical link between EU widening and deepening. In: EU - CONSENT Wider Europe, Deeper Integration? Constructing Europe Network, http://aei.pitt.edu/33151/1/umbach._gaby.pdf

Schimmelfenning, F. / Sedelmeier, U. (2002), „Theorizing EU Enlargement: research focus, hypotheses, and the state of research“, *Journal of European Public Policy*, 9(4), pp. 500-528, p. 500., <https://ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/european-politics-dam/documents/People/Publications/Enlargement/Theorizing.pdf>

Nugent, N., Egan, M., & Paterson, W. E. (Eds.). (2010), *Research Agendas in EU Studies: Stalking the Elephant*. Palgrave Macmillan.

¹⁷ Hayward, J., & Wurzel, R. (Eds.). (2012), *European disunion: between sovereignty and solidarity*. Springer.

¹⁸ Karp, J. A., & Bowler, S. (2006), Broadening and deepening or broadening versus deepening: The question of enlargement and Europe's 'hesitant Europeans'. *European Journal of Political Research*, 45(3), 369-390.

¹⁹ Dyson, K., & Sepos, A. (Eds.). (2010), *Which Europe?: the politics of differentiated integration*. Springer.

²⁰ Laursen, F. (Ed.). (2012), *Designing the European Union: From Paris to Lisbon*. Springer.

Table 2. Main authors analysing EU disintegration*

pre-Brexit period**	Brexit period***	Post-Brexit period
Hassner, P., 1990	Schmitter, P. and C., Lefkofridi, Z., 2016	Banaji, S., 2020 ²¹
F. Schimmelfenning and U. Sedelmeier, 2002	Radoykova, G., 2017	McGrattan, E. R., & Waddle, A., 2020 ²²
Delors, J., 2004	Vollaard, H., 2018	Hobolt, S., Leeper, T. J., & Tilley, J., 2020 ²³
Linn, J.F., 2004	Simeonov, K., 2018 a,b	Richardson, J., & Rittberger, B., 2020 ²⁴
Dinan, D., 2005	Jones, E., 2018	Hobolt, S., Leeper, T. J., & Tilley, J., 2020 ²⁵
Bartolini, S., 2005	Rosamond, B., 2019	Heinkelmann-Wild, T., Kriegmair, L., Rittberger, B., & Zangl, B., 2020 ²⁶
Broadman, H. G., 2006	L. Schramm, 2019	Baines, D., Brewer, S., & Kay, A., 2020 ²⁷
Ludlow, N. P., 2006		Graziano, A. G., Handley, K., & Limão, N., 2020 ²⁸
Karp, J. A., & Bowler, S., 2006		
G. Umbach and A. Hofmann, 2009;		
N. Nugent, M. Egan and W.E. Paterson, 2010		
Dyson, K. and Sepos, A., 2010		
Hayward, J. and Wurzel, R., 2012		
Laursen, F., 2012		
Urwin, D. W., 2014		
Webber, D., 2014		
Vollaard, H., 2014		

Notes: * purely UK-themed publications are not included in this research. Only publications with all-EU relevance are included.

** pre-Brexit period - the period before 20-th February 2016 when the United Kingdom's Prime minister David Cameron officially announced that the UK referendum will be held on 23 June 2016.

*** the Brexit period - 20.02.2016 - 31.01.2020 (23,00 H. GMT) when the UK stopped being a member of the European Union

Source: the author, based on literature research

²¹ Banaji, S. (2020), A Review of Victor Seidler's Making Sense of Brexit: Democracy, Brexit and Post-Truth Politics (2018, Policy Press). *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, 1-7.

²² McGrattan, E. R., & Waddle, A. (2020), The impact of Brexit on foreign investment and production. *American Economic Journal: Macroeconomics*, 12(1), 76-103, <https://pubs.aeaweb.org/doi/pdf/10.1257/mac.20170399>.

²³ Hobolt, S., Leeper, T. J., & Tilley, J. (2020), Divided by the vote: affective polarization in the wake of the Brexit referendum. *British Journal of Political Science*, <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/103485/>

²⁴ Richardson, J., & Rittberger, B. (2020), Brexit: simply an omnishambles or a major policy fiasco?, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/13501763.2020.1736131>

²⁵ Breinlich, H., Leromain, E., Novy, D., & Sampson, T. (2020), Voting with their money: Brexit and outward investment by UK firms. *European Economic Review*, 124, 103400, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0014292120300325>

²⁶ Heinkelmann-Wild, T., Kriegmair, L., Rittberger, B., & Zangl, B. (2020), Divided they fail: The politics of wedge issues and Brexit. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 27(5), 723-741, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13501763.2019.1683058>

²⁷ Baines er, S., & Kay, A. (2020), Political, process and programme failures in the Brexit fiasco: exploring the role of policy deception. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 27(5), 742-760.

