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(De-)legitimizing Differentiated (Dis)integration in the European Union: Between Technocratic and Populist Narratives

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Abstract

Differentiated integration and disintegration are considered key processes of the European project's dynamics. Opt-outs and disintegration pressures are typically associated with laggards or proponents of 'less Europe' who do not wish to integrate further, but prefer to maintain status quo or take a step back. However, differentiation also serves the needs of champions of 'more Europe' who wish to move forward despite lack of unanimous support to do so. Both types of claims are constantly justified and contested as they constitute a deviation from a more traditional and uniform way of 'doing integration' in Europe. This article aims to deal with the differentiation/legitimation nexus in the EU and shed light on the politics of differentiation, while empirically examining legitimating and de-legitimizing practices of differentiation as revealed in technocratic and populist narratives produced by major political actors in France, Poland and the United Kingdom. The article highlights flexible and complementary usages of both populist and technocratic narratives that allow to (de-)legitimate differentiation in line with domestic political agendas.

Keywords

European Union; Differentiation; Legitimation; Narrative; Populism, Technocracy

'In the spirit of the season ... I hope that even Hugh Grant will watch our seasonal offering this year: *Democracy Actually*' (Fox in House of Commons 2019b).

Whereas the pre-Christmas 2019 Westminster vote sealed the United Kingdom's fate outside the European Union (EU), it also made clear that the dual aspiration to make the EU more efficient and democratic was understood quite differently on the opposing shores of the Channel. The EU was long believed to ensure and successfully balance policy output and centralised governance capability on the one hand, and democratic participation on the other, while dealing with heterogeneous preferences by means of differentiation when uniform integration was no longer a viable option. Brexit may be challenging this perception, but in reality it is only one manifestation of the politics of differentiation. National political elites are undergoing a profound transformation, while becoming themselves more differentiated and challenging tenets of the European integration process (Sus and Hadeed 2020). As a result, differentiated (dis)integration is being increasingly politicised and instrumentalised to serve their domestic political agendas.

Analysis of the EU in terms of differentiated as opposed to unitary integration regarding time, space, policy areas and forms of cooperation has attracted considerable scholarly attention, becoming a new buzzword in EU studies. Scholars engage with instances of differentiated integration (DI) in primary/secondary law, internal/external, horizontal/vertical, as well as instrumental/constitutional differentiation (Schimmelfennig and Winzen 2020; Leuffen, Rittberger and Schimmelfennig 2013). Equally, there is growing research output on differentiated disintegration (DDI), typically though not exclusively, related to Brexit (Schimmelfennig 2018; Gänzle, Leruth and Trondal 2020). However, differentiation is a long-standing phenomenon inherent in the integration process and has been an established practice of the Communities and the Union since their creation (Chopin and Lequesne 2016: 531). Some elements were already integrated into the Rome Treaty, whereas the political idea of 'two-speed Europe' dates back to the 'new approach' proposed in the Tindemans Report (European Communities 1976: 20-21). More discussion was triggered by the accession of the United Kingdom (UK), when the term 'Europe à la carte' was coined (Dahrendorf 1979). The political debate became even more lively in the 1990s, both as a result of post-Maastricht deepening (opt-outs granted to the UK and Denmark) and imminent widening to Central and Eastern Europe.

Differentiation results from both selective integration and disintegration processes. Whereas the former implies that states selectively increase the scope and level of integration, the latter means that geographical extension of rule application in selected areas decreases or cooperation becomes looser and less centralised (Schimmelfennig 2018). Differentiation appears where high interdependence exists, but high degrees of politicisation of some areas of cooperation, especially 'core state competences' (Genschel and Jachtenfuchs 2014), prevent uniform application of rules among actors with (increasingly) heterogeneous preferences (Leuffen, Rittberger and Schimmelfennig 2013).

Whereas much of the literature focuses on manifestations, types and mechanisms of differentiation in the EU, there is significantly less attention being paid to processes of legitimisation of differentiation. Two strands of emerging scholarship should be highlighted here. First, scholars have recently become increasingly interested in conditions under which differentiation is democratically legitimate (Fossum 2019). Second, there is burgeoning literature directing attention to popular legitimacy, for example citizens' attitudes towards DI or, more broadly, the degree to which ordinary citizens believe in international institutions' legitimacy (Leuffen, Müller and Schüssler 2020; Dellmuth and Schlipphak 2020).

