



Brexit: A Case Study in Post-Truth Politics and European Disintegration

Vittorio Orlando

Thesis for the degree of PhD
in Political Science

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School of Social Sciences

FACULTY OF POLITICAL SCIENCE

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Brexit: Tilviksrannsókn á stjórnámálum eftirsannleikans og gliðnun Evrópusamstarfsins

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Ágrip

Þessi ritgerð rannsakar Brexit bæði sem einstakan pólitískan atburð og sem fyrirmyndardæmi um evrópska sundrunu, og setur það í víðara samhengi eftir-sannleikspólitíkur. Meginmarkmið rannsóknarinnar er að skilja hvernig hugmyndafræðilegir, stofnanalegir og samskiptalegir þættir fléttast saman og ögra samheldni Evrópusambandsins (ESB). Með því að sameina fimm samtengd rannsóknarverkefni þróa ritgerðin kenningarlegt ramma um evrópska sundrunu sem byggir á hlutverki kreppa, pólitískra gerenda og eftir-sannleiksumræðu.

Aðferðafræðilega beitir ritgerðin eigindlegum tilviksrannsóknum, ferlagreiningu (process tracing), eigindlegri innihaldsgreiningu og rammagreiningu. Empírískt efni felur í sér pólitískar ræður, kosningagögn, stefnuskrár stjórnmalaflokka, fjölmiðlaefni og texta frá stofnunum ESB. Greinaform ritgerðarinnar, sem byggir á greinum, gerir hverri birtingu kleift að beina sjónum að sérstöku vídd sundrunar, en saman leggja þær grunn að þróun heildstæðs kenningarlegs líkans.

Fyrsta greinin greinir orsakir Brexit með ferlagreiningu og greinir samspil fyrirliggjandi hugmyndafræðilegrar Evrópuskepsis, stofnanalegra kreppa á borð við evrukreppuna og flóttamannakreppuna, og stefnumótandi hlutverks pólitískra gerenda. Niðurstaðan er sú að sundrunu sé best að skilja sem afleiðingu þrískipts samspils hugmynda, gerenda og kreppa.

Önnur greinin rannsakar hlutverk eftir-sannleikspólitíkur í herferð Leave-hreyfingarinnar og sýnir hvernig rangfærslur og tilfinningalega hlaðin frásögn settu aðild að ESB í hættusamhengi. Með því að flokka herferðarefni í þematíska flokka sýnir greinin hvernig gerendur beittu eftir-sannleiksaðferðum á ólíkum vettvangi og staðfestir þar með miðlægt hlutverk samskiptalegrar meðhöndlunar í sundrunarferlum.

Þriðja greinin fjallar um áhrif Brexit á Evrópuskepsis í Ítalíu og Þýskalandi. Með samanburðargreiningu á efni fjögurra Evrópuskeptískra flokka kemur í ljós að Brexit varð að orðræðulegum viðmiðunarpunkti. Í Þýskalandi studdi AfD opinberlega „DEXIT“, en á Ítalíu styrktu flokkar á borð við Lega og Fratelli d'Italia Evrópuskepsis sína án þess að stefna að úrsögn. Stofnanalegt samhengi og þátttaka í ríkisstjórn skýra að miklu leyti þennan mun og sýna hvernig Brexit hafði áhrif á þjóðlega orðræðu án þess að leiða til einsleitra afleiðinga.

Fjórdá greinin rannsakar stofnanalegar afleiðingar Brexit með áherslu á aðgreinda samþættingu. Með greiningu á stefnumótandi skjölum og opinberum yfirlýsingum ESB kemur í ljós að þótt Brexit hafi skapað sundrunarþrýsting hafi það jafnframt styrkt aðgreinda

sambættingu, einkum á sviði peningamála og utanríkisstefnu. Þetta bendir til þess að sundruna geti mótað sambættingarferla fremur en einfaldlega grafið undan þeim.

Fimmta greinin metur Evrópuskeptíska frásögn í kosningum til Evrópuþingsins 2024 með greiningu á efni frá flokkum á ysta vinstri og ysta hægri. Með rammagreiningu greinir hún viðvarandi þemu — fólksflutninga, stjórnarhætti og efnahagslegt fullveldi — sem endurspeglar eftir-sannleiksaðferðir Leave-herferðarinnar. Niðurstöðurnar sýna að eyðileggjandi Evrópuskepsis er enn sterk og setur ESB fram sem ólöglegt, á meðan uppbyggileg Evrópuskepsis leggur áherslu á umbætur fremur en úrsögn.

Í gegnum allar fimm rannsóknirnar koma fram nokkrar samræmdar niðurstöður. Í fyrsta lagi móta stjórnámálflokkar og stofnanir sundrunu með því að skapa frásagnir sem endurramma aðild að ESB sem spurningu um sjálfsmynd, öryggi og fullveldi. Í öðru lagi fléttast hugmyndafræðilegir kraftar á borð við þjóðernishyggju og efnahagslegan ótta saman við kreppur og skapa frjóan jarðveg fyrir sundrandi frásagnir. Í þriðja lagi eykur eftir-sannleikspólítík þessi ferli með því að veita tilfinningum og framsetningu forgang umfram staðreyndalega nákvæmni. Að lokum er sýnt fram á að Brexit er bæði orsök og birtingarmynd evrópskrar sundrunu: þótt það hafi ekki leitt til tafarlauss kerfishruns hefur það endurrammað aðild að ESB sem afturkræfa og veitt fyrirmynd fyrir framtíðaráttök.

Ritgerðin kemst að þeirri niðurstöðu að evrópsk sundruna sé fjölvítt ferli knúið áfram af samspili kreppa, gerenda og hugmyndafræðilegra afla. Eftir-sannleikspólítík gegnir lykilhlutverki í þessu ferli með því að gera pólitískum gerendum kleift að umbreyta kreppum í sundrunartækifæri. Með því að sambætta innsýn úr Brexit og síðari þróun Evrópuskepsis leggur ritgerðin fram smíðahyggjukennan kenningarlegan ramma um sundrunu sem eykur fræðilegan skilning á veikleikum ESB og framtíðarþróun þess.

Lykilorð:

Brexit, evrópsk sundruna, Evrópuskepsis, eftir-sannleikspólítík, popúlismi

Abstract

This dissertation investigates Brexit as both a unique political event and a paradigmatic case of European disintegration, situating it within the broader context of post-truth politics. The overarching aim is to understand how ideological, structural, and communicative dynamics interact to challenge the cohesion of the European Union (EU). By combining five interlinked studies, the research develops a theory of European disintegration grounded in the role of crises, political actors, and post-truth narratives.

Methodologically, the thesis employs qualitative case study designs, process tracing, qualitative content analysis, and frame analysis. Empirical materials include political speeches, campaign documents, party manifestos, media content, and EU institutional texts. The article-based format allows each publication to focus on a distinct dimension of disintegration while collectively contributing to the development of a comprehensive theoretical model.

The first article analyses the causes of Brexit through process tracing, identifying the interplay between pre-existing ideological Euroscepticism, structural crises such as the Eurozone and refugee crises, and the strategic agency of political actors. It concludes that disintegration is best understood as the outcome of a triad of ideas, actors, and crises.

The second article investigates the role of post-truth politics in the Leave campaign, demonstrating how misinformation and emotionally charged narratives framed EU membership as a risk. By classifying campaign materials into thematic groups, it shows how actors mobilised post-truth strategies across different arenas, confirming the centrality of communicative manipulation in disintegration processes.

The third article explores Brexit's impact on Euroscepticism in Italy and Germany. Through comparative content analysis of four Eurosceptic parties, it finds that Brexit served as a rhetorical benchmark. In Germany, the AfD openly advocated "DEXIT," while in Italy, parties such as Lega and Fratelli d'Italia reinforced their Euroscepticism without pursuing withdrawal. Structural contexts and government participation largely explain these divergences, highlighting how Brexit influenced national discourses without producing uniform effects.

The fourth article examines Brexit's institutional consequences, focusing on differentiated integration. Analysing policy documents and official EU statements, it finds that while Brexit introduced disintegration pressures, it simultaneously reinforced differentiated integration,

especially in monetary and foreign policy. This suggests that disintegration can reshape integration trajectories rather than simply weaken them.

The fifth article assesses Eurosceptic narratives in the 2024 European Parliament elections, analysing materials from far-left and far-right parties. Using frame analysis, it identifies persistent themes—migration, governance, and economic sovereignty—mirroring the Leave campaign’s post-truth strategies. The findings indicate that destructive Euroscepticism remains strong, framing the EU as illegitimate, while constructive Euroscepticism advocates reform rather than withdrawal.

Across the five studies, several consistent results emerge. First, political parties and institutions shape disintegration by constructing narratives that reframe EU membership as a matter of identity, security, and sovereignty. Second, ideological forces such as nationalism and economic anxiety interact with crises to provide fertile ground for disintegrative narratives. Third, post-truth politics intensifies these dynamics by privileging emotion and representation over factual accuracy. Finally, Brexit is shown to be both a cause and a symptom of European disintegration: while it has not produced immediate systemic collapse, it has reframed EU membership as reversible and provided a blueprint for future contestation.

The dissertation concludes that European disintegration is a multidimensional process driven by the interaction of crises, actors, and ideational forces. Post-truth politics plays a pivotal role in this process, enabling political actors to transform crises into disintegrative opportunities. By integrating insights from Brexit and subsequent Eurosceptic developments, the thesis proposes a constructivist theory of disintegration that advances scholarly understanding of the EU’s vulnerabilities and future trajectories.

Keywords:

Brexit, European Disintegration, Euroscepticism, Post-Truth Politics, Populism

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While customary, acknowledgments are often the only part of a dissertation that anyone will read, so I shall make the most of it. I would like to acknowledge the British voters and all Eurosceptic actors in the European Union for giving me years of material to think about,

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Writing a PhD is a significant part of life, and I am grateful to the friends who accompanied me through it. In order of age—for some sort of order is necessary: Matteo Tarsi, an unparalleled model of productivity and efficiency, capable of publishing five articles in the time it takes me to write an introduction; Magnus Sigurdarson, who must be noted was entirely uninterested in my research; Saeed Shamshirian, who reminded me that political processes are the sum of individual choices and, ultimately, culture; Brian Barr, who untangled the mystery of formatting; Goda Cicinaite; Marco Sodano; Piergiorgio Consagra; Marco Recenti; Giulia Zorzan; Elisabeth Backes; and Zaw Myo Win. Living far from home, one needs a family, and over the years they became mine.

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List of Abbreviations

AfD: Alternative für Deutschland (Alternative for Germany)

CDU: Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands (Christian Democratic Union of Germany)

CFSP: Common Foreign and Security Policy

COVID-19: Coronavirus disease 2019

CPE: Critical Political Economy

DI: Differentiated Integration

ECB: European Central Bank

ECR: European Conservatives and Reformists Group

ECRI: European Commission Against Racism and Intolerance

EEC: European Economic Community

EFDD: Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy

EMU: Economic and Monetary Union of the European Union

ESM: European Stability Mechanism

ESN: Europe of Sovereign Nations

EP: European Parliament

EU: European Union

FdI: Fratelli d'Italia (Brothers of Italy)

FDP: Freie Demokratische Partei (Free Democratic Party)

FN: Forza Nuova (New Force)

FPÖ: Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (Freedom Party of Austria)

GCM: Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration

GUE/NGL: The Left in the European Parliament

ID: Identity and Democracy Party

IR: International Relations

KSČM: Komunistická strana Čech a Moravy (Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia)

LFI: La France Insoumise (France Unbowed)

LI: Liberal Intergovernmentalism

LN: Lega Nord (Northern League)

LSP: Lega per Salvini Premier (League for Salvini Premier)

M5S: Movimento 5 Stelle (Five-Star Movement)

MENF: Movement for a Europe of Nations and Freedom

MFF: Multiannual Financial Framework of the European Union

NATO: North Atlantic Treaty Organization

NF: Neofunctionalism

NGEU: Next Generation EU

NHS: National Health Service

NRRP: National Resilience and Recovery Plan

PaP: Potere al Popolo! (Power to the People!)

PC: Partito Comunista (Communist Party)

PD: Partito Democratico (Democratic Party)

PESCO: Permanent Structured Cooperation

PF: Postfunctionalism

PfE: Patriots for Europe

PTB: Parti du Travail de Belgique (Workers' Party of Belgium)

PTP: Post-Truth Politics

PRR: Populist Radical Right Parties

PVV: Partij voor de Vrijheid (Party for Freedom)

QCA: Qualitative Content Analysis

RN : Rassemblement National (National Rally)

RRF: Recovery and Resilience Facility

SPD: Svoboda a přímá demokracie (Freedom and Direct Democracy)

SYRIZA: Synaspismós Rizospastikís Aristerás – Proodeftikí Symmachía (Coalition of the Radical Left – Progressive Alliance)

TEU: Treaty on European Union

TSCG: Treaty on Stability, Coordination and Governance in the Economic and Monetary Union

UK: United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland

UKIP: UK Independence Party

US: United States of America

VB: Vlaams Belang (Flemish Interest)

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4. Publication V

Table 1. Parties analysed in the study.

Table 2. Summary of the findings of the thematic analysis.

Table 3. Electoral results of the parties analysed.

List of Original Papers

This thesis is based on the following original publications:

- I. Agency and structure in the age of European disintegration. Orlando, V., & Conrad, M. (2024). *Frontiers in Political Science*, 6, 1383485.
- II. Post-Truth Politics, Brexit, and European Disintegration. Orlando, V. (2022). In *Europe in the Age of Post-Truth Politics: Populism, Disinformation and the Public Sphere* (pp. 103-127). Cham: Springer International Publishing.
- III. Reinforcing or moderating? The impact of Brexit on Italian and German Euroscepticism. Orlando, V., & Conrad, M. (2024). *Frontiers in Political Science*, 6, 1063039.
- IV. Brexit as a Driver of European Disintegration: Institutional Reform and Differentiated Integration. Orlando, V., & Conrad, M. (2025). *Canadian Journal of European and Russian Studies*, 18(2), 26-49.
- V. Eurosceptic narratives in post-Brexit Europe: the 2024 European Parliament elections. Orlando, V. (2025). *European Politics and Society*, 1-19.

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Declaration of Contribution

This dissertation was carried out under the continuous supervision of Professor Maximilian Conrad, who oversaw the entire project and provided sustained guidance on its design, structure, and drafting. The doctoral committee also reviewed and commented on successive versions of the thesis. Within this framework of supervision, the research framework, theoretical foundations, planning and design of the study, as well as the collection, processing, analysis, and interpretation of data were conducted by me. The drafting, writing, reviewing, and final editing of the dissertation and the associated publications were also my responsibility, with ongoing feedback and advice from my supervisor.

The thesis itself, together with the second and fifth publications, were written entirely by me, while Professor Conrad's role in these cases was that of a supervisor: he advised on the overall structure and commented on early drafts, but the research, analysis, and writing were under my responsibility.

In three of the publications our collaboration went beyond supervision, resulting in joint authorship. In the first article, Professor Conrad contributed substantially by reorganising the structure, editing substantial parts of the text, and managing the revisions required by peer review. In the third article, he authored the section analysing German Eurosceptic parties and was responsible for revisions after peer review, while I focused on the comparative framework, the Italian case study, and the broader analysis. In the fourth article, he played an active role in reviewing the general structure and commenting extensively on the first drafts, helping shape the framing of the argument.

The thesis was financed through a two-year RANNÍS doctoral grant. The first three publications also benefited from additional support provided by Professor Conrad's individual research grant, and by the University of Iceland teaching grant.

1 Introduction

In Political Science, particularly within the Euro-North American context, 2016 will likely be remembered for two unexpected events that challenged our understanding of democracy and political institutions. The first was the United Kingdom's referendum on European Union membership, which set the stage for what would eventually become known as Brexit. The second was the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States. Both events were preceded by electoral campaigns centred on the notion of breaking away from the *status quo*. The actors behind the two successful campaigns defined the *status quo* as a situation of economic, social, and cultural instability driven by elites portrayed as detached, if not outright hostile, to the concerns of ordinary people. The slogans of the two campaigns, "Make America Great Again" and "Take Back Control," also indicated a desire to move past this growing disconnect, offering voters a chance to break away from the past. Another significant aspect shared by the 2016 US Presidential Election and Brexit was the deliberate manipulation of information to further a political agenda, a phenomenon known as post-truth politics. In EU studies, the outcomes of the Referendum also questioned the future of European integration, showing how it could be reversible. This work looks at Brexit within the context of post-truth politics, aiming to provide a deeper understanding of the driving forces behind European disintegration.

1.1 Aims and Objectives

This research analyses Brexit within the context of a paradigm shift in political communication, termed the post-truth era. This phenomenon is closely linked to the rise of populist narratives (Newman & Conrad, 2024). The motivation behind this focus lies in understanding that the dynamics leading to the Referendum and its outcome are deeply connected to a campaign style characterised by rhetoric, reliance on factually incomplete or incorrect information, and the use of narratives crafted to provoke emotional responses from voters. Although the Leave campaign is not the first or only example of such tactics—which are common in political campaigns—it represents a notably successful use of misinformation to an unprecedented degree.

The second aim is to explore the connection between post-truth politics and European disintegration, using Brexit as a case study. The Referendum suits this analysis for two reasons: first, it provides empirical evidence of successful European disintegration, thus offering insights into how such processes function. Second, the United Kingdom's departure has likely influenced Eurosceptic narratives and discourses, affecting other member states and European institutions collectively.

Aligned with these objectives, the overarching goal of this dissertation is to set the analytical

foundations for the development of a comprehensive theory of European disintegration. Instead of treating Brexit as an isolated event, this research proposes it as a paradigmatic case from which systematic insights can be drawn concerning the convergence of longstanding ideological currents, structural challenges, and post-truth dynamics that undermine European integration. By synthesising these complex dimensions, the ultimate aim is to propose a theoretical framework that not only explains disintegrative forces but also allows to examine future challenges for European institutions. It is acknowledged that this framework is currently based solely on Brexit and requires additional case studies for refinement and broader applicability.

To achieve these aims, this work set several objectives. The first was to reconstruct the causal process behind Brexit, paying particular attention to the dualism between structure and agency. Regarding post-truth politics, focusing on the Leave campaign helped identify critical elements in Eurosceptic discourse, emphasising the link between populism and post-truth narratives. The impact of Brexit on European disintegration was examined through domestic dimensions of member states by comparing Eurosceptic parties' campaign materials in Italy and Germany. At a systemic level, the consequences of the Referendum were analysed from the perspective of differentiated integration to assess how the EU's institutional architecture has evolved post-Brexit. Lastly, by analysing content from far-right and far-left Eurosceptic parties during the 2024 European elections, it was possible to reconnect the dimensions of post-truth and disintegration. This analysis aimed to evaluate whether the political communication style used in the Leave campaign has gained traction continent-wide and to gauge the strength of Eurosceptic parties in the European Parliament. This multidimensional approach enabled the thesis to address the research questions introduced in the next section.

1.2 Research Questions

This thesis studies Brexit from the vantage point of theorising European disintegration against the broader backdrop of discussions on post-truth politics (Newman, 2019; MacMullen, 2020). The dissertation's overarching research question is the following: *How can European disintegration be explained?* This question is addressed through five interconnected articles that provide insights into various aspects of the issue. In addition to the specific questions tackled in each article, further elaborated upon in the methodological chapter, it is possible to identify three shared research questions essential for a comprehensive examination of the central inquiry of this research.

The first of these questions focuses on the causes and dynamics surrounding the Referendum and can be summarised along these lines: *Why and how did Brexit occur?* This problem is of central importance, as understanding the causal process behind Brexit is an indispensable premise for using it effectively as a case study, and it is primarily explored in the first two articles. The first one does so by testing to which extent Brexit can be explained by reference to structural and ideological factors. The second article focuses more on the

post-truth dimension of the dissertation by exploring the causal impact of disinformation on the outcome of the Brexit campaign.

Addressing the first question clarifies the causal process behind European disintegration, which leads to the second research question: *What does Brexit reveal about the mechanisms of EU disintegration?* This aspect is examined in the last three articles of the thesis, particularly in the third one, which explores Eurosceptic discourse in Italy and Germany. The main objective of this comparative study is to determine the extent to which the conditions that led to Brexit are also present in these two member states. The decision to focus on Eurosceptic narratives is driven by a desire further to investigate the role of post-truth in these disintegrative processes.

The third research question addresses the impact of Brexit on EU disintegration both in terms of institutional design and political campaigning. This question can be formulated as follows: *What impact did Brexit have on EU disintegration?* This aspect is explored in the two final articles. Specifically, the fourth paper analyses the effects of Brexit on institutional reforms in key EU policy areas such as common defence and monetary policies. Lastly, the fifth article assesses the rise of anti-EU populism and post-truth politics in countries where dissatisfaction with the EU has been growing. The concluding chapter of the dissertation utilises the findings from the five papers to analyse the causes and methods of Brexit, while also discussing the future of European disintegration and the influence of post-truth politics and ideological forces on it.

According to the model proposed in this thesis, the pathway to European disintegration begins with underlying ideological and structural factors that give rise to Eurosceptic actors. During periods of crisis, these actors craft narratives which are subsequently amplified and disseminated through post-truth political practices, ultimately causing European disintegration. Figure A below provides a visual overview of the overall analytical framework, clarifying how the five articles interlink to address the research question and contribute to the development of the theory of European disintegration.

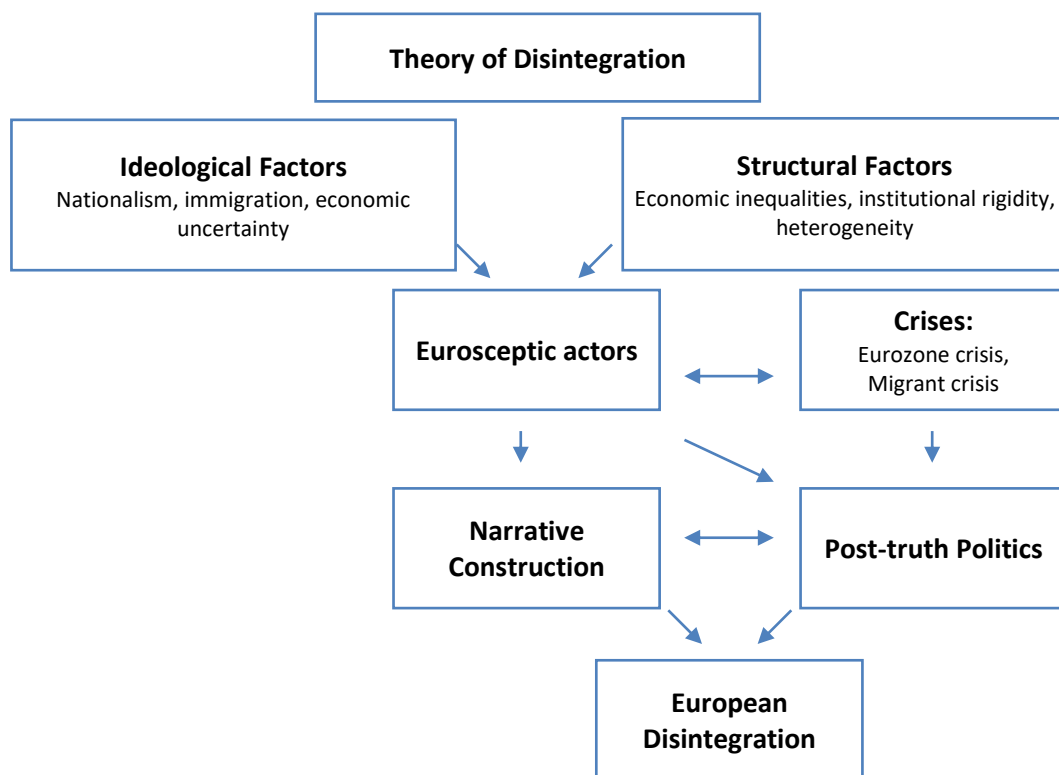


Figure 1. Theory of Disintegration

1.3 Theoretical Context

The scope of this dissertation spans two primary areas: the emerging literature on European disintegration (Vollaard, 2014; Rosamond, 2016) and recent research on post-truth politics and misinformation, particularly in the context of EU contestation and the discursive enactment of Euroscepticism (Zappettini & Maccaferri, 2021; De Wilde et al., 2013). Regarding disintegration, this work builds on the idea that citizens’ perceptions of the EU pose a significant threat to integration (Van Middelaar, 2018). It contributes to this field by examining how post-truth politics, and particularly misinformation, can exploit external crises and pre-existing ideological forces to construct new representations of reality aligned with specific political goals. This framework is applied to Brexit and to the rise of Eurosceptic movements and discourses in other member states. Moreover, the thesis also engages with literature on the delegitimation of the EU within party politics (Jones, 2019) and on the constraints Brexit imposes on member states experiencing systemic crises (Leruth et al., 2019).

In addressing the systemic effects of the Referendum, this work treats Brexit as a catalyst for institutional reform, aligning with scholarship on differentiated integration (Fossum, 2015; Schimmelfennig, 2018a; Schimmelfennig et al., 2023) and drawing from neofunctionalist accounts of integration (Niemann & Ioannou, 2015). This is examined through empirical analysis of narratives promoted by Eurosceptic parties, continuing a line of research focused on the politicisation of EU issues by such actors (Brack, 2020). In doing so, the thesis links the structural and ideological dimensions of disintegration, highlighting the causal relationship between policy, electoral outcomes, and the narratives and ideological currents that shape them.

The research contribution lies in starting from an analysis of Brexit's causes to develop a theoretical model of European disintegration grounded in post-truth politics—understood as a communicative environment marked by populism, misinformation, polarisation, and issue exploitation by political actors. Given its aim to explain Brexit and apply it as a model, this work holds both retrospective and prospective value. Its retrospective contribution lies in the empirical reconstruction of the dynamics leading to the Referendum and the diffusion of Eurosceptic narratives. Prospectively, it offers a framework for evaluating future and ongoing crises.

This dissertation adopts European disintegration as an analytical framework rather than as a description of a linear or zero-sum process. Disintegration is not conceptualised as the simple reversal of integration, nor as institutional collapse or de-Europeanisation. Instead, it is understood as a process through which the scope, legitimacy, and meaning of European integration are contested and potentially reconfigured. This approach allows integrative and disintegrative dynamics to coexist, reflecting the empirical complexity of the European Union in the post-crisis period.

Framing the analysis around disintegration is therefore compatible with the more nuanced findings presented in later chapters, which document significant patterns of institutional adaptation and differentiated integration. Such developments are interpreted not as contradictions of disintegration, but as responses to disintegrative pressures in politically contested policy areas. Conceptualising disintegration as a process rather than an outcome enables the dissertation to analyse Brexit alongside other critical EU crises, capturing how integration is challenged, politicised, and renegotiated without necessarily producing exit.

In this context, Brexit constitutes a unique political event in the history of European integration insofar as it resulted in the formal withdrawal of a member state from the European Union. However, while the outcome itself is unprecedented, the political dynamics that produced it are not *sui generis*. This dissertation approaches Brexit as a paradigmatic case of European disintegration, not because it represents a typical trajectory for the European Union, but because it renders visible a set of causal mechanisms that have been present, albeit in less extreme forms, across multiple European crises. In this sense, Brexit functions as an analytically revealing case through which processes of disintegration can be examined.

The value of Brexit as a paradigmatic case lies in its capacity to expose how long-standing ideological Euroscepticism, structural pressures generated by successive crises, and the strategic agency of political actors can converge to challenge the cohesion of the European project. Similar configurations have emerged in the context of the Eurozone crisis, the refugee crisis, conflicts over the rule of law, and, more recently, debates surrounding the political and economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. While these episodes did not culminate in withdrawal, they activated comparable patterns of contestation, including the politicisation of EU authority, the mobilisation of sovereignty-based claims, and the reframing of European integration as a source of risk rather than stability.

From this perspective, Brexit should not be understood as a predictive model for future exits, but as an extreme manifestation of broader disintegrative dynamics that may unfold in different institutional and political forms. Rather than signalling an inevitable collapse of the European Union, Brexit has contributed to a reconfiguration of the meaning of EU membership by demonstrating that integration is not irreversible. As such, the case provides a critical vantage point for analysing how disintegration pressures emerge, how they are articulated through political discourse and post-truth narratives, and how they interact with institutional responses that may simultaneously generate new forms of integration. Treating Brexit as a paradigmatic case therefore allows this dissertation to derive analytically transferable insights into European disintegration while remaining attentive to contextual variation and non-exit outcomes.

The framework developed in this dissertation is grounded in the empirical analysis of Brexit and related cases and does not claim universal applicability beyond comparable political and institutional contexts; however the thesis fills a gap in the literature by bridging divergent theoretical perspectives on EU contestation and disintegration, and by analysing how ideological, structural, and post-truth processes interact to undermine the European project. Lastly, for the purpose of this work, ideological factors refer to the prevailing beliefs, values, and political attitudes that shape citizens' and actors' perceptions of the EU. Structural factors encompass the institutional arrangements, economic conditions, and systemic pressures that influence the stability and cohesion of the European Union.

1.4 Structure of the Thesis

This work is structured into six chapters, including this introduction and a shorter conclusive chapter, proceeding as follows. The second chapter presents the theoretical framework of the research. It begins with a brief introduction addressing the study's background and context and is divided into four sections, each dedicated to a key theoretical concept underpinning the thesis. The first two sections discuss European integration theory and European disintegration. The third section examines Euroscepticism as a causal factor in disintegration. Finally, the last section explores post-truth politics, identified as a tool that promotes Euroscepticism and consequently European disintegration. Overall, this chapter develops the conceptual framework by integrating literature on European disintegration,

Euroscepticism, and post-truth politics. The subsequent empirical chapters apply this framework to different arenas and time periods, allowing for both integration and disintegration dynamics to be observed

The third chapter focuses on the thesis's methodological aspects, beginning with the decision to adopt an article-based dissertation format. The second section details the research methods, explaining the rationale for using qualitative approaches, specifically process tracing, qualitative content analysis, and frame analysis. This is followed by an overview of the materials used in the five papers, along with the criteria guiding their collection and analysis. The chapter concludes by acknowledging the methodological limitations.

The fourth chapter presents the five papers comprising the dissertation. It opens with an overview of each article's contributions. The first paper employs process tracing to examine the causal factors behind the Referendum. The second explores the Leave campaign within the context of post-truth politics. The third assesses Euroscepticism in Italy and Germany through qualitative content analysis of declarations and campaign materials of Eurosceptic parties in the two member states. The fourth discusses Brexit's disintegrative impact on the EU, focusing on monetary policies and the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). The fifth conducts a frame analysis of campaign materials from far-left and far-right parties in the 2024 EU parliamentary elections. The chapter's final sections summarise the connections between the main findings, leading into the discussion chapter.

The discussion chapter answers the dissertation's overarching research question: to construct a general theory of how supranational entities unravel, taking Brexit as a paradigmatic example. It pays particular attention to the rise of post-truth politics and its impact on public opinion, elite discourse, and institutional resilience.

It comprises three sections, corresponding to the three sub-research questions introduced earlier. The first section draws from the first two papers to discuss Brexit's causes and their implications for European disintegration. The second examines Brexit's consequences, focusing on its influence on Eurosceptic political narratives and the EU's institutional architecture. The final section addresses the central research question, arguing that Brexit and the rise of post-truth politics necessitate a new approach to theorising European integration.

The sixth and final chapter adopts a forward-looking perspective. It contextualises the thesis's findings and outlines potential avenues for future research, highlighting the need to account for post-truth politics and Eurosceptic narratives when examining the future trajectories of European disintegration.

The theory of disintegration proposed here suggests that European integration is gradually weakened by a combination of longstanding ideological currents and persistent structural challenges. Nationalism, scepticism towards supranational governance, and historical grievances intertwine with structural pressures such as economic instability and institutional

rigidity. Crises, whether economic, political, or social, act as catalysts, enabling Eurosceptic actors to seize opportunities by crafting and promoting disintegrative narratives through post-truth politics. By exploiting these crises with misinformation and emotive rhetoric, they influence public opinion and erode trust in European institutions, ultimately fragmenting the cohesion of the European project.

A visual outline of this framework is presented in Figure 2.

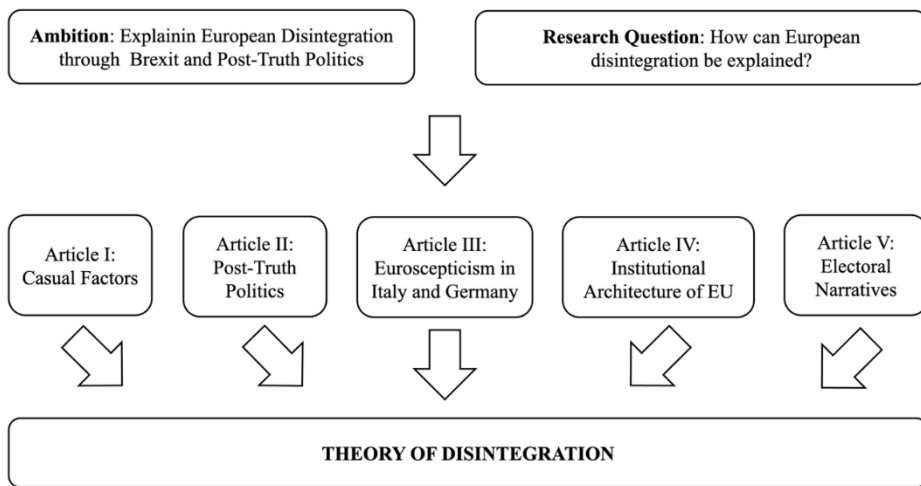


Figure 2. Research Framework

2 Theoretical Framework

2.1 European Integration

Given the explicitly constructivist orientation of this work, the theoretical overview of European integration begins with the theory most distant from this position and gradually moves towards approaches more aligned with the thesis's perspective. Intergovernmentalism posits that European integration is primarily driven by the functional interests of member states, mediated through their leaders (Hooghe & Marks, 2019). From this view, institutions result from intergovernmental bargaining shaped by national preferences. As states are presumed to act based on strategic and economic interests, Brexit is seen as having a limited structural impact, the referendum alone being insufficient to sever the deep interdependence between the UK and the EU. Moravcsik (2016) argued provocatively that Brexit is largely a domestic affair with little bearing on the broader integration process. However, as Schimmelfennig (2018b) noted, this theory fails to account for internal, identity-based factors influencing national preferences.

This work acknowledges the importance of intergovernmental bargaining given the EU's institutional architecture, where national governments retain significant power despite the expansion of supranational competencies. Yet, it rejects the notion that states act in a vacuum. As Brexit shows, domestic politics, including ideological contestation and electoral pressures, can reshape government preferences. Therefore, a robust theory of European disintegration must incorporate these internal dynamics, especially as they evolve over time.

Moving closer to this thesis's perspective, neofunctionalism interprets integration as driven by both domestic and transnational actors seeking efficient frameworks for cooperation (Haas, 1958). It centres on the spillover effect, where cooperation in one sector prompts further integration in others, gradually producing a shared regulatory framework (Haas, 1970). While this perspective usefully highlights incremental, interest-driven processes, it has been criticised for neglecting identity and public opinion (Kuhn, 2019). One significant weakness is its failure to adequately address disparities in how integration's benefits are distributed, a key factor behind rising Euroscepticism (Schmitter & Lefkofridi, 2016). Though neofunctionalism theoretically allows for "spillback," a reversal of integration due to waning functional interdependence, this aspect remains underdeveloped (Vollaard, 2018).

As this thesis argues, both intergovernmentalism and neofunctionalism offer partial insights into the integration process but struggle to fully explain deeper socio-political currents, particularly those relating to identity and discourse. These limitations underline the need for a constructivist approach that foregrounds ideational factors, public narratives, and the role of post-truth dynamics in shaping the future of the European project.

This thesis recognises the theoretical contribution of neofunctionalism in identifying and describing mechanisms of European integration in the presence of optimal conditions, as well as the role of local interest centres in influencing political action in favour of further integration. However, in light of Brexit and broader mechanisms of European disintegration, this work argues that additional factors can significantly diminish the spillover effect theorised by neofunctionalism. These factors comprise two interconnected elements, one ideological and the other structural. The ideological aspect concerns the democratic nature of European states, where politicisation of EU membership can lead to the emergence of Euroscepticism. In the electoral context, this could overshadow the sectoral interests identified by the neofunctionalist analysis, as in the Brexit Referendum. As noted earlier, the structural issue is the risk that external factors may make European integration less advantageous, at least in the short and medium term, especially in the absence of substantial structural reforms.

Postfunctionalism focuses on the role of public opinion and identities, shifting away from the idea that functional pressures are the primary drivers of EU integration (Hooghe & Marks, 2009). It developed in response to the increasing politicisation of EU issues following the Maastricht Treaty and aims to explain how differing stakeholder preferences affect the EU's institutional development. It examines how political actors mobilise national identities during elections and referendums, and how this affects EU integration by reinforcing contestation (Hooghe & Marks, 2019). As it was designed to address politicisation directly, postfunctionalism suits the study of Brexit particularly well. On the role of ideational forces in governance, the theory argues that governments are constrained by the need to secure domestic support, within parties and electorates, while also maintaining international credibility. This tension is central to the analysis of the Referendum in this thesis and has informed studies of post-Brexit negotiations (Biermann & Jagdhuber, 2022).

This work embraces the postfunctionalist perspective, focusing on identities and the politicisation of EU membership as key drivers of European disintegration. However, it diverges from a strictly postfunctionalist approach for three reasons. First, this thesis explores the construction of identities and their evolution over time. Second, it considers how EU integration is shaped by domestic and geopolitical factors, largely overlooked in postfunctionalist research. Third, it views European integration as a multi-level process, where the three theories discussed should be seen as complementary rather than alternative accounts.

Alongside these grand theories explaining European integration, other frameworks from sociology and political economy have addressed its underlying dynamics. A thorough review of all methodologies is beyond this study's scope, but it is important to acknowledge those that influenced it. One such approach is institutionalism, which includes rational choice, historical, and sociological strands. These theories view institutions as pivotal to integration, arguing they resist change and tend to reproduce existing practices, a phenomenon known as path dependency. However, critical junctures—events significant enough to force major

change—can disrupt these patterns (Pollack, 2019). This thesis uses path dependency and critical juncture to analyse Brexit and situate it within the EU's institutional development.

Normative theories focus on the EU's democratic legitimacy, investigating the role of norms and practices in shaping its functioning (Bellamy & Attucci, 2009). In this regard, Habermas (2013) observed how the EU finds itself at a crossroads between preserving its economic policies and further integration. However, according to the German philosopher, integration is contingent upon overcoming short-term national interests in favour of a shared political vision. This work acknowledges this perspective in that it recognises the central role of norms and legitimacy especially concerning the tension between the immediate interests of member states and the need for greater European integration.

Critical Political Economy (CPE) examines socioeconomic power relations as the main driver behind European integration, arguing that EU institutions articulate transnational capitalism's interests (Cafruny & Ryner, 2009). Consequently, EU crises reflect economic system crises. While this thesis acknowledges that macroeconomic conditions influence European institutions, it goes further by analysing how governments and social actors mediate this influence, extending beyond traditional CPE perspectives.

Constructivism views political institutions as products of a socially constructed reality, emphasising agent-structure interaction and the influence of social norms on individuals (Lombardo & Kantola, 2021). This perspective includes several epistemological approaches. Conventional constructivism analyses norms and identity through a positivist lens, while interpretative and radical constructivism focus on language's role in shaping social reality (Checkel, 2006). Unlike agency-centred rationalist perspectives in other integration theories, which see actors' interests as determined by structures, constructivism seeks to understand how these interests form (Risse, 2018). This approach addresses gaps left by grand theories, explaining divergences between actors' behaviour and theoretical predictions via ideational forces. Rather than assuming predefined preferences, constructivism investigates their development. It might thus be better seen as a vantage point than a conventional theory. This perspective has guided this research, shaping the analysis of Euroscepticism as a catalyst for disintegration. Paraphrasing Wendt (1992), this work maintains that European integration is what actors make of it. It argues that integration and disintegration arise through dynamics similar to other theories but ultimately depend on the role of norms and identities. Accordingly, it develops a theory of European disintegration grounded in analysing Euroscepticism and the evolving notion of EU membership.

2.2 European Disintegration

The theories discussed so far seek to explain European integration and predict its future developments. However, these trajectories are not necessarily linear, as the EU and its predecessor institutions have experienced several crises throughout their history. These crises have significantly shaped the current institutional architecture of the EU, leading to a

monetary union, a common foreign and defence policy framework, and generally, a system of political and commercial integration unprecedented among supranational organisations.

The 2009 Eurozone debt crisis had an unprecedented effect on the European Union, prompting scholars to question the future of the common currency and the EU itself. The crisis had a significant structural impact, leading to an economic recession and jeopardising the survival of the Euro. Moreover, it profoundly affected public opinion and national political institutions, elevating EU contestation to a new level (Schmitter, 2012). This situation created an increased need to conceptualise European disintegration, defined as reversed integration potentially culminating in the collapse of the EU. Characterised by a gradual erosion of EU competencies and the rise of anti-EU political discourse, this process could result in member states exiting the union and, ultimately, the EU's dissolution (Krastev, 2012).

Brexit confirmed the growing need for a theory of European disintegration, exposing the limitations of traditional EU integration theories in addressing disintegrative forces. It also highlighted the necessity of adopting alternative perspectives and considering the broader socioeconomic context when studying EU disintegration (Rosamond, 2016). In the absence of a universally accepted definition, European disintegration can be understood as both a process and an outcome. As an outcome, disintegration can produce several scenarios ranging from the dissolution of the EU to the exit of a member state, decreased EU competencies in specific policy areas, or reduced obligations of a member state through opt-outs (Patberg, 2021). These two dimensions are closely interrelated, as outcomes arise from processes forming part of larger causal mechanisms. Given its ambition to theorise European disintegration, this work focuses on it as an ongoing process; accordingly, it explores the conditions under which member states may seek less integration, either by withdrawing from specific policies or by following the UK's example and exiting the EU altogether.

Disintegration can concern any of the three dimensions of European integration identified in the literature: sectoral, vertical, and horizontal (Schimmelfennig & Rittberger, 2006). The sectoral dimension involves the expansion of EU competencies into new policy areas, aligning with the neofunctionalist understanding of integration. Horizontal integration pertains to the enlargement of the EU through accession of new member states; this has been a significant point of debate, particularly following the Eastern enlargement in the early 2000s (Hobolt, 2016; Karp & Bowler, 2006). Lastly, vertical integration consists of the transfer of powers from national governments to the EU level, as seen in monetary policies, leading to a deepening of EU decision-making authority. By distinguishing these dimensions, European disintegration can be understood as a multifaceted process in which the three dimensions are interconnected rather than mutually exclusive (Schramm, 2019). Accordingly, horizontal disintegration, exemplified by Brexit, could still result in vertical integration through increased cooperation among remaining member states. Likewise, broadening the EU's competencies in one sector does not necessarily preclude disintegration resulting from significant transfers of powers in other policy domains.

This dissertation argues that each of the main theoretical approaches offers valuable insights into European disintegration. However, it goes beyond them by focusing on their complementary aspects and addressing gaps through an empirical case study. By situating this case within the context of post-truth politics, the analysis seeks to provide an alternative understanding of the mechanisms driving European disintegration.

As noted by Schimmelfennig (2017), the Eurozone crisis triggered intergovernmental bargaining, highlighting the divide between wealthier states and highly indebted countries. These two groups attempted to reconcile conflicting preferences: ensuring the euro's stability while securing the solvency of crisis-stricken countries. This bargaining process resulted in the Fiscal Compact and the European Stability Mechanism (ESM). The central role of governments in EU crises aligns with an intergovernmentalist understanding of integration and is explored in detail in the fourth paper of this thesis. Intergovernmentalism recognises that intergovernmental bargaining is the primary driving force behind post-crisis decision-making. However, this process unfolded within the framework of European institutions. This dynamic aligns with neofunctionalist theories, as member states found themselves in a situation of path dependency, reinforcing existing institutions during both the Eurozone crisis and subsequent systemic crises (Jones et al., 2021). This pattern, termed "failing forward", reconciles intergovernmentalism and neofunctionalism by showing how member states, acting under intergovernmental logics, address crises by relying on the EU and thus within institutional boundaries predicted by neofunctionalism. While this process may foster further integration, it does not eliminate the risk of long-term European disintegration.

According to the postfunctionalist perspective, addressing crises through EU institutions may politicise the EU. This politicisation can trigger legitimacy crises domestically, leading to elections where European integration becomes central. Political actors may then distance themselves from the EU, a trend observed during the Eurozone crisis and Brexit (Webber, 2019). The negative repercussions of crises on Eurosceptic narratives are central to this work, particularly in the third and fifth papers. Postfunctionalism does identify empirically observable dynamics contributing to disintegration—namely Brexit. However, a broader view of EU crises suggests that integration has proven more resilient than expected (Webber, 2018). This resilience stems from factors such as the limited impact of Eurosceptic parties, which often remain in opposition or, when in power, refrain from enacting their Eurosceptic promises, favouring conventional policies instead (Winzen, 2020). Overall, the disintegrative effects of politicisation are counterbalanced by structural government interests (as per intergovernmentalist theory) and path dependency mechanisms.

This complexity prompted the adoption of a constructivist vantage point to balance theoretical assumptions with empirical realities, placing ideology at the centre of the theory of disintegration developed here. This research focuses on the narratives shaping European identity, engaging with the postfunctionalist question: under what conditions can politicisation lead to disintegration? (Kuhn, 2009). The literature distinguishes between

constraining dissensus and permissive consensus. The former occurs when public politicisation of European issues slows or reverses integration (Hooghe & Marks, 2009). The latter refers to European matters being largely handled by governments and elites, with little public salience. The UK's transition from permissive consensus to constraining dissensus was influenced by actors such as the media and political parties (Daddow, 2012).

This dissertation argues that ideological forces impact EU disintegration like coastal erosion: gradually, over time. It contends that politicisation and contestation of the EU are persistent features of European politics, with effects that extend beyond any single election. Brexit highlights this dynamic; the Leave campaign's narratives did not emerge in isolation but were rooted in longstanding ideas of sovereignty and security.

From this perspective, the contradictions between major integration theories become less problematic. Political actors may follow intergovernmentalist or neofunctionalist logics depending on policy area or crisis, yet their preferences remain subject to change through internal pressures. Moreover, decisions made through intergovernmental bargaining are shaped by domestic ideological factors. As De Vries et al. (2021) argue, politicisation of international politics in national arenas can destabilise international institutions. This was clear in the UK, where enduring dissatisfaction with the EU—centred on identity, sovereignty, and legitimacy—created fertile ground for disintegration. However, this malaise alone did not trigger the referendum. Rather, political entrepreneurs mobilised and amplified it, strategically deploying post-truth narratives to turn diffuse discontent into a concrete political rupture.

To further explore this topic, this thesis examines the narratives shared by Eurosceptic parties, aiming to investigate the evolving ideological construction of Europe. This choice draws from the notion that the narratives currently promoted by smaller political forces could resonate with the public under certain conditions, influencing mainstream parties and governments as well. Since some of the political forces analysed are already major actors in their respective countries, monitoring their electoral content is crucial for assessing the potential shift in EU representation within the domestic discourse of member states. If such a shift were to occur, it may lead to a gradual disintegration of European identities. Therefore, the focus on Euroscepticism arises from its potential role as a catalyst for European disintegration.

