

# More integration or more disintegration in the European Union?

## A sociological perspective

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### Abstract

*This paper analyzes the scholarly debate about integration in the European Union; its emergence, evolution and current state. It examines works employing theoretical and problem-driven approaches, dedicated to analyzing integration as their main object. The findings suggest that the debate has progressed significantly - a fact evident by the change of the initial question with which scholars engaged – whether international organizations and institutions have a future as independent entities. The way the EU integration was explored has also gradually shifted from paradigmatic debates, mostly between realists and liberalists, to diverse problem-driven contributions. This new, pragmatic approach is preferred as an effort to better explain the complex question of the EU integration in times of crises. An assessment of this debate is required to improve the quality of the future research agendas, methodological approaches, and policy recommendations of the field.*

### Keywords

Debate; Disintegration; EU; Integration; Sociology

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## Introduction

Generations of scholars have looked to evaluate the European Union. In the uncertain times after the world wars it was claimed as an impossible illusion to construct an international community. The initial branch of scholarly discussions were focused on the role of such an international community. As the states needed to abandon the old balance-of-power doctrine, they realized that anarchy is hard to temper, state interests are a persistent tendency even when a compromise must be reached for the sake of the common peace and wellbeing. Despite these tendencies, in 2016, the EU has been described as “a unique partnership in which member states have pooled sovereignty in certain policy areas and harmonized laws on a wide range of economic, social, and political issues” (Archick, 2016).

Scholars no longer argue if the idea of an international society could be implemented at all. Instead they started wondering if it will disintegrate, and eventually disappear, or further integrate to become a cohesive multinational community. While they differ in the ways in which they look to address the problem, they all contribute to the question of the future of the European Union and integration. Some examine what particular theory would be most useful in assessing current events and thus will be most appropriate for making predictions. Others use a problem-driven approach<sup>7</sup> to reflect on how particular crises could influence the development of the Union – leading to more or to less integration. As one of the most influential figures in bringing European states together, Jean Monnet, recognized early on that “Europe will be forged in crises and will be the sum of the solutions adopted for these crises” (Barber, 2010). Indeed, scholars see crises as the ultimate test for the foundations of the EU – the sense of common identity, shared interests and goals. The crises challenge these notions and pose the question if the Union will walk toward more or less integration in the future.

In this paper, I aim to explore how the scholarly debate about the integration of the European Union has evolved since the foundation of the Union, the current trends in how the topic is discussed, and the potential causes of these trends. Similar to other studies, such as the one by Höing and Kunstein (2018), this study is a scholarly effort to examine different conceptualizations of crises and questioning whether one framing is prevalent over others. Previous studies using scholarly articles to assess trends in popular debates, and to suggest areas for future research accentuate more on a quantitative approach (Kolk and Rivera-Santos, 2016). Therefore, this study will be a qualitative analysis. It is important to contribute to this question since the evolution of the debate on the future of the European Union still continues as global developments - from rising nationalism and the refugee crisis to economic inequality and deterring expansionistic Russia - keep

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<sup>7</sup> A distinction between problem-driven and theoretical approaches is made in the “Methodology” section.

challenging scholars. Researchers attempt to address these problems by providing a parsimonious approach that will both facilitate contextualizing political phenomena, and enhance decision-making. Moreover, in times of crises, these conditions of the international system require scholars to be even more careful in their predictions (Goudzwaard, Vander Vennen and Heemst, 2017). Building on these crises, the main task of this article is to assess whether theoretical or problem-driven approaches are preferred in the recent scholarship on the EU integration. To complement this task, I also present a brief overview of the history of the debate and the central questions in the field.

