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Disintegration à la Brexit is and remains the exception

The many other faces of European disintegration

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1. Introduction

The United Kingdom is still in the EU. So, how can you do research on European disintegration while it didn't happen yet? – that's the question I've been asked often whenever I introduced myself as EU disintegration expert. My answer is twofold. First, I can and did examine a wide variety of theories to see whether they would be able to conceptualise and explain EU disintegration fruitfully (Vollaard, 2018). Second, disintegration involves more than an entire member state leaving voluntarily, as the United Kingdom is trying to do now for a while. Indeed, no member state has withdrawn itself fully from the EU until now. However, as this paper shows, disintegration has many other faces, such as partial exits from the EU also by other actors than member states. These varieties of disintegration can be seen before in the history of the EU and its predecessors, and can therefore be object of empirical study. This paper defines the varieties of disintegration (section 2) and also offers an explanations of disintegration (section 3). Thus, it also points out that the type of disintegration à la Brexit has been not only an exception until now, but also remains one in the foreseeable future (section 4 and 5). The conclusion will touch upon the way this will mark the prospected trajectory of the EU.

2. Varieties of disintegration

The problematic discussions on defining the EU were once famously compared by Donald Puchala with blind men each describing an elephant according to the part they touched, its ears, hoofs, or tail. That led to quite diverging conclusions on what an elephant is. Imagine how difficult it is to define a disintegrating EU, based on what blind men can no longer touch as the elephant had lost a leg or trunk. Perhaps they can still smell a disintegrating elephant or hear the buzzing flies eating their way through the rotting meat, but is hardly a better base for a clear-cut definition either of what exactly is decaying and how. Nevertheless, without a proper definition of disintegration it is hard to recognize, let alone to be explained. For long, political scientists only occasionally dealt with the conceptualization of disintegrative

phenomena in the European integration process (see, *e.g.*, Lindberg & Scheingold, 1970 and Schmitter, 1971 on spillback). Fortunately, the definition of European disintegration has recently received more attention from some EU scholars (Scheller and Eppler, 2013; Webber, 2018). They point out that similar to European integration, disintegration is also multi-dimensional. Distinctions can be made between cultural, economic, legal, social, and political disintegration, while further distinctions can be made within the political domain. For instance, Douglas Webber distinguishes sectoral, horizontal, and vertical disintegration to denote a decrease in the EU's in the number of policy-areas, member states, and competences, respectively. In discussions on European disintegration, it should therefore be carefully noted what exactly is meant by that concept.

Definitions should also avoid implicit understandings of what (EU) politics is about. Conceptualisations and accompanying explanations of European integration has often been developed on the case of the European integration process only. As the EU and its predecessors emerged from cooperating and integrating states, disintegration would thus quickly be equated with the EU ceding power to its member states, or falling apart into states again. But why should disintegration be necessarily be a matter of states only? Moreover, conceptualisations based on comparative analysis of other political systems would also direct our attention more clearly to (failing) dimensions of the EU that enlighten our understanding of European disintegration. In sum, a definition of European disintegration should be clear, precise, and unbiased, sensitizing us of the crucial aspects of this political phenomenon.

To meet this standard, I would start to define the EU in an Eastonian way as a system of interactions through which authoritative allocations of values are made and implemented (cf. Easton, 1965). This Eastonian understanding of politics has shown its applicability to a wide range of political entities and organisations, underlining its comparative value beyond the single case of the EU. This understanding also allows to distinguish between individual actors participating in this system and the system itself. Thus, disintegration (whether in the EU or elsewhere) can both refer to individual actors less or no longer taking part in the allocation of values and the system of allocating values to a lesser degree. As will be explained in further detail in the explanatory section below, the understanding of disintegration from Stein Rokkan (1999), who explored the making of political entities in Europe's history with the help of Albert Hirschman's triad of exit, voice, and loyalty. Hirschman (1970) used this triad to

analyse how individual actors express their dissatisfaction to an organization they are related to, be it as consumer, subject, citizen, or user. Exit equates here disintegration by individual actors, referring to the withdrawal from an organization, *in casu* a system of allocating values. As Stefano Bartolini (2005: 13) explained in his application of Rokkan's understanding of the making of political entities to the EU, exit can be defined as "the act of transcending a boundary", a boundary delineating a system of allocating values. Also Hirschman has been used to analyse a wide range of political and non-political organisations, for which it has shown its comparative value beyond the single case of the EU. In addition, as will be explained in a minute, this conceptualisation allows for a more refined understanding of European disintegration than simply entire states withdrawing voluntarily from the EU.

