Reverse to Disintegration: The Cohesive Effect of Brexit on the EU27

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Abstract

This contribution analyses the political impact of Brexit on the cohesion of the EU27. Contrary to the mainstream idea that Brexit has led to disintegration, the hypothesis is that Brexit had a cohesive effect on EU integration. Paradoxically, Brexit was a break of EU integration due to the loss of the UK but led also, after the crises of the 2010s, to a reconfiguration of EU 27 in favour of keeping integration strong. The article is divided into four parts. First, it presents a critical review of the theoretical literature on EU disintegration. In the second section, it analyses why the EU27 member states remained cohesive during the Brexit negotiation talks on crucial issues as the Single Market, free movement of persons and budgetary contribution. In the third section, the article explains why Brexit did not have a strong effect on the rise of Euroscepticism among the public opinions of the EU27. In the fourth section, it analyses the reasons why Eurosceptic parties (especially right wing ones) within the EU27 started using Brexit as an argument against the very idea of EU integration, but quickly abandoned as the negotiation talks between the EU27 and the UK progressed.

Key words
Brexit, disintegration, EU negotiations, EU political parties, EU public opinions, integration, Single Market

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Introduction

Until the coming into force of the Treaty of Lisbon on 1 December 2009, there was no procedure in the EU treaties allowing a member state to leave the EU and renationalize entirely its policies. Demands for exit never concretely happened, even if Algeria in 1962 and Greenland in 1985 quitted the European Communities as the first left France and the second became more detached from Denmark (Patel, 2018). The Treaty of Lisbon introduced article 50 in the Treaty on the European Union. It states that ‘any member state may decide to withdraw from the Union in accordance with its own constitutional requirements’. There are reasons why such a provision on exit was introduced so lately in the EU treaties. For five decades, national politicians considered the EU as a polity that evolves through crises (sometimes severe ones) and requires differentiation to accommodate diversity among the member states, but never abandoned the teleological goal of having more ‘integration’ (Saurugger 2013). It is with the rise of Eurosceptic parties in the 2000s (Lecomte 2010) that some national politicians, at the edge of the political spectrum, started contemplating the possibility for a Member State to give up its membership and renationalize entirely its policymaking. Such a scenario became a reality with the UK referendum on Brexit of 23 June 2016, resulting in 51.9 per cent of the British citizens supporting exit from the EU (Evans and Menon 2019). With Brexit, EU national politicians started seeing the EU not from the sole perspective of ‘integration’ between the member states anymore, but also with the perspective of ‘disintegration’.

If Brexit can effectively be considered as a form of disintegration, this article shows that looking at the EU27 member states shows a paradoxical effect of Brexit, which is an increase in EU cohesiveness and integration. To demonstrate this thesis, the article proceeds in four parts. First, it presents a critical review of the theoretical literature on EU disintegration. Second, it explains why the EU27 governments remained cohesive during the Brexit negotiation talks on crucial issues such as the Single Market, free movement of people and EU budgetary arrangements. Third, the article shows why Brexit did not contribute to the rise of Euroscepticism among the public opinions of the EU27 member states. Finally, it analyses the reasons why Eurosceptic parties (especially right-wing ones) in the EU27, considering the difficulties of the Brexit negotiation talks, quickly abandoned in their programmes the possibility for their
member state to follow the UK and leave the EU. The article concludes by taking the opposite view on Brexit meaning only disintegration and break of the EU polity.

**Brexit and EU Disintegration Debate**

Scholarly research follows a similar path to the political debate regarding the study of the EU. From the 1950s to the 2010s, the theoretical literature, both in International Relations and comparative politics, was focused on the concept of European ‘integration’ postulating that the EU was a process of convergence between the policies, politics and polities of its member states (Bulmer and Lequesne, 2013). Differentiation between the member states was taken more seriously into account from the 1990s onwards (Leufen, Ritterger, Schimmelfennig 2013), but without upsetting seriously the concept of ‘integration’, with few exceptions (Vollaard, 2014; Webber 2014). While the British referendum on Brexit opened the concrete possibility of a member state leaving the EU, scholars activated the concept of European ‘disintegration’ and questioned more in depth the relevance of the existing EU theories to analyse such a new perspective (Webber 2019a; 2019b).