## Methodology

In order to analyze the development of the debate over the years, I first conduct a sociological analysis on the existing research and how it approaches the issue of integration. The analysis follows a sociological logic as it “operates according to a methodological principle of linguistic consistency; that is, if a ‘sufficient proportion’ of participants’ accounts appear consistently to tell the same sort of story about a particular aspect of social action, then these accounts are treated as being literally descriptive” (Gilbert and Mulkey, 1984: 7). Furthermore, to begin the examination of the topic and to provide a framework that situates this article within a broader literature, I build on Douglas Webber’s work titled *“How likely is it that the European Union will disintegrate? A critical analysis of competing theoretical perspectives”*, that laid the foundations of the integration/disintegration metadepbate. However, while Webber (2014) focuses on theoretical perspectives on the topic, I further expand the analyzed materials to also include the more recent problem-driven approaches. Moreover, I add the element of the five EU-crises, following the framework Archick (2014) suggests (the sovereign debt crisis, the refugee flow, the Brexit, resurgent Russia, and the threat of terrorism), as they trigger controversial reactions in the scholarship in regard to the EU’s future as an expression of more or less integration. Nevertheless, I consider Webber’s research and his continued efforts as a focal point in measuring the effectiveness of scholarly contributions and their applicability in the complex environment of EU politics.

At this point, a few words need to be dedicated to the selection of the scholarly works included in this study. While the most seminal contributions on the question of EU integration have been written in the period of the two world wars and after the end of the Cold War, more recent works were selected for this study, through a Google Scholar search using keywords such as “EU integration”, “EU disintegration”, and “EU crises”. Therefore the time-period the works cover is from 2008 onwards as more recent articles were preferred over older ones from a large volume of works. In addition, since the integration debate benefits from a very broad scholarly attention, the works selected for the analysis emphasize mostly the literature from International Studies/Political Science fields as it was the scholars from these two academic traditions were the ones that initiated

the debate and are more engaged with it. Additionally, a proper analysis of the literature on the future of EU integration should include a few words about the inevitable definitional issues, since only a small number of scholars define “integration” or “disintegration” before utilizing the terms. Webber’s definition brings some clarity to the dimensions of the debate. He sees three aspects of the term integration: (1) “the range of common or joint policies adopted and implemented in the EU”, (2) “the number of EU member states”, and (3) “the formal (i.e. treaty-based) and actual capacity of the EU organs to make and implement decisions if necessary against the will of individual members” (Webber, 2010: 342), whereas “disintegration” implies a decreasing number/authority of these elements.

In the following parts of the article, first, I present the framework that accounts for the foundational theoretical approaches in literature and some more recent ones. Second, I incorporate the problem-driven scholarship on the subject, divided into four different crises that point to scholarly views on more integration or less integration in the Union. While a distinction between a theoretical lens and a problem-driven approach is subjective and a clear line for differentiation is difficult to achieve, I employ the following criteria. By a theoretical perspective, I identify a predominant, if not full, focus on a theory that is applied to a phenomenon. As opposed to this, a problem-driven approach is a tool that utilizes a specific case and empirically examining it in an effort to make a broader argument. Thus the theoretical approach relies more on deductive reasoning (applying a principle to a case) while the problem-driven one is rooted in inductive reasoning (using a case to build a conclusion). Third, I discuss the implications of this debate, its characteristics and directions of research. Fourth, I summarize the main findings and propose avenues for subsequent inquiries.

### **Theoretical approaches**

Webber describes some of the main theoretical approaches which differ in evaluating how the crises changes/changed the EU - either in the direction of increased optimism toward integration or pessimism. First, there are the realists represented by John Mearsheimer (1990: 5-6), who argue that after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the absence of a common threat for Western Europe would be followed by the disappearance of NATO and the withdrawal of the U.S. presence, engendering mistrust, suspicion, and fear between Western Europeans. Building on these, Mearsheimer anticipated the dissolution of the European Union by various crises that would most likely surface from power struggles between the main powers in Europe. Furthermore, he maintained that the cyclical nature of world events will continue to present itself in the time ahead, driven by the impossible task to temper forces of anarchy.

Another theoretical perspective is the one of classical intergovernmentalists that Webber (2010) classifies as “moderate”, as opposed to the utter “pessimists” in the case of the realist school. Here, Stanley Hoffman sees the vital role of the nation-states as “a factor of international non-integration” (1966: 863). In a similar perspective to Hoffman but a bit more nuance, Moravcsik puts the emphasis of EU integration on the degree of overlap between major actors’ interests in the context of intergovernmental negotiations and the dynamics of domestic politics (1991: 25-27).

