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Europe's political, social, and economic (dis-)integration: Revisiting the Elephant in times of crises

ABSTRACT

Since the outbreak of the European debt crisis, the EU has faced some of its greatest challenges to date. Discussions about the downsizing of the Eurozone, the UK exit referendum or the increasing success of EU-sceptic parties contradict the vision of an “ever-closer union.” As disintegration becomes increasingly conceivable, so does our need for a conceptual understanding of the compound processes of European integration. In the present paper, European integration is understood as a bidirectional and multidimensional process. It is assumed that processes of integration and disintegration can occur simultaneously, and that their results can be measured with the help of the same indicators. Moreover, European integration is not limited to political integration: processes of integration and disintegration also proceed in the economic and social dimension. We exemplarily point out the complex relations between dynamics of integration and disintegration in its political, economic and social dimensions, and we specially focus on the causal relations between indicators of social and political integration.

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1. Introduction

In past decades, the European Union (EU) has managed to overcome various crises. Usually, these crises have been productive episodes, fostering further integration (Kaelble 2013). The current crisis, however, is different. As Webber (forthcoming) has pointed out, it is ‘uniquely multidimensional, protracted and intense’. It can be characterized as an accumulation of different crises: the Eurozone crisis, the Ukraine crisis and the Schengen/‘migration’ crisis. These crises have preoccupied the EU for several years and they have been accompanied by unprecedented mass politicization (Rauh and Zürn 2014), decreasing support for the EU (Maurer 2013, Pew Research Center 2016) and increasing electoral success of EU-sceptic parties (Treib 2014). In the Netherlands, people voted against the Association Agreement between the EU and Ukraine in April 2016, whereby some campaigners argued in favor of a ‘NEXIT’. On June 23th, 2016 British voters decided to leave the EU, although a countries’ withdrawal from the EU had been predicted to ‘amount to economic suicide’ (Moravcsik 2012, 68).

These unprecedented crises of the EU have attracted the attention of scholars of European integration. There are now ample publications addressing the possible disintegrative effects of the crisis (Eppler and Scheller 2013; Vollaard 2014; Webber 2014; Zielonka 2014). To explain the current developments, new theories of integration such as Postfunctionalism (Hooghe and Marks 2009; Schimmelfennig 2012) and approaches of flexible integration (Maurer 2004; Rittberger, Leuffen and Schimmelfennig 2013) are currently used by some scholars. Conventional theories of European integration are being examined with regard to their implicit assumptions about potential causes and mechanisms of disintegration (Webber 2014; Niemann and Bergmann 2013; Scheller and Eppler 2014). Explanations from other strands of theories, such as the research on the stability and collapse of empires (Bieling 2013; Vollaard 2014; Grande 2012), sociological integration theories (Scheller and Eppler 2013) and ‘dynamic theories of federalism’ (Eppler forthcoming) are currently being applied to European integration. In addition, all kinds of potential scenarios are developed, from the economically motivated continuation of integration to the dystopian ‘collapse of the Union’ (Krastev 2012, 24). Clear definitions of current phenomena or concise concepts which enable their classification are not easily found due to the topicality of events in the ongoing discourse. The range of current discussions in European research reflects the variety of theoretical approaches concerned with integration, not only regarding the selection,

categorisation, and arrangement of single observations, but also with regard to expectations and functions of theories (Bieling and Lerch 2012, 14).

The aim of this paper is to propose ‘conceptual containers’ (Sartori 1970, 1039; cf. Sartori 2008), in which the results of current dynamics can be classified.¹ Therefore, we draw on different theorists, who in the late 1960s and early 1970s already considered aspects of European integration, and whose findings might be useful in the mapping of the current situation. In other words, this paper is concerned with aspects of concept formation, which, stimulated by the current situation allow recent developments to be recorded and classified more precisely. Based on Gary Goertz’ (2006) ontological understanding of social science concepts, we ask what constitutes European integration today, and how it can be measured empirically. We contribute to the current debate about European disintegration in three ways:

First of all, like Lindberg and Scheingold (Lindberg and Scheingold 1970; Lindberg 1971), we assume that European integration does not necessarily develop unidirectionally, which is why we propose a conceptual openness towards processes of disintegration. We argue that processes of integration and disintegration can occur simultaneously, and that their results can be measured with the help of the same indicators (section 2). However, we do not assume that disintegration automatically implies the complete breakdown of the system, and want to avoid a normative bias towards disintegration as well as integration.

Second, we conceptualize European integration as a multidimensional process and distinguish between political, social and economic integration (section 3). This, however, is also not new, since Nye (1968) and other early representatives of Neofunctionalism (Haas 1958) and Federalism (Friedrich 1964) already assumed a multidimensional understanding of European integration, which is why they referred to the connection of political, social and economic integration in their theory formation. In section 4, we therefore provide definitions of political, social and economic integration and suggest indicators to measure them.

