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POLITICS AND GOVERNANCE

# The Causes and Modes of European Disintegration

Edited by Martijn Huysmans and Sven Van Kerckhoven

Volume 11

Issue 3

2023

Open Access Journal

ISSN: 2183-2463



Politics and Governance, 2023, Volume 11, Issue 3  
The Causes and Modes of European Disintegration

Published by Cogitatio Press  
Rua Fialho de Almeida 14, 2º Esq.,  
1070-129 Lisbon  
Portugal

Design by Typografia®  
<http://www.typografia.pt/en/>

Cover image: © hanohiki from iStock

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Editorial

## The Causes and Modes of European Disintegration

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Submitted: 9 May 2023 | Published: 5 July 2023

### Abstract

This thematic issue on the causes and modes of European disintegration seeks to answer two main questions: What are the causes of (potential) European disintegration across countries? And what are the actual and potential modes of European disintegration? The articles on the causes of EU disintegration go beyond the immediate causes of Brexit, to date the prime example of European disintegration. They address, for instance, the impact of ignoring the results of referendums on EU treaty changes. The articles demonstrate that the extensively studied proximate causes of Brexit may be different from more long-term drivers of potential disintegration in the UK and other member states. The second question raises a point that has been largely overlooked. Going beyond the growing literature on Brexit, differentiated integration, and non-compliance, the articles on the modes of European disintegration address issues such as (temporary) opt-outs from the Schengen agreement. The thematic issue is innovative not only due to the questions it raises but also by deploying a multi-disciplinary social science perspective. Contributions are quantitative, qualitative, and theoretical from a wide array of social science disciplines. Taken together, the contributions to this thematic issue advance scholarly understanding of European (dis)integration.

### Keywords

Brexit; disintegration; European Union; Euroscepticism; Schengen; secession; withdrawal

### Issue

This editorial is part of the issue “The Causes and Modes of European Disintegration” edited by Martijn Huysmans (Utrecht University) and Sven Van Kerckhoven (Vrije Universiteit Brussel).

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### 1. Introduction

Before Brexit, the EU had only grown in terms of member states and depth of integration (Hooghe & Marks, 2019; Huysmans, 2019). On the one hand, Brexit has called into question the idea of an ever-closer union. On the other hand, support for EU membership seems to have gone up in the remaining member states, pointing at clear deterrence effects (De Vries, 2017; Walter, 2021), and the potential for deeper integration and collaboration among the remaining EU member states has improved. Moreover, countries in the Western Balkan and Ukraine have shown a clear interest in joining the EU.

This thematic issue investigates the causes and modes of European disintegration beyond the particulars of Brexit. Are other European countries likely

to try to reverse certain aspects of European integration? If so, what causes this and how could they envision exiting (partially or fully) from certain aspects of European integration? How are these disintegration pressures addressed in different member states?

(Dis)integration processes result from potentially politicized cost-benefit assessments of international cooperation (Gastinger, 2021). For a long time, attempting to raise efficiency and attaining economies of scale within the European Union mainly favoured further integration (for political economy theories on the optimal size and scope of federations see, e.g., Alesina & Spolaore, 2003; Huysmans & Crombez, 2019). In recent years, Eurosceptic, populist, and nationalist movements have questioned the size and distribution of these efficiency gains and the EU’s output legitimacy, while politicizing



the costs and questioning the legitimacy of integration in terms of a loss of autonomy and sovereignty (de Wilde & Zürn, 2012; Jones, 2018; Vollaard, 2018).

In response to differences across member states, the EU has engaged in differentiated integration. Some member states have the euro, others do not; some are part of Schengen, some are not. This allows like-minded member states to move forward while keeping others within the existing structures. Complementary to differentiated integration, this thematic issue focuses on disintegration, i.e., reversing some aspects of European integration. The results may be similar to differentiated integration, but the mechanisms leading to a reversal of integration are different than those leading to differentiated integration.

EU member states are also well-known to be, on occasion, guilty of non-compliance (Börzel, 2021). Whereas this is a quiet form of seeking to escape from very specific aspects of European integration (e.g., the transposition of individual directives), we see disintegration as a louder and more activist form.

Since the Brexit vote, a large and growing number of articles and issues have shed light on the drivers and the aftermath of this particular event (Bressanelli & Chelotti, 2021; Bulmer & Quaglia, 2018; De Vries, 2017; Hobolt, 2016; Hodson & Puetter, 2018; Huysmans & Crombez, 2019; Leruth et al., 2019; Owen & Walter, 2017; Richardson & Rittberger, 2020; Van Kerckhoven, 2021).

This thematic issue on the causes and modes of European disintegration explores a different angle by focusing on the causes and modes of European disintegration beyond Brexit. It seeks to provide answers to two main questions. First, what are the drivers of potential European disintegration across countries? The increased attention on the costs of uniform EU policies plays out differently in different EU member states, each with substantially different policy preferences. Second, what are the actual and potential modes of European disintegration beyond a full-blown exit from the EU? Disintegration drivers have led and might lead to different outcomes.

This thematic issue innovates not only due to the questions it raises but also by deploying a multidisciplinary social science perspective. The contributions include quantitative, qualitative, and theoretical work. The empirical contributions zoom in on multiple countries, including Austria, Italy, France, Germany, Greece, and the UK.

## 2. The Causes of European Disintegration

The contributions to the causes of EU disintegration go beyond the immediate causes of Brexit. The extensively studied proximate causes of Brexit may be different from more long-term drivers in the UK and other member states. The first set of articles critically reviews these drivers.

Crombez et al. (2023) present a theoretical model on the role of preferences of politicians and voters as potential causes of (dis)integration. Ruiz et al. (2023)

look at the 2005 referendum in France on the proposed EU constitution and find long-lasting effects. Looking at two other member states, Greece and Italy, Kouloglou and Georarakis (2023) find consistent evidence that both cultural and economic factors play a role in public support for the EU and its institutions. Donat and Lenhart (2023) look not only at different causes (attitudes and approaches to EU integration) but also an understudied group, namely regional members of parliament, which sit between voters and national and EU-level political elites.

## 3. The Modes of European Disintegration

The second question focuses on the modes of disintegration and raises a point that has been largely overlooked in the extant literature. The proposed contributions on the modes of disintegration go beyond the growing literature on differentiated integration and non-compliance. These contributions critically address how pressures towards EU disintegration are translated into certain modes and preferences for disintegration. Brexit can hence be understood as only one specific mode of disintegration.

O'Dubhghaill and Van Kerckhoven (2023) analyze the special case of Gibraltar, a UK enclave in Spain, and demonstrate the risk of Brexit resulting in patchwork disintegration across different parts of the UK. Furst (2023) analyzes how temporary internal border controls in the Schengen area lead to temporary disintegration in terms of free movement. Relatedly, Josipovic et al. (2023) discuss sectoral disintegration through the case of Austria's contestation of the Common European Asylum System and opposition against the expansion of the Schengen area to Romania and Bulgaria.

## 4. Conclusion

This thematic issue addresses two different but inter-linked questions: What drives EU disintegration? And what are the potential modes of EU disintegration? The rationale for combining these two perspectives is obvious but has not yet been discussed extensively in the literature: Different causes of EU disintegration pressures may drive different potential outcomes.

Taken together, the contributions advance scholarly understanding of European (dis)integration and produce timely, and policy-relevant, insights on how to identify (and perhaps counter) drivers of disintegration across Europe. In addition, outlining different modes of disintegration that can respond to these drivers without resulting in a complete withdrawal from the project of European integration.

## Acknowledgments

The authors gratefully acknowledge the funding from the Jean Monnet module The Economics of European

(Dis) Integration (611389-EPP-1–2019–1-BE-EPPJMO-MODULE), as well as presenters and discussants at the workshop of June 2021 on this topic.

### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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Article

## Preferences and Institutions in European (Dis)Integration

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Submitted: 31 January 2023 | Accepted: 17 April 2023 | Published: 5 July 2023

### Abstract

In this article, we present a game-theoretical model of political (dis)integration, and the incentives voters and politicians face during integration processes. We apply the model to the European Union. Preference homogeneity and economies of scale do not suffice to explain European integration. Rather, integration decisions are taken within an institutional setting that involves politicians with interests that may diverge from those of the voters they represent. Such politicians may take integration decisions that are not in line with their voters' interests as a result. We show that voters can in some circumstances prevent integration by strategically electing representatives who are farther away from them. The model provides novel insights into the process of European (dis)integration and the voter–politician dynamics that determine it. In addition, our model offers an alternative explanation for the relative success of extremist parties in the European Union.

### Keywords

European integration; European representatives; political institutions; spatial models; voters' interests

### Issue

This article is part of the issue “The Causes and Modes of European Disintegration” edited by Martijn Huysmans (Utrecht University) and Sven Van Kerckhoven (Vrije Universiteit Brussel).

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### 1. Introduction

The study of the optimal size of nations and political unions has received considerable attention. Alesina and Spolaore (2003, 2005) and Alesina and Wacziarg (1998), for example, find that the optimal size of nations is the result of a tradeoff between costs that result from the heterogeneity of policy preferences and economies of scale in the provision of government services. The costs of heterogeneity reduce the optimal size of nations, whereas economies of scale increase it. As nations become larger and the policy preferences of voters diverge, the benefits they derive from common policies tend to decrease. The per capita costs of providing services, such as defense, tend to decline, however, as nations expand.

We contribute to this literature by including in our analysis the political processes and institutions that lead to (dis)integration and the preferences of the politicians

involved in them. We use the term “integration” to refer to the establishment of supranational political institutions by a set of countries with the objective to jointly set policies in a number of policy areas. We consider disintegration as the withdrawal of one or more countries from the union.

We show that voter policy preferences and economies of scale are not enough to explain (dis)integration. Integration does not occur only if voter preferences are sufficiently aligned and scale economies are sufficiently high in the policy areas under consideration. Conversely, disintegration does not necessarily occur if the opposite is true either. Rather, integration decisions are taken within an institutional setting that involves politicians with interests that may diverge from those of the voters they represent. The features of these institutions and the interests of the politicians have an impact on these decisions. In this article, we focus on this impact. In particular, we consider a simple political



process. In each country that may integrate voters first choose a political representative, who then decides on integration together with the other countries' representatives by unanimity. The representative does not need an agreement with other countries' representatives to withdraw from the union after its formation and cause its (partial) disintegration. We consider representatives who are partially motivated by the value of holding office, unlike the voters they represent. This may lead to integration decisions that are in conflict with voters' interests. A country's representative may decide to integrate even if its voters prefer not to integrate and vice versa. Voters may anticipate and in some cases prevent integration by electing politicians with policy preferences different from their own.

In the European Union, for example, Belgium tends to elect politicians who are in favor of a federal Europe. One such politician is its former prime minister, Guy Verhofstadt, who is also a former leader of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe Group in the European Parliament (EP). Expressing views shared by most mainstream Belgian politicians he wrote in 2017:

After decades in service to the European people, I can honestly say that, at every turn, the greatest threat to the safety and prosperity of Europe is a failure to finish the great project begun in 1953, to unite the seemingly disparate nations of the continent together into one grand federal project. (Verhofstadt, 2017, pp. 8–9)

Meanwhile, five-term Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán declared in January of that same year that Europe “became enslaved to a utopia—and the name of that utopia is a supranational Europe” (Orbán, 2017, p. 6). He further stated that Europe must “abandon the illusion of federalism” and that “we are interested in a strong Hungary in a strong European Union” (Orbán, 2017, p. 6).

Such vastly different statements suggest that Belgian and Hungarian voters may have had starkly different opinions on European integration. Yet, in the 2017 Eurobarometer poll Hungarians' images of the EU were nearly as positive as those of Belgians. In particular, Hungarians gave the EU a net-positive score of 15, with the EU conjuring up a positive image for 36% of respondents and a negative image for 21% (European Commission, 2017). In turn, Belgians gave the EU a net-positive score of 17, with the EU conjuring up a positive image for 39% of respondents and a negative image for 22% (European Commission, 2017). Why, then, do Hungarian voters elect politicians with a much more negative attitude toward the EU than their own? And why do Belgian voters do the opposite? We explain why voters in some countries elect more pro-integration politicians than those in other countries, even though their attitudes toward integration are about equally positive.

Our article has important implications for policymakers and academics. Even if voters do not have a direct

say on (dis)integration through referenda, they can still affect it through their choice of representatives. Second, this article adds to our understanding of voters' choice of representatives. It shows that voters may have incentives to vote for politicians with more extreme views than their own and those of mainstream EU politicians.

## 2. Literature

The three most prevalent theories of (European) integration are neofunctionalism, intergovernmentalism, and postfunctionalism. Neofunctionalists, most prominently Haas (1964), argue that the initial integration in a number of functional policy areas has tended to “spill over” beyond states' control with the help of EU institutions and interest groups, and eventually undermines states' sovereignty. Neofunctionalists see integration as a gradual and self-sustaining process because it generates unanticipated problems that trigger further integration (Hooghe & Marks, 2019; Risse, 2005).

Intergovernmentalists, such as Hoffmann (1966), by contrast, argue that member states remain the principal, uniquely powerful actors in the integration process. Moravcsik (1993) contended that states are still in control of integration since unanimity in the Council is required for the approval of treaties. Intergovernmentalists arguably focus on the gatekeeping role of national governments (Tsebelis & Garrett, 2001).

Postfunctionalists, finally, challenge the rationalist-economic logic of neofunctionalism and intergovernmentalism (Hooghe & Marks, 2019). As European integration proceeded, they argue, issues related to it became more politicized and more salient in the public sphere (see also Carubba, 2001). As a result, the (national) identity of voters and the structure of the political conflict in elections and referenda play a key role in driving forward European integration. A theory of constraining dissensus rather than permissive consensus thus underlies this theory (Hooghe & Marks, 2008).

Our theory could be considered as a combination of intergovernmentalism and postfunctionalism, because in our model the national governments are the main actors who decide whether to proceed with integration (Moravcsik, 2018), and voters are cognizant of the EU and the role it plays when taking part in national elections respectively. The strategic interplay between voters and elites—and the conflicts of interests between them—is thus of primary interest in this article.

In addition to studying the impact of institutions on European integration decisions, our article contributes to the literature on voters' choices of political representatives. Specifically, our model is closely related to that presented by Kedar (2005). In her model, voters care about policy outcomes and take into account the institutional context that governs post-election bargaining. Anticipating compromise bargaining, voters may vote for parties that have more extreme preferences than they have themselves. In this article, we show that a

similar mechanism may affect decisions on European (dis)integration.

### 3. The Model

#### 3.1. Policies, Actors, and Preferences

We present a spatial model of integration and policy-making. In spatial models, policies are represented as points in a policy space. Each dimension in the space corresponds to a particular policy issue, with different locations on that dimension matching different policy positions on the issue. Policymaking then consists of choosing a point in the policy space. While we apply the model to the EU, it is meant as a generic model that can also be used to analyze the formation of unions elsewhere.

For simplicity, we assume that the policy space is one-dimensional. This is a standard assumption in the literature on spatial models of EU policymaking (Van Gruisen & Crombez, 2019, 2021) and beyond (e.g., Kedar, 2005). That is, only one policy issue is considered. For example, under consideration may be whether to integrate trade policy and what trade policy to set. Different points in the policy space may then correspond to different levels of protectionism. In our model, integration does not represent a policy dimension and actors do not have preferences over integration as such. Rather, they have preferences over a substantive policy issue, such as trade, and decide whether to integrate it based on their expectations of the policies that will be set on that issue with and without integration.

There are two types of actors: voters and politicians. Voters' utilities depend on the location of the policy and its efficiency. As far as the location is concerned, we assume that voters have Euclidean preferences. They have ideal policies and prefer policies that are closer to rather than farther away from their ideal policies. For example, on trade policy, we consider actors as having ideal levels of protectionism and preferring levels that are closer to them.

As for a policy's efficiency, we assume that it is affected by economies of scale. Efficiency is higher for a larger country or union of countries. Efficiency gains in trade policy may result from an improved bargaining position in international negotiations, for example. Our way of modeling efficiency is similar to the way Hirsch and Shotts (2012) model valence. They consider political actors as caring not only about the location of policy but also about its valence. Valence refers to the quality of the policy, the extent to which it has been studied carefully and can be implemented rapidly.

In the absence of integration, policy is set at the national level  $n$ . The utility  $U_j^n$  of voter  $j$  in country  $k$  then is:

$$U_j^n(x_k^n, I_k) = -(x_j - x_k^n)^2 + E(I_k)$$

Policy  $x_k^n$  is the policy set at the national level  $n$  in country  $k$ , whereas policy  $x_j$  stands for  $j$ 's ideal policy. The function  $E$  denotes the efficiency of a policy. It is strictly increasing in country  $k$ 's population size  $I_k$ .

The utility  $U_j^u$  that voter  $j$  in country  $k$  derives if a policy is set at the union level  $u$  is:

$$U_j^u(x^u, \sum_{c \in K} I_c) = -(x_j - x^u)^2 + E\left(\sum_{c \in K} I_c\right)$$

Policy  $x^u$  is the policy set at the union level. Country  $c$  belongs to the subset  $K$  of integrating countries:  $c \in K \subseteq N$ , where  $N$  is the set of countries. Voters may lose utility as a result of integration because union policy may be farther away from their ideal policies than the national policy, but they gain from the efficiency of policies set at the union level.

In each country  $c$  there are  $z_c$  politicians competing in a national election. They care about the location of the policy that is set, whether it be for ideological or electoral reasons, about its efficiency, and about holding office. Like voters, they have Euclidean preferences over policy locations, and their utilities are strictly increasing in efficiency. Unlike voters, they are also motivated by the value of holding office. This motivation is thus the driver of conflicts between voters and politicians. If policy is not integrated, and thus set at the national level, the utility  $V_p^n$  of politician  $p$  in country  $k$  is:

$$V_p^n(x_k^n, I_k) = M(I_k) - (x_p - x_k^n)^2 + E(I_k)$$

The function  $M$  stands for the utility politicians derive from holding national office. It is strictly increasing in population size  $I_k$ . Policy  $x_p$  stands for politician  $p$ 's ideal policy.

The utility  $V_p^u$  politician  $p$  in country  $k$  gets if a policy is set at the union level  $u$  is:

$$V_p^u(x^u, \sum_{c \in K} I_c) = T\left(\sum_{c \in K} I_c\right) - (x_p - x^u)^2 + E\left(\sum_{c \in K} I_c\right)$$

The function  $T$  stands for the utility politicians obtain from holding higher office and is strictly increasing in the size of the union. The value of holding office reflects the importance politicians attach to the power and prestige that comes with it, whether at the national or union level. In addition, the value may include the spoils that officeholders hand out to their followers and the electoral value of incumbency.

Office can be interpreted broadly. At the national level, it may refer to the office of head-of-state or head-of-government, other ministerial or legislative positions. In our model, we focus on one officeholder. This could be a national government minister. At the union level office may include executive and legislative positions as well. In the EU, commissioners, members of the Council of the EU, members of the European Council, and members of the EP all hold offices that yield power as a result of their involvement in the formulation of policy

agendas, the legislative process, or the implementation of policies.

The value of holding office at the national level may not be equal to the value of holding office in a union of the same size, because the institutions and legislative process may differ. The functions  $T$  and  $M$  are thus distinct. At the union level, more officeholders may be involved, for example, and the value of holding a single office may be lower as a result. In the EU, national government ministers share legislative powers with the representatives of other countries in the Council, for example.

However, the value a politician attaches to holding office in the EU may also reflect the likelihood that she be elected to other offices, such as the Commission, the presidency of the European Council, and the EP. In general, the ambition to one day be a leading politician at the union level can give politicians incentives to govern responsibly at the national level (Myerson, 2006). The stability of federal systems largely depends on their set-up and institutions and the incentives they provide their politicians (Riker, 1964; Rose-Ackerman, 1981).

We assume that all politicians value office equally. Centrists and extremists thus attach the same value to office at the national as well as supranational levels. In reality, extremists arguably value supranational office relatively less, however. European integration is a project that is mostly favored by mainstream centrist politicians, whereas politicians at either end of the political spectrum tend to oppose it. This opposition may reduce the value they attach to holding office at the union level. Adams et al. (2021), for example, find empirical evidence that governing parties are more pro-EU. They thus arguably value supranational office more. We will show below that allowing for variation of officeholding values would reinforce our conclusions. Finally, we note that

extremist parties may also induce a shift of centrist parties' positions, mainly for strategic reasons. This does not affect the conclusions of our model, however.

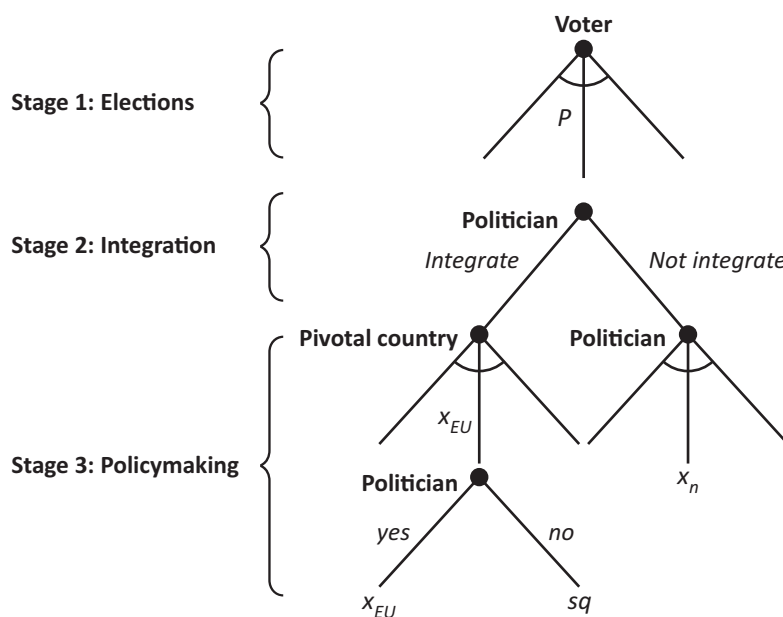
### 3.2. The Sequence of Events

The sequence of events is as follows. In the first stage, each country's voters elect one politician to office, as shown in Figure 1. In the second stage, the elected politicians choose whether or not to integrate, that is, set government policy jointly with the politicians elected in other countries, or keep policymaking at the lower level. Subsequently, politicians set policy.

The first stage is the only stage in which voters play a role. In particular, in each country, they elect a politician to office. Politicians differ only from one another with respect to their policy preferences. Voters thus consider the politicians' policy preferences in elections.

Since electoral systems and national political institutions are not the main focus of our article, we simply assume that countries have democratic political systems and that the median voter gets to choose the politician he wants. Elaborating further on national electoral systems and political institutions would not yield any additional insights and would go beyond the purpose of this article. Below we focus on the countries' median voters for that reason, unless explicitly indicated differently. The median voter's choice of politician in a country may or may not be a politician with policy preferences equal to his own.

In the second stage, politicians decide whether to integrate policy, that is, set policy at a higher level. They vote "yes" or "no" on integration. A union is formed if a subset  $k$  of at least two countries decides to form a union. The countries that vote in favor of integration then form



**Figure 1.** The sequence of events. Notes:  $P$ —choice of politician by the domestic voters;  $x_{EU}$ —policy at the EU level;  $x_n$ —policy at the national level;  $sq$ —status quo.

the union. The other countries stay out of it. If no country or one country only votes in favor of unification, no union is formed. After its formation, a politician does not need an agreement with other countries to withdraw from the union and thus (partially) disintegrate it.

Suppose that a country's elected politician decides to keep policymaking at the lower level in the second stage or is the only one who votes for integration. Then she sets policy at the national level on her own in the third stage. Suppose, by contrast, that she decides to set policy at the union level and at least one other country's elected politician does so too. Then she sets policy jointly with the politicians from the other countries that voted for unification. This happens in two steps. First, the politician who represents the relevant pivotal country makes a proposal. The voting rule used in the second step determines which countries are pivotal. Under supermajority rule, there are two pivotal countries: one for moves to the left and another for moves to the right. However, for any location of the status quo, a supermajority can be found for moves in at most one direction. So, only one pivotal country is relevant. We focus on that country. If no supermajority wants to move away from the status quo either pivotal country can be considered as relevant. Assuming that more countries and other actors could formulate proposals would complicate the model without gaining additional insights relevant to the analysis.

Next, politicians vote on the proposal. It is adopted and becomes policy throughout the union if it obtains a pre-determined share  $\gamma \geq \frac{1}{2}$  of the votes. Otherwise, the status quo prevails in the countries whose elected politicians decided to integrate. For simplicity, we assume the status quo is the same in all countries. Countries may have one vote each or their vote weights may depend on their population sizes, as is the case in the EU under the qualified majority rule.

The model can be applied to disintegration as well. In the second stage, politicians then decide whether to remain in the union or leave it. If a politician decides to leave or is the only one who decides to remain, she sets policy on her own in the third stage. If she decides to remain and at least one other politician does so too, they together set policy at the union level in the third stage.

### 3.3. Information

We present a game-theoretical model with complete and perfect information: the political actors know the structure of the process, each other's preferences, the actions taken, and the location of the status quo. Thus we use the subgame perfect Nash equilibrium concept. We make these informational assumptions because they allow us to present a relatively simple model that yields clear insights. In reality, political actors, especially voters, may not have perfect information on the preferences of national politicians or the structure of the political process. Nonetheless, our model yields conclusions that remain valuable even if voters and politicians have only

a vague idea of others' preferences and the functioning of political institutions (for a similar approach, see Kedar, 2005).

## 4. The Equilibrium

Since there is perfect and complete information, the model can be solved by backward induction. As a consequence, we first consider the third stage of the integration and policymaking process.

### 4.1. Policymaking (Stage 3)

If policy is set at the national level, the elected politician sets policy equal to her own ideal policy, because that policy maximizes her utility. However, if policy is set at the union level, the situation is more complicated. That stage then consists of two steps. In the last step, politicians compare the proposal to the status quo. The pivotal country's politician proposes her own ideal policy in the first step. That policy is adopted if a majority  $\gamma$  prefers it to the status quo. Otherwise, the status quo prevails.

As a result, there are three possible policy outcomes in a country in the third stage: the ideal policy of the nationally elected politician, the ideal policy of the politician who represents the pivotal country at the union level, and the status quo. The utility of politician  $p$  if the policy is set at the national level can then be characterized as follows:

$$V_p^n(x_k^n = x_p, I_k) = M(I_k) + E(I_k)$$

Since the elected politician obtains her ideal policy, her utility consists of the utilities she derives from holding national office and policy efficiency. The median voter  $j$ 's utility, if the policy is set at the national level, is:

$$U_j^n(x_k^n = x_p, I_k) = -(x_j - x_p)^2 + E(I_k)$$

If the policy is set at the union level, by contrast, the utility of politician  $p$  is as follows:

$$V_p^u(x^u = x^*, \sum_{c \in K} I_c) = T\left(\sum_{c \in K} I_c\right) - (x_p - x^*)^2 + E\left(\sum_{c \in K} I_c\right)$$

The policy  $x^*$  denotes the policy set at the union level, whether it be the status quo or the ideal policy of the elected politician of the pivotal country. Median voter  $j$ 's utility under integration is as follows:

$$U_j^u(x^u = x^*, \sum_{c \in K} I_c) = -(x_j - x^*)^2 + E\left(\sum_{c \in K} I_c\right)$$

### 4.2. Integration (Stage 2)

In the second stage, politician  $p$  compares the utilities she derives in the third stage with and without integration, taking as given the integration decisions the other countries' elected politicians make. In particular, she

decides to integrate policy if and only if the following inequality holds:

$$\begin{aligned}
 V_p^u \left( x^u = x^*, \sum_{c \in K} I_c \right) &\geq V_p^n \left( x_k^n = x_p, I_k \right) \\
 \Downarrow \\
 T \left( \sum_{c \in K} I_c \right) - (x_p - x^*)^2 + E \left( \sum_{c \in K} I_c \right) &\geq M(I_k) + E(I_k) \\
 \Downarrow \\
 \underbrace{\left( T \left( \sum_{c \in K} I_c \right) - M(I_k) \right)}_{\text{office gains}} + \underbrace{\left( E \left( \sum_{c \in K} I_c \right) - E(I_k) \right)}_{\text{efficiency gains}} &\geq \underbrace{(x_p - x^*)^2}_{\text{policy loss}} \quad (1)
 \end{aligned}$$

That is, politicians approve integration if and only if the gains in the value of officeholding plus the gains in efficiency outweigh the utility loss that results from policy preference heterogeneity at the union level. Similarly, after the formation of a union a newly elected politician withdraws if this equation does not hold for her. By contrast, median voter  $j$  prefers integration under the following condition:

$$\begin{aligned}
 -(x_j - x^*)^2 + E \left( \sum_{c \in K} I_c \right) &\geq -(x_j - x_p)^2 + E(I_k) \\
 \Downarrow \\
 \underbrace{E \left( \sum_{c \in K} I_c \right) - E(I_k)}_{\text{efficiency gains}} &\geq \underbrace{(x_j - x^*)^2 - (x_j - x_p)^2}_{\text{policy loss}} \quad (2)
 \end{aligned}$$

Voter  $j$  prefers integration when the efficiency gains outweigh the loss due to policy preference heterogeneity.

#### 4.3. Elections (Stage 1)

In the first stage, voters elect politicians to office. They take into account politicians' policy preferences, the decisions they expect politicians to make in the second stage, and the policies these decisions lead to in the third stage. They elect the politician whose actions yield them the highest utility.

If all politicians in country  $k$  make the same decision on integration in the second stage, the median voter in country  $k$  can do no better than elect the politician with policy preferences equal to his own. To see this, suppose first that all politicians decide to integrate. Then the policy outcome is equal to the status quo or the ideal policy of the politician who represents the pivotal country. The median voter in country  $k$  cannot move the outcome closer to him by voting for a politician who is farther away from him. If the pivotal country is to the left (right) of him, then he can only move the policy outcome by voting for a politician who is to the left (right) of the pivotal country, which is counter to his preferences. Suppose next that all politicians in country  $k$  decide not to integrate.

Then the median voter in country  $k$  elects the politician with policy preferences equal to his own in the first stage and obtains his own ideal policy. In equilibrium, voters thus vote for the politician with policy preferences equal to their own, if all politicians make the same integration decision.

Voters may only have incentives to elect politicians with policy preferences different from their own, if politicians with the same preferences over policy make decisions on integration in stage two that are different from what the voters want, whereas politicians with different policy preferences make the integration decision the voters want. In particular, the voters elect politicians with different policy preferences in one of two scenarios.

##### 4.3.1. Scenario 1

The median voter wants to integrate, whereas the politician with the same policy preferences does not. Rearranging Equations 1 and 2 for  $x_j = x_p$ , we can see that this occurs when the following two conditions hold:

$$\begin{aligned}
 \left\{ \begin{array}{l} -(x_p - x^*)^2 + E \left( \sum_{c \in K} I_c \right) - E(I_k) < M(I_k) - T \left( \sum_{c \in K} I_c \right) \\ -(x_p - x^*)^2 + E \left( \sum_{c \in K} I_c \right) - E(I_k) \geq 0 \end{array} \right. \\
 \Downarrow \\
 \left( M(I_k) - T \left( \sum_{c \in K} I_c \right) \right) > \left( E \left( \sum_{c \in K} I_c \right) - E(I_k) \right) - (x_p - x^*)^2 \geq 0 \quad (3)
 \end{aligned}$$

That is, median voter  $j$  wants to integrate but a politician with the same policy preferences does not if the efficiency gains that result from integration outweigh the losses due to policy heterogeneity, but these net gains are not large enough to compensate for the loss in officeholding value.

In this case, the best alternative for the voter is to elect a politician with an ideal policy equal to the policy outcome at the union level:  $x_p = x^*$ . That politician will be the most in favor of integration because she does not suffer from policy heterogeneity, whereas the voter is indifferent between that politician and other politicians who want to integrate and have policy preferences closer to his own because they do not affect the union's policy outcome  $x^*$ .

Suppose that the voter elects such a politician. Then that politician supports integration if the efficiency gains compensate for the loss in officeholding value. From Equation 1 we obtain the following:

$$\left( E \left( \sum_{c \in K} I_c \right) - E(I_k) \right) \geq M(I_k) - T \left( \sum_{c \in K} I_c \right) \quad (4)$$

If the opposite is true, and the efficiency gains do not fully make up for the loss in officeholding value, no politician wants to integrate. In that case, it is optimal for the



median voter to elect a politician with policy preferences equal to his own, because that policy will then be implemented at the national level.

#### 4.3.2. Scenario 2

The median voter does not want to integrate, whereas the politician with the same policy preferences does. This occurs when the opposite of Equation 3 holds, that is, if the efficiency gains that result from integration do not outweigh the losses due to policy heterogeneity, but this net loss is smaller than the gain in officeholding value.

In this case, voter  $j$  does not necessarily vote for a politician with policy preferences equal to his own either. He may want to elect a politician with different policy preferences. A politician with policy preferences closer to the policy outcome at the union level is even more in favor of integration than a politician with policy preferences equal to his own. Voting for such a politician thus does not yield a higher utility. Voting for politician  $q$ , who is farther away from the policy outcome at the union level than he is himself, may yield a higher utility, however. For this to hold the following two conditions need to be satisfied: (a) The politician does not want to integrate and (b) the policy the politician sets at the national level yields a higher utility to the voter than the integrated policy. This is shown by the following equations:

$$\left\{ \begin{array}{l} T\left(\sum_{c \in K} I_c\right) - (x_q - x^*)^2 + E\left(\sum_{c \in K} I_c\right) \leq M(I_k) + E(I_k) \quad (5a) \\ - (x_j - x_q)^2 + E(I_k) \geq - (x_j - x^*)^2 + E\left(\sum_{c \in K} I_c\right) \quad (5b) \end{array} \right.$$

For the voter, there is no point in electing a politician farther away from himself and the policy outcome at the union level than is needed to make sure that the politician votes against integration. A politician who is even farther away would yield a lower utility. The voter thus looks for the politician with the ideal policy  $x_q$  that makes her indifferent between integration and no integration. For this politician, Equation 5a is binding. Solving for  $x_q$ , we obtain the following values:

$$x_q = \left\{ \begin{array}{l} x^* + \sqrt{\left(T\left(\sum_{c \in K} I_c\right) - M(I_k)\right) + \left(E\left(\sum_{c \in K} I_c\right) - E(I_k)\right)} \quad (6a) \\ x^* - \sqrt{\left(T\left(\sum_{c \in K} I_c\right) - M(I_k)\right) + \left(E\left(\sum_{c \in K} I_c\right) - E(I_k)\right)} \quad (6b) \end{array} \right.$$

Equations 6a and 6b show the two ideal policies that make a politician indifferent between integration and no integration. If the policy outcome at the union level is to the right (left) of country  $k$ 's median voter, the median prefers to elect the politician to the left (right) of himself. Equation 6b (6a) then applies. There is no point for the

median voter to appoint a politician to the right of the policy outcome at the union level if he is to the left of it. Such a politician would either go for integration, which at best yields the same result as electing a politician with the same policy preferences as himself, or no integration and a policy that is further away than the policy outcome at the union level, which is worse than integration for the median.

The equations show that the higher the gains from holding a union office are, the farther away  $x_q$  needs to be from the policy outcome at the union level and thus the median voter in country  $k$ . Efficiency gains also increase the distance between  $x^*$  and  $x_q$ .

For a voter to go ahead and indeed choose a politician with this ideal policy  $x_q$ , and hence avoid integration, the policy that results from this election must yield a higher utility than the integrated policy would. That is, Equation 5b must hold. For a policy outcome at the union level that is to the right of the voter,  $x^* > x_j > x_q$ , this inequality holds under the following condition:

$$\begin{aligned} & - \left( x_j - \left( x^* - \sqrt{\left( T\left( \sum_{c \in K} I_c \right) - M(I_k) \right) + \left( E\left( \sum_{c \in K} I_c \right) - E(I_k) \right)} \right) \right)^2 \\ & \geq - (x_j - x^*)^2 + E\left(\sum_{c \in K} I_c\right) - E(I_k) \end{aligned} \quad (7)$$

Whether this condition holds depends on the integrated policy  $x^*$ , the officeholding values  $T(\sum_{c \in K} I_c)$  and  $M(I_k)$ , and the efficiency of policies  $E(\sum_{c \in K} I_c)$  and  $E(I_k)$ . A similar condition needs to be fulfilled for a pivotal country to the left of the voter. As the office gains from integration,  $(T(\sum_{c \in K} I_c) - M(I_k))$ , increase above a crucial level, there is no politician voter  $j$  prefers over a politician with an ideal policy equal to his own, and integration thus occurs.