Full exit - Often, European disintegration is exclusively understood as the voluntary withdrawal of an entire political entity from the EU, as the United Kingdom is now trying to do. Indeed, Brexit is disintegration, as an actor, *in casu* a member state, withdraws from the EU's allocation of values. Secession is a synonym for a full exit, the complete withdrawal of a political entity from a system of allocating values. The withdrawal of the Algerian departments of France (1962) following Algeria's independence, Greenland after it obtained home rule from Denmark, and the island of Saint Barthélemy (2012) in the aftermath of its secession from the French overseas department of Guadeloupe are instances of full exits in the history of the EU and its predecessors. A voluntary withdrawal from an entire member state has not occurred before. Nevertheless, it has been propagated by a variety of parties throughout the EU's history, and became almost reality when the UK organized a referendum on membership on the participation in the EU's predecessor in 1975.

Partial exit - In Bartolini's understanding, exit comprises not only complete withdrawal. Actors can also remain part of a political formation, but temporarily use public goods from another political formation (for example, by consuming healthcare elsewhere), withhold resources, boycott decision-making, or refuse to comply with the system's rule. The latter types of behaviour are defined as 'partial exits' (Bartolini, 2005: 7). The opposite of exit is entry to a political system. Entry also has another opposite, non-entry. In the start-up phase of a political system or when a political system takes further integrative steps, actors can choose between entry and non-entry, fully or partially. In EU-speak, partial non-entries are often called opt-outs.

Also partial exits are present in the EU's history. For instance, the French government withdrew its representatives from the Council of Ministers during the so-called the Empty Chair Crisis (1965-1966), thus withdrawing partially from the EEC's allocation of values. The introduction of non-tariff trade barriers in the 1970s, by the then EEC member states, constituted another partial exit from the internal market. Governments of the EEC member states did not live up to the mutual exchange-rate agreements made in the 1970s; the French government withdrew twice from the so-called Snake, indicating the margins of the mutual conversion rates of their currencies. In 1981, the new socialist government in France considered exiting from European monetary arrangements (Parsons, 2003: 171), whereas the United Kingdom and Italy withdrew from the European exchange rate mechanism in 1992. Right-wing French politicians campaigned against the Economic and Monetary Union that was agreed upon by the French government in the Maastricht Treaty (1991) and went so far as to briefly consider exiting from the monetary arrangements when they were in government in 1993 (Parsons, 2003: 224). Additionally, Germany, France, and Greece have been criticised for their refusal to comply with the Stability and Growth Pact of the Economic and Monetary Union, whereas Austria, Poland and Hungary have been blamed for not complying with EU values such as the rule of law and freedom of speech. Other instances of partial exits are "temporary" border controls within the Schengen area, attempts to contribute less to the EU by the Hanseatic League, and the full-blown resistance to the binding reallocation of migrants by CEECs.

Involuntary exits – so far, the instances of full and partial withdrawal from the EU's allocation of values refer to member states voluntarily. However, exits can also be made involuntarily, as in the last ten years several governments have discussed whether Greece should be expelled from the Schengen area and Eurozone.

Exits by other actors than member states – Not only member states can withdraw themselves from the EU partially or fully, but also neighbouring states in the EU's sphere of influence, seeking full national independence or joining competing regional systems such as the Eurasian Economic Union, instead. The act of exit can also be carried by individuals and organisations such as companies. They can withdraw their resources (such as brains or taxable revenues) from the EU and its member states, either legally or illicit, by migration or by being sold by foreign companies or governments.

Systemic disintegration - Last but not least, disintegration does not only refer to withdrawals of individual actors from a system of allocating values, but also to the system itself. Following the definition of exit as transcending boundaries, systemic disintegration fundamentally concerns the locking-in capacity of a political system, to keep actors within its boundaries. It is not necessarily about more or fewer competences, institutional capacities, policy-areas, activities or expectations or more or less enforcement *per se*, but about the capacity to keep actors within a system of allocating values. The locking-in capacity involves the strength of boundaries (how easily can they be transcended?), and the maintenance of boundaries (how many efforts are made to uphold both by physical means but also coercive and socialising mechanisms and institutional arrangements elsewhere, such as enhancing loyalty to the system through education and offering effective voice within the system). Disintegration concerns the weakening locking-in capacity of a system. Devolution or re-nationalization of competences should therefore not necessarily be seen as disintegration. The key issue is whether that would weaken (by facilitating exit) or strengthen the locking-in capacity (by enhancing legitimacy).

In sum, many more varieties of European disintegration exists in addition to the voluntary withdrawal of a member state à la hard Brexit.

3. *Explaining actor-level disintegration: the mechanism of exit, voice and loyalty*

As indicated before, disintegration concerns both actors within a political system and the political system itself. Here, two explanatory mechanisms are presented to explain disintegration at the actor-level and the system-level. These mechanisms are derived from Stein Rokkan's analyse of the formation of states in Europe's history and selected as the most fruitful starting point from a wide range of potential theories that could account for European disintegration (Vollaard, 2018).

