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# Centralization through decentralization? The crystallization of social order in the European Union

Sean Mueller <sup>a</sup> and Michael Hechter <sup>b</sup>

## ABSTRACT

Attaining social order is one of the principal dilemmas in the social sciences. Whereas most individuals and polities would be better off in a highly ordered society, their self-interested motivations instead often lead them to forgo cooperation and engage in behaviour that undermines social order. This paper develops a novel theory – termed crystallization – that shows how inter-territorial cooperation at lower levels of organization can sustain social order at a higher level. The framework is tested empirically to account for the integration of the European Union. All told, it is found that the extent of regional authority within a European Union member state is positively correlated with that state's legal and economic integration into the European Union. These results are compatible with a modified account of liberal intergovernmentalism. More generally, it is contended that large-scale cooperation between groups or states is causally linked to the concatenation of smaller scale governance units and polities nested within them. Thus, it emerges, somewhat paradoxically, that further centralization at the European Union level is likely to be encouraged by decentralization within the member states.

## KEYWORD

cooperation; European Union; integration; crystallization; regional authority; social order


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## INTRODUCTION


Why do some states and sovereign polities cooperate more with one another than others? For all its centrality to global problem-solving capacities, there are surprisingly few answers to this question. Drawing on European Union (EU) integration theory, two ideal-type answers are possible. *Liberal intergovernmentalists* contend that states only cooperate when it suits their own, selfish, national interest. That interest, in turn, is shaped by contextual factors such as the economic situation, size and national leaders' rational calculations to maximize the opportunities available to them (Hoffmann, 1966; Moravcsik, 1998). Having conquered the world in carving it up into some 200 sovereign states, national governments call the shots no matter if they are acting bi- or multilaterally. All cooperating units – that is, nation-states – are treated alike: as unitary actors rationally pursuing their own, clearly identifiable goals (Moravcsik & Schimmelfennig, 2009, p. 68).

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By contrast, *neo-functionalists* argue that states cooperate only if they are either pressured by specific problems or because of prior collaboration efforts that suck them ever deeper into common problem-solving structures (Haas, 1958). Integration automatically breeds further integration because of cross-border interdependencies and spillover effects that act as a quasi-deterministic pressure on national governments (Lindberg, 1963). This happens regardless of national interest. A more important explanatory variable, therefore, is time: the longer two units have been cooperating, the more likely that new problems will be solved in common. Finally, integration proceeds unidirectionally towards ever closer cooperation in ever more policy areas (Niemann & Schmitter, 2009, p. 49).

These two endpoints on the continuum mirror the age-old agency versus structure debate: nation-states either autonomously cooperate or are forced to do so by structural constraints. A third, more recent, set of authors has tried to find a middle ground. *Post-functionalists* argue that both structural factors, such as size, distance, density and heterogeneity of preferences, as well as actors, and especially *identity-related politicization*, matter in determining EU integration (Schakel, Hooghe, & Marks, 2015). Functionalist spillovers exert the greatest effect on inter-state cooperation if they come hand in hand with transnational problems that demand corresponding solutions (p. 275). Yet ‘the demand for self-rule of national, regional, and local communities’ (p. 280) does not disappear. This is what functionalists have neglected and intergovernmentalists collapsed into general national interest aggregation. Time remains an important factor, since over time people can (un)identify with almost anything, but ‘what matters is the extent to which identity is exclusive and whether it is cued by Eurosceptical political parties’ (Hooghe & Marks, 2009, p. 21). Post-functionalists bring domestic (party) politics back into the analysis: differences across national histories and related mobilization in favour or against ‘an ever closer union’ (Art. 1 of the Treaty on the European Union, 2012) co-determine the extent of supra-nationalism.

To the best of our knowledge, predictions arising from these contending perspectives on the causes of inter-state cooperation, in general and at the level of the EU, have not yet been systematically investigated. The first, more empirical goal of this paper is therefore to provide a simple cross-sectional analysis at the level of member states as to *their* degree of cooperation through EU structures and institutions. Our second, more theoretical goal is to introduce and test a new explanation based on *crystallization theory*. Predictions arising from this approach will be assessed alongside the three standard accounts of EU integration just presented. Our broader ambition is to develop a theory of territorial cooperation that can travel both vertically (from the EU to the world, for example) and horizontally (to other continents). We further contend that such cooperation is the only way to achieve sustainable social order, as discussed next.

## CRYSTALLIZATION AND SOCIAL ORDER

‘Crystallization’, as the term is used here, denotes a process whereby social order comes about through the cooperation of small solidary groups that are nested within larger ones (Chai & Hechter, 1998; Hechter, 2000, pp. 37–45; Hechter & Kanazawa, 1993; Ostrom, 1990). Crystallization in the literal, chemical sense describes the ‘formation of a solid phase’ out of a gaseous or liquid state (Jones, 2002, p. 61). Our metaphorical use of the term similarly refers to a stabilization process, but with human intentionality as the driving force. And whereas a crystal’s ‘flat faces intersecting at well-defined angles’, which are due its lattice structure, clearly distinguish it from ‘the amorphous solid state’ (Beckmann, 2013, p. 1), the outcome analysed here is social order – that is, a stable state of society in which the existing social structure is accepted and sustained by most of its members.

In contrast to real crystallization, however, where molecules are motivated to coalesce by thermodynamic and kinetic forces (Beckmann, 2013, p. 14), we are concerned here with individual groups and larger ones composed of smaller groups as the building blocks of the ‘crystalline

state' (p. 1). Prominent examples of such multi-unit groups include the Venetian state after the year 600 (Barzel, 2002, pp. 273–75); the Sovereign Military Order of Malta (Knights of Malta), which established a state on the basis of eight constituent *langues* (Sire, 1994); the growth of the University of Oxford from its independent colleges; the Swiss and the US (con)federations; and the EU (see next section).

Crystallization theory as used here operates within a broad rational choice framework and builds on several axioms. The first is that small but highly solidary groups – perhaps composed of no more than 35 members (Boyd & Richerson, 1988; Hechter, 1987) – can be treated as if they were individuals. The second concerns self-interest. Although individuals can behave in either a selfish or an altruistic manner, at different times and in different conditions (e.g., Fehr & Gintis, 2007; Tomasello, 2009, pp. 44–47), we treat groups and the individuals composing them as primarily self-interested. Since we attempt to explain cooperation and not its absence, this raises the key obstacle that must be overcome. The assumption implies that an inclination towards cooperation occurs *only* under conditions of an expected payoff, which in turn must be higher than the net benefit of either non-cooperation, free-riding, or cooperation with somebody else (cf. Chai & Hechter, 1998).

