Political Differentiation as the End of Political Unity? A Narrative Analysis

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ABSTRACT
Which narratives do political actors use in times of increased political differentiation, and do they use them to strategically promote political unity in the EU? Two periods were selected for a narrative analysis. First, the years 2000-2004 preceding the ‘big bang’ enlargement and second, the crises in the Euro area between 2010 and 2014. Despite more political differentiation in both analysed time periods and their different construction, the narrative analysis shows that political unity was not undermined. The two identified key narratives – ‘united in diversity’ and ‘divided in unity’ – legitimised the EU’s political unity by promoting it through differentiated integration.

KEYWORDS
differentiated integration; European Union; narratives; political unity

Political differentiation has always been an intrinsic characteristic of the European Union (EU) and a consequence of the diversity of its member states (MS). This diversity entails differences that can be identified in, but are not limited to, the political systems, political cultures and traditions, social cleavages, territoriality, socio-economic factors and demographic patterns in the EU (Burgess and Gress 1999). Political differentiation corresponds to any modality of cooperation that allows states (members and non-members of the EU) to work together in non-homogeneous, flexible ways. During the economic recession of the 1970s, the Tindemans Report to the European Council suggested for the first time “differentiated integration” as a possible solution to manage differences and achieve more unity among EU MS, each of them at its own pace (Brunazzo 2019, 6). The EU’s diversity has kept growing over the years through subsequent enlargement rounds and the outbreak of specific crises, accompanied by an ongoing discussion on differentiated integration strategies that try to reconcile the diversity within the EU system with the aim of preserving unity (Stubb 1996, 283).

Over the years, both EU and national political actors have shaped the discussion on the EU’s integration process, for example Wolfgang Schäuble and Karl Lamers in 1994 or Jacques Chirac and Helmut Kohl in 1995 (see Brunazzo 2019). In doing so, they constructed specific narratives, which they used as tools to legitimise the EU’s policy- and decision-making (Cianciara 2021).
In this article, we argue that in times of increased political differentiation, the analysis of how political actors narrate political unity reveals their respective legitimation strategies for the European integration process. The related research question is what kind of narratives political actors use in times of increased political differentiation and, more specifically, whether they abandon the idea of a united EU. The related puzzle links up to the two faces of differentiation. On the one hand, differentiation is perceived as a tool for managing the EU’s diversity (Tekin 2012); on the other, there is a risk of triggering centrifugal tendencies or even disintegration in the EU stemming from differentiation (see Brunazzo 2019; Lord 2015). Some analysts perceive the United Kingdom’s (UK) exit from the EU, for example, as a logical consequence of its multiple opt-outs from EU policies.

Our analysis focusing on political elite narratives in two time periods of increased political differentiation highlights, however, that those narratives did not abandon the idea of a united EU, but rather continued to promote its preservation. We identify a pro-EU narrative between 2000 and 2004 (‘united in diversity’) and another with a stronger national focus (‘divided in unity’) between 2010 and 2014, respectively. Despite being differently constructed, these two narratives’ aim is the reconciliation of diversity, and hence the preservation of political unity through forms of differentiated integration as ways of legitimising the European integration process.

The first section outlines the problem that we seek to address, our main concepts and the methodology. In the next section, we analyse which narratives political actors predominantly use in times of increased political differentiation, based on a new dataset,¹ which was created by using a qualitative analysis software to manually code textual documents of both EU and national actors. Finally, we draw our conclusions.

Narrative analysis of political unity: concepts and method

An intrinsic problem of the European integration process is the constant dilemma between diversity and unity. Political unity in the EU corresponds to “the unity of its policies, laws and institutions; and to any prospect of it developing into a political community based on shared rights and obligations of membership” (Lord 2015, 784). Differentiated integration strategies represent a tool to achieve such unity despite diversity among MS as well as EU policy areas. Differentiated integration refers to a process in which MS, potentially joined by non-EU members, opt to move forward at different speeds and/or towards different objectives, in contrast to the notion of a monolithic bloc of states pursuing identical objectives at a single speed. The analysed literature confirms that differentiated integration can indeed contribute to safeguarding integration despite the constitutional diversity within the EU’s sui generis system (Tekin 2012). We specifically refer to two strands of literature. The first one engages with differentiated integration (for example, Leuffen et al. 2013; Pirozzi et al. 2017; Schimmelfennig and Winzen 2020), while the second engages with narratives in the EU (for example, Eder 2009; Kaiser and McMahon 2017; Cianciara 2020; 2021; McMahon and Kaiser 2021).