2.3 Euroscepticism

A theory of European disintegration that emphasises the role of Euroscepticism must engage with the various typologies that have emerged over the years. Euroscepticism is not a monolithic phenomenon but rather a spectrum of attitudes towards European integration, ranging from moderate criticism to outright opposition. The literature has focused on categorising different forms of Euroscepticism; this thesis argues that such classifications are not merely descriptive but essential for explaining the disintegrative role of Eurosceptic actors. In particular, it is necessary to identify which forms of Euroscepticism, under what

conditions, and through what mechanisms contribute to the construction of disintegrative narratives capable of translating scepticism into political action. The following section outlines the key typologies of Euroscepticism, demonstrating their relevance to a broader theory of European disintegration.

Given the complexity and variability of Euroscepticism, it is useful to begin with a definition, even if the term itself remains contested. Euroscepticism refers to a critical stance towards European institutions, policies, and the overall concept of integration. In this sense, it represents one end of a continuum encompassing the positions of political actors as well as the public towards the EU and its significance (Hooghe & Marks, 2007). This phenomenon is multidimensional, influencing various aspects of the EU and its policies with differing levels of intensity. While it is transnational, its characteristics vary by national political context. Additionally, it involves a range of actors beyond political parties, including the media, governments, and non-party organisations (Usherwood & Startin, 2013).

Euroscepticism can also be analytically distinguished between policy-oriented and polity-oriented forms (De Wilde & Trenz, 2012). Policy Euroscepticism targets specific EU competences or policy outcomes, often advocating reform or renegotiation within the existing institutional framework (Szczerbiak & Taggart, 2017). Polity Euroscepticism, by contrast, contests the legitimacy, authority, or very nature of the European Union as a political order (Ibid.). While these forms frequently overlap in empirical practice, they imply different modes of political conflict and different implications for integration. This dissertation focuses primarily on polity-level Euroscepticism, as it is this form that most directly challenges the foundations of European integration and renders disintegration conceivable. Policy contestation is treated as analytically secondary, insofar as it becomes disintegrative when articulated through broader claims about sovereignty, identity, and democratic legitimacy.

The literature identifies several causes of Euroscepticism, one being regional wealth inequality among member states (Vasilopoulou & Talving, 2024). The EU is often blamed for these disparities, especially due to its monetary policies, which have become focal points in Eurosceptic discourse, as discussed in the third and fifth papers. In this context, the EU is criticised for hindering development via excessive austerity measures; simultaneously, it is accused of forcing net contributor countries to shoulder the financial burden of more indebted states (Carrieri & Vittori, 2021). On an ideological level, Euroscepticism rests on the belief that the EU threatens national sovereignty—a concern intensified by perceptions of its democratic deficit (Bertoncini & Koenig, 2014). Sovereignty is closely linked to national identity. The EU is often depicted in Eurosceptic discourse as enforcing homogenising cultural norms that erode national traditions and values. Concurrently, it is accused of promoting immigration—from within the Schengen Area and from outside the EU. This issue was central to the Leave campaign and gained prominence during the 2015–2016 migrant crisis (Hallgrimsdottir et al., 2020). Immigration thus becomes not just a policy concern but a symbolic issue reflecting broader anxieties about identity, autonomy, and control.

While many such narratives are driven by right-wing populist parties, left-wing variants of Euroscepticism also exist. These critics argue that the EU's institutional architecture—especially its economic governance—is embedded in a neoliberal framework. From this view, the EU privileges free-market principles over social welfare, thereby harming working-class interests (Brack, 2020). Left-wing Euroscepticism does not necessarily reject integration itself but opposes the direction and institutional form it currently takes.

Classifying Euroscepticism is a complex task. One influential typology, proposed by Taggart and Szczerbiak (2004), distinguishes between hard and soft Euroscepticism. Hard Euroscepticism entails principled opposition to EU membership or a desire for radical institutional restructuring. Soft Euroscepticism involves conditional or pragmatic opposition to specific policies or aspects of the EU, while retaining general support for integration. This binary is particularly helpful in analysing political parties, whose positions may shift in response to public opinion or party competition. For instance, the rise of UKIP—a hard Eurosceptic party—pushed the Conservative Party towards a more Eurosceptic stance, culminating in the Brexit Referendum. Internal divisions deepened, and the party's evolving position reflected both ideological change and strategic calculation.

Nevertheless, the hard/soft dichotomy has limitations. It may fail to capture the nuance between temporary opposition to specific EU decisions and a more structural critique of the integration process. To address this, Kopecký and Mudde (2002) introduced the distinction between “diffuse” and “specific” support. Diffuse support refers to abstract endorsement of European integration as a normative goal, whereas specific support concerns approval of the EU's current institutions and policy outputs. This generates a fourfold typology based on two axes: Europhilia vs Europhobia and EU optimism vs EU pessimism. Some political actors, for instance, may support the concept of integration but reject the EU as it currently exists—opposing its neoliberal orientation while advocating for a more democratic supranational framework. Others—so-called Euroenthusiasts—support both the idea and its current institutional realisation. Meanwhile, Europragmatists endorse the EU only insofar as it provides material or geopolitical advantages, and Eurorejects oppose both integration in principle and in practice.

An additional refinement is provided by Vasilopoulou (2009), who proposed a three-dimensional model to analyse Euroscepticism: principle, practice, and future. The principle dimension assesses support for the general idea of integration; the practice dimension evaluates the legitimacy of current EU institutions and policies; and the future dimension considers attitudes toward further deepening of integration. This typology yields three categories: Rejecting Euroscepticism (opposed to all three), Conditional Euroscepticism (accepting the principle but rejecting practice and future expansion), and Compromising Euroscepticism (accepting both the principle and practice, but resisting future deepening). This model proves particularly insightful when applied to Brexit, as parties occupying the middle ground of compromising Euroscepticism often struggled to articulate compelling

alternatives when faced with more radical and clear-cut positions from conditional or rejecting Eurosceptic parties.

Together, these classifications highlight the complexity of Euroscepticism as a political phenomenon. Rather than a monolithic ideology, it emerges as a diverse and dynamic field of opposition, shaped by ideological commitments, strategic calculations, and evolving structural contexts. Another way to understand Euroscepticism is as a reactive phenomenon—a collection of evolving practices extending beyond party politics, manifesting in public opinion, media portrayals of the EU, and civil society (Usherwood, 2018). All the theoretical frameworks discussed so far contribute to the definition adopted in this work. Given this dissertation's focus on European disintegration, Euroscepticism is understood here as any attitude toward the EU aimed at reducing its competencies and reversing its trajectories.

The definition presented here aligns with literature framing Euroscepticism as a form of polity contestation. This contrasts with policy contestation, which is a normal feature of democratic discourse. Polity contestation involves rejecting the political system centred on European institutions (De Wilde & Trenz, 2012). Although distinguishing between policy and polity contestation in EU affairs can be challenging, this framework offers insights into the broader legitimacy crisis the EU faces. This crisis has emerged as the EU's competencies have expanded, prompting the public to question its democratic accountability.

As noted throughout the papers in this work, political parties have capitalised on public discontent by promoting Eurosceptic narratives. This process of polity contestation is significant for understanding potential disintegrative dynamics. Though primarily involving fringe parties, mainstream forces are also affected. As Meijers (2017) observed, anti-EU arguments from Eurosceptic actors can increase the salience of European integration in political discourse, prompting shifts in previously pro-EU parties. Returning to the distinction between conditional and compromising Euroscepticism, this research suggests that mainstream parties may adopt what Vasilopoulou defines as an EU-compromising stance to avoid alienating moderately Eurosceptic voters likely to defect to EU-conditional parties.

Consequently, these parties often take a more cautious approach to EU integration. Yet the Brexit case suggests this may not suffice against more assertive Eurosceptic forces. For example, David Cameron attempted to appease Eurosceptic Conservative voters during the Referendum negotiations and campaign. He advocated reducing EU competencies and opposed further integration, but the strategy ultimately failed.

Once Euroscepticism is identified as contestation of the EU's legitimacy—especially in its current forms—it becomes essential, in line with this work's constructivist approach, to examine how this contestation materialises through narratives shaping the EU's construction. The growing centrality of European integration in political discourse can be linked to several factors: the Maastricht Treaty, which established political and economic

union; the 2004 enlargement, which brought in states with differing social and economic backgrounds; and the EU's increasing global role in recent decades (Cloet, 2017).

These developments, along with the EU's central role during the Eurozone crisis, the migrant crisis, and the management of COVID-19 and its economic effects, have made it an easier target for contestation. With its expanded competencies, the EU is often held responsible for these crises. While accountability is inherent to democratic governance, EU contestation has extended beyond criticism of individual policies to narratives questioning the EU's very existence. By integrating insights from various theoretical approaches, this thesis develops a constructivist framework to explain disintegrative narratives and assess their wider implications for European integration.

These narratives portray the EU as an institution controlled by bureaucrats indifferent to the needs of national states, serving major financial powers over ordinary citizens. The EU is seen as endorsing migration policies that threaten the security and cultural identity of member states. Additionally, a recurring theme in Eurosceptic discourse is the belief that the EU operates without sufficient democratic accountability, particularly regarding economic policies. The rise and effectiveness of these narratives have contributed to the development of a Eurosceptic post-truth rhetoric, which is propagated by political actors through social media and subsequently adopted by traditional media (Rowinski, 2021).

This thesis explores the relationships between EU contestation, populism, and the spread of factually incorrect information to support these narratives. In doing so, it shows how these interlocking dynamics function as indirect causal factors in the broader process of European disintegration. To this end, it examines how post-truth politics serves as a tool for promoting Eurosceptic discourse and, in turn, acts as a causal factor in European disintegration.

2.4 Post-truth Politics

Even though simplification, emotional appeal, and low levels of political knowledge are long-standing features of political communication, post-truth politics is analytically distinct from each of these phenomena. Simplification involves the selective reduction of complexity, and low information refers to cognitive or informational deficits among citizens. Post-truth politics, by contrast, is characterised by a strategic indifference to factual accuracy, in which the distinction between truth and falsehood becomes politically secondary to affective resonance and narrative coherence. In this sense, post-truth politics does not merely distort reality but reorganises the criteria through which political claims are evaluated.

The term post-truth politics lends itself to different interpretations. In the historical context, it defines a period in which political discourse is characterised by uncertainty about what can be accepted as facts (Newman, 2022). In the sphere of communication, it represents a specific approach that has emerged in recent years, aided by social media. This approach involves the spread of factually inconsistent statements designed to capture the public's attention and provoke emotionally charged reactions (Davis, 2017). Both definitions, which

are complementary, suggest a paradigm shift in political discourse. Political and journalistic communication has always included dubious claims and charged rhetoric to advance specific narratives. However, if the tools remain the same, the difference now lies in the effectiveness, frequency, and intensity with which these tactics are used. What characterises this as a paradigm shift is also the change in how the public responds to such strategies (D'Ancona, 2017). This alteration in the public's relationship with the truth has multiple causes, the subject of ongoing multidisciplinary debate that extends beyond the scope of this work.

In this regard, Fossum (2022) observed how post-truth politics is a pathological feature of society and a symptom of democratic decline. This decline results from structural factors, including changes in the party system and the politicisation of certain issues amid a broader societal crisis. Additionally, the rise of post-truth politics is facilitated by the nature of political communication on social media, which tends to feature brief content and foster information bubbles. These often exclude alternative perspectives that challenge dominant narratives. Moreover, the success of these strategies encourages a range of political actors to adopt them, creating a vicious cycle that exacerbates the democratic crisis noted by Fossum.

The implications of post-truth politics for democratic institutions and civic engagement are considerable. It undermines the quality of political debate by shaping both the prominence of issues and the types of solutions that gain traction. A defining feature of post-truth discourse is its tendency to oversimplify complex topics during electoral campaigns, encouraging support for rhetorically powerful proposals that are often factually inaccurate and difficult to implement. These dynamics have made post-truth politics a particularly effective vehicle for advancing Eurosceptic narratives. Empirical evidence confirms this trend, showing how European populist parties on Twitter employ discursive strategies that define key issues, assign blame to the EU, and promote solutions consistent with their political agendas (Alonso-Muñoz & Casero-Ripollés, 2020).

A clear example of these dynamics is the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration (GCM), a non-binding cooperative framework promoted by the United Nations to address international migration. The adoption of the GCM by Germany, Austria, and Sweden triggered mobilisation on digital media led by far-right actors, who sought to control the discourse around the issue (Conrad, 2021). While this case does not directly concern Euroscepticism, the theme of immigration is central to such narratives. Moreover, it shows how populist actors employ post-truth tactics to reinforce their positions.

Alongside social media's role in disseminating Eurosceptic campaigns, the literature also examines post-truth's impact on EU representation in traditional media. In this regard, Galpin and Trenz (2017) note how negative representations of the EU in mass media can increase support for Eurosceptic parties. At first glance, this may appear to reflect the freedom of expression typical of democratic systems, where criticism facilitates dialogue between institutions and public opinion. However, their analysis shows how these dynamics

stem from a growing demand for content that questions the EU's legitimacy, with the media playing a central role in crafting misleading information. These materials are then promoted by Eurosceptic political actors and further spread on social media, generating demand for similar content.

This negative spiral is further amplified by how the electorate's preferences are often shaped by a generalised understanding of political issues. As a result, contents that provoke an emotional response are particularly effective in shaping perceptions of the EU. This phenomenon is linked to a broader aspect of Eurosceptic discourse: a loss of confidence in the status quo, associated with mainstream political parties and European institutions. Structural factors, such as rising unemployment, can further erode trust in democratic institutions and make voters more susceptible to political forces that promise a break from the past (Algan et al., 2017). These narratives often emphasise the contrast between the interests of ordinary people and those of the elites identified with the EU. In this context, European integration is viewed as threatening sovereignty and traditional values, as it encourages globalisation and unchecked modernisation.

The type of Eurosceptic populism that perpetuates such narratives and utilises misinformation is often marked by a nationalist approach, resulting in a dual layer of contestation: on the one hand, it portrays the people against the elites, and on the other, it places the sovereign state in opposition to European institutions (Wellings, 2023). Those most vulnerable to these narratives tend to have lower educational levels; this demographic is notably linked to Euroscepticism, primarily when political information is sourced from social media (Fortunato & Pecoraro, 2022). This correlation highlights the idea that exposure to simplified and divisive rhetoric, such as that employed by the Leave campaign and featured in the Eurosceptic materials analysed in this dissertation, plays a crucial role in shaping the preferences of specific segments of the electorate. The consequences of these tactics, where political actors and the mass media spread Eurosceptic content lacking in factual substance, are significant for European disintegration, as exemplified by the case of Brexit. In this context, the decision to resort to a Referendum reinforced this narrative of people against the elites, as encapsulated in the Leave campaign slogan "Take Back Control."

Furthermore, the campaign surrounding the Referendum exemplified the intersection of post-truth politics and Euroscepticism within the context of European disintegration. This relationship emerges from the critical issues of the Leave campaign, such as the NHS and immigration, and how these topics have been framed on social media through factually incorrect statements related to EU membership (Cassidy, 2020). As noted by Cianciara (2021), the use of populist narratives is not confined solely to those advocating for European disintegration; however, it remains prevalent among Eurosceptic actors, as it effectively aids in delegitimising the EU.

Advocating for European disintegration extends beyond proposing policy alternatives; it is frequently employed opportunistically to gain leverage in domestic political debates. This contributes to a defining characteristic of post-truth politics: political discourse increasingly

prioritises emotional appeal and superficial narratives over coherent, long-term visions. In the case of Brexit, this lack of strategic clarity became particularly evident following the Referendum, when those same political actors who had relied on post-truth narratives were confronted with the challenge of translating vague promises into concrete policy.

As previously discussed, a central feature of Euroscepticism is the absence of a constructive alternative to European integration. Populist parties leveraging Eurosceptic rhetoric often succeed more at capturing public discontent than at developing viable governance strategies (Usherwood, 2020). In this context, the relationship between post-truth politics and Euroscepticism becomes especially salient. The former denotes a political strategy that dismisses factual accuracy and avoids comprehensive planning in favour of emotional messaging and misinformation. The latter involves the rejection of supranational cooperation without articulating a substantive alternative, relying instead on simplified and often misleading narratives.

The convergence of populism, Euroscepticism, and post-truth politics poses significant challenges to European institutions and liberal democratic norms. Scholars have linked the rise of these phenomena to the perceived decline of the liberal-capitalist order, particularly in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis (Van Dyk, 2022). Within this framework, post-truth politics may be interpreted as a symptom of a broader systemic crisis. Addressing it may require mainstream political actors not merely to defend the existing order, but to critically reassess its foundational assumptions.

As demonstrated in the fourth article of this thesis, the European Union's economic response to the COVID-19 pandemic—particularly through expansionary fiscal measures and the issuance of Eurobonds—represents a notable shift. These measures, unimaginable in the wake of the Eurozone crisis, suggest an evolving willingness to challenge neoliberal orthodoxy. Rather than competing with populists on rhetorical grounds, a more effective strategy may involve acknowledging the legitimate socio-economic grievances underlying populist support. While refuting falsehoods is necessary, it may be insufficient if not paired with substantive policy responses.

Lastly, post-truth politics overlaps with, but is not reducible to, populism or misinformation. Whereas populism operates through an antagonistic construction of “the people” and “the elite,” and misinformation denotes the circulation of empirically false claims, post-truth politics functions as a communicative mode that normalises factual instability itself. This dissertation therefore does not treat post-truth politics as a necessary condition for disintegration, but as a contingent and context-dependent facilitator that enables political actors to translate crises and Eurosceptic ideas into emotionally compelling and politically effective narratives. For the purposes of this dissertation, post-truth politics is treated as an overarching communicative logic rather than as a competing concept. Misinformation, disinformation, populism, and emotionalised discourse are therefore understood as forms through which post-truth politics can manifest in practice, depending on context and

strategic use. This approach allows post-truth politics to be analysed as a tool that enables the mobilisation of affect and the destabilisation of factual authority.

2.5 Integrating Disintegration, Euroscepticism and Post-Truth Politics

The literatures discussed so far on European disintegration, Euroscepticism, and post-truth politics have largely developed in parallel, often focusing on distinct explanatory levels. Studies of disintegration emphasise institutional strain and crisis dynamics, research on Euroscepticism foregrounds ideological contestation and party competition, while work on post-truth politics concentrates on communicative strategies and discursive manipulation. While each perspective captures an important dimension of contemporary European politics, analysing them in isolation risks obscuring how disintegration processes emerge through their interaction. This dissertation therefore brings these strands together into a single analytical framework.

At the core of the framework is the interaction between ideas, actors, and crises. Ideationally, Euroscepticism provides a repertoire of narratives centred on sovereignty, identity, and democratic legitimacy through which European integration can be contested. Structurally, crises such as the Eurozone crisis, the refugee crisis, and Brexit itself create moments of heightened uncertainty and politicisation, lowering the threshold for contestation and destabilising existing integration equilibria. Actorially, political parties, leaders, and campaign organisations strategically mobilise both ideas and crises in pursuit of political advantage. European disintegration, in this perspective, is not the product of any single factor but emerges from the convergence of these three elements.

Post-truth politics occupies a specific position within this framework. Rather than constituting a background condition or an independent causal force, it functions as a communicative facilitator that amplifies disintegrative dynamics. By privileging emotional resonance, selective representation, and strategic indifference to factual accuracy, post-truth narratives enable political actors to reframe crises and Eurosceptic ideas in ways that intensify perceptions of threat and loss of control. Importantly, post-truth politics is not treated as a necessary condition for disintegration, but as a contingent mechanism whose relevance varies across contexts and empirical settings.

This integrative framework provides the conceptual foundation for the empirical chapters that follow. While each study focuses on a distinct arena—ranging from the domestic causes of Brexit to its transnational and institutional consequences—they are united by a common analytical logic that traces how ideas, actors, and crises interact under specific communicative conditions. In doing so, the dissertation captures both disintegrative pressures and adaptive responses, allowing European disintegration to be analysed as a dynamic and multifaceted process.

3 Methodological Approach

This chapter outlines the overarching methodological approach of the dissertation, including its ontological perspective and the criteria used for selecting and analysing the collected materials. The following sections define and clarify the research boundaries within which this work operates. These considerations shaped the research design of the articles forming the dissertation, further integrated by the methodological sections presented in each paper.

The research for all five papers is grounded in qualitative methods, drawing primarily on case study methodology (Yin, 2003) and process tracing (Beach & Pedersen, 2013). This is not merely an epistemological preference, but a deliberate choice based on the specific explanatory advantages qualitative approaches offer for understanding complex political phenomena. Case study and process tracing methods are particularly suited for causal inference in contexts where mechanisms, meanings, and historical sequences matter more than correlations, as well as for analysing how social constructs shape actors' perceptions and choices (Hennink et al., 2020).

The central aim of this dissertation is to develop a theory of European disintegration. It examines the Brexit process as a paradigmatic case of this broader phenomenon. A qualitative case study approach is necessary to uncover how ideological currents, such as Euroscepticism, and structural factors interact over time, and how political actors mobilise these interactions to produce lasting institutional outcomes. The richness of qualitative data allows to trace how Eurosceptic narratives shaped both elite strategies and public preferences, culminating in the decision to leave the EU.

This approach highlights causal relationships between political discourse, actor preferences, and institutional change. Unlike quantitative methods, which may obscure such mechanisms by abstracting them into variables, qualitative research captures the processual and meaning-laden nature of political developments. Through this lens, the dissertation shows how Brexit was not merely the result of popular discontent, but the outcome of strategic agency acting upon those sentiments. This methodological approach extends to the wider study of European disintegration. Understanding disintegrative dynamics requires attention to the interplay between structures, ideas, and agency—an interplay best traced through qualitative methods.

3.1 Research Design

The decision to adopt a qualitative research design derives from the research questions, which explore ideational and political processes that cannot be meaningfully captured by quantitative indicators alone. This study employs causal-process tracing within a case study framework, following the methodological principles of Yin (2003) and George and Bennett

(2005). These approaches are suited to context-sensitive explanations, where sequencing, agency, and the interplay between structure and ideas are central. Qualitative methods allow for a detailed examination of how disintegration unfolds, how actors construct meaning, and how these processes shape institutional outcomes—core concerns of this thesis.

The choice to structure this dissertation as a series of articles rather than a monograph is both theoretical and methodological. The article format enables engagement with distinct but related dimensions of European disintegration, allowing for varied conceptual and empirical perspectives. While a monograph might offer narrative coherence, the article-based structure allows greater analytical flexibility and supports the development of an integrative framework in the concluding discussion. Methodologically, the article format accommodates diverse tools suited to different aspects of the central research question, enhancing the empirical and conceptual richness of the study. In this sense, the thesis contributes to theory-building from case-based evidence (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007), constructing an analytical model grounded in real-world developments and refined across the five publications.

The conclusions drawn are the result of inductive reasoning, supported by qualitative data and shaped by sustained engagement with the relevant literature. Rather than testing fixed hypotheses, this thesis integrates existing theories to address a gap in understanding three intertwined phenomena: European disintegration, Euroscepticism, and post-truth politics. The literature contextualises the analysis and defines the scope of inquiry.

The epistemological stance of this research further justifies its approach. Instead of treating theories as universal explanations, they are used as analytical tools to illuminate complex social and political dynamics. This thesis does not aim to validate any single theory but seeks to determine which frameworks best align with observed empirical patterns. Each article follows a distinct research design, yet all contribute to a broader methodological strategy linking literature and method to the central questions.

3.2 Methodological Overview of the Papers

The first article offers a novel causal explanation for Brexit using process tracing and historical analysis (Mahoney, 2015). Combining rationalist and constructivist theories, it shows how ideological Euroscepticism, structural crises, and strategic actors interacted to drive disintegration. This framework highlights the agency-structure interplay and sets the stage for further research on European disintegration.

The second article investigates the role of misinformation and disinformation in Brexit through a case-study design, building on the first article's findings. Using qualitative content analysis (Wesley, 2014), it categorises Leave campaign materials into three inductively derived groups. Grounded in the distinction between arenas and actors of post-truth politics (Conrad & Hálfðanarson, 2022), it analyses who promoted these narratives and where. This

refines the understanding of how post-truth politics shape major political outcomes like Brexit.

The third article uses a comparative, hypothesis-testing case study (Levy, 2008) to examine Brexit's impact on Euroscepticism in Italy and Germany. It tests whether negative EU portrayals drive Euroscepticism (Galpin & Trenz, 2019) and if Brexit intensified EU contestation. Analysing materials from four Eurosceptic parties, it identifies four key themes. This paper links national reactions to supranational events, positioning Brexit as a test case for broader disintegration trends and extending the findings of the first two articles.

The fourth article examines Brexit's systemic impact on EU institutional development, offering a new lens on European integration. Using an embedded single case study design (Yin, 2003), it analyses EU legislation, policy documents, and official statements to trace institutional shifts. The study integrates theory and observation to explore how Brexit has influenced differentiation in key policy areas like monetary union and CFSP. It argues that Brexit has not only triggered disintegration pressures but also reshaped the trajectory of integration by reinforcing differentiated integration across the EU's institutional and policy landscape.

The final article analyses electoral materials from far-right and far-left Eurosceptic parties during the 2024 EU Elections, offering a systematic post-Brexit study of evolving Eurosceptic narratives. Designed as a case study, it categorises content into three analytical frames: EU governance, migration, and the economy. Frame analysis was used to examine how narratives shape public understanding (Lindekilde, 2014). The frame selection emerged from material analysis and aligns with literature on populism and disintegration (Kantola & Miller, 2021; Keith, 2017).

While each paper addresses a distinct empirical puzzle, they are united by a common analytical logic and conceptual vocabulary. Across the studies, European disintegration is examined through the interaction of ideas, actors, and crises, with particular attention to how political narratives and communicative practices shape perceptions of European integration. The methodological diversity across the papers reflects variation in research questions rather than theoretical inconsistency. Together, the articles form a cumulative research programme in which individual findings inform and reinforce one another, contributing incrementally to the development of the overarching analytical framework employed in the dissertation.

3.3 Research Methods

As previously noted, this thesis adopted a qualitative approach due to the broad and ideational nature of the research questions. While theoretical discussions could have included quantitative data—such as voters' socio-economic status or cross-national measures of Euroscepticism—this research maintains that such variables become significant only when interpreted through specific ideological contexts. Existing studies have analysed

socio-economic influences on Brexit (Richards et al., 2021) and regional disparities in EU attitudes (Vasilopoulou & Talving, 2024); their findings were used to inform and support this study's theoretical lens. The underlying assumption is that patterns revealed by quantitative data only become politically consequential through ideological mediation—a process best explored through a context-sensitive case study. As Yin (2003) notes, case studies are appropriate when the boundary between phenomenon and context is blurred. Understanding Brexit as a disintegrative event thus requires examining both structural conditions and the ideational and narrative work that translated them into political rupture. This research investigates causal mechanisms linking political narratives, strategic agency, and institutional change through a combination of process tracing, qualitative content analysis (QCA), and frame analysis.

Process tracing was central to uncovering how Brexit unfolded and influenced Euroscepticism elsewhere. Applied across multiple articles, it effectively reconstructed the sequence of events that led to the Referendum, identifying key actors, turning points, and mechanisms of politicisation. It also traced how Brexit reshaped Eurosceptic discourse in other member states, particularly Germany and Italy, where parties adopted the UK experience as a rhetorical benchmark. Following Beach and Pedersen's (2013) typology, this research combined theory-building and outcome-explaining process tracing. The former extracted generalisable insights from the Brexit case, while the latter—especially in the first article—reconstructed key causal chains, decisions, and ideational framings. The third article examined how Brexit reshaped party narratives in other EU countries. These shifts revealed the strategic appropriation of Brexit as both warning and aspiration, depending on ideological alignment. Although generalisability is limited in single-case research, this approach offered the empirical depth needed to identify mechanisms of politicisation and develop a theoretically generative model of disintegration.

Alongside process tracing, QCA was used to explore Euroscepticism and post-truth politics. Consistent with this study's epistemological grounding, QCA treats discourse as both reflective and constitutive of political dynamics. It proved especially useful for identifying themes in party manifestos, campaign materials, and media content, enabling reconstruction of narratives and classification of rhetorical patterns (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009). Overall, QCA helped distinguish between different forms of communication—misinformation, disinformation, and emotionally charged factual messaging.

QCA featured in the second, third, and fifth articles. In the second, it identified core narratives and misinformation strategies during the Leave campaign. In the third, it tracked Brexit's resonance in German and Italian party discourse. In the fifth, it enabled comparative analysis of EU contestation across far-right and far-left platforms. Coding frames developed inductively from the Euroscepticism literature were used to categorise materials. These were treated as variables within broader EU contestation (Schreier, 2012) and built on clustering, rhetorical emphasis, and keyword analysis (Linström & Marais, 2012). Despite variation across articles, recurring frames emerged: portrayals of the EU as a threat to

sovereignty, identity, or democracy; critiques of migration policy; and contestation of economic governance.

These frames connect back to the process tracing in the first article, which highlighted how structural grievances were politicised. Identifying such themes helps locate where disintegration pressures may emerge next, particularly in policy domains where member states have historically diverged from the EU mainstream. Thus, while grounded in a single case, the qualitative approach enables broader theoretical insights into European disintegration.

3.4 Materials

This thesis undertook a detailed analysis of a wide range of materials to construct a comprehensive understanding of the phenomena examined in each article. As discussed in the previous chapter, the research consistently engaged with a robust body of scholarship on Brexit, post-truth politics, and European disintegration. This focus was deliberate, as the dissertation aims to contribute to and expand existing academic debates. Alongside this engagement with secondary sources, the research drew on a diverse array of primary materials. Across the studies, the empirical material consists primarily of textual and discursive sources relevant to elite political communication and institutional positioning. These included newspaper articles, mainstream media content, political manifestos, electoral programmes, social media posts, policy documents, public statements, and other audiovisual or textual materials. The selection of materials was guided by their relevance to the research questions and their centrality within the political debates under analysis, rather than by representativeness in a statistical sense. Temporal boundaries were defined in relation to key political moments and crisis periods in order to capture phases of heightened contestation. This approach ensures comparability across cases while preserving sensitivity to contextual variation and issue-specific dynamics

Primary sources, interpreted within a strong theoretical framework, enabled the identification of causal mechanisms underpinning Brexit and broader disintegrative trends in the European project. This facilitated the construction of a descriptive narrative that forms the thesis's core analytical contribution (Beach, 2017). The emphasis on mainstream media reflects scholarship underscoring its role in constructing and disseminating narratives about European integration (Daddow, 2015; Zappettini & Krzyżanowski, 2019). Acknowledging the reciprocal influence between mass media and political elites, this study also examined how Eurosceptic discourse is produced and instrumentalised. Political statements, interviews, and party manifestos were critically assessed for their representations of the EU.

To determine the relevance of materials to each article's themes, a broad data collection strategy was adopted. This began with the compilation of potentially relevant content from media databases, political social media, and official party sources. The aim was to isolate explicit instances of Euroscepticism—whether in critical portrayals of the EU, opposition to integration, or calls for withdrawal. While each article details its data selection process, the

general approach was to begin broadly, then narrow the dataset using theoretically informed, inductive criteria, such as Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA).

The timeline in which the materials collected were produced varied depending on the specific research questions addressed in each paper. Given the process-tracing approach of this research, the selection criteria were to select data produced within the timeframe of the processes under observation; in turn, this timeframe was developed inductively through the analysis of said materials. The rationale for this approach stems from the understanding that European disintegration is understood in this work as a continually evolving process that cannot be limited to a specific timeframe. Since this thesis focuses on political actors, domestic and European elections were used as temporal markers, with particular attention paid to the programmes and materials released during these events.

Regarding data availability, all the materials analysed are accessible online. This decision was based on two considerations. From a theoretical standpoint, this work aimed to understand how Eurosceptic narratives spread among the population, making it logical to focus on materials that were both accessible and targeted to this audience. Methodologically, using accessible materials ensured the study's reproducibility, albeit within the limitations of a purely qualitative approach. Given how this thesis aims to examine Euroscepticism beyond the borders of the United Kingdom, the materials collected were initially in several European languages. However, the fact that some of the contents were translated before the analysis does not impact the validity of this study, as the focus was on the content itself rather than on the specific terminologies used.

3.5 Data Collection

The data collected for this work included both secondary and primary sources. Secondary sources consisted of theoretical studies using qualitative and quantitative methods, which provided essential insights for the analysis. Quantitative data was also drawn from Eurobarometer reports, domestic statistical agencies, and independent fact-checking websites to assess the reliability of claims encountered. While these sources helped establish the analytical framework and define the research problem, conclusions were primarily grounded in the interpretation of primary evidence. This included government and EU documents, newspaper articles, party programmes, interviews, social media content, and other materials pertinent to the study's focus. Sources were selected for their relevance to process tracing and qualitative content analysis, informed by literature on European integration, populism, and post-truth politics.

Data collection strategies were tailored to the objectives of each individual study and conducted in accordance with established qualitative research practices. Rather than following a single uniform procedure, data were collected in ways appropriate to the specific empirical contexts and analytical aims of each article. This includes targeted collection around key political events, campaigns, and crisis periods characterised by intensified public debate. A detailed account of data collection procedures, including source selection and

temporal scope, is presented in the methods sections of the individual articles. This structure avoids redundancy while ensuring transparency at the level of each empirical analysis.

Given the qualitative stance of the research, depth of analysis took precedence over sample size. A substantial yet manageable collection of materials was compiled to ensure rigour and enhance trustworthiness (Elo et al., 2014). Some parts of the study involved targeted samples to support theory-building, while others required a broader selection of evidence. For instance, the analysis of the Leave campaign involved identifying dozens of misinformation cases based on outputs from relevant political actors. Similarly, content from German and Italian parties was reviewed to trace Eurosceptic discourse and frame contestation. In another case, electoral programmes from a wide ideological spectrum were examined to identify representations of the EU—even when these did not qualify as traditional Euroscepticism. All datasets were publicly available online at the time of access. Digital availability allowed for transparency and replicability, with manifestos, articles, and statements cited in full. In some instances, extensive collections were reviewed to identify key examples, though only a selection was referenced in the final text.

The data collection was conducted manually and separately for each article over several months. It began by identifying the relevant sources to answer each paper's research question, focusing on political parties, actors, or news outlets. This stage was followed by the data selection process, guided by different research approaches. For electoral programmes and posters, all potentially relevant material was analysed. For news articles, interviews, and social media content, the databases were analysed through keyword-based searches within the specified timeframe. The categorisation of materials was influenced by the chosen qualitative approach. In this context, the relevance of the data was determined through an assessment that considered theoretical frameworks rather than adhering to rigid pre-determined criteria (Mandal, 2018). The samples collected were selected for their potential to significantly contribute to the research questions; this assessment was made during the data collection phase and was further evaluated in the subsequent stage.

3.6 Data Analysis

The overarching goal of data analysis across this thesis was to generate meaningful interpretations of political narratives and institutional developments related to Brexit and European disintegration. While each article adopted a distinct methodological approach, the unifying principle was the systematic interpretation of political content to test hypotheses, trace causal mechanisms, and support theory-building.

Data analysis across the dissertation combines process tracing, qualitative content analysis, and frame analysis, with each method selected to match the specific research question addressed in the individual studies. While the precise coding schemes and analytical procedures differ across articles, they follow a shared analytical logic focused on identifying patterns of meaning, framing strategies, and discursive constructions related to European disintegration. Coding was conducted through an iterative process that combined

theoretically informed categories with inductive refinement based on the empirical material. This ensures comparability across studies without imposing uniform coding frames that would be inappropriate for distinct empirical contexts. Detailed descriptions of coding procedures and analytical steps are provided in the methods sections of the individual articles, where study-specific choices are documented in full, whereas this section presents a more general overview of the process adopted.

A common analytical thread throughout the five papers was the structured identification and interpretation of narratives, actors, and institutional developments. Across the case studies, qualitative content analysis was employed—sometimes inductively, sometimes deductively—to explore how Euroscepticism was constructed, disseminated, and institutionalised. Narrative frames (e.g., sovereignty, identity, economy) were used to organise and interpret the data, enabling cross-case comparison and the abstraction of broader patterns in Eurosceptic discourse and EU responses. Importantly, the analysis moved beyond description to engage with theoretical frameworks on disintegration, post-truth politics, and differentiated integration. In doing so, it tested and refined existing hypotheses on the interaction between structure and agency, the role of misinformation, and the evolution of EU contestation.

Despite the variation in sources—ranging from party programmes and campaign materials to institutional documents and elite statements—the data were analysed in a consistent sequence: identifying relevant content, interpreting meaning in light of theoretical frameworks, and classifying findings into analytical categories. This qualitative approach was grounded in established methodological literature (Caudle, 2004) and allowed each article to contribute not only empirical insight but also conceptual clarity.

Thus, while the individual papers are methodologically autonomous, they are analytically unified by a focus on how political meaning is constructed and mobilised in the context of Brexit and European disintegration. Table 1 summarises how the collected data were used to address each research question, illustrate the causal mechanisms behind the investigated processes, and contribute to the overall findings of this research.

Table 1. Summarisation of the data analysis and findings.

Research Question	Data Source	Research Method	Findings
<i>Why did Brexit happen?</i>	Materials from the Leave campaign; tabloids; political actors; the UK government.	Process tracing; QCA analysis of the Leave campaign.	Successful construction of EU membership as a cost and a risk by Eurosceptic actors.
<i>What does Brexit reveal about EU disintegration?</i>	Materials from Eurosceptic political actors post-Brexit.	Case study	Brexit can be seen as a blueprint for disintegration.
<i>What impact did Brexit have on EU disintegration?</i>	Manifestos and campaign material from Eurosceptic parties; EU policy documents.	Case study, process tracing.	Limited, but long-lasting in altering the perception of EU membership.
<i>What is the role of post-truth politics in EU disintegration?</i>	Theory-based, supported by all of the above.	QCA, Frame analysis.	Significant in every instance of EU contestation analysed.

3.7 Limitations

This study was conducted with careful attention to its theoretical, methodological, empirical, and analytical limitations. Theoretically, it tackles two complex themes —European disintegration and post-truth politics— raising the risk of conceptual overstretch. Rather than diluting the analysis, however, the thesis aims to develop a theory of disintegration that captures the interplay between ideational and structural dynamics. By highlighting the interconnections between political narratives, public perceptions, and institutional change, it addresses gaps in the existing literature.

Methodologically, the research recognises the limitations of a qualitative case study, particularly concerning generalisability and causal inference (Queirós et al., 2017). The analysis is based on political discourse, media content, and policy documents, which offer insight into framing strategies and discursive shifts. Though these sources cannot replace direct access to elite decision-making, triangulated analysis enables tracing observable narrative transformations. Source bias was mitigated through triangulation, using political, academic, and media sources from a range of ideological perspectives. Materials were selected for relevance, traceability, and consistency with empirical findings.

This dissertation adopts a qualitative and interpretive methodological approach that prioritises analytical transparency and theoretical integration over mechanical replication. While the use of multiple methods and context-specific coding limits strict reproducibility,

the study enables analytical replicability by making explicit the logic of case selection, data collection, and interpretation across the individual studies. Each article provides a detailed account of its analytical procedures, allowing readers to assess the consistency and plausibility of the findings.

The research does not include elite interviews. This reflects both practical constraints and a deliberate analytical focus on political discourse as it appears in public, media, and institutional arenas. The absence of interviews limits claims about actors' subjective intentions but does not undermine the analysis of how political meanings, narratives, and frames are constructed, circulated, and mobilised. The dissertation therefore focuses on discursive effects rather than motivational reconstruction, which is consistent with its theoretical and methodological orientation.

Lastly, even though the UK is a deviant case in the EU context, its selection is theoretically driven. Brexit suggests how disintegrative dynamics can arise under specific political and ideational conditions. The findings are not universally generalisable but are intended to be theoretically generative—offering conceptual tools for understanding disintegration elsewhere. Internal validity was supported through process tracing and evidence-based claims. External validity is limited by the single-case design but offset by the theory-building aim. This study does not claim to exhaust the subject of European disintegration or post-truth politics; rather, it lays the groundwork for future inquiry into these evolving phenomena.

4 Collection of Papers

This chapter presents the papers included in this dissertation. Each of the five publications addresses the research questions of this thesis from one specific perspective, and their complementary findings serve as the foundation for the theory of disintegration outlined in the fifth chapter. In addition to contributing to this aim, each paper independently tackles critical issues within the ongoing debate on Euroscepticism, Brexit, and European disintegration. The order in which the articles are presented reflects the approach taken to address the overarching objective of this thesis: formulating a theory of European disintegration based on the case of Brexit and post-truth politics. To this end, this research began by exploring the causes of Brexit; specifically, it examined whether the outcome of the Referendum should be attributed to structural or ideological factors, an open question already explored by the literature on EU disintegration (Carl et al., 2019; Rosefielde, 2016).

The second publication focused on the role of post-truth politics in the Leave campaign. This allowed to focus on Brexit not only as a paradigmatic case of European disintegration, but also as a pivotal moment in the paradigm shift associated with the rise of post-truth politics

(Rose, 2019). The third work in this thesis examined the impact of Brexit on European disintegration and, specifically, how it has influenced Eurosceptic discourse within member states. For the purpose of this analysis, it compared two countries that, while holding very different positions within the EU, are similar in terms of demographics and economics: Italy and Germany. This article built on previous studies exploring the effects of crises on Euroscepticism, particularly in relation to Brexit (Taggart & Szczerbiak, 2021).

The fourth article focused on how the Brexit Referendum has affected the institutional development of the EU. It investigated the implications of Brexit within the debate on European differentiation, addressing whether its impact has been negative or positive for the EU (De Witte, 2018; Leruth et al., 2019). The final work centred on the 2024 European Parliament Elections and analysed the themes of post-truth and European disintegration by examining the electoral materials of Eurosceptic parties. This approach drew on a substantial body of literature investigating the role of Eurosceptic parties in European elections (Emanuele et al., 2016; Ehin & Talving, 2021; Nai et al., 2022). This paper is the most forward-looking of the five, as it assesses the current state of Eurosceptic discourse to identify the narratives that will shape future electoral strategies.

In addition to including the five works discussed so far, this chapter presents and summarises their findings. The choice of a qualitative method blurs the lines between describing and interpreting results. However, this section has a clear purpose: to introduce the concepts derived from the articles, which will be further developed in the subsequent discussion. The content is organised thematically, with each section dedicated to one of the four research questions of this thesis. Within this structure, the contributions of each article are examined in relation to each theme. The chapter concludes with an overview of the findings of this research and their significance for the following discussion.

4.1 Paper 1: *Agency and Structure in the age of European Disintegration*

Published in *Frontiers*, 08 July 2024, Vittorio Orlando and Maximilian Conrad

Abstract

This article analyses the causal factors behind the Brexit vote, aiming to contribute to the literature on European disintegration. It addresses how, amidst external factors such as the EU debt crisis and the 2015 refugee crisis, pre-existing ideological forces deeply ingrained in a society can surface and steer a country's trajectory in relation to European integration. Employing a rigorous process-tracing design, it highlights the forces that led to the referendum and its outcome, identifying key patterns that can be extrapolated to comparable cases within the field of EU integration theory. The analysis operates at two levels: it scrutinizes the constraints faced by Cameron's government in the lead-up to the vote, and it probes the British electorate's attitude toward EU and how it was influenced by the Leave campaign. The study draws from an empirical case to identify some of the patterns of this ongoing political process.

1. Introduction

The idea that European integration could be reversed gained traction in the last decade, fuelled by events such as the 2009 European debt crisis, the 2015 refugee crisis, and the rise of openly Eurosceptic political parties in some member states. Krastev (2012) highlighted the conflict between strengthening European political institutions and increasing democratic participation of citizens as the main challenge faced by the European Union today. Furthermore, Brexit demonstrated that the dissolution of the EU is a real possibility, emphasizing the need to develop a theory of disintegration as both an outcome and a process (Rosamond, 2016). The debate on differentiated integration became prominent in the 1990s, coinciding with the establishment of the EU, as it became clear that different member states chose varying levels of involvement within the institution (Holzinger and Schimmelfennig, 2012). If we consider the possibility that the union could gradually dissolve through the secession of member states, it is essential for a theory of disintegration to analyse the causes of Brexit, which would help identify similar symptoms in other European countries. This disintegration process is influenced by a combination of structural factors, which are prominent in the institutionalist approach (Vollaard, 2014), and ideological or agency-centred factors, such as the evolution of the British Eurosceptic discourse during the UK's EU membership (Hobolt, 2016; Kostakopoulou, 2017). The question of agency and identity is also crucial when examining structural factors, which are the tangible political and economic elements shaping the Brexit process. The issue of agency resurfaces as the two main concerns addressed by the Leave campaign—intra-European migration and asylum seekers—are related to themes of social inequality and human rights (Frost, 2019). Therefore, to understand the role of these structural factors, it is necessary to first determine British voters' stances on these issues and how they were shaped over time, thus looking at main features the British European policy debate. In the *Meditations*, Marcus Aurelius noted how a “purple-edged robe [is] just sheep's wool dyed in a bit of blood from a shellfish.” Similarly, structural factors are merely isolated events until an ideologically charged narrative assigns them specific political meanings.

This article attempts to individuate both types of causal factors by looking at the chain of events that started with the 2014 European Elections electoral campaign, thus following an approach already adopted in the study of Brexit (Clarke et al., 2017). It uses a process-tracing design to identify Brexit's causal factors and make broader assumptions about states' behaviour in the context of European integration, aiming to formulate a theory of European disintegration. The choice of process tracing derives from how this method allows the identification of threshold points in the analysis of the causal mechanism, thus highlighting which conditions were necessary for each step to take place; specifically, this work is interested in causation within the boundaries of the case addressed, namely the decision for the Brexit referendum. In order to figure out what Brexit tells us about this, the paper assesses whether it can be understood as a rational decision. This aim is achieved by testing two rival hypotheses: rationalist and constructivist. The rationalist one emphasizes the

aspect of utility maximization, defined as a choice taken to maximize the utility function of the actors involved (Rosefielde, 2016; Vasilopoulou, 2016).

On the other hand, the constructivist hypothesis revolves around ideational aspects such as the notions of sovereignty, identity and independence (Fossum, 2019). The paper proposes rhetorical entrapment (Glanville, 2019) as a way of bridging the two perspectives, arguing how Brexit was the consequence of a change in the way EU membership was perceived by British society. Accordingly, and with respect to the agency-and-structure duality mentioned earlier, the position of this work is oriented toward an ideational explanation.

The main aim of the article is to develop a comprehensive framework for the analysis of the forces at play in European disintegration. To achieve this, the article meticulously describes the process leading to the Brexit vote, highlighting the interplay between structure and agency from an IR perspective. Following this introduction, the next section presents a thorough review of the existing literature on EU disintegration and Brexit. This section also introduces the two rival hypotheses, defining the constructivist and rationalist perspectives, thereby ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the theoretical underpinnings of the study.

Section 3 then presents a critical analysis of the 2010–2016 period leading to the referendum, discussing the main causal factors behind it and addressing the Eurozone crisis and the 2015 refugee crisis, which are considered two of the main structural factors or catalysts of Brexit. This section aims to analyse the extent to which Brexit was caused by structural constraints and a specific ideological environment respectively.

The fourth part analyses how domestic preference formation and intergovernmental bargaining at the EU level played a role in Brexit. It discusses how governmental action is the culmination of several independent decision-making processes. While these processes can be expected to be guided by rational decision-making, their interactions can lead to irrational outcomes, as actors function within a complex framework of forces and interests.