The third and final axiom concerns the bounded rationality of actors, meaning that individuals (and the groups they compose or are equated with) behave rationally within a context of incomplete information, imperfect processing skills, and pre-existing values and belief-systems (Kahneman, 2011; Simon, 1982; Thaler, 2015). Without such rationality, actors would be unable either to determine what their self-interest consists of, or to identify and pursue the path leading to its maximization. Once we reach the highly aggregated level of nation-states, this assimilates our theory to both liberal intergovernmentalism and post-functionalism.

We can now spell out the causal mechanisms of crystallization theory in greater detail. The process starts by analysing cooperation *within* small groups (Hechter, 1987). Individuals become and remain part of voluntary groups (as distinguished from groups such as the family and the state that are obligatory) only because they derive net benefits from their membership. The principal motive for joining such groups is to receive goods that they are unable to attain alone or otherwise. Whereas the products that such groups supply to their members can be highly variable – ranging from access to golf courses (in the case of country clubs), to large sailboats (yacht clubs), to bowling alleys – the fundamental goods that motivate membership are *security* and *insurance*. Both of these goods cannot be attained by individuals alone because they require contributions by others.

A good example is *credit*, which is very difficult to attain when individuals have no access to bank loans. An institution found the world over that supplies credit to poor people is the rotating credit association (RCA). RCAs are based on the sequential, rotating access to a pool of resources that all participants pay into. They hold together not principally because of ties of sentiment among the participants, although such ties may indeed exist (Hechter, 1987, ch. 6; Koike et al., 2018). Rather, *dependence* and *control* are their fundamental glue. Participants only join because membership provides them with access to funds they are unable to obtain otherwise. Therein lies the basis of the members' dependence.

But what assures members that the hard-earned funds they have contributed to the RCA remain secure? Absent the perception of security – which inhibits a grantee from absconding with the funds – no one would ever join in the first place. The perception of security flows from the fact that potential RCA members are highly selected with respect to their honesty, reliability and other personal qualities that inspire trust on reputational grounds. Since each member has a stake in the preservation of his or her own investment in the common fund, this gives everyone an incentive to monitor everyone else. Beyond this, the ultimate factor undergirding the perception of security is the members' rootedness in the community. To the extent that their families live in the same locality, family members can be taken hostage (as it were) in the event that a wayward member defaults. In effect, members' families act like collateral on a loan. This

capacity represents the ultimate sanction in the RCA's arsenal. These twin bases of group solidarity – dependence and control – help to resolve the second-order free-rider problem (Heckathorn, 1989).

The next questions to be addressed are when and why do different small, localized groups like these cooperate *with one another*, and how can this lead to social order writ large, notably on the scale of an entire continent such as Europe? Cooperation-facilitating factors between groups may be either internal or external. Externally, cooperation is more likely to happen the more commonalities the different groups possess – especially with regard to the global benefit that all seek (such as security). For example, shared ethnic ties foster trust, lowering the costs for enforcing contractual obligations. The same counts for other shared social ties. Thus, in his analysis of medieval trade, Greif (2006, p. 59) argues that:

individuals with a particular social identity – those who belonged to the community – would share information and collectively punish a cheater. ... At the same time, the benefits of transacting with other community members were greater than those each trader could have realized by establishing agency relations based on a reputation mechanism outside the group. Each member was therefore motivated to maintain his communal affiliation, thereby perpetuating this social entity.

This aspect resembles the identity factor of post-functional theories, and more particularly the extent and intensity of 'feeling European'. It also ties in with the advocates of a Europe based on a shared culture, history and past suffering.

The internal dimension of cooperation-facilitating factors, in turn, builds on the groups' first-hand familiarity with compliance, given their own respect for small-scale corporate obligations within them. Hence, in multi-unit groups, the monitoring and collective sanctioning processes work in part because the constituent groups can apply *the same* mechanisms that they are familiar with and use to maintain their own, lower level solidarity. Notions such as solidarity, commitment, reputation, transaction costs and benefits are well-established benchmarks within the group to assess the behaviour of other groups and react accordingly.

This mirrors Alexis de Tocqueville's famous argument that democracy is best learned locally, at the smallest scale of public life. Giuliano and Nunn (2013) similarly present compelling evidence that experience with selecting local leaders through formal or informal consensus (including elections) leads to more democracy at the national level. Their central causal mechanism works through individual beliefs and value systems (Giuliano & Nunn, 2013, p. 92; also Ostrom, 1990, p. 184). To paraphrase de Tocqueville: because the whole country is divided into separate local governments that all have inculcated their inhabitants with the spirit of freedom and democracy, trust in one's co-citizens is higher, too.

At the same time, in large groups made up of smaller ones, the costs of monitoring and sanctioning at the highest level are lower than in equal-sized groups merely composed of individuals. The vertical division of labour, although admittedly more complex, is most efficient when the sub-units do much of the work to control individuals *within* their own groups, while the larger unit simply deals with conflict *between* groups. This presupposes a certain autonomy of the higher level. In consequence, the existence of such a large multiunit group may be able to generate more cooperation at a given cost than its constituent small groups would if they operated in isolation from or in competition with one another.

Note, however, that our theory does not predict that nestedness within groups *determines* cooperation between them. There will always be political, cultural and social factors militating against any form of cooperation. Yet, as stated above, we predict that cooperation takes place when constituent units expect that its benefits will exceed its costs. To the extent that the division of labour within each group helps to depress the overall costs, cooperation between them becomes

more likely. Within-group cooperation is thus above all a *facilitating* factor for between-group collaboration.

The literature on state formation provides us with similar insights into the operation of vertical dynamics. On the one hand, there is *bargaining* between a would-be national government and strong local governments. Moller (2018, p. 303), for example, argues that the key to explaining the emergence of state capacity limited by the rule of law (as opposed to unlimited, tyrannical state capacity; cf. also Barzel, 2002, ch. 13) is ‘medieval communalism’: strong local self-governing polities such as towns, parishes or, in Switzerland, valley communities (*Talschaften*) (Würgler, 2010). Such local polities were able to extract central government concessions in the form of legal guarantees in exchange for providing legitimacy and bureaucratic infrastructure to the emerging state (Moller, 2018, p. 311; cf. also Wimmer, 2018). Acting as the central state’s agents on the ground, strong local and regional governments thus shoulder much of the enforcement costs so that vertical cooperation is a win–win both for those at the top and at the bottom (cf. also Ziblatt, 2006).

Moreover, strong and stable sub-state entities can provide the national government with publicity and a much-needed presence on the ground that add to its ‘performative dimension’, whereby ‘public interpretations of certain acts of violence successfully assign to the state a reality and consequentiality that then orients future action. Appearance and its variable interpretation become the medium for the accumulation and exercise of power’ (Reed, 2019, p. 8). Accordingly, Reed’s analysis of US state formation relies on the federal army as essentially composed of state- and county-based militias (p. 11). In a similar way, the Swiss cantons retained a certain degree of control over the infantry well into the 20th century (Dardanelli & Mueller, 2019, p. 152).