¹The dataset was collected within the framework of the Horizon 2020 project “EU IDEA: Integration and Differentiation for Effectiveness and Accountability”: https://euida.eu.
Narratives of European political unity in times of political differentiation

Whereas scholars have widely analysed integration processes, less attention has been devoted to their legitimation through the narratives constructed by political actors (for example, Cianciara 2021, 130). The concept of legitimation “means the creation of a sense of positive, beneficial, ethical, understandable, necessary or otherwise acceptable action in a specific setting” (Vaara 2014, 503; see also Van Dijk 1998). Legitimation – and its opposite, delegitimation (Vaara 2014; Schmidtke 2019) – correspond respectively to the processes of justification and contestation intended to shape the beliefs underpinning an institution’s legitimacy, that is, its exercise of authority perceived as appropriate (Tallberg and Zürn 2019; Lavenex and Križić 2019, 18).

Based on studies of EU narratives (for example, Cianciara 2017; 2021; Garcia 2017; Kaiser 2015), we define a narrative as a story constructed by a specific actor or group of actors. Constructed narratives can form identities within society and have a constitutive role in the integration of the EU as well as in the construction of European (and national) identities (Wodak 2018). Since “narratives are essentially a process of inclusion and exclusion, ordering and interoperaion of facts and characters, [...] the politicisation of discourses, policy alternatives and forms of collective action has a potential to legitimise the EU” (Bouza Garcia 2017, 343ff.). Narratives are thus a tool of political actors to potentially legitimise the EU’s unity and integration process (for example, Cianciara 2020, 29).

The identification of political ‘elite narratives’ – that is, narratives constructed by EU as well as national political actors and key institutions (Kaiser and McMahon 2017) – helps understand the ideological underpinnings behind them (Della Sala 2018; Vaara 2014). In fact, any narrative is a story in terms of “events and actions [that] are drawn together into an organized whole by means of a plot” (Polkinghorne 1995, 5, 7). Put differently, each narrative, which results from different sub-narratives, is a construct of reality consisting of two main elements: goal and plot. Whereas the goal indicates the objective at which the narrative aims (for example, more integration in the future), the plot is determined by three elements: time (when the narrative unfolds); space (where the actor constructing the narrative stands geographically and institutionally); and relationality (how the actor constructing the narrative stands in relation to their audience) (see also Manners and Murray 2016, 186).

Given the multiplicity of actors, events and places, there is usually not just one (sub-) narrative, but multiple ones (Manners and Murray 2016). Consequently, “new and competing narratives appear as the norm in the majority of political debates about Europe” (Cloet 2017, 291).

In order to identify what kind of narratives political actors use in times of increased political differentiation, we built a new dataset by collecting, manually coding and analysing 167 documents from EU institutions, that is, the European Council, the European Commission and the European Parliament (EP), as well as from a number of selected MS (more details below). The documents were selected based on time (speeches and statements in the selected years), topic (integration in the EU) and actor relevance (institutional figures both at the national and European level, that is, ministers, prime ministers and presidents).²

²For more details, see the Online Appendixes attached to this article, namely the Methodological Appendix providing information on the conduct of the qualitative research that was carried out for the analysis and the Codebook, which lists all codes generated by the researchers during the document analysis.
**Selecting two periods and four country studies**

In the light of previous research (for example, Nicolaïdis and Howse 2002; Cianciara 2020; 2021; McMahon and Kaiser 2021), we present the predominant recurring narratives and their underlying sub-narratives in two periods of heightened political differentiation. Our hypothesis is that forms of differentiated integration allow political actors to legitimise the EU through their narratives even when these narratives are not explicitly pro-European, but rather critical towards the EU.

