ISSUE OF IDENTITY

Visions of European Integration in V4 and Nordic Countries

A SYSTEMATIC DISCIPLINARY REVIEW

Visegrad Fund

University of Pécs · University of Prešov · University of Helsinki · Vienna School of International Studies · Nicolaus Copernicus University

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About This Volume

The project. This volume is part of the Visegrad project "*Issue of Identity: Visions of European Integration in V4 and Nordic Countries",* implemented between February 2025 and June 2026 and co-financed by the governments of Czechia, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia through Visegrad Grants from the International Visegrad Fund. The mission of the fund is to advance ideas for sustainable regional cooperation in Central Europe.

The project brought together five partner institutions — the University of Pécs (coordinator), the University of Prešov, the University of Helsinki, the Vienna School of International Studies, and the Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń — to examine the dynamic interplay between sovereignty and federalism within European integration, comparing the Visegrad countries (Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia) with the Nordic countries (Finland and Sweden), and situating both alongside the Austrian case.

The Visegrad countries, having regained sovereignty after the end of communist rule, have historically been cautious about ceding power to EU institutions; recurring crises since 2008 have sharpened debates about nationalism, populism, and the balance of authority between member states and supranational institutions. Comparing this experience with that of the Nordic countries — long characterised by a more pragmatic, functionally driven relationship with European cooperation — allows the project to illuminate what is distinctive, and what is shared, in how different European regions negotiate the tension between national sovereignty and federalist integration. The project's central aim is to foster a broader, more interdisciplinary scientific dialogue on this tension, and to translate that dialogue into resources — a systematic disciplinary review and a jointly developed lecture — that bridge scholarly research, policy engagement, and public understanding, including for the training of future diplomats.

The purpose of this review. As a first step toward that goal, the project invited researchers from four disciplines — history, international relations, political science, and social psychology — to conduct an independent, discipline-specific review of how the issue of European integration, and specifically the relationship between sovereignty and federalism, has been conceptualised and studied within each field. Rather than producing a single synthetic account, the partners chose to preserve the distinct analytical vocabularies and theoretical traditions of each discipline, so that their differences and points of convergence could be examined side by side. The four contributions that follow approach the same underlying question from different perspectives: a historical and comparative account of nationalism, federalism, and sovereignty in Austrian, Visegrad, and Nordic historiography; a social-psychological account of European identity, intergroup threat, and collective memory; a political-science account of the EU's "internal federalization" and the concept of demoicracy; and an international-relations account of identity, sovereignty, and federalism amid a changing global order. Taken together, they provide an interdisciplinary baseline for the collaboratively developed educational lecture and serve as a resource for researchers, students, and policymakers with an interest in the future of European integration.

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Nation, Empire, and Identity: Comparative Perspectives from Central and Northern Europe

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Introduction:

This review is a comparison between two European regions, The Visegrad 4 and Austria on the one hand, and the Nordic countries on the other. The aim is to expose the various forms of internal cooperation and tensions with regards to the European integration project and to ponder the various national and regional strategies, political legacies and identity markers that are to be found. The focus is historical pointing at long term structures and with the suggestion that history has returned, as it did not end in the early 1990s. The overarching theme is how these two semi-peripheral regions relate to the idea of European unity and the EU as a federalist project. In order to tackle these questions, the review consists of two parts, one on the Central European Visegrad 4 and Austria, and the other on the Nordic region. Special attention is given to the dynamics of the major neighbouring powers, such as Germany and Russia, but also towards questions of national/regional identity, culture and historical memory narratives. Also, the cultural legacy of the distinct Chirstian identity, one region Lutheran and the other predominantly Catholic, is another category of historical importance and with implications for present day identity. In the conclusion we strive to provide answers with a comparative perspective.

1. Contested Pasts, Contested Futures: Nationalism, Federalism, and Sovereignty in Austrian and Visegrád Historiography

The task to outline the evolving historiographical interpretations of nationalism, federalism, and sovereignty, with a special focus to Austria and the Visegrád Four countries —namely the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia— is multifaceted. It is evident that these concepts have been central to the general political and cultural development of Central Europe, having taken on renewed relevance particularly in the post-Cold War context – also amid shifting geopolitical dynamics within the European Union. By focusing on Austria and the Visegrád Four countries, this section also examines how these ideas have been reinterpreted, contested, and mobilized in national historical narratives. It explores the ways in which historiography in these countries reflects broader political transformations and identity negotiations, shedding light on the intersections between historical scholarship and contemporary debates on statehood, integration, and regional autonomy. Through a critical review of historiographical trends and key scholarly debates, it aims to contribute to a deeper

understanding of how the enduring tensions between national sovereignty and supranational integration in Central Europe has been shaped in contemporary history.

1.1. Federal Tensions and National Aspirations in the 1867 Austro-Hungarian Compromise

Reviewing the concepts of federalism, nationalism and sovereignty, it is necessary to outline the early developments of "Slavic" nationalism in Central Europe in the 19th century. Slav nationalists, whose territory had once been part of the Holy Roman Empire and ruled by the Habsburg monarchy, had already opposed Austria's accession to a unified German nation-state emerging from the Frankfurt Parliament in 1848, through petitions and newspaper articles. A different idea of Austria's role in Europe, known as "Austro-Slavism", was simultaneously developed by certain Slav nationalists. The prominent Bohemian historian František Palacký rejected the concept of Austria's inclusion in a unified Germany in the spring of 1848, stating that the Czech Slav nation ought to be kept separate from a German nation state. He was also one of the main proponents of a "Slavic" federal Austria. Palacký fused a more recent Czech ethnic nationalism that aimed for linguistic parity—or hegemony—in the governance of Bohemia with old diet-based patriotism that called for autonomy for Bohemia within a federal Austria (Judson, 2016, pp. 206–207)

The so called "*Ausgleich*", also known as the Austro-Hungarian Compromise of 1867, stands as a particular vital moment in Central European history. The 1867 compromise was after all a response to surging nationalist pressures, which had been driven from the Hungarian elite, and was envisioned as a measure to stabilize the Austrian empire by recognizing Hungary's autonomy while simultaneously maintaining "imperial unity". The initial driver for the Ausgleich was Austria's defeat by Prussia at the infamous Battle of Königgrätz in 1866, after which the Habsburg Empire had to reevaluate the Austrian Empire's internal structure. The result of this revaluation was the creation of the Dual Monarchy of Austria-Hungary, a unique federal arrangement that granted Hungary equal status with Austria under Emperor Franz Joseph I (Seton-Watson, 1939). Historians such Robert Kann have argued that the Ausgleich was a pragmatic but flawed solution, as it institutionalized ethnic inequality and sowed the seeds of future disintegration. The system was inherently dualist, not truly federalist, as it privileged two dominant nations (Germans and Magyars) over others (Seton-Watson, 1939).

Three events, according to Kann, eventually contributed to this development: First, it became clear that the second part of the 19th century saw significant flaws in absolutist authority. Great Britain and France, two naval powers, were forced to give up any claims to global political dominance after the Russian Empire, which had been powerful and dominant in forming European politics in the first half of the 19th century, failed miserably in the Crimean War (1853–1856). Second, Austria's inferiority was exposed by a number of lost engagements. These included Königgrätz in the Austro-Prussian War (1866) and the Battles of Magenta and Solferino in the Sardinian War (both in June 1859) (Kulturstiftung, 2017). And third, even though the Ausgleich offered a reprieve to the Habsburg-Empire, the concessions made to ethnic Hungarians outraged other ethnic groups within the Empire -

Czechs, Slovaks, Poles, Croats, and other ethnicities remained underrepresented and often marginalized within the imperial framework (Seton-Watson, 1939).

Confidence by those groups that the Austro-Habsburg Monarchy would act in their best interests was substantially weakened by these concessions. Indeed, Francis Joseph I, Emperor of Austria (1830–1916), reluctantly accepted the concessions to Hungary in order to prevent making any other concessions to any other ethnic group. On the other hand, it can be contended that Franz Joseph was more impartial and that his historical account suggests that the other ethnic groups' internal strife kept them from coming to comparable agreements. (Witt, 2009, pp. 82–85). It became more evident with the conclusion of the Austro-Hungarian Compromise in 1867 and the recognition of full Serbian independence in 1878 that it was impossible to realize southern Slav union within the Austrian orbit. Thus, the Yugoslav movement's centre of gravity inexorably shifted from Croatian Catholicism to Serbian Greek Orthodoxism, from apathy toward Austria to animosity (Kann, 1950, p. 252).

1.2. From Trialism to Wilsonianism: National Aspirations and Ethnic Tensions in Central Europe, 1867–1918

Soon after the Austro-Hungarian Compromise of 1867, ideas of “trialism” arose primarily as a response by Slavic countries to the Hungarians' newfound privilege and extraordinary power. Czech politicians, like František Palacký (1798-1876) and František Ladislav Rieger (1818-1903), who had previously advocated Austro-Slavism, were among the first to espouse trialistic principles. The idea was to turn the empire into a federation of independent entities that would defend the rights of all countries, but particularly those of the Slavic people. The Czechs proposed a trialistic approach since these ideas could not be implemented after dualism (Austria and Hungary) was established in 1867 (Drozdowski, 2014). In their initial plan, the third part of the monarchy would be a Slavic federation with Prague as its capital. The other, more specific proposal was the so-called "Fundamental Articles," which were proposed by the Czech nationalist lobby in 1871 (Heimann, 2009, pp. 16–17). In these, Czechs demanded that the Bohemian Crown's domains (Bohemia, Moravia, and Czech Silesia) be given the same status as the Kingdom of Hungary – nevertheless, those efforts were consistently blocked by Germans and Hungarians residing in the Czech territories. A trialist idea that suggested the union of South Slavic nations from Trieste to the Drina River was also advocated by clerical periodicals before to the outbreak of WWI. A collaboration with Croatian parties from Istria and Dalmatia was crucial to this plan, seeking the unification of the Croatian lands through the reformation of the Croatian–Hungarian Settlement of 1868 (Ivašković, 2024, p. 86).

Despite having made a formal pledge to that effect, Francis Joseph I chose not to be crowned king of Bohemia (Drozdowski, 2014). Simultaneously, Slovaks, Croats, and Romanians in Transylvania experiences attempts of “magyarization” aimed at assimilating them into Hungarian culture (Witt, 2009, pp. 84–85). The process of “magyarization” itself was multifaceted - during the period between the Compromise of 1867 and the dissolution of Austria-Hungary in 1918, non-Hungarian nationals residing in the Kingdom of Hungary, which was then a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, underwent this process, in which they adopted the Hungarian national identity and language. In certain ways, some

government policies required magyarization, which happened both willingly (Molnár, 2014, p. 218) and as a consequence of societal pressure, mandated by law (Molnár, 2014, p. 223).

The outbreak of WWI and the subsequent collapse of Austria-Hungary in 1918 led to the emergence of new nation-states: Austria, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Poland - reconstituted after partitions. According to the ideology of "Wilsonianism", which were forged in the spirit of US President Wilson's 14 Points, these states were founded on the principle of national self-determination. In regard of Austria's and the Visegrád State nation building, Willson's 14 Points were essential, since his points envisions Austria-Hungary to be provided an opportunity for self-determination, the creation of an independent Polish state and, more generally, open diplomacy with economic free trade. The historian Erez Manela attempted to dissect, how Wilson's rhetoric about self-determination had a major influence on nationalist movements, also fuelling the concepts of sovereignty — not only in Europe but also in colonized regions like Egypt, India, China, and Korea. In regard to Europe, he addressed how Wilson's Fourteen Points raised expectations by nationalist movements, particularly in Central Europe:

> *"Quite apart from Wilson's own intentions when he uttered the words of the Fourteen Points address or his other well-known speeches, different groups and individuals adopted the language of self-determination to varying extents and adapted it to varying circumstances. Perhaps most famously, it was used by many of the national groups that emerged from the wreckage of the Habsburg and Romanov empires in East-Central Europe, and helped shape the postwar settlements that created Czechoslovakia, Poland, and the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes as independent states." (Manela, 2007, p. 7)*

Nevertheless, those states inherited a complex multiethnic populace and unresolved territorial disputes. The Historian Tony Judt stressed that following the dissolution of the ancient empires in 1918, the newly established nations that arose were impoverished, unsteady, and hostile toward their neighbours. Europe was teeming with "revisionist" republics in the years between the wars (Judt, 2005, p. 4). Russia, Germany, Austria, Hungary, and Bulgaria had all lost the "Great War" and were waiting for a chance to regain their territory. Particularly after 1918, there was just an interval brought on by fatigue; there was no return to global stability or a restored balance between the European powers. Instead, it transformed into internal issues, including racial discrimination, nationalist rhetoric, class conflict, and civil war.

Austria, once Central Europe's dominating entity, had been also left in a vulnerable position after WWI. The historian Pieter M. Judson stressed that even the new Austrian Republic claimed the right to merge with Germany (*Anschluss*) in the 2nd Article of its constitution (Judson, 2016, p. 437)**. However, the Allied powers forbade such a union, fearing destabilization and German expansionism. Judson also portrays how German-speaking Jews and other minorities were denied Austrian citizenship post-WWI, despite identifying with Austria, which evidently reflected yet again tensions between ethnic nationalism and civic identity (Judson, 2016, pp. 444–445) During the 1920s and particularly the 1930s, Europe thus found itself in an unstable transitional period between the aftermath of one war and the impending threat of another (Judt, 2005, p. 4).

1.3. From Trianon to the European Union: Hungary's National Trauma, Federalism, and Sovereignty in the 20th Century

It may be concluded that the Austrian monarchy, which was converted into a federation, would not have been doomed in the absence of the WWI. Regarding the Hungarian stance however, the fundamentals are well known, according to the late Hungarian historian Miklós Molnár: The crushing weight of a Hungary with 20 million people would have diminished the other national ethnicities—Austria, Germany, Czechia, Poland, and Italy—to the tiniest part. Second, no nationality in the Hungarian monarchy would have been open to being left behind after such a reorganization. In any case, ancient Hungary would have fallen apart as a result of federalization. In addition to the unavoidable demands of the Serbs, the likely Ruthenian demands, and the predictable Saxon demands, it would have meant breaking away from Croatia, losing Upper Hungary to become a federal Slovak state, and the secession of the Transylvanian Romanians in one way or another (Molnár, 2014, p. 248).

A Soviet-style Republic of Councils took over Hungary in 1919, after the democratic government of Count Mihály Károlyi, who led the brief and unrecognized first Hungarian Republic (1918–1919), failed to protect the country from military assaults by Romania, Serbia, and the newly formed Czechoslovakia. Here it is vital to stress the impact of this incident on Hungary's subsequent national development - although the Soviet republic lasted only 133 days, the counterrevolutionary administration that followed under Admiral Miklós Horthy gained credibility for the following 25 years by opposing Hungarian Bolshevism (Deák, 2000, pp. 42–43). A national parliament chose Horthy as the kingdom's regent in March 1920, also owing to military pressure. A newly formed Hungarian government was then tasked with signing the infamous Treaty of Trianon (Molnár, 2014, p. 262).

The Trianon treaty can be indeed regarded as Hungary's "national trauma" - it costed Hungary 60% of its population and 72% of its territory. Hungary shrank from 282,000 km² to 93,000 km², and just 8 million of its initial 18 million populace were left within the newly drawn borders. While mixed and fully Hungarian lands were also disconnected, including those where the Hungarians lived directly next to the new Hungary without any intermediate nationality, the bulk of the detached areas were inhabited by Romanians, Slovaks, Serbs, Croats, Ruthenians, or Germans. A third, or around 3.3 million, of the initial 10 million Hungarian speakers were subject to foreign domination. About half of them were split off without a vote, based only on strategic reasons such the location of branch railway lines, and with no respect for ethnic borders. The nation of Hungary grew reliant on foreign raw materials. Roughly one in four families were impacted by such large-scale population and land losses (Hevizi, 2004, pp. 103–104).

Even Austria, which was also harshly punished, was given a portion of the Hungarian kingdom, Burgenland, which had 290,000 (mostly ethnic German) inhabitants (Molnár, 2014, p. 262). The Hungarian-born Austrian author and journalist Paul Lendvai said that the treaty of Trianon deeply embedded national trauma in Hungary's cultural memory, also arguing that it fuelled revisionist ambitions, anti-liberal nationalism, and shaped Hungary's collective identity well into modern times. Regarding the Trianon treaty, he wrote:

> *"A single word, Trianon, sums up for all Hungarians to this day the most devastating tragedy in their history In the Trianon palace, in the park of Versailles, the Allies presented the death certificate of the 1,000-year realm of St Stephen, and two representatives of Hungary, whose names have long been forgotten, had to sign the dictated settlement on behalf of the government and Parliament. On that fateful day, 4 June 1920, church bells rang all over the country, black flags flew over buildings, traffic came to a standstill, news papers appeared with black borders, and funeral services were held in churches. Trianon meant the vivisection of the Hungarian nation and the end of historical Hungary." (Lendvai, 2003, p. 373)*

In addition to failing to protect Hungary from German and Soviet imperialism, the Horthy regime failed to maintain its territorial gains - Hungary actually lost some additional territory after WWII - surrendered half a million of its most hardworking citizens to the German murder factory and failed to save the nation from destruction and ruin (Deák, 2000, p. 55). The 1956 Hungarian popular uprising against the post WWII Soviet occupation was a clear renewed expression of Hungary's national self-determination and revealed the persistence of a Hungarian distinct national consciousness, generally opposed to any form of external control. However, Soviet suppression prevented any institutional development toward decentralization or federalism, until its collapse in 1991.

With its accession to the EU in 2004, Hungary experienced a new form of political integration, this time within a supranational federal framework. While the EU structurally incorporates elements of a federalist system, Hungarian politics has become increasingly nationalist and Eurosceptic. It can be truly emphasized that many post-socialist European states have a rather ambivalent attitude toward the EU - on the one hand, they benefited economically, but on the other, many citizens and political elites perceived supranational governance as a threat to national sovereignty. Hungary can be seen as a good example that particularly "ethnocultural" nationalism has been growing since the 2010s, which tends to reject supranational federalism and emphasizes the primacy of a national identity.

1.4. Poland as the "Special Case": The Legacy of Partitions and the Rise of National Consciousness

The national identity of modern Poland was clearly forged in the crucible of foreign domination. Following the multi-partitions of Poland, in 1772, 1793 and 1795, the once mighty Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was literally erased from the map and divided among Russia, Prussia, and Austria. Nevertheless, despite the absence of a Polish state, a strong national movement was still able to emerge, which was particularly rooted in the remnant memory of the Commonwealth - and the ideals of the emerging Enlightenment and Romanticism (Molnár, 2014, p. 248).

The January Uprising of 1863 against Russian rule was a defining moment, with Polish nobility staging a final uprising against Russian control. Following this uprising, the Russian empire started to question Polish economic and cultural supremacy in its western territories. Significant segments of the old Polish elite rebelled against conventional notions of the country and the politics following the uprising. A few activists and imperial authorities joined

them, suggesting that language and religion determined the fate of countries (Snyder, 2003, p. 4). Though ultimately crushed, it galvanized a generation of Polish patriots and intellectuals. The failure of armed resistance led to a shift toward “organic work”—a strategy of cultural and economic development aimed at preserving Polish identity under foreign rule (Blejwas, 1970, p. 23).

The disintegration of the once federally structured aristocratic state (Rzeczpospolita) raised fundamental questions in Polish society about statehood and national identity. Norman Davies emphasizes that Polish nationalism developed during this period primarily as a cultural and historical resistance to external powers (Davies, 2005, p. V). Federalism as a political idea played only a marginal role, as federal structures were considered either inefficient (as in the old aristocratic state) or a means of foreign domination (e.g., in the Habsburg Empire). The Polish national identity was therefore primarily shaped by language, Catholic faith, and historical memory—not by institutional plurality (Davies, 2005, pp. 55–56). The meaning of "nationalism" in Poland changed from an enlightened and gentry-led romantic ideal to a large mass movement. In the late 19th century, peasants and workers acquired a sense of belonging to the Polish nation, promoted by education and nationalist political groups. (Millard, 1995).

Poland re-established its independence as the Second Polish Republic after WWI. The new state was ethnically diverse, with substantial Ukrainian, Jewish, Belorusian and German minorities. Nevertheless, the Polish government continued with centralistic and assimilationist approach, which also led to the marginalizing non-Polish groups (Millard, 1995). Historian Timothy Snyder also outlined that the early modern Polish nation, which initially fell apart in the late nineteenth century, was able to survive divisions - in the new polities created following WWI, a fierce struggle between ethnic nationalism and conventional patriotism persisted. The historical integument that allowed early modern concepts of nationality to cohere was only ultimately broken by the organized carnage of WWII. Indeed, WWII ravaged Poland — the invasion in 1939 by Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union brought occupation, genocide and the virtual annihilation of Poland’s historically grown Jewish population. Ethnic cleansing and deportations emptied cosmopolitan cities and laid waste to the country, also opening the way to modern nationalism, according to Snyder. (Snyder, 2003, p. 2).

The WWII Yalta Conference in 1945 placed Poland within the Soviet sphere of influence. Churchill and Roosevelt initially attempted in vain to regain control over Eastern Europe at Yalta. Without specifying its boundaries, they acknowledged Poland's claim to territory that had been taken from eastern Germany. Between July and August 1945, the Allied Powers quickly resolved the majority of the remaining issues at the Potsdam Conference. They approved the expulsion of Germans from Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary, fixed the Polish German frontier on the Oder and Western Neisse, and demanded free and democratic elections be held as soon as possible to confirm the makeup of the current government after briefly consulting with a Polish communist delegation that the Soviets had skilfully prepared. Poland was thereafter left to its own devices by the Western Powers (Davies, 2005, pp. 364–365). After the Hitler-Stalin Pact (1939) and again from 1945 onwards, Poland was occupied by the Soviet Union and properly integrated into the Soviet sphere of influence.

The post-WWII People's Republic of Poland, established in 1947, was a centralized communist state, which rejected federalism and subordinated nationalism to a Marxist-Leninist ideology (Millard, 1995). Federalism was ideologically impossible under the Communist Party regime, as national unity was equated with central control. Timothy Snyder describes Poland during this period as a "forced member state within Moscow's imperial system," in which national and federal autonomy were systematically suppressed. At the same time, a strongly ethically based nationalism developed within the population—particularly in the context of Solidarity—which was fed by resistance to Soviet hegemony. The experience of "externally imposed centralization" still shapes Polish distrust of external centers of political power—whether from Moscow or Brussels (Snyder, 2010, pp. 98–127, 237–264).

The Polish October in 1956, also known as the "Polish thaw" saw a change in the politics of the Polish People's Republic, with the appointment of Władysław Gomułka as First Secretary of the ruling Polish United Workers' Party (PZPR), a step that marking the end of Stalinism in Poland. Here it is important to highlight that the 1956 establishment of the national Communist regime's tactical posture was merely a modernized version of the traditional "organic work" theme. It was only natural for the ancient self-preservation mechanisms and the ingrained behaviours of resistance to continuously reassert themselves as long as Poland's historical subordination to Russian power persisted (Davies, 2005, p. 520).

The fall of communism in 1989 ushered in the Thir d Polish Republic, a democratic state with a unitary structure. The 1997 Constitution reaffirmed Poland as a unitary state, though it granted significant autonomy to local governments through administrative decentralization. Since joining the EU in 2004, Poland has been caught in the tension between European federalism and national sovereignty. The Polish government – particularly under the PiS (Law and Justice) party – has emphasized a sovereignty-centered policy for years, which often conflicts with the federal nature of the EU institutions. (Zielonka, 2006, pp. 131–132). The current relationship with Russia exacerbates this tension: Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine (2022), Poland sees itself as a frontline state of the West and refuses any cooperation with Russia, which is largely perceived in Warsaw as an imperial threat. Geopolitical polarization reinforces both nation-state thinking and the need for a transatlantic (not primarily federal) security partnership, for example, with the USA (Zielonka, 2006, p. 159). Historically, this also reflects the "Antemurale myth", an idea outlining that a nation has the mission to be a bulwark defending "Western Christianity", culture and values against an any "external" threats.

Over the span of 200 years, Polish nationalism has evidently shifted from a so called "civic-territorial model" to an "ethnic-cultural one", particularly in regard of the 20th century (Millard, 1995). The Polish national identity proved itself as quite resilient, despite centuries of foreign rule. Modern Poland was evidently forged in the legacy of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth - with its decentralized and multiethnic structure, and its multiple partitions. Poland's historical legacy also fuels debates about federalism and regionalism. Nevertheless, modern Poland remains a unitary state, with federalism not gaining significant political traction, also in view of the country's EU accession.

1.5. The Czechoslovak Experiment: Centralization, Federalism, and National Identity

Czechoslovakia emerged in 1918 from the collapse of Austria-Hungary, a multi-ethnic state. Officially, it was a republic of two nations forming one state, but in practice, Czech nationalism dominated the political system, with Slovaks often being treated as "junior partners" in this state structure. Slovaks, like German Bohemians and Hungarians, also often perceived the state as centralized and Czech-dominated (Heimann, 2009, p. 70). Particularly the absence of genuine federal structures, such as an autonomous Slovak parliament, led to deep frustration among the non-Czech population. Federalism and Slovak aspirations for autonomy, remained a dead letter until the Munich Agreement of 1938. The centralized state was the expression of a Czech national project, not of equal federalism.

In the interwar years, federalism was largely abandoned in favour of centralized nation-states. Looking at Czechoslovakia, it is quickly recognisable that it was the most democratic and federal in structure. Indeed, the Czechoslovakia under Tomas Masaryk, who served as Czechoslovakia's first president from 1918 to 1935 can be regarded as a genuinely democratic and comparatively tolerant entity, also recognizing Slovak autonomy to some extent, at least during the interwar years. The late historian Joseph Rothschild also highlighted that Czechoslovakia was the only interwar Central European state to preserve democratic institutions, uninterrupted from 1918 to 1938:

> *"The political history of interwar Czechoslovakia up to the Munich disaster of 1938 was unique in East Central Europe not only for its uninterrupted constitutional and civil libertarian continuity, but also for a pattern of extraordinary stability, mentioned above, within and among the political parties. Once the Communists and Socialists had parted in 1920, and the Czech and Slovak Populists in 1921, no later crisis or election brought any drastic shifts in the positions or the relative strengths of the Czechoslovak political parties. Even the virtual absorption of the Sudeten German political community into the Henleinist incarnation of nazism in the mid-1930s had no organizational or electoral impact upon Czechoslovakia the traditional balances that prevailed among the non-German parties" (Rothschild 1998, 100-101).*

Czechoslovakia was a multicultural state where all minorities were at least accepted, in contrast to nearby Romania, Hungary, or Poland. It should be kept in mind though, that a "Czechoslovak" majority community did not exist though, since even the Czechs themselves made up a relative majority – this is why Germans, Slovaks, Hungarians, Ruthenes, and Jews were able to find a place in this interwar entity, even though Germans in particular were prone to irredentist sentiments brought in from their neighbours (Judt & Snyder, 2012, p. 20). On the other hand, despite constitutional guarantees, Slovak autonomy was very limited - political tensions continued to grow in the country, especially during the 1930s, with the Slovak People's Party under Andrej Hlinka demanding greater self-rule. This development resulted in the infamous Munich Agreement of 1938, after which Slovakia was granted its desired autonomy within a Czechoslovak entity and then declared independence in March 1939 under Nazi patronage (Henderson, 2002, pp. 11–12).

After WWII, Slovakia was assimilated into Czechoslovakia, ultimately becoming a communist state in 1948. Similar to other satellite entities of the Soviet Empire, the communist

Czechoslovak regime was highly centralized, also curtailing Slovak autonomy. Outlining endeavours for federalism within this entity, the Prague Spring of 1968, led by Slovak reformer Alexander Dubček, briefly showed an alternative path, away from a centralized Czechoslovakia. The 1968 Constitutional Law of Federation finally transformed Czechoslovakia into a federation of two equal republics: the Czech Socialist Republic and the Slovak Socialist Republic (Heimann, 2009, p. 270). Although this process was a vital step towards the creation of two separate states, the Warsaw Pact invasion in August 1968, which came right after the Prague Spring, put a stop to any hopes and endeavours for reforms. As a result, real federalism stayed mostly just a symbolic idea within Czechoslovakia until the Velvet Revolution in 1989. (Heimann, 2009, pp. 231–233). Nevertheless, it was precisely the formal federal structure that strengthened Slovak national consciousness and paved the way for later independence movements.

Czechoslovakia peacefully disbanded in 1993 after democracy and the Velvet Revolution. Without mentioning the Habsburg Empire, let alone the Holy Roman Empire, the Czech Republic traced its ancestry from the medieval Kingdom of Bohemia to the Czechoslovak Republic of the twentieth century. By defining the Slovak people as the heirs of the Great Moravian Empire of the ninth century, along with "members of national minorities and ethnic groups living in the Slovak Republic," Slovakia revived the double-barred cross, promoted itself as a Christian nation, and kept its Hungarian and Roma populations at bay, even in the preamble to its own constitution (Heimann, 2009, p. 320).

Both successor states – the Czech Republic and Slovakia – joined the EU in 2004. Since then, the Czech Republic manged to develop itself in a predominantly pro-European and technocratic state, while Slovakia, on the other hand, has at times viewed more federal EU tendencies with scepticism. However, Slovakia eventually joined the European Union and NATO in 2004. The country remained a unitary state, with a rather decentralized administrative structure. Reviewing contemporary Slovak nationalism is complex and multifaceted - it includes both civic elements, emphasizing EU integration and democratic values, and ethnic elements, often tied to historical memory and identity politics. Debates over the legacy of the wartime Slovak state and the country's relations with Hungary continue to shape the national discourse.

Both Slovakia and the Czech Republic have significantly escalated their relations with Russia following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. While Prague plays a leading role in providing military support to Ukraine, Bratislava has occasionally appeared divided under successive governments. The experience of Soviet oppression has shaped both countries – especially the Czech Republic – and led to a critical attitude towards authoritarian power projections from Moscow.

1.6. Postwar Trajectories and Cooperation: The Visegrád Group, Austria, and the Politics of Sovereignty in Central Europe

Following WWII, the paths of the Visegrád countries and Austria evidently diverged significantly. Austria, solidified as a federal republic by the 1955 State Treaty – developing a constitution that stressed regional autonomy, democratic rule and permanent neutrality.

Meanwhile, Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary became part of the Soviet Union, as satellite states, simultaneously embracing centralized communist regimes and systems. Consequently, federalism was stamped out under communist rule, with nationalist tendencies often being stirred up and controlled by the state.