In his book, Douglas Webber identifies three forms of political disintegration in the EU (Webber 2019a; Webber 2019b). Sectoral disintegration equates to the reduction of issue areas in which the EU exercises policy-making competences. Vertical political disintegration concerns the reduction of the formal (i.e. treaty-based) competences and effective authority of the EU’s supranational political organs vis-à-vis the intergovernmental institutions and/or those of the member states. Finally, horizontal political disintegration corresponds to a reduction in the number of EU member states (Webber 2019a: 14). Webber’s multidimensional definition of political disintegration in the EU is very inspiring, but also provides a certain risk of confusion with preexisting concepts. For instance, sectoral political disintegration in Webber’s terms is very close to the existing definition of differentiation, except that scholars of differentiated integration often discussed the effects of differentiation on the continuity of European integration and do not really deal with disintegration (Leufen, Ritterger, Schimmelfennig 2013). In Webber’s terms, vertical political disintegration can also be confused with intergovernmental cooperation, even if the definition also captures situations where the member states pursue their own, unilateral policies. In this article, disintegration will only be used in the restrictive sense of the retreat of a member state
from the EU and, as a consequence, the re-nationalization not only of its policies but of the polity. Disintegration corresponds to a situation where a state retreats completely from the EU and assumes that it will not be submitted at all to the power of the EU institutions and EU policies anymore. In this situation, the classic distinction made by Tanja Börzel between ‘scope’ and ‘level’ in political integration becomes a non-issue (Börzel 2005).

In the case of Brexit, our analysis will demonstrate that the withdrawal of the UK from the EU has a cohesive effect on the 27 remaining member states and, therefore, on European integration. Contrary to what has been predicted in the media but also academia at the time of the Brexit referendum, the prospect of the withdrawal of the UK did not lead to a domino effect towards more EU exits and re-nationalization in the EU27. It is the reverse situation that is happening.

The most convincing theoretical argument to explain the cohesive effect of Brexit on the EU 27 is grounded in Hans Vollaard’s article on EU disintegration, later developed as a book (Vollaard 2014, 2018). Based on Stefano Bartolini’s work on EU polity formation (Bartolini 2005), Hans Vollaard’s work reminds us that European integration is first of all ‘a process of boundary re-definition: state boundaries are transcended, while the boundaries of the EU are constructed’. Disintegration can ‘subsequently be described in opposite terms. A polity is disintegrating when there is a weakening in boundary control’ (Vollaard 2014:8). In the case of Brexit, dissatisfaction and Eurocepticism among UK voices led to an exit option, in Hirschmann’s sense of the term (Hirschmann 1970), which ended up with a decision to de-construct EU boundaries and re-construct national boundaries. The decision to leave the EU was possible in the UK only because, for economic as well as cultural reasons, a majority of British citizens believe that credible national alternatives to EU membership exists. Let’s mention three of these alternatives: a return to a full control of the national parliament on policy for all Brexeters; a move to a Global Britain and Singapore-upon-Thames economic model for neoliberal Brexeters; a return to a purely national Welfare State in which the former UK contribution to the EU budget is transferred to the national budget for left-wing Brexeters (Evans and Menon 2019). There is a British idiosyncrasy regarding this belief in national alternatives to EU boundaries. However, Eurosceptic dissatisfaction, which feeds political movements across EU member states (except perhaps Luxemburg), does not go in the same way as in the UK with ‘credible, external alternatives’ and a belief ‘in national efficacy’ (Vollaard 2014: 14). In the EU 27, Brexit
has been an opportunity for governments and public opinions to realize that there is no real national alternative to the EU internal market (from which capital and employment depend), free movement of persons, and the distributive effects of the EU budget.

If Brexit equates to disintegration as it consists in the withdrawal of a member state, it is also means more EU integration as the EU27 member states exclude the reorganization of their polity, policies and politics around purely national boundaries. For this reason, it is possible to assume that Brexit provides a cohesive effect on the 27 member states and reinforces EU integration in reconfiguring the game between the 27.

**Governemental cohesion in the Brexit negotiations**

The Brexit negotiations between the UK and the EU27 took place, under the provisions of article 50 TEU, from June 2017 to November 2018. This section focuses on this 18 month-period of negotiations while the 27 member states were represented by a plenipotentiary negotiator, Michel Barnier, a former French minister and EU commissioner, who got his mandate approved by the 27 member states on 22 May 2017 (Toute l’Europe 2019). If Michel Barnier worked with a special team composed of Commission staff, his negotiating tasks were supervised during the whole process by the governments of the 27 member states to which he was accountable. Michel Barnier, who had to deal with three different UK chief negotiators during a period of 18 months, did not therefore define his positions in total autonomy. He was constrained by the member states’ positions expressed on a regular basis at the levels of the European Council, the “General Affairs” Council of ministers, and the Committee of Permanent Representatives (COREPER) (Jacobs 2018).