Third, we want to draw attention to the relation between integration and disintegration dynamics in the three dimensions. It is beyond the scope of this paper to develop a theory of the causal relations between the three dimensions. Section 5 is therefore confined to a discussion of some exemplary works on the relations between social and political integration. While early studies have largely neglected the social dimension of European integration and

¹ Parts of this paper are based on: Anders, Lisa H./Eppler, Annegret/Tuntschew, Thomas. 2016. Europäische Integration: zweidirektional und multidimensional. *integration* 39 (3), 198-212.

citizens have been viewed as irrelevant for political integration, there is now a burgeoning literature on the relations between social and political integration (cf. Fligstein 2009, Hooghe and Marks 2009, Risse 2015). The brief discussion of this literature provides two valuable insights: On the one hand, it substantiates the need for a multidimensional understanding of European integration. On the other hand, it illustrates that the causal relations between social and political integration have yet been determined. The causal interdependencies between dimensions and individual indicators, the search for explanatory variables and the formulation of hypotheses deserve closer attention in future research.

As in the past, empirical developments today pose new theoretical challenges to integration research (cf. Wiener and Diez 2009; Dinan 2010; Schimmelfennig and Rittberger 2006). Puchala highlighted in his seminal article on ‘blind men, elephants and international integration’ (1971) that different interpretations of empiricism are connected with different ontological understandings of European integration (cf. Bieling and Lerch, 16). We will discuss the meaning of integration as well as its ‘fundamental constitutive elements’ (Goertz 2006, 5) based on basic requirements for concept formation, as outlined by Goertz. He argues for a critical and reflexive approach towards the terms and concepts of social sciences, and suggests analyzing complex social phenomena on different levels of abstraction to make them empirically tangible. Normally, three levels of social science concepts can be distinguished: the first level, which defines the fundamental meaning of a concept; the second level, which illustrates different dimensions of meaning by naming constitutive dimensions of the concept; and the third level, on which indicators for data collection are specified. Some considerations of Goertz might be of particular significance for the conceptualization of European integration and disintegration. He argues that, on the first level of concepts, not only positive but also negative poles have to be determined. Moreover, he highlights the relevance of reflection on the relations between a concept’s dimensions.

2. The dynamics of European integration and disintegration

Goertz argues that concepts of social science often only include the positive characteristics of phenomena, while their negations or opposite meanings (‘negative pole’) are rarely taken into account (2006, 31). This criticism applies to at least much of more recent political science research on European integration. As Faber and Wessels (2005) have criticized the latter suffers from a ‘normative bias’. While there is a rich body of literature on European

integration (cf. Rosamond 2000; Wiener and Diez 2009), failed attempts of integration, phases of stagnation and disintegration have been less amply researched (see for an exception Lindberg 1971). As Zielonka (2011) puts it: ‘we have numerous books on European integration, but hardly any on disintegration’. This asymmetry is understandable, given that political integration has largely been a successful endeavor. In light of the current crises, however, European disintegration has become increasingly conceivable. Therefore, the following paragraphs will explicitly address disintegration as the negative pole of a concept of integration.

On this ‘basic level’ of a concept according to Goertz, it is a logical implication that the relation of positive and negative poles has to be captured. With regard to integration and disintegration, one has to specify whether they are dichotomous, that means mutually exclusive phenomena, or if a gradual shift exists, which can be illustrated via a continuum with multiple grayscales and hybrid forms. Regardless of their concrete definition, for many scholars European integration was empirically seen as a ‘moving target’ (Bieling and Lerch 2012, 9) and theoretically understood as a process, whereby separate parts form or constitute a unified whole (Nye 1968, 856).² If European integration is defined as a process, disintegration, in turn, must also be a process: the process whereby a formerly unified entity disaggregates into its constituent parts. When understood as processes, integration and disintegration can be determined in relation to their respective former levels of integration. This view is by no means new; in fact, such an understanding of integration was already presented by neo-functionalist scholars. In 1970 Lindberg and Scheingold defined a ‘spill-back’ as the opposite of a ‘spill-over’, as ‘an outcome pattern which is characterized by a decrease in sectoral scope or institutional capacities or both’ (1970, 199; cf. Schmitter 1971, 242).³ In order to measure the results of regional integration and disintegration, Lindberg developed ten indicators. The increase of the value of one of these indicators represents integration, its decrease disintegration. Lindberg assumed that the values of the indicators could simultaneously develop in different directions (Lindberg 1971). Thus, decades ago representatives of Neofunctionalism interpreted integration as a reversible process.⁴ On this view, processes of integration and disintegration do not stand in a dichotomous relation to each other: they represent parallel and simultaneous dynamics in theory and practice.

