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**European Disintegration – non-existing
Phenomenon or a Blind Spot of
European Integration Research?**

Preliminary Thoughts for a Research Agenda

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Abstract

The still continuing effects of the financial and economic crisis 2008/2009 constitute a dilemma for political science research on European integration. Since an elaborated European disintegration theory does not exist, it is hard to oppose the popular scenarios on a possible collapse of the EU with well-grounded scientific explanations. This Working Paper therefore wants to stake out the research field to outline the complexity of the problem. We argue that the discussion of European disintegration phenomena extends our understanding of the whole integration process and its functional conditions. For this purpose, the Working Paper first collates the most recent state of research. In a second step, we evaluate established integration as well as federalism theories with regard to their explanatory power of European disintegration. This is followed by our own definition of disintegration, which allows us to capture the various dimensions of the phenomenon. In the penultimate section, we exemplify the requirement for a multidimensional understanding of European disintegration by a brief empirical analysis of the integration process since the outbreak of the financial and economic crisis in 2008/2009.

Zusammenfassung

Die bis heute nachwirkende Finanz- und Wirtschaftskrise 2008/2009 stellt die politikwissenschaftliche Europaforschung vor ein Dilemma: Den weitgehend populär(wissenschaftlich)en Szenarien zum möglichen Auseinanderbrechen der EU kann sie keine elaborierte Theorie europäischer Desintegration entgegensetzen, die es erlauben würde, die aktuellen Entwicklungen zu erklären und einzuordnen. In diesem Working Paper wird zunächst der Forschungsstand zum Thema aufgearbeitet. In einem zweiten und dritten Schritt erfolgt eine Prüfung, inwieweit sich aus gängigen Integrations- und Föderalismustheorien Erklärungen für europäische Desintegrationsphänomene ableiten lassen. Anschließend erfolgt eine eigene Definition des Desintegrationsbegriffs. Im vorletzten Abschnitt wird die Notwendigkeit eines mehrdimensionalen Verständnisses europäischer Desintegration am Beispiel einer kurzen empirischen Analyse zur Entwicklung des Integrationsprozesses seit Ausbruch der Finanz- und Wirtschaftskrise 2008/2009 verdeutlicht.

General note:

Opinions expressed in this paper are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Institute.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The public debate about the future of Europe since the 2008/2009 financial and economic crisis is characterised by a shift “from total optimism to catastrophism” (Majone 2011, 24).¹ The present situation constitutes a dilemma for both political actors as well as academics dealing with European integration: for academics, namely, the absence of a theoretical understanding concerning the causality between European integration and disintegration processes; and for political leaders, a growing disconnect between their daily tasks at hand and an increasingly alienated electorate. Moreover, some academics, like political actors, have a vested interest in the status quo.² Just as politicians are often influenced by institutional interests, some academics – who are cognitively invested in the narrative of ever deepening and widening EU processes – ignore economic regional divergences and legitimacy problems within the EU.

We need to contemplate both unthinkable scenarios like the possible collapse of the EU as well as small phenomena of disintegration in a rational scientific manner. Even if we want to avoid it, we need to first understand the current developments with well-grounded explanations. Both the causes and effects of EU disintegration as well as possible causalities between integration and disintegration processes have hardly been addressed in the theoretical discourse so far. The research on disintegration is so poor that there are hardly any definitions, not to mention theory-based explanations of the interplay between integrative and disintegrative developments in the EU. One reason for this deficit is a “normative bias” of integration research (Faber/Wessels 2005, 355; Majone 2011).

Thus, political achievements like the creation of a single market in Europe gain greater attention than “Abbau- oder Desintegrationstendenzen” in the integration process. “Erfolgreich durchgeführte Vertiefungs-, Erweiterungs- und Reformprojekte [werden] höher bewertet, d. h. für untersuchenswerter geachtet, als Krisen und rückläufige Entwicklungen” (Faber/Wessels

¹ We thank Scott Stelle for the language editing and for helpful comments.

² One might notice strong differences of opinion among scholars from different nationalities, like Germany, France, and the UK, as seen in Harpers’ forum on the Euro and German Hegemony, “How Germany Reconquered Europe: The euro and its discontents,” *Harper’s Magazine*, February 2014.

2005, 355). Crises are often assessed as catalysts for subsequent phases of EU integration steps (Weidenfeld 2007), without focusing on the crises themselves and their possible disintegrative impacts. This “crises-catalyst-narrative” rather serves as proof for the problem-solving capacities of the EU. By analogy, many authors interpret the current financial and economic crisis and the measures that the EU has taken to combat it in a similar way. While doing so, many analyses focus only on formal legislative outputs and outcomes of the EU to demonstrate the continuing explanatory power of traditional integration theories (Genschel/Jachtenfuchs 2013; Fehlker/Ioannou/Niemann 2013; Schimmelfennig 2012). Meanwhile, economic, social, and legitimacy aspects of the current situation are often neglected in their interconnections with institutional and territorial aspects. The discussion on European integration is fragmented among different discourse communities and disciplines and disintegrative trends in the economic dimension of integration are rather discussed solely by economists.

Since the 2008/2009 crisis and its after effects, it appears that market forces may be stronger and more direct drivers on European integration and disintegration than previously suspected. The specific logic of global financial markets has been exacerbating the already existing macroeconomic and fiscal disparities within the EU. Undoubtedly, we are facing growing economic disparities between the member states and therefore a phenomenon that could be subsumed as “disintegration” within the economic dimension of integration. Due to the growing economic distress of individual member states, the financial markets tend to perceive the Union as a mere sum of its member states and regional markets, which renders it both an object of risk and return at the same time. It is becoming obvious that the strict austerity measures in different crises ridden states are creating even stronger socio-economic disparities. Moreover, growing socio-economic divergence among member states seems to be impacting the legitimacy and efficiency of the Union’s policy-making (Höreth/Mann 2013; Habermas 2014).

The EU has been addressing the financial crisis mainly with the building up of new institutions and instruments as well as austerity measures. At first glance, this is a sign for further integration. Nevertheless, the scope and restrictiveness of these measures can also be seen as a

kind of “over-regulation”, “over-integration” or even a “legal overstretch” (Schwarzer 2013, 185; Scharpf 2014, 51). They engage deeply not only in the member states’ sovereignty, but also create massive socio-economic consequences. Moreover, the instruments created to save the Euro are mainly driven in an intergovernmental way of governance, leaving out the European Parliament and reducing most of the national parliaments to a “Yes” or “No” in the ratification processes when decisions have already been taken. Concerning other aspects of institutional integration, there is a call from different member states to transfer legislative powers back to the member states (cf. the “subsidiarity review” of the Dutch government). The long-term implications of the observable power shifts in the institutional system of the EU itself and between the different layers of government in the multi-level system are not clear yet.

