

WHY THE EU BECAME “EUROPE”.
TOWARDS A NEW HISTORY OF EUROPEAN UNION

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ABSTRACT

The process of European integration is often framed in a teleological narrative, drawing a straight line from its early postwar steps to the contemporary European Union. Historical analysis, in contrast, shows a process made of many alternatives, twists and turns, trials and errors, and inherent tensions. When the European Community was founded in 1957, it was already a latecomer in a field densely populated with international organizations and cooperation institutions, heavily conditioned by the Cold War. It was only by confronting the economic and political challenges of the 1970s that the EC became the main forum of the integration of Western Europe. As the EC became more important, it also became more vulnerable. The essay argues for the need of paying a more specific attention to how European integration and, finally, the EU developed by responding to wider processes in global history (such as the Cold War, economic crises, and decolonisation); they were shaped by the dialectics between different international institutions and agreements, between national interests and internationalism.

Keywords: Europe, European Integration, European Union, Cold War, Internationalism, Colonialism.

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Today, many people treat the terms “Europe” and “European Union” as if they were synonymous. Most European states are members of the EU. It is the EU that stands for open internal borders, supports structurally weak regions, and occasionally steps in to bail out a member. The fate of its member states is – for both better and worse – intimately bound up with that of the Union as a whole, particularly for those countries that also

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belong to the Eurozone. These days, the European Union is frequently identified more with Europe's problems than with their solutions. And if a state decides to leave, the repercussions are felt throughout the Union and in all four corners of the world. It is so easy to equate Europe with the European Union, or at least with international cooperation in Europe, given its systemic importance across European societies.

That temptation has only grown further over the past quarter-century. It also affects historians, who often regard the EU as the only international organization in Western Europe during the Cold War, or at least far and away the most important. One might easily conclude that European integration began in an international void; that nations basically had to choose between national sovereignty and integration on the EC model. This underestimates two aspects: Firstly, the EC was a fragile latecomer in an already densely-populated field of international organizations; seventy years ago (and more recently too) it in fact appeared rather unlikely that this particular organization would one day come to be identified with Europe as a whole, or even just with Western Europe. And secondly, the integration process was not only shaped by the histories of the participating states and the general historical context. It was also influenced by a veritable web of relationships with other Western European organizations and transnational forums – as a dimension that has received much less attention in existing research. This forms an important dimension of the integration process, especially for the period of the Cold War that this article focuses on. Europe was never just the EU, and the EU (and its precursors) were never all of Europe. Hence, we need to understand how that equivalence became so strong and how the EC was able to develop from humble origins into Europe's pre-eminent international entity (Patel 2013: 649-673; also see Patel 2020).

In order to do so, this article will first put the early EC into the wider context of international cooperation efforts in postwar Europe. It will then scrutinize the reasons that over time helped the EC to become the dominant forum of international cooperation. Furthermore, it will examine the role of enlargement as a factor contributing to the EC's increasingly important role, while also challenging existing interpretations which have over-emphasized "widening and deepening" as characterizing features of the integration process at the expense of disintegration and dysfunctionalities. As will be shown, the latter characterized the EC's development, too. The next section will then discuss trial and error, as well as the interrelationship with other international organizations in Western Europe, as factors shaping the EC's trajectory. The text will then discuss differentiation as an important consequence of the EC's gain in importance, before the conclusion will summarize and contextualize the text's main findings.

THE MANY EUROPE OF POSTWAR INTERNATIONALISM

European integration never followed a clear-cut path, and the forerunners of today's EU were never the only efforts of regional integration in Europe. By the early 1950s, when the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), the EU's first predecessor organization, was established, internationalization and globalization had reached a point where the states of Western Europe no longer formed self-contained entities – if they ever had. Driven by the lessons of the economic and social crises of the past, and the recent experience of the Second World War, genocide, and mass displacement, hundreds of new International Organizations cropped up worldwide, with a clear geographic focus on the North Atlantic region and even more on Western Europe (Iriye 2002: 37-59). Instead of creating one institutional reality of international cooperation and integration in Europe, several cropped up during the postwar years.