² Cf. Wiener and Diez (2009) for a different understanding of integration as a process, a status and a construct.

³ For Schmitter a ‘spill-back’ is a “retreat on both dimensions (level and scope), possibly returning to the status quo ante initiation” (ibid.).

⁴ Cf. also the approach of „dialectical functionalism“, Corbey (1995).

The end result of the processes of European integration and disintegration are not currently at the heart of research interest. The *finalité* of European integration has always been politically and theoretically contested. There is no consensus on the end state of the integration process. From a conceptual point of view, the final result of the integration process will be reached when the indicators that measure integration processes have achieved their maximum values. For instance, if political integration only referred to the transfer of competences from the national to the European level, the process of integration could by definition only proceed as long as these competences can be transferred. And vice versa, European disintegration could only occur as long as competences from the European level can be transferred back. If social integration referred to the evolution of an exclusive European identity the process could only proceed up to the point where each European citizen has an exclusive European identity. Social disintegration, in turn, could only take place up to the point where each citizen has ceased to identify with Europe. These maximal values or end poles depend on the respective understanding and operationalization of integration. They limit a specific spectrum in which integration and disintegration can take place. In line with this reasoning, European disintegration does not necessarily mean the complete breakdown of the EU, just as European integration does not necessarily imply ‘complete integration’. It rather describes a process which, in extreme cases, may lead to the aforementioned consequences (Eppler and Scheller 2013, 31). Whether a specific result of integration or disintegration is desirable or not, is obviously a normative question that should not guide conceptual considerations. Therefore, the present draws the reader’s attention towards an indicator-based measurement of—usually gradual—dynamics that operate in two directions.

Some of these insights correspond with research on comparative federalism, which assumes that national multi-level-systems are subject to the constant dynamics (Benz 1985; Benz and Broschek 2013) and processes of centralization and decentralization which take place simultaneously. A ‘federal continuum’ is used as a template, in order to locate the degree of centralization and decentralization of federal systems (Riker 1964,1975; Schultze 2005, 252 f.).

To conceptualize integration and disintegration as contrary, temporally overlapping processes and to measure them with the same indicators does not imply that both processes are subject to the same causes and mechanisms. Moreover, something ‘disintegrated’ might look completely different from something which had never been integrated before: historical institutionalism teaches us to include temporal factors (Pierson 2000). Due to the rigidity of

institutions one can assume that the formation and expansion of a system is easier than its disintegration.⁵

3. The dimensions of European integration and disintegration

According to Goertz, the constitutive elements of a concept are determined on the ‘secondary level.’ A glance at different theories of European integration makes it clear that differences and theoretical debates are located on this ‘secondary level.’

At the beginning of the integration process, scholars perceived European integration as a multidimensional process and highlighted the interrelations between the dimensions. Turning away from the idea of early federalists (cf. Freiburghaus and Grädel 2005), namely that Europe could be made all at once, the politicians who founded the Union spurred economic integration which they regarded as a prerequisite for political integration. At the same time, they expected that political integration would eventually result in social integration.⁶ Theorists of integration also underlined the interdependence of the three dimensions of integration, although their assumptions on how the dimensions were causally linked differed. According to Deutsch (1966), increasing trans-border interactions result in intensified communication and the development of a sense of community. Friedrich considered social integration as a prerequisite for political integration (Friedrich 1964). Haas also highlighted the societal aspects of European integration. He defined integration as a process ‘whereby political actors in several, distinct national settings are persuaded to shift their loyalties, expectations and political activities toward a new centre’ (Haas 1958, 16) and assumed that it would result in ‘a new political community, superimposed over the pre-existing ones’ (Haas 1958, 16). Similarly, Nye (1968) contended that European integration is a multidimensional process. He argued that integration comprises political as well as economic and social integration.

In the meantime, political science integration research seems to have temporarily lost sight of the three-dimensional understanding of European integration. In recent decades, studies have predominantly focused on the analysis of political integration and consolidation and the enlargement processes, and therefore on the political—institutional and territorial — dimension of integration. The underlying societal dimension of European integration, in

⁵For factors stabilising the European Union cf. Kelemen (2007).

⁶Schuman Declaration, 9 May 1950: http://europa.eu/about-eu/basic-information/symbols/europe-day/schuman-declaration/index_de.htm (26.5.2016).

contrast, has been ‘more or less ignored’ (Delhey 2004, 3). This does not come as a surprise, and reasons are closely linked with unfulfilled expectations of the ‘founding fathers’ mentioned above: social integration took place, but much slower than economic and political integration. For decades, European integration remained an elite project. Based on the ‘permissive consensus’ (Lindberg and Scheingold 1970, 62)—the passive support of citizens—European integration proceeded in a technocratic fashion (Checkel and Katzenstein 2009, 2). Thus, later integration theories did not consider social factors such as the citizens’ identities and attitudes towards the EU as relevant explanatory factors of political integration (Höreth and Mann 2013; Schimmelfennig 2010, 52).