Against this background, and following Tallberg and Zürn's (2019) work on legitimisation of international organisations, this article adopts a sociopolitical approach to (de-)legitimation practices, strategically pursued by purposeful political actors by means of justification and

contestation claims, empirically observable in official texts and public statements. (De-)legitimation is above all a narrative phenomenon: political actors produce narratives that legitimate or de-legitimate a given institution, in our case: DI and DDI or their specific manifestations. Thus, the principal research objective is to shed light on the politics of differentiation in selected EU member states, while empirically examining production of legitimating and de-legitimizing narratives of D(D)I at both polity and policy level. The unit of analysis are claims produced by relevant political parties, both in power and in opposition. Accordingly, the focus is on strategically constructed partisan representations of differentiation rather than on existing institutional arrangements. I hypothesise that it is more likely for political actors to legitimate differentiated integration (DI) with a technocratic narrative and de-legitimate DI with a populist one. Conversely, it is more likely for political actors to legitimate differentiated disintegration (DDI) with a populist narrative and de-legitimate DDI with a technocratic one.

Drawing on existing work (Bickerton and Invernizzi Accetti 2017; Bertsou and Caramani 2020) I define technocracy in terms of political power transfer to institutions and actors that draw legitimacy from independent technical expertise that aims at maximising long-term welfare of the entire community (government *for* the people), rather than from electoral process (government *by* the people). Populism, on the other hand, is about pursuing and sustaining political power by means of identifying the general will of the people, based on common sense solutions to complex problems, where the 'people', often framed as a homogenous and morally pure imagined community (Anderson 1983) of sorts, were betrayed and deprived of a voice by an evil elite (Weyland 2017; Mudde 2017). Operationalisation of these concepts in terms of narrative structure is outlined in detail in the research design section.

Beyond the introduction, this article consists of two theoretical and two empirical sections, and a conclusion. The theoretical sections provide an outline of (de-)legitimation practices of differentiation and operationalise the structure of technocratic and populist narratives. The empirical sections reveal the principal features of different types of (de)legitimizing narratives as produced by relevant political actors in France, Poland and the UK. The conclusion nuances the hypothesis, while highlighting adaptive flexibility of political actors in their usages of complementary technocratic and populist claims aimed at (de-)legitimizing differentiated (dis)integration.

(DE-)LEGITIMATING DIFFERENTIATION IN THE EU

'Legitimacy is central for international organizations to make a difference in world politics ... [their] long term capacity to deliver is conditioned on their legitimacy in the eyes of governments and citizens' (Tallberg and Zürn 2019: 581). Legitimacy is understood here as an attribute of an institution based on a given audience's belief that the exercise of authority by this entity is justified even when it goes against the audience's narrow self-interest or instrumental cost-benefit calculation (Tallberg, Bäckstrand and Scholte 2018: 9). Legitimacy determines whether a given institution remains relevant to its members and stakeholders as a focal arena for policy coordination and problem-solving. It affects the capacity to develop new rules and norms. For instance, when the EU and its institutions suffer from poor legitimacy among national elites and citizens, it becomes more difficult to secure support from member state governments for ambitious policy solutions. Finally, legitimacy allows to secure internal compliance with institutional norms and rules without recourse to coercion (Lindblom 1977).

Legitimacy is a relational property, determined by beliefs and perceptions of audiences, such as political elites, media, civil society and ordinary citizens, about the appropriate exercise of authority. A sociopolitical approach to legitimacy implies that the process of legitimation is understood as observable empirical phenomenon rather than a normative

concept (Tallberg and Zürn 2019: 583). An important implication of the social embeddedness of legitimacy is the possibility for purposive actors to affect legitimacy beliefs of others. Political actors attempt to shape legitimacy beliefs of various audiences, while strategically engaging in legitimation and de-legitimation practices. The former are processes of justification, where proponents of an institution (here: DI or DDI) seek to cultivate confidence among state and societal actors in its right to rule. Conversely, the latter are processes of contestation, where opponents of an institution aim at undermining beliefs in its rightful authority (Tallberg, Bäckstrand and Scholte 2018: 11-12). Political actors making legitimacy claims constitutes the lifeblood of the politics of legitimation (Reus-Smit 2007).

Establishing, using and countering legitimacy is largely a narrative phenomenon (Steffek 2003; Halliday, Block-Lieb and Carruthers 2010). Analysis of narrative production illuminates the struggle for legitimacy, while revealing actors' strategies for 'more Europe' or 'less Europe'. Opt-outs and disintegration pressures are typically associated with laggards or proponents of 'less Europe' who do not wish to integrate further but prefer to maintain the status quo or take a step back. However, differentiation equally serves the needs of champions of 'more Europe' who wish to move forward despite lack of unanimous support to do so. Both types of claims need to be constantly justified and contested as they constitute a deviation from a more traditional and uniform way of 'doing integration' in Europe as exemplified by the unity of the single market. Drawing on legitimation model elaborated by Jonas Tallberg and Michael Zürn (2019: 590) I assume that purposeful political actors produce strategically-oriented narratives featuring justification claims (legitimation process) and contestation claims (de-legitimation process) referring to institutions of DI and DDI with regard to three dimensions: a) authority; b) procedure; c) performance. These claims are structured by two broader and analytically distinct paradigms related to liberal democratic governance or the way it may become perverted: technocracy and populism.

