

Założenia teorii dezintegracji regionalnej: proponując dalsze badania

Streszczenie

Kryzysy które uderzyły UE po 2008 wyzwołyły tendencje dezintegracyjne. Wymaga to nie tylko dalszych, pogłębionych badań nad stanem Unii, lecz również teoretycznej konceptualizacji, która wspomogłoby wyjaśnienie procesów dezintegracji. W niniejszym artykule zaproponowano cztery podejścia teoretyczne do prowadzenia tego typu analiz, które mogą z wielu stron wesprzeć wyjaśnienie problemów dezintegracji regionalnej w Europie, jak i w innych częściach świata. Podejście autora bazuje na istniejących koncepcjach teoretycznych: neofunkcjonalizm, konstruktywizm, instytucjonalizm i realizm. Autor poszukuje komplementarności ujęć teoretycznych, aby wyjaśnić zjawisko dezintegracji.

Słowa kluczowe: *teoria dezintegracji regionalnej, neofunkcjonalizm, konstruktywizm, instytucjonalizm, realizm.*

Abstract

The crises that hit the EU after 2008 brought about disintegration tendencies. That requires not only further in-depth research on the state of the Union, but also theoretical conceptualisation facilitating an explanation of the processes of disintegration. In this article four theoretical approaches to carry out this type of analysis are proposed, which in a multilateral way may help to explain the problems of the regional disintegration in Europe, but also in other regions of the world. Author's approach is based on existing theoretical concepts: neofunctionalism, constructivism, institutionalism and realism. Author seeks the complementarity between the theoretical approaches in order to explain the phenomenon of disintegration.

Keywords: *regional disintegration theory, neofunctionalism, constructivism, institutionalism, realism.*

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Assumptions of the theory of regional disintegration: suggestions for further research

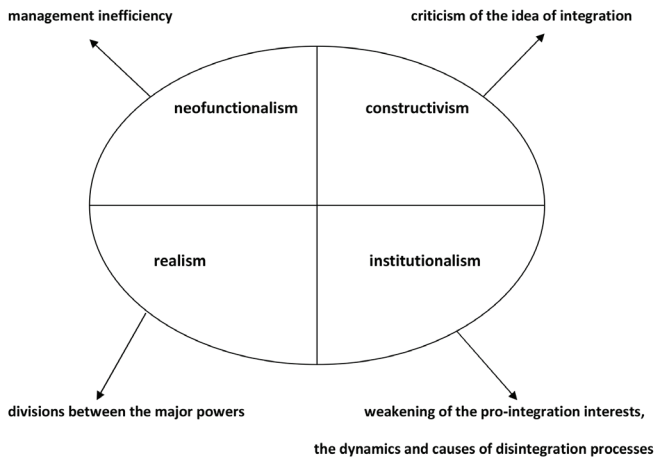
The accumulation of crises in the European Union led to the rise of disintegration tendencies. However, the problem is that while European research knows a wide range of theories describing the integration processes, it lacks a theory explaining the disintegration of regional cooperation. It is therefore a challenge for scientists of different disciplines, but especially European studies. The purpose of this article is to attempt to determine the assumptions of the theory of regional disintegration relating to contemporary international relations, European studies and based on the theory of political science. The examined area will be the European Union, but the theory about the regional disintegration should have a broader reference and therefore can also apply to other regions of the world. The proposals for further research will be referred to the theoretical concept that goes beyond Europe.

The existing integration processes in Europe were based on a “community model”. This model was based on the relative balance between the various European institutions and the gradually increasing autonomy of the EU institutions (such as the European Commission or the European Parliament) with respect to intergovernmental institutions. As part of the *community model*, a balance of power between the largest and smallest Member States was maintained. The Community institutions and the consistency of the regulatory system in the EU were guarantors of the balance. The basic principle of this model consisted of solidarity with the weaker participants of the integration process.