The idea of a ‘permissive consensus’ (Lindberg and Scheingold (1970, 62) was challenged when the discussion about a so-called “EU democratic deficit” took off after the failure of the referendum on the Treaty of Maastricht in Denmark in 1992 (Reif 1993). As a result, the multi-dimensional concept of integration was, at least, partly revitalized. Consequently, recent theoretical political science approaches, such as Post-functionalism (Hooghe and Marks 2009) and Neo-gramscianism (Gill 2001), also started debating the role played by the population, or, respectively, of the economy. The social dimension of European integration has especially attracted the attention of students of European integration (Favell and Guiraudon 2009; Fligstein 2008; Guiraudon and Favell 2011; Hooghe and Marks 2009). Moreover, the systematic consideration of the multidimensional nature of European integration has become a focal point of theory formation. Fligstein (2008, 10) sees European integration going on in ‘economic, social, and political fields [...] across Europe,’ and thus as the development of economic, social and political arenas of interaction. Similarly, Trez characterizes European integration as a project, ‘that stretches from market building to polity building and society building’ (2011, 200).⁷ A few of the above-mentioned ‘dynamic theories of federalism’ (cf. Braun 2004, 136 f.) also include different dimensions of a multi-level system. They look for causes of institutional dynamics in other arenas or dimensions (Lehmbruch 2000; Benz and Broschek 2013), such as in economic (Oates 1972) and social ones (Livingston 1952; Friedrich 1964; 1968; 1972; Montesquieu 1748).

⁷ The growing interest of sociology in European integration has contributed significantly to this change of perspective: Bach (2008); Keutel (2011); Favell and Guiraudon (2009); Trez (2012); Guiraudon and Favell (2011).

4. Measuring political, economic, and social integration and disintegration

Without doubt, European integration is compound process, in which institutional innovation on the European level, economic integration, as well as societal interaction are all parts of a larger development. On the third level of concept building according to Goertz, indicators have to be identified for all dimensions of the concept. The number of possible indicators to measure the results of integration and disintegration is almost unlimited and for none of the three dimensions is there an uncontroversial set of indicators. Our contribution to the ‘disintegration debate’ is therefore limited to an exemplary outlining of potential indicators for Goertz’s third level of concept formation. It does not pursue the goal of a final operationalization.

Political integration in general describes the process of consolidation and enlargement of the European Union, thus the integration of states. Economic integration includes the formation of a transnational economy, thus the convergence of single national economies to a regional economic area (Nye 1968, 858; El-Agraa 2001, 1). Social integration describes the process in which ‘different parts of a social system integrate to a cohesive entity’ (Keutel 2011, 150, translation).

Differences between political, economic and social integration concerning the units and modes of integration have implications regarding the measurement of integration and disintegration. The level of political integration is comparatively easy to determine by looking at the de jure integration laid down in the treaties. They mention the member states and clearly codify the issue-areas in which the EU has decision-making authority. This does not apply to social and economic integration. The outcomes of social and economic integration cannot be measured by means of unequivocal de jure indicators. Contrary to political integration, social and economic integration processes are neither rule-based nor laid down in the treaties (cf. Delhey 2004), but they are rather fluid processes and much harder to determine.

4.1 Political integration and disintegration

The understanding of what political integration is—what theoretical properties it carries and what causations it implies—has changed over time in accordance with the actual development of the EC/EU (Rosamond 2000) and up until now, political integration does not have one

authoritative definition. Regarding the operationalization of political integration, Lindberg and Scheingold (1970) distinguished between *level* and *scope* of integration. Their distinction and also their operationalizations are still widely used in integration research (Börzel 2005; Pollack 2000; Schimmelfennig and Rittberger 2006). The scope of integration is defined as the ‘expansion of EU authority to new polity areas’ (Börzel 2006), the level of integration is defined as ‘the relative importance of Community decision-making as compared with national processes’ (Lindberg and Scheingold 1970).

Similarly, Schimmelfennig and Rittberger differentiate between a *sectoral* and a *vertical* dimension of political integration. In accordance with Lindberg and Scheingold’s concept of *scope*, Schimmelfennig and Rittberger define sectoral integration as the process ‘through which new policy areas or sectors are increasingly regulated at the EU level’ (Schimmelfennig and Rittberger 2006, 74). The vertical dimension of integration ‘refers to the distribution of EU competencies between EU institutions’ (Schimmelfennig and Rittberger 2006, 75).. According to Schimmelfennig and Ritterber it tells us if and how many decisions are taken at the national or at the European level. Other authors (Börzel 2005) also consider how these decisions are taken.