Thus, much like state-building in those two early (con)federations, crystallization is essentially a *bottom-up* process. Its efficacy derives from its ability to deliver benefits to its members, to provide a framework for cooperative behaviour and to minimize monitoring and sanctioning costs at higher levels of organization. Social order writ large thus rests on the extent of the *internally* cooperative nature of its constituent group members. Collective solidarity and, over time, shared identities incentivize individuals and groups at all levels to engage in cooperative behaviour and familiarize them with the requisite values, vocabulary, and rules to that end.

What contemporary evidence is there to support this claim? Looking at interregional cooperation in Canada, the United States, Germany and Switzerland, Bolleyer (2009) finds that power-sharing *within* regions is more likely to lead to power-sharing *between* them. States, provinces and *Länder* with unified (presidential) or single-party (parliamentary) governments resulting from fierce inter-party competition do not want to relinquish power by engaging in high levels of cooperation with other regions. By contrast, in regions with (de facto) multi-party coalitions, where blame and gain are shared – such as within the Swiss cantons – power is more easily shared externally as well, notably through institutionalized, multi-policy and contractually binding horizontal cooperation (cf. also Behnke & Mueller, 2017).

Further, single-party governments are much more likely to work towards short-term solutions, whereas coalitions can afford more long-term thinking (cf. Lijphart, 2012). This is particularly the case if there are institutions that force actors to cooperate, such as direct democracy in Switzerland or the *Bundesrat* in Germany (Hooghe et al., 2016; Neidhart, 1970; Vatter, 2018). In both countries, parties must cooperate across the aisle (which does not even exist in this literal sense) to avoid defeat in a referendum (which eight cantons can call) or the second chamber (where German *Länder* governments are directly represented).

In sum, crystallization offers a middle ground between theories relying on a Leviathan to facilitate, channel and enforce cooperation, and others that postulate anarchy, or a perfect market situation, and then treat very small and very large groups identically (cf. Chai & Hechter, 1998). Instead, as in Ostrom’s (1990) theory of collective action with regard to common-pool resources, crystallization allows for self-regulation through autonomous, self-interested cooperation. The



main difference from Ostrom's theory, which dealt with individuals, is that crystallization theory lets smaller groups nest within larger ones, allowing them to vertically divide the costs of monitoring and sanctioning and thus collectively increase the net benefits of cooperation.

The next section assesses to what extent these assumptions, mechanisms and outcomes hold in the case of the EU, especially when compared with rival theories of inter-state cooperation and European integration.

## THE CASE OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

### EU integration in essence

As just defined, crystallization refers to a process of increasingly tight cooperation between large groups that are composed of smaller, nested groups – in other words, a *matryoshka* type of cooperation. At first sight, EU integration is a good example of such a process (Haas, 1958, p. 16). After the Second World War, six liberal-democratic nation-states – Belgium, France, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and West Germany – signed a series of treaties establishing different supranational communities with complementary functions. In 1951, the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) was established. Plans for a European Defence Community failed and the much more loosely structured West EU (that included the UK) arose in its place, before the European Economic Community (EEC) and Euratom were founded in 1957 (again without the UK; cf. Nugent, 2010, ch. 3).

To label the cooperating actors in these instances as 'social groups', however, requires some justification, since of course we are referring to large-scale sovereign nation-states.<sup>1</sup> However, they all possessed, and still possess, an elected government, democratic accountability and judicial review mechanisms – that is, some form of hierarchy with popular input into collective decision-making and clearly defined membership criteria (borders, citizenship, residency requirements, and so forth). One of them – West Germany – was itself a federation with strong *Land* autonomy (Kaiser & Vogel, 2019); Italy had at least a constitutional clause to this effect (Putnam, 1993); and the Netherlands formed the archetype of consociational government (Lijphart, 1968, 2012). Solidarity within these EU founding states was and remains bolstered by strong levels of national identification – serious regionalist challenges to centralism in France, Belgium or Italy only arose in the 1970s (Keating, 1998). All these countries, including small Luxembourg, also possessed and still possess local governments with more or less autonomy (Ladner et al., 2019).

Subsequent treaties deepened and widened European inter-state cooperation. In 1965, the three Councils of Ministers and the High Authority/Commissions of the ECSC, EEC and Euratom were merged into a single European Council and a single European Commission (EC), respectively; a Court of Auditors was established in 1975 alongside the already existing Court of Justice; and since 1978 all members of the assembly (which after 1962 called itself the 'European Parliament' – EP) have been popularly elected (Nugent, 2010, pp. 28, 53f.). The Single European Act (1986) and the Treaties of Maastricht (1992), Amsterdam (1997), Nice (2001) and Lisbon (2007) gradually extended qualified majority voting within the Council, added further policy areas in which there was to be cooperation, increased the legislative powers of the EP, and created a Court of First Instance to alleviate the workload of the European Court of Justice (ECJ, later relabelled Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU); Nugent, 2010, p. 54ff.). The EEC was renamed the European Community in 1997 and included in the newly established EU alongside the ECSC and Euratom, a common foreign and security policy, and cooperation in justice and home affairs (p. 56).

Maastricht laid the foundation for a common currency, created European Union citizenship and the advisory Committee of the Regions, entrenched subsidiarity and gave the CJEU the ability to impose fines on member states in case of non-compliance (pp. 56f.). Amsterdam introduced

constructive abstention in external relations, through which a member state would not be bound by a particular decision yet allow the EU to proceed (p. 61). Nice changed the composition of the EC to one national per member state and replaced unanimity with qualified majority voting in the Council when appointing said EC (p. 63). The Lisbon Treaty saved what it could from the failed Constitutional Treaty 'to ensure ratification' (p. 78). It incorporated justice and home affairs into the renamed Treaty on the Functioning of the EU, replaced 'Community' with the slightly stronger 'Union', created citizen initiatives requiring 1 million signatures, tied the nomination of the EC president to the outcome of EP elections, gave legal standing to the European Council, and provided national parliaments with a suspensive veto (pp. 81ff.).

Thus, in the span of only 60 years, inter-state cooperation moved from issue-specific coordination on coal and steel between just six nation-states to quasi-constitutional institutionalization, significant delegation of powers to supra-national bodies and direct EP elections held concurrently across all 28 members. EU law is superior to national rules in areas in which the EU is competent, policed by the EC and the CJEU to ensure uniform application. Citizens can travel and do business freely across the entire EU, and in most places the euro is used.