Since the negative referendum on the Maastricht Treaty (1992, Denmark), the failure of the Constitutional Treaty (France, Netherlands, 2005) and the referendums on the Lisbon Treaty (2008 and 2009, Ireland), increasing discussion about the existence and nature of the hitherto adopted “permissive consensus” has gained momentum (de Wilde/Zürn 2012, 139; Hooghe/Marks 2009 and 2012). Socio-cultural and legitimating foundations of European integration are changing, such as approval ratings for EU membership, attitudes to the EU, common identities, solidarity, mission statements, and narratives and ideas of finality. The politicization of European policy since the beginning of the financial crisis is becoming increasingly polarised along a north/south divide: For example, citizens in Greece, France and Germany are discussing the same issues but with different opinions. Organisations like “Open Europe” are forming cross-border discussions of Euro-sceptics. However, the causalities between changes in the legitimacy dimension of European integration and the economic, institutional and territorial developments taking place at the same time are not yet clear.

In addition to open discussions at national levels about exit strategies for individual member states leaving the EU (UK) or backing out of the Monetary Union (Greece), various political actors and some academics are demanding a secession and/or a controlled disintegration

(Scharpf 2013; cf. Böttger 2013), a partitioning of national markets, and (temporary) limitations of the internal market freedoms.

These empirical developments, however, do not disprove that European disintegration is occurring. An analysis only of the institutional setting and territorial scope of the EU might lead one to the conclusion that disintegration is not taking place because many new institutions have been built up during the financial crisis or that territorial disintegration is rather unlikely because referendums, like in the UK, might not lead to a split up (Hatje 2014, 74). However, disintegration becomes manifest when economic, sociocultural and legitimacy aspects are taken into account.

Apparently, integration and disintegration are taking place simultaneously in different dimensions of the integration process. In so far our main argument draws upon the thesis that, beneath an institutional (deepening) and territorial (widening) dimension, an economic and a sociocultural dimension have to be taken into account and to be linked theoretically with the other dimensions. To capture the observed ambivalences in the current integration process, a comprehensive theory is necessary which is also able to explain matters of EU disintegration. This paper seeks ways to define and approach this phenomenon theoretically. Therefore, we are going to collate the (most recent) state of European disintegration research firstly. Since only very few authors have dealt (explicitly) with EU disintegration phenomena so far, we evaluate in a second step established integration theories as well as theories of federalism with regard to their probable explanations of European disintegration phenomena. Due to the overall intention of these theories to explain how *integration* functions in the context of the EU, such an examination has to be conducted very carefully in order to avoid the impression of a general uselessness and inexpediency of these approaches. Thirdly, this is followed by our own approach to define disintegration. In order to capture the various dimensions of this phenomenon and following our main thesis, we also incorporate findings from sociological and economic integration/disintegration theory. In the penultimate section, we exemplify the requirement for a multidimensional understanding of European disintegration by a brief empiri-

cal analysis of the integration process since the outbreak of the financial and economic crisis in 2008/2009. This Working Paper concludes with some remarks on areas where future research must be directed.

2. STATUS QUO OF EUROPEAN DISINTEGRATION RESEARCH

There have recently been only a few published scholarly works that explicitly discuss European disintegration (Webber 2013; Vollaard 2014 and 2008; Hayward/Wurzel 2012; Schmitter 2012; Zielonka 2012 and 2006). However, they do not offer comprehensive theoretical conceptualizations because of their limited focus and scope. Instead, some of them rather examine the narrow bunch of traditional integration theories (liberal intergovernmentalism, neo-functionalism, supranationalism etc.) and theories of international relations (realism, neoliberal institutionalism, transactionalism, communitarianism etc.), questioning to which extent the integration mechanisms described by these single approaches could – mirror-inverted – also explain disintegration phenomena. At a first glance, this inversion seems to be a self-evident and rational attempt to explain the new challenges that the EU is facing in the current phase theoretically. However, since the attention of the original theories lies not on (exogenous and endogenous) economic and socio-cultural dimensions of the integration process, such an examination of the pure integration and disintegration mechanisms seems to be limited. In parallel to that, this new disintegration literature widely neglects findings of sociological integration research (Bartolini 2005; Eig Müller/Mau 2009; Bach 2008; Beck/Grande 2004; Münch 2008; Kaina/Karolewski 2013; Mau/Verwiebe 2009), economic integration theory and the broad strand of discussions about a “legitimacy deficit” of the EU.

Since the financial crisis started jeopardising the EU in its very existence, a new strand of academic discourse from a historical-comparative perspective has arisen, which investigates how knowledge of the collapse of previous empires may be applied to the current situation of the EU (Zielonka 2006; Posener 2006; Cooper 2002; Bieling 2013a; Grande 2012). Such analogies problematize the worst-case of disintegration – the “decline in the number of EU member

states” (Webber 2013, 342). Affiliated with the common understanding of integration as “deepening and widening”, Webber’s concept is situated in the institutional and territorial dimension of integration, neglecting economic and socio-cultural issues. Yet, reciprocal influences and causalities between integration and disintegration as well as the integrative potential of disintegration processes and vice versa must be considered, too.

In contrast, theoretical approaches of “differentiated integration” or “flexible integration” (the terminology is fairly heterogeneous) broach the wide range of legal opt-outs and opt-ins within EU law making as well as all kinds of partly (intergovernmental) policies in which not all member states are participating (Schimmelfennig 2012; Rittberger/Leuffen/Schimmelfennig 2014). Schimmelfennig differentiates between “integration”, “differentiated integration”, “fragmentation” and “renationalization” along the two axes of “unitarisation versus differentiation” as well as “centralization versus decentralization” (Schimmelfennig 2013, 12). In doing so, this approach assumes legal, temporal, spatial and/or instrumental impairments of the integration process and it takes into account economic and legitimacy issues. However, it comes along with a functional understanding of integration because it is focusing mostly on legally and temporarily bound arrangements, less on (possibly disintegrative) impacts of differentiation (what has been pointed out by Maurer 2004 and 2007; Maurer/Haerder 2007).

Diverging from these approaches, economic and sociological integration research has been discussing disintegration phenomena for a longer time. However, such considerations have not yet been widely approved by the EU researchers of the political science community. Economic theories deal with issues of internal market integration, the design of optimal currency areas as well as an efficient competence allocation within multi-level governance systems (de Grauwe 1997; Molle 1997; Peterson/Shackleton 2006; Beckmann/Hebler/Kösters/Neimke 2000). Dangers of disintegration are therefore mainly pending due to macroeconomic imbalances that exist between the member states of a common currency area with a weak legal competence superstructure. Corresponding warnings were formulated in advance of the Euro introduction, but without being further developed into a comprehensive disintegration theory.