The conclusion of this research not only addresses the ideational forces at play in EU politics and their relevance to the analysis of Brexit on the ideological dimension, but also underscores the practical implications of this understanding. By contributing to the development of a theory of European disintegration, this research offers a prospective application to similar cases, integrating the retrospective understanding of the Brexit vote discussed in the earlier sections.

2. Literature review on EU disintegration and Brexit

This work addresses Brexit both as an outcome and as a process. As an outcome, Brexit is seen here as an instance of disintegration. As a process, it is discussed against the backdrop of the structure-agency debate in International Relations. The ontological divide between structural and ideological approaches within IR theory revolves around whether political phenomena can be better understood as the results of the environment in which political

actors operate, or as a product of their choice and free will (Vadrot, 2019). This article draws from the definition elaborated by Alexander Wendt in his early work (Wendt, 1987); the American scholar pointed out how society simultaneously shapes and is shaped by the interactions of the social actors inhabiting it. In a more recent article, Wendt underlined how the constructivist approach does not reject the notion of social structures determining states' behaviour. However, in contrast with the neorealist approach, it adopts a broader definition of structure, including practices, knowledge and norms among the constitutive elements of the international system (Wendt, 1995). In the context of EU studies, constructivism understands integration as a change in a state's collective identities and political culture. The belief that ideational factors determine national preferences enables us to account for choices at odds with the existing economic and political interests of a state, interests on which research programs grounded in a rationalist ontology are usually focused (Risse, 2009). In view of this, the purpose of this article is not to determine the primacy of ideological or structural causal factors, but rather to discuss how such factors have influenced the decision-making process of actors deeply embedded in pre-existing and mutable cultural fabrics. This analysis is necessary as understanding these factors and how they exercise their influence is central to draft a theory of disintegration, which can then be used to infer the future development of the EU.

This work aims to discuss whether the impact of these forces increased due to the external factors discussed earlier. The guiding assumption is that Eurosceptic positions found a broad audience in the country, gradually leading political actors (who had previously been open to a certain degree of European integration) to switch their preferences; this, in turn, led to the normalization of the nationalistic positions that caused the referendum.

Due to the qualitative nature of the research questions, the article will use the outcome-explaining variant of process tracing. This choice is motivated by the method's empirical rigor and its capacity to track complex causal processes (Waldner, 2015). In this case, the analysis is based on two rival hypotheses, i.e., rationalist and constructivist. Precisely because Brexit appears to be driven to a significant extent by ideational factors (as captured in the constructivist hypothesis), it is necessary to opt for the outcome-explaining variant in order to consider all possible causes without being limited to one single theoretical framework (Beach and Pedersen, 2011). Even though the hypotheses are derived from prominent theoretical perspectives (rationalism and constructivism), the primary purpose of this work is not to test the validity of a given theory or to elaborate a model applicable to other instances. Instead, it proposes an explanation of Brexit, thus offering a retrospective understanding of the process leading to it, while also addressing its significance for developing a theory of European disintegration, thus allowing a prospective application to other member states.

2.1 Rationalist-exogenous

Regarding the relationship between structure and agency, understanding European institutions as the product of interactions between social actors allows for some

considerations on the nature of both. This work distinguishes between states and institutions and the social reality that generated them (Koslowski, 1999); the former are structures created by pre-existing actors, and the latter is a continuum composed of actors, norms, and practices. Over time, social structures emerge, are shaped, and change according to the repetition of certain practices and the internalization of specific behavioral norms.

This article discusses how structural and ideological factors influence each other. It starts from a concrete case to examine how member states' economic and strategic interests tie themselves to the intrinsic properties of the practices and norms existing at a given moment. As best portrayed by Gifford (2016), one of the main causal factors of Brexit was the United Kingdom's model of political economy, which is characterized by a strong executive and treasury; hence, the country's opposition to the European Monetary Union (EMU), a stance shared by both Conservative and Labor governments. After the 2009 European debt crisis, these pre-existing tensions played a central role in British political debate, with several politicians promoting the conceptualization of the UK as an international financial player whose sovereignty was restrained by unelected European bureaucrats. This rhetoric was also favored by the country's weakness during the Eurozone crisis, which becomes evident when looking at the Treaty on Stability, Coordination, and Governance negotiation process in the Economic and Monetary Union (Thompson, 2017). This example shows how a government faced with structural constraints, understood both as those coming from being part of a supranational organization and as external crises, might opt for an apparently disadvantageous course of action due to the influence of consolidated political practices and an ideologically charged discourse. In the United Kingdom's case, these practices coincided with the defense of its sovereignty and the need to maintain a higher degree of independence from the EU's regulatory structures. This behavior of the UK's government, which for the purpose of this work is seen as the leading actor behind Brexit alongside the pro-Leave forces, is in line with the core assumption of rational choice theory, which states that actors will try to maximize their utility functions while being subject to external constraints (Pollack, 2007).

2.2 Constructivist-endogenous

In the context of the relations between London and Brussels, the British government and, in particular, the Conservative party were affected by the need to reconcile EU membership and the need to act in line with a narrative that saw the UK in a vulnerable position due to financial instability and migrants, both elements associated with the above-mentioned membership. These constraints are of an ideological nature, and the impact they had in the Brexit process, and hence on European disintegration, can be analyzed through rhetorical entrapment. European studies generally employ this concept to analyze the EU's attitude toward enlargement (Schimmelfennig, 2009). It can be summarized as the tendency for a political actor to conform to a specific behavioral pattern, against its long-term interests, since acting differently would contrast with positions and norms previously promoted by the same actor for rhetorical purposes. These preferences are dictated by the need to reach

short-term interests, often of an electoral nature, and to act according to an image previously crafted by the political actors. In this case, the British government's propensity to antagonize the EU in the field of economic policy, combined with the Eurozone crisis, led to the escalation of pre-existing contrasts. This work adopts an inclusive ontological framework (Kauppi, 2010), capable of reconciling an exogenous formal logic of action with an endogenous substantive one. According to this view, actors follow a logic of action based on accumulating valuable resources, a logic shared by different institutions and social spheres; actors' values and practices are determined by the framework in which they operate, thus endogenously (Kauppi, 2018, p. 38). In the context of EU studies, the exogenous formal logic of action is driven by a member state's objectives, e.g., improving its economic position and its influence. The endogenous substantive one, on the other hand, is driven by the way the goals mentioned above are pursued according to ideational factors.

The following section explores the context preceding the referendum to analyze the actors involved and the ideological forces affecting them. It also relies on the concept of international socialization. The term indicates the mechanism by which actors adopt the norms of a given community, "switching from a logic of consequences to a logic of appropriateness" (Checkel, 2015, p. 804). In the case of Brexit and regarding European disintegration in general, it might be more accurate to speak of reverse socialization. In line with this understanding of the concept, this article refers to a process involving states moving from a course of action based on a rational calculation of costs and benefits to one they consider ideologically appropriate. However, the process distinguishes itself from conventional instances of socialization because this change in preferences did not happen to comply with the rules of external institutions. The hypothesis of this study is that this was caused by a shared sense of national identity and a deep-rooted diffidence toward external interferences, which led a substantial part of the political class and the British electorate to consider it necessary to leave the European Union. Both these causal factors derive, in turn, from the long-standing features of the British political debate on EU integration, which have been discussed at length by a consolidated literature.

Accordingly, this work argues that Brexit results from a clash between two ideological forces: the EU's normative influence and that of Eurosceptic parties and actors within the UK. A distinction can be made between two types of indirect normative power: the concept of socialization discussed above and emulation. The latter refers to the process by which the practices of a given actor are judged desirable and repeated by others (Lenz, 2013). Both effects have been explored in the context of European studies (Börzel and Risse, 2012) to provide a constructivist explanation of integration. However, in the UK, both processes have been hindered by diametrically opposed ideological forces throughout the country's history in the EU.

3. A critical analysis of the pre-referendum period (2010-2016)

The following section has a 2-fold objective. Firstly, it aims to uncover the reasons behind the UK government's decision to hold the 2016 Referendum. Second, it examines the factors

that influenced the British population's choice in the vote. This analysis of the British political debate is crucial for understanding the causal mechanism that led to the referendum, helping us identify the causal links around which our analysis is structured. It begins by identifying the causes behind the Brexit vote and then proceeds to analyse how these factors contributed to the outcome. The analysis considers the interplay between structural and ideological factors. Additionally, it assesses how existing ideological forces were affected by the external socio-political context. In this context, it is important to address the two major crises that impacted the EU in the years leading up to the referendum: the Eurozone debt crisis and the 2015 refugee crisis. Both of these have been identified as key drivers in the rise of Euroscepticism in several member states (Taggart and Szczerbiak, 2018).

3.1 Brexit's casual factors

The refugee and economic crises are intertwined with two other structural factors, which had significant ideational consequences on the political debate preceding the Referendum. The first is intra-European immigration to the United Kingdom, mainly the migration flows that followed the EU's enlargement in the early 2000s. The second one is the crisis in the neoliberal system that characterized the years after the fall of the Berlin Wall. The link between the first factor and the Referendum's outcome emerges particularly from an analysis of the Leave campaign's main arguments (Vasilopoulou, 2016). This characterization of immigrants as an obstacle to the economic wellbeing of British citizens has been associated by Bailey (2018) with a broader crisis of the British capitalist system, leading to the dilemma of aspiring simultaneously to membership in the single market and maintaining control over migration policies.

3.1.1 Evidence for the constructivist hypothesis

On a cultural level, looking at the UK's attitude toward European integration throughout its membership may be helpful. In 1975, 2 years after the country entered the European Economic Community (EEC), the first referendum on membership saw a clear victory for the Remain side. In the almost two decades of Conservative governments that followed, during which the EU was founded by the Maastricht Treaty, the UK's membership was not questioned again. However, the country remained outside any project concerning further monetary integration. In the Blair and Brown years, despite the presence of governments that were more favorable to the EU, the British public's attitudes toward the EU remained rather tepid (Allen, 2013).

Overall, while the country's governments have held various positions concerning Europe, the population has never been particularly enthusiastic about European integration compared to other large member states, as shown by an empirical macro analysis by Anderson and Hecht (2018). In the 2010s, the public perception of the EU further deteriorated, mainly due to the considerable extension of Brussels' competencies after the Lisbon Treaty. Moreover, since 2010, the UK saw a resurgence of the Conservative party, historically characterized by an antagonistic stance toward EU integration, albeit at the same time generally supportive

of the economic aspects of EU integration understood as a better opportunity for trade. This stance is evident from Cameron's pledge to renegotiate the terms of Britain's relationship with the EU and to validate the negotiation's outcomes through a referendum (Copsey and Haughton, 2014). However, leaving the EU was arguably not the goal of the Cameron cabinet, as it can be inferred from the government's pro-Remain position before the 2016 vote (HM Government, 2016).

There are at least three elements that can explain this contradiction. The first is rhetorical entrapment: For decades, the EU had been portrayed as an obstacle to British sovereignty and used as a scapegoat in the context of migration and economic policies. This view was shared by Cameron's party and a considerable portion of the British press (Allen, 2013, p. 118). As a result, the political costs of canceling the referendum seemed too high to be considered. The second factor is the miscalculation of Britain's position in the negotiations with the other member states before and after the referendum. In hindsight, it might have been beneficial for the EU to adopt a more conciliatory stance toward the United Kingdom, but it's important to consider how Britain was already subject to unique and advantageous conditions compared to the other member states (Glencross, 2015). Lastly, it might be argued that both the UK (here understood as the actors behind the Leave campaign) and the EU failed to grasp the ideological forces asserting themselves in the years immediately preceding the referendum. The emergence and the impact of right-wing populism, nativism, and widespread anti-elitist stances were not fully grasped by mainstream political parties before Brexit. These ideological forces contributed to shaping both the results of the referendum and the political debate preceding it (Iakhnis et al., 2018). Cameron's government may have underestimated this changing zeitgeist due to the successes achieved in the 2014 Scottish Independence referendum and the 2015 General Elections.

A similar phenomenon, namely, a political leader binding the future of his government to a referendum, can be found in the case of the 2016 Italian constitutional referendum. Emboldened by his party's results in the 2014 European Elections, Italian PM Matteo Renzi staked his political capital in an attempt to pass the reform mentioned above, the failure of which led to his resignation (Ceccarini and Bordignon, 2017). Alongside Donald Trump's victory in the 2016 Presidential elections, Brexit can be studied as a turning point for the assertion of a new type of political discourse. The three factors listed above explain Cameron's excessive confidence in the outcomes of both the negotiations and the referendum. Concerning the question of why the British PM deemed it necessary to prioritize the issue of EU membership, the answer may lie in a combination of electoral calculation and party politics. Specifically, Cameron's goals were to avoid losing votes to the UKIP, and to resolve what he perceived as a weakness and a point of contention within his party (Smith, 2018). He attempted to achieve both goals by moving toward more Eurosceptic positions, even though moving toward these positions may have increased the electorate's Euroscepticism.

In the context of the United Kingdom's complex relationship with EU institutions, it's

important to consider the country's history, particularly its role as the center of the world's largest colonial empire. Even after the decline of the British Empire, the UK maintained a special relationship with most former colonies, primarily through the Commonwealth. However, in geopolitical terms, the main factor influencing the British attitude toward EU integration might be its ties with another former colony, the United States. The special relationship between the US and the UK, strengthened through two world wars and the common threat of the Iron Curtain, appears to have had an impact that extends beyond economic, military, and strategic levels, influencing the cultural identity of the UK (Startin, 2015). Perhaps, after losing its empire, the country managed to uphold its sense of importance by positioning itself as a partner in the American one.

3.1.2 Evidence for the rationalist hypothesis

However, the ideational factors discussed above were not sufficient to prevent the UK from joining the EEC, and even the first failed attempt to leave it through a referendum was motivated by the Labour Party's skepticism toward the Community's economic stance, rather than by a fear of losing international influence (Evans, 2018). In the following years, alongside the increasing influence of European institutions, the issue of sovereignty gradually assumed a central position in the debate regarding EU membership. Despite the reluctance shown by the Thatcher government, the UK acceded to the Maastricht Treaty. This choice inevitably reinforced the pre-existing Eurosceptic tendencies shared by part of the British population. Startin lists two more external events that further strengthened these attitudes. The first one is the 2004 EU enlargement, which led to the perception that an increasing flow of migrants from the new member states would have a catastrophic impact on the British labour market. The second one is the 2007 global recession; the EU's unprecedented role in responding to the crisis made it a target for those already opposing European integration. These external events also reinforced the ideological forces mentioned above due to the role played by mass media. While it is challenging to determine to what extent media shapes people's preferences, the literature has already pointed out the role of British tabloids in shaping media discourse by portraying the EU as a centre of interests in contrast with the United Kingdom (Usherwood and Startin, 2013).

Alongside this representation of the EU as a non-democratic institution, far from the interests of British citizens, another cornerstone of the Leave campaign was the issue of uncontrolled immigration to the United Kingdom. The attempt to portray immigration as a threat emerges from an analysis of the campaign's official sources (Zappettini, 2019), the claims of several political exponents, and from how part of the press approached the theme. The tone of the discourse adopted by British tabloids may be summarized by mentioning how they were admonished by the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) for how they addressed the topic of migrants (Rzepnikowska, 2019). This narrative arguably had a significant effect on the working class, already impoverished by the dismantling of the welfare state since the 1980s. In turn, it led some population strata to identify the cause of their malaise in the increasing number of foreigners and, consequently,

in the EU, which was seen as the driving force behind these migratory phenomena. This process led to a vicious circle in which tabloids offered arguably racist content to increase their sales; by doing so, they strengthened the pre-existing concerns of the public opinion toward foreigners, which led the public to expect more of the same contents. Against this background, it is hardly surprising that the actors involved in the Leave campaign exploited this issue to influence the referendum's outcomes. As highlighted by Zappettini, the campaign succeeded in offering an interpretation of reality based on the following causal chain: EU membership was the cause, or at least a determining factor, behind the presence of immigrants in the UK; in turn, these immigrants are a threat to the job market, to the welfare system, and domestic security. Although these claims are highly questionable, the Leave campaign had the advantage of exploiting ideas already rooted in a part of the public opinion, whereas the Remain side had the more difficult task of disproving them. In the broader scope of this article, these dynamics can be seen as preliminary to disintegrative events, inasmuch as it can be expected that the actors interested in reversing European integration will resort to similar arguments.

Two macro-areas are particularly interesting when looking at signs of malaise in a state's EU membership: the first concerns the economy, and the second security. Satnam and McGeever (2018) have identified two predominant and contrasting narratives in the Leave campaign: a sense of nostalgia for the past, traceable to Britain's imperial history, and the assumption that the United Kingdom should isolate itself from an increasingly globalized world. These two narratives can be traced back to two underlying ideas or fears. The first is that the UK economy is threatened by globalization, represented by the EU, which limits the potential of the local industry and imports workers from outside. The second is that migrants pose a threat to national security. The terrorist attacks that happened in Europe in the years immediately preceding the referendum contributed to fuelling this fear; attacks that were understood, at least by part of the public opinion, as a direct consequence of the refugee crisis that followed the Syrian Civil War.

3.2 The path to disintegration

Until now, we have examined the main factors that led to the referendum and its outcomes individually. In the following section, we will look at how these factors combined over time to form a traceable process, which can then be applied to the broader issue of EU disintegration. To do this, we need to trace the period before the referendum on the United Kingdom's membership in the European Union and highlight how the ideological forces opposing integration evolved and interacted with the structural factors discussed earlier (see Figure 1).

The years leading up to Brexit were characterized by a combination of the following elements: a fertile ideological environment, multiple external crises, and individuals or groups seeking to exploit these crises to reinforce existing ideological forces. In this context, Cameron's decision to hold the referendum can be seen as an effort to win over moderately Eurosceptic voters, who had shown support for Nigel Farage's UKIP in the 2014 European

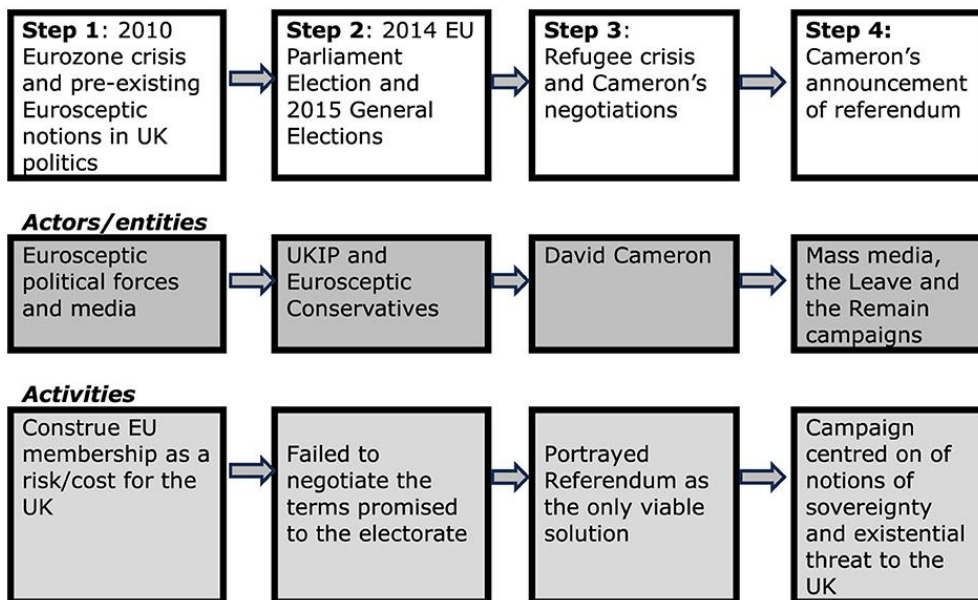


Figure 1. Summarisation of the casual mechanism.

Elections, and to solidify his leadership within the Conservative party. As part of this strategy, Cameron took moderately Eurosceptic positions to avoid alienating these same voters. Not holding the referendum could have led to electoral failure for the Tories and a loss of legitimacy for Cameron's leadership. However, a victory for the Leave side would have had similar consequences for the Cabinet and the Conservative leadership, suggesting that the Prime Minister may not have anticipated this outcome. Cameron's optimism can be attributed to two reasons.

After Brexit, any leader faced with the choice between holding a membership referendum or risking poor performance in an election will need to consider the consequences of the British vote. However, when Cameron agreed to the referendum, there was little precedent for a state leaving the EU. The second reason can be attributed to Cameron's understanding of British public opinion. Following the vote on Scotland's independence, the Prime Minister might have assumed that public opinion would again support the status quo. This assumption would align with the Remain campaign's rhetoric, which emphasized the potentially disastrous consequences of leaving the EU (Jessop, 2017).

Cameron initiated the referendum with the hopes that it would fail and expecting it to fail. In a speech at Bloomberg, the Prime Minister outlined three major challenges for the EU: a crisis in the Eurozone, a crisis in competitiveness, and a lack of democracy in European institutions. Cameron's speech reflected a Eurosceptic stance, influenced by the political climate following the European banking crisis. The main message was that while it would be preferable for the UK to stay in the EU, this decision should be made through a referendum, after negotiating improved membership terms.

The speech can be interpreted in different ways: as a warning to the EU in the upcoming negotiations, as a way to maintain control over Eurosceptic factions within the Conservative Party, and as reassurance for moderately Eurosceptic voters. Following the 2015 General Elections, the British PM had to balance his efforts to reach a deal with the EU and project a successful image of the negotiations, while facing pressure from those who would later form the Leave campaign if the deal failed. However, the strategy to contrast Euroscepticism with soft Euroscepticism was ineffective. It's worth considering whether the outcomes of the negotiations could have been different if the EU had taken the risk of Brexit more seriously. However, agreeing to Cameron's demands would have had two significant costs for EU leaders. Firstly, it would have been hard to justify a similar approach to their own electorates, with the risk of favoring Eurosceptic parties within their countries. Secondly, a perceived weakness of the EU could have hastened the disintegration process and weakened the European position in future negotiations.

In November 2015, a letter to Donald Tusk reiterated the three points mentioned in the speech and asked for a guarantee that non-Eurozone countries cannot be financially liable for operations aimed at supporting the Euro. Additionally, it centered on the idea that the relationship between Eurozone and non-Eurozone states should be fairer. Concerning competitiveness, the British Prime Minister asked to decrease the level of regulations.

Regarding sovereignty, Cameron demanded that the United Kingdom be exempted from working toward a closer union, a more significant application of the subsidiarity principle, and an increase in the powers of national parliaments. However, this demand may appear to conflict with the EU's institutional architecture. Cameron added a fourth demand to the three points already present in Bloomberg's speech: the request to limit immigration from other member states (Weiss and Blockmans, 2016).

Tusk's response in December 2015 used optimistic tones regarding the negotiation's outcomes and tried to reconcile Cameron's demands and the position of the other member states. It concluded by remarking on how the UK will continue to play a central role in the development of the EU. The President's response reflected the European Council's willingness to grant moderate and mostly symbolic concessions to the UK, while still having a strong interest in the UK remaining in the EU (Schimmelfennig, 2018). This course of action is likely due to a wrong assessment of the likelihood of Brexit. This assessment was influenced by the substantial benefits of membership for the United Kingdom, as mentioned by Cameron himself, and the fact that no state had ever left the EU before. It is debatable to what extent the EU's response would have been different if the prospect of the UK leaving had appeared more credible. Perhaps the nature of the requests put forward by the most Eurosceptic fringes of the UK Conservative and UK Independence Party was incompatible with the EU's founding principles, making any agreement impossible, especially regarding the circulation of people.

In the February 2016 speech in which he announced the referendum date, Cameron remarked on how Britain would be stronger as an EU member while reiterating the need to

reform European institutions from the inside. However, this moderate approach failed to convince the British electorate. It seems that Cameron overestimated both public opinion and the mass media's support for the EU.

Up to this point, the paper mapped the elements that combined to cause the referendum and influence its result. The following section discusses how these factors influenced both voters' preferences and the government's policies and which lessons can be drawn from Brexit with respect to the behavior of a state about to leave the EU.

4. Discussion on the lessons of Brexit for a theory of EU disintegration

The analysis of the causal mechanism so far suggests that a group of actors, including members of the mass media and the most Eurosceptic exponents of the UKIP and the Conservative party, successfully influenced the British government and the country's population over a few years. They achieved this through two interconnected activities, one related to the internal sphere and one to the external sphere.

Regarding the internal sphere, the main factor discussed here is the pressure political actors applied to Cameron's cabinet to bring about a referendum. The same Tory MPs that later formed the Leave campaign put increasing pressure on Cameron to pass a Referendum Bill, starting as early as 2011 and again in 2013 (Wintour and Watt, 2013). Cameron was also constrained by the competition of another party, i.e., UKIP, which could earn the support of those voters who were disappointed with the Conservatives' EU policies (Watt et al., 2013). Due to the first-past-the-post voting system implemented in the UK, Farage's party never managed to have more than one MP in the House of Commons. However, the UKIP's rise threatened Cameron for two reasons. Firstly, it might erode the party's majority by splitting the Conservative vote and thus favouring Labour candidates; secondly, for the risk of those dissatisfied with Cameron's leadership defecting to UKIP (Hunt, 2014).

On the external level, it is noteworthy that some mass media framed EU membership according to a specific political agenda, tying it with uncontrolled immigration, high costs, and lack of democratic representation. While the direct effect of this phenomenon on the referendum's results is challenging to measure, it appears that the mass media served as an echo chamber for the Leave campaign (Barnett, 2016). This phenomenon can be explained as a combination of ideologically driven interests and an attempt to provide their audiences with sensationalist content capable of matching the arguments and languages adopted by political actors. This process might have led to a vicious cycle in which campaigners disregard factual information (Barnett, 2016). Because of the interplay discussed above between economic interest and ideological consideration, the media conformed to this approach, thus enabling political actors to disregard reality further. The tendency to promote sensationalistic narratives was not limited to the Leave side, as we can observe a general shift in the political debate toward the employment of exaggerated claims and oversimplification (Beckett, 2016). In this context, it is unsurprising how voters with lower educational levels were more vulnerable to the arguments and strategies adopted by the

Leave campaign, as pointed out by an aggregate-level analysis of the vote's results (Goodwin and Heath, 2016).

The widespread exposure to and influence of overly critical views on the EU within the public had an impact on the power dynamics within the Conservative party. Despite not being particularly Eurosceptic himself, Cameron had gained considerable experience in managing the more extreme elements of his party over the years. As he successfully held the party's leadership for more than a decade and won two General Elections, it could be argued that the former Prime Minister was confident in his ability to reconcile his approach to the EU with the more extreme views held by some of his MPs and voters. In this context, granting a referendum should not be seen as solely a response to external pressures faced by Cameron. Instead, it appears to be in line with Cameron's strategic approach, which had been effective up to that point (Hayton, 2018).

Considering these deep divisions within the Conservative party concerning European integration, looking at this phenomenon as an issue of party leadership and internal politics rather than a foreign policy problem may be helpful. However, to completely exclude from the causal factors those structural aspects typically associated with states' decision-making process in IR theory would be a mistake since considerations of a similar nature partly dictated the preferences of those who supported the Leave front.

One of the main arguments of those supporting leave was that the UK would have been in a better position by defining its trade agreements with the European bloc and with the rest of the world autonomously, without the inevitable limits to sovereignty resulting from EU membership and without the risk of having to use its economic resources to assist other states. Such an approach existed, but it was maintained only by a relatively limited section of the political class. However, due to the party logic set out above, the influence of this vision was amplified; due to external structural circumstances, the debt crisis and the Syrian civil war, Cameron chose to adopt a suboptimal strategy and compromise against his interests, starting the process that culminated in the referendum. This contrast between a given actor's preferences and their decisions leaves us to reflect on how a state's choices are inevitably the product of the balance between different forces with conflicting interests and objectives. In other words, Brexit results from several actors prioritizing their interests over the state's. The ideologization of structural factors, understood here as the ability to organize external events in a convincing narrative built upon pre-existing notions of sovereignty and identity, proved particularly effective for the Leave campaign. This success is due to the Leave campaign's capacity to present the referendum as the only possibility to influence what had been presented as a system, the European Union, detached from the democratic process and controlled by distant bureaucratic and political elites.

It is disconcerting to note that a significant number of voters made decisions based on incomplete or factually incorrect information. The most glaring example is the claim that post-Brexit, the UK would be able to allocate £350 million a week to the NHS, a promise swiftly disowned by Nigel Farage after the vote (Reid, 2019). This aligns with the rational

irrationality model, where individuals maintain biased beliefs, even to the point of going against their own interests, due to the psychological costs of challenging their pre-existing ideas (Caplan, 2001).

In the case of Brexit, a significant portion of the voters found that the ideas presented by the Leave campaign aligned with their worldview. In a context characterized by economic instability, increasing ethnic diversity, and the threat of terrorism, the message that Britain could somehow revert to its glorious past by leaving the EU resonated with the electorate. Faced with the costs associated with obtaining information on European and International law, the micro and macro-economic consequences of EU membership, and the real causes and effects of migration, voters decided to endorse the simplified version of reality offered by the Leave campaign. They did so because the campaign was able to leverage real problems, namely the decline of the middle class, using effective communication tools to spread captivating messages. Furthermore, the Leave campaign managed to attract single-issue voters who were particularly sensitive to a specific aspect of the campaign but were uninterested in the ramifications of leaving the EU. In this regard, concerns over immigration were a significant variable in determining voting preferences (Goodwin and Milazzo, 2017). Another possible example of single-issue voting is that of fishermen, overwhelmingly in favour of Leave due to the possibility that this would help the British fishing industry, regardless of the overall effects of the negotiations on the country's economy.

Considering the above, these three elements should be included among the referendum's causal factors and understood as necessary prerequisites to the outcome researched in this work. Firstly, Cameron's decision to pursue a strategy already adopted in the past, a strategy relying on keeping the Eurosceptic fringes of his party under control by adopting a slightly toned-down version of their arguments while contemporarily appealing to the potential benefits of EU integration. Secondly, the Leave campaign's ability to present the referendum as a last resort to influence a phenomenon otherwise beyond the reach of ordinary people. Lastly, the state of deliberate and selective ignorance on the part of some of the electorate, a state reinforced by a persuasive, albeit often groundless and simplistic, campaign. These elements combined to determine the foreign policy of one of the largest states in the world, leading to a choice that can only be explained by the interaction between structural and ideological causal factors.

Moreover, it can be concluded that Leave voters were more motivated to vote. This greater propensity to participate in the Referendum is because the campaign had a more significant effect on them since it successfully presented the vote as an opportunity to democratically influence a political issue framed as outside of the voter's control.

One of the mistakes of the Remain campaign was to emphasize that the status quo was the only acceptable option. In other terms, they reinforced the vision of the EU as something inevitable, paradoxically motivating some of the voters to want to affirm their preference against this situation.

Regarding the contrast between the decision to vote Leave and a rational assessment of the consequences, this analysis indicates that voters were not interested in broadening their understanding of the issues related to the vote. Instead, they were swayed by a rhetoric focused on nationalism and economic sovereignty, as promoted by mass media and the Leave campaign. Consequently, voters chose to embrace a narrative that aligned with their preferences, rather than confronting complex issues and overcoming their ideological biases.

5. Conclusion

This paper aimed to contribute to European studies by examining the extent to which Brexit can be attributed to structural or ideological factors. It provides a comprehensive analysis of the process leading to the referendum and its outcome, identifying the main actors, their preferences and actions, and the consequences of their decisions. The study also delves into the role of the UK's government led by Cameron, the mass media, and the British electorate's ideological substratum. The focus is on the period between Cameron's pledge to renegotiate the terms of British membership and the 2016 vote. The analysis of structural factors includes the political and economic situation of the United Kingdom, while the ideological sphere is explored through the identity and preferences of the British voters and political class concerning European integration.

Our research showed how the division between agency and structure may appear challenging to mark in the analysis of this empirical case. In Brexit's case, the three main structural causal factors were the European debt crisis, the migrant crisis, and the fear on the part of some actors that the UK could see its sovereignty reduced by a higher degree of European integration. However, these elements caused the United Kingdom's exit from the EU only due to the previous ideological substratum, characterized by a historically skeptical attitude toward European integration, especially following the eastern enlargement and the increase in the number of immigrants.

Furthermore, the electorate's ideological preferences have been shaped by purposeful actors with a specific agenda, supported by a political discourse relying on rhetoric with low regard for factual information. In other terms, structural factors served as catalysts for a process made possible by pre-existing ideological factors and interests built on cultural and emotional elements.

The theoretical and prospective value of these findings lies in how they can be used to assess the likelihood of a state leaving the EU by verifying whether the following factors are present: a pre-existing ideological background centred around the notion of sovereignty, the presence of political forces capable of promoting an agenda of disintegration, external structural shocks capable of enhancing the appeal of those ideas for the general population. In the case of Brexit, those shocks were the debt crisis, which resonated with the idea that the UK should not be responsible for the financial difficulties of other member states, and

the migrant crisis, which was exploited by the Leave campaign by relying on pre-existing mistrust toward foreign nationals living in the UK.

Moreover, the most dangerous consequence of Brexit for the EU is that the catastrophic scenarios envisioned by the Remain campaign have remained mostly unrealized, thus showing how European integration is a potentially reversible process. However, it must also be noted how the UK was in a relatively privileged position due to its economic and diplomatic weight and the fact that the country remained outside the Eurozone. Overall, European disintegration, not unlike European integration, is a complex process influenced by a combination of structural and ideological factors. The only way to predict its trajectory is to identify both possible future external shocks and the already existing ideological forces that might be strengthened by them while simultaneously keeping the actors that might benefit from disintegration under control.

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4.2 Paper 2: Post-Truth Politics, Brexit, and European Disintegration

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Abstract

This chapter analyses the effect of post-truth on European disintegration, a process that led to the strengthening of Eurosceptic political parties and the Brexit referendum. This work has the twofold purpose of analysing the role of PTP in the Leave campaign and discussing its implications from a theoretical standpoint. The chapter consists of four parts. The first one includes an overview of the literature on European disintegration, Brexit, and post-truth; it also offers a conceptualisation of post-factual politics, discussing how the notion evolved

and how it relates to misinformation. The second part consists of an analysis of the Leave campaign; it identifies the actors behind misinformation and their role before and during the referendum campaign. The third section is an empirical analysis of the discourse on Brexit, with a focus on factually ambiguous or incorrect statements. The ties between deception and politics are further analysed in the fourth part, attempting to describe to which extent, during a crisis, political actors can exploit pre-existing ideological forces to construct a specific narrative. The conclusion addresses the effectiveness of misinformation on the Leave campaign and whether a similar approach will play a more significant role in the ongoing debate on EU integration. The ambition of the chapter is to analyse misinformation as a tool to create consensus, looking at the actors employing it, its effectiveness, and its role as a causal factor in the Leave campaign and the process of European disintegration.

Introduction

This work investigates the role played by post-truth politics in the 2016 United Kingdom referendum on EU membership, exploring the links between misinformation, Brexit, and European disintegration. The concept of misinformation has been widely explored in the literature; it can be defined as the tendency of political actors to incorporate empirically incorrect statements in their discourse to influence public opinion (MacMullen, 2020). The spread of this practice, a consolidated strategy in political communication, has led some scholars to argue that we currently live in the era of post-truth (Marshall & Drieschova, 2018). This concept seems to imply a paradigm shift, thus assuming the existence of a past moment in which political actors only relied on factual information. However, this chapter does not intend to investigate such claims; conversely, this work argues that it is unnecessary to demonstrate the existence of a previous state of truth to speak of post-truth. Accordingly, it is sufficient to demonstrate that the actors analysed successfully implemented a strategy based on deception to use the term post-truth without ruling out the hypothesis that such tactics already existed in the past. What has changed, allowing us to use the term post-truth politics, is how these tactics are employed and their effectiveness on an unprecedented scale (Suiter, 2016).

A fundamental distinction for this chapter is the one between campaigning, intended as a component of the democratic process that in the case of Brexit inevitably included spreading arguments against membership in the most convincing way possible, and misinformation, or all those instances in which the Leave campaign circulated factually incorrect or ambiguous information. An example of this is the Leave campaign carried out ahead of the 2016 Referendum. The campaign was characterised by a series of false or equivocal messages representing the European Union in a negative way (Rose, 2017). This chapter looks at political actors, exploring their lack of interest or awareness regarding the empirical reliability of their claims during the Leave campaign; this phenomenon is the core element of post-truth politics, which offers a vantage point from which to analyse populist discourse and the future of European disintegration.

The chapter is structured as follows: the first part consists of an analysis of the most recent literature on the topics of Brexit and post-truth politics, in line with the aim to discuss the role of misinformation in the Leave campaign and frame it in the context of European disintegration. The second part focuses on the actors involved, trying to identify through which media and arenas they have made more use of factually ambiguous or incorrect statements. The third section categorises and analyses the material collected; this part aims to map the Brexit discourse by dividing it into the three frames of security, economy, and sovereignty. The subsequent section of the chapter discusses the findings from the frame analysis; it focuses on the role of misinformation and the circumstances that favoured its use as a political tactic, both in the Brexit referendum and in the discourse on European integration at large. The conclusion goes beyond assessing the impact of misinformation on Brexit by addressing what repercussions these findings can have in the context of European disintegration. Overall, this chapter is in continuity with the work already done on Brexit and misinformation; however, it aims to look further by discussing the implications of post-truth on a continental scale, contributing to the formulation of a theory of disintegration.

Post-Truth and Brexit

The concept of post-truth has established itself in academic debates in recent years and is particularly associated with two events that occurred a few months apart: Brexit and the election of Donald Trump (Conrad & Hálfðanarson, 2022; Newman, 2019). The central notion behind it is that political debate is characterised by a substantial disinterest in empirical reality, which is exaggerated or manipulated based on the need to promote specific narratives. This disregard for factual information has significant consequences for the nature of the Western democratic system, which is based on the assumption that collective decisions result from a rational evaluation of reality.

Although this assumption on democracy is questionable, given that the nature of society is the product of a complex network of power and meaning relationships (Farkas & Schau, 2019), for the purposes of this chapter, post-factual politics is understood as the tendency of political discourse to deviate from facts as they are generally understood and interpreted by the community. Let us take, for example, the claim repeated during the Leave campaign that the UK sends £350 million a week to the EU and that this money could instead finance the NHS. A similar statement lends itself to several questions regarding the nature of our economic system and our value system; however, for the purposes of this work, it is relevant mainly as factually incorrect and as an attempt to promote a specific and distorted understanding of reality. In other words, this chapter is interested in those statements that are not in line with empirical reality and in how reality is a constantly changing social construct.

This debate stems from the observation that, while lying has never been a foreign tool within the political arena, today the truth can be systematically ignored with impunity (Newman, 2019); while politicians tried to circumnavigate the truth in the past, today they can trample on it. Similarly, this chapter does not address whether there was a paradigm shift from an

era of truth to one of post-truth. This work does not investigate the causes, or even the mere existence, of such a paradigm shift. Instead, it focuses on how post-truth politics have been successfully employed in the political arena. Misinformation as a tool is particularly effective for populist actors, due to their tendency to focus their discourse on the division between “real people” and those not conforming to their narrative (Müller, 2017).

In the case of Brexit, this phenomenon has been extensively explored within the literature. In the years following the referendums on the Constitutional Treaty, Hobolt (2007) noted how the effectiveness of referendums on European integration was linked to voters’ competencies, defined as the ability to express their preferences based on factual information. Schmidt (2017) observed how the Leave campaign resorted to lying to spread persuasive, albeit unfounded, ideas among voters. The voters themselves could perceive this substantial use of misinformation (Renwick et al., 2018), leading Watson (2018) to label it as a violation of their epistemic rights. From a comprehensive analysis of the role of news media in the campaign, it also emerged how the Leave campaign managed to frame the contributions of experts as propaganda of the establishment, thus reinforcing that the Brexit vote was about the masses regaining control from the EU’s antidemocratic élites (Moore & Ramsay, 2017). As for the impact of this strategy, a study conducted in 2019 highlighted the existence of a network of over 13,000 bots active on Twitter and mainly supporting Leave (Bastos & Mecea, 2019). Although Bastos and Mecea (2019) carefully pointed out how the contribution of bots is quantitatively marginal compared to the discussion on Brexit that took place on Twitter, this and other similar studies highlight the non-negligible role played by misinformation in the Leave campaign (Safieddine, 2020).

In general, any attempt to measure the exact effect of an external factor on a given vote is somewhat questionable, considering the vast number of interrelated causal factors contributing to an electoral result. However, the instances of misinformation and manipulation discussed so far, both in the mass media and in the social media dimension, suggest an attempt to cause in the voters those emotional reactions commonly referred to as “one of the causes of the Leave vote” (Clarke et al., 2017). The influence of these practices on the democratic process is also evident from the emergence of an institutional and academic debate focused on how to increase social platform accountability (Selva and De Blasio, 2021); such attempts at mitigating the impact of misinformation on the democratic functioning of society are a sign of the increasing role played by these tactics in the aftermath of Brexit and during the Covid-19 pandemic.

This work uses misinformation as an umbrella term, thus including factually incorrect and misleading material regardless of the criterion of intentionality, upon which misinformation and disinformation are usually differentiated (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). This decision stems from the fact that this distinction is not particularly relevant for this chapter, as both misinformation and disinformation are features of post-truth politics. These tactics are powerful tools for obtaining electoral consensus, leading to decisions based on factually incorrect elements and thus representing a threat to the democratic system. Accordingly,

this work aims to identify which political actors take advantage of post-truth politics, and in which circumstances this approach is effective. The Leave campaign includes all the relevant elements for this investigation since it includes populist actors, the use of misinformation, and an unprecedented impact on European disintegration.

Actors and Arenas of Post-Truth Politics

A central aspect of this work is to look at how post-truth politics can be used to shape public opinion. This approach, then, requires the existence of actors interested in carrying out this strategy and of the infrastructures through which to do so; hence, the choice herein of the distinction between arenas and actors of post-truth politics upon which this study is based (Conrad & Hálfðanarson, 2022). As for the actors, they can be defined as agents interested in influencing the outcome of the vote; hence the decision to include political actors, newspapers well-known for promoting Eurosceptic narratives, and the two leading organisations campaigning for Leave. As a consequence, it was decided to ignore the incidental actors, such as individuals or organisations active in supporting the campaign but not in shaping its tactics and language.

A further distinction can be made between foreign and domestic actors. This work includes political actors actively campaigning for Leave, social movements, and mass media. Determining foreign actors can be more challenging, but Russian interference in the Brexit vote has been widely discussed both academically and on the institutional level (Dobrowolski et al., 2020; McGaughey, 2018). The distinction between the two, not unlike the one between misinformation and disinformation, is not always clear-cut, with the extent and effectiveness of foreign attempts to influence the vote still being investigated. This study focuses on the domestic sphere, as it assumes that foreign actors mainly amplified predominantly endogenous notions and narratives, acting as an echo chamber for a discourse moulded by national stakeholders.

As for the political forces involved in the Leave campaign, the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) played a central role. In the years leading up to the referendum, the party led by Farage managed to attract the support of those voters disappointed by the convergence towards the centre of both Cameron's Conservative Party and Blair's Labour; it did so by promoting a narrative centred around the notion that the two mainstream parties represented the interests of the establishment, at the expenses of the British people (Tournier-Sol, 2020). This narrative is typical of the populist and Eurosceptic discourse, and part of the Conservative party also adopted it during the campaign (Bale, 2018). Moreover, as both the positions and the methods employed by those actors can be found in other EU member states, looking at the leave campaign sheds light on European disintegration at large.

Indirectly, the rhetoric adopted by UKIP had an impact on the Conservative party, especially by influencing its position in the debate on European integration. In this context, Cameron opted first to include the reform of the European institutions in his program and later to

promise a referendum on EU membership if this process of reform proved unsatisfactory. Moreover, due to UKIP's increasing electoral success, Cameron was concerned with the possibility of losing the support of the more Eurosceptic elements within his party (Hayton, 2018); against this backdrop, it is not surprising how a sizeable minority within the Conservative Party can be counted among the actors in the Leave campaign. While UKIP and part of the Conservatives constituted the campaign's backbone, some members of the Labour Party, various Northern Irish Unionist parties, and exponents of other minor parties, also campaigned for leaving the EU. However, compared to the two major political forces, those political actors did not significantly shape the campaign's narrative; therefore, they should be considered secondary forces for this analysis.

Three organisations mainly carried out the Leave campaign, focusing on somewhat different aspects of a shared Eurosceptic narrative. The main one, designated by the Electoral Commission as the official campaign, was Vote Leave, an organisation formed by exponents of the Conservative and Labour parties, and also supported by the Eurosceptic association Business for Britain. The group focused on the economic drawbacks of EU membership rather than on the immigration dimension. The second organisation, Leave.EU, was closer to the positions and rhetoric of UKIP, thus carrying out a campaign centred on immigration and promoting itself as distant from the establishment, represented in this case by Vote Leave (Vasilopoulou, 2016). A third group, Grassroots Out, was founded by representatives of several parties, including Farage, in 2016; the organisation merged with Leave.EU and other smaller groups in a failed attempt at being designated by the Electoral Commission as the official campaign (Hall, 2016).

Another actor who played a decisive role in the campaign and in shaping public opinion on the issues of European integration is the British press. The role of mass media emerges from a content analysis conducted by Zappettini (2021), which highlighted how tabloids routinely resorted to populist rhetoric strongly biased towards the Leave campaign and often used incompletely or factually incorrect with the aim of influencing public opinion. While promoting a specific political position falls within the prerogatives of journalism, this analysis looked at those newspapers that for decades promoted a Eurosceptic framing of the EU, often through sensationalistic reporting and factually incorrect claims (Birks, 2021). These findings align with a phenomenon widely studied within the literature on the subject, namely how media discourse has promoted the same antagonistic representation of the EU at the heart of the Leave campaign (Daddow, 2015).

After identifying the actors responsible for the use of misinformation in the electoral campaign, it is necessary to establish where they employed misinformation strategies. The analysis carried out in this chapter looks at three arenas, understood both as spaces where narratives are constructed and as infrastructure for their diffusion. The first one, definable as the political dimension, includes declarations by political actors in speech and interviews, as well as material spread by the official campaigns on their websites. The second arena is the social media one, and it has already been deemed relevant in the case of Brexit, given

how it promotes a high level of mobilisation and accentuates the pre-existing polarisation in the public debate (Brändle et al., 2021). The third dimension is that of the legacy media, and especially the newspapers in their online form. The importance of this last arena has been often pointed out, for instance, by Maccaferri (2019), who showed how the Europe/Britain dyad had been constructed by the press over the years, emphasising the need for the British people to regain control and reverse a process of decline caused by EU membership.

The actors and arena dimensions might appear to conflate, such as in the cases of social media and newspapers. This stems from the fact that the actors shaping the political discourse are deeply interconnected with the tools and spaces in which they operate—shaping and being shaped by them—and are better understood through a holistic approach.

Table 6.1 Actors and areas analysed

<i>Actors</i>	<i>Arenas</i>
1. Politicians from UKIP and the Conservative Party	1. Social Media (Facebook, Twitter)
2. Newspapers supporting Leave (Daily Mail, Express, The Sun, The Telegraph)	2. British mass media, regardless of their stance in the campaign
3. Leave.EU and Vote Leave	3. Campaign websites and public statements

However, this work considers actors as agents able to carry out a determined strategy to achieve a pre-determined goal, which translates to implementing Eurosceptic practices through misinformation. The arenas are those loci where these practices occur, and the public attitude towards Euroscepticism takes shape in line with what has already been theorised within the literature (de Wilde & Trenz, 2012).

