

The Politics of the European Union

MT week 5

13/11/25



DPIR
DEPARTMENT OF POLITICS &
INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Theories of European Integration and Disintegration

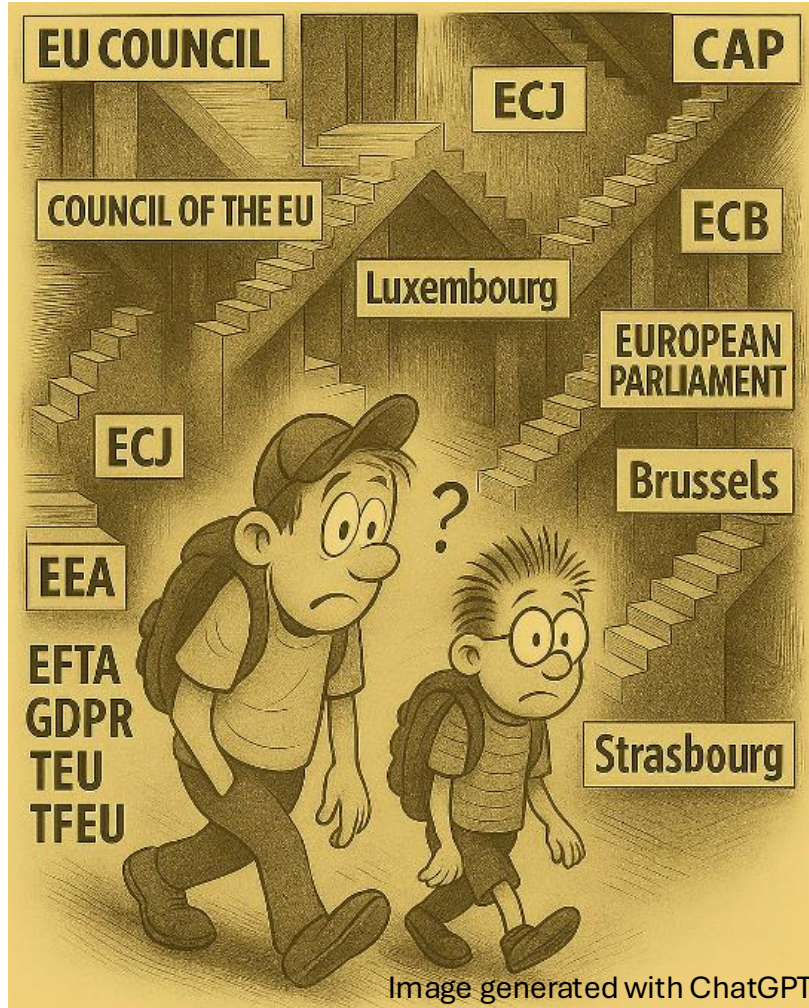
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Border crossing between Italy and Austria

Introduction: What do we need integration theories for?

