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Abstract

Heterogeneity among countries in the European Union has continuously grown through enlargement processes or the outbreak of specific crises. After reaching important outcomes such as the European Monetary Union or the Schengen Agreement, in the face of the "big bang" enlargement of 2004 both national and European Union representatives subsequently committed to the motto "united in diversity", confident that the European project would progress and deepen. Nevertheless, the crises in the euro area posed a number of new internal and external challenges to the overall European integration process as well as the EU's political unity in terms of member states sharing the same rights and obligations, making permanent forms of differentiated integration more likely. Against this background, the paper presents a new collected dataset to outline how the EU narrative of political unity changes during times of increasing political differentiation and consequent differentiated integration. As such, it conducts a narrative analysis in two selected cases, the period between 2000 and 2004 preceding the big bang enlargement as well as the years of the crises in the euro area between 2010 and 2014. Although the existing narrative of political unity in the EU has changed in response to the crises under the more sceptical phrase "divided in unity", our analysis shows that differentiation is not a threat to political unity.

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Introduction: Political differentiation as the end of political unity?

Heterogeneity and the consequent political differentiation have always been an intrinsic characteristic of the European Union given the diverse systems of its member states (MS). As a result, during the economic recession of the 1970s, the Tindemans report to the European Council suggested for the first time "differentiated integration" as a possible solution to manage heterogeneity and achieve more unity among EU MS, each of them at its own pace (Brunazzo 2019: 6). Nevertheless, this heterogeneity has kept growing over the years through subsequent enlargement processes and the outbreak of specific crises along with an ongoing discussion on differentiated integration rotating between possible integration strategies, "which try to reconcile heterogeneity" within the EU system (Stubb 1996: 283).

In this paper, we expect that an increasing heterogeneity[1] is not only likely to lead to new forms of differentiated integration, but also to a changed political discourse on political unity in the EU in terms of MS sharing the same rights and obligations. Building on scholarly work and official documents, the specific research question we address is how narratives of political unity change in times of political differentiation. We seek to do so by presenting a new collected dataset, which was built through the analysis of documents from EU institutions, i.e., the European Council, the European Commission and the European Parliament (EP), as well as documents from a number of selected MS (presented in section 2). The different fluctuations in the EU history of differentiated integration are usually determined by either Treaty reforms, rounds of enlargement or crises (Tekin 2017). In the following analysis, we concentrate on the latter two only, by exploring the political discourse during two selected milestones in the history of the EU's differentiated integration: first, the years preceding the EU's largest single enlargement with the official accession of ten new countries in 2004 (Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia), starting from 2000; and second, the crises in the euro area during the most challenging years between 2010 and 2014. We chose these two timeframes, since on the one side the enlargement of 2004 increased the heterogeneity of EU membership and hence heightened political differentiation, making differentiated integration more likely; and because on the other side, the crises in the eurozone affected the EU integration process by showing the risks attached to MS heterogeneity.

With more and more MS joining the EU during the so-called "big bang" enlargement of 2004, increasing political, economic and social differences between MS started challenging the political unity of the EU. The purpose of this paper is to address current fears stemming from the belief that more differentiated integration might undermine both the idea of a united EU as well as an already fragile European identity. An intrinsic problem of the differentiation concept is the constant dilemma between flexibility and unity. By tracing narratives of political unity in times of increasing political differentiation, this analysis shows that differentiation is not a threat to political unity.

1 For a specific account of heterogeneity among MS and how it leads to differentiated integration see Schimmelfennig (2019).

Besides suggesting correlations between political differentiation in the EU and a changed discourse on political unity, a further purpose of the paper is to clarify a specific concept, namely "narratives". Whereas previous research has rather limitedly engaged with the analysis of narratives in the EU (Nicolaïdis and Howse 2002, more details follow below), we explore "new" overarching narratives of political unity and their underlying sub-narratives. In doing so, we assess how political unity is actually conveyed in political discourses *by* the EU and *within* the EU in times of heightened political differentiation. We further outline how these narratives might in turn affect political unity, in terms of shared rights and obligations of membership, in the EU.

In order to contextualise our analysis, section 1 of this paper outlines the research gap that we seek to address, while section 2 focuses on the milestones and country studies that we selected in view of political differentiation as well as the main concepts deployed. In section 3, we evaluate how narratives of political unity changed, by conducting a narrative analysis to trace the main narratives and their sub-narratives based on the mentioned new dataset,[2] which we set up by manually coding textual documents of both EU and national actors and making use of a computer-assisted qualitative analysis software. Finally, we draw our conclusions by linking our narrative analysis with assumptions on differentiated integration.

1. Bridging the research gap between differentiated integration and narratives

In this paper, we refer to two strands of literature. The first one engages with the concept of differentiated integration, while the second strand explores the concept of narratives in general as well as narratives of European integration in particular. Despite there being a wide array of studies engaging with the analysis of narratives and, relatedly, with discourse analysis, little research has been devoted so far to actual narratives of EU political unity or narratives of European constitutionalism and identity (e.g., Eder 2009). We therefore use the existing studies presented in the following as a launching pad to analyse new narratives of political unity in the EU.

Within the first strand of literature, studies exploring differentiated integration have usually revolved around two main questions, namely how to maintain cohesion and coherence within the EU vis-à-vis an increasing heterogeneity among MS, and how the legitimacy and transparency of the EU can be fostered (e.g., Bertoncini 2017, Leuffen et al. 2013, Pirozzi et al. 2017). Scholars have argued that the phenomenon of differentiated integration has become an enduring characteristic of the EU as consequence of an expanding policy scope and a growing number of different MS joining the EU (Jensen and Slapin 2012, Kölliker 2006). As mentioned in the introduction, the discussion on different models of differentiated integration started with the 1976 Tindemans report during the economic crisis context and has

2 The dataset was collected within the framework of the Horizon 2020 project "EU IDEA: Integration and Differentiation for Effectiveness and Accountability". For further information visit the project's website: https://euidea.eu.

continuously engaged many scholars such as Dyson and Sepos (2010), Holzinger and Schimmelfennig (2012), Leuffen et al. (2013) as well as Tekin (2012). Three theories are dominantly applied in EU integration studies to demonstrate that existing heterogeneities within the EU are the actual drivers of differentiated integration: liberal intergovernmentalism, neofunctionalism and postfunctionalism (Schimmelfennig and Winzen 2017).