From this point of view, the online press is an actor inasmuch as the editorial policy of a given newspaper spreads articles and content to create and reinforce a Eurosceptic narrative. At the same time, it counts as an arena given how said content finds a place within it—regardless of whether they originate from individuals affiliated with a given newspaper—and originate from public statements by political actors or by the public debate in general. At the same time, content originating from the press (seen in this case as an actor) can be shared on social media, which in these circumstances becomes an arena (Table 6.1).

This chapter identifies cases of misinformation carried out by the following actors: politicians from the Conservative Party and UKIP, the four most widespread newspapers siding with Leave, and the two most prominent campaign organisations: Leave.EU and Vote Leave. As for the arenas, the frame analysis looks at material collected on Facebook and Twitter; on the online editions of the four newspapers, alongside other media outlets of national importance that hosted relevant content regardless of their position in the campaign; and lastly, all the material that does not fall into the first two categories, including the websites of the two campaigns, is classified together. The material analysed consists of statements either subsequently proven to be factually incorrect by independent fact-checking websites

such as Full Fact, or misleading due to the language utilised. On a quantitative level, the cases included in the sample were selected to include a similar amount of material for each of the actors and the arenas analysed; nonetheless, as shown in Tables 6.2 and 6.3, political actors and mass media are over-represented, respectively, in the actors and arenas groups. This imbalance results from two characteristics of the political debate. First, politicians were at the centre of the campaign; second, the analysis of material on newspapers included both opinion pieces and news.

Table 6.2 Misinformation by articles (total number of articles in parentheses)

<i>Actors (total)</i>	<i>Category</i>		
	<i>Security</i>	<i>Economy</i>	<i>Sovereignty</i>
Political actors (25)	17	19	17
Newspapers (12)	6	9	8
Campaigns (14)	6	11	5

Table 6.3 Misinformation by arenas (total number of articles in parentheses)

<i>Arenas (total)</i>	<i>Category</i>		
	<i>Security</i>	<i>Economy</i>	<i>Sovereignty</i>
Social Media (16)	9	10	4
Mass media (20)	11	15	13
Campaign material (15)	9	14	13

In the choice of material, the chapter is in continuity with similar works focused, among other things, on the narrative promoted by the most prominent exponents of Leave (Spencer & Oppermann, 2020) and on a wide-ranging analysis of the content shared on social media (Lilleker & Bonacci, 2017). Unlike big data studies, in which a large amount of material is selected to identify a specific narrative, each instance of misinformation included in this work was selected purposefully. This allowed for an in-depth analysis of the empirically verifiable claims and, more importantly, the purpose and meaning of the material collected. The reason for this choice is that the existence of such practices in the case of the Leave campaign is already widely recognised, and this work builds upon this to analyse the nature of this material and draw conclusions on a systemic level. The choice of framing misinformation in the categories of actors and arenas underlines some of its features; in particular, it shows how political actors and mass media differ in manipulating information and how the content changes depending on the context in which they are shared. This vantage point also allows for some reflections on how the language of misinformation is not univocal; instead, it changes depending on the policy problems discussed and specific rhetorical choices. A consequence of this approach is that the corpus examined is smaller than similar works, as the material was selected to highlight specific narratives and not to demonstrate their existence.

Misinformation in the Leave Campaign

The subsequent analysis looks at 51 instances of misinformation that emerged during the Leave campaign, manually selected from thousands of content generated by the relevant actors between October 2015 and the day of the referendum. For the purposes of this work, disinformation refers to factually incorrect or highly misleading content deliberately spread to pursue political goals; this definition draws explicitly from the work of Bennett and Livingston on disruptive communication (2016). However, as noted earlier, the actor's intentionality is assumed in the broadest sense, thus going beyond the terminological distinction between misinformation and disinformation. Indeed, this work assumes that the protagonists of post-truth politics are not interested in knowing if the information is accurate, misleading, or false as long as it resonates with the narrative they are trying to establish. Accordingly, the cases of misinformation selected here either contain precise statements that were later disproven by independent third parties or are phrased to imply a factually incorrect understanding of reality. Hence the need to distinguish between rhetorically charged statements and claims based on false premises: a methodological approach consistent with the one adopted by similar studies (Höller, 2021).

However, although relevant for the purposes of the empirical rigour of this analysis, the distinction between mere claims and verifiable arguments is not as clear-cut, given how post-truth politics also consists of a communication strategy in which reality is redefined to provoke strong emotional responses in the electorate. The coexistence of these two sides of post-truth is a consequence of the intrinsic nature of electoral campaigns, which do not consist of the mere presentation of facts rationally analysed by the electorate but rather in an attempt to shape the voter's identities and preferences. Accordingly, the information presented in the articles, speech, and social media content categorised in this chapter can be seen as the foundation on which the Brexit narrative was built; the same narrative was then amplified and spread in the material discarded due to its highly speculative and unfalsifiable nature. For these reasons, some claims that would appear to be hardly falsifiable due to their vague nature, such as the notion that the Eurozone was due to collapse in a few years (Leave Eu, 2016a) or that Churchill would have voted Leave (Lawson, 2016) were included as they can give some insights on the rhetoric that permeated the campaign. In this framework, the material excluded from this analysis is still relevant as it contributed to creating a climate of mistrust towards European institutions by promoting and reinforcing the same narratives found in the factually incorrect data.

The cases of misinformation collected are classified according to three frames: economy, security, and sovereignty. The frames are identified inductively based on what appear to be the pillars of the Eurosceptic rhetoric adopted during the campaign. The first category pertains to the negative economic consequences of EU membership, such as the claim that leaving the EU would have allowed an increase in public spending in the NHS by £350 million a week (Reuben, 2016). This claim, constantly repeated throughout the campaign and later denied by, among others, Nigel Farage (Stone, 2016), shows how the Leave campaign has

tried to leverage a real problem perceived by the electorate by associating it with the EU. This strategy is in line with what Watson (2018) observed regarding how the Leave campaign succeeded in convincing voters dissatisfied with the status quo and feeling “left behind” after decades of ineffective liberalists policies, and therefore willing to vote for the promise of change offered by Brexit.

The association between the economic sphere and the migration one promotes the notion that migrants are detrimental to the healthcare system, the economy, and their presence has worrying security implications. The ties between the discourse on immigration and the vote results have been widely explored (Dennison & Geddes, 2018), and this appears clearly in the second category developed for this study, namely that of security. The idea that immigrants represented a threat not only to the economy but also to the security of the United Kingdom is evident both from the constant references to the risk of Turkey’s imminent entry into the EU and from news reports linking the arrival of refugees to the EU (Slack & Groves, 2016), claims later corrected by the Daily Mail due to their misleading content (Khomami, 2016). The choice not to consider immigration as a separate category is since, generally, immigration itself is not considered a danger by the sources analysed but rather in terms of its impact on the economic and security dimensions.

The third category is that of sovereignty, a residual group encompassing all the material not directly classifiable in the first two and those statements highlighting how EU membership is incompatible with the independence of the United Kingdom. In the Leave campaign narrative, the notion of sovereignty also touches the economic sphere and the immigration one, but it transcends these two dimensions as it emphasises how Britain is a prisoner of an undemocratic system both at the institutional and cultural level. This discourse promoted a narrative in which sovereignty is fetishised, and voters must “Take Back Control”; a slogan implying that the British people were menaced due to European bureaucrats controlling them from above and immigrants threatening their freedom from below, for instance, by stealing jobs and hindering the healthcare system (Pencheva & Maronitis, 2018).

This narrative draws from several topics, including the constant threat of Turkey joining the EU, the perspective of the UK forcefully bailing out other member states on the verge of bankruptcy (Vote Leave, 2016a), and some hardly qualifiable claims such as the fact that the EU imposes oppressive regulations on light bulbs and vacuum cleaners (The Telegraph, 2016). While some of these claims have been proven false or misleading (Full Fact Team, 2016), others escape similar scrutiny due to their abstract nature but have nevertheless been included as significant examples of the discourse adopted during the campaign.

As noted above, most of the sources analysed include misinformation relevant to more than one of the three categories. This tendency is evident from the subdivision presented in Table 6.2, and it derives from the nature of the sources collected. Those include lists of reasons to vote Leave (Green et al., 2016; Daily Mail, 2016a); speeches or interviews in which the speaker refers to different topics (Johnson, 2016; Farage & Neil, 2016); and articles that

move from crucial topics in the Eurosceptic discourse to describing the consequences of these events over the three categories discussed (Vote Leave, 2016a). The latter is prevalent with articles discussing Turkey's accession to the EU or the NHS.

Concerning the subdivision of the collected sources among the actors (Table 6.2), it emerges how the material shared by political actors generally includes references to several categories. This strategy is evident in a speech by Nigel Farage to the European Parliament, reshared by his party on Facebook. In the speech, the British MEP observes how Turkey is about to join the European Union, with negative consequences linked to the country's poverty, the influx of "75 million migrants", and remarking the EU's inability to negotiate with Turkey during the 2015 refugee crisis. The speech, like other interviews and public statements by Boris Johnson, Farage himself (Farage, 2016; Ross, 2016), and other politicians (Fox, 2016), shows a certain tendency to start from a single issue, such as Turkey joining the EU or the NHS crisis, to move onto a broader narrative encompassing the three dimensions conceptualised in this work. The conclusion is that a vote to remain is a vote for Turkey, for uncontrolled immigration, and it will expose Britain to terrorism, remarking the need to choose Leave and regain control of the country's borders (UKIP, 2016).

As for the newspapers, the predominant element seems to be the economic one. Alongside the previously mentioned lists of reasons to vote No, both the articles and the pieces of opinion analysed focus on the economic aspect, even when they mention immigration, and on a vague concept of sovereignty (The Sun, 2016). The concept of sovereignty is also present in a more abstract than practical sense in the material shared on social media by the two campaigns. Here, it is preferred to leverage more immediate images, such as the riots that took place in Cologne (Leave.eu, 2016b)—which, according to the campaign, was "neglected by British media"—and the costs of financing Turkey's accession to the EU instead of the NHS (Vote Leave, 2016c).

As far as arenas are concerned, the division between the various categories seems more homogeneous, as shown in Table 6.3. Sovereignty is less present in social media, probably as this concept is more of a broader backdrop than a source of specific topics. This homogeneity suggests that arenas, more than actors, are the determining variable when selecting a topic; although it maintains some constant characteristics, misinformation adapts according to the channels by which it is spread. The analysis shows how social media are used both by political actors and by the official campaigns, and similarly, the websites of the two campaigns host several interviews and speeches by political actors. As for legacy media, the analysed newspapers mainly present two types of content: news articles presenting factually incorrect or misleading information (Dominiczak & Whitehead, 2016) and opinion pieces or interviews serving as an echo chamber for the positions of political actors active in the Leave campaign. Lastly, all the arenas include lists of reasons why voters should choose Leave, frequent references to Turkey and the NHS, and the notion that the collapse of the EU is imminent and inevitable.

Brexit, Post-Truth Politics, and European Disintegration

As the analysis in the section above attests, several actors employed misinformation in the Leave campaign in different arenas. This phenomenon can suggest a paradigm shift in political communication strategies. The ambition of this chapter is not to question whether this approach is in discontinuity with the past; instead, it focuses on how false or ambiguous content plays a role in Brexit and in EU disintegration. To this end, this section tries to draw a conceptual map of the conditions necessary for misinformation to become an effective political tool. Regarding Brexit, the Referendum needs to be contextualised in the framework of EU politicisation. As noted, among others, by Zürn (2019), the increase in dissent against European institutions has given rise to a conflict between mainstream political parties supporting the European project and a substantial part of their electorate.

A consequence of this contrast has been the emergence of identity politics, which was promoted and shaped by those political entrepreneurs interested in obtaining the consent of this Eurosceptic electorate. Suppose we accept the notion that the intersection between identity politics, cultural and economic instability, and the EU was constructed by purposive actors (Hooghe & Marks, 2009). In that case, it follows that EU membership has been associated over time with a series of harmful elements attributable to the three categories discussed above; this emerges from the literature, and from the material collected in this chapter.

As for the immigration dimension, we have the usual clichés against immigration predating the debate on the EU. The typical features of this discourse are that immigrants commit more crimes than citizens, are unwilling or unable to integrate with the cultural environments of the host countries and will place excessive pressure on public services. These aspects are partly reworked in an anti-European key, for example, by underlining the risk of Turkey joining the EU by portraying the country as an inexhaustible source of immigrants or by linking immigration with terrorism. In the economic sphere, which is intrinsically linked with the sovereignty dimension, the main criticism is that the UK would have been forced to come to the rescue of the other EU countries in the event of another economic crisis. Furthermore, there is a tendency to underline how resources are diverted from services (mainly, in the material analysed, the NHS) as EU membership forces the UK to allocate its budget differently.

Lastly, concerning the dimension of sovereignty, it is evident how this category draws from the other two. This connection is a consequence of how migration and economic policies fall within the area in which sovereignty is expressly limited by adhering to EU treaties. Accordingly, failure to reform the European treaties was the central element behind the initial push towards the Referendum; throughout the campaign, Cameron was portrayed as unable to guarantee the UK's sovereignty within the EU. This lack of sovereignty is constructed as implying negative consequences on multiple levels. It hinders the country's international competitiveness, preventing the state from determining its tariff policies independently; it also affects the capacity of distinguishing between "positive" and

“negative” immigration, a dichotomy typical of Eurosceptic rhetoric and corollary to the notion that EU membership causes “uncontrolled” migrations due to free circulation of people. An example of this tendency can be seen in how the fact that the 2004 EU enlargement led many EEC workers to migrate to the UK has been used to construct a narrative of immigrants burdening the welfare system.

These notions pre-existed both the Leave campaign and the domestic debate on whether the UK had to renegotiate its membership in the EU; in fact, they had been the subject of strategy competition between British political parties for years, in line with the dynamics highlighted by Hooghe and Marks (2009) in their postfunctionalist theory of European integration. This “logic of party interaction and issue politicisation” promotes fertile ground for the use of misinformation, as past parties’ commitments constrain their strategic positioning over time. The signs of this vicious cycle, consisting of political actors unable to keep pace with their narrative, can be seen within the Conservative party in the years leading up to the Referendum; specifically, those Tories in support of Remain saw their room for manoeuvre reduced by having to compete against the Leave front while using its same arguments.

In a context characterised by these ideological forces exploited by political actors, an additional element can contribute to forming a fertile environment for misinformation. This element is the presence of an external systemic crisis, which lends itself to being instrumentalised and tied to existing ideas. Political actors can construct this sort of connection, which can become real for the public as long as people accept it and consider it part of the political discourse. In other words, it is not enough to associate an external event with a series of pre-existing ideas, but this juxtaposition must appear convincing enough to be digested by the public. In the case of Brexit and the three categories analysed in this chapter, the two external events in question are the 2009 Eurozone crisis and the 2015 European migrant crisis. The impact of these events on the European integration debate has been extensively explored in recent years, mainly focusing on how such crises have been used to reinforce pre-dating Eurosceptic positions (Taggart & Szczerbiak, 2018). Specifically, and regarding the Leave campaign, these two events served as a catalyst. For example, in the case of immigration, the causal chain that led to misinformation in this area can be summarised as follows.

Over the years, the UK’s population has changed demographically, both due to the influx of immigrants from the former British colonies and due to the EU enlargement in 2004. This demographic change has led to the emergence of racial tensions, accentuated by a markedly Islamophobic attitude due to the association between Islamic minorities and terrorism which is promoted by the mass media (Capdevila & Callaghan, 2008). These tensions have, in turn, been used by political actors in their rhetoric, which focuses on the contrast between “us and them” and which identifies membership in the European Union as one of the causes of immigration and as an obstacle in allowing the United Kingdom to carry out an independent migration policy (Zappettini, 2019).

In this context, external events such as the Syrian refugee crisis have reinvigorated a narrative that sees immigration as a burden to economic development and a threat to security. As was also highlighted by an analysis of comments on the decision to resettle Syrian refugee children in 2015, the juxtaposition between refugees and Brexit intensified following the crisis (Goodman & Narang, 2019). This connection is partly due to how the press and political forces have exploited the Syrian crisis to build a rationale for Brexit. In the campaign, this narrative included Turkey's entry into the EU; an understandable link considering the country's geographic location and its majority Muslim population. Moreover, the ties between the two events are further strengthened by how Turkey welcomed millions of refugees following the Syrian civil war.

The triad formed by Turkey-immigration-terrorism is a constant presence in the material collected and applicable both to the security and the economic dimensions. The same also applies to the Eurozone crisis, especially relevant in the economic framework; according to the Leave campaign, the UK was about to sacrifice its sovereignty in favour of deeper EU integration, which would have led the country to be financially responsible for other member states (Jessop, 2017). These external events have been exploited as catalysts for pre-existing ideas by interested actors, leveraging emotions, and recombining narrative elements, often in a factually inaccurate fashion. This approach is in line with the communication methods typical of populism, mirroring what Waisbord (2018) has defined as an "elective affinity" between populism and post-truth. This affinity is particularly evident with regard to the division between people and the establishment, personified in this case by the EU, as well as the tendency to reject and distort facts in contrast with a specific narrative.

However, the type of populism that played a crucial role in the case of Brexit is difficult to position within the political spectrum. It exhibits some significant internal inconsistencies, such as rejecting the European elites and globalisation while embracing economic liberalism and arguing how the UK would strengthen its position in this system by leaving the EU. This ideological ambiguity, at least concerning the grand debate between right and left, and between alternative economic systems, makes this strand of populism—heavily relying on misinformation—particularly well-suited to deal with the theme of European integration through referendum campaigns.

Populist political actors can simplify or ignore reality, focusing instead on the voter's emotional dimension; simultaneously, followers of post-truth politics can reject any factual information in contrast with the preferred narrative as lies of a corrupt political elite. As a result of these dynamics, campaigning does not require discussing concrete policymaking solutions since it is sufficient to attribute any issue to EU membership and propose a clear solution, such as Brexit, to solve them. This process has allowed populist actors to exploit the lack of high-quality information (Renwick et al., 2020); in the context of European disintegration, this can mean either more states leaving or different forms of institutional reform within the EU.

Conclusions

Within this chapter, analysis was undertaken to examine how misinformation was systematically used as a tool in the Leave campaign, exploring the links between post-truth politics, Brexit, and European disintegration. Specifically, it explored how populist actors exploit misinformation to shape the public discourse on the EU; the study of these dynamics can help trace the future patterns of European disintegration. This chapter shows the dynamics through which different arenas offer political actors the infrastructures necessary to spread misinformation, and it does so through a frame analysis of material collected on newspapers, social media, and campaign websites. The material collected was then divided into three analytical frames: security, economics, and sovereignty. The analysis highlighted how, throughout the Leave campaign, the actors claimed ownership of the narrative on UK membership in the EU, directing the public debate within the three frames discussed above and thus crafting a narrative appealing to undecided voters. This process was facilitated by relying on pre-existing ideas on immigration and sovereignty, consistent with the arsenal of populist rhetoric and identity politics. These ideas were particularly effective in influencing the vote as external factors, such as the Eurozone and the refugee crises, were exploited as catalysts during the campaign.

Another element that strengthened this process was the use of misinformation, a very effective tool in the hands of populist actors. As highlighted by this study, the use of incorrect or ambiguous information is very effective in the debate on the EU, given the complexity of the matter; this approach also lends itself well to referendum campaigns, as the choice between two options makes simplistic solutions more enticing. Although the sample of sources analysed by this work is limited, it is still possible to come to some conclusions, regarding both Brexit and European disintegration, in general. Brexit is, currently, the only case of a country leaving the EU; inevitably, the Leave campaign is the only successful antecedent available to actors interested in promoting an agenda of European disintegration in their respective countries. The same tactics implemented during the Leave campaign are likely to be adopted by Eurosceptic actors in other EU states. This chapter has contributed in two ways: first, by proposing the study of Eurosceptic discourse through the three analytical frames discussed above; and second, by describing a pattern behind the misinformation processes based on the triad of actors, ideas, and external crises. Future research will need to look at these dynamics in other member states, as the ability to identify and study the change in these elements could provide a deeper understanding of European disintegration. Furthermore, considering how misinformation proved itself an essential political tool, we can expect it to be used again in the future; especially by those populist actors interested in reversing the process of European integration, the heroes of post-truth politics.

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4.3 Paper 3: Reinforcing or moderating? The impact of Brexit on Italian and German Euroscepticism

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Abstract

This article investigates the impact of Brexit on Eurosceptic parties' arguments for leaving (or remaining in) the European Union (EU). Drawing on a comparative design, the article looks at the images and narratives of the EU that Eurosceptic parties in Italy and Germany have advanced in the aftermath of the 2016 Brexit referendum and reflects on the broader

implications in terms of the prospects of further states leaving the EU. This research is motivated by two assumptions grounded in the literature on Euroscepticism and EU polity contestation: firstly, that Euroscepticism is fuelled by external circumstances that are exploited by interested political actors; and secondly, that both the Brexit referendum and the UK's departure from the EU have had a profound impact on discourses on the EU within member states, most importantly because this process has highlighted the real possibility of replacing EU membership with trade agreements and other specific arrangements. By means of a comparative analysis of the development of Eurosceptic discourse in Italy and Germany after Brexit, the article reveals that on the structural level, Eurozone membership remains the main obstacle to leaving the EU. Yet on the ideological level, Eurosceptic discourse in the two countries centers on two principles that are at odds with each other. Beyond the alleged lack of democratic representation within EU institutions that is pointed out by Eurosceptic parties in both countries, the main criticism of the EU project in Germany is that the country shares the costs of states with lower economic outputs. In Italy, on the other hand, the criticism is that the EU benefits wealthier states while constraining the country's opportunities for development.

1 Introduction

Brexit reinforced the idea that European integration might be reversible, showing how a member state can renegotiate the terms of its membership of the European Union (EU), hold a referendum on continued membership, and ultimately leave the EU in a relatively short time (Rosamond, 2016). The idea that an exit from the EU is possible, and that the path to achieving this goal has already been traced, has changed public perceptions of the EU and provided new arguments to Eurosceptic actors (Taggart and Szczerbiak, 2018). Against this backdrop, this article analyses the impact of Brexit on discursive Euroscepticism (De Wilde and Trenz, 2012) among political parties in Germany and Italy and considers the possibility that one of the two countries might leave the EU in the near future. This is done by analyzing the ways in which the EU has been represented in Eurosceptic political parties' discourse in the two countries, specifically by assessing the impact of the core ideas underlying the disintegration process. In doing so, the study pursues the dual objective of discussing European disintegration at a systemic level by shedding light on the impact of the Brexit process on Eurosceptic discourse among German and Italian political parties. This ambition contributes to the literature on European disintegration by tracing the process through which external events catalyze Eurosceptic discourse at the national level. The two cases selected here are particularly relevant as both Italy and Germany are large founding members of the integration process that have witnessed, over the last 10–15 years, the emergence of important Eurosceptic movements and the use of Eurosceptic rhetoric by pre-existing political parties.

Following this brief introduction, the second section presents a literature review that positions this study within – and clarifies its contribution to – the literatures on *European disintegration* and *Euroscepticism*. The third section introduces the article's analytical

framework and explains the article's choices in terms of case selection and the comparative approach. The fourth section presents the empirical analysis, i.e., a comparison of the main themes addressed by Eurosceptic parties in Italy and Germany in the wake of the Brexit referendum. This empirical analysis begins with a brief introduction to the main political parties that can be characterized as Eurosceptic in the two countries, followed by a comparison of the specific themes addressed by these parties in creating negative (or positive) images of the EU. This comparison highlights the impact of structural crises within the union – which are considered to have played a central role in the Leave campaign (Hobolt, 2016) – on the positions advocated by the parties examined here. On the basis of these findings, the fifth section presents a concluding discussion that addresses possible future trajectories of Eurosceptic discourse in the two countries as well as the prospect of one or both of the two countries leaving the EU. Although Brexit has strengthened Eurosceptic positions in both countries, this process has played out very differently due to different ideological forces at play, but the possibility of leaving the union seems unlikely in both cases.

2 Brexit, Euroscepticism, and European disintegration

2.1 Brexit as a case study in European disintegration

Following Vollaard (2014), European disintegration can be viewed as a process caused by the dissatisfaction of member states toward the EU. Unless they are able to reform the aspects of their membership that they consider to be problematic, this can lead them to re-evaluate and potentially also terminate their membership. Disintegration is, however, an umbrella term that goes beyond covering only the most extreme scenario of states *leaving* the EU. Instead, the concept also covers institutional reform or an intensification of Eurosceptic positions amongst mainstream political parties. This process can be facilitated by inequality of opportunities, i.e., the perception by a member state of being unable to affect EU governance (Jones, 2018). In this regard, Brexit sets a precedent that has reinforced such mechanisms. But this precedent is arguably not sufficient *on its own* to fundamentally alter the pre-existing integration trajectories of other member states. Furthermore, there is a broad range of Eurosceptic positions that can change over time due to external circumstances. That said, it is still the case that the dominant narrative on European integration and/or the EU has changed over the last decade both in Italy (Brunazzo and Mascitelli, 2021) and in Germany (Krouwel and Abts, 2007). In order to come up with a nuanced analysis of the trajectories of the two states, it is therefore necessary to consider both structural and ideological factors.

To account for the impact of structural factors in how Brexit was processed within the two countries, it is useful to look at the deeply connected aspects of immigration and economic sovereignty. The literature has widely highlighted the centrality of these two areas on Euroscepticism, looking at their role in the Brexit referendum and the political debate in the other member states. EU membership entails significant compromises both in terms of

circulation of people and economic policies. It is therefore unsurprising that these two spheres were central in the negotiations unsuccessfully carried on by David Cameron in the years preceding the Brexit referendum. In the cases of Germany and Italy, the impact of EU policies is even more significant considering how the two countries are also part of the Eurozone. As regards immigration, both member states adhere to the Dublin Regulation, which provides that the state in which the asylum seeker applies first is responsible for processing the claim. As a country with no extra-European borders, Germany benefits from this regulation over countries such as Italy or Greece. During the refugee crisis, the attitudes of the German electorate toward asylum seekers shifted from being extremely welcoming in the early phases to a critical one (Conrad and Aðalsteinsdóttir, 2017). Accordingly, it is not surprising that, after suspending the application of the Dublin Regulation in 2015, the Merkel government returned to more conservative positions in the following years (Zaun and Ripoll Servent, 2021).

In Italy, a country at the center of migratory routes from Africa, the politicization of migration has followed a different trajectory. Over the years, the League and the Brothers of Italy (Fratelli d'Italia/Fdi) have focused heavily on the danger associated with migrants and asylum seekers (a distinction rarely made in the two parties' political discourse).¹ The League's attitude toward immigration revolves around the criminalization of NGOs, and attacks on the judiciary, the press, and the European Union, presented as an establishment distant from the concerns of the population in line with the populist rhetoric discussed earlier (Berti, 2021). The EU is considered responsible due to its inability (or disinterest) to support the country. Despite this, the League was conspicuously absent from the work in the European Parliament to reform the Dublin system, at the same time exacerbating the problem of illegal immigration through two widely contested security decrees as they made it more challenging to stabilize the situation of immigrants in Italy (Geddes and Pettrachin, 2020).

In the presence of other external crises, Eurosceptic actors might leverage their old narratives to take advantage of changing public attitudes toward the EU. In this context, Brexit constitutes an important precedent, as it offers a blueprint for conducting a successful Eurosceptic campaign and provides the only empirical case of successful effort to leave the EU. It is, therefore, possible to expect that EU membership will continue to be a contested issue, leading political actors to exploit it as a distinctive and polarizing element in the domestic political arena. In this sense, the emergence of a Eurosceptic public sphere observed by the literature already before Brexit (Gattermann and Vasilopoulou, 2017) is a signal that the future of the EU will depend on its ability to balance these political forces by changing in those areas that most expose it to Eurosceptic criticism.

2.2 Euroscepticism

The perception that the EU is an institution inadequate to meet the needs of member states is at the heart of Eurosceptic positions. Following (Vasilopoulou, 2017), this analysis is based on a multidimensional understanding of Euroscepticism that has the dual objective of

understanding its causes and uncovering its consequences at a systemic level. The approach chosen for this purpose is the comparative study of political parties, and specifically of their attitude toward the European integration project and the possibility of extending the Union's competencies (Szczerbiak and Taggart, 2017). The choice to focus on political parties is motivated by their capacity to reinforce and shape Eurosceptic discourse as well as to leverage opposition to the EU to their advantage. The case of Brexit indicates that the process leading to the referendum was significantly influenced by dynamics internal to the Conservative party.

The literature has extensively explored the ties between Euroscepticism and European disintegration, showing how Eurosceptic actors center their discourse around a complete rejection of the status quo (e.g., Alonso-Muñoz and Casero-Ripollés, 2020; Rump, 2022), to the point of recurring to factually incorrect statements to mobilize support and promote their narrative. This strategy has been central in the Leave campaign (Orlando, 2022), but it has also been adopted in Germany by the *Alternative for Germany* during the 2019 European Parliament elections (Conrad, 2022). The tendency of Eurosceptic parties to exploit external crises to advance their narrative and promote negative images of the EU has also been explored with particular attention to the financial crisis of 2008 (Pirro and Van Kessel, 2017, 2018; Pirro et al., 2018) and to the refugee crisis that began in 2014 (Stockemer et al., 2020). In this article, Brexit is viewed as an additional external factor that can be instrumentalised in a similar way. Indeed, the Referendum constitutes an additional opportunity for Eurosceptic actors to voice their grievances, as it demonstrates the possibility of leaving the EU on the grounds of concerns about national sovereignty.

In analyzing the Leave campaign's impact on the narratives of the EU that are promoted by Eurosceptic parties in Italy and Germany, this article speaks directly to theoretical propositions about the potentially disintegrative momentum unleashed by Brexit, i.e., the idea that Brexit may in the short to medium term launch the integration process on a “centrifugal” or “centripetal trajectory” (Cini and Verdun, 2018): Brexit could result in closer integration of the remaining member states, but it could also trigger a domino effect and thus result in the withdrawal of more states.

3 Analytical framework, case selection, and methodological considerations

The analysis of the images and narratives advanced by Eurosceptic parties in Italy and Germany is based on a comparative analysis of the relevant parties' party platforms, elections manifestos, and public statements from relevant actors within the different parties. The study starts by looking at the how the position of Eurosceptic parties toward the EU was affected by the Brexit referendum. Against this backdrop, it then compares the state of Euroscepticism in the two countries.

3.1 Case selection: why Italy and Germany?

The choice to compare the impact of Brexit on Eurosceptic actors in Italy and Germany is motivated by the observation that while the two states share certain significant similarities, there are also relevant differences that are important to address. In terms of similarities, the two countries are amongst the largest EU members both economically and in terms of population. However, Euroscepticism, and Eurosceptic discourse in the two countries are based on opposite assumptions. Broadly speaking, while German Euroscepticism (initially) framed the EU as an institution that compels Germany to “rescue” other member states in times of financial crisis, Italian Eurosceptics frame the EU and, in particular, its monetary policy as driven by excessive austerity, with Germany frequently being framed as the main promoter of such policies.

The impact of structural factors, particularly the EU's economic and monetary policies, on Euroscepticism and the union's legitimacy crisis has been widely studied (Notermans and Piattoni, 2017). Germany and Italy are countries in which European austerity policies have resulted in vastly different outcomes. This disparity between the center and the southern periphery of the Eurozone has, in turn, been exploited by actors critical of the EU (Notermans and Piattoni, 2021) and has resulted in very different Eurosceptic discourses. In Germany, the AfD's initial focus was on the risk of rescuing countries perceived as less virtuous, e.g., Italy.² By contrast, for parties such as Lega, FdI and the M5S, the central narrative explained Italy's crisis as a consequence of the Euro and the loss of sovereignty imposed by an EU construed to be much closer to the interests of core members.

For Germany, participation in the Eurozone made it possible to implement, at the EU level, the same policies underlying the German financial success, such as controlling inflation and public debt (Sepos, 2016). For Italy (and other countries with historically weaker economies), joining the common currency has involved an attempt to restructure its economy to align itself with German monetary policies (Sepos, *ibid*). This contrast is reflected in the Eurosceptic discourse of the respective countries. In Italy, the two right-wing parties and the M5S have promoted potentially inflationary policies to revive the Italian economy, a position perfectly reflected by Salvini's promise to “tear up the European rules that massacre Italy” (Reuters, 2019). This approach is also visible within the M5S, which in 2014 asked for a referendum in case Europe should be unable to support member states and, in 2019, continued to underline the need for Europe to guarantee growth-oriented reforms by loosening public budget constraints (Il Sole 24 Ore, 2019). As for Germany, the AfD adopted a position *opposite* to that of the Italian sovereignists, stressing that the main risk for Germany is to bail out other member states. This approach was also reiterated by party founder Bernd Lucke, according to whom Greece should have left the Eurozone as it could not fulfill the conditions required by the EU (Lucke and Armbrüster, 2018).

In *ideological* terms, Brexit affected Eurosceptic discourse in Italy and Germany by demonstrating the distinct possibility of a member state leaving the EU. This has allowed Eurosceptic actors to frame withdrawal from the EU both as necessary *and* possible: at least,

the decision to leave the EU could be shown to be beneficial, or at least far from the catastrophic scenarios envisioned in the pro-EU discourse. Brexit is, therefore, relevant as it helps build the idea that a future outside the EU does not pose an existential threat to the former member states. This point is underlined by a Facebook post by Matteo Salvini in January 2021, claiming that “in the UK of Brexit,” the state reimbursed citizens whose activities were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic (Salvini, 2021). The choice to conflate Brexit with emergency measures for the pandemic constitutes an attempt to strengthen a dichotomy that is central to Eurosceptic populist discourse, centered around sovereign states close to the people vs. the directives of EU bureaucrats. In post-Brexit Eurosceptic discourse, the UK thus became success story to be praised and a model to be emulated.

The present analysis includes four parties that can be characterized as Eurosceptic – three in Italy and one in Germany. They were selected on the basis of political relevance *and* stances on European integration. While there are several parties that promote decidedly Eurosceptic positions in Italy, our analysis includes Eurosceptic parties that were elected to Parliament in the 2018 general elections, namely *Lega*/the League, *Movimento Cinque Stelle*/the Five-Star Movement (M5S), and *Fratelli d'Italia*/the Brothers of Italy (Fdi). The motivation for this choice is that our interest is in parties that are politically relevant, which results in leaving out some parties from the far-left (e.g., Power to the People/PaP and the Communist Party/PC) and the far-right (e.g., CasaPound Italy and the coalition Italy for the Italians/FN-FT).³ In the German case, there is only one politically relevant party that can be categorized as Eurosceptic, namely the Alternative for Germany (AfD). In the period analyzed here, Germany was characterized by considerably greater political stability than Italy. To date, the AfD has not been part of any government coalitions, whether at the federal or at the regional level. This allows the party to exploit issues felt among the population not to be addressed adequately by the governing parties. This strategy, characteristic of “challenger parties,” has resulted over the years in a Eurosceptic attitude following the Eurozone and refugee crises (De Vries and Hobolt, 2020).

3.2 Materials and methods

The material analyzed in this article consists of party platforms, election manifestos and public statements of relevant figures within the analyzed parties. This material has been collected via the party's websites (party platforms and election manifestos) as well as via traditional mainstream media and digital media (public statements). The selection of this type of material is motivated by the observation that the negative representation of the EU in news coverage is one of the driving forces of Euroscepticism (Galpin and Trenz, 2019). In terms of selection criteria, the analysis only includes material originating from by the selected parties and/or relevant political figures associated with these parties. This approach allows us to focus on the impact of Brexit in terms of shaping narratives on the EU in the two countries.

The analysis of qualitative content is a first step to discuss the characteristics of Euroscepticism in the political discourse of the two countries. The comparison between the

two cases allows us to highlight the peculiarities of each country and to assess how their integration trajectories could be affected by Brexit. Connected to this, the material furthermore highlights the two states' different perceptions of EU institutions and, ultimately, also differences in identification with the European project. This is particularly visible in how the national discourse differed with regard to two frames that were also at the center of the Brexit campaign: monetary policies and migration.

4 Empirical analysis: German and Italian euroscepticism after Brexit

4.1 Brief overview of Eurosceptic political parties in Italy and Germany

4.1.1 The Five Star Movement

In the 2018 general elections, the M5S became the largest Italian party with 32% of the votes, up from the 25% obtained in 2013. The party was characterized from the outset by advocating popular sovereignty and criticizing the Italian political system, the functioning of representative democracy, and an EU that was considered to be undemocratic. In the 2014 EP elections, the party ran on a 7-point program, including a referendum to exit the Euro, the end of austerity measures, and the abolition of the European Fiscal Compact (Grillo, 2014). Although the party joined the *Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy* (EFDD) parliamentary group after the elections, an analysis of its MEPs' voting behavior shows how the party rarely voted alongside the UKIP and other EFDD members, but often voted alongside Social-Democratic and Green parties (Franzosi et al., 2015; Salvati, 2019). Notably, the party's 20-point election platform from the 2018 general elections did not mention the EU (Movimento Cinque Stelle, 2018). In its campaign for the European Parliament elections the following year, on the other hand, the party ran on a reformist platform that explicitly *distanced* itself from nationalist and Eurosceptic movements (Blog delle Stelle, 2019). In this platform, the party explicitly described itself as "Europeanist" and aiming to relaunch Italy and restart Europe. In the platform's foreign policy section, subsection on Europe (pp. 202–230), the party advocated institutional reform in order to close the democracy gap between citizens and EU institutions, arguing for the need to change the treaties and implement more Keynesian monetary and fiscal policies, and even discussing the possibility to extend the powers of the European Central Bank and building a common EU defense/foreign policy in order to reinforce the position of Europe internationally. After the EFDD's dissolution in 2019, the Movement has not become affiliated with any other parliamentary group.

4.1.2 The Northern League

The other main Eurosceptic party in Italy, the Northern League (LN), has progressively moved from the regionalist stances that it had held since the early nineties (when the party aspired to achieve the independence of Northern Italy) to more nationalistic positions during the 2000s, in particular since Matteo Salvini's election as party secretary in 2013. Between 1994 and 2011, the party was part of four coalition governments led by Silvio Berlusconi, contrary

to other far-right European parties generally confined to the opposition (Passarelli, 2013). After Salvini's election, the party has taken more markedly Eurosceptic and nationalist positions, which has also had an impact on its rhetoric (Öner, 2020). Originally, the Northern League's discourse was centered on the idea that the Italian government, personified by Rome, represented an obstacle to the sovereignty of the North. Under Salvini, the party has maintained a similar ideological structure, but has identified Brussels as the undemocratic center of power where distant bureaucrats undermine national sovereignty (Ansa, 2015; La Repubblica, 2015; Corriere della Sera, 2016). The party's original anti-Southern rhetoric has faded away and become replaced by the theme (already present in the past) of extra-European immigration. The recurring image of the criminal immigrant from Southern Italy, unable to integrate into society, stealing jobs from Northerners and abusing the welfare system, has now been replaced by the image of non-EU immigrants (Brunazzo and Gilbert, 2017). According to Maggini and Chiamonte (2019) analysis of the contents shared on social media by LN, the European dimension had only a marginal role in the 2018 electoral campaign due to the fact that at this point, the party was part of a coalition with Forza Italia (FI) and other parties with diverging positions concerning European integration. The party's discourse on the EU has therefore arguably been determined more by its government alliances than by external factors such as Brexit.⁴ In the 2019 European Parliament elections, the party supported the manifesto of the Eurosceptic Movement for a Europe of Nations and Freedom (MENF) that was later merged into the *Identity and Democracy* group (Lega Salvini Premier, 2018). However, the party's participation in a government coalition with the Democratic Party (PD), suggests that the LN has repositioned itself as a governing party with little interest in leaving the EU.

4.1.3 The Brothers of Italy

The 2022 general elections saw Giorgia Meloni's *Brothers of Italy* (Fratelli d'Italia) win the highest share of votes of all parties (26%). Consequently, the party became the leader of the new center-right coalition government. As suggested by a quantitative content analysis of Facebook posts during the 2018 election campaign, the party extensively drew on the narrative of elites threatening Italian values such as, e.g., the traditional family, and of immigrants unable or unwilling to integrate into Italian society. However, Europe is rarely mentioned in this context (Bobba and Roncarolo, 2018).

4.1.4 The Alternative for Germany

Given Germany's deep-rooted commitment to European integration, Euroscepticism has traditionally not been a politically relevant phenomenon in the country (e.g., Lees, 2002; Alternative für Deutschland, 2019; Böttger and Tekin, 2021). This has however changed significantly over the EU's decade of crisis. Evidently, the increasing contentiousness of European integration did not begin with Brexit, but Brexit has nonetheless contributed to the dynamic development of EU polity (and policy) contestation in Germany in this period (Baloge, 2021). However, the most relevant events that have resulted in and shaped the emergence of a politically relevant Euroscepticism in Germany

are the Eurozone debt crisis, in particular the “Greek bailouts,” as well as the refugee crisis of 2015–2016. These events have resulted in the emergence and gradual radicalization of the Alternative for Germany (AfD) as the country’s first politically relevant Eurosceptic party (Arzheimer, 2015; Decker, 2016; Lees, 2018; Conrad, 2020). As the analysis below will demonstrate, Euroscepticism and EU polity contestation are phenomena that are largely confined to the AfD in the German context, and are set against the backdrop of a broad consensus of the continued desirability of European integration (Conrad et al., 2019). Similar to the Italian case, there is however also a politically relevant criticism of the current form of European integration. As a case in point, the German Left Party (Die Linke) is profoundly skeptical of the presumably *neoliberal* orientation of the European project (Die Linke, 2019), but staunchly emphasized the high value of European integration as well as the need to defend the project against right-wing populism in its manifesto for the 2019 EP elections (*ibid.*; see analysis below).

As the only politically relevant Eurosceptic party in Germany, the AfD emerged as a direct consequence of the Merkel government’s handling of the Eurozone debt crisis and, in particular, the “Greek bailout packages” (Arzheimer, 2015; Grimm, 2015; Böttger and Tekin, 2021). The party was founded in 2013, its name alluding to Angela Merkel’s oft-quoted statement that there was no alternative to bailing out Greece and saving the Euro. At the time of its founding, the party was essentially a party of academics, drawing its support primarily from disgruntled supporters of the conservative CDU and the liberal FDP. However, it has also been observed that the party was *also* supported, from the outset, by voters on the far right of the political spectrum, and also that the party from very early on attempted to utilize its appeal to such voters. The party’s development is therefore also a story of an increasing radicalization, as the party gradually transformed from a single-issue soft Eurosceptic party (Grimm, 2015), aiming to withdraw Germany from Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) while staying in the EU, into a radical-right populist party, focusing mostly on issues of immigration and multiculturalism (Goerres et al., 2018), that ultimately also called for a more or less unconditional withdrawal from the union.

4.2 Themes addressed by the selected parties

Our analysis points to four themes that are particularly salient in the way the selected parties construe the EU in the selected materials. These four themes are (1) the need for a fundamental reform of the EU and its institutions; (2) the EU as a threat to national sovereignty and/or democracy; (3) the EU as a threat to national identity/culture/way of life; and (4) the EU as a threat to economic prosperity. In the following sections, we will now look at how those four themes were used by the respective parties. In doing so, we will highlight the role and impact of the Brexit process by emphasizing the ways in which Brexit has been

taken up as a point of reference and either enhanced or moderated the respective parties' Eurosceptic discourse (see Table 1 for a summary of the findings of the thematic analysis).

Table 1. Summary of findings of the thematic analysis.

Theme	Used by	Impact of Brexit
Fundamental reform of the EU	Lega, FdI, AfD	<i>Reinforced</i> Euroscepticism
	M5S	<i>Moderated</i> Euroscepticism
Threat to national sovereignty/ democracy	Lega, FdI	Reinforced claims for renegotiation of relationship with EU
	M5S	Reinforced claims for democratic reform
	AfD	Reference point in hardening Euroscepticism
Threat to national identity/culture/way of life	FdI	Unchanged
Threat to economic prosperity	AfD	Reinforced claims for a German exit from the Eurozone and/or the EU

4.3 Fundamental reform of the EU

The first theme that is commonly addressed in the analyzed material is the need for a fundamental reform of the EU and its institutional architecture, which is frequently connected to claims for a transfer of decision-making authority back to the member states. This theme can be addressed in quite contradictory ways: in some cases, it can be used as a way of promoting the dissolution of the EU in its current form, but it can also be used as a way to promote – and indeed *save* – the very idea of European integration. Possibly the most interesting finding regarding the impact of Brexit on Eurosceptic parties in Italy and Germany consequently also has to do with their respective positions regarding the claim for a fundamental reform of the EU. Before Brexit, all parties included in our analysis emphasized the need for such a fundamental reform. After Brexit, on the other hand, we see a shift in emphasis on a subtle, but very important point: while the stance of parties such as Lega, FdI

and the AfD hardens, the positions of the M5S in fact shows a certain ambivalence, thereby suggesting a moderating effect of Brexit (see below).

In the German context, the AfD advocated for a fundamental reform of the EU already *pre-Brexit*. In its first federal election campaign in 2013, where the party received 4.7% of the votes and fell just short of making it into parliament, the party's main concern was the German government's handling of the Eurozone debt crisis, not membership of the EU as such. Consequently, a withdrawal from the EU was not mentioned in the election manifesto, but what was included was the demand that Germany should push for the right of member states to leave the Eurozone. Having said that, the party promoted the vision of a "Europe of sovereign nation states with a common market" (Alternative für Deutschland, 2013, p. 1) already at that point. Brexit then had a clear impact on the party's position on German EU membership and the demand for a fundamental reform of the EU's institutional architecture. Already in the party manifesto for the 2017 federal elections (the first federal elections in the immediate aftermath of the Brexit referendum), the party demanded a referendum on Germany's continued membership of EMU and "potentially also the EU" (Alternative für Deutschland, 2017, p. 14). This demand cannot be explained exclusively by Brexit, but the explicit reference to "the British role model" (*ibid.*) clearly underlines the impetus given by the recent Brexit referendum. In terms of institutional reform, the 2017 election manifesto also expressed the party's continued commitment to reducing the EU to a confederation of sovereign nation states. Arguably, the Brexit process also motivated the explicit emphasis on article 50 TEU and the right of member states to leave the EU (*ibid.*: 7), as it was Brexit that first drew attention to the existence of this treaty article. But maybe most strikingly, the AfD's manifesto explicitly urged that "Germany has to follow the example of Great Britain and leave the EU" (*ibid.*: 8) *unless* the goal of reducing the institutional scope of the EU could be achieved. The party's insistence on a fundamental reform (or better: reduction of the EU's supranational powers) then hardened in the context of the 2019 EP and 2021 German federal elections. In the manifestos for these elections, the claim for a German exit from the EU (now referred to as "Dexit") is notably connected to the EU's supranational powers: the only way for the party to support continued membership is if the EU would be reformed along the lines of a Europe of sovereign nation states. The causal impact of Brexit is also clear here, as Brexit is explicitly "respect(ed) as a sovereign decision of the British citizens to leave the EU"; if anyone is to blame for Brexit, it is "the EU's political classes" which are claimed to have caused "severe damage to Europe" (Alternative für Deutschland, 2019: 13). At this point, "DEXIT" is included as a separate subchapter in chapter 2 of the 2019 EP manifesto ("A Europe of Nations"), proposing a German exit or, alternatively, a dissolution of the EU and the founding of a new "European economic and interest-based community" (*ibid.*: 12). Finally, Dexit becomes a declared aim of the AfD in the campaign for the German federal elections in 2021. The party's manifesto now demands Dexit as a *necessary* step without qualification (Alternative für Deutschland, 2021, p. 28), without leaving institutional reform as any sort of backdoor. Consequently, the manifesto advocates for the founding of a new "European economic and interest-based community"

(ibid.) and supports this by claiming that the EU's "transformation into a planned-economy superstate" shows that the EU cannot be reformed fundamentally (ibid.).⁵

In Italy, Giorgia Meloni's Brothers of Italy (Fdi) insisted on the renegotiation of all European treaties, with particular attention to the single market and migration policies (Fratelli D'Italia, 2018). The party's 15-points program in 2018 mentioned the EU already at the second point, titled "Italy and Italians first."

