

ALEKSANDRA SPALIŃSKA<sup>1</sup>

DOI : 10.14746/rie.2025.19.6

Polish Academy of Sciences

European University Institute and University of Sussex

ORCID: 0000-0002-2494-858X

## Theorising European (Dis)Integration – Logics of Ordering and Unsettling the Polity

### Introduction. Theorising (Dis)integration and its Challenges

Theorising disintegration has become a crucial task in contemporary European studies. The literature offers both future-oriented scenarios concerning the possibility of disintegration (Riddervold, Trondal, Newsome, 2021) and attempts to theorise the degrees and trajectories of disintegrative processes – as seen in the case of Brexit (Innerarity, White, Astier, Errasti, 2018) or the agency of non-state actors such as political parties (Kröger, Lorimer, Bellamy, 2021, pp. 563–581). However, given the predominance of integration theories and the absence of equally elaborate theories of disintegration, a central issue arises: how can we analytically conceptualise the relationship between integration and disintegration, and what are the implications for empirical research?

This challenge also touches on how observed processes, their dynamics, and contexts are interpreted – and thus, on how research perspectives are constructed. From a research design perspective, this is evident in ongoing debates about the feasibility of approaching integration and disintegration within a single analytical framework (Vollaard, 2014). A similar issue emerges in attempts to account for both internal and external factors driving integrational dynamics (Hoffmann, 1966, pp. 862–915; Schimmelfennig, 2018a). Some of these efforts have drawn on theories of polity formation (Vollaard, 2014; Schimmelfennig, 2018a) and differentiated integration, particularly in terms of conceptualising disintegration and designing research around it (Leruth, Gänzle, Trondal, 2022). Can we meaningfully consider integration and disintegration as separate processes, or are they so closely interrelated that isolating them is analytically mistaken (Eppler, Anders, Tuntschew, 2016)? Can both be explained through a unified theoretical approach?

This article provides such an approach. It argues that (dis)integration consists of interrelated processes shaped by external logics of ordering, rooted in global economic dynamics. These logics – such as financialisation – emerge from tensions within global capitalism. As a result, integration and disintegration within the EU are not only outcomes of internal dynamics but also become instruments of power competition shaped by these broader logics. This article thus proposes a dialectical framework for



<sup>1</sup> This article is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike License (CC-BY-SA 4.0).

theorising European (dis)integration and evaluates its potential to enhance our understanding of political contradictions within and beyond the EU. Crucially, this article does not only aim to fill a gap in the existing literature on European disintegration – it critically interrogates how that gap is defined in the first place. Rather than treating disintegration as an anomaly within integration theory or as a mere reversal of integrative processes, I propose a reconceptualisation of integration and disintegration as dialectically interrelated dynamics. Drawing on globalisation studies and polity formation theory, I develop a framework that situates (dis)integration within broader global logics of ordering – such as financialisation – thus moving beyond state-centric and internally focused models. In doing so, the article contributes to theorising disintegration by proposing an alternative framework that embeds (dis)integration processes within and beyond the European polity. It proceeds in three parts: first, I review existing approaches to theorising disintegration; second, I examine how polity formation theory and the neo-medieval model illuminate EU dynamics; third, I propose a dialectical framework grounded in global logics of ordering.

### 1. Literature Review: Theorising EU's Disintegration

Given the consensus within EU studies, the term “integration crisis” has become a recurring theme in scholarship, particularly in reference to the EU's poly-crisis of the last decade. Much of the literature has focused on theorising the roots, trajectories, and consequences of these crises, with a strong emphasis on Brexit (Zielonka, 2014). Explanations are primarily derived from traditional integration theories (Webber, 2014; Schimmelfennig, 2017, pp. 316–336), such as neofunctionalism (particularly through the concept of spill-back) (Schmitter, Lefkofridi, 2016, pp. 1–29), (liberal) intergovernmentalism (Schimmelfennig, 2021; Schimmelfennig, 2018b), multilevel governance, and transactionalism (Webber, 2018; Webber, 2019). Additionally, International Relations (IR) theories, such as including neorealism, intergovernmentalism, and new institutionalism (Riddervold, Trondal, Newsome, 2021) have also been applied.

A significant contribution has been made by the growing body of research on differentiated integration (Leruth, Gänzle, Trondal, 2022). However, a fundamental issue remains: these theories were originally developed to explain integration – not disintegration (Vollaard, 2018; Lefkofridi, 2016; Börzel, Risse, 2018). Nevertheless, they highlight several aspects that are crucial for theorising disintegration. Firstly, they expose the illusion of equal development and engagement among EU member states. Secondly, they underscore the inadequacy of the federal model for understanding the EU's complex dynamics (Zielińska-Głębocka, 1999, pp. 27–28). This also applies to other normative models of European integration, such as the “Europe à la carte” approach, which could in fact be interpreted as a potential outcome of differentiated disintegration.

Moreover, it is necessary to consider relatively recent approaches that incorporate disintegration within their theoretical frameworks. Post-functionalism (Webber, 2019) and new intergovernmentalism (Bickerton, Hodson, Puetter, 2015), demonstrate that

self-destructive tendencies can alter the trajectory of integration and may be triggered both within the EU's institutional system and within the Member States themselves. The first call for developing a theory of disintegration emerged in 2012 – well before the migration crisis or the Brexit campaign (Bickerton, Hodson, Puetter, 2015). Jan Zielonka contributed to this debate two years later by analysing potential scenarios of disintegration and proposing (normative) models for re-integration (Bickerton, Hodson, Puetter, 2015). More far-reaching paradigm shifts began only after the Brexit referendum (Rosamond, 2016, pp. 864–871) which coincided with yet another wave of populist electoral victories. In this context, scholars began investigating the interplay between disintegration and de-Europeanisation, particularly as a consequence of the EU's performance during the poly-crisis (Rosamond, 2019, pp. 31–44; Thomas, 2021, pp. 619–635; Smith, 2021, pp. 637–649).