Rokkan used the Hirschmanian triad of exit, voice, and loyalty to offer an explanation for why actors opt to withdraw when they are dissatisfied with an organisation. Whether or not actors use (partial) exit to express their dissatisfaction depends on a variety of considerations. Exit is a somewhat risky option when it is unclear whether membership in another system would offer superior goods and values. The more political systems resemble each other, the greater

the chance of exit, as uncertainty around exit is diminished (Hirschman, 1970: 81). Exit also depends on other costs. Furthermore, in a region that borders on another system, it is easier to find external support for escape than in 'system-locked' regions. These considerations also underline the fact that exits are differentiated among the members of any political formation, be they individual or institutional. In addition, one member may be able to bear the costs of exit more readily than another.

Dissatisfaction is not only expressed in terms of exit, but also through voice, which refers to a wide array of individual, organised and collective activities of political articulation intended to express dissatisfaction, including petitioning, voting and protesting (Hirschman, 1970: 30). Among other things, the use of voice depends on the benefits and costs involved. Voice can be rather costly if rulers forcefully retaliate against dissent (Hirschman, 1981). However, members may still seek to use voice because of the value of the act of (democratic) voice in and of itself (Bartolini, 2005: 36; Hirschman, 1970: 77). Individuals often need collective action to gain effective influence on the allocation of values. Collective action does not only depend on the presence of eloquent political entrepreneurs, but also on the existence of organizations and institutional infrastructure for voice that greatly enhances the efficient and effective use of voice. When the voice infrastructure is well-developed, voice can be fairly easily (re-)mobilised at a low cost.

Hirschman emphasises that exit and voice are not necessarily mutually exclusive. A dissatisfied actor would thus face two questions: a. should I stay or go? and b. should I raise my voice or keep silent? (Ferrera, 2005: 29; *cf.* Hirschman, 1970: 98ff). The calculus of when to exit and when to express dissatisfaction by voice depends not only on the benefits and costs at play. Loyalty also intervenes, a psychological factor that impacts actual behaviour (Dowding *et al.*, 2000: 481). 'Loyalty' can be defined as attachment to an organisation built upon feelings of solidarity, trust and common identity within the organisation and among its members (Bartolini, 2005: 31). Loyalty may prevent members from exiting and also from voicing criticism, since their commitment to the organisation prevents them from doing so. Even if actors are somewhat dissatisfied with the allocation of a specific value, they may still stay and remain silent out of loyalty to the political system as a whole. In sum, the use of exit and voice depends on an actor's level of dissatisfaction, the opportunities available to employ exit and voice, as well as the degree of loyalty.

So, how would this mechanism play out in the EU? Various actors and resources can leave fully or partially the EU's allocation of values. For instance, a few ten thousands of often highly skilled and well-educated individuals leave the EU for the USA every year (Choi and Veugelers, 2015). Also capital and firms have left the EU partially or fully to find more satisfactory business or investment opportunities elsewhere. Nevertheless, more Foreign Direct Investment is usually flowing inward than outward the EU, indicating that EU member states are still able to attract financial resources. In addition, sourcing business activities is still concentrated within the member states and the EU. In particular northwestern European member states perform rather well in terms of global competitiveness and the ease of doing business (World Economic Forum, 2016; World Bank, 2017). The EU also appeals to economic migrants trying to access this area of relative peace and prosperity legally or illegally in the last decades. In sum, the EU may lose some actors and resources, but also attracts lots of labour and capital.

In addition to individuals and companies, member states can leave fully or partially the EU. Also here, the interplay of a variety of factors according to the mechanism of exit, voice and loyalty explain whether and why actors such as voters, political parties, and governments are more inclined to select no, partial or full exit of their member states than others. To start, exit is a means to express dissatisfaction. If an actor is not dissatisfied, there is no reason to consider withdrawal. The higher the level of dissatisfaction, the likelier it is that an actor considers exit. As explained in the previous chapter, the level of EU-directed dissatisfaction differs among actors across the EU. Only for this reason, member states' inclinations to exit from the EU's allocation of values will vary.

EU-directed dissatisfaction can yet be stemmed by compensation for those who perceives themselves as losers of external de-consolidation of their member state, in particular when they have become disappointed about the EU for socio-economic reasons. In this way, root causes of dissatisfaction (such as migrants or business relocation) are not taken away, but the costs of losing are partially or fully covered. Dissatisfaction about the (rising) costs of EU membership are thus reduced by (re)distributing benefits. Also in the nineteenth century and after the Second World War, Western European governments provided social protection to workers, regions, or business that experienced loss of income, job perspectives, market share, or economic development due to international economic competition (Swank, 2002).