By comparison, Brexit has a very different impact on the development of the Five-Star-Movement's (M5S) Euroscepticism. *Pre-Brexit*, the party's Euroscepticism was characterized by a demand for fundamental institutional reform, as underlined by, e.g., Beppe Grillo's 7 points for Europe ahead of the 2014 EP elections: the leader of M5S demanded an increase of the 3% balance deficit, abolition of the principle of a balanced budget, abolition of the fiscal compact and, notably, a referendum on Eurozone membership (Grillo, 2014; Il Fatto Quotidiano, 2014). But the Brexit referendum drew attention to the potentially existential threat that it represented to the integration process. In the aftermath of the Brexit vote, M5S therefore warned that the EU was "going to die" unless it changed, thereby suggesting that European integration does have a high value that should not be relinquished. This is an important point because it suggests a *moderating* effect of Brexit on this particular party's Euroscepticism. It is also against this backdrop that we need to see the fact that the M5S did not take a clear position with respect to the need for an Italian referendum on EU membership (La Repubblica, 2016; Zaffarano, 2016).

However, this finding also has to be seen in the context of Italian domestic politics. The Conte I coalition government between M5S and Lega (June 2018 to September 2019) started with some controversies over the proposed appointment of the economist Paolo Savona as Minister of the Economy. Designated by the M5S, Savona – who had advocated an emergency plan to leave the Eurozone – ultimately became Minister of European Affairs due to the opposition of the President of the Republic (La Repubblica, 2018). While this rough start, culminating as it did with Luigi di Maio (M5S) advocating the impeachment of Mattarella, could have suggested a Eurosceptic turn for Italy, the Conte I government's policies with the respect to the EU turned out to be in continuity with its predecessors. Accordingly, the two parties' coalition agreement only addressed the need to protect Italian interests in Europe and reform the existing treaties, but did not mention the possibility of leaving the Eurozone, let alone the EU (Movimento Cinque Stelle and Lega Nord, 2018).

Strikingly, the example of Brexit did not necessarily constitute an example for Italy to follow for Matteo Salvini's Lega, either. When the Brexit negotiations ended in December 2020, Salvini expressed his support for the UK government and defined the negotiations' end as a *victory for democracy*, but did not go as far as framing Brexit as an example to follow for Italy (Libero, 2020).

4.4 Threat to national sovereignty/democracy

A second central theme in the Eurosceptic discourse of the analyzed parties concerns the EU as a threat to national sovereignty and/or democracy. In Italy, this theme is particularly salient in the cases of the Lega and FdI, both of which construe and celebrate Brexit as a triumph of democracy in the days following the referendum (Il Sole 24 Ore, 2016; Rai News, 2016). The two parties' initial enthusiasm could be interpreted as a consequence of the need to conform to their electorate's expectations rather than by a concrete intention to follow in the UK's footsteps. In the years following the referendum, both parties have distanced themselves from hard Eurosceptic stances. Although the two parties' leaders occasionally mentioned the option of an Italian referendum on membership, the possibility of leaving the EU was not addressed in their respective programs.

With regard to FdI, Giorgia Meloni did not directly comment on the UK's withdrawal from the European Union. However, in an open letter published in the *Corriere della Sera* (2021) in late December 2020, she discussed the position of the European right on the EU in her role as chairperson of the European Conservatives and Reformists Party (ECR) (Galici, 2020). Though not referring directly to Brexit, the letter emphasized how conservative parties are not opposed to the EU, but to how it interferes with citizens' rights. The leader of FdI also warned against the risks of a Franco-German coalition dictating EU's policies. Brexit is not explicitly addressed here, but Meloni mentioned the danger of excessive interference by the two largest members states after the UK's departure.

Similarly, the Lega construed Brexit as an opportunity for changing Italy's relationship to the EU rather than as an opportunity to break away from the union. In its program for the 2018 general elections, the party did not refer directly to Brexit, but addressed the undermining of Italian sovereignty and democracy by construing the EU as a “gigantic supranational body, devoid of a true democratic legitimacy [...] that sets the agenda for our Governments [...],” remarking how Italy's membership of the EU should be conditional to the re-discussion of all treaties, especially in the areas of monetary and migration policies (Lega Salvini Premier, 2019). This rhymes with the FdI's manifesto for the 2019 EP elections opens with the proposal to reform Europe, transforming it from a “giant led by bureaucrats” into a “confederation of free and sovereign states,” replacing Brussels as the capital with Athens or Rome (Fratelli D'Italia, 2019). By comparison, M5S did not express a clear stance on Brexit after the end of the negotiations, but Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio mentioned the consequences of the deal for Italian citizens in the United Kingdom, without addressing the impact of Brexit on his party's position (Rai News, 2020).

4.5 Threat to national identity/culture/way of life

A theme that was fairly pronounced in the discourse of the *Brothers of Italy*/FdI construed the EU as a threat to national identity, culture and/or way of life. Interestingly, the program presented for the 2022 elections did not include any significant Eurosceptic contents besides general remarks of how the interests and culture of Italy must be protected (Fratelli D'Italia,

2022). However, the program emphasized the need to protect Italy and its citizens from the EU, which serves the interests of high finance while threatening national identities (Fratelli D'Italia, 2019). Similarly, and consistent with the previous year's electoral campaign, the Fdi's 2022 program reiterated the party's support for welfare and the traditional family as well as protection of national borders from migrants (Fratelli D'Italia, 2019).

4.6 Threat to economic/monetary stability

Conversely, the theme of economic and monetary stability plays a key role in the Eurosceptic discourse of the AfD in Germany. In fact, this aspect constitutes one of the founding pillars of the party, considering that the party originally emerged as a “professors' party” critical of the Merkel government's handling of the Eurozone debt crisis. In fact, when the party first ran for the European Parliament in 2014 (receiving 7.1 % of the vote and getting seven candidates elected to the EP), a German exit from the EU was still not considered as an option in the manifesto. However, the AfD demanded a dissolution of the Eurozone, or a complete reorientation of monetary policy, or alternatively a smaller monetary system of “stability-oriented member states” (Alternative für Deutschland, 2014). In its manifesto for the 2017 federal elections, the party described Germany's citizens as the “paymasters of Europe” who are made to pay for the continuously growing debt of other EU member states (Alternative für Deutschland, 2017: 8). Brexit has given additional momentum to this claim. In the same manifesto, the AfD explicitly referred to the “British role model” in demanding that “the German people be allowed to vote on Germany's continued membership of the Eurozone and potentially also the EU” (ibid.).

5 Conclusion: possible future trajectories of Euroscepticism in Italy and Germany

This article explored the links between Brexit and European disintegration by analyzing Eurosceptic parties' discourse/narratives on the EU in Italy and Germany. Specifically, it examined how such parties within the two countries framed Brexit in their respective narratives of the EU. Analyzing these dynamics allows us to understand better how the process of European disintegration was influenced by Brexit, allowing us to hypothesize the future developments of the phenomenon. Based on material collected from news articles, social media, and election programs, the analysis looked at Brexit as a potential catalyst alongside the two main events indicated by the literature as turning points in Euroscepticism: the European debt crisis and the migrant crisis. The analysis showed that Eurosceptic parties within the two countries understood Brexit threefold: as a sign of the decline of the EU, as an example of democracy in action, and as proof that there is an alternative to the mode European integration advocated and defended by the elites.

The empirical analysis revealed certain differences between the Italian and German cases. In Italy, the League and the Five-Star Movement softened their stance on leaving the EU and the common currency, largely due to their coalition governments between 2018 and 2019 and from 2021 to 2022. In Germany, the development of the AfD – which has never been part of any government, whether at the federal or at the regional level – underscores the

continued salience of the issue of European integration and EU membership, especially as a means to promote a narrative critical of the government and/or elites more broadly.

The two countries also differ in how the two crises mentioned above have been metabolized in their respective Eurosceptic discourses. Concerning the Eurozone crisis, Eurosceptic parties in Italy consider the austerity measures imposed by the EU as a form of tyranny and a limit to its development. In Germany, the main concern was having to bail out other member states unable to meet the criteria established by Brussels. As for immigration, Italy was portrayed by Eurosceptic actors as a country penalized by the Dublin Regulation; in Germany, one of the AfD's main criticisms concerned the decision to temporarily suspend the Regulation during the Syrian refugee crisis.

Structural differences are at the basis of the different trajectories of the Eurosceptic discourse in Italy and Germany. However, the main obstacle to a referendum on EU membership in either country is also of a legal nature, as a similar referendum would require constitutional reform. Moreover, in line with neofunctionalist theorizing, interdependence between member states creates common interests that outweigh the potential benefits of disintegration (Chopin and Lequesne, 2020). Unlike the UK, Italy and Germany are both Eurozone member states, so that withdrawal from the common currency would be a necessary preliminary step to further disintegration. As shown by the party positions analyzed in this article, anti-Euro stances are much more common than anti-EU ones. The likelihood of either state withdrawing from EMU seems low, however. Similarly, in the years following the financial crisis, Lega, FdI and M5S have gradually abandoned their strongly anti-Euro positions, limiting themselves to reiterating the need to reform the treaties and protect national sovereignty. However, the mere belonging to the common currency and the fact that this element is not seriously questioned in the programs of the major parties is not enough to rule out the possibility that the situation will change. Notwithstanding the important differences regarding structural and ideological aspects, this article demonstrated how Brexit reinforced the idea that a state can leave the EU while also providing a prime example for how to carry out an election campaign on the issue. For this reason, it is possible that in the presence of future crises, the gradual process that culminated in the referendum could be repeated, with the necessary variations, in other European states. Therefore, to have a deeper understanding of European disintegration, it is necessary to monitor how external factors are metabolized in the national political discourse while accounting for each member state's pre-existing circumstances.

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4.4 Paper 4: Brexit as a Driver of European Disintegration: Institutional Reform and Differentiated Integration

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Abstract

This study investigates the disintegrative impact of Brexit on the European Union's institutional framework. Disintegration may occur in the form of other member states leaving the union. Still, it can also manifest in terms of institutional reform in the direction of increased intergovernmentalism and executive dominance, resulting in a renationalization of the EU's policymaking competences. The article contributes to the literature on European disintegration and differentiated integration by addressing the causal impact of Brexit as a driver of flexible institutional designs to meet the diverging demands of EU member states. The authors' research is grounded in a constructivist approach, which draws from several theoretical accounts of European integration, proposing that Brexit has and will continue to result in increasing institutional differentiation in the EU. The authors test this hypothesis through an embedded single case study that examines how member states reacted to the new European power balance. The authors focus on proposals for institutional reform, particularly in relation to the Common Foreign Security Policy and the European Stability Mechanism.

1. Introduction

This article studies the impact of Brexit on European integration. The UK's departure from the EU has raised several questions about the future of European integration (Leruth et al. 2019b). On the one hand, Brexit represented an ontological threat to the EU, as it highlighted the risk, until then theoretical, that member states could unilaterally withdraw under certain external and internal conditions. At the same time, given how the United Kingdom has been a *sui generis* member over the years, tending to be reluctant to adopt reforms in the direction of greater European integration, Brexit has been seen as an opportunity to accelerate this integration process. Both possibilities, which are not mutually exclusive, could occur gradually at different rates in different member states. This work explores the effects of Brexit on European disintegration, looking at how the UK referendum on EU membership has influenced the member states' agenda in the context of EU policies. The aim of this article is to assess how Brexit has affected the vision of the future of Europe of the other member states by highlighting how European integration is a reversible process. The referendum reinforced the notion, hitherto only theoretical, that a state can leave the EU and has spread awareness among member states that the EU is less stable than previously thought.

As a result, rather than striving for further integration, a more effective strategy for states could be to champion differentiated integration (DI) in the fields of their interest. In essence, Brexit might have redefined the perception of the EU, shifting from an embryonic stage of a supranational entity with state-like ambitions to a mere international organization with exceptionally broad competences. Despite the coexistence of both visions within the various member states and their respective political classes, a similar shift could significantly alter EU integration trajectories. This article does not aim to prove that one vision has replaced the other. Instead, it seeks to gauge the disintegrative impact of Brexit by highlighting the changes that have occurred in the years following the referendum. In pursuing this goal, it looks at two different, albeit not mutually exclusive, hypotheses: first, has Brexit resulted in increased differentiation? Second, did its impact on differentiation, whether positive or negative, lead to more integration or more disintegration? It does so by analyzing the political discourse of the member states on the central themes for European integration, which are the same policy issues at the heart of the British referendum debate and the agreement signed in February 2016 between Prime Minister David Cameron and the European Union. These issues include sovereignty, economic governance, and restrictions on movement and access to national welfare for intra-European migrants.

The article is structured as follows. The first section focuses on the effects of Brexit and the models of disintegration developed by the literature review. The following section discusses the methods used in this study, also outlining the criteria behind the data selection. The third part analyzes the institutional developments of the EU in the fields of monetary and security policy. The fourth section builds on this analysis to explore the role of Brexit as a catalyst of already present disintegrative forces, highlighting the causal links between the referendum

and strengthening the Eurosceptic discourse. The fifth section discusses these ties, addressing the article's central hypothesis that Brexit has given momentum to a new type of discourse on EU membership. Finally, the conclusion offers some remarks on how the study of European integration can develop on the subject, taking into account the case of Brexit and the general idea that external events can reshape the ideological fabric of a political system, influencing its future.

2. Literature Review

This research looks at the ties between disintegration— a concept which played a foremost role in EU studies in the last decades—and differentiated integration (DI). Differentiated integration centres around the notion that European policies are applied unevenly across member states in terms of centralization, defined as vertical integration and territorial extension, or horizontal integration, which is linked to the number of member states adhering to a given policy (Schimmelfennig et al. 2015). Schimmelfennig (2021) distinguishes between differentiated integration and differentiated disintegration, defining the former as the delegation of national competences to the EU by the member states and the latter as the culmination of a process that originates from the politicization of European integration issues within the sphere of mass politics. The consequence of this process is the strengthening of Eurosceptic parties, which, notably through referenda, seek to achieve differentiated disintegration, ultimately resulting in withdrawal from the EU. Overall, the two terms can be understood as the two ends of the differentiation spectrum—a conceptual category that includes a wide range of phenomena such as opt-outs, cooperation agreements, and the renationalization of specific competences (Leruth et al. 2022). Given this foundation, this study examines the impact of Brexit on DI to assess its disintegrative effects. By analyzing how Brexit has influenced differentiation, it evaluates whether the UK's departure has strengthened Eurosceptic political actors in other member states by demonstrating the feasibility of leaving or, conversely, has discouraged such movements by highlighting the complexities and costs of disentangling from the EU.

2.1 Differentiation and Disintegration

This research draws from the recent literature on EU disintegration, combining it with an empirical assessment of EU policies. The aim is to determine the extent to which Brexit can act as a catalyst for European disintegration, which aligns with intergovernmentalist theorizing. According to this approach, member states will perceive EU membership as disadvantageous to their interests, also due to the pressures exerted by Eurosceptic elements within them (Leruth et al. 2019a). At the same time, it is also conceivable that the actors in this process, i.e. the member states as well as the institutions and interest groups within the EU, proceed with the creation of new institutional arrangements to overcome the challenges posed by the result of the referendum, a scenario comparable to the approach implemented by the EU in the banking and energy fields (Bauer and Trondal 2015).

In the negotiations with the EU before the 2016 vote, Prime Minister David Cameron emphasized the importance of member states being able to determine autonomously the extension of their adherence to the European project. This underscored the relevance of differentiated integration in the context of Brexit. Both in the Bloomberg speech and during the “Remain” campaign, Cameron advocated for institutional “flexibility” to address the new challenges faced by the EU. This position aligns with the approach already preferred by the United Kingdom, a member state generally hesitant to adopt some of the most significant reforms in the EU, notably opting out of the Schengen Agreement and the Eurozone.

Differentiated integration (DI) was also advocated by member states who sought greater EU involvement in specific policy areas. France has been a prominent advocate of this approach, especially under the leadership of French President Emmanuel Macron. The French President has consistently remarked on the importance of fiscal and institutional reforms within the EU, including a common defence strategy based on a Franco-German partnership open to interested member states (Michel 2020; Schmidt 2019). This work draws from the literature that has described differentiated integration as the situation in which some member states choose to pursue further integration, while others seek to be exempted from specific aspects of European legislation, as was the case with the UK until Brexit (Holzinger and Tosun 2019). In this regard, the unique form of membership developed by the UK in the decades before its departure—characterized by the contradiction of seeking a central role within the single market while opting out of the euro—has been highlighted in the scholarly literature as one of the causal factors behind Brexit (Fossum and Lord 2023).

Accordingly, the development of similar institutional arrangements in other member states could further destabilize the EU in the future, a scenario known as “EU à la carte” (Hoekman 2007). This model could also provide member states with greater autonomy to define their preferences within a larger framework. As a result, increased differentiation could strengthen or hinder EU integration, leading to the four empirical scenarios outlined in Table 1.

Table 1: Impact of differentiation on integration. Source: Authors.

	<i>More Integration</i>	<i>Less Integration</i>
<i>More Differentiation</i>	Differentiated integration	Differentiated disintegration
<i>Less Differentiation</i>	Conventional integration	Renationalisation in areas where DI is currently practiced

Part of the literature focused on how Brexit might lead to a less differentiated EU, as the withdrawal of the United Kingdom results in a double effect: first, it strengthens political unity between member states and, simultaneously, it discourages the adoption of models

similar to the British one, which was based on opt-outs and external differentiation (Martill 2021). Other authors have observed how Brexit has instead highlighted the limits of the EU's ability to cope with requests for flexibility from its member states, underlining how differentiated integration is an intrinsic characteristic of the EU and shared, in certain areas, by every member state (Kendrick 2023). Considering how differentiated integration affects specific policy areas depending on the state analysed and the external circumstances, and thus in line with the ambition of studying the effects of Brexit on this phenomenon, this work pays particular attention to the monetary and security fields. The choice of these sectors is motivated by their relevance, as they are areas generally linked to the concept of sovereignty as portrayed in Eurosceptic narratives; it has been widely observed how the issues of security and the economy were at the centre of the "Leave" campaign and is a recurring topic in the Eurosceptic discourse across Europe (Orlando 2022).

Differentiation is a consequence of the heterogeneity of preferences and capabilities among member states, due to the significant demographic, economic, and societal differences between them. According to the supply and demand theory, differentiation arises from the contrast between states resisting deeper integration (demand side) and those promoting it (supply side) (Schimmelfennig and Winzen 2020). States on the demand side will pursue differentiation through opt-outs, while those on the supply side may support this process to advance further integration without being hindered by the constraints posed by the former.

In turn, the dynamics leading from heterogeneity to differentiated integration (DI) have been studied through the lenses of the three main European integration theories: liberal intergovernmentalism, neofunctionalism, and postfunctionalism. Specifically, liberal intergovernmentalism (LI) and, to a minor extent, neofunctionalism (NF) consider the heterogeneity of wealth among member states as one of the causal factors of differentiated integration. Member states with similar economic outputs are more likely to cooperate and experience greater spillover effects, while those with significant economic differences may opt for more flexible arrangements, leading to varying levels of integration across the EU. This process is facilitated by the significant advantage of wealthier states in realizing their preferences, due to their greater bargaining power. On the other hand, postfunctionalism (PF) focuses more on domestic factors and national identity in researching the driving forces of differentiated integration, thus offering an alternative, albeit complementary, explanation (Schimmelfennig and Winzen 2019). Postfunctionalism, therefore, differs from the other two grand theories in that it turns its attention to the role of identity in individual preferences in shaping the jurisdictional architecture of the EU; this mechanism becomes of primary importance where European integration is politicized, that is, it enters the arsenal of political actors, conditioning their positions and limiting their range of action due to the fear of electoral or referendum defeat (Hooghe and Marks 2009). These dynamics, already hypothesized in the years following the Maastricht and Lisbon treaties, were widely observed in the choice of government led by David Cameron to renegotiate the United Kingdom's position in the EU first and in granting a referendum afterwards (Schimmelfennig

2021). They were also reflected in the post-Brexit negotiations, which have been described as unfolding within a reality of constraining dissensus (Biermann and Jagdhuber 2022).

This article aims to make a unique contribution to the existing scholarship by drawing from both the postfunctionalist approach, liberal intergovernmentalism (LI), and neofunctionalism (NF), as well as by analysing the institutional developments of the EU in the years following Brexit. To achieve this, it conducts an analysis of the member states' policy decisions in the most significant and politicized areas of European integration, namely economic governance and security policies. In this context, the impact of Brexit on disintegration could manifest in two ways. First, Brexit might demonstrate alternative cooperation mechanisms and the viability of referendums as a tool to implement differentiated integration. Alternatively, the exit of the United Kingdom could accelerate the process of European integration, potentially through the implementation of a series of reforms that lead to the coexistence of a softcore Europe alongside smaller and more integrated policy communities (Schmidt 2019). The purpose of this article is therefore to seek evidence in support of these two possibilities and, based on the findings, draw conclusions about differentiation in post-Brexit Europe.

These two scenarios should not be considered mutually exclusive, as their coexistence is possible and probable. Given the heterogeneity of preferences mentioned before, it appears likely that some member states would seek greater flexibility, motivated both by the desire to reduce the economic costs of further integration as envisaged by LI and NF and the internal political constraints at the centre of postfunctionalist theory. This process, identified by Schimmelfennig and Winzen as the supply and demand model of disintegration, can conceivably push those states interested in expanding the EU's scope of competence to achieve their aims through internal agreements. At the same time, if some member states decide to carry out ambitious reforms characterized by a high level of integration, such as the previously discussed cases of common defence and fiscal policies, it is foreseeable that they would opt for some form of differentiated integration (DI), rather than allowing their efforts to be blocked by the reservations of more reluctant member states.

If this is the case, Brexit has opened the doors to a multi-speed Europe, a phenomenon that predates it and that the referendum could further legitimize. The example of the UK has provided a new weapon to the arsenal of Eurosceptic actors at the domestic politics level, while in the context of EU negotiations, it showed how concessions and opt-outs can be preferable to having a member reluctant to conform to the European integration project. In line with the choice to focus this analysis on the economic and security areas, examining the two crises that hit the EU after Brexit—the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine—is inevitable.

Regarding the community response to the pandemic, the EU coordinated its efforts despite some initial resistance by certain member states; this high degree of coordination applies both to the health aspect, such as the supply of vaccines, and to the response to the economic and fiscal consequences of the crisis (Schilin 2023). Given these findings, Schilin

also suggests that the relevance of differentiated integration (DI) decreased after Brexit, as granting the UK opt-outs was not sufficient to prevent its withdrawal from the EU; accordingly, he hypothesizes that the role of DI as a causal factor of European disintegration is conditioned to the existence of specific circumstances capable of strengthening its ideational importance.

Regarding the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), the 2022 escalation of the Russo-Ukrainian War has called into question the EU's role in security. Although the central pillar of European defence remains, for most states, NATO membership, the EU's response to the war shows the goal of implementing a common response. At the same time, DI is an intrinsic characteristic of the security field—an area in which historical and geopolitical reasons led to various types of cooperation: between individual member states, between member states and non-member states, and through bilateral agreements with non-European countries, both outside and within the NATO framework (Rieker and Giske 2024). This high level of DI in the defence field is not surprising, considering how the military aspect has historically been the most emblematic expression of state sovereignty, with the very survival of the state often depending on it, as reminded by the war in Ukraine.

3. Materials and Methods

The literature discussed so far presents a highly complex picture concerning DI in general and specifically the impact of Brexit. At the same time, on the empirical level, it can be observed how the two major crises faced by the post-Brexit EU resulted in vastly different outcomes. Through an extensive analysis of the literature and policy documents, selected through an in-depth analysis of the relevant material, this work aims to explain and partly reconcile these evident contrasts by analyzing policy decisions and explicit statements toward a higher level of differentiated integration by member states and the EU. The material, meticulously collected via traditional mainstream media, digital media, and official policy documents between 2020 and 2024, provides a comprehensive understanding of the disintegrative effects of Brexit in the context of community policies, particularly in the final stages of the negotiations and the months preceding the official exit of the United Kingdom from the EU.

Through an assessment of government declarations and programs, this comprehensive approach provides the opportunity to focus both on the institutional developments within the EU, measurable through an analysis of the policies implemented by member states, and on the ideological dimension, indicative instead of Brexit's impact on how the notion of belonging to the EU has changed. As a result, this work aims to discuss the disintegrative effect of Brexit from the vantage point of differentiated integration, providing an empirical analysis while being cognizant of the leading European integration theory approaches. The analysis presented here, however, does not take into account programs of political parties and electoral material since, while recognizing their importance for the study of Euroscepticism, it has been observed that the positions of the parties are characterized by a

high level of ambivalence (Heinisch et al. 2021). Therefore, they appear poorly suited for studying the institutional developments of relations between the EU and its member states.

The analysis of the material presented in the following section aims to provide empirical support for a theoretical discussion on Brexit's direct and indirect effects on differentiated integration. By examining how Brexit has influenced the evolution of EU institutions and shaped member states' perceptions of the costs and benefits of membership, this discussion contributes to a broader assessment of European disintegration trajectories. Through this institutional perspective, the study seeks to better understand Brexit's disintegrative impact within the framework of differentiated integration.

This last aspect is the basis of the choice to focus on monetary policy and security, already at the centre of the Brexit campaign and widely considered sectors in which it is challenging to carry forward common European policies (Orlando and Conrad 2024). By focusing on these crucial areas, the authors aim to shed light on the most pressing issues surrounding Brexit and its impact on differentiated integration.

4. Institutional Development

Although on a purely theoretical level, EU membership obliges all member states to comply with the provisions of the treaties, it is evident that, in practice, exceptions in this sense are, in fact, the norm. In the two macro-areas affected by this analysis, a widespread tendency to resort to opt-outs can be observed. Examples of this phenomenon are the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU), based on three stages of progressive economic integration that have not been adopted by all member states, as well as from Schengen membership, temporary in the cases of Romania, Bulgaria, and Cyprus, and permanent in the case of Ireland.³⁴ The existence of such resistance leads to a reflection on the supranational nature of the EU, as these two areas are not only, as previously noted, cornerstones of the Eurosceptic discourse, but also involve competences generally delegated to the central government in federal states (Schimmelfennig et al. 2023).

4.1 Economic Policy

The first necessary distinction in the analysis of differentiated integration is between those states partaking in the EMU and those outside it; following the 2010 Eurozone crisis⁵ and the

³ For a detailed account of the history of the Economic and Monetary Union, and on which some member states have yet to fulfill the convergence criteria see European Parliament 2025. "History of the Economic and Monetary Union." Accessed June 17, 2025. <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/en/sheet/79/history-of-the-economic-and-monetary-union>.

⁴ Although Schengen technically falls under the Area of Freedom, Security and Justice (AFSJ), in the context of Eurosceptic rhetoric and populist discourse the issue of freedom of movement is generally framed as a security one, hence the inclusion above.

⁵ The Eurozone crisis, beginning in 2010, was a sovereign debt crisis that exposed structural weaknesses in the euro area. Triggered by the 2008 global financial crisis, it primarily affected Greece,

ensuing reforms, the gap between the two groups widened significantly. Some examples of this process include: the creation of the European Stability Mechanism (ESM) to assist euro area member states in financial difficulty; the establishment of different monitoring and reporting measures for Eurozone members in the context of the Stability and Growth Pact; the Treaty on Stability, Coordination and Governance in the Economic and Monetary Union (TSCG), which subjects Eurozone countries to particularly stringent budget rules and enhanced supervisory mechanisms; the entry into force of a specific regulation aimed at monitoring macroeconomic asymmetries (Reg. 1176/2011), accompanied by special sanctioning measures for euro area countries (Reg. 1174/2011). These measures have contributed to increasing the distance between the two groups of states and, at the same time, giving rise to conflicts between the Eurozone states, as they are bound by new and more stringent measures which have exacerbated pre-existing differences in terms of policy preferences (Pilati and De Angelis 2020). The EU's response to the Eurozone recession was a labyrinthine network of measures, signifying a resolute intent to prevent crises of the scale experienced in 2010 from recurring within member states. This was accomplished by amalgamating support tools with novel methods of sanction and supervision (Börzel 2016).

The measures implemented after the COVID-19 pandemic, however, appeared to be aimed at intervening not only in the pathological stage of the member states' finances but also at significantly amplifying the scope of EU investments, thereby acting already in the physiological phase of the functioning of the European economy. The Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), adopted for the years 2021–2027, witnessed the EU endorsing an ambitious financial project aimed at fortifying its economy post-pandemic; this project, dubbed "Next Generation EU" (NGEU),⁶ was distinguished not only by its substantial magnitude but also by the decision to finance it through the issuance of EU debt instruments, henceforth defined as Eurobonds, to be repaid until 2058 (European Commission 2021a). The funds raised from the issuance of these Eurobonds were then allocated to member states through the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF), an instrument explicitly created to provide such performance-based financing to member states under conditions that they present a National Resilience and Recovery Plan (NRRP) in which they outline the reforms and investments to be implemented by 2026 (European Commission 2021b).

Ireland, Portugal, and Spain, leading to bailouts coordinated by the European Central Bank (ECB), European Commission, and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Austerity measures and economic stagnation followed, sparking political unrest and raising doubts about the Eurozone's long-term viability.

⁶ Next Generation EU (NGEU), launched in 2020 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, is a €750 billion recovery instrument aimed at supporting economic resilience and green and digital transitions across the EU. Marking a significant step toward fiscal integration, it allowed the European Commission to issue common debt on behalf of member states—an unprecedented move that redefined the scope of EU-level solidarity.

The negotiations that led to the approval of these measures were significantly influenced by the resistance of a bloc of states labelled as the Frugal Fours (Austria, Denmark, the Netherlands, and Sweden) and Finland (Bisciari et al. 2021). Although eventually overcome, these resistances allow us to spell out some considerations regarding the institutional dynamics of post-Brexit Europe. In contrast to the reaction to the 2010 crisis, in which the economic support of the EU was conditioned and secondary compared to the austerity measures introduced, the strategy to respond to the pandemic shows an approach aimed at promoting the development of member states, almost in a Keynesian fashion. The main objection raised by the Frugal Four was that the issuance of Eurobonds could damage the functioning of the Eurozone, specifically in the absence of a system of conditionality and accountability linked to the disbursement of European funds. After intense negotiations, these concerns were addressed by establishing the RRF and other smaller programs aimed at increasing accountability for member states benefitting from these measures (Vanhercke et al. 2021).

The decision to respond to the crisis through direct EU intervention of unprecedented scope has been interpreted as a post-Brexit development of European economic policy, as it represents an overcoming of the neoliberal logic prevalent in the United Kingdom (Joseph and Juncos 2024). Another possibility is that the need to address the COVID-19 crisis forced Europe to face a dilemma rooted in two arguments at the core of Eurosceptic criticisms. On the one hand, the claim—central in the Brexit campaign and quite common in wealthier member states—that the EU tends to redistribute resources to benefit its poorest members, effectively subsidizing their failing economic policies. On the other hand, there is the opposing view that EU monetary policy and its austerity measures represent a threat to the economy of those states with below-average economic performance (Orlando and Conrad 2024). The achievement of these agreements demonstrates that, despite internal divisions arising from conflicting economic preferences and ideological differences within domestic politics, the EU has successfully pursued common financial objectives, fostering optimism about its future. This outcome aligns with the conventional understanding of EU integration, corresponding to the “more integration/less differentiation” scenario outlined in Table 1, where deeper cooperation prevails over fragmentation.

4.2 Foreign and Defence Policy

As regards the second area covered by this article, namely the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), it would appear that the direct impact of Brexit is lower than what the international relevance of the United Kingdom would suggest. This discrepancy is because the UK took advantage of the high level of flexibility available in these areas in the years preceding Brexit, so its contribution to the administrative field was reduced (Schade2020). Nonetheless, losing a member state with a military and diplomatic apparatus on the scale of the UK's had significant consequences for the CFSP. The attempts to reach an agreement through some form of external differentiation by the Theresa May-led government proved fruitless, both due to the lukewarm reception by the EU and the rise of Boris

Johnson's government, characterized by more drastic positions on the topic (Martill and Sus 2023). In parallel with the need to readjust its strategy following Brexit, the EU found itself facing the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. In March 2022, the European Council endorsed the Strategic Compass, a document previously approved by the Foreign Affairs Council, which contained an analysis of the EU's priorities and objectives in the field of security (Council of the European Union 2022).

The Strategic Compass, hastily revised in the weeks between its promulgation and the onset of hostilities, begins by acknowledging the resurgence of war in Europe and the European Union's commitment to upholding the European security order. While the document alludes to the concept of the EU's strategic autonomy as a security actor, it remains somewhat unclear about the implementation of this autonomy, particularly in relation to the EU's mutual assistance clause and EU-NATO cooperation (Koenig 2022). In essence, the Strategic Compass serves more as a roadmap for the future development of European security than a concrete institutional development. Despite the document's resolute language and ambitious objectives, undoubtedly influenced by the events in Ukraine, it is yet to be seen how willing member states are to put it into practice, especially regarding the potential for coordinated operations under EU supervision, as outlined in Article 44 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) (Blockmans et al. 2022).

The extent to which the EU can act autonomously at a regional and global level, implementing its preferences independently from the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and individual member states, remains uncertain. For instance, the fact that Sweden and Finland have joined NATO, along with the skepticism of Central and Eastern European countries about the CFSP's concrete capability to protect their interests, suggests that the EU has a long way to go before it becomes the primary security provider for its member states. This is despite the significant support in the form of financial and strategic aid provided to Ukraine (Helwig 2023).

Returning to the focus of this article, the institutional developments in the field of CFSP offer some relevant insights. Enhanced cooperation in this sector is explicitly referred to in EU legislation, such as the institution of the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) based on the Treaty on European Union (TEU). Moreover, it is also logically desirable given the differing security needs of member states, such as the above case of the Central and Eastern European bloc, as well as shared interests, for example, among Mediterranean countries concerning the management of migration flows. On these grounds, and given the need to accommodate divergent interests, differentiated integration (DI) has represented a recurring feature of the CFSP. However, it was present more in its passive meaning, especially in terms of opt-outs, than in the active sense, conceptualized as a higher degree of integration. This significant fragmentation is visible in the case of PESCO, where it was recommended to implement straightforward guidelines and a more stringent monitoring system for member states (Houdé and Wessel 2023). Based on the four-fold typology outlined in the second section, this policy area exemplifies differentiated integration

(characterized by both more differentiation and integration), as certain states seeking deeper cooperation are advancing beyond the common EU framework. This trend suggests the emergence of strategic security partnerships among like-minded countries rather than the development of a unified European defence strategy.

This analysis described how post-Brexit Europe has evolved, focusing on institutional developments in the economic and security fields. Although a deep analysis of both events is beyond the scope of this work, it is necessary to address how the pandemic and the Russo-Ukrainian War affected these policies. Therefore, the two crises are considered external causal factors capable of accelerating endogenous dynamics independent from them. The authors have highlighted how the EU has implemented robust economic measures to support its member states, overcoming internal opposition through minor concessions. Although the Strategic Compass represents a step forward in the direction of more incisive EU-level action, within the CFSP, it appears that the national and NATO dimensions continue to be dominant in the areas of diplomacy and security. The following section explores the role of Brexit in the institutional developments discussed so far, aiming to determine whether, and to what extent, the notion that a state could leave the EU has had an integrative, disintegrative, or mixed effect.

5. The Role of Brexit

5.1 Main disintegrative factors

To discuss the impact of Brexit on European integration, it may be helpful to summarize the main profiles under which it can be analyzed. Possibly the most profound consequence of Brexit is a disintegrative impact that could lead other member states to leave the EU. However, this domino effect has yet to be observed, and it does not appear likely to happen in the immediate future. Another possibility is for the post-Brexit EU to experience disintegrative spillovers, differentiated disintegration through the renationalization of specific competences, or a weakening of EU structures at the advantage of member state governments in line with intergovernmental theories (Niemann 2021). At the same time, both during and after the Brexit negotiations, the 27 EU member-state governments and public opinion privileged cohesiveness. It has been observed how even Eurosceptic parties raised the issue of reforming the EU rather than promoting the example set by the UK (Chopin and Lequesne 2022). Such instances of reform might indicate an evolution of the EU in the sense of a more flexible institutional design. Institutional safeguards have been a quintessential feature of the EU constitutional design, aimed at guaranteeing member states the possibility of opting out of specific policy initiatives, a mechanism often used by the United Kingdom (Glencross 2021). Alongside the possibility that Brexit has incentivized member states to seek more flexible designs, it is also necessary to consider the dilemma of future trajectories for European integration: whether to favour deepening (institutional) or widening (geographical) integration. As noted by Hobolt (2016), a process of greater differentiated integration is underway, destined to accentuate the divisions within the EU in

the sense of a deeper integration of core Eurozone members. In this context, the DI process would represent an intrinsic characteristic of a more flexible design, and it would go hand in hand with the deeper integration required by some states.

5.2 Imitative effects

Concerning the contagion effect, on a political level, the most significant threat consists of the potential emulation effect mediated by local Eurosceptic forces and the perception by member state citizens that the UK improved its position by leaving the EU. To offset this risk, the EU maintained a hard stance in the negotiations, emphasizing that the benefits associated with membership must be tied to the related costs—a position that aligns with voter preferences, as demonstrated in a large-scale quantitative study (Walter 2021).

This process can be witnessed in the EU-UK negotiations on the CFSP. Despite Brexit offering Brussels an opportunity to expand its competences in the security and foreign policy domains, the EU also had to confront the claims advanced by Eurosceptic actors that such developments would result in a loss of national sovereignty and the establishment of a superstate. Furthermore, both parties faced significant constraints in their efforts to outline the future profiles of their cooperation in the area. The EU had to avoid an agreement that was too favourable towards the UK, as it would have reinforced the perception of an *à la carte* integration, with all the benefits of membership and none of the associated costs. Simultaneously, Boris Johnson's cabinet could not settle for a compromise that curtailed the UK's sovereignty, which would have contradicted the hard Brexit stance of his government. Ultimately, this conflict led to the exclusion of the issue from the 2020 EU-UK treaty (Harrois 2023), and such an agreement is still pending at the time of this writing (Posaner et al. 2023).

5.3 Executive Dominance and the EU Democratic Deficit

A further aspect of primary importance in assessing the disintegrative impact of Brexit concerns executive dominance, specifically the tendency of member state governments to bypass the multilevel structure envisioned in the EU design, which includes both national parliaments and EU institutions. The relevance of this phenomenon harks back to the debate on the democratic deficit in the EU, one of the main points of contention in the Eurosceptic discourse. In the context of the Brexit referendum, the term highlighted the distance between the EU and the citizens of member states. In this analysis, a surge in executive dominance is relevant as it indicates a shift towards an understanding of the EU as an institution ultimately managed by member states, rather than a democratic supranational entity.

A recent quantitative study aimed at assessing the impact of EU executive action versus member states' governments in the 2015 refugee crisis and during the pandemic suggests how, in both cases, the executive action of national governments was decisive in shaping the relevant policymaking decision (Bojar and Kriesi 2023). However, in the case of COVID-19 and the fiscal reforms connected to it, the friction represented by minority coalitions of

member states had a minor effect, attributable to the symmetric distribution of the crisis and the limited role played by national identities. These findings align with a further quantitative study highlighting the reduced role of national parliaments in influencing government preferences (Tarlea et al. 2024). The reduced role of national parliaments is partly due to the constitutional architecture of member states; however, Brexit might have influenced governments to compromise more. This phenomenon is due to the absence of the UK, which has historically been a reluctant partner and to avoid facing the consequences of hindering the EU decision-making process. Not only was executive dominance present independently of Brexit, but the UK's withdrawal has partly facilitated negotiations between member states, easing the implementation of shared policies.

Thus, Brexit did not increase the democratic deficit of the EU, as neither the other national actors have seen their role diminished due to the referendum, nor can one observe a surge of supranational centralization to the detriment of the member states. The central role of national governments is, instead, the leading cause of European democracy's imperfect nature. Although governments are directly or indirectly accountable to their voters, they decide on EU affairs with significant autonomy; moreover, the collegial nature of the EU decision-making practices allows them to offload their political responsibility significantly.

5.4 Heterogeneity

A further factor to consider is the high degree of heterogeneity between member states, which results in various institutional convergence clubs, i.e. groups of countries with comparable performances in several macroeconomic and institutional indicators (Glawe and Wagner 2021). This heterogeneity could be fertile ground for differentiated integration, as a flexible institutional design would help overcome conflicts between member states with different preferences; it would also allow for joint projects to be carried out with countries at a comparable level without waiting for the other member states to complete the necessary structural reforms. Given such conditions, a disintegrative event like Brexit could lead to a more flexible institutional design to avoid conflicts between member states. In the context of the CFSP, a sector already characterized by a high level of flexibility and autonomy on the part of the member states, it is not possible to observe any development in this sense (Klose et al. 2023). On the contrary, after the referendum, and in the context of the war in Ukraine, which led Denmark to join the Common Security and Defence Policy, the effect of Brexit appears to be negligible.

In the context of security policies, DI can manifest both in the sense of opt-outs and as enhanced cooperation between member states within the structures provided by European legislation. In the economic and single market fields, the type of DI most relevant for the study of European disintegration is the former; the British government's requests to the EU to avoid the referendum represent a clear example of this disintegrative drive. In the 2015 letter addressed to the President of the European Council, Donald Tusk, PM David Cameron called for exemptions for non-Eurozone states from financing operations supporting the euro, limits to the free circulation of people, and an increase in the power of national

parliaments (Cameron2015). Despite the eventual failure of Cameron's plea, a post-Brexit EU might accommodate similar instances of reform from member states to avoid their withdrawal. If this were the case, one might expect to observe an easing of European constraints, particularly budgetary ones, accompanied by a trend towards renationalizing national competences in critical sectors. This tendency would represent a radical change in the core features of the EU, as highlighted by Tusk's negative response to the British government's requests, a position shared by the member states during the Brexit negotiations (Matthijs et al. 2019).

5.5 The Institutional and the Ideational Profile

A shift of this magnitude, facilitated and accelerated by the referendum's outcome but not attributable only to it, can be studied from two perspectives. The first, empirical and particularly relevant in the short and medium term, is the assessment of instances of competences renationalization. These processes would occur gradually and concern only specific sectors at any given time. A comprehensive empirical study focused on the dynamics of single market integration across multiple policy areas contradicts this hypothesis, showing instead a situation characterized by the relaunch of initiatives aimed at promoting greater integration and a high degree of resilience towards instances of renationalization (Raudla and Spendzharova 2022).

The second vantage point, theoretical and therefore better suited to address the long-term dynamics of European integration, shifts the focus from what has been done to what has yet to be done. In other words, it evaluates whether Brexit forced institutional actors to delay reforms to avoid being targeted by Eurosceptic forces or exacerbating the conflict between member states (Zeitlin et al. 2019). In such a scenario, differentiated integration could serve a dual purpose. It would offer member states constrained by the dynamics described above greater leeway and allow those actors interested in European integration to pursue a deeper form of it independently. The following section discusses the extent to which this has happened and the role of Brexit in these developments.

6. Discussion

6.1 Brexit as a Structural Driver of Disintegration

The authors' examination of the current state of the EU has primarily delved into its institutional reforms and the concept of differentiated integration while assessing the profound disintegrative impact of Brexit. In the context of EMU policies, the measures outlined in the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), alongside the issuance of Eurobonds, represent a visible sign of development in the sense of greater integration. In the security field, although the Strategic Compass contains several blueprints for development, the situation appears substantially unchanged. This gap between external security and other policy areas, with the latter confined to the decision-making autonomy of member states, is a feature of EU policymaking already observed by Börzel (2005) in a

macro analysis of the institutional evolution of the European project. The distinction between level, referring to the issues falling under EU competences, and scope, measured in terms of supranational centralization versus the involvement of national governments in the decision-making process, provides a useful framework for further analysis (Börzel 2005). The extensive distributive policies implemented post-pandemic, along with the establishment of a monitoring system by the Commission, demonstrate a broadening of competences. However, it is important to note that the approval of these measures was a result of consensus among the member states. In the case of the CFSP, the national dimension still holds sway in both aspects; even the calls to enhance defence cooperation by European heads of state primarily pertain to the national dimension, with the EU's role limited to providing an institutional framework for such initiatives (Le Monde 2024).

However, the presence of these structural limits alone cannot be considered a sign of disintegration, much less can it be attributed to Brexit. On the contrary, considering that one of the central factors of divergence between the UK and Brussels was the implementation of redistributive policies, Brexit facilitated the implementation of Next Generation EU. Nonetheless, establishing a permanent macroeconomic stabilization mechanism in the future is desirable and such a mechanism would be even more effective if paired with broader EU competences in the fiscal field (Codogno and Van den Noord 2022). Brexit has facilitated the negotiations, as, based on the positions of the British government during its membership and specifically the Eurozone crisis, it was unlikely that the UK would have accepted a project of economic recovery of this magnitude. Furthermore, the exit of the most prominent non-Eurozone member changed the balance of power within the EU further in favour of the euro area countries. In this sense, Brexit can be considered a driver of European integration in line with the tenets of intergovernmentalism, which focuses on the power relationship between member states.

6.2 Brexit as an Ideological Driver of Disintegration

Some further considerations can be drawn by analyzing these dynamics from a postfunctionalist perspective. Brexit and the experience of the 2010 Eurozone crisis had a positive impact because European leaders approached the pandemic aware that an austerity-driven reaction would have a potentially disintegrative effect, as it would favour a narrative centred on an EU distant from its citizens. The ideological effect of the referendum, combined with the emergence of more interventionist governments in various European states, also contributed to a paradigm shift in EU trade policies in the sense of greater protectionism alongside the redistributive measures already mentioned (Bauerle and Meunier 2024). One cannot underestimate the causal impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine in this paradigm shift; however, already at the time of her inauguration, the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen (2019), had underlined the intent to increase the use of economic tools by the EU for geopolitical purposes. These difficulties in isolating the impact of Brexit derive from the fact that institutional

developments can be understood as the result of the interplay between external events and how they are interpreted and metabolized within the political arena.