The different fluctuations in the EU history of political differentiation are usually determined by either Treaty reforms, rounds of enlargement or crises (Tekin 2017). The following analysis concentrates on the latter two only, by exploring the ‘elite narrative’ during two selected periods. First, the years 2000-2004 preceding the EU’s largest single enlargement of 2004, which increased the number of MS and heightened political differentiation. Second, the crises in the Euro area between 2010 and 2014, which highlighted the MS’ political and economic diversity and its challenges to the EU integration process.

The selection of the two periods under analysis follows existing assumptions on how enlargement and crises increase – to different degrees – political differentiation as well as promote different patterns of differentiated integration.

During accession negotiations prior to the 2004 enlargement, EU candidate countries committed to adopting the *acquis communautaire*. This did not imply, however, that all new EU MS were able to immediately adopt the *acquis*. In order to allow all states to join and for the EU to protect its rules from being undermined by newcomers, transitional periods were necessary. They were framed through so-called “transition arrangements” (Verheugen 2001, 4), which correspond to a specific set of rules of temporary nature between the EU and acceding countries. The resulting differentiated integration thus followed a ‘multi-speed’ pattern, mainly affecting secondary law.

The second period corresponds to the crises in the Euro area. As a consequence of the global financial crisis of 2008, the European Monetary Union (EMU) experienced numerous crises starting from 2010: a sovereign debt crisis, a banking crisis, an economic crisis and a governance crisis. In 2012, the EU MS agreed to create a partial banking union, while Euroscepticism was growing among the population (see also Haas and Gnath 2016). The EMU had been born in “a heterogeneous economic space” and lacked the “typical adjustment mechanisms that are common at the national level” (3). This led to a strong divide between Northern and Southern European countries, given the different economies of the respective MS. Only in 2014, also countries such as Greece and Cyprus managed to partly regain market access. Between 2010 and 2014, the crises led to a ‘variable geometry’ as the predominant pattern of differentiated integration through the creation of the banking union, the fiscal compact and the European semester, entailing permanent or long-term differentiation to accommodate different, geographically circumscribed groups of countries (Stubb 1996; Tekin 2017).

Whereas the 2004 enlargement was accompanied by an increase of EU members and hence of diversity, which stemmed primarily from socio-historic factors following the East-West divide (Schimmelfennig and Winzen 2017), the crises of the Euro area affected EU countries unevenly and laid bare socio-economic differences between EU MS along
North-South lines (Glencross 2013). The purpose of this article is not, however, a comparative analysis between the two periods, but to identify the respective political narrative and related sub-narratives.

We investigated speeches from four MS: France, Germany, Italy and Poland, following a diverse study selection strategy (Gerring and Cojocaru 2016). The chosen countries belong to four different regions (North, South, East and West), but they are not supposed to be representative of these regions as such. The selected countries rather show the political, economic and social diversity within the EU, which impacts on the narratives on differentiated integration. Generally, however, divides between MS are not always clear-cut and can partly overlap. For example, while France, (West) Germany and Italy had already been part of the European Economic Community, Poland had experienced Communist leadership under the Soviet Union until the fall of the Iron Curtain and the end of the Cold War (old-new MS divide). Moreover, unlike France, Germany and Italy, Poland is not a member of the Euro area. Divergent demographic patterns can also be identified in the four countries. The respective populations of former EU-15 countries include a larger share of individuals older than 65, whereas the acceding countries – like Poland – have a rather young population (Eurostat 2019a; 2019b). During the crises in the Euro area, the divide shifted: the increased diversity among EU countries was linked to the diverging economic performances between a richer ‘enlarged’ North, including the Eastern and Western European regions, and a weak South. Whereas Northern and Western EU countries were able to withstand the crises and return to growth, even surpassing pre-2008 figures, the Southern region (for example, Italy) was economically devastated. For its part, while having a poor economy at the turn of the millennium, Poland subsequently experienced continuous economic growth and high birth rates even during the financial recession (European Commission 2014, 3–4; 21). As we shall see, the diverse history of these countries not only affected their respective political systems as well as socioeconomic and demographic developments, but also led to a different narrative construction (see also Kaiser and McMahon 2017). Hence, although the selected countries are not representative, they present diverse characteristics, which allows insights into the construction of narratives with regard to a diverse EU.