Resistance towards open state boundaries can be dampened yet again. Whether member state governments would provide compensation depends on their willingness and capacity. Certain governments lack the financial means or administrative efficiency to offer effective compensation to immobile workers, needy regions, or domestic-oriented business. When governments have not sufficient sources of income for these compensatory arrangements, governments have to attract capital and business to invest in their member states.

Also the EU shapes the possibilities to compensate the losers. On the one hand might the sanitization of public budgets in the framework of the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) and the Open Method of Coordination on social policies have helped member states' governments to adopt financially sustainable and effective measures for compensation. On the other hand, EU rules on state aid and non-discrimination limit the opportunities to support certain categories of losers. In addition, austerity measures required in exchange for loans and guarantees to support debt-ridden Euro-members during the Great Recession resulted in major cuts in welfare arrangements. Compensation at the EU level is only available to a limited extent through the structural funds for economically less developed member states, regions, and groups. In addition, feelings of politico-cultural alienation by European integration and migration are harder to be compensate for than those who are dissatisfied for the redistributive consequences of European integration (*cf.* Van Elsas et al., 2016). Thus, inclination towards exit does not only vary by the level of dissatisfaction, but also by the possibility and availability of compensation. Variation in exit tendencies will be strengthened by the varying level of loyalty towards the EU, because attachment to the EU differs among the actors across the EU. The more attached actors are to the EU, the less inclined they are to leave partially or fully. However, EU loyalty is much lower than loyalty to member states, and also of a voluntary and civic, rather than cultural and thick nature (Conti et al, 2010). Its restraining impact is therefore more limited.

A subsequent consideration concerns the opportunity to voice EU-directed dissatisfaction effectively. Member states feature well-developed voice infrastructure, from electoral systems, party systems, and parliaments to corporatism and federalism. Also the media landscape is much more developed at the national level, for which social movements, protests, and demonstrations can receive effective attention outside the more formal voice infrastructure. Non-electoral voice such as protests yet requires a certain measure of organizational skill and endurance, whereas the costs of voicing through elections are fairly

low within member states. It is therefore no surprise that frustration with European integration and other forms of external de-consolidation such as globalization has been foremost expressed in member states' electoral arenas by voting for parties calling to re-consolidate state boundaries (cf. Grande, 2012: 287).

Member states' parliaments and governments can decide to withdraw the member state from the EU, with or without a referendum on the issue. This might constitute a more effective exit from the EU than by no longer taking part in the EU's political process or complying less with EU law, in particular for those who resist the EU for principled reasons. Voters hold the important resource of legitimising parties, parliaments and governments. Existing or new political parties can seek to capitalize on the existing EU-directed dissatisfaction. The very question is whether they are able to obtain sufficient voters' support to enter parliament and government. Voters with low or no support for European integration often belong to the lower educated and less skilled workers (see among others Dolezal and Hutter, 2012). These groups have a rather low self-perception of political efficacy. It may therefore be harder to motivate them voting, as they would prefer to opt for less costly, more effective partial withdrawals such as political non-participation, limited compliance, or moving into the shadow economy. This saps the power of parties with proposals to restore state boundaries. Yet, given this disbelief in effective voice in member states, populist calls to defend the pure people against morally corrupt elites spoiling national democracy, solidarity, identity, or sovereignty can be a rallying message for EU-directed dissatisfaction.

Apart from the electoral and party systems, effective voice of parties dissatisfied about the EU depends on the power from parties advocating European integration. These parties can also use the well-developed voice infrastructure of member states to counter attempts to partial or full exits. The opponents of state closure can seek support from actors in favour of open boundaries, such as funding or publicity from competitive regions, and export-oriented business, or electoral legitimacy from pro-EU voters. The self-perceived political efficacy of the often more highly educated and higher skilled pro-EU voters is above average, for which they are more often going to the ballot box in parliamentary or presidential elections. The influence of pro-EU actors can be even stronger, because some of them can threaten to withdraw resources such as taxable incomes and profits within the EU, if other parties, parliament, or government are less willing to support European integration. The varying

strengths of pro-EU forces in member states further adds to the differentiated pattern of effective calls for partial or full exits from the EU.

Even when Eurosceptic parties manage to enter government, or obtain a larger share of seats in the European Parliament, the question remains whether they can exert an effective voice. Part of EU decision-making decisions is in the hands of non-elected, technocratic institutions such as the European Central Bank, and the Court of Justice of the European Union. EU decision-making on other issues involves many actors in the European Commission, Council, the European Parliament, and the member states. Many decisions concerning the politico-cultural and socio-economic setup of the EU have been laid down in the treaties and the multi-annual financial framework. Changing the EU's course into an Eurosceptic direction is therefore a challenge. With limited opportunities of effective Eurosceptic opposition *within* the EU, Eurosceptic parties are pushed to express opposition *against* the EU (Mair, 2007). This would strengthen tendencies towards partial or full exits.