As a latecomer to this process, the EC illustrated several lessons from the history of regional cooperation and integration during the first five years after World War Two. Firstly, it reflected the new Cold War realities along with the tendency to go for a rather small geographical scope, with comparably homogenous member states, instead of larger and more diverse forums. Secondly, it epitomized the trend to prioritize low politics instead of more contentious issues of high politics where national interests often obstructed an agreement. Thirdly, the EC stood for a particularly intense form of integration, with more legal muscle than other and earlier efforts of regional cooperation. This in turn was only possible thanks to the homogeneity and hence the small size of this new community (Patel 2020: 13-49).

Firstly, then, on size: the first meaningful effort of regional cooperation and integration in postwar Europe was the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), founded in 1947 under the auspices of the United Nations. Originally, it brought together eighteen states. The UNECE included good parts of Western Europe, but also Eastern European states like Czechoslovakia and Poland, as well as the United States and the Soviet Union as the superpowers of the emerging Cold War order. Despite rising tensions between East and West, the UNECE understood itself as a pan-European institution with the mission of coordinating the reconstruction of Europe and keeping the spirit of the wartime alliance against Nazism and Fascism alive. The latter task became obsolete just months after the UNECE had been set up, and the escalating Cold War led to the formation of three camps: East, West, and neutral (Stinsky 2019). By 1950, when the Schuman Declaration paved the way for the ECSC, the

Iron Curtain had become a defining reality, restricting the scope of all new attempts of regional integration to one of the two main camps, and leaving comparably little room for maneuver for the neutrals.

The Eastern camp prioritized a communist form of global internationalism over specifically European formats of cooperation; for this reason, regional integration with an emphatic focus on Europe was soon restricted to Western Europe. Established in 1952, the ECSC reflects how the geographic scope of European regional cooperation had shrunk in the five years since the UNECE had been set up: instead of the UNECE's eighteen members, it brought together a mere six Western European states (Belgium, France, West Germany, Italy, Luxembourg and the Netherlands). The Federal Republic of Germany's participation as a founding member – the first time the western part of the divided country was invited to join one of postwar Europe's organizations of regional integration as a founding member – also reflected the new, increasingly ineluctable contours of the Cold War (Rasch and Kurt 2007; Gillingham 1991; Trausch 1993).

Table: Founding Member States of Various European Organizations

UNECE (1947)	Brussels Pact (1948)	OEEC (1948)	Council of Europe (1949)	European Communities (1951/1957)
Belgium, Byelorussia, Czechoslovakia, Denmark, France, Greece, Iceland, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Sweden, Turkey, United Kingdom, United States of America, Ukraine, USSR, Yugoslavia	Belgium, France, Luxembourg, Netherlands, United Kingdom	Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, United Kingdom	Belgium, Denmark, France, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, United Kingdom	Belgium, Federal Republic of Germany, France, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands

Secondly, on high vs low politics: security concerns, as the core of high politics, had defined the purpose of the Brussels Pact, established in 1948 by five Western European states. NATO, created one year later, claimed a similar role for the North Atlantic area. As the Cold War gained momentum, Western Europe's international security mostly came to be or-

ganized in a transatlantic framework, with the United States as benevolent hegemon. The EU's predecessors, in contrast, were chiefly preoccupied with issues of low politics, especially with economic questions. This tendency reinforced itself after 1954, when attempts to build up a European Defence Community and a European Political Community failed (Loth 2015: 20-74). The EC's secondary role, under the radar of the most pressing concerns of international politics, gave it the room to slowly develop and consolidate. But its low politics focus also explains why the EC was not the foremost forum of regional integration in Western Europe. This also held true because the EC did not even monopolize questions of trade and economic governance. Some 20 other regional organizations, most prominently the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development; originally founded under the auspices of the Marshall Plan in 1948 under the acronym OEEC, for: Organisation for European Economic Co-operation), were active in this field in Western Europe, too (Speich-Chassé 2014: 187-212).

Thirdly, on the precise form of integration: While the EU's predecessors had fewer member states and dealt with less crucial issues than other attempts of regional cooperation and integration in Europe, the EC was special in another respect. Already the European Coal and Steel Community as the EU's first predecessor had greater powers in comparison to the intergovernmental setup of all other international organizations in Western Europe. Due to its supranational dimension, thanks to which member states surrendered some of their sovereignty to a High Authority, it was able to take legally binding majority decisions with immediate effect within the member states, without these first having to be implemented in national law (Spiereburg 1994).