Sociological integration theories focus on the importance of cultural and functional, non-territorial sub-spaces within the EU (Vobruba 2012; Münch 2006; Bach 2008; Beck/Grande 2004) in order to analyse which effects they have on public attitudes towards Europe and the dynamics of the integration process. This perspective implies the theoretical differentiation between systemic and social integration/disintegration (Lockwood 1964; Esser 2001; Gerhards/Lengfeld 2013; Friedrichs/Jagodzinski 1999). System integration refers to the integration of sub-systems and institutions of a society into the entirety of a (political) system (Schimank 1999). Social integration, on the other hand, “refers to acting individuals and their integration within a society” (Gerhards/Lengfeld, 2013, 21, but also: Fox 1999, Frederick/Jagodzinski 1999). Although formal system integration is conceivable if there is a low level of a pronounced social integration (Esser 2001, 4), this case refers to legitimacy deficits that may undermine the success of integration projects. Although sociological integration theories may give us some useful hints towards a theory that might be able to capture the current developments (see below), the growing socio-economic disintegration within the member states and its impact on the overall European integration process are of particular interest.

3. DISINTEGRATION IN LIGHT OF INTEGRATION THEORIES

The theoretical discourse on European integration has for decades been confronted with cycles of stagnation as well as the failure of specific integration projects. Periods of stagnation or failure have typically led to modifications of theoretical explanations and some of them have caused theoretical paradigm changes. For example, the failure of the European Defense Community and comprehensive political integration in the mid-1950s was the starting point of the neofunctional approach that stated that a “big bang” as expected by the early federalists was not necessary and that small steps in the “Monnet Method” would lead to more integration automatically. With the so-called “empty chair policy” forced by French President Charles de Gaulle, all decisions of the community were effectively blocked between 1965 and 1966, hence seriously diminishing the explanatory power of neofunctionalism. It was the beginning of the intergovernmental era that attempted to realistically explain integration by the interests of the

member states. In short, this shows how events and crises have influenced the way we theoretically explain European integration.

In search of explanations for the ongoing and diverging events in the EU described in the introduction of this paper, it seems to be necessary to scrutinize a wider range of integration theories – including sociological inspired theories and federalism theories – with regard to possible clues to disintegrative moments in the integration process (compare Niemann/Bergmann 2013; Webber 2013; Vollaard 2008). For this analysis, the following question is of particular importance: In which way do the theories of European integration take into account simultaneous integration and disintegration processes, not alone in a deepening and widening perspective, but namely in the economic and the socio-cultural area? The following review follows a chronological approach in analysing the different theories with regard to their time of origin.

Against the backdrop of two world wars, the idea of establishing a federalist “United States of Europe” in one “big bang” became popular in the 1940s.³ Very soon, though, these idealistic plans were discarded as politically infeasible. After ambitious projects such as a “European Defense Community” and a “European Political Union” had failed, the founding members of the European Community realised that the only way to cooperate was to build up a community in more economic and technical fields, namely, coal, steel, industries and energy. The theoretical school of neofunctionalism countered the model of a federal system in Europe by first attempting to explain the integration steps in the 1950s. The assumption was that transnational cooperation in rather non-political areas would cause “spill-over” effects in politically sensitive policy areas (Haas 1958, 1970 and 1990). Yet, neofunctionalism never formulated a final status for Europe; it simply says that once you start cooperating in one policy area with a few states, spillover effects are automatically generated, causing steps towards cooperation in familiar policy fields and integrating more and more states. Therefore, neofunctionalist scholars rather attempt to explain the sequencing of integration steps that are often interpreted as qua-

³ For the concept of a “United States of Europe” see i.e. the “Ventotone Manifesto” from 1941 from Altiero Spinelli and others as well as the speech Winston Churchill held in Zurich in 1946.

si-automatic processes and, due to past success in technical and non-political areas, still expect a logic of expansion, leading to a steady growth towards a supranational institutional system and supranational policies within a growing number of member states. A transfer of loyalty towards supranational institutions is not a necessary condition, but is understood as a natural consequence.

Indeed, neofunctionalism problematizes a deceleration or a possible stagnation of regional integration processes (Haas 1958). Retarding factors are explained by a lack of integrating spillover effects. Moreover, facing the French “empty chair policy”, Lindberg and Scheingold, as exponents of the neofunctionalism, already observed “spill-back” phenomena in the 1970s, which they recognised as “[...] an outcome pattern which is characterized by a decrease in sectoral scope or institutional capacities or both” (Lindberg/Scheingold 1970, 199). A “spill-back” is explained by a stagnation of integration due to national self-interests. These exercise a veto power up to the moment when the pressure to solve problems leads to further integration steps (ibid, 199). Drawing from Lindberg and Scheingold, Schmitter differentiates between the integration mechanisms “spill-back”, “muddle-about” and “retrench”, each influencing the level and scope of integration (Schmitter 1971, 242; Anders/Eppler/Tuntschew 2014). In the 1990s, Corbey’s approach of “dialectical functionalism” assumed that any communitisation in a certain policy field automatically provokes a backlash by national interest groups in related fields (Corbey 1995). Niemann (2006; Niemann/Bergmann 2013) brings together a neofunctional basis with elements of liberal intergovernmentalism (differences between states, national sovereignty) and therefore covers the questions of diverse national interests that block further integration.

Although some scholars of neofunctionalism are taking disintegration elements into account and even call them explicitly “disintegration” (Lindberg/Scheingold 1970), the focus of neofunctionalism is clearly on integration and not on disintegration. Moreover, formal capacities of policy-making are the main issue in which neofunctionalism is interested. Though economic cooperation is seen as a starting point of the integration process, in the course of fur-

ther integration, economic policy is only seen as one policy field beneath other policy fields. Questions of loyalty are addressed by neofunctionalism, yet the transformation of loyalty towards the EU is, as other integration steps, interpreted as an automatism. The fact that more or less support of the EU might have a direct influence on further integration (Höreth/Mann 2013) is not taken into account. Dealing with an understanding of integration that is based on territory and institutions, neofunctionalism neglects different (bottom-up) factors like the refusal of integrative policies by the people as well as the influence of economic forces. Therefore, neofunctionalism is only partially able to explain the current situation.

Since the mid-1960s, neofunctionalism has failed to deal with questions of power and national interests. “De Gaulle has proved us wrong”, stated Ernst B. Haas (1966, 327), the original father of neofunctionalism. So, within the theoretical discourse, a new strand emerged that was geared towards addressing obstacles for integration processes: “intergovernmentalism” (Hoffmann 1966 and 1982), and later “liberal intergovernmentalism” (Moravcsik 1993 and 1998). This theoretical approach has its roots in realism (Kunz 2013), which has placed the nation-states and their governments at the centre of analysis, and thus has accused neofunctionalism of underestimating the sovereignty of nation-states and their respective interests within the European integration process. Henceforth, integration has been interpreted as the dependent variable of national interests and international bargaining. National interests are determined from the inner situation, namely, objective factors (e.g., political system, social structure, geographical location) and subjective factors (e.g., values, traditions, prejudices), and by their perception by the decision makers in defining appropriate strategies (Hoffmann 1966, 867-869, Niemann/Bergmann 2013).