Two key narratives of political unity

The analysed speeches of political leaders from France, Germany, Italy and Poland as well as of EU representatives from the European Council, the European Commission and the EP from the period 2000-2004 reveal the key narrative ‘united in diversity’.4 This narrative was characterised by an underlying positive attitude towards the growing diversity and political differentiation in the EU as a result of the ‘big bang’ enlargement.

Conversely, the analysis of the second period reveals a different narrative constructed in the shadow of the Euro area crises: the key narrative ‘divided in unity’. The actors proposing this narrative no longer emphasised the benefits of being part of a diverse EU,

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3 The authors thank Nils Fabian Müller for his research work on this section.

4 "Unity in diversity" was an expression first coined by Nicole Fontaine (2000), President of the EP, during her speech at the European Council Special Meeting on 19 June 2000. It was later chosen as the official motto of the EU by Valéry Giscard d’Estaing (for further details see Mahony 2003).
but rather its disadvantages compared to national solutions. The initial underlying optimism of the early 2000s was undeniably shaken by the financial recession. MS became increasingly divided among themselves, apparently moving away from the Union (for example, fearing a possible ‘Grexit’).

**The key narrative ‘united in diversity’**

Between 2000 and 2004, politicians and institutional representatives constructed five sub-narratives that can be combined into one key EU narrative – *united in diversity* – as outlined in Table 1. The overall goal of this narrative was to achieve deeper integration in the EU and hence more political unity despite an increased political differentiation generated by the 2004 enlargement.

In the first sub-narrative, *No alternative to enlargement*, the goal was to promote the reunification of the European continent. Its *plot* emerged from speeches held by representatives of all four MS mostly in front of their respective national parliaments. Besides national actors, EU Commissioners also promoted the idea that enlargement was the only option to maintain stability. However, this usually happened when they spoke in front of targeted, small Eastern European audiences, in order to dissipate persistent fears regarding accession (see, for example, Günter Verheugen’s speeches of 2002 and 2003). Through this narrative, they conveyed the overall message that EU enlargement was the only viable option for both new and old MS to achieve enduring peace, and thus part of Europe’s historical legacy and moral duty. Even some conservative political leaders, such as Polish Secretary for European Integration Danuta Hübner (2002), considered the option of enlargement as the only feasible one.

Through the second identified sub-narrative, *The EU project as a factor of increased power/one voice*, political leaders of the ‘old’ Western MS – France, Germany and Italy – as well as the EP stressed that EU membership was a precondition to increase the power of the single MS (for example, “l’union fait la force” [“Unity makes strength”]: Chirac [2000b]). MS could no longer face the challenges of the new centuries alone (for instance, “If we want to play a role in relation to the outside world we have to be ‘we’”: Amato [2001]) and ought to speak with “one voice” when it came to foreign policy matters (see, for example, Ciampi 2000) (*plot*). The goal of this sub-narrative, constructed for larger European audiences, was to achieve more prosperity, security and democracy. Actors repeatedly emphasised that the EU was a capable player on the global stage (Prodi 2004, 5) and that Europe would be able to play a decisive part in shaping politics (Verheugen 2001, 3; see also European Council 2001) in a world that was becoming “less stable, less predictable and more frightening”, especially after the 9/11 terrorist attacks of 2001 (Prodi 2001, 3).

European Commissioners, Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) (Barroso 2004a; Cox 2003), French and Italian leaders (for example, Barnier 2004; Chirac 2000b; Ciampi 2001; Lenoir 2003a; 2003b) shaped a third sub-narrative – *Diversity as a strength* – with a *plot* valuing differences between countries as an asset. This narrative emerged through the speeches of ‘old’ MS’ representatives, whose goal was to concretely support present and future enlargement rounds, by addressing either their own national parliaments or audiences in foreign universities with huge European media response (for instance, Fischer 2000; Ciampi 2003).
Table 1. Narrative analysis between 2000 and 2004