The two organizations that joined the European Coal and Steel Community on the basis of the Treaties of Rome in 1957 – the European Economic Community (EEC) and Euratom – were also partly supranational, meaning that they were able to take legally binding majority decisions with the potential of having immediate effect within the member states. All three organizations that ultimately formed the EC shared this characteristic. This supranational trait also explains why the EC originally had less member states than other international organizations in Western Europe – such as the OECD or the Council of Europe, as another forum set up in 1949. Many Western European states were not prepared to accept as great a transfer of power as the EC aimed at. Next to the Cold War realities, this specificity of its legal setup and governance structures explains why the EC started out so small (De Witte and Thies 2013: 23-38).

Having said that, it is easy to overemphasize the legal and administrative differences between the EC and other efforts of regional cooperation

and integration, such as the UNECE, the Brussels Pact, the OECD or the Council of Europe, at least for the first and formative years in their existence. The characterization of the EC as *sui generis* (of its own kind; exceptional) which already existed in the 1950s and was pushed for by its supporters, is quite misleading.

In the EC, supranationalism was always highly contested, with top politicians such as Charles de Gaulle (President of the French Fifth Republic, 1959-1969) and Margaret Thatcher (British Prime Minister, 1979-1990) as particularly vocal opponents. Moreover, the transfer of powers to Brussels always remained partial and important supranational powers were not set in stone in the EC's foundational treaties (Nicola and Davies 2017). Some of them only came into being thanks to the European Court of Justice (ECJ) and its rulings since the early 1960s. With the so-called Luxembourg Compromise of January 1966, the member states made sure that vital national interests could triumph over the idea of a further shift towards supranationalism (Palayret, Wallace and Winand 2006). Even if the discourse of a pursuit of an 'ever closer union' lingered and even if federalists continued to ferociously push for deeper integration, already the Luxembourg Compromise turned the EC into a permanently hybrid creature. Intergovernmental elements, according to which ultimate powers remain with the member states, came to play a more permanent role than originally foreseen (Ludlow 2006: 71-124).

All in all, postwar regional cooperation and integration in Europe became a maze of partly overlapping, partly competing organizations. During the early 1960s, it was still unclear that the EC would one day outpace all others; particularly the OECD was a serious contender. Moreover, the parallel existence of multiple organizations was a permanent feature: earlier forums were not discontinued once the EC was set up; instead, conflict and cooperation between these organizations became a defining feature of Western Europe's international governance structures. It was only from the 1970s and 1980s onwards that the EC acquired the lead over normal international organizations (Patel 2017), eventually turning into the "most prominent institutional pioneer in regionalism" (Lenz and Burilkov 2017: 654-680; Hooghe, Marks, Lenz, Bezuijen, Ceka and Derderyan 2017).

THE EC'S EVOLUTION INTO THE MAIN FORUM OF (WESTERN) EUROPEAN INTEGRATION

Three factors help to explain why the EC developed into the primary and increasingly also the dominant forum of integration in Western Europe. Firstly, the focus on a customs union and a common market (origi-

nating in the ECSC and even more in the European Economic Community) turned out to be crucial in the long run. That economic logic produced many functional connections to other areas. The possibility of spill-over effects from one policy domain to another were already recognized during the 1950s: the creation of the common market had repercussions in other fields such as hygiene standards, consumer protection, vocational training and social policy (Haas 1958). Research has long demonstrated that such dynamics did not come from nowhere (see, e.g., Rosamond 2000; Rosamond 2005: 237-254). Spill-overs did not occur quasi-automatically, but only if there were groups and institutions claiming supposed or actual inherent necessities and actively pushing to expand the powers of the EC – be they the Commission, the Parliament, transnational interest groups or individual member states. For example, in agriculture: Once common market organizations existed for wheat, eggs, dairy products and vegetables and proved beneficial for producers of these staples, it was only a matter of time before the vintners, the olive growers, and even the flax and hemp farmers demanded similar arrangements (Knudsen 2009; Ludlow 2005: 347-371). In each case the logic of the market raised questions that impacted other policy areas – that then had to be accordingly promoted or constrained.