Intergovernmental approaches understand European integration as a common framework for action, which has been negotiated by the participating national states under the conditions of the Cold War. In this way, intergovernmentalism includes international and global influences (also those of economic nature) in its analysis of European integration processes conveyed by the interests of individual member states. According to Hoffmann, both social developments

in general and international relations in particular principally constitute an open, undirected and versatile process. The world is assumed to be a system of joint decision-making of sub-units and actors. It is subject to constant change due to many technical, military, economic and ideological influences. In this complex and dynamic environment, nation states try to enforce their own foreign policy interests in international negotiation systems. The specific design of transnational institutions, the possible transfers of sovereignty and the voluntary adoption of financial obligations is an expression of their respective interests. On these grounds, the European integration process represents a reproduction of national sovereignty (Kunz 2013; Bieling/Lerch 2005).

Though intergovernmentalism has not used the word “disintegration” as explicitly as late neofunctionalism, it clearly is not only dealing with the question of why nation states might move towards more integration, but also with the question of why certain situations and specific interest constellations do not lead to more integration. From an intergovernmentalist perspective, European disintegration would be interpreted as a process in which the member states deny allegiance to the EU through further competence transfers. If the power of the EU is always dependent on the (temporally bounded) will of the nation states, they are likewise able to withdraw these derived competences in using themselves again. “Disintegrative forces” from the perspective of intergovernmentalism are interpreted as different national interests as well as a feeling of national sovereignty (Niemann/Bergmann 2013). (Liberal) intergovernmentalism is therefore able to explain fairly well the resistance of the member states against some of the current EU’s crisis containment measures, which have far-reaching consequences on their national sovereignty. In addition, a changing support for the EU and as its result, a change of EU strategies of national leaders, is easy to explain by intergovernmentalism. It is even able to consider the disintegrative impacts that market forces have caused during the recent crisis, as it takes the international economic development into account. The shortcomings of intergovernmentalism to explain the current crisis seems to lay in the fundamental assumption of intergovernmentalism: the central role of the nation state. Legitimacy aspects as well as (global) economic aspects that are impacting the EU directly are only understood as factors

that influence the policy of the nation state. As for the EU, intergovernmentalism is focusing on deepening and widening processes, effects from economic or sociocultural/legitimacy issues are indirectly transmitted by the nation states. Direct influence of international markets on the EU or Eurosceptic cross-border movements with participation of non-state actors are not covered by the state-centric approach.

In the wake of crises and political conflicts that accompanied the integration process in the 1970s, interestingly, no new approaches emerged that tried to explain the characteristics of this stagnation theoretically. New momentum in the “political construction site” of the European integration process only began during the mid-1980s, firstly via the Single European Act (1986), then the fall of the “Iron Curtain” and the Treaty of Maastricht (1992).⁴ Once again, new developments in the “theoretical construction site” followed real historical events (List 1999). As European integration sped up in the 1990s, so did theory construction, development and partial merging of traditional integration theories, i.e. in the form of “liberal intergovernmentalism” (Moravcsik 1991, 1993) and “supranationalism” (Sandholz/Zysman 1989) approaches, which are still focused on the driving forces of the European integration process within the existing multi-level system.

Starting in the mid-1990s, theoretical approaches boomed. Theory was no longer preoccupied with the causes of integration in the first place (“integration as a process”). Instead, the political system of the EU became the object of many analyses that studied the EU similarly to national political systems. “Integration” was interpreted more as the “nature” of the political system of the EU, a kind of permanent condition. That is why theories since the mid-1990s have been transferred to EU research that had only focused on the analysis of national systems. In this context, not only different strands of neo-institutionalism have to be mentioned, i.e. the actor-centred institutionalism (Scharpf 2003; Benz 1998; Eising 2000) as well as historical institutionalism (Pierson 1996), but also social constructivism (Christian-

⁴ Single European Act (SEA), Luxembourg, 17 February 1986, OJ L169 of 29.6.1987; Treaty on European Union (Maastricht Treaty), Maastricht, 7 February 1992, OJ C191 of 29.07.1992.

sen/Jørgensen/Wiener 1999) and postfunctionalism (Hooghe/Marks 2009 and 2012, see below).

In 1985, Scharpf had already applied his thoughts on “joint decision making” between the federation and the federal states in Germany to the relationship between the EU and its member states (Scharpf 1985, 323-356). Scharpf can be seen as a representative of rational choice institutionalism, one strand of neo-institutionalism. Rational choice institutionalism states that institutions (as formal entities and rules) are providing a framework in which rational choice actors take their decisions. While a lot of approaches within rational choice institutionalism are focusing on principal-agent-models and therefore implicitly provide reasons of disintegration in the interests of the member state as the principals (Niemann/Bergmann 2013), Scharpf treats stagnation and blockade explicitly. In doing so, Scharpf came to the conclusion that particular negotiation patterns in the European multi-level system may lead to a form of blockade (“joint decision trap”) that hampers fundamental reforms. From this perspective, European disintegration could be seen as a result of different claims of power and the inability of the involved actors to change their form of interaction. At this time and later, Scharpf like others turned the attention to aspects of transparency and democratic legitimacy, but also to the efficiency and capacity for reforming the European multi-level system (input- and output legitimacy within the EU system: Scharpf 1999; cf also Follesdal/Hix 2006; Eriksen/Fossum 2007; Neyer/Wiener 2010; Hooghe/Marks 2009, 2012).

Governance approaches which had been developed for different levels and sectors of a global multi-level system have been included in the analysis of the EU (for an overview: Benz/Lütz/Schimank/Simonis 2007). With regard to the increasing involvement of sub-national units in EU policy-making, the multi-level governance approach has been used to capture specific forms of interaction between state and non-state actors at different levels since the Treaty of Maastricht (Marks 1993; Hooghe/Marks/Blank 1996). By emphasising the autonomy of supranational actors of the EU and the limited role of national governments, the multi-level governance approach demarcates itself – very often in combination with network ap-

proaches (Peterson 1995) – from intergovernmental concepts (Hooghe/Marks/ Blank 1996). In terms of European disintegration, these approaches would interpret tensions in negotiation networks – as a result of different interests of the involved actors as well as the nature of the network – as an obstacle for further integration (Niemann/Bergmann 2013, 51f. and 54f.). The internal structure of a network, the degree of its isolation, the dependency of its members on the network's resources, and the degree of confidence between network members might be explaining variables for dynamics within the multi-level governance system. As for the legitimacy dimension, the multi-level governance approach has mostly taken – as most governance approaches – the output-side of legitimacy into account. Recently, Hooghe and Marks integrated the term of the “constraining dissensus” in their concept and developed it in the direction of “Postfunctionalism”, dealing with the decreasing support of the citizenship towards the EU (Hooghe/Marks 2009 and 2012, 848-849). Nevertheless, research on the concrete impacts of that “constraining dissensus” on day-to-day EU politics is rather limited. Moreover, the legitimacy dimension is not linked with an economic dimension of integration and disintegration. As for the economic dimension, the multi-level approach includes economic actors in its analyses (formal and informal relations of economic actors, their role and function in networks that are dealing with specific policies etc.). Nevertheless, the approach still stays in the European multi-level framework and is therefore rather less able to explain interaction barriers between the markets and the negotiation circles of the EU. Anyway, the multi-level governance approach is more a model for the existing nature of the EU and less a theory explaining big dynamics and developments of the system.