Empirically, the positions of the 27 member states during the negotiations can be identified through positions, declarations and speeches by national ministers and officials. There is only a small body of academic literature on these member states’ reactions to Brexit (Kassim and Usherwood 2018; Martill and Staiger 2018). The section will mostly refer to the well-documented country chapters in Kassim and Usherwood’s study of EU27 reactions to Brexit.
If all 27 member states expressed regrets after the UK government’s decision in March 2017 to activate article 50 TEU, more concerns could be expected from some member states than others, because they were politically close to the UK on EU issues. We will concentrate on these member states to demonstrate that political closeness with the UK
did not impact the cohesiveness of member states’ positions regarding Brexit. We define political closeness by means of two criteria: (i) interest and (ii) ideology. Interest closeness refers to the high degree of economic exchanges and/or public policies that a member state shares with the UK. Ideological closeness refers to a shared macroview of the future of the EU polity and/or the process of European integration.

On the interest side, Ireland, Denmark, the Netherlands and Poland, but also Germany, are politically close to the UK. The latter is Ireland’s third partner for export sales (Laffan 2018), the Netherlands’ third biggest trade partner (UK Government 2018) and the second trade partner of Poland after Germany, absorbing 7 per cent of the Polish sales (Styczynska 2018). In Denmark, experts consider that Brexit could represent a loss of 0.5 to 2 per cent of the GDP due to the very dynamic economic exchanges (Dagnis Jensen and Dahl Kelstrup 2018), while in Germany, Brexit is mostly perceived by the CDU-CSU/SPD government as the loss of a close partner in the EU negotiations on internal market and trade policy issues (Heidbreder 2018).

On the ideological closeness side, Central European member states like the Czech Republic, Poland and Hungary, since they became members in 2004, have seen in the UK a political guarantor to balance the power of the Franco-German tandem in the EU (Kaniok 2018; Krotz and Schild 2018). The balancing function of the UK has been perceived in the same way in Denmark and Sweden which remain outside the Eurozone (Dagnis Jensen and Dahl Kelstrup 2018; Braun 2018). In Poland and Hungary, the minimal engagement of the UK regarding European integration has also been considered by the right-wing conservative leaders, such as Kaczyński and Orban, as a useful limit to the development of the European polity towards more supranationality (Styczynska 2018; Csehi 2018).

These two forms of political closeness –interests-based and ideology-based- with the UK could have led these member states to accept generous concessions during the Brexit negotiation talks. But the contrary happened. They remained cohesive inside the EU27 member states on setting red lines to UK demands, making Michel Barnier’s task easier than what the British negotiators first expected. Three issues on which the positions of the EU27 remained cohesive vis-à-vis the British demands can be mentioned: (i) the internal market and customs union, including the management of the Irish border; (ii) the free movement of persons; (iii) the British budgetary contribution. On the internal market and customs union issues, it appeared after Theresa May’s speech at Lancaster House in January 2017 that the UK government did not want to
stay in both frameworks. The Norwegian or the Swiss models consisting of fully implementing the Single Market rules without being an EU member state was ruled out by the British Prime Minister (May 2017). A major problem happened regarding the relationship to the Republic of Ireland in the absence of a hard border with Northern Ireland. In her Lancaster House speech, Prime Minister May said that ‘the United Kingdom will share a land border with the EU, and maintaining that Common Travel Area with the Republic of Ireland will be an important priority for the UK in the talks ahead’ (May 2017). For the EU27 governments, a logical question ensued from the British Prime Minister’s proposal: how to have border-free traffic between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland if the former (part of the UK) has left the EU Single Market and the Customs Union? The Irish border soon became the hot potato of the Brexit talks. During the negotiation rounds, the British delegation tried to downplay the problem by proposing various technological means of control – most of them to be invented - to avoid the re-establishment of a hard border. But the EU27 governments considered that there was no alternative to the reestablishment of a hard border, because accepting a derogation would immediately open a breach in the integrity of the Single Market. Whatever their previous closeness to the UK, the EU27 governments stayed united on the question of the Irish border which contributed to the so-called ‘Irish backstop’ solution. As Michel Barnier’s proposals to keep Northern Ireland entirely in the Single Market or to establish customs border controls between the two islands were not acceptable for the British side, it was decided in the November 2018 Withdrawal Agreement that the UK as a whole would stay in the EU customs union, forming with the EU a single customs territory (Withdrawal Agreement and Political Declaration 2018). This compromise, which avoided a need for tariffs, quotas and checks on rules of origin between the EU and the UK, became one of the most controversial reasons why a majority of UK members of Parliament rejected the EU-UK deal. But it also showed that the EU27 governments preferred staying united on the functioning of the EU internal market and the customs union than accepting the break proposed by the UK.