As Lucas Schramm observes, in the wake of the Eurozone and migration crises, “the number of academic publications and political debates on ‘European disintegration’ has grown considerably. However, a standard definition, let alone a theory, is still lacking.” (Schramm, 2019, p. 1; Leruth, Gänzle, Trondal, 2017; Manners, Whitman, 2016, pp. 3–18). The rationale for such a theory can be derived from the implications suggested by integration theory itself. Within the integration paradigm, disintegration constitutes an anomaly in the Kuhnian sense. As a result, any setback – if acknowledged at all – is framed as an “integration crisis,” and the broader discourse on the EU tends to be dominated by crisis narratives. At the same time, this discourse, rooted in integration theory, often ignores or marginalises voices that focus on disintegration (Zielonka, 2014).

A theory of disintegration, by contrast, would treat such anomalies as normal. In this framework, progress in integration would be seen as the exception rather than the norm. This reversal of perspective would shift analytical attention toward understanding why exits become viable options and how the EU persists despite ongoing crises. Theorising disintegration would allow scholars to identify elements of integration even in moments of stagnation or anticipated breakdown. Paradoxically, such a theory could offer a more optimistic outlook than traditional integration theory, which tends to portray a bleak picture when expectations of integration fail to align with political realities. This is the rationale behind my decision to engage with the question of how to theorise disintegration – even if the complete disintegration of the EU, understood as a political and economic collapse, remains unlikely.

Two major studies are directly dedicated to the theorisation of disintegration: the aforementioned works of Hans Vollaard and Douglas Webber (Vollaard, 2018; Webber, 2018; 2019, pp. 341–365). Webber draws on explanations developed within hegemonic stability theory and domestic politics research (Webber, 2019). In terms of empirical focus, he analyses events and processes that have significantly impacted the EU's condition, including the Eurozone crisis, the hybrid war in Ukraine, the refugee crisis, Russian interference in elections within particular Member States, and Brexit (Webber, 2018). A central concern in his work is Germany's leadership role and its capacity to sustain that role over time. Webber's (2018) emphasis on domestic politics is further validated by the domestic factors influencing support for the EU's core normative pillars – such as the rule of law – in countries like Poland and Hungary.

Increasingly, the problem of disintegration is tied to adherence to the EU's axiological foundations, which Member States are expected to uphold.

Vollaard, on the other hand, offers a critical analysis of the main streams of European integration theory and explores alternative avenues for theorising disintegration (Vollaard, 2014). He draws on insights from comparative federalism, secession studies, and comparative imperialism in both contemporary and historical contexts. Elements of comparative historical analysis also feature in his approach. In the European context, this involves, first, comparing the EU with historical formations such as the Roman Empire and medieval Christendom (Vollaard, 2014). Second, it includes comparisons with specific cases such as the Holy Roman Empire (First German Reich) and the Austro-Hungarian Empire (Zielonka, 2006).

However, Vollaard ultimately proposes his own framework, grounded in the works of Stein Rokkan, Albert Hirschman, and Stefano Bartolini on polity formation (Vollaard, 2014). Polity formation theory examines the factors and trajectories of polity (dis)integration, where the degree of integration or disintegration results from the interplay between two key processes: external consolidation and internal structuring (Rokkan, 1999). To evaluate the effectiveness of polity formation from a socio-political perspective, another analytical triad – exit, voice, and loyalty (Hirschman, 1970) – is employed, assessing the behaviour of social actors within the context of internal structuring. I return to this model in detail in the following section.

Moreover, returning to the theme of comparative imperialism, the EU is not only compared with empires of the distant past but also with more recent ones – particularly the Soviet Union. For instance, Ivan Krastev offers a comparative analysis of the EU's poly-crisis and the disintegration of the USSR (Krastev, 2021). According to Krastev, EU decision-makers can learn valuable lessons from the Soviet collapse to avoid repeating similar mistakes. In his view, this is particularly relevant in the context of crisis management policies and a deeper awareness of the risks involved in governance. One key lesson, he argues, is that the belief in the improbability of disintegration can itself become a contributing factor to collapse.

Nevertheless, such comparisons are inherently problematic, given the ambiguity surrounding how the EU's structure should be conceptualised. As has been noted, "the EU as an object and a project has no modern historical antecedent, and no cultural template or political form with which people have become comfortable through long-standing enculturation" (Bellier, Wilson, 2000). This renders the EU a kind of paradox – or even an oxymoron (Neuwirth, 2020, pp. 51–65) – due to its institutional complexity, the persistent uncertainty over its *finalité politique*, and the dynamic nature of its integration, which often unfolds through a process of "failing forward" (Jones et al., 2016, pp. 1010–1034). For the purposes of this article, I conceptualise disintegration as a set of overlapping processes, shaped by a convergence of phenomena, events, and developments occurring across different domains and timelines. These include both spill-over and spill-back effects, which operate at varying speeds and in different policy areas. As a result, both integration and disintegration are best understood as spectra. Within these spectra, one can analytically identify various forms of differentiated integration and differentiated disintegration, which can, for the sake of

clarity, be divided into flexible stages (Schimmelfennig, 2016, pp. 789–810; Schimmelfennig, Winzen, 2020).

However, theorising disintegration remains primarily centred on institutional approaches and intergovernmental politics, including issues related to power dynamics inspired by neorealism (Zielonka, 2014; Vollaard, 2018). As a result, there is a risk that such theorisation remains constrained by the so-called “territorial trap,” which is associated with methodological nationalism and state-centrism (Vollaard, 2018). This trap is both empirical and normative, as it frames EU disintegration as a reversion to the traditional state system. Interestingly, not only realist scholars, but also proponents of federalism, tend to fall into this trap (Vollaard, 2018) which manifests in the aspiration to establish a European state. Neo-functionalism reflects a similar logic: within its framework, disintegration is conceptualised as a reversal of integration, described through the mechanism of spill-back, which is assumed to mirror spill-over (Vollaard, 2018). This approach risks severing political decision-making from its territorial dimensions altogether (Vollaard, 2018).

