Revisiting Transnational European Consociationalism.

The European Union a Decade after Lisbon

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To appear in: "Half a Century of Consociationalism: European and Overseas Experiences", Editors: Ludger Helms (University of Innsbruck) and Matthijs Bogaards (Jacobs University), *Swiss Political Science Review*.

Abstract

The concept of consociationalism has frequently been used to interpret the institutional logic and the actual functioning of the European Union (EU). This article discusses the notion of consociationalism as applied to the EU and assesses whether the institutional and procedural changes introduced by the Treaty of Lisbon and by the management of the Euro and refugee crises still warrant considering the EU as a case of consociational democracy. Our contention is that the changes introduced by the Treaty of Lisbon bore the promise to strengthen the consociational structural traits of the Union but that the further institutional and procedural changes engendered by the management of the Euro and refugee crises have made the behavioral dimension of consociationalism all the more necessary just as the willingness of the political elites to cooperate had begun to evaporate. We support this argument by looking at empirical evidence which allows us to offer a set of propositions on the effects of the recent crises on the attitudes of the European elites towards the future of EU democracy.

Keywords: Consociationalism, European Union, Treaty of Lisbon, political elites, Euro and refugee crises.

Introduction

The concept of consociationalism has frequently been used to interpret the institutional logic and the actual functioning of the European Union (EU). In order to explain the evolution of an economic and political order which managed to hold together many different societal segments without falling apart, the uniquely distinctive trait of consociationalism – elite cooperation – has been frequently indicated as absolutely crucial. Whether this behavioral predisposition alone or more structural elements are necessary in order to qualify the EU as a consociational democracy has been the object of a small but vibrant literature and is the object of this paper.[1]

At the dawn of the twenty-first century, a number of political occurrences have shown the limits of such a reading of the EU political system. The tensions caused by the implementation of the single currency (in the 1990s and 2000s), the crisis following the failed ratification of the Treaty Establishing a European Constitution (in 2007) and finally the Euro crisis which exploded in 2009 and the refugee crisis peaking in 2015 fundamentally altered the prospects for the Union's progression towards a consociational democracy.

These contrasting developments have complicated the adoption of consociationalism as an acceptable template to describe the current functioning of the EU. Developments in both the theoretical elaboration of the model and the empirical material provided by the evolution of European governance have made the identification of the EU as a consociational system ever more contentious. On the one hand, the model has been refined and reinterpreted several times. Consociationalism has been variously interpreted as indicating a particular societal configuration, a particular institutional architecture or a particular mode of decision-making (see the Introduction to this issue). Hence, emphasis has been given alternatively to the component social segments, to the political and socio-economic institutions and to the orientation of the elites. On the other hand, the functioning of the EU has been periodically transformed by successive treaties and under the impact of crises. While the formal institutional architecture of the Union has not been dramatically altered since the early nineties, the inter-institutional balance of powers has been recalibrated several times as new competences and institutional bits were added to the original template.

As it often happens, while institutional architectures grow slowly and by accretion, contextual circumstances may cause a different utilization of the powers that they crystallize and give elites the opportunity to deploy them in surprisingly new ways. This is what happened to the institutional architecture envisioned in the Treaty of Lisbon (ToL), whose actual functioning was powerfully shaped by the Euro and refugee crises. The Euro crisis caused a new swing of the decision-making pendulum (Wallace 2010) inducing an intensified use of the intergovernmental modes highly reminiscent of consociationalism although in a significantly less accommodating context; the refugee crisis tested to the breaking point the cooperative predisposition of European elites. So, while the institutional architecture designed by the ToL seemed to project the EU towards a more decidedly consociational future, the institutional and procedural innovations necessitated by the Euro crisis and the changed climate brought about by the refugee crisis called into question one of the fundamental preconditions for a functioning consociational democracy: the accommodating stance of the political elites. The idea that EU democracy could keep working as a consociational system has certainly not been abandoned, but no consensus has been reached on the utility of such a template in recent times.

This article wants to assess whether the institutional and procedural changes introduced by the ToL and by the management of the Euro and refugee crises still warrant considering the EU as a case of consociational democracy. Our contention is that the changes introduced by the ToL bore the promise to strengthen the consociational *structural traits* of the Union but that the further institutional and procedural changes

[1] We would like to thank the editors of this special issue and three anonymous reviewers who have generously given us very useful comments on previous versions of this article.

engendered by the management of the Euro and refugee crises have made the *behavioral dimension* of consociationalism all the more necessary just when the willingness of the political elites to cooperate began to evaporate.

