

The Mass Politics of International Disintegration

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Abstract

In the past few years, the world has witnessed an unprecedented popular backlash against international institutions. Popular demands to not only slow down, but to reverse international integration have proliferated, and have resulted in referendum and election outcomes that have reverberated across the world. Examples range from the Swiss 2014 mass immigration initiative over the British 2016 Brexit referendum to the 2016 election of a US President seemingly determined to withdraw US support from various international treaties. The implications of these mass-based disintegration efforts reach far beyond the countries in which they originate. First, the disintegration process is shaped by how remaining member states respond to one member's bid to unilaterally change or terminate the terms of an existing international agreement. Second, mass-based disintegration bids also pose considerable risks of political contagion by encouraging disintegrative tendencies in other countries. Yet despite their disruptive nature, very little research exists beyond individual case studies on the general drivers, dynamics and challenges these instances of mass-based disintegration pose for international cooperation. This paper therefore engages in a comparative inquiry into the mass politics of disintegration that pays particular attention to the strategic dilemmas these instances pose for the affected international institutions and their remaining member states. It argues that the remaining member states have incentives to intervene in domestic campaigns in which disintegration figures as a viable outcome, but that the difficulties of successful intervention are considerable. It also shows that after a vote in favor of disintegration, the remaining member states face an “accommodation dilemma” between preserving as many cooperation gains as possible and making exit costly in order to discourage other member states from following suit.

1. Introduction

In the past few years, the world has witnessed an unprecedented popular backlash against international institutions. Faced with increasing trade-offs between the gains from international cooperation, democracy, and national sovereignty (Rodrik 2011), popular demands to not only slow down, but to reverse international integration have proliferated. The most prominent example of such an instance of “mass-based disintegration” is the 2016 Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom (UK), in which British voters decided to leave the European Union (EU). This direct democratic vote has set in motion the biggest withdrawal negotiations ever seen in an international organization. Although highly disruptive and unusual, Brexit is, however, not unique. Voters in Greece, Iceland, and Switzerland have used popular referendums to repudiate the terms of existing international agreements in recent years. And US President Trump has fulfilled key campaign promises by withdrawing from the Paris Climate Accord and renegotiating the North American Free Trade Area (NAFTA) agreement. Skepticism about the merits of international cooperation is nothing new (see for examples the overviews in Hobolt and de Vries 2016; Kuo and Naoi 2015). But the vehemence with which it has manifested itself more recently is a new development.

Much research has focused on the causes of this popular turn against international cooperation (e.g., Hobolt 2016; De Vries 2018). Much attention has also been paid to the internal political struggles that follow upon popular votes to fully or partially withdraw from an international agreement. However, there is much less research about what a unilateral withdrawal from an international institution means for the institution’s other member states. This is surprising because the consequences of mass-based efforts of disintegration reach far beyond the countries in which they originate. Not only does one member’s unilateral bid to improve its membership terms threaten to leave the others worse off. Mass-based disintegration bids by one member state also reverberate among the mass public in other countries. This is particularly true when the withdrawal occurs in a highly visible and politicized manner such as through a referendum vote, because such processes tend to be highly politicized, perceived as legitimate, and receive a lot of attention both at home and abroad.

For example, after the Brexit referendum vote, euphoric Eurosceptics across Europe, from France’s Marine le Pen to the Slovak People’s Party-Our Slovakia, called for similar referendums in their own countries. And across the Atlantic, then-candidate Donald Trump

tweeted that British voters “took their country back, just like we will take America back.”¹ Similarly, the leaders of Spain’s Podemos or Italy’s Five-Star-Movement celebrated Greece’s 2015 referendum-based bid for a more generous bailout package, raising fears that it would spark similar demands in other Eurozone crisis countries.

Mass-based disintegration thus poses considerable risks of political contagion by weakening the benefits of international cooperation and emboldening integration-sceptics elsewhere. Not surprisingly, this phenomenon is widely seen as a serious threat to international cooperation. The Economist has warned that the “politics of anger” might lead to an unravelling of globalization and the prosperity it has created (The Economist 2016). This concern is shared by academics, who have argued that growing popular support for disintegration poses a fundamental challenge for international institutions such as the EU (e.g., Hobolt 2016; Blyth 2016) and the contemporary liberal world order more generally (e.g., Ikenberry 2018; Pepinsky 2017; Rodrik 2017). However, political contagion does not always occur. For example, public support for the EU has increased since the Brexit referendum (Eurobarometer 2017) and popular appetite to leave the Paris Accord has not spread to other countries, and no other country has followed the US in withdrawing from the Paris Climate Accord.

Against this backdrop, it is imperative to better understand how mass-based attempts to revert integration spread, how they can be contained, and which dynamics they produce in the international arena. In short, we need a better understanding of the *mass politics of international disintegration* and their implication for international relations.

However, our theoretical tools to develop such an understanding so are underdeveloped. There is vast research on the creation and functioning of international institutions (for overviews, see e.g. Martin and Simmons 2013; Pevehouse and von Borzyskowski 2016; Gilligan and Johns 2012), but analysis of how such institutions disintegrate has remained rudimentary (for notable exceptions, see Helfer 2005; von Borzyskowski and Vabulas 2018; Shanks, Jacobson, and Kaplan 1996; Helfer 2017; Leeds and Savun 2007).² For example, in the Oxford Handbook of International Organizations (Cogan, Hurd, and Johnstone 2016), none of the 55 chapters focuses on the dissolution of international organizations. Even in research on the European Union, where scholars have had to grapple with the challenges of popular Euroskepticism for some time (Hooghe and Marks 2009), a theory of European disintegration remains elusive

¹ Tweet from June 24, 2016

² I define international institutions as relatively stable sets of norms and rules that pertain to the international system, the actors in the system and their activities (Duffield 2007). They cover a spectrum that ranges from international treaties to supranational organizations.

(Börzel 2018). Scholars agree that disintegration is not “integration in reverse”, but not on much else (Vollaard 2014; Jones 2018; Webber 2013; Rosamond 2016). A better understanding of the causes, dynamics, and consequences of international disintegration is thus urgently needed (Schneider 2017).

This paper works towards this goal by conceptualizing and systematically exploring the mass politics of international disintegration. It first defines *mass-based disintegration* as unilateral attempt by one member state to change or terminate the terms of an existing international agreement on the basis of a strong popular mandate. Mass-based disintegration is thus a specific type of international disintegration. It then examines the challenges that a mass-based disintegration bid by member state presents to the remaining member states: I argue that the mass politics of international disintegration are fundamentally shaped by an “accommodation dilemma,” that is the dilemma that accommodating the revisionist country’s disintegration bid carries large contagion risks, but that non-accommodation is costly to the remaining member states. The remainder of the paper examines how this dilemma shapes how the remaining member states respond to mass-based disintegration, both before the vote (section 4) and after the vote (section 5). The final section discusses the long-term challenges that the mass politics of disintegration pose for international cooperation. Throughout the paper, I draw on evidence from several recent mass-based disintegration processes in Europe.