An increase in efficiency gains from integration  $E(\sum_{c \in K} I_c) - E(I_k)$  has a twofold effect. First, the higher these gains, the further a politician has to be from the policy outcome at the union level and voter  $j$  to oppose integration. This has a negative effect on the utility voter  $j$  derives from the policy the politician would set. Second, the utility voter  $j$  derives from integration increases when efficiency gains rise. This means that the politician has to be closer to the voter than when efficiency gains are low for the voter to choose her and prevent integration. These two effects reinforce themselves. They both render the election of a politician who does not want integration less advantageous for voter  $j$ . As efficiency gains increase beyond a certain level, there is no politician voter  $j$  prefers over a politician with an ideal policy equal to his own, and integration thus occurs.

Finally, as the distance between the integrated policy  $x^*$  and voter  $j$ 's ideal policy  $x_j$  declines, voter  $j$ 's utility from integration (on the right-hand side of Equation 7) rises, whereas his utility from the policy set at the national level (on the left-hand side) decreases. As the

distance drops below a crucial level, voter  $j$  prefers integration and the election of a politician with an ideal policy equal to his own.

In sum, the equilibrium strategy for country  $k$ 's median voter is to elect a politician with an ideal policy equal to his own, except in two circumstances. First, he elects a politician with an ideal policy equal to the status quo or the ideal policy of the politician who represents the pivotal country if the efficiency gains that result from integration outweigh the losses due to an increase in heterogeneity. Moreover, these net gains compensate for the loss in the officeholding value for a politician with an ideal policy equal to the policy outcome at the union level, but not for a politician with an ideal policy equal to his own. This scenario is illustrated in Figure 2 (left panel). For simplicity, the status quo is assumed to be to the left of all countries in the figure.

In Scenario 1, the median voter  $j$  wants integration, but the politician  $p$  with policy preferences equal to his own does not. Rather than voting for that politician, the voter votes for a politician with preferences equal to the pivotal politician at the union level ( $x_{EU}$ ) to obtain integration. Note that there is one politician  $x_i$  between  $x_{EU}$  and  $x_j$  that is indifferent between integration and no integration. In Scenario 2, the median voter does not want integration, but the politician with similar policy preferences does. Rather than voting for that politician, the voter votes for a politician with preferences farther away from the pivotal politician at the union level ( $x_q$ ) to prevent integration. This politician is indifferent between integration and no integration.

Second, he elects a politician with an ideal policy that makes the politician indifferent between integration and no integration, if the efficiency gains that result from integration do not outweigh the losses due to an increase in heterogeneity. Moreover, the gain in officeholding value compensates for this net loss for a politician with an ideal policy equal to his own, but not for a politician who is

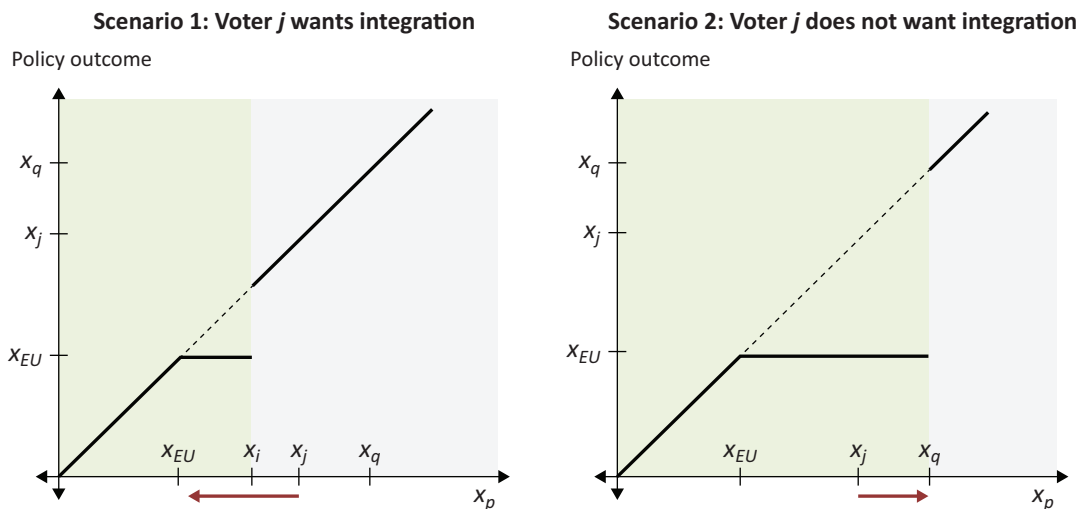
sufficiently far away from him and the policy outcome at the union level. Finally, this politician needs to be sufficiently close to the voter. This scenario is also illustrated in Figure 2 (right panel).

Voters and politicians also have to take into account the actions of voters and politicians in other countries, because these actors' decisions affect their own utilities. The voters and politicians have optimal strategies given any subset of countries whose elected politicians choose to form a union with their country. If, for all the countries in the subset, voters elect politicians that integrate, the countries integrate. There could be multiple subsets of countries that in equilibrium could form a union, and, as a consequence, there could be multiple equilibria. Which union is established in equilibrium depends on factors that are not considered in our model, such as negotiations, bargaining power, informal rules and norms, etc. In our model, we do not study which union is formed. If, for each subset, one of the countries does not want to integrate, no integration occurs.

Similarly, when a union has been formed, voters vote for politicians with preferences equal to their own, except in two scenarios. First, voters may vote for politicians with preferences equal to the policy set at the union level, if they want to stay in the union but politicians with preferences equal to their own do not (any longer). Second, voters may vote for politicians who are farther away from them and the policy set at the union level, if they do not want to stay in the union (any longer), but politicians with preferences equal to their own do. A voting change may result from changes in policy preferences, efficiency gains, or the values of officeholding.

### 5. Discussion

In this section, we discuss how EU integration and recent elections in the EU can be interpreted in light of our theory.



**Figure 2.** Stage 1: The choice of representative  $X_p$ . Note: Grey represents the set of politicians that do not prefer integration and green represents the set of politicians that do prefer integration if elected.

Since 2017, extremist parties on the left and right have gained ground in recent elections throughout the EU, even though the shift may be less pronounced and less universal than often portrayed (De Vries, 2018). This success could indicate that voters have shifted their positions on the main political issues of the day and no longer want to pursue centrist policies. Our theory offers an alternative explanation. In particular, it shows that voters may have incentives to vote for politicians with more extreme views than their own and those of mainstream EU politicians.

As we showed above in our discussion of Equation 7, voters have a higher incentive to vote for an extremist politician if the efficiency gains from integration are smaller and policy heterogeneity at the union level is higher. Over the years efficiency gains from further integration arguably have indeed decreased, whereas heterogeneity recently rose as a result of the financial and economic crisis, for example.

A series of treaties, from the Treaty of Paris (1952) to the Treaty of Lisbon (2007), transferred powers from the member states to the Union and integrated policies in ever more policy areas. Several policy areas that display clear economies of scale, such as the single market, competition policy and external trade policy, became EU responsibilities. Each individual member state is quite small compared to the EU as a whole. Even the largest member state, Germany, accounts for only 16% of the EU population. Even for Germany, there are thus considerable economies of scale that can be achieved by integrating such policies as trade and competition. The EU is in a stronger position vis-à-vis other countries in international trade negotiations than Germany would be on its own. Likewise, it is better placed to enforce competition rules with respect to large multinational companies.

As EU integration continued, however, and more responsibilities were handed over to the EU level, these included responsibilities that display much smaller economies of scale. Arguably the economies of scale that result from integrating aspects of cultural and sports policies, for example, are considerably smaller than those from integrating trade policy (Alesina & Spolaore, 2003).

Moreover, the financial crisis of 2008 and subsequent economic crises revealed or accentuated the heterogeneity between member states. Prior to the sovereign debt crisis, GDP per capita converged in the euro area, but this evolution was reversed thereafter (Bordignon et al., 2022). In member states that were net recipients of EU budget funds and member states that suffered most during the crises and received financial aid to get through them, voters arguably felt that they were not treated well by the better-off member states and moved to the left. Voters in member states that were net contributors to the EU budget and member states that paid for other member states' bailouts, by contrast, may have felt that they had to pay too much and shifted right. The financial crisis could thus be considered an external shock that increased preference heterogeneity.

The decrease in scale economies of further integration and the rise in preference heterogeneity may have led to a decline in voter enthusiasm for the EU (European Commission, 2017; Nancy, 2016). This decline may have increased the support for extremist parties that are more inclined to leave the EU and favor its disintegration. As our model shows, this does not necessarily imply that the voters of these parties are as extremist as the parties are. The voters may merely experience too much policy heterogeneity when they compare their own ideal policies to EU policy and the efficiency gains may not be sufficient to overcome this.

If politicians then place too much value on the EU office, voters may turn to the election of extremist politicians who do prefer disintegration and leaving the EU. However, as shown in our model, in the absence of political contenders that satisfy conditions 5a and 5b, too little disintegration may occur. In reality, however, politicians do not all value office equally, contrary to what we assumed in our model. Voters can then turn to extreme parties that value office less, especially office at the Union level. This presents opportunities for challenger parties that are ideologically at the extremes and value office less, to enter the political landscape, win government office, and take their country out of the Union. Allowing parties to value office differently thus reinforces our conclusions, as pointed out in Section 3.1.

In the UK, one such challenger party, UKIP, arguably represented such a threat to the ruling Conservative Party that it felt the need to call a referendum on continued EU membership. Voters thus got the opportunity to directly vote on rolling back integration and leaving the EU. They narrowly voted to leave. Not surprisingly, the UK is the member state that is the least dependent on trade with the rest of the EU and has always perceived itself as distinct from it. The economies of scale of integration were thus lower for the UK than other member states and the perceived cost of heterogeneity was high. As seen above, this increases the incentives for voters to vote for politicians with more extreme preferences than their own.

In countries that benefit a lot from economies of scale (for example open economies such as Belgium), voters may have incentives to elect politicians with policy preferences closer to the EU's pivotal countries than they are. For example, at the 2014 EP elections in Flanders, the victory of the Flemish Nationalists was less outspoken than in the national elections held on the same day. The Flemish Nationalists campaigned on a platform of economic reform but were more critical of EU integration than mainstream parties such as the Liberal Democrats and the Christian Democrats, who performed better in the EP elections than in the national elections. This may indicate that Flemish voters preferred the Nationalist's economic policies, but voted for the Liberal and Christian Democrats in greater proportions in the EP elections because EU integration was arguably more on their minds than economic policies, and because they realized

that the EU generates important economies of scale for their relatively small economy. Therefore, they did not want to set the country on a path that would lead to an exit from the EU.

Voters' perceptions of the gains of integration may vary over time, leading to changes in voting behavior. Parties may respond to these changes by repositioning themselves or altering their rhetoric. Walter (2021) shows how Brexit has deterred voters in other countries from pursuing a similar path. Martini and Walter (2023) find that the UK experience has mitigated populist parties' anti-EU rhetoric. In our model, such changes in voter preferences and perceptions make them less inclined to vote for more extreme politicians. Parties can react to that by mitigating their rhetoric.

Our theory may also explain why integration proceeded in certain policy areas but has been very modest in other areas. Consider, for example, defense policy. Even though there are considerable economies of scale in this policy area, it is not integrated in Europe. Politicians may see a national army as a way to hand out jobs, thus increasing the value of holding national office. If European armies were to be integrated, the number of soldiers would be significantly reduced. This may withhold politicians from pursuing further integration in this area.

## 6. Conclusions

This article builds on the literature on the size of nations but focuses on (dis)integration and how it is affected by the political process that leads to it. It addresses the question of why policymaking in certain policy areas is integrated, whereas countries are reluctant to give up sovereignty in other areas. It looks beyond the economic gains and losses that result from economies of scale and policy preference heterogeneity and considers political actors' incentives during the process of (dis)integration.

We find that the value politicians attach to higher office at the union level relative to office at the national level may induce them to implement integration even though their voters prefer no integration, and vice versa.

In particular, politicians integrate policy in spite of their voters' preferences, if they value union office sufficiently high relative to national office. Voters can then prevent integration in equilibrium by electing politicians with policy preferences farther away from the pivotal actors in the union unless politicians value union office too highly. This option becomes even more advantageous for voters if extremist politicians value union office less highly than mainstream politicians. Similarly, if a country is already in a union, voters can prevent further integration or achieve disintegration by voting for politicians with more extreme preferences, thus creating opportunities for challenger parties to enter the political landscape.

Likewise, politicians do not integrate policy even though their voters prefer it if they value national office sufficiently high relative to union office. In that case, voters may obtain integration after all in equilibrium by

electing politicians with policy preferences equal to the pivotal actors at the union level, unless politicians value national office too highly.

Our theory may explain why EU voters elect politicians to national office with more extreme policy preferences than their own if they do not want integration or prefer disintegration, but the value of holding EU office is relatively high. Similarly, it may clarify why other countries' voters elect politicians that seem more pro-EU than they are themselves.

## Acknowledgments

We would like to thank the editors of this thematic issue and the reviewers for their helpful comments and suggestions.

## Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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Article

# Voter Disenchantment in the Aftermath of the 2005 EU Constitutional Referendum in France

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Submitted: 10 January 2023 | Accepted: 12 April 2023 | Published: 5 July 2023

## Abstract

In a popular referendum in 2005, French voters rejected their country's adoption of a proposed EU Constitution. Yet, in seeming defiance of the popular vote, the government subsequently proceeded to implement the core of the legislation without consulting the public again. This article empirically examines the electoral impacts of these events. We build a comprehensive fine-grained dataset of nationwide election results for more than 36,000 metropolitan French municipalities. Employing cross-sectional analysis for all national elections held in the decade after the referendum vote, we find that the strength of a municipality's rejection of the EU Constitution in 2005 is associated with a lower voter turnout, higher shares of blank votes, and larger gains for anti-system parties in subsequent elections. The findings are robust to various modelling choices and the inclusion of a large array of controls. The results indicate that bypassing a popular vote could entail protracted adverse effects on the quality of democratic participation and deliberation.

## Keywords

anti-system politics; electoral participation; EU; EU Constitution; France; party cartelization; referendum

## Issue

This article is part of the issue “The Causes and Modes of European Disintegration” edited by Martijn Huysmans (Utrecht University) and Sven Van Kerckhoven (Vrije Universiteit Brussel).

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## 1. Introduction

On 29 May 2005, France voted on the adoption of the Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe (TCE) in a popular referendum. A surprisingly clear majority of 55% of voters rejected the Constitution. Yet, despite the popular rejection, the government continued working on implementing the international agreement. In 2008, the revised version of the TCE, the Lisbon Treaty, was ratified without consulting French voters anew.

The purpose of this article is to examine the electoral impact of this bypassing of the popular vote on subsequent national elections. To do so, we compile a municipality-level dataset, containing more than 36,000 French communes, linking the voting outcomes of the 2005 TCE referendum to two cycles of European Parliament (EP), legislative, and presidential elections

throughout the decade following the referendum vote. Applying cross-sectional analysis, we evaluate the impact of the bypassing of the referendum on three expressions of voter disillusion with the political process: turnout (passive disengagement), blank votes (active disengagement), and vote shares of anti-system parties on the political fringes.

*Ceteris paribus*, communes with higher no-vote shares at the referendum in 2005 registered a significantly lower voter turnout and higher shares of blank votes in subsequent elections (with the size of effects gradually waning out over time), while vote shares of fringe parties increased. Results are robust across various model specifications.

The findings uncover new empirical evidence that the bypassing of popular votes is detrimental to the quality of democratic deliberations. While our empirical

analysis delves into one particular case, the findings are of broader relevance. For one, the referendum was an early manifestation of the strengthening political cleavages around globalization and international integration that continue to reshape electoral politics in early 21st-century liberal democracies (Bornschier, 2008; Ivaldi, 2018). Additionally, the bypassing of the French referendum vote represents a paradigmatic example of a more regular feature of contemporary democratic politics, emphasized by accounts of party cartelization (Katz & Mair, 2009), in which governing apparatuses (are perceived to) sidestep popular demands to push through a policy agenda favoured by political elites. Our analysis illustrates the potential electoral implications of such behaviour in fine-grained empirical detail. In this sense, the article speaks to deeper drivers of the causes and modes of EU disintegration that pre-date the Brexit vote. At the same time, looking forward, popular referendums on questions regarding international integration are becoming increasingly common, as the emerging literature on the new “mass politics of international disintegration” has highlighted (Walter, 2020). Thus, it is likely that more future governments will be facing similar dilemmas as the one confronted by French governing elites in the 2000s, forced to make a choice between respecting international obligations or the popular will. Revisiting the case can help us better understand what is at stake under such circumstances.

## 2. Voter Alienation and the Rise of Anti-System Politics

Established party systems in rich democracies on both sides of the Atlantic have experienced dramatic disruptions over the past decade. Turnout has fallen to record lows (Mair, 2013) and electoral support for centrist mainstream parties has declined rapidly (Trubowitz & Burgoon, 2022). Anti-system protest parties have thrived in many countries (Hopkin, 2020). In response to these developments, a rapidly growing field of literature in political science and economics has set out to examine the roots of this apparent electoral backlash against the political mainstream. Much of that literature has debated the deeper cleavages underlying the politicization of globalization and the extent to which these voter sentiments were driven by cultural or economic factors (Kriesi et al., 2006; Walter, 2021).

In particular, theories of party cartelization (Hopkin, 2020; Katz & Mair, 1995, 2009) have suggested that, in addition to economic grievances and cultural anxieties, the backlash against international integration is also fuelled by voters’ growing disenchantment with mainstream parties and a loss in trust towards political elites. Patterns in the organization of political parties in advanced democracies emerging in the 1980s and 1990s, and firmly established in the 2000s, considerably widened the gap between large parts of the population and the political elite. Changes in party financing (e.g., reduced reliance on member contributions)

and an associated professionalization of political elites (e.g., the rise of “career politicians” and political managerialism), coupled with an emerging consensus about the primacy of free markets and the desirability of deep international economic integration, gradually alienated mainstream parties from their voter bases (Blyth & Katz, 2005; Scarrow, 2006). Mainstream parties’ discourses increasingly aligned with the views of socio-economic insiders (i.e., the highly educated in urban areas with relatively secure professions), which left little room for meaningful ideological competition (Blyth & Katz, 2005; Jacobs et al., 2021; Keman, 2014; Linsi et al., 2022). As a result, large segments of society, and in particular underprivileged groups, felt less and less represented in national politics and gradually lost trust in political institutions, generating political apathy and laying the ground for the rise of anti-system parties keen to exploit existing grievances (Hopkin, 2020).

Work on Euroscepticism has investigated related patterns at the EU level. Having emerged as an elite project, popular support for the European project has gradually grown more important for the legitimacy of the EU institutions over time (Hobolt & de Vries, 2016). But at the same time, in an attempt to deflect blame for the lack of more meaningful ideological competition, national politicians increasingly turned to paint the EU as a restrictive external institution that limits the available scope of national policymaking options (Turnbull-Dugarte, 2020). Deepening elite–mass divides and the depiction of the EU as a restricting force has turned the European project into an increasingly politicized phenomenon, a process Hooghe and Marks (2009) seminally described as a gradual shift from “permissive consensus” to “constraining dissensus.”

Finally, a more recent stream of literature on the mass politics of international disintegration has drawn attention to popular referendums on international agreements as manifestations in which elite and popular interests increasingly frequently collide, generating difficult tensions for the multilateral international order built on the prefaces of liberalism (which seeks to combine interstate collaboration with respect of democracy at home).

Calls for popular referendums on international agreements—from Brexit or Switzerland’s participation in the Schengen agreements to the Paris climate accords—have grown increasingly frequent over the past years (Malet, 2022; Walter, 2020). If they pit the people’s vote against a country’s international obligations, such referendums can put governments in a difficult bind. Breaching the latter can complicate a country’s foreign policy. But bypassing the former could undermine the legitimacy of national institutions and, in the worst case, damage the domestic democratic process itself.

Against this background, this article proceeds to examine in depth the electoral consequences of one early controversial popular vote on international integration, the 2005 EU constitutional referendum in France.

### 3. The EU Constitutional Referendum in France

#### 3.1. Economic and Political Background

The politicization of globalization and the cleavages underlying them started to become salient in France earlier than in many other Western democracies. Having vocally resisted the full embrace of economic internationalization and visions of a US-led liberal order during its Gaullist period, the government irrevocably shifted towards market-based strategies in the 1980s. The liberalization strategy gradually transformed the economy and society by curtailing the government's power to intervene in markets and provide sustenance to its citizens, while expanding the free flow of people, capital, and goods (Schmidt, 1996). The imposition of these liberalizing reforms, adopted by nominally left-wing President François Mitterrand, was accompanied by structural changes in the political landscape. Political competition started to move away from traditional left–right, socio-economic, and religious lines towards divisions focused on national sovereignty, culture, and values. In particular, European integration became one of the most politically salient issues and contributed to an increasingly fragmented party system (Bornschier, 2008; Grunberg & Schweisguth, 2003). While established centrist parties converged in their approval of an ever-deeper integration into the European and international free-market framework, fringe parties became successful by lumping the system together and offering a contrasting alternative (something that became apparent already in the presidential elections of 2002, in which a far-right candidate reached the second turn). It was in the context of this shifting political landscape that the referendum was held in 2005 (Bornschier, 2008).

#### 3.2. Background of the Treaty Establishing a Constitution for Europe

After several years of consultation, the TCE was signed by representatives of all the 25 then-members of the EU, on 29 October 2004. The goal of the treaty was to integrate the various EU treaties into one single text and to somewhat strengthen political integration through some modifications of existing rules. After its signing, the treaty had to move through national ratification procedures in all member countries. Whereas 15 member states opted for parliamentary ratification, 10—including France—decided to hold a popular referendum on the adoption of the TCE (Crum, 2007).

#### 3.3. The Position of French Parties Before the Vote

The French decision to hold a referendum was taken by then-President Jacques Chirac. On the one hand, since France had a history of putting important matters before a popular vote (Morel, 2007), Chirac faced outside pressure to act democratically. On the other hand,

Chirac reportedly was confident that the treaty would easily pass the referendum, boost his image as a capable statesman, and weaken the opposition Socialist Party (PS), which was internally divided over the issue (Hobolt, 2006; Shields, 2006). Early polls indicated a comfortable margin of up to 20% in favour of the TCE. Chirac's own party Union pour un Mouvement Populaire (UMP) was clearly in favour of ratification. The main opposition party, the center-left PS, was split: While most of the leadership advocated supporting the treaty, a large part of the base opposed it, perceiving it as promoting a neoliberal version of the EU (Crespy, 2008; Wagner, 2008). An internal vote finally led the PS to officially endorse the yes campaign, but the margins were close. The parties on the far left (most notably the Lutte Ouvrière, but also the larger and better-known French Communist Party) and far right (most notably the Front National) opposed ratification of the TCE, which the left portrayed as an expression of (Anglo-Saxon) free market capitalism while the right framed the treaty as a threat to national sovereignty and the cultural heritage of France (Richard & Pabst, 2005).

#### 3.4. The Referendum Vote in France

The first popular referendum on the TCE was held on 20 February 2005 in Spain. A large majority of more than 80% of Spanish voters approved ratification. On 29 May 2005, the second popular referendum was held in France. A clear majority of 55% of French voters ended up rejecting the treaty—voter turnout was around 70%, the largest ever for a referendum in modern France (Shields, 2006). The French rejection, together with a similarly clear no-vote in the Netherlands shortly after, derailed the ratification process and the constitutional project was postponed (Crum, 2007; Malet, 2022).

Why did French voters reject the referendum? Political analysts have highlighted both attitudinal and second-order forces (Brouard & Tiberj, 2006; Startin & Krouwel, 2013): the combination of different kinds of Euroscepticisms on the left (socio-economic) and right (cultural; van Elsas, 2017) and the referendum as an opportunity for voters to express discontentment with President Jacques Chirac, or with political elites more generally (Shields, 2006). Exit polls confirm the role of these factors and the salience of socio-economic concerns (see Startin & Krouwel, 2013, p. 72).

#### 3.5. The Bypassing of the Referendum Vote

Although the popular rejection of the TCE in France severely interrupted the constitutional project, it did not ultimately halt it. After a “period of reflection,” during which the French government made little attempts to address the referendum outcome (De Beer, 2006), the Berlin Declaration signed on 25 March 2007 set out a roadmap for the elaboration of a new version of the TCE. The new Lisbon Treaty simplified the structure of the TCE

and omitted some of the dispositions about symbolical issues that proved particularly controversial (e.g., the EU flag and anthem), but in substance took over most of the content that had been rejected by French voters in 2005 (Cleppe, 2009).

The revival of the constitutional project had been boosted by the French presidential elections in May 2007, which were won by Nicolas Sarkozy who, in contrast to his challenger Ségolène Royal, had painted the eventual acceptance of a new constitutional treaty as inevitable. Despite strong protests by far left and far right parties as well as trade unions, which called on the government to respect the people's will, Sarkozy rushed the ratification of the Lisbon Treaty through parliament. While some abstained in protest, a majority of members of the PS ended up backing Sarkozy's strategy. On 7 February 2008, the Lower House and French Senate authorized ratification, paving the way to make France the second country (after Hungary) to formally ratify the Lisbon Treaty.

This bypassing of the popular referendum vote has been described as an important moment in the observed growth in voter apathy and Euroscepticism in France. Liberal activists decried politicians' concerted negligence of the popular vote as a betrayal of democratic principles (Cleppe, 2009) which exposed underlying democratic deficits (De Beer, 2006). Jean-Luc Mélenchon, one of today's most popular leftist politicians in France, accused elites "to despise" the people ("Le 'non' de gauche," 2005). The Communist Party leader Marie-Georges Buffet remarked that "the referendum marked a break. People voted, and there has been a refusal to accept the decision of the people. Disillusionment settled in" ("When France," 2016). Or, as the president of a progressive pro-EU movement (Sauvons l'Europe) phrased it: "It's not surprising that people don't care anymore" ("When France," 2016).

#### 4. Research Design, Data, and Methods

##### 4.1. Research Design

In our empirical analysis, we test claims of voter frustration econometrically. Zooming in on French municipalities (communes), we evaluate the relationship between the strength of rejection of the TCE in a commune and its political behaviour in the aftermath of the referendum vote and its bypassing, focusing on three outcome variables. The first outcome variable is the turnout at elections as an indicator of the degree of political participation and civic engagement (Mair, 2013). The second is the number of blank or invalid votes cast at elections as a proxy of protest voting and expression of frustration with the political system (Driscoll & Nelson, 2014; Ugglà, 2008). The third is the vote shares of mainstream vis-à-vis anti-system parties on the far right or left (Hopkin, 2020; Mair, 2013; Trubowitz & Burgoon, 2022).

As it became increasingly clear that the government would bypass the referendum outcome, our prior expecta-

tion is that political participation would decrease and support for anti-system parties would increase in municipalities where the referendum was rejected by a larger margin. Thus, we expect a negative relationship between the municipality-level no-vote share at the referendum in 2005 and turnout levels in subsequent national elections, a positive relationship with the number of blank votes, a negative relationship with vote shares of traditional centrist parties (PS and UMP), and a positive one with anti-system parties on the fringes. Since party vote shares can be strongly contingent on idiosyncratic election-specific factors (such as candidates' popularity or evolving party coalitions), and because France's political party landscape is known to be particularly volatile (Bornschieer, 2008), we expect these last relationships to be less clear-cut than those for turnout and blank votes. Furthermore, in line with previous literature on voter "memory" (Bechtel & Hainmueller, 2011), we expect effects to be the strongest in elections taking place during, and soon after, the bypassing process and fading out after a few years.

Having no detailed and comprehensive data on individual voters' opinions, our unit of analysis is the municipality, and we focus on variation in electoral politics between municipalities. Although it is individuals, not municipalities as such, who vote, a substantial body of evidence indicates that local environments and cultural milieus influence the vote choices of individual voters (Ansolabehere et al., 2014; Hartevelde et al., 2021; Rodríguez-Pose, 2018; Walsh, 2012). According to this literature, local conditions and interactions can serve as filters of perception that play a role in shaping political attitudes and voting behaviour. David et al. (2018) argue that the level of municipalities is optimal in identifying such effects statistically. Applied to our case, we assume that individual voters take cues from the (municipality-level) communities they are living in.

##### 4.2. Data

Using election results published by the French Ministry of Interior and population census data from the French National Statistical Office (Insee), for our main analysis we build a municipality-level dataset containing the two EP elections in 2009 and 2014, and the two first rounds of the presidential and the legislative elections held in 2007 and 2012. Municipality-level outcomes from these six national elections are linked to the local outcomes of the 2005 referendum.

We limit our sample to mainland municipalities and to municipalities that are available throughout the sample period (including the pre-referendum years 2002 and 2004). Elections in Corsica and the overseas territories tend to follow somewhat different dynamics from the mainland and are more strongly influenced by local issues, such as the independence movement in Corsica or the legacy of colonialism in the overseas territories (De la Calle & Fazi, 2010; Hintjens et al., 1994).



Additionally, for many overseas departments, election and referendum results are not reported at the municipality level. Therefore, we exclude Corsica and overseas territories from our main analyses (additional analyses available in the Supplementary File show that results are not sensitive to the inclusion of the available data from Corsica and overseas territories).

To control for various socio-economic factors in our regression analyses, we match the data on election and referendum outcomes with the respective annual municipality-level information provided by Insee. This data-collection effort yields a database with complete information on about 33,000 French communes (out of a total of around 36,200 mainland communities in 2005, according to Insee) over the referendum vote and two subsequent national election cycles.

#### 4.3. Variables

Our main dependent variables are voter turnout and blank votes as indicators of voter (dis)engagement. In further analyses, we also examine the impact of the refer-

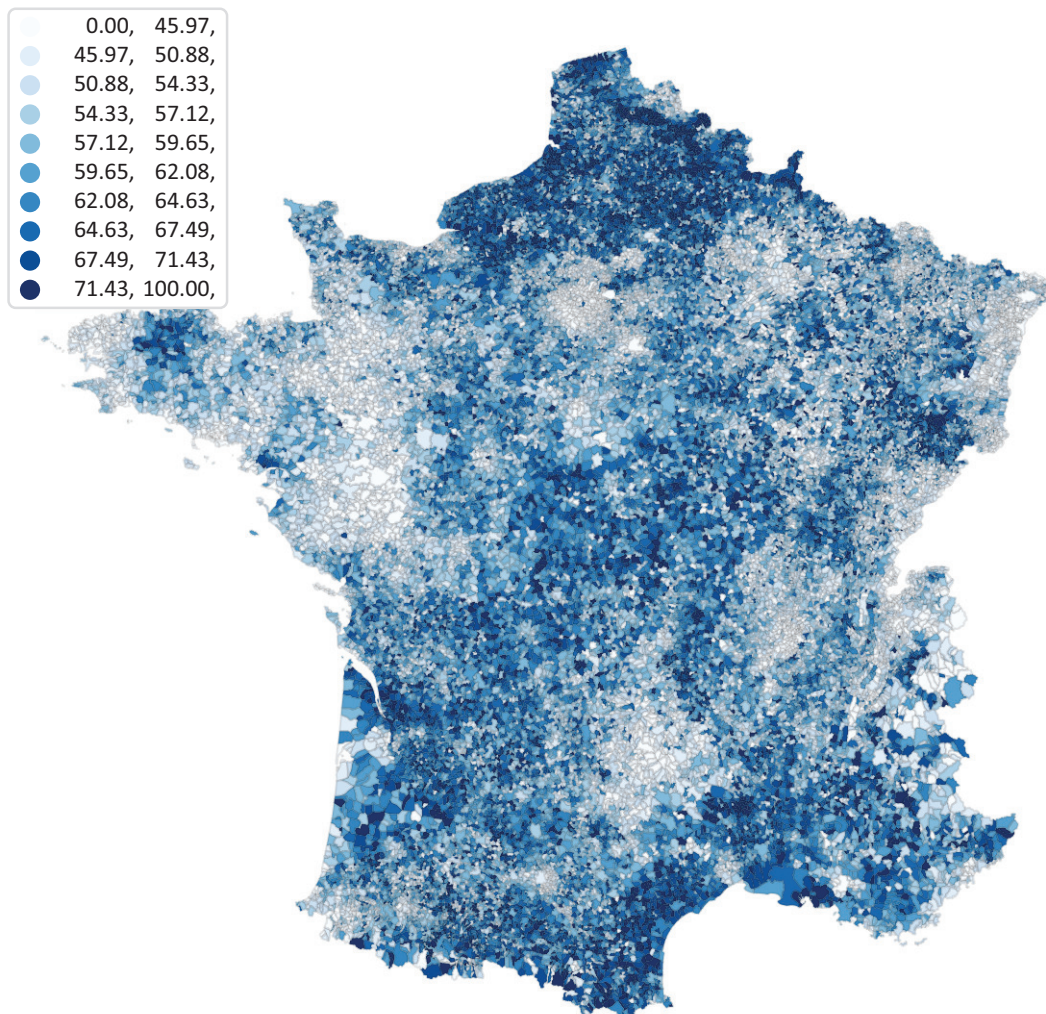
endum vote on party vote shares. Our primary independent variable is the municipality-level no-vote share at the constitutional referendum of 2005, which is depicted geographically in Figure 1. All electoral information is from the French Ministry of the Interior.

To control for relevant political, socio-economic, and demographic characteristics of communes we include a large array of relevant municipality control variables which we source from Insee (for a full list, see the notes beneath Table 1. We provide detailed descriptive statistics in the Supplementary File).

#### 4.4. Empirical Strategy

We estimate our main results with standard linear regression analysis. In additional analyses, we check the robustness of our findings in a beta regression model. Our modelling choices are justified in greater detail in the Supplementary File.

To minimize the threat that unobserved variables are driving our results, we (a) include a large array of socio-economic, demographic, and political control variables;



**Figure 1.** Municipal voting in the French Referendum 2005. Notes: Municipalities are allocated into deciles according to the strength of their no-vote; the darker the shade of blue, the higher the municipal no-vote.



(b) conduct Oster tests (OT; Oster, 2019) which evaluate treatment selection on unobservable variables and assess coefficient stability (test results above the value of one indicate that omitted variables would need to be at least as relevant as all included variables together to nullify the effect of the tested coefficient); (c) check that there is no effect on most pre-referendum outcomes, and (d) check our results with an alternative estimation technique (all tests provided in the Supplementary File).

We estimate cross-sectional regression analyses covering presidential, legislative, and EP elections from 2007 to 2014. For a randomly drawn commune  $i$  at election year  $t$ , we specify our full model as follows:

$$y_{i,t} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{No - vote}_{i,2005} + X'_{i,t} \beta_3 + \beta_4 y_{i,\text{pre-ref}} + \theta_i + u_{i,t}$$

The dependent variable  $y$  is either turnout, blank vote share, or vote shares of specific parties. The explanatory variable of interest is the intensity of the municipal rejection of the TCE, measured by the percentage share of no-votes among the valid votes in the referendum in France in 2005. The control matrix  $X$  represents a battery of political, economic, and sociodemographic municipality controls. To account for political cleavages around globalization and international integration that predate the referendum vote, and which might have also mattered for the referendum and subsequent elections, we include the variable  $y_{i,\text{pre-ref}}$  which represents the respective outcome of the most recent election of the same kind (i.e., presidential, legislative, or European election) held before the referendum in 2005. The inclusion of this “lagged” outcome variable ensures that the coefficient of the no-vote variable measures the referendum’s effect on current differences in turnout or party support, all else being equal (including distinct outcome levels in the election predating the referendum). Furthermore, it diminishes the threat of omitted variable bias since many unobserved factors that affect both municipal election outcomes after the referendum and its referendum no-vote are likely to be absorbed by previous election outcomes (Wooldridge, 2013).

To facilitate interpretation, all continuous variables are standardized. Finally, the regional fixed effects  $\theta_i$  capture broad unobserved characteristics of 21 NUTS2 regions. We cluster our standard error over 95 departments to allow for potential correlation in the error term of municipalities located in the same department.

## 5. Main Results

We first show how the referendum vote affected electoral participation in the form of voter turnout and blank votes in subsequent elections. Then we turn to investigate the effects on vote shares of principal mainstream and anti-system parties. Our presentation prioritizes the outcomes of EP elections, which are of lower salience and thus arguably less influenced by idiosyncratic factors (such as strategic voting, individual candidates, changes

in party landscapes, or particular local issues) than either presidential or legislative elections, which can make them more valid to assess broader underlying trends and revealed voter sentiments (Van der Brug et al., 2007, p. 5; Van der Eijk et al., 1996). Moreover, and specifically regarding party vote shares, the European elections might also be the type of elections most likely to capture rejection of further European integration. This being said, we investigate all types of national elections, namely French legislative, presidential, and European Parliament elections. Findings that are consistent across the different types of elections are particularly strong because they are robust to election-type-related idiosyncrasies.