Free movement of persons was the second element of the Brexit negotiations on which the EU27 governments remained tough and united. According to the United Nations and the UK National Office of Statistics, 1.3 million British citizens lived and worked in the EU27 member states (mostly in Spain, France and Germany), while 3.8 million EU27 citizens (mostly from Poland and Ireland, but also Italy and France) lived and
worked in the UK (Financial Times 4 November 2018; Full Fact 2019). As the issue of reducing migration in general, and intra-EU migration in particular, were presented as priorities by the Brexiteers during the referendum campaign, EU27 governments worried about the future of their citizens in the UK. In Poland, the main issue of Brexit discussed in bilateral exchanges between the Polish Prime ministers and the UK Prime Minister during the Brexit talks was the rights of the Polish citizens living in the UK (estimated between 700,000 and 900,000 in 2017) to stay and work after Brexit (Styczynska 2018). In the Czech Republic, the government rejected during the negotiation ‘any attempt to limit free movement of people’ (Kanioc 2018: 43). In Italy, ‘the preservation of the rights for Italian citizens living in the UK’ was also essential (Brunazzo and Dela Salla 2018: 35). All governments, whatever their previous political closeness with the UK supported a strong protection of rights for the 3.8 million EU citizens living in the UK and a strict reciprocity of treatment between their citizens in the UK and the UK citizens in their countries. On this issue as well, the EU27 governments formed a cohesive front based on preserving the acquis of the free movement of persons. There was no breach consisting in accepting flexible demands from the UK during the negotiation talks.

Regarding the British budgetary contribution, the 27 member-states agreed that the UK must pay a budgetary compensation to the EU in order to respect its previous commitments to the EU policies. This issue was particularly controversial on the British domestic scene, especially among hard Brexiteers from the Conservative Party and UKIP. Again, the debates in the member states which were traditionally close to the UK are relevant to analyse. In the Netherlands, the UK’s possible refusal to pay opened a debate about refusing the increase in the Dutch contribution to the EU budget, as the country was still an important net contributo (DutchNews.nl.2018). The same concerns emerged in France, Germany and Sweden, while in Poland and Lithuania—net beneficiaries of the EU budget- safeguarding a generous funding from the EU was the issue at stake (Styczynska 2018; Vilpisasaks 2018).

Three conclusions can be drawn from the positions of the EU27 governments in the Brexit negotiations, in particular if we look at the member states which had been close to the UK inside the EU. First, ideology was never a sufficient criteron among the EU27 governments to grant concessions to the UK. The British government was never able to play the game of Euroscepticism as an ideology to obtain concessions in the negotiations, including with Eurosceptic governments such as in Poland and Hungary.
Previous relations with the UK did not influence the positions of the EU27 governments on the Single market rules, free movement of persons and budgetary contribution in the negotiation talks. The rhetorical game consisting in linking Brexit to a strong critic of the EU (as Orban or Kaczynski are used to do) does not fit with the game consisting in preserving the economic interests provided by the EU. Second, and as a consequence of the first conclusion, rational economic interests matter for the EU27 governments and explain their clear refusal of any opt-out from the Single Market rules, free movement of persons and budgetary arrangements. Third, EU27 governments not only ruled out the scenario of disintegration launched by the UK government with Brexit, but reaffirmed the scenario of integration between themselves. They clearly demonstrated that they did not agree with a rollover of their political boundaries from the EU to the nation-state.