The scope of political integration has been operationalized in different ways. While Schmitter (1996) measured the level of integration by counting how many policy decisions were made at the national and the European level,⁸ Börzel did not consider the decisions but rather measured the ‘number of issues in a given policy sector for which the EU has power to legislate’ (Börzel 2005, 220). Both aspects are crucial. It is important to know whether the EU has the power to legislate and it is similarly important to know whether European institutions use their capacities to legislate.

The level of European integration has been operationalized by Börzel (2005) by means of a five-point scale, reaching from intergovernmental coordination to supranational centralization. In addition, Schimmelfennig and Rittberger consider a *horizontal* dimension of integration. This dimension of integration refers to the ‘territorial extension of sectoral and vertical integration’ (Schimmelfennig and Rittberger 2006, 76). Horizontal integration takes place if the number of member states increases.

⁸1 = All policy decisions at the national level; 2 = Only some policy decisions at the EC level; 3 = Policy decisions at both national and EC level; 4 = Mostly policy decisions at the EC level; 5 = All policy decisions at the EC level Schmitter (1996, 125f).

More precise indicators are both thinkable and desirable. For instance, the capacities of stable institutions to solve problems could be measured. Moreover, possibilities of classification of formal flexibilization and processes of group formation could be useful (cf. Schimmelfennig, Leuffen, Rittberger 2014).

Table 1: Political Integration

Political Integration	Indicators
Scope / sectoral dimension	Degree of EU authority in new polity areas 1 = All policy decisions at the national level 2 = Only some policy decisions at the EC level 3 = Policy decisions at both national and EC level 4 = Mostly policy decisions at the EC level 5 = All policy decisions at the EC level
Level / vertical dimension	Mode of decision-making at the European level 0 = exclusive national competences 1 = intergovernmental co-ordination 2 = intergovernmental co-operation 3 = joint decision-making 1 4 = joint decision-making 2 5 = supranational decision-making
Horizontal dimension	Number of member states Flexible integration / territorial differentiation

Source: Schmitter (1996), Börzel (2005), Schimmelfennig and Rittberger (2006).

Turning the definition and indicators of integration on their head, political disintegration may be understood as a process whereby either (1) level or (2) scope of political integration decreases, or (3) member states withdraw from the EU or from its policies.⁹

4.2 Economic Integration and Disintegration

Conventional approaches capture the economic level of integration with recourse to different stages of market opening and political market coordination (e.g. free trade area, customs union, common market and a complete economic union) (Balassa 1962). Economic integration is therefore understood as the removal of trade-barriers and the development of a central coordination with common policies.¹⁰ However, simply determining economic integration via the respective legal-institutional framework falls short of the desired outcome. It does not, for example, provide any information about the actual market behavior within the

⁹ Apart from formal disintegration such as the re-nationalization of competences or a member state's withdrawal from the EU, another behavioral form of disintegration seems possible: level and scope could formally persist while European actors lose their capacity to legislate due to resistance from national actors. Kelemen describes such a development as "atrophy": "EU institutions would continue to exist in more or less their current form, but would be increasingly ignored by governments and interest groups (...). Over time, the EU would cease to be a significant forum for policymaking." (Kelemen 2007, 63)

¹⁰ On the distinction between negative and positive integration: Tinbergen (1954).

defined geographic area (Fligstein 2008, 68). There are, however, countless price- or quantity-based indicators, or sets of indicators available, in order to grasp the realities of market integration (Shure 2013, 105–124).¹¹ The challenge is to select suitable indicators that are simple yet complex enough to provide information not only about the integration of sub-markets, but also about economic integration as a whole.

An attempt to empirically grasp the complexity of the economic integration of the EU in a compound index has been made by König (2014). In order to determine the integration of national economies in the common market, he not only includes legal-institutional factors, but also behavioral market factors. He therefore additionally takes economic convergence and homogeneity between the member states as well as the symmetry of economic developments into account. The EU-index is built upon 25 indicators and is used to capture the economic interdependence of individual as well as clustered national economies within the EU (König and Ohr 2013, 1088). Although the EU-index is based on a specific understanding about the ideal monetary area, it nonetheless documents that different economic indicators easily run contrary to each other and, more generally, even contrary to political integration. Considering for example the development of national GDPs, price levels, labor costs and debts with regard to ‘homogeneity’, there was a growing gap between EU member states between 1999 and 2010 against the backdrop of increasing political integration (König and Ohr 2013, 1084).