2. What is Mass-based Disintegration?

I define mass-based disintegration as a process in which a member state of an international institution attempts to unilaterally change or terminate the terms of an existing international agreement on the basis of a strong popular mandate. It aims at international disintegration because it seeks to partly or fully withdraw from the rules of an international institution, such as an international agreement or an international or supranational organization. It is mass-based because it is grounded in strong domestic popular support, expressed for example a referendum vote or as part of a successful candidate’s election campaign. This not only provides the disintegration decision with a high degree of democratic legitimacy, but also politicizes the question of whether an international treaty can be changed ex post or terminated among the other member states (Zürn 2014; Hutter, Grande, and Kriesi 2016). Mass-based instances of disintegration therefore tend to be much more politicized and salient in the political debate than

disintegration decisions taken by a small foreign policy elite.³ Mass-based disintegration should be seen as a process. Its starting point is domestic integration scepticism, but it acquires an international dimension as soon as the national government takes up this mounting domestic pressure to negotiate better membership terms with the other member states. If the other states do not accommodate such a request, the process can accelerate: the disintegrating state officially announces its intention to partially or fully withdraw from the international institution, negotiates the terms of withdrawal, and ultimately withdraws from specific rules or the entire international institution. Of course, the process can also end along this way, if the disintegrating state backs down.

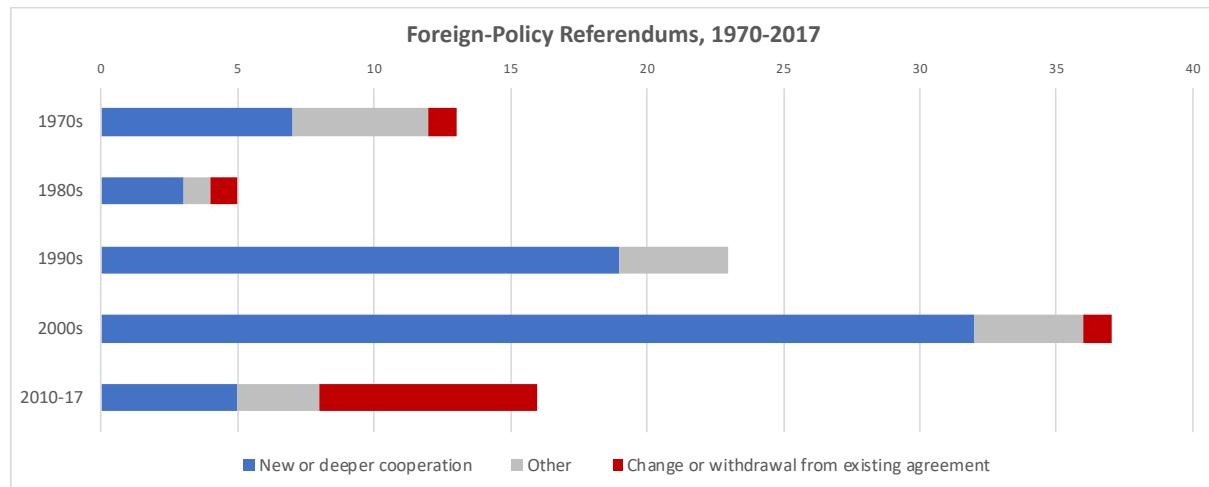
The most prominent example of such an instance of “mass-based disintegration” is the 2016 Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom (UK), in which British voters decided to leave the European Union (EU). This direct democratic vote has set in motion the biggest withdrawal negotiations ever seen in an international organization. Although highly disruptive and unusual, Brexit is, however, not unique. Voters in Greece, Iceland, and Switzerland have used popular referendums to repudiate the terms of existing international agreements in recent years. And across the Atlantic, US President Trump has fulfilled key campaign promises by withdrawing from the Paris Climate Accord or the Iran deal, and renegotiating the North American Free Trade Area (NAFTA) agreement.

Scepticism about the merits of international cooperation is nothing new (see for examples the overviews in Hobolt and de Vries 2016; Kuo and Naoi 2015). But the vehemence with which it has manifested itself more recently is a new development. Figure 1 shows that mass-based disintegration efforts have proliferated in the recent decade. It focuses on referendums, the clearest form of mass-based disintegration efforts and distinguishes between “integration referendums” that establish or deepen cooperation between states and “disintegration referendums” that, if successful, roll back *existing* forms of international cooperation, either partially by unilaterally mandating changes to an agreement, or fully, by mandating a withdrawal. The Brexit-referendum is the most prominent example for the latter, but another example is the 2014 Swiss ECOPOP referendum, which called for the termination of any international treaty that limits Switzerland’s ability to limit immigration. An example for referendums which, if successful, force the government to not comply with certain provisions in existing international agreements is the 2016 Hungarian refugee quota referendum, which

³ For a discussion of these latter instances, see von Borzyskowski and Vabulas (2018) or Leeds and Savun (2007).

aimed at not implementing an EU decision to relocate asylum seekers across all European Union member states. Another example is the 2015 Greek bailout referendum.

Figure 1: Number of integration and disintegration referendums, 1970-2016



Source: C2D Datenbank, Zentrum für Demokratie Aarau, updated by myself for recent years.

Notes: Own classification of all national referendums on questions concerning international cooperation.

Figure 1 shows that while referendums aimed at international disintegration are still relatively rare, they have become much more frequent and much more dominant in recent years. Six of the ten disintegration referendums held so far and almost all ‘successful’ ones (i.e. resulting in a disintegrative vote) have been held since 2014.⁴ Moreover, populist leaders across Europe have called for more disintegration referendums, so that the number may continue to grow. It is not a coincidence that these referendums are mostly directed against the EU, which has achieved a level of integration that makes the trade-offs between national sovereignty, democracy and international cooperation gains particularly pronounced (Rodrik 2011).