In the negotiations following the referendum, although the possibility of forming a “European Army” was one of the arguments employed by the “Leave” campaign, the issue of the CFSP was relatively overshadowed compared to other aspects (Howorth 2017). The first developments in this area were the signing of PESCO in 2017 and the reiteration by the Commission of the need to create a single market for defence, optimize economies of scale, and ultimately “move towards a security and defence union” (European Commission 2017). These developments suggest that EU defence integration gained momentum after Brexit, with member states putting into practice the visionary discourse already present in the Treaty of Lisbon but essentially left unrealized in the following decade (Svendson 2019). Five years later, the Strategic Compass reiterated this intention. However, rather than providing a framework for a common defence market, it reaffirmed the need for member states to increase military expenditures. Overall, compared with the economic dimension, developments in the security sector have been more moderate. The reason for this different pace might be that, despite the Russian invasion of Ukraine, member states are not under the same pressure when it comes to security.

If one assumes that the main drivers of institutional development are the need to adapt to crises and the emergence of ideological forces, the main difference between the two fields was NATO’s presence. In the economic field, the pandemic was the structural factor leading to the need for institutional reform. On an ideological level, the experience of the 2010 crisis and the UK’s absence shaped the response of the EU; this resulted in unprecedented measures to support member states, shaping a narrative of the EU as an actor capable of responding effectively to an economic and social crisis. Suppose one transposes this paradigm into the security sphere; in that case, the external event driving institutional adaptations would be the Russo-Ukrainian War, as highlighted by the tones of the Strategic Compass and the declarations of European leaders. However, the NATO-national state dualism is still prevalent on the ideological level. Despite the impact of Brexit, also postulated by the literature, the EU is still a secondary actor. As a result, institutional developments in the sector consisted of “best endeavour” norms that have not been accompanied, until now, by concrete and effective actions.

Thus, the current situation is marked by uncertainty. On the one hand, the EU has managed to avert the disintegrative domino effect predicted by Brexit, despite facing a global pandemic and a military conflict on its borders. On the other hand, the UK’s departure did not accelerate European integration, which continues to follow an intergovernmentalist logic. In this context, Brexit remains a reminder of the potential extreme consequences of community policy failures, accentuating the domestic constraints faced by member states’ governments. This stagnant situation can be attributed to the underdeveloped European identity among the population, despite the prominence of EU issues in national debates. In

times of crisis, the EU becomes an easy target for criticism from interested domestic actors, as evidenced by the “Leave” campaign.

6.3 Future Trajectories of European Integrations

A further halting factor is linked to the democratic deficit of European institutions, in particular in the context of EU constitutional politics. As observed by Patberg (2017), the EU currently lacks an institution that allows citizens to exercise constituent power independently of the governments of member states. This limit, accompanied by a European identity weaker than the national one, can only discourage any attempt at significant reform, making it politically hazardous. In this context, the EU’s democratic deficit can be traced back to two significant causal factors. The first, and perhaps the most crucial, is the member states’ need to preserve their autonomy. This need is met by maintaining a consensus-based decision-making system, aligning with the principles of liberal intergovernmentalism. However, this process, while protecting national sovereignty, also hampers integration. As actors bound by domestic electoral constraints, national governments are often reluctant to decrease their sovereignty, thereby impeding the EU’s democratic functioning. The second factor contributing to the EU’s democratic deficit is the lack of citizens’ involvement at the institutional level. This issue is evident in the relatively minor role of the European Parliament and the absence of a strong European identity. Against this background, differentiated integration, understood as opt-outs or controlled disintegration, can potentially prevent or mitigate the dysfunctions of European integration, ultimately empowering citizens to shape their policy preferences (Patberg 2020). This interpretation can also be applied, a posteriori, to the negotiations conducted by the British government prior to the referendum. While some of the requests made by the British Prime Minister in 2015 show a clear intention to stop or even reverse European integration, they can also be seen as a plea for differentiated integration. Given that the United Kingdom was already an EU member with unique characteristics, it appears that the British government viewed differentiated integration as a potential solution to the issues it faced at the time.

These issues are the same ones that ultimately led to the outcome of the referendum—namely, a domestic context characterized by a plurality of potential disintegrative factors, including weak support for the EU amongst the public, a high level of polarization on European topics, and the existence of solid opposition to the EU both within the Conservative Party and in the electorate (Niemann et al. 2020). It would be bold to claim that an increase in the institutional flexibility granted to member states is in itself a remedy for European disintegration. However, within the framework of the complex dynamics of European integration and the inevitable conflicts that arise from it, one of the lessons of Brexit is that the EU’s adoption of overly strict positions can exacerbate the polarization of the debate and reinforce Eurosceptic narratives. This further underscores the need for a flexible approach to European integration, one that accounts for the diverse needs and perspectives of member states and their citizens.

Brexit, therefore, represented a significant turning point, demonstrating the potential consequences of an excessively rigid approach, namely, demonization by national actors of the EU. This process, in turn, has created a space for Eurosceptic forces to shape the domestic debate on European integration. Consequently, mainstream parties found themselves fighting an unequal battle on the national front without being able to rely on policy solutions at a European level (Schmitter and Lefkofridi 2016). As of today, the lessons of Brexit have been at least partially received by the EU. The issuance of Eurobonds and the intention, although not yet fully realized, to implement a common defence strategy represent significant developments in this sense. The relevance of these institutional developments lies not only in the scope of such measures but in the potential ideological impact on the debate on European integration. However, although Brexit has yet to represent a driver of differentiated integration, it cannot be considered an isolated event. Euroscepticism, understood as a radical opposition to further integration, still has a central role in the EU debate. The critical warning of Brexit is, perhaps, that EU membership is reversible given the right conditions. In terms of institutional development, these conditions can stem from a systemic crisis and the conflicts that could arise following the EU's attempt to deal with such an event.

Under the prevailing circumstances, Brexit has had a notably contained influence on European disintegration. Particularly in the institutional sphere, the progress in economic and security policies observed thus far allows us to dismiss the notion that the referendum halted institutional development or led to increased differentiated integration. However, the referendum's outcome has bolstered the factors that precipitated it, notably the presence of a fertile Eurosceptic narrative that political actors can exploit to impede the EU's institutional progress. This situation has, to some extent, given rise to a scenario described by Rosamond (2016, 868) as an "institutional equilibrium of diminishing returns"—the belief that the costs and risks of integration are too steep to implement the ambitious reforms that have characterized the European project over time.

Conquering this interplay of institutional and ideological constraints, which Brexit has facilitated, poses a significant hurdle to EU development. There are, however, potential strategies that could alter this trajectory. Firstly, the EU's democratic deficit could be reduced by enhancing the role of Parliament. Secondly, deeper integration in key policy sectors could yield positive results, even if it is limited to a core group of states. This process would align with the constructivist understanding that policy boundaries can shift over time (Hoeffler 2019). If this holds true, establishing a more integrated institutional model in the fiscal and security sectors, in addition to the structural benefits envisaged by liberal intergovernmentalism (LI) and, to a minor extent, neofunctionalism (NF), could, on the ideological level, counter the negative politicization of EU issues that led to Brexit. In other words, it could introduce and reinforce among the population the narrative of a Europe close to its citizens and capable of meeting their needs.

7. Conclusion

This article discussed the effect of Brexit on institutional developments in the EU. It delved into the disintegrative impact of the referendum at a systemic level, examining whether and to what extent Brexit contributed to differentiated integration, with a specific focus on economic and security policies. By concentrating on these two areas, which played a pivotal role in shaping the Eurosceptic narrative that led to the referendum, the authors tested the central hypothesis of this work, which was to assess the disintegrative impact of Brexit on the institutional framework of the EU. This was done by looking at the effects of Brexit on differentiation, exploring the two sides of it: differentiated integration and differentiated disintegration. This research was based on an analysis of official policy documents in these sectors, supplemented by a comprehensive review of qualitative and quantitative studies on Euroscepticism and European integration. Additionally, the authors considered the two crises that the EU has faced in the post-Brexit period, the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine, aligning with the theoretical assumption that external events significantly impact the institutional developments of the EU.

The analysis reveals that developments in the two sectors were not adversely affected by the referendum. In the economic sphere, the measures adopted after the pandemic, focused on support for member states by the EU, demonstrate significant progress compared to the European response to the 2010 Eurozone crisis. In this context, the effect of Brexit was likely positive for two reasons: the absence of the opposition represented by the UK and the recognition that a response focused on austerity would have been unpopular and would have strengthened Eurosceptic forces. In the sphere of the CFSP, the most relevant causal factor was the Russian invasion of Ukraine, a few weeks after the promulgation of the Strategic Compass. This document, significantly modified after the outbreak of hostilities, reflects member states' ambivalence towards a common security policy. Although the document highlights the intention to implement a common defence framework, these developments are still largely unrealized.

Concerning differentiated integration, the strong stand adopted in the Brexit negotiations, especially in the context of the CFSP, shows how this option was not contemplated in the case of the United Kingdom. As for other member states, a certain level of differentiated integration remains the norm in the security sector, a sector characterized by broad decision-making autonomy by national governments. In the economic sphere, however, despite the Frugal Four's concerns regarding the accountability of member states concerning the funding received in the context of the National Resilience and Recovery Plan, the community response was substantially unitary.

This research indicates that Brexit has not triggered a surge in differentiated disintegration within the EU, nor has it initiated a trend towards institutional reforms that would lead to greater disintegration. However, Brexit has had a dual impact on European disintegration. In line with postfunctionalist theorizing, it has provided interested actors with a roadmap for effectively promoting a Eurosceptic narrative within their member states. Furthermore, it

has imposed additional constraints on the governmental policy level by highlighting the risks of politicizing policy issues. This trend could potentially lead to a deceleration of European integration in the long run, by escalating the costs of potentially unpopular reforms.

In addition to providing an overview of the current state of European institutional development, this article has examined how Brexit has fundamentally altered the concept of EU membership. The long-term implications of this transformation are uncertain. While further crises could lead to a negative politicization of the EU in the aftermath of Brexit, there is also potential for positive change. Strategies such as addressing the democratic deficit within the European Union, promoting differentiated integration in specific sectors to overcome any situations of paralysis, and striving to counter the ideological forces that precipitated the referendum could all be effective. Future research will need to explore the feasibility and consequences of such an approach in more detail.

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4.5 Paper 5: Eurosceptic Narratives in Post-Brexit Europe: The 2024 European Parliament Elections

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Abstract

This article examines the transformation of Eurosceptic narratives in the aftermath of the 2024 European Parliament elections. Building on previous research highlighting the increasing polarisation of discourse around European integration, it reconsiders these dynamics through the lens of ideological and narrative change. The study conducts a

comparative analysis of electoral manifestos from left-wing and right-wing parties affiliated with the two most prominently Eurosceptic groups in the European Parliament, selected also on the basis of national levels of public trust in the EU. To this end, the analysis applies a frame-based approach, focusing on three core domains: EU-governance, economic policy, and migration. These frames are situated within a broader debate on European disintegration, understood not as a singular event but as an ongoing, multidimensional process. Brexit is treated not as a direct causal driver, but as an ideological benchmark – a formative moment that reconfigured the narrative landscape and continues to inform the rhetoric of Eurosceptic actors. The article situates its findings within existing literature on EU polity contestation, contributing to our understanding of how Eurosceptic narratives evolve in response to shifting political and institutional contexts, and how they articulate competing visions of Europe's future.

1. Introduction

The 2019 European elections represented a turning point compared to the past due to the polarisation of the debate around transactional issues, to the point of being defined as first-order polity elections (Galpin & Trenz, 2019). The impact of Brexit in such circumstances was notable, as it strengthened the anti-EU camps (Taggart & Szczerbiak, 2018), showing how European integration is reversible and broadening the scope of discursive Euroscepticism, understood as the use of critical narratives and rhetoric that challenge or undermine the legitimacy and benefits of the European Union, shaping public opinion against deeper integration (Orlando & Conrad, 2024a). In this context, Brexit is not treated as a direct catalyst of institutional disintegration but as an ideological turning point that demonstrates how a state may leave the EU, a fact that must be considered when discussing European disintegration.

After five years and two major crises, this study undertakes a comparative analysis of left-wing and right-wing Eurosceptic narratives – as expressed in the electoral manifestos and programmes of 13 political parties across 9 EU member states – in the aftermath of the 2024 European Parliament elections. By doing so, it aims to contribute to the literature on European disintegration by linking narrative evolution and ideological shifts with the potential trajectories of integration and disintegration. Building on a comparative framework of narrative evolution, this research situates the ideological debates within the broader discourse on European disintegration, emphasising that while Brexit did not trigger a cascade disintegrative effect, the same discourse that predated the Referendum can be seen today in other member states.

The study focused on parties from the Identity and Democracy (ID) and The Left in the European Parliament (GUE/NGL) groups, which are known for their Eurosceptic positions on several key issues. The collected material was categorised using three frames: EU-governance, economic policy, and migration. This choice allowed to capture opposition to European integration and also reflect divergent narrative constructions between soft and hard Euroscepticism (Taggart & Szczerbiak, 2008), thereby enabling a comparative

ideological analysis. The decision to examine Euroscepticism by focusing on political parties, especially those at the extreme ends of the political spectrum, is based on the vast literature highlighting the significant role of these parties in shaping the debate on European integration (Heinisch et al., 2021; Hernández & Kriesi, 2016).

The article is organised as follows. The second section presents a literature review that outlines key concepts – including Euroscepticism, European disintegration, and the indirect yet pivotal impact of Brexit on ideological debates – and discusses the role of narratives as drivers in these processes. This theoretical overview frames the article within the bodies of literature to which it contributes. Specifically, by comparing left-wing and right-wing narrative evolutions, the study offers a nuanced portrayal of ideological divergences within Eurosceptic discourse.

By exploring how these evolving narratives might prefigure future patterns of European disintegration, the study adopts Brexit as a vantage point, understood not as a direct causal factor but rather as a blueprint for disintegration. The third section contains the methodology of this study, motivating the choice to conduct a qualitative content analysis, the case selection, and presenting the frames adopted to examine them. The fourth section opens with the empirical analysis of the campaign material, classifying the claims found in the campaign materials and sorting them across the three reference frames adopted; an in-depth analysis of the contents for each thematic area follows this analysis. Subsequently, the findings are juxtaposed with the dynamics observed in the 2019 elections to highlight the evolution of party narratives over time.

The fifth section consists of a discussion on the role of Eurosceptic narratives in the electoral campaign; in this discussion, special attention is given to the divergent ways in which left-wing and right-wing actors incorporate the legacy of Brexit as an ideological reference point for debating European disintegration. Finally, the discussion synthesises how these narrative evolutions inform our understanding of potential future disintegrative trends in the EU. The conclusion draws from the analysis of the 2024 vote to suggest some hypotheses for the developments of the Eurosceptic discourse in Europe, pointing out some avenues for future research. Overall, the article contributes to the theory of European disintegration by presenting empirical insights into the evolution of politically charged narratives, while acknowledging that the multifaceted nature of this issue warrants further investigation beyond a single electoral cycle and a limited number of political forces.

2. Literature Review

2.1 EU disintegration

This work conceptualises European disintegration as a multidimensional process whereby member states seek to reduce their involvement in the European project, through means such as renationalising competencies, cutting budget contributions, or, in extreme cases, withdrawing from the EU (Vollaard, 2018). Central to our analysis is the view that

Eurosceptic narratives not only critique European integration but also drive disintegration by reshaping collective understandings of the EU beyond national borders (McMahon & Kaiser, 2022). First, the Eurosceptic narratives examined here act as disintegrative factors, as delegitimising the EU within political parties discourages further integration (Jones, 2018). Second, Brexit – the most significant example of disintegration – has profoundly influenced this discourse. While reversibility of integration was once marginal, the Brexit referendum has become a seminal event that reconfigures ideological debates, even though it did not trigger widespread disintegration (Taggart & Szczerbiak, 2021).

Moreover, in the post-Brexit era, the possibility of leaving the EU has become tangible enough to prompt political actors to include it in their agendas (Brusenbauch Meislova & Buckledee, 2021). In this context, disintegration can be seen as a self-fuelling mechanism. The two driving forces of this mechanism are the negative politicisation of the EU, which even mainstream political parties must consider, and the perception that adopting a Eurosceptic rhetoric represents a viable and effective option. This mechanism operates both passively – where states attempt to depoliticise integration (De Wilde & Zürn, 2012) – and actively, whereby external events like the Eurozone and migrant crises, as well as the Brexit campaign, are exploited to drive a reorientation towards disintegration (Leruth et al., 2019). On the passive side, states have repeatedly tried to minimise the politicisation of European integration – for instance, in response to the Constitutional Treaty’s failure – yet these strategies have faltered in the wake of systemic shocks such as the 2010 Eurozone crisis and the 2015 migrant crisis. Actively, disintegration is advanced through framing external events as evidence of EU failure – a process that was epitomised by the Leave campaign’s use of these crises. Brexit exposed the interplay between these two dimensions as it provided new ammunition to the Eurosceptic arsenal while putting further constraints on member states dealing with crises.

Recent scholarship further showed that ideological orientations and narrative strategies are key to understanding disintegration. For instance, Capati (2024), Fagerholm (2025), Rovny et al. (2022), and Szczerbiak and Taggart (2024) have demonstrated in various contexts that pre-existing ideological commitments shape party responses to EU crises. Similarly, research by Capati et al. (2024) and Fabbrini and Zgaga (2024) indicates that even as mainstream forces moderate their positions, radical narratives persist in framing EU membership as contingent, a perspective enriched by studies such as those by Chopin and Lequesne (2022), and Turnbull-Dugarte (2021). Accordingly, this work conceptualises European disintegration as a dynamic process driven by party narratives that yield institutional effects – such as withdrawal pressures, policy shifts, and normative delegitimation. By integrating insights from narrative politics and institutional change scholarship, disintegration is framed as a party frame, whereby Euroscepticism functions not merely as critique but as an active ideological blueprint for reorienting institutional and policy structures.

2.2 Euroscepticism

The classification and study of Euroscepticism has generated extensive literature since the 1990s, resulting in multiple scholarly debates and attempts to conceptualise and explain its drivers (Brack & Startin, 2015). Given Euroscepticism's central role in this analysis, a concise conceptualisation is essential. Recent debates on narrative politics define it as party discourse not only criticising European integration but also constructing alternative policy paradigms (Pirro & Taggart, 2018). This study draws on the distinction between hard and soft Euroscepticism, with the former representing outright rejection of EU integration and the latter opposing specific aspects of the European project (Taggart & Szczerbiak, 2004). Although other typologies exist, such as Kopecký and Mudde's (2002) four categories, this distinction is appropriate for two reasons: it aligns with the focus on parties in the two most Eurosceptic groups, and it supports the view that Euroscepticism – especially in its hard form – can act as a causal driver of European disintegration. Hard Euroscepticism is emphasised here since its narratives and proposals for radical institutional reforms are likely to produce the most pronounced disintegrative effects if embraced by mainstream actors.

An example is UKIP's influence on public opinion and the Conservative Party, which helped advance the Brexit referendum (Tournier-Sol, 2021). Recent studies also show that framing external crises as EU failures allows hard Eurosceptic parties to influence mainstream positions more effectively than their electoral performance might suggest (Pirro & Taggart, 2018). In the context of the symbiotic relationship among Eurosceptic positions, mainstream parties, and public opinion, this research aims to identify Eurosceptic discourse in the 2024 elections as a key step in assessing its role in shaping European integration's future.

Moreover, this analysis distinguishes left and right Euroscepticism. Recent literature (Szczerbiak & Taggart, 2024) shows Euroscepticism by national parties strongly associates with anti-establishment positions, more pronounced on the right. In contrast, left-wing Euroscepticism, while equally critical of the EU, often incorporates anti-austerity and social justice arguments. Complementing this, large crises like the pandemic and financial crisis have heightened the salience and polarisation of EU issues in national party competition (Capati et al., 2024). These findings highlight that distinctions between soft and hard Euroscepticism reflect not only opposition levels but also divergent ideological underpinnings – hard Euroscepticism tends toward radical, often exclusionary narratives, while soft Euroscepticism adopts more reformist, though critical, stances.

2.3 Brexit

The relevance of Brexit to this work is twofold. Firstly, as an exemplary case of EU disintegration, Brexit represents a defining moment in the process under investigation. Its historical trajectory and outcome provide a critical retrospective lens to understand the forces driving disintegration within the EU, and these insights can be applied to current and future processes. Secondly, Brexit is an unavoidable point of reference for any actor

promoting a Eurosceptic narrative, whether directly or indirectly. For this reason, some scholars have defined Brexit as the ultimate opt-out, interpreting the Referendum's outcome as evidence of the EU's failure to provide sufficient flexibility for its member states (Kendrick, 2023). In parallel, other authors have highlighted the centrality of nationalism in the build-up to Brexit and, more broadly, in European disintegration (Alexandre-Collier et al., 2022). By focusing on Brexit as a paradigmatic instance of EU disintegration, the study does not suggest that parties are simply imitating or directly driven by Brexit. Instead, Brexit is treated as a powerful example that both informs and shapes broader ideological debates around disintegration. It provides a starting point to assess how Eurosceptic narratives invoke the possibility of exit, ultimately enhancing our understanding of the conditions under which the EU might be reconfigured or fragmented.

Regarding the referendum's impact on populist radical right parties (PRR), it has been observed that Brexit has had a substantially limited impact. These findings highlight the complexity of the dynamics behind the formation of Eurosceptic political discourse; however, it is also necessary to consider how this assessment dates back to the period of the UK's negotiations, suggesting that the uncertainty surrounding the withdrawal process played a role in determining the positions of the PRR parties analysed (Van Kessel et al., 2020). Additionally, different political actors have attributed a different ideological value to the referendum, with interpretations ranging from seeing it as a rejection of the federalist ambitions of the EU to the expression of a need for a more social Europe (De Ville & Siles-Brügge, 2019). While the immediate effect of Brexit on the fortunes of populist radical right parties may appear modest, it is crucial to recognise that public opinion towards EU membership is shaped by more than mere electoral outcomes. According to De Vries (2018) benchmark theory, public sentiment is formed by comparing the benefits of EU membership with the perceived advantages of being outside the EU. This benchmark, however, is not fixed; it is dynamically influenced by the ideological forces and narratives propagated by political actors. In this regard, Eurosceptic narratives play a central role in framing the costs and benefits of integration, thereby affecting the public's evaluation of the status quo. Thus, Brexit remains a necessary reference point, as it shows the ideological contest over the benefits of EU membership versus the allure of national sovereignty – a contest that is central to understanding both the evolution of Eurosceptic discourse – and the broader process of EU disintegration.

2.4 Brexit

Another critical question addressed in this study concerns the role of narratives, understood in the constructivist sense, in European disintegration. Narratives are carefully constructed representations of reality that link specific causes with key issues and contribute to the politicisation of EU integration. For instance, a common narrative depicts the EU as a bureaucratic behemoth indifferent and disconnected from citizens' needs. Narratives delegitimise EU integration by shaping voter preferences and constraining political actors, who tend to avoid policies reinforcing unfavourable narratives (Zappettini & Bennett, 2022).

This aspect is essential because analysing electoral content cannot be separated from exploring the politicisation of European integration, particularly evident among right – and left-wing parties; the former focus on identity and sovereignty, the latter on inequality in resource redistribution (Hooghe & Marks, 2009). This strategy represents a rejection of the status quo embodied by mainstream parties and European institutions, with potential to influence the political landscape by pushing moderates to adjust positions and challenging the liberal foundations of the European project (Sus & Hadeed, 2021).

Politicisation has produced a narrative pitting Eurosceptic parties against elites, rhetoric extensively used by the Leave campaign. Various factors fuel these dynamics, including competition with mainstream parties, contextual conditions like the Eurozone crisis, and strategic party leadership decisions (Pirro & Van Kessel, 2017). In line with these insights, this study seeks to identify the frames in which these narratives appear in the countries examined and reviews electoral outcomes to assess how politicised discourse contributes to a broader set of EU-pessimist positions – encompassing both outright rejection and scepticism towards EU integration. The term EU-pessimist, coined by Pirro and Van Kessel, is particularly apt for the parties studied here, allowing further nuance within the hard Eurosceptic category.

This focus on narrative content builds on existing research on Eurosceptic party behaviour during European Parliament elections, recognising party discourse is strategically shaped and may evolve post-election depending on political opportunities and broader conditions. Already in 2009, scholars observed increasing politicisation of EU integration among Eurosceptic parties, though the tone and intensity of their criticism varied across member states (Adam et al., 2013). Subsequent elections following the 2010 Eurozone crisis marked a significant turning point, with Eurosceptic forces substantially increasing their representation in the European Parliament, especially among creditor and debtor member states (Emanuele et al., 2016). Furthermore, the 2019 elections showed a positive correlation between electoral success and adoption of hostile Eurosceptic rhetoric at the European level, contrary to trends in mainstream parties (Nai et al., 2022).

Moreover, the conclusions of McMahon and Kaiser (2022) underscore that decades of increasing political competences and crises have politicised the EU, fragmenting its foundational narrative and empowering a complex Eurosceptic opposition that not only rejects integration but actively constructs counter-narratives by repurposing pro-integration themes such as peace and democracy, highlighting the need for further research into contested notions like European sovereignty and the interaction between elite and popular narratives.

This study contributes by analysing the 2024 elections in terms of rhetoric types, narrative salience, and cross-national variation. It treats politicisation not only as backdrop but as an active mechanism through which parties construct disintegrative narratives. While benchmark theory (De Vries, 2018) explains how citizens assess EU membership by comparing it to an imagined alternative outside the Union, this comparison is never neutral;

it is shaped by the ideological content of political narratives, which is precisely the subject of this analysis.

3. Methodology

3.1 Analytical Framework

This study examines the narratives advanced by Eurosceptic parties during the 2024 European Parliament election through a qualitative analysis of party manifestos and official campaign platforms. Parties characterised as radical left and radical right were included based on the idea that Euroscepticism tends to be stronger at the extremes of the political spectrum (Carrieri & Vittori, 2021). Thirteen parties from nine EU member states were selected, all affiliated with either the Identity and Democracy (ID) or The Left in the European Parliament (GUE/NGL) groups. The decision to focus exclusively on these two groups was made in order to concentrate on parties exhibiting consistently high levels of opposition to the EU. While Eurosceptic forces also exist within other groups, such as the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR), many of these parties have moderated their positions when participating in government or engaging in institutional politics at the national level (Taggart & Szczerbiak, 2013). Including them would have required a broader typological differentiation that exceeds the analytical scope of this article.

The focus on ID and GUE/NGL allows for a more coherent comparison between ideologically distinct forms of hard Euroscepticism: one rooted in nationalist and identitarian frames, the other grounded in criticisms of market liberalism and democratic deficits. This comparative angle contributes to recent literature calling for more systematic cross-ideological analyses of Eurosceptic discourse (Kantola & Miller, 2021).

Party manifestos were retrieved from official online sources (see Table 1), translated where necessary, and coded manually. The materials were analysed using three thematic frames that reflect recurrent dimensions of Eurosceptic narratives: EU governance, economic policy, and migration. They do not presume a rigid typology but reflect areas in which politicisation and disintegration-oriented rhetoric are most likely to appear. To support cross-case comparison, each party's position within each frame was summarised using a simple ordinal scale:

2: rejection of EU involvement in the policy area;

1: endorsement of major reforms or restrictions;

0: acceptance of the status quo or absence of any significant reference.

This classification does not replace qualitative interpretation but supplements it, offering a heuristic device to observe broader trends. The analytical focus remains on how narratives are constructed and deployed within and across ideological families. Finally, the study compares electoral results in 2024 with those from the 2019 EP election, offering preliminary

observations on whether the adoption of more assertive Eurosceptic narratives correlates with improved electoral performance. These findings are intended to generate hypotheses for further testing, not to establish causal claims.

Table 1. Parties analysed in the study.

Party Name (Abbreviation)	Translation	2019 EP Group (Abbreviation)	Country	Materials
Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (FPÖ)	Freedom Party of Austria	Identity and Democracy (ID)	Austria	Website; Manifesto
Vlaams Belang (VB)	Flemish Interest	ID	Belgium	Program; Website
Svoboda a přímá demokracie (SPD)	Freedom and Direct Democracy	ID	Czech Republic	Program; Manifesto
Rassemblement national (RN)	National Rally	ID	France	Program; Manifesto Speeches;
Alternative für Deutschland (AfD)	Alternative for Germany	ID	Germany	Manifesto; Website
League for Salvini Premier (LSP)	League for Salvini Premier	ID	Italy	Program; Manifesto
Partij voor de Vrijheid (PVV)	Party for Freedom	ID	Netherlands	Program; Manifesto
Parti du Travail de Belgique (PTB)	Workers' Party of Belgium	The Left in the European Parliament – GUE/NGL	Belgium	Program; website
Komunistická strana Čech a Moravy (KSČM)/Stačilo!	Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia/Enough!	GUE/NGL	Czech Republic	Website; Manifesto
La France Insoumise (LFI)	France Unbowed	GUE/NGL	France	Program; Manifesto
Die Linke	The Left	GUE/NGL	Germany	Program; Manifesto
Synaspismós Rizospastikis Aristerás – Proodeftikí Simachía (SYRIZA)	Coalition of the Radical Left – Progressive Alliance	GUE/NGL	Greece	Manifesto; Website
Podemos	We can	GUE/NGL	Spain	Website; Manifesto

3.2 Case selection

The parties analysed in this study belong to two parliamentary groups known for their sustained opposition to the EU: Identity and Democracy (ID) and The Left (GUE/NGL). The selection focuses on the radical left and radical right, based on the assumption – widely supported in the literature – that the most pronounced forms of Euroscepticism are typically found at the ideological extremes (Carrieri & Vittori, 2021). This dual focus helps illuminate both ideological and strategic variations in anti-EU discourse.

Case selection was based on a mix of qualitative and quantitative criteria. On the qualitative side, preference was given to parties operating in national contexts marked by high levels of public mistrust in the EU, as measured by the Spring 2023 Eurobarometer (Eurobarometer, 2023). An exception was made for the Netherlands, where trust levels are higher than the EU average, but the Party for Freedom (PVV) emerged as the leading party in the 2023 general elections – indicating a strong national-level mandate for a Eurosceptic platform. While the 2023 Dutch election campaign featured little overt discussion of the EU, the PVV's success remains relevant from the constructivist perspective of this work. Electoral outcomes signal more than issue salience; they reflect the resonance of deeper ideological frames; accordingly, the victory of a party long associated with anti-EU discourse suggests that opposition to European integration is embedded in broader narratives of sovereignty, identity, and political distrust. Even when Europe is not central to the campaign, the success of such actors indicates the growing normalisation of disintegrative imaginaries.

To ensure analytical depth while limiting the number of states examined, this study employed selection criteria that included the number of European Parliament seats, which consequently led to the exclusion of smaller member states. At the same time, care was taken to ensure geographical diversity, with cases drawn from both core and peripheral

Eurozone countries. This choice reflects scholarship emphasising how structural factors – such as centre – periphery dynamics – inform divergent Eurosceptic narratives (Notermans & Piattoni, 2020).

Some parties were excluded due to their limited national relevance or minimal electoral weight. The final sample reflects a balance between analytical depth and comparative breadth, with the aim of capturing a range of ideological, institutional, and geographical contexts relevant to the study of disintegrative narratives. A full list of the selected parties, along with their 2019 group affiliation, is provided in Table 1.

3.3 Frames

The analysis is structured around three thematic frames that emerged from repeated close readings of party manifestos. These frames – EU governance, economy, and migration – were identified as recurrent areas in which Eurosceptic narratives are both concentrated and politically consequential. Their selection is supported by existing literature on the discursive dimensions of Euroscepticism (Brack, 2020; Meijers, 2017; Orlando, 2022) and refined through the empirical material itself. While the three frames appear across parties and countries, their expression varies significantly based on ideological orientation, national context, and party strategy. The aim is not to impose rigid typologies but to highlight the dominant themes through which disintegration-oriented rhetoric is articulated.

3.3.1 EU-governance

The first area of focus in this analysis is European governance, which refers to the EU's ability to ensure member states' compliance with supranational rules and the institutional framework needed to implement such legislation. This aspect, encompassing the institutional development of the EU, is highly politicised by Eurosceptic forces. They have shaped a narrative based on the dissatisfaction of their voters with the ever-increasing EU interference in policy-making, depicting them as losers in the European integration process (Borzel, 2016). The contents included in this analytical frame touch upon sovereignty and voice criticisms regarding the democratic deficit within the EU. The proposed solutions range from rejecting further integration to significant reforms aimed at reducing EU competencies, to the point of advocating complete withdrawal from the EU.

Material falling into this frame includes calls for treaty revision, repatriation of competences, or complete withdrawal from the Union. While the specific language differs across parties, a common feature is the portrayal of the EU as democratically illegitimate or hostile to national self-determination. What distinguishes this category from the following two is that, in the material encompassed in this frame, the need for fundamental reform of the EU is not confined to a specific policy area. These narratives, despite their differences at a geographical and individual party level discussed in the next section of this paper, are primarily focused on returning decision-making authority to member states, with the ultimate goal of dissolving the EU. Right-wing parties tend to frame this in terms of

sovereignty and national identity, whereas left-wing parties more often invoke democratic deficit and institutional opacity. Both, however, express a desire to re-centre political authority at the national level.

3.3.2 Economy

The economy and in particular monetary stability play a central role in Eurosceptic arguments, especially after the Eurozone crisis. As the EU shifted towards the integration of core state powers in this field, it has inevitably exposed itself to a series of criticisms, exacerbated by the constraints faced by it in comparison with a nation-state with full autonomy in the fiscal and redistributive sphere. This frame captures how parties link economic grievances to the EU's institutional design, portraying it either as a constraint on national development or as a mechanism of unfair redistribution (Genschel & Jachtenfuchs, 2018). The nature of such criticisms varies based on whether they come from countries with a high level of trust in their economy and institutions, mainly concerned about having to contribute excessively to the finance of other member states, or from states perceiving EU-imposed austerity measures as burdensome to their development (Carrieri & Vittori, 2021; Orlando & Conrad, 2024a).

Left-wing parties tend to emphasise inequality, lack of fiscal flexibility, and the EU's role in deepening economic insecurity. Right-wing parties are more likely to frame the EU as extracting national resources or undermining domestic producers. Despite this, the proposed solutions converge towards withdrawing from the Eurozone and renationalising economic and monetary powers. Referendums are commonly proposed as mechanisms for such changes, reinforcing narratives of popular sovereignty and bypassing parliamentary constraints. This rhetorical strategy is partly shaped by these parties' limited institutional access, when compared with their mainstream counterparts, making direct democratic tools a prominent feature of their discourse.

3.3.3 Migration

The migration frame includes narratives that criticise the EU's approach to border control, asylum, and immigration. These narratives typically portray EU policies as threats to national identity, public order, or labour markets. This frame is particularly central to parties aligned with the ID group, which often link migration with security and cultural degradation. These parties, across various member states, have campaigned for the restoration of permanent state-border controls and advocated for referendums on full exit (Vollaard, 2023).

However, migration also appears in the rhetoric of left-wing parties, though framed more in terms of humanitarian critique or exploitative labour regimes. The literature extensively explores the connection between negative attitudes towards immigration and the EU, revealing a relationship that extends beyond a simple cause-and-effect dynamic with external events. Instead, it suggests a more profound ideological link tied to the multidimensional nature of Euroscepticism (Stockemer et al., 2020).

The choice of this analytical frame is further justified by the fact that, in the aftermath of Brexit, some of the parties under scrutiny may propose migration policies mirroring those implemented by the United Kingdom. In the post-Brexit context, some parties reference the UK as a model for reclaiming control over immigration policy. While the practical feasibility of replicating such measures within the EU is limited, the symbolic appeal remains strong. The slogan ‘take back control’ continues to resonate across parties and countries, offering a powerful shorthand for opposition to supranational authority.

4. Analysis

4.1 The campaign material

The analysis of the campaign materials, presented in Table 2, has revealed two variations of a narrative common among the parties associated with the ID and the GUE/NGL groups. This narrative centres on the idea that the EU is failing and requires significant reforms. According to the far-right parties, this failure is primarily due to excessive bureaucracy and attempts to establish a superstate (Lega, 2024; Partij voor de Vrijheid, 2024; Rassemblement National, 2024). On the other hand, for parties located at the opposite end of the political spectrum, the need for substantial reforms arises from the excessive ties between EU officials, lobbyists, and the interests of multinational corporations (Die Linke, 2024; Podemos, 2024; SYRIZA, 2024).

Table 2. Summary of the findings of the thematic analysis.

Party (Abbreviation)	Country	2019 Group	2024 Group	EU-Governance	Economy	Migrator
Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (FPÖ)	Austria	ID	Patriots for Europe (Pfe)	1	1	2
Vlaams Belang (VB)	Belgium	ID	Pfe	1	2	1
Svoboda a přímá demokracie (SPD)	Czech Republic	ID	Europe of Sovereign Nations (ESN)	2	2	1
Rassemblement national (RN)	France	ID	Pfe	1	1	2
Alternative für Deutschland (AfD)	Germany	ID	ESN	2	2	2
Lega per Salvini Premier (LSP)	Italy	ID	Pfe	1	1	0
Partij voor de Vrijheid (PVV)	Netherlands	ID	Pfe	1	1	1
Parti du Travail de Belgique (PTB)	Belgium	GUE/NGL	GUE/NGL	1	1	0
Komunistická strana Čech a Moravy (KSCM)/ Stačilo!	Czech Republic	GUE/NGL	Non-attached member	1	2	1
La France Insoumise (LFI)	France	GUE/NGL	GUE/NGL	1	1	1
Die Linke	Germany	GUE/NGL	GUE/NGL	1	1	1
Synaspismós Rizospastikís Aristerás – Proodeftikí Simachía (SYRIZA)	Greece	GUE/NGL	GUE/NGL	1	1	1
Podemos	Spain	GUE/NGL	GUE/NGL	1	1	1

These distinct but converging criticisms contribute to a broader narrative of disillusionment with the current model of integration, grounded in differing understandings of sovereignty, legitimacy, and power. The concept of sovereignty is central to the programs of all the parties analysed, and they all express significant criticism of the *status quo*. Only the SPD explicitly mentions holding a referendum on membership (Svoboda a přímá demokracie, 2024), while the AfD emphasises that Germany should not make any further commitments without a referendum, although it does not mention explicitly the possibility of leaving the EU (Alternative für Deutschland, 2024). In the ID parties, sovereignty is seen as the re-nationalisation of competencies from the EU, aptly labelled as *den Brüsseler Moloch* (Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs, 2024a) this framing is strongly associated with a

defence of national identity and self-determination, often positioned against perceived elite control.

In contrast, left-wing parties emphasise democratic renewal and popular control. Their programmes call for greater transparency, citizen engagement through instruments like the European Citizens' Initiative (La France Insoumise, 2024; Parti du Travail de Belgique, 2024a, 2024b, 2024c, 2024d), and institutional reform to strengthen parliamentary authority (Podemos, 2024; SYRIZA, 2024). Although the precise proposals differ, these parties share a critical narrative that frames the EU as structurally unaccountable and distant from democratic control. Whether sovereignty is framed as national control or popular empowerment, both left – and right-wing narratives converge in presenting the current model of European governance as fundamentally flawed.

4.2 EU-governance

As shown in Table 2, only the Czech SPD and the German AfD received a score of 2 in EU governance. This higher score is due to the fact that these two parties are the only ones advocating for a referendum on EU membership. The SPD (2024b) openly supports it, while the German party's stance is more ambiguous. Other parties do not explicitly support withdrawal but propose major institutional changes that reflect a fundamental critique of the current EU structure. For example, the FPÖ (2024b) proposes the halving of the Parliament, the Commission, and the budget, viewing the EU as 'the end of the nation-state.' The Rassemblement National proposes to revoke any legislative function from the Commission, while the AfD and Vlaams Belang support the abolition of Parliament itself to radically reform the 'failed EU project'.

These proposals reflect a broader narrative among ID parties in which EU institutions are framed as undemocratic, overreaching, and resistant to national accountability. Sovereignty is positioned as incompatible with continued supranational governance, and reform is often framed as a pathway to renationalisation.

In contrast, left-wing parties like SYRIZA and Podemos emphasise the need to strengthen Parliament and reform the founding treaties of the EU to ensure its control over the Commission. Die Linke's program suggests that the Commission should be directly elected by the members of Parliament. The Workers' Party of Belgium (2024b) goes further by proposing to halve the salaries of MEPs and Commission members, echoing a common point among left-wing parties about the distance between European officials and the people. Notably, the Stačilo coalition, made up of the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia and other far-left Czech parties, departs from the broader left-wing trend. It explicitly opposes further EU integration and calls for the defence of national sovereignty by limiting the Union's powers (Komunistická strana Čech a Moravy, 2024). This alignment with ID narratives on governance suggests that institutional scepticism may cut across ideological lines, although the underlying motivations and justifications differ (Halikiopoulou et al., 2012).

Concerning the future of the EU, Vlaams Belang (2024) is openly against EU enlargement, opposing the entry of Turkey, Moldova, Ukraine, and Georgia. The threat of Turkey's imminent accession to the EU represented one of the main narratives employed during Brexit. Additionally, the Belgian party wants to 'De controle terugnemen', echoing the slogan adopted by the Leave campaign. This illustrates how ID parties draw on a discourse of sovereignty as recovery, linking EU expansion to the perceived erosion of national authority.

In contrast, SYRIZA advocates for further EU expansion in the Balkan region, a unique position among the political forces analysed. The ID parties, along with the Stačilo coalition, are also against any future expansion of EU powers. Salvini's League invokes the subsidiarity principle to support the sovereignty of national states, a position explicitly shared by the RN and the SPD, with the latter also opposing the creation of an EU Army.

In contrast, left-wing parties advocate deeper EU reform in order to achieve greater democratic control and social accountability. As stated by La France Insoumise, they 'want more Europe, but different.' Podemos calls for a 'refounding' of the EU, while Die Linke proposes a new constitution. These parties demand greater transparency, reduced influence of lobbyists, and enhanced citizen participation (LFI; PTB). SYRIZA's proposal to elect 10% of MEPs from joint lists across member states reflects an interest in transnational democracy and institutional innovation.

Meanwhile, the ID parties tend to frame the EU as in decline, citing a democratic deficit caused by technocratic governance and elite overreach (League; FPO; AfD; PVV, 2024; SPD, 2024a). However, several parties recognise the benefits of European cooperation (VB; AfD). In this context, the slogan of Alternative für Deutschland, 'Europa neu denken', encapsulates the broader orientation of the parties analysed: a desire to fundamentally rethink the EU, even if what that means diverges sharply between ideological camps.

4.3 Economy

The economic dimension encompasses monetary policies and the redistribution of resources among member states. This frame captures how economic grievances are woven into broader disintegration narratives, with parties assigning blame to supranational institutions rather than national governments, thereby reinforcing calls for renationalisation or radical reform. Economic narratives often present the EU's fiscal and monetary arrangements as either a constraint on national sovereignty or an opportunity for democratic reform.

The ID parties emphasise sovereignty and, in the case of net contributor states to the EU budget, criticise the transfer of resources from the north to the south (VB; PVV). Conversely, political forces affiliated with the GUE/NGL group advocate for public investments and direct democratic control of the European Central Bank (Die Linke, 2024, LFI). Among the left-wing parties, Stačilo stands out by openly opposing the European Exchange Rate Mechanism (ERM II) (Stacilo, 2024) and calling for a referendum on the possible accession of the Czech Republic to the common currency. While expressing the objective to combat inequalities

between EU countries, as the other far-left parties analysed, the Czech coalition also supports economic sovereignty, arguing that the euro serves the interests of larger member states.

Regarding economic reform, left-wing parties emphasise reforming the European Central Bank (ECB). Die Linke suggests a system modelled after Canada and the UK, where the central bank directly lends money to governments. Podemos also supports this idea, proposing that the ECB invest directly in the public sector and share state debt, acting as a lender of last resort. From this Keynesian perspective, inevitably, the parties in question are vehemently opposed to the austerity measures promoted by the EU, advocating instead for initiatives such as a European minimum wage, transferring resources from the private sector to the public sector, and making large-scale investments in line with the Next Generation EU plan (PTB, 2024c; SYRIZA, 2024; Die Linke, 2024). Although none of the parties, except Stačilo, have positions that are per se critical of EU membership, the radical nature of the reforms they propose can be interpreted as a form of Euroscepticism due to the significant distance difference between their vision for the EU and its current functioning as outlined in the treaties. These approaches are defined here as ‘constructive Euroscepticism’: an ambition to repurpose EU economic institutions for social goals while retaining membership.

By contrast, ‘destructive Eurosceptic’ parties – such as the AfD, VB, and SPD – directly challenge the euro’s legitimacy. Vlaams Belang labels the euro ‘unworkable’ and demands an end to north-to-south transfers. The AfD calls the euro a failure and urges withdrawal, alongside ending all debt relief; the SPD similarly rejects monetary union on grounds of national sovereignty (Svoboda a přímá demokracie, 2024c). RN, PVV, and FPÖ share these grievances less radically, focusing on budget cuts and reduced contributions (FPÖ even suggests halving the EU budget).

In contrast, the League opposes austerity policies, possibly due to the unpopularity of EU austerity measures in Italy over the last decade. In line with the governance frame, these economic demands serve as another avenue to reassert national authority and portray the EU as deeply flawed.

4.4 Migration

Migration emerges as a highly polarised frame, revealing stark differences in how parties construct threats and solutions. For ID parties, migration is framed as a threat to security and national identity. Rassemblement National demands the expulsion of ‘illegal immigrants,’ the reinstatement of national borders, and the renationalisation of all EU migration competences. The AfD includes a section on the incompatibility of ‘fundamentalist Islam’ with European values, calling to ‘defend Europe from Islamic terrorism.’ It also advocates closing borders, repatriating migrants ‘to help their own countries,’ cutting social benefits for non-Germans, reforming Schengen, and adopting a Japanese-style migration model.

The FPO (2024c) proposes ‘the Australian model,’ framing the EU as imposing unwanted migrants on member states and accusing it of causing Europe’s ‘Islamisation’ (SPD). Vlaams Belang echoes Leave-style warnings about Turkey’s accession, stressing the need to ‘halt immigration’ and adopt the ‘Danish exception’ EU-wide. The PVV opens its programme with an image of a hijab-clad woman and declares the Netherlands ‘full,’ linking migration to strains on health and education. The League’s treatment of migration is less central but still invokes ‘defending tradition’ and ‘stopping Islamic extremism,’ while favouring EU cooperation to fight human trafficking and reform asylum rules. Stačilo again aligns with far-right rhetoric, framing southern member states as gateways for unwanted migrants.

In contrast, left-wing parties treat migration as a humanitarian issue requiring EU-level reform. The PTB and LFI insist on defending the rights of asylum seekers, with the Belgian party rejecting the Pact on Migration and Asylum (PTB, 2024d) and the French one proposing to close Frontex. Die Linke remarks the need to protect those fleeing wars, cautioning against compromises with undemocratic regimes aimed at lowering migration rates. The German party also suggests the removal of border controls within the EU, a position shared by SYRIZA and Podemos. The two parties, in line with their geographical position at the borders of the EU, propose a new EU migration framework to distribute migrants across member states (SYRIZA), derogating from the country of entry principle (Podemos). These divergent narratives demonstrate how migration is politicised either as a security crisis – with disintegrationist overtones – or as a symptom of institutional failure, warranting deeper European solidarity.