In the mid-1990s, Wessels formulated the so-called “fusion hypothesis” (Wessels 1997). It assumes that the nation state is changing dynamically by its symbiotic (self-) integration in the European multi-level system: “staatliche Akteure mehrerer Ebenen [sind ständig] gemeinsam, aber in variierenden Formen, an der Vorbereitung, Herstellung, Durchführung und Kontrolle allgemein verbindlicher Entscheidungen zum Einsatz legislativer und budgetärer Handlungs- und Steuerungsinstrumente der EU beteiligt” (ibid, 35). The “fusion hypothesis” postulates that in the course of the European integration process a “fused federal state” arises, which

would be irreversible as such. Similarly, various Europeanisation approaches deal with the question of how the political systems of the member-states are being transformed as a result of their integration into the EU (Radaelli 2003), implementing EU laws while trying to protect their own interests and sovereignty rights (Falkner/Hartlapp 2009). For example, Dyson und Goetz define Europeanisation as a “complex interactive ‘top-down’ and ‘bottom-up’ process in which domestic polities, politics and public policies are shaped by European integration and in which domestic actors use European integration to shape the domestic arena. It may produce either continuity or change and potentially variable and contingent outcomes” (Dyson/Goetz 2004, 20). The main interest of Europeanisation approaches is the interaction between adaptation processes on different levels; therefore, the starting point of these approaches is the EU’s multi-level structure. Interestingly, Europeanisation approaches explicitly integrate a disintegration phenomenon: There are different outcomes of Europeanisation processes, analysing more or less adaption of a national system towards the EU. One possible outcome of Europeanisation is “retrenchment” which occurs if a “national policy becomes less ‘European’ than it was” (Radaelli 2003, 33). The reason for such a development might be the strengthening of Eurosceptic actors or even veto-players within a national system through the integration of the system in the EU. Therefore, in the view of this approach, impulses for “more” integration may lead to “less” integration.

An approach that is focusing on the relationship between global market developments and the integration process in the EU and therefore particular interesting with regard to explanation of economic disintegration phenomena is the critical or neo-Gramscian approach in its different variations (Cox 1977 and 1987; Gill 1990; van Apeldoorn 2014; Bieling 2013a). Neo-Gramscian authors interpret the interaction of states as a conflict about cultural hegemony. Governments try to dominate their partners in adopting common cultural perspectives concerning the world and the economy. In this context, transnational elites (networks of academics, think tanks, economic leaders etc.) play a fundamental role in formulating and replicating these universal paradigms. From a neo-Gramscian perspective, many political actors see poli-

cies like the Single Market policy of the EU, including its harmonising impacts on the economic and financial policies of the member states, as inevitable and without any alternative.

With regard to recent developments in the EU integration process, there are increasing academic discussions concerning to what extent federalism theories may explain centralisation and decentralisation processes in the EU. Many of these approaches lack the characteristics of a theory since they do not provide a binding set of non-contradictory statements (Braun 2004; Detterbeck 2010; Burgess 2005). The idea of adopting notions of federalism for EU integration is an old one. In the 1940s, when the discourse about Europe was still in its infancy, it was marked by ideas that were aimed at a comprehensive reform, creating a European federal state. Ideas to reform the EU in the direction of a more federal architecture have been advanced from political actors from time to time. In a more analytical way, Friedrich and others tried to explain dynamic and supranational aspects of the European integration process by using socio-cultural integration as an explanatory variable. Friedrich saw the European Community as a federal system under construction (Friedrich 1964).

Individual aspects of various federalist theories seem to be useful in explaining the interplay of disintegrative and integrative tendencies in the European integration process. Firstly, different theoretical approaches of federalism understand multi-level systems as dynamic (Benz 1985). Federalism therefore is “much more a matter of process as of structure” (Elazar 1987, 67). Such approaches assume that the equilibrium between the autonomy of the jurisdictional levels as well as the solidarity and cooperation – so to say, between unity and diversity – between all levels must be balanced time and again in federal systems. Secondly, some theories characterise the interactions in multi-level systems as a complex interplay between decentralising and centralising tendencies. Riker and Schultze exemplified this in a continuum between the poles of autonomy and solidarity (Riker 1975; Schultze 2005, 252). It is not just the extent and simultaneity of centralisation and decentralisation processes which shapes the dynamics of federal systems and their different subsystems. It is rather the absence of normative ratings of these contrary processes which make these approaches interesting for the context at hand. From a

scientific view, neither centralisation nor decentralisation are the “desirable direction” in multi-level systems (political actors at the different levels might have a different view in favour of strengthening “their” own level). If decentralisation tendencies represent a constitutive feature of a multi-level governance system, this could be applicable to the European integration process as well.

Thirdly, various theories of federalism deal with the question of how different subunits of federal systems interact with each other and thereby determine the dynamics of the whole system. Montesquieu already considered the “federal republic” as a “society of society” and thus distinguished between state structure and society (Montesquieu 1748). Lehmbruch explains the dynamics of federal systems with the “potential incongruity of two central arenas” of the political system from which a possible “structural break” may result: competitive democracy in the party system, on the one hand, and consent democracy in the federation with a specific logic of negotiation and compromise on the other hand (Lehmbruch 2000, 19 – translation by authors). In turn, Benz and Broschek differentiate between diverse “dimensions of change” which determine the dynamics of federations (Benz/Broschek 2013, 8). From a societal, institutional and normative-ideological dimension and the constellations of (political) actors, Benz and Broschek derive “sources and mechanisms of change” (ibid, 8).

In order to explain the dialectics of integrative and disintegrative tendencies in the EU, federalism theories could thus provide some fruitful assumptions – especially with respect to the dynamic developments in different dimensions of the multi-level system and the simultaneity of the processes. Nevertheless, the EU and its current crises have characteristics deriving from the supranationality of the system and therefore, federalism theories have to be examined carefully before being transferred to the EU system. Moreover, federalism theories are suffering a “normative bias” themselves; while they are able to explain decentralisation, most of them ignore the possibility of a breakdown of the whole system or a secession of some parts.

In sum, the previous overview of integration as well as federalism theories shows that they only partially classify and explain the peculiarities of the current integration crisis. Their shortcomings are, firstly, that they focus mainly on successful integration steps while ignoring disintegration; and secondly, they widely neglect socioeconomic and legitimacy problems and issues that are directly impacting the EU institution and negotiation system. This observation gives evidence about the fragmentation of the European integration discourse: Since the mid-1990, we are witnessing a broad theoretical discussion about the legitimacy of the EU (Habermas 2004; Scharpf 1997; Kraus 2008; Kielmansegg 1996; Majone 1998; Moravcsik 2002 etc.). However, these debates are fairly disconnected to causal theories of European integration and their advancement.

Disintegration phenomena are discussed explicitly only by the neofunctional and the Europeanisation approach. Although almost every theoretical approach has some implicit assumptions on disintegration issues, the scope for opening up for an incorporation of explanations of the disintegrative impacts of the current crisis of most of the discussed approaches seems to be limited. Thus, they can hardly explain the EU's far-reaching integration efforts, given the tendencies towards disintegration at the same time. They also do not cover the direct effects of diminishing support towards the EU and cross-border movements on the one hand, as well as the power of the global financial markets on the other hand.