3. Mass-based Disintegration as a Challenge for the other member states

Mass-based disintegration efforts by one member state create considerable challenges for the remaining member states, both before and after the “disintegration vote.” First, the loss of a member state weakens the institution’s overall economic and political clout. Second, ex post changing the terms of an international agreement to one country’s benefit tends to leave the

⁴ These are the 1975 UK referendum on continued EC membership, the 1984 Greenland referendum on leaving the EC, the 1986 Spanish referendum on continued NATO membership, the 2000 Brazil IMF referendum, the 2010 and 2011 Icesave referendums, the 2014 Swiss “Against Mass Immigration” initiative, the 2014 Swiss ECOPOP initiative, the 2015 Greek bailout referendum, the 2016 Swiss Implementation Initiative, the 2016 Hungarian refugee quota referendum, and the 2016 British Brexit referendum.

remaining member states worse off, because international agreements are usually the result of mutually beneficial compromises (e.g., Keohane 1984; Abbott and Snidal 1998). Disintegration therefore leads to the loss of existing cooperation gains. It reintroduces barriers to cooperation that the international institution had hitherto removed, and thus is costly both in economic and more general efficiency terms. For example, if disintegration leads to the re-introduction of trade barriers, exporters in both the remaining members and the leaving state will be hurt and international supply chains will be disrupted. This is likely to cause job losses and economic downturns in both the leaving state and the remaining members. Other forms of cooperation and policy coordination between the remaining countries and the leaving country – from police cooperation to environmental protection – are also likely to become more difficult. This creates transaction costs, economic distortions, and also financial risks that arise as economic agents adjust to the new disintegrated environment. Finally, successful disintegration also raises the risk that additional member states will emulate this move, thus putting the institution's long-term viability in question.⁵

Given these negative externalities, policymakers in the other member states need to confront the question of how to respond to one member state's unilateral, mass-based disintegration bid. The remainder of this paper examines the challenges and dilemmas they confront in this regard both before a disintegration vote (section 4), and after such a vote (section 5).

4. Challenges for foreign policymakers before the vote

The best case scenario for policymakers who are confronted with a referendum or election campaign abroad that could generate negative externalities at home is a voting outcome in which disintegration is rejected by a popular vote. When faced with a disintegration referendum in another member state or an election in which integration-sceptic candidates have a good chance of winning (such as in the recent US and French presidential elections), domestic policymakers thus have a strong preference for foreign voters to vote against disintegration or in favor of continued integration. This creates incentives for them to get involved in what would normally be regarded another country's domestic affairs: a foreign election or referendum campaign.

⁵ This political contagion effect has been well documented in the context of secessionist movements on the national level (Walter 2006b; 2006a; Coggins 2011).

Because the response of the remaining member state to a popular vote in favor of disintegration strongly determines how such a vote would ultimately play out for the disintegrating country, voters should be interested in learning about the likely response in advance. This gives foreign policymakers an opportunity to convey their likely reaction to a disintegrative vote. They can use a variety of strategies to communicate their opinion and resolve during the election or referendum campaign. Least intrusive, foreign policymakers can try to coax voters in the other country to vote in favor of continued cooperation, for example by emphasizing the value of continued membership, making normative appeals and promising future benefits. However, they can also take a more aggressive stance, for example by warning, or even threatening, voters about the negative consequences of a disintegrative vote. Finally, they can actively intervene in the campaign, such as European policymakers did in the run-up to the 2015 Greek bailout referendum when they cut off Greece from additional financing during the referendum campaign. Increasingly, foreign involvement in domestic campaigns also occurs in more decentralized forms via social media (Sevin and Uzunoğlu 2017).⁶

Such foreign interventions in domestic elections or referendum campaigns raise both normative and practical questions. In normative terms, foreign interventions in domestic referendum and election campaigns, especially in its more active forms, violate the principle of non-interference in domestic affairs and thus conflict with national sovereignty. Yet, as democratically elected leaders, foreign policymakers are also tasked to represent the interests of their citizens. From this viewpoint, interventions in a foreign campaign with the intention to protect the country's own voters from harm may be legitimate. These normative questions about the legitimacy of foreign campaign interventions are difficult to resolve.

Intervening in a domestic disintegration referendum campaign from abroad also poses practical challenges. Such intervention is no easy feat, because foreign policymakers face obstacles with regard to the credibility, the effectiveness, and the costs of such interventions (Walter et al. 2018). Because foreign policymakers act in the interest of their own country, their interventions in domestic election campaigns may not be credible or effective. Positive foreign messages can easily go unheard in a heated domestic campaign. With regards to warnings, foreign governments face private information and time-inconsistency problems that make it particularly difficult for them to credibly communicate their resolve not to accommodate a non-cooperative vote (Fearon 1995). Because non-accommodation also imposes costs on those other countries

⁶ Such direct foreign interventions in domestic elections have been rare among Western democracies, but were more common during the Cold War and still are relatively common in developing country elections (see for example Corstange and Marinov 2012; Levin 2016). I am not considering the outright illegal forms of foreign interventions seen in the recent US elections and Brexit campaign here.

themselves, their pledge to punish such a vote *ex post* may suffer from credibility issues and may therefore not be taken seriously by domestic voters. What is worse, they can also backfire if voters perceive them as an undue interference in domestic affairs (Shulman and Bloom 2012). As such, foreign interventions may not be very effective.

To illustrate this problem, consider the 2016 Brexit campaign in the UK: Because of the large risks that Brexit posed for the European integration project, EU and EU-27 policymakers had a strong interest in a ‘remain’-outcome in the referendum. Yet, they were rather hesitant to get too strongly involved in the Brexit campaign because it was feared that given the widespread British distrust towards to EU, such interventions might strengthen, rather than weaken, the Leave-camp (Glencross 2016).

More generally, evidence collected during the campaign illustrates the difficulties for foreign policymakers in influencing expectations, beliefs, and vote intentions in such a setting. To examine how warnings by foreign policymakers influence respondents’ expectations in a disintegration referendum campaign, I conducted a survey experiment with 1778 respondents in Britain about two weeks before the 2016 Brexit referendum.⁷ All respondents were informed that “after a referendum vote to leave the EU, Britain and the EU [would] have to negotiate an agreement about their future relationship.” Respondents were then randomly given one of four different treatments, in which a domestic (The Remain Campaign) or a foreign (the Belgian Prime Minister, the President of the EU Commission, or the US president) had “warned that the EU will only sign such an agreement if it makes Britain worse off compared to where it stands now.”⁸ Respondents were then asked about their expectations about a potential post-Brexit world, such as whether such an agreement would make the EU and the UK better or worse off,⁹ whether the UK would lose access to the EU’s single market, whether such an agreement would leave the UK worse off economically, or whether the UK would have less influence in international negotiations than as an EU member.¹⁰ For the analysis below I recoded

⁷ Data are from an original YouGov online poll, fielded on June 7, 2016, N=1778. Data are weighted.

⁸ A fifth control group were not given any warning. Adding the control group in the analysis does not substantively change the results presented below.