The limited effect of Brexit on EU27 public opinion

This section focuses on the impact that Brexit had on the public opinions of EU27. In Exit, Voice and Loyalty, Hirschman distinguishes between two alternative modes to express dissatisfaction with organizations: ‘exit’ which consists in leaving the organization, and ‘voice’ which consists in claiming dissatisfaction with the aim of influencing and changing the organisation. ‘Loyalty’ may delay the expression of dissatisfaction and affect the choice between ‘exit’ and ‘voice’ (Hirschmann 1970). In the late 2000s, academic literature introduced a typology distinguishing between ‘soft’ Euroscepticism and ‘hard’ Euroscepticism in order to differentiate protest from outright rejection expressed in the form of Europhobia (Szczerbiak and Taggart 2008). In the first case, Euroscepticism consists in accepting the principle of European integration while criticising EU policies; in the second case, Euroscepticism consists in rejecting the membership to the EU and supporting leaving it.

In general, three approaches explain the attitude of public opinion towards Euroscepticism. First, a utilitarian and economic approach (cost/benefit calculation) shows that citizens with higher human capital, such as education and income, tend to support European economic integration and the Single Market (Gabel 1998). Second, studies on identity stress that citizens with an exclusive attachment to their nation state are more likely to be Eurosceptic (McLaren 2002). Third, the ‘cue theory’ focuses on the importance of political mediation (Hooghe and Marks 2005); it considers the EU as
an integral part of national policies and assumes that political attitudes towards the EU are influenced by national political institutions. In other words, elites and political parties at the national level mediate the way public opinion perceives the EU. In this perspective, while the mainstream parties provide positive cues about the EU, the far-left and far-right parties generally show a Eurosceptic attitude towards the EU (De Vries and Edwards 2009).

These different approaches are useful to understand public attitudes towards the EU and Euroscepticism. However, they do not provide a full analysis of how the outcome of the referendum on Brexit has impacted public opinion in the EU27. As De Vries wrote, ‘public opinion towards the EU is best understood with reference to benchmarks’ and the ‘benchmark theory suggests that people’s attitudes towards Europe are ultimately rooted in a comparison, namely in a comparison between the benefits of the current status quo of membership with those associated with an alternative state of one’s country being outside the EU (…) When we understand support and scepticism as a comparison between the benefits of the current status quo of membership and those associated with an alternative state, the Brexit vote and its immediate aftermath become crucially important’ (De Vries 2017: 40-42). Opinion polls conducted after the British referendum suggest that public opinion has become more favourable to EU membership in all EU member states including the UK (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2016; Pew Research Center 2017). More recent survey data (European Parliament 2018; Eurobarometer 2018; Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung 2018) show in the same way that support for EU membership has increased significantly since the Brexit referendum (Figure 1).

**Figure 1:** EU28 public opinions and membership to the EU (2007-2018)
Moreover, as shown in Figure 2, there is no majority in favour of leaving the European Union (‘exit’) in any EU27 country - including Hungary, Poland and Italy - although there are criticisms of EU policy-making (‘voice’).

Figure 2: Attitudes towards EU membership at national level (October 2018)

Source: Eurobarometer Survey 90, European Parliament, October 2018
Research shows that immigration has a stronger effect on Euroscepticism among the EU27 public opinions than Brexit (Krastev 2017). As we will analyse in the next section, this explains why Eurosceptic political parties seek to promote against the EU a discourse focused mostly on the rejection of immigration. It is considered as a top priority of the political agenda in more than two thirds of the EU27 member states and it is the first issue that fuels Euroscepticism among public opinions (Figure 3).

**Figure 3 : Salient issues at EU level**

![Figure 3: Salient issues at EU level](image)

Source: Standard Eurobarometer surveys

Beyond the immigration issue, three other factors can explain why Brexit has not been a mobilising issue in the EU27 (Jacobs 2018). First, since the Brexit referendum, high political uncertainty has been felt due to the tensions among the different components of the UK polity. These difficulties have increased support for EU membership (De Vries 2017). Second, the fear of the economic and financial consequences of exiting the EU leads a majority of public opinion to argue against leaving the EU or the Eurozone (Roth, Jonung and Nowak-Lehmann 2016; Hobolt and Wratil 2015; Hobolt and Leblond 2014). The most recent studies (Bergbauer, Jamet, Persson, Hernborg 2019) and opinion surveys show that support for the Eurozone membership stands high in the Eurozone (Figure 4). 75% of respondents in the Eurozone support the single
currency, while only 20% are against it. Among the member states of the Eurozone, support is lower but rising in Italy (63%, +2pp), and highest in Slovenia (86%, +2pp) (Eurobarometer Survey EB 90 November 2018).