Yet, for all its success, not everybody has subscribed with equal enthusiasm to the EU project. Apart from the UK's 2016 decision to leave, more subtle cases involve countries not adopting the euro, staying out of Schengen or opting out of specific policies (Schimmelfennig, Leuffen, & Rittberger, 2015). Why would some countries decide to go further and others instead stay behind? The next section applies our own theory before comparing it with three standard explanations of EU integration.

## Explanations

In discussing the EU, a distinction must be drawn between its initial emergence – why did the leaders of six nations sign the Rome Treaty? – and its subsequent operation and evolution – the ever-closer EU. Whereas it is one thing to agree on creating a supra-national community in the first place, it is quite another then not only to maintain that structure but also further develop it institutionally, politically and territorially. Our theory pertains to the latter: the process of increasing large-scale cooperation through the EU. As already stated above, however, we do not claim that intra-state cooperation *determines* EU integration, alone or in conjunction with other factors, but merely that once a decision is taken to join or deepen the union, states with territorially nested groups will find it easier to move ahead than those without.

Applied to sovereign polities at continental scale, crystallization theory thus looks at *inter*-state cooperation as a function of – inter alia – *intra*-state cooperation. The latter is necessary so that a vertical division of labour can emerge where (1) the supra-national level ensures compliance by its members and (2) the latter control the behaviour of *their* own members, in turn. Thus, the overall group (of countries, i.e., the EU) must be composed of members that are themselves composed of further, smaller groups, which in turn are again comprised of even smaller groups, and so on, down to the lowest level.

EU accession history itself provides some evidence that the internal character of (prospective) members matters: the Copenhagen Criteria of 1993 famously required liberal democracy, a functioning market economy and readiness to accept the *acquis*.<sup>2</sup> Yet, what matters for present purposes is the territorial organization of liberal democracy *within* states. In principle, nested groups can be territorially delineated, such as regional and local governments, or they can be corporate/functional/social actors such as trade unions, business associations, or religious and linguistic groups (cf. Lijphart, 1968, 2012). The basic idea is that the EU's member states are large-sale social groups, which in turn are composed of smaller but still fairly large groups such as regions and local governments. The EU is at the apex of a pyramid consisting of groups of smaller, constituent groups. For the purposes of this paper, however, we limit ourselves to territorial actors, as they are the most long-lasting. Whereas obviously many different types of territorial arrangements are



possible, our theory concerns largely autonomous subgroups that resemble the overall group as much as possible, albeit on a smaller scale.

One option to operationalize this conception is through a simply unitary versus federal state dummy. Much more sophistication is afforded by the regional authority index (RAI), however. The RAI (Hooghe et al., 2016) assesses both regional autonomy ('self-rule') and influence over national decisions ('shared rule'). Whereas self-rule denotes the policy and institutional depth of regional governments, shared rule captures the extent of regional influence over state-wide decisions. Since both express at least a potential for intra-state cooperation – both horizontally, between regions, and vertically, between regions and the central government – we retain the original RAI measure which adds their scores. We use data for the last year available, 2010, since ours is a simple cross-sectional research design.

Intra-state cooperation must not be confined to regional governments, however. Smaller and most Nordic countries have no regional tier at all. Instead of – or in addition to, for example in the United States or Switzerland – regions, central governments can also work with strong local governments. To assess the political and institutional strength of municipalities cross-sectionally, we rely on the local authority index (LAI; Ladner, Keuffer, & Baldersheim, 2015; Ladner et al., 2019), which more or less replicates the RAI. Here, the latest available year is 2014. Table A1 in Appendix A in the supplemental data online provides summary statistics for these two and all other variables used below. The following hypotheses thus emanate from crystallization theory:

*Hypothesis 1: The stronger a member state's regional governments (measured through the regional authority index – RAI), the higher its level of European Union cooperation.*

*Hypothesis 2: The stronger a member state's local governments (measured through the local authority index – LAI), the higher its level of European Union cooperation.*

However, what exactly does a nation-state's degree of inter-state cooperation through EU institutions, or *EU cooperation* for short, refer to and how can we measure it? In keeping with the purpose of this paper, the *dependent variable* captures the extent to which member states cooperate with one another as part of the overarching EU institutional framework. Social order, as stated above, comes about when individual units (regardless of their scale) behave in ways that benefit the common good. Ideally, then, we are in possession of a measure of EU cooperation for each state and year of its EU membership. Three such measures of EU inter-state cooperation at the level of member states exist, two of which are confined to a few specific years:

- König and Ohr's (2013) *EU index* measures the degree to which member states are economically integrated. Its four indicators assess integration into the EU single market; states' degree of convergence or EU homogeneity; symmetry of business cycles; and compliance with EU rules as well as participation in important institutional integration steps (pp. 1077–79). We average the values for 2004 and 2012 for all 24 countries for which data are available.<sup>3</sup>
- Nanou, Zapryanova, and Toth (2017, Q24, p. 11) conducted an expert survey that included a question on the degree of *Europeanization* at the country level: 'Thinking about the average speed of Europeanization across countries as a baseline, which country or countries stand out as the most Europeanized?' Experts could mention more than one country, so the result is a count-measure.
- Finally, Schimmelfennig (2019; also Leuffen, Rittberger, & Schimmelfennig, 2013; Schimmelfennig et al., 2015) assesses the number of 'opt-outs' for each member state. Opt-outs are either deliberate choices by member state governments not to subscribe to a certain EU integration step, or they result from the decision of existing members to partially and often temporarily exclude new ones (Schimmelfennig, 2019). We use the total number of opt-outs per

member state between 1958 and 2016, inverted and standardized so that higher figures correspond to full *Integration*.

These three measures all correlate positively and moderately with one another.<sup>4</sup> Yet, since they relate to different aspects of EU cooperation – the first more economic, the second more political, the third more legal – we shall keep them apart for the purpose of the empirical analysis.

As *controls*, we use several variables that three main groups of scholars have relied on to explain EU integration as a more or less distinct type of inter-state cooperation. Neo-functionalists, liberal intergovernmentalists and post-functionalists have made different statements regarding the form and extent of inter-state cooperation (Hooghe & Marks, 2019). Among the earliest scholars of EU integration, *neo-functionalists* postulate that once a given set of states has decided to pool decision-making in a certain policy area, further integration will inevitably follow in this and related domains (Haas, 1958; cf. also Lindberg, 1963; Niemann & Schmitter, 2009, p. 49). From this perspective, the internal character of cooperating units is largely irrelevant: all of them are subject to the same global pressures and will resort to the same functional remedy. Cross-sectional variation results from the duration of state membership, with the greatest EU cooperation predicted for those states that have been part of the club for the longest time. Accordingly, we measure the *duration of EU membership* through the difference in years between 2018 and a country's official EU accession date. A second key aspect of the neo-functionalist theory is functional pressure. Thus, the more a state is in need of supra-national coordination to solve its problems, the more likely it is to cooperate within the EU framework. We measure such pressures through *density*, on the one hand, and the *distance* (km) between a nation's capital and Brussels. While far from perfect, these indicators at least give some sense of likely functional interdependencies between EU member states.