How do political actors use technocratic and populist narratives to legitimate and de-legitimate DI and DDI in the EU, while pursuing their strategic objectives domestically? The main hypothesis is that technocratic narrative is more likely to be used for legitimation of differentiated integration (DI) and de-legitimation of differentiated disintegration (DDI), whereas populist narrative is more likely to be used for de-legitimation of differentiated integration (DI) and legitimation of differentiated disintegration (DDI).

Table 1. Politics of Differentiation: hypothesis

	Technocratic narrative	Populist narrative
Differentiated integration	Legitimation	De-legitimation
Differentiated disintegration	De-legitimation	Legitimation

The aim here is not to argue that individual political leaders or parties qualify as populists or technocrats based on their narrative production, but rather to highlight flexible and complementary usages of components of both populist and technocratic narratives by various political actors that seek to (de-)legitimate differentiation in line with their preferences and strategic goals. Accordingly, it is assumed that technocratic narratives can be produced by non-technocratic organisations, including political leaders or political parties, whereas populist narratives can be produced by political actors that we would normally refrain from labeling as populists. Moreover, as populism and technocracy are not necessarily mutually exclusive logics (De Blasio and Sorice 2020; Bickerton and Invernizzi Accetti 2021), the (de-)legitimizing narratives may possibly reflect their blended claims.

TECHNOCRATIC AND POPULIST NARRATIVE PRODUCTION: RESEARCH DESIGN

Narratives are more than stories. They provide means for political actors to construct a shared meaning of the past, present and future of international politics (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin and Roselle 2017) in order to achieve political objectives, especially in terms of influencing beliefs and thus behaviour of other actors. They constitute a combination of selective historical accounts of what happened and normative visions of a political project that serves the goals of a narrative entrepreneur. In line with the structuralist interpretation of the Narrative Policy Framework (NPF), it is argued here that narratives consist of identifiable components that can be studied empirically and generalised across space and time (Shanahan, Jones, McBeth and Radaelli 2018: 175).

Analysis of the narrative structure, informed by the NPF, reveals four basic narrative components: setting, characters, plot, and moral of the story (Shanahan, Jones and McBeth 2018: 335-336). The setting is the scene where action takes place over time. It outlines the broader policy context including legal, economic and normative conditions. Characters play different roles, especially those of a hero (an entity that fixes the problem), a villain (an entity that causes the problem) or victim (an entity that is negatively affected by the problem caused by the villain). The plot links the characters and the setting while organising action. Finally, the moral is typically equivalent to a policy solution and may culminate in a call to action (Shanahan, Jones, McBeth and Radaelli 2018: 176). Our setting is constituted by the institutions of differentiated (dis)integration in the EU, whereas characters, plot and moral are organised by conceptual frameworks of technocracy and populism. Importantly, a narrative produced by a given political force may rely on a synthesis of populism and technocracy or technopopulism (Bickerton and Invernizzi Accetti 2021), although either populism or technocracy are expected to dominate. Therefore, it seems justified to analytically distinguish these two narrative scripts.

How to recognise a technocratic narrative when we see it? Critically drawing on recent literature (Bertsou and Caramani 2020) I identify four major features of technocratic narrative production. First, it praises the authority of the merit-based knowledge elite: scientists and independent experts. They are heroes that know better and are capable of fixing complex problems for the benefit of citizens who are passive recipients of optimal solutions. Second, the narrative promotes evidence-based approach to policymaking and allocation of resources, while justifying decisions with progress, rationally defined long-term welfare of the society as a whole, as well as with necessity based on objective processes or external constraints, such as markets, global transformations or supranational institutions. It is thus anti-pluralist and anti-political, in the sense of being either critical or negligent of competing sociopolitical interests, thus de-legitimising power struggles between various groups within a society, while effectively annihilating a meaningful policy choice. Third, the technocratic narrative favours procedural leadership where key roles are assigned to independent officials engaged in highly institutionalised and routinised governance practices, who are not bound by short-term responsiveness to electoral concerns. Finally, the plot revolves around performance understood in terms of policy output, growth and efficiency, while neglecting non-output related values.