²⁸ Graziano, A. G., Handley, K., & Limão, N. (2020, May), Brexit Uncertainty: Trade Externalities beyond Europe. In *AEA Papers and Proceedings* (Vol. 110, pp. 552-56), <https://pubs.aeaweb.org/doi/pdfplus/10.1257/pandp.20201021>

In 2014 Douglas Webber asked „How likely is it that the European Union will dis integrate?“ and offered a critical analysis of competing theoretical perspectives²⁹ that paved the way of the future theories of EU disintegration (Webber, D., 2014). From the starting positions of the existing EU integration theories he analysed the conditions under which they could predict a potential EU disintegration and assessed to what extent these conditions exist. According to Webber EU integration theories are quite „optimistic“ and lack comparative inter-spatial and inter-temporal focus. Webber combines aspects of *domestic politics approaches to international relations* and the *hegemonic stability theory* to suggest that the EU future will be more unanticipated than EU integration theories assume because of two main reasons:

- firstly, because EU integration theories do not properly take into account the domestic politics role in the EU integration development in a situation when all member states experience a rise of „anti-European“ political movements;
- secondly, because EU integration theories omit the detail that the EU uniquely high level of political integration depends on the engagement of the EU's economically most powerful „semi-hegemonic“ state – Germany. Although a fundamental reorientation of the German European policy is currently unlikely, it is not inconceivable in the long run. The EU has survived many crises over time but none of them came from Germany. The EU's current crisis has the symptoms of a broader crisis of regional and international multilateralism (Webber, D., 2014).

Existing theories of European integration offer little purchase on the problems facing the European Union today, debates Erik Jones³⁰ during the Brexit period (Jones, E., 2018). New theories of disintegration are emerging, but they remain disjointed. The purpose of Jones's research is to suggest *an overarching theoretical framework* which structures the existing literature and suggests new areas for research. Jones's research explains how integration and disintegration interact at different levels of aggregation.

According to Ben Rosamond, the current „perfect storm“ of European crises proves that the EU suffers from severe tensions that limit the key integration gains of the past seven decades³¹ (Rosamond, B., 2019). Existential threats to the EU have provoked the creation of „disintegration“ theories which lag temporally behind real world developments. He argues that *any attempt to theorise integration should be capable of theorising disintegration as well* but recent EU studies skip the analysis of integration, developing sub-literatures presuming institutional and systemic resilience. Thus Rosamond formulates three main ideas:

²⁹ Webber, D. (2014), How likely is it that the European Union will dis integrate? A critical analysis of competing theoretical perspectives. *European Journal of International Relations*, 20(2), 341-365.

³⁰ Jones, E. (2018), Towards a theory of disintegration. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 25(3), 440-451.

³¹ Rosamond, B. (2019), Theorising the EU in crisis: De-Europeanisation as disintegration. *Global Discourse: An interdisciplinary journal of current affairs*, 9(1), 31-44.

- any return to the analysis of integration/disintegration is risky, because of the fallacy to project future probabilities from past experience.
- earlier neo-functionalism theory developed quite sophisticated accounts of disintegration, which illustrate the importance of political economy and sociological dynamics in European integration.
- extant scholarly knowledge on the EU may inhibit the development of robust policy understanding of potentially disintegrative dynamics.

In 2014 Hans Vollaard argued that the probability of EU disintegration has been prominently on the public agenda while most of the EU studies neglected this probability in the pre-Brexit times³² (Vollaard, H., 2014). His article from 2014 looks for a theoretical starting point to conceptualize and explain European disintegration. Vollaard didn't stop his interest in the issue and a few years later published a book on European disintegration³³ trying to explain this concept and process using the theories of European integration, international politics, comparative federalism, optimum currency areas and imperial decline (Vollaard, H., 2018). Some of these theories suffer from a state bias; others are too narrowly focused to explain the complex process of disintegration while third ones fail to interconnect coherently the variety of disintegrative factors. The theoretical framework of Bartolini³⁴ (Bartolini, S., 2005) is accepted by Vollaard as the most promising basis for explanation of European disintegration as it avoids the above-mentioned problems and shows that Eurosceptic dissatisfaction induces partial exits of the EU due to the Union's weak lock-in power and the lack of proper full exit options. Confusion and contradictions are rife in the evolution of the EU and predictions range from full-scale federalisation to complete collapse. Theories should catch structural dynamics, crucial factors and actors in European disintegration, but unfortunately there had not yet been much theorising on it, notices Vollaard. To fill this gap he wrote the book „*European disintegration: A search for explanations*“ providing a thorough analysis of European disintegration conceptualised by testable statements within the broad theory frameworks of:

- **Neo-functionalism.** „Spill-overs“ from one policy area to another are the basis of the neo-functionalism explanation of regional integration. Spill-overs bring shifts in expectations, activities and loyalties towards the new regional political community in which member states become increasingly locked-in, making disintegration unlikely. Neo-functionalists explain potential disintegrative forces with the concept of „spill-back“ which refers to a situation in which previous commitments are no longer met or applied. A list of background variables of integration could help in explaining disintegration, particularly in comparison with other forms of international

³² Vollaard, H. (2014), Explaining European Disintegration. *JCMS: Journal of common market studies*, 52(5), 1142-1159.

³³ Vollaard, H. (2018), *European disintegration: A search for explanations*. Springer.

³⁴ Bartolini, S. (2005), *Restructuring Europe: Centre formation, system building, and political structuring between the nation state and the European Union*. OUP Oxford.

regional integration. The interconnections between these time and place-specific variables are however unclear. Also the process and the outcome of disintegration cannot necessarily be defined as integration in reverse³⁵. The mixed results of the empirical analysis of neo-functionalism ideas suggest that there might be some corresponding increase in the likelihood that the EU could disintegrate (Schmitter, P. C., Lefkofridi, Z., 2016).

- **Realism and intergovernmentalism.** Neo-realist and liberal-intergovernmentalist theories explain international cooperation as a result of: the international distribution of powers among countries seeking security or their desire for international economic interdependence according to principles, norms, rules, and procedures at the will of domestic actors. The application of these theories to EU disintegration is problematic because they assume that the EU will simply fall apart into its constituent states without explaining why its member states will exit and become independent territorial states again after they have participated in a common governance network. With their exclusive focus on security and economy, they fail to explain the multi-causal nature of the disintegration process.
- **Federalism.** Every federal system is characterised by a mix of common rules and own rules of its members. Comparative federalism studies the sustainability and failures of federal systems and the potential secession of individual member states. The sustainability or failures of federal systems depend on many factors: the presence of external security threats; shared economic interests; cultural similarities (or differences); ideological commitments to the federal division of powers etc. Comparative federalism however doesn't explain the relative importance of these factors and how they are interconnected during the disintegration process; it only provides a checklist indicating the likelihood of disintegration. Similar criticism is addressed to federalist explanations of secessions of individual states which also suffer from a solid base. Notwithstanding the criticisms, comparative federalism provides useful elements in the pursuit of a convincing explanation of EU disintegration.
- **Comparative imperialism.** Comparative analysis of failed empires of the past could provide a useful insight into the EU disintegration, if we assume that the Union sufficiently resembles an ideal empire, because of its unequal and asymmetric „centre-peripheries“ relationships in a radial pattern, ranging from the Eurozone, member states with opt-outs, candidates and neighbouring countries. The export of rules via the enlargement and neighbourhood policies shows the EU's expansive nature, making its boundaries unstable. Similar to past empires, the byzantine EU centre exerts control over the foreign and domestic politics of its peripheries. Analogy between disintegrated past empires and the EU can be done but the problem here is that the available data about

³⁵ Schmitter, P. C., & Lefkofridi, Z. (2016), Neo-functionalism as a theory of disintegration. *Chinese political science review*, 1(1), 1-29.

the past empires often provides lists of disintegrative factors without revealing the exact way and extent to which they are interconnected in the disintegration process.

- ***International liberalisation, globalisation and cosmopolitanism.*** Contemporary advanced transport and communication technologies combined with all-sectors constant liberalisation stemming from the EU integration and economic globalisation trends reduced travel costs and all types of exit costs for the EU businesses and physical persons. The combination of decreased im-permeability and exit possibilities (decreased exit/entry costs), dissatisfaction by some member (and third) states and low levels of national loyalty, resulted in increased interest to rich regions. Perceived as threats by the rising nationalistic movements these new European and global trends reshaped the existing coalitions of EU member states. That's how rising euro-pessimism and discontent with the EU's external deconsolidation gradually opened the door for appeals for the restoration of national identities and national solidarity (within the EU member states) which contradicts to international liberalisation, globalisation and cosmopolitanism trends. The fact that similar processes are evident also in other parts of the world shouldn't be emollient for the Union pretending to be most developed integration community on the globe.

Therefore a proper explanation of EU disintegration should take into account the multi-dimensional nature of the EU and the presence and interdependence of both disintegrative and integrative forces. Besides any static checklist of factors, it's important to find out the mechanisms driving the processes of disintegration. The mechanisms of exit, voice, and loyalty explains the will of member states for partial or full withdrawal from the EU. The mutual dependence between external consolidation and internal construction explains disintegration at systemic level.