Third perspective that Weber mentions is the institutionalist one. Within this category, Keohane and Nye for instance, accept the role of supranational actors not as completely independent entities but rather as tools through which a higher degree of collaboration between states could be achieved (1977: 20-28). Moreover, they argue that such institutions make the “collective” element in the EU realistic and expanding.

In general, neofunctionalists, transactionalists, and liberal intergovernmentalists share a more optimistic perspective. For instance, Karl Deutsch, one of the most notable scholars among the transactionalists, maintains that the increased transactions between the states in the European community will result in increased cooperation (1961). Here, Webber points out it is unlikely that “even profound economic crisis...could undermine European integration” (2010: 348), while underlining the arguments of contemporary neofunctionalist scholars like Sandholtz and Sweet (1999: 152-153). To this group of scholars could be attributed the work of Adler and Barnett (1998) who build on Deutsch’s concept. However, instead of measuring integration from the standpoint of transactions, they utilize a constructivist approach that implements the idea of socialization of the states sharing common goals and interests. While they do not deny that a very cohesive (“amalgamated”) security community could be achieved, they acknowledge that this concept could have different expressions – some “nascent”, others more “mature” (Adler and Barnett, 1998: 48).

Finally, evaluated from the perspective of the federalists, Kelemen, believes that a common sense of identity may empower integration in the Union (2007: 53-61). Furthermore, it is capable of overcoming the uncertain future of federations that domestic partisan politics in the EU could evoke.

In regard to parsimonious approaches to integration, Bulmer and Joseph on the other hand, point out that integration as a process is too complex to be examined simply through the lens of class, economic privilege or functionalism (2016: 744). They maintain that integration is a sum of hegemonic projects that could be easily disrupted by any issues experienced at the domestic level, later reflecting much higher on the EU-structure (2016: 725). Other scholars argue that the role of identity politics is severely undermined when addressing the process of integration through liberal intergovernmentalist and neofunctionalist approaches. For instance, drawing on the idea of “ideational liberalism” that Moravcsik (1997: 515) introduces, Börzel and Risse (2017: 102) claim that

social constructivism could best explain some crises, such as the sovereign debt crisis. However, where some of these crises result in more integration, and others result in more disintegration (the Schengen crisis, that later was incorporated into the narrative of the refugee crisis, and Brexit). These crises, among others, will be analyzed in the paragraphs below through the lens of some problem-driven, rather than theoretical, approaches.

### **Problem-driven approaches**

As opposed to these theoretical perspectives on the process of European integration, other scholars prefer to focus on the subject by utilizing a problem-driven approach. For instance, in the cases of the sovereign debt crisis, the refugee flow, the Brexit, resurgent Russia, and the threat of terrorism, Archick (2016: 17-18) envisions four possible scenarios for the future of the EU that imply either higher level of integration or disintegration. According to her, an initial outcome from these crises can be a steady situation in which the current status-quo persists – EU continues to adopt and apply common policies where possible. A second scenario would be a “Europe on two speeds”, that refers to a close tight cooperation and policy harmonization between some states and more independence in legislation for other member states. This scenario incorporates both integration and disintegration features. According to her, a third possible development would be more intergovernmental cooperation, instead of further integration strategies. In this scenario, she claims, there would be some amount of disintegration caused by far-right parties that traditionally express Euro-skepticism. The fourth scenario may involve closer integration between a lower number of member states than before the crisis occurred. Differently, authors such as Karolewski and Cross (2017: 151) accentuate on the “restraining or enabling” effects the crises have on EU integration. They claim that in some cases, the EU could produce a common policy and a united reaction against the external crisis. In other cases, the crisis could merely show that the limits of integration have been reached, and that the member states are, to a large extent, comfortable with maintaining their sovereignty intact and thus rejecting further integration (Karolewski and Cross, 2017: 141-142).