### 5.1. Electoral Participation

Table 1 presents the regression results of the no-vote on the EP election turnout in 2009 and 2014. The first three columns show the impact of the no-vote on municipal turnout rates in 2009, gradually adding control variables to the model until arriving at the above-defined full model in column 3. Columns 4–6 repeat this exercise for the election in 2014.

Throughout all model specifications in both elections, the no-vote is consistently negatively associated with the municipal turnout. The first specification includes past political variables (namely the municipality turnout in the EP election in 2004 and participation in the referendum in 2005), as well as fixed effects for the 21 French NUTS2 regions. In the second column, municipality-level control variables are added to the equation. Finally, in column 3 municipality-level median income is included, restricting our sample size by excluding very small municipalities due to data availability.

Looking at the fully specified model results in columns 3 and 6, the control variables attenuate the impact of the no-vote, which indicates that disregarding socio-economic characteristics entails an upward bias in the coefficient of the no-votes. OT deltas exceed unity, making it highly unlikely that the correlation between the no-vote and the EP election turnout in 2009 and 2014 is spurious. A one standard deviation higher no-vote—about 10.1 percentage points (pp; see Supplementary File, Table A2)—is associated with a lower turnout of around 0.61 pp in 2009 and with 0.25 pp in 2014, *ceteris paribus*. To put the magnitude of these coefficients into perspective, in 2009 a one standard deviation higher unemployment rate (18.9 pp) decreases turnout by 0.17 pp (0.15 pp in 2014), and in a municipality with a one standard deviation higher share of university graduates (31.6 pp) turnout increases by 0.81 pp (0.80 in 2014), *ceteris paribus* (full regression results of every equation are available upon request). The effect of the no-vote for turnout is hence substantive, at least for the EP elections in 2009.

In the 2014 EP election, the impact is smaller, in line with our expectation of the referendum vote’s waning importance over time, but its impact is still larger than

**Table 1.** No-vote share and EP election turnout: Stepwise inclusion of control variables.

	EP elections 2009			EP elections 2014		
	1	2	3	4	5	6
No-votes	−0.954*** (0.0663)	−0.525*** (0.0602)	−0.614*** (0.0609)	−0.634*** (0.0893)	−0.211*** (0.0778)	−0.254*** (0.0682)
Municipalities Controls	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Median Income	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes
Election controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Region FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
N	36166	36164	33047	36166	36164	33047
Adj. R <sup>2</sup>	0.60	0.64	0.65	0.50	0.57	0.58
OT delta			1.74			1.12

Notes: Election controls include turnout in the previous EP election and turnout for the referendum of 2005; municipality controls contain (a) the size of the eligible voter base, (b) the population density in four categories (from very densely to very sparsely populated), (c) the share of the population with 60 years and older, (d) the share of residences that lay vacant, (e) the average household size, (f) the share of relatively lowly educated graduates (highest degree vocational studies or aptitude certificate), (g) the share of the population with a university degree, the share of workers engaged in (h) blue-collar labor, (i) agriculture, (j) education and science, and (k) artisans (such as craftsmen, tradesmen, and small business owners), (l) the population's immigration share, and (m) the unemployment rate; the median income is listed separately as it excludes municipalities with less than 50 households from the sample; all independent variables are standardized; also, included in all regressions are regional fixed effects; robust standard errors clustered over 94 departments are in parentheses; \*  $p < 0.10$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ .

a one standard deviation difference in unemployment. In additional analyses, we further extend the timeframe to the EP elections held in 2019, where the association between the municipality-level no-vote and turnout disappears. This suggests that the referendum vote by itself ceases to be an important factor for electoral outcomes in France beyond the first decade after the referendum was held. This is in line with the literature on electoral myopia which argues that voter memory on policy rarely extends two election cycles (Bechtel & Hainmueller, 2011). Another consideration is that important changes over that period in the French political landscape, where former chief actors in the referendum process, such as the PS and UMP, had lost much of their electoral relevance by 2019.

Estimation results on legislative and presidential elections corroborate this picture. Figure 2 graphically illustrates the results of applying the full model on all three election types (underlying regression tables available in the Supplementary File).

There is a significant and substantive effect for all immediate post-referendum elections, which is strongest for EP elections (which is the “most likely case” for the reasons previously discussed), followed by legislative, and presidential elections. Overall, the results suggest that the more strongly a municipality voted against the TCE, the more people abstained from voting in major national elections following the referendum's bypassing. At the same time, the participation-depressing effects appear to have largely dissipated in the second election cycle: There is no longer any statistically significant association in the legislative and presidential elections of 2012 and the size of the coefficient for the EP election

in 2014 more than halves (and finally dissipates for the election in 2019).

### 5.2. Blank Votes

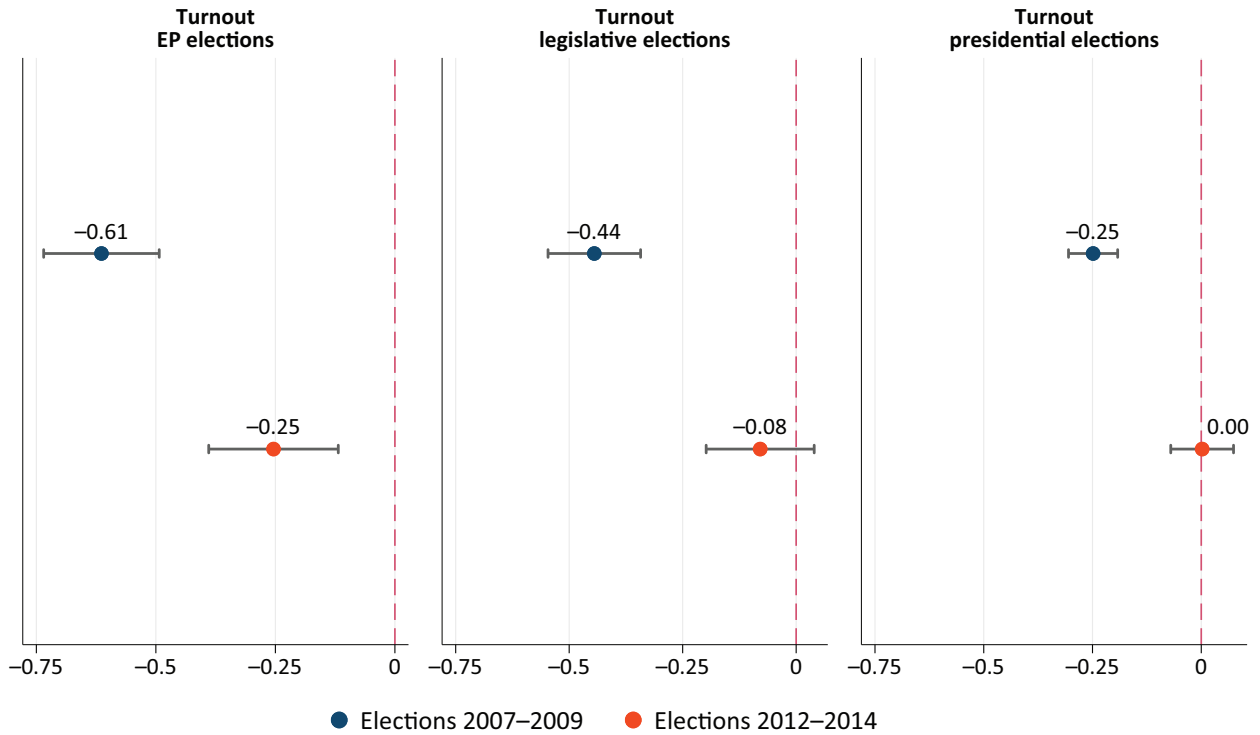
The share of blank votes is our second measure of voter disengagement. To the extent that casting a blank vote requires a greater effort than not voting, it can be considered a more active form of expressing voters' discontent with the political system (Driscoll & Nelson, 2014; Uggl, 2008).

The results for blank votes are presented in Figure 3. The findings mirror the turnout results: All else equal, the share of blank votes was significantly higher in municipalities that had a higher no-vote share immediately following the referendum's bypassing. As with turnout, municipality differences become null for the legislative and presidential elections in 2012 but remain statistically significant for the EP election in 2014 (dissipating again in 2019).

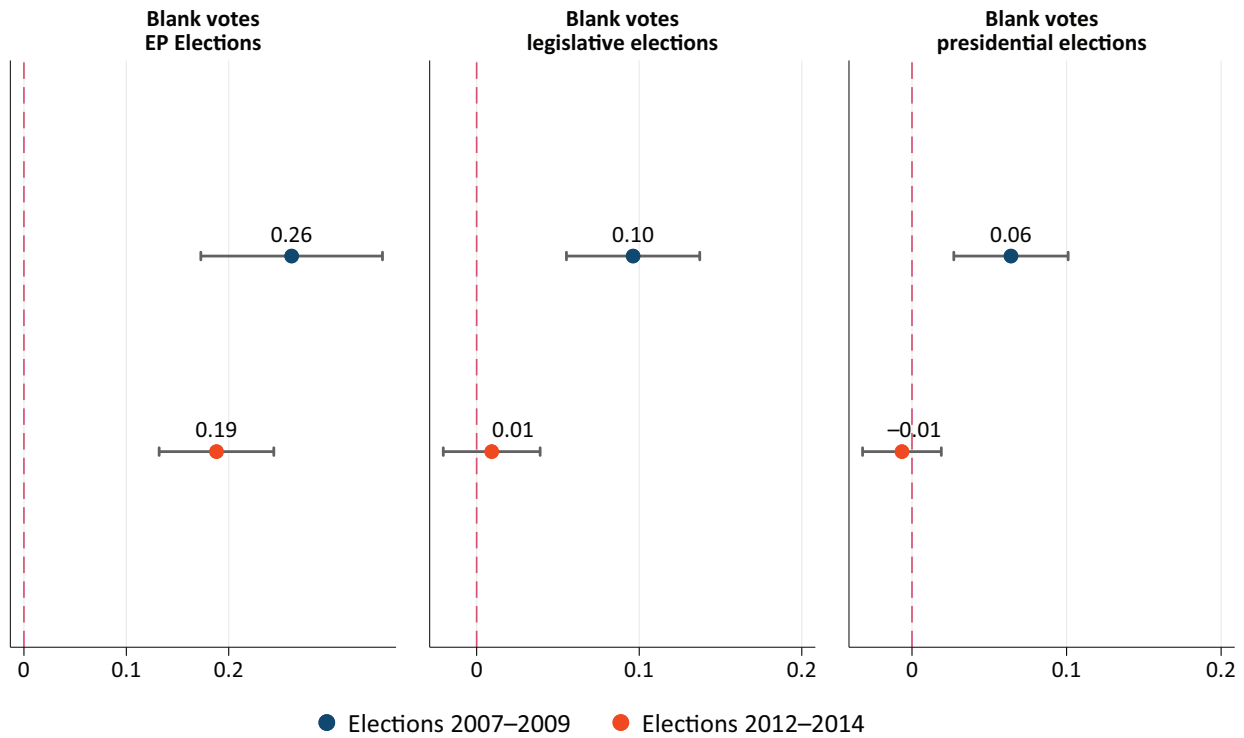
The results presented so far strongly suggest that the bypassing of the referendum outcome further fuelled voter disengagement in municipalities that had rejected the TCE.

### 5.3. Party Vote Shares

To evaluate the impact of the referendum's bypassing on municipality-level party support, we focus on the combined vote share of the two centrist mainstream parties at the time of the referendum, PS and UMP, and anti-system forces on the fringes, the Front National on the far right, and a group of parties associated to the far left (see the Supplementary File for a detailed listing).



**Figure 2.** Association between municipal no-vote and turnout in the National French Elections 2007–2014. Notes: Results are from the fully specified model with all covariates included (as in columns 3 and 6 in Table 1); dots represent the estimated coefficients; whiskers show the 95% confidence interval around them.



**Figure 3.** Association between municipal no-vote and blank vote share in the National French Elections 2007–2014. Notes: Results are from the fully specified model with all covariates included (as in columns 3 and 6 in Table 1); dots represent the estimated coefficients; whiskers show the 95% confidence interval around them.

Looking at party vote shares at all six elections (Figure 4), we observe some volatilities, as is to be expected given the different types of elections and the evolution of the French party system over the sample period. Yet, the general pattern is in line with our expectations. While the municipal vote share for anti-system parties correlates positively and strongly with the referendum no-vote, the established centrist mainstream parties lost support in municipalities that had more strongly rejected the TCE. The decline for the traditional mainstream parties is driven by vote share losses of the UMP, while both the far left and the far right experience gains in the aftermath of the referendum.

An important nuance of the party vote share analyses is that results are getting stronger over time (also beyond our sample period), which stands in contrast to turnout and blank voting results. We interpret this as an indication that in the aftermath of the referendum and its bypassing populist anti-system parties were successful in mobilizing apathetic, disaffected voters, particularly with eurosceptic and anti-establishment platforms (Ivaldi, 2018; Krouwel & Abts, 2007). At the same time, it is also plausible that over time factors other than the referendum itself started to play a greater role in the mobilization of disaffected voters by anti-system parties. In that sense, the referendum may have fed into—and further amplified—pre-existing cleavages.

In sum, our analyses uncover evidence for all three types of voter disengagement in response to the bypassing of the referendum. Municipalities that had more strongly rejected the referendum experienced lower turnout, more blank votes, and higher vote shares for

anti-system parties in subsequent elections. Underlying regression tables for these results are provided in the Supplementary File.

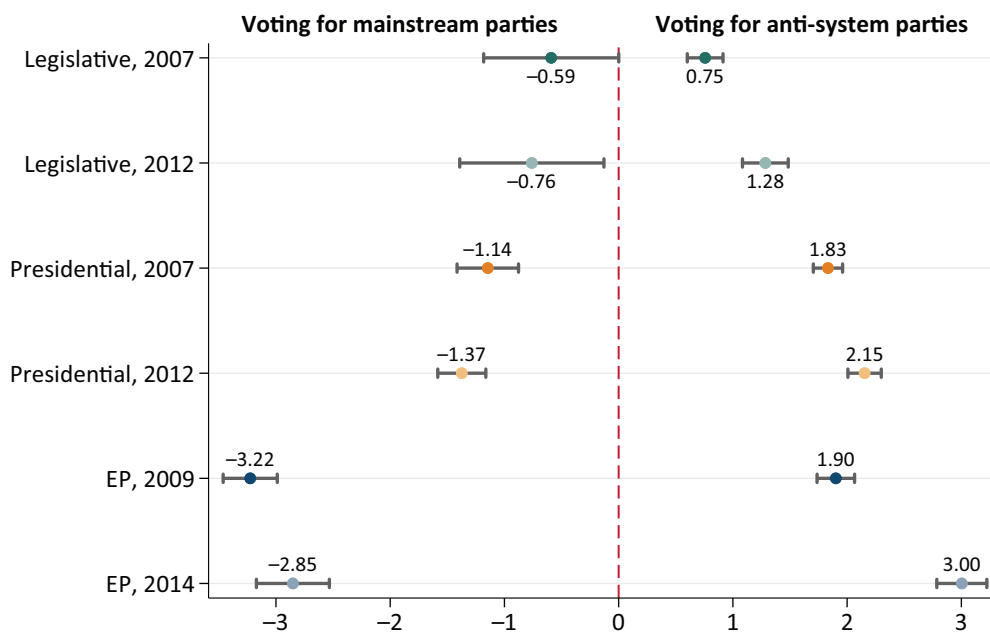
### 6. Survey Data Analysis

In a final step, we assess whether the referendum and its bypassing can be linked to changes in individual attitudes. We do so by looking at trends in satisfaction with French and European democracy from 2000 to 2015 as expressed by French respondents in Eurobarometer surveys.

Given the central role played by the French government in the bypassing of the referendum, we would expect that French voters were more pessimistic about the democratic functioning of their state, especially so in regions that voted more strongly against the TCE. At the same time, to the extent that the electorate perceived the EU as an accomplice in, or even reason for, ignoring the popular demands voiced by the no-vote, there might have been a backlash against the EU as well.

The two Eurobarometer survey questions that we investigate in more depth have a scale from one to four and are: On the whole, are you *very satisfied* (4), *fairly satisfied* (3), *not very satisfied* (2), or *not at all satisfied* (1) with the way democracy works in France? And how about the way democracy works in the EU?

We split the sample into three groups according to the intensity of the no-vote of the respondents' residence (the Eurobarometer provides information only on the NUTS2 level) and perform event studies for each group. By regressing the Eurobarometer answers on



**Figure 4.** Association between municipal no-vote and aggregate vote shares in the National French Elections 2007–2014. Notes: Aggregate share of the established traditional parties on the left side, and for the far right and left on the right side; results are from the fully specified model with all covariates included (as in columns 3 and 6 in Table 1); dots represent the estimated coefficients; whiskers show the 95% confidence interval around them.

regional and yearly fixed effects, these analyses show how satisfaction with democracy, either with respect to France or the EU, developed within these groups from 2000 to 2015.

Figure 5 depicts the estimated coefficients. Dots represent point estimates, i.e., relative differences to the respective group’s satisfaction in the base year 2000, and the whiskers indicate the statistical significance of these differences within 95% confidence intervals. We highlight the referendum in May 2005 and the official ratification of the Lisbon Treaty by the French Parliament in February 2008 with dashed vertical grey lines. We interpret divergences between the three groups (accepted, rejected, and strongly rejected TCE) after the referendum and its bypassing as an indication that the regional no-vote mattered for individual sentiments towards the EU.

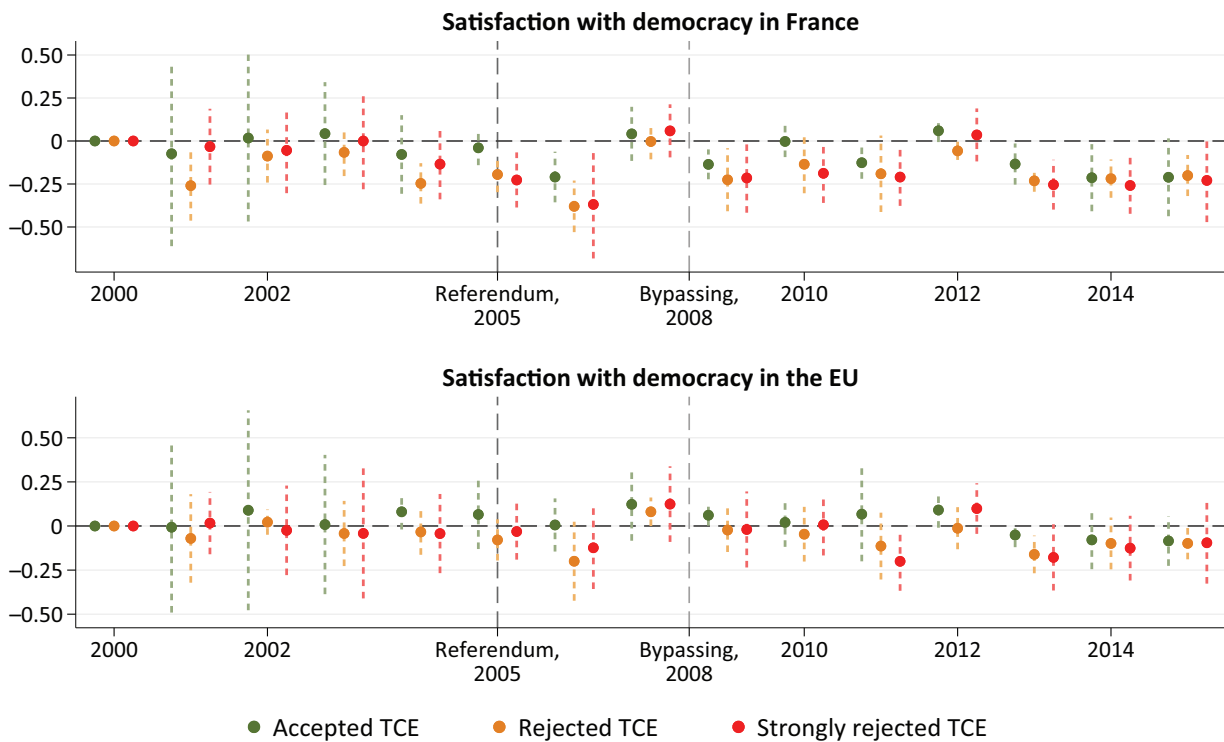
While results are necessarily cruder due to the higher level of geographical aggregation (NUTS2 level instead of municipalities), we observe some interesting patterns. The top panel shows that satisfaction with French democracy is relatively stable initially—with the average for each group lying at around 2.6, which falls between *not very satisfied* (2) and *fairly satisfied* (3). However, starting with the referendum year 2005, average assessment drops and recovers to base levels only during short “honeymoon period” stints in the election years of 2007 and 2012. For every other year, the average assessment is relatively more pessimistic across all regional groups. This

being said, there is a salient regional disparity in the years immediately following the referendum. In 2005 and 2006, years in which the media covered the referendum and its bypassing extensively, satisfaction with French democracy hit a low, especially so in regions which voted against the TCE: In 2006, the average satisfaction in regions that rejected the constitution dropped by 0.4 points, which was twice the drop in regions that accepted the TCE.

The bottom panel shows the same trend but concerning democracy in the EU. Dissatisfaction with the EU seems more muted and fewer obvious trends are discernible. In this sense, the analyses suggest that the French electorate does not seem to have blamed the bypassing of the referendum on European institutions in particular. The backlash from the bypassing appears to have more strongly affected views on domestic democratic processes.

### 7. Conclusions

Our analyses leverage the bypassing of the popular referendum on the TCE in France as a case study to empirically examine the electoral consequences of technocratic political engineering and the cartelization of mainstream political parties more broadly. Our analyses uncover evidence that turnout decreased, the share of blank votes increased, and support for anti-system fringe parties grew in municipalities that had more strongly rejected



**Figure 5.** Eurobarometer trend assessing average satisfaction with French and EU democracy in the years 2000–2015. Notes: The markers show decreases and increase relative to the base year 2000; differences are statistically different from 0 when the dashed whiskers do not cross the grey horizontal line.



the referendum. The findings suggest that the decision of the French government to ratify the Lisbon Treaty led to both voice and exit behaviour among French voters, with adverse consequences for the quality of democratic participation and deliberation in France. In particular, it appears to have further fuelled the sustained decline of electoral participation and support for traditional centrist parties in France. Survey assessments corroborate that the referendum process seems to have contributed to decreased satisfaction with French democracy and its institutions. The behaviour and structure of political parties might thus have contributed to increasingly widespread perceptions among the electorate to be living in a deficient democracy (Keman, 2014).

To strengthen the democratic legitimacy of international institutions, popular referendums on inter-governmental agreements have become more frequent in Europe in recent years (Walter, 2020). However, perceptions about the benefits of international cooperation often diverge between the nation's decision-makers and its population (Dellmuth et al., 2022). When voters reject an international treaty—as they did in the 1992 Danish Maastricht Treaty referendum, the French TCE referendum in 2005, the Irish vote on the Lisbon Treaty 2008, or the Brexit vote in 2016—they can create difficult dilemmas for governments, who can be left to choose between breaching its multilateral obligations and relations with other states (as in the case of Brexit), forcing a re-negotiation with their partners (as in the case of Denmark 1992 or Ireland 2008), or ignoring a democratically taken decision at the risk of fostering distrust towards elites and eroding electoral participation (as in the case of France 2005; Morel, 2007). Either way, the stakes are high. Understanding the causes and modes of EU disintegration makes it imperative to improve our understanding of the tensions between collective decisions taken at the international and the domestic level, and how they affect the quality of governance and the viability of international cooperation in the longer run.

### Acknowledgments

We thank the editors of this thematic issue and the three anonymous reviewers for their very helpful comments. Earlier versions of this article were presented at the SOM PhD workshop in Groningen and the EPSA 2022 conference in Prague. We thank the workshop participants for the useful comments and suggestions, especially Greg Fuller, Maite Laméris, Milena Nikolova, and Viola Angelini. The findings, interpretations, and conclusions expressed in this article are those of the authors. They do not necessarily represent the views of the institutions they are affiliated with.

### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

### Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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Article

# Public Support for European Integration in Greece and Italy Between 2015 and 2020

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Submitted: 30 January 2023 | Accepted: 13 April 2023 | Published: 5 July 2023

## Abstract

The consecutive crises of the last decade have eroded public support for the EU, especially so among Southern European member states. A long-standing scholarly debate centers around whether it is economic or cultural considerations that drive public support for the EU. However, it is still unclear whether public attitudes toward European integration are driven primarily by economic evaluations or concerns associated with growing immigration flows. To explore this question, we draw on data from the Eurobarometer in Greece and Italy between 2015 and 2020. We find consistent evidence that diffuse public support for the EU and specific support for EU institutions are associated positively with economic evaluations of the European economy and household finances and negatively with opposition to immigration. Our study provides further insights into the dynamics of public support for the EU in the European periphery during critical times.

## Keywords

European economy; European integration; European Union; Greece; immigration; Italy; political trust; public opinion

## Issue

This article is part of the issue “The Causes and Modes of European Disintegration” edited by Martijn Huysmans (Utrecht University) and Sven Van Kerckhoven (Vrije Universiteit Brussel).

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## 1. Introduction

Since the 2009 eurozone crisis and the 2015 immigration crisis, public support for the EU has been questioned across member states, especially in Southern Europe. The increasing public opposition to the EU has manifested itself in the rise of nationalist-Eurosceptic parties across the continent (Schmitter & Lefkofridi, 2016). Euroscepticism further proliferated during the Covid-19 pandemic crisis, even though the EU’s response to the pandemic has been evaluated relatively positively (Jones et al., 2021; Rhodes, 2021). This dynamic was particularly salient in Greece and Italy, two European countries that were hit hard by all three crises. In Greece, the eruption of the financial crisis had an impact on the rise of anti-EU sentiments (Georgiadou, 2019; Halikiopoulou, 2020). Similarly, public opinion in Italy has been increasingly Eurosceptic since the eurozone crisis, and in some cases,

it has even been starkly negative against deeper European integration (Conti, Di Mauro, & Memoli, 2020; Conti, Marangoni, & Verzichelli, 2020; Giannetti et al., 2017).

However, it is still unclear in the existing literature whether economic evaluations or opposition to immigration is a better predictor of public attitudes toward the EU. This article attempts to fill the gap in the literature by exploring the economic and immigration-related cultural antecedents of public support for the EU in Greece and Italy between 2015 and 2020. This period was marked by considerable suffering caused by the financial, immigration, and Covid-19 crises in both member states. More specifically, the article aims to answer the question: Does the impact of economic evaluations or opposition to immigration better explain public support for the EU in Greece and Italy?

To investigate the correlates of public support for European integration, we draw on cross-sectional and

longitudinal data from the Eurobarometer. We provide consistent evidence that diffuse public support for the EU and specific support for EU institutions are positively associated with favorable evaluations of the European economy and household finances and negatively associated with opposition to immigration. We argue that anti-immigrant sentiments are the primary suppressor of public support for the EU in both countries. As these sentiments increase, diffuse support for the EU and specific support for EU institutions diminish, even for institutions that are not directly responsible for the management of the immigration crisis, such as the European Central Bank. Furthermore, positive economic assessments of the EU economy and household finances are positively correlated with trust in the EU.

We specifically focus on Italy and Greece from 2015 to 2020 for three reasons. Firstly, we consider this period critical due to the outbreak of the immigration crisis in 2015 which mostly affected Greece and Italy. In fact, both countries received the largest numbers of migrants and asylum seekers and reported the highest percentages of such populations among all first-arrival European countries (International Organization for Migration, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2021). During this period, the effects of the 2009 eurozone crisis were still being felt in both countries (Bull, 2018; Maris et al., 2022; Serapioni & Hespanha, 2019). In terms of gross domestic product, the fiscal years of 2013–2016 were the worst for both Greece and Italy in the pre-Covid-19 era (The World Bank, 2023).

Finally, the Covid-19 pandemic, an unprecedented crisis for the entire world, hit Greece and Italy hard, resulting in high fatalities and an economic downturn. At the beginning of the pandemic, fatalities were higher in Italy than in Greece, but, as the crisis progressed, Greece performed significantly worse in terms of both health and economic outcomes according to Chantzaras and Yfantopoulos (2022). Overall, these consecutive crises have harmed public support for deeper EU integration (Dimitrakopoulos & Lalis, 2022; Lefkofridi & Schmitter, 2015; Schimmelfennig, 2018).

## 2. Public Support for European (Dis)Integration

In the conceptual framework initially introduced by Easton (1975), diffuse and specific support represent a stable political self-orientation toward political objects in a system of governance. Norris (1999) expanded this classification into a five-fold framework, introducing the notions of political support for the community, principles, performance, institutions, and actors. As “critical citizens” express their support for distinct levels of governance, this conceptual framework is useful for measuring public support for the EU for two reasons.

First, during times of economic stress, “without a reservoir of goodwill towards democratic institutions” (Norris, 1999, p. 203), the buffer zone between people’s demands and the performance of the political sys-

tem weakens. Second, regime (diffuse) support is taken for granted in established democracies. However, in the case of a hybrid multilevel political system such as the EU, this type of support is highly uncertain (Hobolt & de Vries, 2016). Further, specific support for EU institutions is also affected during times of crisis as EU policies affect national policies and practices (Hooghe & Marks, 2001) and strengthen the ambiguity around the EU’s polity (de Wilde & Trenz, 2012).

Therefore, the two-dimensional approach of public support for the EU project is relevant because it allows for a nuanced understanding of public attitudes toward the EU. Regime support refers to overall support for the establishment of the EU, while institutional support measures public trust in the institutional framework of the EU (Hobolt & de Vries, 2016).

Public opposition to the European project has been steadily increasing since the 2000s (Hobolt & de Vries, 2016). According to Webber (2018), EU disintegration occurs when one or more EU institutions lose power or authority, when a member state withdraws from the union (e.g., Brexit), or when a process for renationalization of EU common policy starts. Scholarship also argues that European disintegration is a multifaceted process that involves economic, socio-cultural, territorial, political, and legal dimensions, rather than a unidimensional political outcome (Vollaard, 2018).

The ambiguity surrounding policymaking and decision-making processes in the EU has been increasingly politicized and mediatized, even before the eurozone crisis in 2009 (de Vries, 2007; Hobolt, 2009; Hooghe & Marks, 2009). The lack of consensus between elites and the public about the nature of the EU and its institutions has spurred an almost existential crisis within the EU (de Wilde & Trenz, 2012; Hobolt & de Vries, 2016). Although EU integration has deepened and the public interest in EU affairs has increased over the years, public opinion has remained highly reluctant toward the EU project (de Vries & Steenbergen, 2013).

Since 2009, the future of the EU has been put into question due to the rise of Eurosceptic parties (Lefkofridi & Schmitter, 2015; Schmitter, 2012), the politicization of EU issues at the national level, and the decrease in trust in national and EU institutions (Cramme & Hobolt, 2015). During the eurozone crisis, the issue of integration became increasingly politicized by parties challenging the EU project (Hobolt & de Vries, 2015). Indeed, the impact of the financial crisis demonstrated how public opinion can be a “leverage” for national governments to negotiate with EU institutions (Halikiopoulou, 2020; Hobolt & de Vries, 2016; Vollaard, 2014; Webber, 2018).

## 3. Economic Hardship and European (Dis)Integration

Public support for European integration is often thought to have a utilitarian explanation. The main argument of this approach is based on the benefits of the liberalization of EU trade and how it rewards citizens with



higher levels of income and human capital, particularly in terms of education and professional skills (Kriesi et al., 2012; Tucker et al., 2002). Indeed, high-skilled workers and entrepreneurs with capital are more supportive of European integration than blue-collar workers (Hobolt & de Vries, 2016; Hooghe & Marks, 2005).

Economic assessments of support or opposition to the EU project can be divided into two main categories: egocentric and socio-tropic (Hooghe & Marks, 2005). According to the former, an individual's perception of having benefited or not from the EU project can affect their trust in EU integration (Aiello et al., 2019). The latter refers to the fact that individuals' support depends on the evaluation of national economies and whether or not their countries received economic aid from the EU (Aiello et al., 2019).

Economic hardship at the national level predicts opposition toward the EU project (Hobolt & de Vries, 2016). Public support for the EU is higher in countries where economic performance is positive, due to the benefits of EU integration (Anderson & Kaltenthaler, 1996; Eichenberg & Dalton, 1993; Hooghe & Marks, 2004). Short-term economic performance is an important determinant of EU support, according to this approach (Boomgaarden et al., 2011), as well as a strong predictor for the future of national and EU economies (Aiello et al., 2019; de Vreese et al., 2008; Loveless, 2010). The political context can also influence public support or opposition and interacts with economic evaluations. Specifically, discontent is more pronounced when accountability mechanisms are clear (Anderson, 2000), i.e., when public opinion can evaluate the performance of an institution in a straightforward manner.

Since the eurozone crisis, economic insecurity has clouded many of the benefits of EU integration. In Greece, the economic crisis has undermined trust in the traditional political system (Kriesi, 2012) and served as a springboard for far-right ideologies advocating for further disintegration (Ellinas, 2013). This impact increased the electoral base of anti-austerity parties, such as Syriza on the far left and Golden Dawn on the far right of the political spectrum (Bedock & Vasilopoulos, 2015). The percentage of Greek citizens with a negative opinion about the EU increased from 2009 onwards, and this trend continued with the discussion of a potential Grexit after the referendum of 2015 (Katsanidou & Lefkofridi, 2020; Vasilopoulou, 2018). Making austerity measures a prerequisite for EU membership hardened Greek Euroscepticism (Lefkofridi & Nezi, 2020), and the EU became a target of blame (Verney, 2015) as Greek public opinion rejected EU economic policies and interference in national politics (Vasilopoulou, 2018).

In Italy, economic performance was already a strong predictor of EU evaluations even before the crisis. However, the financial crisis and the subsequent austerity measures imposed by the EU have strengthened Italians' negative attitudes toward the EU (Bull, 2018) and increased Eurosceptic voting (Bellucci, 2014). Similar

to the Greeks, Italians blamed the EU for being an entity that imposes austerity measures (Conti, Di Mauro, & Memoli, 2020). As a result, EU-led austerity policies increased Eurosceptic attitudes in Italian public opinion (Conti, Di Mauro, & Memoli, 2020). In the past, public opinion often associated economic motivations and material benefits with European integration (Bellucci et al., 2012), but this link was disrupted after the eurozone crisis, enhancing Eurosceptic sentiments in Italy (Giannetti et al., 2017).

In line with these findings, we expect that public support for the EU and EU institutions will be positively (negatively) associated with (un)favorable assessments of the European (H1a) and national (H1b) economy as well as household finances (H1c).

#### 4. Immigration and European (Dis)Integration

The immigration crisis of 2015 has increased the importance of the "cultural threat" and aggravated anti-EU sentiments (Brack, 2020). This has given rise to a new cultural cleavage that opposes "open" positions of integration to "closed" positions of demarcation, which has had a significant impact on identity politics in European countries (Kriesi et al., 2008; Loch & Norocel, 2015). As argued by Loch and Norocel (2015), this cleavage involves an internal dimension (immigration) and an external dimension (European integration). Perceived cultural threats play a major role in the articulation of national identities, as they trigger the rejection of different cultures and the protection of national ideals (Loch & Norocel, 2015).

Furthermore, immigration is often associated with Eurosceptic attitudes characterized by hostility toward immigrants and minority groups (de Vreese & Boomgaarden, 2005; Hobolt et al., 2011), as well as toward different cultures in general (McLaren, 2002, 2006). Carey (2002) also demonstrated that people who express strong national attachment and pride are less supportive of EU integration. Moreover, left-wing and right-wing Eurosceptics perceive immigration differently. On the one hand, left-wing Eurosceptics argue that the EU should create a "safe path" for people to immigrate (Brack, 2020). On the other hand, right-wing supporters claim that immigration poses a threat to national identity and security and publicly oppose the free movement of foreign populations in the EU (Brack, 2020).