Four scenarios for the development of disintegration in the EU are highly possible according to Vollaard (Vollaard, H., 2018): (1) disintegration may continue due to the lack of better alternatives and limited voice options; (2) the EU's weak external consolidation (for example consolidation on further enlargement) may constrain its internal construction; (3) the external deconsolidation of member states may increase dissatisfaction; (4) with low loyalty, limited voice opportunities, and available exit options, member states may make their way to the direction of full exit from the EU. In the absence of better external alternatives, dissatisfied actors will opt for partial withdrawals.

Member states' dissatisfaction stemming from different decisions at EU level³⁶ (Radoykova, G., 2017) may not necessarily result in exit of a certain country from the EU. The thesis of Vollaard is that full withdrawal will only happen if compensation for member states' external consolidation, EU loyalty,

³⁶ Radoykova, G. (2017), TOWARDS A MORE ACCOUNTABLE EU. MISSION POSSIBLE?. *Modelling the New Europe. An On-line Journal*, (23), 95-107.

voice opportunities within the EU, and exit costs are low, and viable national or international exit options are available (Vollaard, 2018). If these conditions are not met, member states will seek for partial exits – they will be less willing to transform powers and competences to the EU, they will insist on smaller Union budgets and smaller national contributions to these budgets, they will be less willing to adopt the EU legislation and standards, etc. In spite of Brexit, and even because of it, the EU institutions and the leaders of some of the (biggest) member states demonstrate unity whenever the occasion allows it. Moreover immediate and huge disintegration processes are unlikely to start in the EU in the recent years because of the lack of available much better alternatives for the EU member states. There is an ocean dividing (geographically and recently politically) the EU from its transatlantic partner – the USA, China is economically speeding up but even though being a major trade partner of the EU still remains politically and culturally distant from the EU values, and the time still hasn't come for strengthening the other logical axis of possible integration – the Eurasian one, represented by the idea of creating a real common economic space from Lisbon to Vladivostok.

External consolidation of the EU had been historically postponed by different events (such as the refusal of the UK's entry in the 1960-s) while internal construction of the (then) European communities proceeded. Integration in Western Europe proceeded since the lack of better alternatives and coalitions between the biggest member states had the strongest voice. The prospect of each further enlargement periodically re-ordered existing coalitions, reshaped the EU budget structure, re-distributed the seats (the number of votes) of the member states in the European parliament, provoked diverse societal reactions among different citizens groups but never brought to real disintegration and exit of a member state from the Union. All these processes however shaped an internal construction limited by too many interdependencies and few instruments for: educating loyalty to the EU (in the member states' societies), executing clear institutional powers and voice, compliance assurance in all fields and its' effective verification, boundaries control, etc. That's how the EU's weak external consolidation that lasted for several decades practically confined its internal construction. In this situation the continuing existence of the EU for a long period of time could be explained mainly with its relative attractiveness rather than with its locking-in capacity. Its relative attractiveness seems to be weakening in recent times – after 2020 only the small Western Balkan economies are still insisting to enter the EU while bigger and economically stronger states such as Turkey no more declare such a desire.

Conclusions

Different ideas of collaboration, cooperation and integration developed on the European territory over time, all of them leading to controversial societal reactions and economic and political results. Oftenly debates concomitant geographical widening or voluntary deepening of integration between the

participating countries have been focused on the costs and benefits stemming from them. Periods of „euro-euphoria“ had been periodically replaced by times of „euro-pessimism“ and vice versa to give way of occasional appeals for denials of further integration. A proper explanation of EU disintegration should take into account the multi-dimensional nature of the EU and the presence and interdependence of both disintegrative and integrative forces. Besides any static checklist of factors, it's important to find out the mechanisms driving the processes of disintegration. The mechanisms of exit, voice and loyalty explain the will of member states for partial or full withdrawal from the EU. The mutual dependence between external consolidation and internal construction explains disintegration at systemic level. In spite of Brexit, and even because of it, the EU institutions and member states demonstrate unity whenever the occasion allows it. Moreover *immediate and huge disintegration processes are unlikely to start in the EU in the recent years because of the lack of available much better alternatives for the EU member states*: there is an ocean dividing (geographically and recently politically) the EU from its transatlantic partner - the USA, China is economically speeding up but even though being a major trade partner of the EU still remains politically and culturally distant from the EU values, and the time still hasn't come for strengthening the other logical axis of possible integration – the Eurasian one, represented by the idea of creating a real common economic space from Lisbon to Vladivostok.

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