*Liberal Intergovernmentalists*, in turn, predict inter-state cooperation exclusively in terms of a given state's national interest (Hoffmann, 1966; Moravcsik, 1998; Moravcsik & Schimmelfennig, 2009, p. 68). Allowing for variation across member states as to their degree of EU integration, this strand of the literature also countenances disintegration (Vollaard, 2018, pp. 50ff.) through changes and reversals of said national interest. It matters little, however, whether and to what extent states also cooperate internally. Just as neo-functionalists portray EU integration to be inevitable in the face of ever-growing complexities, for liberal intergovernmentalists large-scale cooperation and the delegation of power to supra-national organizations are necessary costs to secure commitment by their fellow member states. Most plausibly, richer and larger states will see greater benefit in cooperation as it allows them to export their goods, import raw materials and/or enlarge their workforce donor pool. Hence, to assess national interest we use *per capita gross domestic product (GDP)* (as of 2017, in purchasing power standards and indexed so that EU-28 = 100) and *population size* (as of 2018), since richer and bigger countries would seem to have more to gain from supra-national economies of scale and/or are better able to impose their preferences onto others.

*Post-functionalists*, finally, argue that both *structural factors* such as size, wealth, distance and density as well as *identity-related politicization* matter in determining EU integration (e.g., Hooghe & Marks, 2009, p. 21; Schakel et al., 2015). Politicization refers to the electoral contestation and mobilization of the gap between functional pressures for large-scale solutions and attachment to nation-state identity (Hooghe & Marks, 2019, p. 1116). Subsequently, as with liberal intergovernmentalism, there can be variation across member states in their degree of cooperation, and the process of EU integration can be halted or even reversed, in contrast to neo-functionalist theory. In short: integration is very much determined by whether and how successfully political actors within a state contest EU-wide cooperation. To measure identity, we rely on Eurobarometer (2018, p. 111) data when questions about the extent to which citizens *identified as EU citizens* were asked. We add the percentage of respondents answering 'yes, definitely' or 'yes, to some

extent'. The strength of *Eurosceptic parties* is measured through national vote shares at the 2014 EP elections (EP, 2014). Only parties scoring 7 or higher on Schmitt, Braun, Popa, Mikhaylov, and Dwinger's (2016) 'anti-integration' measure, which runs from 0 to 10, are included. Parties and their votes shares, shown in Table A2 in Appendix A in the supplemental data online, are summed to the level of their member state. In the absence of Eurosceptic parties on either the left or the right, the value obtained is 0.

## RESULTS

Figures 1–3 show the results for our three dependent variables: the *EU index* (König & Ohr, 2013), *Europeanization* (Nanou et al., 2017) and *Integration* (Schimmelfennig, 2019). Displayed are standardized correlation coefficients resulting from the final models, for which all variables that were significant at least once when included separately were retained (for details, see Tables A3–A5 in Appendix A in the supplemental data online).

In two out of these three final models, namely those regarding the EU index and Integration, regional authority is significantly and positively correlated with EU-wide cooperation, in line with Hypothesis 1. Regional authority is also significantly and positively correlated with EU-wide cooperation in most individual models (1–9), including those with Europeanization as the dependent variable. Local authority is never significantly correlated with the extent of a country's EU cooperation, contrary to Hypothesis 2.

First the results for economic integration will be discussed (Figure 1). The only other two variables that are also significantly associated with economic integration are per capita GDP and the strength of Eurosceptic parties, measured through their performance at the state-level in the 2014