Table 2: Economic Integration

Economic Integration	Indicators
Legal understanding	Stages of economic integration: free trade area, customs union, common market, economic union, and complete economic integration Comparing legal frames for businesses: rules of exchange, property rights, and rules of completion and cooperation (In fact political integration)
Economic indicators	<i>Quantity-based understanding</i> Private dimension: degree and quantities of inter-national exchange of goods, services, capital and people (e.g. intra-EU trade in % of GDP, share of country’s working population coming from other member states) Public dimension: degree and quantities of jointly administrated services / re-distributional expenditures /

¹¹ For example, the development of inter-national and supra-regional export volumes, the extent of cross-border/transnational investments or corporate mergers, and the share of national and commonly managed budgetary resources are typical quantity-based indicators, whereas price-based indicators include typically costs of production factors or interest rates of, for example, government bonds (Nye 1968, 861; Fligstein 2008, 81ff.; Shure 2013).

	common budget at EU-level <i>Price-based understanding</i> Testing the law of one price: factor prices across given market area (e.g. production costs, interest rates on government bonds)
Business cycle symmetry	Growing coupling of GDP growth rate, inflation rate, change in unemployment and government net borrowing over time.

Source: based on Balassa (1962); Nye (1968); Fligstein (2008); Schure (2013); König (2014, 16–17).

Economic integration can therefore be defined as convergence of significant economic indicators and the growing symmetry of economic developments between geographic entities within a geographic area. Thus, economic disintegration is understood as growing divergence of these economic indicators and the economic decoupling of the geographic entities.

4.3 Social Integration and Disintegration

In line with Deutsch (1966), we attempt to grasp societal integration along three dimensions: trans-border interactions, the evolution of a communicative space in Europe, and the evolution of a sense of community among people of the member states.

First, social integration can be measured by looking at the intensified social interactions across Europe. Potentially there are countless indicators to investigate these interactions (Fligstein 2008, 165 ff.). Delhey (2004) mentions, among other things, interstate migration, mutual interest and knowledge. Other indicators such as the acquisition of a second European language and inter-European marriages could be added.

Second, social integration can be understood as the evolution of a communicative space in Europe. Various scholars have argued that due to structural impediments, the evolution of a genuine pan-European public sphere is highly unlikely (Risse 2015, 17). European citizens speak various languages and the media remain nationally segmented, ‘which give privileged access to national political actors keen on reproducing national identities over European actors’ (Diez Medrano 2011, 44). Therefore, research has mainly focused on the Europeanization of national public spheres (Diez Medrano 2009, 90; Risse 2015, 3; Vreese 2007, 10; Koopmans 2015). In the past, the Europeanization of national public spheres has been investigated mainly along three dimensions: the salience of European affairs in national discourses, the role of European actors, and the similarities and differences of frames in these discourses (Risse 2015, 10 f.).

Third, social integration can be measured by investigating the evolution of a European identity. The meaning of this concept of ‘European identity’ is contested (Kaina and

Karolewski 2013, 40). Put in simplified terms, it refers to the extent that European citizens from different member states have developed a sense of ‘we-ness’ and perceive themselves as belonging to the same political European entity. European identity has commonly been measured via surveys (for an overview see Kaina 2010). The bulk of empirical studies relied on Eurobarometer data. Even though this data source is far from being perfect (Höpner and Jurczyk 2012), it provides an insight into long-term trends regarding European identity.

Table 3: Social Integration

Social Integration ¹²	Indicators
Trans-border interaction of European citizens	Interstate migration Mutual interest and knowledge, foreign language competences
European public sphere / Europeanized public spheres	Salience of European issues in national public debates Convergence of frames in national public debates
European Identity	Survey data

Source: Fligstein (2008); Kaina and Karolewski (2013); Risse (2015); Vreese (2007).

Therefore, social disintegration in our understanding means a process whereby either (1) the trans-border interactions of European citizens decrease, or (2) the Europeanization of national public spheres decreases, or (3) identities re-nationalize.

4.4 Interdependencies between dimensions and indicators

To resume, European integration and disintegration, when understood as processes that are simultaneously taking place and whose outcomes can be measured by the same indicators, can be illustrated with the help of the outlined indicators. The increase of an indicator’s value would indicate integration, while its decrease would indicate disintegration. However, with the help of the indicators proposed, the empirical phenomena observed currently (for an overview of the empirical developments cf. Eppler and Maurer 2016) can only be measured partially. And moreover, like many other indices capturing multi-level systems (cf. Hooghe, Marks and Shakel 2016), they are only able to capture the outcomes of integrative and disintegrative processes.

Integration and disintegration within the three dimensions do not necessarily occur at an equal rate or magnitude. Whole dimensions, as well as single indicators within a dimension, can

¹² When measuring social integration by means of these three indicators, we need to clarify when social integration is high or low and what completed social integration would look like. Delhey (2004) suggests evaluating levels of social integration by means of comparison, for example, social integration “would be fully achieved if intergroup relations between the EU nationalities were mutually as frequent and cohesive as in-group relations within these nationalities” Delhey (2004, 20). Koopmans suggests comparing the Europeanization of public debates with the communicative structures found in contemporary national spheres (Koopmans 2015, 54).

develop differently and in opposite directions. Considered empirically, integration within the three dimensions took place at different paces: the level of economic and political integration that has already been reached is far higher than the level of social integration. In addition, empirically observed reciprocal effects exist between different dimensions (territorial expansion leads to economic divergence, that is the decline of the economic level of integration, whilst territorial reduction would probably facilitate political decision-making) and individual indicators ('Disintegrative tendencies in sociostructural terms open up chances of integration in the discursive area' (Bach 2015, 214 translation)).