According to contemporary contributions, differentiated integration has however become a difficult strategy to achieve reforms in the near future, especially in policy areas that have been shaken by crises. Such crises have exacerbated existing heterogeneities, which might in turn "frustrate attempts to differentiate" (Schimmelfennig 2019: 189). In contrast to such implications, in this paper we expect various forms of differentiated integration (Stubb 1996: 287, Tekin 2012: 42) to continue to represent a vehicle of integration and a viable opportunity to overcome current integration challenges.

Modes of differentiated integration vary depending on the policy area under focus, such as the Single Market; the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU); the Area of Freedom, Security and Justice; and the Common Foreign Security Policy (Tekin 2012). Scholars have accordingly offered analyses of how differentiated integration plays out in different policy areas in times of crisis, making predictions about two possible scenarios within the future of the EU: on the one side, MS might continue to pursue common goals although at different speeds (which echoes the widespread notion of a "multi-speed Europe"); on the other side, the current status quo suggests that MS might increasingly pursue different goals, constituting more permanent forms of differentiated integration in the future without renouncing *unity* in the EU (see Fabbrini and Schmidt 2019 about the possible future of EU differentiated integration).

By building on these studies, we seek to draw attention to the temporal and geographical dimensions of political differentiation rather than to the specificities of the mentioned policy areas. In this paper, we assume that political unity and political differentiation are not mutually exclusive but complementary, while differentiated integration can relatedly contribute to safeguarding the constitutional diversity within the EU's *sui generis* system. The timeframes and the national documents we select are obviously linked to the integration achieved in specific policies (e.g., the establishment of the EMU), but these policies themselves are not the focus of the analysis.

With regard to the second strand of literature on narratives, studies regarding the discourse on political unity in the EU are rather limited. Academics have outlined, for instance, the importance of narratives of European integration, exploring how multiple actors and interest groups contribute to shaping specific narratives over time, but they have not investigated new narratives in times of change. In the past starting from the 1950s right after WWII, the main narrative on the EU usually projected to the outside world was that of an "EUtopia" (Manners and Murray 2016). This narrative was used to assert the EU's normative and soft power and evolved after the end of the Cold War into the narrative of the EU as a "civilian power" (Nicolaïdis and Howse

2002). EU technocrats and elites thus usually advanced the "old Europe" narrative of peace and economic success without taking into account how recent crises have led to the questioning of such a story (Manners and Murray 2016: 188). Instead of focusing on these "old" narratives, we explore "new" kinds of different narratives in the EU. By complementing existing studies in both strands of the literature, this paper aims to shed light on the under-researched aspect of how an increasing political differentiation shapes narratives of political unity.

2. Milestones and concept analysis

The cyclical development of the discourse on differentiation over time reflects the cyclical developments in the history of European integration. Given the complexity of the topic under focus, we geographically and temporally circumscribe our analysis and limit it to political differentiation and its effects on narratives of political unity.

2.1 Selecting two milestones and four country studies in view of political differentiation

In the understanding of this paper, political differentiation results from the heterogeneous composition of EU MS. Notable differences can be identified in, but are not limited to, the EU countries' respective political systems, socio-economic factors, historical foundations and demographic patterns. Hence, we do not deploy the concept of "differentiation" as synonymous to "differentiated integration".

The selection of the two milestones under analysis follows existing assumptions on how enlargement and crises generate – to different degrees – increasing political differentiation as well as different forms of differentiated integration. Whereas the enlargement of 2004 was accompanied by an increase in heterogeneity of EU membership, which stemmed primarily from socio-historic factors following the East–West divide (Schimmelfennig and Winzen 2017), the crises in the euro area laid bare socio-economic differences between EU MS along the North–South divide and consequently affected EU countries unevenly (Glencross 2013).

During accession negotiations prior to the 2004 enlargement, EU candidate countries committed to adopt the entire body of EU rules, i.e., the *acquis communautaire*.[3] While some EU MS and their strong interest groups (e.g., in Germany) feared "economic and financial losses or a reduction in governance efficiency as a result of market integration with the new member states", new MS were afraid of foreign investment as well as "popular opposition against membership" (Schimmelfennig and Winzen 2017: 243). Therefore, additional negotiations were necessary between the EU and acceding countries resulting in so-called "transition arrangements" (Verheugen 2001: 4), which correspond to a specific set of rules of a temporary nature. The goal of these arrangements was to overcome intergovernmental deadlocks, which were likely to

3 The *acquis communautaire* covers all rights and obligations, which are binding on all EU MS.

arise in bargaining negotiations on the cost-benefit distribution (Schimmelfennig and Winzen 2017: 243, Schneider 2009). In the end, however, enlargement was recognised as beneficial by all members and differentiated integration took a "multi-speed" form, affecting mainly secondary law.

The second set of events in the history of differentiated integration, the crises in the euro area, had different effects in terms of political differentiation. In the wake of the global financial crisis that broke out in 2008, EU politicians agreed in 2012 to create a partial banking union, even while Euroscepticism kept growing among the population (see also Haas and Gnath 2016). There are three competing explanations for the crises in the eurozone: first, an excessive public debt in many EMU MS, which thus failed to respect the Stability and Growth Pact; second, a diverging competitiveness in incomplete markets; and third, a weak regulation of the financial sector in the euro area. The EMU had been born in "a heterogeneous economic space" and lacked the "typical adjustment mechanisms that are common at the national level" (Haas and Gnath 2016: 3). This led to a strong divide between Northern and Southern European countries, given their different economic systems. Between 2010 and 2014, the crises hence led to a "variable geometry" as the predominant form of differentiated integration, entailing permanent differentiation to accommodate different, geographically circumscribed groups (Stubb 1996, Tekin 2017).