4.5 Election Results

The comparison of the 2019 and 2024 European Parliament election results serves to assess whether the narratives identified in this study – specifically those related to EU governance, economic policy, and migration – have had any measurable impact on electoral performance. Table 3 displays the rankings of the parties analysed in their respective countries and compares their performance to the previous EU elections. It also features an overall Euroscepticism score derived from the scores in the three frames discussed earlier. While it would be reductive to attribute any changes in electoral results solely to the Eurosceptic content of their campaigns, this section seeks to explore a potential relationship between stronger Eurosceptic narratives and electoral success. The analysis does not account for changes in the number of MEPs due to Brexit or other factors, as these are not the result of an election, nor does it consider the parliamentary groups formed after the 2024 elections. The focus here is strictly on the parties that were part of the ID and GUE/NGL groups during the 2024 electoral campaign. The comparison of electoral results across two election cycles allows to gauge the salience of Eurosceptic narratives (as measured by the content of party manifestos) in influencing voter support, especially for parties that position

themselves as challengers to mainstream parties.

The FPO, VB, and the Rassemblement National each won the most seats in their respective countries. The FN, already the largest party in the 2019 elections, significantly improved its position, leading French President Macron to call for new parliamentary elections. In the case of the Flemish party, it's important to note that in Belgium, Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) are elected within three language-based constituencies. Vlaams Belang only ran in the Dutch-speaking electoral college, the largest one demographically. They

Table 3. Electoral results of the parties analysed.

Party (Abbreviation)	2019 Seats (percentage)	2024 seats (percentage)	Position 2019	Position 2024	Aggregated Euroscepticism score
Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (FPÖ)	3 (17,2%)	6 (25,3%)	3rd	1st	4
Vlaams Belang (VB)	3 (12%)	3 (14,5%)	2nd	1st	4
Svoboda a přímá demokracie (SPD)	2 (9,1%)	1 (5,7%)	5th	7th	5
Rassemblement national (RN)	21 (23,3%)	30 (31,3%)	1st	1st	4
Alternative für Deutschland (AfD)	11 (11%)	15 (15,9%)	4th	2nd	6
Lega per Salvini Premier (LSP)	28 (34,2%)	8 (8,9%)	1st	5th	2
Partij voor de Vrijheid (PVV)	0 (3,5%)	6 (16,9%)	10th	2nd	3
Parti du Travail de Belgique (PTB)	1 (8,4%)	2 (10,7%)	6th	4th	3
Komunistická strana Čech a Moravy (KSČM) /Stačilo!	1 (6,9%)	2 (9,5%)	7th	4th	4
La France Insoumise (LFI)	6 (6,3%)	9 (9,8%)	5th	4th	3
Die Linke	5 (5,5%)	3 (2,7%)	6th	8th	3
Synaspismós Rizospastikís Aristerás – Prooideftikí Simachía (SYRIZA)	6 (23,7%)	4 (14,9%)	2nd	2nd	3
Podemos (in 2019 Unidas Podemos Cambiar Europa-Podemos-IU)	6 (10%)	2 (3,2%)	4th	7th	3

obtained 23% of the votes within their constituency and emerged as the most-voted party nationally. The AfD, which scored higher than every other party analysed, significantly improved its position, highlighting the growing influence of Euroscepticism among German voters. Compared to the 2019 elections, the PVV had the most significant increase in their share of votes. This success follows the positive trend established at the 2023 general elections, although the overall number of votes was lower than in the general elections. Two far-right parties have seen their support eroded: the SPD and, with the worst result among the ID parties, the League. The results of the League in the previous EU Parliament elections reflect its position as the leading political force in the Italian opposition party at the time (Orlando & Conrad, 2024a), while currently, they are part of a governmental coalition with their main competitor, represented by the party of the Italian Prime Minister Meloni, Brothers of Italy, which adheres to the ECR group.

The collapse of SYRIZA and Podemos, two of the main parties of the European left, stands out within the GUE/NGL group, which also features lower Euroscepticism scores. La France Insoumise and the Belgian PTB saw an increase in their votes, but they remain on the political fringes in their respective countries. Die Linke lost two Members of the European Parliament (MEPs), while the Stačilo coalition performed better than the KSČM did in the 2019 elections, though this result may have been influenced by the presence of smaller parties in the coalition. Overall, right-wing populist parties outperformed left-wing parties in most countries under scrutiny. This trend may suggest that Eurosceptic voters tend to prefer the approach of right-wing populists, which is sharply contrasted with mainstream political forces. As Maggini and Chiaramonte (2018) argued in their analysis of the 2018 Italian

elections, the success of outsider or challenger parties cannot be taken as a straightforward proxy for public attitudes toward the EU. This caution is especially relevant in the case of EP elections, where voters frequently engage with campaigns shaped more by national dynamics than by integration-related concerns. Therefore, this work examines not only what is said explicitly about the EU but how political actors construct meaning around crisis, identity, and legitimacy – dimensions that often underpin the resonance of Eurosceptic narratives even in the absence of direct EU references.

In this light, the electoral decline of left-wing parties in 2024 reflects the marginalisation of an alternative vision for meaningful reform from within – one that aimed to reshape the EU along more democratic, social, and inclusive lines. The failure of this narrative to mobilise broad support has contributed to a discursive environment in which the most visible opposition to the *status quo* comes from actors promoting what is here termed ‘destructive Euroscepticism’ – a mode of contestation that delegitimises the very principles of supranational governance. This evolution does not point to an inevitable disintegration but suggests that the boundaries of political imagination are increasingly structured by narratives that challenge, rather than reconstruct, the European Union’s normative foundations.

Overall, the comparative analysis of these electoral results offers preliminary insights into how the Eurosceptic narratives of ID and GUE/NGL parties may be influencing public opinion. Although the relationship between narrative content and voter support is complex and shaped by many factors beyond the scope of this analysis, the success of challenger parties – those that position themselves far from mainstream political positions – suggests that Eurosceptic rhetoric may be resonating with a growing segment of the electorate. This insight aligns with the findings of Crombez et al. (2023), who note a shift in voters’ perceptions of the benefits of European integration.

5. Discussion

5.1 Eurosceptic narratives in the campaign

The narratives found in the campaign material gathered in this study provide insights into the evolution of EU contestation. A key factor is the influence of Eurosceptic parties on mainstream ones, shifting their support for European integration (Meijers, 2017). As Vasilopoulou (2013) points out, growing support for Eurosceptic forces can explain changes in the programmes of traditional parties.

The first finding is that contestation of the EU differs markedly in both intensity and content between the two parliamentary groups. Stačilo is a notable exception, with positions closer to the ID group. Right-wing parties generally frame the EU as inefficient, expensive, and responsible for migration. Their proposed solutions focus on reducing the EU budget and renationalising powers, especially in economic and immigration policy, with the aim of restoring national sovereignty.

However, except for the SPD and the AfD, ID parties do not openly advocate for leaving the Eurozone or the EU. Their support for EU membership is contingent upon implementing radical reforms, such as closing the borders between member states. As such, this stance can be regarded as a form of hard Euroscepticism (Taggart & Szczepiński, 2002). It's worth noting that the proposals put forth by the ID parties often align with the requests made by Prime Minister Cameron in the months preceding the announcement of the Brexit Referendum (Cameron, 2015). As in the case of the United Kingdom, it is conceivable that, if confronted with the unfeasibility of their political projects within the boundaries of membership, these parties may shift towards more drastic positions.

By contrast, GUE/NGL parties support expanding the EU's budget and competences. Their dominant narrative suggests the EU could address member-state problems but is currently too aligned with international finance. Though their proposals are equally or more radical, they differ fundamentally in seeing the EU as a potential solution. This aligns with literature suggesting left-wing parties seek to reform the EU, while right-wing ones aim to roll it back (Braun et al., 2019).

The groups also diverge sharply on migration. ID parties consistently portray migration as a threat – framing it as a security, economic, and cultural risk, particularly in reference to 'Islamisation.' This continues a narrative established during the 2015 migrant crisis (Hallgrímsson et al., 2020). In contrast, left-wing parties frame migration as a humanitarian issue requiring structural reform at the EU level. They criticise current institutions and advocate new frameworks to manage migration ethically and effectively.

On the other hand, the far-left parties portray migrations as a humanitarian crisis that needs to be addressed primarily at the EU level. They are highly critical of the current European institutions and regulations, advocating for their reform to ensure a more effective and ethically sustainable management of migrants. A core conclusion is that ideology outweighs national context in shaping party narratives. While factors like North – South divides or budget contributions appear in some cases, their influence is limited. For example, Podemos and SYRIZA oppose the country-of-entry rule, while Die Linke and LFI criticise border controls and Frontex. The League stands out as the only ID party supporting cooperation on migration. Stačilo's overlap with SPD likely reflects domestic conditions. Overall, ideological orientation, rather than structural context, proves most decisive in shaping how parties narrate European disintegration.

5.2 Brexit in the background: narrating disintegration in 2024

Brexit has been widely studied as a milestone in the development of Eurosceptic discourse across Europe. This work has been conducted at the country level (Baloge, 2022; Kaniok & Hloušek, 2018) and a systemic level. At the systemic level, Brexit was initially deployed as an argument against further integration, but over time parties shifted to more institutional, reformist narratives preferring to advocate for reducing the competencies of the EU from within (Chopin & Lequesne, 2022; Fabbrini & Zgaga, 2024). This study considers Brexit in two

dimensions: whether it is directly cited in manifestos, and whether its narrative logic remains influential. Interestingly, there were no direct references to Brexit or the 'British model' of European integration in the material, underscoring how the Referendum does not explicitly constitute a component of the Eurosceptic narratives put forward by the 13 parties analysed.

While Brexit does not feature explicitly in the analysed party programmes, this omission may itself be significant. Given the increasing public support for EU membership observed across most member states in the aftermath of the United Kingdom's departure (De Vries, 2023), parties may have strategically avoided invoking Brexit as a model, despite continuing to employ many of its core rhetorical motifs. This suggests a form of discursive adaptation, in which overt calls for exit are muted in favour of sovereignty-focused reform proposals that retain broader electoral appeal. The United Kingdom's historically exceptional relationship with the European project – characterised by opt-outs, a largely Eurosceptic public discourse, and institutional ambivalence – renders Brexit an outlier rather than a replicable precedent. Accordingly, many Eurosceptic actors appear to draw upon the symbolic capital of Brexit while distancing themselves from its practical consequences.

However, this strategic silence should not be mistaken for the end of disintegrative ambitions. European disintegration may proceed through more incremental, less explicit routes. Withdrawal might become unnecessary if the Union is gradually stripped of its supranational powers and reoriented around intergovernmental cooperation. Conversely, exit could re-emerge as a serious option, should Eurosceptic forces gain broader electoral support and future crises reignite popular contestation – much as the Eurozone and migration crises catalysed the Brexit Referendum (Orlando & Conrad, 2024b). In this respect, Brexit remains a critical benchmark not only for its historical rupture but also for the narrative logic it introduced – one in which institutional retreat and rhetorical sovereignty are positioned as credible and potent political alternatives.

Moreover, its indirect role as a narrative precedent remains significant. The core criticisms of the EU voiced during the Leave campaign – elites, unaccountability, loss of sovereignty – predated Brexit and remain common in several member states. Narratives centred on an EU that seemed disconnected from its citizens, governed by unelected bureaucrats, posing a threat to national sovereignty, and besieged by uncontrolled immigration existed before Brexit. What changed in 2016 was the demonstration that such narratives could lead to disintegration, making them more electorally potent. The Leave campaign showed that public opinion could challenge EU continuity through democratic mechanisms, re-legitimising referendums as tools of disintegration. As observed by Webber (p. 354, 2014) in the aftermath of the Eurozone crisis, the EU has 'entered uncharted territory'; in this context of uncertainty, Eurosceptic actors using the same narratives as those that led to Brexit suggest the aim to achieve a similar outcome, either by exiting the EU or through the implementation of institutional reforms so radical as to fundamentally alter the Union's founding principles to the extent of making it unrecognisable.

For most parties, unlike the UK, Eurozone membership presents a structural barrier to exit. Leaving the EMU would be highly costly in terms of economic, monetary, and political consequences, considering the scope of the EU fiscal institutions and policies in determining member states domestic macroeconomic environment (Aslett & Caporaso, 2016). Nonetheless, some authors have considered this possibility, noting that the feasibility of this decision cannot be excluded *a priori*, given adequate political reforms to withstand its impact (Malinen et al., 2018). In this scenario, exiting the EMU could be the culmination of a disintegrative process originating from the proposals included in the programs of ID parties such as the AfD, FPO, and VB. Specifically, by reducing the EU budget and the role of European institutions in favour of national governments, these reforms could lay the foundation for a new EU closer to its pre-Maastricht features.

Another layer is the comparative perception of EU vs UK post-Brexit, which aligns with De Vries' benchmark theory (2018): citizens assess EU membership by comparing it to life outside the EU. But in the 2024 campaign, Brexit was neither framed positively nor invoked as a policy goal, and no parties analysed actively pushed for exit. Although there are no strongly anti-euro positions, echoes of Brexit are still noticeable in the narratives favoured by the ID parties. They emphasise the need to reform the treaties, bring national sovereignty back to the centre of European politics, restore control of national borders, and restrict access to welfare to national citizens. Meanwhile, left-wing parties endorsed redistributive solidarity, democratic deepening, and humanitarian migration frameworks. Though critical of EU structures, GUE/NGL parties reject both the drivers and remedies that characterised the Leave campaign and right-wing Euroscepticism. While the absence of explicit references to Brexit or direct calls for EU exit might suggest its influence has faded, such a reading risks understating the structural dynamics still at play. The expectation that Brexit would lead to immediate emulation in other member states arguably rests on a superficial interpretation of disintegration processes. The more enduring relevance of Brexit lies not in its replication, but in the persistence of the conditions that made it possible. The discursive drivers that fuelled the Leave campaign – anti-establishment rhetoric, dissatisfaction with EU institutions, and delegitimising narratives centred on sovereignty, economic justice, and migration – continue to feature prominently in the programmes of many Eurosceptic parties. As has been argued, large-scale crises have increased the salience and polarisation of EU-related contestation (Capati et al., 2024), while Euroscepticism itself remains closely tied to anti-establishment positioning (Szczerbiak & Taggart, 2024). Although most parties analysed do not currently advocate withdrawal, the hypothesis of future exits – triggered by cumulative narrative and political pressure – cannot be dismissed. Nor should alternative forms of disintegration be overlooked, including the gradual hollowing out of the EU from within through institutional obstruction, the rollback of competences, or the symbolic erosion of supranational legitimacy. In this light, Brexit functions not as a programme to emulate, but as a benchmark against which ongoing disintegrative dynamics can be understood.

5.3 Destructive and constructive Euroscepticism

The 2024 parliamentary elections resulted in moderate success in the far-right Eurosceptic front and a decline in the far-left one. Mainstream parties remain dominant in the European Parliament, and the relatively moderate rhetoric of most Eurosceptic forces, along with the EU's resilience post-Brexit (Chelotti & Bressanelli, 2021), suggests limited immediate risk of major institutional disruption in the tenth legislature. This assessment stems from the limited influence that the ID and GUE/NGL parties will have in the EP, considering their performance in the previous legislature and lack of representation in national governments and, therefore, the European Council. The growing support for the AfD and the RN poses a potential threat, particularly considering the importance of Franco-German cooperation in the post-Brexit EU. The differences between the two countries in policy areas and long-term goals (Krotz & Schramm, 2021) could be heightened by the emergence of Eurosceptic forces in one or both states, leading to new challenges for EU integration.

A comprehensive evaluation of the role of Eurosceptic parties in the EP will only be feasible after the formation of parliamentary alliances. Currently, these political forces are likely to remain on the fringes, as they have in previous legislatures. Nevertheless, such marginalisation could bolster the narratives promoted by Eurosceptic parties, as it aligns with their strategy to position themselves as anti-establishment and offer radical alternatives to the *status quo* (Brack, 2018), as seen in UKIP's case. Another possible dynamic resulting from the consolidation of right-wing parties is the potential shift of their views into the mainstream, particularly if future crises strengthen these narratives, as seen in the previous decade. This process could increase anti-EU sentiment within member states, potentially resulting in government coalitions that include Eurosceptic parties. Importantly, it could also significantly influence decision-making in the European Parliament and the European Council, as national governments seek to avoid backlash at home, like in the case of the UK before Brexit (Orlando & Conrad, 2024b).

This study proposes an additional layer of distinction beyond the traditional hard/soft typology of Euroscepticism. It centres instead on the type of reform: destructive Euroscepticism, which seeks to weaken or reverse integration, and constructive Euroscepticism, which aims to democratise and expand EU authority. This distinction draws from the one Keith (2018) developed between Expansionist and Conditional Eurosceptics. However, it is applied here across the ideological spectrum. Destructive Euroscepticism, most evident in ID platforms, advocates a rollback of EU authority and restoration of national sovereignty. By contrast, constructive Euroscepticism seeks stronger EU-level governance coupled with increased democratic oversight and reduced dominance of national executives and economic elites.

The threat of destructive Euroscepticism lies in how radical right parties could affect European politics, even beyond the three frames discussed in this article. As Brexit has shown, disintegrative dynamics can be amplified by crises, absorbed by mainstream parties, and become irreversible once activated. Furthermore, while the demands of right-wing

Eurosceptics may seem radical at first glance, they stem from the idea of national sovereignty, which strongly resonates with significant portions of the electorate. Destruction, in political terms, is often easier to mobilise than institutional reform – especially when nationalist framing aligns with broader public sentiment.

On the other hand, Constructive Euroscepticism challenges the entire neoliberal economic system and seeks to alter the EU's institutional framework. This stance shares similarities with Disobedient Euroscepticism but differs in that it aims to reform rather than replace the EU framework (Bortun, 2022). The current political climate makes it unlikely that certain positions will appeal to the broader electorate. Nonetheless, these positions may still influence mainstream politics in the coming years, similar to how right-wing Euroscepticism has after the Eurozone crisis. If we acknowledge that existing ideological beliefs gain momentum under specific external circumstances, then future crises – economic, security-related, or environmental – may serve as catalysts for such reformist narratives. The Next Generation EU package stands as a recent example of anti-austerity reform emerging from systemic stress. Similarly, the impact of ideological orientation was confirmed by national party responses to the EU's handling of COVID19 (Rovny et al., 2022).

However, the aftermath of the 2024 Elections paints a different picture. Right-wing Eurosceptics have made significant strides, with the newly formed Patriots for Europe group, which includes several ID parties mentioned in this work alongside Hungary's Fidesz, Spain's Vox, and other minor political forces, now the third-largest group in the EP. With the Europe of Sovereign Nations group and the potential for additional parties affiliated with the ECR to further radicalise, it's clear that the narratives of right-wing Eurosceptics will have a significant and concerning impact on the tenth European legislature.

6. Conclusion

This study examined the electoral material of 13 Eurosceptic parties from nine EU member states during the 2024 EP elections. The aim was to identify and categorise the dominant narratives shaping Eurosceptic discourse. Through a qualitative frame analysis of party manifestos, programmes, and digital platforms, three thematic dimensions were identified: governance, economy, and migration. The findings revealed that both far-right and far-left parties contest the current distribution of sovereignty within the EU. However, their proposals diverge substantially: the right seeks a reassertion of national sovereignty, while the left calls for enhanced democratic participation at the EU level.

This distinction underpins two fundamentally different agendas. Right-wing parties call for the repatriation of competences, budgetary reduction, and the restoration of national borders. Left-wing parties advocate reforms to the ECB to support public investment, the expansion of parliamentary powers, and the curtailing of corporate influence on EU policymaking. Their migration narratives also differ sharply: the right frames migration as a

security and cultural threat attributed to EU failures, whereas the left presents it as a humanitarian issue requiring systemic reform. On this basis, the study proposes a distinction between ‘destructive’ and ‘constructive’ Euroscepticism – terms that better capture the contrasting orientations of parties seeking less EU and those seeking a different EU.

While Brexit did not emerge as a direct reference in the campaign materials analysed, it continues to function as a relevant benchmark in Eurosceptic discourse. Despite the absence of direct references to the Referendum in the material analysed, there are unmistakable parallels in the rhetoric of the far-right parties and that employed during the Leave campaign. Its relevance lies not in imitation, but in how it symbolises the political potential of long-standing critiques related to sovereignty, technocracy, and identity.

This study focused on a limited sample; broader developments will depend on evolving domestic and systemic contexts. Nevertheless, this article contributes to the literature on Euroscepticism in two key ways. First, it offers a detailed snapshot of party-based EU contestation during a pivotal electoral cycle – a reference point for assessing future developments across legislative terms. Second, it introduces the destructive/constructive distinction as an operational framework. This typology provides a more nuanced lens through which to assess the intentions and implications of Eurosceptic discourse, contributing to a better understanding of the heterogeneous pressures shaping the future of the EU as a political order.

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4.6. Results

Each article presented in this chapter addressed a different aspect of European disintegration, starting with the case of Brexit and extending to a systemic assessment of

Euroscepticism. The first paper highlighted that Brexit was caused by a combination of structural and ideological factors, demonstrating how the politicisation of EU crises was the key factor influencing the outcome of the Referendum. Building upon these findings, the second paper revealed that the Leave campaign utilised narratives based on factually inconsistent data, intending to elicit emotional responses from voters.

The last three articles moved beyond the analysis of Brexit, instead considering it a factor in the context of European disintegration. Specifically, the third paper concluded that, despite the need to account for the differences among member states, Brexit has introduced the notion that a state can leave the Union, thereby providing a blueprint for EU contestation to other Eurosceptic actors. The fourth article showed that, although Brexit has not yet led to increased differentiated integration, it has raised concerns among member states about the risks of politicising issues related to the EU. The fifth paper analysed the differences between right-wing and left-wing Eurosceptic narratives, noting that the arguments used by right-wing populism closely resemble those employed by the Leave campaign. The following sections will contextualise these findings within the thesis and outline how they address its four research questions, ultimately contributing to the development of a theory of European disintegration.

4.6.1. Causes of Brexit

The first research question addressed the causes of Brexit, focusing on both the decision to hold the Referendum and its outcome. While a unique, context-specific event, Brexit also exemplifies broader disintegrative dynamics within the EU. Case studies such as this are valuable not only for their particularities but also for illustrating general processes with wider theoretical implications, even where outcomes may differ. Thus, while acknowledging Brexit's singularity, the analysis situates it within a broader phenomenon of supranational fragmentation.

The first and second articles investigated the causes of Brexit through both structural pressures and the strategic manoeuvres of the Leave campaign. The first article reconstructed the process leading to the Referendum, beginning with the 2010 General Election and ending in February 2016. This account considered structural factors such as the UK's economic governance and the impact of the Eurozone and refugee crises (Gifford, 2016; Thompson, 2017; Goodwin & Milazzo, 2017). It also addressed ideological elements, particularly British political discourse on the EU and its influence on voter attitudes (Satnam & McGeever, 2018; Startin, 2015). The findings suggest that government pressure to counter Eurosceptic parties, notably following UKIP's success in the 2014 European Parliament elections, contributed to the Referendum. These parties capitalised on external crises, portraying them as EU-caused threats and presenting the Referendum as a chance to reassert national sovereignty over an allegedly undemocratic institution. The second article focused more closely on the ideological dimension, analysing how Eurosceptic actors used factually incorrect claims to elicit emotional responses among Leave voters (Clarke et al., 2017; Safieddine, 2020). The Leave campaign framed the EU through populist narratives,

especially on immigration and economic decline, promoting a notion of sovereignty intertwined with nationalism and xenophobia. These narratives leveraged structural crises to hold the EU responsible for social and demographic change in the UK. In conclusion, the findings suggest that Brexit's causes lie in the government's efforts to appease a Eurosceptic electorate, the influence of external crises on public opinion, and the Leave campaign's populist framing of these crises in a post-truth political environment.

4.6.2. Causes of European Disintegration

The second research question of this study explored the factors contributing to European disintegration. Brexit was used as a paradigmatic case to uncover key mechanisms, with the Referendum serving to delineate stages of the disintegration process that may apply more broadly across member states.

The first of these elements was dissatisfaction with the EU, shaped by both external and domestic factors. These include levels of trust in national institutions and the public's perception of their country's international relevance (Vollaard, 2023). External crises can further exacerbate EU contestation, especially where institutional and cultural conditions allow political parties to challenge mainstream narratives on divisive issues (De Vries & Hobolt, 2020). In such contexts, Eurosceptic forces can influence public discourse and accelerate disintegration.

These dynamics were also observed in Germany and Italy, where the promotion of Eurosceptic narratives mirrored those in the UK, though shaped by each country's unique stance on immigration and monetary policy. While an exit does not appear imminent in either case, the explanation lies in structural—not ideological—factors. The nature of EU contestation in both countries resembles that which existed in the UK prior to its Referendum. Another dimension concerns the role of EU institutional architecture in disintegration, as highlighted during Brexit negotiations (Schimmelfennig et al., 2023). Inflexibility in the EU's framework could, under pressure, lead to opt-outs or renationalisation of competencies (Kendrick, 2023). While this outcome did not follow Brexit, the findings suggest it remains a possible trajectory under future crisis conditions.

Further analysis showed that far-right Eurosceptic parties across member states have called for transferring sovereignty back to nation-states and reducing the EU budget. European integration is framed as a threat to national financial stability, security, and cultural identity. Although these narratives echoed the themes of the Leave campaign, explicit calls for EU or Eurozone exit were rare in electoral documents.

In sum, European disintegration emerges as a multifaceted process driven by several interconnected factors. First is the presence of internal or external crises, which can heighten public dissatisfaction with the *status quo*. Second are ideological drivers—particularly nationalism and opposition to the EU's liberal economic model. Finally, disintegration requires the presence of political actors who can construct and promote

polarising narratives capable of convincing the electorate of the desirability of withdrawal or radical reform.

4.6.3. Impact of Brexit

In addition to serving as a case study for understanding European disintegration, Brexit was analysed in this thesis as a disintegrative factor in its own right, investigating its influence on member state policies and on party-based EU contestation. Particular attention was given to whether Brexit encouraged centrifugal or centripetal institutional trajectories, thus either weakening or reinforcing integration (Cini & Verdun, 2018). Furthermore, the thesis examined whether the Referendum served as a successful example of disintegration adopted in the narratives of other Eurosceptic parties (Taggart & Szczerbiak, 2021).

In exploring how Brexit was framed in Eurosceptic discourse in Italy and Germany, the third article found that the Alternative for Germany (AfD) openly presented Brexit as a model to follow. The party cited Article 50 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) and devoted a section of its 2019 European Parliament programme to “DEXIT.” In contrast, Italian parties displayed more ambivalent responses. The Lega and Fratelli d’Italia (Fdi) saw Brexit as reinforcing their Euroscepticism, yet neither advocated EU withdrawal. Meanwhile, the Five Star Movement (M5S) moderated its position post-Referendum. These variations are attributed to differing structural contexts, despite both countries being within the Eurozone. Party positioning within national politics also shaped responses. As a persistent opposition party, the AfD has remained free to adopt more radical critiques. In Italy, all three parties examined have participated in government coalitions since Brexit, and literature suggests that parties in power tend to moderate their Eurosceptic rhetoric (Taggart & Szczerbiak, 2013).

Regarding institutional impact, the fourth article found that Brexit did not obstruct developments in EU economic or security policy. Post-COVID-19 measures reflected a shift toward expansionary economic policies—contrasting with the UK’s past advocacy of austerity. Although integration under the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) remains limited, the Strategic Compass, introduced after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, signals potential for enhanced cooperation. While no significant medium-term disintegration has occurred, the fifth article showed that party-based Euroscepticism remains unchanged. Far-right narratives continue to reflect those seen during the Leave campaign, labelled in the article as destructive Euroscepticism. Thus, Brexit’s significance lies less in its immediate institutional consequences and more in its role as proof that, under the right conditions, such narratives can indeed facilitate European disintegration.

4.6.4. The Role of Post-Truth Politics

The central hypothesis of this dissertation is that post-truth politics—understood both as an era in which factual accuracy has become secondary to representation, and as a strategy in political communication—plays a crucial role in both Brexit and the broader process of

European disintegration. While prior research has examined EU contestation, rising nationalism, and structural crises, this thesis builds on that literature by showing how post-truth politics intensifies these dynamics and may ultimately contribute to disintegration.

This premise might suggest that the articles included here measured and analysed misinformation levels across the cases studied. However, this dissertation adopted a different approach. Rather than seeking direct correlations or causal links between misinformation and specific political events, it pursued an inductive method better suited to the complexity of the subject matter (Giusti & Piras, 2020).

Consequently, post-truth politics is not explicitly referenced in most articles, except for the second. Its presence is instead inferred through a qualitative, constructivist lens. Although the truthfulness of the analysed material is not formally assessed, the theoretical framework supports the claim that these materials exemplify post-truth politics through their form and their role in polarising discourse (Waisbord, 2018; Newman, 2024).

Post-truth politics thus remains a consistent undercurrent in the analysis of Eurosceptic narratives throughout the five papers. It takes centre stage in the second article, which defines and conceptualises the phenomenon while exploring its role in Brexit. That article provides both a comprehensive theoretical account and an empirical analysis of how post-truth strategies were deployed during the Leave campaign. In that context, misinformation acted as the unifying force within the causal triad outlined in the first article—comprising actors, pre-existing ideological conditions, and crises exploited for disintegrative purposes. The interaction between post-truth politics and the manipulation of ideological forces forms the core of the theory of European disintegration developed in the next chapter.

4.6.5. Summary

The combined findings of the five publications allow for the following considerations. At the actor level, political parties influence European disintegration in two main ways: they construct and disseminate narratives that shape public opinion, and they directly or indirectly affect governmental actions. On the institutional level, the governments of member states and European institutions emerge as crucial players. In line with intergovernmentalist and neofunctionalist frameworks, these institutions can implement policies that shape the trajectory of both integration and disintegration. Mass media also contribute by framing such narratives, often guided by commercial imperatives or ideological positions.

A second key element that emerged is the role of ideological forces. These include shared norms and beliefs—ranging from nationalism to attitudes on the economy, immigration, security, democracy, and sovereignty—that inform how societies perceive the EU. These ideological orientations evolve within specific historical, cultural, and socioeconomic contexts and are continually reshaped by structural pressures and external crises.

Within the timeframe of this study, five major crises had particularly significant effects. First, the 2009 Eurozone crisis cast doubt on the EU's economic stability. Second, the 2015 migrant crisis—compounded by terrorist attacks and the rise of ISIS—amplified cultural and security concerns. Third, the Brexit referendum challenged EU cohesion amid a surge in Euroscepticism. Fourth, the COVID-19 pandemic prompted the EU to adopt more cohesive and expansionary policies. Finally, the 2022 escalation of the Russo-Ukrainian war highlighted NATO's and national governments' primacy in military security, underscoring the EU's limited role in this domain.

Such crises are central to the construction of political narratives—understood here as representations of reality invested with political meaning. Political parties, in particular, rely on these narratives to shape public discourse and advance strategic goals. These narratives draw on existing ideological currents and are reinforced by external developments. For instance, austerity during the Eurozone crisis reinforced perceptions of the EU as undemocratic, while the suppression of dissenting views reflected a drift towards post-truth politics marked by misinformation and reductionism. In conclusion, the publications included in this chapter clarified how Eurosceptic narratives are formulated and propagated, while emphasising the significant threat they pose to the European integration process. The broader implications of these findings are discussed in the following pages.

5 Theoretical Findings

This chapter aims to connect and contextualise the findings discussed so far to outline a theoretical framework that clarifies the current understanding of disintegrative dynamics within the EU. Building on insights from both Brexit and broader disintegration, the chapter integrates these themes into a unified theoretical model.

In examining the Referendum, this study suggests a complementary explanation to those offered in the existing literature. The analysis of Brexit drew upon several studies that explored the Referendum as a result of the UK's unique cultural and structural characteristics (Carl et al., 2019; Arnorsson & Zoega, 2018), as well as factors such as Euroscepticism and the approach taken by the Cameron government in managing the crisis (Startin, 2015; Smith, 2018). Against this background, this dissertation proposes an explanation that places these factors within the context of post-truth politics. This understanding of European disintegration, informed by the Brexit case, is in continuity with the ongoing theoretical debate on EU contestation. It considers the challenges member states face in reforming aspects of their membership that they find unsatisfactory, along with issues related to inequality of opportunities (Vollaard, 2018; Jones, 2018). It proposes a theorisation of disintegration as a multidimensional process, predominantly driven by ideological forces.

This theorisation is developed in the following sections, each progressively broadening the scope of this dissertation. The first section looks at the necessary conditions for disintegration, identified in the triad of ideas, actors, and crises. It discusses how these variables interacted in the Brexit process and what they reveal about disintegrative dynamics more broadly. By tracing the strategic use of crises, the mobilisation of specific narratives, and the role of key political actors, the analysis builds toward a conceptual understanding of disintegration as a process determined by ideational forces and contingent political agency.

The second part of the chapter interprets the empirical findings by assessing Brexit's effects on political parties and the EU, with particular attention to ideological shifts. From a constructivist perspective, Brexit reframed EU membership as reversible—no longer a fixed, institutional given but a politically contingent choice. This discursive transformation suggests that the disintegrative consequences of Brexit extend beyond the immediate, shaping how membership is understood and contested.

The final section explores how these longer-term effects unfold within broader disintegration dynamics. In this context, post-truth politics is examined as both a symptom and a facilitator of systemic crisis in EU legitimacy. Crises become politically potent when reframed by actors in ways that delegitimise the EU project. The findings show how this

process operates through Euroscepticism, the central force linking Brexit to wider disintegration trends.

Together, these insights inform a constructivist theory of European disintegration. Grounded in the findings from the five publications, this model emphasises the interplay of crises, actors, and ideational constructs, offering a framework not only to explain Brexit, but to analyse future episodes of contestation. A key mechanism in this process is post-truth politics, which amplifies ideological divides by privileging emotional resonance over factual accuracy. Through simplified and polarising narratives, political actors reframe crises as threats to national identity, eroding trust in supranational institutions. In the Brexit case, post-truth rhetoric—particularly around immigration, sovereignty and welfare—legitimised withdrawal and helped normalise disintegration as a political choice.

5.1 Conditions of Disintegration: Lessons from Brexit

This section distils from the Brexit case four general conditions that underpin a theory of European disintegration, showing how any member state may come to challenge—and ultimately withdraw from—the EU. Using a constructivist framework (Wendt, 1995), it demonstrates that exit emerges not from material pressures alone but from their politicisation through evolving narratives of sovereignty, democratic deficit and cultural threat. It further reveals how external shocks—such as the Eurozone and migrant crises—amplify these narratives, how political entrepreneurs harness them to mobilise support for departure, and how the convergence of framing, crises and strategic agency produces a tipping point resulting in institutional rupture.

5.1.1 Ideas and Crises

The ideological frames central to the Brexit process—and to Eurosceptic narratives more broadly—offer important insight into the causes of European disintegration. In this section, ‘ideas’ are not understood as coherent political ideologies, but as ideational frames and recurring interpretive schemes through which crises are narrated and politicised.

A central frame is sovereignty, understood not only as an institutional attribute but also as a core aspect of collective identity (Pencheva & Maronitis, 2018). In the context of Brexit, sovereignty symbolised the solution to a perceived loss of national control, with EU membership presented as a constraint on self-determination. This narrative was reinforced by the UK’s history of legal opt-outs and its longstanding ambivalence toward deeper European integration (George, 2000). In member states where sovereignty is embedded in national self-understanding, the legitimacy of EU membership is more likely to be questioned. This dynamic is not limited to the British case. Sovereignty-based narratives can be found across the Union, particularly in states where collective memory is shaped by foreign domination or rapid institutional change (Pisciotta, 2016). In such contexts, EU integration may be perceived as a new form of external constraint. While these frames are not a necessary condition for disintegration, they heighten the likelihood of contestation

when linked to other structural pressures. Exit can still occur in the absence of sovereignty-centred narratives—especially when democratic legitimacy is in crisis or economic grievances dominate—but the politicisation of sovereignty remains one of the most effective tools for mobilising public support for withdrawal. What proves decisive is not the presence of these narratives alone, but how they are strategically activated and amplified by political actors in moments of crisis.

Sovereignty discourses often overlap with concerns over immigration, which can function as a disintegrative force when represented as a threat to social cohesion, public services, or national security. During the Brexit campaign, migrants, asylum seekers, and terrorists were frequently conflated—often with Islamophobic undertones—and were blamed for perceived declines in service provision and wage levels (Zappettini, 2021a). When immigration is politicised in this way, it becomes a key site where sovereignty grievances are activated, strengthening calls for national control and, ultimately, for exit.

Economic decline is another central frame mobilised in disintegrative narratives, particularly those focused on citizens who feel "left behind" by globalisation and neoliberal restructuring (Watson, 2017). In the Leave campaign, the EU was blamed for imposing economic constraints, while Brexit was promoted as a path toward economic renewal and more advantageous trade arrangements. These arguments did not operate in isolation but were integrated into broader narratives about sovereignty and national identity. The disintegrative power of economic grievance lies not only in material hardship but in how that hardship is ideologically reframed as evidence of external interference and political abandonment.

Two additional factors reinforce this dynamic. First, fiscal grievances become disintegrative when financial contributions to the EU are framed as unjustified or excessive. The UK's status as a net contributor was portrayed as a misallocation of national resources, fostering resentment and the sense that EU membership imposed an unfair burden. Second, cultural and identity-based anxieties—whether related to ethnicity, gender roles, or changing social norms—can be projected onto the EU, which is then depicted as a driver of unwanted cultural change. These narratives weaken attachment to the EU, especially when they align with nationalist or populist ideologies (Corbett, 2016; Ford & Goodwin, 2014).

Crises play a key role in intensifying and legitimising such narratives. Rather than acting as neutral disruptions, they are reframed into stories of institutional failure or betrayal. Existing research has highlighted how Eurosceptic actors exploit crises to galvanise anti-EU sentiment, particularly during the Brexit campaign and the rise of populist movements (Hobolt, 2016; Pirro et al., 2018). This thesis proposes that crises serve as intervening variables that mediate between ideological predispositions and political outcomes. They provide the context in which latent grievances are reframed into cohesive narratives capable of mobilising public opinion.

Two specific crises highlight this mechanism. The first is the Eurozone crisis, which exposed structural tensions within the EU's institutional framework. A centralised monetary system under the European Central Bank operated alongside decentralised national fiscal policies, producing tensions between creditor and debtor states, as well as between Eurozone and non-Eurozone members. These tensions led to perceptions of asymmetrical burden-sharing and institutional imbalance (Habermas, 2012a). In Britain, exclusion from Eurozone governance mechanisms reinforced a sense of marginalisation and prompted Prime Minister David Cameron's 2015 demand for assurances that the UK would not be financially liable for Euro-area support—a demand that later fed directly into the Referendum discourse (Caporaso, 2018).

The second major crisis is the 2015 European migrant crisis, which further amplified anxieties around immigration and sovereignty. The perception that the EU lacked control over its external borders contributed to broader concerns about security and national autonomy. Overall, such crises interact across economic, cultural, and political domains, reinforcing Eurosceptic sentiments and transforming discontent into structured, resonant narratives that fuel the pressure for disintegration.

The 2015 migration crisis suggests a key lesson for European disintegration: when immigration is securitised and tied to identity threat, it becomes a potent catalyst for exit narratives. In this case, political actors and media outlets framed the refugee influx as an imminent security risk—linking asylum seekers with Islamic terrorism and elevated crime rates (Dennison & Geddes, 2018). Such framing undermines trust in the EU by portraying free movement as an external imposition that erodes national sovereignty (Harteveld et al., 2018). Moreover, by depicting migrants as a danger to traditional customs and public resources (McLaren & Johnson, 2007; Bailey, 2018), Eurosceptic discourse converted demographic change into a symbol of institutional failure. Broadly, this demonstrates that securitisation and identity-based anxieties, once harnessed by strategic actors, can politicise structural factors—transforming routine policy issues into disintegrative pressures that challenge supranational cohesion.

A third element must be considered to understand how these crises have affected pre-existing ideas, strengthening them and altering public attitudes toward the EU. This element is represented by actors, agents of disintegration capable of connecting ideas and crises to form narratives serving their objectives. Investigating these actors is essential for the disintegration model proposed here, which suggests that narratives do not evolve independently; instead, they are deliberately constructed and promoted for specific purposes.

5.5.2 Actors

The understanding of the causal mechanism behind Brexit hinges on the role of political actors who can sway public opinion. This section does not focus on actors as static entities, but on the strategic practices through which political actors mobilise ideas and crises in

disintegrative contexts. Specifically, it explores how actors embark on a transformative process that turns abstract ideas into concrete narratives. Additionally, since post-truth politics serves both as a tool and an environment, actors can be seen as the agents utilising this tool while operating within that context.

To secure the electorate's consent, they framed the Referendum as a protest vote encompassing more than just the question of EU membership. Understanding post-truth politics as both a style and a symptom is key to grasping its role in Brexit and, more broadly, European disintegration. On the one hand, it functions as a strategy used by political actors to shape narratives, bypass deliberation, and mobilise support through emotional appeal. On the other, it reflects a deeper transformation in the political culture of liberal democracies—a shift towards polarisation, distrust, and fragmented information environments. This dual character explains how political leaders in the UK were able to exploit post-truth tactics within an already fertile cultural landscape. What made the Brexit campaign so effective was not just the use of misleading claims, but the fact that these claims resonated in a public sphere already disoriented by a breakdown of shared facts and weakened norms of accountability. These conditions, rooted in structural and technological changes, are part of what Conrad (2025) describes as the “post-truth condition”: a cultural context shaped by media manipulation, epistemic fragmentation, and declining democratic deliberation. In this environment, political actors do not simply lie—they operate within a space where the very grounds for truth have been eroded, turning post-truth from a tactic into a condition that facilitates disintegration.

Brexit offered citizens a means to voice opposition to domestic and foreign elites and to immigration. The Leave campaign framed its message as “common sense,” channelling public frustration while omitting contradictory evidence (Clarke & Newman, 2018). Its strength lay in a singular focus on winning the Referendum, presenting a stark choice between the perceived failures of the status quo and radical change. The same dynamics operate in wider EU contestation, where simplified narratives and elite critique can transform diffuse grievances into powerful calls for disintegration.

This model examined domestic political actors as well as the press, particularly tabloid newspapers. While political actors were motivated by achieving electoral consensus, the press operated under a slightly different logic. Some media outlets, which openly supported the Referendum, shared the same goal as political actors: a victory for the Leave campaign. However, tabloids had an additional motivation: attracting public attention. The combination of these two drivers led them to publish sensational material, even when it was factually incorrect, in order to resonate with the preferences of their audience. Consequently, a symbiotic relationship developed between tabloids and political actors, with both sides reinforcing and sharing their respective contents (Zappettini, 2021b).

In the case of Brexit, political actors have increasingly exploited the politicisation of several issues, in line with a post-functionalist understanding of European disintegration. From this perspective, the success of these actors depended on their ability to radicalise mainstream

values. Specifically, they amplified concerns shared by other parties and already familiar to the public while presenting solutions perceived as more straightforward to implement (Mudde, 2010).

This discussion presents two complementary interpretations of why this process resonates with the electorate. The first explanation is based on demand-side theories of populism. According to this approach, the rise of populist arguments is connected to the changing demands of citizens during structural crises, as well as to the failure of institutions to meet those demands (Marcos-Marne et al., 2023). The second model, classified by the literature as supply-side, focuses on the agency of political actors and their capacity to shape the issues dominating political debate (Mols & Jetten, 2020). These two approaches can be viewed as two sides of the same phenomenon, as they can reinforce each other, leading to identical outcomes.

Populist actors have successfully heightened the importance of social and cultural issues, emphasising the divide between national identity and EU membership. They have responded to the electorate's demands, as indicated by demand-side models of populism, while reinforcing the perception that both EU institutions and the British government have failed to meet voters' needs. This view aligns with what Berman (2021) described as the voluntarist model, as it focuses on the role of political actors in steering public opinion. However, it does not overlook the fact that public attitudes can also be shaped by structural crises and institutional failures, a phenomenon inherent to the political and democratic process. This understanding suggests that dynamic has been exploited and amplified by parties with vested interests who raised the prominence of policy issues that fit their narratives. In this scenario, the distinction between demand and supply sides begins to blur, as public dissatisfaction can lead to populism, and populist actors can effectively channel and intensify that dissatisfaction. The dynamics observed in the UK's Brexit case offer important implications for other EU member states facing similar challenges. As political actors across Europe increasingly exploit social and cultural cleavages and institutional dissatisfaction, the interplay between demand- and supply-side populism may fuel further Euroscepticism and political fragmentation. Tabloid media and political elites elsewhere might similarly amplify divisive narratives to mobilize support, potentially destabilizing consensus on European integration. This suggests that without addressing underlying structural crises and restoring trust in institutions, other member states could experience intensified politicisation and challenges to EU cohesion, mirroring the UK's experience.

5.5.3 Process

Brexit can be understood as a dynamic process shaped by structural crises, ideological narratives, and political contestation. The Referendum emerged in a context where public opinion became increasingly receptive to Euroscepticism, driven by overlapping crises: the failures of the neoliberal model, pressure on public services, and demographic shifts linked to immigration. These combined with ideological grievances such as expanding EU competencies, terrorism, and political distrust. Collectively, they fuelled discontent with the

status quo—a populist sentiment signalling shifting societal values (Inglehart & Norris, 2016). Understanding how structural pressures interact with ideological frames is essential for identifying when EU membership faces serious political challenge.

In the UK, discontent was channelled by political actors who framed the Eurozone and migrant crises as proof of the EU's costs. Tabloid media and social platforms amplified these narratives, creating echo chambers that entrenched populist discourse (Gerbaudo, 2018). These messages resonated because they reflected pre-existing beliefs—blaming the EU for national decline and accusing the domestic elite of complicity. Dominant themes included a people-elite divide, nostalgia for lost sovereignty, and cultural insecurity. Similar elements appear across the EU, pointing to a broader disintegration pattern.

UKIP's success in the 2014 European elections revealed rising dissatisfaction, especially among Conservative voters, pressuring party elites to adopt Eurosceptic frames—sovereignty, democratic deficits, financial burdens, and border control (Weiss & Blockmans, 2016). This illustrates how elites adjust narratives in response to public mood. Yet, the Referendum result exposed the limits of this strategy. By validating anti-EU concerns but offering only tempered reforms, the Conservatives inadvertently legitimised more radical positions. This mirrors a broader European trend: when mainstream parties embrace soft Euroscepticism, they risk conceding narrative control to hardliners, weakening their own credibility and losing moderate voters. During the campaign, both sides acknowledged concerns about immigration and economic trade-offs. Faced with shared premises, many voters chose the more decisive option—leaving the EU—rather than incremental renegotiation. This dynamic shows how, once populist frames dominate the discourse, radical outcomes become viable political choices.

In the sixth canto of *Purgatory*, Dante expresses his indignation at the political situation of his time by comparing Italy to a ship without a helmsman caught in a violent storm. The same similitude can also be applied to Brexit. In this analogy, the sea represents ideas, the medium through which society progresses. The storm symbolises external events, the crises that reinforced these ideas, moving the ship forward. The ship itself represents the voters, while the Eurosceptic leaders act as the helmsmen, effectively using the winds and tides to steer the ship in their intended direction. This process is not unusual, and it reflects the normal functioning of democracy.

However, the distinctive element in the case of Brexit was that Eurosceptics disregarded the truth and the potential aftermath of their actions in pursuing a specific outcome. A fitting analogy can be drawn from another seafaring character from Dante, Ulysses, in canto XXVI of the *Inferno*. The Homeric hero urges his companions to sail into the unknown, ultimately leading to their doom as the sea swallows them. While the immediate consequences of Brexit may have seemed less catastrophic than Ulysses' fateful choice to venture beyond the Pillars of Hercules, the question of its long-term impact remains crucial to understanding European disintegration. The following section will explore these long-term consequences,

analysing how Brexit has influenced Eurosceptic movements across other member states, reshaped the EU itself, and affected the very narratives that fuelled the Referendum.