Again, the comparison to other international organizations is revealing. The Council of Europe for example was responsible for the vital matter of human rights. But, in discharging this overtly political responsibility, it found itself facing much greater resistance from member states than did the EC with its economic focus along with its more technocratic and seemingly apolitical approach. In view of the overwhelming predominance of the nation state as the model for political order, the idea of European cultural and ethical unification associated with the Council of Europe offered much less spill-over into other areas, or at least fewer actors successfully advocating such a course. In comparison, the economic logic of the European Communities often met less resistance (Duranti 2017).

Secondly, there was European law. The incremental emergence of a legal culture of its own with a strong binding character, from legislation to implementation, gave the Community an immense advantage over other international organizations in Western Europe. The latter were generally reliant on voluntary cooperation by their member states to implement broadly couched agreements into national law. In contrast, in the EC even ordinary citizens were able to appeal directly to the European Court of Justice under certain conditions. This, along with its other powers, lent a specific dynamic to the Court of Justice of the EU and the development of law in the Community. At a very general level, the role of the ECJ was often key in expanding the powers of the EC, not least by applying a broad interpretation of the market-driven mandate of the treaties. The impact

of European law – directly applicable and largely independent of the law of the member states – often proved to be the EU’s strongest weapon (De Witte *et al.* 2013; Nicola and Davies 2017).

Thirdly and lastly, the EC commanded larger financial resources than other Western European organizations. The OECD’s budget allowed for little more than funding its secretariat, a modicum of statistical research and a few expert commissions. The situation in the Council of Europe was very similar. The EEC, in contrast, possessed revenues of their own from 1970, while the ECSC had enjoyed the same since the very beginning. This made the EC comparatively independent of its member states, especially where spending decisions lay largely with the Commission and the Parliament. The arrangement was hard-fought; but once in place it granted the EC a degree of freedom that its rivals could only envy (Shackleton 1990; Patel and Kaiser 2017). Together, these three factors propelled the EC into a position of primacy among regional organizations in Western Europe.

WIDENING, DISINTEGRATION AND VENUE CHOICE

The EC’s gradual rise is also reflected in the decisions of third states. Already in the early 1960s, Turkey, Greece, and Spain considered an application for membership. But the biggest success came in 1961 when the United Kingdom applied to join the EC. With this step, it chose to abandon the European Free Trade Association (EFTA), yet another regional trade organization and free trade area that the UK had set up as a competitor to the EC only one year earlier, in 1960. Even if a French veto ultimately shot down Britain’s application, this plea for membership represented an almost immeasurable symbolic boost for the EC. This was even truer once new members joined, starting with the Northern enlargement of 1973, when the UK, Ireland, and Denmark accessed the EC, and continuing with the six further enlargement rounds that led to today’s EU having more than twenty member states. This trend was further substantiated by the growing number of states negotiating association agreements and other forms of economic and political ties with the EC (Kaiser and Elvert 2004; Vahsen 2010).

This does not mean that deepening and widening were the only trends. Since its early days, the EU experienced clear counter-tendencies, even if these have been ignored in standard accounts of European integration. Disintegration commenced as early as 1962, when Algeria parted ways with the emerging EC. With its roughly eleven million inhabitants, the North African country had joined the EC as part of France’s global empire. In for-

mal terms, however, Algeria – unlike for example Tunisia or Senegal – was not a colony but a part of France itself, constituting several of its *départements*. It then left the EC in parallel to its separation from France after a bloody war of independence. Occurring in the foundational period of the EC, the event left barely a trace in the history of European integration, and the same holds true for the case of Greenland. The world’s largest island with a population of just fifty thousand joined the EC in 1973 as part of the Kingdom of Denmark. It left the EC in 1985 while remaining with Denmark (Patel 2020: 209-231).

Admittedly, both Algeria and Greenland had not joined the EC as sovereign states, but within the context of European colonialism – a core dimension of contemporary European history that most accounts of EU history completely ignore. This colonial framework is a marked difference to today’s Brexit, even if Brexit also brought up thorny questions about Europe’s imperial legacy, as in the case of Gibraltar. Beyond such differences, the cases of Algeria and Greenland demonstrate that the current phase is not the first in which the status quo of European integration has been challenged and reversed (see, e.g., Martill and Staiger 2018).