In order to narrow down our narrative analysis, we outline political differentiation by looking at four MS in total: France, Germany, Italy and Poland. In doing so, we followed a *diverse* case selection strategy (Gerring and Cojocaru 2016), according to which the chosen countries represent the political, economic and social heterogeneity (or diversity) among the EU's four regions. It should be noted that although the selected countries are not representative of the entire European region to which they belong, they present diverse characteristics, which allow us to gain insights into the construction of narratives with regard to a heterogeneous EU.

Each of these MS belongs to one of the four geographical regions within the EU, following the above-mentioned *North–South* and *East–West* divide (Lehne 2019, Schimmelfennig and Winzen 2017). In the real world, however, these divides are not always clear-cut and can partly overlap. For instance, important differences still exist along the old–new MS divide: while France, Germany and Italy had already been part of the European Economic Community dating all the way back to the Treaty of Rome (1957), Poland had experienced Communist leadership under the Soviet Union until the fall of the iron curtain and the corresponding end of the Cold War (1989–90). The diverse history of these countries consequently determined not only different political systems and socio-economic developments, but also a distinct sense of national identity as well as divergent demographic patterns. Moreover, unlike France, Germany and Italy, Poland is not a member of the eurozone. With regard to the demographic aspect, countries formerly belonging to the "Eastern Bloc" still manifest on average a lower life expectancy than their European counterparts as well as a higher infant mortality rate. In terms of demographic patterns, the former EU-15 countries' respective populations present a larger share of people aged 65 and over, whereas the acceding countries and Poland in particular have a rather young population (Eurostat 2019a, 2019b).

Once the crises hit the euro area, the divide shifted: the increased heterogeneity among EU countries can be attributed to the varying economic performances between a richer "enlarged" North, including the Eastern and Western European regions, and a weak South. Whereas Northern and Western EU countries, such as France and Germany, were able to withstand the crises and experience growth, even surpassing figures that had been registered before 2008, the Southern region (Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain) was economically devastated. In contrast to this situation, Poland registered continuous economic growth and consequent high birth rates even during the financial recession. With regard to economic development, Eastern countries such as Poland were an embodiment of transformative power before and during the financial crisis in the euro area. While displaying a noticeably poor economy as of 2000, Poland experienced momentum starting from 2004, a year that kicked-off an incredible growth, which the country was able to maintain (European Commission 2014: 3–4; 21).

2.2 Narratives of European political unity in times of political differentiation: A storytelling guide

Despite its intrinsic differentiation, the EU has always strived for political unity. The project, within which this paper is embedded, identifies political unity as the foundational element of the narrative of European constitutionalism and identity. Recent studies have reported criticism directed at the phenomenon of differentiated integration in the EU, since it challenges "the unity of its policies, laws and institutions; and to any prospect of it developing into a political community based on shared rights and obligations of membership" (Lord 2015: 784). At the same time, scholars have asserted that differentiated integration has moved from being a "taboo" to one of the main practical compromises in EU politics (Lord 2015: 784). Against this backdrop, we understand political unity as the ideal goal of the EU being a *political* community where MS share the same rights and obligations.

The aim of this paper is to trace *narratives* of political unity within two timeframes during which political differentiation crystallised itself with great intensity and led in turn to increasing forms of differentiated integration. Any narrative is a story with a particular kind of configuration that generates it (Polkinghorne 1995: 5), whereas a story is in turn a discourse production in which "events and actions are drawn together into an organized whole by means of a plot" (Polkinghorne 1995: 7). The plot bestows the contextual meaning upon the single events that are told and a narrative is accordingly shaped not only by the actors contributing to the discourse and telling the "emplotted stories", but also by geographical and temporal specificities. Thus, we understand each narrative as a story and a construct of reality resulting from the analysis of two main elements, namely *goal* and *plot*. Whereas the goal indicates the objective to which the narrative aims (e.g., more integration in the future), the plot of the narrative is the result of three elements: time (when the narrative unfolds), space (where the actor constructing the narrative stands institutionally) and "relationality" (how the actor constructing the narrative stands in relation to its audience, i.e.,

the contextualisation of the narrative) (see also Manners and Murray 2016: 186). Narratives are hence constructions and reproductions of political realities, while narrative analysis is a method (or rather, as some scholars might argue, an approach) that provides a vehicle for looking at narratives and the social and political fields within which discursive events are embedded (e.g., De Fina and Georgakopoulou 2012). Given the multiplicity of actors, events and places of discourse, there is usually not just one narrative, but multiple ones (Manners and Murray 2016). Consequently, no single new narrative simply replaces a single old narrative, but rather "new and competing narratives appear as the norm in the majority of political debates about Europe" (Cloet 2017: 291).

In the past, studies have highlighted the link between narratives and power – and specifically, how the narrative of a strong EU as a civilian power has helped strengthen its actual soft power (e.g., Nicolaïdis and Howse 2002). This dynamic becomes particularly evident when looking at accession negotiations and enlargement rounds, where EU institutional figures often used the old narrative of the EUtopia, in order to increase their leverage over political outcomes in the new acceding country (Nicolaïdis and Howse 2002). Although narrative analysis is closely intertwined with constructivist assumptions (Risse 2018), it is not the purpose of this paper to engage with constructivist theory even though we acknowledge that the narrative is in itself a construct.

The importance of narratives has been widely acknowledged by scholars trying to understand the social world (Manners and Murray 2016). Collective identities such as the European one have also been interpreted as narrative constructions, which create the boundaries for a common ground of communication (Eder 2009). Following existing studies on narrative analysis, we conduct our research by investigating discursive manifestations of the empirical events under focus through two main levels. First, we analyse the text of the "communicative event" under observation (e.g., speeches of heads of governments in front of the respective national parliament) and then the historical frame of the event, in order to put it into context (Wodak 2018).