Eastern and Central Europe saw a distinct and swift interest in nationalism and federalism following the gradual dissolution of the communist regimes in 1989 and 1990. The peaceful separation of Czechoslovakia in 1993 should be stressed here as a prime example of this development - the primary causes of this division were after all the divergent Czech and Slovak national identities and political objectives. The Visegrád Group (V4) was established in 1991 by Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia (later the Czech Republic and Slovakia), in the aftermath of the dissolution of the Soviet Empire. In order to facilitate deeper collaboration among themselves as well as their entry into the European Union, they established this organization, also as a platform for dialogue. The Visegrád Group developed ultimately into a vessel for these nations to cooperate based on their common history and cultural identity, while not being a formal union. Despite the EU's significant economic benefits, V4 member states frequently oppose a more federalized Europe. The V4 states' nationalisms are comparable in that they place a strong focus on cultural preservation, Christian identity, and sovereignty, while both domestic and EU federal systems are perceived with caution.

Austrian federalism is also presented as an example of balanced decentralization, though fiscal federalism and regional unbalance are still controversial subjects. The Visegrád Group countries, however, have seen an increase in nationalism in recent years. Hungary, under Viktor Orbán, has particularly pursued nationalist policies by challenging EU standards. Poland did likewise under the Law and Justice Party PiS. The Czech Republic and Slovakia saw alternating nationalist sentiments, which had heretofore been increasingly associated with immigration, relations with the EU, and historical memory.

Even before the dissolution of the Soviet Union, initiatives were drafted to develop regional cooperation between countries in Central, Southeastern and Eastern Europe. The “Central European Initiative” (CEI) was such an initiative. It was founded in Budapest in 1989, initially named “Quadragonale” (four-member format), with Italy, Austria, Hungary, and Yugoslavia as founding countries. In 1990, Czechoslovakia joined, and the forum was renamed Pentagonale; in 1991, Poland also joined, evolving the group into the “Hexagonale”. The initiative was finally renamed the “Central European Initiative” in 1992 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic). Austria itself pursued strategies to strengthen regional collaboration with V4 countries as early as 2014, with the Austria–Czech–Slovak "Austerlitz Format", which was established as a flexible substitute for the V4 group (Schubert, 2015). Due to historical tensions in the Habsburg territory (such as Visegrád's anti-imperial symbolism), this established Austria as a cooperating partner without V4 accession. Since then, Austria has collaborated through academic, cultural, and security policy exchanges with the Visegrád Group.

2. Nordic Exceptionalism and European Integration

The five Nordic countries Denmark, Sweden, Norway Iceland and Finland have a long tradition of cooperation, which makes it possible to look at them as a group with regards to Europe and European integration and the tensions between sovereignty and federalism. The Nordic five do not always act as one group, and the Nordic cooperation model parts from an unnegotiable respect for each country's sovereignty. In this way the whole idea of Nordic cooperation is different from the European post-II World War integration project, where the core states constantly have pushed for deeper integration. This Nordic principle has historical roots which date back to 19th century pan-Scandinavian failures and more specifically to Norway's history of being part of Denmark and then in an asymmetric union with Sweden 1814-1905. The 19th century pan-Scandinavianism was on the one hand a liberal student driven movement, and on the other a dynastic project to unite the three crowns. The idea of a united Scandinavian kingdom was buried with the Danish defeat against German and Austrian troops 1864 in the Second Schleswig War, when Sweden-Norway did not commit to enter the war on the Danish side. Furthermore, for Norway, as well as for Iceland and Finland, the recent independence achieved during the 20th century is valued as very precious and constitutes a raison d'être with national-mythological dimensions (Hansen & Wæver, 2002).

One main incentive for Nordic cooperation is the shared small state identity, which presents a shared interest in cooperation on the international scene. The security concerns have been pivotal, with two major neighbouring powers Russia and Germany. However, at times of security crisis the diverging geopolitical concerns have so far always proved an obstacle to any major and profoundly integrated defence union. From the outside the Nordics are usually perceived as one group, keen to defend rule of law in international politics and respected for their egalitarian and prosperous societies. The Nordic cooperation builds on the 19th century Scandinavianist idea of a special kinship between the Nordic peoples, and parts from the recognition that all five countries have very similar political systems, societies and customs, and that most people can understand each other's languages (with the exception of Finnish and Icelandic). Back in the days Finnish and Icelandic politicians and civil servants would often be fluent in Swedish and Danish respectively, which contributed to a cooperation culture and practice between both civil society actors and state institutions during the 20th century.

The Nordic countries are characterized by strong and centralized state institutions, and during the long modernization period starting in the late 19th century a perception of strong unitary culture and homogenous population marked the self-image. The Lutheran state churches in all Nordic countries, established during the 16th century, have been an important factor in not only distinguishing the region in terms of church organization from Catholic Europe, but also in forging a political culture where the state has strong agency over the individual and civil society. As Henrik Stenius has noted the Nordic countries have had very little tolerance for sub-cultures, which has also produced a very late awakening concerning ethnic minorities and especially the indigenous Sámi and Inuit nations. Any serious domestic regional separatist challenges have been purely cultural, however, the three autonomies

Åland Islands, Faroe Islands and Greenland have developed various forms of independence claims and narratives.

During the 1930s regular and informal foreign minister's meetings were arranged to ponder the worsening security situation Europe, and it was self-evident that all countries would trust each other when exchanging ideas, information and viewpoints. However, the II World War was a traumatic experience for the idea of a Nordic unity, and a reminder of the fact that the Nordic governments were not ready to form wartime alliances. After the war Sweden's proposal 1947 for a Nordic defence union failed, with Denmark, Norway and Iceland joining NATO, other ways had to be sought for. The result was the Nordic Council (NC), founded in 1952, an inter-parliamentarian body with 87 members which assembles once a year for one week. The setup is based on producing joint non-binding recommendations which are hoped to turn into harmonized legislation and policies in the respective national parliaments. At the same time NC became a meeting forum for Nordic parliamentarians for edifying personal contacts and even long-lasting friendships.

In the start NC would focus on gaining results in those fields where it was possible, and quite soon both a passport-free zone (starting 1952, final agreement 1957) and free movement of labour was agreed upon (Iceland staying out until 1966), including the right to social security for Nordic citizens in any fellow country (Thorhallsson, 2015). This is considered one of the great achievements in Nordic cooperation and a substantial proof of factual integration that was even ahead of the European counterpart. Nordic identification with Europe is that of ambiguity and hesitation as there has been a parallel regional project. However, Nordic cooperation is by no means isolated from Europe, quite the contrary. Nordic cooperation has been a constant dialogue with European integration as we will see (Olesen, 2000).

If we consider the Nordic understanding and self-identification with European culture another dimension appears. As a periphery, the Nordic region, or Scandinavia, has been at the receiving end of what generally can be referred to as continental European culture. Western Christian expansion in the Middle Ages and the reception of cultural influences during centuries have established a peripheral European identity recognizing a certain cultural heritage superiority of core Europe. In this context 'European culture' stands for something desirable and is underpinned by an understanding of being in debt of gratitude towards European cultural refinement when edifying Nordic cultural life in the periphery.

2.1. Entangled Parallel Projects

Denmark, Norway, and Sweden were founding members of the Council of Europe in 1949, but like Great Britain firmly against it developing into a supranational organization (Wivel, 2025). Hence, the Nordic countries did not join the European Coal and Steel Community nor the EEC or the European Atomic Energy Community. The Nordics stayed out of the first phase of creating the European six during the 1950s. As export industry economies the Nordic countries sought for ways to still benefit from the Western European market, and consequently all three countries joined the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) when founded in 1960 on a British initiative. Finland, restricted by concerns towards the Soviet

Union, negotiated a non-member partnership (FINEFTA) the following year 1961 (full member 1986) and Iceland would later join in 1970.

The question remained if any of the Nordic countries would actively strive for becoming a member of the EEC? Here the Nordic countries had different concerns and positions. For Denmark, Norway and Iceland the concerns were mainly domestic, while Sweden and Finland viewed it from a foreign policy perspective and their status as neutral countries (Ingebritsen, 1998). The agricultural sector was also important, and Iceland, Norway, Sweden and Finland, due to climate realities, had a protectionist approach. For Denmark, dependent on its highly competitive agriculture export, the British market was crucial and following the British decision to apply was a logical consequence. In August 1961 the Danish government announced that it was applying for full membership in EEC alongside Great Britain. Shortly afterwards the Swedish Prime Minister Tage Erlander made it clear that the Swedish government had no intentions to apply, since it would not be compatible with Swedish neutrality. Neutrality was a priority above deeper integration, even if the economic benefits of joining a European inner market was acknowledged. Another issue for the Swedes, and in extension all Nordic countries, was the fear of losing sovereignty in social and labour policy matters. A deeper integration into the western European core was seen a potential threat to the Nordic welfare state model portraying a more advanced set of state financed benefits, higher taxation and levels of minimum wages. Joining 'Europe' was in this regard seen as a potential step back, confirming the self-perception of the Nordics being ahead.

Eventually Denmark did not join the EEC, as Great Britain was consequently blocked by the French president Charles de Gaulle during the entire 1960s. But before this was decided, there was a considerable turmoil within Nordic cooperation. The Danish application caused a crisis which eventually produced the inter-governmental Helsinki Treaty for Nordic cooperation signed by all five Prime Ministers 23.3.1962. The treaty, also commonly referred to as the constitution of Nordic cooperation, was a vaguely formulated confirmation of the achievements so far and a declaration from all parts to continue their engagement in official Nordic inter-governmental cooperation. Still the institutionalization was weak and only in 1971 would a permanent secretariat with a small proper budget, the Nordic Council of Ministers, be established.

The crisis leading up to the Helsinki Treaty showed the limits of Nordic cooperation. The Danish government was reluctant to signing a treaty as it was feared to weaken their negotiation position towards the EEC, while the Norwegian stand was ambiguous. The social-democratic government was in favour, but the right-wing opposition held on to the traditional Norwegian suspicion towards Nordic cooperation as being a disguised grand-Swedish project. Also, the firm orientation towards the North Atlantic and Anglo-Saxon sphere, a consequence of the World War II experience, affected this Norwegian attitude. Iceland supported the treaty and for the Finnish government it was crucial, since a breakup of the Nordic group would have left Finland without its only option for a western orientation. In the end the sense of Nordic solidarity was enough to produce a treaty, however, with many wordings changed in the last minute from 'shall' to 'ought to'.

The issue of Nordic vs. European economic integration resurfaced on the agenda a decade later with the NORDEK plan, which was a proposal for a Nordic customs union which also included deeper integration of capital flows, maritime traffic, and industrial and energy policy. Launched in 1968, NORDEK was to be a parallel organization to the EEC, and Sweden and Norway were investing in its success. The treaty proposal was approved by the Nordic Council in November 1970, but soon afterwards Finland withdrew, and when also Denmark voiced its renewed interest for joining the EEC (De Gaulle was no longer in power), the NORDEK plan was buried. This was a spectacular failure, taken personally by politicians like PM Olof Palme and PM Mauno Koivisto. The main reasons behind NORDEK's failure were the reawakened Danish interest for joining the EEC, and Finland's concern that it would endanger its relationship to the Soviet Union. In the latter case perhaps Finland's president Urho Kekkonen used his Soviet card to put a stain on the popular social democratic PM Koivisto for political reasons that had a domestic logic.

Finland's delicate relationship to the Soviet Union, and being a neutral country, also gave it a mediator role in European Cold War politics. Hosting the CSCE Helsinki summit in 1975 gave Finland a role as a mediator between east and west. Even if the concrete results were meager at the time, it nonetheless put the human rights issues on the agenda and began a process of exposing its violations within the communist bloc. Even if the events of 1989 were not in sight in 1975, the eventual dissolution of the Soviet Union impacted Finland's position. Initially the breakdown of the bilateral clearing trade plunged Finland into a very severe recession, but from a security perspective, Finland's independence was now on a more solid base.

Denmark joined the EEC 1973 together with Great Britain, after a referendum. A similar referendum was arranged in Norway the same year 1972, but here the outcome was negative, with 53,5% of the constituency voting against. In the Norwegian case national sovereignty and concerns for the important fishing sector were the main factors for rejecting membership. And even if Denmark voted yes, Prime Minister Jens Otto Kragh stated after the election that Denmark would withdraw from the Community if Great Britain did so, and during the referendum campaign he also firmly rejected anything that resembled an increase in supranational institutions or powers. Denmark was still far from embracing the Schumann vision of a federal Europe (Miles, 2015).

This was not to be the end of Nordic cooperation, but rather one of many events marking the relationship between Nordic and European integration. During the 1970s and through most part of the 1980s, the Nordic countries would view European integration in positive terms with regards to economy. None of the countries displayed any further engagement in the creation of a deeply integrated Europe as an imagined community that would compete with national and Nordic identity. Denmark as an EEC and NATO member and Norway and Iceland as members of the latter, were never aiming at the core, but rather behaved as 'reluctant Europeans.' (Miljan, 1977). On social policy level, as has been noted by Bo Stråth, a certain distrust towards Catholic Europe has marked the attitude in the protestant north by otherfying and feeling uncomfortable with Europe (Stråth, 1992). Up until the mid-1980s this remained the Cold War era logic of the Nordic countries, split in their European engagement but committed to low-politics cooperation in the Nordic setting.

2.2. The Nordic vs. European Model of Cooperation and Integration

The Helsinki Treaty of 1962 has been updated seven times, mainly to reflect formal changes such as the establishment Nordic Council of Ministers (1971), the addition of the autonomous regions Åland Islands, Faroe Islands (1974) and Greenland (1983), and finally the accession of Sweden and Finland into the EU (1995). Since 1997 the treaty has not been updated, but with the changing security environment a new Helsinki Treaty is on the agenda 2025, reflecting the current centripetal forces with the Ukraine War and the US demands towards Greenland that have resurfaced and brought the Nordic governments to seek for closer cooperation. It is telling that Nordic cooperation has not produced a series of treaties as is the case with the EEC/EU, where the continuous advancement of a deeper integration, with binding legislative content, has been the order of the day.

The Nordic model of cooperation is marked by its low-political character and demand for consensus, effectively aborting any ambition for a deeper federalist project. Those who want the least in any concrete matter can dictate the course. Only when facing serious threats to their economies, security and societies at large, have the Nordics been willing to tamper on their sovereignty. Another feature for the Nordic way in comparison with the European project is the general absence of idealistic proclamations, while rather the practical and utilitarian aspects of Nordic cooperation is often highlighted. However, all Nordic cooperation and especially in the relationship with Europe is permeated by a sense of a Nordic exceptionalism and a firm belief in the existence of specific Nordic values. Those usually include at least democracy, openness, rule of law, equality, and environmental protection, and as such potentially positions the Nordic countries in contrast to the rest of the world including continental Europe.

During the 1970s Nordic cooperation produced some advancement, notably the Nordic Investment Bank (NIB), established in 1976. The idea was in many ways a copy of the European Investment Bank, and a compensation for the failure of NORDEK. The base capital was provided by the five owning member states, but the bank was given independence from the other Nordic institutions. As the only bigger official Nordic institution, NIB incorporated all three Baltic states Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania into its organization in 2005. The official institutions of Nordic cooperation have since early 1990s systematically engaged in various cultural and societal support and cooperation schemes with the Baltic countries, but these have not been given more that observer status in the Nordic institutions. From a Nordic perspective the Baltic countries are close and good neighbours, but in the end not considered family.

In the field of culture, a priority in Nordic cooperation, a cultural fund saw the light in 1967 and has established itself as an important agent in promoting a common Nordic cultural public sphere. Culture is widely regarded as the base layer for upholding and developing the Nordic sense of belonging and common identity, also at times when the political results have been meagre. The Nordic Council of Ministers award high profile prizes annually in literature (since 1962), music (1965), environment (1995), film (2002), and children and young people's literature (2013).

The steering principle for Nordic countries relationship with the EU has traditionally been that of pragmatic functionalism (Grøn & Wivel, 2018). The pragmatic approach is that of seeking benefits in separate policy fields, which also can be referred to as a compartmentalization of Nordic EU policy. This means opting out of policy areas which are seen to jeopardize national sovereignty and more specifically the Nordic welfare state model. That only Finland is member of the EMU, and that the Nordic region has five different currencies, is one concrete example of this. The importance of the common market and the economic benefits of being part of EU is acknowledged, but the positive effects it has on the Nordic export industries are seen to belong to the national revenue and as such forming a viable economic base for continuing to uphold a Nordic welfare state, different from the rest of Europe (Schouenborg, 2013, pp. 114, 121). Since the Nordic five is not united within EU there is a considerable grey zone for Nordic joint action, and the Nordic cooperation within the EU is typically that of informal but tight exchange of information and seeking common interests. The non-EU members are close lobbyists to the EU, especially Norway (Haugevik, 2017). In selected policy areas Norway has an active strategy and invest in common policies, like environment and security (Graeger, 2002). The relationship has been pragmatic in the sense of being non-visionary and at times even anti-visionary, or as Anders Wivel has expressed it:

> *The Nordic countries and autonomous territories do not – individually or as a group – have a clear vision of what the EU is or what the EU ought to be. They have continuously reacted with skepticism towards any grand visions for EU-integration seeking to construct a European identity or establish quasi-state powers in Brussels. The relationship is functionalist in the sense that the Nordic states do not view the EU as an end in itself or as a vehicle for building a European identity or a geopolitical actor, but as an instrument that is sometimes useful and sometimes detrimental for domestically defined goals. (Wivel, 2025, p. 282)*

2.3. Winds of Change

The end of the Cold War obviously affected Europe in a fundamental way. For the Nordics the change might not appear as drastic in comparison to the former Soviet satellite states. But from a Nordic perspective, and especially what concerns the relationship to European integration the change was considerable. Starting already in the mid-1980s during Soviet glasnost and the loosening of monetary regulations globally, the Nordic countries slowly started to adopt a more pro-European attitude. The Nordic states increasingly started to adopt EC priorities in domestic decision-making, internalizing European standards, regulations and policies (Ingebritsen, 1998, p. 185). In 1988, the Swedish social democratic party, then in government, for the first time indicated that it was considering the European integration project as one possible option for Sweden. Finland became full member of EFTA in 1986, and Norway was becoming an economic powerhouse due to its oil and gas incomes making it a somewhat special case and attractive from the Brussels perspective. Iceland was still mainly concerned about its fishing industries and did not see a future EU membership as a viable option. Leading up to the three EU referendums in 1994 in Norway, Sweden and Finland, the world around the Nordic region was in a massive state of change.

Allan Larsson, former Swedish social democratic Minister of Finance (1990-1991), has defined these years as the era of a new "international wave" (Granadino et al., 2023, p. 35). He refers to a new order when Keynesian measures were seen as insufficient, and a new neo-liberal era was at hand. Other terms had been used for the same phenomenon, like the "Thatcher-Reagan revolution" or "Age of Finance" (Fulla, 2022, pp. 48, 49). Countries like Sweden could no longer maintain the same level of sovereign economic policies and was pushed into a new reality. To maintain leverage and voter support each country and leading political parties had to enter this new mode of thinking. For the social democrats in all Nordic countries, it meant making a neoliberal turn. This was paired with the pressure from the right, now sensing its momentum, that the social democratic Nordic welfare state model had lost relevance and had passed its best before date. Carl Bildt, who became Prime Minister in in a new Swedish right-wing government 1991, loudly voiced that no one wants to choose a political ideology that had failed, alluding to the fall of the communist Eastern Europe. This "end of history" narrative promoted a historicization of the Nordic welfare state model as a way of questioning it and of pointing at its terminal stage. This debate has prevailed ever since, but still the Nordic countries are recognized internationally by this very model. The Nordic countries continuously occupy the top spots in various international rankings, providing soft power assets that still portray the Nordic Welfare State model as a success worth admiration and even emulation.

It is telling that Allan Larsson was part of the joint European Socialist (PES) working group that in the early 1990s sketched a new European Employment Initiative (EEI), which had a considerable impact on the Commission report known as the Delors White Paper on Unemployment published in 1993. It marked a shift from 'welfare' to 'workfare' and has been described as a key document introducing a market-oriented socialist policy before Tony Blair and Gerhard Schröder introduced the idea of a Third Way/Neue Mitte (Fulla, 2022, p. 62). It is also a tangible example of how Sweden's social democrats had shifted focus towards becoming an important player in European politics, in this case striving for a "Nordicisation" of European socialist employment policy even before Sweden was a member of the EU.

The fall of the Berlin Wall and the disintegration of the Soviet Union had a fundamental impact in many ways. For Finland it meant that it for the first time as an independent country was free to choose its foreign policy direction in a time of no visible military tension in its vicinity. Finland could now 'join Europe' without any major concerns for its eastern neighbour. The security policy aspect was most decisive in the Finish case, even if the general concerns about the agricultural sector and endangering the Nordic welfare model were big questions to tackle in the debates leading up to the referendum in 1994.

The three referendums were held in October and November 1994, starting with Finland. All three governments were openly for the EU accession, and thus strategically the Finnish vote was first, since this was the most likely to come out as victorious for the yes side. Finland had a Center Party lead government, and the Prime Minister Esko Aho had managed to rally the traditionally sceptic agrarian party members behind the yes vote. The yes side victory was clear with 56,9% of the votes, in Sweden the yes side got 52,3% of the votes with an 83,3% voter turnout. The last episode in this drama was Norway, and here the Norwegians turned down EU membership one more time. The turnout was sensationally high 88,6%, and the

main reasons for 52,22% of the Norwegian rejecting EU membership can be found in the traditional nationalistic fear of losing sovereignty, and the bad sound of the word 'union' carrying reminiscence of the 19th century union with Sweden. Norway's main economic assets oil and fishing was not seen as benefitting from EU membership, and as has been pointed out Norway was de facto already enjoying most parts of the common market through the EEA agreement (1994), and thus a more national-emotional vote became a safe option for the majority of the voters (Fossum, 2019). For the Norwegian government and its social democratic Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland the main arguments for joining the EU were that Norway was a European country and consequently belonged to the new and enlarged European Union, and that the economic benefits by far outweighed any negative concerns.

The identity turn expressed by Brundtland was a factor in both Sweden and Finland, and by the mid-1990s being euro-positive had become a shared value among educated elites and young people. Curiously the EU-opposition was stronger in Denmark, as a result of a hibernating popular left-wing anti-European movement dating back to the 1970s. In both Sweden and Finland there was a strong zeitgeist about a new European era, and that the Nordics could not opt out from the accelerating Euro-train that was redrawing the political map of Europe. The Finnish EU policy that evolved after 1995 and lasted well into the early 2000, is a prime example of this new attitude which distanced itself from the traditional Nordic reluctance and only partial commitment to European integration.

The quite unusual, but for Finnish conditions not unthinkable, coalition government between the social democrats and the right-wing Coalition Party (*Kokoomus*) took the EU membership as their point of navigation to pilot Finland in consensual spirit out of the severe recession that hit the country in 1990. Prime Minister Paavo Lipponen (Soc Dem), helped by the favourable economic growth figures with the then extremely successful mobile phone company Nokia as the main locomotive, went all-in for Finland aiming at reaching as close as possible to the EU core. This self-chosen role as the model pupil of the EU resonated in Finnish society, eager to become Europeans and conscious of leaving a certain little brother complex in the Nordic family matters behind. It was only logical that Finland as the only Nordic country would join the Eurozone in 2002, and that only with a parliament voting decision unlike in Sweden where a referendum resulted in a rejection of the European Monetary Union.

It is interesting to compare Finland's and Sweden's foreign policy initiatives in the late 1990s, when the former initiated the Northern Dimension (ND) policy, and the latter took strong leadership in developing the relations to the Baltic states. Finland's and Lipponen's ND scheme was a post-Soviet reframing of the relationship between EU and Russia, especially its north-western parts. The aim was to lower tension and build cooperation and thus security on all levels in a region where Finland was geographically in the centre. However, the point was that this was to be the policy of the entire EU not just a Finnish concern (Lipponen, 2025). On the other hand, Sweden did not see EU involvement as a priority as it developed extensive bilateral relations, including various economic cooperation projects, with the Baltic states.

Finally, another development that challenged the traditional Nordic understanding of democracy and good governance was the challenge posed by the European tradition of legalist constitutionalism. In Sweden the right-wing think-tank Timbro started to actively promote a more European and neoliberal understanding of individual rights and constitutional protection of the market economy. This was targeted against what was seen as a social democratic government and parliamentary majority-based decision making, understood to limit the constitutional rights of the individual (Strang, 2025, p. 55). This was a way to challenge the notion of the Swedish 'people's home' (*folkhemmet*), seen as a social democratic collective endeavour monopolizing the concept of society as something almost equivalent to the (social democratic welfare) state. This was a new definition of democracy introduced in Sweden during the 1990s which found its support in European legal tradition. This redefined the political language and culture in Sweden and affected similar debates in other Nordic countries.

Conclusion

If we compare the two regions here under study, and in particular their internal dynamics and relationship to Europe both as a cultural category and political institutions, various conclusion can be made. The history of Austria and the Visegrád states – the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia – illustrates the complex interplay between federal ideas, nation-state ideology, and external pressure. Federal ideas were as much in their mind as a possible response to multiethnic problems in the Habsburg Empire as they were systematically silenced with Soviet domination in the 20th century.

The historical legacies are key in understanding present day reactions and actions within the framework of the European Union. The Habsburg imperial legacy in combination with the Cold War communist bloc experiences can not be underestimated when considering present day attitudes towards supranational political projects. In the case of Poland, the Habsburg legacy is not so strong, but the historical memory of the partition of the Polish kingdom provides a similar protective sense of the nation state. The postwar period in Central and Eastern Europe was characterized by fundamental restructuring, during which the Soviet Union dominated political reorganization in the V4 nations. Either directly, such as in Poland or Hungary, or indirectly via the institutional reshuffle in Czechoslovakia, the ideological and geopolitical mark of Moscow made an exceptional impression on the political institutions and identity formations of these states. The 1975 Helsinki Final Act, and particularly the human rights provisions of "Basket III", initiated a profound transformation within the Soviet sphere of influence. The Soviet Union inadvertently stimulated the emergence and organization of dissident movements, which eventually destabilized the authoritarian regimes.

In Poland, for example, this process was also followed by a certain cultural and religious dynamic: the Catholic Church's mission—namely by Pope John Paul II—along with deep-rooted national myths supported resistance against the communist regime and set the stage for the "Solidarity" movement. It is therefore no coincidence that cultural, religious, and historical themes became the key pillars of post-communist identity formation in the Visegrád states. The rediscovery of histories of myth-making—be this the Polish tradition of

the republic, the Hungarian trauma of Trianon, or the Czechoslovak experiments with centralised versus federal statehood—gave rise to a reimagined self-conception after 1989. Europeanization, however, was always bound up with an ambition towards national independence and cultural self-governance.

As the nation state and its imperative of national units have guided roughly the past 180 years in the region, the multitude of linguistic, religious and ethnic minorities have created tensions that are still latent. If we consider the amount of border changes and creations of new independent states in the region in comparison with the comparatively calm stability of the Nordic region, the difference is striking. For these reasons the Visegrad 4 and Austria tend to have a longer historical projection in present day memory culture, while the Nordic countries have neutralized past internal conflicts of mediaeval and early modern periods into the category of 'common historical experiences', and these do not affect present day politics in the same way.

The Nordic countries share an identity of modern, peaceful, democratic and progressive societies, which was built during the past two centuries and especially from the 1930s onwards with a specific Nordic welfare state model. These separate national identifications are compatible with a regional Nordic identity and does not include elements of conflict, rather that of learning from each other. The Nordic ambiguity towards European integration stems more from a perceived idea to protect the specific Nordic model from vanishing in a greater European project that might not fulfil the same level of democracy and progress.

Both regions mainly view European integration in economic terms as a positive project. In the Visegrad case as a locomotive for transitions economies to catch up with Western Europe, and in the Nordic and probably also Austrian case, as a necessary and welcomed forum for continuing to be prosperous societies. For the Nordic countries this has often brought a compartmentalization of European politics where the benefits of economic integration have been subdued to the maintenance of national sovereignty in other policy fields, such as environment and social policies, where these countries have seen themselves as forerunners. Therefore, vocal advocations for a deeply integrated European federal union has scarcely been articulated by leading Nordic politicians, as this is rarely seen as a viable argument among the national constituency.

As in all of Europe, national-populist parties have gained momentum in both regions, shaking up the established political system in the Nordic region and Austria, and guided the political development in the Visegrad countries in a direction that has become more inward-looking.

Questions of national and European identity and national sovereignty are at the heart of this development, and the answers cannot be found without including a longer historical context. In both regions, especially at times when the economic development has not been favourable, EU is often seen as an elitist project partially driven by forces that are outside democratic structures.

Therefore, it has also been challenging to root a strong pro-European historical narrative among the population in both regions. The historical narratives are still predominantly

national and include the relationship to neighbouring countries. In the case of Austria and the Visegrad countries, the legacy of the Habsburg Empire is still central, while the Nordic counties as small states have their own historical relationships at the heart of their respective national historical narratives. The Visegrád Group remained an informal cooperative association—held together by shared experiences and a common, but not institutionalized, federal idea. Religious origins, cultural tradition, and shared experience of imperial domination—particularly by Russia—account for the V4 states' general reluctance to European integration. Russian presence—state-building earlier, system-stabilizing later—still lingers today, as a negative historical experience or a geostrategic threat. Here, federal ideas remain vibrant the V4 countries and Austria, but are mainly negotiated along the national identity, religious heritage, and in line with geopolitical realities.

In the case of Finland its long historical relationship with Russia, in the case of Sweden its neutrality (until very recently) and having stayed out of any wars since 1814, but with a bad collective conscience about the collaboration with Nazi Germany during the Second World War. The Norwegian narrative combines a strong and heroic pride in its independence with the special relationship to the UK and the US as a comforting guarantee. In Denmark the long-term relationship to Germany includes memories of conflict and bitter defeats, but as of today they do not constitute a sense of urgent concerns. Rather Greenland and the Danish presence in the Arctic region is becoming a challenge not only for the current political leadership but also for the maintenance of a historical narrative of Denmark as a benevolent patron kingdom to the Greenlanders.

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Social Psychological Approaches to European Integration: Identity, Threat, and the Persistence of a Divided Memory

Orsolya Vincze, Michał Główczewski and Adrian Wójcik

Introduction

The European Union represents an ongoing experiment in establishing a sense of shared belonging that coexists with deeply rooted national identities. Since the 1990s, social psychologists have increasingly collaborated with political scientists and sociologists to elucidate why some citizens support this initiative while others oppose it. They also seek to understand why identical policies – such as a shared currency, enlargement, or redistribution of border control – are perceived by some as acts of solidarity and by others as infringements on valued national attributes. Beyond the EU's economic, political, and institutional frameworks, it is crucial to comprehend the psychological mechanisms through which citizens interpret, resist, or embrace the integration process. Support for or opposition to European integration cannot be attributed to a single psychological factor. Instead, it emerges from the interplay between the cognitive structuring of the "European" category, the security or defensiveness of citizens' national identification, and the symbolic historical resources employed to interpret the present.