In order to make this argument, we first take stock of the interpretations of the EU as a consociational democracy in order to assess whether the traits that have been identified by the literature on consociationalism as constitutive and facilitating factors are present to a sufficient degree at EU level to induce European political elites to cooperate. We ask to what extent we can today consider the overall degree of elite cooperation and institutional polycentrism within the EU similar to what we would expect to find in classic national consociational democracies. Secondly, we explore the transformation of the different dimensions of EU consociational democracy by analyzing whether elite attitudes, values and visions are now significantly different from those prevailing during the period which marked the maximum effort of European integration – i.e., the period leading up to the creation of the Euro – which also coincides with the beginning of the analysis of the EU as a consociational democracy.

To reach this goal, we propose a two-pronged strategy. The first part of the article is devoted to the discussion of the continued sustainability of the concept of "EU consociationalism" after the Great Recession of 2008-2014 and the refugee and migrant crisis of 2014-2015. Therefore, in the next section, after reviewing the literature on EU consociationalism, we briefly discuss the points of contact and difference with other models that have been recently used to interpret EU functioning, such as executive federalism and deliberative intergovernmentalism. We also analyze the changes introduced by the ToL and ask whether they endowed the EU with an institutional structure which could consolidate the willingness of the elites towards consociationalism. We then discuss the changes to this institutional architecture engendered by the emergency legislation enacted to counter the Euro crisis, and question whether it amplified or restricted the space for consensus-building.

In the second part, we explore the extent to which we can still document for the EU what is probably the most characteristic trait of consociationalism: the accommodating stance of the elites. This will be taken up by reviewing some recent data – elite and expert surveys on the transformation of party position – in order to test the perceptions of the European political elites concerning the present and future of the EU and the functioning of EU democracy. In particular, we look at the extent to which national elites are still willing to coalesce around EU-level compromises, despite the increasing saliency and contentiousness of EU policies, thus contributing to the debate on whether, in the case of the EU, consociationalism is necessarily premised on its depoliticization or it can instead operate also in the presence of a vibrant transnational mobilization.

Is the European Union a Consociational Democracy? The Debate before the ToL

A small but significant literature emerged at the turn of the century debating whether consociationalism should be considered as just an evocative metaphor or it could be used more sharply as a tool for comparative analysis and for theorizing the configuration and likely evolution of EU democracy (Gabel 1998; Bogaards and Crepaz 2002; Costa and Magnette 2003; Papadopoulos and Magnette 2010). The camp divides roughly equally between those who look at the *functioning* of democracy and therefore focus on the predisposition and *behavior* of European political elites and those who run a strict check of the cleavage and institutional *setup* of the EU and run a more *structural* analysis of the political system. Obviously both aspects are present in Lijphart's analysis, but whether it is the structure that validates elite behavior or it is the behavior of the elites that shapes the structure – or rather they co-evolve and co-determine each other in time – is open to debate (for a thorough discussion see Bogaards 1998, 2000).

The plausibility of one or the other approach and the extent to which different analyses strike us as convincing also depends on the particular moment at which the consociational model is applied to the EU. Matthew Gabel (1998), the initiator of this line of analysis, wrote at a time (immediately after the signing of the Treaty of Maastricht and before the introduction of the single currency) when the EU still showed remarkable signs of stability and elite cooperation was sufficient to carry integration forward. Since then things have become significantly more complicated and the sustainability of the Union has been called into question.

Gabel started from the common assumption that national communities are the equivalent of the subcultural segments in consociational democracies (an assumption which was later questioned by Costa and Magnette 2003: 3) and wondered how it was possible that such deeply divided segments could nevertheless be subjected to a common authority without much visible friction (at the time of his writing). Gabel's argumentative strategy is fairly demanding, as it requires both behavioral and structural factors of consociationalism to be present in order to warrant the application of this model to the EU. Among the *behavioral and structural factors* characterizing the functioning of the EU, Gabel found that the following were indeed present also at EU level: a) national elites had an accommodating orientation and a consensual decision-making style; b) national communities retained veto power over matters of vital interest; c) the European Parliament is elected through (a variety of systems of) proportional representation and normally worked through oversized majorities; d) national authorities retained autonomy in questions of exclusive concern in core policy areas (or could obtain exemptions and opt-outs).