Based on these, the following sections describe problem-driven works focused on different crises, suggested by Archick (2016) that the EU faced throughout the years and faces presently: 1) economic crises (2007-2009); 2) security-related crises; 3) Brexit; 4) crises concerning EU-Russia relationship. Here, Brexit and the EU-Russia relationship are placed in separate categories, mostly because of they include multiple aspects (e.g. economic, social, and security elements). The implications of such scholarship show that integration or disintegration tendencies are best demonstrated in times of crises. Theoretical insights are not missing in these contributions, but instead they are oriented toward a problem (crisis)-driven perspective that seeks to hypothesize from a single or a number of cases. In theoretical contributions, the theory predominantly sets the

conceptualization of the events and suffers from its limitations because it aims to apply a set of principles (a theory), perceived as valid, to a case. In problem-driven contributions, the problem stays in the core of the analysis, and the chosen method of reasoning and framework revolve around the problem, and not on the contours of the employed theory. Authors who advocate for such approach find it capable to avoid the “often bitter, repetitive, and inherently inconclusive paradigmatic debates” (Katzenstein and Okawara, 2002: 183).

### **The EU’s financial crisis**

Becker and Jäger (2012: 183) argue that the Eurozone created room for uneven economic development of the member states as it stimulated growth based on substantial debt, thus provoking instability in the entire Union. This conclusion that more integration could ironically lead to more disintegration in the future was also supported by Polyakova and Fligstein (2016). Seeing that the financial crisis of 2007-2009 that pushed forward integration on the economic level, in terms of coordinating fiscal policy and bank supervision, at the same time made citizens anxious about their economic security. This eventually led to an increased support for right-wing parties that advocated for (more) domestic sovereignty, which can lead to a certain degree of disintegration in the Union (Polyakova and Fligstein, 2016: 68).

To further problematize the issue, Kuhn and Stoeckel (2014: 638) assert that strict economic policies adopted on a supranational level are perceived by developing member states as a difficult but much needed measure, while stronger economies in the Union tend to see it merely as an additional financial burden. In addition, Kuhn and Stoeckel (2014: 638) propose that European integration is conditional upon whether member states perceive it as a threat to the national identity. On the other hand, a much more hopeful view on the future of European integration, in the spirit of post-functionalism, is the one of by Frank Schimmelfennig (2014). Since he argues that in challenging times of a financial crisis in Europe, integration policies defeated disintegration, thanks to three essential factors:

isolating policy-making at the European level from the constraining dissensus through Euro-compatible government formation, avoiding or taming referendums, and supranational delegation (Schimmelfennig, 2014: 335).

### **The crises engendered by EU’s security concerns<sup>8</sup>**

The refugee crisis brought a tension escalation about the immigration policies in the European Union. One of the puzzles that scholars look to resolve, in this regard, relates to the

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<sup>8</sup> By security concerns, I identify the most debated topics in this field such as the refugee flow, border control and immigration policies, as well as their implications for integration. Terrorism is not listed as a separate category because

asylum law on a supranational level and its implementation or lack of implementation in the member states. Trauner (2016: 321) argues that imposing rules to deal with the refugee crisis would be an immense burden for the Southern states, while ignoring the problem and the legislations to solve the issue would burden the Northern states. Explained through a more theoretical point of view, this work seems to imply that nation-states have diverging interests and pose the inevitable dilemma of the Rubik's cube – a solution that is good for Northern Europe causes disruption in the Southern Europe, and so on. Thus, the refugee crisis and border control concerns could reintroduce the problem of disintegration that stems from the incompatible interests of different member states.

Contrary to this perception about the refugee crisis, Timothy Hatton (2015: 605) sees it as a case for deeper integration, which is “desirable and politically possible”. The focus of his analysis is on the success of harmonization policies and shared responsibilities in the process of developing a Common European Asylum System. Introducing the idea of a search for “social optimum”, Hatton (2015: 632) encourages further integration efforts in times of crises related to European security. To this end, Alexander Caviedes (2015: 563) subscribes as well. He emphasizes the great amount of work by EU institutions and agencies dedicated to issue of migration in the Union, thus demonstrating the increased level of integration between the member states and the empowerment that supranational bodies received as a consequence through the implementation of Directives in regard to asylum, for instance (Caviedes, 2015: 561-562).

