How Many Europes? Fragmentation in the European Space since the Great Recession

Marco Zoppi

To cite this article: Marco Zoppi (2020): How Many Europes? Fragmentation in the European Space since the Great Recession, The International Spectator, DOI: 10.1080/03932729.2020.1771053

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2020.1771053
How Many Europes? Fragmentation in the European Space since the Great Recession

Marco Zoppi
University of Bologna

ABSTRACT
Since the Great Recession started in the late 2000s, the European Union (EU) has experienced an acute crisis that has triggered internal divisions among EU members. Three factors can help shed light on this tendency towards political fragmentation: economics and finance, culture, and territory. Each of these reveals a specific ‘geography’, in terms of policies and narratives, of the current malaise regarding the EU project and the limits of the Union in addressing issues important for the domestic debates of its members. Such discontent, as well as anti-EU sentiment, fuels strong political reactions including populism and anti-elitism that could further fragment the EU in the future.

KEYWORDS
European Union; fragmentation; Great Recession; democracy

The last decade in the history of the European Union (EU) has been turbulent on many fronts and has prompted renewed debate on the Union’s internal cohesion, its normative power and, ultimately, its possibilities of continuing to play an important role in global dynamics (Lucarelli and Fioramonti 2010; Persson et al. 2015; Baimbridge et al. 2017). The overall impression is that the EU has lost its momentum as a normative power with the rise of internal contradictions that undermine its legitimacy: its image is closer to that of a ‘fortress’ resisting multiple external challenges, than of a global agent capable of confidently spreading certain universal norms, rules and practices to other countries. Political fragmentation is taking place internally as the EU is engulfed in a multi-layered and somewhat chaotic process of reframing its space and identity. Bo Stråth (2017, 245) has described it as a process of “re-nationalization” – closely connected to the rise of so-called populist parties in Europe. However, while most EU political leaders have quickly condemned populism and nationalism as frightening reminiscences of the continent’s darkest moment in history, there seems to be little interest in exploring the roots of this political re-orientation. Ignoring its primary causes does not help understand what is producing and reproducing fragmentation, which should instead be the focus of more analysis.

The threshold event marking the beginning of the fragmentation, which in truth has affected large parts of the world, was the financial crisis sparked in 2007. Its backlash effects were felt for several years in the Eurozone and, more importantly for the analysis set out in this article, exposed the differences in the EU countries’ ability to recover.
(Albonico et al. 2019). In the aftermath of the financial debacle and the subsequent sovereign debt crisis, the EU discovered the consequences of nurturing pre-crisis disequilibria and discrepancies in the economic structures of its members. In conjunction with other factors, this set Europe on two separate tracks, with some EU members (for example, Austria, Germany, Sweden) displaying signs of rapid economic recovery as early as the 2010s and others (Southern European members) falling into deep recession (Landesmann 2015).

One may recall the creditor/debtor drama and the implementation of austerity measures in several EU countries under pressure from the so-called “Troika” (European Central Bank, ECB; International Monetary Fund, IMF; and the European Commission), resulting in harsh spending-review measures for the countries concerned (Hutter et al. 2018, 11). The absence of any fiscal solidarity mechanisms combined with the Troika’s fiscal conservatism hit Greece particularly hard, which soon became the symbol of resistance to EU institutions – the perceived German-run Europe – and the global and financial markets speculating on its default. Talk of a possible Grexit anticipated that of a Brexit and, notably, was not based on an intention expressed by the Greek people to leave the EU. And yet, while the Eurozone was slowly overcoming the quagmire of the global fiscal crisis, a new divisive wave began to destabilise the European space.

