

“We the *European People*...”
European Citizens as the New Force for Change in the EU

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1. Introduction

“We are not forming coalitions of states. We are uniting people.”

- Jean Monnet, April 30th, 1952

With these words--on the eve of the creation of the European Union--its founding father inaugurated the vision for the Europe he wanted to create.

People--over states--were its foundation.

Today, almost sixty years later, Monnet’s vision could not be farther from the European reality his predecessors have realized. For decades, state actors have worked to realize their conception of Europe at distance from the public--furthering the process of integration without involving the European “people” that Monnet stressed. Indeed, the sources of Europe's most pressing institutional issues today remain this disconnect from its populous--the EU’s democratic deficit pressingly threatens the longevity of the union as a whole (Sivulka 2018). In failing to empower and “unite [its] people”, the EU has failed to form a ever stronger “coalition of states”--perverting Monet’s union into a battleground for national interests (Zielonka 2014). Now, both of Monnet’s lofty ambitions have given way to division. Detachment from the supranational institution has fueled Eurosceptic sentiment while successive crises have pummeled a European unity on the verge of collapse.

For the first time the people of Europe have begun to sufficiently mobilize on a continental scale--but not in an act of unity or democracy as Monnet had hoped (Rooduijn 2017). Increasingly, Europe’s future is no longer in the hands of elite politicians; a disillusioned public with populist politics has taken hold.

People--over states--were the foundation of Monnet's vision, but today they jeopardize the last semblance of unity that it created.

Understanding the role of this versatile but mobilized European populus is absolutely fundamental to not only grasping the breath of the union's present issues, but also the path of its future--albeit one with an uncertain trajectory. As such, this research hones in on this new force in the European political sphere--Europeans themselves, and the implications that their changing sentiment and polarization will have on its future. Herein, a quantitative analysis of the shifting public sentiment of the EU, coupled with a qualitative assessment of its origins, powers, and implications for the continent's future substantiates the following claims:

Claim 1: The various crises that the EU has suffered and failed to adequately respond to, coupled with its the faulty and complex institutional nature, have directly fueled divisions in European political sentiment--polarizing the public in unprecedented ways.

Claim 2: This polarization of the populus has and will continue to threaten the union as it currently stands, indicating a future not wholly optimistic or radically negative for the EU--but rather one significantly different from the European status quo.

2. Shifting Public Attitudes Towards European Integration

2.1 Types of Public Support

To appropriately survey contemporary change in European public sentiment, it's imperative to define the concept under analysis--"citizen support" for a political institution. For this, David Easton's political theory of public support distinguishes between diffuse support--stemming from citizens' values and ideologies--and utilitarian support--based on one's cost-benefit analysis of personal or national benefit by the system (Easton 1975)

While the wide majority of available data on the EU's citizens actually fails to differentiate across these types of support, analyzing surveys through the lens of Easton's distinction allows us to make qualitative interpretations about their results. As such, although the commission's "Eurobarometer" surveys poses generalized questions instead of targeted inquiries, it is still possible to distill poignant conclusions (Hobolt 2012, 718). In the same vein, juxtaposition with data from privately funded surveys--including the PEW Research Center--augment this analysis in context. Coupled together, these sources outline not only a growing amount of discontent with the EU throughout member states, but also an almost equivalent polarization across the public spectrum--even in globalistic support.

Indeed, Euroscepticism may still dominate the media, but the reality of citizen support is more nuanced than many realize.

2.1 Rise in Euroscepticism

Nevertheless, any assessment of the contemporary change in European public sentiment would be blatantly incorrect without a discussion of the rise in Euroscepticism over the last 15 years. Euroscepticism's prevalence in the current European dialogue is with good reason--the tumultuous trials of the last decade have rattled the public landscape. As Sara Hobolt's study on Public Opinion and Integration puts it, since the turning point rejection of the Constitutional Treaty by the 2005 referenda, the world of "insulated leaders [making] decisions without public consultation" has been over. (Hobolt 2012, 716) "A move away from the 'permissive consensus'" for integration towards a "constraining dissensus" has transpired, fundamentally challenging the union today.