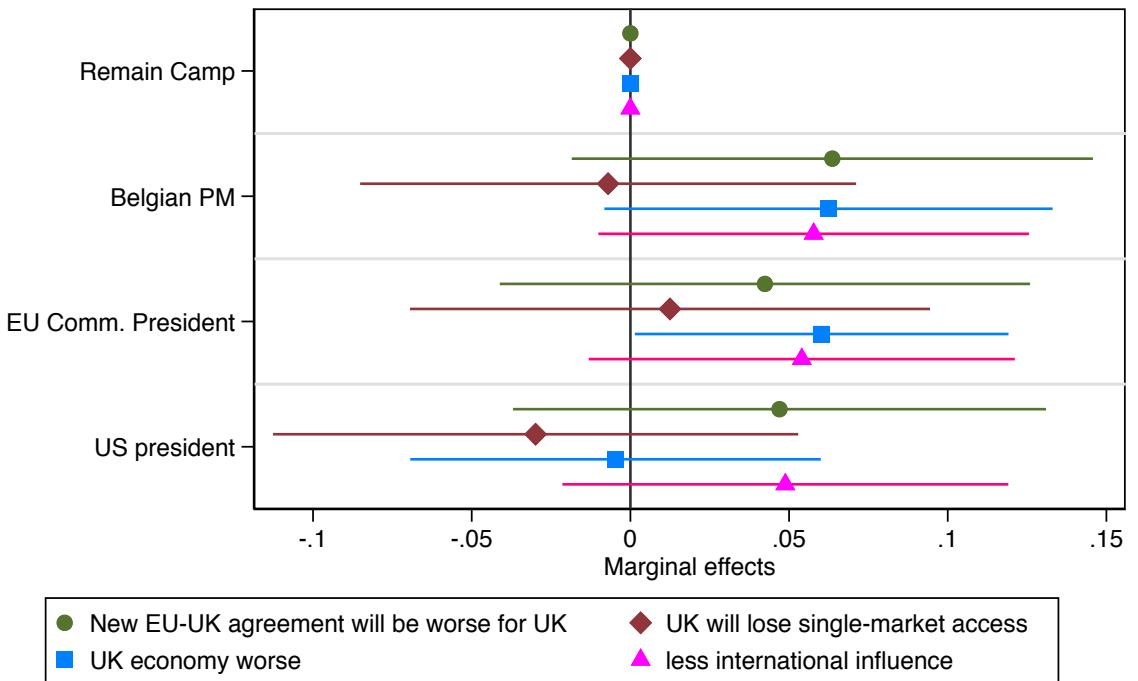
⁹ “Compared to today’s relationship, how do you think this new agreement would look? A new arrangement would be worse for both Britain and the EU/ worse for Britain and better for the EU/ better for Britain and worse for the EU/ better for both Britain and the EU.”

¹⁰ “In the run-up to the referendum, we have heard many different arguments about what would happen if the UK were to leave the EU. For each of the following scenarios, how likely do you think that this scenario will come true if Britain votes to leave the EU in the referendum?: If Britain votes to leave the EU, Britain will ...negotiate an agreement with the EU that leaves it worse off economically than it is today. ... lose full access to the EU’s single market. ... have less influence in international negotiations than as a EU member.”

the answers to these questions into dummy variables that take the value of one for more pessimistic expectations.

Figure 2: Survey Experiment: Effects of threats by different foreign actors on expectations

In the run-up to the referendum, there have been many different arguments about what would happen if the UK were to leave the EU. For each of the following scenarios, how likely do you think that this scenario will come true if Britain votes to leave the EU in the referendum?



Based on logit analyses that control for gender, age, political attention, social grade, education, referendum vote intention, figure 2 shows the marginal effects of each of the treatments on the likelihood that a respondent has a more negative expectation regarding the foreign response to a Leave-outcome in the June 2016 Brexit referendum, with 95% confidence intervals.¹¹ Although warnings by foreign policymakers, especially European politicians, did make voters somewhat more pessimistic, these effects were rarely statistically significant. Warnings attributed the US president made voters even more optimistic at times, underlining the difficulty of the task. Figure 2 thus shows how difficult it is for foreign policymakers to sway public opinion in disintegration referendum campaigns.

¹¹ Results are the same when I only control for the referendum vote intention, which had been elicited at an earlier point in the survey

Faced with these difficulties of signaling their resolve, another way for foreign policymakers to increase the credibility of their interventions is to send costly signals about their determination not to accommodate a voting outcome that would harm their own citizens (Walter et al. 2018). To be effective, however, these signals have to carry considerable costs, without any guarantee that this investment will pay off. A prominent example is the referendum campaign leading up to the 2015 Greek bailout referendum, in which Eurozone policymakers intervened to an unprecedented degree. The bailout referendum tried to force Greece's creditors to give it better terms on a bailout agreement for the crisis-ridden country by rejecting the existing offer through a referendum vote. An accommodation of Greece's wishes would have fundamentally changed the EMU crisis management mode, which is why the other Eurozone member states were adamantly opposed to a Greek exception. However, they were at the same time highly exposed to the consequences of the referendum: A rejection of the bailout agreement (a "no"-vote) was feared to result in "Grexit", and hence a break-up of the Eurozone, which European policymakers had tried to avoid throughout the Eurozone crisis (Copelovitch, Frieden, and Walter 2016). As a result, European policymakers strongly intervened in the Greek campaign, warning that a Greek no-vote would not result in better terms for a new bailout package, but rather result in Greece's exit from the Eurozone. After all, Grexit was also an outcome which a strong majority of Greeks did not want.

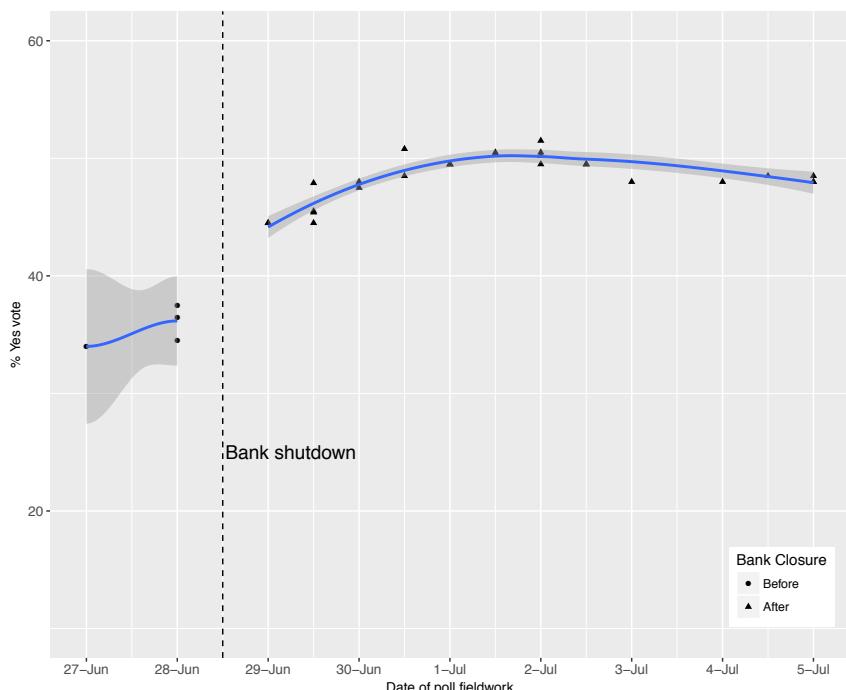
To underline their resolve, European policymakers resorted to a clear demonstration of their determination not to accommodate a referendum vote against the bailout agreement on offer. When the existing bailout agreement expired during the referendum campaign, they refused to extend it for a few days. The ECB also declined Greece's request to increase emergency liquidity assistance to Greek banks. These decisions forced the Greek government to close the banks and to become the first developed country to ever default on an IMF loan early on in the referendum campaign. The costs of this European signal of resolve were immense, not just for Greece, but also for the other Eurozone governments. They caused enormous economic damage, which at least doubled the amount Eurozone governments ultimately had to invest in a third bailout package for Greece.¹²