To start with, Russia’s annexation of Crimea in early 2014 shattered the Union’s Neighbourhood Policy, and with it, part of its normative power ambitions vis-à-vis other political actors. On the southern front, the repercussions of the so-called Arab Spring and its, in many cases, violent outcomes paved the way for another great shock, the massive migration flows peaking in 2015. The ensuing political debate soon revealed the EU’s failure to be able to work out a common policy, the lack of agreement on the redistribution and integration of the incoming refugees and an overall solidarity deficit dividing EU members (Agustín and Jørgensen 2019). The debate on the issue of migration would lead to a much more profound reflection (not yet resolved) on a number of crucial issues: among others, the EU’s moral duty to welcome refugees and economic migrants; the legitimacy of EU incursions into the national sovereignty of its members; and the threat that migration supposedly brings to security and the European identity.

The Brexit (June 2016) and the Catalan independence (October 2017) referenda further invigorated images of fragmentation and potential territorial reconfigurations of the Union, undermining the already weakened sense of EU internal cohesion. In the background, global powers such as Russia and the United States seem to be interested in undermining the achievements of the EU, by influencing public debates through disinformation campaigns, especially online propaganda and statements encouraging the dissolution of the Union (European Parliament 2018; LaFranieri et al. 2019). In early 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has provided yet another case to assess the state of fragmentation in Europe, in at least two ways. First, the EU institutional debate about the emergency economic measures to be implemented (in particular about the so-called ‘coronabond’) has prompted once again the ‘old’ split between Northern and Southern member states, with the former opposing the idea of being liable for the debts of the latter. Second, the management of the crisis at the EU level has generated discourses about the alleged lack of intra-EU solidarity, especially when confronted with the medical supplies and staff sent by China and Russia (Braw 2020).
Taking stock of both the challenges and limits of current debates on EU affairs, this article reviews the existing literature through the analytical lens of fragmentation, with the aim of revealing what explains or contributes to explaining the growing divergencies in EU political interests, narratives and visions. The advantage of the proposed approach is that it contextualises and historicises the various motives behind anti-EU sentiments: this will be instrumental in showing that most recent political issues can be explained to some extent by insufficient initiative on the EU’s part in dealing with them, rather than external challenges. It will also demonstrate that most of the existing gaps and differences are not being mediated effectively by EU institutions – something that casts a shadow on the EU’s ability to deal with new challenges and, as a result, its future cohesion.

It will be argued that what the proposed explanations have in common is the surge in inequality and processes of erosion of democracy that have become particularly evident since the financial crisis (Matthijs 2014). In fact, the renationalisation of the European space, taken to mean the re-affirmation of national sovereignty, may not be as threatening per se as often depicted. More alarming for the cohesiveness of the EU is the sympathy among some European parties and public opinions for the global populist/authoritarian conjuncture as currently manifested in the politics of China, Russia and the US (Walker 2016). In the long run, the projection of populist and authoritarian regimes could erode the preference accorded to the current values and aspirations upheld by the EU, replacing them with less internal support for freedom, democratic institutions and humanitarian values (Inglehart and Norris 2017; Wagnsson and Hellman 2018). This ‘illiberal convergence’ would represent a major hurdle for the EU architecture in sustaining cohesiveness in the area.

Imaging discontent: an overview of the emerging geographies of Europe

In an effort to describe the recent tensions in the European space, observers have started plotting various ‘geographies’ of discontent, on the basis of concepts, values and forces that make it possible to delineate various sub-geographies throughout the area. Not all of them are informed by geographical perspectives in a strict sense. Still, what emerges from the socio-political analysis in the literature is a topography of conceptual tensions in the European space. National sovereignty vs supranational institutions; nation-states vs global markets; cosmopolitanism vs nativism or communitarianism; white Christians vs non-white ‘others’ are just some of the most significant examples of political cleavages in the EU. In other words, institutions, values, culture and race are all different ways of articulating ongoing divisions. Some of these conceptual opposites produce fixed constellations of pro and con actors, while others are more fluid in that actors reposition themselves on different stances more quickly.

How then do we account for the remarkable reframing processes of space and identity taking place across the European continent that all seem to question “the emplotment of events of the previous fifty years” (Della Sala 2018, 269)? What key messages about current and future EU affairs can be deduced from such dynamics?