## **Brexit**

Brexit not only posed difficult questions for the future of the EU integration process, but also gave scholars a variety of new topics to consider – What would be the future of the U.K. outside of the EU? How would the EU continue survive without one of the strongest actors in the Union? Could Brexit be seen as an opportunity for further integration, remaining as is, or would it have a spillover effect over other member states that are already skeptical about their membership? In terms of these general trends about Brexit, Giandomenico Majone (2017: 26) argues that concerns for sovereignty would make member states indecisive in terms of crises when it comes to further integration, thus “contemporary Europe can become, at best, a confederation”. He adds that the idea for a confederation, as an expression of the functionalist approach, might be a possibility in the negotiations between the EU member states, especially after Brexit and other events that entail disintegration.

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its components fall under one of the already included categories. There were no scholarly works found that examined the relationship between EU integration and “homegrown terrorism”, as this is the only element not examined in this work from the category pertaining to terrorism.

Thus, the future of the previously outlined integration-disintegration dyad could be understood, as a risk for disintegration for some while a chance for more integration for others – where some countries will form stronger bonds, as others become peripheral (Pisani-Ferry et al., 2016: 10). Richard Whitman (2016: 49) sees the degree to which the U.K. wants to remain a part of the EU's common foreign, security and defense policy, as a determining component of the extent of disintegration after Brexit. Sampson (2017: 181), on the other hand, questions if Brexit should be perceived as a negative response to the increased integration in the Union or merely as a result of the fact that globalization has certain boundaries, which were reached. Another important issue that also needs consideration is “understanding and responding to the motivations of voters who oppose the European Union” (Sampson, 2017: 182). For this, Nauro Campos expresses strongly positive opinions for the case of greater integration (2016: 41). He underlines that it is not questionable if more or less integration is needed, but a more efficient and enhanced type of integration should be the focus of policy-makers, scholars and the public.

### **The multispectral crisis of the EU-Russia relationship**

When it comes to the meaning of EU integration in terms of its relationship with Russia, Timothy Snyder (2015: 706) underlines Russia's role in stimulating disintegration processes in the context of support for nationalist and separatist parties across the Union. Focusing on the same question, Lukyanov (2008: 1118) views Russia's policy as a reaction to the EU's refusal to recognize it as a European state, even though it has participated in the politics of the region for centuries. While there was a certain degree of notable closeness in the positions of the EU and Russia in the past, the latter still gravitates towards East and South Asia while rejecting the EU-model with the claim of it being unsuccessful (Lukyanov, 2008: 1118).

Russia and the EU, according to Samuel Charap and Mikhail Troitskiy (2013: 51) have created intense competition for integrating new states into their political entities, which exacerbated their otherwise conflictual relationship. During the EU and Russia's attempts to integrate Eastern European states into their economic and social models, the states were weakened and destined to remain highly dependent on one of these respective regional hegemons (Bosse, 2014: 107). According to Richard Sakwa (2015: 554), another factor that contributed to the problematic relationship between the EU and Russia, ever since the end of the Cold War, was the exclusion of Moscow from the implementation of the idea of a “pan-continental” unity (Sakwa, 2015: 579). Based on these, Delcour and Kostanyan (2014: 10) conclude that no stable future for integration in the continent would be possible without a proper understanding of the geopolitics and historical

relationship that Kremlin has with some of the current EU member states as well as some potential member states.

On the other hand, the annexation of Crimea brought new aspects of consideration into EU-Russia relationship. Åslund (2014: 64) argues that European integration would now, to a large extent, depend on how Ukraine manages to overcome its most serious problem – corruption. He believes in that the EU, the IMF and the U.S. will have a very important role to play in helping Ukraine become a well-functioning state, replacing corruption practices with order, justice and legal means of economic development (Åslund, 2014: 73). Further examining Ukraine as a component in the EU-Russian political environment, Samokhvalov (2015: 1372) puts an emphasis on the choices and preferences of “three significant social actors: government, society and business elites”. Namely, these components would contribute to answering the question whether Ukraine will come closer to the EU, thus contributing to the integration process, or lean toward Russia, closing the door for further cooperation with a united Europe.