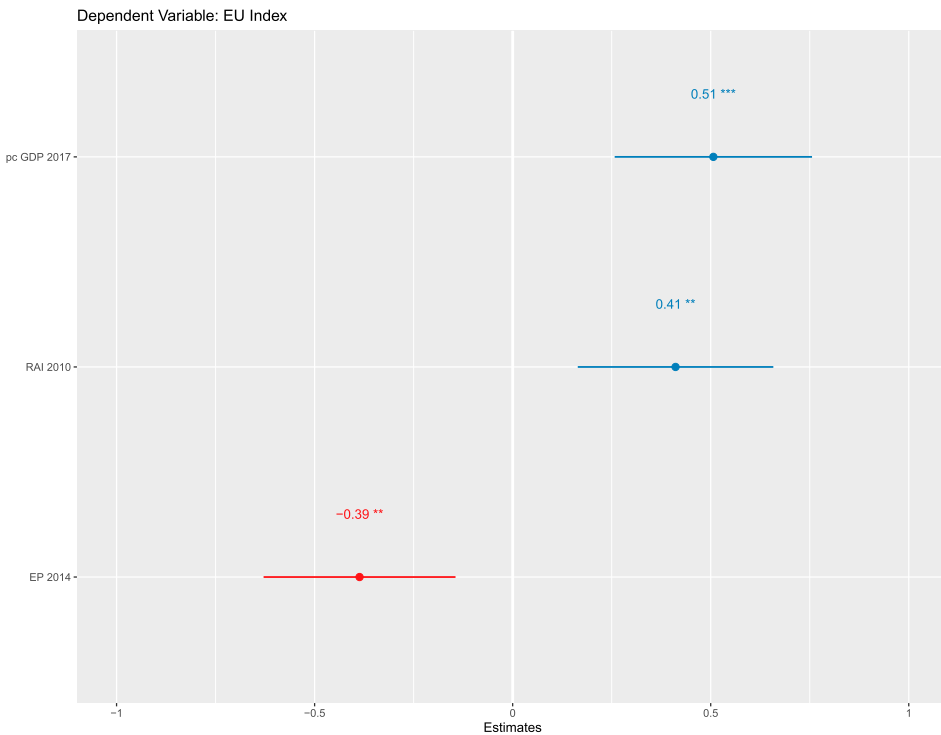
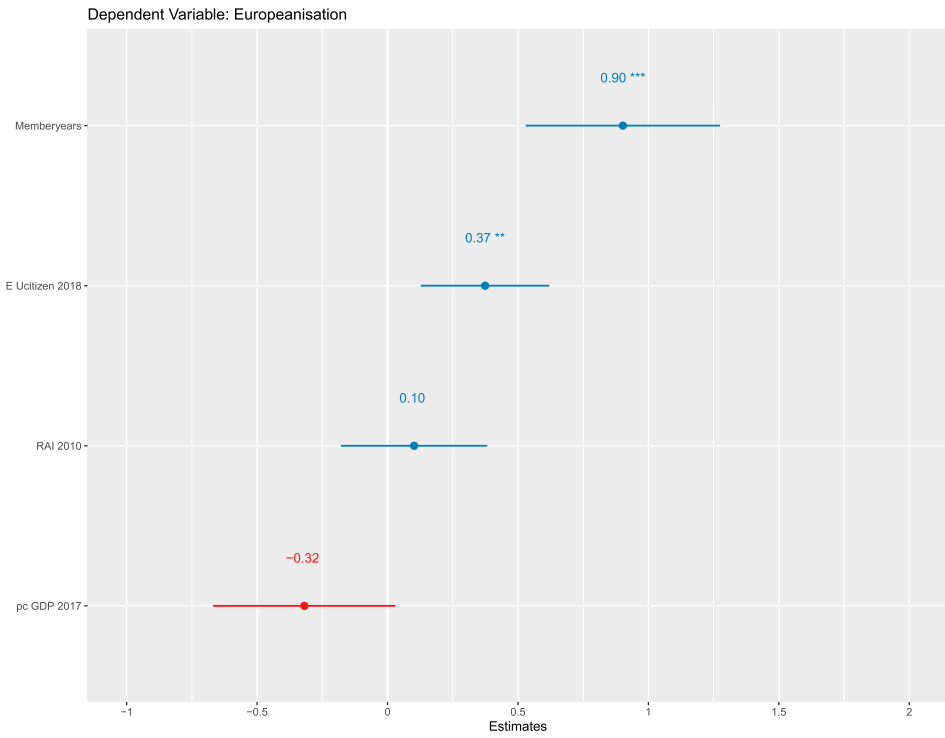
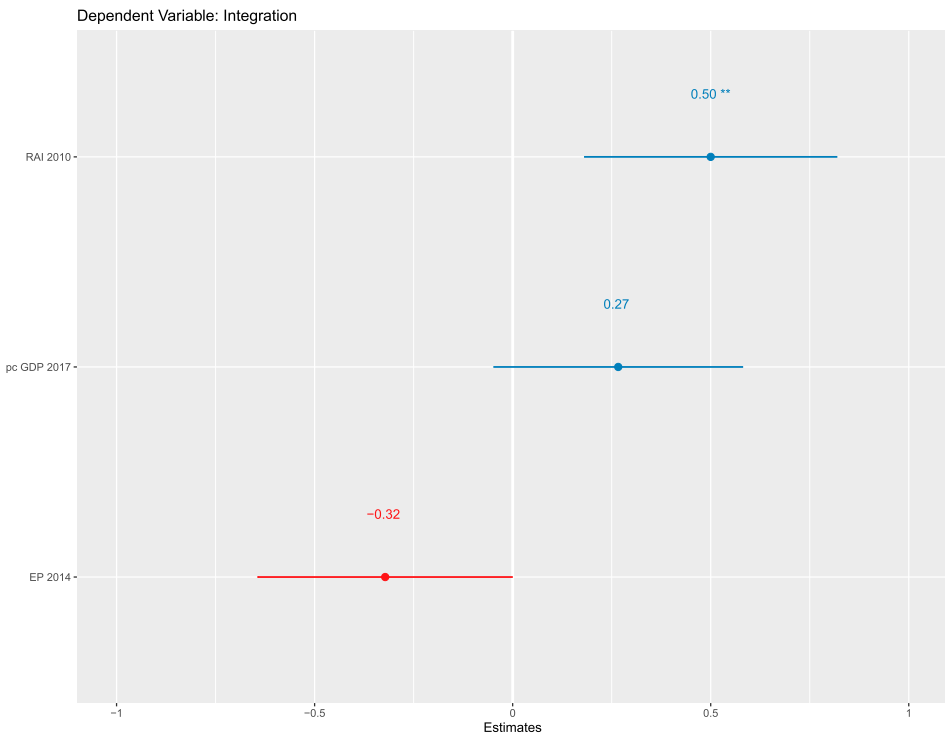


Figure 1. Ordinary least squares (OLS) estimates for the EU index.



**Figure 2.** Ordinary least squares (OLS) estimates for Europeanization.



**Figure 3.** Ordinary least squares (OLS) estimates for integration.

EP elections. In the final, trimmed-down model with an adjusted  $R^2 = 0.679$ , crystallization theory thus makes a significant and substantial contribution alongside variables emanating from liberal intergovernmentalist and post-functionalism approaches. As Figure 1 shows, all three variables have about the same effect size. Leaving out the RAI from this final model brings the adjusted  $R^2$  down to 0.532, a loss of 21.7 percentage points.

Turning to Europeanization (Figure 2), the RAI is positively and significantly correlated with that dependent variable in seven out of 10 models, but not in the two final models with all (significant) controls. The only variables significantly associated with Europeanization are the duration of a country's EU membership, per capita GDP and EU identity. In the final, trimmed-down model with an adjusted  $R^2 = 0.728$ , elements from neo-functionalism, liberal intergovernmentalism and post-functionalism thus all prove significant. The substantive effect of membership duration, shown in Figure 2, is by far the highest of all the determinants assessed here.

Finally, when it comes to integration as conceived of through the lack of opt-outs (Figure 3), the RAI is again positively and significantly correlated with this conception of EU-wide cooperation even when we control for other factors. Only the weakness of Eurosceptic parties is similarly correlated with this aspect of European social order. With an adjusted  $R^2 = 0.322$ , however, this model provides the worst fit of all those analysed here. Yet, the RAI still provides for the greatest – positive and significant – impact, as Figure 3 shows.

For all their theoretical and conceptual affinities, our three dependent variables thus seem to capture separate aspects of a country's cooperation within the EU framework. *Economic integration* is explained by elements of crystallization, liberal intergovernmentalism and post-functionalism. This suggests that there are many different motivations and causal mechanisms for cooperating economically and legally. In turn, Europeanization as assessed via an expert survey is best explained by neo- and post-functionalism – the longer a country has been a member of the EU and the more its nationals identify as EU citizens, the more it is seen as one of its leaders. Instead, quasi-constitutional opting-out during Treaty negotiations, that is by refraining from legal cooperation, is related to successful politicization through Eurosceptic parties and weak regional governments.

For the purposes of our theory, two main insights emerge. First, *regional but not local* authority matters for social order on a European scale. At least as measured by Hooghe et al. (2016), the RAI is consistently and positively associated with EU integration. The more that states share power internally with regional governments, the more they partake in European multilevel governance. Second, however, regional authority matters only for *legal and economic integration*, but not so much for political leadership. Regional authority does not predict Europeanization, but membership duration does. In this sense at least, the EU functions like a club where the longest-serving members have the most to say – even when *controlling* for the power of states as measured through their per capita GDP and population size.