1. The Social Identity Approach

Social psychological approaches to regional and European integration draw primarily on Social Identity Theory (SIT) (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) to explain the process by which individuals construct, negotiate, or resist supranational affiliations. According to the theory, individuals strive to maintain a distinct and positive self-concept, which is partially derived from group membership and gains psychological meaning through comparisons with relevant outgroups. Optimal Distinctiveness Theory (Brewer, 1991) extends this framework by proposing that individuals are simultaneously driven by two opposing needs: the need for assimilation, that is, for being similar to others and the need for differentiation, that is, for a distinct sense of self. Optimal identification occurs with groups that are inclusive enough to satisfy belongingness, yet bounded and distinctive enough, relative to relevant outgroups, to still allow the individual a meaningful, differentiated social identity.

Since the foundational volume by Breakwell and Lyons (1996), which set out a research agenda for examining social change in Europe through identity processes, including the reconstruction of national identities and the emergence of a distinct European identity,

social identity theory remains the most widely used psychological framework for the study of European integration – despite some criticism (Cinnirella, 1996; Hopkins & Reicher, 1996).

In the context of Social Identity Theory (SIT), a vital question regarding Europe is whether "European" can serve as a legitimate ingroup category and whether someone can talk about “European identity”. This inquiry examines how individuals identify as European and achieve positive distinctiveness, despite the absence of a unified language, historical narrative, or cultural traditions akin to those of national groups. Early applications of the theory to the EU were explicitly exploratory in this sense, asking whether a shared European identity could be socially constructed even in the absence of the ethnic or cultural markers that social identity theory was originally built around. This question soon prompted more systematic attempts to conceptualise and measure European identity. Bruter (2004) differentiated between the civic and cultural components of European identity. The civic component pertains to attachment to EU political institutions and citizenship, while the cultural component involves a sense of shared European culture and heritage. He argues that these components develop along distinct trajectories and are influenced by different stimuli. Castano (2004) directly addressed the measurement problem arising from the social identity and self-categorisation framework. He emphasised that European identification, when appropriately operationalised in accordance with the framework, should predict ingroup favouritism and outgroup differentiation, like other forms of social identification. It is important to note – as Duchesne (2008) points out – that the concept of a social identity was originally developed to explain everyday intergroup comparison and was not built to capture the specifically political nature of a supranational polity that claims authority, redistributes resources, and makes binding decisions. Importing the vocabulary of identity without adapting it to this political content, she argues, risks treating "European identity" as a simple analogue of national identity rather than as something with its own distinct logic. Although social identity theory does not provide a comprehensive explanation for fully understanding a governing political situation (such as the EU), it elucidates fundamental psychological processes that contribute to a better understanding of the phenomenon of integration, whether it is about European or regional.

2. Superordinate Identity Models: Common Ingroup Identity versus Ingroup Projection

To address the question of whether Europeans can form a social identity, it is necessary to examine what happens to relations among national subgroups (e.g. French, Polish, German) when they are recategorised under a shared superordinate identity such as ‘European’.

Two influential and partly opposed models address this question. The Common In-Group Identity Model (CIIM) (Dovidio et al., 2000) identifies four potential cognitive representations that may result from intergroup contact, two of which are particularly relevant to the context of European integration. In the one-group representation – also called common ingroup identity – members of previously distinct groups recategorise themselves under a shared superordinate category, thereby downplaying the salience of subgroup boundaries. The psychological boundary that used to separate "us" from "them" is redrawn to

include both parties within a single, more inclusive “we”. Applying this to the EU, this would correspond to a citizen coming to regard themselves primarily as “European”, with their national identity downgraded to a secondary status. On the other hand, in the case of dual-identity, subgroup identities remain salient but are reconfigured as embedded within a superordinate category, such that identities like being French, Polish, or Hungarian and being European are held concurrently rather than one replacing the other. Although dual identity offers a compromise whereby national and European identities can be maintained simultaneously, it is not sufficient in itself and, indeed, it may even be risky.

This is highlighted in their ingroup projection model developed by Wenzel et al. (2007). According to the ingroup projection model (IPM), a superordinate category provides the dimensions and norms against which ingroup and outgroup are compared, and groups derive positive value to the extent that they are perceived as prototypical of this superordinate category. Because group members are motivated to view their own group positively, they tend to project the ingroup's distinctive characteristics onto the superordinate category, implicitly defining "European" (or "student", or "German") in the image of their own group. To the extent that the outgroup differs from this self-servingly constructed prototype, its difference is interpreted not as neutral variation but as deviation from a shared, and ostensibly binding norm, and consequently, is evaluated negatively. This is the point at which the model complicates the notion of dual identity. Namely, Wenzel et al. (2003) found that group members who identified strongly with both the subgroup and the superordinate category (dual identifiers) showed the strongest tendency toward ingroup projection, and this held both for arbitrary categories (business versus psychology students, nested under "students") and for the EU case (Germans versus Poles, nested under "Europeans"). Germans who strongly dual-identified rated Germans as relatively more prototypical Europeans than did other participants, which, in turn, predicted less favourable attitudes toward Poles. Dual identity is therefore risky when both identities are simultaneously salient, and the superordinate category fully encompasses both subgroups, thereby providing a single, common reference point over which the subgroups can compete for prototypicality. The two models thus offer contrasting predictions concerning the same underlying process. According to the common ingroup identity model, emphasizing a shared European identity reduces intergroup bias. Conversely, the ingroup projection model suggests that this emphasis may create a new context in which subgroups compete to determine whose national profile is perceived as more authentically "European."

To reconcile these two conflicting approaches, it appears that when the superordinate identity is not fully inclusive of the two subgroups, but instead constitutes an alternative, cross-cutting categorisation, ingroup projection does not occur. Meiser et al. (2004) illustrated this pattern in an intergroup context, where chemistry students showed strong ingroup projection when the superordinate category was fully inclusive of both chemistry and biology students ("natural science students"), but showed no significant projection when the shared category was merely cross-cutting and only locally common to both groups ("students of the University of Jena").

Thus, dual identity becomes tenable, once the superordinate category is construed as internally diverse rather than as a single, clearly delineated ideal type. Waldzus et al. (2003)

tested this assumption by experimentally manipulating German participants' representation of "Europeans" as either well-defined (a strong, shared consensus about what Europeans are like) or vague (widespread disagreement), and, in a second study, as either simple (Europe defined by its unity) or complex (Europe defined by its diversity). Ingroup projection, and the consequent negative bias towards Poles, was consistently weaker whenever the superordinate category was portrayed as vague or, especially, as complex, because no single group can plausibly claim to constitute a prototype. The results show that integrity, whether at regional or European level, is beneficial when the superordinate category is understood as composed of complementary, mutually indispensable parts, none of which can single-handedly represent the whole, rather than as a homogeneous "one-group" ideal that subgroups are implicitly expected to approximate.

Building on the finding that a complex representation of the superordinate category weakens ingroup projection, Peker, Crisp and Hogg (2010) argue that although complexity reduces ingroup projection, it also diminishes identification with the superordinate category. Because a highly complex, multi-subgroup category is also highly inclusive, and inclusiveness activates the need for differentiation described by optimal distinctiveness theory (Brewer, 1991), members identify less strongly with a superordinate category the more diverse it is portrayed to be. Peker et al. (2010) demonstrated that the coherence of a superordinate category, that is, the extent to which information about its constituent subgroups is organised in a clear, structured, and readily comparable manner, can suppress ingroup projection as effectively as complexity does, but without reducing identification with the superordinate category. Ingroup projection was consistently strongest only when the superordinate category was represented as both simple and incoherent. Either a coherent or a complex representation was independently sufficient to weaken it, but only complexity, not coherence, came at the cost of weaker superordinate identification.

This result suggests that a dual identity, or a common ingroup identity in a broader sense, does not inherently yield positive or negative outcomes for intergroup relations. Instead, its effects depend on the cognitive representation of the superordinate category. A dual identity may lead to competition over prototypicality when the superordinate category fully includes the subgroups and is perceived as simple, homogeneous, and singularly defined. Conversely, it can achieve the harmonious outcomes predicted by the common ingroup identity model when the category is perceived as internally differentiated, either through genuine complexity or a coherent, well-organised structure, preventing any single subgroup from plausibly claiming to represent the whole. Thus, the structural and representational characteristics of the superordinate category are crucial determinants of whether a shared social identity approach to European integration fosters tolerance or discrimination.

However, the situation is more complicated in practice. The representation of "Europe" that prevails, and who is considered prototypical versus peripheral, is influenced by pre-existing asymmetries of power and status among the subgroups competing to define the category. Prototypicality claims are systematically constrained by historical intergroup relations and status differentials (Alexandre et al., 2016). Complexity and coherence may be necessary conditions for a successful dual identity, but they are not sufficient, because the capacity to establish a given representation of "Europe" as the shared, legitimate one is unevenly

distributed among member and prospective member states. Obradović and Sheehy-Skeffington's (2020) study on Serbian attitudes toward EU accession exemplifies this dynamic. The focus-group data revealed that Serbian participants did not perceive "Europeanness" as a diverse and inclusive category to which they could equally contribute. Instead, they associated "Europe" with a small set of powerful Western states, specifically Germany, France, and the United Kingdom. They also expected that Serbia would join as a "third-class country", having to follow rules that its more typical and powerful predecessors would not need to follow. This result fits the Ingroup Projection Model, but with a key change: the cause and effect are switched. Ingroup projection is not caused by dual identification. Serbia's limited power made claiming to be a typical example unlikely, which lowered its perceived compatibility with "Europe". This, in turn, reduces identification with the superordinate category and weaken the confidence in the EU as a hierarchy-attenuating union, ultimately diminishing support for accession. In this context, dual identification is not merely about portraying the superordinate category as complex or coherent, but it also necessitates that the subgroup either be granted or acquire sufficient relative power to be acknowledged as a legitimate, representative component of that category. In a following study Karić, Eckerle, and Cohrs (2025) reached a similar conclusion. They found that both German and Serb participants rated Western European countries as most representative of Europe, with Germany consistently the most prototypical, confirming that ingroup projection by the dominant subgroup shapes the prototype for everyone, not only for the projecting group itself. The representativeness of Germany was positively correlated with perceived cultural, economic, and political similarity to Germany for German but not for Serbian participants. Serbians, in contrast, seemed to merely conform to an externally imposed, Western-centric standard, exemplifying the phenomenon of "submitting to the prototype" found in the study by Obradović and Sheehy-Skeffington.

Obradović and her colleagues (2025) stepped further demonstrating that recognition, rather than merely power or prototypicality, functions as the operative mechanism. By manipulating meta-perceptions (what Romanians, Serbians, and Turks believed Germans thought of their "Europeanness"), they found that positive meta-perceptions increased European identification and EU support in both Romania and Serbia. The manipulation had no significant effect in Turkey, however, where decades of explicit exclusion from the European "we" appear to have produced a baseline perception. Notably, across all three countries the negative condition barely differed from the neutral one, while the positive condition stood out, suggesting that a degree of anticipated non-recognition is already the default, internalised starting point for participants. Alexandre, Waldzus, and Wenzel (2016), however, demonstrated through experiments that power asymmetry is not completely unchangeable. By encouraging a complex representation of a shared superordinate category, lower-status subgroups can increase their perceived prototypicality while reducing that of higher-status groups. This provides a practical way, along with recognition, for peripheral member states to challenge an unfavourable prototype instead of just accepting it. However, for negatively valued superordinate categories, lower-status groups use complexity to distance themselves from an undesirable shared identity. These findings indicate that recognition by a prototypical subgroup serves as a genuine causal factor influencing

superordinate identification and political support. However, effectiveness depends on a country's broader historical and political context in relation to Europe.

The ingroup projection model has important implications for the politics of federalism. A federal structure fundamentally institutionalises the EU as a superordinate category. Within this framework, the national profiles of certain member states – particularly those that are founding, larger, or economically dominant – are more likely to be implicitly considered as representative of "Europe" as a whole. Conversely, other states are perceived as peripheral or less representative. This provides a socialpsychological explanation for a frequently voiced concern by citizens and elites in smaller or more recently acceded member states. They argue that shared "European" norms and institutions implicitly reflect the preferences and self-image of a subset of dominant nations rather than a genuinely neutral, pan-European standard. This can lead to “fear of insignificance” (Hufnagel, 2010) and a sovereigntist backlash, which is consistent with, yet not reducible to, more overtly political interpretations of sovereigntist sentiment among Central and Eastern European states.

3. Is European Integration endangering national identity?

Although the dual identity model and ingroup projection model provide a solution to reconcile national and supranational belonging, achieving a dual identity does not mean that European integration can not provoke a sense of threat. Even when national identity is formally recognised and accommodated within a supraordinate category, integration continues to touch on domains, borders, currency, law, and cultural practice that citizens can experience as under threat (Arts & Halman, 2005; Boomgaarden et al., 2011; McLaren, 2004). Extensive documentation shows that perceived threat to national identity reduces support for EU membership (e.g., Carey, 2002; Marks & Hooghe, 2003) and is positively linked to the desire to leave the EU (e.g., Van De Vyver et al., 2018). The models reviewed thus far elucidate the conditions under which a shared European category is subject to contestation at the level of prototypicality. Nonetheless, they fail to address why integration itself is perceived as a threat initially, or why the perceived threat varies significantly in content, encompassing concerns ranging from economic loss to cultural erosion, and even to the continuity of the nation as a distinct entity. To address these issues, we extend the interpretative framework with the Integrative Threat Theory (Stephan et al., 2000).

Integrative Threat Theory in social psychology identifies four distinct types of threats. This discussion, however, is limited to an examination of two specific types: realistic threats and symbolic threats. Realistic threat refers to the perception that an outgroup poses a danger to the well-being of the ingroup. This threat may manifest through risks to physical safety, health, economic resources, political power, or even the group's survival. While realistic threat can involve actual competition for limited resources, it is primarily characterised by the perceived harm to the ingroup's welfare. On the other hand, symbolic threat arises from the perception that an outgroup compromises the values and identity of the ingroup, including its moral standards, worldview, and lifestyle. Both symbolic and realistic threats may influence support for European integration. For certain citizens, integration is perceived primarily as a symbolic threat, as it is often portrayed as undermining national identity,

traditions, and sovereignty (Bíró-Nagy et al., 2022; McLaren, 2004). Conversely, others may view it as a realistic threat, particularly when initiatives at the EU level are perceived as redistributing resources. For instance, despite the fact that at the objective level, EU membership appears broadly beneficial (Badinger, 2005; Roeger & 't Veld, 2021) and perceived economic benefits are positively linked to European identity (Borz et al., 2022). Nevertheless, framing the EU as an administrative and regulatory burden, and portraying membership as economically harmful, remains a common discursive strategy among Eurosceptics (Vogler, 2023), one that was particularly prominent during the Brexit campaign (Foos & Bischof, 2022). In recent years, prominent controversies surrounding EU policy agendas, such as immigration policy, climate and energy initiatives or trade agreements, have served as focal points for the activation and politicisation of both symbolic and realistic threat perceptions and their impact on European integration (Kyriazi & Natili, 2026).

It is important to note that the threat is not solely imposed by the EU on its associated members. It may also arise from countries that are either candidate or prospective members in the EU enlargement process. Applying the theory of group position – originally formulated by Blumer (1958) to elucidate American racial attitudes – to the context of EU enlargement politics Dixon (2010) argues that countries are situated within a hierarchy that is historically and culturally established. The position of a candidate country within this hierarchy influences whether the perceived threat to the EU members is primarily realistic or symbolic. Examination of the Eurobarometer data from all 25 EU member states showed that a candidate's position in the hierarchy of "Europeanness" determines which kind of threat drives opposition to its entry. Attitudes toward post-Communist countries occupying a middle position in the hierarchy following the end of the Cold War were shaped substantially by material interest. In contrast, opposition toward Turkey's accession was driven by a perceived symbolic threat. Turkey, situated at the bottom of the hierarchy due to its predominantly Muslim population and its geographical position bridging Europe and Asia, was perceived as a threat to the collective European identity. Recently, Jiang (2026) reached the same conclusion by examining North Macedonia's EU accession process. Greece and Bulgaria, both current EU members, viewed North Macedonia's use of the name "Macedonia" and the designation of a "Macedonian language" as symbolic threats to their national narratives, historical claims, and linguistic heritage. Consequently, they used their veto power within the accession process to block membership until these symbolic disputes were addressed, as exemplified by the 2018 Prespa Agreement. These cases illustrate that within the politics of enlargement, threats – whether it is symbolic or realistic – can operate laterally, rather than solely vertically, from the supranational body to the nation.

A closely related question that the above-mentioned social psychological models tend to assume, rather than empirically investigate, is the nature of the relationship between European and national identities – whether they are nested, mutually exclusive, or largely independent. Risse (Risse, 2010) advocates for a "marble cake" model, as opposed to a "layer cake" model, to describe this relationship. He argues that national and European identities are not arranged in distinct layers but are interwoven and mutually constitutive for most individuals. Consistent with this nested view, studies consistently found a positive correlation between European and national identity (Agirdag et al., 2012; Grosfeld et al., 2022; Jugert et al., 2019; Wegscheider & Nezi, 2021), suggesting that these identities are unlikely to be

fundamentally conflicting, under specific conditions European identity may be perceived as opposing national identity. In particular, certain forms of national identification may be inherently more susceptible to intergroup hostility than others (Cichocka & Cislak, 2020). The sociopsychological approach suggests that ingroup identification can be divided into two qualitatively distinct forms: secure and defensive (Cichocka & Cislak, 2020; Kosterman & Feshbach, 1989; Roccas et al., 2008). Secure ingroup positivity denotes a genuine, stable commitment to one's group that does not depend on external validation, remains resilient to threat, and is associated with positive attitudes toward outgroups. The concept of defensive ingroup positivity encapsulated by collective narcissism (De Zavala et al., 2009) or glorification (Roccas et al., 2008), represents a conditional belief in the group's superiority. This belief necessitates ongoing external validation, increases sensitivity to perceived threat (Wohl et al., 2010), and leads to being less willing to cooperate with outgroups and more focused on narrowly defined ingroup interests. The distinction directly influences the recognition dynamics previously discussed. Individuals with secure identity theoretically are more likely to accept a subordinate or non-prototypical position within a superordinate category without existential distress. In contrast, individuals with defensive identity are inclined to perceive social and symbolic challenges, such as a perceived denial of prototypicality, as threats to their group's status, prompting protective and exclusionary reactions.

Consistent with this framework, researchers provide evidence that defensive, rather than secure, forms of national identification are the driving force behind resistance to European integration and hostility toward partners. Golec De Zavala et al., (2017) and subsequently Cisłak et al. (2020) demonstrated that collective narcissism was positively correlated with willingness to vote for leaving the EU, whereas non-narcissistic national identification was a negative predictor of such willingness. This divergence indicates that a robust sense of national identity does not inherently conflict with European integration; rather, it is only the defensive and narcissistic variant that does. This divergence suggests that a strong national identity does not inherently oppose European integration. Rather, it is the defensive mode of identification that does. Additionally, they discovered that the relationship between collective narcissism and support for leaving the EU was entirely mediated by the perceived economic threat. Guerra et al., (2022) came to a similar conclusion: when a nation feels threatened (economically or symbolically), this can foster either a secure, resilient form of attachment that leaves room for constructive intergroup relations, or a defensive, narcissistic form that fuels antagonism.

The studies presented so far have reframed the EU as a sovereignty-threatening entity. However, the most recent research – prompted by Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine – points to a complementary but contrasting pattern, showing that under certain conditions, external threat can override the defensive logic, reframing the EU from a perceived threat into a source of shelter. Schulte-Cloos and Dražanová (2026), analysing survey data from 16 EU countries collected just five weeks after the invasion, found that nationalists responded most strongly to perceived Russian threat, showing European pride and support for a common European army – and this effect was particularly pronounced in Central and Eastern European countries. The authors argue that this constituted a functional realignment specifically aimed at the European Union as a superordinate community. The war seems to

have altered the perception of the Union, even among the Eurosceptics, transforming it from a perceived threat to national sovereignty into an essential safeguard. The psychological mechanism was further refined by La Barbera and colleagues' (2025) study, which found that perceived threat indirectly strengthened identification with the EU through the EU's perceived entitativity (i.e., the perception of the Union as a coherent, unified entity with a shared fate and values). This heightened identification, in turn, was associated with more positive attitudes toward both EU integration and enlargement. These studies empirically substantiate the core principle of Muzafer Sherif's Realistic Group Conflict Theory (1988): a superordinate goal, exemplified by collective defence against Russia, can mitigate tensions among previously rival or distinct subgroups (nation-states) and redirect loyalty towards a broader, superordinate category (European Union). In Sherif's classic summer-camp experiment, groups of boys recategorised each other as "us" when confronted with a shared technical problem (e.g., a broken water supply) that required joint action. The shared danger posed by Russia narrowed the perceived distance between the "EU as threat" and "nation as victim" framings, reinforcing instead a "Europe as shelter" narrative. As Uncertainty-identity theory (Hogg, 2007) posits, feelings of uncertainty motivate people to identify with social groups and to choose new groups with, or configure existing groups to have, certain properties that best reduce, control, or protect from feelings of uncertainty. Even though people prefer clearly bounded, highly entitative groups such as nation, it seems that functional demand for security can supersede the cultural resistance of nationalism in specific contexts, particularly where threats are acute and proximate (Unan & Klüver, 2025)

4. Collective Memory, Collective Nostalgia, Historical Narratives, and Attitudes Toward the European Union

The legitimacy, desirability of, and attitudes toward the EU are intertwined with a shared and divergent historical context that underlies contemporary national and European identities. The European project, from its inception, has relied on collective memory as a foundational element for legitimacy. The concept of supranational governance emerged explicitly from the remembrance of the trauma caused by two World Wars and was sustained through the institutionalisation of memory regimes focused on reconciliation, human rights, and the moral lessons derived from Europe's most challenging periods (Sierp, 2020). Yet the attempt to establish a unified European identity accompanied by a shared historical narrative consistently encounters tension due to the enduring strength of national historical narratives. National narratives tend to be more emotionally impactful and cognitively accessible to most citizens compared to supranational narratives. Since the Amsterdam Treaty of 1997, the European Union has increasingly recognised this issue, prompting numerous research proposals and other initiatives (e.g., Europeana) aimed at enhancing European citizenship despite the divergent national memories and fostering a unified perspective on Europe's past, present, and future (Rigney, 2012; Stainforth, 2022; Verovšek, 2021).

Collective memory can be conceptualised an active, ongoing process that entails a continuous interaction between individual and collective memories, as well as between past and present

(Roediger, 2021). Research on collective memory emphasises the role of group history and past representation in shaping and maintaining group identity. Two basic motives drive the preservation of a group's past: epistemic and identitary (Licata & Mercy, 2015). The epistemic need reflects the group's demand to understand its origins ('Where did we come from?'). While the identitary motive focuses on self-definition ('Who are we?'). These two motives are aligned with the dual functions of collective memory: accuracy, which aims to preserve the past as it happened, and the 'usable past', which refers to the past tailored for the present purposes (Zamora 1998, cited in Wertsch 2002:31). The latter suggests that the past is dynamic and shaped by the current identity needs of a group. As Jan Assmann points out, 'History turns into myth as soon as it is remembered, narrated, and used – that is, woven into the fabric of the present' (Assmann 1997:14). On the other hand, memory inherently changes over time, as the distance from an event causes the details to fade inevitably, leaving room for shaping the memory in an identity-congruent way (Baumeister & Hastings, 2013; Boyer & Wertsch, 2009; Irwin-Zarecka, 1994). From the perspective of Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner, 1975), the group aims to portray itself positively and depict events in a way that provides an acceptable and distinct identity for its members. In this context, self-serving distortions and asserting the group perspective are inherent aspects of collective memory (Klar & Bilewicz, 2017; Ranger & Hobsbawm, 1983).

Research in social psychology and political science indicates that attitudes toward the EU are not merely rational responses to policy evaluations. Instead, they are affectively charged reactions based on individuals' perceptions of their nation's trajectory, whether they perceive continuity or disruption, loss or progress, and how they utilise the past to interpret the present. When European integration is perceived as challenging or diluting national sovereignty and distinctiveness, citizens and political actors frequently counter this challenge by mobilising nostalgic, historical or restorative narratives that highlight the nation's enduring uniqueness (Hooghe & Marks, 2005; Pistan, 2020).

Szabó and Csertő's (2023) research provides a compelling illustration of the mechanism by which perceived threats to national distinctiveness prompt the mobilisation of historical narratives to justify Euroscepticism. The studies conducted in Hungary examined the influence of exclusive victimhood beliefs – defined as the conviction that one's national group has experienced uniquely severe and unparalleled historical suffering, which remains insufficiently recognised by others (Vollhardt et al., 2021) – on attitudes toward the EU. The findings indicated that individuals who strongly believed their nation had suffered more than any other nations throughout history tended to evaluate the EU and the process of European integration more negatively. Importantly, this relationship was mediated by interpretive links between past and present: exclusive victimhood beliefs correlated with perceiving similarities between the EU and Hungary's former oppressor, the Soviet Union, an increased propensity to believe in EU-related conspiracies targeting Hungary, and the perception that Hungary's history and suffering are insufficiently acknowledged by European institutions. These perceptions, in turn, predicted more negative attitudes toward the EU. These findings demonstrate that the past is actively reconstructed and redeployed by citizens and political actors. Framing current institutions as continuations of past oppression can mobilise resentment, distrust, and grievance, thereby reframing contemporary political opposition as a defence of the nation's enduring, unrecognised distinctiveness.

The literature indicates that nostalgia serves as a significant emotion through which individuals experience the past. Initially characterised as a bittersweet sentiment primarily linked to a longing for home (Sedikides, 2004; Sedikides & Wildschut, 2019) the concept of nostalgia has evolved. It is now understood less as a condition associated with homesickness and more as a psychological return to past experiences (Davis, 1977; Kaplan, 1987).

Collective nostalgia is specifically defined as a sentimental yearning for the historical experiences of a group (Smeekes, 2015a; Wildschut et al., 2014). Collective nostalgia, unlike personal nostalgia that pertains to individual autobiographical experiences, focuses on the group, positioning it as the central element in emotional reflection. Sedikides and Wildschut (2019) describe this emotion as inherently social. When people experience collective nostalgia, they engage with shared memories that reaffirm their group identity and strengthen their perceptions of belonging. Collective nostalgia has the potential to enhance solidarity and cooperation within a group. Nevertheless, it may also lead to exclusionary tendencies, particularly when the nostalgic past is perceived as ethnically homogeneous, morally superior, or culturally pure (Stefaniak et al., 2021a).

A growing body of empirical work establishes a link between collective nostalgia and negative orientations toward the EU. De Vries and Hoffmann's (2018) EUpinions report revealed that nostalgia is widespread across EU member states, and that individuals with nostalgic tendencies are more likely to support culturally conservative positions, express scepticism toward globalisation, and endorse restrictive immigration policies. In the Netherlands, for example, nostalgia is associated with stronger support for the radical right-wing political movements (Smeekes et al., 2021; Versteegen, 2024) and out-group prejudice (Smeekes, 2015b), e.g., opposing the rights of Muslims to express their identity publicly (Smeekes et al., 2015).

While not all nostalgists are Eurosceptic, the psychological profile associated with nostalgic attitudes aligns with patterns commonly observed among EU-critical voters. As Norris and Inglehart (2019) contend that individuals who most vehemently oppose European integration and the European Union's progressive policies are characterised as "people of the past." Voters who pessimistically perceive their social surroundings may be more prone to support populist and Eurosceptic parties, as these parties often use nostalgic rhetoric and social pessimism in their narratives (Steenvoorden & Harteveld, 2018).

Steenvoorden (2015) further adds that nostalgic narratives often depict society as experiencing decline. In a recent study, Demeter and Goyanes (2021) investigated the antecedents of Eurosceptic attitudes in three Mediterranean countries – Spain, Italy, and Greece. These three countries were traditionally pro-European, but recent crises – the 2008 financial crisis and the 2015 European migration crisis – led to the rise of populist and Eurosceptic parties across all three (Plaza-Colodro et al., 2018). One of the tested antecedents was nostalgia, measured with one item: 'In general, would you say life in (survey country) today is better or worse than it was fifty years ago for people like you?'. Answering this question, 22.4% of Spaniards, 52.6% of Italians, and 53.2% of Greeks stated that life in their country is worse than it was half a century ago. Moreover, nostalgia was positively related to Euroscepticism in Greece and Spain, but not in Italy. The authors argued that the possible

mechanism underlying those results was the difference between left-wing populism (in Greece and Spain), which typically criticises the EU's financial system and economic operations, and right-wing populism (in Italy), which typically rejects the whole idea of European integration.

Links between nostalgia and anti-EU attitudes also manifest in political behaviour and communication. Using large-scale automated content analysis of party manifestos and speeches in 24 European countries, Müller and Proksch (2024) demonstrate a strong association between nostalgic rhetoric and Eurosceptic political platforms. In their research, the authors identified that nostalgia is predominantly expressed by nationalist, conservative, and Christian democratic parties, particularly in Central, Eastern, and Southern Europe. These parties, which highlight a proud or lost national history, are considerably more inclined to criticise the EU, depict integration as a threat to national sovereignty, or call for reduced supranational authority.

The relevant example supporting this observation is Sweden. In their research on the rebirth of ethno-nationalism in Sweden, Elgenius and Rydgren (2019) presented the case of the Sweden Democrats – a far-right, nationalist party – investigating its political manifestos and articles from the party newsletter. The Sweden Democrats party, established in 1988, emerged as the largest entity within Sweden's right-wing bloc by 2024. According to Elgenius and Rydgren, the Sweden Democrats articulate a narrative centred on a 'golden age,' specifically referencing Sweden during the 1940s and 1950s. This period is depicted as an ethnically homogeneous society, devoid of foreign influence, and marked by robust social cohesion. The party strategically employs this idealized past to evoke nostalgia for perceived better times, suggesting that recent political developments have precipitated social decline and the erosion of national identity. Within this narrative, the party identifies several 'enemies of the nation,' including political elites accused of betraying the populace, multiculturalism and immigration – particularly from non-European countries – and politically correct actors, who are held responsible for undermining Swedish cultural identity.

Recent research increasingly emphasises that the impact of nostalgia is contingent not on the emotion itself, but rather on the content of the nostalgic memory. In a study utilising a large representative sample from Britain, Richards et al. (2020) identified two distinct forms of nostalgic sentiment among participants: traditional nostalgia, which reflects a yearning for the past linked to social and cultural features that have evolved (e.g., attitudes toward ethnic diversity, gender roles, and traditional norms), and egalitarian nostalgia, which pertains to nostalgic feelings associated with concerns about social equality and political representation. Subsequent analyses revealed that traditional nostalgia correlated with intentions to support Brexit and Euroscepticism, whereas egalitarian nostalgia was linked to intentions to remain in the European Union and pro-European Union attitudes.

In this line of research, Stefaniak and colleagues (2021b) show, using samples from the US, Canada, and England, that conservatives and liberals express distinct forms of collective nostalgia. Across all studies, conservatives consistently exhibited higher levels of nostalgia for a historically more socially homogeneous society than liberals. In contrast, liberals demonstrated stronger nostalgic sentiments toward a past characterised by greater openness

and inclusivity. Moreover, increased nostalgia for homogeneity, combined with reduced nostalgia for an open society, partially mediated the relationship between a conservative (as opposed to a liberal) political orientation and more negative attitudes toward outgroups.