What is the populist narrative script? Critically drawing on existing literature (Ostiguy 2017; Mudde 2017) I argue that it is characterised by the following four features. First, it constructs an antagonistic relationship between the good people 'from here', whose authentic voice is not heard and true interests are not represented (victims), and the corrupt/cosmopolitan/unresponsive elite that serves powerful/foreign/hostile interests (villains). Heroes are those who fight for giving the voice back to the people. Second, the narrative promotes a common sense approach to policymaking and simplistic solutions, while justifying decisions with the popular will, responding to imagined homogenous preferences of the majority, but neglecting responsiveness to minorities and objective risks. As a result, and similarly to the technocratic narrative, the populist narrative is also monist and de-politicised as it ignores pluralist and conflicting interests. But the latter are

de-legitimated not as irrational, irresponsible or short-sighted, but as special interests or preferences of foreign agents. Third, the populist narrative favours personalist leadership, where decision-makers react swiftly, in a direct, unmediated and procedurally unlimited way, as opposed to remote and bureaucratic institutions that are designed to obstruct the popular will and facilitate unresponsiveness of the elite. Finally, the narrative’s plot revolves around performance constructed as greater voice given to the oppressed and unheard majority.

Table 2. Structure of technocratic and populist narratives

Narrative structure	Technocratic narrative	Populist narrative
Characters	Experts and scientists Citizens as passive recipients of optimal solutions designed for their benefit	Corrupt (evil) elite Morally pure people
Guiding principles	Evidence-based long-term societal welfare, progress & pragmatic necessity	Popular will and common sense
Leadership	Procedural	Personalist
Performance	Efficiency	Voice

The empirical analysis is qualitative and based on three national case studies (France, Poland and the UK) featuring speech acts by representatives of political elite from relevant parties in power and in opposition. The cases are not subject to systematic comparison, but rather serve as an illustration of the full spectrum of the differentiation/legitimation nexus. Whereas France, a crucial member of the EU and the eurozone core, is widely regarded as fervent advocate of DI in the form of *avant-garde*, the UK, a former EU member since 1 February 2020, has long championed DI in the form of numerous opt-outs and more recently DDI, be it in the form of the so-called new settlement or ultimately, protracted exit. Finally, Poland constitutes a puzzling in-between case of an EU member that talks unity yet acts differentiation, while cherishing the principal laggard status, staying outside of the eurozone and various enhanced cooperation formats (Cianciara 2019).

The dataset for the narrative analysis consists of a corpus of articulations made by presidents or prime ministers, ministers of foreign or European affairs, as well as members of parliament (MPs) during parliamentary debates on European policy, where some form of DI or DDI (for example ‘enhanced cooperation’, ‘multi-speed Europe’, Brexit, and so on) was mentioned or implied. The dataset includes 53 speech units (see Annex) articulated in the years 2011-2019: 20 (38 per cent) from Poland, 14 (26 per cent) from France and 19 (36 per cent) from the UK. All articulations in French and in Polish were translated into English by the author. The year 2011 is considered a useful starting point as the eurozone crisis reinvigorated the differentiation debate in all the three member states under scrutiny. Differences between national corpuses are mainly due to national context-specific systemic and institutional factors, which necessarily guided data selection. Whereas the French corpus features predominantly longer articulations in the form of presidential and party leader speeches (UMP, Socialist Party, LREM, National Rally), the Polish and British corpuses contain numerous shorter units articulated during parliamentary debates by representatives of governments and political parties: especially Law and Justice and Civic Platform in the Polish case; Conservatives, Labour and Scottish National Party (SNP) in the British case. This empirical material was coded by hand following the technocratic and populist narrative codebooks outlined above (see Table 2). Identification of relevant

elements of the technocratic and populist narrative structure in the corpus was followed by assignment of those elements to legitimating and de-legitimizing strategies pursued by political actors both in power and in opposition.

(DE-)LEGITIMATING DIFFERENTIATED (DIS)INTEGRATION: TECHNOCRATIC NARRATIVE PRODUCTION

How do political actors in France, Poland and the UK use the technocratic narrative to legitimate differentiated integration (DI) and de-legitimate differentiated disintegration (DDI)? Unsurprisingly, technocratic legitimation of DI as necessary and efficient tool for desirable progress is especially and consistently evident from the French narrative production across the spectrum of major political forces (republicans, liberals, socialists) represented in parliament. It was also part and parcel of the narrative produced by the British Conservative government at the beginning of the discussed period, before disintegration became the only game in town. Finally, the Polish liberal government led by the Civic Platform, in power until 2015, narrated DI as inevitable reality that Poland had to adapt to, while possibly co-defining scope conditions and working towards eventually reducing differentiation by joining the eurozone integration core.