3. Two overarching narratives of political unity: The struggle between unity and political differentiation

According to our analysis, a main overarching narrative emerged during each of the two selected milestones. By examining differences and overlaps between these two narratives and the sub-narratives that play into them, the analysis showed that although some of these narratives might at first appear very similar, they actually followed different plots and pursued distinct goals, depending on the timeframe they were constructed in.

During the years preceding the official enlargement (2000–2004), analysis of the speeches of political leaders from France, Germany, Italy and Poland[4] as well as of EU representatives from the European Council, the European Commission and the EP revealed the overarching narrative of "united in diversity".[5] This overarching narrative was mostly characterised by an underlying positive attitude towards the growing diversity and political differentiation in the EU as a result of the big bang enlargement. Diversity was accordingly associated with strength and prosperity, since the reunification of the continent was going to guarantee permanent peace as well as increase the power of each individual MS. The diverse MS would eventually converge and ultimately reach political unity by resorting only to temporary forms of differentiated integration.

Conversely, the analysis of the second timeframe revealed a different narrative constructed in the shadow of the crises in the euro area: the overarching narrative of "divided in unity". The actors constructing this narrative no longer emphasised the benefits of an increasing heterogeneity among EU MS, but rather its disadvantages. Political differentiation (especially in the economic realm) was interpreted in a negative sense and depicted as a challenge. Despite institutional actors stressing the importance of staying in the EU as well as relaunching the European project as a pragmatic necessity, the initial underlying optimism of the early 2000s was undeniably shaken by the financial recession. The former confidence in a stronger EU as portrayed in the past had dissolved. While, in order to ensure stability, EU institutional actors kept communicating to the outside world that the EU was united in the fight against the crises, MS became more and more divided between themselves, moving increasingly away from the Union (e.g., the fear of a possible withdrawal of Greece from the eurozone as a result of the country's severe debt crisis, the so-called "Grexit"). By acknowledging substantial differences between the MS' willingness vis-à-vis achieving political unity for all MS, political actors increasingly acknowledged permanent forms of differentiated integration subsumed under the concept of variable geometries (Tekin 2012: 42ff).[6]

3.1 Overarching narrative "united in diversity"

Between 2000 and 2004, politicians and institutional representatives constructed the EU overarching narrative "united in diversity", whose overall goal was to achieve more and deeper integration in the EU despite an increased political differentiation generated by the 2004 enlargement. In parallel to the accession negotiations of ten

4 Although we acknowledge that it is virtually impossible to grasp all conceivable narratives unfolding in the EU as a whole, we are confident in our selection and treat all four countries under analysis as highly individual MS as well as representative countries (with regard to their respective political tradition, cultural and historical foundations as well as economic system).

5 "Unity in diversity" was an expression first introduced by Mrs Nicole Fontaine (2000), President of the European Parliament, during her speech at the Special Meeting of the European Council in Feira on 19 June 2000. Later it was chosen as the official motto of the EU by Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, who drew up the draft European constitution in 2003 (for further details see Mahony 2003).

6 Variable geometries are linked to the variable of space and draw on "the general ability for further integration while acknowledging substantial differences between the willingness of Member States to transfer particular parts of their sovereignty" (Tekin 2012: 39 and 42ff).

new countries, EU and national representatives were also working towards a Treaty establishing a European Constitution,[7] a project that added up to a general wave of confidence in the future of the EU. During these years, actors were *anticipating* and not yet directly *experiencing* a heightened political differentiation. Hence, EU and national actors from all four MS championed the widened EU project in front of large audiences (such as national parliaments) throughout Europe. Moreover, EU figures and representatives of "old" MS echoed the abovementioned old narrative of an EUtopia, by speaking in the Eastern region about the benefits of the widening process. The discourse was thus constructed in a widespread atmosphere of positive expectations. Although the EU and the 15 MS announced in both political and public fora (e.g., universities in European capitals such as Berlin and Prague) that the enlargement would inevitably lead to initial forms of differentiated integration, they guaranteed that these would only represent temporary vehicles to eventually achieve political unity among all MS and integration between "old" and "new" countries. Political unity in the EU would accordingly withstand increasing heterogeneity without the need for permanent forms of differentiated integration.

Our analysis specifically revealed five main sub-narratives that flowed into the overarching narrative of "united in diversity". In the first sub-narrative of "*no alternative to enlargement*", the *goal* was to promote the reunification of the European continent. Its *plot* emerged from speeches held by representatives of all four MS mostly in the presence of their respective national parliaments. Joschka Fischer stated, for instance, in his famous speech of 2000, that there was "no serious alternative to eastward enlargement". Besides national leaders, EU Commissioners also promoted the idea that enlargement was the only option to maintain stability. However, they mainly spoke in front of targeted, smaller Eastern European audiences, in order to dissipate persistent fears regarding the accession (e.g., Günter Verheugen's speeches in Warsaw in 2002 and 2003 as Commissioner for Enlargement). Through this narrative, actors conveyed the overall message that EU enlargement, as Europe's historical legacy and moral duty, was the only viable option for both new and old MS to achieve enduring peace. Even some conservative political leaders – who had on both sides assessed the (geo-)political role of either the EU or of the acceding MS as undesirable or at best not ideal – considered the option of enlargement as the only feasible one. In 2002, for instance, the Polish Secretary for European Integration, Danuta Hübner, described to the Polish national parliament Poland's accession to the EU as a "choice for which there was no real alternative" (Hübner 2002).