Obviously, if you want to build up explanations for the current and ongoing crisis only by turning the established theories on their head, you are still going to be missing pieces of the picture because legitimacy and economical aspects would be neglected. The big picture in our opinion may be best realised in connecting the dots of the behaviour of real individuals and socioeconomic processes on the one hand, with institutional and territorial integration on the other hand. In order to overcome the "normative bias" of traditional European integration theories (Faber/Wessels 2005, 358), we need, according to our main thesis, to integrate economic, social and legitimating aspects as well as external influences (Eppler/Scheller 2013a

and b). For this purpose, integration research is challenged to build bridges between the specialised strands of the theoretical European integration discourse.

4. APPROACHING A DEFINITION

It is surprising that only a handful of European integration theories have formulated their own definitions of “integration”. Yet, definitions of “disintegration” as such hardly exist (exception: Webber, 2013; Kelemen 2007). Helen Wallace understands integration as “the creation and maintenance of intense and diversified patterns of interaction among previously autonomous units” (Wallace 1990, 9). Haas had defined European integration earlier in his neofunctionalist approach as a process “whereby political actors in several, distinct national settings are persuaded to shift their loyalties, expectations and political activities toward a new political centre, whose institutions possess or demand jurisdiction over pre-existing national states” (Haas 1958, 16). Haas’ definition focuses on the actors and therefore encompasses sociological aspects to some extent. Intergovernmentalist definitions, however, solely consider political integration and understand it as the particular emergence of new political institutions at a supranational level (Diez/Wiener 2009, 2) or as “deepening and widening processes” (as shown by Böttger 2013, 257). As has been seen in the section above, most of the current theories of European integration in political science neither differentiate between different integration phenomena nor take into account disintegrative phenomena. In order to explain the simultaneity of integration and disintegration processes we are currently observing, we need to understand causal connections between integration and disintegration in different dimensions of integration (institutional, territorial, economic, sociocultural dimension).

To develop our own working definition of European disintegration, it is helpful to start with a denotative meaning of the term “integration”, which means the restoration of a whole or “the intermixing of people or groups previously segregated” (Oxford Dictionary Online, 2014, 1.1). Taking the mirror definition, “disintegration” is understood as “the process of losing cohesion or strength” and a “process of coming to pieces” (Oxford Dictionary Online, 2014, 1, 1.1).

From a sociological point of view, these are “erosion processes of integration” or the “weakening of social bonds, social disorganisation and disorder up to anomie, social decay processes and social fragmentation” (Heitmeyer/Imbusch 2012, 12; translation by the authors; Eppler/Scheller 2013a, 22-24). For the purpose of this paper, the focus is on social processes and not on a static condition “in which something exists” after it has been integrated or disintegrated (Heitmeyer/Imbusch 2012, 12). Indeed, at least since the onset of the global financial and economic crisis and its enormous dynamics, the post-Maastricht understanding of “integration” as a relatively stable condition, which had also major influence on the theoretical discourse of the 1990s, is hardly convincing any more at the moment.

For the analysis of both integration and disintegration phenomena in the EU context, recourse to sociological theories of social disintegration are enlightening (Esser 2001; Heitmeyer 1997; Heitmeyer/Imbusch 2012, 13), even if they concentrate on the societal integration and disintegration in terms of disadvantaged individuals and groups. At any time, there are “opportunities of integration” but also of disintegration in a society. Both integration and disintegration are “gradual concepts” that are “always realized more or less” in different societal subsystems (Heitmeyer/Imbusch 2012, 13 and 10; translation by the authors). Hence, social disintegration theories are not paradigmatically based on “either/or” patterns: integration and disintegration are taking place at the same time. The differentiation in subsystems is another crucial point; in one subsystem, integration might take place while in another subsystem disintegration takes place. What is particularly interesting are rather the dynamic drivers of both phenomena, which are “influenced by individual and collective actors in civil society, as well as economic and state actors” and shaped by configurations of power which “either tend towards integrative directions or fuel disintegrative tendencies” (ibid, 14, translation by authors). Consequently, there is an “overlay and mutual reinforcement” of both dynamics. Disintegration phenomena are accordingly not “per se problematic for social integration”. Since some were “even productive because they set necessary innovation processes in motion which initiate social debates and promote problem solving” (ibid, 16, translation by authors).

At first glance, this consideration seems to go along with the “crisis-catalyst-narrative” of the European integration discourse. The significant difference is, nevertheless, the change of the perspective. A deeper understanding of the crisis itself opens the door for a deeper comprehension of integration. Regarding the analytical categorisation of integration and disintegration phenomena, it is therefore important not to succumb to one single normative concept of a “good society” (ibid, 16). A conflict-free community at a high social level of integration should not be equated with a society in which no social inequalities and disadvantages exist.

The first political science approaches dealing explicitly with EU disintegration are shaped by a comprehension of disintegration that is much narrower. Thus, Webber defines European disintegration “as a decline in (1) the range of common or joint policies adopted and implemented in the EU, (2) the number of EU member states, and/or (3) the formal (i.e. treaty-rooted) and actual capacity of EU organs to make and implement decisions if necessary against the will of individual members” (Webber 2013, 342). This definition implies an institutional and territorial understanding of integration and disintegration, because – complementary to the underlying assumption of many integration concepts, which define sovereignty transfers and the supranationalization of powers on the EU-level as well as territorial enlargement a central characteristic for European integration – disintegration is interpreted as a reallocation of competences to the member states and dwindling capacities of the EU to act autonomously. This understanding reflects the “constitutionalist bias” of traditional integration theories (Wessels/Gläser 2012, 365 and 370; Wiener/Diez 2004, 238; Eppler/Scheller 2013b): Since adequate alternatives are missing, theoretical explanations of the EU legal system use criteria originating from national constitutional law. However, this mirror-inverted definition of European disintegration hides the economic and socio-cultural dimensions of disintegration as well as legitimacy issues.

Taking all these considerations into account, especially the sociological findings above, a working definition of disintegration could be the following: European disintegration can be

understood as erosion processes promoted by individual or collective actors within and outside the European multi-level system which lower the legal, economic, territorial, socio-cultural and/or legitimating integration level to a status quo ante. These processes undermine the unity of the internal market, the Monetary Union and the European legal area and the common inventory of normative guiding principles and leitmotifs so profoundly, that even an optional and democratically legitimate system- and policy-making by the EU and its member states may be rendered (temporarily) impossible. So, European integration may be understood as a dialectical interaction between systemic and social as well as overt and covert integration and disintegration processes. Disintegrative developments constantly imply an integrative potential and vice versa. Integration and disintegration take place simultaneously in different dimensions – institutional, territorial, economic and socio-cultural – and developments in one dimension might cause effects in another dimension.