| Sub-narrative                           | Goal                          | Plot                                                                                                                                                                                                 | Actors                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|-----------------------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| No alternative to enlargement          | Reunification of the European | Enlargement and accession to the Union are considered the only options to achieve the reunification of the European continent and its stability. European enlargement is indispensable. | European Commissioners and Members of the European Parliament (MEPs); German Foreign Ministers, German Chancellor, German President, French Foreign Ministers, French President, Polish Secretary for European Integration, Italian President |
| The EU project as a factor of           | More prosperity, security and | The EU guarantees increased powers to MS along with growing prosperity, stability and security as long as MS speak with one voice. The EU is seen as a ‘global player’.                                      | European Commissioners (specifically President of the Commission and Commissioner for Enlargement), European Council, President of the EP, MEPs; French Foreign Ministers, former Italian Prime Minister |
| increased power/ one voice             |                               |                                                                                                                                        |                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
| Diversity as a strength                | Contemporary and              | Diversity within the EU is regarded as an asset and a strength. Differences between its countries do not represent an obstacle.                                                                   | EU Commissioners (President of the Commission and Commissioner for Enlargement), European Council and MEPs; French Ministers for European Affairs, French Foreign Ministers, French President, Italian President, German Chancellor, German Foreign Ministers, German President |
|                                        | future enlargement            |                                                                                                                                        |                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
| The EU as a secure anchor              | More integration despite     | Countries in the EU need to have a secure anchor to the EU by recognising its fundamental principles to extend European peace. The EU is described as ‘home’ and ‘family’.                             | European Commissioners (Presidents of the Commission, Commissioner for Enlargement), European Council, MEPs, President of the EP; Italian President, German President, French President |
|                                        | differences                   |                                                                                                                                        |                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
| Differentiated integration, but only   | Convergence between old and   | All new MS need to be eventually fully integrated into the acquis communautaire. There is no Europe à la carte and no second-class membership.                                                      | European Commissioners; Italian Prime Minister, Italian and French Presidents, French Ministers for European Affairs, Foreign Ministers, German Chancellor, leader of the German opposition |
| temporary                               | new MS                        |                                                                                                                                        |                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
The fourth sub-narrative – *The EU as a secure anchor* (Ciampi 2000) – aimed at achieving more integration despite differences (goal) by envisaging patterns of differentiated integration. During debates at the EP or European Council meetings, actors maintained that those MS wishing to be at the forefront in the integration process of an enlarged EU could form a ‘core’ through reinforced cooperation. This process would engage some countries in closer structures of cooperation, which should nevertheless still be open to accession for other countries that had not been able or had not wanted to participate from the beginning. The proposal of a reinforced cooperation was built on the EU’s old image as a ‘secure anchor’ of fundamental principles, guaranteeing peace and stability (plot). Relatedly, French President Chirac (2000a) referred to a “pioneer group” of countries that would move “further and faster” together, with Germany and France at the forefront.

Although European representatives, as well as French and Italian political leaders, seemed to be in favour of a multi-speed Europe, they explicitly emphasised that any form of reinforced cooperation should not develop into a *Europe à la carte*. The fifth sub-narrative – *Yes to differentiated integration, but only if temporary* – focused directly on this. French and Italian heads of state and foreign ministers constructing this narrative aimed at achieving convergence between old and new MS (goal). Actors from old MS and the EU addressing national parliaments as well as the EP welcomed new MS to the European ‘family’ and the consequent increasing political differentiation (plot). New and old MS needed to eventually ‘converge’ within the EU in terms of their political and economic systems in order to avoid a two-speed or second-category Europe (Moscovici 2001). At the same time, this narrative acknowledged that new MS would unavoidably have a different speed than the old ones and that, as a result, old MS would have to give impetus to the integration process. Institutional actors accordingly envisaged a deeper and reinforced integration after the 2004 enlargement for a better functioning of EMU as well as the Union’s *acquis*, while stressing that no political discount would be granted to new EU members (Chirac 2000b; Verheugen 2002). The latter would still have to fulfil the conditions of EU membership to be fully integrated into the *acquis communautaire* and respect the “rules of the game” of the EU (Chirac 2000b).

In sum, between 2000 and 2004, optimistic narratives prevailed in the ‘West’, which focused on the East-West or old-new MS distinctions, while the ‘East’ seemed to fear more substantial national losses (for example, with regard to Polish agriculture due to free movement of capital: see Hübner [2002]), despite acknowledging that there was no alternative to an EU accession. The key narrative ‘united in diversity’ portrayed the enlargement and growing political differentiation in the EU as an inalienable necessity as well as a unique opportunity to guarantee long-lasting stability on the European continent (for example, Verheugen 2000).