This also holds true due to dysfunctionalities which EU studies have failed to take seriously – let alone to theorize – until recently. The Common Agricultural Policy, a central pillar of the EC during the Cold War, became dysfunctional for some time in the 1960s and 1970s because its mechanisms hinged on fixed exchange rates – and thus on questions of monetary policy which, at the time, were beyond the control of the EC. While the Common Agricultural Policy continued to exist, the crisis produced a temporary re-nationalization of the common agricultural market. These developments were rather technical; still, they demonstrate that processes of widening and deepening were repeatedly counter-balanced by disintegration and dysfunctionalities (Patel 2020).

Finally, the choice for the EU was never uncontested. When the economic crises of the 1970s hit Western Europe after some thirty years of immense growth, deeper integration was by no means the default mode of the respective governments in power. On questions of economic governance, which were at the core of European integration at the time, the member states often first prioritized national measures, bilateralism, and other formats of international cooperation, for instance GATT and the OECD. Only by the mid-1980s did they opt for the EC as their key venue of economic coordination and integration (Warlouzet 2017).

All in all, widening and deepening were never the sole directions that the integration process knew, even if this narrative dominates existing accounts. The EC was a latecomer in a densely crowded arena of regional organizations and only incrementally came to play the primary role. Crises

and reorientations, such as the Luxembourg Compromise, defined its trajectory and defy simplistic and linear accounts of its history.

POLICY AND POLITY DEVELOPMENT BY TRIAL AND ERROR

No overriding logic or clear-cut division of labor defined the policy areas the EU's predecessors were active in. The European Coal and Steel Community was about sectoral economic integration, creating shared rules for two industries which at the time were indispensable to wage war. Their integration was meant to make a military conflict impossible – but the 1950 Schuman Declaration, the ECSC's starting point, also reflected very specific national interests on the part of the French government (Gillingham 1991). The next two plans would have rotated the EC into a very different direction – defence and political integration – but these projects were abandoned after the French parliament's veto in 1954, as mentioned before. The Treaties of Rome then saw the return to a project with a sectoral, economic orientation – Euratom with its focus on nuclear power – but also the European Economic Community with its much broader ambitions. The EEC was set up to establish a Common Market with free movement of goods, services, people and capital and common external trade rules (Loth 2015).

The somewhat haphazard overall character of the early European Communities was also reflected in their fragmented organizational structure. While they shared some institutional structures such as the Parliamentary Assembly (the predecessor of today's European Parliament), each of them also had separate bodies. It took a whole decade until, in 1967, the three communities merged further into one. Especially during this early period, EU integration was characterized by trial and error. Key actors such as Jean Monnet, one of the most influential supporters of European unity who mostly worked behind the scenes and without a major official position, tried to identify issues for which the interests of the member states overlapped sufficiently to allow for new initiatives – while also avoiding those areas in which another regional organization was already working successfully (Schwabe 2016).

The latter clearly mattered. It helps to explain, for instance, the divergent fate of agricultural and transport integration under the EC banner. Both fields were integrated in the 1957 EEC Treaty with rather vague stipulations. Ten years after the Treaty, the Common Agricultural Policy had turned into the policy domain with the largest bureaucracy, the highest costs, and the biggest controversies in all of the EC. Transport, in contrast, remained marginal in EC policy-making until the 1990s – not least because more technical bodies outside the EC, such as the so-called Eu-

ropean Conference of Ministers of Transport, took care of the international coordination needs in Western Europe. As so often, business actors and stakeholders – in this case railway companies and the transport sector more generally – mattered, and for a long time, they preferred the legally less rigid and geographically broader format of the EC's contenders over integration under the banner of 'Brussels' (Patel and Schot 2011: 383-403).