To conclude so far, the more and stronger EU-directed dissatisfaction, the less compensation available or possible, the lower the EU loyalty, and the lower effective voice for EU-directed dissatisfaction, the more actors are inclined to seek exit from the EU (see figure 1). The subsequent question is whether this will be a full or partial exit. First, that depends on the costs of a full exit of a member state. This includes the degree of integration. When a member state is fully part of the Economic and Monetary Union and the Area of Freedom, Security and Justice (including the Schengen arrangements), the exit costs will be higher. This involves incidental expenses of leaving, but also structural costs for re-introducing the legal and administrative arrangements for monetary and border policies. Costs of a full exit also involve the geopolitical and economic dependence on the other EU member states. The stronger the dependencies, the higher costs of the rupture of a full exit, for instance in terms of reputation, re-introduction of trade barriers, or lost opportunities to coordinate security measures (although growing dependences can also unleash satisfaction because of their de-consolidating effect). Full exit costs also depend on the perceptions of the costs and benefits of EU membership, for instance with respect to the level of economic growth attributed to the EU, EU budget contributions, migration, policy flexibility, security, and, in case of parties, electoral vulnerability. When the costs of a full exit are too high, actors will opt for partial exits, instead.

The subsequent question concerns the availability and the relative costs and benefits of national and international alternatives. Actors in member states with a sense of national superiority, higher trust in member states' institutions, and (self-perceived) international weight are expected to be more inclined to believe that these member states can do without EU membership. In addition, a wide variety of international organisations such as the United Nations, World Trade Organisation, and the International Monetary Fund continue to offer a basis for international cooperation after member states left the EU. Also international organisations such as the EFTA or the Russia-led Eurasian Union can constitute alternatives to the EU, independently or in combination with national and other international alternatives. When actors believe their member state can bear the costs of leaving, and the alternative to the EU is more attractive, a full exit is expected.

However, the unavailability of (a combination of) national and international alternatives or the uncertainties surrounding them, can easily discourage actors to promote full exit of their member states. In particular actors in smaller member states would feel more that their governments would lose a say in international politics after an EU exit, whereas they usually lack the former colonial ties or the positions in international bodies such as the UN Security Council to strengthen their negotiating position in other ways. A lack of international alternatives more beneficial (or less costly) than the EU would restrain actors from seeking full exit. Nevertheless, their Eurosceptic dissatisfaction is still there. In those cases, this will be expressed by partial exits. Where Euroscepticism goes with actors' positive assessment of a member state's capacity expressed in terms of trust in political institutions and the perceived superiority of the national politico-economic system, partial exits such as opting-out, declining budgetary solidarity in the Eurozone, and renationalization of competences follow. To reduce costs of EU Membership, these partial exits are accompanied with growing resistance against enlargement with costly or culturally distant countries, and calls for the full or partial exit and non-entry of costly member states. Where Eurosceptic dissatisfaction takes hold in member states with actors' negative assessment of the member state's capacity, partial exits such as less compliance with both national and EU law is the response to limit the costs of EU membership. Costs can also be reduced by increasing the benefits of EU membership. Given the limited effective voice, in particular to address politico-cultural dissatisfaction about the EU, this will be less pursued.