Economic-financial fragmentation

The 2007 financial crisis and its aftermath can be taken as the first moment in recent history revealing the emerging fractures within Europe. A look at this delicate moment may help identify the economic-financial factor of fragmentation.
At that time, the EU had just welcomed Bulgaria and Romania to the club, three years after the previous accession round had brought in ten new members. The pace of enlargement – until then central to the understanding of the EU project – began to be considered problematic by some EU members, such as France and the Netherlands, as it would jeopardise the Union’s capacity to operate as a single political unit (Lane 2007; Della Sala 2018). Among other things, these two countries rejected the Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe via referenda and displayed a marked internal division among pro- and anti-EU political parties (Ivaldi 2006). By contrast, the enlargement process particularly satisfied the vision of the United Kingdom, which prioritised the building of a strong economic market over concerns for “absorption capacity” and political cohesion (House of Lords 2006). Debates over different interpretations of values and identity between core and peripheral countries, and between an “old” and a “new” Europe unfolded in these years and can be considered precursors of future tendencies (Lauristin 2007).

However, the 2007 financial crisis exposed not only enlargement fatigue, but also differences among established members. As mentioned earlier, the ensuing debt crisis and the risk of contagion persuaded the EU to subsidise debt in return for austerity measures in the countries that were in the most dire conditions, namely Ireland and the Southern European countries. Since a significant part of that debt (especially in the case of Greece) was held by Northern European banks, this was accompanied by the narrative that the north had ‘come to the rescue of the south’, saving these indebted countries from default. Thus a rift appeared in the middle of Europe, separating “surplus” from “deficit” countries, and a financially stable “core” from a “debt-ridden” periphery (Matthijs 2014, 102).

This moment is crucial for understanding the EU crisis of cohesion. However, the crisis did not start here. Even before the sovereign debt crisis, the Eurozone presented important disequilibria that had “a domestic endogenous nature linked to long-lasting structural asymmetries between peripheral and central economies” (Botta 2014, 170). They concerned productive and export structures as much as divergences enhanced by the euro’s institutional design (Matthijs 2014). In fact, Eurozone members have limited space for fiscal policy, as they no longer have an independent monetary policy nor tools (e.g. devaluation of national currency) to counter country-specific shocks (Hermann 2014; Guiso et al. 2019). With the ensuing crisis, austerity packages and structural adjustment measures were soon implemented by the Troika in the indebted countries (as a condition for receiving the emergency funds), leading to dramatic contractions in social expenditures and GDP in the countries affected. The interventions focused mainly on competitiveness based on predetermined indicators, disregarding the countries’ diverse economic arrangements as well as sensitive social aspects (Hermann 2014, 122). Angela Wigger (2019) concurs with this view, and adds that the EU’s crisis management was highly influenced by policies already adopted in Germany, to the point that the “Modell Deutschland” seemed “to have been elevated as the EU standard”, for example, in targeting the unit labour costs in deficit countries (357).

Structural differences and unmediated dissimilarities within the EU represent a first source of fragmentation undermining the Union’s cohesiveness. Differences include export structures, wage/price bargaining, social protection measures and economic behaviour, all crucial to explaining the various fiscal manoeuvres in a moment of stress such as the crisis and post-crisis years (Boltho and Carlin 2012). As a matter of fact, in the aftermath of the financial crisis, as the narrative of an irresponsible Southern Europe
became decidedly predominant, debates on institutional flaws in the euro’s design and strategies to improve convergence increased (Matthijs and McNamara 2015) and pressure for reform mounted, but the division between creditors and debtors in the EU has never been healed. While the financial outlooks of countries like Greece, Italy, Spain and Portugal speak for themselves, a deeper focus by policymakers on the “institutional asymmetries in the political economies of [EU] member states” that engulfed the monetary union in the first place (Hall 2016, 52) has never taken place.