To corroborate our findings further, Tables 1 and 2 divide the RAI into its two components, self-rule and shared rule, and show how our findings hold even with this further degree of specification. A series of diagnostics performed on these models (available from the authors on request) shows no problems with outliers (studentized residuals with Bonferroni  $p < 0.05$ ); the assumptions on skewness, kurtosis, link function and heteroskedacity also prove acceptable. All variance inflation factors are below 3.8 (at most) and generally between 1 and 2. Table 2 further excludes Germany, which one could have thought might bias our results (large shared rule, pivotal EU driver), but results are basically identical.

To conclude the empirical part of this paper, three limits to our analyses are briefly discussed. First, we are dealing with a small number of cases: 28 for the whole of the EU and 24 in models with missing data on the EU index. Second, our research design is purely cross-sectional and not longitudinal. Whereas both limitations are driven by data availability, the fact that we obtain significant results nevertheless is all the more reassuring. Moreover, several factors indicated by

**Table 1.** Separate ordinary least squares (OLS) regressions for self-rule and shared rule.

Independent variables	Dependent variable					
	EU index		Europeanization		Integration	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Self-rule	0.320*** (0.109)		0.025 (0.175)		0.063*** (0.022)	
Shared rule		0.589*** (0.194)		0.401 (0.270)		0.114** (0.041)
EU membership duration (years)			0.396*** (0.079)	0.352*** (0.063)		
% EU citizens (2018)			0.336*** (0.104)	0.276** (0.107)		
Per capita GDP (2017)	0.126*** (0.031)	0.123*** (0.031)	-0.081* (0.040)	-0.066* (0.034)	0.007* (0.004)	0.006 (0.004)
% Eurosceptic parties (2014)	-0.159*** (0.050)	-0.106** (0.046)			-0.021** (0.010)	-0.012 (0.010)
Constant	42.949*** (3.291)	44.116*** (3.284)	-9.388 (6.660)	-5.714 (6.785)	-0.982* (0.486)	-0.613 (0.467)
Observations	24	24	28	28	28	28
$R^2$	0.700	0.708	0.764	0.784	0.371	0.367
Adjusted $R^2$	0.655	0.664	0.723	0.747	0.292	0.287
Residual standard error	3.810 (d.f. = 20)	3.764 (d.f. = 20)	4.747 (d.f. = 23)	4.536 (d.f. = 23)	0.841 (d.f. = 24)	0.844 (d.f. = 24)
F-statistic	15.576*** (d.f. = 3; 20)	16.130*** (d.f. = 3; 20)	18.578*** (d.f. = 4; 23)	20.891*** (d.f. = 4; 23)	4.714** (d.f. = 3; 24)	4.631** (d.f. = 3; 24)

Note: \* $p < 0.1$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ .



**Table 2.** Separate ordinary least squares (OLS) regressions for self-rule and shared rule, without Germany.

Independent variables	Dependent variable					
	EU index		Europeanization		Integration	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Self-rule	0.387*** (0.120)		-0.077 (0.157)		0.060** (0.026)	
Shared rule		0.723*** (0.212)		0.214 (0.256)		0.108** (0.047)
EU membership duration (years)			0.367*** (0.070)	0.322*** (0.058)		
% EU citizens (2018)			0.255** (0.096)	0.225** (0.099)		
Per capita GDP (2017)	0.128*** (0.031)	0.124*** (0.030)	-0.069* (0.035)	-0.052 (0.032)	0.007* (0.004)	0.006 (0.004)
% Eurosceptic parties (2014)	-0.174*** (0.050)	-0.110** (0.045)			-0.021* (0.011)	-0.012 (0.010)
Constant	42.562*** (3.253)	43.962*** (3.208)	-3.407 (6.192)	-2.468 (6.287)	-0.958* (0.501)	-0.611 (0.476)
Observations	23	23	27	27	27	27
$R^2$	0.716	0.727	0.734	0.739	0.310	0.304
Adjusted $R^2$	0.671	0.684	0.686	0.692	0.220	0.213
Residual standard error	3.750 (d.f. = 19)	3.674 (d.f. = 19)	4.151 (d.f. = 22)	4.109 (d.f. = 22)	0.858 (d.f. = 23)	0.861 (d.f. = 23)
F-statistic	15.938*** (d.f. = 3; 19)	16.859*** (d.f. = 3; 19)	15.171*** (d.f. = 4; 22)	15.595*** (d.f. = 4; 22)	3.438** (d.f. = 3; 23)	3.351** (d.f. = 3; 23)

Note: \* $p < 0.1$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ .

mainstream theories as being important for understanding EU integration, such as membership duration, national wealth or collective identity, point in the ‘right’ direction. This further strengthens confidence in the validity of our findings. Also, when it comes to analysing EU member states as such (and not merely a sample of sovereign nation-states), we are covering the universe of cases. The third and final limitation concerns the use of somewhat weak proxies for factors postulated by alternative theories of EU integration. Notably, functional pressures – to the extent that they go beyond mere modernization and globalization and exert a different effect on different states – could only be operationalized inadequately through distance from Brussels and density. Yet, developing proper measures of such pressures at member state level lies beyond the scope of this paper.

## CONCLUSIONS

What explains social order on a very large scale such as the European continent? This paper has presented a novel approach to creating social order by focusing on EU integration as the dependent variable. Novel in that for the first time the propensity to cooperate *between* states is theoretically and indeed causally linked to cooperation *within* them.

The crystallization theory presented here works as follows. At the most general level, cooperation takes place among groups that themselves consist of smaller groups nested within them. As those smaller groups cooperate with one another, they monitor and sanction each other’s behaviour. This allows the larger groups to focus on monitoring and sanctioning their own behaviour, in turn, so that a vertical division of labour emerges. The EU was conceptualized as resembling such a nested group design in that most member states possess regional and local governments with more or less autonomy. Hence, as much as local and regional governments are controlled by each other and their national government, member states have similarly delegated control of *their* behaviour to supra-national institutions such as the EC or the CJEU.

The empirical analyses have yielded the following results. When controlling for neo-functional, liberal intergovernmental and post-functional explanations of the degree of a state’s cooperation within the EU framework, crystallization theory – as measured by regional authority (Hooghe et al., 2016) – is positively and significantly associated with *legal and economic* integration. Yet, the neo-functionalist argument of membership duration best predicts *political* Europeanization in terms of (being perceived as) actually driving EU affairs. The extent of local authority (Ladner et al., 2019) did not emerge as a significant factor affecting inter-state cooperation.