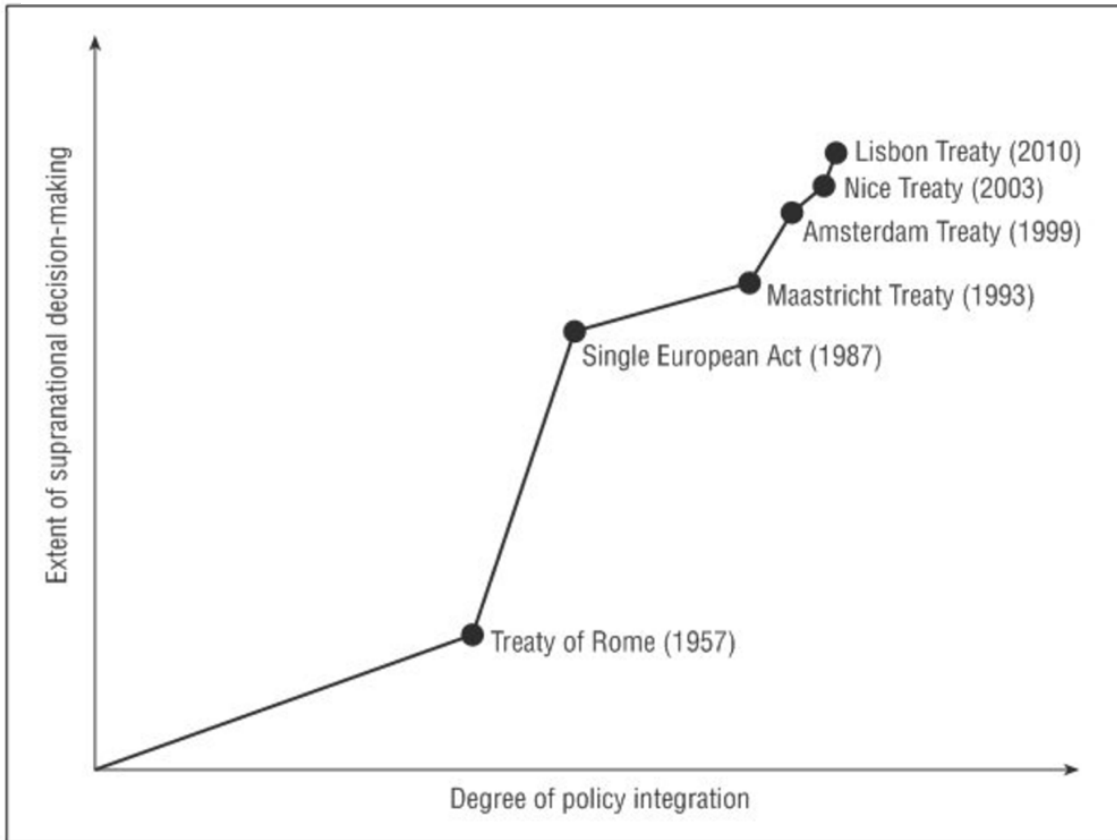


To help us make sense of the EU's complexities and answer important questions that concern us throughout this course, like:

- Why do different EU institutions exist and where do they fit in the EU's broader institutional architecture?
- Why is there a common currency but not a European welfare state, and is this a problem?
- Is the EU democratic?
- Has the EU emerged weaker or stronger from the crises it has faced since 2010 – the Eurozone crisis, the migration crisis, Brexit, COVID-19, Russian aggression?

European integration: A timeline

Advancement of the integration process with each treaty:



Source: Hix and Høyland 2011

Even though there has been no new treaty since Lisbon, the integration process has advanced in important ways since then, e.g.:

- The creation of the European Banking Union in the 2010s to strengthen financial market regulation
- Joint borrowing through Eurobonds to finance the recovery from the pandemic

But there are also examples of disintegration like Brexit.

Structure of the rest of the lecture

1. Who drives the European Integration process?

- The debate between intergovernmentalism and neofunctionalism

2. How does day-to-day policymaking work in the EU?

- Is the EU a political system like any other or are its governance processes unique?

3. Will EU integration continue to advance at a time of continuous crisis?

- Will the practical advantages of addressing crises together trump the popular backlash that repeated crises provoke?

Conclusion & two bonus questions

1. Who drives the European Integration process?

The liberal intergovernmentalist answer: Member-states

- EU politics are dominated by national governments, which participate in European integration because it is in the **economic interest of major domestic producer groups**
- Governments reach mutually beneficial deals in the Council through **interstate bargaining**. Governments least interested in a deal get the most concessions.
- Governments delegate power to supranational institutions as a means of ensuring that the deals they have struck will be adhered to. This allows them to **credibly commit** to cooperate.