A similar limitation applies to the tendency to privilege internal factors of disintegration over external ones, rather than addressing both within a unified analytical framework (Vollaard, 2018; Hoffmann, 1966). In this context, Vollaard’s approach stands out as a substantial and holistic exception (Vollaard, 2018, pp. 35–62). Elements of a broader, more integrated approach to theorising disintegration can also be found in (neo)realist perspectives. For instance, John Mearsheimer argued that post-Cold War Europe was expected to be both isolated by the superpowers and inherently unstable (Mearsheimer, 1990, pp. 5–56; Reichwein, 2021, pp. 79–97; Zimmermann, 2021).

Furthermore, in the context of the growing politicisation of public affairs, social conflict and contentious politics have become increasingly prominent in scholarship on EU affairs (Fligstein, 2008; Trenz, 2018, pp. 66–82). This has led to important contributions from critical theory and debates surrounding the shaping of the economic system (Offe, 2015). In response to the Eurozone crisis, scholars have turned to explanations offered by International Political Economy, as well as comparative politics – particularly in relation to the rise of populism and questions of legitimacy (Jensen, Snaith, 2016, pp. 1302–1310). Simultaneously, renewed reflection on *the political* has contributed to the emergence of republican concepts, including considerations of the conditions necessary for constituting a political community (Jensen, Snaith, 2016), rooted in political philosophy (Bellamy, 2019; Bellamy, Castiglione, 2019). These ideas have found concrete application in the model of differentiated integration, envisioned as a normative project for the EU in response to the poly-crisis (Bellamy, Kröger, 2019; Bellamy, Kröger, Lorimer, 2021). This article engages with these debates by proposing an alternative approach to theorising European (dis)integration.

## 2. European (Dis)integration and Polity Formation

Hans Vollaard develops his approach to conceptualizing and framing European disintegration by building on the works of Stein Rokkan, Albert Hirschman, and Stefano Bartolini on polity formation (Vollaard, 2014). His approach focuses on the factors

and trajectories of polity (dis)integration, which result from the interplay between two processes: external consolidation and internal structuring (Rokkan, 1999; Bartolini, 2005). To assess the effectiveness of polity formation in a socio-political sense, Vollaard (Vollaard, 2014) employs the concepts of exit, voice, and loyalty to analyze the behavior of social actors within the context of internal structuring (Hirschman, 1970).

External consolidation results from the degree of permeability and congruence of boundaries – both geographical and legal, with the latter referring to the boundaries of jurisdiction across functional areas. The greater the permeability and the lower the congruence, the slower the process of polity formation (Vollaard, 2014). For internal structuring, key factors include closure and system-building. When these are achieved, social actors become less willing (due to loyalty) and less able (due to high costs) to withdraw from the polity (exit). This is because participation meets their needs and interests, and their voice is heard – further reinforcing loyalty. At the same time, successful external consolidation restricts the possibility of withdrawal or renders it prohibitively costly. The interdependence between external consolidation and internal structuring creates a “bounding-bonding nexus,” the strength of which determines the success of polity formation (Vollaard, 2014). In the EU context, reaching this stage would entail a redefinition and transformation of existing boundaries and jurisdictions, leading to increased congruence and impermeability at the supranational level. Disintegration, then, can be defined as the reversal of polity formation (Vollaard, 2014).

On such basis, Vollaard proposes four testable trajectories of potential disintegration (Vollaard, 2014). These trajectories are grounded in the weakness of external consolidation, constrained internal structuring (and thus growing citizen dissatisfaction), and partial exits from the polity. Such exits are typically instigated by Eurosceptic actors, whose efforts are driven by public discontent and the absence of a compelling alternative framework, combined with insufficient power to effect a full withdrawal. Within the complex and still-evolving European polity, the strategy of partial exits appears to be the most effective and viable path (Vollaard, 2018). Similar variables are employed by Frank Schimmelfennig (2018a) in his model of differentiated disintegration. Drawing on the case of Brexit, he outlines a process that begins with internally differentiated disintegration (reflected in domestic debates over EU membership), proceeds through external differentiation (in the form of proposed models for the future relationship with the EU), and culminates in external disintegration (full withdrawal from the EU) (Schimmelfennig, 2018a). Crucially, however, disintegration is not just the reverse of integration (Vollaard, 2014; Vollaard, 2018).

This is due to both external transformations – such as differences in the temporal horizon of the two processes and shifts in the regional or global context – and internal changes shaped by the integration process itself and the trajectory toward polity formation. Contrary to what is suggested by Stefano Bartolini’s model (Vollaard, 2014; Vollaard, 2018), it is not evident that disintegration would result in a straightforward reintegration of nation-states, beyond the mechanical reallocation of competences and the reconfiguration of borders. The EU has profoundly transformed its member states, particularly through financial mechanisms and regulatory frameworks. At the same time, the failure of internal structuring at the supranational level can also weaken internal structuring within member states themselves. This is evident in the deep social



divisions sparked by exit debates (as seen in the UK) or by governments' defiance of EU institutions and non-compliance politics (as in Poland and Hungary).

Furthermore, polity formation ultimately points toward state formation – bringing us back to the issue of state-centrism as both a research outcome and a political aspiration. From a research design perspective, the polity formation model provides a valuable conceptual framework for understanding European integration, as it accounts for the roles and behaviours of social, private (business), and non-state public actors (such as metropolitan and local authorities). These actors are recognised as influential in shaping integration dynamics. The model also effectively captures the complex, multi-layered, and multi-causal nature of integration and disintegration processes, clearly illustrating their potential consequences.

Despite these strengths, however, the model remains strongly embedded in an inclusion/exclusion logic. Within polity formation, this manifests as internal/external and domestic/foreign binaries – foundational to the construction of modern nation-states (Hardt, Negri, 2000). These divides are often instrumentalised for external consolidation (e.g., through assertive foreign policy) and internal structuring (e.g., via social mobilisation against perceived external threats). When applied to the EU, the polity formation model tends to frame deepening integration as both the *finalité politique* and the expected trajectory – thus reinforcing a state-centric teleology even while acknowledging the EU's *sui generis* nature.