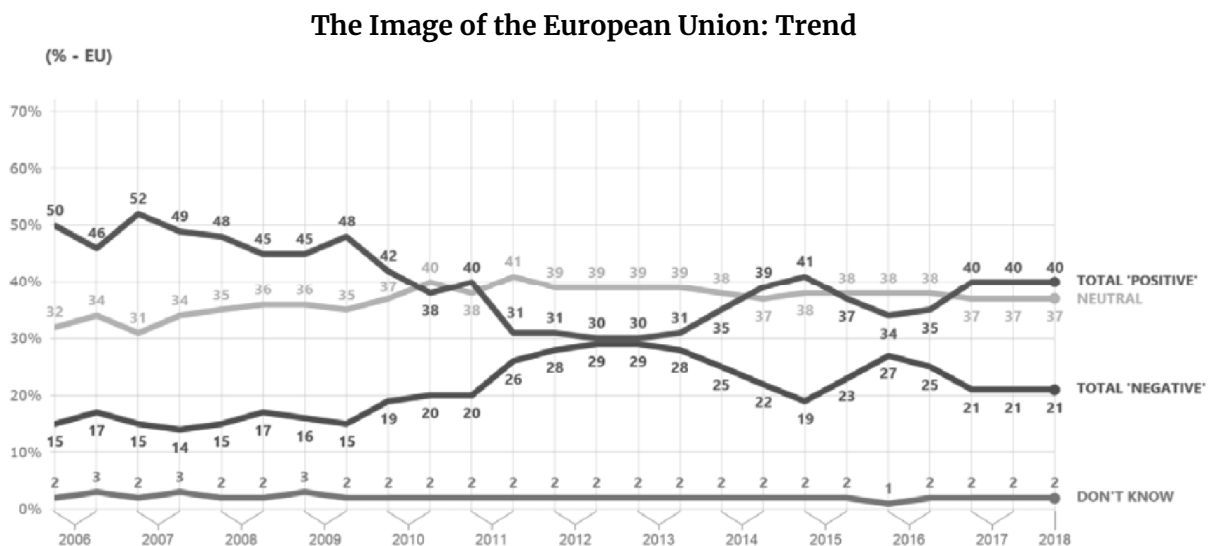


Figure 1. Spring 2018 Eurobarometer Report graph on EU favorability (European Commission 2018, 15)

Current survey data from the Eurobarometer for the last two decades heavily underscores the magnitude of this change. Perhaps one of the most generalized yet relevant Eurobarometer questions addresses sentiment best: "Does the EU conjure up for you a positive, neutral, or negative image?" (Figure 1). For such a broad question, the insights presented are shockingly telling. As seen in Figure 1, since 2006--right after the Constitution referendum rejection--positive sentiment has dropped 10% points--currently sitting at only 40% of the European population. Two 5% rises in both negative and neutral sentiment perfectly correspond to this 10% loss, underscoring the loss in support of ~51 million EU citizens. (European Commission 2018, 15). Notably, the financial and Eurozone crisis spanning from 2008 to 2012--as well as the more recent and ongoing Migration crisis that peaked in 2015 and 2016--correspond to the two largest inversions in sentiment; EU public opinion hasn't quite recovered from these setbacks.

A PEW Research survey even further elucidates the effects of this diversion of sentiment on attitudes towards integration, with results indicating negligible enthusiasm for delegating more power to Brussels. While, unsurprisingly, only 6% of United Kingdom citizens polled for desiring this more powerful union, the majority of other member states shared this sentiment, with the strongest support for an “ever closer union” in France remaining at only 34% (Stokes 2017). There’s no doubt in the reality of the public’s “constraining dissensus”--a reality crippling globalist dreams of further integration.

To truly understand the source of this skepticism, it is necessary to analyze this Euroscepticism in the context of the greatest crises that fueled it.

2.2 The Wake of the Eurozone Crisis

One of the greatest disasters to hit Europe--and arguably the most devastating of the last two decades--the European sovereign debt crisis from 2009 onwards completely exposed, disrupted, and decimated the underpinnings of the Eurozone--the world’s second largest free-market economy (Lane 2012). Today, while record unemployment, recession, and instability that rattled Europe have finally corrected, the public’s negative image of the Eurozone’s single monetary policy, and the EU as a whole lingers, a vestige of the past that plagues Europe’s economic future (De Vries 2017).

Post-crisis divisions within the union itself--especially within the various levels of the EU’s monetary union--elucidate underlying trends in the nature of this Eurosceptic surge, and the public’s appeal to a utilitarian point of view as well.