In Greece, immigration became an issue of significant concern for public opinion mostly after 2015 and the outbreak of the migration and refugee crisis on the Greek shores and islands (Dimitriadi & Sarantaki, 2019). This crisis, similar to the debt crisis, incited the discussion around Grexit and turned the EU into the scapegoat considered responsible for the crisis and for failing to provide adequate response and assistance to Greece (Dimitriadi & Sarantaki, 2019). This disaffection was manifested by an increase in public support for anti-immigrant and neo-fascist political parties (Dinas et al., 2019). The Popular Orthodox Rally (LAOS) and Golden Dawn

based their political programs and rallies on an anti-immigration and anti-EU agenda (Dennison & Geddes, 2019; Ellinas, 2013; Vasilopoulou & Halikiopoulou, 2015), as did the new far-right party Greek Solution more recently (Georgiadou, 2019).

Similarly, in Italy, the public perceived the management of the refugee crisis by the EU and the rules established by the Dublin regulation as the cause of disproportionate costs for the country (Dixon et al., 2018). The crisis of 2015 increased perceptions of the cultural threat of immigration and added to the fear of its economic impact on the country, in a context already burdened by socio-economic concerns, particularly by the conservative and nationalist segments of Italian society (Conti, Marangoni, & Verzichelli, 2020). Italians also consider immigration to be one of the two most important issues affecting their country and the EU, and they have a less positive image of the EU than other Europeans (Geddes & Pettrachin, 2020). The EU was also held accountable for leaving Italy alone to handle the migration and refugee crisis, and far-right supporters openly challenged EU migration policies and approaches (Brunazzo & Mascitelli, 2020).

Following these findings, we expect that public support for the EU and EU institutions will be negatively associated with anti-immigrant sentiments (H2).

### 5. The Interaction Between Economic Evaluations and Anti-Immigrant Sentiment

Opposition to immigration also has an economic dimension, often referring to it as a threat to “economic competition” (Dennison & Geddes, 2021; Pardos-Prado & Xena, 2019; Ruist, 2016). Immigrants are considered to have negative effects on individual and societal material well-being. Far-right Euroscepticism is mostly driven by the fear of cultural and economic losses (Bremer & Schulte-Cloos, 2019; Lefkofridi & Michel, 2017), as it perceives national sovereignty not only as cultural but also as an economic response against external threats (Mazzoleni & Ivaldi, 2020). Far-right supporters see immigrants, particularly low-educated immigrants from non-Western economies (Edo et al., 2019), as potential “threats” to the national economy and labor market (Mazzoleni & Ivaldi, 2020).

In contrast, far-left Euroscepticism focuses solely on the negative economic impacts of European integration (Brack, 2020). For the far-left opposition to the EU, immigration is not a real concern and has a negligible economic dimension. Far-left supporters believe that immigration is not a “crisis” and advocate for creating a safe passage to Europe for immigrants while addressing the underlying causes of immigration (Brack, 2020).

In Greece, the far-right contestation responds to attitudes against immigration in the EU. Although the cultural threat is more prevalent, Greek far-right supporters believe that immigration can have negative effects on the national economy because immigrants could affect the

redistribution of the welfare system to natives (Sekeris & Vasilakis, 2016; Vasilopoulou & Halikiopoulou, 2015). Such discourses were evident in the political rallies of various far-right parties, including LAOS, Golden Dawn, and, most recently, Greek Solution (Georgiadou, 2019; Roumanias et al., 2018).

Similarly, in Italy, opposition to immigration due to economic grievances comes from far-right Eurosceptic parties, as the left and far left see positive effects of immigration on the domestic economy (Barone et al., 2016). Immigrants are often accused of “stealing” jobs and housing from Italian citizens in various political discourses of far-right parties (Caiani & Kröll, 2017; Castelli Gattinara & Froio, 2016). These fears increase during times of crisis as immigrants are perceived by far-right supporters as competitors against Italian citizens for the same limited resources (Conti, Marangoni, & Verzichelli, 2020).

### 6. Data and Methods

To explore the correlates of public support for the EU and EU institutions, we turn to 10 representative surveys of the Greek and Italian population that cover the period between 2015 and 2020 ( $N = 20,337$ ). All studies are part of the Eurobarometer (waves 83.3, 85.2, 86.2, 87.3, 88.3, 89.1, 90.3, 91.5, 92.3, and 93.1) and correspond to the annual surveys of 2015–2020. From 2016 to 2019, we draw on two waves per year.

This six-year period was critical for public support for the EU. On the one hand, the effects of the economic crisis of 2008 were still strong on the population of the European periphery. On the other hand, this period captures the European migrant crisis and the years that immediately precede it. In the EU, the migrant crisis peaked in 2015 but the pressure from massive migration flows is still felt in both countries. Finally, the 2020 survey wave studies attitudes during the first phase of the Covid-19 pandemic, which represents a critical juncture for public trust in the EU.

#### 6.1. Measuring Anti-Immigrant Sentiment and Economic Evaluations

Previous literature suggests that public support for the EU hinges on identity-related factors as well as on utilitarian evaluations of the economy (for an overview, see Hobolt & de Vries, 2016). To gauge anti-immigrant sentiments, we combine two items in an additive scale (Cronbach’s alpha = 0.674; for exploratory factor analysis, see Table B1 in the Supplementary File). The first question asks respondents whether they agree that immigrants contribute a lot to their country on a four-point scale, ranging from *totally agree* to *totally disagree*. The second item asks how respondents feel about the immigration of people from outside the EU on a five-point scale ranging from *very positive* to *very negative*.

Further, we measure socio-tropic and egocentric evaluations of the economy by constructing three additive scales. The first two scales tap into retrospective and prospective evaluations of the national and European economy by adding assessments of the current situation in the national/European economy (measured on a four-point scale) and relevant expectations for the next 12 months (measured on a three-point scale). Accordingly, we gauge egocentric economic evaluations by adding two similar items that ask respondents about their assessment and expectations regarding their household finances (for exploratory factor analyses and the respective Cronbach’s alpha reliability coefficients, see Tables B2–B4 in the Supplementary File).

Finally, we measure respondents’ ideology (measured on a 10-point scale), sex, age, education, occupation, and self-reported belonging to the working class, the middle class, or the upper class of society (for the correlation matrices, see Figures B1–B3 in the Supplementary File).

### 6.2. Measuring Diffuse and Specific Public Support for the European Union

Our main dependent variables of interest measure diffuse and specific public support for the EU. In the Eurobarometer, the classic measure of diffuse public support for European integration is an item that asks respondents if their country’s membership in the EU is a good thing, a bad thing, or neither good nor bad. However, this item is not available in any of the Eurobarometer waves we draw on. Moreover, the fact that this question is measured with a three-point scale would make the regression analysis more complicated as the dependent variable would be ordinal. To overcome these shortcomings, we create a nine-point scale that combines two items that arguably tap into a closely related construct.

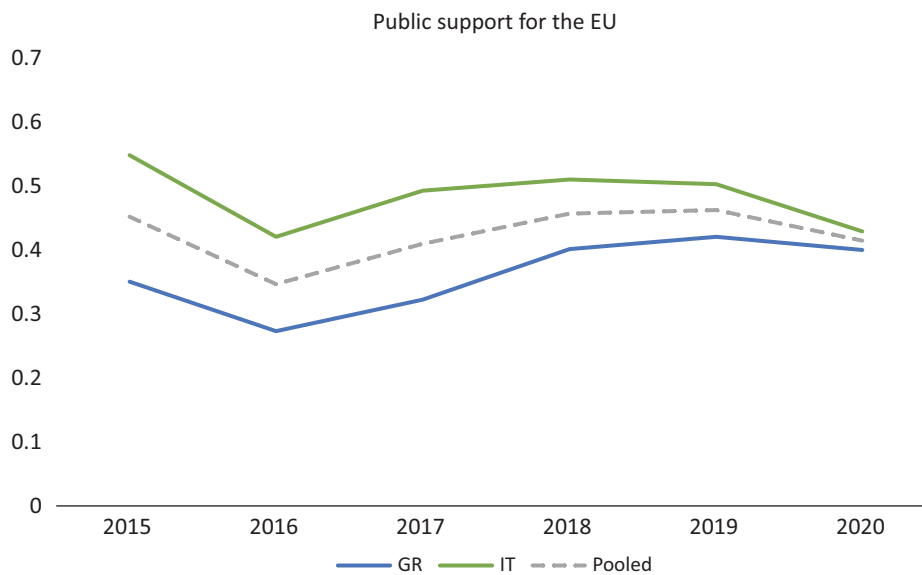
Indeed, the first item asks respondents to rate the image of the EU on a five-point scale ranging from *very good* to *very bad* while the second question is a dummy that asks if respondents tend to trust or not to trust the EU (Cronbach’s alpha = 0.699; for exploratory factor analysis, see Table B5 in the Supplementary File).

Accordingly, we use three measures of specific public support that ask whether participants tend to trust or not to trust the European Commission, the European Parliament, and the European Central Bank. In addition, we construct a scale that gauges public support for European institutions in general (Cronbach’s alpha = 0.881; for exploratory factor analysis, see Table B6 in the Supplementary File).

Figures 1 and 2 show how average public support for the EU and EU institutions fluctuates between 2015 and 2020. Across all four targets, public support steadily decreases to reach an average level of almost 40%. This trend resonates with previous trends reported by Hobolt and de Vries (2016) who found that public support for EU membership plummeted among Southern member states after the 2010 financial crisis. Indeed, Greeks and Italians seem to be reluctant to trust the EU even after 2015 as the migration crisis unfolds.

### 6.3. Analytic Strategy

To study public support for the EU in Greece and Italy, we run a series of linear regressions. We pool observations from 2015 to 2020 and fit a series of linear models that include anti-immigrant sentiment, evaluations of the national and European economy, and evaluations of the household finances as predictors while adjusting for wave, year, and country fixed effects as well as for ideology, sex, age, education, occupation, and self-reported class identity. We choose to estimate fixed-effects models as we employ a similar systems design, which allows



**Figure 1.** Average public support for the EU in Greece and Italy (2015–2020).

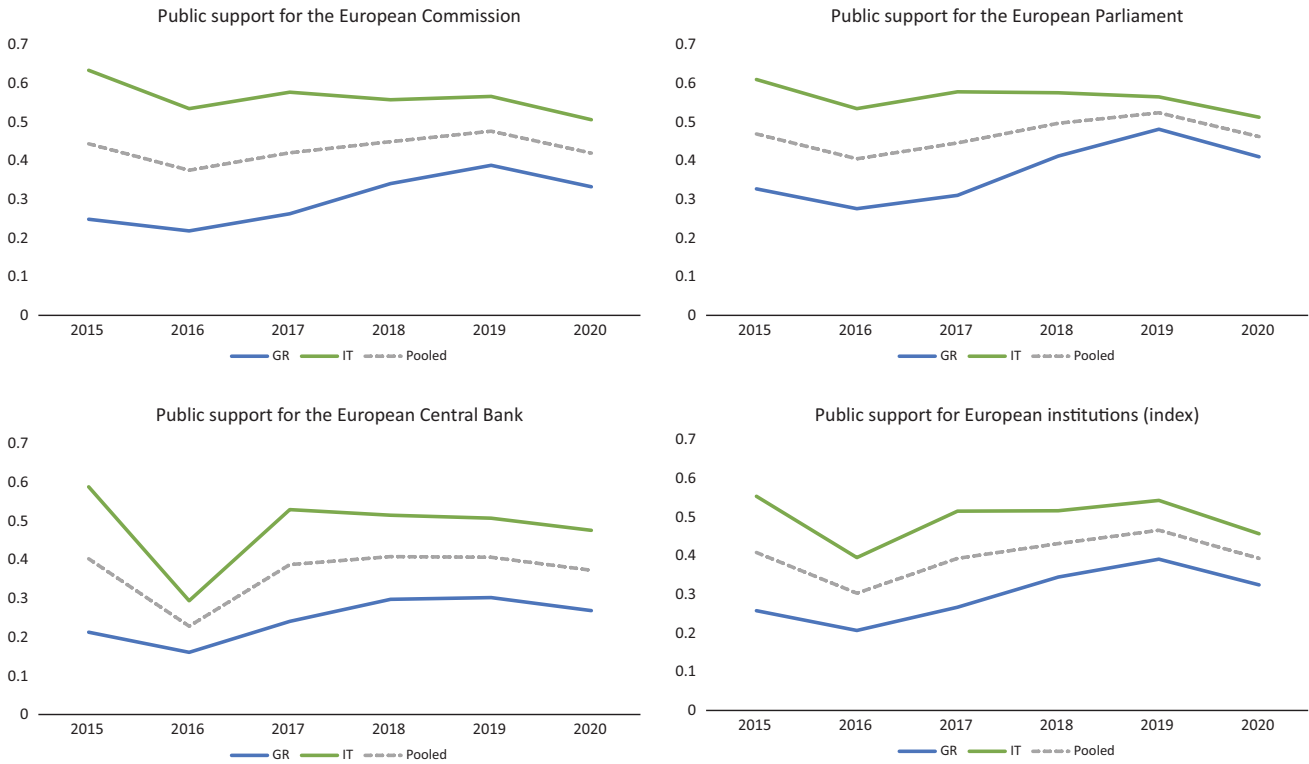


Figure 2. Average public support for EU institutions in Greece and Italy (2015–2020).

us to reduce the heterogeneity between the cases we analyze and to study the associations of main interest in depth (Sartori, 1991). Moreover, fixed-effects models are more appropriate than mixed-effects models for our analysis as they are less vulnerable to omitted variable bias, depend on fewer assumptions, and the sample size of the superordinate variables (countries, years, waves) is relatively small (McNeish & Kelley, 2019).

The dependent variables of the models are diffuse public support for the EU and specific support for the European Commission, the European Parliament, the European Central Bank, and European institutions in general. The formula of the multivariate fixed-effects OLS equations is structured as follows:

$$Y_{i,t,w,c}^* = a + \beta_1 \text{antiimm}_{i,t,w,c} + \beta_2 \text{natecon}_{i,t,w,c} + \beta_3 \text{euecon}_{i,t,w,c} + \beta_4 \text{hhfin}_{i,t,w,c} + \beta_n X_{i,t,w,c} + \gamma_t + \kappa_w + \chi_c + \varepsilon_{i,t,w,c}$$

where  $t$ ,  $w$ , and  $c$  index years, waves, and countries (with Greece assigned in the reference category), respectively;  $\beta_1$ – $\beta_4$  report the associations of anti-immigrant sentiments and evaluations of national and European economy and household finances;  $X_{i,t,w,c}$  is a set of controls outlined above;  $\gamma_t$ ,  $\kappa_w$ , and  $\chi_c$  are the year, wave, and country fixed effects, respectively; and  $\varepsilon_{i,t,w,c}$  is the error term. In addition, to study how the association between the dependent variables and the main regressors of interest vary across years, we estimate a series of conditional fixed-effects OLS models, that is models that include interactive terms. The structure of the conditional equa-

tions is as follows:

$$Y_{i,t,w,c}^* = a + \beta_1 \text{antiimm}_{i,t,w,c} \times \text{year}_{i,t,w,c} + \beta_2 \text{natecon}_{i,t,w,c} \times \text{year}_{i,t,w,c} + \beta_3 \text{euecon}_{i,t,w,c} \times \text{year}_{i,t,w,c} + \beta_4 \text{hhfin}_{i,t,w,c} \times \text{year}_{i,t,w,c} + \beta_n X_{i,t,w,c} + \gamma_t + \kappa_w + \chi_c + \varepsilon_{i,t,w,c}$$

Prior to estimating the models, all variables were normalized to range from 0 to 1, and therefore coefficients should be interpreted as percentage points. Although our analysis has a descriptive value, an important caveat is that in the absence of random assignment, we cannot support any causal claims.

## 7. Empirical Results

We begin the analysis by showing the results of diffuse public support for the EU. We then turn our attention to specific public support for the European Commission, the European Parliament, the European Central Bank, and European institutions in general. This differentiation between levels of trust provides the opportunity to provide a more comprehensive analysis of the dynamics of public support for the EU and EU institutions. Due to the large size of the sample, we focus on the substantive rather than the statistical significance of associations and report related 95% confidence intervals. The large size of our sample increases the precision of reported associations and thus many of them achieve statistical significance. However, in the subsequent analysis, we show that anti-immigrant sentiments and economic evaluations are substantively stronger predictors of diffuse

and specific public support for the EU than other variables included in the models, even ideology and social class. In the following tables, we present results from multivariate and conditional OLS fixed-effects models.

7.1. Diffuse Public Support for the European Union in Greece and Italy

Table 1 presents the correlates of diffuse public support for the EU in Greece and Italy from 2015 to 2020. Anti-immigrant sentiments and economic evaluations are the primary drivers of public support for the EU. However, the strength of these associations varies considerably in predicting public support.

Anti-immigrant sentiments are the most powerful suppressor of public support for the EU ( $b = -0.241$ , 95% CI [-0.257, -0.224]), providing thus evidence in favor of H2. In contrast, positive assessments of the European economy are correlated with higher trust in the EU ( $b = 0.336$ , 95% CI [0.316, 0.356]). Similar but

weaker associations are found about assessments of household finances ( $b = 0.134$ , 95% CI [0.113, 0.156]) and assessments of the national economy ( $b = 0.090$ , 95% CI [0.069, 0.111]). Collectively, these results offer initial support for H1a, H1b, and H1c. Although economic evaluations and opposition to immigration are the dominant predictors of public support for the EU, social class and ideology also shape it decisively. Citizens who identify as right-wing tend to be more in favor of the EU ( $b = 0.140$ , 95% CI [0.080, 0.199]) but the relationship is not necessarily linear. Instead, people that position themselves on the extreme left or extreme right are less likely to be favorable toward the EU ( $b = -0.119$ , 95% CI [-0.175, -0.064]). Finally, self-identification with higher social classes is positively associated with trust in the EU ( $b = 0.097$ , 95% CI [0.078, 0.116]).

Results from the conditional fixed-effects OLS model resemble closely those obtained from the multivariate linear model. Two points stand out. As the European economy recovers from the decade-long financial crisis,

**Table 1.** Anti-immigrant sentiment, economic evaluations, and public support for the EU in Greece and Italy (2015–2020).

	Public support for the EU	
	Fixed-effects OLS model	OLS conditional model Fixed-effects
Anti-immigrant sentiment	<b>-0.241</b> [-0.257, -0.224]	<b>-0.242</b> [-0.297, -0.187]
Assessment of national economy	<b>0.090</b> [0.069, 0.111]	0.018 [-0.048, 0.086]
Assessment of EU economy	<b>0.336</b> [0.316, 0.356]	<b>0.259</b> [0.197, 0.321]
Assessment of household finances	<b>0.134</b> [0.113, 0.156]	<b>0.223</b> [0.157, 0.288]
Anti-immigrant sentiment		
* 2016	—	-0.004 [-0.071, 0.061]
* 2017	—	-0.025 [-0.090, 0.040]
* 2018	—	0.039 [-0.025, 0.105]
* 2019	—	0.009 [-0.055, 0.074]
* 2020	—	-0.018 [-0.090, 0.054]
Assessment of national economy		
* 2016	—	0.061 [-0.021, 0.143]
* 2017	—	<b>0.131</b> [0.049, 0.213]
* 2018	—	0.080 [-0.0004, 0.162]
* 2019	—	0.038 [-0.043, 0.120]
* 2020	—	0.071 [-0.022, 0.165]



**Table 1.** (Cont.) Anti-immigrant sentiment, economic evaluations, and public support for the EU in Greece and Italy (2015–2020).

	Public support for the EU	
	Fixed-effects OLS model	OLS conditional model Fixed-effects
Assessment of EU economy		
* 2016	—	–0.007 [–0.083, 0.068]
* 2017	—	0.074 [–0.00009, 0.148]
* 2018	—	<b>0.123</b> [0.047, 0.199]
* 2019	—	<b>0.144</b> [0.068, 0.221]
* 2020	—	<b>0.104</b> [0.013, 0.196]
Assessment of household finances		
* 2016	—	–0.064 [–0.142, 0.013]
* 2017	—	<b>–0.122</b> [–0.020, –0.044]
* 2018	—	<b>–0.150</b> [–0.230, –0.070]
* 2019	—	–0.056 [–0.137, 0.023]
* 2020	—	–0.087 [–0.178, 0.002]
Ideology	<b>0.140</b> [0.080, 0.199]	<b>0.142</b> [0.083, 0.201]
Ideology (sq.)	<b>–0.119</b> [–0.175, –0.064]	<b>–0.121</b> [–0.177, –0.066]
Female	<b>0.011</b> [0.003, 0.019]	<b>0.011</b> [0.003, 0.019]
Age	–0.028 [–0.058, 0.001]	–0.027 [–0.057, 0.002]
Education	0.003 [–0.021, 0.028]	0.004 [–0.020, 0.029]
Social class	<b>0.097</b> [0.078, 0.116]	<b>0.098</b> [0.079, 0.118]
Italy	<b>0.047</b> [0.039, 0.056]	<b>0.048</b> [0.040, 0.057]
Year fixed effects	✓	✓
Wave fixed effects	✓	✓
Constant	<b>0.275</b> [0.243, 0.306]	<b>0.292</b> [0.235, 0.349]
<i>N</i>	20,337	20,337
Adj. <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.281	0.283
AIC	4,614.477	4,576.187
BIC	4,923.365	5,043.479

Notes: Entries are OLS coefficients and 95% confidence interval in brackets; coefficients associated with 95% CI that do not contain 0 are shown in bold; all models control for respondents' occupations; all variables are rescaled to range from 0 to 1.

positive socio-tropic economic assessments play an increasingly important role in rating the EU positively (in 2018,  $b = 0.123$ , 95% CI [0.047, 0.199]; in 2019,  $b = 0.144$ , 95% CI [0.068, 0.221]; in 2020,  $b = 0.104$ , 95% CI [0.013, 0.196]). Nevertheless, this trend is not echoed in the case of egocentric assessments of household finances. In fact, as the years progress, assessments of household finances become negatively associated with public trust in the EU (in 2017,  $b = -0.122$ , 95% CI [-0.020, -0.044]; in 2018,  $b = -0.150$ , 95% CI [-0.230, -0.070]).

In Tables C1 and C2 in the Supplementary File, we also investigate whether economic assessments interact with opposition to immigration or country to predict public support for the EU. Although we find little evidence in favor of interaction between anti-immigrant

sentiments and economic assessments, the results suggest that country variation is substantive but relatively small. More specifically, anti-immigrant sentiments and positive assessments of the national economy are more negatively associated with support for the EU in Italy than in Greece while the inverse association is found regarding assessments of the EU economy.

### 7.2. Specific Public Support for European Union Institutions in Greece and Italy, 2015–2020

We now turn our focus to specific public support for EU institutions. Table 2 presents the results from the first set of tests. In line with previous findings, opposition to immigration is negatively associated with support for the European Commission ( $b = -0.284$ , 95% CI

**Table 2.** Fixed-effects OLS models: Anti-immigrant sentiment, economic evaluations, and public support for EU institutions in Greece and Italy (2015–2020).

	Public support			
	European Commission	European Parliament	European Central Bank	EU institutions (combined)
Anti-immigrant sentiment	<b>-0.284</b> [-0.311, -0.257]	<b>-0.343</b> [-0.370, -0.316]	<b>-0.290</b> [-0.316, -0.263]	<b>-0.315</b> [-0.338, -0.293]
Assessment of national economy	<b>0.084</b> [0.049, 0.118]	<b>0.094</b> [0.060, 0.129]	<b>0.072</b> [0.038, 0.105]	<b>0.075</b> [0.047, 0.103]
Assessment of EU economy	<b>0.401</b> [0.369, 0.434]	<b>0.417</b> [0.384, 0.449]	<b>0.339</b> [0.307, 0.370]	<b>0.375</b> [0.348, 0.402]
Assessment of household finances	<b>0.170</b> [0.135, 0.205]	<b>0.197</b> [0.161, 0.232]	<b>0.157</b> [0.123, 0.191]	<b>0.152</b> [0.123, 0.181]
Ideology	0.069 [-0.027, 0.166]	<b>0.126</b> [0.029, 0.224]	<b>0.124</b> [0.029, 0.219]	0.030 [-0.049, 0.110]
Ideology (sq.)	-0.061 [-0.151, 0.029]	<b>-0.127</b> [-0.219, -0.036]	<b>-0.114</b> [-0.203, -0.026]	-0.013 [-0.087, 0.061]
Female	<b>0.014</b> [0.001, 0.027]	0.005 [-0.007, 0.019]	-0.002 [-0.015, 0.010]	-0.0004 [-0.011, 0.010]
Age	-0.008 [-0.057, 0.040]	-0.032 [-0.082, 0.016]	0.042 [-0.005, 0.090]	0.001 [-0.039, 0.041]
Education	<b>0.056</b> [0.016, 0.097]	<b>0.063</b> [0.022, 0.104]	0.022 [-0.017, 0.062]	<b>0.034</b> [0.0005, 0.067]
Social Class	<b>0.104</b> [0.072, 0.135]	<b>0.133</b> [0.102, 0.164]	<b>0.127</b> [0.097, 0.158]	<b>0.137</b> [0.111, 0.163]
Italy	0.173 [0.159, 0.187]	<b>0.092</b> [0.078, 0.106]	<b>0.141</b> [0.128, 0.155]	<b>0.102</b> [0.091, 0.113]
Year fixed effects	✓	✓	✓	✓
Wave fixed effects	✓	✓	✓	✓
Constant	<b>0.198</b> [0.147, 0.249]	<b>0.271</b> [0.220, 0.323]	<b>0.190</b> [0.140, 0.240]	<b>0.235</b> [0.192, 0.277]
<i>N</i>	20,337	20,337	20,337	20,337
Adj. $R^2$	0.201	0.204	0.192	0.245
AIC	24,597.16	24,832.44	23,663.52	16,768.49
BIC	24,906.05	25,141.32	23,972.41	17,077.38

Notes: Entries are OLS coefficients and 95% confidence interval in brackets; coefficients associated with 95% CI that do not contain 0 are shown in bold; all models control for respondents' occupations; all variables are rescaled to range from 0 to 1.

[−0.311, −0.257]), the European Parliament ( $b = -0.343$ , 95% CI [−0.370, −0.316]), the European Central Bank ( $b = -0.290$ , 95% CI [−0.316, −0.263]), and European institutions in general ( $b = -0.315$ , 95% CI [−0.338, −0.293]). These results support H2 as they show that opposition to immigration is the strongest and most persistent sup-

pressor of public support for the EU in Italy and Greece during the six-year period.

The results concerning economic evaluations follow a similar pattern as in previous tests. Positive assessments of the European economy are the strongest predictor of public support for the European Commission

**Table 3.** Fixed-effects conditional OLS models: Anti-immigrant sentiment, economic evaluations, and public support for EU institutions in Greece and Italy (2015–2020).

	Public support			
	European Commission	European Parliament	European Central Bank	EU institutions (index)
Anti-immigrant sentiment	<b>−0.298</b> [−0.388, −0.208]	<b>−0.349</b> [−0.439, −0.258]	<b>−0.257</b> [−0.345, −0.170]	<b>−0.299</b> [−0.373, −0.225]
Assessment of national economy	0.057 [−0.053, 0.168]	0.082 [−0.029, 0.193]	0.090 [−0.018, 0.198]	0.068 [−0.022, 0.160]
Assessment of EU economy	<b>0.259</b> [0.158, 0.361]	<b>0.313</b> [0.211, 0.415]	<b>0.196</b> [0.097, 0.295]	<b>0.232</b> [0.148, 0.315]
Assessment of household finances	<b>0.241</b> [0.134, 0.348]	<b>0.210</b> [0.102, 0.318]	<b>0.280</b> [0.175, 0.385]	<b>0.229</b> [0.141, 0.317]
Anti-immigrant sentiment				
* 2016	0.033 [−0.074, 0.142]	0.014 [−0.094, 0.123]	−0.071 [−0.177, 0.034]	−0.018 [−0.107, 0.071]
* 2017	−0.008 [−0.116, 0.098]	−0.010 [−0.118, 0.097]	−0.018 [−0.123, 0.086]	−0.047 [−0.136, 0.040]
* 2018	0.024 [−0.082, 0.132]	0.031 [−0.076, 0.140]	0.0009 [−0.104, 0.106]	−0.007 [−0.096, 0.081]
* 2019	0.045 [−0.061, 0.152]	0.005 [−0.102, 0.112]	−0.023 [−0.127, 0.080]	0.018 [−0.069, 0.106]
* 2020	−0.040 [−0.159, 0.078]	0.020 [−0.139, 0.099]	−0.070 [−0.185, 0.045]	0.037 [−0.135, 0.060]
Assessment of national economy				
* 2016	0.035 [−0.099, 0.170]	0.0005 [−0.135, 0.136]	0.065 [−0.197, 0.066]	−0.015 [−0.126, 0.095]
* 2017	0.099 [−0.035, 0.233]	0.071 [−0.063, 0.206]	0.081 [−0.050, 0.212]	0.067 [−0.043, 0.178]
* 2018	−0.002 [−0.135, 0.130]	0.005 [−0.127, 0.139]	−0.056 [−0.186, 0.073]	−0.022 [−0.132, 0.087]
* 2019	0.001 [−0.132, 0.135]	−0.021 [−0.156, 0.114]	−0.035 [−0.167, 0.095]	−0.001 [−0.112, 0.109]
* 2020	0.009 [−0.144, 0.163]	0.007 [−0.146, 0.162]	−0.042 [−0.192, 0.108]	−0.007 [−0.134, 0.119]
Assessment of EU economy				
* 2016	0.079 [−0.044, 0.204]	0.031 [−0.093, 0.156]	0.078 [−0.042, 0.200]	0.085 [−0.016, 0.188]
* 2017	<b>0.122</b> [0.0007, 0.244]	0.102 [−0.019, 0.225]	<b>0.177</b> [0.058, 0.296]	<b>0.148</b> [0.048, 0.249]
* 2018	<b>0.244</b> [0.120, 0.369]	<b>0.143</b> [0.019, 0.268]	<b>0.224</b> [0.102, 0.345]	<b>0.203</b> [0.101, 0.305]
* 2019	<b>0.205</b> [0.080, 0.330]	<b>0.188</b> [0.062, 0.313]	<b>0.134</b> [0.012, 0.256]	<b>0.193</b> [0.090, 0.296]
* 2020	0.108 [−0.040, 0.258]	0.107 [−0.042, 0.258]	<b>0.177</b> [0.031, 0.324]	<b>0.169</b> [0.045, 0.292]

**Table 3.** (Cont.) Fixed-effects conditional OLS models: Anti-immigrant sentiment, economic evaluations, and public support for EU institutions in Greece and Italy (2015–2020).

	Public support			
	European Commission	European Parliament	European Central Bank	EU institutions (index)
Assessment of household finances				
* 2016	−0.043 [−0.171, 0.084]	0.038 [−0.090, 0.166]	<b>−0.203</b> [−0.327, −0.078]	−0.093 [−0.198, 0.011]
* 2017	−0.120 [−0.249, 0.007]	−0.059 [−0.188, 0.069]	<b>−0.177</b> [−0.303, −0.052]	<b>−0.126</b> [−0.232, −0.020]
* 2018	<b>−0.159</b> [−0.289, −0.029]	−0.089 [−0.220, 0.041]	<b>−0.149</b> [−0.276, −0.021]	<b>−0.129</b> [−0.237, −0.022]
* 2019	−0.040 [−0.171, 0.091]	0.022 [−0.110, 0.154]	−0.039 [−0.167, 0.089]	−0.011 [−0.120, 0.096]
* 2020	0.009 [−0.138, 0.157]	0.039 [−0.109, 0.188]	−0.037 [−0.181, 0.107]	−0.027 [−0.150, 0.094]
Ideology	0.070 [−0.026, 0.167]	<b>0.127</b> [0.030, 0.225]	<b>0.125</b> [0.030, 0.220]	0.030 [−0.049, 0.110]
Ideology (sq.)	−0.061 [−0.152, 0.029]	<b>−0.129</b> [−0.220, −0.037]	<b>−0.116</b> [−0.205, −0.028]	−0.015 [−0.090, 0.059]
Female	<b>0.014</b> [0.001, 0.027]	0.005 [−0.007, 0.018]	−0.002 [−0.015, 0.010]	−0.0005 [−0.011, 0.010]
Age	−0.006 [−0.056, 0.042]	−0.031 [−0.080, 0.017]	0.042 [−0.005, 0.090]	0.001 [−0.039, 0.041]
Education	<b>0.057</b> [0.016, 0.097]	<b>0.064</b> [0.023, 0.105]	0.028 [−0.011, 0.068]	<b>0.037</b> [0.003, 0.070]
Social class	<b>0.105</b> [0.074, 0.137]	<b>0.135</b> [0.103, 0.166]	<b>0.128</b> [0.097, 0.158]	<b>0.138</b> [0.112, 0.164]
Italy	<b>0.175</b> [0.161, 0.189]	<b>0.093</b> [0.079, 0.107]	<b>0.145</b> [0.132, 0.159]	<b>0.106</b> [0.094, 0.117]
Year fixed effects	✓	✓	✓	✓
Wave fixed effects	✓	✓	✓	✓
Constant	<b>0.247</b> [0.154, 0.341]	<b>0.319</b> [0.225, 0.413]	<b>0.170</b> [0.078, 0.261]	<b>0.255</b> [0.178, 0.331]
<i>N</i>	20,337	20,337	20,337	20,337
Adj. <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.202	0.204	0.194	0.246
AIC	24,595.57	24,838.88	23,627.76	16,749.69
BIC	25,062.87	25,306.17	24,095.05	17,216.98

Notes: Entries are OLS coefficients and 95% confidence interval in brackets; coefficients associated with 95% CI that do not contain 0 are shown in bold; all models control for respondents' occupations; all variables are rescaled to range from 0 to 1.

( $b = 0.401$ , 95% CI [0.369, 0.434]), the European Parliament ( $b = 0.417$ , 95% CI [0.384, 0.449]), the European Central Bank ( $b = 0.339$ , 95% CI [0.307, 0.370]), and EU institutions ( $b = 0.375$ , 95% CI [0.348, 0.402]). Further, egocentric assessments of household finances, as well as socio-tropic assessments of the national economy, are correlated positively with public trust in EU institutions but to a lesser degree ( $b$  ranging between 0.072 and 0.197). Taken together, this evidence is in favor of H1a, H1b, and H1c. Accordingly, self-identification with

the upper social class is the only demographic attribute that predicts moderate but consistent public support for EU institutions ( $b$  ranging from 0.104 to 0.137).

The results from our final tests are presented in Table 3 and essentially replicate the analysis above. One exception is worth highlighting: The association between assessments of the national economy and public support for EU institutions is found to be substantively negligible. Similarly, to diffuse public support, the association between positive evaluations of the EU economy

and public support for EU institutions grows stronger as the European economy recovers from the financial crisis starting in 2017.

In Tables C1 and C2 in the Supplementary File, we extend our analysis to study whether anti-immigrant sentiment or country moderate the association of economic assessments with public support for EU institutions. We do not find evidence that the conditional effect between anti-immigrant sentiments and economic assessments is substantive. In contrast, evidence supports that there is variation across Greece and Italy, albeit relatively small. Similar to previous results, anti-immigrant sentiments and assessments of the national economy predict support for the EU more negatively in Italy than Greece while the opposite is true regarding assessments of the EU economy.

## 8. Discussion

The economic depression, immigration crisis, and Covid-19 pandemic have all contributed to a decline in public support for deeper EU integration, particularly in the periphery. These challenges have diminished the reservoir of goodwill that once legitimized European institutions and initiatives for greater integration. To alleviate the socio-economic repercussions of the Covid-19 pandemic in EU countries, the NextGenerationEU recovery program was introduced as a mitigation policy. However, as this program was adopted in December 2020, during a period that is outside the scope of this study, its impact on public opinion in Greece and Italy should be explored in future research.

To understand whether public support for the EU is based on economic evaluations or anti-immigrant sentiments, we examined data from the Eurobarometer survey conducted between 2015 and 2020 in Greece and Italy. Indeed, our study focuses on the association between subjective economic evaluations and opposition to immigration with public support for the EU at the individual level. Future studies should investigate whether objective measures of migration flows and changes in GDP also predict public trust in the EU at the aggregate level as well as whether subjective perceptions and objective measures are sufficiently correlated with one another, or whether public opinion suffers from widespread misperceptions.

Opposition to immigration and economic evaluations are the primary correlates of public support for the EU and its institutions in Greece and Italy. More specifically, favorable economic evaluations of the European economy and household finances are positively associated with the trust of Greeks and Italians in the EU, the European Commission, the European Parliament, and the European Central Bank. In contrast, economic evaluations of the national economy play only a negligible role.