Did this costly signal convince Greek voters of Europeans resolve? Evidence collected by Walter, Dinas, Jurado and Konstantinidis (S. Walter et al. 2018) shows that right before the vote, a majority of Greeks believed that a non-cooperative referendum outcome would result in

¹² see <http://www.economist.com/blogs/economist-explains/2015/06/economist-explains-5> and http://ec.europa.eu/economy_finance/assistance_eu_ms/greek_loan_facility/index_en.htm

continued negotiations, whereas only about one quarter thought that a No-vote would lead to Grexit. Thus, the foreign intervention in the Greek referendum campaign failed to convince Greek voters of the European resolve not to accommodate a negative vote. Nonetheless, Figure 3 shows that the intervention on net did sway about 10% of Greek voters away from voting no and towards voting yes.¹³ Given the huge costs, this is a rather meagre result. Ultimately, the foreign intervention did not succeed in changing the referendum outcome in favor of a cooperative outcome.

Figure 3: Effect of the Greek bank shutdown on average support for the bailout proposal (cooperative outcome) in the 2015 Greek bailout referendum, based on 33 polls on referendum vote intention.



Note: Each dot/triangle represents a poll published during the referendum campaign. The blue curve denotes local average estimates, shaded areas denote 95% confidence bands. Figure is from Walter et al (S. Walter et al. 2018).

Overall, this discussion has shown that intervening in other countries' election or referendum campaigns is a tricky path for policymakers, both for practical reasons and for legitimacy concerns.

5. Responding to successful disintegration referendums: the Accommodation Dilemma

¹³ Survey evidence suggests that about 12% of voters switched from No to yes, but about 4% also hardened their position and switched from yes to now (Walter et al. 2018).

How can the other member states of an international institution respond if voters in one member state have cast a popular vote in favor of disintegration? This question once more poses significant challenges for the remaining member states.

For one they are confronted with normative questions: Is it undemocratic not to implement the democratically expressed wish of (one) people? Or is it undemocratic to implement a policy that produces negative externalities for others without asking them about it? The fierce criticism of the EU's "undemocratic" response to the Greek bailout referendum, embodied in the hashtag #thisisacoup, illustrates the appeal of the first position.¹⁴ The hashtag made the round on twitter after Greece had been forced to accept a third bailout package in the post-referendum negotiations. This third bailout came with harsh conditionality, the very thing Greek voters had just rejected in the referendum. Critics thus argued that by not accommodating the Greek referendum vote, the remaining EU member states had shown a disrespect for democracy, staging in fact a "coup" against democracy. Eurozone policymakers countered this argument by emphasizing that they had been elected to represent their own citizens' interests, not Greece's, and that their citizens would be worse off if a Greek vote could force them to accommodate their demands.

In addition to these normative questions, however, the question of how to respond also presents policymakers with a practical "*accommodation dilemma*". How the disintegration process evolves, and whether the country pursues or aborts its disintegration request, depends to a large degree on the other member states of the international institution. The latter can choose from a wide array of possible reactions, but confront a trade-off between maximizing their short- to medium-run well-being and maintaining the long-run stability of the international institution. On the one hand, the remaining states can accommodate the democratically expressed wish of the other people, e.g. by granting the exceptions demanded or by maintaining wide-ranging post-withdrawal cooperation with the withdrawing state. Such post-disintegration arrangements limit the disruptions implied by a sharp rupture in the hitherto cooperative relations. By accommodating the referendum country, the material costs of disintegration can thus be decreased for everyone involved. However, although an accommodation strategy preserves the benefits from cooperation as far as possible, it also comes with two significant downsides. First, because international agreements are usually the result of mutually beneficial compromises (e.g., Keohane 1984; Abbott and Snidal 1998), changing the terms of such an agreement to one country's benefit ex post tends to leave the remaining member states worse off.

¹⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2015/jul/13/greek-supporters-social-media-backlash-germany>

Second, and perhaps more consequentially, accommodation carries considerable risks of political contagion because it demonstrates that countries can unilaterally improve their position through mass-based disintegration bids. For voters, it is generally difficult to correctly predict how one's country would fare if it left an existing international institution. Voters can compare their own country relative to others to imagine such a counterfactual situation, for example by benchmarking their country's economic performance (e.g., Gärtner 1997; Hobolt and Leblond 2009; Hobolt and Leblond 2013), or national political system (Rohrschneider 2002; e.g., Anderson 1998; Sánchez-Cuenca 2000; Armingeon and Ceka 2013; Ecker-Ehrhardt 2012). But such national benchmarks are imperfect proxies, especially because so much depends on the nature of the future relations between the withdrawing state and the members of the international institution. Voters tend to understand this strategic complication (Christin, Hug, and Sciarini 2002; Finke and Beach 2017; Hobolt 2009; Dinas et al. 2017), but for lack of a realistic counterfactual often misperceive the strategic incentives of the other member states. Some voters therefore imagine their country's post-integration future in too rosy a color (e.g., Milic 2015; Owen and Walter 2017; Sciarini, Lanz, and Nai 2015; Walter et al. 2018), and such optimism makes voters more willing to risk breaking apart from an international organization. For example, more than 90 percent of Greek voters who rejected the bailout agreement in the 2015 referendum expected their vote to result in continued negotiations and a better bailout package (Jurado, Konstantinidis, and Walter 2015), and two thirds of "Leave"-voters in the Brexit referendum believed that the UK would retain full access to the EU's single market post-Brexit (Owen and Walter 2017).

By observing another country's efforts to disintegrate from a common (or similar) international institution, voters can update these beliefs. Another country's disintegration experience thus provides voters with a powerful counterfactual that allows them to assess more accurately to what extent disintegration presents a viable and better alternative to membership in the international institution (de Vries 2017; Walter 2017). It informs voters about the likely response of the other member states and of the likely economic, social, and political consequences of disintegration. A disintegration experience that improves the situation of the withdrawing country demonstrates that integration can be reversed and that nation states can be better off on their own. This creates an "encouragement effect" that makes successful disintegration of one member state "socially contagious" (Pacheco 2012). By observing this experience, voters in other countries become more optimistic about national prospects outside

the international institution, which encourages the spread of disintegrative tendencies abroad.¹⁵ Such a diffusion of disintegrative tendencies among the institution's remaining members, however, threatens the long-run viability of the international institution as a whole.