This line of evidence helps explain why collective nostalgia does not uniformly lead to Euroscepticism across contexts. When the past is recalled as a period of cooperation, cross-cultural exchange, or civic unity, nostalgia may foster a favourable attitude toward European integration. In contrast, nostalgic narratives that emphasize past grandeur, imperial glory, or cultural homogeneity often depict the EU as a disruptive force to traditional nations. In these instances, the EU is perceived as a symbolic adversary in the emotional conflict between a cherished past and a contested present. This distinction underscores the necessity of examining not only the intensity of nostalgic emotions but also the symbolic content of historical narratives. Furthermore, it underscores the strategic potential of political communication, as elites may selectively activate memories, emphasise certain values, and foreground specific images of the past to influence contemporary political attitudes.

4.1. Collective nostalgia, historical narratives, and the Brexit campaign

An excellent example that brings together all the threads discussed so far – historical narratives, collective nostalgia, and anti-EU attitudes – within a single context of public debate is the Vote Leave campaign in the UK, whose goal was to persuade voters to support the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the EU in the 2016 referendum. During the 2016 referendum campaign and in subsequent public debates, a recurrent theme among scholars was that appeals to British historical identity – whether framed as imperial memory, discourses of national greatness, or narratives of independence and "standing alone" – played a visible role in the rhetorical repertoire used by some Leave actors and in the cultural background that made those appeals intelligible and, for segments of the public, persuasive.

Saunders (2020) observed that Brexit campaigning frequently fused a future-oriented vision – promises of revived global trading links and sovereign autonomy – with nostalgic imagery or implications that Britain had once had a more expansive and decisive international role. In this rhetorical move, the past was used instrumentally to legitimate a projected future – leaving the EU was presented as the mechanism by which Britain could resume a historically grounded international prominence. Melhuish (2022), in a qualitative study of Vote Leave's texts and in 13 interviews with former campaigners, showed how an idealised account of Britain's past was blended with a promised post-Brexit future. The interviews further revealed that campaign strategists were consciously mobilising affective and mnemonic registers to make the proposition of withdrawal seem not merely instrumental but redemptive.

The central slogan used in the Vote Leave campaign was "Take back control". Goldsmith (2017) claims that Dominic Cummings's, Vote Leave's campaign director, believed that the referendum would not be decided by rational cost-benefit analysis, but rather by voters' emotional sense of having lost agency. He advised that the Leave campaign should not take specific policy positions but rather should offer a simple, emotionally resonant message:

"whether you think X or Y about Z, the most important thing is that we *take back control* of Z." The power of this slogan derived from deep historical narratives about British sovereignty and national identity. Cummings stated that he initially considered the slogan "Take Control" but amended it to "Take Back Control" because the word "back" appeals “to a strong evolved instinct – we hate losing things, especially control" (cited in Buchanan, 2019). The British Election Study reports (2016a, 2016b) corroborated this insight – voters with an external locus of control (the belief that external forces control their outcomes) were more likely to vote Leave than those with an internal locus of control.

Beyond taking back control, the Vote Leave campaign and its sympathisers invoked a set of historical narratives centred on World War II, particularly the myths of Dunkirk, the "standing alone" of 1940, and the "Blitz Spirit." Historians of British memory document how the Dunkirk evacuation of May 1940 was transformed, through film, media, and popular representation, from a chaotic military retreat into a positive metaphor for British resilience and justified isolation (Chin, 2016). This memory was explicitly mobilised in the 2016 campaign, when billionaire Brexit supporter Peter Hargreaves declared that leaving the EU would be like the Dunkirk evacuation – a retreat from the continent that would make Britain 'incredibly successful' again (Gardian, 2016). Chin's analysis notes that such rhetoric glorified wartime Britain as a time of cohesion, social homogeneity, and moral clarity, ignoring more complex realities documented in wartime Home Intelligence reports: class conflict, racism, and ambivalence toward European allies. British historian Max Hastings pointed out the irony that Churchill himself "never saw anything in the least glorious about standing alone," and stated flatly that "wars are not won by evacuations" (Hastings, 2018).

Similarly, this was the case with narratives about the Blitz used during the referendum period. Studies show that myths of the Blitz – stoicism under bombardment, national unity, brave defiance – were repeatedly invoked in press commentary and political rhetoric (Chin, 2016). However, Chin emphasises that this "Blitz Spirit" myth obscures historical reality – Home Intelligence Reports documented derogatory remarks aimed at Jews in London Underground shelters, and in 1941, anti-French sentiment had escalated to the point that the Ministry of Information recommended a campaign to address these attitudes, after incidents of violence against members of Charles de Gaulle’s Free French naval forces, who were mistakenly identified as Vichy troops.

One of the most substantial empirical contributions to a better understanding of the Brexit referendum and its aftermath is the longitudinal research conducted by Loughnane and colleagues (2024). They collected the data for their study twice before the UK’s official withdrawal from the EU and once after. Loughnane et al. found that higher levels of collective nostalgia predicted a greater desire to leave the EU. Their cross-lagged analyses indicated a directional effect – nostalgia was not merely a rationalisation after the fact but a precursor to political preferences. This underscores the psychological, rather than purely ideological, roots of Euroscepticism. The same research also emphasised the moderating role of social ties. Participants who reported stronger connections to EU citizens displayed weaker levels of collective nostalgia and, correspondingly, lower support for leaving the EU. In contrast, those with strong ties only to co-nationals expressed greater nostalgia, demonstrating how

emotional and relational processes form an interconnected system that shapes political behaviour.

In sum, the Brexit campaign illustrates how selective historical portrayals – whether explicit invocations of the empire or subtler narratives of national greatness and independence – can be woven into contemporary political persuasion. Empirical evidence from discourse analysis, longitudinal surveys, and psychological studies supports a nuanced conclusion: mnemonic narratives played a significant role in the referendum, particularly where they resonated with identity-related insecurities and weak transnational ties; however, they operated alongside a constellation of political, social, and economic factors that collectively shaped the outcome – Brexit.

Conclusion

It is visible that Europeanness is a very complex and multilayered collectively constructed phenomenon that is actively developed and debated in public discourse. Analysing representations of European integration is essential for understanding how they can serve as legitimising frameworks to address the challenges faced by Europe in the 21st century. The Social Representation Theory (Moscovici, 1988) approach treats European integration as socially constructed, communicated common sense. The theory of social representations argues that unfamiliar or abstract social objects – a currency, a distant institution, a set of treaties – become psychologically manageable only after a community anchors them to familiar categories and objectifies them into concrete, communicable images. "Brussels," "the Euro," or "the Visegrad Four" are, from this perspective, not simply attitude objects that individuals evaluate privately but shared representations built through everyday conversation, media coverage, and political rhetoric, which is why they can differ sharply in content from one national public sphere to another even when the underlying institutional facts are identical.

The research in the field shows that social representations of Europe and the European Union are heterogeneous, shaped markedly by national history, geopolitical positioning and East-West power asymmetries (Romaniszyn, 2005). EU institutions have actively promoted a shared historical memory to foster European identity, but national lenses reinterpret these top-down narratives. Drawing on social representations theory, Sakki et al. (2021) examined 86 history textbooks published between 1960 and 2010 from six EU member states – deliberately chosen as peripheral rather than founding countries. Their central question was whether a shared "historical charter" (a widely shared and iconic representation of group history that carries moral and legitimising force for present-day group action (see Liu & Hilton, 2005)) of European unification exists. The analysis revealed that the representation of European unification is considerably more fragmented than unified, organised along two independent dimensions: a utilitarian-versus-ideological dimension, separating countries of the European east, centre, and north (where integration is narrated mainly in economic and Cold War terms) from western countries (where it is narrated as a political and value-based project); and a European-versus-national dimension, separating a unifying supranational

perspective from narratives that foreground the nation-state's own accession, benefits, and losses.

The only narrative that most closely resembled a shared charter was the Early EU Cooperation represented by the foundation of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) in 1951. Although this narrative was present in all the textbooks, it focused solely on Western actors and places, thereby shaping the foundational story as Western European Unification. Alternative Cooperation served as a counter-narrative to the Early EU Cooperation theme. It is frequently associated with descriptions of other post-war European initiatives that aimed to foster cooperation among countries, particularly those that were more prevalent in post-Soviet states.

Moreover, the theme of the "European Idea," which encompasses shared culture, symbols, and values, was the least addressed. This suggests that the EU's value-based, identity-focused narrative, which it has actively promoted since the 1970s, has not become an ingrained component of collective memory.

The temporal analysis revealed that the allocation of textbook space to European unification reached its peak in the 1990s, aligning with the Maastricht Treaty and the introduction of the euro. This focus diminished subsequently in most countries during the 2010s due to the rise of Euroscepticism following the eurozone and migration crises. At the same time, narratives emphasising national perspectives notably increased in Finland, Portugal, and Hungary. These findings imply that the EU's institutional narrative rests on a moral charter (the founding story) which is geographically and historically exclusive, an ideological charter, characterised by a shared European value-community that is largely absent from collective memory, and a political charter, represented charter (Maastricht and its institutions) that is rather elite-driven and lacks a personified, narrative structure needed to attract identification.

Research conducted by Bouchat and colleagues (Bouchat et al., 2023) provides converging evidence for the fragmented representation of the European Union. Their findings indicate that figures central to European integration, such as Schuman, Adenauer, and Monnet, were predominantly recognised by students from the founding member states (i.e., Belgium, France, Germany, and Italy). In contrast, students from Croatia, Portugal, Poland, Serbia, and the United Kingdom did not identify these figures, suggesting that the EU's foundational narrative remains geographically confined even among the current generation of university-educated young Europeans. On the other hand, figures associated with communism, such as Stalin, Lenin, and Marx, were notably prominent among students from Eastern and Northern countries, including Poland, Croatia, Finland, and Serbia. This pattern further underscores a regionally specific rather than a pan-European historical perspective.

The lack of a unified historical charter and the fragmented nature of European memory within national curricula necessitate that nations find their position within European collective memory (Sakki, 2014). In this process, the collective symbolic resources available to citizens for understanding the EU are crucial; however, the representational differences across the European east-west might sustain the ongoing discourse on sovereignty and challenge the legitimacy of EU institutions.

This narrative and normative unevenness also has an institutional counterpart in the political behaviour of the Visegrad Group (V4) states. Kazharski (2018) argues that the departure of Visegrad Group from the EU's normative mainstream may not simply represent a set of isolated national deviations, but a broader process by which Central Europe is transforming the EU into a more heterogeneous space of political and cultural norms. On this reading, the turn of the Visegrad Group towards illiberal politics might constitute a new basis for regional cohesion, organised around social conservatism and national interest rather than around the EU's own liberal-democratic normative core. Mogildea (2018) extends this argument, suggesting that V4 cooperation offers an alternative model of Europeanization, one in which sub-regional political pressure, rather than top-down convergence towards Brussels, becomes a channel for reshaping norms at the European level. The case of the Visegrad Group suggests that normative and narrative heterogeneity across the European east-west divide may not be a transitional problem awaiting resolution, but a durable structural feature of an enlarged and diverse Union.

Sakki et al. (2021) draw attention to expanding the identity content of the EU through the inclusion of national figures, events, issues, and celebrations into the European narrative. This approach may foster "sympathy between identities" (Liu & Hilton, 2005, p. 11) and concurrently address the growing nationalist critique present in several European countries. This critique argues that the uniqueness of "local histories" is being overshadowed by the supranational EU framework. Bouchat et al. (2023), however, question whether a singular pan-European hegemonic narrative is even a relevant goal for building a supranational identity, and, following Mälksoo's (2009, p. 673) warning that "it would be a categorical mistake to predict the imminent emergence of the common European historical vision," suggest that attempts to manufacture such a narrative may provoke further proliferation of competing histories rather than resolve them. Broadening the EU's narrative content to include more national and regional figures, as Sakki and colleagues suggested, is one way of allowing competing histories the space Mälksoo calls for, rather than a step towards a single hegemonic charter.

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Between Federalism and Sovereignty in the EU from the Perspective of Political Science

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Introduction

The European Union (EU) is, by its nature, a specific political system *sui generis*, which cannot be classified into the traditional categories of state, federation, or confederation. Given the absence of the adoption of a unified European constitution, the EU has gradually become a complex system of shared authority, or a specific system with very strong supranational elements. In this system, the legal, political, and administrative competencies of multiple levels of governance overlap. This process is referred to in academic literature as federalization from within and proceeds predominantly incrementally, through law, judicial dynamics, regulatory mechanisms, and executive decision-making.

In the individual theoretical approaches to European integration, opinion disparities can be found. On the one hand, federal and neo-functionalist interpretations can be found, which emphasize the gradual centralization of powers. On the other hand, there are also intergovernmental and post-functionalist approaches, which speak of the sovereignty of member states and their limited willingness to delegate this sovereignty to a higher level. These approaches only partially capture the empirical reality of the EU, in which some federal elements are asserted without a formal declaration of federation. Sovereignty in this context is neither fully centralized at the EU level nor fully preserved at the level of the member states. In such a situation, tension understandably arises between the legal constitutionalization of the EU and the existing political fragmentation of its democratic legitimacy.

The aforementioned tension also forms the main leitmotif of this study, which is designed as a textbook for students of various disciplines to bring the complexity of the EU environment closer from a political science point of view. The main problem is that EU law is strengthening faster than political and democratic control in practice. We assume that this discrepancy is not merely a temporary phenomenon or anomaly, but a structural feature of EU integration as a multi-level and pluralistic political order.

The aim of the study is to identify the differences between the main theoretical approaches to European integration and to point out that their mutual disunity reflects and confirms the structural nature of the problems associated with the functioning of the EU. The text also presents a systematic disciplinary review (SDR) of the given issue. Based on the analysis and comparison of the main theoretical lines on the process of EU integration, its consequences for democratic legitimacy, sovereignty, and the exercise of public power in the EU are critically evaluated. The contribution is based on an interdisciplinary framework, as it

connects legal theory, political science, and the theory of governance, with special attention paid to the interaction of law, institutions, and political practice.

In the first part, the study presents an analysis of the process of "internal federalization" the EU through the connection of constitutionalization, multi-level governance, Eurolegalism, and judicial dynamics. It points in particular to the influence of EU doctrines (primacy of law and direct effect of law), which, in combination with the case law of the Court of Justice of the EU (CJEU), have created an autonomous legal order with constitutional effects without the existence of a formal constitution, thereby shaping the EU as a pluralistic and multi-level political system. The second part presents the normative concept of *demoicracy*, which interprets the democratic legitimacy of the EU as the result of the co-governance of several national *dêmoi* in conditions of shared sovereignty. The last part deals with executive federalism, in which federalizing elements are asserted through legal, regulatory, and administrative mechanisms, as well as strengthening the role of national executives and European institutions in crisis governance.

1. The Process of Internal Federalization of the EU

The fact that the EU, from its inception to the present day, has gradually moved closer to a federal form of government without a formal declaration of a federation as such, remains a subject of academic discourse. Firstly, the EU's legal order (*acquis communautaire*) continues to evolve, coexists, and interacts with globalization processes. However, individual decision-making processes within the EU are also changing, continuing to push the boundaries of national state sovereignty towards shared authority. This involves not only a change in the institutional framework of the EU, but above all in its legal framework, although no federal constitution has been formally adopted. In this sense, one can collectively speak of a process of "iternal federalization." This analytical framework points to gradual changes in the internal mechanisms within the EU – various legal doctrines are being adopted, multi-level governance mechanisms are being introduced, and there are multiple regulatory mechanisms – which are gradually transforming the power structure within the EU from inside. In summary, it is about the (re)formulation of internal governance patterns, i.e., the way in which authority is distributed between Brussels, the EU member states, and ultimately the regions. Internal federalization is thus not a one-off political act, but a long-term dynamic that takes place through the daily practice of decision-making, the implementation of EU legal norms into practice, and judicial review. Naturally, the internal politics of each of the member states respond to these processes.

The key "tools" of this process are primarily:

1. *EU constitutionalization* – the development of doctrines of direct effect and the primacy of EU law, which led to the creation of an autonomous EU legal order;
2. *multi-level governance* (MLG) – this concept states that political power is dispersed among several levels (European, national, regional and local level);

3. *Eurolegalism* – represents the processes that strengthen the role of courts and regulatory bodies in the creation and enforcement of common rules of the *acquis communautaire*;
4. *joint decision-making mechanisms* – although they allow mutual coordination between member states, they also reveal the limits of further centralisation of power.

1.1. Constitutionalization of the EU

The constitutionalization of the EU law is one of the key themes of European legal and political theory. There is extensive academic literature devoted to the specific effects of legal norms, fundamental treaties, and jurisprudence on the creation of the EU's constitutional framework. A key question is how the EU integration project could acquire constitutional features without the adoption of a formal European constitution and without an explicit decision by the member states to create a federation. The common denominator of these works is therefore the assertion that the EU has constitutionalised primarily through law, jurisprudence, and case law (e.g., Hartley, 1981; Stein, 1981; Weiler, 1981, 1991, 1999, 2003; Stone Sweet, 2001, 2004, 2010; Alter, 2001, etc.).

One of the first systematizers of EU law is, for example, Emeritus Professor Trevor C. Hartley. Thanks to his work, the doctrines of direct effect and the supremacy of EU law were interpreted as constitutional principles that effectively shift the EU integration project towards federal features. In his book (1981), he showed that even without a formal federal constitution, the EU, through jurisprudence, especially in the key judgments *Van Gend en Loos v. Nederlandse Administratie der Belastingen* (1963) and *Costa v. ENEL* (1964), has transformed itself into an autonomous legal order superior to national systems. His work also had a didactic dimension, containing fundamental interpretative theses. The most important finding is that by joining the EU, member states definitively relinquish part of their sovereignty, as their legal order is limited by the supremacy of European law. Federalization here thus takes place primarily through law and jurisprudence, not political decisions.

This "doctrinal" line was followed by other authors who directly named the EU as a new type of constitutionality, created by courts and legal communities. A significant contribution was an essay by the American (originally Czechoslovak) lawyer and theorist of European integration, E. Stein, entitled *Lawyers, Judges, and the Making of a Transnational Constitution* (1981), in which the author systematically designated the law of the European Communities (EC) as a "transnational constitution," which does not arise from the decision of states, but from the activities of courts, legal communities, and the Court of Justice. He emphasized that the EC is neither an international organization nor a federal state, but a new type of legal system in which national and European courts become partners in the creation of a common constitutionality. EC law is thus a hybrid formation that does not fit into the standard categories of state or international organization.

This theoretical level is followed by a more empirical view of how doctrines function in member states. For example, Belgian lawyer K. Lenaerts analyzed the enforcement of direct effect and the primacy of Community law in the domestic legal systems of member states in his works (1986, 1988). His study of the application of Community law in Belgium showed

how the case law of the Court of Justice is reflected in national legal practice. By comparing the US Constitution and the Treaty of Rome, he also pointed to the federal and constitutional elements of the EU and the special relationship between supranational authority and Member States. In his view, the EU represents a "federalizing" legal system that is gradually moving away from the traditional categories of state and international organization.

While the aforementioned authors focused on individual doctrines and their effects, J. H. H. Weiler placed them in the broader historical context of European integration. In his works (1981, 1991, 1999, 2003), he captured the gradual transformation of the EU from a "classical" international organization into a "constitutionally constituted" legal order, which in many respects resembles a federation. He argued that the doctrines of direct effect, supremacy (primacy) of EU law, and implied powers had "transformed" the original treaty order into a quasi-constitutional structure, particularly through the case law of the Court of Justice. This shift was not only legal; it also changed political accountability between levels of government. However, he highlighted a fundamental paradox: while legal developments were moving towards federalism, the political institutions and processes in the EU Council and the European Council remained strongly intergovernmental. This means that the internal federalization of the EU is taking place through law and the courts, not through a political decision by Member States to relinquish sovereignty. The EU therefore has a dual character – legally supranational and politically intergovernmental – which creates tension and questions of democratic deficit, as the power of the courts and the EC grows without a parallel strengthening of democratic representation.

Weiler's "internal federalization" of EU law was further developed by A. Stone Sweet. In his works (e.g., 2001, 2004, 2010), he described this development as a process of "judicialization of politics" (decisions of the European Court of Justice, primacy of EU law, etc.). The courts of the Member States were drawn into a process where they had to accept the supremacy of European law, thereby undermining their traditional legal sovereignty. The author's finding was the same – the federalization of the EU is not the result of a political decision on federation, but of gradual legal and institutional development.

Later literature returns to these basic doctrines, but examines their stability and limits in the context of an enlarged and differentiated EU. An example was Bruno de Witte (2021), who analyzed the doctrines of direct effect and the primacy of EU law as pillars of the autonomy of EU law. In addition to the author's contribution in the collective monograph edited by P. Craig and G. de Búrca (2021), there are also contributions by other authors (C. Donnelly & T. de la Mare; M. Cremona, etc.) in which the authors address various topics related to the internal federalization of the EU. EU integration is clearly conditional on the willingness of national courts to apply these doctrines in practice. An examination of the EU's autonomy in external relations has shown that, although the EU has gained autonomy in this area, Brexit has raised the question of the balance between autonomy and sovereignty as a central issue for the EU's continued existence.

However, alongside legal and doctrinal analysis, a parallel debate has been developing since the 1990s on the consequences of the constitutionalization of the EU for democracy and sovereignty. Sociologist and philosopher J. Habermas developed the concept of "post-

national citizenship," as he was convinced that the classical understanding of sovereignty based on the nation state was outdated in a globalized world and that national identity no longer formed a suitable basis for modern citizenship. He drew on the idea of "constitutional patriotism" (*Verfassungspatriotismus*), which he had already presented in the 1960s. He saw the EU as a model of a political community in which the legitimacy of political power is based on deliberative democracy and citizenship is independent of the nation state. In this conception, he saw the EU as a "laboratory" for a post-national political order and emphasized the creation of a European constitution that would ensure the democratic participation of citizens and strengthen the federal elements of the EU. He continued to advocate this idea even after the so-called eurozone crisis (2008 – 2012), because he saw integration without democratization as a threat of a "technocratic shift" and a loss of legitimacy for the EU. He pointed out that the federalization of the EU must go hand in hand with democratization, otherwise it would become unsustainable. He saw the solution, for example, in the creation of a European political public sphere and the strengthening of the powers of the European Parliament. His argument for the creation of a European constitution had a clear goal – to ensure the democratic participation of the people and the intertwining of national and European citizenship.

A fundamental shift also occurred in the redefinition of the concept of sovereignty, as developed by Neil MacCormick, for example. In his works (e.g., 1993, 1999, 2007), he introduced the concept of a "post-sovereign state," in which sovereignty is neither absolute nor indivisible, but pluralistic and divided among several levels. EU law and national legal systems form an interconnected network in which the state remains an important actor, but no longer the sole bearer of authority. Christian Joerges emphasized the economic dimension of the changing relationship between federalism and sovereignty through the concept of the so-called economic constitution. In his works (e.g., 1997, 2004, 2010), he argued that the EU performs constitutional functions without a formal constitution. He claimed that the core of EU integration is not the political will of member states to create a federation. The main point is the creation of a single market and regulatory mechanisms. This gives rise to "regulatory federalization," or a new type of European "regulatory state," in which the sovereignty of member states is weakened in favor of legally binding EU standards, especially in the economic and social spheres. This "regulatory state" is not based on classical political sovereignty, but rather on technical and legal regulation. This concept fits in with the well-known and still relevant thesis that the EU is not a project of uniformity, but of harmonization in diversity. Joerges (2010) thus rejected the idea that the EU was moving towards a classic (vertical) federation. He promoted the idea of a polycentric legal order, because individual member states cannot be forcibly unified under a single constitution. However, he pointed to a democratic deficit in the EU, because federalization through increased regulatory policy and legal integration is not accompanied by a deepening of democratic legitimacy, thereby weakening the space for political deliberation (2004, 2023).

This line of thought was taken up by German lawyer Ernst-Ulrich Petersmann, who linked economic integration with the dimension of human rights protection. According to him, the EU project represents not only an economic but also a normative constitution based on economic freedoms and citizens' rights. He argued that market integration regimes (WTO, EU) are constitutional in nature because they limit the sovereignty of states through market

freedoms and competition rules, while protecting individual rights by creating legally binding standards. Economic freedoms thus represent limits on state power, and individuals are the primary addressees of this legal order (Petersmann, 1997). He thus presented the idea of a "commercial constitution" that combines economic freedoms with the values of the rule of law (Petersmann, 2004). However, federalization cannot suppress the observance of universal human rights. For this reason, the legitimacy of the EU should not be based solely on economic benefits; it must be anchored in the values of the rule of law and respect for human dignity (Petersmann, 2004). In his monograph (Petersmann, 2017) and other texts (e.g., 2006, 2013), he wrote about the concept of "multilevel constitutionalism," in which state sovereignty is derived from the rights of individuals and subordinated to norms of higher constitutional quality. He thus pointed out that federalism and market integration in the EU are not just a matter of power distribution, but above all a moral and legal project that must ensure the protection of fundamental rights and human dignity.

The constitutional role of the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) was ultimately elaborated by Anthony Arnull, for example, in his monograph *The European Union and its Court of Justice* (1999) and other works (e.g., 2012, 2020). He pointed out that this court not only performs an interpretative role in relation to individual treaties, but also acts as the EU's "constitutional legislator." The court's case law has gradually brought the EU closer to a federal model and created the fundamental constitutional pillars of the EU, thus closing the circle back to the original doctrinal line of constitutionalisation. This is not a one-sided process, but a mutual dialogue between judicial authorities.

Following normative debates on sovereignty and legitimacy, since the beginning of the 21st century, academic literature has increasingly focused on how the process of EU constitutionalization works in practice and what its limits are. Attention is shifting in particular to the role of the courts, the mechanisms for enforcing EU law, and the relationship between European and national constitutional authority. A significant contribution in this regard was made by Karen J. Alter (2001), who analyzed how and why the principle of the supremacy of EU law prevailed despite the absence of a clear political mandate. She pointed out that federalization in Europe is not taking place through the adoption of a constitution or a political act, but through gradual and often conflictual judicial practice. The supremacy of EU law is the result of a gradual and unintentional process[1] that would have remained ineffective without the cooperation of national courts. It is a unique model of international rule of law that has no parallel in other international organizations. The courts have accepted the primacy of EU law because it has strengthened their position vis-à-vis national parliaments and government executives. According to Alter, federalization is being implemented as "judicial federalism."

The question is to what extent the resulting constitutionality of the EU is democratically sound. Sionaidh Douglas-Scott (2002) critically pointed this out by stating that although the

[1] As she pointed out in another monograph (2009), the political and legal power of courts in the EU does not stem solely from the text of individual treaties, but also from the social and political contexts in which these courts operate. It is precisely this aspect that enables them to slowly shape a federal legal order.

EU has many features of a constitutional order, it lacks the key political and social foundations typical of national constitutions. According to her, the constitutionality of the EU is fragmented and largely detached from political reality. She warned against overestimating case law, as court decisions cannot replace the political process or the collective will of citizens, because the EU does not have a unified *dêmos* and lacks a common political identity.[2] The constitutionalization of the EU, based primarily on courts and case law, is therefore democratically deficient. An empirical correction to this criticism was provided by Lisa Conant (2002), who focused on the implementation of CJEU case law in member states. She showed that although the decisions of the CJEU have the potential to extend integration (a federalizing element), their effect is often "contained" in practice by national governments and institutional factors. The federalization of the EU through law therefore exists, but it is limited by the ability and willingness of Member States to actually implement these decisions. This mechanism creates a balance between supranational law and national sovereignty.

Parallel to the enforcement of EU law, the formation of general principles of law has been singled out as a separate line of constitutionalization. British professor of European law Takis Tridimas (2006) pointed out that principles such as proportionality, legal certainty, protection of legitimate expectations, and prohibition of discrimination have acquired a constitutional function and have become constitutional pillars of the EU legal order. In other words, they have transformed the EU into a constitutional order that goes beyond the framework of classical international law. In this context, however, the fundamental question of the relationship between European and national constitutionality, addressed by Leonard Besselink (2007), has emerged. He characterized the EU as a "composite constitution"[3] that was not created by the adoption of a single overarching document, but by the interconnection of European treaties, CJEU case law, and national constitutions. The constitutionality of the EU is thus the result of the intertwining and interdependence of several levels, not their hierarchical arrangement. The federalization of the EU is therefore gradual and fragmented, with the EU's constitutional order being multi-level and non-hierarchical.

Armin von Bogdandy followed up on this pluralistic view of constitutionality, shifting the discussion from the structure of constitutionality to its internal supporting elements. In his works, he pointed to two aspects of internal federalization of the EU: a) identity-forming (constitutional treaty and identity symbolism) and b) legal-doctrinal (basic principles as a constitutional basis). In both cases, the sovereignty of states is transformed into shared constitutionality and identity within the EU, albeit without a full federal constitutional act. He understood the basic principles of EU law as "constitutional principles" that prove that the EU functions as a constitutional order, even though it is not a federation. At the same time, he addressed the issue of constitutional identity and the symbolic significance of the

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[2] She has also pointed out this problem in other works, for example Douglas-Scott (2011). Similarly, another work points out that the EU represents a model example of "postmodern law" and constitutionalization without a state, because its constitutionality is based more on courts than on political will (Douglas-Scott, 2013).

[3] For more on this issue, see De Witte (2021).

Constitutional Treaty (2005). He argued that collective identity is an essential element of the viability of a political community and that a constitution has the potential to weaken the exclusive dominance of national sovereignty through shared symbolic and normative meanings. However, according to him, this identity-forming effect remains limited, as citizens' identification with the EU cannot be normatively enforced. Federalization therefore requires not only legal norms but also legitimization through identity. Ingolf Pernice developed a similarly pluralistic but more systematic conception of constitutionality through the concept of "multilevel constitutionalism." He argued that the EU already has a constitution in the material sense, which is a combination of European treaties, the case law of the CJEU of the EU, and national constitutions, including their constitutional courts. This constitutional system is *sui generis* in nature and is not hierarchical, but functional and shared. Sovereignty is not exercised exclusively by states, but by citizens at multiple levels of government. However, he pointed out that Member States are no longer the exclusive "masters of the treaties" and that national constitutions are changing from "state constitutions" to "constitutions of Member States." According to him, the Treaty of Lisbon (2009) confirmed this model in practice by strengthening constitutional elements, the legal binding nature of the Charter of Fundamental Rights, and democratic legitimacy without formally declaring the EU a federation. The Treaty of Lisbon is therefore proof that his theory of multilevel constitutionalism works in practice. The constitutionality of the EU is spread across several levels, and national sovereignty is transformed into shared sovereignty of citizens and institutions (Pernice, 2009).