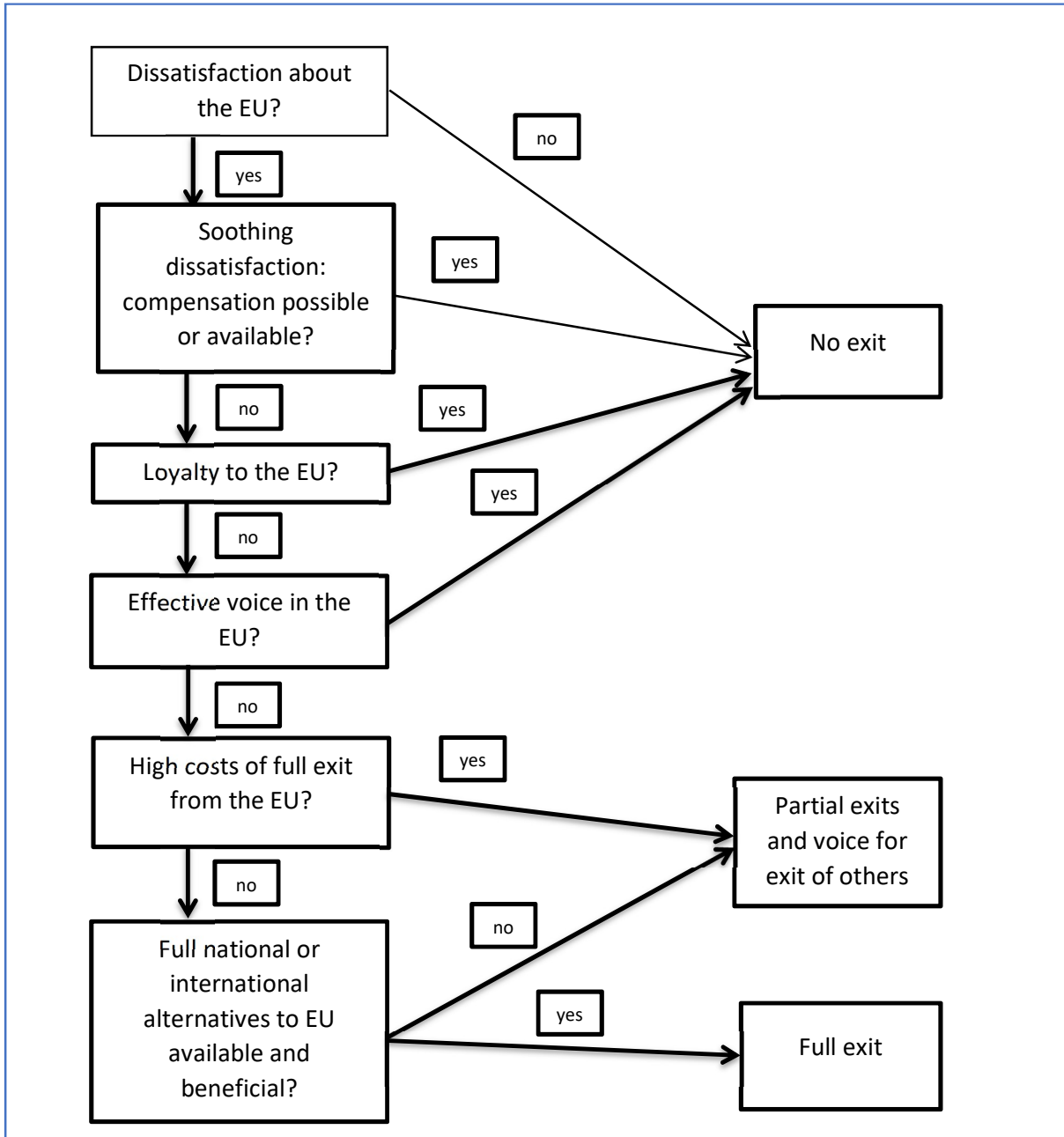


Figure 1: No exit, partial exit or full exit

4. Brexit the exception

The withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the EU, a Brexit, has received most attention to date. The Brexit referendum in June 2016 divisions within and between parties as well as in the electorate about the question whether the UK should remain or leave. Nevertheless, the mechanism of exit, voice, and loyalty indicates why a full exit has been quite likely. Euroscepticism has always been present in the mainstream parties. A plea to leave the

European Economic Community in its 1983 manifesto reflected the resistance to the 'capitalist club' in Labour. Politico-cultural reservations to European integration had also been present in Labour, but became increasingly pronounced in the Conservative Party since the late 1980s. In addition to the traditional governing parties have the British National Party and the UK Independence Party obtained considerable support in European Parliament elections for their politico-cultural Euroscepticism. Politico-cultural Euroscepticism emphasizes the defence of parliamentary sovereignty and British or English identity against the say of non-national voices such as unelected European Commission and the Court of Justice of the European Union. Resistance to supranational authorities had been a reason not to join the European integration process in the 1950s. Emboldening the political nature of the EU, the Maastricht Treaty constituted a significant impetus for this resistance in the Conservative party (Startin, 2015). At the mass level, the enlargement to Central and Eastern Europe fostered a mixture of social-economic and politico-cultural Euroscepticism, with concerns about MNEs relocating business activities to lower-wage areas as well as job competition and (ab)use of welfare arrangements by labour migrants (Startin, 2015). The salience of the migration issue buoyed with migration flows from Syria and elsewhere trying to enter the EU and the UK at Calais. Immigration featured prominently as a negative drawback of EU membership (Lansons, 2013).