Since congruence and closure are prerequisites for successful internal structuring, deepening integration emerges – implicitly – as the model's primary recommendation for political practice. At the same time, the prospect of further enlargement appears discouraged within this framework, as the increasing social and political diversity introduced through enlargement may delay or even obstruct the process of polity formation. As a result, applying this model to policymaking can lead to sceptical conclusions regarding further EU enlargement – particularly salient in current debates surrounding Ukraine's membership prospects (Bruszt, Jones, 2024). Moreover, such conclusions are already evident in public discourse, where concerns about internal structuring are leveraged to argue against enlargement, often framed in terms lack of ability to meet the EU's requirements.

An alternative to some of the limitations discussed above is offered by Jan Zielonka's model of Europe as a neo-medieval empire (Zielonka, 2006). In this conceptualisation, an empire – as a form of polity – contrasts sharply with the modern nation-state: it is flexible, uneven, and inherently heterogeneous, rather than aiming for homogeneity (Kelemen, McNamara, 2022, pp. 963–991). The differences between the nation-state and empire encompass multiple dimensions, including political development, economic governance, border architecture, mechanisms of law enforcement, the foundations of collective identity and demos, and the nature of interrelations between constituent entities (Zielonka, 2006). According to Zielonka, the EU cannot be understood as a “superstate,” given its considerable diversity and geographical reach. This diversity is not limited to socio-cultural distinctions, but also includes divergences in political traditions, levels of economic development, and degrees of technological advancement (Zielonka, 2006, pp. 10–11). Whereas the modern sovereign state is characterised by hierarchical and closed governance, the neo-medieval empire model

is defined by dispersed and disjoint authority. It produces multi-layered governance structures, with a variable number of “rungs,” and a functional and territorial scope that arranges actors and competences into concentric circles.

As in the previously discussed models, borders play a central role in the neo-medieval empire framework, since their architecture reflects the mechanisms through which power is exercised. In the case of modern states, borders are clearly defined and tightly regulated – both cartographically and physically – and their territorial scope typically aligns with a specific legal and economic order. In contrast, within a neo-medieval empire, borders are semi-open, fuzzy, and permeable; the territorial reach of formal authority often does not correspond with legal or economic jurisdictions (Zielonka, 2006, pp. 10–11). In this context, boundaries lack predetermined architecture and may resemble medieval marches, serving more as borderland zones of than strict lines of division.

Given these complexities – partially supranational competences, diffuse authority, and an ambiguous developmental trajectory – the neo-medieval empire may be described as a “federal entity in progress.” This conceptual ambiguity contributes to the persistent difficulty of situating the EU’s logic of governance *within* the conventional frameworks of international order: the EU is neither a sovereign state nor a traditional international organisation. In Zielonka’s model, the EU becomes a compromise between national and supranational polities, representing a state of persistent unsettledness – one that transcends the historically exclusive forms of political organisation in Europe. Internal structuring remains incomplete, hindered by democratic deficits and the absence of a shared identity, whereas external consolidation is perennially obstructed by the reluctance of national governments to cede competences and by tensions surrounding the EU’s geopolitical aspirations, particularly as exemplified by ongoing enlargement debates. In Zielonka’s model, the European polity is simultaneously integrating and disintegrating – but across different functional and geographical domains (Zielonka, 2006). While this dual movement is analytically compelling and offers valuable insights for research design, it presents significant challenges for political practice. First, the EU operates within an international system structured around the principle of sovereign statehood and is therefore pressured to conform to its norms and expectations – either to become a state or adapt more intergovernmental mode of operating.

Second, the EU embodies a set of normative aspirations – such as equality and solidarity among Member States – that are difficult to reconcile with the fluidity and heterogeneity inherent in the neo-medieval framework. Nevertheless, the more flexible organisational structure of the neo-medieval empire arguably allows for a better accommodation of disintegrative tendencies and centrifugal dynamics. Similar to the model of a “flexible Europe” (Bellamy, Kröger, Lorimer, 2021), the neo-medieval approach does not rely on rigid institutional or territorial frameworks, which may enable the EU to adapt more effectively to internal divergences and crises. However, this persistent state of unsettledness and institutional ambiguity is compounded by the fact that EU Member States are simultaneously engaged in other multilateral projects, most notably NATO, upon which many rely for security. Moreover, the EU’s deep entanglement in global governance structures and the global economy further contributes to the lack of closure, complicating efforts at both internal structuring and external consolidation.



### 3. Logics of Ordering and Unsettling the Polity

This section proposes a framework for understanding European (dis)integration through the lens of global dynamics – particularly those shaped by the evolution of the capitalist system and the ideological confrontations of the Cold War. At the centre of this approach are the *logics of ordering* and contradictory socio-economic processes that operate at the intersection of politics and the neoliberal economy (i.e. globalization and neoliberalisation) (Cerny, Prichard, 2017, pp. 378–394). The concept of “ordering” is increasingly applied to demonstrate how precisely the order is created and maintained (both internationally and domestically), and who invents and uses its mechanisms (Guillaume, 2007, pp. 741–759).

The logics of ordering unfold simultaneously and transversally, cutting across state borders and political structures, including the EU itself. The European Union is both shaped by and an agent of these global logics: it depends on them, generating similar dynamics internally, especially in its relationships with member states and other political actors. Contemporary logics of ordering transcend the institutional and normative frameworks of the modern era – especially the modern state, whose architecture was traditionally structured by the “bounding-bonding nexus,” distinguishing between domestic/foreign, internal/external, public/private spheres. The framing of European (dis)integration proposed here is inspired by critical theory and philosophical inquiry into the consequences of globalization, offering a way to capture the unsettled and non-linear character of political transformation in and beyond Europe (Sloterdijk, 2013; Hardt, Negri, 2000).