These political contagion risks in turn create incentives for the remaining member states to pursue a hard, non-accommodating strategy that inflicts high costs on the withdrawing country.¹⁶ When the disintegrating country fails in its efforts to change or leave the international institution, voters in other countries equally update their beliefs: Observing that a country is worse-off post-disintegration (or aborts its disintegration bid for fear of negative consequences) is likely to make them more pessimistic about their own country's post-disintegration future. Such a "deterrence effect" should thus decrease voters' enthusiasm for an exit of their own country. Beyond the effect on disintegration support, the encouragement and deterrence effect are also likely to influence how voters evaluate the international institution and the merits of international cooperation more generally (Ecker-Ehrhardt 2012; Clements, Nanou, and Verney 2014).¹⁷ It may therefore be in the remaining members' and the institution's interest to make non-compliance or withdrawal so costly for the withdrawing country, that it prospectively helps to discourage similar mass-based efforts at disintegration in other member states. Because it also makes withdrawal very costly for the disintegrating state, this strategy moreover raises the probability that the latter will reconsider its bid to not comply or withdraw (as the Swiss and the Greek ultimately did at the end of the negotiations with the EU and the remaining member states). The downside of the non-accommodation strategy is, however, that it is likely to be costly for everyone involved.¹⁸

A unilateral, mass-based bid for disintegration thus creates an *accommodation dilemma* that puts the national governments of the remaining states into a strategically difficult situation in which public opinion features both as a constraint on and an outcome of the disintegration negotiations. The Brexit example illustrates the accommodation dilemma nicely. While granting the UK continued access to the EU's single market would maintain existing economic ties and preserve many cooperation gains in the other member states, the remaining EU-27

¹⁵ This effect has also been well documented in the context of secession on the national level (e.g., Coggins 2011).

¹⁶ An example for a non-accommodation strategy is the EU's reaction to Switzerland's referendum vote in 2014 to restrict immigration and subsequent decision not to extend freedom of movement to nationals of a new EU member state (Croatia) in violation of its bilateral treaties with the EU. The EU retaliated by barring Switzerland's access to the new Horizon 2020 research program, which eventually succeeded in convincing the Swiss parliament not to implement the referendum and to honor its obligations enshrined in the bilateral treaties.

¹⁷ These effects are not limited to voters in other countries, but may extend to voters in the leaving state – who may update and potentially change their preferences as the true benefits or costs of disintegration are revealed.

¹⁸ The rationale for this strategy is thus not dissimilar to the logic of economic sanctions (Martin 1993).

member states are weary that such a response might put the entire European project at risk in the long run by creating incentives for other countries to defect as well. In contrast, the non-accommodation strategy might dampen others' incentives to leave the EU, but would come at a high economic price for both the UK and the remaining member states (e.g., Chen et al. 2017).

4.1 Assessing the risks of political contagion

The rationale for a non-accommodation strategy vis-à-vis the referendum country in the disintegration negotiations rests on the expectation that such a hard line will have a deterrence effect that limits the potentially centrifugal effects of political contagion. This raises the empirical question whether this expectation is warranted: Does a hard, non-accommodating bargaining position indeed discourages further disintegration in the remaining member states? This question applies to two levels of analysis, the country-level and the individual-level. On the country-level, the question is to what extent an accommodation of referendum-induced non-compliance or disintegration encourages other governments to seek exceptions for their own countries. The country-level problems are relatively well understood, especially when it comes to non-compliance (Simmons 2010). I therefore here focus on the individual-level, which has become increasingly important in recent years, especially in Europe (Hooghe and Marks 2009; Hobolt and de Vries 2016).

A rigorous test of this hypothesis would require a dynamic analysis of how individuals respond to disintegration negotiations and outcomes, and how this feeds back into their own support for an international institution and demands for disintegration. While such an analysis would ideally be based on a huge and longitudinal (preferably panel) data collection effort, which I am currently engaged in, I here present some preliminary data that uses correlational evidence from the Brexit case to examine whether individuals take the fate of a disintegrating country into account when forming an opinion about whether they themselves support disintegration of their own state. To this end I use data from an EU-wide online poll that Dalia Research conducted on my behalf in July 2017 on public opinion across 28 EU Member States (see also S. Walter 2017b). The sample consists of 9371 working-age respondents (ages 18-65), drawn across the remaining 27 EU Member States,¹⁹ with sample sizes roughly proportional to their

¹⁹ I omit the UK for the analysis.

population size. In order to obtain census representative results, the data were weighted based upon the most recent Eurostat statistics.²⁰

Respondents' support for disintegration of their own country from the EU was measured with the question "*If [YOUR COUNTRY] were to hold a referendum on leaving the EU today, how would you vote?*". The possible answers ranged from "I would definitely vote to leave the EU (1) to I would definitely vote to remain (4). I then examine how assessments about the likely effect of Brexit on the UK are associated with the propensity of respondents to support an exit of their own country from the EU. I use the question "*Five years from now on, do you think Brexit will make the UK much better off/somewhat better off/neither better nor worse off/somewhat worse off/much worse off?*" Of course, this opinion will be strongly influenced by what respondents' attitudes about the EU. I therefore control for the respondent's general opinion of the EU, using the question *What is your opinion of the EU? Very negative/Somewhat negative/Neither negative nor positive/Somewhat positive/Very positive*". Because research has shown that Euroskepticism is a multidimensional concept (Hobolt and de Vries 2016), I additionally control for respondent's views about the EU's competences: "*Which statement best describes your views about the future of the European Union? The EU should return some power to national governments/The division of power between national governments and the EU should remain as it is today/National governments should transfer more power to the EU.*" I additionally control for some sociodemographic variables (age, gender, education, whether the respondent lives in a rural or urban setting, and country).

Figure 4 shows the marginal effects from an OLS regression on the likely vote in a national exit referendum in the respondent's own country. It demonstrates that both a deterrence and an encouragement effect are at play: Those who assess the UK's prospects outside the EU more pessimistically are less likely to vote for an exit of their own country from the EU. Likewise, those who think that the UK will do well after it has left the European Union are also more likely to potentially vote leave if their own country held an exit referendum. This effect holds even after two different dimensions of EU-related opinions are controlled for. Not surprisingly, a possible disintegration vote is strongly influenced by these opinions. Nonetheless, the likely effect of Brexit on the UK exerts an additional effect on respondents' vote intentions.

²⁰ The target weighting variables were age, gender, level of education (as defined by ISCED (2011) levels 0-2, 3-4, and 5-8), and degree of urbanization (rural and urban). Results are robust to using only the data from the biggest five countries, whose sample sizes exceed N=1000.