Additionally, the Troika’s commitment to austerity and reduction in the cost of labour in the absence of reforms and mediation of differences triggered two additional sources of fragmentation. First, dynamics within the EU were reconfigured according to “core-periphery” relations (Algan et al. 2017). Baimbridge et al. (2017), who subscribe to this categorisation, recently proposed a flexible differentiation of the Eurozone based on economic performance, opposing a core typified by Austria, Germany and the Netherlands to a periphery represented primarily by Greece, Portugal and Spain, to which Ireland and Italy are often added. However, a core-periphery relationship is also a geographical representation of power, thus involving real and perceived power relations between the two poles. The Great Recession seems to have confirmed indeed this power structure.

The second consequence of the poor management of the crisis and post-crisis situation in Europe has been the rise of populism since the early 2010s. While it is beyond the scope of this article to discuss the varieties and features of this multifarious political phenomenon (Kaltwasser et al. 2017), what appears to have been established in the literature is a correlation between the economic recession and the flourishing of successful anti-establishment parties (Algan et al. 2017). Hence, even though anti-elitism and anti-EU supranationalism already existed in most EU countries (Albertazzi and Mcdonnell 2008), the novelty is the accentuation of the blame put on Eurozone institutions for “the inability of individual governments to counter shocks” (Guiso et al. 2019, 128). The most remarkable upshot was that Euroscepticism or overt opposition to the European project became prominent in electoral arenas in several countries and now feature as a stable element in the repertoire of many populist parties (Hutter and Kriesi 2019, 16). The poor management of the effects of the Great Recession also caused governments to become reticent about dealing with other pan-European challenges, that of migration flows in primis, often driven by an attempt to take advantage of the growing sceptical attitude of voters towards the EU (Agustín and Jørgensen 2019).

Cultural fragmentation

In his interpretation of fragmentation, Ivan Krastev (2017a) attributes a key role to the migration issue, which he reconnects to the increased “popularity of right-wing populism” as well as to the return of the “East-West divide” in Europe (291-2). A return, he claims, because he recognises a pervading presence of the past in current European discourses and narratives, in the form of a renewed clash of solidarities between national, ethnic and religious principles, as clarified further in his book After Europe (Krastev 2017b). According to Krastev, the cosmopolitan values on which the European Union is founded have been perceived as a threat by most EU countries in Eastern and Central Europe. His view is echoed by Vincent Della Sala (2018), who underlines the failure of the
EU narrative to preserve the “ontological security” of its members, pushing some of them to fear that the EU’s political agenda does not acknowledge their diverse views on crucial matters, and may thus represent a threat to their security. The Visegrád countries (Czechia, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia) are strongly opposed to the notion that EU members have to accommodate refugees (Gerhards et al. 2018, 27), with questions of security and national identity salient to sustaining this view for reasons that are rooted in their individual histories. More specifically, Krastev (2018) contends that these concerns are ingrained in past traumas of territorial partition by neighbouring superpowers, or the existential fear of being a small country (55). Such fears are not shared by Western EU countries, which are haunted, rather, by the ghost of mutual destruction.

Hungarian Premier Viktor Orbán is probably the political figure that best embodies this dichotomy, as he not only opposed the EU-wide refugee resettlement quotas, but raised confrontation to the level of a reassessment tout court of the “the liberal way of organizing a society [. . .] a general principle in Western Europe”, as he affirmed in a speech in 2014. With his choice of words, Orbán distinguished Hungary and like-minded EU countries from Western Europe. He asserted that

\[
\text{the Hungarian nation is not a simple sum of individuals, but a community that needs to be organized, strengthened and developed, and in this sense, the new state that we are building is an illiberal state, a non-liberal state. It does not deny foundational values of liberalism, as freedom, etc. But it does not make this ideology a central element of state organization, but applies a specific, national, particular approach in its stead (Orbán 2014).}
\]

This is indeed a manifestation of the conceptual clash between a communitarian approach to nation-making and a cosmopolitan understanding of society. In Poland, the leader of the Law and Justice party, Jarosław Kaczyński, joined the call for a “cultural counter-revolution” to reform the EU, after having won domestic elections with a campaign focused on an anti-European and anti-liberal ticket (Foy and Buckley 2016). With slightly softer tones, the other two Visegrád countries have all followed the same path of contestation and rejection of EU-proposed quotas.