**Figure 4: Support for the Economic Monetary Union and the euro in EU Member states (November 2018)**

![Map of EU Member states showing support for the euro](source)

Even though controlling more strictly immigration was a top priority for UKIP during the Brexit referendum campaign (Clarke et al. 2017), surveys suggest that a majority of voters in the EU27 consider that the reduction of migration flows require solutions at the European rather than the national level (Figure 5). One of the consequences of the refugee crisis of 2015 has been a growing awareness that the problem of border control is a European public good. Figure 5 shows that a majority of Europeans are in favour of a common European migration policy.

**Figure 5: Europeans in favour of a Common Migration Policy**
Three conclusions can be drawn about the effect of Brexit on public opinion in the EU27. First, immigration is a factor which has a stronger effect than Brexit on Euroscepticism in the EU27. Second, a majority of EU27 voters consider that they are benefitting more from being inside the EU and the Eurozone than outside. Third, there has been not only a limited effect of Brexit on the rise of Euroscepticism, but the public have become more favourable to EU membership in all Member States since the British referendum took place. Brexit negotiations favours to a certain extent a reconfiguration of EU public opinions in favour of integration. Brexit reinforced rather than diminished European integration in the EU27.

The limits of Brexit for Euroceptic political parties

In this section, we analyse first how Euroceptic political parties in the EU27 were tempted to use Brexit as a discursive resource and an instrumental strategy to demand
drastic changes in the EU policy agenda. Second, we identify the reasons why Eurosceptic parties rapidly abandoned the use of the exit argument.

The analysis starts with Brexit as a discursive resource for Eurosceptic parties. In several EU27 member states, such as the Netherlands and Czech Republic, new neologisms like ‘Nexit’ and ‘Czexit’ appeared in the public debates in the aftermath of the British referendum of June 2016. During the 2017 campaign for the presidential election in France, far-right leader Marine Le Pen mentioned Brexit to ‘regain France's national sovereignty in a Europe of independent nations at the service of its peoples’ (Le Pen 2017). It directly echoed the slogan of Brexeters in the UK: ‘Take back control’.

Two reasons explain the temptation of Eurosceptic parties to use Brexit as a discursive resource. First, the success of the Brexeters in the referendum convinced Eurosceptic parties that EU integration was not an irreversible process and that it was possible to stop it (Webber 2019a). Imitating Nigel Farage's neo-sovereignist narrative was perceived as a means to break the 'rhetoric of impossibilism' (Krastev, quoted in Dujin 2019). Secondly, the British referendum appeared in a context where several crises of the EU had already occurred. The financial and economic crisis had showed how vulnerable the Eurozone was and the refugee crisis had highlighted the weaknesses of the EU in controlling its borders. In such a context, Eurosceptic parties tried to exploit discursively Brexit to stress more generally the vulnerabilities of the EU and maximize their electoral benefits (Chopin, 2017).

Eurosceptic parties in the EU27 also used Brexit as an instrumental strategy to condition EU membership to substantial reforms of the EU agenda. This approach of ‘reform or leave’ was close to the strategy used by UK Prime Minister David Cameron for the Brexit campaign (Jacobs 2018). Such an instrumental strategy was selected, for example, by the French left-wing Eurosceptic party La France Insoumise during the 2017 presidential campaign. Its leader, Jean-Luc Mélenchon, denounced the ‘submissiveness’ of France to the EU and asked for a radical reform of the European treaties in order to ‘free’ the European peoples from the ‘austerity’ policies imposed by Economic and Monetary Union. In case such a strategy failed, he suggested a ‘Plan B’ which consisted in withdrawing from the European treaties (Drake 2018). The same kind of instrumental strategy was used by other Eurosceptic political parties in the EU27, such as Alternative für Deutschland in Germany (Conrad, Brunet-Jailly and Hallgrimsdottir 2019) and Fidesz in Hungary, in their claim for a radical change in the EU policymaking (Orban 2018).
However, and this is an important point for our analysis, Eurosceptic parties in the EU27 quickly abandoned the reference to exit as the negotiation talks between the EU and UK progressed. The U-turn in the programme of the French Rassemblement National is an illustration of this evolution. After her failure at the 2017 presidential election, party leader Marine Le Pen no longer defended the project of leaving the EU and the Eurozone, and refocussed her criticisms of the EU on the issue of immigration (Perrineau, 2017). Similarly, the German Alternative für Deutschland, created in 2013 as a response to the Eurozone crisis, abandoned the project that Germany should leave the Eurozone and return to the Deutsche Mark (Beterlsman Stifstung 2017). Alternative für Deutschland also concentrated its Eurosceptic discourse and strategy on the negative consequences of migration and the refugee crisis for Germany (Lees 2018; Grimm 2015).