During the crisis of the Eurozone, we witnessed trends that may indicate a departure from the *community model*. There was an increase of the intergovernmental importance, the decision-making influence of the largest Member States strengthened, especially

Germany and the hierarchy of power among the strongest countries and the weaker ones completely engrossed in crisis became increasingly evident. Although the formal and informal powers of technocratic institutions, such as the Commission and the European Central Bank, strengthened, they were also politicised, they were more than previously supervised by governments which put the informal political pressure. In this way, they were losing autonomy to intergovernmental institutions and the strongest states. More and more often, they became the enforcer of the hierarchy of power between the EU countries, especially in the Eurozone. In this way, the Community institutions were less and less able to guarantee the balance between the weaker and the stronger entities and to uphold the equal application of the law to all countries regardless of their economic strength and political influence. All these changes are referred to as a shift of an integration model towards the *asymmetric confederation* (Grosse 2016a). This was supposed to facilitate the management of crises, but the improvement of management in the EU left much to be desired, a violation of the institutional balance in the political system being a side effect of these changes. Successive crises also resulted in the devaluation of the ideas and values of Europe, as well as the erosion of the authority of the law and the EU institutions. The crises have also brought geopolitical cracks, including disputes between France, Germany and Great Britain. The further research on the theory of regional disintegration will refer to all these phenomena. In my view, it should refer to the four main trends of analysis.

Figure 1



Neofunctionalism

Firstly, neofunctionalism is an important theory of the European integration (Haas 1964; Schmitter 1970; Lefkofridi, Schmitter 2014). According to one of its key claims, regional integration is more functional because it is easier to solve social and economic problems for the regions, rather than for a single national government. Moreover, crises are a catalyst for positive change in Europe as they force stronger integration, regulatory expansion and delegating more power to the EU institutions. Another assumption is that the main driving force behind the progress of the integration consists of deepening the economic cooperation, which then has a spill-over effect on the increase of political integration. In principle, all these assumptions were challenged during the crisis, which began in Europe in 2008.

It turned out that integration was not functional, because the European institutions were not able to effectively and efficiently deal with crises. Therefore, more and more politicians and social groups demanded a return to the national policy and clear responsibility of the governments of the Member States for the economic situation. It also turned out that the crises did not become a catalyst of integration, especially in the direction of greater political cooperation, including aiming to establish a strong political power at the EU level. “Institutional breakthrough” towards a democratic federation failed (Grosse 2015). In many areas of public policies, the scope of European regulations increased, as well as formal powers of the EU institutions, which can be considered as evidence of the further development of European integration during subsequent crises. All of these solutions did not lead, however, to solve the fundamental economic and social problems, they were partial and not systemic, sometimes they only postponed problems in time or even contributed to side effects, which caused dissatisfaction of a large part of politicians and the society in the Member States. As I mentioned, the neofunctionalism assumes higher efficiency (functionality) of regional integration in relation to the actions taken by individual countries, especially in the economic sphere. Meanwhile, the problems of the Eurozone were not effectively solved either (Stiglitz 2016), contributing to the increase in euro-sceptic sentiment across the EU and causing a political crisis striking at the foundations of the project of regional integration in Europe. In turn, during the migration crisis, the solutions taken by some of the nation-states proved to be more effective (at least in the short term) than those adopted by the EU. Both examples (i.e. management in the Eurozone and the migration crisis) seem to seriously violate the assumptions of the neofunctionalist theory.

This leads me to the conclusion that the collapse of the neofunctionalist concept in times of EU crises can be used to explain the trend of disintegration. It occurs mainly when regional cooperation does not lead to effective resolution of existing problems of economic and social issues. In addition, the likelihood of disintegration tendencies grows especially when there is strong accumulation of various problems at the same time and instead of constituting an impulse to the progress of integration, they bring more and more side effects, enhance old or provoke new crises, causing the accumulation of costs and weights of dysfunctional integration processes, especially in certain countries or social groups.

Constructivism

Secondly, the processes of disintegration can also be examined through the prism of the constructivist theory. Its main assumption within the European studies is that the creation and promotion of the European ideas can gradually build a European identity of EU citizens and thus build a European political community (Risse 2004). It is essential if you want to deepen political integration and eliminate the deficit of democratic legitimacy of the Union. Also on the basis of these assumptions, we can look for the reverse processes favouring disintegration. Crises undermine European values and ideas, especially when the EU is inefficiently managed or when sharp contrasts between the declared values and political practice are revealed. This was, among others, the case of EU solidarity, which worked well in times of prosperity but in times of crisis, it began to be repeatedly violated. Crises may also compel policy makers to make difficult choices, choices between the fidelity to the declared ideas or standards and the effectiveness of tackling the crisis. Such a phenomenon could be seen, among others, in the attempt to deal with excessive wave of immigration to the EU. Failure to deal with crises also leads to the reduction in the legitimacy of the entire political system (Lipset 1959), which further weakens the pro-integration ideas, but also the European identification.