As sociologist Frank Furedi (2017) put it, we may then have to go back to the somewhat provocative question of “who decides Europe’s values” in order to shed light on the conflict centred on EU principles (and their interpretation) in relation to pluralism and diversity. In this scramble for appropriating EU values, Visegrád countries have resorted to religion, representing themselves as defending Christianity from being overrun by non-Christian (in particular Muslim) immigrants and positioning their countries against those EU countries considered too lenient with asylum seekers and economic migrants (Stojarová 2018). This all points to the cultural factor of fragmentation.

The contours of this form of contestation are not so sharply defined, however, as religious-cultural values and symbolisms have also played out importantly in public debates in some Western European countries (for example, France and Italy), where populist parties are/have been in government or are at least in a position to exert influence on government decisions. On this basis, Jan Zielonka (2019) has questioned the role of cultural legacies as a deciding factor in the East-West divide. In their place, he has indicated that three overlapping fault lines currently cutting across the continent could actually have more analytical significance: one divides states directly exposed to refugee flows from those that are not under this pressure. Another pits (again) creditor
against debtor states. The last one is between states governed by illiberal parties and states in which populists are still kept at bay. The prevalence of one element over the other evidently changes over time.

**Territorial fragmentation**

The kinds of fragmentation explored so far divide the European space mainly at the state or regional level. Yet, another kind of fragmentation is happening more deeply at the territorial level, dividing Europe into sub-national areas and bringing together areas across the continent that are experiencing similar socio-economic conditions. This is the *territorial factor of fragmentation*.

A recent policy brief of the European Parliament reports:

Common inequality measures have revealed that, while regional disparities have been decreasing when considering the EU as a whole, they have been increasing within some countries. A number of persistently low-growth regions exist in southern Europe, as do many low-income regions in eastern Europe. Every Member State has a number of ‘inner peripheries’, which are habitually located in post-industrial or rural areas and often characterised by high levels of unemployment, poor infrastructure, lack of skilled workforce and hampered accessibility (Widuto 2019, 1).

The most prominent authors pointing to the territorial factor are Caroline De Gruyter (2016) and Andrés Rodríguez-Pose (2018), who speak of the “revenge” of the countryside or marginal areas: a revenge manifested at the ballot box against both the political parties in government and the ideals they ascribe to. Revenge against the austerity measures and liberalism already mentioned in this article could also be included. The prolonged lack of economic growth, exacerbated by unemployment, youth emigration and the increasing impoverishment of social services are all factors that underlie the resentment against central governments and, in most cases, against the EU. Therefore, the territorial explanation of resentment takes into consideration not only the distance from urban centres per se, but also a combination of real and perceived inequalities leading to a sense of being left behind by the government’s and/or the EU’s development vision.

In a recent study for the European Commission, Dijkstra *et al.* (2018) consider the anti-EU vote a very appropriate indicator for detecting potential fragmentation tendencies.

The anti-EU vote is mainly driven by a combination of long-term economic and industrial decline, low levels of education, and a lack of local employment opportunities. Once these factors are taken into consideration, well-off places are more likely to vote for anti-EU parties than places that are worse off, in contrast to explanations linking anti-establishment voting with poor people living in poor places. Moreover, other factors that have featured prominently as drivers of populism – such as ageing, rurality, remoteness, employment decline, and population decline – seem to matter much less or matter in different ways (1).

In their view too, the explanation is a *combination* of several factors. Yet, EU voters seem to put the blame on the EU and its policies. Territorial interpretations of resentment have been applied widely to explain the voting pattern across Europe and indeed seem to contribute to explaining recent political developments.
In the case of Brexit, recent studies of vote patterns led some to conclude that “areas with deprivation in terms of education, income and employment were more likely to vote Leave” (Becker et al. 2017, 1). In France, the result of the 2017 presidential election showed that Marine Le Pen (the far right, populist candidate) gained large electoral support in rural areas and among farmers: not surprisingly so, as she made the defence of public services against the social desertification of remote areas one of her key campaign points (BBC 2017).