Four reasons explain that Eurosceptic parties in the EU27 stopped using exit as a discursive resource and an instrumental strategy. First, the uncertainties resulting from the controversial negotiations on the conditions of Brexit convinced Eurosceptic parties that leaving the EU was in fact a tricky issue. Second, Brexit negotiation talks demonstrated that preserving the integrity of the Single Market was in the interest of the national economies of the EU member states. In the EU27, there was no majority of citizens ready to accept the economic risks of leaving the EU’s internal market or the Euro, as we have seen above (UK in a Changing Europe, 2018). Third, given the domestic political crises triggered by the Brexit negotiations in the UK, the British withdrawal did not act as a model, but as a counter-model for Eurosceptic parties, even if they could not state it loud and clear (Schnapper 2019). Fourth, the immigration issue linked to national identity constituted - more than Brexit - the core of a change in the political supply of the Eurosceptic parties, insofar as this issue makes possible the promotion of political discourses that differentiate and divide (Chopin, Fraccaroli, Hernborg, Jamet 2019).

For all these reasons, Eurosceptic parties started accepting that membership of the EU had some positive effects on the economies of the member states and that it was better to criticize the EU from inside than outside. Brexit had a impact on the reconfiguration of the programmes of Eurosceptic parties in favour of staying inside the EU to change it. Therefore, it demonstrates that Brexit, as an unprecedented but also difficult political experience, led paradoxically Eurosceptic parties in the EU27 to accept European integration more than to reject it.
Conclusion

As an unprecedented phenomenon, Brexit pushes EU studies to look more in depth into the new debate on disintegration, which appeared in the scholarly literature in the 2010s under the effect of crises, especially the EMU one. The main conclusion of this article is that Brexit (as probably the other crises of the 2010s) can also be analysed as a reinforcement of integration because it opens not just to one game between states but several games in parallel, equivalent to what George Tsebelis identified as ‘nested games’ (Tsebelis 1991). In focusing on the EU27 member states, we draw four conclusions from the effects of Brexit on EU integration. First, mainstream neofunctionalist theory of the EU, which assumes that crises are a crucial vectors to stimulate integration, remains valid when we look at the effect of Brexit on EU27 member states (Saurugger 2013). Governments, public opinion and Eurosceptic parties, although they were first tempted to echo the scenario of disintegration stemming from Brexit, finally chose a form of resilience consisting in safeguarding integration. Interests more than ideology explain this choice for integration. Second, government cohesion and popular cohesion follow a similar path in the safeguard of integration as they could have been dissymmetric. Third, the contextual variable of the negotiation talks, highly uncertain between the UK and the EU but more again inside the UK institutions, catalysed the cohesion of the EU27. UK-EU and intra UK negotiating games do not produce the same effects on the EU27 game. At the same time, the conflictual context of the EU-UK and intra-UK negotiations cannot explain alone a ‘negative’ choice of the EU27 for integration; interests at stake (the single market, free movement of people, budgetary arrangements) are the important variable to explain the ‘positive’ choice of the EU27 in favour of integration. Causes are multiple and must not be mixed up. Finally, the limited effect of Brexit on the EU27 shows that institutional questions related to the EU polity, on which scholars have spilled so much ink, has a limited influence on the attitudes of public opinion. Value-oriented questions, such as multiculturalism resulting from immigration, have a much stronger effect on the attitude formation of EU27 citizens.

In general, Brexit confirms that disintegration can be considered as a relevant concept as long as it describes the loss of a member state for the EU. The UK assumed disintegration defined as a full re-nationalization of its polity, politics and policies. But
this UK choice did not automatically favour the same effects on integration when we consider the EU27 member states. Governments and public opinions of the EU27, which can also be called the remaining members, plaid a completely different game regarding Brexit which consists in assuming the validity of EU membertateness and EU integration.

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