Key scholar: Andrew Moravcsik

The European Council:
“In the EU, every leader becomes a monarch”,
The Economist (Charlemagne, 23/10/21)



Example: Moravcsik's explanation of the Maastricht Treaty

- Following a series of currency crises, producer groups in France and Italy supported a common European currency to benefit from the **monetary stability** it would bring.
- Because **Germany was least interested** in the common currency (the Deutsche Mark was already stable), it could impose its own preferences regarding the design of Economic and Monetary Union.
- National governments delegated power to a highly autonomous European Central Bank to guarantee the **credibility of their commitment to low-inflation monetary policymaking**.



The neofunctionalist answer: Supranational actors & spillover effects

- While the national governments' initial decision to integrate – i.e. to shift political activities to a new centre – is attributable to their interests and values at the time, the integration process later becomes self-perpetuating.
- Integration in one policy area will create a rationale for integration in related policy areas (**functional spillover**)
- Supranational actors will seek to expand their mandate (**cultivated spillover**)
- Socioeconomic groups will pursue their interests at the European level (**political spillover**)

Key scholars: Ernst Haas, Leon Lindberg

The Commission President:
“The European Commission is becoming more
powerful, quietly”,
The Economist (Charlemagne, 1/5/21)



Peter Schrank

Example: A neofunctionalist interpretation of Maastricht

- Functional spillover: The **Single Market** created a need for a common currency to reduce transaction costs
- Cultivated spillover: **Jacques Delors**, Commission President between 1985-94, made the political, intellectual, and technical case for adopting the common currency
- Political spillover: A **transnational coalition of central bankers** significantly influenced the EMU's architecture

The New York Times

Jacques Delors, Passionate Architect of European Unity, Dies at 98

As the executive of the European Union for a decade, he oversaw its increasing economic integration and led the drive for a single currency, the euro.



The historical institutionalist addition: Path dependence

- An additional reason why the integration process becomes self-perpetuating is that integration-related decisions taken in the present may prove undesirable in the future...
 - e.g. due to the **short time horizons** of elected politicians or due to **unintended consequences**
- ... but may be **path-dependent**, i.e. difficult to reverse.
 - This can happen due to decision-making rules with a **status quo bias** (e.g. unanimity or qualified majority voting rules), or due to earlier decisions being costly to reverse, which causes **lock-in**.
- Example: Including Greece in EMU