Many poignant speeches were delivered primarily by EU and old MS’ representatives to engage large European audiences and convey the idea of the EU ‘family’: the reunification of the European continent by peaceful means. Against all challenges that more political differentiation posed, political actors seemed to agree on an approach that could be subsumed under the optimistic motto ‘Yes, we can’. Their narrative legitimised the EU’s political unity, which could be achieved through multi-speed differentiated integration.
The key narrative ‘divided in unity’

Between 2010 and 2014, national and European actors experienced and interpreted the crises in the Euro area in various ways, depending on their country’s situation and institutional affiliation. They started constructing a key narrative that can be subsumed under the more disenchanted phrase divided in unity and which revolved around five main sub-narratives as outlined in Table 2.5

Actors across EU institutions and all four MS repeatedly used the sub-narrative No alternative to integration. This narrative might at first sound similar to the first sub-narrative constructed during the enlargement process, but it had a different goal and connotation in the light of the crises: that is, to achieve more economic integration despite political divisions. The plot was built by addressing not only large audiences such as national parliaments, but also smaller ones, including experts or political figures only (for example, Hollande 2014). In troubled countries such as Italy, pro-EU speeches were often held in front of smaller rather than larger audiences (for instance, Terzi di Sant’Agata 2011a). Although national political leaders kept criticising the EU’s poor management of the crises, they also asserted that the idea of the EU as such was indisputable (Fabius 2014). The crises were depicted as an opportunity to achieve deeper EU integration (for instance, Juppé 2011) by pursuing economic growth under the condition of unity, according to which “no one will be left behind” (Letta 2013). At the same time, actors ‘outside’ the Euro area, for example Polish Minister of Foreign Affairs Radoslaw Sikorski (2011), based on the domestic context forecast “a partial dismantling of the EU” to avoid stark outcomes such as a total collapse of the Union or more differentiated integration with Poland having second-class membership. Poland supported the EU and the Euro area similarly to its Western counterparts. Eastern European countries and non-Euro area members as Poland were aware that they could not enjoy the benefits of being outside the Euro area while the EU’s very foundations threatened to crumble. Although the crises increasingly divided EU MS, in this first narrative, it seemed out of the question to back-pedal or to question the long-standing EU project (see Juppé 2011).

Distrust towards the EU’s ability to solve crises became more evident in the criticism of French, Italian and Polish political actors constructing a second sub-narrative, The EU as failed leader/Democratic deficit. These actors no longer regarded the EU as a global leader and advocated its reform (goal). Contrary to the expectations developed during the enlargement process, in the face of the financial recession, the wide majority of national political actors from all four MS as well as some MEPs lamented that the EU had not been speaking with a single voice (plot). Countries were consequently paying the cost of a “non-Europe”, since the EU had failed to deliver true European governance that would have hindered the spread of the crises (for example, Giulio Terzi di Sant’Agata [2011b] explicitly referring to a “leadership crisis”). Strong critiques of the EU’s “one size fits all” strategy were advanced not only by Italian representatives (Ibid.), but also by MEPs, who criticised the EU’s “inappropriate, insufficient and belated political responses to the crisis and […] structural weakness” (European Parliament 2010). French and Italian leaders also seemed to agree that the crises had been managed poorly at the EU level (for example, in 2011, Nicolas Sarkozy claimed that “Europe has disappointed”).