Stories told by these political actors may vary and underpin highly differential strategic objectives, yet they are all based on discursive commitment to facts, international realities and pragmatic necessities imposed by objective processes and external constraints. The facts, identified by the narrative entrepreneurs seeking to legitimate DI, are the following: 'multi-speed Europe is already here' (Macron 2017); 'Europe already has different facets. Britain is not in the single currency or in the Schengen no-borders agreement ... the EU secures more than half of our exports and millions of British jobs' (Cameron in House of Commons 2011); 'I do not invent anything new: this [DI] is the way that made Schengen and single currency possible' (Hollande 2013); 'permanently staying outside the eurozone limits our room for manoeuvre' (Sikorski in Sejm 2013). Pragmatic necessity and inevitability act as fundamental justifications for actors' preferences and actions. In line with the French presidential narrative, the EU will be doomed if specific actions in response to 'global changes and challenges' are not taken and economic and monetary union is not deepened (Macron 2019a; Hollande 2013). DI is legitimate as it is the only logical, functional and viable solution under given circumstances: a single currency 'cannot work' when economic and fiscal systems are diverging, while 'it is impossible' to 'plead for federalism and at the same time for the enlargement of Europe' (Sarkozy 2011). Enlargement is only 'acceptable', when 'the strengthened Union's core allows for more differentiation' (Macron 2017). For the British Conservative government DI has a different facet: as 'a new global race of nations is underway ... the EU must be able to act with the speed and flexibility of a network' (Cameron 2013). For Poland's Civic Platform government, 'eurozone consolidation seems unstoppable' (Schetyna in Sejm 2013), and thus Poland, although non-euro member, should be part of the new fiscal pact and the banking union. 'Whether we like it or not' Europe seems more and more divided into circles of integration and 'a new European Union emerges, one that is centred around the eurozone'; thus 'it is in Polish strategic interest to join this integration centre: a geopolitical choice for decades' (Sikorski in Sejm 2013). This articulation summarises the puzzle of the Polish centre-right actors' cautious and conditional legitimation of DI: it serves as justification for euro adoption, driven by strategic and geopolitical, instead of exclusively economic rationale.

The technocratic narrative revolves around policy output, while stressing the need for elaboration of effective toolkit and identifying numerous specific solutions, often in the form of new institutional and procedural arrangements, that are to foster growth and progress for the entire EU. Over 60 policy measures, voiced by the French president since his election in May 2017 in order to reinvigorate Europe, range from creation of the

European border police and European climate bank to collection of carbon tax on EU borders and strengthening independent scientific assessment of food safety and substances hazardous to the environment and health (Macron 2019a; Macron 2017). Whereas these are proposals for the EU27 to adopt, the magnitude of challenges facing the EU is used as justification to move forward as soon as possible: 'those who wish to move faster should not be prevented from doing so' (Le Drian in Assemblée Nationale 2017). 'We need *efficient* tools to fight climate change, unfair competition, lack of political courage that prevents fiscal and social harmonisation' (Auconie in Assemblée Nationale 2017). Adequate policy output in the reformed eurozone cannot be secured by informal cooperation, but requires establishment of an 'appropriate governance structure' (Le Drian in Assemblée Nationale 2017).

The narrative relies on output legitimacy. EU's positive image depends on whether it delivers: on social harmonisation according to the French narrative or on competitiveness according to the British one. Notions such as democratic deficit are absent, although the problem of trust in the European project is recognised. But according to the French presidential narrative, the solution to citizens' limited trust is more independence of experts: 'Europeans wish to be able to trust experts' (Macron 2017). Accordingly, citizens will trust decision-makers more if collective decisions rely on evidence-based solutions proposed by scientists that work independently and transparently, insulated from undue influence exercised by politicians or industry lobbies.

On the other side of the spectrum, how is technocratic narrative used to de-legitimize DDI? Such usages were common in the narrative produced post-referendum by the opponents of 'hard Brexit' - Labour and SNP. Some elements of the technocratic narrative were used by the Polish liberal and left-wing opposition who sought to de-legitimize policies of Law and Justice, in power since 2015, as a highway to 'Polexit'. In the overwhelmingly pro-integrationist Polish society, with 91 per cent in favour of EU membership (CBOS 2020), disintegration, differentiated or not, remains unpopular and thus constitutes a useful tool for the opposition to engage in ruling-party-bashing. Although the mainstream political parties in France favour differentiation in many integration areas, they nevertheless draw red lines as to where it cannot apply.

This de-legitimizing technocratic narrative relies on scientific evidence on the one hand, and contestation of (differentiated) disintegration as unrealistic and irresponsible choice on the other. Opposition MPs in the House of Commons used detailed data and scientific analyses to demonstrate the catastrophic effects of (full) exit, while accusing the Conservative government of making ideology-driven decisions unsupported by any reliable evidence. Trading with the EU under WTO rules 'would be a catastrophe for Scotland, threatening up to 80,000 jobs in our country alone' (Blackford in House of Commons 2017). In fact:

getting the Prime Minister's Brexit done will leave the UK £70 billion worse off than if it had remained in the EU, according to a study by the National Institute of Economic and Social Research ... a basic trade agreement will lead to GDP being lower by the equivalent of £1,600 per person compared with EU membership. (Blackford in House of Commons 2019b).