On this background, the question of the relationship between European and national constitutional authority has shifted from structural models to specific conflicts. Professor of law M. Kumm (2005) analyzed the tension between the primacy of EU law and national constitutions. He pointed out that although national courts often respect the supremacy of EU law, they retain control reservations, particularly in the area of fundamental rights protection and competence limits. He therefore rejected the idea of the absolute supremacy of EU law and national constitutions, emphasizing that the European constitutional order functions through pluralism and judicial dialogue. The aforementioned analysis of constitutional conflicts naturally raises the broader question of whether the European constitutional order can be understood as a unified and hierarchical system at all. It is precisely this question that Matej Avbelj and Jan Komárek systematically explored in their edited collection *Constitutional Pluralism in the EU and Beyond* (2012). The authors proceeded from the conviction that there are several legitimate constitutional authorities in the EU—European and national—between which there is no fixed hierarchy or final "constitutional arbiter." They therefore did not consider the EU legal order to be a hierarchically closed system. In their view, constitutional pluralism does not deny the existence of EU constitutionality, but rejects its interpretation exclusively through the logic of the state or a classic federation. They emphasized that tension is a normal part of the functioning of the system, because conflict is not destructive (as a failure), but rather a way in which the system develops and adapts. Their analysis does not point to a classical model of federalization, but rather to a linear transfer of power, with federalizing elements being implemented selectively. The stability of the European constitutional order depends on constant dialogue between the CJEU, national constitutional courts, and political bodies.

This dialogue is a practical mechanism for resolving conflicts and a way of balancing autonomy and sovereignty.

The pluralistic nature of the European constitutional order was further developed in the debate on the failure of the EU's formal constitutional project. For example, Hermann-Josef Blanke and Stelio Mangiameli (2006) analyzed the process of adoption and subsequent failure of the Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe (2004), which was intended to codify and simplify EU primary law. They pointed out that the EU is developing through treaties that, although they do not take the form of a federal constitution, contain constitutional elements. The Constitutional Treaty was intended to codify and symbolically unify these elements, but its rejection revealed the limits of the political federalization of the EU. The authors identified federalization tendencies, particularly in the strengthening of the European Parliament, the expansion of qualified majority voting, and the enshrinement of the Charter of Fundamental Rights. At the same time, however, they emphasized that decisive powers remain in the hands of the member states, creating an asymmetrical and fragmented model of federation. Sovereignty is shared in this model, but not abolished, and the political limits of federalization are mainly related to the absence of a common political nation and collective identity.

Monica Claes (2006) drew attention to the role of national courts in this pluralistic system. In her monograph, she analyzed the mandate of national courts in the European constitutional order and emphasized that the constitutionalization of the EU is not a unilateral process of the supremacy of EU law, but the result of a dialogue between national courts and the CJEU. National courts thus become co-creators of European constitutionality: on the one hand, they protect national constitutional identity, and on the other, they accept the fundamental principles of EU law. In this sense, federalization is a cooperative and pluralistic process. The discussion on the multi-level constitutionality of the EU was also expanded by Victoria Jennett (2007), who originally included sub-state entities in her analysis of the constitutionalization of the EU. She pointed out that European constitutionalism is changing the meaning of sovereignty not only in the relationship between the EU and its member states, but also between states and regions. The principle of the primacy of EU law and the strengthening of European institutions create a multi-level political space in which sub-state entities can establish direct relations with the EU. This weakens the state's monopoly on sovereignty and redefines self-determination as constitutional participation in a post-national framework.

Following the ratification of the Lisbon Treaty (2009), the debate on the constitutionalization of the EU shifted towards the stability and structure of this pluralistic system. In his works (e.g., 2009, 2012, 2017), Daniel Halberstam developed the concept of constitutionalism through pluralism and "constitutional heterarchy."[4] He argued that the EU cannot be understood as a hierarchical system with the clear supremacy of a single center of power, but

[4] This concept refers to a constitutional arrangement in which there is no ultimate authority with the final say. In this system, there are several constitutional authorities that compete for the final interpretation of the law. For more details, see: Halberstam, 2009, pp. 326–330.

as an arrangement in which multiple levels make competing claims to ultimate authority. He therefore did not consider conflicts between national constitutional courts and the CJEU to be a crisis, but a natural part of the functioning of a pluralistic constitutional order. His concept thus shifted the discussion from the dichotomy of "federalism" versus "sovereignty" to a more flexible model in which federalization is a process of conflict management and coordination, not the creation of a superior center of power. However, the author did not advocate anarchy or relativism; he considered his concept of heterarchy to be normatively defensible and based on the accountability of the courts.

The constitutional dimension of the Lisbon Treaty has been examined in detail by Lucia Serena Rossi (2017), for example. She focused on the legal status of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU, to which Lisbon granted the same legal force as the founding treaties. The Charter strengthens the constitutional quality of the EU and the position of the individual as a rights holder, but according to the author, it does not in itself constitute evidence of federalization, nor does it represent a "constitutional" document of the EU, as it has its limitations. Rather, the author's analysis revealed the continuing tension between the autonomy of EU law and national sovereignty.

Another interesting contribution was Norbert Reich's monograph (2013), in which the author revealed the penetration of constitutionalization into spheres outside public law. He pointed to the autonomy of European civil law (the principle of "framed autonomy"), especially consumer law, which is directly applied in the legal systems of member states. However, this autonomy is "framed" by national constitutional traditions and the principles of the rule of law. The federalization of the EU is thus also reflected in private (civil) law, although not in the federal sense. EU law is indeed autonomous in reality, but it continues to be framed by national constitutional traditions. This view corresponds with the analysis of Cherednychenko and Reich (2015), according to whom the constitutionalization of European private law takes place through selective "gateways," but at the same time remains limited by national constitutional traditions and the principles of the rule of law.

Allan Rosas and Lorna Armati (2012) provided a summary overview of the constitutional nature of the EU. They characterized the EU as a constitutional system with significant federal features, but one that does not resemble a classic federal state. The constitutionality of the EU has developed gradually, through the case law of the CJEU and the protection of fundamental rights, while its legitimacy is based on the principle of the rule of law and the status of the individual (2009). The constitutionality of the EU therefore exists even without the existence of a formal federal state or a single constitutional act.

A critical counterpoint to this line of thinking is represented, for example, by Dieter Grimm (2015), who saw serious consequences for democratic legitimacy in the process of EU federalization. He argued that the EU had undergone a form of "pre-constitutionalization," particularly through the case law of the CJEU, which introduced constitutional principles and the legal supremacy of EU law without the EU being able to speak of a unified European political people. He was therefore critical of the role of the CJEU, which has no direct democratic mandate. According to Grimm, shifting key political issues to the legal and judicial level weakens democratic political competition and increases the democratic costs of

integration. In his view, the legitimacy of the EU must be derived primarily from the member states.

Grimm's criticism of the "pre-constitutionalization" of the EU is followed by Bruno de Witte's less normative and more doctrinal approach, which focuses on the internal structure and functioning of the EU legal order. De Witte (2021) analyzed the doctrines of direct effect and primacy of EU law as the fundamental pillars through which the CJEU has constituted the autonomous nature of EU law. He emphasized that these doctrines do not derive directly from the founding treaties but are the result of case law developments that have separated EU law from classical international law and enabled it to directly confer rights on individuals. According to him, the primacy of EU law does not represent hierarchical superiority, but a functional principle necessary to ensure the uniform and effective application of the law, the functioning of which is conditional on the willingness of national courts to accept these doctrines. EU integration is thus the result of constant interaction between the CJEU and national courts, not a unilateral assertion of power. However, the author rejected the understanding of these doctrines as an expression of judicial activism; he saw them as a response to the structural needs of the integration project. De Witte, however, broadened the discussion on the constitutionalization of the EU to include the issue of differentiated integration as a permanent and structural feature. He pointed out that EU law has a dual function in this process: it allows for more flexible integration, while at the same time protecting the unity and autonomy of the EU legal order. He distinguished three main legal instruments of this integration: a) opt-out regimes, b) enhanced cooperation, and c) separate intergovernmental agreements between Member States, emphasizing that even integration outside the framework of the EU treaties is legally limited by the primacy of EU law and subject to the control of the CJEU. According to the author, the federalization of the EU is thus not developing towards a classic federation, but as a complex legal system with "variable geometry," in which the sovereignty of Member States is transformed into a legally framed and shared form.

Finally, recent works have opened up new debates focusing, for example, on the issue of identity as a new frontier of integration. One example is Rana Hirschl and Yaniv Rozania (2024), who analyzed the concept of "constitutional identity" as an ambivalent tool. Constitutional identity can protect the fundamental principles of the constitutional order of member states, but at the same time it can be misused to reject integration commitments and legitimize illiberal tendencies (e.g., Hungary, Poland). In the context of the EU, it becomes a place of conflict between national and supranational constitutionality. There is therefore a risk of abuse of this concept, as governments can misuse and arbitrarily interpret the term "constitutional identity" for their own political goals. The authors thus confirmed that the issue of EU federalization and the preservation of national sovereignty is today largely conducted through the concept of constitutional identity. It is both a bridge and a battlefield – it can legitimize federalization through shared values, but it can also reinforce sovereignist tendencies if it is approached rigidly and ethno-nationalistically.

Not only the above findings and theoretical concepts of various authors suggest that, in the case of the constitutionalization of EU law, we are talking about a process in which the EU integration project has gradually transformed into a legal order of a constitutional nature

(effects) without the formal adoption of a European constitution and without an explicit decision by the Member States to create a European federation. The essence of this process lies in the fact that the EU has acquired constitutional features mainly through law, case law, and judicial practice. The doctrines of direct effect and the primacy of EU law (especially after the *Van Gend en Loos* and *Costa v. ENEL* judgments) have become key doctrines of the EU. These doctrines have contributed to the creation of an autonomous EU legal order that directly guarantees the rights of individuals and limits national legal orders, so that Member States relinquish part of their sovereignty through integration. At the same time, the powers of the CJEU of the EU have been extended through case law, creating a self-reinforcing dynamic in which the case law of this court generates further integration. Several authors therefore argue that the EU already has substantive constitutionality, or a constitutional minimum, which is moving the EU towards federal characteristics. At the same time, however, it appears that the constitutionalization of the EU is also based on dialogue between the CJEU and national courts, which is essential for the practical enforcement of European law. Several authors therefore point out that there is still tension between the legal shift towards federal features and the continuing intergovernmental policy, which in many cases raises questions of democratic legitimacy. Constitutionalization thus also creates a multi-level and often pluralistic constitutional space (i.e., pluralistic centers of power) in which sovereignty is transformed into a shared form rather than disappearing altogether. In recent discussions, the issue of identity and disputes over the "constitutional identity" of member states has also emerged as an important boundary of this development.

1.2 Multi-level governance (MLG)

Another dimension, or trajectory, of the EU internal federalization process is linked to the assertion that European integration is not merely the result of formal treaties between member states or the deliberate creation of federal institutions "from above." This "internal" process also takes place through the practical functioning of legal, political, and administrative mechanisms. This approach shows that federalization can take place without an open political decision to create a federation, gradually through the strengthening of legal norms, institutional autonomy, and dispersed authority. This is the concept of multilevel governance (MLG), developed in particular by Liesbet Hooghe and Gary Marks. Both authors are among the most cited theorists of European integration.

Empirical evidence shows that authority in Europe is dispersed across multiple levels and decision-making is "spread across different levels" (European – national – regional/local). MLG is understood as a "form of good governance" and "refers to a multi-level and multi-actor paradigm." At the same time, it "does not directly challenge the sovereignty of states" but describes how a multi-level structure is created, thereby "removing the gray area between intergovernmentalism and supranationalism." MLG therefore operates on the principle of multi-channel engagement, in which regions and cities use different institutional channels to articulate their interests and needs, which fits into the participatory model of democracy. The MLG concept thus provides an analytical framework for understanding the interrelationships between regions, cities, local actors, and citizens within a multilevel political system (Hooghe, Marks, & Schakel, 2010, p. xii).

The above definition of MLG creates space for empirical research into how this redistribution of authority manifests itself in specific EU policies and institutions. Liesbet Hooghe already pointed to a fundamental transformation of European integration, in which political authority is not concentrated solely in the hands of Member States, in her monograph Building a Europe with the Regions (1996). Based on an analysis of EU regional policy, she showed that the European Commission actively involves regions and sub-state actors in policy-making and implementation, creating direct links between the regional and European levels. This weakens the monopoly of national governments on mediating European decisions and signals a transition to a multi-level system of governance.

While Hooghe pointed to the practical weakening of the monopoly of national governments through regional policy, other authors such as G. Marks, L. Hooghe, and K. Blank (1996) placed this development in a broader theoretical framework and laid the foundations for the concept of multi-level governance by emphasizing its contrast with the state-centric model, which is associated with intergovernmentalism and presupposes the control of sovereign states over integration. However, they argued that this interpretation is empirically insufficient because it does not explain the extent and stability of the transfer of decision-making powers beyond the national level. In MLG, competences are shared between the European, national, and sub-national levels, and there is no single center of authority, with supranational institutions enjoying growing autonomy. It follows that they did not understand integration as a simple weakening or preservation of sovereignty, but as its transformation into a permanent system of multi-level governance.

A more systematic elaboration of the MLG concept was presented by L. Hooghe and G. Marks in a later monograph (2001) and scientific studies (e.g., 2003, 2009), in which they characterized the EU as a non-hierarchical political system without a single center of power. Decision-making here is based on negotiation, coordination, and network interactions, with individual outcomes emerging as compromises between actors with overlapping competences. The authors also distinguished between MLG type I (stable territorial levels, e.g., EU–state–region) and MLG type II (flexible, functionally oriented model with overlapping jurisdictions and temporary authorities). With this typology, they showed that MLG cannot be reduced to a single institutional model or automatically equated with federalism, as sovereignty is vertically divided and functionally fragmented.

While the original MLG typology focused primarily on the structural arrangement of authority, later research by the authors expanded the analysis to include political conflicts, identity, and questions of legitimacy. In a later publication (2016), the authors, together with other theorists, developed a "post-functionalist theory of governance," according to which the distribution of authority depends not only on functional needs, but also on political conflicts, identity, and the legitimization of power. They introduced the concept of regional authority, which is based on a combination of self-rule and shared-rule capacities of regions. At the same time, they showed that transfers of powers provoke resistance if they are perceived as a threat to identity or a weakening of democratic accountability. They thus linked the theoretical concept of MLG with issues of political conflict, politicization, and legitimacy. Their goal was to empirically measure regional authority in Europe (and beyond) using the *Regional Authority Index* (RAI). They pointed to a trend toward its strengthening, with the

EU acting as both an integrating and decentralizing factor (especially through the implementation of policies at the regional level). This concept was updated in a later article by the authors (2018), primarily with regard to reflecting on the EU's experience with multiple crises and linking it to cleavages theory. They emphasized that authority in the EU cannot be centralized, that the exercise of power is layered and controversial, and that further federalization faces political limits to centralization because European decisions are losing public support.

Simone Piattoni, for example, followed up on this analytical clarification, viewing MLG not as a closed theory but as a flexible analytical framework suitable for examining practical decision-making processes. In her monograph (2010), she examined MLG as a solid analytical framework and "critical synthesis," not as a closed theory. She emphasized that the EU is specific in its sharing of competences and the interconnection of the European, national, and regional levels, with MLG helping to understand how federalization occurs in practice in decision-making processes. At the same time, she pointed to conceptual, empirical, and normative challenges and the democratic fragility of the process, as MLG increases complexity and makes accountability and transparency more difficult.

Bache & Flinders (2004) also made an important contribution to establishing MLG by placing this concept within the broader discussion on governance. It is a model of management that is applied in a globalized world. Their publication highlighted the shift from hierarchical governance to negotiated and networked forms of power, with MLG being understood not only as specific to the EU, but also as an analytical tool for domestic fragmentation of power. However, this concept can also be seen in countries that have undergone processes of decentralization, devolution, or administrative reform. From the authors' point of view, European integration cannot be understood as a shift towards a classic federation, but as a process of diffusion and sharing of responsibility between institutions, governments, regional actors, and non-governmental organizations. Based on empirical studies, it is clear that the state is no longer the sole bearer of authority. It is only one of the actors in a broader network of governance, and its ability to coordinate and control political processes is significantly limited. MLG therefore represents a pluralistic concept that highlights the complexity of state transformation in globalization, European integration, and social complexity.

This shift towards governance was further specified in analyses of network and partnership decision-making mechanisms developed, for example, by Kohler-Koch (1996, 1998, 1999, 2006). She pointed out that the functioning of the EU is based on network and partnership structures, in particular through comitology (committees composed of representatives of the Member States and the EC) and expert networks. The EU is therefore not a classic federation, as decision-making takes place in flexible networks and legitimacy derives more from effective problem-solving than from classic mechanisms. At the same time, however, network governance complicates accountability and transparency and is not universal in all policies. The EU therefore represents a new type of political system based on "network governance," which is not uniform or universal, as it prevails mainly in economic and regulatory policies. In monetary policy, foreign policy, and security, member states guard their positions of control.

Analytical attention naturally shifted from institutional networks to the behavior of actors, which opened up space for empirical research on interest groups within the MLG. This space was filled by Rainer Eising's research (2004, 2007). He elaborated on the MLG through policy-interest analysis and showed that the EU provides multiple arenas and entry points that actors strategically combine. He thus interpreted the MLG as a practical, empirically observable pattern of actor behavior, not as a uniform hierarchy, with the process of federalization meaning the opening and diversification of channels of political influence, not the transfer of sovereignty. In this sense, it is not just a constitutional or legal project; it is a practical process that changes the way the interests of different actors are pursued. MLG essentially changes the way interests are pursued, i.e., instead of the interests of the nation state, the interests of companies and associations operating in a network of multilevel forums come to the fore.[5]

Findings on the strategic behavior of actors also indicate that decision-making in the EU often deviates from formal rules, as analyzed in detail by Professor Emeritus Adrienne Héritier (1999, 2002, 2003, 2008). Although she did not explicitly address MLG in her work, her findings fit within the scope of this concept. She emphasized the multi-level and non-hierarchical nature of governance in the EU and pointed out that decision-making often deviates from formal rules. According to her, comitology creates a composite model of democracy. The author thus identified the emergence of new modes of governance, which are characterized, for example, by non-legislative instruments (e.g., soft law, recommendations, benchmarking), voluntary coordination, the participation of national and non-state actors, and the absence of a strong central authority. New modes of governance can be found at all levels without hierarchy, with responsibility dispersed among actors. Governance in these regimes is not directive, but rather coordinative and educational in nature. It implicitly follows that MLG is a practical (empirical) consequence of the political and institutional limits of the EU (Héritier, 2002, 2008). It follows from the above that the federalization of the EU is not taking place through the constitution or institutions, but through informal, silent regulation, technical and network mechanisms that are gradually transferring authority to the European level.

If EU decision-making processes are non-hierarchical and often informal, then the question arises: what is their legitimacy? Vivien A. Schmidt (2010, 2013) sought to answer this question through the concept of discursive institutionalism and by extending the traditional concept of legitimacy to include so-called throughput legitimacy, which is procedural legitimacy relevant to MLG—i.e., the quality of procedures, inclusion, and transparency. Although she did not explicitly write about MLG, she analyzed how discourse (e.g., language,

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[5] National governments have thus lost their monopoly on promoting corporate interests. If a company wants to promote its interests, it can easily bypass the national government and promote its interests directly in Brussels. This means that the EU cannot be understood as a central authority, but as a creator of multiple forums that can be used. In practical terms, for example, in matters of cohesion policy, individual companies are active at the national and regional levels. However, when it comes to regulatory policies (e.g., energy, telecommunications), companies prefer the European level (e.g., the European Commission, agencies, etc.).

argumentation, communication) influences the legitimacy and functioning of individual institutions within the above framework. MLG can also be understood as a process of deliberation between actors at different levels, where the quality of communication is as important as institutional structures. The discursive dimension of the EU therefore means that the EU maintains the legitimacy of its power primarily through the argumentation and deliberation of multiple actors. Federalization attempts can therefore be seen as processes of "communicative governance" or as a quasi-federal constitutional order in discourse.

In practice, the discursive dimension of governance is complemented by specific forms of political mobilization, especially at the regional level, as empirically elaborated by Norwegian political scientist M. Tatham, who in his MLG research emphasized quantitative and network analysis of regional lobbying in Brussels and EU regional policy. He empirically demonstrated the growing influence of subnational actors (including lobbyists) and regional subsystems in the EU beyond the state. The regions themselves enter the European political arena independently of central governments, although their access and influence are uneven. They do not merely function as implementing bodies for given policies, but actively influence these policies at various levels of decision-making (2011, 2018). Lobbying by regions, for example through direct representation in Brussels or through supranational networks, is a key manifestation of MLG (Tatham, 2019, 2021). It is, in fact, paradiplomacy that regions engage in at the EU level, reducing the need for the national level of diplomacy as the sole mediator of interests. By bypassing national governments and negotiating directly with EU bodies, regions weaken the nation state's monopoly on sovereignty. The EU thus directly creates space for shared and multi-level sovereignty, in which regions gain a greater voice.

However, the influence of regions does not mean the emergence of a unified "Europe of the Regions," as Charlie Jeffery has critically pointed out. In an earlier collective monograph (1997), he presented the finding that although the EU had provided regions with a number of possibilities and new political opportunities, particularly through cohesion policy and consultation mechanisms, this trend had not led to the emergence of a separate regional level of governance. The power of the regions therefore remained asymmetrical and dependent on national institutional frameworks. Similarly, Michael W. Bauer and Tanja Börzel (2010, p. 253) stated that so far, no "convincing empirical evidence of a comprehensive trend of emancipation at the subnational level triggered by the EU [...] has been found. Instead of a Europe of regions, we seem to be witnessing the emergence of a Europe with some regions, where regional involvement varies across Member States and across policy areas." Various works by the author (e.g., 1996, 2000) have also shown that instead of a "Europe of regions," it is more relevant to speak of a pluralistic map of regions in the EU, with the influence of regions being limited and asymmetrical. The sovereignty of states remains strong, as many decisions on the distribution of powers to regions are made at the national level. In a joint study with J. Peterson (2020), the author pointed out that MLG is not only a theory of European integration and a descriptive framework of European governance, but also a broader analytical and theoretical project that became the basis for later post-functionalism , which explains the dispersion of authority across different levels and explains the tension between functional efficiency and political-identity conflicts in modern Europe.

From the political level, the analysis of MLG has also moved to the administrative level, which has been systematically developed by Morten Egeberg and Jarle Trondal (2004, 2009, 2011), for example. They pointed out that MLG also has an administrative dimension: European and national agencies are linked in an integrated multilevel administration. They wrote about "double-hatted" agencies and the diffusion of power across levels, with integration also taking place through bureaucratic and organizational links. MLG is therefore an administrative order and everyday practice of the EU. EU integration takes place not only normatively, but also through bureaucratic and organizational links. The federalization of the EU thus also means administrative integration, which weakens the classic vertical understanding of sovereignty. Federalization therefore has the character of joint bureaucratic administration, and sovereignty is weakened by everyday administrative practice.

At the same time, administrative links intersect with the spatial dimension of governance, in which regions and cities become key nodes in European and global administration. This dimension of MLG has been examined, for example, by sociologist Patrick Le Galès (2002, 2010, 2011, 2013). According to the author, cities and regions are not just implementers of projects, but active co-creators of policy through networks and partnerships, with the consequences of MLG being uneven depending on resources and capacities. In this way, federalization shifts in the EU manifest themselves in practice, in the day-to-day management of policies, not just in a formal transfer of sovereignty. This is a bottom-up federalization process that is asymmetrical, resulting, for example, in regional disparities. On the other hand, strengthening cities/regions can improve citizen participation and increase the democratic legitimacy of governance.

If power is exercised in such a dispersed and networked form, then legitimacy can no longer be based on a single sovereign, as Oliver Gerstenberg (2002a, 2002b) has argued. He claimed that legitimacy in the EU does not stem primarily from a single constitution or a single political people, but from procedural and deliberative mechanisms that allow different levels to participate in decision-making on important issues. According to the author, the constitutional character of the EU is procedural and open, with democratic legitimacy based on justification, participation, and mutual control. He therefore understood the EU as a political system with legal and deliberative features without the existence of a single European people. The procedural and deliberative nature of legitimization is ultimately linked to the question of how European rules retroactively shape national systems, as analyzed by Tanja A. Börzel and Thomass Risse (2000, 2003). These authors emphasized that it is not enough to examine the process of European integration solely through the lens of the creation and functioning of European institutions, but also through its impact on member states, i.e., how the EU influences national policies and institutional arrangements. They defined the term Europeanization as the process of creating and developing governance structures at the European level that affect member states. They viewed Europeanization as a multi-level process with feedback loops. Change at the national level occurs when there is a mismatch between European and domestic arrangements, with diffusion mechanisms operating through coercion, incentives, learning, and socialization (Börzel & Risse, 2012). It is thus a process of vertical and horizontal penetration of European normative pressures into national systems. According to the authors, EU integration does not only work from the outside in (hierarchically), but also creates relationships between levels of government,

which are at the core of the MLG concept. The EU is therefore characterized by a combination of several forms of governance, and authority is coordinated without the existence of a sovereign center (Börzel, 2010; Börzel & Risse, 2010).

Based on individual findings, it can be summarized that multilevel governance (MLG) describes the EU as a non-hierarchical political system in which authority is divided between the European, national, regional, and local levels. In this framework, European integration is not understood as a one-off transfer of sovereignty, but as a gradual change in the way of governing through legal, political, administrative, and network mechanisms. MLG shows that a federation can emerge "from inside" even without a formal declaration, through the daily practice of decision-making and policy implementation. It is characterized by overlapping competences and the absence of a single center of power, with decision-making taking place through negotiation, coordination, and compromise. However, the MLG concept emphasizes the participation of a wide range of actors, from EU institutions and member states to regions, cities, interest groups, and expert networks. State sovereignty is not eliminated in MLG, but is vertically divided and functionally fragmented. An important part of MLG is also administrative and network integration, which links European and national bureaucracies in everyday practice. The concept also points to democratic challenges, in particular the problems of legitimacy, transparency, and accountability in a complex system of governance. Instead of a "Europe of regions," an asymmetrical and pluralistic map of subnational actors' involvement is emerging. MLG thus provides a key analytical framework for understanding how the EU functions as a system of shared and multi-level authority that stands between the state, federation, and network governance.

1.3 Eurolegalism, the regulatory state, and judicial dynamics

Another perspective on the process of EU federalization from within focuses on the question of how EU law, and in particular the decisions of the CJEU, translate into real integration, legitimacy, and governance. Several authors have examined whether this court merely interprets or actively shapes the dynamics of integration, what the limits of judicial power are in an environment of political compromise, and how integration is enforced outside of formal constitutional acts. This creates an image of the EU as an order that is federalized mainly through law, regulation, administration, and judicial mechanisms, but at the same time encounters democratic and political boundaries.

One of the early attempts to critically examine the role of the CJEU in this process was the research of Hjalte Rasmussen, who opened the debate on the limits of judicial power in European integration. In his book *On Law and Policy in the European Court of Justice* (1986), he examined the extent to which CJEU decisions are legal or political, concluding that in key cases, policy considerations often prevailed over strictly legal arguments. He argued that several doctrines created by the court had no clear basis in the text of the treaties and served to promote EU integration. He therefore viewed the CJEU as an organ of judicial activism with federalizing consequences arising without an adequate democratic mandate. He warned that if the court takes on an integrative political role, the balance between law and politics is disrupted. However, a critical interpretation of the CJEU as a judicial actor with political ambitions does not fully explain why EU law has been so effective in practice.

Authors Anne-Marie Burley and Walter Mattli (1993) explained the success of legal integration in a non-functionalist way – EC/EU law has been effectively enforced even without federal authority because it has functioned through the interaction of three groups: the CJEU, national courts, and private actors. The authors identified the CJEU as a key actor in legal integration, but did not perceive it as an "activist" court. The CJEU responded to initiatives from national courts and formulated those doctrines that are functionally necessary to ensure the unity of the acquis communautaire. The CJEU is thus a central actor in federalization processes, particularly thanks to the preliminary ruling mechanism. Integration is cumulative: decisions create new expectations, which generate further disputes, which in turn generate further decisions. The federalization effect thus arises from a chain of precedents as a by-product of legal rationality, not as an explicit political project.

However, functional legal integration through case law also points to possible tensions between the development of the legal order and the capacity of political institutions to take joint decisions. This problem was highlighted in particular by German political scientist Fritz W. Scharpf, who identified the fundamental paradox of EU integration – it combines stability without progress and a low capacity for political adaptation. According to Scharpf (1988), the EU does not suffer from a lack of cooperation or the threat of disintegration, but it is unable to effectively develop policies in areas requiring the clear consensus of several governments. He explained this situation with the concept of the "joint-decision trap," which arises when central decisions depend on the unanimous consent of member states. In such an environment, rational behavior by governments leads to collectively suboptimal results. He saw an analogy in German cooperative federalism, with the same logic applying in the EU. The European Commission does not have autonomous executive power, and the right of veto in the Council of Ministers means that the implementation of joint decisions depends on national administrations. The weaknesses of integration thus do not stem from the political unwillingness of the actors, but from the institutional arrangement of the EU itself. In a later revision (2006), the author confirmed the validity of this concept, which he supplemented with an analysis of the supranational-hierarchical mode of governance through the EC and the CJEU. These institutions are able to enforce binding decisions through law and case law, giving the doctrines of supremacy and direct effect a quasi-legislative character. This mode of governance systematically reinforces negative integration, while positive integration remains tied to consensus and is weakened. The result is asymmetry in favor of market liberalization and the emergence of a problem-solving gap, in which states lose their capacity to address social and economic problems without the existence of a politically legitimate authority at the EU level. The federalization of the EU is therefore significantly limited: shared authority does not lead to effective federal governance, but to a cooperative regime in which it is easier to block common solutions than to enforce them.

The EU's limited capacity to adopt redistributive policies explains the shift towards regulatory instruments. In his article *The Rise of the Regulatory State in Europe* (1994), political scientist Giandomenico Majone conceptualized the emergence of the "regulatory state" as a consequence of liberalization, privatization, and growing economic interdependence. Regulation has become the main instrument of public intervention, as it allows markets to be influenced without the extensive budgetary resources that the EU – especially the European Commission – does not have at its disposal. The EU is therefore a

natural environment for regulatory policy, which Majone elaborated on in his book *Regulating Europe* (1996) as a shift from the welfare state to the regulatory state. Regulation is based on expert knowledge and the stability of rules, which leads to the delegation of powers to independent regulatory bodies, but at the same time creates tension between technocratic independence and democratic accountability. In his book *Dilemmas of European Integration* (2005), the author critically assessed the development of the EU as a project of "integration by stealth," in which the powers of European institutions were expanded without an explicit political mandate. According to him, the functionalist transfer of powers led to a weakening of political accountability and deepened the contradiction between the scope of decision-making at the EU level and the absence of a European people (*dêmos*). Majone therefore rejected the evaluation of the EU according to the criteria of a federal state and considered hidden federalization to be normatively problematic, as it takes place in a technocratic manner, through regulations, and often outside of open democratic debate.