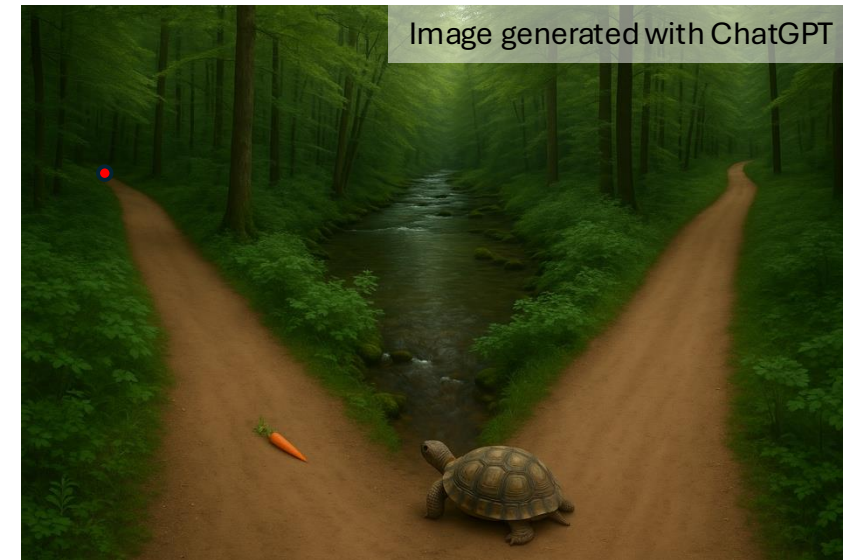


Image generated with ChatGPT

Key scholar: Paul Pierson



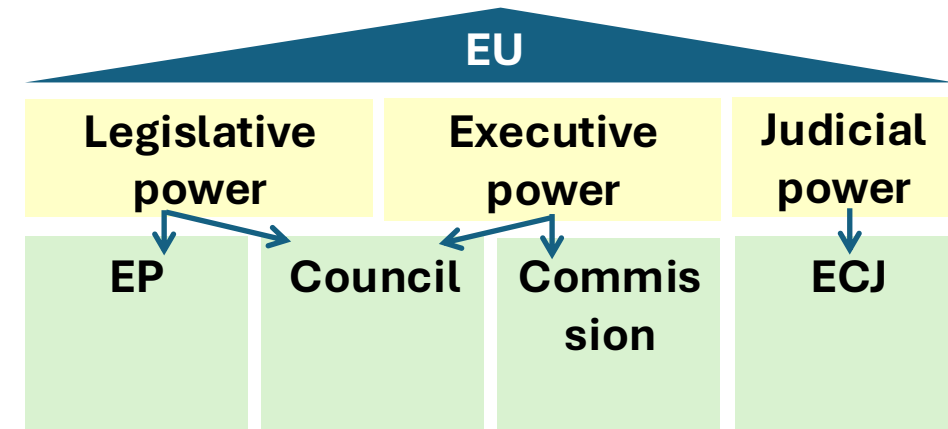
2. How does day-to-day policymaking work in the EU?

The EU as a political system like any other

- Despite its peculiarities, the EU has stable institutions for collective decision-making, receives political demands from EU citizens on a continuous basis, and significantly affects the allocation of resources and values in Europe

➔ It is a **political system like any other** and we can draw on **theories from comparative politics** to answer questions like:

- Compared to domestic political parties, how effective are European parties at aggregating and representing citizens' preferences?
- Compared to other core executives, does the College of Commissioners exercise political leadership effectively and accountably?



Key scholar: Simon Hix

The EU as *sui generis* political entity

- Despite the characteristics it shares with both federal systems and international organisations, the EU is neither of the two:
 - ➔ It is a **unique instance of supranational integration** among nation-states with distinct politics and cultures, and we should study it **in its own terms**, drawing concepts from international relations, comparative politics, and political theory selectively.
- E.g. How does decision-making work in the EU? ➔ **Multilevel governance** approaches: Authority is split among the sub-national, national, transnational, and supranational tiers
- E.g. How should democracy work in the EU? ➔ **Democracy** approach: In ways that reflect the EU's character as "a Union of peoples who govern together, but not as one." (Nicolaïdis 2013)

Key scholars: Gary Marks and Liesbeth Hooghe

Key scholar: Kalypso Nicolaïdis

3. Will EU integration continue to advance at a time of continuous crisis?

Forces of integration

- To the extent that they can be managed better through cooperation at the European level, crises provide a **renewed functional imperative** for integration

“Europe will be forged in crises, and will be the sum of the solutions adopted for those crises.” - Jean Monnet

- The EU’s existing **institutional architecture** favours the adoption of collective, rather than national, responses to crises. E.g., during the pandemic:
 - A joint economic recovery from COVID-19 was a shared EU interest due to the interdependence generated by the Single Market and the Euro (**functional spillover effect**)
 - Paradoxically, the **weakness of the centre** of the EU polity facilitated a negotiated solution that was broadly acceptable to member-states (*Alexander-Shaw et al. 2023*)



Forces of disintegration

- Crises are **critical junctures** where many options are on the table: the continuation of path-dependence processes and business as usual cannot be taken for granted.
- Some of the crises that the EU has faced in the last fifteen years have been highly **divisive** (especially the migration crisis and the Eurozone crisis)
- Repeated crises exacerbate the **popular backlash** that has been constraining the process of European Integration since the early 1990s (this is the phenomenon of **constraining dissensus** identified by Hooghe and Marks 2008)





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Conclusion

Key take-aways

- Theories provide **conceptual building blocks** and **roadmaps** that help us answer important questions about a complex reality.
- **Who drives the European integration process?** → Liberal intergovernmentalism emphasises the **primacy of member-states**, while neo-functionalism and historical institutionalism highlight the **self-reinforcing logic** of the integration process
- **How does day-to-day EU policymaking work?** → Viewing the EU as a state-like political system highlights **important dynamics** at play, but recognising the EU's uniqueness helps avoid **simplistic comparisons** and **misleading prescriptions**
- **Will the EU survive repeated crises?** → There are **forces of both integration and disintegration** at play – which ones do you think will prevail and why?