Over time, however, the EU tapped into more and more policy fields, mainly thanks to its economic rationale. After the foundational period of the 1950s, which saw the creation of the three original communities, particularly the economic and political challenges of the 1970s sparked new initiatives. This contradicts the standard narrative, according to which this decade was a 'dark age' of European integration (Keohane and Stanley 1991: 1-39). This misperception partly results from the fact that most of these new initiatives developed incrementally and without a firm treaty base; in fact, many of them were only later given a robust legal basis with the Single European Act (1986), the Maastricht Treaty (1992), and more recent treaties. Obvious examples are the efforts during the 1970s to venture into monetary policies; other than that, the decade also saw initiatives in fields as diverse as foreign and security policy, environmental protection and health. With its roots in the Treaties of Rome, regional policy slowly evolved from its roots in the Common Agricultural Policy after the first enlargement (see, e.g., Hiepel 2014; Laursen 2014; Weiler 1999). Also from the 1970s, the EC even developed the rudiments of its own cultural policy – partly because culture was conceptualized as a sphere to be exempted from the EC's economic rationale; partly because various actors from the Commission and some of the member states felt that efforts in this field were needed to give the integration project new legitimacy (Patel 2013).

This expansion of the EC's policy domains implied a renegotiation of the relationship to other international organizations. The 1970s saw fierce competition between them, for instance on environmental policy as a domain that was only 'invented' as a comprehensive field of international policy-making at the decade's beginning. At the time, the OECD, the Council of Europe and even, for instance, NATO became active in this hot issue. As the most recent research shows, these forums did not just co-exist and compete; time and again, they also cooperated and emulated each other. Here and in other contexts, the EC often proved receptive to ideas, approaches, and governance structures first discussed and implemented in other international organizations; repeatedly, it adapted such approaches and developed them further. Its greater legal integration as well as its larger financial means helped it to eventually emerge as the key forum on environmental issues in Western Europe (Kaiser and Meyer 2016).

And environmental policy is only one example. On trade, for instance, the EC outpaced the OECD since the 1960s and 1970s while on regional policies and more and more also on human rights issues, it started to compete with the Council of Europe. In all these cases, the European Communities selectively adapted policies first developed in other forums. Also during this period, nation-states did not see the EC as the only alternative to national sovereignty or to traditional diplomatic formats – instead, they shopped around for various venues. In the end, however, they more and more frequently ended up in the emporium of the European Communities (see, e.g., Meyer 2017; Wasserberg 2017: 423-444; Soriano 2015).

The majority of these changes happened incrementally and remained below the radar of most citizens. During the Cold War, the EC mostly dealt with issues of comparably low political and economic salience. Admittedly, the ECSC was set up to prevent war among the member states by integrating the coal and steel sectors. However, some of its key features fell defunct only a few years after this earliest predecessor of the EU had been set up. For Western Europe's security, NATO was always much more important than any EC policy. The Common Market removed trade barriers but also here, negotiations and results remained mostly technical. The Common Agricultural Policy, finally, served as a means to secure the peaceful transition of the primary sector into a post-agricultural and even a post-industrial world; in that sense, it was more a social than an economic policy. Many policy-makers, experts, and citizens considered its high costs a serious nuisance – still, the substantial budget earmarked for the support of farmers never threatened to wreck the stability of the member states. In that sense, the economic and systemic impact of EC policies remained secondary. Where it mattered more was at the symbolic level. Again, particularly since the 1970s, the EC came to represent all efforts of European integration, and to secure a peaceful, prosperous future for the (Western half of the) continent. This symbolic role, however, should not be confused with the actual salience and impact of its policies on the societies of its member states.

PAYING PRICE OF PRIMACY: DIFFERENTIATION

The EU only gained real systemic importance and visibility when the reform debates and initiatives of the 1970s and 1980s fully impacted on political practice from the 1990s onwards. The most important project in this context was the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU), initiated on the basis of the Maastricht Treaty and achieved in three stages. The most far-reaching accomplishment was the introduction of the single currency in

1999 and actual euro notes and coins three years later. Again, the prehistory is revealing. Monetary policy, as EMU's backbone, had remained beyond the powers of the EC in the 1950s and 1960s. That does not mean that there existed no cooperation in this field. The capitalist monetary order of the time was secured by the Bretton Woods system, an international arrangement in which the US dollar was tied to gold and other western currencies were linked to the dollar at a fixed exchange rate. But when Bretton Woods collapsed in the early 1970s, a yawning governance gap opened up which the EC sought to close through various measures. Whereas its initiatives during the 1970s and 1980s were not too successful, EMU lifted developments to a fundamentally different level. Similar processes also characterized other fields, such as migration, where the full weight of the EU only came to be increasingly visible and felt after the end of the Cold War (Harold 2012; Mourlon-Druol 2012; Schmitz 2014).