Further, anti-immigrant sentiments are negatively correlated with public support for the EU. As anti-immigrant sentiments increase, diffuse public support

for the EU, as well as specific support for EU institutions, decreases, even in the case of institutions such as the European Central Bank that are not responsible for addressing immigration issues. Indeed, the case of the European Central Bank highlights the pervasive symbolic consequences of anti-immigrant sentiments. These considerations have become so central in how the Greek and Italian publics perceive and evaluate the EU that citizens do not seem to differentiate between institutions based on their policy area of responsibility. Future research should delve deeper into the mechanisms that underlie responsibility attribution across different policy areas and institutions in the EU.

Finally, ideology and social class are the only remaining factors that correlate with public support for the EU. Individuals who identify as right-wing and those from the upper classes are more likely to express pro-European opinions, but the relationship is not linear. Instead, people who adhere to extreme ideologies, either right or left, are more critical of the EU.

In this article, we find that Italian and Greek citizens are capable of distinguishing between the performance of the EU economy and their national economies. Specifically, the Italian and Greek publics assess the economic performance of both national and European economies but only the latter assessments predict support for EU institutions. In addition to socio-tropic evaluations, both publics take into account egocentric assessments of their household finances. This finding is significant because it demonstrates that Italians and Greeks are able to use information and experiences from their daily lives to evaluate European institutions, which are often believed to have complex and overlapping responsibilities that hinder the effective attribution of accountability. Future research should examine how multilevel governance in the EU affects public support and accountability attribution for EU institutions. Moreover, future investigations should study whether the associations reported here generalize beyond the cases we analyze, and more precisely to countries of the European north such as Germany and the Netherlands, which were differentially affected by the consecutive crises of economy, migration, and the pandemic.

Overall, the increasing immigration flows driven by the war in Ukraine and the ongoing climate crisis are likely to exacerbate public opposition to immigration and shape European politics in the immediate future. As international, ethnic, and social tensions become more acute, security threats will increase, and cultural divisions will deepen within European societies. Furthermore, with the advent of automation and artificial intelligence, immigration will put additional pressure on the European labor force, particularly on less-skilled workers who have precarious jobs in sectors disrupted by the digital revolution. It is, therefore, important for future research to investigate the consequences of immigration, international instability, automation, and climate change in the European job market, and how the



structure and characteristics of the European economy may condition these consequences.

### Acknowledgments

We would like to thank Assistant Professor Martijn Huysmans (Utrecht University) and Assistant Professor Sven Van Kerckhoven (Vesalius College and Institute for European Studies, Vrije University Brussels) for organizing the workshop “The Causes and Consequences of European (Dis)Integration” and editing the current thematic issue. Moreover, we would like to thank Assistant Professor Stamatis Poulakidakos for his helpful conversations and feedback.

### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

### Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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Article

# The Debate on the European Union’s Future From the Perspective of Regional Members of Parliament

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Submitted: 30 January 2023 | Accepted: 27 April 2023 | Published: 5 July 2023

## Abstract

Differentiated integration has become ubiquitous in the European Union today. However, the evaluation of differentiated integration by the academic community is much contested: While some see it as a remedy to political gridlock, others think of it as the beginning of the end of the EU (i.e., disintegration). Our article sheds light on the relationship between differentiated integration and disintegration from the viewpoint of subnational members of Parliament. Assuming that at least some scenarios of differentiated integration are related to disintegration, we report on data from a survey of seven EU member states about subnational members of Parliament’s preferences regarding future scenarios for the EU. Our results find that a preference for a Europe with a singular focus on “nothing but the single market” is related to a functionalist approach towards European integration and the perceived disintegration of the EU. This preference is especially prevalent among subnational MPs in the Czech Republic and Poland, both known for having opt-out solutions. While the Czech Republic constantly shows high levels of Euroscepticism in public surveys, the reverse is true in Poland. Obviously, a general commitment to the EU should not be equated with a shared common goal of further European integration. If such differences become permanent, European integration may genuinely be endangered.

## Keywords

differentiated integration; European disintegration; regional members of Parliament; regional parliaments

## Issue

This article is part of the issue “The Causes and Modes of European Disintegration” edited by Martijn Huysmans (Utrecht University) and Sven Van Kerckhoven (Vrije Universiteit Brussel).

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## 1. Introduction

Since the major rounds of enlargement of the European Union in the 2000s and early 2010s, increasing heterogeneity among member states can be observed and, consequently, the rise of differentiated integration (Leuffen, Rittberger, & Schimmelfennig, 2022). The concept of differentiated integration has been used to refer to the diverse modes of integration within the EU (Gänzle et al., 2020). However, the question arises as to how many differences and how much differentiated integration a community or political project can bear (Hooghe & Marks, 2022). For some authors, differentiated integ-

ration is perceived as a “double-edged sword” (Chopin & Lequesne, 2016) or as “poison or a panacea” (Lord, 2015) because differentiation can function as a driver for deepening EU integration as well as its disintegration. Our article aims to investigate the relationship between differentiated integration and disintegration. The EU future scenarios (European Commission, 2017) are considered indicators of certain preferences for differentiated (dis)integration (Leruth et al., 2019b). Until now, these scenarios have been rarely used in studies (Goldberg et al., 2021; Praprotnik & Perlot, 2021).

Differentiated integration concerns not only the national level but also the sub-national level (Dyson &



Sepos, 2010). In this contribution, we use data from a novel survey among regional (subnational) members of Parliament (MPs) from seven EU member states to analyse scenarios of differentiated (dis)integration. The sub-national level can be affected by “multi-level differentiation” (Fumasoli et al., 2015), which describes the influence of differentiation on various levels in the EU. In many EU member states, the sub-national level is responsible for the legal implementation of EU law in various policy fields (Borghetto & Franchino, 2010). Regions still have limited influence in the EU multi-level system. In the course of deepening EU integration, regions have faced a loss of competence in the EU. In return, they demanded enhanced rights in shaping EU policy at both the domestic and EU levels (Abels & Battke, 2019; Panara, 2015). In this context, regional parliaments can make use of different extra-state and intra-state channels (Bauer & Börzel, 2011). The Lisbon Treaty introduced a central measure for empowering (regional) parliaments in 2009. Regional parliaments have been given the opportunity to participate in the early warning system (EWS) for subsidiarity control (Bursens & Högenauer, 2017). Theoretically, the EWS can be used by regional parliaments to set claims for differentiation directly. However, participation in the EWS is only possible for regional parliaments with legislative competencies and depends on national parliaments’ assessment of whether regional parliaments should be consulted in this process (Högenauer, 2019). Tight time frames and limited resources on the side of the regional parliaments make the EWS a rather exclusive way of participation. Beyond limited formal rights (domestic involvement in EU affairs, Committee of the Regions, EWS), regional MPs must rely on informal contacts and networks (Schneider et al., 2014) to push their agenda.

Apart from regional parliaments’ involvement in EU policy-making, the regional level can be a breeding ground for discontent and support for European disintegration. Dijkstra et al. (2020) found regional disparities to be a main driver for anti-EU voting. This result also mitigates the objection that regional elections are often considered second-order elections. Schakel and Jeffery (2013) criticise the applicability of the second-order election model with regard to regional elections and found out that regional elections are not second-order elections per se. A more nuanced perspective on regional elections is called for, as studies on regional elections acknowledge (Bolgherini et al., 2021; Gougou, 2023; Liñeira, 2016; Linek & Škvrňák, 2022). Moreover, regional-level coalition-building may serve as an opportunity to test the fit of two or more coalition partners before implementing any such coalition at the national level. Coalition building among Eurosceptic forces at the regional level should thus be observed from an early stage. Additionally, the regional level is often deemed “closer to citizens” (Piattoni, 2010), which makes the investigation of regional politicians’ attitudes towards European integration particularly rel-

evant. To some extent, at least, regional MPs “mirror” the attitudes of their constituencies since they are elected representatives. Conversely, (regional) politicians can also act as top-down opinion leaders in their constituencies regarding preference formation on the EU’s future development (Telle, de Blok, et al., 2022a).

Studies by Leuffen, Schuessler, and Gómez Díaz (2022), Schuessler et al. (2022), and Telle, Badulescu, et al. (2022) found that differentiated integration can be linked to disintegration under certain conditions despite its perception as being a political instrument for dealing with heterogeneous preferences (Adler-Nissen, 2011). Building on these contributions, our article aims to investigate the potential consequences of EU future scenarios and the relationship between differentiated integration and disintegration more closely from the viewpoint of regional MPs. Our research questions are as follows:

- Are differentiated integration and disintegration linked to each other from the viewpoint of regional MPs, and if so, how?
- Which scenarios for differentiated integration are associated with pro-European attitudes, and which can be associated with attitudes opposing further European integration?

Moreover, we concentrate on the Single Market Only scenario, which represents the notion of “à la carte Europe” (Stubb, 1996) because this scenario may trigger disintegrative developments as recent scholarship indicates (De Blok & de Vries, 2022; Telle, de Blok, et al., 2022). Following this, our further research questions address the following aspects:

- How prevalent are preferences for this scenario (Single Market Only) among regional MPs?
- Which political strategies in EU affairs are linked to this scenario at the regional level?

Our results find that at least some scenarios for a future Europe are linked to disintegration from regional MPs’ viewpoint. The analysis shows that a preference for future scenarios focusing on economic integration and “doing less more efficiently” is associated with anti-European attitudes and a high perceived likelihood of EU disintegration. The structure of this article is as follows: Section 2 provides an overview of both concepts, differentiated integration and disintegration, argues for possible linkages, and embeds our research questions within a literature review. Next, Section 3 introduces the methods and data used in our analysis. In Section 4, using a novel survey among regional MPs in several EU member states, we then explore the relationship between differentiated integration and disintegration empirically. Finally, in Section 5, we discuss our results and implications for future research.

## 2. Differentiated Integration: A Remedy or Harmful to European Integration?

While processes of differentiation are an essential part of a politically and socio-economically heterogeneous EU (Gänzle et al., 2020), differentiated integration is, nevertheless, contested. The European Commission (2017), which describes various future scenarios in their *White Paper on the Future of Europe: Reflections and Scenarios for the EU27 by 2025*, notes that differentiation can either be seen as part of the problem or part of the solution. This contested perspective on differentiation can also be found in scholarship on differentiated (dis)integration. On the one hand, differentiated integration is perceived as a policy-making tool to avoid political deadlock and accommodate the heterogeneity of political preferences at the supranational EU level and among member states. From this perspective, differentiated integration can deepen the EU integration process (Adler-Nissen, 2011; Dyson & Sepos, 2010; Kölliker, 2001; Schmidt, 2019). On the other hand, increasing differentiation can also promote disintegrative developments, as Kelemen (2021, p. 679) suggests: “If taken to an extreme, DI [differentiated integration] could contribute to European disintegration through a process of fragmentation and atrophy.” For a comprehensive understanding of differentiation which includes perspectives on both integration and disintegration, we have followed Leruth et al. (2022), who suggest using the term *differentiation* as an “umbrella term referring to heterogeneous modes of integration and disintegration in the EU” (Leruth et al., 2022, p. 10).

Differentiated integration is multifaceted and only certain aspects of it have the potential to fuel disintegration. Schimmelfennig and Winzen (2020a, 2020b) follow Stubb’s (1996) seminal typology by relabeling its categories as “multi-speed” (time), “multi-tier” (space), and “multi-menu” (matter) differentiation. Schimmelfennig et al. (2022) emphasise the importance of duration when distinguishing between temporary and permanent states of differentiated integration. One can easily imagine that these various forms of differentiation have different consequences regarding deepening or loosening European integration. While permanent differentiation might lead to irreversible manifestations of differentiation (perhaps even disintegration), temporary agreements can be taken back if they become useless, obsolete, or unnecessary. While in a “multi-speed” Europe, differentiation might lead to uniformity in a reasonable timeframe, a “multi-menu” Europe implies no convergence towards uniformity (Schimmelfennig et al., 2022, p. 4). The current main drivers of differentiation are an instrumental- or capacity-driven logic and a constitutional- or sovereignty-driven logic, according to Schimmelfennig et al. (2022). Instrumental- or capacity-driven differentiation refers to concerns about distribution and efficiency in the context of EU enlargement (Schimmelfennig et al., 2022, p. 5): For “old” mem-

ber states, these tend to be concerns about redistribution of funds and cost distribution, which arise in the process of enlargement; for “new” member states, these tend to be concerns about market and regulatory processes on domestic products. By contrast, constitutional differentiation captures the heterogeneity of preferences regarding a deepening of European integration among member states (Schimmelfennig et al., 2022). While instrumental- or capacity-driven differentiation is typical in a multi-speed Europe, constitutional differentiation is likely to become durable and relates to multi-menu differentiation (Schimmelfennig et al., 2022, p. 5). Constitutional differentiation refers to the concerns of member states and governments about shifting competencies to the supranational EU level and relates them to the idea of protection of national sovereignty and identities. These motives are currently dominant in member states with strong (exclusive) national identities. Concerns about sovereignty and increasing national pride provide a fruitful ground for a constitutional-driven logic, as we can currently observe in some Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) countries. De Blok and de Vries (2022) and Leuffen, Schuessler, and Gómez Díaz (2022) find that Eurosceptic citizens more commonly support opt-outs, whereas pro-European citizens tend to be more indifferent towards differentiated integration. Pro-European citizens are more supportive of a multi-speed Europe to overcome political deadlocks, while Eurosceptic citizens are most supportive of opt-outs, mainly driven by national sovereignty concerns. As previously pointed out, permanent differentiation, especially a “multi-menu” Europe scenario and a constitutional- or sovereignty-driven logic, can evoke disintegrative developments. This allows a connection to research in EU disintegration.

In contrast to the scholarship on differentiated integration, the scholarship on EU disintegration is comparably young and has only in the last decade attracted increasing attention, mainly due to Brexit (Eppler et al., 2016; Grimmel, 2020; Leruth et al., 2022; Vollaard, 2014, 2018; Webber, 2019). As discussed below, member states’ sovereignty-based concerns are important in understanding EU disintegration. Webber (2019) conceptualises disintegration as a three-dimensional construct. Sectoral disintegration refers to a reduction in the number of policy fields in which the EU exercises exclusive or shared competencies. Vertical disintegration is the reduction of treaty-based responsibilities. Horizontal disintegration means a decline in EU members. In this understanding, disintegration is a possible consequence of the renationalisation of EU competencies. Moreover, Vollaard (2014, 2018) provides a complex framework for polity formation and conceptualises two dimensions of disintegration, an actor-level and a systemic level. He defines dis(integration) as follows: “Integration concerns the making of a system of authoritative allocations from other systems of authoritative allocations, whereas disintegration is the unmaking of such a system”

(Vollaard, 2018, p. 5). Missing options for “full exit” and “effective voice” can lead to disintegrative developments since member states seek to call for more opt-outs and the renationalisation of competencies. Against this background, Vollaard (2018, p. 7) assumes: “The EU will thus be limping ahead with many rather grudgingly accepting it as the least unattractive option.” Since regional actors lack opportunities to raise their “voice” in the EU’s multi-level system efficiently, they can be a specific source of discontent in the current system.

EU disintegration can have different manifestations and should be perceived as a process. This evaluation is also shared by Leruth et al. (2019a, p. 1391), who agree that a full rupture involving cutting all ties without making provisions on handling future relations by (legal) agreements would be nearly impossible due to global interdependencies. Schimmelfennig (2018, p. 1154) describes this process using the term “differentiated disintegration,” which implies a “selective reduction of a state’s level and scope of integration.” Leruth et al. (2019b, p. 1015) point to the multidimensionality of such differentiated disintegration: “as the general mode of strategies and processes under which (a) member state(s) withdraw(s) from participation in the process of European integration (horizontal disintegration) or under which EU policies are transferred back to member states (vertical disintegration).” Here, in addition to the re-transfer of competencies from supranational to the member-state level, aspects of reduced cooperation between political actors and EU actors in shaping EU policy are also included. Moreover, Leruth et al. (2019b, pp. 1023–1025) make a case for there being three major scenarios of European (dis)integration which theoretically acknowledge the spectrum of possibilities: (a) “breaking down,” in which the EU fails completely due to a lack of willingness or ability of EU member states to deal collectively with challenges; (b) “muddling through,” which describes the reliance on existing institutional structures to maintain the status quo; (c) “heading forward,” in which crises such as Brexit may elicit a deepening of cooperation. At least some forms of differentiated integration, that is to say, those centring around an increase of national sovereignty while at the same time lowering commitment towards European integration, are important in this respect.

To summarise, the following can be concluded from the brief review of the relationship between differentiated integration and disintegration. Three characteristics of differentiated integration seem to be crucial in this relationship. First, a temporal dimension distinguishes between permanent and temporary differentiated integration; second, the existence of a common goal regarding European integration versus fears about protecting member states’ sovereignty; and third, the processuality of differentiated (dis)integration. Based on our research questions, we expect that differentiated integration and disintegration are linked to each other and that certain EU future scenarios are associated with pro- and contra-

Europeanness. The following hypotheses structure our data analysis:

- H1: Regional MPs’ preferences for scenarios involving less cooperation are linked to the perception that the EU might face disintegration in the future.
- H2: Regional MPs preferring scenarios such as “Single Market Only” and “Doing Less More Efficiently” state more often that European integration has already gone too far.
- H3: Preferences for a Single Market Only scenario (multi-menu differentiation) are more likely in CEE countries due to sovereignty-based concerns.
- H4: Preferences for a Single Market Only scenario are not only related to lower support for further European integration (H2) but also to preferences for more competition and less cooperation at the regional level in the EU.

Since the future scenarios used in this article are indicators for political (dis)integration, we are only able to concentrate on the political dimension of EU (dis)integration (Eppler et al., 2016). As the review on differentiated (dis)integration has shown, differentiated integration, despite its usefulness as an instrument for deepening integration (Adler-Nissen, 2011; Schmidt, 2019), can evoke disintegrative developments if certain conditions apply. Certain forms of differentiated integration, such as the “multi-menu” Europe, have the potential to fuel disintegrative processes, as Schuessler et al. (2022) and Telle, Badulescu, et al. (2022) discuss. Sovereignty-based concerns, in particular, have been found to be drivers of EU disintegration.

### 3. Methods and Data

Empirical research on differentiated integration and disintegration has, until now, mainly focused on two scenarios: “multi-speed Europe” and, referring to multiple preferences for opt-outs, “multi-end Europe” (De Blok & de Vries, 2022; Moland, 2022; Telle, Badulescu, et al., 2022; Telle, de Blok, et al., 2022). Nevertheless, Börzel (2018), Leruth et al. (2019b), and Schuessler et al. (2022) criticise the use of such a simplified scale and strongly argue for the use of more sophisticated approaches to measuring European (dis)integration. These authors argue that measurements should refer to the full continuum of European (dis)integration, from “heading forward” to “breaking down” (Leruth et al., 2019b). Applying such kinds of measurement, we argue, is not only a more valid measure of theoretical assumptions but also necessary in presenting symmetric item batteries, including positive, neutral and negative scenarios to survey respondents. To this end, we included two item batteries in our questionnaire, the first focusing on various states of differentiated integration and the second which also addresses scenarios of disintegration.

The first item battery includes future scenarios about the EU, as introduced by Jean-Claude Juncker in the *White Paper on the Future of Europe: Reflections and Scenarios for the EU27 by 2025* (European Commission, 2017). The White Paper presents five different scenarios about the future development of the EU, ranging from Carrying On (i.e., the status quo) to scenarios in which there is less integration (“Nothing but Single Market” and “Doing Less More Efficiently”) to scenarios of (differentiated) integration (“Those Who Want More Do More” and “Doing Much More Together”). Although these scenarios do not directly refer to the term differentiated integration, Leruth et al. (2019b, p. 1014) find them to be valid measures for differentiated (dis)integration, since the concept is at least implicitly inherent in the scenarios, particularly Scenario Three (Those Who Want More Do More): “However, while the document avoids referring to the term of differentiated integration expressis verbis, the concept is implicitly present in the third scenario” (Leruth et al., 2019b, p. 1014). Furthermore, Leruth et al. (2019b) argue that Scenario Two (Nothing but Single Market), as well as Scenario Four (Doing Less More Efficiently), can be understood in terms of differentiated disintegration. Considering the political relevance and the spectrum addressed by the future scenarios in the White Paper, it is surprising that they have rarely been used in empirical studies until now (Goldberg et al., 2021; Praprotnik & Perlot, 2021). Our survey respondents were asked to state whether these future scenarios are good or bad options on a scale from 1 (*very good option*) to 4 (*very bad option*).

We addressed disintegration even more concretely in our second item battery, where we followed Leruth et al. (2019b, pp. 1023–1025) in considering “breaking down,” “muddling through,” and “heading forward” as possible scenarios. Thus, four major scenarios were included in the second item battery in which: (a) the EU Fails Completely, (b) More Countries Leave the EU, (c) Cooperation Continues as Before, and (d) Cooperation Between Member States Deepens. Respondents were asked to rate the likelihood of these options on a four-point scale (1 = *very likely*, 4 = *very unlikely*). Once again, we aimed to offer a symmetric item battery including a continuum of possible scenarios from the dissolution

of the EU to a deepening of integration. Section 4.2 examines the relationship between our two item batteries (future scenarios and item battery on disintegration) more closely.

Our data was collected by an online survey undertaken between autumn 2020 and winter 2021. The survey was part of the REGIOPARL project, which aimed to investigate the activities of regional parliaments in EU affairs and the perception of European integration from the viewpoint of regional deputies. Our research was conducted in seven member states: Austria, Germany, Italy, Spain, France, the Czech Republic, and Poland. This country selection was guided by considerations of geographical scope and with a view to representing “old” and “new” member states, federal and centralised political systems, and “strong” and “weak” regional parliaments with respect to their competencies (cf. Table 1). We used the Regional Authority Index (RAI; Hooghe et al., 2016; Schakel, 2023) to take regional “power” in the domestic context into account. The RAI measures the authority in self-rule and shared rule exercised by regional governments on 10 indicators and ranges from 0 to 30. When comparing the selected countries, it becomes obvious that three can be described as centralised states whose regional parliaments have no legislative power, as reflected by their comparatively low RAI values. Especially in Poland and the Czech Republic, regional authorities only exert weak power over their national counterparts. We are going to take these differences into account when interpreting our empirical findings later on.

Our standardised questionnaire included 28 questions about regional MPs’ general attitudes to European integration, their professional activities, and political strategies, and questions on their networks in the EU’s multi-level system. The survey was conducted using the program Lime Survey. We translated questionnaires into the respective languages of each country and used a multi-step procedure for contacting regional MPs (by email, post, and telephone). Additionally, we asked regional parliaments’ head offices to support our research and sought multipliers, such as universities, in the respective countries. We have contacted *all* regional parliaments and their deputies in the respective

**Table 1.** Selection of countries.

	Geographic position	EU membership	Political structure	Legislative power	RAI (Schakel, 2018)
Austria	Central Europe	1995	Symmetric federalism	Yes	23
Germany	Western Europe	Founding member	Symmetric federalism	Yes	27
Italy	Southern Europe	Founding member	Asymmetric federalism	Yes	18.12
Spain	Southern Europe	1986	Asymmetric federalism	Yes	23.65
France	Western Europe	Founding member	Centralised state	No	10
Czech Republic	Central Eastern Europe	2004	Centralised state	No	9.12
Poland	Eastern Europe	2004	Centralised state	No	8

countries. We yielded satisfying though varying response rates for the total sample compared to similar studies targeting (regional) deputies as a group of interest (Table 2). The total average response rate of our survey across all countries was 29.8%, in line with similar surveys of Wonka (2017), who conducted a survey in the German Bundestag, yielding a response rate of 16%, and Schneider et al. (2014), who report on a survey among German regional MPs that had a response rate of 28.5%. Nevertheless, despite the same procedure for conducting fieldwork being used uniformly, country samples vary. While we were able to reach a representative spectrum of political parties in Germany and Austria, respondents in France and Italy were less likely to participate in the survey. Response rates in regions of the two CEE countries, the Czech Republic and Poland were quite satisfactory. The PiS party is clearly under-represented in the Polish sample, although not completely absent. We can report no major deviations concerning gender compared to actual distributions in the regional parliaments at the time of the survey. We can also report a fairly even participation rate across individual regions for each country surveyed. Our sample can be described as fairly pro-European for all countries since Eurosceptic MPs and parties were harder to reach than their pro-European counterparts. These limitations should be kept in mind by readers when turning to our results in the next sections. Regional MPs are, like all politicians, a hard-to-reach population and have not been surveyed that often. This makes our data set innovative, and our results give a relevant first insight into their attitude patterns on European (dis)integration.

#### 4. Empirical Analyses and Findings

Our analysis investigates our theoretical assumptions as follows: First, we present univariate distributions of general attitudes towards European integration and the perceived advantages for each region of being in the EU from the viewpoint of regional MPs; second, we examine bivariate correlations of scenarios of differentiated integration and disintegration; third, we examine the

relationship of these scenarios with perceived advantages for each region being in the EU; fourth, we conduct a multiple linear regression analysis to investigate which scenarios are linked to attitudes that are pro-European integration and which are linked to the perception that European integration has already gone too far. In the fifth and final step, we focus on one scenario, multi-menu differentiation (i.e., the Single Market Only scenario) and ask for its prevalence and its association with political strategies at the regional level. The exact wording of the survey questions can be found in the Supplementary File.

##### 4.1. European Integration, Differentiated Integration, and Disintegration From the Viewpoint of Regional Members of Parliament

We asked regional MPs to rate the level of European integration by asking a question commonly used in large-scale surveys:

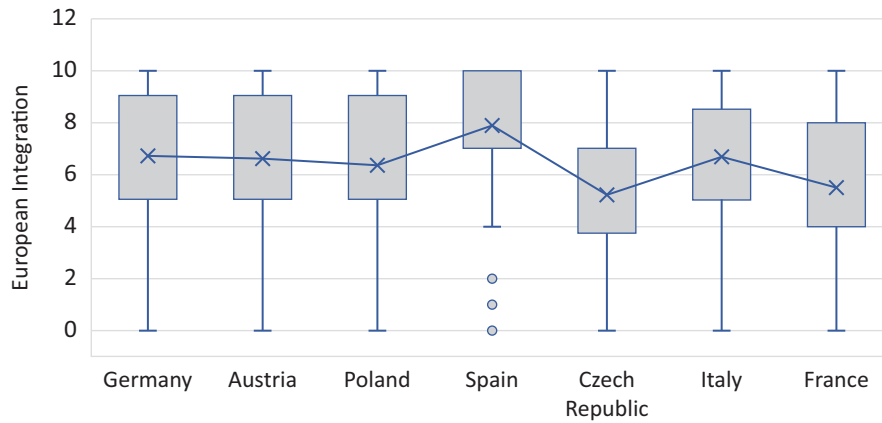
Some say that European integration should be pushed further. Others say it has already gone too far. What is your opinion regarding this topic? Zero means that European integration has already gone too far, and 10 means that European integration should be pushed further. Five is equivalent to the opinion that European integration has reached a satisfactory level.

Figure 1 shows boxplots of the answers to this question, revealing Spanish regional MPs to be very much in favour of European integration, while Czech and French regional MPs are comparatively sceptical about further integration. The mean values of the Czech and French regional MPs are somewhat low, while we find an upper quartile of German, Spanish, and Italian regional MPs who state that European integration should be pushed even further. We analysed country differences also regarding party profiles. In all countries except France members of right-wing parties in our sample agree that European integration has already gone too far. As already stated in the description of our sample, members of Eurosceptic

**Table 2.** Sample and response rates.

	Total number of MPs in regional parliaments	Total number of participants in the REGIOPARL survey	Response rate (%)
Austria	440	315	71.6
Germany	1,860	398	21.4
Spain	1,208	255	21.1
Poland	552	156	28.3
France	1,711	312	18.3
Italy	893	157	17.6
Czech Republic	735	224	30.5
TOTAL	7,399	1,817	29.8





**Figure 1.** Attitudes towards European integration: Boxplots.

parties were hard to reach in all participating countries, which makes our sample in all countries more pro-European. Additionally, MPs have been sceptic about providing personal information in our survey due to concerns about anonymity, which leads to a considerable decrease in sample sizes on these questions.

As well as asking regional MPs about their attitudes towards European integration, we were interested in opinions on the perceived advantages and disadvantages of a region in the EU. Being in the EU is rated as an advantage by the majority of regional MPs in all participating countries surveyed (Table 3). Regional MPs in Poland especially rate their country’s membership in the EU very positively (47.4% of Polish MPs surveyed are convinced that being in the EU is advantageous to the region). Once again, by contrast, French and Czech regional MPs are less enthusiastic about being in the EU. Taking the eta-squared value as a measure of association between nominal and interval data suggests a slightly significant and positive association between country and perceived advantages for the region being in the EU ( $\eta^2 = 0.246$ ;  $p = 0.001$ ).

In the next step of our analysis, we ask how scenarios of differentiated integration and disintegration are related to each other and which are related to perceived advantages for a region of being in the EU (Table 4). We find that all scenarios with less integration or disintegration are related to each other and negatively correlate with scenarios representing the status quo or

a deepening of integration. Thus, Nothing but Single Market, Doing Less More Efficiently, Doing Much More Together (negative correlation), EU Fails Completely and Is Dissolved, and Advantages for a Region of Being in the EU build one cluster of attitudes, which can be described as an instrumental approach towards European integration. Perceived advantages for the region of being in the EU seem to be influenced by economic concerns and a rejection of further and deeper integration. We will analyse this instrumental approach towards European integration and its relationship with the political strategies of regions in more detail in the last part of our results section.

**4.2. Scenarios Representing Differentiated (Dis)Integration: Pro or Contra European Integration?**

In this section, we aim to show how different scenarios of differentiated (dis)integration relate to attitudes toward European integration in general. To this end, we use our general question on European integration, with answers ranging from 0 to 10, as a dependent variable for multiple linear regression analysis. Various scenarios on differentiated (dis)integration serve as independent variables. We excluded scenarios that have either proven to be highly correlated or address similar aspects of European integration (cf. Section 4.1). All independent variables have been dichotomised to ease interpretation and to provide a parsimonious model. Four scenarios are

**Table 3.** Perceived advantages and disadvantages for a region of being in the EU (%).

	Germany (n = 331)	Austria (n = 278)	Poland (n = 97)	Spain (n = 195)	Czech Republic (n = 141)	Italy (n = 82)	France (n = 172)
Only advantages	10.9	9.7	47.4	18.5	9.2	13.4	5.2
Some advantages	66.2	68.7	38.1	60	53.9	45.1	53.5
Neither/nor	10.9	15.8	10.3	11.3	24.8	19.5	22.7
Some disadvantages	10.0	5.0	4.1	8.2	11.3	14.6	16.9
Only disadvantages	2.1	0.7	0	2.1	0.7	7.3	1.7
	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

**Table 4.** Bivariate correlations of differentiated integration, disintegration, and perceived advantages for a region of being in the EU.

	Carrying On	Nothing but Single Market	Those Who Want More Do More	Doing Less More Efficiently	Doing Much More Together	EU Fails Completely and Is Dissolved	More Countries Leave the EU	Political Cooperation in the EU Continues as Before	Cooperation Between EU Member States Deepens	Advantages for Region of Being in the EU
Carrying On	—									
Nothing but Single Market	-0.016	—								
Those Who Want More Do More	0.102**	0.075**	—							
Doing Less More Efficiently	-0.177**	0.658**	0.098**	—						
Doing Much More Together	0.200**	-0.473**	0.008	-0.534**	—					
EU Fails Completely and Is Dissolved	-0.202**	0.364**	-0.058*	0.280**	-0.243**	—				
More Countries Leave the EU	-0.265**	0.268**	0.002	0.292**	-0.248**	0.563**	—			
Political Cooperation in the EU Continues as Before	0.184**	-0.138**	0.034	-0.138**	0.151**	-0.257**	-0.317**	—		
Cooperation Between EU Member States Deepens	0.302**	-0.113**	0.115**	-0.161**	0.212**	-0.285**	-0.295**	0.106**	—	
Advantages for Region of Being in EU	-0.268**	0.358**	-0.037	0.406**	-0.374**	0.330**	0.362**	-0.174**	-0.246**	—

Notes: Spearman correlations;  $N = 1,270$ ; \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ .

clearly negatively linked to European integration, namely Nothing but Single Market, Doing Less More Efficiently, EU Fails Completely and Is Dissolved, and More Countries Leave the EU (Table 5). Therefore, we can conclude that a preference for these scenarios not only reflects aspects of differentiated (dis)integration but is explicitly associated with the perception of disintegration. Four scenarios representing the status quo or a deepening of integration are positively linked to a general attitude toward European integration, although the coefficients are comparatively small. Our analysis yields a satisfactory adjusted  $R^2$  value of 0.433 which can be mainly attributed to the explanatory power of the four variables addressing differentiated disintegration.

#### 4.3. Preferences for Multi-Menu Differentiation, Preferred Regional Strategies in European Union Affairs, and Prevalence of Scenarios Across Countries

A prominent scenario on differentiated European integration is the Single Market Only scenario which aims to shift competencies towards the member states and constrain EU action to the single market only. This scenario indicates a preference for economic integration and represents multi-menu differentiation or a “Europe à la carte.” In the last section of our data analysis, we turn from a more general analysis of attitude patterns in the broad context of European integration back to a more detailed regional perspective. We aim to investigate which political strategies at the regional level can be associated with a preference for the Single Market Only scenario. To this end, we use two metric indices as independent variables measuring a preference for either “regional competition” or “transregional cooperation” in EU affairs. These indices have been developed

using exploratory factor analysis (cf. Donat & Lenhart, 2023) applied to an item battery on regional strategies in EU affairs in our survey. We asked regional MPs which strategies and goals they pursue in EU affairs for their region. The “regional competition” strategy includes two items: (a) “Achieve as many advantages as possible for my region” and (b) “raise as many funds as possible for my region.” The “regional cooperation” strategy includes three items: (a) “Make EU’s achievements more visible in my region,” (b) “deepen cooperation with other European regions,” and (c) “pay greater attention to the European perspective in my decision-making.” Both indices range from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 5 (*strongly disagree*). We dichotomised answer choices of our dependent variable “preference for the single market scenario only” and computed a binary logistic regression. Model 1 (M1, Table 6) illustrates that. Regional MPs who prefer the “regional competition” strategy are more likeable to prefer a Single Market Only scenario for European integration. The model fit improves considerably when adding country dummies to our model (M2, Table 6). The results of M2 indicate a strong preference for the Single Market Only scenario in Poland and the Czech Republic. Regional MPs in Poland have a 4.216 higher probability and regional MPs in the Czech Republic have a 5.417 higher probability of preferring this scenario than the reference group of regional MPs in Germany. Regional MPs in France and Austria also show a higher probability of preferring this scenario than the reference group but comparatively lower than their colleagues in Eastern Europe. The effect for regional MPs in Italy is only significant at  $p = 0.05$  and should be treated with caution due to the small sample size in Italy. We also find significant effects for the two indices, although the “regional cooperation” effect is again very low. Regional

**Table 5.** Attitude towards European integration.

Variable	<i>B</i>	SE
Carrying On	0.152	0.134
Nothing but Single Market	-1.355***	0.177
Those Who Want More Do More	-0.045	0.174
Doing Less More Efficiently	-1.840***	0.162
EU Fails Completely and Is Dissolved	-1.298***	0.225
More Countries Leave the EU	-0.906***	0.146
Political Cooperation in the EU Continues As Before	0.456**	0.153
Cooperation Between EU Member States Deepens	0.432**	0.137
Constant		0.233
$R^2$		0.436
Adjusted $R^2$		0.433
$N = 1,240$		

Notes: Unstandardised coefficients (*B*), standard error (SE), and measures of fit from multiple linear regression; dependent metric variable from 0 (*European integration has already gone too far*) to 10 (*European integration should be pushed further*); \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ .

**Table 6.** The EU concentrates exclusively on the single market and transfers all other competencies to the member states.

Variable	M1		M2	
	OR	SE	OR	SE
Regional competition	1.976**	0.099	1.748**	0.104
Regional cooperation	0.386**	0.095	0.371**	0.099
Country (Reference: Germany)				
Austria	—	—	2.000**	0.240
Poland	—	—	4.216**	0.319
Spain	—	—	0.770	0.311
Czech Republic	—	—	5.417**	0.282
Italy	—	—	2.120*	0.351
France	—	—	2.288**	0.292
Constant	0.811	0.504	0.828	0.536
McFadden's pseudo- $R^2$ value		0.144		0.197
Cox and Snell		0.162		0.215
Nagelkerke (Cragg and Uhler)		0.230		0.304
$N = 972$				

Notes: Odds ratio (OR), standard error (SE), and measures of fit from logistic regression; dependent variable of 1 (*very likely or somewhat likely*) or 0 (*very unlikely or somewhat unlikely*); \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ .

MPs favouring a regional competition strategy have a 1.748 higher probability of preferring a Single Market Only scenario compared to MPs who do not.

In sum, our analysis indicates some country-specific differences. While regional MPs from Poland rate European integration and the advantages for its regions from being in the EU quite positively, they clearly tend to prefer economic integration. This is even more true for regional MPs from the Czech Republic, who are comparatively sceptical about European integration and the perceived advantages for the region, having the strongest preference for the Single Market Only scenario. Turning to our hypotheses in Section 1, we find evidence for H1, H2, and H4. In H3, we assumed a preference for the Single Market Only scenario, especially in our CEE countries, Poland and the Czech Republic. Additionally, our comparison also indicates a remarkable preference for this scenario in France, which leads us to discuss possible explanations for this effect in the final section of our article.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusion

Our analysis aimed to elaborate on the relationship between differentiated integration and disintegration from the viewpoint of regional MPs. We offered our respondents scenarios representing differentiated integration and disintegration, providing a symmetric measurement of these two phenomena. Concerning our main research question on the relationship between differentiated integration and disintegration, we find at least certain scenarios associated with disintegration under

certain circumstances. The Single Market Only scenario explicitly assumes a reversion of competencies from the EU to the national level; a preference for this scenario can serve to breed ideas which assume disintegration. "Pick and choose" or opt-outs lead to the avoidance of uncomfortable policies in the European Community (Schuessler et al., 2022). It is especially this "Europe à la carte" which leads De Blok and de Vries (2022) to doubt whether differentiated integration will decrease heterogeneity within the EU. Additionally, Telle, de Blok, et al. (2022) assess that this scenario bears the potential for permanent differentiated integration. While temporary differentiated integration can help overcome gridlock, permanent differentiated integration can lead to irreversible forms of disintegration. Whether disintegration becomes dangerous for a political system's stability depends on the system's ability to balance integrative and disintegrative elements. Vollaard (2018) argues that integrative and disintegrative elements, or centripetal and centrifugal powers, can exist in political systems at the same time. The more political communities grow, the more interests they have to integrate. This "natural" differentiation leads to different competencies and responsibilities among the single units, as observed in many asymmetric federal systems, which is also the case in some of our sampled countries. Political systems can handle this divergence if subunits are loyal while also having the opportunity to voice their concerns (Vollaard, 2018).

Additionally, we find evidence that a Single Market Only scenario, which is associated with strategies of

competition at the regional level, is much more likely to be preferred in Poland and the Czech Republic. Cianciara (2022, p. 538) describes Poland as the “champion of internal differentiation in post-Brexit Europe.” Although very pro-European in public opinion surveys, Poland currently refuses to go beyond traditional areas of integration such as the single market. Its alternative vision of a “Europe of nation-states” is clearly undermining further European integration (Gagatek et al., 2022, p. 13). Similar assessments can be found for the Czech Republic, which, together with Sweden, joined even more differentiation projects than Poland before 2018 (Cianciara, 2022, p. 540). Contrary to Poland, public surveys show a consistently high rate of Euroscepticism among the Czechs (Smekal & Havlík, 2022). Havlík and Havlík (2018) have analysed the great interest of the Czech Republic in accessing funds. Returning to our research question, we find preferences for multi-menu differentiation, especially where the ideological environment is already conducive to disintegration. Additionally, differing goals for European integration might also be grounded in the fact that regional actors in Poland, the Czech Republic, and France lack a “voice.” Vollaard (2018) assumes that limited opportunities to have a “voice” in the EU lead to opt-outs. Regional actors in these three countries are embedded in centralised systems and have no legislative powers (cf. Table 1). These characteristics might also be responsible for a functionalist or instrumental approach towards European Integration, with a focus on economic instead of political integration. Further research should investigate the origin of this attitude pattern (preference for the single-market scenario) more in-depth, comparing regional and national attitudes. If this pattern is caused by limited opportunities for regions to raise their “voices,” we should find different patterns at the national level, which is much more powerful in the EU’s multilevel system. If such attitudes are grounded in ideological roots, they might also prevail at the national level. The “skewness” of our sample regarding its “pro-Europeanness” limits the possibility for investigating these aspects more closely. Additionally, including Nordic countries in our analysis could increase our sample’s empirical basis for centralised states.

Our analysis focused on a specific dimension of European Integration: political integration. Spillover effects towards other dimensions, such as social, cultural or economic integration, do not necessarily occur but are at least to some extent influenced by the framework political actors and systems provide (Eppler et al., 2016). Our research follows the design of a cross-sectoral analysis and provides some initial insight into the relationship between differentiation and disintegration. Crises can exert a major influence on the process of integration and disintegration (Vollaard, 2018). Currently, we perceive a great fear of history repeating itself in many CEE countries, given the Russian invasion of Ukraine. It seems that, at least in some respects, countries such as Poland have widened their interest in European integration bey-

ond merely economic aspects. Yet we cannot anticipate how long this attitude change will endure or how deep it will be. Leruth et al. (2019b) emphasise the potential of crises to lead to windows of opportunity for more integration. Given the currently volatile political situation in the EU and beyond, we agree with Börzel (2018) in arguing strongly for longitudinal studies on disintegration to better understand its causes and consequences.

Our findings empirically illustrate the complex relationship between differentiation and disintegration and its association with political strategies at the regional level. Formal ways of engaging in EU affairs, such as participation in the EWS, are limited for regional MPs, as described at the beginning of our article. Hence informal ways such as networking or lobbying are an important resource for receiving and spreading information or attempting to set claims in the EU. Whichever path regional MPs choose, attitudes—for example, about the EU’s future—are an important pre-determinant of their EU engagement. On the other hand, it becomes clear that a lack of say leads to ignorance and withdrawal in the long run. Our research contributes to the rare empirical studies in this field, which until now have mainly focused on population surveys. Complementary surveys among politicians can widen our understanding of preferences and perceptions in the context of European integration, in which the regional level is one player among many.

### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

### Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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Article

## Between a Rock and a Hard Place: European Disintegration, Brexit, and Gibraltar

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Submitted: 31 January 2023 | Accepted: 4 April 2023 | Published: 5 July 2023

### Abstract

This article aims to explore the contours of Gibraltar, a uniquely situated region in Europe and a non-self-governing British overseas territory. It explores the basis for Gibraltar’s continued and maintained presence within the EU after Brexit. Gibraltar’s full accession into the Schengen area, which was expected to be implemented by the end of 2022, is a significant departure from the disintegration that was observable elsewhere in Brexit negotiations but also does not align with the United Kingdom’s staunch resistance to Schengen more generally. This move will potentially result in Gibraltar having more features in common with what the EU refers to as outermost regions, which are remote areas within the EU where special provisions exist. To that end, this variation in approach by the United Kingdom has placed Gibraltar in an altogether different category of its own and invites new questions about the region’s specificity and status, as well as about the process of disintegration more generally. We argue that Gibraltar’s desire to join the Schengen area has presented challenges to the ongoing predicament of Brexit and has exacerbated its outlier position within the EU. This has given rise to specific questions that this article aims to address: What is the current situation of Gibraltar regarding the United Kingdom and the EU? And, what can the case of Gibraltar teach us in terms of disintegration? This article also examines, from a political science perspective, how reclassifying territories can be employed as a vector to facilitate the United Kingdom’s efforts to disintegrate from the EU, but underscores the ongoing issues surrounding the reclassification of Gibraltar and its people, with every effort to do so proving challenging.

### Keywords

Brexit; disintegration; EU; European integration; Gibraltar; outermost regions; overseas territories; United Kingdom

### Issue

This article is part of the issue “The Causes and Modes of European Disintegration” edited by Martijn Huysmans (Utrecht University) and Sven Van Kerckhoven (Vrije Universiteit Brussel).

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### 1. Introduction

In recent years, significant policy and scholarly attention have been devoted to the study of European (dis)integration (Markakis, 2020; Vollaard, 2018; Webber, 2018). After years of continuous expansion and deeper integration, the potential for EU disintegration has slowly started to receive more attention in tandem with examinations of (ultra)nationalist support and Eurosceptics, particularly regarding the broader academic concern with the rise of populism (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017; Mueller, 2016). In particular, the United Kingdom’s decision to leave the EU (via the Brexit referendum) has pro-

vided further impetus to this emerging field of inquiry (Shore, 2021; Wilson, 2020). This effort has resulted in a wide variety of analyses that have studied the nature of the implications involved when a member state decides to leave the EU, and what impact that has on both the governance of its related territories and throughout the EU more generally. For our purposes, we advance the notion that examining smaller and less commonly considered political actors can generate significant insight into the process of disintegration.

Research studying the causes and modes of disintegration has mostly focused on specific industries, such as fisheries (Phillipson & Symes, 2018), the financial sector

(Van Kerckhoven, 2021), as well as policy fields, including global cooperation (Wouters & Van Kerckhoven, 2019) and issues surrounding last-minute efforts to acquire different kinds of citizenship to retain access to the single market and the benefits that integration bestows (O'Dubhghaill, 2019). In most of these analyses, the United Kingdom is approached as a unitary actor, a single landmass that is responding to the difficulties of managing a democratically given mandate and the intricacies involved therein. This has had the effect of overlooking the specificity of the wide variety of effects and the experiences of other regions and overseas territories to which the United Kingdom has historically laid claim.

As such, this article approaches disintegration from the perspective of Brexit, but its conclusions and arguments inform the broader discussions concerning disintegration. As a framework of analysis, this study observes the perspective of an actor that seeks secession as an independent variable. The outcome, the disintegration as such, is defined by a pathway that includes the geographical location of the parts that make up the seceding entity.

In this case, the actor seeking disintegration is the United Kingdom, which left the EU through Brexit. However, the United Kingdom has several territories that, due to their geographical location, have been subject to different levels of disintegration. Our particular focus is on Gibraltar, a non-self-governing enclave, which is only one of the many United Kingdom parts that did not share the preference for leaving the EU. We review the different outcomes and support for Brexit hereunder, drawing parallels to the case of Gibraltar.

Gibraltar is unique in the context of Europe's outermost regions (ORs)—i.e., regions typified by their comparative remoteness from the capital city of the country to which they belong and historically occupied core-periphery style relationships with this "home" countries with which they are associated.

Before providing an analysis of the specific modes and causes of disintegration, it is necessary to examine Brexit and the history of the United Kingdom's relationship with Gibraltar more closely. The article then discusses the position of Gibraltar pre and post-Brexit, before turning to overseas departments and ORs. We end with a short conclusion.

## 2. Brexit and Its Impact on the Different Parts of the United Kingdom

Scotland, which voted to remain within the EU (62% against 38%), has, in the aftermath of Brexit, repositioned itself in a manner more in line with the EU's view on issues concerning immigration, a common leitmotif in the run-up to the Brexit referendum (Thiec, 2021). This discrepancy between the United Kingdom's and Scottish governments has also been leveraged by the Scottish Nationalist Party to argue for a second referendum on the topic of Scotland's independence (colloqui-

ally referred to as "Indyref2"), an increasingly pressing concern after Brexit. Moreover, the features and composition of Scotland's system of governance diverge from the United Kingdom's in many other respects as it has a system of proportional representation, its own parliament, and a broadly pro-EU disposition (Hughes, 2020). The parallel with Gibraltar here can be observed in the necessity of smaller entities to reposition themselves regarding the EU in the aftermath of Brexit. In precisely this vein, Thiec (2021, p. 122) claims that:

By arguing that membership of the EU, far from representing a threat to sovereignty, is a way—especially for small member states—of amplifying their national sovereignty by embracing their interdependence with other nations, the First Minister of Scotland has clearly underlined the European dimension of her party's narrative of independence and dissociated her government's position on Europe from that of the United Kingdom government.

Wales voted to leave the EU by a narrow margin of 52.5% to 47.5%. The commonly cited reason for this result is attributed to wealthy retirees from the United Kingdom, whereby it was even claimed that "Wales was made to look like a Brexit-supporting nation by its English settlers" (Perraudin, 2019).

Similar to Wales, Gibraltar also permits residents of the United Kingdom to retire there (currently, there are 1,741 pension recipients from the United Kingdom doing so). However, no similar effect can be observed in comparison to Gibraltar's overwhelmingly unambiguous decision to remain in the EU as it only counted a total of 823 votes to leave, out of about 20,000 total votes (The Electoral Commission, 2017).

One of the primary ramifications of Brexit for Wales was the replacement of the European Regional Development and European Social Funds (ESF) with the United Kingdom's Shared Prosperity Funds, despite promises that there would be no concomitant loss of provisions for Wales after the Brexit referendum (Jones, 2017). The Welsh Government (*Llywodraeth Cymru*) has recently estimated that the difference between the EU's provisions and the United Kingdom's post-Brexit provisions results in a shortfall of approximately £772 million (Evans, 2022). Disintegration has proven a particularly costly endeavour for Wales, in ways very similar to Gibraltar.

Finally, Northern Ireland shares with Gibraltar the necessity to put specific provisions in place concerning the necessity to have a border with an EU member state (with The Republic of Ireland and Spain, respectively) in the aftermath of Brexit (Birrell & Gray, 2017). The difficulties involved in this case are outlined in what follows, but here we highlight that the parallels between Northern Ireland and Gibraltar include a relatively porous border that is traversed by significant swathes of the population daily. In Northern Ireland such crossings are estimated



to be roughly 30,000 and in Gibraltar it is estimated to be roughly 16,000 (de Mars et al., 2018). The management of the border between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland has proven a particularly difficult sticking point in Brexit negotiations (Murphy & Evershed, 2022) and Gibraltar's interest in joining the Schengen area is an altogether different approach to managing the disruption brought about by Brexit.

The common denominator shared by all of these different regions, within and beyond the mainland United Kingdom, is that they were all affected by Brexit and have had to reorient their approach regarding the EU. However, we argue that Brexit's impact on these different entities cannot be viewed as being fundamentally similar. Each area has its own historical relationship to the United Kingdom (and its monarchy) and has different levels of autonomy through which to express its respective political will. The necessity to disintegrate the United Kingdom's position from that of the EU has been coupled with, either coincidentally or not, moves made within further flung regions to alter and/or disintegrate their own relationship with the United Kingdom.

This is an opportune time for scholars to pay closer attention to what it is that these peripheral entities can tell us about the story of Brexit, the nature of disintegration from within and without, and the unique predicament that the United Kingdom finds itself in. We will focus on Gibraltar as one of these interesting areas due to its unique location on the Iberian peninsula.

While Gibraltar's desire to join the Schengen area does represent a departure from the programme followed by the United Kingdom, it is a significantly less radical programme of action than that undertaken by other formerly non-self-governing British overseas territories. In April 2022, six countries (Jamaica, Belize, Antigua and Barbuda, Barbados, Bahamas, and Grenada) sought to terminate the position of England's monarchy as their head of state (Yang, 2022). As Wood (2011) contends, the relationship between Britain's overseas territories and its own mode of governance is often thrown into sharp relief when these territories are examined: "The law of the overseas territories often sheds light on the British constitution itself. Perhaps surprisingly for a country without a written constitution, Britain has contributed handsomely to the writing of constitutions for others, starting with its overseas territories" (Wood, 2011, p. 827).

Brexit has provided a broader context based on which smaller countries can express their desire to disintegrate from the United Kingdom in a similar way to how the United Kingdom expressed its desire to no longer be a part of the EU.

This article specifically looks into the case of Gibraltar, a small landmass at the southern tip of the EU, and tries to extrapolate based on this microcosm into an examination of some causes and modes of disintegration that have conventionally received less academic scrutiny. Gibraltar's uniqueness notwithstanding has yet

to receive sustained and substantial attention within academic circles, except some recent outstanding anthropological accounts (Haller, 2021; Irvine, 2022) and some legal analyses (Hendry & Dickson, 2018; Waibel, 2009). Gibraltar has so far failed to attract substantial attention from observers and academics working on the topic of Brexit in comparison with the depth of analysis related to other issues. However, we argue that the case of Gibraltar, with respect to Brexit, clearly displays less commonly considered modes and methods that are equally indicative of disintegration more generally. In doing so, the article contributes to the political science debate on this topic but also builds on a variety of other disciplines in the broad field of social sciences.

### 3. Gibraltar and the United Kingdom

As suggested previously, Brexit has created some specific situations for specific areas within and beyond the United Kingdom, not just because the last is not contained to a single landmass, but also has a presence on landmasses in which it is joined to another EU member state (such as in Northern Ireland and Gibraltar). The limited view of the United Kingdom as being contained within one landmass seems to have given rise to a great deal of seemingly insoluble problems with the actual implementation of Brexit. One telling example of this can be observed in Northern Ireland in terms of issues concerning the "backstop," and the intractable problem of managing a border that is shared with an EU member state. However, another instance in which the United Kingdom, as a third country, shares a land border with the EU is Gibraltar. Gibraltar has been a British overseas territory since 1713 and has proven to be an important strategic point for the United Kingdom, in particular regarding military matters (Archer, 2005; Constantine, 2006).

British Gibraltar was established after the Spanish Succession Wars when an Anglo-Dutch army seized the fortified town of Gibraltar. It was then assigned to the British after the Treaty of Utrecht (1713, article 10), which stated that it would be "held and enjoyed absolutely with all manner of right forever" by Britain while adding that if Britain decided to part with it the Crown of Spain would be the preferred successor (for more see Hills, 1974). However, there was no reference to the isthmus that joins the "rock" of Gibraltar to the peninsula, to which Spain has claimed sovereignty (Gold, 2010). Initially mainly used as a military stronghold, Gibraltar slowly transitioned into a civil British haven, although it represented a key military stronghold in the Second World War (Hills, 1974). The experience of Gibraltar is similar, in some respects, to another of the United Kingdom's strategically valuable overseas territories, namely Malta, which experienced a barrage of attacks between June 1940 and December 1942. The efforts of the Maltese people were recognised by King George VI and Malta was awarded the George Cross,

an honorific so significant that it was incorporated into Malta's flag in 1943. While Malta struggled with issues of self-governance and only received political independence from the United Kingdom in 1964, Gibraltar had self-government in 1950, with the coming into effect of the Gibraltar Constitution Order and Gibraltar Election Rules. That understood Gibraltar opted to remain a British overseas territory, whereas Malta became fully independent and later a fully-fledged member state of the EU. For context, it might be necessary to examine this issue in terms of broader discourses about decolonization from around the same time, a topic to which the following paragraph is dedicated.

In 1963, as part of the decolonization process, Spain requested that the UN Decolonization Committee looked into the enclave of Gibraltar, leading to a referendum on whether Gibraltarians wanted to join the United Kingdom or Spain that resulted in a strong demonstration of support for a continuous affiliation with the United Kingdom. The 1969 Constitution stated that Gibraltar would remain part of "Her Majesty's Dominions" unless and until an Act of Parliament provided otherwise, but more significantly it also included the commitment from the British Government that it will "never enter into arrangements under which the people of Gibraltar would pass under the sovereignty of another state against their freely and democratically expressed wishes." This resulted in a Spanish blockade that lasted 16 years (Gold, 2005). Relations remained tense, with Spain and Britain holding yearly talks about the sharing of sovereignty. Gibraltarians disapproved of such a sharing agreement as shown in a referendum organized by Gibraltar in 2002. Gibraltar never sought independence from the United Kingdom but received a high degree of economic independence as its economy grew due to favourable taxation over the years.

#### 4. Gibraltar Within the EU Pre-Brexit

Gibraltar joined the European Community (the predecessor to the EU) as a dependent territory of the United Kingdom via the 1972 European Communities Act. Gibraltar has been denoted as a "special territory" of the United Kingdom and the EU until Brexit. Gibraltar oscillated in terms of its political identification with the European project for some time and neither participated in the 1975 United Kingdom's European Communities membership referendum nor did it participate in the European Parliament elections between 1979 and 1999. However, a case was brought before the European Commission on Human Rights regarding the inability of a British citizen in Gibraltar to participate in the 1994 European Parliament elections (*Denise Matthews v. The United Kingdom*; see Rudolf, 1999). Gibraltar was allowed to take part in the 2004 European Parliament elections as part of the South-West England constituency (as well as those elections that followed), after a 2002 British Parliament Agreement.

Within the United Kingdom, Gibraltar is a British overseas territory. These entities are (normally) internally self-governing in most matters, but the United Kingdom retains responsibility for defence and foreign relations. There are 14 United Kingdom overseas territories, and nine of these entities are associated with the EU via the Overseas Association Decision, which was a decision reached by the EU in 2013. Gibraltar was the only United Kingdom overseas territory included as part of the EU under article 355(3) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union. The other overseas territories are much further removed from the United Kingdom and the EU and as such were not included in this provision.

Overseas Countries and Territories (OCTs) are not directly part of the EU and, thus, are not directly subject to EU law; however, these entities possess associate status. Part IV of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union discusses the member states' broad agreement to associate certain non-European countries and territories, which have special relations with, for example, Denmark, France, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom, with the EU to maintain and promote economic and social development, the establishment of harmonised or otherwise close economic cooperation, the necessity to mitigate the effect of discrimination in economic matters (something that OCTs are particularly at risk of due to their remoteness and parenthetically their dependence), and the workers within OCTs' right to free movement (Clegg, 2016; Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, 2012, articles 198 to 203). Annex II then lists these countries, including United Kingdom's overseas territories, excluding Gibraltar.

As such, Gibraltar had a closer relationship with the EU than the United Kingdom's other overseas territories, given that it was a component of the United Kingdom's accession in 1973. Under this specific status, Gibraltar has applied most EU laws, except regarding the Common Agricultural Policy on issues related to VAT, the EU's Common Commercial Policy, and the EU's Common Customs Territory. A more thorough overview of these derogations can be examined in articles 28 and 29 of the 1972 United Kingdom's Act of Accession.

The citizens of Gibraltar were much more supportive, and enthusiastic, about the EU than those on the British mainland. Anecdotal evidence, by Garcia (2016), describes that Gibraltarians paid to be able to change their license plates to the EU common format numbers. They also enjoy EU identity cards and health cards, the former is a valid travel document in the EU that does not exist in the United Kingdom, and the latter provides them with access to medical care throughout the EU.

#### 5. Gibraltar and Brexit

Gibraltar was the only British overseas territory that previously participated in EU elections. It was also the only territory that allowed for Brexit to be voted on. This was due to its special relationship with the EU, given

that it is bordered by Spain. Gibraltarians voted with an overwhelming majority to stay in the EU. Out of 20,172 votes (on a total of 24,119 registered voters), 19,322 (95.91%) voted in favour of remaining in the EU (The Electoral Commission, 2017). However, since the United Kingdom's voters voted in favour of Brexit with a 51.9% majority, the United Kingdom and Gibraltar had to get set to leave the EU (The Electoral Commission, 2017). Compared to the other United Kingdom overseas territories, the impact of the decision to leave was much more direct and apparent in Gibraltar.

Continuous access to the EU's single market was extremely important for Gibraltar. Its shipping, trade, and gambling industries grew strongly due to this access and became an important part of its economy, as well as its investment, insurance, and banking services which benefited strongly from passporting rights, not unlike other United Kingdom-based financial institutions (Van Kerckhoven & Odermatt, 2021). Gibraltar can also offer tariff-free access to investors under the free movement of capital rules. Additionally, Gibraltar received significant EU funding, mainly under the ESF and the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF). Funding from the ERDF has been historically important to Gibraltar—like how it had been to Wales, as mentioned previously. Gibraltar also received funds from the Growth and Jobs Goal Programme, 2014–2020 (Clegg, 2016). Approximately €5.5 million was allocated to aiding sustainable economic growth, competitiveness, additional apprenticeships, assistance to people under 25 and long-term unemployed people, fostering an entrepreneurial climate, and harmonising education with the demands of the labor market. This programme was supplemented by resources from the ESF, with initiatives fostering sustainable and quality employment, labor mobility, and education and vocational training for skills and lifelong learning (European Social Fund, 2015). A range of businesses has been strengthened as a consequence of EU funding, including those involved in freight forwarding, light industrial activity, eco-tourism, broadband services, and medical and health services.

Gibraltar's government claims that EU-funded projects have directly contributed to the retention and continued safeguarding of 3,615 jobs. These programmes have also resulted in the matriculation of 5,000 qualified students. One of the 2014–2020 programme's aims was to "assist in sustainable growth in a low-carbon economy" (European Social Fund, 2015). Much like elsewhere in Europe, there was a focus on fostering and facilitating the expedient production of renewable energies. Funding has been offered for a micro-renewable energy project.

EU funds have also been given for a range of other projects, such as partial funding (£4.3 million came from the public purse while £1.5 million came from the EU, with the remainder being donated by civil society actors) to build the Commonwealth Park, Gibraltar's first "green zone." The continued existence of all of these initiatives is potentially jeopardised by Brexit.

Additionally, Gibraltarians see the EU in general, and EU law in particular, as a safety measure against Spain, which at certain points has proven to be willing to demonstrate an interest in shared sovereignty, or has even displayed hostility towards Gibraltar (Garcia, 2016). Following the referendum, Gibraltar's chief minister argued that "a hard Brexit would be really an existential threat to [our] economic model" (McSmith, 2016). After the United Kingdom voted to leave the EU, Spain's acting Foreign Minister Manuel Garcia-Margallo stated, on 23 June 2016, that Spain wanted to jointly govern Gibraltar with the United Kingdom. However, Gibraltar's Chief Minister Fabian Picardo immediately responded that there would be no such talks, as Gibraltarians rejected co-sovereignty with Spain with a staggering 99% of votes in 2002. Garcia-Margallo then stated that Spain would push to keep Gibraltar out of any general Brexit negotiations and will aim for bilateral talks with the United Kingdom to seek co-sovereignty of the peninsula (Nazca, 2016). The EU (Council of the European Union, 2017) stated the following in its guidelines on negotiations for withdrawal: "After the United Kingdom leaves the Union, no agreement between the EU and the United Kingdom may apply to the territory of Gibraltar without the agreement between the Kingdom of Spain and the United Kingdom." This clearly hints at veto power for both Spain and the United Kingdom and diminished the prospect for Gibraltarians to be involved in the discussions.

Tensions rose and waned in the years that followed, ultimately resulting in a deal in October 2018, the specific details of which have not been made available to the public, although it was stated that Gibraltar was not going to pose an issue in the Brexit negotiations. Such a bilateral deal was also in line with the 2017 guidelines from the Council of the EU. Gibraltar was not included in the scope of the 2020 EU–United Kingdom Trade and Cooperation Agreement as was already decided at the European Council meeting of 25 November 2018 that:

After the United Kingdom leaves the Union, Gibraltar will not be included in the territorial scope of the agreements to be concluded between the Union and the United Kingdom. However, this does not preclude the possibility to have separate agreements between the Union and the United Kingdom in respect of Gibraltar. Without prejudice to the competences of the Union and in full respect of the territorial integrity of its member states as guaranteed by article 4(2) of the 1992 Treaty on EU, those separate agreements will require a prior agreement of the Kingdom of Spain. (Tusk & Juncker, 2018)

Gibraltar was, therefore, not included in the preparations for the withdrawal agreement. The important veto right given to Spain should also be borne in mind here. It was only on the very last day of the transition period that an agreement was reached so that Gibraltar could

in principle join the Schengen area, but a treaty on the matter has yet to be negotiated.

This last-minute decision was immediately followed by a request by the United Kingdom and Spanish Governments to the President of the European Commission asking to mandate them with the powers to create such a Treaty, eventually leading to the creation of a special committee in charge of handling EU–Gibraltar matters, which contained representatives of both Spain and the United Kingdom. On 20 July 2021, the EU Commission adopted a Recommendation for a Council Decision authorizing the opening of negotiations for an EU–United Kingdom Agreement on Gibraltar (European Commission, 2021), which was approved by the European Council in October 2021 (Council of the European Union, 2021). A formal agreement and negotiations are yet to be concluded, failing to adhere to the deadlines, which required the continuation as well as the introduction of temporary bridging measures.

While Gibraltar might occasionally be either viewed or framed as just a smaller part of a bigger system of (dis)integration, there are also instances in which the mischaracterisation of Gibraltar incurred significant delays in the ratification of extremely time-sensitive legislation in anticipation of May 2019. The reason revolves around Spain's perception of Gibraltar as a sort of satellite of the United Kingdom in terms of affiliation. Gibraltar's legal status, it seems, has changed little since 1964 when representatives of the Spanish Government:

Further insisted that the present population of Gibraltar was “prefabricated” by the British to facilitate British rule. These representatives reiterated the argument that Gibraltar and Spain are inextricably linked, claiming that Gibraltar would suffer severe economic consequences should Spain close the border. When the United Nations passed Resolutions 2070 and 2231, Spain supported both measures, satisfied that neither resolution recognized Gibraltar's right to self-determination. (Lincoln, 1994, pp. 310–311)

Nearly identical tensions flared up in March 2019 in response to a draft law by the European Parliament's Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs that outlined the protocol to be adopted concerning visa-free travel by United Kingdom nationals to member states, provided that a similar arrangement was welcomed by the United Kingdom's House of Commons for the inverse to take place (Regulation [EU] 2018/1806 of 14 November 2018, 2018). Negotiations were stalled and the original rapporteur was replaced after the discovery of a reference to Gibraltar as a “crown colony,” a term employed before 1981 when it was changed to “dependent territory” and then to “British overseas territory.” In the original rapporteur, the United Kingdom's MEP Claude Moraes was removed and replaced by MEP Sergei Stanishev, a move that Gibraltar's government

argued was a political gesture that was undertaken to remove the previous rapporteur because they were from the United Kingdom. Gibraltar's government condemned the anachronistic characterisation, calling it “disgraceful,” alleging that the move was part of an effort to single out Gibraltar for mistreatment by Spanish MEPs based on nationalist zeal (HM Government of Gibraltar, 2019). To show the stakes of mischaracterising Gibraltar, we can look at the second rapporteur's assessment of the draft law's importance for the citizens of both European citizens and the United Kingdom:

Today's vote is an important step for guaranteeing the right to visa-free travel for European and British citizens after Brexit, especially in the case of no deal. It is no secret that the negotiations were blocked over the Gibraltar footnote, but in the end, it was the Parliament who demonstrated responsibility and put citizens' interests first. The Council's irresponsible approach seriously undermines the spirit of sincere cooperation between the EU institutions and I hope it will not be repeated in the future. (European Parliament, 2019)

As such, the current situation for Gibraltar remains unclear about its future direction with the EU. Clearly, Gibraltar would benefit enormously from a situation whereby it can open its borders to the EU, but that would reverse what Brexit was meant to achieve. At present, discontinued funding, questions of self-determination, and exactly how Gibraltar and its people should best be understood are exacerbating older tensions as a result of the necessity to disintegrate from the EU.

## 6. Conclusions

It is clear that the interests of the United Kingdom and Gibraltar were not aligned and that a referendum held by Gibraltarians in 2002 is still casting a long shadow regarding power-sharing initiatives. Gibraltar's complicated history, coupled with its unique geographical setting, have allowed for broader considerations to be brought to the fore concerning both the United Kingdom's singular “islandness” and its contentious and longstanding connection to territories overseas and the extent to which they are permitted to disintegrate from the United Kingdom (by referendum or otherwise). What this has meant is that Brexit is not a phenomenon with a restricted effect on one entity alone, but has instead spread to many other areas, giving rise to questions about what kinds of entities can suspend rules during transitory phases (and what kinds of pressures would permit that) as well as what the outcome of such processes would mean in terms of (further) disintegration elsewhere.

The causes and modes of disintegration are not clear-cut because the United Kingdom is not a discrete entity. Instead, it possesses connections and agreements spanning centuries. However, it seems that the provisions put



in place to stem the tide of the negative effects of Brexit by the EU far outweigh the volume of similar provisions made in anticipation of Brexit by the United Kingdom. What this means is that Gibraltar, and seemingly marginal entities like it, will remain a fascinating object of critical scrutiny now and in the future in terms of continued efforts in the domain of disintegration. Thus, it could be argued that, by taking back control, the United Kingdom has led to a bottom-up push in some of its overseas territories to wrest control from it through disintegration. Gibraltar can be seen as a special case in European integration and disintegration following Brexit. While the specificities of how Gibraltar will manage Schengen membership or whether Gibraltar will see itself embroiled in additional efforts to classify and reclassify the landmass are vague, one thing is certain: Gibraltar is stuck between a rock and a hard place because it embraces the status quo, except where it does not.

### Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank the three thorough reviewers for their thoughtful comments. Their contribution was incredibly helpful in modifying this work.

### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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Article

# Differentiated Implementation of Controls: The Internal Border Regimes of Schengen

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Submitted: 31 January 2023 | Accepted: 17 April 2023 | Published: 5 July 2023

## Abstract

The use of temporary internal border controls in the Schengen Area reached a new record during the outbreak and spread of the Covid-19 pandemic. Several member states chose to introduce internal border controls that had not done so up until that point, while others have had continuous border controls in place since the refugee crisis in 2015. Other member states have never or only rarely used this temporary opt-out from the principle of free movement of persons inside Schengen. This development has raised the question of whether we are moving towards the disintegration of the Schengen Area as member states make very different choices regarding controls towards their EU neighbours. Comparing the use of internal border controls by all member states, the article suggests the concept of differentiated implementation to explain the variations in internal border regimes among Schengen member states. Focusing on two dimensions of control, the control of movement originating internally or externally to the EU, a typology is developed that conceptualises differentiated implementation as four types of internal border regimes. The analysis illustrates these four types by applying them to the use of controls up until 2022, identifying the grouping of member states. The proposed typology of internal border regimes presented represents an ambition to conceptualise the differences in internal border control use that have previously often been understood as a general problem of the Schengen regime.

## Keywords

border control; Covid-19; European integration; migration; Schengen Area; temporary borders

## Issue

This article is part of the issue “The Causes and Modes of European Disintegration” edited by Martijn Huysmans (Utrecht University) and Sven Van Kerckhoven (Vrije Universiteit Brussel).

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## 1. Introduction

In the Schengen Area, the use of temporary internal border controls (IBCs) reached a new record during the outbreak and spread of the Covid-19 pandemic. Following developments in March 2020, many EU member states chose to introduce IBCs that had not done so up until that point. Previous research has suggested that the expanded use of IBCs in 2020 was a “knee-jerk reaction” made available as a result of the “taboo” of using IBCs in the EU being broken during the refugee crisis of 2015 when many member states introduced IBCs and then continued to prolong them far beyond their intended short-term use (Wolff et al., 2020). Yet some member states that had previously introduced IBCs chose not to do so due to the Covid-19 crisis. As member states thus

make very different choices about controls towards their EU neighbours, this development has raised the question of whether we are moving towards the disintegration of the Schengen Area. How should the highly diverging practices of how member states make use of IBCs be conceptualised? As the use of temporary IBCs becomes more widespread, differences in their use among EU members has the potential to create more long-term differences in the management of internal borders, and thus affect the legitimacy and status of the principle of free movement in Schengen. This article proposes that the concept of *differentiated implementation* can be used to describe this process.

Since the first expansion of IBC use in 2015, there has been extensive research on their development over time (Gülzau, 2021) and on the motives and justifications

of controls (Pettersson Fürst, 2023; Votoupalová, 2019) as well as the legal implications and responses from the EU institution to these controls (Mantu, 2021). Several authors have also studied the impact of controls in specific contexts (Barbero, 2020; Casella Colombeau, 2020; Evrard et al., 2018), on citizen attitudes (Lutz & Karstens, 2021), or the use of controls by a specific group of member states (Karamanidou & Kasperek, 2020). Recently, progress has been made towards synthesising the empirical analysis of these controls into broader analytical frameworks for understanding European border governance (Schimmelfennig, 2021) and specifically towards the internal border regime, focusing on the consequences of three categories of reasons for control—migration, terrorism, and Covid-19 (Guild, 2021).

The present article contributes to these ongoing efforts by proposing a typology grounded on a distinction between two types of border functions in the Schengen Area: the regulation of internal and external movement, respectively. Drawing on previous conceptualisations of border regimes, the article develops and proposes a typology of differentiated implementation, which can be used to identify the kind of border regime that is being created at the internal borders of the EU. Using the member states notifications of IBC introductions from September 2015 (following the “refugee crisis”) until the end of 2022, the article’s empirical analysis illustrates how the typology can be used to identify core differences between groups of member states’ implementation of the Schengen border rules.