The timeframe set by the government for negotiating a new deal with the EU is utterly unrealistic as 'it took Canada seven years to reach an agreement [with the EU]' (Benn in House of Commons 2019b). Jobs are reduced 'on the basis of ideology' (Blackford in House of Commons 2019b), whereas the government has not provided 'an economic assessment of the single most important decision that we are going to take and the nature of the future relationship ... history will record that that was an act of irresponsibility' (Benn House of Commons 2019b). Equally, liberal government in Poland evoked irresponsibility, ignorance of international realities and illusion of an alternative to the EU, in order to de-legitimize European policy orientation of the opposition: 'some are delusional about cherry-picking

or think they may have greater weight and freedom outside of the EU ... this is dangerous fantasy' (Sikorski in Sejm 2013). Another (performance-based) strategy was for the liberal opposition to accuse Law and Justice government of total disregard for EU's policy output: 'you think only in terms of national egoism, you do not propose anything to make the Union more effective' (Szałpka in Sejm 2019).

Whereas the French governmental narrative favours progressive differentiation, it clearly delimits what is not negotiable, namely DDI regarding the rule of law. Policy cooperation may be differentiated, but fundamental values cannot be subject to a 'two-speed' or 'à la carte logic' (Macron 2017; Loiseau 2019). Disintegration or 'not being part of the European Union' is not a viable alternative but a 'trap', whereas 'nationalist retrenchment offers nothing' but pure rejection, according to the French president (Macron 2019a). Thus there is no other choice but to 'construct in Europe a coalition for progress that will make it possible to move forward and will not give in to the coalition of ... disintegration' (Macron 2019b). This is where technocratic narration gives in to a more confrontational and antagonistic 'us versus them' logic, where heroic forces of growth and progress rise against dark forces of irrationalism and destruction.

The technocratic narrative may dominate justification of DI and contestation of DDI in all the three member states, but this does not exclude selective usages of the populist narrative. Scottish opponents of hard Brexit used the people-elite opposition and the argument of voice to de-legitimize disintegration in a similar way the ruling Conservatives did in order to legitimate it: 'Scotland has voted to remain and, in particular, wants to stay in the single market and the customs union', so the 'UK Government cannot drag Scotland out of the EU before gaining the legislative consent of the Scottish Parliament' (Blackford in House of Commons 2019b; 2017). On the other side of the spectrum, Conservative backbenchers sought to de-legitimize external DDI in favour of full exit, while instrumentalising the notion of the 'people' in line with their preferences: prime minister Theresa May was accused of 'inability to deliver the Brexit that *people* voted for' (Rees-Mogg in House of Commons 2019a), despite the fact that those who voted 'Leave' may have voted with extremely divergent terms of withdrawal in mind. Finally, de-legitimizing the idea of biggest integration laggards being able to block DI initiatives as 'heresy' (Macron 2017) seems all but a technocratic argument at first sight. Yet it denotes deviation from the universal doctrine of rational progress coupled with the necessary exclusion, without a possibility of accommodation, of all those who draw attention to input-related instead of output-related values. Such a justification relies on convergence of technocracy and populism (technopopulism), underpinned by the common grammar and similar overarching 'us versus them' logic of exclusion.

(DE-)LEGITIMATING DIFFERENTIATED (DIS)INTEGRATION: POPULIST NARRATIVE PRODUCTION

How do political actors in Poland, France and the UK use the populist narrative to de-legitimize differentiated integration (DI) and legitimate differentiated disintegration (DDI)? Neither populist nor technocratic de-legitimizing usages of DI were identified among partisan and governmental actors in France, where DI remains the preferred alternative to the status quo guided by lack of integrationist ambition from some EU members. For a long time, DI was also the only acceptable *modus operandi* across the political spectrum in the UK, allowing for opt-outs from unwanted cooperation championed by other member states, notably France. Thus DI is useful for justifying both moving forward and standing still. In contrast, the populist narrative has been used in Poland across the political spectrum in order to de-legitimize existing power relations in the EU on the one hand, and to campaign for eurozone accession on the other.