## Discussion

### *History of the debate*

While the debate about the future of international society (Carr, 1946) emerged in the field of international studies many decades ago, it did not have the form it has today. The reason for such development is that the challenges the international society faced, in a sense that Bull (1977) implies, changed significantly over the years. Therefore, the focus of the discussion, transitioned slowly from questioning the existence of elements of an international society to the question of its capabilities, and future, as it was accepted to exist. Even those scholars who believe in the scenario in which the European Union will soon disintegrate and lose its power as an independent international body, admit that an international community currently exists and is (except for the case of Brexit) expanding. On one hand, this view differs greatly from the perspective expressed in the years after the world wars, when most of the scholars were disillusioned by the destructive balance-of-power politics (Fox, 1944) and the shortcomings of the League of Nations that made them skeptical about the prospects of an international community. On the other hand, others like E.H. Carr have, to some extent, kept their ambitions and hopes that while the present times were not promising in terms of international cooperation, “idealism” was something to strive for, thus still possible to be achieved if the issue of power and interests is taken seriously (Carr, 1946). While Carr to some extent shares the concerns of other scholars who were very skeptical of the idea for international community, he believes that is still possible if the unequal power distribution between units in the system is taken seriously. Mainly this perspective became in the center of future efforts to support the existence and

the development of an international community despite the predominant, at the time, scholarly view that such idea would be impossible.

### ***Substantial contributions in the field***

Ever since the beginning of the EU-integration debate, scholars have made significant contributions that resulted in even deeper and broader discussions. Initially, they argued about general questions pertaining to the future of Europe – either as a united entity or as a continent that will be repeatedly torn apart by power struggles. Every work in the field that has given strong evaluations about the future of the EU has moved the debate further – it pushed other scholars to counter the arguments that others presented. During this time, as the question of whether European states have a future together emerged, it was viewed and analyzed mainly by realist and liberalist (idealist) approaches. While the realist approach remained negative, the liberal approach revealed different nuances that demonstrated a large variety of prognoses, not as skeptical as the one held by realist. Neofunctionalists, transactionalists, institutionalists, classical and liberal intergovernmentalists share more optimistic perspectives than realists. But their standpoints are quite different in terms of how far integration would go, and what specific conditions should be included in the theoretical framework for making predictions about it. It was also the question of European integration that gave birth to the emergence of the main schools of thought's different divisions in terms how likely they think EU integration is. Considering this issue, realists were perceived as too uncompromising in terms of a skeptical scenario for integration, and liberalists (idealists) were seen as too extreme in their optimistic prognoses.

After the first stage when the debate relied mostly on theoretical approaches passed by, the new generation of scholars began looking at integration from a more practical, problem-driven perspective. They added a conditionality in their analyses and were no longer questioning whether integration is possible anymore, but asking under what conditions it could occur. As opposed to this, others looked at conditions that might presuppose disintegration. Some of these works were entirely detached from affiliations to a particular school of thought. Instead, they adopted an eclectic approach that drew on both scholarly and foreign policy theories<sup>9</sup>. The complexity of the problems at hand called for much more diverse approaches than the application of monochromic realism or liberalism. It became clear that the best might be found somewhere in between. What started to

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<sup>9</sup> The difference between IR-theories and foreign policy theories is that the first group seeks to explain phenomena and their effects at a global level, considering the whole system of IR, while foreign policies take as a starting point the national perspective and how different elements within the nation can provoke changes in the system, and how the system can affect these elements.

matter more were the particular nuances of the approach, how they addressed the issue and not so much the approach itself.

### *State of the debate*

In an effort to make an evaluation of the lifecycle of the scholarly debate about the future of the European Union, one of the most important conclusions in this regard is that it made a significant progress. From a simple “illusion” of having a collective security system, it evolved into a discussion seeking to improve the imperfect, though still well-functioning, union of states. In more recent times, the question whether the EU is developing into a more integrated or more disintegrated community, is mostly viewed through an evaluation of the crises it experiences. In this form, the debate reached a steady phase where it is neither getting resolved, nor it has disappeared from the literature. Some scholars see crises as a potential for a more integrated community, and others see them as just another event leading to disintegration. Until the official dissolution of the European Union or until an event leading to its utter amalgamation, scholars will most likely keep the debate alive without uniting around a common position since signs of total disintegration or achieving a superior form of integrated community are not currently evident.