After all, it should not be forgotten that the protest of the gilets jaunes in late 2018 was a reaction to the government’s proposal to increase a direct tax on diesel fuel, which would have disproportionately affected those using cars to go to work – mostly residing in the periphery of large cities and rural areas.

As also confirmed in a number of other studies (Antonucci et al. 2017; Hansen and Olsen 2019), the profile of those “left behind” does not necessarily include the poor, the less educated or the “losers of globalisation”. Anti-elitism and defence of the welfare state against rising inequality and globalisation are prominent features suggesting dissatisfaction for the perceived ineffectiveness of democratic institutions in protecting the rights of the citizens across the EU (Pastor and Veronesi 2019). Therefore, the analysis of territorial dynamics reveals that the polarisation between core and peripheral EU countries is replicated at the intra-country level, and since such divisions are becoming increasingly important, they make a new mapping of Europe’s geography more complex. As a matter of fact, the depopulation of rural areas and the concentration of wealth in huge urban agglomerates are phenomena that concern most countries in the European space (Zoppi 2019).

Healing the rift? The three forces redesigning Europe

The various interpretations of current European affairs proposed in the previous section suggest that Europe is confronted with multiple and overlapping challenges that create a complex scenario for analysis. Ultimately, it is exactly because these challenges are concurrent that no single line of argumentation can prevail over the others. Europe can now, more than ever, be considered a fluid political space where the EU core is distancing itself from its periphery; where Northern and Southern countries are divided by their economic structures; where the East and the West are set apart by cultural values; where rural areas suffer from depopulation and lack of competitiveness vis-à-vis growing urban centres; and where liberal democracy is given diverging interpretations. In the difficult search for interpretative keys, three main forces are currently reshaping Europe: as these forces are likely to remain influential in the next decade, they must be included in the analyses of Europe’s internal affairs.

Inequality

To start with, inequality in Europe is increasing dangerously (Iammarino et al. 2019). Inequality takes multiple forms: differences in GDP, lack of services in peripheral areas, youth emigration, ageing and increasing hydrogeological risks (Espon 2018). The result of the neglect of rural and peripheral areas, where no less than 26 percent of all Europeans currently live (UNDESA 2018), is mounting frustration and resentment against ruling elites. According to some of the views presented in this article, this resentment is
responsible for some recent electoral patterns in EU countries. In other words, many of
the challenges for cohesion start at a very local level: it is precisely there, in rural, isolated
villages or economically depressed communities that the future of the EU may be written,

Brexit has been a powerful example of that. The reason is similar: within the single
countries making up the European space, peripheral and remote areas have become the
symbol of long-term socio-economic decline. Countryside, hilly and mountainous areas,
islands: besides the most obvious demographic problems deriving from emigration, these
areas share lower levels of economic development, access to services, quality of life
compared to cities, as well as under-exploitation of their economic potential: agriculture,
forest resources and, above all, tourism (Espon 2018; Zoppi 2019).

In Europe, a “dichotomy persists between dynamic large urban agglomerations and
stagnating industrialised and remote regions” (Iammarino et al. 2019, 274). The pro-
longed lack of political attention for these areas contributes to emigration of the resident
population, which will be even more salient in the coming decades, producing clear
challenges to social cohesion in the European area. Furthermore, considering the ageing
trend, one can conclude that the European space as a whole is on the verge of dramatic
demographic changes and internal migration dynamics that will have much more of an
impact than the recent flows of asylum seekers and economic migrants – which have so
divided members since late 2014 – without receiving the same public attention.