However, the regulatory nature of integration is not only reflected in policy-making, but also in case law, which is gradually creating the basic constitutional framework for the single market. According to Luis M. P. Maduro (1998), the CJEU has become a key player in shaping the "European economic constitution" of the single market, despite the absence of a democratic mandate and outside the traditional constitutional processes. However, this constitution did not come about through a constitutional act or political decision (agreement), but through the case law of the CJEU, in particular the interpretation of Article 30 of the Treaty establishing the European Community (now Article 34 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU), which defined the fundamental pillars of this constitution. The European economic constitution thus came into being incrementally, on the basis of judicial interpretation and without an explicit constitutional mandate. He did not simply label this as activism; rather, he argued that it was a matter of enforcing " majority" European rules against autonomous national decisions (1998, p. 11). At the same time, however, he pointed to an asymmetry: the CJEU strongly protects economic freedoms (negative integration), while social and collective rights often give way to market logic. In a later reflection (2003), he emphasized that although the EU has constitutionality, it cannot have a classic federal constitution without the existence of a unified demos; its legitimacy is therefore fragmented and renewed functionally, because it is not based on "origin" but on performance. It is the courts that serve as a mechanism for stabilizing the pluralistic order, because European constitutionality is the result of compromises. Not only for this reason would a formal (federal) constitution not resolve the fundamental tensions in the EU, but would only shift them to another level. It is therefore a functional, albeit unconventional, constitutionality.

Although CJEU case law plays a key role, the development of EU law cannot be reduced to a single line of judicial expansion. According to some authors (Craig & Burca, 2011, 2012), the development of EU law is neither uniform nor linear, but rather sectoral – expansive in some areas, stabilizing or corrective in others. Constitutional doctrines have consolidated and adapted over time, shaped by the political context, EU enlargement, and a combination of legal mechanisms and intergovernmental decisions. In EU administrative law, they have shown that the exercise of public power takes place through interconnected administrative processes (MLG), which has required specific principles of control and procedural rules with

constitutional significance. EU administrative law is of constitutional significance because it defines the exercise and control of public power in the supranational legal order. Although fragmented, it is functionally coherent enough to ensure efficiency, legal protection, and accountability in the MLG system. At the same time, CJEU case law has confirmed the autonomy of EU law in relation to international law, demonstrating the EU's own constitutional standards (de Búrca 2009).

The expansion of the EU legal framework through CJEU case law has also opened up new opportunities for non-state actors and civil society to get involved through the law (by filing lawsuits). Civil society and organized groups are thus mobilized through EU law and litigation before the CJEU. However, mobilization is not automatic—it depends to a large extent on capacity and resources, expertise, and transnational networks. Litigation can bring about political change, but the effects of judgments are often conditioned by implementation and the national context. The judicial arena is therefore one of the channels of participation that extends the reach of EU law, but at the same time reinforces the judicialization of politics at the expense of parliamentary deliberation (Cichowski, 2004, 2006, 2007). The aforementioned legal mobilization of non-state actors is not only the result of individual strategies of actors, but also of broader professional and social structures. This is the sociological dimension of EU constitutionalization, which points to the fact that integration is based not only on treaties and case law, but also on the professional community of "euro-lawyers." This specific group (network) of actors consists of judges, European Commission lawyers, attorneys, academics, and senior officials with legal training. They act as brokers or intermediaries between law and politics, essentially translating political conflicts into legal language and transferring them to judicial and administrative forums. The constitutional character of the EU as an autonomous and superior framework has been established mainly through the professional practice of these groups, the repetition of arguments about the constitutional nature of the EU, and their gradual normalization, rather than through one-off and explicit political decisions. Law has therefore become the language and instrument of EU integration, moving the EU towards a quasi-federal structure (Vauchez, 2015).

However, empirical research has shown that sociological explanations of judicial power encounter political limits. The idea of a completely autonomous CJEU can be questioned by the fact that the real impact of judicial decisions depends on the executive and legislative bodies that implement them. This means that if the CJEU rules on disputes that affect the interests of actors who control their implementation in practice, then those actors may be able to block or weaken the effects of the decision. The CJEU often makes strategic decisions, aware of the threat of noncompliance by Member States or the threat of political/contractual override, i.e., a collective political response by Member States. Statistically, it has been shown that government preferences have a significant impact on the outcome of decisions, suggesting that the CJEU also takes the political context into account in its decisions. The sovereignty of EU Member States is therefore not eliminated, as states retain limits on judicial power through control of implementation and the possibility of collective response (Carrubba & Murrah, 2005; Carrubba, Gabel, & Hankla, 2008, 2012).

It follows from the above that if the EU judiciary is sensitive to the political context, then the question arises as to what type of legal-political regime is forming in the EU in the long term.

In this regard, a new term, "Eurolegalism," has been introduced into political science practice by American political scientist R. Daniel Kelemen (2011). This is a new legal-regulatory regime of the EU with a high degree of formalization, litigation, and strong regulatory institutions, which in some respects resembles that of the US. This model strengthens the enforceability of law and leads to legal uniformity with federal effects, thereby promoting "silent" federalization. Eurolegalism is therefore one of the main mechanisms of this process. Kelemen (2012) also argued that Eurolegalism does not threaten democracy, but rather changes its character – shifting it toward liberal, legally oriented protection of individual rights. However, he pointed out that the legal regime alone may not be sufficient to address authoritarian tendencies in member states if there is a lack of political will. He pointed this out in the context of the EU's democratic deficit (Kelemen, 2017, p. 212), which he did not perceive at the EU level, but rather at the level of member countries (e.g., Hungary). In his view, the EU can be understood as a quasi-federal democracy in which *"soft versions of authoritarianism can persist for years"*, even though these are *"political systems that are democratic at the federal level"*. In other words, the author argued that while Eurolegalism may stabilize governance in the EU, it also changes the nature of democracy into a legal-technocratic regime that is less effective against authoritarian tendencies in member states. Legal centralization may not only manifest itself in specific judgments, but also in the anticipatory effects of case law. As Susanne K. Schmidt (2018) pointed out, the influence of the CJEU is often indirect and anticipatory—there is a kind of "shadow of case law" that shapes political possibilities in advance. Political and administrative actors adapt proposals to make them legally sustainable in light of existing and expected judgments. Case law thus centralizes legal interpretation without formal constitutional changes, and the federalizing effect manifests itself more in the restriction of national regulatory autonomy than in the direct centralization of political power.

The indirect influence of case law can therefore be interpreted normatively as a consequence of the autonomous nature of the EU legal order, which is a prerequisite for the uniform and effective application of law. EU law differs qualitatively from international law, with direct effect and primacy being logical consequences of the nature of the EU as a legal community. In this sense, the EU constitutes a sui generis constitutional order – it defines powers, protects the rights of individuals, and ensures judicial control of public power. This is a functionalist justification of quasi-federal characteristics without the need for a formal federal act (e.g., Lenaerts, 1990, 2019, 2021). At the same time, if we view EU law as an autonomous constitutional order, then its role also extends to the protection of fundamental rights and values in the Member States. In this sense, however, there is considerable asymmetry – strict control is applied mainly to the implementation of EU law, while purely domestic situations may remain outside its scope. This is a systemic problem that could threaten the very unity of EU values. For this reason, Armin van Bogdandy proposed the introduction of the "*Reverse Solange*" doctrine, which would allow EU law to intervene in exceptional cases where a Member State systematically or seriously violates the essence of fundamental rights protected by the EU legal order. This is a subsidiary "last resort" measure, which is not intended to harmonize national constitutional systems, but to protect the minimum core values of the EU. From the point of view of federalization, this concept moves

the EU towards a value-based constitutional order that can limit the sovereignty of states in situations of crisis of the rule of law and threats to human rights.

From the individual approaches of the authors, it can be concluded that Eurolegalism refers to a method of governance in the EU in which integration is achieved primarily through law, case law, and regulatory rules, rather than political compromises. EU law is becoming the main instrument of coordination, with the CJEU playing a central role in shaping binding norms with quasi-federal effects. This development is also linked to the transformation of the EU into a regulatory state, in which technical and market regulations are enforced instead of redistributive policies. Regulation allows for integration even with limited political and budgetary capacities, but at the same time shifts decision-making to experts and independent institutions. The judicial dynamics of EU integration lie in the fact that case law not only repeals or confirms legal acts, but also shapes the boundaries of what is politically possible in advance ("shadow case law"). Federalization effects therefore arise gradually and often without an obvious political mandate. The result is a stable, legally strong, but democratically tense model of integration. Eurolegalism thus represents the core of the "silent federalization" of the EU, in which law replaces political constitutional agreement.

2. The Concept of "Demoicracy" (*demoi-cracy*)

In academic debates and political speeches, it is often said that in the context of EU political integration, it is necessary to strengthen democracy in the EU and bring it closer to citizens, not just to institutions. But what does it mean to build a more democratic EU? Is it even possible to achieve federalization of the EU in the same way as in the US? Traditional theories of democracy and federalism are based on the assumption that democratic legitimacy is linked to the existence of a single political people, which is the source of constitutional power. In the context of the EU, however, this assumption comes up against the reality of a plurality of national identities, languages, and political communities. The tension between the growing influence of supranational decision-making and the absence of a unified European people has manifested itself repeatedly at key moments of integration (e.g., the adoption of the Lisbon Treaty, the migration crisis, and the redistribution of immigrants according to quotas, etc.). However, academic theory has developed a concept that rejects the traditional dichotomy between a federal state and purely intergovernmental cooperation between sovereign states. This is the concept of *demoicracy*, which is based on the assumption that democratic legitimacy in the EU cannot be derived from a single people, but from the relational sovereignty and co-governance of several national peoples. This chapter focuses on how this concept redefines the understanding of democracy, sovereignty, and federalization in the context of a supranational political order, and why it has become one of the essential frameworks in the discussion on the future of the EU.

British political scientist Michael Burgess noted in one of his books (2000) that the tendency (idea) towards EU federalization had been visible since the beginning of European integration, although it had never been fully realized in the form of a federal state based on a single people (*dêmos*). In his analyses, he emphasized the plurality of federalist concepts, which intertwined with intergovernmental approaches in the EU and created hybrid

compromises. Federalism, as he conceives it, is not a target state, but an analytical framework for understanding the development of the EU as a multi-level political system with shared sovereignty. It is precisely this plurality and the absence of a unified political people that has opened up space for alternative approaches to the democratic legitimacy of the EU, including the concept of *demoicracy*. This pluralistic understanding of federalism has been taken up by other authors who have focused in more detail on the question of democratic legitimacy without the assumption of a unified people. For example, political scientist Philippe C. Schmitter (2007) examined how the democratic legitimacy of the EU could be strengthened and its democratic deficit overcome. He started from the conviction that this deficit cannot be eliminated by transferring national or federal models of democracy to the supranational level. He understood the EU as a *sui generis* political system that requires its own democratization mechanisms. Instead of strong federalization, he therefore proposed reforms within the existing multi-level structure, such as strengthening the European Parliament or involving national parliaments. However, he emphasized that the EU should continue to function as a pluralistic democracy in which different institutions and levels of government create a legitimate system of representation and participation. He avoided strong federalization and leaned more toward the need for deeper democratization of the EU so that citizens would not perceive it as merely a technocratic project.

While Schmitter sought the answer in reforms to the existing multi-level system, the question remained open as to whether such a pluralistic democracy was normatively and functionally sustainable. This dilemma was further elaborated by Fritz W. Scharpf (1999) in his analysis of the relationship between governance effectiveness and democratic legitimacy. He distinguished between input and output legitimacy, pointing out that the EU suffers from a deficit of input legitimacy, as there is no unified European people (*dêmos*) or full-fledged political competition at the European level. He argued that federalization would not solve this problem; on the contrary, it would weaken democratic control. He saw the solution in striking a balance between effective decision-making and preserving democratic legitimacy at the national level, thereby implicitly rejecting the idea of the EU as a classic federation. However, this criticism showed that the problem of legitimacy in the EU is not a temporary deficit. It is a structural feature of a system without a unified demos. Renaud Dehousse followed up on this conclusion by analyzing the actual functioning of the EU as a system of shared and multi-level governance. In his work, he developed the so-called governance perspective, in which the EU is understood as a system of shared and multi-level governance (*co-governance*), rather than a federation or intergovernmental organization. In this conception, the EU is a non-standard political system whose legitimacy derives from governance practices rather than from the existence of a single people (1997). At the same time, he emphasized that democratic control is dispersed and mediated by procedures for balancing interests, not by the existence of a single political people. This view reinforces the understanding of the EU as a system of co-governance by multiple actors (Dehousse, 2002, 2011, 2015).

If we consider that the legitimacy of the EU is derived from how governance and cooperation are practiced, then we must identify the mechanisms that ensure this legitimacy. In this context, the idea of “deliberative supranationalism” was conceptualized. In this concept, the question of the EU's legitimacy shifted to assessing the quality of procedures and the

rationality of arguments rather than the existence of a unified political people. The author of the concept, Christian Joerges, in his works (1997, 2006, 2010), Christian Joerges, the author of the concept, drew on Habermas and Rawls' deliberative theory, arguing that the constitutionalization of the EU takes place primarily through law and the rational balancing of interests between states and European institutions. The quality of deliberative procedures is therefore essential. However, he perceived supranational decision-making as democratically justifiable as long as it is based on procedural justice and control by member states. The emphasis on deliberation as a source of EU legitimacy, however, opened up the broader question of the existence of democracy in political entities that transcend the borders of a single state. Here, however, it must be said that democracy does not necessarily have to be tied to the existence of a single people. As James Bohman (2007) pointed out, the traditional model of democracy based on the legitimacy of a single people is unsustainable in a globalized world. For this reason, we need a model of democracy based on deliberation between multiple political communities ("democratic inter-human interaction"), with its legitimacy based on inclusive and reasonable deliberation across borders, not on centralized sovereignty. Democracy can therefore exist as a pluralistic and deliberative process between autonomous political communities. The author perceived the EU as an experimental space ("laboratory") where new forms of democratic legitimacy without centralized sovereignty are being tested.

An inspiring contribution to the issue was made by Polish-British political scientist Jan Zielonka (2006), who offered a different, historical-analytical perspective on the situation in the EU after its enlargement to include member states from the Eastern Bloc. He argued that the enlarged EU does not resemble a classic federation with a single people. He thus shifted the focus from normative models to the empirical nature of the EU as a polycentric and fragmented political order. He characterized the EU as a "neo-medieval empire," or a polycentric political system with overlapping authorities, unclear boundaries, and multi-level governance. He based this on a historical comparison with medieval European empires and applied this approach to the current state of European integration. He argued that EU enlargement had reinforced the fragmentation of sovereignty and weakened the prospect of a centralized federation. In contrast to federalist and constitutionalist theories, he offered an understanding of the EU as an *empire*—not a hierarchical one, but a networked and polycentric entity. It is therefore an alternative analytical framework for understanding the nature and limits of European integration. According to the author, the EU functions as a networked political order in which the plurality of demos represents a stabilizing, rather than a problematic, element. Understanding the EU as a network of overlapping authorities offers scope for a more detailed analysis of practical forms of co-governance. This logic was further developed by Charles Sabel and Jonathan Zeitlin (e.g., 2005, 2008, 2010, 2012) through the concept of experimental governance in the EU, which is based on shared learning, iterative processes, and flexible division of competences. This concept differs from both MLG and traditional models of federalism. Decision-making in this system is not hierarchical, but takes place through the cooperation of several political units that retain their autonomy. It is therefore close to the concept of *demoicracy*, as it is not based on the existence of a single people, but on the joint participation of several *dêmoi* in the rule-making process. It is essentially an empirically oriented version of demoicracy, as instead of constitutionalization

and federalization, it emphasizes the practical ability of *dêmos* to learn and co-decide in open processes. The authors presented experimental governance as a stable and functional way of governing in a pluralistic and multi-level Europe.

The analysis of the EU's democratic deficit and ways to overcome it has also been addressed in detail by John Erik Fossum and Erik Oddvar (e.g., 2000, 2003, 2012), who systematically linked normative theory with empirical analyses of democracy in the EU. They were interested in when it is possible to speak of democracy in a political entity without the existence of a unified people – i.e., whether it is possible to create a form of democracy among multiple demos. They based their work on deliberative theory of democracy, which they verified with empirical data on the functioning of the EU as well as with the attitudes of citizens. According to the authors, the EU cannot be legitimized as a classic federation or as an intergovernmental regime, because it is a multinational political order (*multinational polity*). If we want to achieve democratic legitimacy, it must be based primarily on deliberation and mutual recognition between multiple national political communities. In essence, they developed the concept of "democracy between *dêmoi*," in which national dêmoi, as bearers of democratic authority, participate in joint decision-making. The authors rejected strong federalization, which is contrary to the pluralistic nature of the EU, which does not even have the socio-cultural conditions for the emergence of a single European people. This is therefore a permanent structural feature, not a temporary deficit. With regard to the democratic deficit, they took the view that it could be overcome through the development of deliberative mechanisms (e.g., European public spheres, a stronger role for the EP, cross-border communication, etc.).

On this theoretical basis, the explicit concept of the EU as a *demoicracy* was developed and systematically elaborated by Kalypso Nicolaïdis (e.g., 2012, 2013). She did not understand this concept holistically (i.e., as one indivisible people, *dêmos*), but as the co-governance of several national *dêmos* without their unification into one common people. These demos govern together, but retain their identity and sovereignty. She thus emphasized the fact that the democratic legitimacy of the EU does not stem from the existence of a single European people, but rather from mutual recognition, equality, and non-dominance among individual national political communities. She perceived the "crisis of democracy" as a consequence of a development in which the aforementioned principle of plurality is weakened when decision-making is centralized or when some states gain disproportionate influence over others. According to the author, the legitimacy of the EU stems from mutual recognition and equality between individual demos, not from the sovereign authority of a single center. However, she emphasized that crises in the EU reveal tensions between the need for joint action and the preservation of the democratic autonomy of individual demos. The concept of demoicracy should therefore serve as an alternative to the dichotomous framework of federation versus confederation.

The theoretical definition of the concept of demoicracy formed the basis for its normative deepening, which was presented by Francis Cheneval (2011) through the theory of multilateral democracy. This form of democracy responds to political arrangements that go beyond the framework of a single state and a single demos. According to the author, legitimacy does not stem from a unified people, but from the equality and mutual recognition

of multiple political communities. He rejected the federal model as a transition to a unified political people, thereby creating a normative basis for the concept of demoicracy. In collaboration with Kalypso Nicolaïdis (2013), he emphasized that the stability of the EU depends on institutional respect for the plurality of demos and that centralization or asymmetry of power weakens the democratic foundations of integration. This is why they did not understand the EU as a federation or an intergovernmental regime, but as a special type of political entity. Later, both authors (2017) expanded demoicracy to include a social dimension, analyzing it as a political reality rooted in the democratic experience of citizens, not just as an abstract normative model.

From the normative definition of democracy as a stable democratic principle, the discussion then moved on to the question of its systematic application within the institutional framework of the EU. Since democratic legitimacy does not require the existence of a single common people, and the EU cannot be adequately described as either a federation or a confederation, the legitimacy of demoicracy must be based on equality, mutual respect, and the absence of dominance between political communities. EU Member States remain sovereign, but they participate in joint decision-making, with demoicracy representing a normatively stable model, not a transition to a federation. The long-term stability of the EU will depend on institutional respect for this plurality, which essentially means rejecting centralist solutions that would undermine it (Cheneval & Schimmelfennig, 2013).

If the democratic legitimacy of the EU is to be based on the idea of plurality of demos, then the question arises as to what mechanisms are used to create and maintain this legitimacy in the day-to-day functioning of the institutions. Vivien A. Schmidt (2010, 2012, 2020) sought an answer to this question, broadening the discussion on the legitimacy of the EU by introducing a third type – so-called *throughput legitimacy* – alongside input and output legitimacy. She pointed out that the democratic nature of the EU depends not only on citizen participation and political outcomes, but also on the quality of decision-making procedures, such as transparency, inclusiveness, and accountability. By analyzing the functioning of institutions, she showed that legitimacy deficits often arise at the procedural level, especially during crises. According to her, the absence of a unified European people does not automatically mean that the EU is undemocratic, as long as the procedural mechanisms are legitimate. Her framework therefore allows us to understand democratic legitimacy as a combination of participation, results, and procedures.

In contrast to approaches that legitimized the EU as a new democratic order, some authors questioned the idea of the EU as an autonomous democratic entity. For example, Peter L. Lindseth (2010), who examined the development of European integration from the perspective of the relationship between the exercise of public power and democratic legitimacy, understood the EU not as a federal or constitutional state, but as an administrative order derived from the member states. He rejected both strong federalism and supranational constitutionalism, emphasizing that democratic legitimacy and the exercise of power at the European level are always secondary to national democracies. According to him, the EU only has powers to the extent that they have been delegated to it by the states, and it cannot function as a fully-fledged supranational democracy due to the absence of a unified political people. The stability of the EU will therefore depend on maintaining the link

between European decision-making and national democratic institutions. The author was therefore critical of federalist interpretations of the EU, which he did not see as a separate constitutional order, but as an administrative extension of national democracies. For this reason, the author's approach was rather opposed to the idea of demoicracy, as he did not consider the EU to be a new type of democratic entity. However, some authors responded to this criticism by attempting to describe the EU as a democratic system without the need for a single center of sovereignty. When Sergio Fabbrini (2007) analyzed the EU as a *compound democracy*, in which political power is divided between several levels and institutions, he pointed out, through comparison with the US, that a system of checks and balances and division of power also exists in the EU without the need for a single center. He argued that the democratic legitimacy of the EU stems from the division of authority between member states and European institutions, as well as from the functional division of sovereignty. He understood the EU as a stable democratic system based on the plurality of demos, not on the need to create a single European people.

The overall mosaic of this pluralistic concept also includes authors who have emphasized, for example, the values and republican foundations of democracy in the EU. One such author is Richard Bellamy (2019), who focused on the question of the democratic legitimacy of the EU without transforming it into a federal superstate. His book was an original contribution to the discussion on European integration after Brexit, in which he developed a republican interpretation of the EU as a political entity based on the cooperation of democratic states, not on the existence of a single European people. He understood democratic legitimacy as the absence of dominance and arbitrariness, based on the equality of political communities and mutual control. He rejected both unitary federalism and technocratic forms of government, emphasizing that the legitimacy of the EU must be anchored in national democracies. The EU thus approaches the model of a pluralistic or republican union of states. Although Bellamy did not explicitly write about democracy, his normative model is a close variant of it.

In connection with the democratic legitimacy of the EU, empirical research on participation and deliberation in practice was carried out in addition to normative models. Ulrike Liebert (2009) focused on the democratic legitimacy of the EU in terms of the role of civil society, deliberation, and participation in the context of MLG. She based her analysis on a pluralistic understanding of democracy without the assumption of a unified European people. Similarly, in collaboration with Kalypso Nicolaïdis (2023), she analyzed *demoicracy* empirically as an existing, albeit unstable, political order. The authors emphasized the need to verify normative theories on the basis of real political processes and institutional practice. Similarly, the legitimacy of *demoicracy* is conditioned by real mechanisms of participation, deliberation, and mutual recognition among member states. With this approach, they effectively bridged normative political theory with concrete data on the state of democracy in the EU. As they pointed out, whether *demoicracy* in the EU is and will continue to be legitimate and accepted by citizens is not only a philosophical question but also a concrete empirical problem.

The empirical openness of the concept of *demoicracy* also raises the important question of whether it is an independent and normatively anchored model of democracy, or rather an adaptation and rearrangement of existing approaches to supranational governance within the EU. *Demoicracy* can therefore also be considered a "third way" between

intergovernmentalism and federalism. However, demoicracy has its own normative characteristics, placing particular emphasis on the non-dominance and freedom of political communities. At the same time, demoicracy cannot function as a completely independent institutional model. To ensure non-dominance, it is therefore necessary to opt for a specific combination of intergovernmental or federalist elements. Demoicracy can therefore be understood as a normative framework that is always implemented through existing institutional forms (Ronzoni, 2016).

Based on the above findings, it can be summarized that the concept of *demoicracy* represents an alternative approach that seeks to find a solution to the structural tension that arises between the growing scope of supranational decision-making in the EU and the absence of a unified European political people. Individual authors who have presented normative or empirical approaches agree that the EU cannot be classified as a classic federation or as a purely intergovernmental regime. For this reason, they view the EU as a political system (order) based on the plurality of national demos. In the concept of *demoicracy*, democratic legitimacy is therefore derived from the co-governance of several political communities, between which there is a relational and shared sovereignty, rather than from the unified constitutional power of a single people. Within this framework, the legitimacy of the EU is based on participation, deliberation, procedural quality of decision-making, and mutual recognition between states. In demoicracy, the process of federalization is fundamentally limited, because any tendency toward centralization of power would undermine the equality between demos and their sovereignty. At the same time, however, demoicracy is not a closed institutional model, but rather a normative framework that is implemented through existing forms of MLG. The stability of *demoicracy* therefore depends on the extent to which EU institutional practice can maintain a balance between joint decision-making and the democratic autonomy of individual political communities.

3. Executive Federalism and Intergovernmental Relations

Until now, discussions on the nature of European integration have focused on issues of constitutionality, democracy, and legitimacy in an environment without a unified political people. In addition to these issues, attention must also be focused to how political power is actually exercised in the EU and what institutional mechanisms enable the adoption and implementation of joint decisions. At this level, the concept of executive federalism comes to the fore, which refers to the transfer of decision-making from the parliamentary level to the executive bodies and administrative structures. In the EU context, this model is even more pronounced, as national governments act not only as holders of domestic executive power, but also as key players in European decision-making in intergovernmental forums, at the level of the Council of the EU and the European Council, or the Committee of Permanent Representatives of the Governments of the Member States to the EU (COREPER) and sectoral councils. In recent years, European integration has increasingly relied on intergovernmental relations (IGR), technocratic coordination, and network forms of cooperation. This development has been significantly accelerated in times of crisis, when decision-making has been concentrated in the hands of national governments at the expense of parliamentary control and transparency towards voters. This chapter focuses on the

analysis of executive federalism and intergovernmental relations as a specific regime of governance in the EU, which helps to explain its effectiveness in regulation, but also the continuing tension between the exercise of power and democratic legitimacy.

One of the most known theorists of European integration, Philippe Schmitter, who is a follower of the neo-functionalist school, has systematically focused on the relationships and balance of power between supranational institutions and intergovernmentalism, i.e. whether integration proceeds autonomously through institutions (EC, EP) or remains under the control of member state governments (EU Council, the European Council). It can be said that in his works (e.g., 1996, 2000, 2002, 2005), he viewed the EU integration process rather pragmatically—i.e., that it is neither straightforward nor automatic, but that it develops unevenly and is subject to political upheavals. In this process, supranational dynamics and control by member states are constantly balanced. According to him, integration proceeds through spillover effects, but encounters limits in the form of resistance from national governments. He understood sovereignty as shared between multiple levels of decision-making and described the EU as a hybrid political system. He particularly emphasized the importance of the European Council and the Council of the EU as executive forums that act as a brake on rapid federalization and maintain intergovernmental control over the integration process.

This emphasis on the role of national governments was followed by a more systematic intergovernmental interpretation of integration. A representative of the liberal theory of this approach was, for example, Andrew Moravcsik (1998), according to whom the main actors of integration were national governments pursuing rational and strategic interests. Integration is the result of domestic political aggregation of preferences, intergovernmental negotiations, and subsequent institutional compromises (Moravcsik, 1993). He perceived European institutions primarily as instruments for ensuring credible commitments between states, not as autonomous actors (Moravcsik, 1993, 1998). According to the author, crisis situations confirmed the dominance of national executives and the European Council, thus demonstrating once again that integration is not an inevitable path to federalization (Moravcsik, 2012). Later, the author defended the relevance of the liberal intergovernmental approach theory when he emphasized that even new EU policies and forms of coordination did not fundamentally change the basic logic of integration, which is governed by national governments (2019). Overall, according to the author (1998, 2012, 2019), European integration is not necessarily a path to federalization, but rather a process that will continue to be determined by the will and interests of member states, including their ability to overcome crisis phases.

In the context of executive federalism, it is not only the role of national governments that is decisive. It is also about the specific institutional bodies in which this power is concentrated. One of these is the European Council, as the main strategic decision-making body in the EU. It has gradually transformed from an informal forum of heads of state and government into the central political body of the EU, which determines the direction of integration mainly through consensus, political negotiation, and the personal authority of national leaders. In crisis situations, according to him, the European Council plays a decisive role in breaking deadlocks and setting new compromises (Bulmer & Wessels, 1987). At the same time, various

crises have also had an impact on the dynamics of European integration. These crises have shown that integration is often a conflictual and open-ended process influenced by national political conditions, with federalization tendencies being selective and asymmetrical. Integration is also the result of political conflicts between competing projects of large states (Bulmer & Joseph, 2016). Integration itself does not mean uniformity among member countries, but rather the adaptation of institutions and policies to national needs and traditions. Member states remain key players in the decision-making processes of the EU, which is a hybrid political system combining supranational and intergovernmental elements (Bulmer & Lequesne, 2020).

However, when looking at specific EU policies, it can be seen that the degree of integration varies significantly between different areas. For example, political scientist Sophie Meunier (2005) pointed out that in the area of trade policy, the EU acts as a single entity externally, with the European Commission having exclusive negotiating power. The reason for this is that, since the adoption of the Treaty of Rome, Member States have gradually transferred their powers to the EC. This model is in many ways similar to a federal arrangement, but it does not apply across the board to all EU policies. Meunier (e.g., 2006, 2007, 2014) also emphasized that integration is sectorally differentiated and at the same time strengthens the EU's external sovereignty vis-à-vis third countries. Federalization thus manifests itself selectively, not as a uniform systemic shift. However, the above-mentioned differences between policies cannot be understood without analyzing the decision-making procedures themselves. This aspect has been addressed, for example, by Frank Häge (e.g., 2008, 2013a, 2013b) and Madeleine O. Hosli (e.g., 2006, 2008), who have taken a closer look at the procedural and negotiating mechanisms of legislative decision-making in the EU. They have shown that policy outcomes depend not only on compromises between states, but also on who controls the individual stages of the procedure and what rules apply to them. According to them, procedural design fundamentally influences the distribution of power among actors. The federalization of the EU thus takes place not only through the transfer of powers, but also through rules that change the balance of power in negotiations.

The examination of decision-making procedures naturally leads to an analysis of the actors who manage these processes. Jonas Tallberg is one of the authors who has elaborated in detail on the theory of formal leadership in EU intergovernmental negotiations, not only theoretically, but also through empirical case studies (e.g., 2003, 2006a, 2006b, 2010). He focused in particular on the role of the EU Council Presidency. He showed that control over the agenda, information, and the negotiation process allows the presiding actors (*Council Presidency*) to significantly influence the outcomes of decision-making. This influence does not stem from hierarchical power, but from procedural powers. Executive leadership (i.e., the Presidency of the Council of the EU and the European Council) is thus an integral part of intergovernmental relations and contributes to deepening integration without a formal transfer of sovereignty. These claims have ultimately been confirmed by empirical (quantitative) analyses of decision-making in the EU. It has been shown that the Council of the EU continues to hold a dominant position in politically sensitive areas and that the European Commission retains its influence in setting the agenda (Thomson, 2006, 2011).