In addition to Eurosceptic dissatisfaction, there has also been growing dissatisfaction among pragmatic supporters for EU membership. The Conservative Party had pursued EEC membership foremost for pragmatic economic reasons. A majority of the voters shared this economic pragmatism in the previous Brexit referendum of 1975. The continuous discussions about the British contribution to the EEC/EU budget weakened the pragmatic case, however (and strengthened the politico-cultural unwillingness to pay to 'foreigners'). And whereas pragmatic EU support increased within Labour with the prospects of social protection against market forces in the 1990s, Conservatives increasingly expressed concerns about the costs of EU bureaucracy and regulation, tying in with the politico-cultural resistance to non-national rules about which a non-national court has the final say. The effectiveness and direction of the Common Security and Defence Policy could also count on growing disappointment in the UK. The EU's handling of the debt crises further undermined the case for the EU as an effective instrument for economic growth. At the mass level, there has always been more people viewing the EU as a bad than a good thing, except for the mid-1990s. In sum, there has thus

been a considerable level of dissatisfaction in the UK. In contrast to differently organized welfare states elsewhere in the EU, the pluralist, majoritarian, and liberal UK had seen considerable welfare state retrenchment with cuts in pensions, unemployment and disability insurance, and sick pay (Swank, 2002: 229-238). The compensation to the impact of international economic competition has therefore been more limited, for which state closure would be preferred more.

Also EU loyalty constitutes a rather limited constraint on British exit behaviour. The United Kingdom, and England in particular, has been perceived as rather distinct from continental Europe, for reasons of geography (UK separated by sea), history (the UK had not lost in the two world wars), politics (parliamentary system for centuries), and religion (its protestant background) (Daddow, 2009). In comparative perspective, the attachment to the EU both at the elite and mass level was very low in 2007 (Best, 2012). British people also feel more closely connected to non-EU member states such as the USA than their counterparts in other EU member states (Lansons, 2013). For its part, British tabloid press, and the Daily Express in particular, has never expressed warm feelings to the EU (Startin, 2015).

Effective voice in the EU may not have been much of a constraint on exit behaviour either. The UK government could and did play an important role in issues such as economic liberalization and foreign and security policy, but had been more restrained by its opt-outs on justice and home affairs and the monetary union. The Conservative party lost influence by leaving the group with the European People's Party in the European Parliament.

With the UK not fully taking part in the Schengen area and the monetary union, the exit costs have been much lower. In contrast to other EU member states, is the British economy also less integrated to EU economies, and in relative terms also declining. Between 2003 and 2015 did the ratio of intra-EU export of goods to extra-EU export of goods drop by 14.9% (EU average: minus 5.9%). Nevertheless, the EU receives 44% of the British exports of goods, and the FDI flows between the UK and the rest of the EU have been of similar proportions. In particular remain voters perceived the economic costs of Brexit, such as decline in trade and employment, a major reason to reject a withdrawal (Hobolt, 2016: 12). However, a plurality among the British public thought Brexit to involve limited costs, if at all, for the UK's international weight, economy, and their daily life, whereas they would perceive Brexit beneficial because it would end non-national rule, migration, and the contribution to the EU (Lansons, 2013).

In addition, a combination of national and international alternatives allowed for a full exit in the eyes of leave campaigners and voters. They referred to the UK's nuclear power and the seat in the UN Security Council, the ties with former colonies in the Commonwealth, the special relationship with the USA, and international organisations such as NATO and the WTO. A sense of national self-esteem has also been fairly high in the UK (European Commission, 2001). In sum, the choice of a full exit from the UK has therefore been not surprising in the light of the mechanism of exit, voice and loyalty (see also Vollaard, 2014).

EU-directed dissatisfaction is also rife elsewhere in the EU. In Italy, France, Cyprus, and Slovenia, liberalization and austerity measures pursued by the EU has met considerable criticism from populist and radical left parties, not only for its economic implications but also for its political limitations for national politicians to adopt a different economic policy. Disapproval about the EU's handling of economic issues is widely spread at the mass level in Italy and France (Pew Research Center, 2017). Cuts in welfare arrangements will not stem this dissatisfaction. Also the way the EU deals with the refugee crisis receives strong disapproval in Italy and France. This ties in with politico-cultural dissatisfaction about migrants arriving from Africa and Asia. In response, parties such as Lega, the Five Stars Movement, Rassemblement National and Front de Gauche pleaded for a re-introduction of permanent state border control, or referendums on the withdrawal from the Euro zone, or a full exit from the EU to restore full control. Eurosceptic, anti-migration parties and politicians in Sweden, Denmark, Czechia, Hungary, Austria, Germany, and Finland also called for referendums on a full exit. Apart from the constitutional hurdles to be taken before these referendums can be held, it is doubtful whether the respective electorates select a full exit, however dissatisfied they are about the EU, how ineffective voice is perceived in the EU, or how low attachment to the EU is. The strong economic connections with Germany and Euro membership make leaving a rather expensive affair. The lack of credible international alternatives in particular will deter parties and voters from selecting a full exit. The EU is to be accepted pragmatically as the 'lesser evil', as an Hungarian respondent once put it (Lengyel, 2011). No full exit does not mean no disintegration. Governments and parties of the above-mentioned member states have sought partial exits, for instance by re-introducing state border control (e.g., Denmark and Austria), resisting expansion of the EU budget (e.g., Finland), refusing to comply with the Stability and Growth Pact (e.g., France), the relocation of refugees (e.g., Hungary),

or migration law (e.g., Italy). Also full restoration of national competences on migration issues can count on widespread support at the mass level (Pew Research Center, 2017). Thus, instead of full exit à la Brexit, partial exits by dissatisfied member states are expected to be remain the main manifestation of EU-related dissatisfaction.