5.6 Effects of Brexit

This section further develops the theoretical framework of European disintegration presented in this chapter, discussing Brexit not only as a key moment that reshaped the EU's institutional trajectory but also as a model for understanding how structural and ideological shifts can trigger disintegrative dynamics. The argument advanced here is that Brexit redefined EU membership as reversible. This is demonstrated through evidence from the final three articles, which highlight two core aspects: changes in political discourse and institutional design. These insights support a theory of disintegration centred on post-truth narratives and the strategic actions of political actors.

The existing literature has extensively examined this topic, especially in relation to Brexit's institutional impact on the EU and its role in reshaping European identity (De Ville & Siles-Brügge, 2019; Leith et al., 2019). In contrast, this study argues that the Referendum is best understood as a symptom of an ongoing ideological shift, a shift that paves the way for future disintegrative events.

5.6.1 Brexit and party-based Euroscepticism

The previous section examined the key actors behind Brexit, its role, and motivations. The discussion now moves to the EU level, where the Eurosceptic party plays a pivotal role in the process of European disintegration. Brexit has provided this party across member states with a compelling example, reinforcing its narratives and strengthening its position in challenging EU integration.

From a theoretical perspective, this analysis shows that political parties have been central in reshaping Eurosceptic discourse after Brexit. Eurosceptic actors not only influenced the Referendum but continue to shape EU-wide narratives, consistent with literature on the politicisation of European integration (Lefkofridi, 2020). While Eurosceptic parties now largely avoid outright withdrawal advocacy, their agendas remain framed by hard Euroscepticism, pressuring mainstream parties to engage with narratives they cannot fully adopt without risking moderate voter support.

Brexit entrenched a political environment where contestation of EU authority became more mainstream. Rather than triggering exits across the Union, it legitimised Euroscepticism as a strategic and ideological position within national politics. Disintegration may thus arise not through radical rupture but through sustained challenges to integration norms. Brexit shows how party competition, shaped by Eurosceptic framing, can escalate opposition to EU sovereignty—even in member states without strong exit movements. Political parties act as intermediaries between public discontent and institutional contestation, transforming diffuse grievances into structured opposition to EU authority. Outside the UK, Eurosceptic parties replicate similar rhetorical strategies, promoting reform over exit but maintaining a

confrontational stance. Brexit thus functioned as both reference point and catalyst, confirming that disintegration is shaped by ideological convergence across borders (Henkel, 2021).

Such Euroscepticism rarely involves direct calls to leave the EU. Instead, parties advocate reducing EU powers, restoring national control over key areas, and cutting contributions—positions closer to those of the pre-Brexit UK government than UKIP. This suggests that disintegration may proceed incrementally, through contestation and power repatriation, rather than immediate withdrawal. The difference lies not in opposition intensity but in strategy—most Eurosceptic parties now prefer gradualist over secessionist approaches. In the UK, structural factors—non-membership in the Eurozone, pre-existing opt-outs, and global diplomatic weight—allowed Eurosceptics to argue plausibly for exit. These conditions are absent in most EU states, limiting similar campaigns. Thus, while Euroscepticism levels may be comparable, its form is more reformist and indirect.

Finally, although some predicted a domino effect post-Referendum, this has only partly materialised (Van Kessel et al., 2020). In Germany and Italy, Brexit was hailed by Eurosceptic leaders as a democratic triumph, yet it did not meaningfully alter party platforms. In the 2024 EU elections, explicit advocacy for exit was rare. Instead, strategic adaptation prevailed, with Eurosceptics invoking Brexit to legitimise reformist demands. This underlines a shift toward incremental disintegration through contestation—an evolution with implications for theorising the nature and pace of European disintegration.

The absence of political forces actively campaigning to leave the EU after Brexit suggests a more nuanced understanding of party-based Euroscepticism. While EU contestation remains strong, openly supporting exit seems too extreme for electoral manifestos. However, this could change if parties believe, as in the UK, that such a campaign would resonate with their electorate. Political actors influence voter opinions by leveraging existing ideological forces. Accordingly, Brexit's true significance may lie in its ideological impact. The Referendum showed that leaving the EU is a viable option while challenging the main mainstream argument that such a choice would cause unpredictable and disastrous outcomes.

5.6.2 Impact of Brexit on the EU

When considering the repercussions of Brexit on the EU, it may be useful to refer back to the dichotomy between the structural and the ideological dimensions introduced earlier. Structurally, the literature has explored how the departure of the UK has reshaped the balance and coalitions among member states within the Council of the EU (Johansson, 2021). Another possible consequence of Brexit is an increase in differentiation among member states. This outcome could unfold in two distinct yet not mutually exclusive ways: member states may assert their right to opt out of specific policies or strive for deeper collaboration that transcends the boundaries set by EU law. These structural shifts highlight how disintegration is not solely about outright exit but can also manifest through differentiated integration, where varying degrees of commitment coexist within the union. This

understanding is crucial for a comprehensive theory of disintegration, as it demonstrates that fragmentation can occur without formal withdrawal, complicating the EU's cohesion. Disintegration through differentiated integration is more likely to occur under conditions where member states seek to balance domestic political pressures with the benefits of EU membership. When governments face internal divisions or electorates that are skeptical of deeper integration but still value certain aspects of the EU they may pursue a selective approach rather than full withdrawal. Additionally, the EU's institutional flexibility to allow varying levels of participation enables this process by accommodating different commitments without forcing all members into a one-size-fits-all model. Therefore, differentiated integration emerges as a middle ground in contexts where outright exit is politically costly or undesirable, but full cohesion is no longer feasible. Clarifying these conditions is essential to understanding how disintegration can take diverse forms beyond formal departure.

To evaluate these developments, the fourth article examined differentiated integration and disintegration. The economic measures implemented in response to the pandemic suggest that Brexit enabled the EU to respond more decisively to the crisis, avoiding the constraining dissensus that characterised the UK (Leruth et al., 2019). While it is essential to temper these conclusions regarding the causal impact of Brexit, especially considering the concurrent effects of the two crises mentioned, the timing of the UK's withdrawal coinciding with these events presents an opportunity to evaluate crisis governance in the post-Brexit EU.

This case shows that the EU retains a degree of institutional resilience, with the capacity to manage both structural pressures and ideological divisions. The coordinated response to the pandemic—through measures such as Eurobonds and the Recovery and Resilience Facility—indicates that integration can deepen even under disintegrative strain. Disintegration, therefore, is neither linear nor inevitable, but shaped by how institutions respond to crisis and mediate between competing interests. At the same time, unresolved issues like executive dominance and limited accountability continue to fuel perceptions of democratic deficit, reinforcing Eurosceptic narratives (Trondal et al., 2022). These institutional weaknesses remain central to disintegration dynamics, as they can be politicised and used to question the legitimacy of the EU itself. Structural resilience alone cannot prevent disintegration if legitimacy gaps persist. This distinction is important for theorising disintegration: political contestation does not automatically lead to fragmentation, but its impact depends on how Euroscepticism is expressed and whether dissent is absorbed or amplified. The EU's ability to manage disagreement and foster legitimate dialogue will be key in determining the direction of its future integration.

As for the disintegrative impact of Brexit, this has not manifested itself as initially envisaged in other member states seeking to exit the EU. However, the effect of the Referendum can be seen in how it has influenced the perception of EU membership, reinforcing the idea that the departure of other member states is a concrete possibility (Ganderson, 2024). As such,

Brexit remains crucial for the future of the EU as it acts as a cautionary tale, reminding Europhiles and Eurosceptics of the potential disintegrative trajectories.

Although the Referendum did not pave the way to internal collapse, it exposed some of the EU's existing weaknesses. Ideologically, it provided Eurosceptics with a new tool: the threat of leaving the EU. In this regard, Brexit has provided a strong argument to Eurosceptic parties: by legitimising the threat of exit, it has exposed deep-seated vulnerabilities within the EU, thereby setting the stage for future disintegrative dynamics.

5.6.3 Identity and Narratives

Although there are currently no clear signs of further disintegration following the UK's departure from the EU, its impact on political discourse and public perceptions remains significant. The way Brexit unfolded has left a lasting imprint on both political actors and citizens, shaping an ideological shift that continues to influence how the EU is viewed. Brexit's significance lies in how it shifted political discourse and public perceptions, making disintegration a real possibility rather than just theory. It empowered Eurosceptic voices and intensified debates on sovereignty and identity. This ideological change is key for understanding disintegration, showing that shifts in ideas and public sentiment can drive fragmentation even without immediate exits.

A recurring theme in this research, as in other theoretical accounts of Brexit (Peitz et al., 2018), is the tension between national sovereignty and supranational governance. Brexit reinforced the notion that EU membership limits sovereignty and that such constraints can be reversed through democratic means. This idea recurs in the analysed material, where EU structures are often portrayed as obstacles to national autonomy. Although this has not led to additional referenda, similar outcomes remain possible if domestic or external conditions become more favourable. Despite Brexit's profound impact, further exits have not materialized, partly because several critical conditions have remained absent. Key among these are strong domestic political consensus favoring withdrawal, sufficient public support, and viable alternatives to EU membership. Additionally, the EU's ability to offer flexibility through differentiated integration and to respond to crises with reforms has helped contain disintegrative pressures. Economic interdependence and the perceived costs of leaving also act as significant deterrents. These missing elements show that disintegration requires not only ideological shifts and political narratives but also concrete structural and institutional factors to align, which so far have prevented a domino effect of exits across member states. However, crises that demand compromises on sovereignty could act as external triggers, as could unpopular EU policies at the national level. Domestic political actors may also capitalise on legal conflicts between national and EU law to promote disintegrative agendas (Verney, 2018).

In analysing the link between populism and Euroscepticism, Kneuer (2019) emphasises that governmental actions can heighten public dissatisfaction and enable Eurosceptic actors. This dynamic is not confined to any single party family. The risk increases if right-wing parties

consolidate support or if mainstream parties adopt their narratives. This research shows that although both right- and left-wing parties criticise the EU, their Euroscepticism diverges ideologically. While right-wing actors often depict the EU as the source of systemic problems, left-wing parties tend to advocate for a reformed Union. For example, right-wing parties call for a smaller EU budget and reduced ECB authority, whereas left-wing parties support expansionary fiscal policy and stronger parliamentary oversight. The prevailing ideological direction will significantly influence the EU's trajectory.

Brexit has also produced two stable political identities built around the question of EU membership, which now shape wider political views (Tilley & Hobolt, 2023). Its main ideological legacy lies in showing how polarisation around Europe can become enduring. If EU membership is framed as an identity issue, similar divisions may arise elsewhere. Whether this occurs, and with what consequences, depends on the nature of future challenges and how institutions respond. Brexit, in this sense, stands as a case study in how the EU is judged through wider narratives spanning multiple policy domains.

5.6.4 Euroscepticism in post-Brexit EU

A key element of the Leave campaign was its emotional appeal, blending nostalgia for a sovereign past with optimistic visions of a more prosperous post-EU future (Melhuish, 2022). This strategy, echoed in the platforms of Eurosceptic parties, suggests that such emotionally charged tactics will remain central. The focus on identity and emotional resonance aligns with post-truth campaigning, where persuasive narratives often eclipse factual accuracy. Pro-Brexit rhetoric frequently relied on populist arguments about reclaiming control from elites, with the Referendum framed as a means to empower the people (Freedon, 2017). This elite–people divide, often culturally exclusive, remains a core component of Eurosceptic discourse. Far-right populism casts the EU as detached from national identities, constructed along ethnic lines. The left similarly adopts this divide, though framed economically: the EU is portrayed as serving global financial interests, while the people are defined by shared class-based struggles.

A crucial distinction between these two forms of populism, both of which seek to resonate with those marginalised by the establishment, lies in their attitudes towards the notion of European identity. While the right conceives identity in ethnonationalistic terms, rejecting the idea of a shared European belonging, the left is generally more open to the concept, seeing it as potentially inclusive and capable of uniting people beyond national boundaries.

But the success of Brexit cannot be solely attributed to emotionally charged rhetoric promoting populist narratives. While such rhetoric undoubtedly amplified voters' frustration and influenced their decisions, this discontent is rooted in more profound issues. Euroscepticism is not merely a reaction to short-term emotions; it is embedded in the structural contradictions within the European Union. A key example of this contradiction is the EU's broad powers, which have not been matched by a corresponding strengthening of its democratic accountability (Matthijs, 2017).

This limitation can be addressed in two ways, reflecting the divide between constructive and destructive Euroscepticism. One option is to renationalise certain policy areas, reducing the EU's competencies and allowing national governments greater autonomy. The alternative involves reforming EU institutions to strengthen democratic accountability. However, this would likely reduce the influence of national governments within the European Council and the Council of the European Union, creating new tensions in the attempt to resolve the original contradiction. Politicisation, defined as the increased public salience and contestation of EU policymaking, has been recognised as a constraint on further integration (De Wilde, 2011). At the same time, it remains an integral part of the EU's political development. Contestation should not be viewed solely as a threat but as a condition for the emergence of a more politically grounded union.

One way to manage this tension is through differentiated integration, which allows member states to define their level of commitment to specific policy areas (Schimmelfennig et al., 2015). This approach provides institutional flexibility and could help prevent future consensus crises, such as the one that led to Brexit. Rather than a temporary compromise, it may represent a necessary stage in the EU's evolution—where political divergence is acknowledged as part of building a more adaptable and legitimate institutional framework (Schmidt, 2020).

5.7 Post Truth and European Disintegration

Building on the discussion of Brexit causes and effects, this final section theorises European disintegration in the context of post-truth politics. It presents a conceptual framework showing how post-truth politics accelerates disintegration and signals a deeper legitimacy crisis within European institutions. Specifically, post-truth politics is treated as a facilitating condition that shapes how ideas and crises are articulated, rather than as an autonomous causal driver of disintegration.

It begins by demonstrating that post-truth politics not only contributes to disintegration but also reflects broader problems of legitimacy in EU governance. The section then explores the interplay between crises and narratives, illustrating how post-truth strategies allow political actors to instrumentalise crises and amplify Eurosceptic rhetoric. This rhetoric stems from a perceived disconnection between the EU and its citizens. The section integrates these insights into a broader model for analysing future disintegration. The framework draws on theories explaining disintegration as a result of preference conflicts between member states (Schimmelfennig, 2017) and as the outcome of domestic legitimacy crises (Webber, 2019). It argues that the interaction of structural conditions and ideological forces, mediated by political actors through strategically constructed narratives, is the main driver of disintegration. Post-truth politics deepens ideological fragmentation and reinforces Eurosceptic discourse, weakening the development of a shared European identity.

While this approach may stall EU contestation and increase interdependence, the real challenge is ideological rather than legislative. In the long run, the development of the

European project depends on whether the disintegrating effect of politicisation can be reversed. Euroscepticism, which views the EU as an international organisation serving member states, reflects a static understanding of European politics. In contrast, the vision held by Europhiles and reflected in the treaties—an experiment in supranational governance—faces inherent contradictions. While it seeks to expand democratic sovereignty beyond nation-states, the ideal of European identity remains elusive, undermined by nationalism and structural divisions. Integration's future lies in resolving these contradictions by balancing national sovereignty with the need for a shared European purpose.

Though it had no direct disintegrative effect, Brexit highlighted these limits in the European project. It exposed the tension between the EU as a tool for national interests and as an emerging political community. To move forward, the EU must confront these contradictions and redefine its purpose and identity. A key part of this is the need for more direct democratic control to address the disconnect between EU decision-making and citizens' democratic aspirations. The challenge is to build a stronger, more democratic unity—one that does not avoid internal tensions but uses them to shape a more resilient European polity.

5.7.1 Post-truth Politics

Post-truth politics constitutes a condition that facilitates European disintegration; although it is not possible to generalize its necessity given that other disintegrative dynamics may follow different patterns, in the context of Brexit and ongoing disintegration it functions both as a causal tool and as an enabling environment.

In democratic systems like the EU, disintegration is not merely a reaction to unpopular policies but reflects a deeper malaise: alienation from the European project itself. Brexit, for example, was not an isolated event but a moment of rupture. It occurred because enough voters, drawn to promises of regained sovereignty de facto impossible to maintain, chose to “take back control.” However, disintegration does not require referendums; it also unfolds incrementally. Fragmentation can occur through the rise of Eurosceptic parties, shifts by mainstream actors to appease Eurosceptic voters, or the rejection of EU initiatives considered politically toxic (Patberg, 2020). At its core, disintegration signals a systemic failure to engage citizens. This study adopted a constructivist approach, arguing that EU identity is shaped through politicised narratives produced by political actors and the media (Risse, 2005). These narratives construct the terms through which citizens interpret Europe.

In this dynamic, post-truth politics not only facilitates the spread of misinformation but alters the very fabric of political discourse. By reducing complex issues to emotionally charged slogans, it suppresses nuance and promotes immediate but unrealistic solutions (Bødker & Anderson, 2019). This dynamic produces a “politics of immediacy,” where difficult, long-term reforms are displaced by symbolic gestures. This shift is particularly evident in right-wing populist discourse, where factually incorrect and provocative content is used to

advance Eurosceptic narratives. A defining feature is the division between “the people” and external enemies—typically elites, the EU, migrants, or the political left. This creates a Manichean political frame, in which opponents are delegitimised not just for their views but for their epistemological foundations (Ylä-Anttila, 2018).

This strategy is successful because it exploits an ongoing legitimacy crisis in the EU. Severs and Mattelaer (2014) argue that the absence of a shared narrative among citizens has undermined institutional trust. Populist and Eurosceptic actors have leveraged this disconnection, especially during crises like migration or economic turmoil. As national solutions seem ineffective and EU institutions appear distant, narratives focused on sovereignty and nationalism become more persuasive. These frames offer emotionally resonant alternatives to a technocratic order increasingly seen as lacking both democratic legitimacy and cultural relevance.

In the absence of a compelling, unifying European identity, voters gravitate toward ideological frameworks that promise clarity and control. Crises do not only catalyse this trend—they expose foundational tensions in the EU’s political economy. Voters feel increasingly powerless, forced to comply with a neoliberal consensus. Within this framework, values like truth and rationality are reframed as tools of the status quo and post-truth politics emerges as an accessible way to express demands for change (Farkas & Schou, 2020). Despite its reliance on falsehoods, post-truth actors express real grievances rooted in systemic inequality and political frustration. They channel discontent with the EU’s dual mandate: to integrate more deeply while preserving national sovereignty. This contradiction, intensified by structural crises, continues to shape the landscape of European disintegration.

Furthermore, the EU’s crisis stems from the contradiction between its aspirations for deeper integration, which requires an expansion of its competencies, and the resistance from member states to further consolidation. This tension is heightened by the EU’s institutional structure, where national governments play a central role while the European Commission remains accountable to the electorate for implementing unpopular measures. Given these dynamics, post-truth functions as a tool for mobilising discontent. It provides an already disillusioned public, inclined to embrace narratives challenging the status quo, with narratives that validate their dissatisfaction and offer a purported solution, one that presents itself as an alternative to the dominant ideological framework.

5.7.2 Post-truth Crisis Narratives and the Politics of Disintegration

This subsection examines how crises are narratively constructed and instrumentalised within post-truth politics to advance disintegrative agendas. Rather than being objective disruptions, crises are framed through selective, emotionally charged narratives that challenge the legitimacy of existing institutions (Hallgrímsson et al., 2020). In the EU context, such narratives often amplify discontent, portraying supranational governance as complicit in or incapable of managing these events.

Moreover, crises can function as turning points: moments that redefine political order. Brexit and the COVID-19 pandemic, respectively, reshaped the European status quo through withdrawal and economic reform. In the post-truth era, crisis politicisation accelerates this process by bypassing deliberative debate in favour of affective messaging, making crises drivers of disintegration rather than reform. This dynamic can be understood through the Hegelian concept of *Aufhebung*, or sublation. In Hegelian terms, *Aufhebung* describes a dialectical stage in which a concept is both negated and preserved within a higher synthesis. Applied to EU crises, this suggests that while Brexit and the pandemic challenged assumptions about integration and governance, they also preserved European unity—albeit in a transformed, contradictory form.

The politicisation of crises is a key vector of disintegration, often exploited by Eurosceptic actors to construct anti-EU narratives (Pasquinucci, 2022; Carpenter et al., 2024). In this dissertation, “narrative” refers to how events and ideas are linked to form interpretations of political reality (Patterson & Monroe, 1998). Two conditions enable such narratives: the principle of subsidiarity, which casts the EU as the ultimate authority during crises; and the absence of a shared European identity, which renders the Union distant and abstract in contrast to the nation-state.

In a post-truth setting, selective facts are embedded into emotionally charged storylines that obscure complexity and redirect blame toward institutions like the EU (Deligiaouri, 2018). These narratives oversimplify crises, fuelling scepticism and resentment. During the Brexit campaign, for example, immigration, terrorism, and welfare fears were fused into a story locating Brussels as the core problem, bolstering support for withdrawal. The EU’s hybrid identity—as both integrative project and remote bureaucracy—makes it vulnerable to such framing. Lacking strong democratic legitimacy, critiques of its policies often escalate into systemic delegitimisation. From a Habermasian standpoint, the divide between administrative governance and public deliberation creates space for adversaries to depict integration as fundamentally flawed.

While Eurosceptic actors frame these crises effectively, the EU has struggled to offer compelling counter-narratives. Without a strong European identity or coherent political storytelling, it has ceded discursive ground to its critics. Thus, crises act as catalysts for disintegration—not simply by testing policy resilience, but by undermining the normative foundations of European unity.

5.7.3 Euroscepticism and Identity

In the context of this theory of disintegration, Euroscepticism represents the ideological force driving actors who, through post-truth politics, embed crises within narratives to promote disintegration. While such contestation is inherent to any democracy—as a mechanism through which competing ideas generate conflict and renewal—it becomes disintegrative when institutions fail to absorb and respond effectively.

In the EU's case, the impact of crises on disintegration is closely tied to the contested, or absent, notion of European identity. Brexit exemplifies the failure of political elites to cultivate shared identification with the EU, enabling right-wing politicians and media to cast it as an adversary to ordinary citizens (Leith et al., 2019). This failure stems from the EU's fragmented institutional voice. The division of executive and legislative powers between the Council, Commission, and Parliament limits the democratic accountability present in nation-states. Intergovernmental decision-making in the Council, driven by national agendas, shapes long-term EU policy. While representative of all member states, this structure reveals how national priorities dominate the Union's agenda, undermining its legitimacy and fuelling public scepticism. Public attitudes toward the EU remain closely tied to national government approval (Boomgaarden et al., 2011).

The European Commission—tasked with counterbalancing national influence—has faced criticism for its technocratic and unaccountable character. Meanwhile, Parliament remains institutionally weaker, contributing to low but rising voter turnout. EU elections often reflect national politics rather than engagement with European governance (Schäfer & Debus, 2018). This institutional inertia restricts democratic responsiveness and the EU's capacity to counteract Eurosceptic narratives. On the ideological level, the main challenge lies in the lack of a European identity that transcends national and partisan boundaries. Cultivating such identity could be supported by reforms: a unified defence strategy, common tax policy, coherent foreign policy, and a stronger role for Parliament—potentially replacing the Council as the main intergovernmental body.

However, this ambition is constrained by a structural paradox: for citizens to develop a European identity, the EU must act like a state. Yet these very characteristics—political coherence and policy authority beyond national interests—clash with its existing intergovernmental foundations. The ideological emphasis on sovereignty entrenches this tension, as integration remains subject to national vetoes and power politics. As a result, the EU is locked in a cycle: institutional fragmentation prevents the formation of a shared identity, empowering Eurosceptic narratives. Political leaders and governments resist reforms that would enhance EU-level democratic accountability, fearing erosion of their own national authority. This reluctance sustains the very conditions that enable Euroscepticism to flourish.

Taking these factors into consideration, this work introduced the categories of constructive and destructive Euroscepticism. This classification, which emerged from the empirical analysis of the electoral materials examined in the paper, is informed by the distinction between diffuse and specific support for EU integration (Kopecký and Mudde, 2002). The application of this framework, already discussed in the theoretical chapter, shows that constructive Euroscepticism aligns with the attitude defined by Kopecký and Mudde as Eurosceptic, whereas the destructive category encompasses Eurorejects. This division between destructive and constructive Euroscepticism also resonates with the classification system proposed by Vasilopoulou (2009), with the former corresponding to Rejecting

Euro-scepticism and the latter to Conditional Euro-scepticism. However, the model presented in this thesis introduces further nuance, as Vasilopoulou's third dimension, concerning attitudes towards the future of the EU, is not conditional on the second one, which pertains to the acceptance of its current institutional architecture.

The application of this system shows that, alongside the radical Euro-scepticism of parties that openly reject any expansion of EU competencies and advocate for a return to national sovereignty, the stance of constructivist Euro-sceptic forces, though currently in the minority, is also significant for the future of European integration. These parties promote building a European identity through large-scale reforms while rejecting the current institutional and ideological framework. Although they wield less influence at present, they stand in contrast not only to destructive Euro-sceptics but also to mainstream parties.

The latter's role is also fundamental, as in supporting the status quo they pose a dual threat to the future of Europe. First, due to the risk that they may adopt more Euro-sceptic positions should these ideas gain wider support. Furthermore, they fail to offer a viable alternative to the calls for change from the public, which are instead addressed by Euro-sceptic parties. Ultimately, the interaction between these divergent attitudes towards the EU will determine the future trajectories of disintegration, the focus of the concluding part of this section.

5.7.4 Theory of Disintegration

This thesis began with Brexit, the clearest empirical example of European disintegration to date. The analysis showed that the Referendum did not emerge in a vacuum, but was the endpoint of a process in which ideological forces, structural pressures, and Euro-sceptic actors gradually eroded trust in European institutions. These elements were not merely concurrent—they were actively shaped and politicised through post-truth politics. Post-truth politics, understood here as a form of communication privileging emotional resonance over factual accuracy, plays a central role in this dynamic. In the case of Brexit, it was more than a rhetorical tool; it defined the terms of debate. The Leave campaign's use of selective truths, simplification, and emotional appeals recast EU membership as a threat to sovereignty and identity. Without post-truth framing of immigration, economic decline, and elite betrayal, the disintegrative message may not have resonated so strongly.

More broadly, the Brexit case suggests that post-truth politics is not merely present at moments of disintegration—it often enables them. It creates a communicative environment where distrust is amplified, institutions are delegitimised, and rupture becomes both imaginable and necessary. Thus, post-truth politics is not only a symptom of democratic crisis (Newman, 2019) but a mechanism through which that crisis is deepened. What this thesis proposes is a theory of European disintegration as a political process rooted in the failure to develop a shared EU identity—shaped by ideological division, intensified by structural constraints, and exacerbated by political actors using post-truth narratives.

These narratives do not emerge spontaneously. They are deliberately crafted to exploit uncertainty, crisis, and dissatisfaction, reframing the meaning of integration. In doing so, they create space for rupture—not just from policy, but from the political order itself. Post-truth politics is therefore not incidental to Euroscepticism; it is a core condition for disintegration to be imagined, articulated, and ultimately enacted. It acts as a bridging condition by amplifying uncertainty and mistrust, which weakens traditional sources of authority and consensus. By blurring the lines between facts and opinions, it enables disintegrative narratives to resonate more deeply, connecting underlying grievances with broader political and social crises. This fusion makes Eurosceptic rhetoric more persuasive and mobilizes public support for fragmentation, effectively linking diverse conditions into a coherent force driving disintegration.

Drawing from accounts of disintegration that emphasise the fragile internal and external cohesion of the EU polity (Vollaard, 2014) and the role of nationalism (Wellings, 2023), this work looked at the underlying causes of disintegration through the vantage point of Brexit. The result is a theory centred on two interrelated factors, encompassing the key dynamics discussed so far, including political actors, structural crises, ideological shifts, and the role of post-truth as both a tool and a context for disintegration.

The first is the EU's persistent failure to construct a shared European identity, constrained by structural arrangements and ideological divides; the second, the vulnerability of that identity to politicised contestation. The Referendum demonstrated how these weaknesses could be weaponised. Post-truth politics functions as a powerful tool that can shape how identity is imagined and how contestation is conducted. By amplifying polarisation, simplifying complexity, and privileging emotion over fact, it degrades the quality of integration debates and increases the fragility of European identity.

In line with the constructivist approach to integration, the theory developed here proposes identity and ideology as the primary drivers of disintegration (Risse, 2018). Structural and institutional factors matter, but their effects are mediated through the social and discursive contexts in which they operate. What emerges from Brexit is a broader theoretical insight: European disintegration becomes more likely in the absence of a compelling, widely shared vision of the EU's future. Without such a vision—one that reimagines sovereignty and identity—post-truth narratives find fertile ground. These narratives, rooted in emotional appeals and selective depictions of crisis, erode already fragile attachments to the EU, transforming latent dissatisfaction into active disintegration.

This work views disintegration as a process that occurs when weak identification with the EU converges with broader demographic, economic, and cultural pressures. While the absence of European identity is not sufficient in itself to cause disintegration, it creates fertile ground for post-truth politics to thrive—politics that reframe crises in national terms and delegitimise supranational governance. Brexit exemplifies this mechanism: not merely a rejection of specific policies, but a symbolic reassertion of national sovereignty in response to the perceived failure of the EU to offer a convincing political future. Disintegration, in this

view, is less the collapse of institutional frameworks than the deconstruction of shared meaning, driven by the absence of a narrative capable of uniting citizens across member states. This theoretical framework is summarised in **Table 2**, which outlines how ideological fragmentation, institutional weaknesses, and post-truth narratives operate in a recursive process that renders disintegration politically constructed and narratively sustained.

Table 2. Theoretical framework of disintegration.

Causal Model	Mechanism	Forms of Disintegration
Weak European Identity	No supranational sense of belonging	Institutional stagnation
Structural constraints	Intergovernmental dominance in EU structure	Opt-outs or renationalisation of competencies
Crises	Exploited by political actors	Differentiated disintegration
Post-Truth Politics	Narrative manipulation	Narrative erosion of EU legitimacy
Eurosceptic actors	Advocating for disintegration	Symbolic rupture (e.g. Brexit)

The UK, with its historically cautious approach to the EU, proved particularly vulnerable to this process. However, similar dynamics may recur in other European states. As the EU’s competencies expand, disintegration appears increasingly as an inevitable obstacle in the path toward building an unprecedented supranational polity. This reflects a fundamental contradiction of the European project: as the EU adopts nation-state-like functions, it fails to foster the democratic legitimacy required to make such a transformation acceptable to its citizens (Habermas, 2012b). The absence of a shared public sphere where European citizens can engage in communicative action and debate about the EU’s direction leaves it exposed to populist and Eurosceptic narratives. Reforming treaties or promoting international cooperation alone may not suffice; the formation of shared identity requires a shared communicative space (Conrad, 2014).

In that vacuum, crises—financial upheaval, migration, or the complexity of EU governance—become raw material for political entrepreneurs. Through post-truth storytelling, these figures flatten nuance into reductive tropes of a remote “Brussels oligarchy,” tapping into public frustration over the EU’s limitations as a supranational actor lacking a common identity. These narratives weaken attachment to the Union and make mainstream parties reluctant to counter them. The result is a vicious cycle: each new crisis is politicised, deepening the EU’s legitimacy gap and reinforcing disillusionment, making the Union less effective and more resistant to the formation of a unifying European identity.

Based on these premises, the future of European disintegration largely depends on the ideological forces shaping political discourse in the years ahead. Two scenarios emerge: one of constructive Euroscepticism aimed at reform, and another of destructive Euroscepticism, exemplified by Brexit. If the latter continues to dominate, similar dynamics could surface in other member states. This work suggests that right-wing Eurosceptic narratives do not merely echo those of the Leave campaign—they replicate them in form and content, operating within the same ideological structure and governed by the post-truth logics outlined throughout this thesis. Crucially, these narratives gain power not only through elite manipulation but also through public projection of discontent and identity loss—deepening the ideological divide at the core of EU contestation.

For a theory of disintegration, this reveals two key dynamics: first, that disintegration is co-produced by political entrepreneurs and electorates in a feedback loop of narrative exchange; and second, that once post-truth frames attain cross-national resonance, they can spread disintegrative pressures beyond any single case, weakening cohesion through ideological contagion rather than structural failure alone.

In times of crisis, be it economic turmoil, sudden migration surges or high-profile institutional setbacks, disintegrative narratives gain force when three conditions converge: the event can be framed as an EU failure, with blame placed on Brussels or its national proxies; mainstream parties falter, either by embracing diluted Eurosceptic demands or by failing to offer a credible alternative; a pre-existing legitimacy gap leaves voters especially open to reframed interpretations. Under these circumstances, post-truth politics becomes a highly effective tool for reducing complex issues to emotive tropes. When these factors align, they mutually reinforce one another, deepening the EU's credibility deficit and driving a self-perpetuating cycle of fragmentation.

While the withdrawal of another member state in the next decade seems unlikely, this is not because disintegrative pressures have disappeared, but because the specific conditions that made Brexit possible are largely absent elsewhere. The United Kingdom benefited from a unique combination of factors: it was a major economic power, outside of the Eurozone, and had always maintained a sceptical and often ambivalent relationship with the EU. Other member states are more tightly embedded in the structures of integration, whether through economic dependency, Eurozone membership, or historical and geopolitical alignments. Each case is shaped by its own domestic context, making generalisations difficult. For a state to leave the EU outright would require a strong and sustained internal opposition to membership, mobilised by political actors actively pursuing withdrawal—conditions that are not currently met in most cases. Furthermore, how states and Eurosceptic actors will react to external crises and how their reaction will affect the electorate will determine the centrifugal strength of their narratives.

Instead, disintegration is more likely to manifest as a gradual reduction of EU competences. This scenario emerges particularly from the analysis of Brexit as a *sui generis* case, and from the programmes and discourses of Eurosceptic parties examined throughout the articles.

These parties, while often avoiding explicit calls for exit, consistently advocate for the return of decision-making powers to the national level. If their influence continues to grow, or if mainstream parties adopt their positions to maintain electoral competitiveness, such demands could translate into a broader shift towards differentiated integration. This would gradually transform the EU into a looser political formation, closer in character to an international organisation than a political union.

The likelihood of each scenario—exit, reduction of competencies, or differentiated disintegration—depends on a range of structural factors, including economic resilience, political stability, levels of dependence on EU support, and the configuration of domestic party systems. At the heart of both dynamics lies the EU's legitimacy crisis: its limited capacity to articulate a compelling vision of the future, its democratic shortcomings, and the absence of a shared European identity. This could gradually turn the EU into an incomplete polity struggling to escape the ideological deadlock caused by a state of permanent legitimacy crisis. These vulnerabilities are further exacerbated by post-truth politics, which provides a powerful rhetorical toolkit for politicising crises and amplifying existing discontent.

If constructive Euroscepticism were to gain traction, both in terms of increased support for these parties and having their narratives and reform demands adopted by mainstream political forces, the EU could bridge the gap between its institutions and citizens. However, it is far easier to dismantle than to build. Within the framework of this theory of disintegration, the persistence of a strong economic and institutional core makes the complete collapse of the EU unlikely. However, the absence of political momentum for deepening integration—particularly through democratic reforms—creates a more plausible pathway for disintegration through the gradual erosion of EU competences and the retreat from supranational ambitions. This tendency reflects a broader pattern identified in the findings: where the EU fails to articulate a compelling and legitimate political project, the structural conditions favour incremental disintegration rather than institutional renewal.

A third possibility, perhaps the most likely, is that these disintegrative and reformist demands will coexist but remain relatively marginal. In this scenario, the more extreme disintegrative outcomes feared following Brexit would be avoided, while the goal of forming a shared European identity would remain unaccomplished. Ultimately, this thesis has shown that the future of the EU is closely linked to how it is represented within the political discourse. Should post-truth politics prevail, where events are distorted to promote simplified yet seductive narratives of the issues faced by voters, it will not only jeopardise the European integration project; the very notion of democracy itself will be under threat.

6 Conclusion

This dissertation analysed Brexit through the lens of Eurosceptic narratives and post-truth politics, using the Referendum as a case study to explore European disintegration and its underlying dynamics. The study's core argument is that European disintegration is driven by ideological forces embedded in political discourse. The first article demonstrated that the Brexit result stemmed from the interaction between these ideological forces, already present in the electorate, and the narratives promoted by Eurosceptic actors.

The second article further substantiated this argument by exploring how post-truth politics shapes these narratives, thereby addressing the causes of Brexit. Regarding the impact of Brexit on European disintegration, this work focused on the consequences of the Referendum for Eurosceptic discourse in other member states and on the institutional architecture of the European Union. Under this profile, what emerged is that the Referendum substantially shifted public perceptions of EU membership, although it did not lead to further disintegration or a significant rise in EU contestation.

The overarching goal of this dissertation was to use Brexit not merely as an event to be explained, but as a vantage point from which processes of European disintegration can be theoretically conceptualised. Under this profile, the findings showed that Brexit has exposed the EU's vulnerability to the narratives advanced by its opponents, thus providing them with a blueprint for disintegration. Regarding the role of post-truth politics in the disintegration of the EU, this work asserts that both Brexit and broader disintegration trends are the product of the interaction between ideological forces, political actors, and narratives. Post-truth politics can be understood as both a tool and an environment particularly suited for constructing and disseminating these narratives and undermining the quality of democratic deliberation. For this reason, it warrants a central role in the theorisation of European disintegration, as it helps to understand the evolving dynamics of political discourse in the EU and offers new insights into the relationship between ideology, politics, and public opinion.

6.6 Aims and Significance

To address the four research questions, this dissertation pursued a set of interconnected objectives aimed at constructing a theoretical framework for understanding Brexit as a case of European disintegration. Particular attention was given to the role of ideological forces and post-truth politics in shaping disintegrative narratives. As the articles demonstrated, this was assessed through a two-stage approach. First, process tracing revealed how Eurosceptic narratives constrained political decision-making and contributed to the call for a

Referendum. Second, analysis of Leave campaign materials demonstrated the connection between post-truth rhetoric and the framing of the Brexit vote.

In assessing Brexit's broader implications, the research engaged with the challenge of conceptualising and measuring a complex phenomenon: the potential for European disintegration. Domestically, this involved studying how Eurosceptic parties in Italy and Germany incorporated Brexit into their political narratives. At the EU level, despite the difficulty of isolating any single crisis as definitive, the analysis—drawing on literature on differentiated integration—showed that Brexit did not produce immediate institutional change. Nonetheless, its long-term ideological effects remain significant.

The overarching aim was to synthesise findings related to Brexit and the broader phenomenon of disintegration, and to develop a theory that accounted for both. This objective was achieved through a systematic analysis of the results across the five articles, integrated with established theoretical perspectives. In this context, the fifth article offered a snapshot of the current state of Eurosceptic discourse, showing that both its content and rhetorical methods have remained largely consistent since the Brexit debate.

The primary contribution of this research lies in its development of a theoretical framework to understand European disintegration, whether through formal withdrawal or via processes of differentiated disengagement. By analysing Brexit in relation to Eurosceptic narratives and post-truth politics, the study identified three core conditions under which disintegration becomes possible: crises that can be politicised; political actors willing to challenge the integration project; and persuasive narratives that resonate with public discontent. These three dimensions—crises, actors, and narratives—form the foundation of the theory presented. Rather than framing disintegration as a sudden rupture, this study conceptualised it as an incremental process, embedded in national contexts and shaped over time. Brexit showed how a legitimacy crisis, filtered through post-truth discourse and sustained by ideological contestation, could trigger a significant shift away from integration. Thus, the research contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the EU's structural vulnerabilities and the conditions under which disintegrative pressures escalate.

The dissertation also addressed a significant gap in the literature by investigating the role of post-truth politics in shaping Eurosceptic discourse and influencing public opinion. While much existing scholarship has focused on the political and economic dimensions of Brexit, less attention has been paid to the ideological and narrative forces at play. This study demonstrated how misinformation, emotion-driven rhetoric, and polarising discourse were employed by political actors to mobilise support, bypassing traditional deliberative processes. In doing so, the research positioned Brexit as both a catalyst and a reflection of broader disintegration trends. It challenged the notion of a domino effect by arguing that, although Brexit reshaped the discourse surrounding European integration, it did not produce a measurable increase in Euroscepticism or disintegration among other member states. This interpretation contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the EU's relative resilience in the face of nationalist and anti-European currents.

This dissertation contributes to and extends existing scholarship on European integration and Euroscepticism by shifting analytical focus from integration outcomes to disintegration dynamics. Building on postfunctionalist accounts of EU contestation (Hooghe and Marks), the thesis complements explanations centred on identity, politicisation, and mass attitudes by foregrounding the interaction between crises, political agency, and communicative strategies. In doing so, it engages critically with the extensive literature on Euroscepticism (Taggart and Szczerbiak; Mudde) and disintegration (Vollaard; De Vries), moving beyond typologies of opposition to examine how Eurosceptic ideas are activated, reframed, and strategically mobilised during periods of crisis.

The dissertation also speaks to crisis-based analyses of European integration, which emphasise the EU's capacity for adaptation and resilience (e.g. differentiated integration and crisis-led reform), by demonstrating that crises simultaneously generate disintegrative pressures. Finally, by incorporating insights from the literature on political communication and post-truth politics, the thesis advances constructivist approaches that highlight the role of discourse and framing in EU politics. Rather than proposing a competing grand theory, the dissertation develops a theoretical framework that integrates these strands to explain how disintegration emerges as a contingent political process.

Beyond its academic relevance, the study offers practical insights for policymakers. As the EU continues to confront populism, economic volatility, and geopolitical fragmentation, understanding the role of ideology and post-truth politics is vital for designing effective communication strategies and institutional responses. By revealing how disintegrative narratives are constructed and politicised, this research provides tools to counter misinformation and address the structural roots of Euroscepticism. In sum, the findings presented here contribute not only to academic debates but also to the broader effort to sustain European unity in an increasingly contested political landscape.

6.7 Contribution and Limitations

This dissertation contributed to the study of Brexit and European disintegration by introducing a theoretical framework integrating the dynamics of Eurosceptic narratives and post-truth politics. It expanded existing constructivist scholarship by examining the ideological forces behind the Brexit vote and their broader implications for the EU, addressing the often-overlooked role of narrative construction and manipulation of public opinion. A central contribution lay in analysing how post-truth politics manifested during the Referendum campaign. By examining the content and rhetoric of Eurosceptic actors, the study provided a detailed account of how misinformation, emotional appeal, and selective framing shaped the Leave campaign's success. This analysis moved beyond typical populist rhetoric accounts, demonstrating that these tactics were embedded in the ideological structure of Euroscepticism. The thesis also introduced the distinction between destructive and constructive Euroscepticism: the former rejects European integration outright, while the latter seeks its reform. Euroscepticism, therefore, emerges not as a monolithic stance but as a site of ideological struggle and potential reinvention or dismantlement.

Empirical evidence from the analysis of Eurosceptic discourse in Italy and Germany, alongside EU policymaking, showed that Brexit's institutional impact was more limited than initially expected. Nonetheless, its long-term ideological significance is substantial, highlighting vulnerabilities in the integration process linked to the absence of a shared European identity. The thesis also developed a methodological approach to studying abstract phenomena like disintegration. By combining process tracing with content analysis, it proposed a framework for evaluating the influence of ideological and political forces on the EU's structural cohesion. This contribution offers a model for future research into disintegration dynamics and a more nuanced lens for assessing the EU's trajectory. In summary, the dissertation's value lies not only in applying the concept of post-truth politics to the Brexit debate but also in proposing new theoretical and methodological tools for understanding European disintegration. It enhanced our grasp of the drivers of Euroscepticism and presented a sophisticated framework for analysing EU politics in a climate of rising nationalism and populism.

However, the thesis has limitations. Its focus on Brexit provides depth but limits the generalisability of findings to other disintegration cases. While it demonstrated the use of post-truth tactics in the Leave campaign, establishing causal claims would require further quantitative analysis. The discourse study in Italy and Germany was confined to a narrow selection of countries; broader comparative research could better capture the scope of Euroscepticism's impact. The framework advanced in this dissertation should not be read as a general law of European disintegration, but as an account of how disintegration becomes politically thinkable under particular conditions. Its explanatory force is strongest in moments of crisis, where the legitimacy of the EU is already strained and political actors are able to translate diffuse anxieties into coherent narratives of loss, threat, and sovereignty. Within this configuration, post-truth politics does not operate as an autonomous cause, but as a mediating logic that reorders the relationship between facts, affect, and political representation. Brexit shows how crises can be retroactively re-signified through post-truth practices, opening disintegration as a plausible horizon of action—without rendering it either inevitable or universally replicable.

Methodologically, while combining process tracing with content analysis provides a robust framework, it cannot fully account for the complexity of political discourse or its reception. The study also did not include the perspectives of citizens or grassroots movements, which could have enriched understanding of how Euroscepticism influences political outcomes. Including primary sources such as interviews with EU officials or political actors would have strengthened the framework by incorporating insights from those directly involved in disintegrative processes. Lastly, the thesis assumes post-truth politics operates uniformly, without addressing how misinformation and emotional appeals may be received differently across media ecosystems and audiences in Europe.

6.8 Future Research

Future research on European disintegration and Euroscepticism could benefit from applying more interdisciplinary frameworks, particularly those that challenge traditional, linear approaches to understanding social and political dynamics. One promising avenue for exploration is Wendt's Quantum Social Science framework (2022). Wendt proposes that social reality is not fixed or deterministic but rather emerges from the interactions of agents, where outcomes are shaped by probabilities and possibilities rather than certainties. This approach could offer a more nuanced way of examining the fluid and evolving nature of political identities and social structures, particularly in the context of Euroscepticism, post-truth and the disintegrative dynamics within the EU.

Rather than viewing political identities as static or pre-determined, a quantum approach would allow for an investigation into how these identities are continuously reshaped through interactions at various levels; between political elites, the media, and the public. Future research could focus on how the political discourse surrounding Brexit remains in a state of flux, with different actors attempting to shape the narrative in response to the changing political and economic environment.

Another area that warrants further exploration is the role of emotions in political movements. While this thesis has touched on the emotional appeals made by Eurosceptic actors, future work could investigate how emotions such as fear, anger, and nostalgia shape political attitudes and decisions. A deeper understanding of these emotional dynamics would shed light on why Euroscepticism persists, even in the face of shifting political realities. Additionally, broadening the scope of comparative research would help contextualise Euroscepticism beyond the UK. Exploring how Eurosceptic narratives manifest in other EU member states, particularly in varying political, cultural, and historical contexts, could offer a more comprehensive understanding of these dynamics. Research could also examine the long-term implications of Euroscepticism for the EU's political structure, particularly its institutional resilience and the future of integration.

Finally, incorporating primary sources from EU officials, political actors, and grassroots movements would further enrich the analysis of Euroscepticism. Interviews or ethnographic approaches could provide valuable insights into the lived experiences of those directly involved in shaping, or responding to, the forces of disintegration.

Overall, future research should aim to embrace a more relational understanding of political processes, one that recognises the fluid and dynamic nature of identities, interests, and political outcomes. Adopting this perspective would allow for a more nuanced exploration of the complex and ever-evolving political landscape, such as that presented by Euroscepticism, beyond static or deterministic frameworks.

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