**Erosion of liberal democracy**

A second force of paramount importance for imagining the future of European cohesion
is the erosion of liberal democracy that has taken place in the last decade. The malaise
stemming from the management of the Great Recession provided the grounds for the
counter-narrative of populism, perhaps the major challenge for European democracies
today. More specifically, the rise of populism has been linked to the widespread sentiment
of representing or inhabiting the society’s periphery (Diamanti 2018): these political
movements have attempted to intercept social discontent, indicating enemies (élites,
migrants, the EU, globalisation) and proposing solutions (respectively, electoral ‘revolt’,
closed borders, exit from Europe, nationalisation of strategic assets). In many cases,
populism has grown in the shadow of fake news and disinformation campaigns deliberately
aimed at misrepresenting the facts and incrementing social discontent.

As Sofie Blombäck (2020, 222) noted, “[P]opulism can be used as an indication of (ill)
health in the political life of democratic countries.” Its demand for elements of direct
democracy and the reduction of the power of political parties, as well as its frequent
attacks on the media are capable of undermining representative democracies. In fact, the
danger of synergies between populist and far-right parties lies in their uncooperative
spirit in reforming and upgrading the European Union. In the long run, this could
transform current cleavages into a permanent sub-regional re-organisation of members’
interests, leading to further criticism of democratic values and eventually to the decline of
the EU as a global actor. The EU’s inability to deter Hungary from sliding back into semi-
authoritarianism speaks for itself. This is not a question of prestige, but a loss of strategic
advantage with respect to other powers, whose actions can easily produce consequences
at the EU’s borders (think of Turkey and refugees; the Balkans and the flows of extra-EU investments; or, again, instability in North Africa and at the Ukrainian eastern frontier).

Moreover, the erosion of democracy may find unintended allies in anti-populist forces. Frank Furedi (2017) noted, for example, that “disappointment with the capacity of the people to vote the right way has led to the publication of a spate of anti-populist literature that questions the value of democracy itself” (vi). Bringing forward the idea that people are voting the wrong way, or even questioning whether they should have this right at all is as detrimental for democracy as populism itself. The real issue is, why are certain narratives, in particular those undervaluing the accomplishment of liberal democracies, permeating the electorate so effortlessly? Why do so many people seem to be dissatisfied with democracy? Therefore, responding to populism effectively should not be a matter of condemning its extremism, which in turn may be seen as a limitation of the freedom of speech, but of targeting the various factors responsible for the new geographies of discontent. Without a common and unitary response to them, it will be hard to guarantee that the solutions put in place by EU member states will go in the same direction. And such a common strategy will have to be put in place soon, since global actors have found that the Europeans’ resentment is fertile ground for spreading propaganda that favours anti-unitary stances.

Lack of consensus-based convergence

The last force responsible for the fragmentation of the European space is the EU’s lack of consensus-based convergence. The European Monetary Union is still not matched by a proper fiscal union that mediates current structural asymmetries and seeks compromises between members and their conflicting interests. Austerity measures may have increased fiscal convergence, but the way in which they were enacted, often as emergency actions and as a precondition for national governments to access funds, lacked any kind of democratic and social accountability towards EU citizens (Hermann 2014, 125). Even worse, the Eurozone sovereign debt crisis led to the advent of unelected technocratic governments that negotiated harsh fiscal measures directly with the Troika (the case of Greece and Italy). The fact that the EU has yet to address these issues further divides EU members on criteria of economic performance and delegitimises central EU institutions in the eyes of Europeans (Guiso et al. 2019). The core-periphery relations stemming from such inaction should have been overcome with a new agreement, in time for the next crisis, and nonetheless the COVID-19 outbreak has found the EU still divided around emergency response measures.

Conclusions: good friends or only good time friends?

At the apex of the Great Recession, German Finance Minister Wolfgang Schäuble did not hesitate to claim: “Greece is a member of the eurozone. There’s no doubt about that. Whether with the euro or temporarily without it: only the Greeks can answer this question.” Yet, his Greek counterpart, Yanis Varoufakis, replied by denouncing what Brussels and the Troika were doing to his government and people as “terrorism” and “humiliation” (Rankin 2015). In 2016, Members of the European Parliament Sophie Montel and Florian Philippot proposed a motion “for a resolution of the European
Parliament on the results of the austerity policies imposed on the Greek people”, in which they called “on the Commission to apologise to the Greek people for the mistakes it has made as a member of the Troika” (European Parliament 2016).