5. Explaining systemic disintegration with the bounding-bonding mechanism

Disintegration not only concerns the members of a political system, it also relates to the system itself: the allocation of values. Integration and disintegration fundamentally relate to the locking-in capacity of a political system, the capacity to keep members and their resources within its boundaries. When actors become more locked-in to a political system, they are more inclined to put their resources into political exchanges with a variety of strategic allies in the political centre to address their dissatisfaction, thereby expanding the centre's political infrastructure and scope of involvement. When actors remain more locked-in to an externally consolidated political system, a stabilisation of patterns of political exchange emerges that is reflected in more permanent alignments across the political system. When voice behaviour is repeated, uncertainty and even distrust may gradually disappear, being replaced by standardised expectations or even mutual loyalty. In a situation of plenty exit options, the development of voice infrastructure will not occur to the same degree, as actors (be they individuals, companies or investors) can easily escape from and destabilise political exchange and alignments (Bartolini, 2005: 48). Thus, the establishment of boundaries is a fundamental prerequisite for the development of voice infrastructuring. This interdependence between internal construction and external consolidation of a political system can be summarized as the bounding-bonding mechanism (Ferrera, 2005; Vollaard, 2018).

The explanatory mechanism behind a system's locking-in capacity is the mutual dependence between external consolidation and internal construction. A system can be in a disintegrative spiral of weakening external consolidation and declining internal construction, but also find itself in an opposite integrative spiral. The mutually reinforcing relationships in the process of integration have been explained above, with more voice, political exchange, stabilisation of political alignments and mutual loyalty as successive integrative components and with less voice, less political exchange, de-stabilisation of political alignments and declining loyalty due to external de-consolidation as the steps of disintegration (*cf.* Bartolini, 2005: 53).

The EU faces a clash between different kinds of dissatisfaction. Most member states are yet expected to remain member failing a viable national or international exit option, for which there is some time to settle the issue without completely unravelling the EU's internal infrastructure. Moreover, relatively satisfied member states such as Germany generate substantial economic resources, whereas the EU as a whole continues to attract FDI. Alignments between politico-cultural anti-federalists and social-economic anti-liberalists may strengthen in the European Parliament and the Council. However, effective anti-system opposition, both of politico-cultural and social-economic nature, are fairly difficult in the EU. Due to the weak locking-in capacities of both the EU and member states, rather than exchanges of resources in closed boundaries to settle dissatisfaction, the EU will feature "exchanges of partial exits". These partial exits continue to constrain the building of the EU centre, limits its capacity of boundary control (for instance, to counter cyber interventions or regulate migration) and effective rule enforcement. Thus, the EU's external de-consolidation remains restrained. Stifled Eurosceptic voices could result in growing votes for protest parties, but also political apathy or withdrawal into alternative self-sustaining communities to avoid state or EU interference. In this way, the locking-in capacity of the EU remains limited. Yet, it might not enter disintegrative spiral, as long as disappointed pragmatic supporters of the EU do not see more attractive national or international alternatives, and continue their political exchanges in the EU, instead.

6. Concluding remarks

Despite widespread dissatisfaction about the EU, the likelihood of an immediate complete disintegration of the EU is rather limited. As in its history, the lack of national or international alternatives allows for the EU's continuation, at least for the time being. Rather than a series of big bangs à la Brexit, the EU's disintegration might rather be a matter of sinking slowly into oblivion even if a strong upsurge of Euroscepticism takes place. Attempts to soothe social-economic dissatisfaction would be blocked by politico-cultural Eurosceptics, resulting into a political gridlock. Even if all EU governments would be Eurosceptic, it would be hard to agree on common understanding whether to dissolve or completely modify the EU. In addition to this stalemate, the Eurosceptic combination of declining compliance and reduced means to enforce compliance would result in the declining implementation of the EU's allocation of

values. Thus, the EU would rather fade away, albeit under one important condition: there are not more attractive alternatives to the EU. In that sense, the fate of the EU is not decided but its own locking-in capacity, but by the evolution of outside powers that can attract capital, brains, and also member states.

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