If we consider that executive bodies play a key role in EU integration, then the question of transparency in decision-making and public scrutiny of these bodies naturally arises. As pointed out by Daniel Naurin, who studied the transparency of decision-making in the EU Council and its relationship to democratic legitimacy, there is a difference between procedural transparency and transparency of results. He emphasized that formal reforms have not led to a fundamental change in the public perception of these bodies. Low transparency facilitates compromise between states, but at the same time weakens public control (2007). On the other hand, complete transparency could weaken the ability of states to reach a compromise, which often requires closed negotiations. The Council of the EU creates space for strategic action by member state governments (2008). Executive co-governance thus remains problematic in terms of legitimacy even after institutional reforms (2015, 2017).

These findings were not the only basis for the normative criticism of executive federalism presented, for example, by Jürgen Habermas (2012). His criticism was directed at the strengthening of the European Council and executive agreements, which he saw as a shift towards post-democratic governance. He warned that decision-making "behind closed doors" weakens public participation and the democratic legitimacy of the EU. As an alternative, he proposed post-national constitutionalism based on strengthening the EP and national parliaments. According to the author, democracy in the EU cannot remain mediated exclusively by executives. This criticism was particularly evident in times of crisis, as pointed out by Daniela Schwarzer (2011), who analyzed the consequences of the eurozone debt crisis, during which decision-making was concentrated mainly in the hands of national leaders, the European Council, and the Eurogroup. Reforms were introduced quickly and often without sufficient democratic debate, which deepened tensions over legitimacy. The crisis strengthened the executive bodies and at the same time increased the asymmetry of power between Member States. The EU thus changed functionally, not constitutionally, while its political form remained unclear. It was not only the eurozone crisis that accelerated the executive and intergovernmental reformatting of the EU, without creating a fully-fledged federal arrangement (2012).

These developments had a direct impact on the position of parliamentary institutions. As Andreas Maurer (2013) pointed out, although the reforms of the European Monetary Union and the adoption of the Lisbon Treaty formally strengthened the role of the EP, in practice these reforms shifted decision-making powers to the European Council and the Eurogroup. The executive coordination of prime ministers and finance ministers has therefore weakened parliamentary control and deepened the democratic deficit. According to Maurer (2012), the EU's crisis management has thus strengthened executive federalism at the expense of representative institutions. These findings are complemented by those of Michael W. Bauer and Stefan Becker (2014), according to whom crises create space for silent federalization through the strengthening of the European Commission. The Commission has expanded its regulatory and supervisory powers through technocratic crisis instruments. This shift took place without any changes to the treaties or broader public participation, with the EC becoming the "unexpected winner" of the crisis, even though its strengthening remained under the control of the member states.

In addition to strengthening the EC, executive integration and agenda-setting were also evident in other policies. Sophie Vanhoonacker and Karolina Pomorska (2013) examined how, after the Lisbon Treaty, the creation of the European External Action Service (EEAS) and the stronger position of the High Representative influenced the setting of EU foreign policy themes and priorities. They analyzed how these new bodies are able to shape the agenda within the Foreign Affairs Council and preparatory forums (e.g., COREPER), even though foreign policy remains a sensitive intergovernmental area. They found that the EEAS's influence is based primarily on capacity building, credibility, and networking, rather than on formal supranational authority. Their findings thus point to the indirect way in which new institutions gain influence in an executive-led system. This indirect but politically significant influence of executive forums can be placed within a broader interpretation of the European Council as a space where political sovereignty is constructed in times of crisis. As Dutch political philosopher and historian Luuk van Middelaar (2013) pointed out, the European Council is a place where the highest political leaders of the member states make compromises and advance integration, especially in times of crisis. He saw the European Council as an arbiter, crisis manager, and engine of integration that makes decisions through executive leadership. He emphasized that these processes are not governed by the classic model of parliamentary control, which strengthens the weight of executive power in the EU. He distinguished between the formal sovereignty of states and the political sovereignty of the EU, arguing that during crises, sovereignty is transformed and the executive forum of leaders can act as a "sovereign in times of crisis."

However, the question arises as to whether this is merely an exceptional phenomenon linked to crises or a stable mechanism of the EU's day-to-day functioning. In his works (e.g., 2012, 2014, 2021), Uwe Puetter analyzed the European Council and the Council of the EU as the main executive forums where real power in the EU is concentrated. In the post-Maastricht era, these forums have become the driving force behind integration even in areas where the EC or EP would be expected to dominate. Through a detailed analysis of decision-making processes, he has shown that political outcomes arise primarily in these forums, while supranational institutions tend to play a secondary or implementing role. He has also developed the concept of *deliberative intergovernmentalism*, according to which negotiations between states are not just a matter of asserting preferences, but also of repeated deliberation leading to consensus. Integration can thus continue without a formal transfer of sovereignty: powers remain with the states, but the practical exercise of power is transferred to joint executive forums (Puetter, 2014). When concentrating the exercise of power in executive forums, it is also crucial how precisely these institutions function as a space for routine negotiation, coordination, and strategic direction.

While the Council of the EU is the key venue for negotiating compromises between national executives, the European Council is the body that determines the EU's strategic trajectory, especially during crises. Both institutions can be characterized as central executive forums for coordination, dominated by the governments of the member states. Decision-making in these bodies is based on continuous negotiation and consensus, not on the autonomous initiative of supranational actors (Wallace, 2010). Jonathan Golub (2012) also examined the functioning of the EU Council, but questioned the notion that decision-making in the EU is predominantly effective, consensual, and based on common European interests. He

empirically demonstrated that decisions are often shaped by national interests and the ability of states to assert themselves in political negotiations, which can also lead to blockages. The success of states depends not only on formal voting rules, but also on power, experience, and strategic behavior. Larger and older member states generally have an advantage, while smaller or newer ones tend to be disadvantaged. The Council of the EU therefore functions more as an arena for intergovernmental political bargaining than as a supranational body for collective decision-making.

Alongside intergovernmental dominance in the EU Council, attempts at politicization and a more "parliamentary" element of integration have emerged, but these have been met with continued executive control by leaders. As Thomas Christiansen (2016) has shown, the nomination process for candidates for the presidency of the EC through European political parties (*Spitzenkandidaten*) after the Lisbon Treaty changed the distribution of power between the EC, the EP, and the European Council. Although the political role of the EP was strengthened, the European Council retained the decisive say in the formation of the executive leadership. This process was a step towards the politicization of integration, but it did not transform the EU into a fully-fledged parliamentary system similar to national models. Integration has thus not moved towards a classic federal or parliamentary model, but rather towards an executive system dominated by governments.

These findings ultimately led to a broader discussion of how various competing theoretical frameworks explain current governance in the EU. This was addressed by Vivien A. Schmidt (2016), who compared three interpretative frameworks of current governance in the EU: new intergovernmentalism, new supranationalism, and new parliamentarianism. She critically assessed new intergovernmentalism, which emphasizes the dominance of national executives in the European Council and the Council of the EU, because such a view may overlook shifts in the influence of supranational actors. New supranationalism, on the other hand, points to the independent influence of the Commission, the European Central Bank (ECB), and other bodies, which cannot be reduced to nation states. New parliamentarism takes into account the strengthened roles of the EP and national parliaments in control and legitimization. With this approach, the author pointed out that the nature of the EU cannot be explained solely by an executive-intergovernmental model, as it is a hybrid form of governance with multiple overlapping elements. On the other hand, according to Wolfram Kaiser, the executive nature of EU integration is a long-standing historical pattern (1999). National governments often use integration to shift politically sensitive decisions beyond domestic political control. At the EU level, they are often presented as necessary, thereby reducing political accountability to voters and reinforcing the technocratic and elitist nature of integration. However, Kaiser pointed out that limited citizen involvement leads to alienation from the EU and that this model has reached its limits. In a later work (2014), he analyzed the emergence of European rules and standards as the result of political agreements between states, which often arose gradually, informally, and without public knowledge. The result is a complex system of rules that is unclear to citizens and lacks a unified vision.

So, when we talk about the institutionalization of intergovernmental cooperation in the context of the EU, what mechanisms can be used to balance its democratic consequences? According to Nicole Bolleyer (2009), the form of intergovernmental cooperation institutions

in federal and multilevel systems depends on the internal distribution of power, especially the relationship between the executive and parliament. Systems with power sharing tend to create more stable coordination institutions than systems with a concentrated executive. She also emphasized that the strength of parliamentary control depends on the degree of interdependence between the executive and the parliamentary majority, with interparliamentary cooperation serving as a balancing mechanism (Bolleyer, 2017). The EU was therefore understood as a multi-level system with a strong role for national executives, where legitimacy depends more on control than on centralization (Bolleyer & Börzel, 2010).

However, the issue of intergovernmental coordination does not only occur between states. Federalism and intergovernmental relations are also closely linked to regional identities and party politics. Regional and nationalist actors can weaken the monopoly of the state and support federalization tendencies, but at the same time create democratic dilemmas. Pressure for decentralization forces governments to create new IGR mechanisms, which often strengthen executive federalism at the expense of parliaments (e.g., Detterbeck & Hepburn, 2010; Hepburn, 2010, 2011, 2013). This raises the question of whether federalism automatically brings stability or whether it also carries destabilizing elements. Federalism is not a uniform institutional model, and its effects depend on the alignment between territorial organization, social identities, and political competition. A mismatch between these elements leads to tension and instability. We can therefore speak of a "paradox of federalism," according to which autonomy can mitigate conflicts but also reinforce fragmentation and separatism. This paradox is also relevant to the EU, where shared sovereignty increases the capacity to act but can deepen differences between states (Erk, 2008; Erk & Koning, 2009; Erk & Anderson, 2009).

If federalism is ambivalent, the question arises as to its relationship to democracy in a multi-level governance context. As Arthur Benz pointed out in his concept of "federal democracy" (2020a), there is tension between the division of power and democratic control in MLG. Coordination between levels requires intergovernmental forums that reduce transaction costs but also strengthen the executive and weaken parliamentary control. Federalism is therefore procedural and open-ended, based on balancing autonomy and common interest. The success of federal democracy therefore depends on mechanisms that enable coordination while preserving democratic accountability (2020b).

Based on individual works and analyses by theorists, it appears that the practical exercise of power in the EU is increasingly less likely to take place through traditional parliamentary mechanisms and is instead concentrated in the area of executive coordination between governments and institutions. Executive federalism in the context of EU integration therefore refers to a form of governance in which decision-making and the implementation of sectoral policies are primarily in the hands of executive bodies, i.e., national governments grouped together in the Council of the EU and the European Council, as well as the administrative and technocratic structures of the EU, with parliamentary control remaining weaker. However, in this model, the EU does not function as a classic federation with a central government, nor as a purely intergovernmental organization. It is rather a hybrid system in which national executives co-decide at the European level and implement the decisions taken at home. This means that gradual integration takes place without a formal transfer of sovereignty – powers

remain with the Member States, but the practical exercise of power is concentrated in joint executive forums and procedures. Analyses have also shown that executive governance has been strengthened, particularly in times of crisis, when decision-making power has been concentrated in the hands of country leaders and technocratic institutions. While this has increased the EU's capacity to act, it has also exacerbated problems of transparency, accountability, and democratic legitimacy. Executive federalism therefore helps to explain why the EU is effective in regulating and coordinating policies. On the other hand, this regime entails constant tension between the exercise of power and democratic control.

Conclusion

This systematic disciplinary review, analyzing various theoretical approaches to EU integration, confirms that the nature and reality of the EU's functioning is so complex and multi-layered that it cannot be reduced to a single theoretical model or traditional typology of political systems. Within this broad spectrum of authors and their concepts, an emphasis on different sources and mechanisms of integration can be identified. Nevertheless, these approaches agree in principle that the EU is a hybrid system, or a pluralistic and multi-level order, in which authority is exercised simultaneously at several levels and through several modes of governance. While nation states and federations are generally based on a single constitutional foundation (the sovereignty of one people, one symbolic constitution), the EU is based on the opposite logic – it is an order that is constituted gradually and evolutionarily, through law, procedures, case law, administration, regulations, and repeated compromises.

The basic finding is that the EU has certain federalizing features and effects, which, however, arise without a formal federal act. This internal federalization takes place in various ways and does not involve the transfer of sovereignty to a single center, but rather its transformation into shared authority. Sovereignty is not lost, but only changes form and ceases to be the exclusive property of the state—it becomes the subject of constant balancing between levels, arenas, and actors.

This development also gives rise to systemic tension, which is the central theme of the study. The individual approaches and analyses of the authors show that the process of legal and regulatory integration of the EU is not accompanied by democratic legitimization and public control. Currently, the EU has specific mechanisms for creating and enforcing rules. On the other hand, in a sense, the EU "suffers" from a lack of sufficient instruments of democratic control that would legitimize these rules. However, this is not a temporary inconsistency, but a structural feature of this system, which creates binding norms with constitutional effects, even though it is not possible to speak of the existence of a single European people (*dêmos*).

The individual approaches and concepts presented by the authors interpret the EU integration process from different perspectives. In addition to the legal and political science perspectives, there is also an administrative and normative perspective, which confirms the complexity and specificity of the EU's nature. Within this spectrum of different authors, there is a common point, or consensus, that the EU cannot be considered a federation or an intergovernmental regime. The difference between these approaches lies mainly in what

constitutes the basis or source of this integration and its dynamics, and what individual authors consider to be its "legitimate basis."

An analysis of the EU constitutionalization process shows that several EU legal norms also have certain constitutional effects. This mainly concerns the doctrine of direct effect and the primacy of EU law. The case law of the Court of Justice of the European Union also plays a significant role in this process. This creates an autonomous EU legal order, which in practice limits national sovereignty and provides stronger guarantees for individual rights. This legal federalization is taking place in parallel with the political level of the intergovernmental regime, creating tension between legal centralization and democratic legitimacy. In addition to constitutionalization, multi-level governance also forms the core of federalization within the EU. The exercise of power is dispersed across multiple levels and actors, with administrative practice and the networking of actors also playing an important role. The third level is Eurolegalism, the regulatory state, and judicial dynamics, which represent the main instruments of "silent federalization." Law and regulation enable the EU to act effectively even in conditions of limited political and budgetary capacity. At the same time, they shift decision-making towards technocratic and judicial actors. Federalization therefore occurs rather indirectly, through case law rather than open democratic deliberation.

From a normative perspective, the EU is primarily a concept of *demoicracy*, which allows for a better understanding of the issue of the EU's democratic legitimacy. This concept rejects the assumption of the existence of a single European *dêmos*. It understands the EU as a political order in which several national *dêmoi* co-govern. Democratic legitimacy derives from their mutual recognition, equality, and the quality of deliberation and procedural mechanisms. This is why the EU's democratic deficit can be seen as a structural feature of this system, which is not based on a single constitutional power.

In the case of executive federalism and intergovernmental relations, the key conclusion is that national executives, together with European administrative structures, play a significant role in governance, particularly in crisis situations. On the one hand, this increases the system's capacity for action and stability. On the other hand, the concentration of power in the executive without parliamentary control mechanisms exacerbates the problems of democratic control, transparency, and political accountability. For this reason, the EU is a hybrid system in which supranational, intergovernmental, and executive elements of governance are intertwined.

In conclusion, it can be summarized that EU integration undoubtedly shows federalization tendencies even without the existence of a federal constitution or a unified *demos*. The question of the direction in which this EU development will continue may be misplaced if we expect only one target state, i.e., a federation or the exclusive sovereignty of states. The stability and sustainability of the EU will therefore depend mainly on its ability to balance different approaches and models in conditions of continuing plurality of sovereignties or shared authority. It is therefore important to remember the main idea that the EU is a political system in which the modern question of government is addressed in conditions of this plurality. The future of the EU therefore does not lie in whether it will one day become a

federation, but in whether it will be able to support its legal and political power with democratically sustainable authority and legitimacy.

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Between Nation, Region, and Union: Conceptual Synthesis for Interdisciplinary Perspectives on European Integration

István Tarrósy and Zoltán Vörös

Introduction:

The relationship between nation, region and union is one of the central conceptual problems of European integration. European integration has repeatedly been interpreted as a process through which historically sovereign nation-states pool, share, constrain or transform their authority in a common institutional framework. Yet the European Union has never simply displaced the nation-state. National political communities remain the primary sources of political legitimacy in many areas, while the Union has acquired extensive capacities to regulate, coordinate and represent its members. The resulting political order is therefore neither adequately described as a conventional international organization nor fully captured by the vocabulary of the federal state. As Kubicek underscores, "scholars try to capture the current reality [of the EU] by referring to multi-level governance, [the concept of which] [...] does not wholly contradict the idea of 'one Europe'. Rather, [it] recognizes that European-level institutions and rules are one of the defining characteristics – but not the only characteristic – of political life in Europe today." (Kubicek, 2026, p. 5) The tension between the different levels becomes particularly visible when integration encounters questions of identity, sovereignty and security. As long as these questions are not separate, they interact continuously: identities shape perceptions of legitimate authority; sovereignty determines who is entitled to decide; and institutional designs such as federalism determine how authority can be distributed across political levels. Since the birth of the 'European Project' in 1957 with the Treaty of Rome, there has been a contestation, or rather tension, between its supranational and intergovernmental characters. The character of the Euro-polity at any particular point in time is the outcome of a tension between supranational and intergovernmental pressures. Marks et al. argued that, "since the 1980s, it has crystallised into a multi-level polity. States no longer serve as the exclusive nexus between domestic politics and international relations." (Marks et al., 1996, p. 372)

This review takes the title "Between Nation, Region, and Union" not simply as a geographical description but as an analytical proposition. The three levels represent distinct but overlapping sites of political authority, identity formation and strategic action. The nation remains a powerful source of collective identification and sovereignty claims. The region constitutes an intermediate level through which states organise collective security, economic relations, norms and political influence. The Union, in the European case, represents an

especially developed regional order whose institutions possess capacities that exceed those of most conventional regional organisations, without fully replacing the constituent states. The central analytical problem is thus how these levels coexist and how their relationship changes when the international environment itself becomes less predictable.

The review adopts a broad systematic-literature approach rather than a narrow meta-analysis. It proceeds from the proposition that identity, sovereignty and federalism should not be treated as independent variables. They form a conceptual chain, but not a deterministic one. Identity helps define the political community whose interests are defended; sovereignty expresses the claim to authoritative self-government; federalism or other forms of multi-level governance seek to reconcile collective action with the continued existence of distinct political communities. International pressures can alter all three. External threat may intensify national identification while simultaneously increasing the functional demand for European cooperation. Conversely, integration itself may generate counter-mobilization when citizens or governments perceive European authority as threatening established forms of political belonging.

The argument is especially pertinent under conditions of post-hegemonic uncertainty, in which "the resurgence of great-power competition casts doubt on the likelihood of [...] global cooperation." (MacAskill, 2022, p. 19) We need to distinguish disorder from chaos, however. Rules and institutions do not simply disappear; rather, their enforcement becomes less predictable, restraints weaken and the stabilizing role of a dominant actor becomes less certain. This distinction is crucial for European integration. The European Union developed within an international environment in which the United States provided a major security framework through NATO. As Vörös (2027) argues, this external security architecture allowed European integration to deepen without requiring the Union itself to become a fully autonomous strategic actor. If that environment changes, European choices become more consequential. The question of who controls defence policy, foreign policy and strategic capabilities becomes simultaneously a question of sovereignty, identity and institutional design.

The review consequently centers around four interconnected questions. First, how has IR theory conceptualized identity and what does this imply for understanding European political community? Second, how should sovereignty be understood when authority is deliberately distributed across national and supranational levels? Third, what does federalism contribute to explaining a political order that combines national governments, supranational institutions and regional forms of governance? Fourth, how does the transformation of the international order alter the balance among these dimensions? The answer advanced here is that European integration is best understood not as the disappearance of national sovereignty but as the continuous reorganisation of sovereignty under conditions of interdependence and external uncertainty. Identity provides the social foundations of this reorganization; federalism and related institutional forms provide mechanisms for distributing authority; and the international environment supplies pressures that can push the system towards either deeper cooperation or renewed nationalization.

Constructivism in IR is a useful and at the same time difficult theory. It looks at "the powerful role that ideas play in international politics. Although they do not deny the importance of material factors such as money and weapons, constructivists argue that the effects of these factors are not predetermined. [...] constructivism seeks to investigate purpose – the goals that actors pursue with the power they have, however power is defined." (D'Anieri, 2010, p. 95) Among the key ideas they focus on, we find identities. A good example for investigating "the extent to which different states might develop shared identities [...] is the European Union, where there clearly exits a 'European' identity in addition to the identities of the separate states." (D'Anieri, 2010, p. 98) This is even further nuanced when we look especially into a federal state – and there are some countries in Europe, which are federal states. Here, different political powers are divided and distinguished between the national and the regional, sub-national levels. In relation to this, Kubicki points out that, "one could make an argument for federalism by invoking the principle of subsidiarity, meaning that political decisions should be taken, for reasons both of democracy and of efficiency, at the closest possible level to the individual citizen. Some issues, such as defense, foreign policy, and national tax rates, must be left to the central government." (Kubicek, 2026, p. 197) The cultural factor and the closely connected concept of identity have gained the momentum over the last couple of decades in the international arena. "The growing cultural factor in national, regional, and global politics can only become a sustainable resource for peaceful and fair conflict resolution on the basis of a comprehensive politics of recognition." (Meyer, 2013, p. 287) Identity politics, according to Fukuyama, "encompasses a large part of the political struggles of the contemporary world [...] National identity in Europe is today confused. [...] national identity in a well-functioning democracy requires something more than passive acceptance of a creed. It requires citizenship and the exercise of certain virtues." (Fukuyama, 2018, pp. 10, 162) Not only in Europe, identity is confused, but as Bremmer underlines: "Fears of diluted identity mix with economic anxieties. [...] Globalization doesn't just move factory-built products. It also moves people, feeding public anxiety by shifting the racial, ethnic, linguistic, and religious makeup of communities, sometimes abruptly." (Bremmer, 2018, pp. 20–21) In the emerging international system, one of the aspects to investigate is the "diffusion of power from states to other actors. [...] Power is shifting away from nation-states, up, down, and sideways." (Zakaria, 2012, p. 5) When dealing with the concept of identity, yet another dimension should not be missed, and that is what Guzzini refers to as being "riddled with problems", one of them connected to "the risk of anthropomorphizing states. Although it is possible to argue that representatives of states do refer to other states as though they had an almost human identity – attributing intention, agency and hence responsibility – this kind of collective identity is surely different from an individual one." (Guzzini, 2012, p. 50) He also warns not to homogenize identity, and with that criticizes even constructivists. When translated all these to the post-Cold War period, Lawson points into the direction of ethnic or identity-based conflict, which "seems to have made [this period] less stable than the Cold War period. [...] in the precarious political situations that often followed independence, ethnic fears, sensitivities and insecurities were frequently used to advantage by politicians for whom identity politics seemed a resource to exploit." (Lawson, 2012, p. 111)

1. A Changing World Order as the Macro-Context of European Integration

Any systematic examination of European integration through IR lenses should begin beyond Europe, as long as the European Union is not an isolated institutional experiment. It is a regional order situated within a broader international system whose distribution of power, institutional norms and security structures condition the choices available to European states and EU institutions. We may conceptualize the contemporary period as a transition away from the post-Cold War unipolar order and towards a less predictable configuration. Our concept of a "disordered world order" (Vörös & Tarrósy, 2026) is deliberately distinguished from chaos: disorder refers to the erosion or weakening of established restraints, reduced predictability, contested territorial structures, declining effectiveness of multilateral cooperation and the absence of an actor simultaneously capable of and interested in maintaining the previous form of global order. This conceptualization provides a useful bridge between traditional systemic IR approaches and the institutional and identity questions raised by European integration.

The historical contrast is important. During the Cold War, international politics was structured by bipolarity. Drawing particularly on Kenneth Waltz (1964), we emphasize that bipolarity restricted the room for maneuver of smaller states because two dominant powers acted as powerful centers of gravity. This structure did not eliminate conflict, but it contributed to predictability and constrained escalation – Lawson (2012) above also deals with this when addressing the question of stability. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the international system entered what has conventionally been described as a unipolar moment (Krauthammer, 1990). This period is associated with American military, economic and technological predominance and with an institutionalized form of hegemony. Ikenberry's (2001) argument is particularly important here because hegemony did not operate exclusively through coercion. Institutions and rules could make the exercise of power more predictable, encourage cooperation and provide legitimacy to the dominant order. In this reading, stability was not the absence of conflict but the existence of mechanisms capable of containing conflict and organizing expectations.

The European Union emerged and developed within this post-war and post-Cold War institutional environment. Its member states could progressively integrate because security was embedded within an Atlantic framework in which the United States played the dominant external role. This did not mean that Europe lacked strategic agency, nor that European states simply accepted American preferences. The history of European defence cooperation demonstrates persistent attempts to create autonomous European capacities, from the Brussels Treaty and the European Defence Community to the European Political Cooperation, the Common Foreign and Security Policy and the Common Security and Defence Policy. Nevertheless, the security architecture surrounding the European integration project meant that the Union could postpone the most difficult question: whether it could ultimately act as a strategically autonomous political entity.

The post-hegemonic transition changes the significance of this unresolved issue. Taggart and Abraham, drawing upon Cox and Sinclair (1996), define "post-hegemony as a prospective empirical condition of world order wherein (class-based) strategies towards global hegemonic maintenance are likely to prove ineffective, and dominance is no longer 'obscured by achieving an appearance of acquiescence'" (Taggart & Abraham, 2024, p. 356). Our world-order analysis stresses that the decline of hegemonic restraint can increase uncertainty and lower the threshold for local and regional conflict. It identifies a movement towards more fragmented governance, stronger minilateralism, competing regional frameworks and selective enforcement of rules. This is directly relevant to Europe because the EU is itself a regional institutional order operating within a world increasingly characterized by regional competition. The Union must therefore reconcile two roles. Internally, it is a project of institutional integration among states with different historical experiences and political identities. Externally, it increasingly seeks to act as a geopolitical actor capable of protecting its interests and contributing to the maintenance of international order. This double position creates a structural paradox. The EU depends upon the international order for the stability that allows its internal integration to function, yet the transformation of that order creates pressure for the EU to become more autonomous. The more uncertain the external environment becomes, the greater the functional incentives for collective European action. At the same time, however, external uncertainty can strengthen national sovereignty narratives. Governments may insist that security, borders, military force and foreign policy are precisely the domains in which national authority must be protected. Thus, the same external stimulus can produce both integrationist and disintegrationist tendencies. "Whether Europe can find the will and resources to do [more on defense] and develop a genuine strategic autonomy from the US and what thus might mean for NATO and Europe as a whole remain to be seen." (Kubicek, 2026, p. 415)

To further illustrate the evolving international order, Rosenau's (1990) notion of turbulence and Kavalski's (2007) Complex International Relations theory similarly encourage attention to dense interactions among multiple actors and levels. For the European case, this means that the traditional opposition between state and international organization is insufficient. EU member states operate simultaneously through national institutions, EU institutions, NATO, bilateral partnerships, regional coalitions and global institutions. Authority is consequently dispersed across overlapping networks. The question is not whether sovereignty has disappeared, but how sovereignty is exercised in a system in which no single level controls all relevant resources. This perspective also cautions against treating multipolarity as a simple replacement for unipolarity. Multipolar structures may generate greater uncertainty because responsibility is divided, interests are blurred and miscalculation becomes more likely, and for Europe, the emergence of a more plural distribution of power does not automatically create an opportunity to become an independent pole. As Acharya emphasizes, "while issues of sovereignty and non-intervention remain a barrier to regional security cooperation, important changes are evident [...] [for instance,] peer review mechanisms [...] [there is a] growing practice of inter-regionalism" (Acharya, 2018, pp. 108–109) The EU possesses enormous economic and regulatory capacities, but political unity, military capabilities and a common strategic identity remain incomplete. Strategic autonomy, therefore, becomes central: European autonomy is not merely a matter of acquiring material

capabilities, but it also requires agreement on what Europe's strategic interests are, who the relevant "others" are, and which level of authority is entitled to act.

2. More about Identity, Community and the International Relations of Belonging

Identity is indispensable to the problem of European integration because political institutions cannot be understood solely through their formal competences. They also require communities that recognize political authority as meaningful or legitimate. In IR, identity can refer to individuals and communities, but it frequently concerns states or communities of states. Constructivism provides the principal theoretical entry point because it treats identities as socially constructed, relational and changeable rather than as fixed attributes. Alexander Wendt's (1992) formulation that identities emerge through participation in collective meanings is especially significant. Interests do not exist independently of identity; rather, identities help constitute interests. This insight challenges rationalist accounts in which states possess fixed preferences and simply calculate the most efficient means of pursuing them. For European integration, the constructivist argument has two implications. First, national interests cannot automatically be treated as immutable. French, German, Polish, Hungarian or Spanish conceptions of Europe are shaped by historical experience, political discourse, institutional participation and interaction with other actors. Second, European identity cannot be reduced to an administrative identity produced by EU institutions. It is a social and political construction that emerges through shared practices, narratives, institutions, conflicts and experiences. European identity may, therefore, coexist with national identity rather than replacing it. And as underscored earlier, the persistence of multiple identities is one of the defining features of the European political order.

Culture is certainly a major context for identity, incorporating language, history, religion, ethnicity, race, class and gender. This broad conception is important because it prevents the analysis of European identity from becoming excessively institutional. Europe is not merely a legal space; it is also a field of competing historical memories and cultural representations. The meaning of Europe differs across political communities because the historical experiences through which Europe has been imagined are not identical. Central and Eastern European experiences of communism, Western European experiences of post-war reconciliation, different relationships with Russia and different interpretations of colonialism, migration and sovereignty all contribute to divergent political meanings attached to European integration.