By providing a typology that enables analytical differentiation between different ways in which member states employ IBCs, this article contributes a more nuanced understanding of what these controls mean. This matters as a foundation for further empirical studies of member state practices, but it can also be useful for developing arguments about whether we should view the use of IBCs as fundamentally in line with, or opposed to, the principles of the Schengen agreement.

### *1.1. Background: The Rules of Temporary Internal Border Controls in Schengen*

The general principle of the Schengen agreement is that its member states have agreed to abolish border checks between them to guarantee the free movement of persons, which enables its citizens to move freely in the Schengen Area for purposes of leisure, work, and living. In principle, this freedom of movement is supposed to happen without being subject to border control when crossing a Schengen border (referred to as an internal border). The countries in the Schengen Area have agreed on a number of common rules to enable the principle of free movement, including harmonisation of visa rules, cross-border police cooperation, and rules for external border controls. The rules governing the Schengen Area borders were laid out in the Schengen Borders Code (SBC; Regulation of 15 March 2006, 2006), with some

amendments adopted in 2013, and are in their current form regulated by the SBC adopted in 2016 (Regulation of 9 March 2016, 2016). The rules governing the use of so-called temporary IBCs can be found in articles 25–35 in the 2016 SBC (articles 23–31 in the 2006 SBC). Article 25 reads:

Where, in the area without internal border control, there is a serious threat to public policy or internal security in a member state, that member state may exceptionally reintroduce border control at all or specific parts of its internal borders for a limited period of up to 30 days or for the foreseeable duration of the serious threat if its duration exceeds 30 days. (Regulation of 9 March 2016, 2016, art. 25.1)

IBC can be introduced on a few different grounds, e.g., for foreseeable events (Regulation of 9 March 2016, 2016, art. 25), for events requiring immediate action (Regulation of 9 March 2016, 2016, art. 28), and in exceptional circumstances, where the overall functioning of the Schengen Area is at risk (Regulation of 9 March 2016, 2016, art. 29). As has been noted by previous research, which article has been used as grounds for the introduction of controls has been inconsistent. During and after the refugee crisis, member states have used different articles and/or shifted which article of the SBC they base their introduction on, and during the Covid-19 crisis, member states’ “flexibility in appealing to articles 23, 25, and 28 while conducting similar checks illustrates the ambiguity of the legal provisions on internal border controls” (Heinikoski, 2020, p. 6). This shows the room for different interpretations and thus implementation that is available in the SBC for when IBCs can be deemed an appropriate measure.

IBC work in two ways to disrupt cross-border movement. First, subjecting people to controls at the border causes delays in travel times and requires people to carry necessary identification documents, which in itself is a disruption to the principle of freedom of movement. Second, in being controlled, people may be denied entry based on not having appropriate documents, or by having appropriate documents but belonging to a category of people not allowed entry, which effectively means denial of free movement. Thus, the more extensive the categories denied entry are, and the more extensive the controls are in scope and time, the more disruptive internal controls are to the principle of free movement.

Importantly, the rules from 2016 emphasise that controls are only to be used as a “last resort” (Regulation of 9 March 2016, 2016, art. 25.2) and specify that prolongations should not exceed six months, or in “exceptional circumstances,” the “total period may be extended to a maximum length of two years” (Regulation of 9 March 2016, 2016, art. 25.4). This is in contrast to the original rules that specified 30 days plus a maximum 30-day prolongation as the rule. Despite these changes that allow for longer prolongations, several countries have continued

to prolong their IBCs for recurring six-month periods since 2015, vastly exceeding the two-year maximum limit. How the prolongation of controls beyond the two-year maximum should be understood is somewhat unclear: Heinikoski (2020, p. 5) argues that by combining different legal bases, “member states have had much leeway” in prolonging their controls, “ignoring the maximum periods outlined in the rules,” and the Court of Justice of the European Union (2022) has declared prolongations incompatible with the Schengen acquis. Yet, while the member states “fall short of demonstrating necessity and proportionality” required by the SBC in their justifications of controls, the Commission has not called for a termination of controls, nor used all the monitoring tools at its disposal (Montaldo, 2020, pp. 528–529).

In 2021, the Commission presented a new legislative proposal (European Commission, 2021) for an amended SBC, which has yet to be adopted. This new proposal seeks to address the problem of IBCs disrupting the principle of free movement by, *inter alia*, making reporting and motivation demands clearer when prolonging controls and by encouraging member states to introduce new measures to be used instead of IBCs, including more “regular police checks in border zones.” However, this proposal does not bring an end to IBCs, as it makes clear that the use of IBCs is within the rights of the member states, and it also establishes the two-year prolongation time frame as a standard maximum with provisions for continued controls beyond that time frame. Thus, although the proposed amendment to the SBC does aim to improve coherence in the implementation of rules, it does not solve the inherent tension between free movement and the use of IBCs.

### *1.2. Previous Research: Border Controls and Disintegration in the Schengen Area*

In the literature on differentiation in the EU, Schengen is typically understood as a “paradigmatic case” of differentiation (Leuffen et al., 2022, p. 338) as some EU members remain outside Schengen (Ireland, Romania, Bulgaria, Cyprus) while several non-EU members are part of the Schengen Area (Norway, Iceland, Switzerland, Lichtenstein). Integration in the Area of Freedom, Security and Justice, which includes the border policies of Schengen, has increased considerably over time (Leuffen et al., 2022, pp. 338–340) but has been challenged by the internal re-bordering crises. Schengen thus presents a case of EU differentiation in itself, which has been analysed extensively by previous research. However, the focus of this article is the differences internal to the Schengen Area, whose members belong to the same formal border regime and have common rules regulating the control of internal and external borders. All are thus part of the Schengen regime, but make different use of its provisions for internal controls.

Already in the early 2000s, Groenendijk (2004) found that the use of IBCs varied considerably between mem-

ber states, but, at this time, the majority of controls were used for temporary events such as high-level meetings. Controls at the internal borders had been an issue before 2015, for example in 2011 following the “Italo-French row” (Zaiotti, 2013). However, it was during the refugee crisis of 2015 and the prolongations of controls that followed that more widespread concern was raised about a “crisis of Schengen” and what it would mean for European integration. Several authors raised the question of what consequences a more everyday use of IBCs will have for the principle of freedom of movement in the Schengen Area and their potential to undermine this core principle of European cooperation. Initial observations of re-bordering during the refugee crisis talked of the “death of Schengen” and the use of IBCs as the beginning of the disintegration of the European Union (Brekke & Staver, 2018). IBCs were argued to undermine the Schengen principle of free movement and the continuous prolongations by several countries have been criticised for shifting the meaning of what constitutes a threat (Karamanidou & Kasperek, 2020). In the most recent re-bordering crisis, the Covid-19 outbreak, the use of IBCs has been further criticised, as they caused unprecedented restrictions to free movement in the Schengen Area countries (Montaldo, 2020) and were implemented in an uncoordinated and unpredictable manner (De Somer et al., 2020; Heinikoski, 2020; Thym & Bornemann, 2020). In many member states, IBCs were also combined with other restrictions to movement, both internal (such as national or regional movement restrictions) and external (such as travel bans for foreign citizens). The IBCs introduced have been argued to be symbolically important, as a means for member states to give a sense of “structure and order” (Thym & Bornemann, 2020, p. 1144), but they were also in many ways more restrictive than before, e.g., for the first time categorically refusing entry to EU citizens (Heinikoski, 2020) and, in several cases, restricting the number of border crossings open for passage. Thus, controls during Covid-19 have been criticised for having far-reaching, unequal, and asymmetrical impacts on citizens in the EU (Evrard et al., 2018; Wolff et al., 2020).

Despite these re-bordering crises, it has also been argued that Schengen has been “impressively resilient” as a system of border governance (Guild, 2021). Explanations for Schengen’s resilience have included member state solidarity and commitment (Votoupalová, 2019), the strength of Schengen as a symbol (Guild, 2021), system adaptability (Mantu, 2021), cross-institutional willingness to preserve Schengen (Ceccorulli, 2019), and intergovernmental efforts (Thym & Bornemann, 2020). Several authors have argued that the crisis of Schengen should be understood not as an anomaly or temporary issue, but rather as part of the structure of Schengen, where instabilities or incompleteness in the agreements of European borders lead to cycles of crisis, re-negotiation, and renewed consolidation of the Schengen regime (Scipioni, 2017; Zaiotti,



2013). It has also been noted that some degree of IBC has always remained in place even since freedom of movement was introduced (Casella Colombeau, 2020). Since border control falls within the policy areas that are particularly sensitive to sovereignty demands, it has been argued that the possibility to use IBCs is an inherent strength of the Schengen agreement as this allows for flexibility in an area where integration would otherwise be difficult (De Somer et al., 2020) and that the member states themselves see the internal controls as a measure taken within the room for discretion allowed by the SBC (Votoupalová, 2018, 2019). While the extent of controls was expanded in duration and scope (Gülzau, 2021) at the discursive level, increased focus on national security was not accompanied by less commitment to European integration among member states that introduced controls (Pettersson Fürst, 2023). This is in line with previous literature on differentiation, which has argued that it is a “normal feature” of European integration (Leruth & Lord, 2015) and has pointed to sovereignty concerns as an important driver of differentiation when EU legislation moves into core state powers (Winzen, 2016).

In sum, previous research has shown that the use of IBCs is part of the legal framework of Schengen, which is available for the member states as a policy tool in times of crisis. At the same time, extensive use of controls, either by several states in an uncoordinated manner or by a few states over a long period of time, challenges the principle of free movement and causes unpredictability and inequality among the citizens to whom this right applies. Furthermore, we have seen that periods of crisis and reconfiguration can be understood as part of the system of European integration and that differentiation has become more common as the EU moves into more sovereignty-sensitive policy areas such as border control. Drawing on these findings, the present article aims to contribute by synthesising and moving beyond previous analyses, which have often focused on how the overall use of IBCs impacts European integration (Börzel & Risse, 2018; Gülzau, 2021; Schimmelfennig, 2021) or on specific cases, such as in the group of member states that continue to prolong them since 2015 (Karamanidou & Kasperek, 2020; Votoupalová, 2018). Although several authors have discussed the consequences and implications of the expanded use of IBCs, there have only recently been efforts made to conceptualise the differences in how member states use this legal tool in times of crisis. Guild (2021) discusses differentiation as three regimes, based on whether controls are due to migration, terrorism, or Covid-19. She argues that these three categories have different implications and have resulted in different reactions from the EU, where the former two have primarily triggered cooperation on external border controls and the latter resulted in more “robust” responses and coordination focused on maintaining free movement at the internal borders (Guild, 2021, p. 403).

While Guild’s article is a major first step in systematically illustrating the different grounds for reintroduction

as three different regimes, her main focus is the different responses from the EU institutions that these different causes for controls have triggered. The purpose of the present article is somewhat different as it aims primarily to highlight and illustrate how member states systematically differ in how they implement controls along two theoretically generalisable dimensions of control. By developing a typology of nested border regimes in the Schengen Area, the article enables the identification of groups of member states that have similar practices, illustrated by the two recent re-bordering crises, but it is also intended to be generally applicable to situations of internal re-bordering that might occur in the future. This provides an analytical framework that can be used to further examine drivers of differentiation (e.g., by identifying good cases for cross-comparison), which in turn is necessary for our understanding of the complexities of the challenges that the Schengen Area is facing.

## 2. Schengen as a Border Regime

According to Krasner’s (1982, p. 186) definition, international regimes are composed of “sets of principles, norms, rules, and decision-making procedures around which actors’ expectations converge in a given issue area.” Within the Schengen regime, the overarching principle is the freedom of movement of persons, which is regulated by the norms outlined in the Schengen agreement. These norms define rights and obligations, including the right of free movement for Schengen citizens between member states and the obligation of each state to control its external borders. The rules and procedures laid out in the SBC govern expected behaviour, such as when and how IBCs can be introduced. Regimes emerge and are sustained by repeated patterns of behaviour or practices that are in line with its principles and rules (Krasner, 1982). The development of Schengen as the system of governing European borders established what Zaiotti (2011, p. 14) calls a post-national regime, a “Schengen culture of border control,” replacing the previous (Westphalian) system of national border control that became accepted as the norm of border governance in the EU. As Schengen replaces each member state’s previous national regimes of border control with a shared regime so that each member state now has both “internal borders” towards other members and “external borders” located in other member states, they must trust each other to uphold the shared border regime through their border control practices: to keep freedom of movement at the internal borders and to control who enters through the external borders (Zaiotti, 2011). Fundamentally, the crisis of Schengen is about the practices of member states (IBCs) being in conflict with the freedom of movement principle. Understanding different uses of internal controls must therefore include an assessment of whether it is the principle of free movement for citizens or if it is the capacity of other member states to control external borders that is being

challenged. Previous research has often focused on the external dimension of the Schengen regime, highlighting the complementarity of the Schengen and Dublin systems, as Schengen “marks the birth of the European External Border as an institution” (Kasperek, 2016, p. 61), which has shifted border control increasingly outwards, externalising it from European territory (e.g., Pacciardi & Berndtsson, 2022). This external border regime has received critique for being “at odds with the humanist values that the EU is supposed to uphold” (van Houtum & Bueno Lacy, 2020, p. 706), not least by contributing to the securitisation of migration (Bigo, 2014; Léonard & Kaunert, 2020).

Importantly, while the Schengen regime is a “paradigmatic case” of differentiation in the EU, as some EU members remain outside, most studies of Schengen as a border regime focus on Schengen as an integrated unit, as its external border becomes increasingly demarcated. Bruns (2019, p. 510) identifies a “double mechanism” of homogenisation and externalisation as constitutive features of Schengen’s external border regime. The internal border regime of Schengen is also often conceptualised as unitary, even in analyses of differentiation and internal re-bordering (Schimmelfennig, 2021). The problem of treating internal re-bordering as a unitary problem is that it might overlook essential differences in what drives the use of IBCs and thereby treat all use as the same kind of problem. A primary function of any border regime is to determine inclusion and exclusion (e.g., Berg & Ehin, 2006). Thus, *what or who* to be excluded becomes important for the analysis of internal re-bordering in the Schengen Area. Here, it is argued that two dimensions need to be taken into account in an analysis of IBC usage. These dimensions are derived from the fundamental character of Schengen as a post-national regime that has established a new and shared external border, and they capture the question of whether the use of IBCs fundamentally targets problems that are *internal* to the Schengen Area or related to the shared *external* border.

Finally, although the use of IBCs is identified as a challenge to the Schengen regime, it must be recognised that its legal framework allows for the temporary use of IBCs. Thus, we must also recognise that this is not an absolute problem, meaning that there are degrees to how problematic the use of internal controls is. In the literature on migration, the Covid-19 crisis and internal re-bordering, the extent of controls over time, and the number of member states that use them are usually what

constitutes the problem. In contrast, the normal use of IBCs before 2015 has not been portrayed as a crisis of the Schengen regime.

### 2.1. A Typology of Differentiated Implementation of the Schengen Border Regime

In the typology presented here (Table 1), differentiated implementation is conceptualised along two dimensions of control: on the one hand, whether the state introduces IBCs to control movement internally towards other Schengen citizens, and on the other hand, whether the state introduces IBCs to control the movement of people who are not citizens of the Schengen Area, a movement that (at least in theory) originates outside the Schengen Area. These two dimensions are important in highlighting that there are qualitative differences between these controls: One is, in principle, about the lack of trust in the external border control capacity of Schengen, whereas the other is, in principle, about controlling internal cross-border movement. Combined, these two dimensions render four different internal regime types: (a) a *freedom of movement regime* among member states that do not use the discretion they have within the SBC to introduce controls, thus upholding the principle of free movement across internal borders; (b) an *external threat regime*, where controls are imposed only towards perceived “risky subjects” who are not EU citizens; (c) an *internal threat regime*, where controls are imposed toward the general population of internal border crossers, and finally; (d) a *re-bordering regime*, where internal controls are imposed that target both general internal populations and border crossers aimed at non-EU citizens.

Having identified two dimensions of control that differentiate the use of IBCs based on whether their primary function is to control movement external to or internal to Schengen, the next question to understand border regime types is how extensive IBCs need to be in order to pose a challenge to the freedom of movement of persons. It can be argued that controls are a problem regardless of duration, but previous research has highlighted that controls are particularly problematic when states prolong them beyond the total duration stipulated by the SBC (e.g., De Somer et al., 2020; Montaldo, 2020). The average duration of internal controls before 2015 was only 10 days (Pettersson Fürst, 2023), which is far shorter than the maximum of 30 days that the SBC allowed for. In contrast, since 2015, several member

**Table 1.** Typology of internal border regimes.

		Controls primarily aimed at external border crossers (non-EU citizens)	
		Not used	Used
Controls primarily aimed at internal border crossers (EU citizens)	Not used	Freedom of Movement Regime	External Threat Regime
	Used	Internal Threat Regime	Re-Bordering Regime

states have controls for six-month periods that have been continuously renewed. If we understand regimes as a combination of norms and rules that are sustained by repeated patterns of behaviour (e.g., Krasner, 1982) and border openness as a function of implementation practices over time (Berg & Ehin, 2006), then the more persistent internal controls are, the more they will challenge the freedom of movement regime, and the more established the internal regime type will become. An analysis of internal border regime types will therefore need to identify and take into account differences in the duration of controls.

### 3. Method and Material

To test this typology on the use of IBCs in Schengen, a dataset was compiled using the European Commission's (2023) official list of the use of temporary IBCs from September 2015 to December 2022, and a dataset, constructed from the member state notifications available in the European Council archives. During this period, the Commission lists 321 notifications of introductions (or of prolongations) of IBCs by member states. In the present analysis, 264 member-state notifications (representing 82% of the controls) were analysed. Some notifications analysed are not included as separate introductions by the Commission, and for some member states, notifications from 2021 and 2022 were not available in the official archives. The analysis focuses on differentiation within Schengen and therefore excludes EU members that are not part of Schengen. Croatia joined Schengen in January 2023 and is therefore not part of the analysis here.

The two dimensions of control were operationalised as follows: The internal dimension was operationalised as the use of controls that primarily aimed to reduce overall movement across an internal EU border, where member states primarily target EU citizens from other member states, and the external threat dimension was operationalised as use of controls that primarily target movement perceived to be originating from outside the EU. During and following the refugee crisis (from September 13, 2015), states that introduced IBCs perceived the threat that motivated controls as originating from outside the Schengen Area, as "unprecedented flows of refugees," "illegal migrants," or "secondary movements" inside the Schengen Area often due to "shortcomings at the external border." The main target of these controls is external, as it is specifically to control the movement of people who are seen as outsiders to the European community, even though controls are performed at the internal border and therefore, of course, also have an impact on all border crossers, regardless of citizenship. In contrast to Guild (2021), who categorises controls due to migration and terrorism as different types, both migration and terrorism-related controls are placed here in the external control dimension for two reasons. First, the majority of notifications

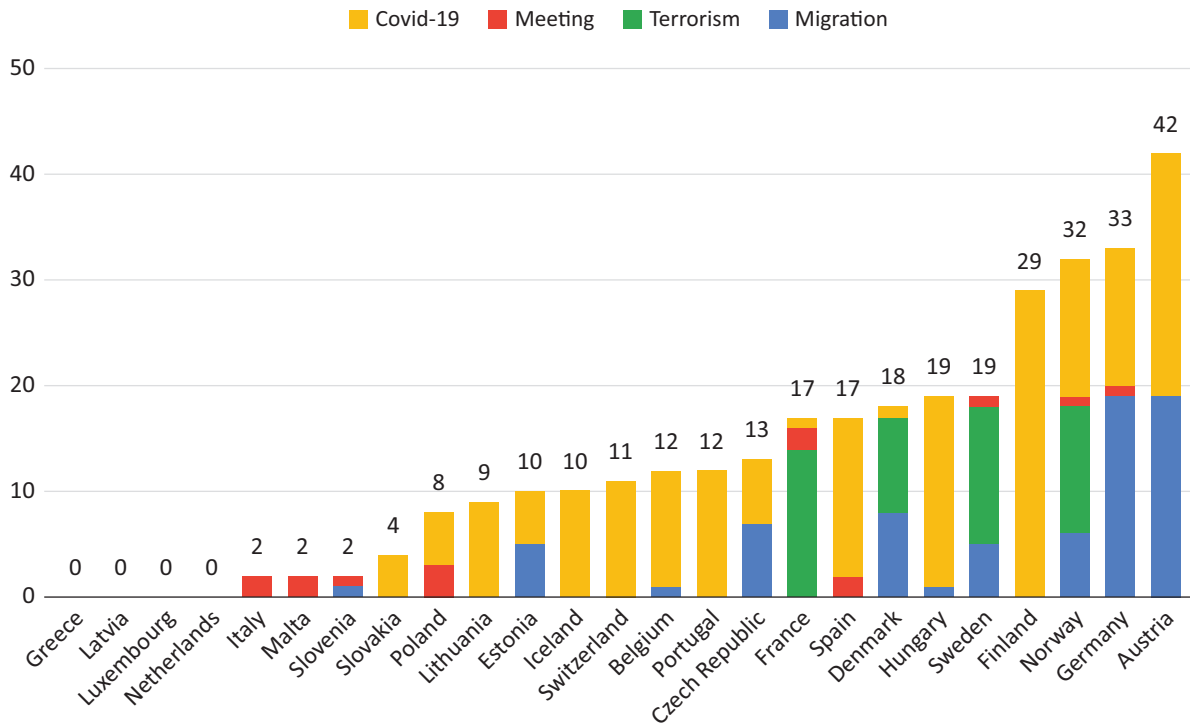
that use terrorism as grounds for IBCs do so in reference to threats that are framed as originating outside the EU, for example, that terrorists may be among groups of migrants who can enter because of shortcomings at the external border, that ISIS/ISIL fighters are returning from Syria, or that terrorists can take advantage of secondary movement in the EU (e.g., France). Second, several member states that continue prolongation of controls for several years shift from migration towards terrorism as grounds for controls over time, often citing secondary movements, irregular migration, and the risk of terrorism, as reasons for controls (e.g., Austria, Denmark, Sweden, and Norway), which indicates that these controls have the same foundational motivation. Thus, all notifications that emphasise migration, secondary movement, the overall security situation outside Schengen borders, or terrorism that is mixed with migration or seen as originating outside the Schengen Area, were coded as belonging to the external dimension.

In contrast to the IBCs due to migration, the controls introduced during the pandemic (first used on March 12, 2020) were not about shortcomings at the external EU border. Instead, they were often aimed at reducing all movement across the internal border. The targets of these controls were more generalised, not aimed at stopping people who were perceived as "external" to the EU, but rather to stop the virus, often by closing the border to all but a few categories (such as essential medical personnel). Many of the notifications from this period also include a reduction of the number of available border crossing points in a way that had not been done before. Controls due to Covid-19 and controls due to other reasons, such as high-level meetings where no specific group was explicitly targeted, were both coded as belonging to the internal dimension.

Coding of who was the target of controls was done based on member state justifications of controls in their notifications, i.e., what or whom they identify as the threat and any specific group of individuals specifically mentioned as targets of controls. All member states were coded for whether or not they used IBCs for each reason, how many times and for how long their total duration of controls lasted during the period in question. As a measure of the regime strength, the difference between the four regime types is operationalised here as the average total extent (in days) that border controls have been in place since the first introduction for that reason, calculated as a percentage of days with controls.

### 4. Analysis: Nested Border Regimes in the Schengen Area

First, let us look at how many times member states have used controls since the first wave of internal re-bordering in 2015. As shown in Figure 1, it is immediately apparent that there is a huge variation in the number of times that controls have been introduced, ranging from no usage to more than 40 times, with some countries



**Figure 1.** Number of controls introduced per Schengen member, 2015–2022.

having introduced controls on a few occasions but most countries having used them several times (on average 12.9 times). This illustrates what previous research has called the “new normal” (Gülzau, 2021), namely that the introduction of controls is not only done by a few states on a few occasions but by most states at some point and on several occasions.

However, as Figure 1 also illustrates, there is quite a lot of variation with regard to the reasons member states have introduced controls. In Figure 1, each introduction

is only coded as having one main reason. However, in the analysis of member state notifications, it becomes apparent that some countries use more than one ground to justify the introduction of controls. For example, both France and Denmark do refer to the Covid-19 situation when prolonging their controls, even when the primary reason they give has to do with risks related to secondary movements. Table 2 below organises each state based on how the detailed coding of each member state notification identified external and internal dimensions of

**Table 2.** Country groupings of internal border regime types.

		External control dimension: Controls primarily aimed at external border crossers (migration, secondary movements, terrorism)	
		<i>Not used</i>	<i>Used</i>
	<i>Not used</i>	<i>Type I</i> Latvia Netherlands Greece Luxembourg	<i>Type II</i> Malta Slovenia Sweden
	<i>Used</i>	<i>Type III</i> Finland Iceland Italy Lithuania Poland Portugal Slovakia Spain Switzerland	<i>Type IV</i> Austria Belgium Czech Republic Denmark Estonia France Germany Hungary Norway

controls, and thus how each country fits into the typology of internal border regimes.

As we can see from Table 2, there is quite a clear differentiation of usage, where four distinct groups of countries can be identified. Some member states (upper left corner) have never used IBCs: neither to control migration nor to prevent internal movement during the pandemic. These member states thus uphold the Freedom of Movement Regime type. The second group of states (upper right corner) are those that introduced temporary IBCs to control migration or so-called secondary movements inside Schengen but that did not introduce controls specifically to prevent the spread of Covid-19. These member states thus use temporary IBCs to perform a border function that is normally associated with external state boundaries and are therefore categorised as the External Threat Regime type.

The third group of countries (lower left corner) are those that have not used IBCs to control external movement but have done so to control internal movement as a response to the Covid-19 spread or high-level meetings, and thus belong to the Internal Threat Regime type. In the short term, the extensive controls due to Covid-19 presented a very serious violation of the principle of freedom of movement. However, many countries had also introduced restrictions on free movement locally or regionally, which indicates that this was not a freedom of movement crisis isolated to the Schengen regime. In the fourth group (lower right corner), we have those member states that have used IBCs that target both external and internal movement. In this group are countries that introduced IBCs because of the refugee crisis in 2015 or the Ukraine war in 2022 and also used controls to reduce the spread of the pandemic. These member states challenge the freedom of movement principle based both on

external and internal border functions and thus belong to the Re-Bordering Regime type.

There are clear internal differences among these four types. Overall, six countries (Austria, Denmark, France, Germany, Norway, Sweden) stand out as long-term users that have had controls in place for more than seven years each since first introducing them in 2015, and thus more permanently challenged the principle of a free movement in the Schengen Area (Figure 2). Another group that stands out are those that have never used IBCs during this period of time (Greece, Latvia, Luxembourg, the Netherlands), or only very briefly (Italy, Slovenia). Most countries have used IBCs for a period between 100 and 200 days. If we couple this with the typology based on the border control function (Table 2), we can measure the degree of openness for each of the internal regime types. The average number of total days that each group has used border controls varies from zero to 1,664 days (Table 3). In Table 3, the total average share of days with border controls within each group presents these differences. The freedom of movement regime countries have per definition not used IBCs during this period. In contrast, the two regime types that include the external dimension controls have, on average, been used for a large share of days (note, however, that the in-group differences are quite large in these two types as some member states coded in this group did not start migration controls in 2015 but in 2022 due to the war in Ukraine). This indicates that these two regime types have a clearly developed pattern of using IBCs, which means that these internal border regimes are fairly well established. In contrast, the countries in the internal threat regime had an average share of 17% of days with controls since the pandemic started, indicating that although very disruptive in the short term, this regime

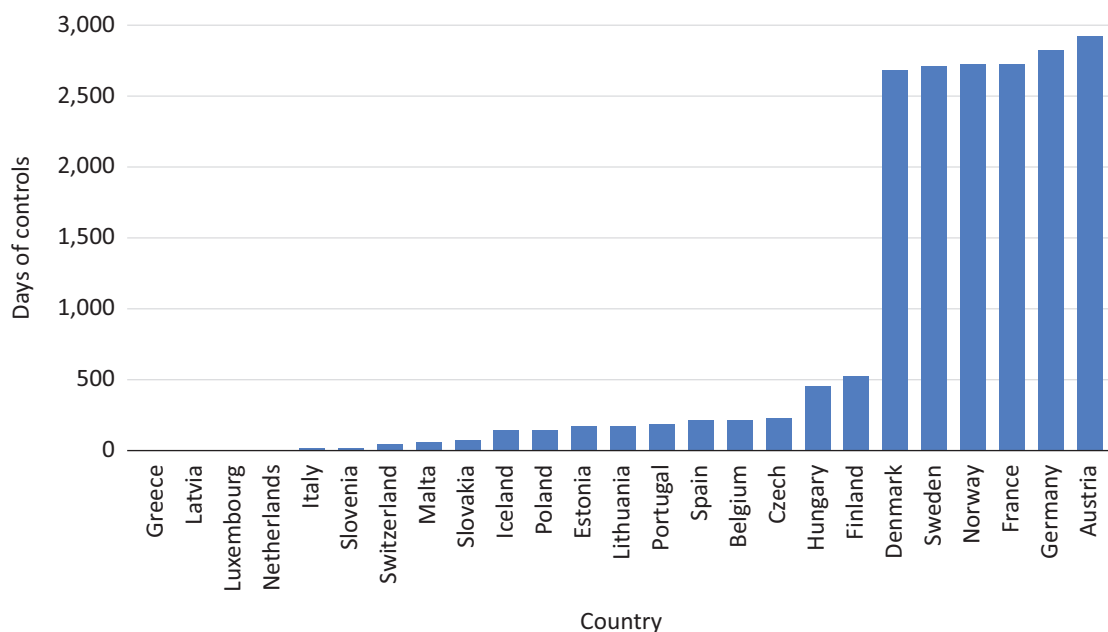


Figure 2. Total days of controls per country, 2015–2022.



**Table 3.** Internal border regime strength.

Regime type	Average days of IBCs	Share of days with IBCs
I. Freedom of Movement Regime	0	0%
II. External Threat Regime	937	35%
III. Internal Threat Regime	178	17%
IV. Re-Bordering Regime	1,664	62%

Note: Types I, II, and IV are calculated as the share of days since September 9, 2015; Type III is calculated from the share since March 3, 2020.

type cannot be considered to have established a strong pattern of behaviour.

## 5. Conclusion

This article proposed the concept of differentiated implementation to account for the internal border regime(s) that have developed since the practice of using IBCs expanded following the two main crises of Schengen, the “refugee crisis” in 2015 and the pandemic in 2020. Following previous literature on the Schengen crises and IBCs, it was argued that a more nuanced understanding of internal re-bordering was needed, beyond whether the implementation of IBCs will mean disintegration or not. A typology of nested internal border regimes was developed, which highlighted the two dimensions of border control functions: One is, in principle, about lack of trust in the external border control capacity of Schengen, whereas the other is, in principle, about limiting internal cross-border movement altogether. Or put differently, one is primarily about an external dimension of control while the other is about an internal dimension.

The analysis then used the typology to identify the ways in which IBC use is differentiated among the Schengen member states. Importantly, it is clear that not all member states implement IBCs in the same way. This kind of internal differentiation risks causing imbalance and dysfunctionalities within the Schengen system as a whole, not least as it makes travel to some countries more difficult than others and disrupts cross-border region-building, which has been a major outcome of the freedom of movement policies. The difference between IBCs that are primarily used to target “external” border crossers and controls that broadly target all internal border crossers is important to make note of. These are, in essence, policy responses to very different types of problems for the Schengen Area and treating them as a unitary problem might obscure possible solutions. It was also argued that the regime strength of the four types was not the same and that the use of IBCs to target freedom of movement during the pandemic has not been developed to an equally established regime type as the external threat control regime types.

The typology presented in this article identifies different internal border regimes of member states based on two dimensions of control, capturing that IBCs can either be directed towards internal cross-border movement or

at movement internal to the Schengen Area that originates outside of it. This has been the case in the two previous internal re-bordering crises, where the controls after the refugee crisis have been about shortcomings at the external border, and during the Covid-19 pandemic, where controls were used to reduce internal movement altogether. However, the intention of outlining the external and internal dimensions underlying the use of IBCs is that these two dimensions are theoretical abstractions that can be generalised to a number of other situations where member states choose to introduce controls at the internal border. The typology presented here could therefore be used as an analytical framework for analysing and comparing current re-bordering to any future re-bordering developments. This typology of differentiated implementation could also be used in comparative studies of country cases of different types to explore potential explanations such as if or why similar countries make different re-bordering choices.

## Acknowledgments

This work was funded by the Swedish Research Council (Project No. 2019–06430). I would like to thank the editors and the anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments. I also wish to thank Michela Ceccorulli, Vittoria Meissner, and the other participants of the workshop “The Politics of European Borders: (Dis)Integration, Security & Mobility,” for comments on an earlier version of this article. Thanks also to the members of the EU seminar at the Department of Government at Uppsala University for their helpful comments on the article.

## Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

## Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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Article

## Policy Entrepreneurs of European Disintegration? The Case of Austrian Asylum Governance After 2015

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Submitted: 31 January 2023 | Accepted: 20 April 2023 | Published: 5 July 2023

### Abstract

The re-establishment of border controls in the Schengen Area since 2015 and repeated contestation of the Common European Asylum System have made the policy sector of migration and asylum a topic of growing importance for European (dis)integration research. This article investigates differentiated disintegration and the factors that facilitate member states' counter-projects to core-EU integration trajectories. Drawing on the concept of policy entrepreneurship and based on an analysis of policy documents, we use the case of Austria to examine how the government coalition, the Austrian People's Party, and their chairman, Sebastian Kurz, have shaped European governance of asylum and borders in the aftermath of the 2015–2016 crisis. We first show how the Austrian government performed a shift towards bilateralism and multilateralism outside the EU framework by using transnational party alliances. Second, we outline a policy discourse that justified Schengen-internal bordering based on asylum politics, which eventually served to delegitimize Schengen's enlargement in 2022. The article contributes conceptually to understanding differentiated disintegration in the sector of migration and asylum, and points to potential drivers of this development.

### Keywords

Austria; border control; Common European Asylum System; European disintegration; policy entrepreneurship

### Issue

This article is part of the issue “The Causes and Modes of European Disintegration” edited by Martijn Huysmans (Utrecht University) and Sven Van Kerckhoven (Vrije Universiteit Brussel).

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### 1. Introduction

The establishment of a border-free Schengen Area is often considered a milestone of European integration. Originally initiated by five member states of the European Community in 1985, the Schengen Treaty on the free movement of goods and people was later incorporated into primary and secondary EU law, marking a key sector of integration during the 1990s and 2000s and urging leaders of the EU member states to foster cooperation on matters of external immigration and a Common European Asylum System (CEAS; Webber, 2019; Zaiotti, 2011).

Although member states had always been reluctant to share sovereignty and competences in the policy area of immigration and asylum (Brack et al., 2019), the 2015–2016 crisis of refugee governance is consid-

ered a critical juncture in the communitization of this policy field (Webber, 2019). The repeated renewal of intra-Schengen border controls by numerous member states, a de facto transferral of EU policy competences to member states, and the lack of policy reform in the face of deficiencies of the CEAS have been viewed as a sign of sectoral disintegration (Schramm, 2020, p. 3). Whereas the Russian war on Ukraine might suggest that member states are moving closer together and acting in an ever-united way, concerns over migration and asylum continue to divide the EU. This became particularly evident when Austria and the Netherlands blocked the accession of Romania and Bulgaria to the Schengen Area in 2022. Repeated interruptions and vetoes illustrate the fragility of the Schengen Area and call into question the assumption that crises are catalysts for the

further development of the European integration project (Vollaard, 2014).

Besides vertical disintegration in terms of treaty changes and horizontal disintegration in terms of member state exits, sectoral disintegration has been conceptualized as the collapse of common policies through the renationalization of specific issues (Webber, 2019, p. 14). For example, scholars have argued that member states of the CEAS and the Schengen Area have returned to increased national control over their borders (Brekke & Staver, 2018; Gülzau et al., 2021). The EU has thus been seen as losing its power to exert supranational authority in the aftermath of the 2015–2016 crisis (Lavenex, 2018).