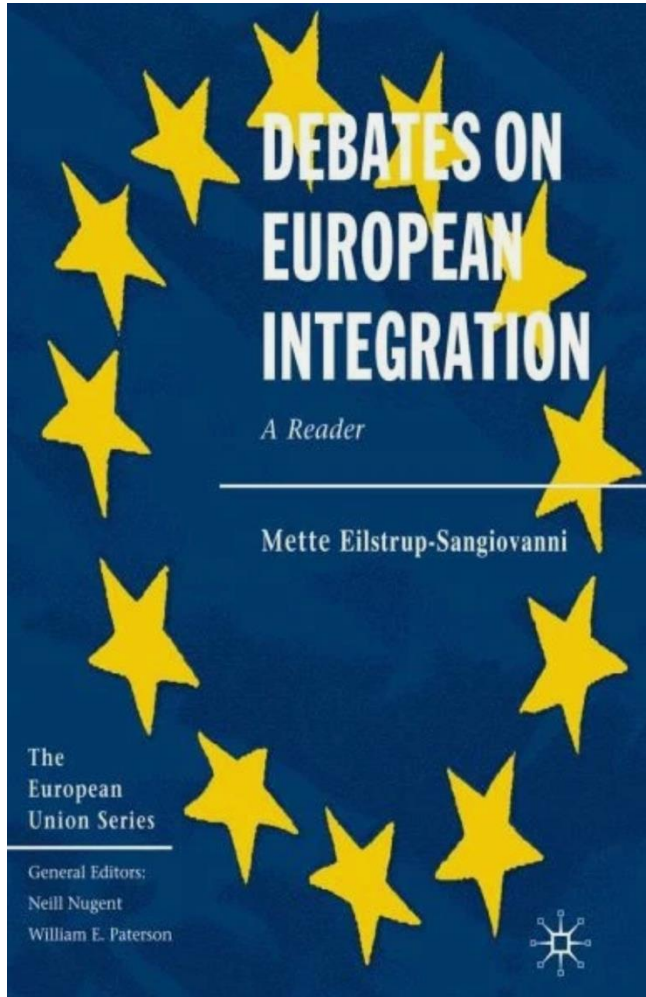
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Two bonus questions

Where do the other theories I have read about fit in all this?

- They offer **insights related to all the questions we have addressed** through the variables and dynamics they highlight. Whether in terms of advancing European integration, taking daily EU policy decisions, or responding to crises...
- **Rational-choice institutionalism** emphasises how self-interested, calculative actors pursue their interests within a given set of **institutional incentives and constraints**
- **Sociological institutionalism** and **constructivism** emphasise the malleability of understandings of individual and national self-interest, the influence of **ideas**, and the role of discourses in shaping policy outcomes
- **Critical perspectives** highlight **overlooked dynamics** at play, such as the influence of neo-liberalism, patriarchy, and colonial legacies in EU politics.

How should I study theories of European integration?



- Don't rely exclusively on how others have reconstructed the main debates about European integration: **Read the original texts and form your own opinion!**
- Theories are useful because they help us answer concrete questions. Rather than trying to grapple with all theories at once, ask yourself:
 - What are the **important questions** in the field?
 - What are the **relevant theories** – those that have offered the principal ways to answer those questions?
 - Which of those answers is **the most compelling**, theoretically and empirically?