Insisting on the normative and empirical value of cooperation might seem strangely outdated, given that current events all point in the opposite direction. Does cooperation not imply what right-wing populism so successfully opposes, namely openness, tolerance and solidarity across international borders? Has European cooperation in the form of ever deeper political integration and burden sharing not been abruptly halted by ‘Brexit’, austerity, and the failures involved in dealing with the so-called ‘refugee crisis’ (cf. also Hooghe & Marks, 2019)? Can the rise of peripheral nationalism in places as diverse as Catalonia, Corsica, Flanders and Scotland not be attributed to failed intra-state cooperation, signalling the disappearance of encompassing collective identities? Do the decline of religiosity and secular social capital and the rise of online echo chambers, even at the individual level, not lead us to suspect that individuals retrench ever more into their own, personal space at the expense of collective action? In sum, has social, cultural, political and economic selfishness at individual, regional and national levels finally replaced altruism, mutualism, shared intentionality and the pursuit of – literally – the commonwealth?

The answer is both yes and no. Cooperation as such has not vanished, but rather the scale at which it is pursued is changing. In this reading, Eurosceptics on both the left and the right oppose supra-nationalism to better realize *intra-state* welfare, claiming to either represent ‘the[ir] people’ as a unified and homogenous entity (Kallis, 2018; Mudde, 2007) or opposing neoliberal globalism and European deregulation (Mueller & Heidelberg, 2019). Most ‘Brexiters’, in turn, want a

strong UK with trade links all over the world, professing to adhere to globally *shared* World Trade Organization (WTO) rules. Similar to that, Scottish and Catalan nationalists, for the most part, want independence *within* the EU, that is, parity with other EU members and sovereignty pooling where this makes sense, not total isolation and abandonment. Even hedonism and the individualist cultivation of one's own reputation are ultimately geared towards recognition and praise *by others*, especially so on social media. Cooperation and communication have retained their principled importance. Yet, the scale at which they are pursued has changed.

Acknowledging that recognition by others (off- or online), integration into common legal, political and economic frameworks (thin or thick), adherence to internationally shared rules (even with minimal scope) and the pursuit of collective welfare (at regional, state, continental or global levels) are human constants opens up interesting avenues for understanding political developments. This paper has focused on European economic, political and legal integration as manifested primarily (but not exclusively) through the EU. We have contended that to understand the creation of European social order, it would be helpful to rely on crystallization theory. Crystallization allows for varying *degrees* of cooperation at varying *levels* which are *nested* within each other. Our empirical analyses of the EU case have shown how regionalism and supranationalism indeed seem to be connected in mutually reinforcing ways.<sup>5</sup>

Crystallization theory provides us with the means to understand EU integration as a non-linear, policy-specific process involving cooperation between more or less cooperative actors themselves. Probably the theory's most contentious prediction is that EU cooperation will not proceed any further unless its member states also share more power internally. Current events provide us with at least some confidence in the truth of this statement. By 2018, opposition to a deeper, closer Union came from three corners: the UK, first through David Cameron negotiating 'concessions' and then the Brexit referendum of June 2016; the Eurosceptic and authoritarian regimes of Hungary and Poland, notably opposed to EU-wide solidarity through refugee quotas (McLaughlin, 2018); and the populist governments of Greece and, more recently, Italy, which oppose austerity and want stricter controls along the EU's external border (e.g., Kyris, 2016; Walt, 2018).

All three camps insist on the EU's democratic deficit, its distance from their own people, and its failure to provide the promised benefits. But in all three contexts cooperation is also under strain *internally*. The UK has only just withstood the ultimate challenge to its very nature in the form of the Scottish independence referendum. Brexit has also made prospects for a second 'Indyref' as likely as a popular vote in Northern Ireland on unification with Ireland. The governments of Poland and Hungary have both embarked on an unusually harsh retaliation against their predecessors, the Liberals (in power 2007–15) and Socialists (in power 2002–10), respectively (Armingeon et al., 2018). Together with Greece, they are also rather unitary-centralized states. Greece and Italy, finally, have both seen the sudden disappearance of established political parties after decades of being in government. The Syriza government of 2015, supported by the far right, ended the Conservative-Socialist alternation era begun in 1974, whereas the 2018 coalition of Five Star Movement and Lega Nord ended a similar pattern regarding the Italian centre-left and -right initiated in 1992 (Armingeon et al., 2018).

All three contexts, then, are characterized by a deep mistrust between at least two partisan antagonists, and between the different political institutions occupied by them but situated at different territorial levels – for example, the centre-left governments of Wales and Scotland versus the centre-right UK cabinet, or several liberal mayors versus the nationalist government of Poland.<sup>6</sup> Divided ideologically and territorially, intra-state coordination declines and so does inter-state cooperation. Ironically, one of the main issues over which antagonists in all three contexts are so divided is EU integration, or more precisely the EU's interference into hitherto core national powers such as the rule of law, human rights, migration control and fiscal policy.

While far from being the only factor driving (further) EU-wide cooperation and integration, our analyses have shown that regional empowerment *within* the recalcitrant states might break the many deadlocks between EU bodies and national governments as it helps divide the costs and multiply the benefits of creating and maintaining social order. In short: further centralization at the EU level is unlikely to happen without increased decentralization within states.

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## DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

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## NOTES

1. International Relations scholars are accustomed to treating states as individuals, despite the fact that they are made up of many constituent parts. This is analogous to the common conception of human beings as individuals, even though each individual is comprised of many distinct organs, vast numbers of individual cells and huge amounts of discrete genomic material.
2. 'Membership requires that the candidate country has achieved stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities, the existence of a functioning market economy as well as the capacity to cope with competitive pressure and market forces within the Union. Membership presupposes the candidate's ability to take on the obligations of membership including adherence to the aims of political, economic and monetary union' (para. 7A-iii of the Official Press Release; retrieved October 25, 2018, from [http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release\\_DOC-93-3\\_en.htm?locale=en](http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_DOC-93-3_en.htm?locale=en)).
3. Not covered are Luxembourg, Romania, Bulgaria and Croatia; retrieved October 1, 2018, from [http://www.eu-index.uni-goettingen.de/?page\\_id=221](http://www.eu-index.uni-goettingen.de/?page_id=221).
4. EU Index and Europeanization: Pearson's  $r = 0.478$ ; EU Index and Integration = 0.622; Europeanization and Integration = 0.538. Using only the number of opt-outs in force by 2016 results in weaker, yet still positive and modest, correlation coefficients with the EU Index and Europeanization (0.337 and 0.312, respectively).
5. Outside the scope of both our theory and the present analysis is the extent to which supranationalism has proactively fostered regionalism, such as the EU's advocacy of a 'Europe of the Regions'.
6. How deep such mistrust can run is shown by the murder of the Mayor of Gdansk, one of the Polish government's most vocal critics, in January 2019. For example, retrieved February 7, 2019, from <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/jan/17/gdansk-mayor-pawel-adamowicz-killing-poland>.

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