Figure 4: Deterrence and encouragement effects of Brexit

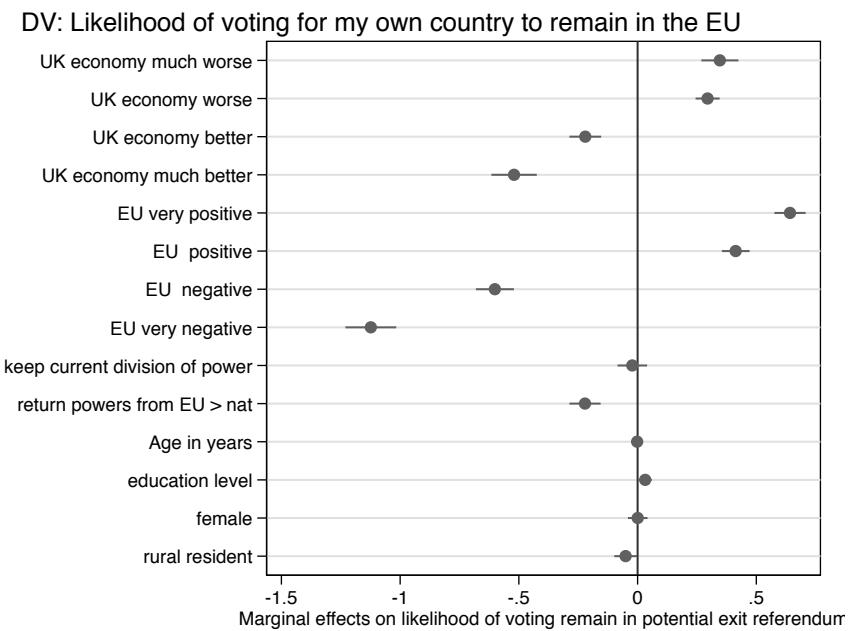
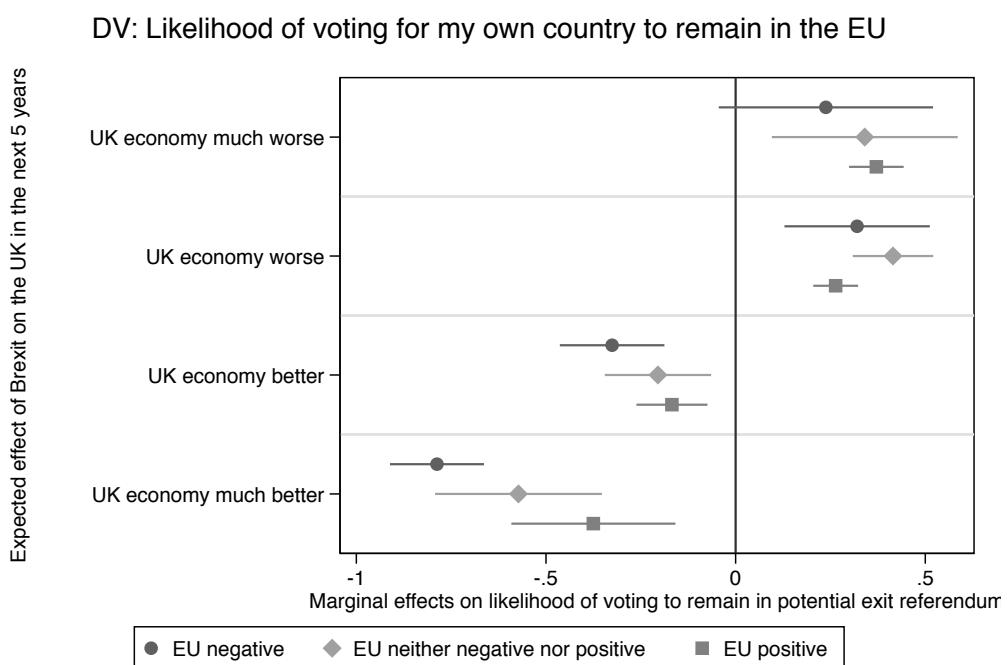


Figure 5 shows that deterrence and encouragement effects can also be observed when we split up the sample according to people's opinion of the EU. This suggests that the accommodation dilemma exists. Nonetheless, future research should explore in more detail whether a tough negotiating stance indeed influences voters' expectations and perceptions about the likely consequences of disintegration for their own country.

Figure 5: Deterrence and encouragement effects of Brexit, by EU opinion



Note: controls for constitutional EU opinion, age, education, gender, rural/urban, and country.

4.2 Country-level variation in responses to disintegrative referendum votes

The contagion risks associated with one member state's withdrawal from an international institution are not just the outcome of the disintegration negotiations, but themselves influence these negotiations.²¹ These negotiations will be fundamentally shaped by the accommodation dilemma, the trade-off between the costs of a non-accommodative strategy and the contagion risks implied by an accommodative strategy. The contours of this dilemma and the extent to which it shapes international disintegration negotiations is likely to vary across member states and disintegration cases, however.

First, countries weigh the costs of non-accommodation more heavily when the potential costs of this strategy to the domestic economy and society are high. The net costs of disintegration are usually distributed unequally among member states and also differ across different issues. They are highest when a member state depends strongly on cooperation with the disintegrating state, and when its ability to potentially benefit from opportunities created by disintegration is low. This exposure to non-accommodation can vary considerably: a “hard Brexit,” for example, is estimated to put less than 0.5% of Slovakia’s and Bulgaria’s GDP, but more than 10% of Irish GDP at risk (Chen et al. 2017). I would expect that states will be particularly hawkish on issues on which their net domestic costs of non-accommodation are small, but more dovish on issues where non-accommodation is very costly for their domestic economy and society.

Second, political contagion risks influence national negotiating positions. Because the bargaining outcome is likely to have significant spillover effects on the support for the international institution in all remaining member states, public opinion moves in the spotlight of the disintegration negotiations. Feedback effects between international negotiations and domestic public opinion are well known in international relations research (e.g. research on two-level games (Putnam 1988), audience costs (Tomz 2007; e.g. Fearon 1994) or the role of domestic politics for international politics more generally (Moravcsik 1993; Moravcsik 1997; e.g. Milner 1997)). In addition to these vertical linkages between voters and their governments, however, the contagion effects in disintegration negotiations mean that policymakers need to consider the contagion risks in other member states and in the withdrawing country (diagonal linkages) in parallel with the political contagion risks in their own country (vertical linkages).

²¹ Note that the bargaining mandate can also be exercised by representatives of the international institution as such, as the EU did in the negotiations about the implementation of the Swiss mass immigration initiative. But because the bargaining outcome needs to be ratified by the remaining member states if it suggests substantive changes to the existing agreement, member state positions will be influential in these instances as well.