Dialectics itself has historically functioned as a foundational framework for the architecture of political order in the modern era (Hardt, Negri, 2000) – particularly in the context of the international states system. However, the European Union represents a departure from this model, as it emerged through processes of sovereignty transfer to the supranational level (in selected policy areas), simultaneously developing the architecture of a new political entity whose *finalité politique* remains undefined and open-ended. Existing literature has already applied dialectical reasoning to the political dynamics of the EU, particularly in the context of its enlargement policy (Vobrub et al., 2003, pp. 35–62). Within such applications, the core dialectical tension is understood to be that between integration and expansion – both in geographical and functional terms. However, as discussed in the previous section, framing European integration in this way risks reducing it to a form of state-building or polity formation at the supranational level, thereby reinforcing state-centric assumptions that may not adequately capture the EU’s unique political character.

A model more aligned with the dialectics of global logics of ordering – and more realistic within that context – is the neo-medieval empire. Unlike the polity formation framework, this model does not imply an “automatic” response to crisis (such as further congruence in support of external consolidation) as a natural or expected outcome. In contrast, the polity formation approach presents integration as a linear, teleological process – one that can eventually be “completed” once the necessary steps are taken. However, the structural conditions of the globalization era challenge this assumption: even well-developed and externally consolidated nation-states have prov-

en insufficiently resilient to global processes and external pressures, including those driven by neoliberal globalization. Moreover, as previously noted, the very concepts of external consolidation and internal structuring can themselves function as ideologically charged logics of ordering. Within a polity, they can be mobilized – or even manipulated – to serve specific political or strategic aims, rather than as neutral indicators of institutional development.

A key question arises: what are we actually facing at the global level – logics of ordering, contradictory and (un)controllable processes, or both? Furthermore, how can we distinguish between these categories, define them conceptually, and evaluate them empirically? In the context of global capitalism, systemic power is distributed across the entire structure, such that no single actor fully controls it – though some actors may exert influence more frequently or effectively than others (Hardt, Negri, 2000). The central issue is control over the processes that constitute and sustain the global system. When such processes are subject to political manipulation, they can be employed strategically to serve the interests of dominant actors. This is why globalization is often associated with Americanization (Mennel, 2011) and why corporate structures are frequently seen as the primary agents of contemporary governance. In this sense, logics of ordering can be understood as politicized, controllable global mechanisms – strategically mobilized in pursuit of power or specific interests. By contrast, contradictory processes refer to system-level forces whose effects may be unpredictable or conflictual, but which nonetheless influence polity formation. These contradictory forces impact both external consolidation and internal structuring, and by extension, disrupt the “bounding–bonding nexus” that underlies polity cohesion (Vollaard, 2018).

Importantly, some processes that were initially launched as logics of ordering – such as financialization (Cerny, 2021) – have evolved into highly uncontrollable dynamics due to their complex and often unpredictable consequences. Based on these assumptions, EU (dis)integration can be analysed through the lens of such globally operating logics and processes, which simultaneously affect both the external consolidation of the EU (e.g. through shifting or contested functional boundaries) and its internal structuring (e.g. through citizens’ satisfaction with policies or sense of belonging to the EU polity). Moreover, analogous mechanisms can be identified within the EU itself. For instance, Europeanisation may be considered both an expansive, all-encompassing process and, when instrumentalised in power competition, a logic of ordering – typically employed by core EU members or supranational institutions. Conversely, de-Europeanisation functions as a process that often accompanies disintegration, particularly when actors contest the norms, policies, or institutional frameworks promoted by the EU (Rosamond, 2019).

Furthermore, differentiation can be considered a logic of ordering, instrumentalised either domestically by particular governments or within inter-state relations – both as a policy practice and as a discursive threat. Simultaneously, differentiation also constitutes a side-effect process arising from broader internal or external factors (Schimmelfennig, 2018a). Consequently, (dis)integration as a state of affairs results either from internally unmanageable or unintended processes, or – when focused on external factors – from logics of ordering effectively manipulated by outside actors (e.g., Russian interference in domestic elections, or the use of EU differentiation by

non-compliant governments to undermine cohesion). Moreover, both integration and disintegration can themselves become logics of ordering when employed strategically in power competition – either in policy or rhetoric. When these dynamics become unregulated or uncontrollable, they transform into contradictory processes that cascade down and affect lower levels of governance, further unsettling the polity.

This complex interplay between strategic manipulation and uncontrollable systemic forces calls for a dialectical approach to theorising European (dis)integration. Rather than treating integration and disintegration as opposing trajectories or mutually exclusive processes, I propose understanding them as co-constitutive dynamics – emerging from and embedded within broader global and domestic logics of ordering. The dialectical framework outlined below captures this dual nature by tracing how (dis) integration functions both as an instrument of power and as a consequence of systemic contradictions that exceed the control of any single actor. To better understand the rationale behind this framework and the impact of logics of ordering on the architecture of political order, it is useful to recall the definition of political order as “systemic configurations of political authority” that rely on underlying “politico-spatial assumptions” (Reus-Smit, 2013, p. 1059) with the internal-external dynamic serving as a fundamental component. These assumptions are constantly challenged and renegotiated (Hardt, Negri, 2000, pp. 139–154, 186–208). Furthermore, centres of power are no longer confined solely to nation-states; they may also emerge from non-state actors such as terrorist groups and the private sector (Beck, 2005, p. 192; Cutler, 2003, pp. 108–140), further complicating the modern political order.

Additionally, regional and global inequalities have a significant impact on the sovereignty of weaker countries. For example, in the aftermath of the financial crisis, Greece and Cyprus effectively became “half-protectorates” governed by a creditors consortium represented by the IMF and the Eurogroup (Zielonka, 2018, p. 121). This illustrates how sovereignty can be undermined in practice through informal modes of dependency (Khanna, 2016). As a result, the relationships between involved actors form a heterarchical structure – a quasi-institutionalized, multi-layered, and multi-nodal system that aggregates power across differentiated and dispersed social structures, as well as public and private units, spanning multiple states (Cerny, 2009, pp. 421–449). This heterarchy operates both vertically and horizontally (Belmonte, Cerny, 2021) reflecting the outcomes of competing and clashing logics of ordering.