Against this theoretical and empirical background, the present article studies differentiated disintegration in the sector of migration and asylum, as well as the factors that can facilitate the establishment of counter-projects to core-EU integration trajectories in individual member states. Our analysis sheds light on two key dimensions of differentiated disintegration in migration and asylum. First, we emphasize how sidestepping the EU institutions is not only achieved by unilateral means but also through bilateralism and multilateralism. Second, our case study stresses internal boundary formation and re-bordering as a policy dimension of disintegration in the Schengen Area (Schimmelfennig, 2021). Drawing on the case of the Austrian government, which has acted especially against EU-wide integration trajectories such as refugee relocation and distribution schemes, we trace both dimensions of disintegration in the aftermath of the crisis of 2015–2016. We adopt the concept of policy entrepreneurship (Mintrom & Norman, 2009) to analyse the divergent course of action by a governmental actor who has played a prolific role in establishing himself nationally and Europe-wide as an anti-immigrant advocate (Hadj Abdou & Ruedin, 2022): the former Minister for Europe, Integration, and Foreign Affairs, later Federal Chancellor, and leader of the Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) Sebastian Kurz.

Based on the analysis of policy documents and newspaper articles from 2015 to 2021, we show that Austria's decision on temporary intra-Schengen border controls and a unilateral asylum cap in early 2016 only marked the beginning of a disintegrative course of action in the sector of immigration and asylum. Persistent intra-Schengen bordering practices against the criticized malfunctioning of the CEAS continues to the present day (2023), despite a limiting ruling of the European Court of Justice. Austria also sought to evade EU institutions through a shift to new decision-making arenas and the bilateral engagement with governments from the Western Balkans, which was largely facilitated by transnational right-wing party alliances within the European People's Party (EPP). We demonstrate further how the issues of irregular migration and asylum were linked to Schengen policies on a discursive level, shaping Austrian arguments for the veto against the enlargement of the Schengen Area in 2022.

The structure of the article follows first a revisit of the literature on European (dis)integration in the wake of the crisis of refugee governance in 2015–2016. Secondly, it proposes a two-dimensional conceptualization of differentiated European disintegration. Thirdly, before introducing the Austrian case (in Section 4), we discuss the analytical approach of policy entrepreneurs to contextualize our analysis. In Section 5, we trace the strategic solo efforts by Kurz and the ÖVP, analysing how they shifted their activities to new forms and arenas of decision-making and established new discourses that linked irregular migration and asylum to Schengen policies. We close with a discussion of the implications of our findings for European disintegration, pointing to party politics and policy learning as drivers of disintegrative counter-projects.

## **2. European (Dis)Integration: Schengen and the Common European Asylum System in the Wake of the 2015 Crisis**

Crises have often been referred to as engines of European integration that function as cyclical processes, revealing policy failures (Pollack, 2003) that have resulted from incomplete regulatory frameworks, and which lead to consecutive re-adjustments (Jones et al., 2016). Yet the crisis of refugee governance in 2015–2016 has raised concerns over disintegrative tendencies in the sector of migration and asylum governance. It fuelled scholarly engagement with questions of centralization level, policy scope, and membership configuration of the EU in this sector (Kriesi et al., 2021). Although research findings on the political responses to the crisis have been far from unanimous, many scholars agree that no substantial deepening of European integration could be observed—neither in terms of treaty changes nor in terms of durable policy trajectories (Scipioni, 2018; Trauner, 2016). Instead, the crisis has put both pillars, the CEAS and Schengen, under unprecedented pressure in the face of some member states' claims to re-assert nation-state sovereignty over issues of asylum and borders.

### *2.1. Core State Powers and the Lack of Integration After 2015*

The CEAS is no stranger to policy failure. In fact, it has been described as less of a system than a “bric-a-brac” (Chetail, 2016) of policy instruments that emerged as compensatory measures for the development of the Schengen Area. In addition, the Schengen Area itself has always been characterized by internal and external differentiations (Schimmelfennig et al., 2015, p. 767). The EU regulations of asylum and borders touch upon core state powers that are considered classic domains of national sovereignty (Genschel & Jachtenfuchs, 2018). The policy area is thus characterized by regulatory integration, where member states have preserved authority over the



implementation of core powers, while EU directives dominate the legal landscape (Asderaki & Markozani, 2022). At the same time, the governance of asylum protection is particularly susceptible to party politics and politicization (Rittberger et al., 2014, p. 196) because the matter is linked to aspects of national sovereignty and collective identity. In the past, this has led to differentiated constitutional integration, notably with opt-outs from Denmark, the UK, and Ireland.

In the aftermath of 2015, the question was whether political conflicts and divergent actions due to the heterogeneity of preferences, dependencies, and capacities among member states had led to more flexibility in the CEAS or to irreconcilable divergences on legal orders and policy values. As the exceptional position of the UK within the CEAS and its opt-out from 35 asylum measures in 2014 (Adam et al., 2016) has shown, facilitating national preferences does not necessarily lead to European integration in the long term. In that case, it encouraged the precursor to the politicization of immigration by Eurosceptics, which had fuelled the vote on Brexit (Dennison & Geddes, 2018).

As early as 2016, Trauner (2016) pointed out that EU policymakers could not agree on paradigmatic changes and thus merely added another layer of policy instruments to sustain the malfunctioning core of the CEAS. These measures primarily included more financial and operational support for Southern EU countries. Even though these steps testify to a joint European action, the European Council's decision on relocation schemes for refugees from Italy and Greece was later met with wilful non-compliance by some member states (Sciocluna, 2021). Similarly, Scipioni (2018) argued that European integration after 2015 was largely confined to incremental changes, such as the upgrading of EU agencies like Frontex or the former EASO, which constitute a conferral of powers to supranational entities. For Schramm (2020), the political reactions to the crisis of 2015–2016 constitute a more clear-cut instance of European disintegration due to a de-facto transferral of EU policy competences to the member state level within the scope of Schengen and the lack of policy innovation in the face of the breakdown of the CEAS. More specifically, he points out the shift of policy arenas based on internal failures (such as the EU–Turkey deal), confrontation over bargaining (conflicts in the adoption of relocation schemes), an uneven change of opportunity structures leading to unilateral action (i.e., highly affected countries like Austria had stronger incentives for national border controls), and a side-lining of supranational agents (i.e., the EU Commission's unsuccessful attempt at relocation quotas and its limited role in the EU–Turkey deal).

Besides research on European integration and differentiation, studies on Schengen (Gülzau et al., 2021) and individual member state reactions (i.e., Brekke & Staver, 2018), while not explicitly addressing developments of (dis)integration, share the diagnosis of renationalization of competences and issues. Arguably, member

states sought to reassert national sovereignty over matters of asylum and borders through systematic controls, exemption clauses, and the non-implementation of EU law in the aftermath of the crisis. Yet Kriesi et al. (2021) have referred to bordering practices in the face of the 2015–2016 crisis as “defensive integration.” They classify the political reactions to 2015 as a form of European integration where both internal and external borders were reinforced, creating not only a stronger differentiation from the non-EU periphery but also between member states. Other than intra-Schengen boundary formation, the authors point to the “closure of the Western Balkan route,” together with the EU–Turkey deal and the deal with Libya, as part of a European integration trajectory.

## 2.2. *Towards the Study of Differentiated Disintegration*

As our literature review demonstrates, scholars have drawn on a variety of theories and concepts to address policy outcomes of European differentiation in the sector of migration and asylum after 2015, in terms of diverging objectives, different levels of compliance, and the adoption of new formal and informal arrangements (Dyson & Sepos, 2010). However, more research is required to understand what Schimmelfennig and Winzen (2020) refer to as the “demand side” of differentiation, namely some national governments' opposition to an integrationist path taken by an inner core of the EU (Schimmelfennig & Winzen, 2020, p. 192). In particular, we need to develop a better understanding of the factors that structure the emergence of member-state-driven counter-projects within the EU. Illuminating these factors is particularly relevant for explaining differentiated disintegration, namely a member state's reduction of the level or scope of European integration, while the rest of the EU maintains the status quo (Schimmelfennig, 2022, p. 619).

We argue that the process of differentiated disintegration is not necessarily confined to non-compliance, opt-outs, the renationalization of policies or other forms of “temporal” or “territorial” differentiation (Leruth et al., 2019, p. 1017). Instead, we propose considering the phenomenon along two dimensions. First, EU policy issues are often part of European competences precisely because they address problems that require inter- or transnational intervention, with migration and asylum as prime examples. For this reason, it appears critical to consider not only national but also international modes of political decision-making that are at odds with joint EU action. In this regard, Schramm (2020) has pointed to a set of exit mechanisms amidst EU decision-making deadlocks that become particularly relevant in crises. He argues that, instead of sticking to a “treaty-based game,” policymakers can shift to political arenas that involve different actors and decision rules (Schramm, 2020, p. 20). This can lead to the erosion of the political authority of supranational institutions and European legal framework but it opens up new spaces for national agency and negotiations.

Second, EU policies do not only seek to solve substantive issues, but they also try to do so in a coordinated manner, which maintains the status quo of cohesiveness of the EU's socio-political system or which further dissolves institutional, functional, and territorial boundaries between member states (Schimmelfennig, 2021). The theory of boundary-making has recently been developed in European (dis)integration research (Kriesi et al., 2021; Schimmelfennig, 2021) and essentially posits that European integration results from internal de-bordering and external re-bordering, while disintegration implies internal re-bordering and external de-bordering. As reasons for internal re-bordering (i.e., intra-Schengen controls), Schimmelfennig (2021) points to widening gaps between different territories, exogenous shocks, and community deficits that impair the political performance of member states and, consequently, call for a reconfiguration of boundaries.

To understand how these two (dis)integration dimensions materialize in the asylum sector and what drives differentiated disintegration within a member state, we will apply the concept of policy entrepreneurship, tracing the Austrian government's responses to the crisis of refugee governance. The EU's complex and fragmented governance structure (van Esch & Swinkels, 2015) has been deemed inefficient in times of crisis because of the lack of clear leadership and converging beliefs as well as common sense-making (Kamkhaji & Radaelli, 2017, p. 717). We argue that national policy entrepreneurs seize these issues to establish counter-projects that facilitate differentiated (dis)integration processes.

### 3. Conceptual and Methodical Approach

The concept of policy entrepreneurship is inspired by economics but has become firmly established in organizational and policy studies. It denotes the transformative agency of political actors who induce change in the public and political sphere by drawing on qualities that are immanent to entrepreneurs in the economic sphere (Roberts & King, 1991, p. 149). Although the literature on policy entrepreneurship has largely focused on individual actors at the political or administrative level of government, the concept can also be extended to institutions and organizations (Perkmann, 2007; Zeilinger, 2021) and can thus be helpful for the study of governments and individual actors nested within these governments (Garcés-Masareñas & Gebhardt, 2020; Zeilinger, 2021). While we are critical of the normative undertone inherent to the notion of entrepreneurs as self-reliant creators of surplus value and champions of positive change, we recognize the analytical benefits of the concept for studying the establishment of political counter-projects driven by political agents who seek to advance their interests during institutional crises.

We will now focus on the nested responsibility and power over European and asylum-related agendas within the Austrian government, inquiring specifi-

cally into the actions of the ÖVP and the Minister for Europe, Integration, and Foreign Affairs (March 2014–December 2017) and later Chancellor (December 2017–May 2019 and January 2020–October 2021) Sebastian Kurz. In terms of method, we base our study on a content analysis of systematically collected policy documents related to federal immigration and border-control measures in Austria. The document search was conducted in the Federal Legal Information System, collecting data from 1995–2021 based on the terms *Grenz* (border), *Grenzraum* (border area), *Grenzraumüberwachung* (border area surveillance), *Grenzkontrolle* (border control), *Grenzübergang* (border crossing), *Schleierfahndung* (dragnet control), *Assistenzeinsatz* (assistance mission), *Schlepperei* (people smuggling), and *Einreise* (entrance). We have identified 166 national laws, bilateral and multilateral agreements, and treaties (1995–2021) and an additional 41 notifications to the European Commission on temporary border closures. For this article, we have only considered documents dated between 2015 and 2022 as primary sources and complemented our material with secondary sources, such as newspaper articles and press releases, that referred to the content of the primary sources (Westle, 2018). Each document was initially coded by the regulatory type of the policy, the implementing government actor, the (sub)-area of policy, the policy target group, and the key objectives.

Analytically, we considered the politics and policy dimensions of policy entrepreneurs. Mintrom and Norman (2009) have characterized policy entrepreneurs as highly capable of both acting strategically and shaping policy beliefs. In terms of strategic action, policy entrepreneurs can be considered flexible on the time and place of policy making. It is assumed that they seize windows of opportunity and even exploit notions of crisis (Mintrom & Vergari, 1996, p. 425) to pursue their winning strategies and networks. Rather than operating on their own, they mobilize personal and professional networks that may reach across jurisdictions and policy sectors. Thereby, according to Mintrom and Norman (2009), policy entrepreneurs tend to act outside of established institutional settings or create new coalitions. The concept emphasizes the embedded agency of member state governments and helps to shed light on how they pursue solutions to decision deadlocks at the EU level (Schramm, 2020), shifting between arenas and including/excluding particular actors. Consequently, we have identified unilateral, bilateral, and multilateral political decisions, agreements, and declarations related to migration, borders, and asylum. Here, we have analysed the political actors' stated objectives and the organizational and institutional ties that facilitate their cooperation. The findings were embedded within the established context of EU policy-making in the area of asylum since 2015.

Considering the dimension of policy beliefs and values, policy entrepreneurs have been described as compelling storytellers who shape public perceptions of what

constitutes a policy problem and who provides corresponding solutions (Cairney, 2018, p. 203). This process is less about offering rational evidence than about telling persuasive stories that help others make sense of a policy issue. Policy entrepreneurs thus seek to reduce ambiguity and alter perceptions of risk by using discursive links and frames. Here, the concept guides our analysis to focus on ways in which internal and external bordering is conceptualized and legitimized in the suggested policy solutions. To study this dimension, we have combined the analysis above with newspaper articles and press releases that included direct statements from ÖVP politicians. These were used to identify public representations of policy issues and the reasoning behind the solutions, all of which are embedded in wider policy narratives and discourses. We have considered four major categories of analysis: the substantive policy issue at hand, related solutions, policy instruments, as well as the legitimization/delegitimization of certain political authorities within European multi-level governance.

#### 4. Establishing the Austrian Context

The veto of the Austrian government against the Schengen accession of Bulgaria and Romania (2022) has made Austria an interesting case for examining how member states shape differentiated (dis)integration in the sector of border and asylum. Without being a frontline state at the EU's external borders and without notable immigration pressure from asylum seekers arriving from the Eastern Balkans, it has recently blocked a major step towards horizontal integration of the Schengen Area. The prominence of the topic of migration and asylum in Austria's argumentation for the veto is embedded in a long history of high-level domestic politicization of migration in the European context, making the country a notable candidate for the study of differentiated disintegration in the sector.

##### 4.1. The Austrian Political Context

Austria has long been an immigration country against its will (Gruber & Rosenberger, 2021), yet it fully adopted the Schengen Acquis and set up an asylum system that has accommodated a considerable number of refugees over the past two decades. This is owed largely to supranational dynamics at the EU level, starting from the early 2000s, when a series of directives, as well as the Dublin Regulation, were introduced to allocate responsibility for asylum procedures and facilitate the reception and status determination of asylum seekers within the CEAS of the EU (Webber, 2019).

While legal competences on asylum gradually moved to the supranational and intergovernmental level throughout the 1990s and early 2000s through the adoption of the Schengen Acquis and the establishment of the CEAS, the topic of immigration domestically became a more politically salient issue. Navigating between immi-

gration and EU-sceptic attitudes in society and increasing pressure of supranational norms, Austria's main government parties, the Social Democratic Party of Austria (SPÖ) and the ÖVP, were also confronted with electoral pressure and populist anti-migration politicization from the far-right Freedom Party Austria (FPÖ), which has held issue ownership on the immigration problem since the 1990s (Hadj Abdou & Ruedin, 2022; Bodlos & Plescia, 2018; Gruber & Rosenberger, 2021).

From 2010 onwards, the ÖVP has included a more pronounced migration profile in its electoral manifestos, expanding its institutional portfolio through the political newcomer Sebastian Kurz, who held the position of State Secretary for Immigrant Integration in 2011. Kurz became minister of European and foreign affairs in 2013 and minister of Europe, Integration, and Foreign Affairs in 2014, before serving as chairman of the ÖVP and Federal Chancellor in 2017. The success of the ÖVP in the general elections of 2017 was particularly affected by debates about and responses to the events of 2015–2016 (Bodlos & Plescia, 2018), not only in terms of issue saliency but also in framing the crisis as a failure of EU leadership. In this phase, the ÖVP adopted the demands of the far-right FPÖ on border control as its own (Gruber & Rosenberger, 2021; Heinisch et al., 2020). Eventually, it became an anti-immigrant party that played a decisive role in domestic and inner-European asylum governance during four government coalitions between 2013 and 2022 (Hadj Abdou & Ruedin, 2022).

##### 4.2. Initial Pragmatic Reactions to the Crisis

Following the arrival of refugees in Europe in 2015–2016, the Austrian government initially adopted a highly pragmatic approach without any pronounced policy entrepreneurship on the part of the ÖVP and Kurz, who at the time were the junior partners in a coalition with the SPÖ. Even though the federal government introduced temporary Schengen border controls at its main border crossings to Slovenia (Spielfeld) and Hungary (Nickelsdorf) on 9 September 2015, it tolerated onward journeys of thousands of refugees when the Hungarian authorities opened their borders. Given this situation, Austria opted for the principle of proportionality, waving through new arrivals without registration, in coordination with German Federal Chancellor Angela Merkel (Ultsch et al., 2017). The coalition government even organized public transportation for refugees' onward journeys (Issig, 2015) and, thereby, informally suspended the Dublin Regulation, which proved to be dysfunctional in this situation.

At the time, the Austrian government still prioritized EU cooperation, which became evident during the Justice and Home Affairs Council on 22 September 2015, when the Austrian minister of the interior, together with her European counterparts, agreed on the relocation of 15,600 people from Italy, and 50,400 from Greece, despite votes against the proposals by

Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Romania. Austria committed itself to admit 1,953 asylum seekers (“Flüchtlingsumverteilung,” 2017) and thereby pursued a core-EU integrationist trajectory based on the idea of establishing long-term distribution quotas across the EU out of solidarity with frontier member states. In light of the ongoing refugee influx from the Western Balkans, Austrian policymakers also attended a meeting, hosted by the President of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, where a 17-point plan for joint migration management in the Western Balkans was agreed in Brussels in October 2015 (European Commission, 2015).

However, as discontent over European asylum governance started to grow among the ranks of the ÖVP, Kurz began to change his strategy, adopting a policy entrepreneurial role as minister for Europe, Integration, and Foreign Affairs from early 2016. In the next section, we will trace his political actions and policy discourses (summarized in Figure 1).

## 5. Towards Sectoral Disintegration: The Austrian Policy Entrepreneur

### 5.1. New Forms and Arenas of Decision-Making

By early 2016, Kurz and the ÖVP gradually began to dissociate from institutional pathways of the EU through unilateral action and the use of non-EU arenas and networks. First, Austria unilaterally introduced an annual cap on asylum applications. This was heavily criticized by the EU Commissioner for Migration and Home Affairs Dimitris Avramopoulos, who argued that “such a policy would clearly be incompatible with Austria’s obligations under European and international law” (Christidis et al., 2016). Furthermore, the Austrian government urged member states, such as Slovenia and Croatia, to follow the so-called domino effect, according to which national border controls should be intensified and daily passage quotas implemented. Secondly, the relocation quota that Austria had initially agreed upon proved to be a false promise. When it came to implementing the

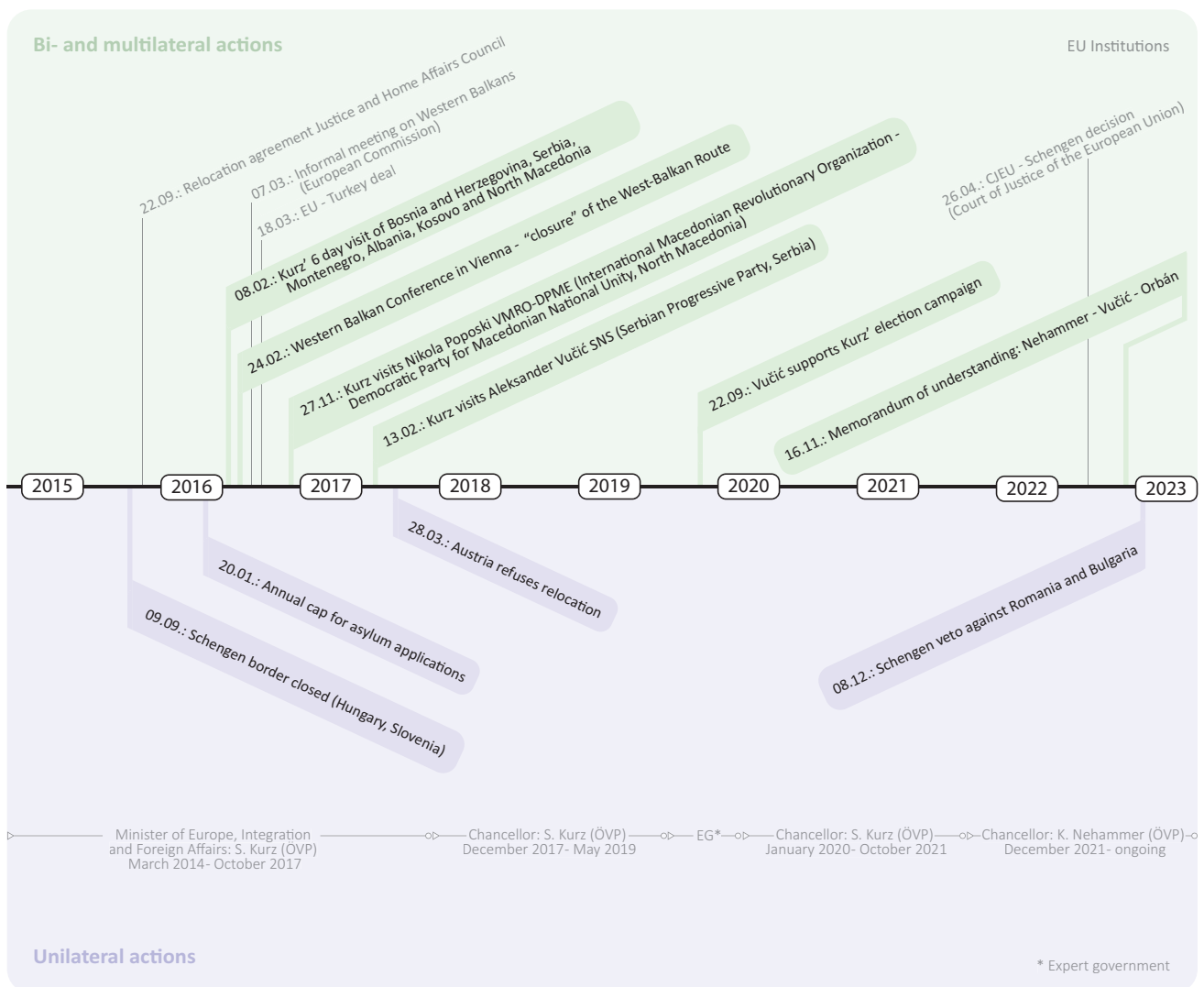


Figure 1. Timeline of the Austrian course of action 2015–2022.

instrument, the government sided with Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic by refusing to accept any further asylum seekers (“Flüchtlingsumverteilung,” 2017).

However, the responses of the Austrian government cannot be reduced to unilateral instruments. Far from acting alone, ÖVP ministers made use of formerly established opportunity structures to foster new forms of cooperation beyond institutional EU settings. In February 2016, the Minister of the Interior, Johanna Mikl-Leitner, together with the Minister for Europe, Integration, and Foreign Affairs, Sebastian Kurz, took advantage of the existing format of the Western Balkans Conference to talk with representatives of EU candidate countries to foster their restrictive migration agenda. These members of the government did not confine themselves to taking sides within an EU setting—by supporting policy proposals by the Visegrád states and criticizing Germany and Greece. They exacerbated political divisions further by pursuing policies within multilateral settings that they coordinated. Notably, Austrian officials neither invited EU representatives nor government officials from Greece—which had been most affected—nor from Germany—which had traditionally participated in the conference. Instead, the conference only included members of the Salzburg Forum, a security politics arena for interior ministers from Central-Eastern European countries formed in 2000, as well as members of the Western Balkans EU candidate countries. In response to these activities, Greek officials called the Austrian move towards an exclusive policy arena “unilateral and non-friendly” (“Greece files,” 2016). The European Commissioner for Migration and Home Affairs expressed concerns “about the developments along the Balkan route and the humanitarian crisis that might unfold in certain countries, especially in Greece” (European Commission, 2016). The creation of the improvised Idomeni refugee camp between North Macedonia and Greece a few weeks later would reveal that these concerns were not unfounded.

Starting from a six-day Balkan trip across six countries in February 2016, the Minister for Europe, Integration, and Foreign Affairs Sebastian Kurz, would simultaneously enter into intensified bilateral talks with government officials from the Western Balkans. Despite their intergovernmental character, these bilateral talks were strongly facilitated by common transnational ties between parties. The ÖVP and Kurz specifically drew on party alliances of the EPP to establish a policy network with their EPP governmental counterparts—the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) in Serbia, the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization-Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity in North Macedonia (VMRO-DPMNE), among others. While bilateral action plans developed during Kurz’s Balkan trip to Serbia and North Macedonia testify to the role of joint migration governance as a key topic pertinent to the rapprochement between the EU and the Western Balkan countries (Federal Ministry for Europe,

Integration, and Foreign Affairs, 2016), later encounters with respective government officials illustrate the links of this meeting with electoral politics.

In November 2016, for example, Kurz held talks with the North Macedonian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Nikola Poposki (VMRO-DPMNE), calling the country one of the most important partners for Austria during the migration crisis. On the same visit, Kurz participated in an election rally of the VMRO-DPMNE. On stage, he thanked a cheering crowd of party supporters for helping with “the Western Balkan closure” (Wölfl, 2016). Following criticism from opposition parties and journalists in Austria, the Ministry for Europe, Integration, and Foreign Affairs stressed that Kurz had visited the event merely as a representative of the EPP and not in his role as minister.

Similarly, the ÖVP fostered party ties with the SNS regarding migration governance. In February 2017, one month before the presidential elections in Serbia, Kurz paid a visit to Belgrade, where he argued that “the Western Balkan countries have made tremendous efforts to protect the borders. Only coordinated action and joint action can ensure that illegal migration and smuggling are successfully combated” (Federal Ministry for Europe, Integration, and Foreign Affairs, 2017). In return, in September 2019, Kurz enjoyed electoral support from Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić, who addressed Austrian citizens of Serbian origin when recommending Kurz as “an honest, responsible, serious young politician who will improve relations in the Western Balkans region and throughout Europe” (Hochmuth, 2019).

While the relations of the Austrian government with Viktor Orbán have remained comparatively strained for years, not least due to the suspension of the Fidesz from EPP membership, the fight against “illegal migration” remains common ground between the two governments. Thus, when the number of asylum applications was on the rise again in 2022, Austrian Federal Chancellor Karl Nehammer (ÖVP) once more declared that the European asylum system had failed and mobilized his ties with Orbán and Vučić. These high-level politicians claimed that the EU had abandoned them in the fight against irregular arrivals and eventually signed a memorandum of understanding, which included joint measures for border protection and against “asylum à la carte” (Mayer et al., 2022).

### *5.2. Establishing the Discursive Schengen-Asylum-Nexus and the “Closure of the Western Balkan Route” Narrative*

At the level of policy discourse, starting in 2016, Kurz and the ÖVP legitimized solo efforts by encouraging a security-oriented immigration discourse, which to a certain extent challenged the EU’s policy legacy. On the one hand, this policy discourse stressed the reform of the CEAS as a precondition for the return to Schengen (Schengen-asylum nexus). On the other, it sought to externalize border controls to a non-EU



periphery by promoting the narrative of “closing the Western Balkan route.”

Considering the re-introduction of intra-Schengen border controls, the Austrian government justified the initial decision of September 2015 as a temporary measure aimed at managing an emergency that had resulted from the high influx of people seeking international protection. While the reintroduction of border controls can conform to the Schengen Border Code (SBC), which includes several exemption provisions (SBC, articles 27–29), such measures are always legally confined to temporary periods. However, a total of 41 notifications sent to the EU Commission between 2015 and 2022 evidence how Austria turned border controls into a state of de-facto permanent exception.

The formal justification letters show how immigration via the asylum system, often framed in terms of irregular migration, had been used as the reason for the partial suspension of Schengen. For example, in 2017, the Minister of the Interior Wolfgang Sobotka said that intra-Schengen border controls were “without alternative” (“Sobotka: Grenzkontrollen,” 2017) because of the incapacity of EU authorities to protect its external borders. The interior minister further intervened with the European Commission for a change in the SBC to extend the deadlines for border controls. During a meeting of the Council of the EU in Brussels, he argued in favour of internal border controls, stating: “Although there is no acute terrorist threat in Austria, we are not an island of the blessed and must be prepared for all eventualities...issues of migration, integration, and extremism are closely linked” (“Sobotka: Fristen,” 2017). So, it comes as no surprise that national borders were increasingly politicized at the domestic level, especially by the ÖVP and the FPÖ, who called for new measures to protect the national territory. In June 2018, for example, the federal government promoted border fortifications under the label “Pro Borders” by publicly staging a mass-migration simulation with 200 background actors and several hundred policemen (Rosenberger & Müller, 2020).

However, the ÖVP’s discursive prioritization of security concerns over humanitarian aid was not confined to the legitimization of national intervention but also projected visions of control to the EU’s external borders. The so-called “closure of the Western Balkan route” narrative emerged as a key rhetorical device for an Austrian counter-discourse to Merkel’s “We can manage this!” (*Wir schaffen das!*) and against European relocation plans. It served as a narrative that presented externalization measures and closed borders as a necessary and effective response to the challenges posed by irregular migration. Notably, it sought to challenge the lack of implementation of external border controls by other member states and the moral standards put forward by the Commission. Kurz, in his position as minister for Europe, Integration, and Foreign Affairs, criticized individual member states like Greece for their

inaction on addressing immigration and enforcing border control, arguing that “it [effective border control] won’t work without pressure on Greece” (Mülherr, 2016). Furthermore, he criticized the German-led plan for an EU–Turkey deal, arguing that it would create dependence on Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. In this context, he famously stated that “it cannot be that we delegate this job to Turkey because we don’t want to get our hands dirty. It will not work without ugly images” (Mülherr, 2016). Anticipating human suffering at European borders, he legitimized the risk of human rights violations by referring to the threat to national borders posed by uncontrolled immigration.

More than half a decade after the crisis, the repercussions of the discursive nexus between Schengen and European asylum management seem to be deepening. In April 2022, the European Court of Justice ruled that Austria’s continued border controls at the Slovenian and the Hungarian borders was a breach of EU Law. However, the Austrian government insisted on extending border controls for another six months until November 2022, arguing that “if it is necessary to protect the population and the borders, then we will continue to do so” (“Schengen-Veto,” 2022). During the Justice and Home Affairs Council in Brussels in December 2022, Austria cast its veto against the accession of Bulgaria and Romania to the Schengen Area. Again, the government drew on the discursive Schengen-asylum nexus to legitimize its decision. According to Federal Chancellor Nehammer (ÖVP), “there will be no enlargement as long as the external border is not effectively protected. The EU’s failed asylum policy has caused this situation” (“Schengen-Veto,” 2022). Similarly, another ÖVP official stated that “an expansion of the Schengen system, which is no longer functioning anyway, makes no sense” (“Schengen-Veto,” 2022).

## 6. Discussion and Conclusion

Our analysis has considered the disintegration trajectory of the Austrian government in the sector of migration and asylum by examining modes of decision-making as well as the boundary-making inherent to policies after 2015. We have conceptualized the ÖVP and, in particular, the Minister for Europe, Integration, and Foreign Affairs and later Federal Chancellor, Sebastian Kurz, as policy entrepreneurs who applied strategic actions and discourses to develop a political counter-project to EU cooperation frameworks. Revisiting the findings presented above, the case study highlights potential drivers of differentiated disintegration, which we want to identify in the next subsection.

### 6.1. Disintegrative Strategies in the Face of Joint-Decision Deadlocks

Our findings on new forms and arenas of political decision-making illustrate how member states’ solo

efforts during crises must not necessarily be confined to renationalization in terms of unilateral action. Instead, they depict a variety of political strategies that have been described by Schramm (2020) as exit strategies from joint-decision problems at the EU level. Initially, Austria's response consisted of national measures aimed at increasing immigration control via intra-Schengen border controls and a unilaterally decreed asylum cap. However, the Western Balkans Conference of 2016 marked a critical moment of arena shifting and exclusion of supranational actors from negotiating and decision-making. This does not imply that treaty-based rules of decision-making did not prevail; however, they were eroded through parallel bilateralism and multilateralism with Hungary and Western-Balkan countries (and continued in 2022). Such a disintegrative approach was also characterized by a confrontational decision-making style towards the European Commission (i.e., exclusion from the Western Balkans conference, intra-Schengen controls) and the European Court of Justice (i.e., continuing intra-Schengen border controls) as well as to other member states (i.e., Germany and Greece, who were blamed for their permissive approach in 2015 and the failure to protect the EU's external borders).

These findings underscore the importance of considering the formation of transnational advocacy coalitions amidst crises and EU decision-making deadlocks. We have consequently pointed out the role of party politics (see Hooghe & Marks, 2009) and how transnational party alliances can bind member state and non-member state governments to engage bilaterally in the management of borders. These newly formed advocacy coalitions, however, must not necessarily be purely functional in seeking to advance policies that are based on shared values and goals that are difficult to realize within the EU. Rather, they can become opportunities for politicizing national and European leadership, promoting national identities, and enhancing government parties' migration profiles for domestic electoral campaigns.

## 6.2. *Re-Bordering Austria and Beyond*

The analysis of the policy discourse has demonstrated an ambivalent (dis)integration trajectory. As has been illustrated with the Schengen-asylum nexus and the narrative on the "closure of the Western Balkan route," the discourse of Kurz mirrors the trajectory of defensive integration as described by Schimmelfennig (2021) and Kriesi et al. (2021). In the context of the Schengen-asylum nexus, the problem as conceived by the ÖVP was not one of distribution and humanitarian aid but of security, national sovereignty, and the loss of capability to control particular types of cross-border movements. Thus, instead of choosing coordinated support from member states and allocation quotas, the Austrian government opted for more intensive border controls (at first only nationally, and later extended towards the periphery of the EU). The "closure of the Western Balkan

route" narrative pointed to external boundary formation, but not in terms of the fortification of the EU's external borders in Greece or Bulgaria. Instead, the claim was that of transnational policing of external borders across the non-EU periphery under the initiative and coordination of Austria as a central EU member state. While this approach was initially at odds with the EU Commission and some member states who feared a humanitarian disaster in the early months of 2016, it did not contradict the EU's paradigm of border control. Quite to the contrary, it fed into externalization efforts that have been pursued since 2004. Likewise, it is important to highlight that Austria's bilateral efforts in Serbia and North Macedonia were also framed in terms of EU enlargement with border control becoming a subject of mutual support.

However, even though the investigated Austrian policy entrepreneurs also pursued external boundary formation, the discursive nexus between Schengen and the CEAS proved to have major consequences for the future of European integration when Austria blocked the accession of Romania and Bulgaria to the Schengen Area in 2022. The policy entrepreneurs quote the collocated failure of the CEAS and Schengen as the reason behind the objection to further integrative steps.

These findings echo policy-learning literature, which has drawn attention to how crises constitute failures of existing policy principles and create opportunities for inferential or contingent learning. Such learning entails evidence or stimulus-based reassessments of a certain public as well as elitist beliefs and values (Radaelli, 2022, p. 15). Ultimately, concepts of internal/external boundaries that are initially inherent to policy lessons drawn from crises can transcend into particular (dis)integrative positions towards an EU polity.

Overall, the article has illustrated the relational character of differentiated disintegration, which, although driven by national leaders, relies on coalition-forming to substantively address policy issues that can at the same time serve the public display of national agency for the establishment of a political counter-project. Likewise, it has been shown how immigration-related asylum policies necessarily touch upon internal or external EU boundaries. Beyond insights into the Austrian case, the paper has enriched conceptual debates on differentiated disintegration by focusing on the role of domestic actors in challenging integrationist paths, demonstrating how domestic policy choices like Schengen border controls can later on call into question common decisions, such as the Schengen enlargement. As became evident, today's policy choices made by member state governments may well structure tomorrow's conditions of European integration.

## **Acknowledgments**

We are grateful to the three anonymous reviewers and the journal editors for their constructive feedback and

many thoughtful remarks. We also thank Magdalena Übleis-Lang and the Jean Monnet New European Borderlands' Network team. Open access funding was provided by the University of Vienna.

### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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ISSN: 2183-2463

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