The second identified sub-narrative of the "*EU project as factor of increased power/ one voice*" is also related to the idea that MS could only gain from enlargement. Through this narrative, actors stressed that EU membership was a precondition to increase the power of the single member state (e.g., "l'union fait la force", Chirac 2000b). According to this narrative, MS could no longer face the challenges of the new centuries alone (e.g., "If we want to play a role in relation to the outside world we have to be 'we'", Amato 2001) and ought to speak with "one voice" when it came to foreign policy matters (e.g., Ciampi 2000). Given that many European citizens no longer believed that they would extract substantial individual benefits from their

7 However, the constitutional project failed after voters in France and the Netherlands rejected the constitution in June 2005 (Hobolt and Brouard 2011).

country's EU membership, political leaders of the "old" *Western* MS (at the head of government or head of state level in France, Germany and Italy) as well as the EP and European Council resorted to this narrative to prove the opposite. The *goal* of this sub-narrative of increased power – which kept emerging almost every year between 2000 and 2004 during speeches to larger audiences – was accordingly to achieve more prosperity, security and democracy. To underpin their message, actors repeatedly emphasised that the EU was a capable player on the global stage – e.g., in exporting democracy, as specified in the speech by the President of the European Commission Prodi (2004: 5) and that Europe would consequently be able to play a decisive part in shaping politics (Verheugen 2001: 3). In a world that was becoming "less stable, less predictable and more frightening" especially after the 9/11 terrorist attacks of 2001 (Prodi 2001: 3), the EU represented the symbol of "a democratic and globally engaged Europe" (European Council 2001: 20).

Along with this wave of confidence and optimism, the public political discourse celebrated the growing heterogeneity within the EU as a strength. Representatives of European institutions, such as European Commissioners and Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) (Barroso 2004a, Cox 2003) as well as French and Italian leaders (e.g., Barnier 2004, Chirac 2000b, Ciampi 2001, Lenoir 2003a, 2003b) shaped a third strong sub-narrative of "*diversity as strength*", which had a *plot* similar to that of the power sub-narrative. The narrative of *diversity as strength* emerged through the speeches of "old" MS' representatives, whose *goal* was to concretely support the enlargement rounds (including future ones), by addressing either their own national parliaments or audiences in foreign universities, with huge media response (e.g., the Humboldt speeches of 2000 by Joschka Fischer as Foreign Minister and as Vice Chancellor of Germany and of 2003 by the Italian President Carlo Azeglio Ciampi at the Humboldt University in Berlin).

The sub-narratives constructed between 2000 and 2004 build on one another and partly overlap. Similar to the previous narratives, the fourth sub-narrative of the "*EU as secure anchor*"[8] aimed at achieving more integration despite differences (*goal*), by envisaging forms of differentiated integration. During debates at the EP or at European Council meetings, actors maintained that those MS wishing to be at the forefront in the process of European integration in an enlarged EU could form an aggregated core through "reinforced co-operation".[9] This process would engage some countries in more united structures of co-operation, which should nevertheless still be inclusive and hence open to accession for other countries that had not been able or had not

8 Expression used by the Italian President Carlo Azeglio Ciampi during his speech to the President of the Commission Romano Prodi and the European Commissioners in Brussels, 7 March 2000; see Ciampi (2000).

9 "Reinforced co-operation" is distinct from "enhanced cooperation", the latter being a procedure enshrined later in the Treaty of Lisbon that allows "a group of at least nine nations to implement measures if all Member States fail to reach agreement. Other EU countries keep the right to join when they want. The procedure is designed to overcome paralysis, where a proposal is blocked by an individual country or a small group of countries who do not wish to be part of the initiative. It does not, however, allow for an extension of powers outside those under the EU Treaties. The possibility was first introduced by the 1999 Amsterdam Treaty, with the 2009 Lisbon Treaty formalising the procedure and introducing the possibility for permanent structured cooperation (PESCO) in defence matters." For further details see European Commission 2019.

wanted to participate in the beginning. The proposal of a reinforced co-operation was built on the EU's image as a "secure anchor" of fundamental principles, guaranteeing peace and stability. Relatedly, French President Chirac (2000a) referred to a "pioneer group" of countries that would move "further and faster" together with Germany and France and set up "forms of cooperation outside the scope of the Treaty, though without calling into question the coherence and existing achievements of the Union". Although European representatives as well as French and Italian political leaders seemed thus to be in favour of a multi-speed Europe, they explicitly emphasised that any form of reinforced co-operation should not develop into a *Europe à la carte*. The fifth sub-narrative of "*yes to differentiated integration, but only if temporary*" focused directly on this last point. French and Italian heads of state as well as foreign ministers constructing this narrative aimed at achieving convergence between old and new MS (*goal*). Actors from "old" MS and the EU addressing national parliaments as well as the EP (*plot*) welcomed new MS to the European "family" as well as the consequent increasing political differentiation. New and old MS needed to eventually "converge" within the EU in terms of their political and economic systems, in order to avoid a two-speed or second-category Europe ("Il n'y aura pas d'Europe à deux vitesses ni surtout d'Europe de deuxième catégorie", stated the French Minister delegate for European Affairs Moscovici in 2001 during his speech at the Charles University in Prague, Czech Republic to reassure the concerned acceding MS). At the same time, the fifth narrative acknowledged that new MS would unavoidably have a different speed than the old ones and that, as a result, old MS would have to give impetus to the integration process. Institutional actors accordingly envisaged after the enlargement of 2004 a deeper and reinforced integration for a better functioning of the EMU as well as the Union's *acquis*, while simultaneously stressing that "no political discount" would be granted to new EU members (Verheugen 2002). The latter would still have to fulfil the high conditions of EU membership to be fully integrated in the *acquis communautaire* and accordingly respect the "rules of the game" of the European Union (Chirac 2000b).

In sum, between 2000 and 2004 the discourse was dominated by optimistic narratives primarily coming from the "*West*", which focused on the East–West or old–new MS distinctions, while the "*East*" despite acknowledging that there was no alternative to accession, seemed to fear more substantial national losses (e.g., with regard to the Polish agriculture due to free movement of capital, Hübner 2002). Political actors at both the EU and the MS level helped construct the overarching narrative of "united in diversity", which portrayed the enlargement and the growing political differentiation in the EU as an inalienable necessity as well as a unique opportunity. The independence reached by many countries in Eastern Europe after the end of the Cold War and their geographical vicinity to the European Community fostered the idea that enlargement, although fraught with challenges, would pave the way for future political and economic gains. The accession of new countries from the previous Eastern Soviet bloc and their democratic progress would eventually guarantee long-lasting stability on the European continent (e.g., Verheugen 2000).