As these passages effectively capture, the 2008 financial collapse exacerbated tensions in the European Union, and this article has argued that the crisis created a schism between countries considered ‘frugal’ and those considered ‘to blame’ for their financial imbalances. The events of the late 2000s provoked political responses that have called into question the European project of integration, that have scapegoated migrants and that have thrown doubt on liberal democratic values. They are identified here as the core moments of EU fragmentation, that is the internal reconfiguration of interests and power. From that moment on, new geographies of multiple ‘Europe’s’ have been conceived and narrated in what appears increasingly to be a fluid and mutable political space.

While the crisis and its management opened a rift between EU countries and undermined internal trust, the structural disequilibria between member states have not been addressed properly via political reforms, so as to prevent further crises. Quite the opposite, the Great Recession has paved the way for further fragmentation tendencies, which have been manifested in the form of cultural and territorial challenges to EU cohesiveness. These are likely to remain serious limitations, preventing the forging of more profound solidarity links between members. In fact, the last decade is seriously at risk of being remembered for its record of divisions, fragmentations and questioning of the EU’s institutions, values and global role.

Ironically, this is happening exactly as the EU’s Structural and Cohesion Funds are being praised for having boosted a dramatic economic spurt of growth in Central and Eastern members (KPMG 2016; Walker 2019). The result of political inaction at such a delicate time may well be that younger generations of Europeans and candidates to become Europeans will know the EU mostly for the impasse it has been going through since the turn of the millennium. In their imagination and memories-in-the-making, the milestones once represented by peace in Europe after two continental civil wars, the collapse of the Berlin Wall (which recently celebrated its 30th anniversary) and the eastward enlargement to former Soviet territories – the recollection of all these things may not be as vivid as the images and discourses linked to the financial crisis, the quarrels among EU members on quotas for asylum seekers, terrorist threats and the Brexit vote. Developments have also strengthened the sense of physical fragmentation: the erection of walls and fences, as well as the temporary suspension of the Schengen agreements, that is free circulation within Europe. As a result, images of fragmentation now prevail over what was previously a vision – and to some extent a reality – of integration and cohesion.

This is why the quest for reforms and a ‘new narrative’ for Europe launched by former Commission President José Manuel Barroso in 2013 seems more vital than ever for tackling the many challenges that the Union faces. So far, the achievements of the allegedly new narrative have been poor: the main EU actors seem to have ignored the lessons of the Great Recession and have instead maintained the narrative focus on the neoliberal market and globalisation. Striving for compromise among diverging interests still takes second place to the idea of market-compliant democracy, as described earlier. At the same time, member states have continued to display different orientations towards enlargement: the last instance of this was France’s temporary veto of the start of EU accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia in October 2019. Finally, the so far shaky handling of
the COVID-19 outbreak in the first months of 2020 has revealed that fragmentation is still lurking beneath the ashes of the Great Recession. As part of the problem, it was noted that the EU is struggling considerably to even “communicate its response” to the coronavirus crisis, with the result of inadequately addressing criticisms for the alleged lack of solidarity (Rose 2020).

In conclusion, quick fixes to the EU’s problems will have to leave space to more ambitious initiatives aimed at countering the erosion of democracy throughout the continent and at reclaiming the supremacy of politics in EU affairs. All the more so as the EU remains vulnerable to soft power campaigns from Russia and other global powers that are intent on undermining its political achievements.

**Notes on contributor**

*Marco Zoppi* is a Research Fellow in the Department of Political and Social Sciences, University of Bologna, Bologna, Italy.

**ORCID**

Marco Zoppi [http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8201-9183](http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8201-9183)

**References**