An interesting feature of the populist narrative produced by Poland's Law and Justice party, both when in opposition and in power, is its dual usage of 'evil elite versus good people' opposition. On the one hand, European elites, both from EU institutions and national capitals (Polish liberals and leftists included), are narrated as 'arrogant' and 'self-proclaimed' (Szczerski in Sejm 2013), fearing their voters and 'wearing elegant suits, courting our [EU] partners, no matter how they treat Poles and their traditions' (Gosiewska in Sejm 2019). On the other hand, the elite-people antagonistic relationship is transformed into antagonism of dominant-and-rich powers versus weaker-and-poorer member states, where the former are embodied by the 'Berlin-Paris-Brussels triangle' (Waszczykowski in Sejm 2013) and the latter by Poland governed by Law and Justice - the 'true' elite that puts 'interest of the ordinary citizen first' (Gosiewska in Sejm 2019). Thus the Law and Justice heroes:

will not allow that the stronger decide for us and control us; we are not going to be a henchman under anybody's leadership ... we should look for allies who do not see their future in a federation ruled by the powerful, but in a community of equal states. (Szczerski in Sejm 2013)

Accordingly, the DI, labeled as two- or multi-speed Europe, is de-legitimated as a tool of the powerful few to discipline weaker EU members and thus strengthen inequality within the EU.

Differentiation is at the heart of domestic political usages of European integration in Poland. On the one hand, DI, understood as economic and political consolidation of the eurozone, can be bluntly de-legitimated, as equaling mortal threat of EU disintegration, by the Left seeking to promote swift euro adoption: 'if we do not join the eurozone, we will be completely marginalised' (Gibała in Sejm 2013). On the other hand, DI may be (temporarily) justified by the liberals, provided certain conditions are met. But if these conditions of inclusiveness and informality were not fulfilled, Poland would be deprived of voice: 'there is no greater risk for Poland today than silent division of Europe where nobody pays attention to those outside the eurozone' (Tusk in Sejm 2011). Proponents of DI may be glorifying its efficiency, but voice is equally important: the EU can only become efficient if it has a democratic mandate for action, when both citizens and member states feel that their voice matters in crucial matters (Czaputowicz in Sejm 2019; 2018). Does this mean that the main political forces in Poland would refrain from legitimating DDI? Not necessarily.

How does the populist narrative legitimate DDI? Populist usages were common among the UK Conservative Party and government, especially after the 2015 general elections, as well as among leaders of National Rally in France (a specific case of an anti-EU party that is almost absent from the national parliament, yet repeatedly wins European elections, whereas its leader received 34 per cent of the vote in the second round of the 2017 presidential election). Usages of the populist narrative in Poland are quite puzzling as Law and Justice, in power since 2015, is half-heartedly de-legitimizing differentiation, while legitimating one-speed disintegration.

These narrative entrepreneurs focus a lot on the evil Brussels elites who oppress the people. The founding fathers are de-mystified as agents of special economic and foreign interests, whereas the only goal of 'anonymous officials in glass buildings' is 'harmonisation that equals uniformity that equals submission of the people' (Le Pen 2019; 2018). Both morality and output-related competence of EU officials are contested: by organising mass-immigration they make 'the French change their ways, look down, avoid certain streets' (Le Pen 2018), but at the same time they are 'making France and Europe lag behind in global technological wars' (Le Pen 2019). National elites can be equally oppressive: 'for too long, the people of Britain have been denied their say. For too long, powers have been handed to Brussels over their heads. For too long, their voice on Europe has not been heard' (Hammond in House of Commons 2015). Fortunately, here there are the 'true'

heroic elites who stand with their people, declaring: 'I do not love Brussels. I love Britain' (Cameron 2016), and tirelessly working towards a 'peaceful and democratic revolution' (Le Pen 2019). These elites reject the 'German-dominated ... bureaucratic, federal, undemocratic Union' (Waszczykowski in Sejm 2013). Revolution is imminent as 'people and our ideas triumph already in Italy, Austria, Poland, Hungary, UK and US' (Le Pen 2018).

This narrative legitimates DDI with popular will, that is one for the whole nation, and with the common sense. Hence it posits that all British people feel that the EU is 'something that is done to them, not for them' (Hammond in House of Commons 2015) and they are all not 'happy with the EU's direction of travel' (Baron in House of Commons 2013). What is needed is a looser 'union of common sense': 'we hear all the time that we cannot do something because we are in the EU', but 'we can't be held hostage to this one referendum that took place a while ago': as 'Union changes, we have the right to decide again' (Szczerski in Sejm 2011). A union of common sense is 'far less bureaucratic and far more competitive'; this means bringing 'Europe back to the people, ensuring that decisions are made as close to them as possible' (Hammond in House of Commons 2015).

Contrary to the technocratic narrative that cherishes policy output, growth and decision-making efficiency, the populist narrative highlights voice as the ultimate indicator of institutional performance. Hence the Alliance of European Nations, Marine Le Pen's 'beautiful European idea' of DDI, is about 'Europe where people are free to decide to cooperate or not to cooperate, free to decide on areas of cooperation, free to leave the cooperation when they want to' (Le Pen 2018). Despite declarations to the contrary, the 'euro-realist community of nations and states' or the 'union of common sense' advocated by Poland's Law and Justice relies on differentiation and implies selective disintegration or 'withdrawing from objectively disadvantageous forms of enhanced cooperation that Poland is already part of', such as Council decision on relocation of asylum seekers, as this decision 'violated the essence of democracy, being taken against the Poles' (Law and Justice 2019).