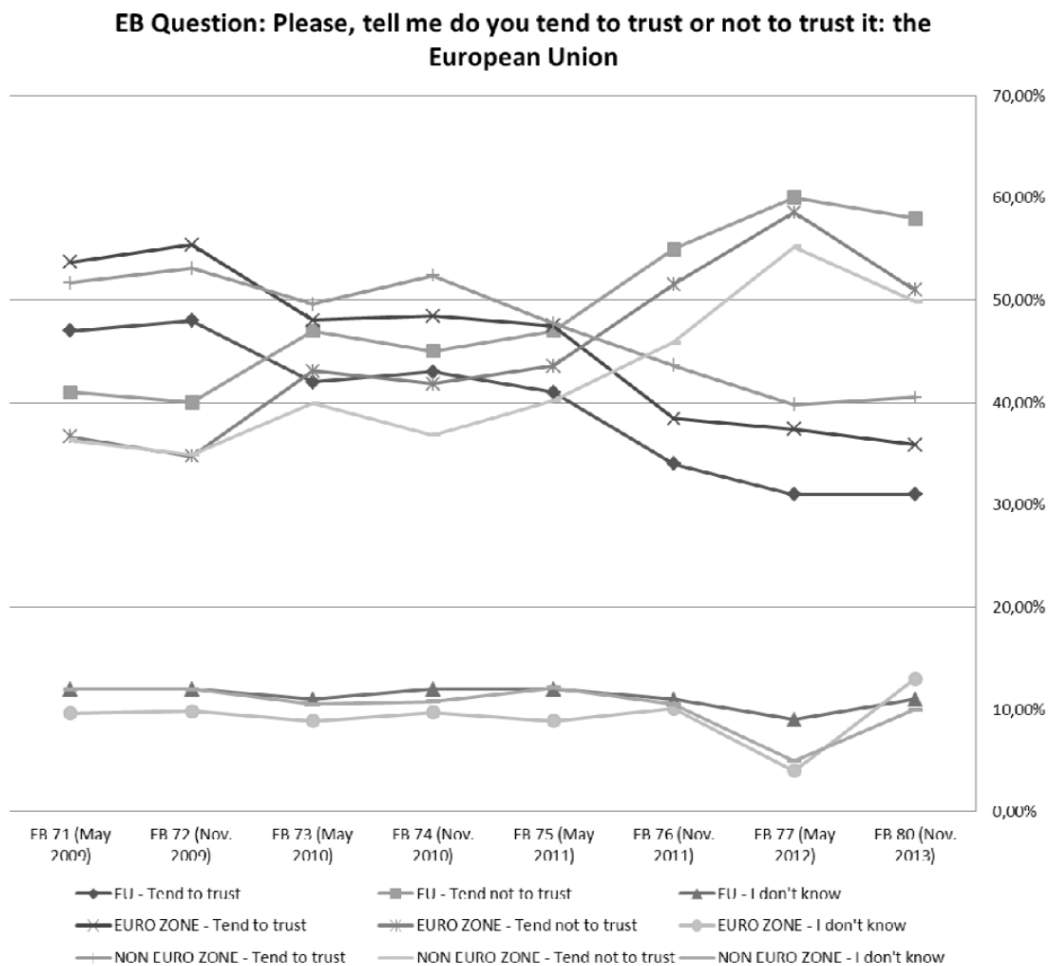


Figure 2. Trust in the EU across Eurozone and non-Eurozone countries in the midst of the debt crisis (Bârgăoanu et al. 2016)

Indeed, the most heavily integrated Member States--especially those in the Eurozone--correspond to the heaviest Eurosceptic shift in the last decade, suggesting even stronger relationships between negative sentiment and the crisis that ravaged the continent (Bache 2015). A 2016 study using longitudinal data analysis of standard Eurobarometers between 2008 and 2013 (Bârgăoanu et al. 2016). distinguished Eurobarometer populus blocks by membership in the Eurozone--uncovering lower levels of trust in the entire EU institution for these countries, and a discontent that grew worse with time (Figure 2). Even further, from 2011 onwards, Eurozone member states “became more skeptical with regard to the level of democracy within the EU” than non-Eurozone member states (European Commission 2018). Indeed, when further analyzed, countries with healthier economies had monumentally higher levels of “satisfaction with the functioning of (EU) democracy”--such as France (67%), Germany (70%), and the Netherlands (78%)--when compared to the sentiment of those struggling--like Greece (22%) and Portugal (16%) (European Commission 2011). Here, doubts of the EU’s output legitimacy--the functioning of the Eurozone--seem to cascade into doubts that undermine perception of its input legitimacy--the functioning of European democracy itself (Habermas

2013). This data suggests that with respect to economic downturns--misfortunes the people of Europe can substantially feel--utilitarian public sentiment dominates. Here, the “costs” of integration are felt, experienced, and lived out in a tangible way.