The interdependencies between dimensions and individual indicators deserve closer attention. Goertz reminds us not only to list constitutive dimensions of concepts, but also to define their relations. Fligstein states: 'It is one thing to assert that there has been economic, social and political fields created across Europe, and quite another to theorize their linkages' (Fligstein 2008, 10). Causal relationships can be assumed, hypotheses on these relationships need to be formulated tested in a further step. Although we cannot provide such a theory at the moment, the next section is going to lay out recent explanatory work that focuses on the interrelations of the three dimensions with a focus on the social dimension.

5. How much social underpinning does the EU need?

As has been mentioned before, political, economic and social integration has proceeded at different speeds. Compared with the impressive steps towards political and economic integration in the last decades, social integration seems to lag behind (Bach 2008; Bartolini 2005; Fligstein 2008). This applies at least to two of the three dimensions of social integration outlined above. Trans-border interactions, measured by inter-state migration, are still modest: 'today, less than one in fifty Europeans lives outside their country of origin, and numbers have not grown appreciably with any of the major steps toward European integration' (Favell 2009, 178). Only a small group of Europeans is involved in trans-border interactions and economic integration 'has produced patterns of interaction mainly amongst the young, educated, business owners, and managerial, professional, and white-collar workers' (Fligstein 2008, 156). Regarding the second indicator of social integration, the Europeanization of the public spheres, things look different. In scholarly literature, there is general agreement 'that coverage of EU issues in national media has increased substantially since at least the mid-1990s' (Risse 2015, 11). This is corroborated by recent studies on the politicization of the EU. These studies

confirm the increasing number of EU issues discussed in public debates in the member states and expect the politicization of the EU to be of lasting nature (de Wilde and Zürn 2012; Hutter, Grande, and Kriesi 2016). This rising salience of EU issues in national debates, however, does not automatically lead to a convergence of frames in public debates on EU issues. As became evident during the critical stage of the Euro crisis, there was no consensus about the causes of and the adequate measures to contain the crises. On the contrary, the frames in the public discourses in creditor and debtor countries differed markedly.

Irrespective of the transfer of competences to the European level, the creation of a common market and the rising salience of EU-issues in national debates, the number of people who have a primarily European identity has remained fairly low and stable during the last two decades (Diez Medrano 2011, 36; Polyakova and Fligstein 2015, 60). Even the Euro crisis hardly had any effect on levels of European identity (Risse 2014). Currently, on average 38 per cent of European citizens claim to have a purely national identity, 54 per cent claim to have dual—national and European—identities, and two per cent claim to have a European identity only (Eurobarometer 83.3, 2015).¹³ A comparison with levels of national and sub-national identification reveals tremendous differences. Even in Switzerland—one of the most plurinational states in Europe—52 per cent of the population identify themselves as ‘more Swiss than member of their region’ or ‘only Swiss’ (Diez Medrano 2011, 36).

Levels of European identity not only vary by country (Risse 2014) but also by social strata. People with higher socio-economic status are more likely to see themselves as Europeans (Fligstein 2008, 138 ff.; Fligstein 2009, 140 f.; Kuhn 2015). This does not come as a surprise given that these people usually benefit from Europe. They are more mobile, have broader language skills and profit from the creation of the common market. People with lower socio-economic status usually do not share this experience. They do not have ‘the opportunity to learn second languages or interact for business or travel with their counterparts in other countries’ (Fligstein 2008, 156).

This brief discussion shows that political and economic integration has not been accompanied by strong social integration. As Diez Medrano has put it: ‘The Europe that is unfolding is not and will not be in the foreseeable future a European society in the strong sense’ (Diez Medrano 2011, 28). For decades this has not been seen as a problem. However, now, in view

¹³ In 2010 on average 46 per cent of European citizens claimed to have a purely national identity, 41 per cent claimed to have dual identities, and seven per cent reported to have a European identity only (Eurobarometer 77, Spring 2012, European Citizenship Report).

of the multiple crises of the EU, this asynchrony of political, economic and social integration might lead to disintegrative consequences.