5. INTEGRATION AND DISINTEGRATION IN THE CURRENT CRISIS

We want to exemplify the applicability of the aforementioned considerations through a brief analysis of the integration process since the outbreak of the financial and economic crisis in 2008/2009. Following our main thesis, we therefore resort to findings from sociological and economic integration research, especially Albert Hirschman's considerations (1970) from the field of organizational sociology as well as economic theories about the prerequisites for a functioning of single currency areas. This approach seems to be useful since this crisis has not only exacerbated the macroeconomic and fiscal disparities between the member states, but has also opened up struggles in various policy fields along with specific territorial and cultural conflicts. Additionally, the current phase of the integration process is marked by shifts in the institutional system of the Union, which have impacted the negotiation and decision-making modes within the EU (Hofmann/Wessels 2013, 220) and have turned the European Central Bank (ECB) into one of the most influential key players. Against this background, the current crisis can be interpreted as a turning point in the historical development of the EU, which has

changed the relationship between the European multi-level system on the one side and the markets as exogenous player of the other side.

In the past, agenda-setting and decision-making processes of the EU were dominated by a “structural coupling” between European negotiation systems and “national and sub-national policy structures” (Benz 2003, 323). Characteristically, cross-level negotiations of this kind encompass the balancing out of conflicting interests. By resorting to the “voice-option” (Hirschman 1970), single nation-state actors were indeed able to formulate veto positions. However, these strategies are mostly founded in historical and cultural ideas about sovereignty and national competition among political parties. The basic allegiance to the European project as an integral part of national reason of many member states has not been put into question by such obstacles – especially since there was no formalised and normal kind of “exit-option” for member states until the introduction of Article 50 of the Treaty of Lisbon in 2009⁵.

Since the outbreak of the financial and economic crisis of 2008, these negotiation patterns have not become obsolete, yet the ratio between the “voice-”, “exit-” and “loyalty-option” (Hirschman 1970, 4) has changed considerably. A majority of the member states are facing constraints regarding their ability to act politically. The reasons for that are not so much national opinion polls and altered preferences but new macro-economic imperatives. The economically ailing member states have repeatedly been faced with acute difficulties in payment and refinancing. This is due to poor credit ratings owing to public indebtedness, which has increased over the last four years extremely as some multi-billion bailouts in favour of individual financial companies became inevitable. Greece, Cyprus, Spain and Portugal, therefore, must meet austerity measures as a condition for receiving financial support from the ESM, which enfolds both systemic and socially disintegrative consequences within these countries.

⁵ Consolidated versions of the Treaty on European Union and the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union - Consolidated version of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union signed on 13 December 2007, OJ C326 of 26.10.2012.

People are openly discussing the event of possible withdrawals of individual member states from the euro zone group for the first time, which not only puts the status quo of the systemic integration of the EU in question (though, at the same time, Latvia, a new member, has been integrated in the euro zone). Rather, it is a form of socio-cultural and ideational disintegration, which points also to a change in meaning of the “voice-option” in European integration discourse. So far, the discussion about the “exit-option” has had no concrete consequences in terms of functional/systemic disintegration. However, some of the media and politically motivated actors have stigmatised individual member states in the crisis, which unfolds sociocultural and legitimising exclusion and disintegration effects (Bickes/Butulussi/Otten/Schendel/Sdroulia/Steinhof 2012). Political pressure to obey strict austerity programmes in Greece, Italy, Spain and Portugal – especially in the area of services for the public – is causing self-reinforcing effects and a downward spiral of negative self-fulfilling prophecies. As mainly middle- and low-income population groups are affected by these measures, growing social disintegration is undermining the legitimacy of the political systems. In contrast to the disintegrative break-up of the Single Market, it is hard to measure these social and cultural disintegration processes. To forecast tipping points when creeping disaffection knocks over into political action against the EU seems still to be impossible. Moreover, the party composition of parliaments has restricted the ability of governments to act, and already today, it appears that the political power of EU integration is eroding the social fabric of some nations. Both the member states and the EU as a whole are confronted with dwindling approval ratings (Pew Research Center 2013; Bertelsmann Stiftung 2012). Since the crisis, some member states have been undergoing such duress that they have hardly been able to ensure domestic order comprehensively.

Due to their economic performance and competitiveness, these countries are no longer able to provide functional integration services to stabilise their domestic markets. Without external funding in recent years, especially Greece and Cyprus, but also Spain and Portugal would have already repeatedly defaulted on their government debt. They have also not succeeded in substantially reducing their public debts and current account deficits (Meyer-Rix 2013). In this

way, there is an ever-widening cleavage of macro-economic disparities in the euro zone. Imbalances of this magnitude entail risks of a further weakening of the crisis ridden states and indicate economic disintegration. In addition, domino effects might negatively impact financially stronger member states due to possible defaults in the banking system. Since the EU's conventional instruments within the Economic and Monetary Union clearly were not sufficient to avert the dangers of an economic break-down of the euro zone, the ECB had to intervene with their "Outright Monetary Transaction" (OMT) programme to calm down the markets in September 2012. The enormous divergences in the payment system of the European Central Bank – the "Trans-European Automated Real Time Gross Settlement Express Transfer System" (TARGET II) – also point to the phenomenon of economic disintegration. If the crisis countries had not had the opportunity to take TARGET II liabilities to a large extent, they would probably no longer be in a position to guarantee the functioning of their domestic banking systems. The consequences for the real economy and the domestic markets as a whole are highly difficult to predict.

Pronounced imbalances in the economic performance and competitiveness of the member states are thus underlying causes of economic disintegration processes in the EU's economic and monetary union. In view of possible disintegration hazards, expensive and high-risk measures are required in order to sustain the level of integration obtained so far and to keep up the functionality of the highly connected markets. The exceptional crisis 2008/2009 forced very short-term measures to stabilise the financial markets, which were accompanied neither by economic growth and industrial policy strategies of the nation states nor by the Union's domestic market policy (Moravcsik 1993, 473-524). The traditional "mixed-motive-games" that are typical for negotiation and conflict resolutions applied in the EU multi-level governance system are thus limited due to the political heteronomy by the markets (Benz 2003, 320; Kohler-Koch/Conzelmann/Knodt 2004, 87). The canon of common principles and leitmotifs including "norms of distributive justice" and a prevailing "minimum of cooperation", which actors within the multi-level system acknowledge more or less, however, do not

necessarily exist in the relationship between the EU and the players in the financial markets (Benz 2003, 320).

Indeed, financial market institutions do, at least in the long term, have a vested interest in the stability of the euro zone and its member states and of maintaining the interbank market. At the same time, they continue to benefit from the existing capital rules under Basel II and III, limited regulations on the Over-the-Counter Markets (OTC), extreme short-term investments, such as derivatives and credit default swaps, as well as speculating on the insolvency of individual states – not least because of the historically low interest rates in classical investment securities. The inherent logic of the financial markets obliges relevant institutions and stakeholders to pursue the objective of profit maximisation. This is the complete reversal of political ideals, like “federal solidarity” and “distributive justice”, which the Union has attempted to achieve for years with its cohesion policy and now realising them with transfers in favour of member states threatened by crisis on a new scale.