Nevertheless, this, in no way undermines the contributions in the field. While there are conflicting opinions offering nuanced assessments on the question, scholars could still contribute in conceptualizing problems, developing effective policies, and identifying potential issues. In fact, by doing so, they could determine the future of the Union itself. Scholars closely observe every problem that threatens to become or has already escalated into a crisis, and its implications for integration, to inquire about the future of the EU. The vast majority of them are united around the centrality of the problem in the study of international relations – a fact that is best reflected on the creation of a scholarly journal, called the Journal of European Integration<sup>10</sup> that addresses different components of the topic. When it comes to identifying these focal points (crises) that shape predictions of more/less integration, researchers are relatively unanimous about what constitutes them: the media, at least partly. Ringo Ma writes that:

News media, in the process of reporting, inevitably ‘select, emphasize, and arrange’ events (Singer & Endreny, 1993: 21). Although mass media rarely initiate or change an event, they can influence perceptions of disasters and risks. In other words, the manner in which a crisis is developed can be largely related to the agenda setting role (selecting issues to report) and framing process (selecting specific aspects of issues to report) of mass media. This is why many scholars postulate that media construct reality (2005: 242).

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<sup>10</sup> The first issue dates back to 1977.

Many of the challenges that the EU is facing could rapidly be reported as a “crisis” in the mainstream media through a so-called “discursive struggle”, a motivation to label events in a particular way (Raboy, 1992: 133). Media focuses predominantly on the events that could potentially lead to disintegration and to some extent leave the achievements of the Union outside public attention. This could be attributed to the populist nature of the media coverage, as some scholars argue (Roodujin, 2014: 741). Hence, the public opinion about future integration could quickly become polarized and the integrity of the Union could be gradually jeopardized, as in the case of Brexit.

So far, in the literature, it seems that the negative and the positive assessments of the work of the EU have been balanced, perhaps with a slight prevalence on the side that anticipates disintegration. This could be attributed to the critical thinking the scholars apply to problems rather than to achievements. It is also possible that works that are skeptical towards integration are a reflection of the rise of the populism in the EU, that has achieved a continuous presence in the member states’ and benefitted from voters’ fear of integration, provoked to a large extent by alarming newspaper headlines (Brack and Startin, 2015; Caiani and Guerra, 2017; Usherwood and Startin, 2012). Headlines are frequently exaggerated for marketing purposes and it is also recognized that: “newspapers are more typical points of reference and sources of information for lay people than are academic journals” (Thurlow, 2006: 689). Thus, it should be acknowledged that mainstream media has a much more significant influence on public opinion than academics. However, even though scholars might not have the power to set the tone for portraying a problem and its seriousness, this does not mean they could not be part of its solution.

As noted above, the debate about the future of the European Union attracts a lot of media attention. This makes it inevitable that scholars, public opinion, and journalism are intertwined and mutually influence each other. An example in this regard is a recent study by the Chatham House, published in *POLITICO* (Paravicini<sup>2017</sup>). It seeks to identify public moods about integration, disintegration and their implications. It is most likely to leave a door open for an even more intensified discussion on the topic, since the main result of the survey showed that the largest group of the EU population falls into the category of “hesitant Europeans”. The latter supports the Union and their nation-states’ membership in it, but expresses concerns about a variety of topics, such as immigration, sovereignty, decision-making, etc. They are not only the largest group in the study, but also the one that is likely to be convinced either in favor of the idea that more integration has its merits or that more disintegration will result in more benefits for the respective nation-states.

*Central questions in the scholarship about EU integration*

The most critical questions to be asked in this debate depends highly on one precondition – does a researcher believe that the European Union, as a modern expression of the idea of an international society, has a chance of survival.

One group of scholars in the literature, mostly represented by realist thinkers, believe that integration processes will fail and ultimately the union will either dissolve or become an example of a victory of domestic interests, over collective ones. For this group of scholars, the most essential issue in this debate is (if they are indeed right) that further integration or at least maintaining this level of integration are both impossible. Furthermore, if the EU disappears or ceases to function as a collective body, it should be considered what other mechanisms would replace the power politics and the inevitable conflicts that may follow in future. Traditionally, realists do not focus much on the question of how to enhance the international environment, but rather only give a prediction that stresses the cyclical nature of struggles for power. As outlined in the “Theoretical Perspectives” section, some scholars from this school frame crises into a theoretical approach that could best explain them. While this could be useful in terms of methodological parsimony, such an approach has many limitations as it fails to seek solutions for two factors. First, how the immediate negative consequences from a crisis could be limited, and second, how future crises could be prevented while, at the same time, accounting for the complex nature of the international environment. Additional important questions such as how to fix the direct damage on the EU’s overall credibility and its self-identity narrative that is harmed by a current crisis remain also unanswered.