The higher the contagion risks in at least one member state, the more hawkish governments' negotiation positions will usually be overall. This means that even if a government represents a country in which the mass public strongly supports continued membership, it will opt for a non-accommodating strategy if it fears that accommodation will encourage integration-sceptics in another remaining member state. High contagion risks at home or in another member state thus increase support for a non-accommodation strategy. This effect will be particularly pronounced when the disintegration process is highly politicized. And because ideas also matter in international negotiations (e.g., McNamara 1998; Risse 2004), more integration-sceptic governments will be less concerned about contagion risks.

Third, non-accommodation can be very costly, but also increases the likelihood that the withdrawing state might back down – generally the best outcome for the remaining states. This suggests that the remaining member states have stronger incentives to pursue a non-accommodative strategy vis-à-vis the disintegrating state when there are nontrivial chances that such a strategy will result in a retraction of the disintegration bid. This is most likely when the bargaining power of the remaining states is high. The level of bargaining power depends on a number of factors (Finke et al. 2012; Thomson et al. 2006; Moravcsik 1997; Bailer, Mattila, and Schneider 2015; Keohane and Nye 1977). The leverage of the remaining members tends to be higher when the number of remaining member states is high, when the interdependence between the disintegrating and the remaining member states is asymmetric and in favor of the latter (Keohane and Nye 1977), and when non-accommodation means continuing the status quo (Schimmelfennig 2017). Relative bargaining power also depends on the institutional setup of the withdrawal process, frequently specified in the form of exit clauses (Rosendorff and Milner 2001; Kucik and Reinhardt 2008; Pelc 2009) that disadvantage the withdrawing state. Finally, the remaining member states also have more bargaining power when their preferences are homogenous with regard to a certain issue. For example, the ranks will be much more closed on issues such as continued financial contributions of the withdrawing state – which virtually all states are likely to favor – than on issues such as preferential market access, where positions are likely to be much more divided.

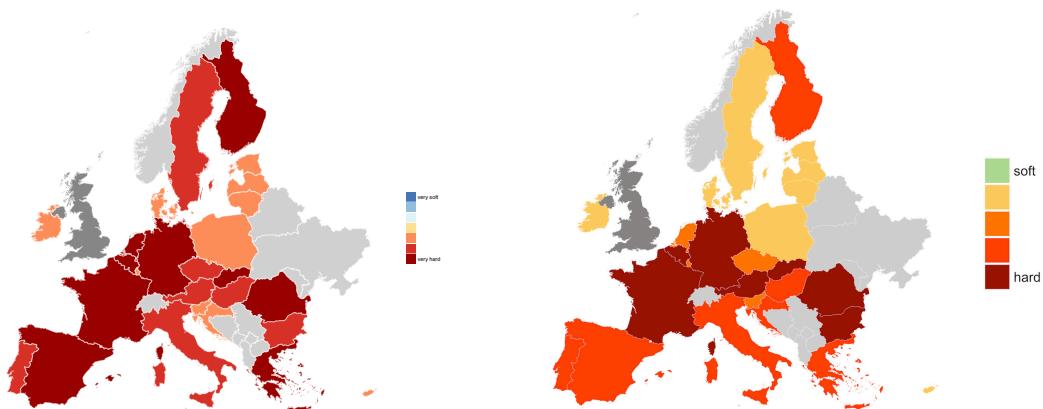
Against this backdrop, one would expect the remaining member states to vary in their responses to a disintegration referendum. Research examining and explaining this variation so far barely exists, but some observations stand out: First of all, the choice of strategy depends on the relative bargaining power of the concerned parties. For example, the EU is engaging with the UK's wish to leave the EU, whereas it refused to even officially open negotiations about a potential treaty change with Switzerland. This partly reflects the fact that the UK has a much

larger economy and is more deeply integrated with the EU-27 countries than Switzerland. Likewise, Canada and Mexico have agreed to open renegotiations of the NAFTA agreement, even though they have been less willing to accommodate the United States' demands to improve the agreements terms only in the latter's favor.

Second, the remaining member states vary in their degree of unity in disintegration negotiations. In the negotiations following the 2015 Greek bailout referendum, for example, Eurozone governments were split in their opinion about whether Greece should be allowed to leave (or be kicked out of) the Eurozone. In contrast, in the Brexit negotiations, the remaining EU-27 countries have shown a high degree of unity in the Brexit negotiations so far. However, the negotiations to date have covered aspects of Brexit on which there is little debate among the EU-27 – for example, everybody is in favor of the UK paying more. Figure 6a shows the positions of the remaining member states on the issues discussed so far, based on assessments of national negotiation positions made by the Economist Intelligence Unit (The Economist 2017). However, figure 6b, which considers a larger range of issues in the Brexit negotiations, including, for example, security, shows considerable variation in the long-run Brexit-approach among the remaining EU member states.

Figure 6a:
Brexit positions, negotiation phase I

Figure 6b:
Overall Brexit negotiation positions



1. Conclusion: Mass-based disintegration, a democratic threat to the liberal world order?

The recent successes of populist parties, candidates, and initiatives have often been based on a common narrative: that by being more assertive in international relations and putting the nation's interest first rather than accepting compromise, the country's prosperity, national

sovereignty, and democratic quality could be improved. Upon closer inspection, however, these promises have usually proven to be built on quicksand. Successes at the domestic polls have been met with resistance abroad. Renegotiating international agreements has proven difficult, if not impossible, and has sometimes forced populist governments to concede that the status quo is better than what they could achieve if they left such an agreement. Although these setbacks have decreased the appeal of such messages to some extent (de Vries 2017), they still garner considerable support.

This paper has demonstrated that so far, mass-based attempts to unilaterally change or withdraw from the rules of international cooperation have not failed because of poor negotiation skills on part of the governments of the withdrawing states, but because they invoke a central trilemma in international relations: Rarely do the trade-offs between international cooperation, democracy, and national sovereignty (Rodrik 2011) move into the spotlight more prominently than when one country votes on an issue in which other countries equally have a large stake.

Yet the failure of populist promises to materialize bears its own risk. When governments tasked with implementing populist referendum outcomes have not been able to deliver the promised lands of milk and honey, they have been decried by populists as incompetent or unwilling to implement the will of the people. Resistance of foreign governments against one country's wishes for unilateral change has been condemned as a lack of respect of democracy. And because intergovernmental bargaining tends to take place between a relatively small number of few government officials behind closed doors, its outcomes have often been characterized as elitist decisions by bureaucrats who have lost touch with normal people. There is thus a risk that the failure of mass-based disintegration initiatives breeds even more resentment and feeding ground for populists. Dealing with this democratic threat to the liberal world order is no easy task. It is important, but not easy, for policymakers to communicate clearly the trade-offs and constraints under which they operate. They also need to straddle the rope between accommodating too much and risking contagion on one hand, and accommodating too little and risking backlash on the other. Only one thing is certain: it is impossible to ignore this challenge to international cooperation from below.

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