Jörg Friedrichs argues that today’s competing powers – and their simultaneous logics of ordering – are represented by the global economy and the nation-state (Friedrichs, 2001, pp. 475–501), or transnational business and international politics (Friedrichs, 2004, pp. 3–36). However, globalization is not the sole driver of this rivalry. An opposing trend – fragmentation – also shapes the landscape, causing the aggregation of power at transnational and global levels to proceed alongside the disintegration of former political forms. This dynamic applies to the state as well, which on one hand relinquishes some competences to the transnational level, while on the other grants increasing autonomy to regions and cities. According to Friedrichs, globalization and fragmentation are the two most intense processes shaping socio-political reality today, often weakening the “middle level” – namely, the state (Friedrichs, 2001). Importantly, fragmentation is not simply a reaction to globalization; rather, both processes evolve

simultaneously (Friedrichs, 2001). In practice, this dual process affects not only the division of competences and authority across different levels but also, indirectly, the status and security of individuals – raising questions about identity and its transformation within fragmented social environments where the *demos* is weak or sidelined by interest groups and elites.

In practice, such dialectics manifests as *asymmetrical governance*, resulting from uneven flows of power and followed by the asymmetrical politicization of “global” issues within the affected societies. A similar logic can be observed in the architecture of inter- and supranational organizations, including the European Union. This is evident in the EU’s patterns of negotiation, the politics of conditionality, and the influence it has cultivated over time – particularly through its normative gravity in areas such as the rule of law, human rights, and economic prosperity. These features serve to attract other actors and encourage them to join or emulate the EU model (Zielonka, 2006). However, growing differentiation emerges from various levels and mechanisms of authority and stems from the co-existence of both territorial and functional logics (Ruggie, 1986, pp. 131–157; Zielonka, 2014). Indeed, one can argue that two competing logics form the foundation of contemporary world society: the *pluralist* logic, rooted in the state system, and the *solidarist* logic, associated with the agency of non-state actors, global markets, and cosmopolitan networks that promote universalistic values (Buzan, 2004, pp. 90–138, 139–160). These tensions are implicitly expressed in the persistent role of states and inter-state relations within an increasingly globalized world (Ferguson, Mansbach, 2007, pp. 529–549).

Consequently, functional and political power can be temporarily captured by non-state actors, highlighting the fact that the logics of ordering – such as global interdependence – no longer align neatly with the authority traditionally centred in dominant states like the United States. This disjunction strengthens the case for analysing *polarity* not solely in relation to states, but also in terms of the competing logics themselves, as proposed in Friedrichs’ approach. Furthermore, Friedrichs’ observation that globalization and fragmentation unfold simultaneously reinforces the rationale for adopting a dialectical framework, as outlined above. Notably, James Rosenau developed a similar perspective on world politics through his concept of *fraggmentation*, which captures the concurrent processes of integration and fragmentation operating at various levels (Rosenau, 2006). While Rosenau originally applied this to world politics – highlighting the simultaneous forces of globalization and decentralization – the concept is highly applicable to the study of European integration and disintegration (Foster, 2022, pp. 116–131). These competing logics affect individuals directly, often transcending or bypassing formal legal-political structures, making their influence tangible even in the everyday experiences of those governed by public authority (Hardt, Negri, 2000, pp. 139–154, 186–208).

#### 4. Conclusions

This article has argued for the necessity of theorising European disintegration not merely as a reversal of integration but as a dynamic process shaped by overlapping

internal and external forces. Traditional integration theories – from neofunctionalism to intergovernmentalism – have offered important insights into the EU's development, but they remain ill-equipped to account for its fragmentation, partial exits, and political contestations. Drawing on Hans Vollaard's polity formation model and Jan Zielonka's neo-medievalism, I have shown how disintegration can be conceptualised as a multi-directional and uneven process, rather than a linear breakdown. Building on this, I proposed a dialectical framework grounded in the interplay of global logics of ordering and contradictory processes. Rather than treating disintegration as an anomaly, this framework positions it as a normal feature of the EU's evolving institutional and geopolitical context – one that can occur simultaneously with integration in different areas and at different levels.

This dialectical approach has both theoretical and practical implications. It challenges the dominance of state-centric and crisis-driven perspectives in EU studies and instead offers a lens that accommodates uncertainty, complexity, and systemic contradiction. It also provides a more realistic foundation for evaluating EU policies, enlargement strategies, and the resilience of European governance. Recognising the EU as a site of ongoing contestation, shaped by overlapping internal and external logics, enables scholars and policymakers to better understand why certain disintegrative tendencies emerge, persist, or are defused. Future research should further explore how specific logics of ordering – such as digitalization, securitization, or green transition – interact with both polity formation and fragmentation. Empirical applications of this framework could illuminate the trajectories of other regional organisations or deepen our understanding of contested integration processes within the EU itself. By reframing (dis)integration as a dialectical process rather than a linear path, we may begin to see not only why disintegration occurs, but also how it reshapes what integration can mean.