At the same time, ideas and values alternative to integration gradually gained in importance, for example the ideas related to the defence of national sovereignty and democracy in the Member States. This was accompanied by the strengthening of national identity and cohesion within national political communities. This was reflected, among others, by the desire to defend against threats from outside, such as the influx of immigration or the excessive political or regulatory pressure exerted by Brussels. All

these feelings found an outlet in the postulates of Eurosceptic parties and resulted in policy initiatives against the progress of integration. Such a phenomenon could have been observed during the referendums initiated by Eurosceptic circles at the national level and in fact directed against the actions of the Union or even questioning the membership. In the case of a Greek referendum in 2015, the Greeks rejected the austerity policy supported by the EU institutions and the largest Member States. During the referendum in the Netherlands in 2016 the society rejected the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement, which was an expression of criticism of the EU approach to the Ukrainian crisis. Indirectly, it also questioned the plans for further political commitment of the EU in the east. Prime Minister Viktor Orban announced a referendum in Hungary (2016), which would be an attempt to reject the EU's policy of tackling the migration crisis. As a result of the referendum of 2016, the British society decided to leave the EU, which was the most glaring example of disintegrating tendencies arising from the European crises. There will be other referendums questioning the policies of the EU or the continued presence of other countries in the EU. There are also attempts to renegotiate conditions for EU membership by successive national governments following the British example. The dynamics of all these processes may be explained by the constructivist theory, firstly in relation to the weakening of the pro-integration ideas, including criticising these ideas in the public discourse and referring to other values and standards, and then to the creation and implementation of alternative political ideas.

Realism

Thirdly, the processes of disintegration can be observed through the prism of the realist theory referring to geopolitics and the power structure in international relations. It should be noted that the primary challenge for regional integration in Europe focused generally on conflicts and disputes between the major powers. The European integration was the way to overcome this competition, especially in relation to the disasters of the first and second world wars. However, these experiences were not the main binder for such cooperation, at least in the light of the realistic theory (Rosato 2011). The informal American hegemony in Europe since the Second World War and the threat of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) were of the utmost importance. The influence of the world powers and their rivalry were toning down to the greatest extent conflicts between the major countries of the Western part of the continent. After the Cold War

three events occurred that were initially designed to integrate, but actually can be interpreted as the seeds of disintegration processes. Firstly, the interest of the United States in Europe diminished and the leading European politicians tried to reduce the American influence on the EU policy. Secondly, the external threat from the USSR was essentially reduced, not only because of the collapse of the system, but also because of a significant weakening of its main entity, namely Russia. The threat from Russia increased as a result of the Ukrainian crisis only in a few EU countries, including Poland, the Baltic States and the United Kingdom (Rettman 2016). Therefore, it did not translate into the stimulation of the integration processes, e.g. in the context of the CFSP and the CSDP. Thirdly, the geopolitical position of Germany significantly increased, both as a result of the unification of the country (in 1990) and under the influence of the crisis in the Eurozone. All these phenomena opened the way rather for the return of the rivalry between European powers than for the deepening of integration.

Taking into consideration the above, the growing asymmetry of geopolitical potential between France and Germany resulting, among others, from the crisis of the common currency was particularly dangerous. Brexit fuels the processes of disintegration as well. Earlier, London sought to control the integration process from inside, for example by balancing the historical rival of the continental Europe, i.e. Germany, and by using the fact that the country was bound by dependencies resulting from EU membership. Brexit can further emphasise the difference of power in Europe between France and Germany (Bosoni 2016). It can also lead to the situation when the elite in Britain will increasingly see the EU as a sphere of domination of Berlin, and therefore the organisation which is a potential threat to British interests. According to the realistic analysis, the situation in Europe is still be affected by external powers. While the US during the successive crises supported the coherence of the EU, Russia fuelled disintegration tendencies, including the subsidies for Eurosceptic organisations and parties (Political Capital Policy Research 2014). This was the result of “freezing” the Ukrainian crisis and the inability of the European side to find an efficient and sustainable solution to the conflict with Russia.