The complex process in which the pre-Maastricht EC became the leading forum of Western European cooperation was bound up with a paradoxical countercurrent. Exactly at the time when it began to acquire real salience and even primacy over other organizations, centrifugal forces gained momentum. These dynamics sometimes unleashed processes of dysfunctionality and even disintegration. Equally important, they led to a new phenomenon within the EC: time and again, only some member states were willing or able to take part in new projects aimed at deepening integration further. The EC's increasing primacy was thus the very reason why terms such as 'multi-speed Europe', 'variable geometry', 'differentiated integration', and 'Europe à la carte' entered the debate and impacted political developments. This discussion became visible in the mid-1970s, in the context of debates about a common monetary policy under the auspices of the EC. From rather mundane beginnings, integration now had the potential of impacting a core issue of state sovereignty.

And this was only the first instance of the debate. During the 1980s, when justice and home affairs entered the radar of EC policy-making, the discussion took a similar turn (Oberloskamp 2017). Again, European integration now touched issues of high salience. This also helps to explain why only some EC member states became part of the 1985 Schengen Agreement which largely abolished internal border checks (see, e.g., Paoli 2013).

Opting in or out also became ever more important as the EC accepted new member states and thus turned into a more heterogeneous entity. All in all, the EC started to play a role in ever more and ever more important policy fields. Simultaneously, enlargement made it more diverse. Against this backdrop, it became increasingly difficult to keep all member states on board in all projects, and differentiation was often the easiest solution to this challenge (De Witte, Ott and Vos 2017).

This trend has become even stronger since the early 1990s. It has characterized the EU ever since, further intensifying with the Common Foreign and Security Policy and the introduction of the euro – two projects that several member states chose not to join. For a long time, public and academic debates have tended to ignore the full implications of this development. Instead, the discussion was dominated by an understanding of differentiation that was doubly short-sighted: For one teleologically, assuming that every state will ultimately reach the same goal, some simply more quickly than others. An awareness that permanent differentiation is the most likely outcome has only become more visible in recent years (De Witte *et al.* 2017). For another, the problem has been framed too one-sidedly in terms of progressive deepening and enlargement making it harder to achieve homogeneity. While that is certainly correct, the EC's gradual rise to become the foremost forum for European cooperation is also relevant. One reason for the proliferation of differentiation questions within the EC and today's EU is that its power increasingly closed off established arrangements for task-sharing among multiple international organizations. Or, to put it differently: In the 1950s and 1960s, governments in Western Europe often had the choice between various international organizations and their different models of governance. Today, that is much less the case – simply because the EU is frequently the only choice available at the European level.

It would be wrong to frame this simply as a success story, according to which the EC/EU became ever more important. Ironically, turning into the primary forum also made it more vulnerable. If everything that matters is brought under one roof, the firewalls that once separated different organizations such as the EC, the OECD, and the Council of Europe are lost. Challenges and severe problems in one policy area can now more easily spark crises in others because they are all handled in one and the same forum. In that sense, phenomena and processes seen as emanating from crises in the EC were in fact frequently the very result of its increasing salience and primacy.

CONCLUSIONS

The predecessors of today's EU were not the only forum of regional cooperation and integration that emerged in Western Europe after 1945. The Brussels Pact, NATO, OECD, UNECE and the Council of Europe are all examples of other such efforts, even if most accounts marginalize their respective contributions. It was only from the 1970s and 1980s onwards that the EC became an entity which far exceeded the roles of these other forums, thus also transcending the remit and scope of a normal interna-

tional organization. The EC’s staunchest supporters – and its fiercest critics – had already seen the potential for such a development decades before. From the perspective of today, however, it is crucial to distinguish between visions and projections on the one hand and the actual role of the EC/EU on the other. From that angle, the eventual rise of the EU to become the foremost forum of cooperation and integration in Europe was not a given, nor were its capacities to impact global affairs. It arrived in such a position as the result of a decades-long process full of twists and turns. It requires rigorous historical analysis to uncover these developments, which have long been buried beneath narratives and interpretative patterns that were strongly shaped by the actors involved in the European integration process itself.

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