Despite the increase in political differentiation, national and European leaders were confident that after the big bang enlargement deeper integration and political unity could be achieved through temporary agreements. Between 2000 and 2004, many

poignant speeches were delivered primarily by EU and "old" MS' representatives to engage large audiences across the European continent and convey the idea of the EU "dream": the reunification of the European continent by peaceful means. Against all challenges, political actors seem to agree on the optimistic motto "Yes, we can". As long as *temporal* two-speed solutions were going to guarantee political unity and overall benefits for all MS, enlargement and the consequent increasing diversity were not regarded as a problem.

Table 1 | Narrative analysis first milestone (2000–2004)

Overarching narrative "united in diversity"			
Sub-narratives	**Goal**	**Plot**	**Actors**
No alternative to enlargement	Reunification of the European continent	Enlargement and accession to the Union are considered as the only options to achieve the reunification of the European continent and its stability. The European enlargement is indispensable.	European Commissioners and MEPs; German Foreign Ministers, German Chancellor, German President, French Foreign Ministers, French President, Polish Secretary for European Integration, Italian President.
EU project as factor of increased power/ one voice	More prosperity, security and democracy	The EU guarantees increased powers to MS along with growing prosperity, stability and security as long as MS speak with one voice. They can no longer face the challenges of the new century alone. Relatedly, the EU is seen as a "global player".	European Commissioners (specifically President of the Commission and Commissioner for Enlargement), European Council, President of the EP, MEPs; French Foreign Ministers, former Italian Prime Minister.
Diversity as strength	Contemporary and future enlargement	Diversity within the EU is regarded as an asset and a strength. Differences between its countries thus do not represent an obstacle.	EU Commissioners (President of the Commission and Commissioner for Enlargement), European Council and MEPs; French Ministers for European Affairs, French Foreign Ministers, French President, Italian President, German Chancellor, German Foreign Ministers, German President.
EU as secure anchor	More integration despite differences	Despite Europe being divided into concentric circles, countries in the EU need to have a secure anchor to the EU by recognising its fundamental principles to extend European Peace. The EU is described as "home" and "family".	European Commissioners (Presidents of the Commission, Commissioner for Enlargement), European Council, MEPs, President of the EP; Italian President, German President, French President.
Differentiated integration, but only temporary	Convergence between old and new MS	All new MS need to be eventually fully integrated into the *acquis communautaire*. There is no *Europe à la carte* and no second class membership.	European Commissioners; Italian Prime Minister, Italian and French Presidents, French Ministers for European Affairs, Foreign Ministers, German Chancellor, leader of the German opposition.

3.2 Overarching narrative "divided in unity"

Whereas the years preceding the 2004 enlargement were characterised by a widespread optimism regarding the EU and its future, envisaging only *temporary* forms of differentiated integration, the discourse changed substantially once the euro area had to face severe crises. Between 2010 and 2014, national and European actors experienced and interpreted the crises of the euro area in various ways, depending on their country's situation and institutional affiliation. Against this backdrop, they started to be divided on multiple fronts and a new overarching narrative emerged under the more disenchanted phrase "*divided in unity*". While social-democratic and left-oriented actors identified the causes of the crises with the utopic belief in a self-regulating market system, conservative actors interpreted the exacerbation of the crises as a consequence of the accumulation of sovereign debt in some MS. In the latter case, specifically Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain were usually blamed for their excessive public debt. According to our analysis, the identified overarching narrative of *divided in unity* rotated between five main sub-narratives. It is worth noticing that sometimes the content of the different sub-narratives contradict one another, even if constructed by the same actor(s).

Between 2010 and 2014, actors across EU institutions and all four MS repeatedly used the narrative of "*no alternative to integration*". This narrative might at first sound similar to the first sub-narrative constructed during the enlargement process, but it had a different *goal* and connotation in the light of the crises in the eurozone. This time, the aim of the actors was to achieve more economic integration and political unity despite contemporary challenges and political divisions. The *plot* was built by addressing not only large audiences such as national parliaments, but also smaller ones including experts or political figures only (e.g., meetings between heads of state and their country's social-democratic MEPs, Hollande 2014). According to the *no alternative to integration* narrative, Europe could only overcome its financial difficulties by choosing solidarity and unity, given that the destiny of the EU was closely tied to that of its MS and vice versa. In troubled countries such as Italy, pro-EU speeches were often held in front of smaller rather than larger audiences. The Italian Foreign Minister Giulio Terzi di Sant'Agata (2011a) stated, for instance, at a national foundation that the re-launch of Italy could only occur with the EU's support, while at the same time the EU could only be economically re-launched through the support of Italy. The constructors of this first narrative warned further against rising "re-nationalisation" phenomena and increasing Euroscepticism in several MS, which needed to be counteracted through "greater capacity for action" (Sarkozy 2011). Although national political leaders kept criticising the EU's poor management of the crises, they also asserted that the EU idea as such was indisputable ("Mais l'idée européenne, elle, est incontestable", Fabius 2014). On the one hand, the crises were seen as an opportunity to achieve deeper EU integration (e.g., Juppé 2011) by pursuing economic growth under the condition of unity, according to which "no one will be left behind" (Letta 2013). On the other hand, actors "outside" the eurozone as the Polish Minister of Foreign Affairs Sikorski (2011) forecasted "a partial dismantling of the EU" to avoid stark outcomes such as a total collapse of the Union. In general, however, during the crises Poland supported the EU and the eurozone similarly to its

Western counterparts. Polish representatives were well aware of the repercussions looming over their national economy in the event of a possible collapse of the Euro. Additionally, during the worst years of the crises Poland had a deep interest in the EU's fate, given that Jerzy Buzek of the governing Civic Platform served as President of the EP between 2009 and 2012 and that Poland took over the Presidency of the Council of the European Union in July 2011. Eastern European countries and non-euro area members such as Poland were aware that they could not enjoy the "benefits" of being outside the eurozone while the foundations of the EU threatened to crumble. Hence, although the crises increasingly divided and challenged the MS' political systems, in this first narrative it was out of the question to back-pedal or to doubt the long-standing EU project (see Juppé 2011).