5The contents of these sub-narratives partially contradicted one another, even if constructed by the same actor(s).
### Table 2. Narrative analysis between 2010 and 2014

**Key narrative:** 'Divided in unity'

| Sub-narrative                          | Goal                                         | Plot                                                                 | Actors                                                                 |
|---------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| No alternative to integration         | More economic and fiscal integration         | Actors disagree with the EU's current political course or certain fiscal responses to the crises, European integration and the EU as a whole are nonetheless seen as inevitable. | European Council; German Chancellor, German Minister of Finance, German Minister of Foreign Affairs, Polish Prime Minister, Italian President, Italian Prime Minister (technocratic government) |
| The EU as failed leader/democratic deficit | Reform of the EU                             | MS in the EU find themselves in a deadlock: the EU is not able to take the lead and help countries to overcome the crises, while MS need the EU’s support to solve new challenges. | MEPs; Polish Prime Minister, French President, Italian President, Italian Prime Minister, Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs |
| Diversity as a challenge              | Renationalisation/institutional reform       | Diversity between MS and diverging national interests challenge the possibility of finding a joint stance. | MEPs; Polish Minister of Foreign Affairs, German Chancellor, German Minister of Finance, French Minister of Foreign Affairs |
| Conditional solidarity                | Fair distribution of liability/protection of national interests | Far-reaching conditions and prerequisites need to be included in economic aid and debt relief proposals. | MEPs; Polish Prime Minister, Polish Minister of Foreign Affairs, German Chancellor, German Minister of Foreign Affairs, German Minister for Economic Affairs |
| Global focus instead of EU focus     | Stability for MS as an individual actor in a globalised world | Solutions on a national/global level are preferable to European ones. There is a need for a strengthened global rather than a reinforced European governance to assert individual national attractiveness for external actors. | Polish Prime Minister, French President, Italian President |
Whereas in the early 2000s, institutional actors, such as José Manuel Barroso (2004b), had reiterated that the EU was an important global player, after the crises in the Euro area, the message conveyed by national politicians was exactly the opposite (for instance, Frattini 2011).

Furthermore, diversity was no longer interpreted as one of the EU’s main assets, but rather an obstacle to common solutions. In all four MS as well as in EP debates, political actors constructing the third sub-narrative, *Diversity as a challenge*, claimed that the EU enlargement’s effects on the composition of EU institutions needed to be ironed out (*plot*) (for instance, Fabius 2014). The goal of this narrative was to foster re-nationalisation as one possible solution (for example, Tusk 2011; 2013) and pass comprehensive institutional EU reforms. Nevertheless, MS knew the limitations of their national policies in the face of the crises, eventually acknowledging the role of the EU in negotiating compromises between them.

The fourth sub-narrative, *Conditional solidarity*, was constructed during the most critical years between 2010 and 2012. Political actors from Germany and Poland in particular, as well as several MEPs, acknowledged the importance of solidarity among EU MS, but emphasised its conditionality to their national parliaments and the EP (*plot*). The narrative pursued the *goal* of a fair distribution of liability and the protection of national interests. Weaker MS, for example, Greece, which depended on the support and solidarity of other MS during the crises, needed to meet certain criteria in order to have access to both financial and political solidarity. As epitomised in the sentence “Keine Leistung ohne Gegenleistung” (“No service without a service in return”) (Brüderle 2012, 23824), before expecting support, Greece and other MS struggling with their public debt first needed to comply with the measures to which they had committed (Merkel 2012). The emergence of this narrative expressed existing North-South divisions, which continued to deepen.

Finally, political leaders from all four MS constructed a fifth sub-narrative, *Global focus instead of EU focus*, by which they sought to strengthen the world’s confidence in their MS’ economy, disregarding the EU. The *goal* was to achieve stability for the individual MS in a globalised world economy. The EU level remained unmentioned, in order to emphasise the need to only pursue the country’s interest (for example, Berlusconi 2010). In order to underpin this message, political leaders such as French President Sarkozy (2011) would refer to the “world” rather than to “Europe” as their country’s immediate counterpart. A relaunch of the national economy was regarded as a prerequisite for a recovery of the global one (*plot*). The way out of the crises was first and foremost *national*, then *global*, but not necessarily *European*.