As various studies demonstrated, the measures to contain the Euro crises spurred political integration (Schimmelfennig 2012), even though they have led to ‘the rise of new EU institutions alongside, and partly in competition with, the central institutions of the traditional Community Method’ (Genschel and Jachtenfuchs 2016, 47). At the same time attempts to contain the debt crisis by means of austerity policies have created socially disintegrative consequences in the member states. As Polyakova and Fligstein have shown, these measures were accompanied by the constituents’ increasing sense of alienation from Europe and its politics (Polyakova and Fligstein 2015, 79, cf. Armingeon, Guthmann and Weisstanner 2015). These developments raise the question of how much social underpinning the EU and the common market need to exist and sustain the EU project. Is there enough ‘solidarity among strangers’ (Habermas 2006, 67) for further integration steps? Is there enough sense of ‘witness’ to stabilize the EU in times of severe crises?¹⁴

According to Risse, the present levels of European identity sufficiently underpin further integration: given that the majority of European citizens claims to have at least dual identities—a national and a European one—he assumes that they are willing to support further integration. According to him, the present ‘Europeanization of national identities is sufficient to sustain carefully crafted (re-)distributive policies on the European level’ (Risse 2014, 1208). Yet, other scholars adopt a more critical stance. According to Kelemen, the growing gap between the dramatically expanded competences of the EU on the one hand and the static levels of European identity on the other hand increases the likelihood ‘that the EU’s power has grown to the point where it exceeds the necessary basis of ‘identity’ safeguards’ (Kelemen 2007, 60). Fligstein, too, argues that ‘there are not enough people with strong European identities to push forward a Europe-wide political integration project’ (Fligstein 2009, 154). This especially seems to hold for re-distributive policies (Kaina and Karolewski 2013, 5). Recent studies on the politicization of the EU share this critical assessment. They argue that mobilization occurs on the basis of this missing or ‘underdeveloped’ European identity. This is supposed to lead to a ‘constraining dissensus’ that might result in ‘downward pressure on the level and scope of integration’ (Hooghe and Marks 2009, 21). Especially right-wing EU-sceptic forces frame European integration in terms of national identity (de Vries and Edwards

¹⁴Trust in or support of the EU is another question. However, trust in a political institution is not in itself an indicator of “social integration,” understood as the integration of people. Another open question is how “democracy” is related to European integration and disintegration.

2009) and they do so with increasing success. Webber (2014) argues that the growing strength of EU-sceptic parties in many member states has eroded the governments' capacity to exclusively control the EU agenda. In addition, he notes that the national governments' ability 'to implement the terms of EU accords against hostile domestic interest, opinion, protest and even strikes has been increasingly called into question' (Webber 2014: 353).

This brief discussion shows that the effect of social (dis-)integration on political integration is currently disputed. While some scholars see sufficient social underpinning for further integration, others expect that the mobilization along the fault lines caused by the missing European identity might affect the level of political integration. Future research needs to further explore the causal interrelations between integration and disintegration in the three dimensions.

5. Conclusion

The present paper has discussed the concept of European integration and disintegration. We defined European disintegration as the negative pole of European integration. While integration research of political science has, due to the disciplinary division of labor, focused on the political-institutional dimension, and moreover, assumed integration to be a unidirectional ongoing process, we proposed a bidirectional, multidimensional, and interdependent understanding of European integration and disintegration.

First, we argued that the results of integration and disintegration can be measured with the same indicators. As already proposed by late Neofunctionalists, integration and disintegration are understood as processes, which might occur gradually, simultaneously and overlapping. With the help of indicators suggested in this paper, the outcomes of integration and disintegration processes can be measured: the increase of the value of an indicator indicates integration, while its decrease indicates disintegration.

Second, we have argued in favor of a multidimensional concept of European disintegration to avoid an institutional or constitutional bias trap. In accordance with Nye, Fligstein and other authors, we conceptualized European integration and disintegration along the three dimensions of political, economic and social integration and disintegration. We provided examples of indicators to measure the effects of integration and disintegration processes. These indicators are modifiable and expandable with good arguments.

Based on these considerations we arrive at an understanding of integration which classifies integration and disintegration as gradual and relational processes, which can take place simultaneously and multidirectional in different dimensions. Such a bidirectional conceptualisation preserves scientific neutrality with regard to the developmental direction. The multidimensionality facilitates the categorisation of integrative and disintegrative dynamics and enables us to sharpen our understanding of causal relations in further steps.

The fact that the outcomes of integrative and disintegrative processes can be measured with the same indicators does not imply that the causes and mechanisms of integration and disintegration are the same. At this point it becomes apparent that only certain aspects of a concept have been discussed in this paper. If dynamics are not analyzed separately but as dimensions of a broader phenomenon, the question of complex interdependencies between the three dimensions and between different indicators arises. In the present paper, we have exemplarily outlined multiple connections with the social dimension—understood as explanatory as well as response variables. Questions regarding the complex interdependencies between the three dimensions as well as between different indicators remain. The formation of hypotheses and their empirical assessment needs to be addressed in future research.

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