Other *facilitating factors* for consociational democracy, however, were either only partially present or altogether absent in the case of the EU, qualifying Gabel's initial assessment. For example, the presence of an external threat, which has historically been fundamental in creating and maintaining the willingness to cooperate across societal segments, was and is only dimly present in the case of the EU since alternative solutions to pooling sovereignty in security matters are or appear to be easily available. Similarly, according to Gabel, the number of subcultures is too high, the population of the EU is too large, and EU citizens hardly have any overarching loyalties across national segments, thus making the prospect for a continuously successful EU consociationalism dimmer than it might otherwise appear.

Impending transformations – enlargement to Central and Eastern Europe, increasing economic disparities across member states and the prospective deepening of the Union in areas closer to the core concerns of each national community – lead Gabel to further question his initial analysis. Moreover, insofar as the Union strives to close its democratic deficit by adopting majoritarian decision-making *procedures* and by mimicking government-opposition dynamics (e.g., through the *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure for the election the President of the Commission by the European Parliament), it inevitably undermines the consociational traits that have served it so well until the late 1990s. Gabel's words sound ominous: "Such a reform [a reform aimed at providing a direct link between citizens and EU policymakers] might well reduce the democratic deficit and advance the federalist agenda, but its effect on the EU's stability is potentially catastrophic. The reform eliminates several institutions that, according to consociational theory, are necessary for stable governance in severely segmented societies: government by grand coalition, deliberation in secret, and a minority veto" (Gabel 1998: 471).

Although the debate regarding the potential of consociationalism to bridge or conversely deepen the cleavages that run through the EU was unsettled, the use of this model of democracy in order to analyze the structure and functioning of the Union has a formidable sponsor: its inventor. The same Arend Lijphart paid a tribute to the slow but epoch-making transformation of the EU political setting by making explicit reference to consociational democracy. In the first edition of his *Patterns of Democracy* (1999), Lijphart writes: "Because of the EU intermediate status, analysts of the European Union disagree on whether to study it as an international organization or an incipient federal state, but the latter approach is increasingly common

… This is also my approach: if the EU is regarded as a federal state, its institutions are remarkably close to the consensus model of democracy" (Lijphart 1999, 34). The creation of the Euro was also seen as a further sign of the establishment of a consensus-like system of government: "If and when the EU develops into a sovereign European State, its institutions are likely to change – the European Parliament for instance will probably become a more powerful legislative chamber – but it is not likely to stray far from the consensus model …" (Lijphart 1999, 47).

Most problematic of all are those requiring the societal segments to be internally politically cohesive, to generate a moderate multi-party political system and to massively approve the principle of government by elite cartel. European national communities are everything but internally politically cohesive and have rather displayed a strong tendency to use the EU, and take position in favor or against it, as a weapon in their domestic political quarrels. Not all member states are characterized by moderate multi-party systems, being therein present also majoritarian and polarized multi-party systems. Moreover, widespread acceptance of government by elite cartel and a tradition of consociationalism are present only in a handful of member states – Austria, Belgium, the Netherlands and, to some extent, Germany – but even in these cases it seems that the lessons learnt at home have been largely forgotten at EU level, as the political elites of these countries do not appear to be any more accommodating than those of any other member state. The contextual, institutional, procedural and behavioral factors necessary for consociationalism present in the EU before the ToL are detailed in Table 1 (below).

Table 1. Structural and Behavioral Consociational Factors Present in the EU before the ToL

Structural factors			**Behavioral factors**
Societal and contextual circumstances	**Institutional features**	**Decision-making procedures**	**Accommodating orientations**
Large number of fairly internally cohesive societal segments; absence of overarching loyalties, yet wide-spread preference for "more Europe" (*permissive consensus*); absence of external threats pushing for cooperative over separate national solutions.	Co-decision procedure between European Parliament and Council in many policy areas; non-identical proportional representation systems for European Parliament elections.	Qualified majority voting in Council and European Council (but conventional use of unanimity); oversized majorities in the European Parliament; low levels of politicization of EU issues and EP elections.	Strong preference for consensual solutions over confrontation along national lines; elite trust in the institutional and procedural setup of the EU to favor consensual decisions.

Source: Authors' elaboration from Gabel (1998).