### Bibliography

- Bartolini S. (2005), *Restructuring Europe: Centre formation, system building and political structuring between the nation-state and the European Union*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Beck U. (2005), *Macht und Gegenmacht im globalen Zeitalter: Neue weltpolitische Ökonomie*, Scholar, trans. Jerzy Łoziński, Warsaw.
- Bellamy R. (2019), *Republican Europe of states: Cosmopolitanism, intergovernmentalism and democracy in the EU*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Bellamy R., Castiglione D. (2019), *From Maastricht to Brexit: Democracy, constitutionalism and citizenship in the EU*, Rowman & Littlefield International/ECPR Press, London.
- Bellamy R., Kröger S. (2019), *Differentiated integration as a fair scheme of cooperation*, Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, RSCAS Working Paper 2019/27, Florence.
- Bellamy R., Kröger S., Lorimer M. (2021), *Flexible Europe*, Bristol University Press, Bristol.
- Belmonte R., Cerny P. G. (2021), *Heterarchy: Toward a paradigm shift in world politics*, "Journal of Political Power", vol. 14, no. 1.
- Bickerton C. J., Hodson D., Puetter U. (2015), *The new intergovernmentalism and the study of European integration*, in: *The new intergovernmentalism: States and supranational actors in the post-Maastricht era*, eds. C. J. Bickerton, D. Hodson, U. Puetter, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

- Börzel T., Risse T. (2018), *A litmus test for European integration theories: Explaining crises and comparing regionalisms*, "KFG Working Paper Series", no. 85, Freie Universität, Berlin.
- Bruszt L., Jones E. (2024), *Ukraine's perilous path toward membership: How to expand Europe without destabilizing it*, "Foreign Affairs", 30.05.2024, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/ukraines-perilous-path-eu-membership>, 10.09.2025.
- Buzan B. (2004), *From international to world society? English School theory and the social structure of globalisation*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Cerny P. G. (2009), *Multi-nodal politics: Globalisation is what actors make of it*, "Review of International Studies", vol. 35.
- Cerny P. G. (2021), *Business and politics in an age of intangibles and financialization*, in: *Handbook of business and politics*, eds. A. Kellow, T. Porter, K. Ronit, Edward Elgar, Cheltenham.
- Cerny P. G., Prichard A. (2017), *The new anarchy: Globalisation and fragmentation in 21st-century world politics*, "Journal of International Political Theory", vol. 13, no. 3.
- Cutler C. (2003), *Private power and global authority: Transnational merchant law in the global political economy*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Eppler A., Anders L. H., Tuntschew T. (2016), *Europe's political, social, and economic (dis-)integration: Revisiting the elephant in times of crises*, "IHS Political Science Series Working Paper", no. 143, Vienna.
- Ferguson Y. H., Mansbach R. W. (2007), *Post-internationalism and IR theory*, "Millennium", vol. 35, no. 3.
- Fligstein N. (2008), *Euro-clash: The EU, European identity, and the future of Europe*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Friedrichs J. (2001), *The meaning of new medievalism*, "European Journal of International Relations", vol. 7, no. 4.
- Friedrichs J. (2004), *The neomedieval renaissance: Global governance and international law in the new Middle Ages*, in: *Governance and international legal theory*, eds. I. F. Dekker, W. G. Werner, Springer, Berlin.
- Guillaume X. (2007), *Unveiling the 'inter-national': Process, identity and alterity*, "Millennium", vol. 35, no. 3.
- Hardt M., Negri A. (2000), *Empire*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA.
- Hirschman A. O. (1970), *Exit, voice, and loyalty: Responses to decline in firms, organizations, and states*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA.
- Hoffmann S. (1966), *Obstinate or obsolete? The fate of the nation-state and the case of Western Europe*, "Daedalus", vol. 95, no. 3.
- Innerarity D., White J., Astier C., Errasti A. (2018), *A new narrative for a new Europe*, Rowman & Littlefield, London.
- Jensen M., Snaith H. (2016), *When politics prevails: The political economy of Brexit*, "Journal of European Public Policy", vol. 23, no. 9.
- Jones E. et al. (2016), *Failing forward? The euro crisis and the incomplete nature of European integration*, "Comparative Political Studies", vol. 49, no. 7.
- Kelemen R. D., McNamara K. R. (2022), *State-building and the European Union*, "Comparative Political Studies", vol. 55, no. 6.
- Khanna P. (2016), *Connectography: Mapping the future of global civilization*, Random House, New York.
- Kröger S., Lorimer M., Bellamy R. (2021), *The democratic dilemmas of differentiated integration*, "Swiss Political Science Review", vol. 27.
- Leruth B., Gänzle S., Trondal J. (eds.) (2017), *Differentiated integration and disintegration in the European Union: State-of-the-art and ways for future research*, "ISL Working Paper", no. 1, Oslo.



- Leruth B., Gänzle S., Trondal J. (eds.) (2022), *The Routledge handbook of differentiation in the European Union*, Routledge, London.
- Manners I., Whitman R. (2016), *Another theory is possible: Dissident voices in theorising Europe*, “Journal of Common Market Studies”, vol. 54, no. 1.
- Markakis M. (2020), *Differentiated integration and disintegration in the EU*, “Journal of International Economic Law”, vol. 23, no. 2.
- Mearsheimer J. (1990), *Back to the future: Instability in Europe after the Cold War*, “International Security”, vol. 15, no. 1.
- Mennel S. (2011), *Globalization and Americanisation*, in: *The Routledge international handbook of globalization studies*, eds. B. S. Turner, R. J. Holton, Routledge, London.
- Neuwirth R. J. (2020), *The European Union as an oxymoron*, in: *Sixty years of European integration and global power shifts*, ed. J. Chaisse, Hart Publishing, Oxford.
- Offe C. (2015), *Europe entrapped*, Polity Press, Cambridge.
- Reichwein A. (2021), *Classical realism*, in: *The Palgrave handbook of EU crises*, eds. M. Riddervold, J. Trondal, A. Newsome, Palgrave Macmillan, London.
- Reus-Smit C. (2013), *The concept of intervention*, “Review of International Studies”, vol. 39, no. 5.
- Riddervold M., Trondal J., Newsome A. (eds.) (2021), *The Palgrave handbook of EU crises*, Palgrave Macmillan, London.
- Rokkan S. (1999), *State formation, nation-building and mass politics in Europe*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Rosamond B. (2016), *Brexit and the problem of European disintegration*, “Journal of Contemporary European Research”, vol. 12, no. 4.
- Rosamond B. (2019), *Theorising the EU in crisis: De-Europeanisation as disintegration*, “Global Discourse”, vol. 9, no. 1.
- Ruggie J. G. (1986), *Continuity and transformation in the world polity*, in: *Neorealism and its critics*, ed. R. O. Keohane, Columbia University Press, New York.
- Schimmelfennig F. (2016), *Good governance and differentiated integration*, “European Journal of Political Research”, vol. 55, no. 4.
- Schimmelfennig F. (2017), *Theorising crisis in European integration*, in: *The European Union in crisis*, eds. D. Desmond, N. Nugent, W. E. Paterson, Palgrave Macmillan, London.
- Schimmelfennig F. (2018a), *Brexit: Differentiated disintegration*, “Journal of European Public Policy”, vol. 25, no. 8.
- Schimmelfennig F. (2018b), *Liberal intergovernmentalism and the crises of the EU*, “Journal of Common Market Studies”, vol. 56, no. 7.
- Schimmelfennig F. (2021), *Liberal intergovernmentalism*, in: *The Palgrave handbook of EU crises*, eds. M. Riddervold, J. Trondal, A. Newsome, Palgrave Macmillan, London.
- Schimmelfennig F., Winzen T. (2020), *Ever looser union? Differentiated European integration*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Schmitter P., Lefkofridi Z. (2016), *Neofunctionalism as a theory of disintegration*, “Chinese Political Science Review”, vol. 1.
- Schramm L. (2019), *European disintegration: A new feature of EU politics*, CEPOB Policy Brief 1, College of Europe, Bruges.
- Sloterdijk P. (2013), *In the world interior of capital*, Polity Press, Cambridge.
- Smith M. (2021), *De-Europeanisation in foreign policy making*, “Journal of European Integration”, vol. 43, no. 5.
- Thomas D. C. (2021), *The return of intergovernmentalism?*, “Journal of European Integration”, vol. 43, no. 5.