Interaction barriers between the “markets” and the “multi-level system” therefore explain the dilemma of the European integration process in the current crisis. The own logic of institutions and actors of both systems complicates processes of reciprocal rebalancing the “checks and balances” between the two arenas in order to correct information asymmetries and imbalances with systemic risk potential. Since the markets are not part of the political bargaining systems, formal or informal recalibration processes are difficult, which are usually applied between the different levels of the multi-level systems. Due to the lack of responsibilities and resources and strong interdependencies between the “markets” and the “multi-level system”, the Union rather repeatedly reaches its regulatory capacities. An internalisation of these externally caused problems was also hardly possible since conventional negotiation strategies (Scharpf 1976, 54; Scharpf 1985, 328) – as practiced with other global challenges – were inadequate because of the time pressure and the risk of a political and fiscal incapacity of individual European partners (Beichelt 2009, 35). These interaction barriers are

the cause of disintegrative tendencies that are intermittently affecting the functioning of the Economic and Monetary Union as the most important project of the integration process.

The markets have specific institutions and instruments that exert a massive momentum and generate the respective political pressure to act. Many of these mechanisms are characterised through the interaction of collective actors. Thus, it is not possible to clearly reconstruct the effect of individual agency in particular cases, for example, the so-called herding behaviour of many market participants buying or selling en masse – motivated by impending loss of value of their investments or subscribing to new, sought-after investment products within the shortest time. This is due to the asymmetric availability of information (Schrooten 2013, 400), which usually puts the investors at a disadvantage. In addition, internet-based technologies allow forms of high frequency trading, which enables multi-billion dollar transactions within seconds and impedes a corresponding control. Admittedly, this is accompanied by a high degree of efficiency and increased market trading. At the same time, these forms of interaction, however, involve an enormous potential for disintegration, as the “exit-option” and possible defaults of individual market actors explicitly becomes a subject of returns generated by different types of investments. The recent changes in the bond markets have exposed the fact that markets create “destructive forces” not only in the economic field. Situations where the state’s refinancing on the markets become difficult due to high-risk premiums owing to excessive indebtedness and a procurement of fresh capital to cover its current budget is factually not possible can be interpreted as a functional disintegration in the economic dimension. The internal market is then breaking up into regional submarkets through a market-driven isolation of individual member states. This form of exclusion on market pricing has disintegrative consequences not only in systemic but also in social terms.

The actual asymmetry between the multi-level system and the markets, which developed into a driving force of European disintegration during the crisis, has its roots in the fact that politics alone apparently does not have adequate instruments and resources for a re-regulation of the markets to fence off such kinds of system hazards. In addition, the “symbolic capital”

(Bourdieu 2001, 1983, 1974) of the EU was obviously not sufficient to protect their own institutions and individual member states in the crisis. In the initial period of the crisis, the financially stronger states even refused – with reference to Article 125 TFEU (“no-bailout-clause”) – financial grants for countries in a budget crisis.⁶ The markets, however, interpreted this absence of appropriate solidarity addresses vis-à-vis the contingency of paying defaults of individual states in crisis as a rejection of liability. This does not apply in a formal legal context today. Concerning the market’s perception, nevertheless, there was a kind of liability given by the community before the outbreak of the crisis owing to the level of integration achieved within the Union. Only the political insistence on compliance with the “no-bailout-clause” in 2010 had the effect that the member states were again perceived as autonomous regional markets by the financial markets. The drifting apart of credit ratings and interest rates in the euro zone (Meyer- Rix 2012, 301-326; Schrooten 2013, 404) represents economic disintegration processes at work that contradict the intentions of an integrated currency area.

A re-regulation of the markets is actually contradictory to the shared narrative of the EU, which has been directed towards market expansion and the reduction of trade barriers since the founding of the European Community. Although it has become clear in the current crisis that the single market has not reached a homogeneous level of integration, instead still being composed of submarkets which vary drastically in their economical strengths (Schrooten 2013, 402), the paradigm of self-regulating markets as a guiding principle of the EU proves to be surprisingly persistent (Bieling 2013b). This demonstrates that the symbolic power of definition is continuously in the hands of the “transnational elites” (Münch 2009, 608). At the same time, the EU still lacks the political institutions that would be able to curb any economic disintegration tendencies resulting from the growing disparities between the member states, or be capable of converting them into positive steps towards integration. Instead, the EU is manoeuvring itself into a paradoxical situation with its often short-term oriented crisis

⁶ Consolidated versions of the Treaty on European Union and the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union - Consolidated version of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union - Protocols - Annexes - Declarations annexed to the Final Act of the Intergovernmental Conference, signed on 13 December 2007, OJ C326 of 26.10.2012.

management. Because of their unilateral orientation on austerity procedures, the large number of measures bears traits of “over-integration” or “over-regulation” (Schwarzer 2013). Mainly because of the social consequences that unfold due to the EU anti-crisis measures, the Union and its member states are increasingly a projection screen for criticism in the crisis countries. In addition to the discussion of scenarios of a possible exit of individual member states out of the monetary union, these opposing forces now trigger protest movements in different member states again.

6. CONCLUSION AND OUTLOOK

At least since the recent financial and economic crisis, we can no longer claim that European disintegration is not a real phenomenon. To capture issues of EU disintegration, we have to take into account not only institutional and territorial aspects of integration but also economic and legitimacy aspects. Moreover, integration and disintegration are taking place simultaneously in different dimensions of integration/disintegration. In conclusion, from our survey of the theories of European integration, we state that they only partially explain and classify the peculiarities of the current integration crisis. Their shortcomings are, firstly, that they focus mainly on successful integration steps while ignoring disintegration, and secondly, they neglect socioeconomic and legitimacy problems that are directly impacting the EU system. Therefore, a deeper understanding of EU integration and disintegration seems to be useful, one that does not repeat the aforementioned – normative and constitutional – biases. To explain the current situation, it is not sufficient to mirror the existing theories on integration that would mean focusing on the antipode of deepening and widening processes.

The discussion of disintegrative phenomena extends our understanding of the conditions of European integration processes. Yet the theoretical debate on European disintegration is in its early stages. The purpose of this Working Paper has been to stake out the appropriate field of study and to outline the complexity of the problem. In no way does this imply a claim to a comprehensive theoretical conceptualisation. The future research agenda on the topic has to

focus on the question of the interaction between integration and disintegration developments. We have to empirically test causalities between the institutional, economic, territorial and legitimising dimension of European integration and disintegration processes. Prospectively, a goal could be to develop a “disintegration mechanism” that allows generalised statements when disintegrative tendencies occur in the various dimensions of the European integration process. An opening of the political science discourse on integration for knowledge drawn from economic and sociological integration research seems to be essential. The complexity of the object itself and the practical research challenges that come with it are in danger of insufficient phenomenological specification. In the course of future research efforts, it will thus be important to question the first approaches and definitions specified here critically and modify them accordingly.

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