The realistic theory gives a wide field to analyse the phenomenon of regional disintegration, basing primarily on the divisions and rivalries between the major European countries. They have a major impact on shaping the international order and thus, to the greatest extent, they can contribute to its disintegration. Smaller states are not so willing to participate in the processes of disintegration, mainly because of the higher risks and costs associated with it, as well as stronger subordination to powers in the frame-

work of the international order. However, sometimes they can join the changes initiated by the largest states, and thus deepen the disintegration tendencies.

Institutionalism

Fourthly, the disintegration of Europe can be examined from the perspective of the institutional theory. I have in mind foremost all these institutions, regulations and interdependence resulting from them, as well as social interests that are opposed to disintegrating trends. I refer in this way to one of the most famous historical institutionalism assumptions, i.e. path dependency (Pierson 2004). According to this assumption social processes, including those relating to the sphere of politics and administration, have a strong tendency for the historical continuation and therefore for the application of similar solutions and policies. This results not only from the propensity to the use of well-known practices, but also from social interests associated with existing institutions. All of these social groups will defend the current structure of the EU against the disintegration tendencies. In addition, over time, dependencies within the EU, reciprocal links, investment and all other manifestations of social or economic exchange are strengthened. Theoretically, it should lead to a higher level of trust between individual societies, but at the time of the regional disintegration, it may also be a source of potential costs. Such costs are particularly high in case of the high level of integration, as EMU, or in the case of the weakest Member States with too little economic reserves to be able to afford the risk of secession from the Union.

Another disintegration phenomenon that can be analysed on the basis of the institutional theory consists in the tendency particularly visible during the crisis to circumvent the EU law, to avoid its implementing as well as to put political pressure on the EU institutions to interpret the law so as make it most beneficial to one single entity. It leads to a weakening of one of the most important institutional foundations of the Union – the cohesion of the regulatory system. In turn, the growing politicisation of the EU technocracy reduces its credibility and influences the erosion of the authority of the Community institutions, for which it is thus harder to defend against disintegration tendencies. This means a weakening of the social interests that have so far supported the processes of “path dependency” in the framework of the European integration.

The institutional theory may also help to explain the dynamics of the process of disintegration. In short, in accordance with this theory, it may proceed in a violent

manner, in a short period of time or may accumulate in the longer term. Historical institutionalism points to, among others, the critical juncture or the phenomenon of punctuated equilibrium, which constitute the significant social change in a relatively short period of time (Conran, Thelen 2016). It may be, among others, a sudden change of a trend in the existing integration processes or a single event characterised as a transition to a completely different dynamics of political processes in the region. For the EU, the Brexit may be this type of event. Institutionalism defines such events as the tipping point, which, for researchers of the regional disintegration, may indicate that factors influencing the decay of the regional arrangement obtain sufficient force (or critical mass), which will allow to change the trend in regional policy.

In turn, the concept of punctuated equilibrium appears to apply to hybrid regimes, the stability of which is based on the relative balance between the various components of the institutional setting. In the case of the EU, hybridity of the political system was based on a combination of confederal institutions (mainly inter-governmental) with federal ones (e.g. the European Parliament and the European Court of Justice). Prior to European crises, this set of institutions had created a delicate balance of the political system, which I call the *Community model*. However, the gradual expansion of the competency of the EU increasingly violated this balance, as the democratic deficit or shortage of political legitimacy of the EU, i.e. legitimacy for the EU authorities, which should be granted as a result of democratic elections, was becoming a problem. This problem could have been solved by the introduction of a democratic federation in Europe, which I call “institutional breakthrough” (Grosse 2015). The Eurozone crisis highlighted this need in a very sharp way, because it turned out that in order to introduce a fiscal union in EMU, the political union modelled on the federal states was essential. Instead of such reforms, in the time of crisis, occurred formal and informal European regime changes leading towards *asymmetric confederation*. As I mentioned above, it disturbed the political balance within the hybrid system of the EU, causing, among other things, the loss of trust between elites (and societies) of the Member States, and thus becoming one of the factors of disintegration.