- Trenz H.-J. (2018), *The political contestation of Europe*, "Culture, Practice & Europeanization", vol. 3, no. 2.
- Vobrubá G. et al. (2003), *The enlargement crisis of the European Union*, "Journal of European Social Policy", vol. 13, no. 1.
- Vollaard H. (2014), *Explaining European disintegration*, "Journal of Common Market Studies", vol. 52, no. 5.
- Vollaard H. (2018), *European disintegration: A search for explanations*, Palgrave Macmillan, London.
- Webber D. (2014), *How likely is European disintegration?*, "European Journal of International Relations", vol. 20, no. 2.
- Webber D. (2018), *European disintegration? The politics of crisis in the EU*, Macmillan, London.
- Webber D. (2019), *Trends in European political (dis)integration*, "Journal of European Public Policy", vol. 26, no. 8.
- Zielińska-Głębocka A. (1999), *Dynamika Unii Europejskiej w świetle teorii integracji*, "Studia Europejskie", no. 3.
- Zielonka J. (2006), *Europe as empire: The nature of the enlarged European Union*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Zielonka J. (2014), *Is the EU doomed?*, PWN, trans. Elżbieta Gołębiowska, Warsaw.
- Zielonka J. (2018), *Counter-revolution: Liberal Europe in retreat*, PWN, trans. Joanna Bednarek, Warsaw.

### Summary

The EU's poly-crisis has raised questions about its future (Riddervold, Trondal, & Newsome, 2021). Yet explanations for disintegrative dynamics are still sought within traditional integration theories (Zielonka, 2014; Vollaard, 2018), risking similarly limited insights. Another issue is the focus on internal rather than external factors, instead of treating both within a unified framework (Hofmann, 1966; Vollaard, 2018). Continued reliance on state-centric models further constrains analysis, as the EU is not a state. This article argues that disintegration consists of processes shaped by external logics of ordering rooted in global economic dynamics. These logics – such as financialisation – stem from tensions within global capitalism. Thus, integration and disintegration become distinct logics instrumentalised in wider power struggles. Drawing on research on polity formation and globalisation, the article develops a dialectical framework to theorise European (dis)integration and its contradictory political processes.

**Key-words:** poly-crisis, European integration, disintegration, power, dialectics

### Teoretyzowanie europejskiej (dez)integracji – logika porządkowania i destabilizowania polityki

#### Streszczenie

Polikryzys UE wywołał pytania o jej przyszłość (Riddervold, Trondal i Newsome, 2021). Jednak wyjaśnienia dynamiki dezintegracji wciąż poszukuje się w tradycyjnych teoriach integracji (Zielonka, 2014; Vollaard, 2018), co grozi podobnie ograniczonymi wnioskami. Kolejnym problemem jest koncentracja na czynnikach wewnętrznych, a nie zewnętrznych, zamiast

traktowania ich obu w ramach ujednoliconych ram (Hofmann, 1966; Vollaard, 2018). Ciągłe poleganie na modelach państwowo-centricznych dodatkowo ogranicza analizę, ponieważ UE nie jest państwem. W niniejszym artykule autorzy dowodzą, że dezintegracja składa się z procesów kształtowanych przez zewnętrzną logikę porządkowania zakorzenioną w globalnej dynamice gospodarczej. Logiki te – takie jak finansjalizacja – wynikają z napięć w globalnym kapitalizmie. W ten sposób integracja i dezintegracja stają się odrębnymi logikami, wykorzystywanymi w szerszych walkach o władzę. Opierając się na badaniach nad formowaniem się ustroju politycznego i globalizacją, artykuł przedstawia dialektyczne ramy teoretyczne do teoretyzowania europejskiej (dez)integracji i jej sprzecznych procesów politycznych.

**Słowa kluczowe:** polikryzys, integracja europejska, dezintegracja, władza, dialektyka

### Author Contributions

Conceptualization (Konceptualizacja): Aleksandra Spalińska

Data curation (Zestawienie danych): Aleksandra Spalińska

Formal analysis (Analiza formalna): Aleksandra Spalińska

Writing – original draft (Piśmiennictwo – oryginalny projekt): Aleksandra Spalińska

Writing – review & editing (Piśmiennictwo – sprawdzenie i edytowanie): Aleksandra Spalińska

Competing interests: The authors have declared that no competing interests exist (Sprzeczne interesy: Autor oświadczył, że nie istnieją żadne sprzeczne interesy): Aleksandra Spalińska