Identity is also relational in a more direct geopolitical sense. To define "Europe" is partly to distinguish Europe from something outside it. Guzzini's (2012) emphasis on the interaction between geographic representations and social reality, together with the notion of geographical imagination, suggests that regions are not simply objective spaces, as they are produced through political discourse. Europe is, therefore, continuously narrated through representations of its borders, its historical core, its external threats and its relationship to "Others." This is why debates over migration, Russia, Ukraine, Turkey, the United States or China can become debates about European identity itself. Adding to this, Smith (2008) looks

at how distinctive the EU1s international identity is/can be, for instance, "by analyzing the extent to which the EU is distinctive actor in the international system [...and] by considering whether the EU's actual foreign policy behavior fits a particular identity category more than others." (Smith, 2008, p. 16)

The emotional dimension deepens this argument. Dominique Moïsi (2009) highlights fear, hope and humiliation as politically relevant emotions, connected to confidence. This is particularly useful in understanding why questions of integration can become politically charged beyond their material consequences. Fear may strengthen demands for protection and therefore increase the attractiveness of national sovereignty. Hope may support integration by associating collective European action with a desirable future. Humiliation may encourage narratives of lost status and resistance to institutions perceived as constraining national autonomy. Anxiety can similarly connect economic insecurity, cultural change and geopolitical uncertainty to political demands for stronger borders and more familiar forms of belonging. These emotional dynamics matter because European integration is frequently experienced not only as an institutional arrangement but as a transformation of social boundaries. The 2015 migration crisis provides a revealing example when dealing with political responses, which differed across EU member states, and national identity was invoked in explicit opposition to culturally different newcomers. The example of British Euroskepticism is also significant: a national political identity grounded in exceptionalism can coexist uneasily with a supranational European identity. Brexit, therefore, cannot be interpreted exclusively as an economic or institutional dispute. It also represented a contest over political belonging and the imagined boundaries of the national community.

The Visegrad example is especially relevant to the title *Between Nation, Region, and Union*. Braun's (2020) argument is that a Visegrad identity was "under construction," while noting that subsequent crises and divergent positions towards Russia and Ukraine have complicated the possibility of a coherent regional identity. Although this illustrates the instability of the regional level, as Schmidt underlines, "people from the Visegrad region are supposed to feel connected to several identities: these are local, regional, national, European and – last but not least – some sort of"Visegrad" or Central European identity." (Schmidt, 2016, p. 116) A region can provide an additional political identity and a platform for collective action without becoming a fully consolidated political community. Thus, regional identity is contingent upon shared interests, narratives and external circumstances. When member states diverge over fundamental strategic questions, regional identity may become weaker or more contested. At the same time, identity should not be understood only as a source of fragmentation. Identity may bridge actors, interests and ideologies across borders and thereby contribute to multilevel interdependence, and this observation is highly relevant to European integration. A European identity does not necessarily require citizens to stop identifying nationally. Instead, the possibility of layered belonging allows political actors to see national, regional and European membership as compatible. The key question becomes whether institutions and political narratives can sustain such compatibility under conditions of crisis.

Identity, therefore, should be conceptualized as an enabling and constraining resource. It can legitimate collective action by creating a sense of common purpose, but it can also restrict cooperation by defining an external "Other" or by presenting supranational authority as alien

to the authentic political community. The IR contribution is to make visible the political work performed by identity. As Berenskoetter's "eye opener" formulation suggests, identity allows analysts to see dimensions of international politics that materialist approaches can overlook. He explicitly suggests that "a key function of 'identity' in IR scholarship is that of an 'eye opener' enabling scholars [and others] to see aspects of international politics they could/did not see before" (Berenskoetter, 2010, p. 3594) For European integration, it reveals why institutional bargains that appear rational at the systemic level can nevertheless generate political resistance when they conflict with established narratives of belonging.

3. Sovereignty Reconsidered: From Exclusive Authority to Multilevel Political Ordering

If identity addresses the question of who "we" are, sovereignty addresses the question of who has the authority to decide. The concept has traditionally been associated with the territorial state, supreme domestic authority and independence from external interference. Berridge (1992) defines the sovereign state as a "set of institutions possessing the authority (however derived) to make and enforce laws over a geographically bound territory, [and which] remains the main agent in world politics." (Berridge, 1992, p. 9) Hedley Bull's (1977) formulation of international order is instructive because the preservation of the independence or external sovereignty of states constitutes one of the elementary goals of international society. According to D'Anieri, sovereignty in the Westphalian system "had important implications for international politics. If no higher power could tell states what to do, then there was no one to prevent states from attacking one another. No was there any international organization to compel or even persuade states to limit their aggression." (D'Anieri, 2010, p. 30) In such an anarchical situation (which was not a chaos), a "central issue [...] is the possibility of establishing order." (D'Anieri, 2010, p. 30) The European Union further complicates this conventional picture: member states have deliberately transferred, pooled or constrained elements of their authority while retaining statehood, national political institutions and significant independent capacities. European integration, therefore, represents one of the most important contemporary laboratories for studying sovereignty as a relational and institutionally distributed phenomenon. From a Central European perspective, Schmidt (2020) adds that: "Looking back over the centuries, Central and Eastern Europe was always a playground for the great powers and the survival of these states was strongly influenced by their ability to cooperate. The euphoria of sovereignty and independence has sometimes hampered and continues to obstruct acceptance of the EU's operating institutional framework." (Schmidt, 2020, p. 19)

The concept of sovereignty is often presented as if there were only two alternatives: sovereign national states or a supranational European state. The history of integration demonstrates why this binary is inadequate. European integration has proceeded through differentiated transfers of authority. The internal market, competition policy, trade, monetary policy for euro-area members, migration governance and many regulatory areas involve different distributions of authority. Foreign and security policy has remained much more strongly intergovernmental. The contrast between these fields is particularly important because it

shows that sovereignty is not transferred uniformly. The EU is a differentiated political order in which the location of authority varies according to policy field, treaty provision and political agreement. In addition, as Padoan indicates, "the integration of Eastern Europe into the European Community (EC) [was] a far from painless task. Adjustments [had] to be made from both sides of Europe. [...] considerable political tensions (both intra-EC and between the EC and the [then] prospective new members) with respect to the twin questions of widening as well as the deepening [of the Community] [were foreseen]." (Padoan, 1994, p. 341)

Vörös's (2027) analysis of the CFSP and the CSDP makes this point particularly clearly. The history of European defence thinking demonstrates that the aspiration to create common European security capacities has existed from the earliest post-war period. The European Defence Community, rejected by the French National Assembly in 1954, already revealed the tension between common security and national sovereignty. Later institutional developments, from European Political Cooperation to the Maastricht Treaty, the Amsterdam Treaty and the Lisbon Treaty, gradually expanded the EU's capacity for common foreign and security action. Yet the member states retained decisive influence, and unanimity remains central in CFSP and CSDP. Security policy, therefore, illustrates a domain in which the European Union has developed collective capabilities without fully replacing national sovereign authority. The concept of strategic autonomy intensifies the sovereignty question. The term initially referred to technological and industrial defence capabilities but gradually acquired a broader meaning encompassing foreign policy, security and economic resilience. Beaucillon's (2023) interpretation of strategic autonomy as a new identity for the EU is particularly significant: autonomy is simultaneously a material capacity and a statement about political selfhood. To say that Europe should be strategically autonomous is to claim that Europe constitutes a political actor entitled and capable of making consequential decisions independently. Thus, strategic autonomy is partly a sovereignty discourse. Yet the politics of the term reveal its ambiguity. Some member states have been uncomfortable with "autonomy" because it can imply a transfer of sovereign authority to the European level or a loosening of the transatlantic relationship. The emergence of "European sovereignty" and "open strategic autonomy" illustrates attempts to negotiate this tension linguistically as well as institutionally. The question is not simply whether Europe should be autonomous, but autonomous from whom, in what policy areas and through which institutions. Damen's (2022) critical question, reproduced in Vörös's (2027) analysis, is particularly important: before autonomy can be achieved, a political community must define its strategic interest and identify the sources of dependence it seeks to overcome.

The changing world order makes this issue more urgent. If the United States remains the principal guarantor of European security, the EU can maintain a division between European economic integration and Atlantic security provision. If American commitment becomes more uncertain, however, European states face a strategic dilemma. They may either increase national defence capacities or strengthen collective European capacities. The former preserves national control but may reproduce fragmentation. The latter can increase European capability but requires greater coordination and potentially greater willingness to accept common decision-making. Sovereignty thus becomes a problem of scale: some

capabilities are more effective when exercised collectively, but collective exercise may require political communities to redefine what they mean by self-government.

Sovereignty is further affected by systemic disorder because weakening external restraints increases the importance of self-help. As Hocking and Smith (1995) highlighted, the principles of sovereignty are the basis for the basic rules of the state system. "The basic 'rules' condition the form in which world politics is conducted; they are not immutable because governments themselves act in ways which continually modify their operations. [...] sovereignty-related rules continue to provide a framework for international interactions." (Hocking & Smith, 1995, p. 63) If the rules of the international system remain but their enforcement becomes less predictable, states have stronger incentives to protect themselves through autonomous capabilities. This may generate a paradox for the EU. The Union is itself an institutional response to the limitations of unilateral national action, yet a more insecure environment may strengthen precisely those national actors whose sovereignty claims constrain further integration. European collective sovereignty and national sovereignty can therefore become simultaneously more necessary and more politically difficult.

The appropriate conceptual conclusion is that sovereignty in the EU should be viewed as layered, negotiated and functional rather than simply lost or retained. Member states remain sovereign political communities, but they exercise sovereignty through institutions that include the Union. European integration changes the conditions under which national sovereignty can be exercised rather than abolishing sovereignty as such. This is consistent with the broader IR insight that authority is increasingly dispersed across networks and institutions. Sovereignty remains meaningful, but its practical exercise is embedded in relationships of dependence, interdependence and institutionalized cooperation. Kubicek draws our attention to the fact that: "As ideas of democracy expanded [over time], the notion of popular sovereignty developed, meaning that it was the people or nation that was sovereign [...] To the extent that supranational organizations such as the EU and global economic forces are undermining the 'power of the people', many worry about both how state sovereignty and democracy will fare as European states draw closer together." (Kubicek, 2026, p. 32)

4. Federalism, Regionalism and the Institutional Problem of the European Union

Federalism enters the discussion because it offers a theory of how political authority can be divided between levels while maintaining a common political order. In its classical form, federalism combines self-government and shared government. It, therefore, appears immediately relevant to a Union in which member states retain political identities and institutions while delegating or pooling authority in common institutions. Yet European integration cannot simply be equated with a federal state. The EU has no single demos in the conventional national sense, lacks a fully centralized monopoly of coercion, and retains a strong role for member-state governments in key policy fields. Federalism is consequently better treated as a spectrum of institutional possibilities and as a conceptual language for understanding divided authority.

The history of European integration shows why a federalist endpoint has remained contested. The European Defence Community provides an early example: the idea of a common European army was proposed, but national political authority proved unwilling to accept the institutional consequences. The failure of the EDC redirected integration towards economic and political cooperation rather than eliminating the underlying aspiration for common European capacities. Decades later, the same pattern remains visible in foreign and security policy. The EU has developed institutions and instruments that enable collective action, but the decisive authority of member states remains strong. European integration, therefore, advances through partial functional federalization without necessarily producing a comprehensive federal constitution. This pattern can also be interpreted through intergovernmentalism and supranationalism. Intergovernmentalist approaches emphasize the continuing importance of national governments and national preferences, particularly in areas regarded as highly sensitive. Supranational perspectives emphasize how institutions can develop autonomy, generate common interests and create dynamics that are not reducible to state bargaining. The EU's development suggests that neither perspective is sufficient on its own. The institutional system combines national control, supranational decision-making and transnational networks. In foreign and security policy, the intergovernmental element remains particularly pronounced, while in many economic and regulatory domains supranational authority is much stronger. "The EU's essence is also described by its functions. [...] its authority in external affairs [has been] greatest in matters of international trade and related welfare issues, seriously circumscribed in political affairs, and has yet to fully develop in military affairs. [...] Its unresponsiveness during the Gulf crisis led Belgium's Foreign Minister Mark Eyskens to conclude that Europe 'is an economic giant, a political dwarf, and a military worm.'" (Kegley & Wittkopf, 1995, p. 170) According to Viilup (2015), however, the EU is neither a political dwarf, nor a military worm, and in a highly (or even more) changed international environment (compared with the 1990s), the member states of the Union "should decide to give new life to EU's security and defence cooperation, to bolster the EU's relevance as a global actor" (Viilup, 2015). Shipkova (2025) adds that: "Europe cannot afford to delay any further building its sovereignty, its strategic autonomy and just keeping on with its 'wait-and-see attitude'. It needs to move forward now, to unstick, to overcome its structural obstacles. [...] In a fragmented world of increasing geopolitical tensions, Europe cannot afford to remain a political dwarf. [...] The EU must embrace pragmatic, bold solutions to break free from paralysis and reclaim its position as a global leader." (Shipkova, 2025)

Multi-level governance provides a complementary vocabulary. Instead of asking whether authority belongs to the state or the Union, as already indicated in the Introduction, multi-level governance asks how authority is distributed across interconnected levels. This is particularly important when dealing with the emphasis on complexity and networked interactions. The EU is embedded in a dense web of relations involving national governments, regional authorities, EU institutions, NATO, international organizations, cities, trans- and multinational corporations and civil society actors. Such density makes clear why federalism cannot be reduced to a constitutional blueprint. It is also a question of governance under conditions in which multiple actors possess partial authority and resources.

Regionalism adds another dimension. The EU is the most institutionalized example of regional integration, but its existence must be interpreted alongside other regional arrangements. In a more fragmented international environment, regional organizations may become more important because they provide intermediate sites of coordination between national states and global institutions. In a changing world order – from bipolarity via unipolarity towards somewhat multipolarity – "more decentralization and a fiercer defense of local interests, values, and identities [gained the momentum]. [...] a new wave of regionalism, or [...] 'new regionalism' appeared. [This] new regionalism possessed several characteristics such as more political elements, multilevel governance, a strong legal framework and the will to promote certain values such as security, development and sustainability" (Sberro, 2013, pp. 350–351). As Acharya points out: "Some forms of decentering, through regionalization, have been going on since the inception of and in tandem with the post-war multilateral system." (Acharya, 2018, p. 71) The region can, therefore, become a political scale at which states seek to manage problems that are too large for unilateral national action but too politically differentiated for universal global governance. This produces a central paradox of regional integration. A regional organization may strengthen its members' effective sovereignty by enabling collective capabilities that individual states cannot achieve alone. At the same time, regional integration may be perceived as limiting sovereignty because collective rules constrain unilateral choices. Federalism attempts to reconcile these two dimensions through shared rule. The European case suggests that the success of such arrangements depends not only on institutional efficiency but also on political legitimacy and identity. Citizens and governments must perceive the distribution of authority as sufficiently compatible with their understanding of political community.

The contemporary security debate demonstrates this especially well. CARD (Coordinated Annual Review on Defence), PESCO (Permanent Structured Cooperation), the European Defence Fund and SAFE (Security Action For Europe) represent different mechanisms for encouraging European cooperation. CARD provides greater visibility of defence spending and investment; PESCO facilitates joint capability development; the EDF provides financial support for cooperative defence research and development; SAFE provides a financial mechanism for joint procurement. Together these initiatives indicate movement towards greater European collective capacity; yet, they do not eliminate national decision-making. Their significance lies less in creating an immediate European federal defence state than in gradually altering the institutional incentives surrounding national capabilities. The result is a form of incremental federalization that is practical rather than constitutional. European states increasingly recognize that certain capabilities are more efficiently produced or exercised collectively, but they remain cautious about creating centralized political authority. This is consistent with the broader historical pattern of European integration, in which functional pressures frequently precede institutional consolidation. The federal question is therefore not whether Europe will suddenly become a federation, but the more useful question is which functions generate sufficient common interest to justify deeper collective authority and which remain protected as domains of national sovereignty. The term 'pooled sovereignty' coined by Keohane and Hoffmann (1991) can capture its essence: "states remain paramount in [the EU's] institutional structures and decision-making procedures. [...] most decisions of the EU still depend on national governments for implementation. Sovereignty is

nonetheless shared, in the sense that decision-making responsibility is now spread among governments and between them and the EU's institutions." (Kegley & Wittkopf, 1995, p. 169)

5. Security, Strategic Autonomy and the Return of Sovereignty Politics

Security provides one of the clearest contemporary arenas in which identity, sovereignty and federalism intersect. In this context, European common security thinking is not a recent response to the Russian–Ukrainian war. The aspiration has been present since the beginning of integration, although it has repeatedly moved between periods of political prominence and marginalization. What has changed is the strategic environment in which the question is being asked. The erosion of confidence in the durability of the post-Cold War order, Russian aggression, changing American priorities and the wider movement towards a more contested international system have made European capabilities more urgent. Yet the institutional evolution was characterized by parallel structures, cautious delegation and persistent national control. The European Security Strategy of 2003 and the EU Global Strategy of 2016 demonstrate the evolution from reactive coordination towards a more comprehensive conception of the EU as an international actor. The 2003 strategy followed the divisions created by the Iraq War and sought to articulate common interests across a fractured transatlantic environment. The 2016 strategy was developed amid changing conditions in the Mediterranean, the Eastern Partnership and relations with Russia. It presented the EU as a responsible global stakeholder committed to international law and multilateralism.

Here again, the issue of identity needs our attention, as any strategy requires not only resources but a community that recognizes its goals as "ours." The problem of European strategic identity is closely related to the problem of European political identity. Member states may agree abstractly that Europe should be stronger while disagreeing about what Europe should defend, against whom, and through which institutions. National strategic cultures continue to shape preferences. Historical experiences produce different threat perceptions, especially concerning Russia, the United States, China, migration and the use of military force. The Union consequently lacks a single strategic culture even while it increasingly possesses common strategic documents. Strategic autonomy attempts to bridge this gap. In its broad form, it implies that Europe should possess sufficient capabilities to act independently when necessary while remaining open to cooperation with partners. This formulation is important because it does not necessarily imply isolation or hostility towards the United States. Instead, it seeks to reduce vulnerability created by excessive dependence. However, the concept is politically contested because dependence itself has different meanings. For some member states, American security guarantees remain the foundation of European security; for others, that dependence increasingly appears as a strategic vulnerability. With these in mind, the same institutional relationship can be interpreted either as security or as constraint. The 2025 NATO developments illustrate this tension particularly strongly. Increased defence spending can strengthen European capabilities, but if spending remains nationally fragmented, it does not necessarily create common European strategic capacity. The problem is thus not simply insufficient expenditure. It is the relationship between national capabilities and collective European capability. If states spend more individually, they may increase national sovereignty while failing to increase European

autonomy. If they coordinate procurement, industrial development and force planning, they may strengthen the Union's collective capacity but also deepen interdependence among member states.

This is where federalism becomes practically relevant. Defence federalization would require not merely joint procurement but shared strategic priorities, decision-making procedures, resource commitments and political accountability. Yet the current institutional framework remains predominantly intergovernmental in CFSP and CSDP. The EU's development is characterized by a contradiction: external conditions create incentives for greater European autonomy, while the political meaning of autonomy remains strongly tied to national sovereignty. The Union is asked to become more sovereign at the European level without necessarily possessing a European sovereign in the classical sense. The problem can be restated in terms of scale. Security threats are increasingly transnational, but political legitimacy remains largely national. This mismatch generates pressure for regional integration. Cybersecurity, energy dependence, supply chains, defence technology, migration and military threats, to name some major overarching issues, cannot always be managed effectively by individual states. Yet democratic accountability and identity remain anchored substantially in national political systems. European integration is therefore forced to negotiate between functional scale and political scale. Federalism and multi-level governance are attempts to reconcile these scales without requiring complete political homogenization.

The preceding discussion suggests that the title Between Nation, Region, and Union should be understood as describing overlapping political scales rather than successive stages of integration. The nation, region and Union are not mutually exclusive containers. They are interacting levels through which political communities define identity, allocate authority and pursue security. National identity can coexist with European identity; national sovereignty can be exercised through European institutions; regional institutions can strengthen rather than simply constrain state capacity. The analytical challenge is to understand the mechanisms that connect these scales.

The relationship among the three levels, i.e. the national, the regional and the European, is dynamic. National governments may use European institutions to amplify national objectives. European institutions may use crises to encourage deeper integration. Regional cooperation may create identities that compete with both national and European identities. Citizens may simultaneously identify with their locality, nation, Central Europe and Europe as a whole. These identities do not have to be ranked. The political problem emerges when institutions demand decisions at one level that are perceived as illegitimate from another level. This is why the federal question cannot be reduced to constitutional engineering. Federalism is ultimately about the organization of political community and authority. If European integration were to become more federal, it would need to develop mechanisms capable of sustaining legitimacy across levels. The issue would not merely be whether Brussels should acquire more competences. It would be whether citizens accept those competences as belonging to a legitimate European political order and whether national communities perceive the distribution as compatible with self-government.

To these, the international environment adds another layer. A more uncertain world order increases the value of scale. Individual European states may struggle to influence great-power competition, secure supply chains or sustain independent defense industries. The European project contains a persistent tension between functional necessity and political identification. The most useful analytical position is consequently neither state-centric nor purely supranational. In sum, a relational multi-level approach is preferable. The nation is a site of identity and democratic legitimacy; the Union is a site of pooled capabilities and institutional coordination; the region is the geopolitical space within which collective European interests are articulated; and the wider international system determines the strategic pressures under which these levels interact. None of these levels can be understood in isolation.

6. Crisis, Emotion and the Politics of Re-Nationalization

The interaction of identity and sovereignty becomes particularly visible in periods of crisis. Crises compress political time, increase uncertainty and make questions of collective protection more salient. The supplied identity text emphasizes that emotions have become an important but often marginalized dimension of international politics. Moïsi's (2009) framework of fear, hope and humiliation is especially useful because it demonstrates how geopolitical perceptions can be translated into domestic political narratives. Fear encourages defensive identification; hope can sustain collective projects; humiliation can support revisionist or sovereignty-centered politics. These emotional structures are not merely psychological background conditions. They become politically meaningful through narratives, institutions and leadership.

European integration has experienced repeated crises that have tested the relationship between national and European identity. The financial and sovereign-debt crises, migration crisis, Brexit, the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's war in Ukraine each produced debates over who should protect citizens and who should decide. In each case, the institutional question was inseparable from identity. Should the response be European because the problem is transnational, or national because political accountability ultimately remains national? Should borders be managed collectively or nationally? Should fiscal solidarity be European or limited by national responsibility? Should defence be European or remain primarily within NATO and national structures? These questions reveal the sovereignty dimension of crisis governance.

The migration crisis is particularly illustrative because it demonstrates how the perception of an external "Other" can reinforce national identity. Political narratives are important to deal with, those, in which migration was represented not simply as a policy issue but as a threat to cultural identity, social protection and territorial boundaries. Such narratives challenge the assumption that functional interdependence automatically generates deeper integration. Citizens may recognize that migration is a European problem while simultaneously opposing European-level solutions if they believe those solutions weaken national control over borders or alter national identity. The same mechanism can operate in reverse. External threat can create a stronger sense of common European purpose. The Russian–Ukrainian war has

intensified discussion of European security, defence spending and strategic autonomy. Yet, threat does not automatically produce convergence. Member states continue to differ in their strategic cultures and relationships with Russia and the United States. Fear can, therefore, produce solidarity, but it can also produce divergent interpretations of the appropriate political community responsible for security.

The emotional dimension is particularly relevant to the question of European legitimacy. Institutions operate through legal rules, but political communities are sustained through narratives of belonging, trust and shared expectation. If citizens perceive European institutions as distant, coercive or culturally alien, the formal rationality of integration may not translate into political legitimacy. Conversely, if European institutions are associated with security, prosperity and collective capacity, European identity can be strengthened. This suggests that the sustainability of multi-level governance depends partly on the emotional and symbolic construction of each level.

The case of the Visegrad Group again provides a useful illustration: a regional identity may be reinforced when member states perceive themselves as sharing a common position vis-à-vis the Union or broader Europe. But external shocks can also expose internal divergence. The Russian–Ukrainian war has demonstrated that geographical proximity does not automatically produce identical strategic preferences. Regional identity is therefore not a stable substitute for national identity; it must be continuously reproduced through political discourse and shared practice. The broader theoretical implication is that identity politics should not be treated as a residual category explaining outcomes that materialist approaches cannot explain. Identity is itself constitutive of interests. If a government defines sovereignty as the protection of national cultural identity, then European integration becomes a different political project than it is for a government that defines sovereignty as the capacity to act effectively through European institutions. Likewise, strategic autonomy means different things depending on whether Europe is imagined as a community of states or as an emerging political actor.

7. An Integrated IR Framework and European Integration as an Incomplete Political Order

The literature reviewed here can be synthesized into an integrated framework consisting of four analytical dimensions. The first is identity: the construction of political community and the interpretation of self and Other. The second is sovereignty: the allocation and justification of authoritative decision-making. The third is federalism and multi-level governance: the institutional organization of authority across political scales. The fourth is world order: the external distribution of power, rules and strategic uncertainty within which the first three operate. The value of the framework lies in treating these dimensions as mutually conditioning rather than independent. It also helps reinterpret the EU's strategic autonomy debate. Strategic autonomy can be seen as a process through which a regional political order attempts to convert interdependence into resilience without abandoning cooperation. It is therefore not equivalent to autarky, nor is it simply military independence. At its core, however, it is a question of agency: whether Europe can make and implement

strategic decisions without being structurally dependent upon another power. The concept of agency is particularly important because the EU's international role cannot be inferred simply from its aggregate resources. A large economy does not automatically generate geopolitical power if member states disagree over strategy. Likewise, common identity is not sufficient without institutional capacity. The Union's capacity to act depends on the interaction between material resources, political consensus, institutional competence and identity. This is why the federal question remains strategically significant: deeper coordination may increase capacity, but only if political legitimacy and strategic convergence can sustain it.

The integrated framework can therefore be expressed as a dynamic cycle. Changes in world order alter threat perceptions and strategic incentives. These changes affect identity narratives by modifying perceptions of security, status and belonging. Identity narratives influence how sovereignty is interpreted. Sovereignty preferences shape the institutional choices available for federalization or intergovernmental cooperation. Institutional choices then create new political experiences that feed back into identity. European integration is consequently a recursive process rather than a linear transfer of competences.

The central finding of this review is that European integration should be understood as an incomplete political order whose incompleteness is not necessarily a weakness but a defining characteristic. The EU has developed beyond the conventional international organization without becoming a conventional federation. Its political order depends upon overlapping national and supranational identities, distributed sovereignty and differentiated institutional authority. This arrangement is constantly renegotiated because its internal foundations and external environment are both changing.

The concept of the "disordered world order" is particularly useful for understanding why these questions have become more urgent. If the contemporary international system is characterized by lower predictability, weaker restraints and more fragmented enforcement, European states cannot simply assume that the external conditions that supported integration will remain unchanged. The post-Cold War environment allowed Europe to benefit from globalization, institutionalization and American security guarantees. A more contested international environment forces Europe to confront questions that could previously remain partially unresolved. Yet disorder does not necessarily imply disintegration. Institutional uncertainty may generate incentives for experimentation: European defence cooperation, joint procurement, strategic autonomy and resilience policies can be interpreted as adaptive responses to a changing environment. The key question is whether adaptation occurs through fragmented national responses or through collective European institutions.

As shown, identity will strongly influence the outcome. If political leaders frame European integration as a loss of national identity, strategic autonomy may become difficult because autonomy itself will be understood nationally. If, however, Europe is represented as a political community capable of protecting national societies while preserving their distinct identities, collective autonomy may become more legitimate. The future of European integration, therefore, depends partly on whether a pluralistic European identity can coexist

with national identities. The sovereignty debate should likewise move beyond the language of loss. Sovereignty is not a fixed quantity that decreases whenever European competences increase. In an interdependent international system, the capacity to exercise meaningful sovereignty may depend upon cooperation. A state that cannot secure energy supplies, protect digital infrastructure, maintain defence-industrial capabilities or influence major-power competition independently may possess formal sovereignty but limited effective autonomy. European integration can therefore be understood as an attempt to convert pooled authority into effective collective sovereignty while retaining national political communities. Federalism offers one possible institutional response, but not the only one. Differentiated integration, flexible coalitions and strengthened regional cooperation may also become increasingly important. The examples of CARD, PESCO, EDF and SAFE shown earlier demonstrate that European integration can deepen through functional instruments without immediately producing constitutional federalization. This incrementalism may be politically realistic, but it also carries risks. If cooperation remains fragmented, European capacity may fail to match the scale of external challenges. The central institutional dilemma is therefore how to achieve sufficient coordination without generating a legitimacy crisis.

This review also identifies a research agenda. Future empirical studies should examine how different European publics interpret the relationship between national and European sovereignty; how strategic crises alter European identity; how regional identities such as Central European or Visegrad identities interact with EU identity; and how defence cooperation changes perceptions of legitimate authority. Comparative studies could examine why some policy fields become more supranational while others remain intergovernmental. Such research would connect constructivist identity analysis with institutional and geopolitical approaches more systematically. A further research priority concerns the relationship between emotion and strategic culture. The supplied identity text suggests that fear, hope, humiliation and anxiety shape political behaviour. These concepts could be integrated with studies of European strategic culture to examine whether threat perceptions produce convergence or divergence among member states. The Russian–Ukrainian war provides a particularly important case because it simultaneously strengthens the perceived need for European security cooperation and exposes differences in national strategic narratives.

Finally, the European case offers a broader contribution to IR theory. It demonstrates that international politics cannot be reduced either to autonomous states or to an emerging world government. Political authority is increasingly distributed across overlapping institutional levels. The EU is one of the clearest examples of this condition, but it is embedded within a broader global movement towards complex, networked and regionalized governance. Understanding the Union therefore requires theories capable of connecting identity, sovereignty, institutions, power and systemic change.

Conclusion

The relationship among nation, region and union is best understood as a dynamic political relationship rather than a sequence in which one level replaces another. National identity

remains a powerful source of belonging and legitimacy; regional organization provides a scale for collective action; and the European Union represents an institutional order capable of pooling authority and resources beyond the nation-state. Identity, sovereignty and federalism are the principal conceptual bridges connecting these levels. Identity answers who constitutes the political community, sovereignty concerns who possesses legitimate authority, and federalism concerns how authority can be shared across levels.

The changing world order makes this relationship more consequential. Post-hegemonic uncertainty suggests that the contemporary international system is becoming less predictable, that established restraints are weakening and that regional conflicts may become more difficult to contain. Europe cannot remain unaffected by such transformation. Its security environment, economic dependencies and strategic position are changing. The resulting pressure for greater European autonomy is simultaneously a pressure to reconsider the meaning of sovereignty. Europe must decide whether effective autonomy is best achieved through national capabilities, collective European capacities or some combination of both. Plural and layered identity is necessary, and a European political order that attempts to erase national identities is likely to generate resistance; one that recognizes multiple belonging can potentially transform diversity into a foundation for collective action.

The most important conclusion of this systematic review is therefore relational. Identity, sovereignty and federalism should be studied together. European integration is neither simply the erosion of sovereignty nor the creation of a federation, but rather it is an ongoing process of political re-scaling under conditions of interdependence and uncertainty. The phrase Between Nation, Region, and Union captures precisely this condition. Europe exists between levels, and its political future will be determined by how successfully those levels can be connected. In a relatively stable international environment, unresolved tensions can remain manageable. In a more disordered world order, they become strategic questions. The EU's ability to respond to geopolitical competition, security threats and global fragmentation will depend not only on what institutions it creates, but also on whether Europeans can construct sufficiently shared identities, define legitimate forms of sovereignty and develop institutional arrangements capable of translating collective interests into collective action. The future of European integration is therefore inseparable from the future of the international order in which it is embedded.

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