Institutionalism seeks to analyse social and political processes in the long run. Even if it documents the processes of the sudden nature, it seeks to explain them in a historical context. This is achieved by the use of the concept of path dependency, which places emphasis on the study of self-reinforcing social processes with clear historical continuation or bound by a specific trend (Pierson 2004). It seems that the disintegration processes can be analysed as the occurrence of a specific political trend, resulting from the

accumulation of negative phenomena unresolved economic and social problems, rising Euroscepticism among societies and political elites in the Member States etc. The institutional school recognises the phenomenon of layering (Schickler 2001), which can be interpreted, among others, as the occurrence of recurrent crises in the EU, as well as the overlapping of dysfunctional institutional processes (anti-crisis measures) and the growing dissatisfaction of the society with the actions taken. “Institutional drift” or “decision-making inertia” are similar concepts that reflect very well the idea of “path dependency” (Hacker 2005). They describe the difficulties of decision-making or accepting existing solutions, even when the external environment changes drastically. It seems that these ideas can be used for the analysis of the crisis in the regional grouping, the elites of which are unable to make decisions adequate to the situation, but rather seek to postpone problems, which could be a source of growing disintegrating tendencies. The concept of isomorphism, especially mimetic, seems similar (DiMaggio, Powell 1983). It can, among others, analyse the trend to copy the “old” solutions, such as those that existed before the crisis and which improperly respond to new challenges. It may also refer to efforts to restore at all costs the “status quo” from before the crisis, ignoring not only the external conditions, but also social and political changes taking place under the influence of the crisis. In both cases, the lack of creativity of elites or stubborn desire to follow ineffective (but well-known) solutions could exacerbate the problems and lead to phenomena of disintegration. These phenomena were clearly visible during the crisis the Eurozone (Grosse 2016b).

An interesting institutional concept concerns the so-called counter-reaction dynamics (Mahoney 2000), which are sometimes referred to as a “domino effect” or the “contagion effect”. They represent the sequence of actions opposed to those originally initiated or undertaken in response to another such initiatives. In the case of disintegrating tendencies, the described phenomenon may consist of challenging the new initiatives designed to deepen the integration or resolve existing crises. It can also occur when the anti-crisis solutions that are meant to stimulate further integration bring the effect opposite from the intended or lead to an increase in the wave of Euroscepticism and political ferment among Member States. They can also cause a domino effect (contagion), e.g. a tendency to take the next referendums questioning the European policies and the need for continued membership in the EU.

Institutionalism can finally help to explain the causes of the disintegration phenomena. Most researchers, especially those dealing with dynamic or breakthrough institutional change, draw attention to the role of external factors, also referred to as exo-

genous shocks (Collier, Collier 1991). It resembles to the impact of the financial crisis in the US (2008) on Europe. The crisis in the United States hit very quickly through the global markets the banking system of the EU causing a crisis of the real economy and the Eurozone. Other theorists point to the internal conditions for the introduction of institutional changes (Pierson 2004), such as poorly designed institutions, including gaps in the institutional system. The basic problem of the Eurozone consisted of design errors of EMU or lack of some institution that would absorb external shocks and enable fast structural adjustment in the weaker economies (Stiglitz 2016, p. 9-22). These dysfunctions were not removed during the crisis, which deepened the economic and political difficulties in the EU (Grosse 2016b).

Conclusion

Under the influence of crises that hit the EU after 2008, disintegration tendencies increased. Such a conclusion requires not only further in-depth research on the state of the Union, but also theoretical conceptualisation facilitating an explanation of the processes of disintegration. In this article, I suggested four theoretical approaches to carry out this type of analysis, which I hope in a complementary and multilateral way may help to explain the problems of the regional integration in Europe, but also in other regions of the world.

My approach is based on existing theoretical concepts: neofunctionalism, constructivism, institutionalism and realism. This may suggest that these concepts can develop theoretical thinking about the disintegration independently in these four directions. My approach is a bit different, as it seeks the complementarity between the theoretical approaches. I think that explaining the phenomenon of disintegration (like the earlier integration processes) requires the simultaneous reference to various theoretical trends. Moreover, I think that the theory about the disintegration of regional governance can also be used outside Europe. The European Union is indeed the most developed, institutionalised and interdependent social, political and economic organism. However, the theoretical conclusions may also apply to the less-developed systems of regional cooperation. Therefore researchers face a double challenge. Firstly, building a solid and mature theory of regional disintegration. Secondly, making such an intellectual synthesis that would allow inference in relation to other regions of the world.

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