A much more pragmatic and larger group appears to be the one of researchers implementing the problem-driven approach that seeks to avoid shortcomings of the purely theoretical framing of crises. This group of researchers invests efforts in changing the status-quo. The main question to be asked by this group is how to overcome the sovereignty concerns of states in an effort to build collective security and a shared identity. In all of the works examined in this essay, it was evident that the clash between domestic and collective interests was at the foundation of every major EU crisis in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Thus, the core of the problem with integration could be depicted in more simple terms: What mechanisms should be developed to increase the number of areas where domestic and collective interests match? While this goal seems difficult to achieve at first glance, it has had remarkable results in the past as the EU have walked towards more and more integration until it obtained the dimensions it currently has. The crises have challenged them to a large extent but instead of general solutions that are impossible to implement in this state of the EU affairs, scholars should concentrate

on more practical issues that may act as a prevention to crises, such as how to increase the level of attraction to the Union in the eyes of the member states.

## Conclusion

A few words about the limitations of this study are also in order. Due to the large volume of literature dedicated to the questions of integration and disintegration, the works that I was able to examine are far from exhaustive. Therefore, I focused on works in the IR/Political Science fields, thus leaving studies in other fields unexplored. Future efforts that aim to contribute to the topic, similar to this one, should select works from other academic disciplines. This would provide academia with an opportunity to compare the evolution of the debate across different scientific fields, and to eventually combine these discussions in an effort to better cope with the interdisciplinary challenges that crises present to the integration of the European Union.

The findings of this study could be summarized in four major points. First, there has been a significant progress in terms of how the topic of European integration was examined over the years. In the very first works where the idea of an international society appeared, the predominant part of the postwar literature was very skeptical about such a perspective. Nowadays, the focus of the debate has shifted toward a discussion on the levels of integration and ceased to be limited to the question whether a common future for European countries is possible. As the scholarship subtly accepted this change in the assessment of the issue, scholarly works evolved in a following direction and achieved notable progress on the problems of EU integration.

Second, an important element of the evolution of the EU integration debate is the tripod of scholarship-media-public opinion that should be understood as an interactive process, rather than a sum of independent static elements that are in a vacuum. They all influence each other, and it will be unwise to analyze the matter of EU integration independently, as it exists in today's highly interconnected world.

Third, there are two main groups of scholars, based on the perspectives they use. The first one uses a theoretical approach and the second one a problem-driven approach. Another characteristic that distinguishes scholars is whether they think that deeper integration is possible. On one hand, realists outline assumptions about the cyclical nature of events, the inevitable conflicts and challenges that international societies face. At the same time, they lack a vision of how a brighter future of European affairs could be achieved. On the other hand, another cluster of scholars address the challenges that threaten the integration processes, investigate the reasons for the crises, and thus suggest solutions on how to avoid crises in the long run. Within the same group, some authors formulate idealistic solutions that could serve as an end goal for the far future of the Union. But, nevertheless, they are not compatible with the concerns about state sovereignty. These suggestions

do not correspond with how these plans should be implemented in an atmosphere of growing mistrust about the idea of collective interests, provoked by various crises that the EU has encountered since its foundation. Thus, it is crucial that scholars of all schools of thoughts, using either theory-driven or problem-driven analyses become receptive to the ideas of other authors, especially such of those that they do not share a standpoint. If achieved, the debate about the future of the EU has the potential to provide a balanced approach that could ensure a much more efficient lens for viewing and analyzing crises.

Fourth, the scholarship on EU integration will surely benefit if researchers dedicate more time and efforts to further evaluate the quality of the debate they have initiated. Therefore, an occasional assessment of the functionality of the existing research would make future contributions more applicable to the multifaceted world of EU politics.

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