2.3 Effects of the Migration Crisis

More recently--and equally as detrimental for public opinion towards integration--the refugee crisis has offered another blow to European unity. In fact, in many ways it has transcended just the issue of an influx of foreigners--it has become a migration of politics, emotions, cultures, and identities. (Krastev 2017, 19).

Understandable for an topic clashing on these many ideological and value-oriented fronts, survey data corroborates the crisis's ties to exacerbating Euroscepticism--here, through the vein of diffuse sentiment. For instance, cultural identity is a key part of many Europeans lives--an issue that many feel migration threatens. According to the Spring 2018 Eurobarometer ‘Cultural Heritage’ Report, over 84% of Europeans feel that “cultural heritage is important to them personally”, while 90% believe that it is “important to their country” (Linninger 2018). Moreover, 80% of citizens believe “heritage is a crucial part of European identity,” important to the EU as a whole (European Commission 2018). The rhetoric of some of Europe’s most successful populist and nationalist politicians highlights the psychological ties of Europeans that associate migration’s rise in the Islamic population of the union as both an economic and cultural threat to the “people.” In fact, one of the major unifying trends among these new parties involves the rallying of support around policies to preserve cultural homogeneity, reduce migration, and limit refugee-imposed economic strain (Krastev 2017, 35). Another PEW Research Survey focusing specifically on value divides and sentiment within the Union further corroborates this correlation, finding that today “a third or more in each country surveyed say immigrants increase the risk of terrorism in their nation,” with Germans and Italians the most likely to express this view (Gramlich 2018). It’s telling that the study concluded that Europeans were split with respect to the impact of immigration on their nation’s culture, security and economy, particularly along ideological lines.

2.4 Institutional Deficiencies - A Neverending “Crisis”

To only focus on European hardships through the lens of these successive crises would be to brush over the union’s undeniably problematic institutional downfalls--issues that challenge support and legitimacy already. Although the last notable step towards European Integration--the Lisbon Treaty of 2007--attempted to correct many of these issues, the union’s failures of a democratic deficit, lack of accountability, and absurd complexity still undermine input, throughput, and output legitimacy (Sivulka 2018; Jones et. al 2012). To the European populus, a supranational institution that fails to uphold almost every form of legitimacy commands no support. To them, further increasing its power via integration would be absurd, if even recognized as a sane possibility.

Significantly, notable amounts of literature analyzing the EU's crises links them to the union's institutional downfalls, citing the government's discord as either the cause of--or a source feeding into--these political disasters (Hodson 2017; Krastev 2017; Lane 2012). While many other crises have plagued contemporary Europe--from Authoritarian setbacks in Poland and Hungary, to transatlantic insecurity, economic threats from China, and security threats from Russia, Jan Zielonka holds that "the most important crisis was and is still one of cohesion, imagination, and trust." (Baracani 2018, Lecture 4; Zielonka 2014, 3). On its most basic level, complexity--coupled with a lack of unity--seems to be the European disaster itself.

2.2 Brexit and Euro-Optimism?

On top of all these other trials for the EU, in 2016 a member state--the principle European economic center of Great Britain--enacted Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty for the first time, ushering in the culmination of a rise in populist, nationalist, and anti-EU sentiment: Brexit.

Yet in the midst of all this rise in Euroscepticism, hope for public sentiment is not all lost. With Brexit, Britain "going overboard" might even offer the EU, and the the public sentiment of its remaining citizens, a lifeline.

Interestingly, the most recent survey data highlights a polarization on the other end of Euroscepticism, and a rise in unprecedented utilitarian public support for the EU. Namely, the European Parliament's September 2018 "Parlameter" survey sheds a more positive light on current European Public sentiment--going so far as to say that "more than ever, European citizens see their country's membership in the EU as a 'good thing.'" Registering at 68% of the populus, this is "the highest result ever measured since 1983." Underscoring both a volatile and a polarizing political environment--the Parlameter's question regarding a nation's previous "benefits from it's EU membership" seems to weigh-in the happenings within Brexit's current political catastrophe. (Schulmeister 2018, European Parliament 2018). That the general opinion of respondents, when asked "why their country had benefited," centered around topic lists lead by "economic factors" underscores at least some shift to utilitarian sentiment. Britain's economic woes in the aftermath of the pro-Brexit referendum are reminding the European people of the magnitude of the "benefits" they might've forgotten while weighing the EU's "costs" so tangibly discussed by populist politicians and a polarized media.