The distrust towards the EU's capacity in solving the crises became more evident in the discourses of French, Italian and Polish political actors constructing a second sub-narrative of the "*EU as failed leader/democratic deficit*". In this narrative, actors no longer regarded the EU as a global leader and accordingly advocated its reform (*goal*). Conversely to the expectations developed during the enlargement process, in the face of the financial recession the wide majority of national political actors from all four MS as well as some MEPs claimed disappointedly that the EU had not been speaking with a single voice (*plot*). Countries were accordingly paying the cost of a "non-Europe", since the EU had failed to deliver true European governance, which would have hindered the spread of the crises (see for instance the speech of the Italian Minister for Foreign Affairs Terzi di Sant'Agata (2011b) explicitly referring to a "leadership crisis"). Moreover, strong critiques of the EU's "one size fits all" strategy were not only advanced by Italian representatives (Terzi di Sant'Agata 2011b), but also by MEPs, who criticised the "inappropriate, insufficient and belated political responses to the crisis and the structural weakness" of the EU's governance capacity (European Parliament 2010). French and Italian leaders, addressing both large audiences in their national parliaments as well as smaller ones during ad hoc meetings, seemed to agree in this second narrative on the poor European management of the crises (see for instance Sarkozy's speech (2011) during which he claimed that "Europe has disappointed"). Whereas in the early 2000s institutional actors, such as Barroso (2004b), had reiterated that the EU was an important global player, after the crises in the euro area the message conveyed by national politicians was exactly the opposite (e.g., Frattini 2011). The narrative of the EU as a "failed" global player also addressed the disaffection among its citizens, who increasingly lamented the EU's democratic deficit in the face of the financial recession (Terzi di Sant'Agata 2011b).

In combination with existing differences between EU MS, the crises uncovered numerous problems and challenges. Diversity was no longer interpreted as one of the EU's main assets, but became, on the contrary, an obstacle to the achievement of political unity. The actors constructing the third sub-narrative of "*diversity as challenge*" in all four MS as well as in EP debates and resolutions claimed that the EU enlargement's effects on the composition of EU institutions needed to be ironed out (*plot*) (e.g., Fabius 2014). Hence, the *goal* of this narrative was to foster re-nationalisation as one possible solution (e.g., Tusk 2011, 2013) and pass comprehensive institutional reforms at the EU level. Nevertheless, MS also knew the limitations of their national policies in the face of the crises, eventually acknowledging

the role of the EU in negotiating compromises between them.

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

Finally, political leaders from all four MS constructed a fifth critical sub-narrative of "*global focus instead of EU focus*", by which they sought to strengthen the world's confidence in their MS' economy, disregarding the EU. The *goal* of this sub-narrative was to achieve stability for the individual MS in a globalised world economy. The EU level remained unmentioned in the discourse, in order to emphasise the need to think in the interest of the country only (e.g., Berlusconi 2010). In order to underpin this message, a political leader such as the French President Sarkozy would refer, for instance, to the "world" rather than to "Europe" as his country's immediate counterpart (see also Sarkozy 2011). Accordingly, a relaunch of the national economy was regarded as a prerequisite for a recovery of the global one. The way out of the crises was consequently first and foremost *national*, then *global*, but not necessarily *European*. At the same time, several MEPs called on the European Commission to finally adopt a "global approach" to resolve the cacophony of voices among EU MS and find a durable solution to the crises in the eurozone.

The five identified sub-narratives playing into the overarching narrative of "*divided in unity*" revealed not only a major cleavage between national leaders and EU representatives, but also internal contradictions as well as divisions along the *North–South* divide. The crises in the euro area exacerbated existing differences, leading to a negative interpretation of the EU's political differentiation and diversity. Representatives of all four MS expressed a general discontent that could be subsumed under the disillusioned phrase "Yes, we must", while simultaneously acknowledging the indispensability of the EU and the inevitable ties between its MS. Although the crises unveiled profound divisions between MS within, but also outside the euro area, the dominating narrative between 2010 and 2014 implies that flexibility and differentiated integration are both necessary for political unity in the EU. During those years, the discourse was primarily constructed in front of national parliaments, the EP and smaller expert audiences, advocating reforms as well as more differentiated and flexible forms of integration. Despite national leaders, especially in France and Italy, favouring an enhanced role of their countries on the global stage rather than European solutions, they did not question the idea of the EU as such, showing against

all odds that differentiation does not constitute a threat to political unity.

Table 2 | Narrative analysis second milestone (2010–2014)

Overarching narrative "divided in unity"			
Sub-narratives	**Goal**	**Plot**	**Actors**
No alternative to integration	More economic and fiscal integration	Actors may disagree with the EU's current political course or certain fiscal responses to the crises, however European integration and the EU as a whole are seen as inevitable.	European Council; German Chancellor, German Minister of Finance, German Minister of Foreign Affairs, Polish Prime Minister, Italian President, Italian Prime Minister (technocratic government).
EU as failed leader/ democratic deficit	Reform of the EU	MS in the EU find themselves in a deadlock: on the one side, the EU is not able to take the lead and help countries to overcome the crises; on the other side, MS need "more Europe" and the EU's support to solve new challenges.	MEPs; Polish Prime Minister, French President, Italian President, Italian Prime Minister, Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs.
Diversity as challenge	Renationalisation/ institutional reform	Diversity between MS as well as diverging national interests challenge the possibility of finding a joint stance.	MEPs; Polish Minister of Foreign Affairs, German Chancellor, German Minister of Finance, French Minister of Foreign Affairs.
Conditional solidarity	Fair distribution of liability/ protection of national interests	Despite invocations of a shared history and European values such as freedom, equality and solidarity, actors from affluent MS may include far-reaching conditions and prerequisites in economic aid and debt relief proposals.	MEPs; Polish Prime Minister, Polish Minister of Foreign Affairs, German Chancellor, German Minister of Foreign Affairs, German Minister for Economic Affairs.
Global focus instead of EU focus	Stability for MS as an individual actor in a globalised world	Actors prefer to seek solutions on a national/ global level rather than on a European one and accordingly plead for a strengthened global governance rather than a reinforced European governance in accordance with efforts to assert their individual attractiveness towards external actors.	Polish Prime Minister, French President, Italian President.