The five sub-narratives playing into the key narrative ‘divided in unity’ revealed not only a cleavage between national leaders and EU representatives, but also internal contradictions as well as divisions along the North-South divide. The crises in the Euro area exacerbated existing differences, leading to a negative interpretation of the EU’s diversity and political differentiation. Representatives of all four MS expressed general discontent that could be subsumed under the resigned phrase ‘Yes, we must’. The narrative was primarily constructed in front of national parliaments, the EP and small expert audiences, advocating reforms as well as more differentiated and flexible forms of integration. However, despite national leaders, especially in France and Italy, favouring national solutions rather than European ones and an enhanced role of their countries on the global stage, they ultimately
did not question the idea of European political unity as such. Against all odds, the narrative ‘divided in unity’ shows that political differentiation does not constitute a threat to political unity and that flexibility is necessary to maintain the latter. By acknowledging substantial differences between the MS’ willingness (or lack thereof) to achieve political unity in the EU and their simultaneous need to do so, political actors tended to accept permanent patterns of differentiated integration subsumed under the concept of ‘variable geometries’ (Tekin 2012, 42ff.).

**Conclusion: What’s next?**

Specific narratives can help political actors to continue to legitimise the EU’s goal for greater unity despite crises (see also Kaiser and McMahon 2017). The narrative analysis proposed in this article revealed a different key narrative for each of the two selected periods. During the first period (2000-2004), political actors seemed to commit not only to the idea of an EU ‘united in diversity’, but also to the optimistic motto ‘Yes, we can’, legitimising the EU’s political unity despite growing political differentiation and diversity. As long as temporary two-speed solutions were going to provide overall benefits to all MS, enlargement and the consequent increased diversity were not regarded as a problem. On the contrary, the second period (2010-2014) was characterised by widespread disenchantment, which led to a key narrative subsumed under the idea of an EU ‘divided in unity’. This national and rather resigned narrative appeared to follow the more cynical motto ‘Yes, we must’. Despite a deepening North-South divide between national political actors, who referred to the EU as a ‘failed leader’, they were still aware of the interdependency between the national and the European level. In the face of an increasing political differentiation, permanent patterns of differentiated integration seemed to become the only solutions for the EU system to survive as such. Despite using a narrative critical of the EU, political actors continued nonetheless to legitimise the overall idea of political unity in the EU to preserve their country’s interest.

The analysis presented here suggests that in both selected periods of increased political differentiation, political actors’ narratives eventually tried to reconcile the need to foster political unity with growing diversity within the EU through the existence of forms of differentiated integration.

This conclusion is particularly interesting in the face of the multiple dilemmas related to differentiated integration (Brunazzo 2019), as the latter could lead to further diversity and divergence within the EU, thus undermining the European political unity and triggering centrifugal or even disintegration tendencies (Tekin 2016a, 6; 2016b). This dilemma seems to suggest a circular pattern where more differentiation leads to changes in narratives and the overall legitimisation of the EU’s political unity, while prompting MS to increasingly resort to patterns of differentiated integration. Patterns of differentiated integration, in turn, are likely to increase differences between MS, the same differences that caused differentiated integration in the first place. In order to break this vicious circle, in the early 2000s, political actors envisaged only temporary patterns of differentiated integration. In 2010-2014, the crises of the Euro area laid bare the profound differences between MS, which seemed to call for more permanent patterns of differentiated integration in order to preserve political unity in the EU.
Accordingly, in the first period, the enlargement process was characterised by the idea of a ‘multi-speed Europe’, that is, a differentiated integration process that is limited in time and where a core group of MS moves towards more integration, giving new members more time to adapt (Tekin 2017). This approach matches the first key narrative of our analysis, revolving around the idea of an EU ‘united in diversity’.

The second period, characterised by the crises in the Euro area, revealed a permanent differentiated integration pattern along spatial lines, known as ‘variable geometry’, whereby different levels of integration involved geographically circumscribed regions. Again, this entails that some MS can advance integration, while others do not (Tekin 2017, 3). This approach matches the second key narrative, ‘divided in unity’, according to which MS still pursue the goal of political unity in the EU although deeply divided across regions.

The narrative analysis conducted aimed at outlining relevant correlations between heightened political differentiation within the EU and the construction of elite narratives legitimising (or not) the EU’s political unity. In the two specific periods in which political differentiation increased, two specific narratives were constructed (‘united in diversity’ and ‘divided in unity’) that ultimately sought to legitimise European unity and the related integration process. Both narratives legitimised political unity in the EU by envisaging differentiated integration as a viable solution to preserve such unity, although in different forms according to the period in which they emerged. Such narratives are likely to affect future choices of differentiated integration as well.

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