In context, while Brexit at first seemed to be the greatest disaster for the EU to date, public and scholarly consensus are beginning to see it as a far greater disaster for Britain itself.

Nevertheless, populism, polarized politics, and divisions abound--Europe is split down the middle while additional crises loom on the horizon. When the continent needs a unified front the most, a patchwork of battling opinions continues to threaten not only integration, but also the future of the Union as it stands.

Either way, the European people are mobilizing--what happens next?

3. Implications for Europe's Future

3.1 Effects of Public Sentiment

The lasting impact that a disillusioned populace can and will have on European politics is directly tied to the precedent of the ability for public sentiment to effect policy. To understand the public's potentiality for impact, this precedent can be viewed through direct and indirect routes of representation (Hobolt 2012, 716)

3.1.1 Direct Representation

Admittedly, the European Union has increased direct avenues for citizen representation over time--yet, per its institutional failures, these electoral connections remain too weak (Sivulka 2018). Indeed, European Parliament elections every five years--the most reliable and widespread channel for democratic control in decision making--arguably remain "second order elections" as proxies for domestic concerns (Hobolt 2012, 724). Politicians feed into this cycle, habitually shifting blame upon the EU for their unpopular policies or taking full-credit for its well-favoured developments, both acting to refocus the role of these elections towards national issues (Jones et. al 2012). A far cry from votes decided on by a European outlook, the nature of European elections seems to almost decrease supranational democracy. Additionally, while directly representative European referendums have also become increasingly popular, they still come up short as an avenue of true democracy due to obvious deficiencies in policy areas covered and a lack of systematized regularity (Heppell 2017). Still, historically, the fact that these referendums have huge amounts of public interest and involvement--a stark contrast to parliamentary elections--underscores the need for more direct democracy.

With the increasing prevalence of populist sentiment and the mobilization of the public discussed above, referenda and European elections might finally refocus on European issues, taking real action--even if it's action against a unified Europe.

3.1.2 Indirect Representation

In addition to these direct routes of representation, indirect representation of public sentiment remains potentially the most crucial mode of representation available to citizens.

Counterintuitively, in the areas where the citizens' voice isn't heard directly, it's quite possibly heard the loudest.

Herein, popular sentiment links to the European Council's decision-making power through the will of the nationally-elected politicians that compose the body. Political parties and politicians elected are obviously incentivized--by re-election potential--to act in the interest of their electorate on the worldstage; European integration has become an increasingly impactful topic

swaying national elections (Williams 2015). The meteoric rise of populism across the world, coupled with the mobilization of the public in the name of these movements, poses to drastically increase the political sway of the people and their sentiment on a continental scale--and is in fact currently disrupting European order in unprecedented ways (Hopkin 2018). Beyond historical precedent, current examples of increased indirect power abound; the ongoing “Yellow Vest” protests in France--the member state’s worst urban unrest in decades--shows a direct correlation between public sentiment and results in--forcefully--achieving desired policy changes. In fact, these tax cuts couldn’t even quell this outrage in public sentiment, which has transitioned into a all-permeating indignation for the Emmanuel Macron, the French globalist president. (Nossiter, 2018). A statement is being made; copycat demonstrations in other countries--from Belgium to the Netherlands and Hungary--are springing up (Nossiter et al. 2018). As French political scientist Dominique Reynié, put it, “the system is in crisis.”

The growing power of public attitude is not only dictating the ‘state of the union’--it’s deciding the future of it as well. Something needs to change; in France and across Europe that change is coming.

3.2 Scenarios for Europe’s Future

However, the nature of this change as well as its implications remain largely up in the air. To attempt to understand and predict Europe’s trajectory, European Union leaders and scholars alike have settled on a variety of different futures. Some indicative scenarios, examined in depth below, reveal the most likely and most pressing outcomes.

3.2.1 The Unlikely and Pessimistic

To many, the European situation looks grim. Populists are expected to vote en masse in the May 2019 European Elections, packing the European Parliament with Eurosceptics (Heath 2018). Traditional signals of a coming recession abound; the European Central Bank--with record-low interest rates and pledges to end Quantitative Easing--has nowhere to turn if another economic crisis hits (Sugarman et al. 2018). External defensive threats, as well as internal cultural divides seem to only be getting worse.