Conclusion: From "Yes, we can" to "Yes, we must" – What's next?

The narrative analysis conducted for each selected milestone revealed two distinct overarching narratives, each with its own goal. During the first milestone between 2000 and 2004, political actors seemed not only to commit to the phrase "united in diversity", but also to the optimistic motto "Yes, we can", whereas in the second analysed milestone between 2010 and 2014, the discourse changed. The most challenging years of the crises in the euro area were characterised by a widespread disenchantment, which affected the overarching narrative subsumed under the phrase "divided in unity". As a result, the discourse appeared to follow the more cynical diktat "Yes, we must". Solutions that were oriented towards re-nationalisation rather than common European answers were favoured in national discourses. Although national political actors were deeply divided between themselves along the North–South divide and referred to the EU as a "failed" leader, they were still aware of the interdependency between the national and the European level. Hence, they continued to be committed to the overall idea of political unity in the EU to preserve their country's wellbeing. In the face of an increasing heterogeneity, as the one generated by the crises in the eurozone, permanent forms of differentiated integration seemed to become the only solutions for the EU system to survive as such.

Nonetheless, as highlighted by Brunazzo (2019), there are multiple dilemmas related to differentiated integration. Forms of differentiated integration could, for instance, lead to further heterogeneity within the EU thus undermining the European political unity and triggering disintegration tendencies (Tekin 2016a: 6, 2016b), a fear that was expressed in the discourse of 2000–2004. This dilemma seems to suggest a circular pattern where heterogeneity leads to changes in the discourse on political unity, while prompting MS to increasingly resort to forms of differentiated integration. At the same time, forms of differentiated integration are likely to increase in turn the heterogeneity among MS, the same heterogeneity that caused differentiated integration in the first place. In order to break this vicious circle, in the early 2000s political actors envisaged only *temporary* forms of differentiated integration. Between 2010 and 2014, the crises in the euro area laid bare the intrinsic and heightened differences between MS, which seemed however to call for more *permanent* forms of differentiated integration, in order to safeguard political unity in the EU.

Scholars researching differentiated integration have accordingly distinguished between long-, medium- and short-term differentiated integration. Integration is "uniform" when the EU's formal rules are equally valid in all MS, whereas it is "differentiated" when the legal boundaries of EU rules do not correspond with the boundaries of EU membership. Hence, in the latter case, MS can be bound by different rules in different policy areas or excluded from participation (Schimmelfennig 2019: 177). Differentiated integration has therefore often been used as synonymous to *flexible integration* (Kölliker 2006). In light of the multiple categories in which differentiated integration is distinguished (i.e., "multi-speed Europe", "core Europe", "variable geometries" and "Europe à la carte"), the enlargement process of 2000–

2004 was characterised by a "multi-speed Europe", i.e., a differentiation model which is limited in time and where a core group of MS moves towards more integration, in order to give the new members more time to adapt (Tekin 2017). This category matches the first overarching narrative of our analysis rotating around the phrase "united in diversity".

The second analysed milestone of the euro area crises between 2010 and 2014 revealed a space-related and temporally permanent differentiation, which is referred in the literature as "variable geometry", since different levels of integration follow geographically circumscribed regions. This entails that the integration goals are no longer predefined and that some MS can advance integration, while other MS are free to join at any time (Tekin 2017: 3). This category matches our second overarching narrative "divided in unity", following which MS still pursue the goal of political unity in the EU although deeply divided across regions.

The narrative analysis conducted in this paper aimed at outlining relevant correlations between heightened political differentiation within the EU and a changed institutional discourse on political unity. Since differentiated integration is any modality of integration or co-operation that allows EU MS to work together in non-homogeneous, flexible ways,[10] an ever-increasing heterogeneity fuelled by an accordingly changing narrative of political unity is likely to affect future choices of differentiated integration as well. Both the narratives of "united in diversity" and "divided in unity" eventually envisaged differentiated integration as a viable solution to safeguard political unity in the EU, although in different forms according to the times.

10 Following the definition as adopted in the EU IDEA project.

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EU Integration and Differentiation
for Effectiveness and Accountability

Differentiation has become the new normal in the European Union (EU) and one of the most crucial matters in defining its future. A certain degree of differentiation has always been part of the European integration project since its early days. The Eurozone and the Schengen area have further consolidated this trend into long-term projects of differentiated integration among EU Member States.

A number of unprecedented internal and external challenges to the EU, however, including the financial and economic crisis, the migration phenomenon, renewed geopolitical tensions and Brexit, have reinforced today the belief that **more flexibility is needed within the complex EU machinery**. A Permanent Structured Cooperation, for example, has been launched in the field of defence, enabling groups of willing and able Member States to join forces through new, flexible arrangements. Differentiation could offer a way forward also in many other key policy fields within the Union, where uniformity is undesirable or unattainable, as well as in the design of EU external action within an increasingly unstable global environment, offering manifold models of cooperation between the EU and candidate countries, potential accession countries and associated third countries.

EU IDEA's key goal is to address **whether, how much and what form of differentiation is not only compatible with, but is also conducive to a more effective, cohesive and democratic EU**. The basic claim of the project is that differentiation is not only necessary to address current challenges more effectively, by making the Union more resilient and responsive to citizens. Differentiation is also desirable as long as such flexibility is compatible with the core principles of the EU's constitutionalism and identity, sustainable in terms of governance, and acceptable to EU citizens, Member States and affected third partners.

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