Is it all about populist narrative or can we also detect usages of a technocratic narrative for justification of (differentiated) disintegration? As agreement on political centralisation of the eurozone governance proved impossible, a way out of the irresponsible monetary integration that disrespected basic economies realities was, according to Poland's Law and Justice, to take a step back and return to EU roots, the four fundamental freedoms (Waszczykowski in Sejm 2016; Waszczykowski in Sejm 2013). But this idea involves uniform rather than differentiated disintegration as all eurozone members would be expected to withdraw and thus protect European unity at a lower integration level: the single market instead of the monetary union. A similar logic guides the tentative of renegotiating the energy-climate package to secure interests of the Polish industry allegedly undermined by the ideologically driven and unrealistic climate policies. Whereas the ideal solution for Law and Justice would be to dismantle the policy at the European level (uniform disintegration), the second-best scenario is a situation where 'Poland will be reaching climate neutrality at its own pace', while being 'released from the [2050] climate-neutrality obligation' (differentiation) (Morawiecki in Gov.pl 2019).

CONCLUSION

The aim of this article was to address the differentiation/legitimation nexus in the EU and shed light on the politics of differentiation, while empirically examining production of legitimating and de-legitimizing narratives of differentiated integration (DI) and differentiated disintegration (DDI) by political actors in France, Poland and the UK. To this end a sociopolitical approach was adopted, highlighting (de-)legitimation practices, strategically pursued by purposeful actors making justification and contestation claims. It was argued that DI was more likely to be legitimated with a technocratic narrative, whereas DDI was more likely to be legitimated with a populist narrative. Conversely, de-legitimation

of DI is more likely to be pursued by means of a populist narrative, whereas de-legitimation of DDI by means of a technocratic narrative.

The empirical analysis largely confirmed that DI is predominantly legitimated by means of a technocratic narrative, whereas DDI is mainly legitimated with a populist narrative. This is well illustrated by the case of the French political arena, where three subsequent presidents representing three distinct political forces (UMP, socialists, LREM) used a similar technocratic narrative to legitimate progressive DI, while populist narrative was being used by a radical right party leader to legitimate DDI and de-legitimate all mainstream political forces. However, elements of (techno-)populist narrative were also present, especially in president Macron's articulations. Meanwhile, the British Conservative Party has undergone an evolution, whereby they used a largely technocratic narrative to legitimate regressive DI at the beginning of the period under scrutiny and adopted a populist narrative to legitimate DDI or even full exit after the 2015 general election that led to the 2016 Leave vote. This in turn has led the opposition to use a technocratic counter-narrative to legitimate existing forms of DI or a 'soft' version of DDI, while seeking to de-legitimate the Conservative government. Poland constitutes the most puzzling case, where D(D)I is de-legitimated by all major political forces, flexibly and simultaneously exploiting both technocratic and populist narratives. Whereas Civic Platform used a technocratic narrative to voice limited and conditional justification for DI in the short term and a mixture of technocratic and populist narratives do de-legitimate their main political opponent, Law and Justice used a populist narrative to de-legitimate all forms of progressive DI and a mixture of populist and technocratic narratives to legitimate uniform disintegration understood as achieving unity at a lower level of integration: the single market, or regressive DI as a second-best scenario.

In line with the objectives of the special issue, this analysis confirmed that political actors introduce a degree of flexibility to their narrative production, while complementing technocratic narratives with populist ones and vice versa. Claims are imitated and blended with the single objective of strengthening one's own legitimacy. Thus proponents of less Europe may also use technocratic narratives, whereas proponents of more Europe may rely on populist narrative elements. Importantly, both types of narratives are anti-pluralist and exclusionary. To be against rationally defined policy is to be against what is right (Caramani 2020: 8), to be a heretic in the words of the French president Emmanuel Macron. To question the voice of the mythical 'people', as expressed in an electoral act or opinion poll, is to commit a mortal sin and side with the evil according to the British and Polish governments. Both proponents of more Europe and less Europe de-legitimate societal conflicts of interests, while accusing their critics of 'dividing the nation/society'; both wish their version of the 'whole' (rational or popular/national) to dominate. Thus differentiated (dis)integration no longer seems to be about functional policy solutions to be negotiated among legitimate partners at the European level. Instead it has become a weapon in confrontational and largely insubstantial domestic struggles over who has the right to define what is right.

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