These trials in Europe’s immediate future look devastating at worst and dire at best, and the rhetoric of politicians, the public, and the media has begun to involve and imagine the end of the Union. (De Vries 2017; Krastev 2017) Even “informational” documentaries interviewing sitting EU politicians--such as “The Great European Disaster Movie” and “Europe At Sea”--outline scenarios of a dystopian future, envisioning collapses from the “abolishing of the Euro” to war and “bleak world disorder” (Piras 2015, Piras 2017).

Yet no matter how these imaginings envision European “disintegration” or total collapse, the structural stability, benefits, and irreversibility of the union act to limit the potentiality for collapse for truly integrated member states. Simply put, there’s too much to lose. The union allows all member states--especially the small ones--to ‘punch above their weight’ in global rivalry and competition with collective action, and the EU is a major force in spreading

economic profits and basic European social values (Zielonka 2014, 54). Even further, per calculations conducted by Hans-Werner Sinn, Germany would lose over \$1.35 trillion, over 40% of its GDP if the Euro failed as Piras' documentary portrays. This is a reality that heavily incentivizes it and other large member states to defend and act against economic collapse in struggling member states--especially those of the P.I.G.S. acronym--no matter their first-order 'taxpayer' cost (Sinn 2014). Benefits, although unnoticed by a public that accepts them as the norm, don't even end here.

3.2.2 Equally Unlikely and Optimistic

On the other hand, some Euro-optimists see these coming challenges and the institutional failures of the past as imperatives for consolidation--the impetus for a "reintegration" or federation-based unification process (Habermas 2017; Hopkin 2018). To them, the supranational governing body should slowly shift into a national--a European--one.

Unfortunately for these European sympathizers, many conceptions of further integration--from the possibility of a "United States of Europe" through the establishment of a European federation, to a German-led "Bundesrepublik Deutschland"--are equally as infeasible (Zielonka 2014, 56). Fundamental to these futures is the establishment of a common fiscal government--uniting an area that has recurrently plagued the EMU. At first may this may seem like a sound idea, reducing complexity and addressing the sources of issues that lead to the Eurozone crisis. This pipe-dream, unfortunately, is exactly that--an unattainable fantasy, at least for the foreseeable future. Common fiscal government would imply a major transfer of sovereignty to one body--involving the impossible: member states relinquishing economic supervision, taxation, redistribution and social welfare. Moreover, true unity would absolutely curbs other powers of the national institutions that hold it together now--a bad thing for democracy as the European Parliament and all other EU institutions remain significantly less representative than National Parliaments (Sivulka 2018).

Where does Europe have left to turn? Where should it?

4. Conclusion

The most feasible and perhaps the most beneficial scenario for all parties involved--on a continental and a national scale--seems to combine elements of both the optimistic and pessimistic scenarios above. Today, the EU is really a "a consolidated system of differentiated integration" due to its policies that "vary with regard to both their level of centralization and their territorial extension." (Schimmelfennig et al. 2015, 779; Baracani 2018) Embracing this 'differentiated integration' to the fullest--removing central institutional rigidity and abandoning the unbending pursuit to increase Brussel's power--would likely allow for a more flexible and functional government.

Given the lack of ability to appease the majority of citizens--highlighted by this research's synopsis of ever-increasing polarization--catering to differences in the short term would likely prove more effective in coping with today's issues of complex interdependence. Jan Zielonka argues exactly this, making the analogy between a differentiated union and a 'polyphonic' song, a musical composition which employs many independent melodies to in a harmonic way.

In this Union, "networks with different scopes and shapes" according to the issue they address allow the body to successfully represent not only subsidiaries' differing interests, but also uphold the collective functionality of Europe as a whole. (Zielonka 2014, 98) Indeed, a 'polyphonic,' differentiated European Union does not seem doomed.

Nevertheless, an ever-diverging union seems just as ineffective as Monet's ever-closer one today. Too much introduced complexity would be just as bad. Zielonka's proposed polity is missing one thing: a formal agreement to eventually evolve these differentiated political networks towards a common universal body in the long term. In other words, the end of Europe's polyphonic song demands a note or refrain to return to. Differentiation--these temporary, discordant harmonies--should be used as a tool--a step towards a true, and effective, union.

After all, the "Ode to Joy"--Europe's proposed anthem--always starts and ends on the same famous refrain.

To all Europeans, these final notes ring loud and clear.

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