Looking at the most frequently mentioned structural and facilitating factors – reciprocal isolation of the societal segments, presence of external threats, balance of power between the segments, and a contained country population (Bogaards 1998: 477) – the European Union appears to have *some of them to some degree*. The societal segments are effectively reciprocally isolated by language barriers, different traditions of social regulation and, not least, still vivid memories of wars. External threats, such as common geopolitical challenges, trade competition with other trading blocks and the migration pressure from Africa and the Middle East, although certainly present, are not yet perceived by national elites and populations as necessarily demanding a joint response, and rather elicit disparate reactions inspired by a still prevalent sovereignist orientation. Power balance among societal segments has always been the most elusive element, being the EU characterized by the coexistence of national communities of dramatically different population size and economic strength.

For a while, a certain degree of formal equality was maintained through constant reminders of the world wars – which humbled even the largest and most powerful countries – and by a rhetoric that emphasized legal and decision-making equality among the member states. As the EU expanded, the number of smaller member states and the distance between these and the largest ones increased, necessitating the establishment of qualified majorities with both member states and population thresholds for decision-making in the Council. Moreover, after the eastern enlargement, the economic weight, geopolitical centrality and international standing of Germany progressively increased, creating a significant differentiation of status even among the largest member states which the rhetoric of formal equality could no longer hide. As for population size, the fourth factor, the EU clearly cannot be considered "small", but if we consider its often implicit functional equivalent, a reduced decision-making load, then this factor can be said to be present to some degree. The EU has certainly expanded its policy scope, yet it commands a paltry budget and still lacks many of the decision-making competences of any national state. For a while, EU elites could keep operating under the shield of a "permissive consensus" which was made of a mix of rhetorical enthusiasm and benign neglect; as the competences of the Union expanded and touched some of the core tasks of states such consensus evaporated and EU decisions now appear to be momentous and highly significant.

Bogaards (1998) concludes his detailed discussion of the facilitating factors expressing a strong position in favor of the voluntarist thesis: consociationalism, in the end, requires nothing more and nothing less than a willingness on the part of the elites to cooperate. Every other facilitating factor is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition but can, at most, create a context within which elites may be more prone to cooperate. Yet, since a theory of elite decision-making is missing, thus stated the theory of consociationalism amounts to little more than a tautology: the elites cooperate when they decide to cooperate. In our opinion, placing the entire burden of consociationalism on the shoulders of the European elites, no matter what the contextual circumstances and the structural conditions might be, is to ask for too much and too little at the same time: too much good will and stoic resistance against the pressures of vocal national constituencies claiming to place their community first and too little help from the decision-making procedures and institutional arrangements that may facilitate the attainment of agreements through codified procedures. This is why we consider the institutional underpinnings of the European Union as having a potentially important role and we register with concern the evaporation of that goodwill upon which EU consociationalism is supposed to rest.

Building on this consensus-based, behavioral argument, Lijphart included the case of the EU in his 1999 study, by far the most pro-consensus model piece in his production, as a sort of corroborative example of the vitality and the creativity of the classic "consensus democracy" format. The main institutional features of the EU in the mid-nineties could easily be re-coded as perhaps a peculiar example of the power-sharing model of democracy (Lijphart 1999, 42-46). We follow this Lijphart in assessing to what extent the Treaty of Lisbon endowed the EU with institutions that could promise to sustain consociational agreements. The Treaty of Lisbon appeared to validate this expectation, as it foreshadowed a proto-federal format for the Union and created expectations that the EU too could evolve in a consociational direction.[2] Yet only a decade later, the sustainability of the Union is in question, and this is due to the crises that erupted in the first decade of the new century and which the provisions of the Treaty of Lisbon could not avoid nor contain. In fact, the institutional and procedural innovations brought about by the crises have powerfully modified the institutional format designed by the Treaty of Lisbon and have changed the behavioral predispositions of European elites.

[2] A federal format is not a necessary condition for consociationalism, but given the peculiar historical context in which the EU was created and given that its societal segments are in reality fully fledged states, a federal format is considered by many as an institutional facilitating factor.

EU Consociationalism after Lisbon and the Euro and Refugee Crises

The Euro and the refugee crises powerfully affected the welfare of European citizens in two core state policy realms – economic conditions and cultural identity – and, perhaps for the first time in the history of the Union, the measures enacted by European elites and EU institutions appeared as either ineffective or as positively harmful (Schimmelfennig 2018). Although the two crises had very different repercussions on the institutional architecture of the EU – introducing many institutional and procedural innovations the Euro crisis while failing to produce (so far) any significant policy change the refugee crisis – they both pushed the Union towards a much more decidedly intergovernmental mode of governance (Scipioni 2017). Yet, as this decision-making mechanism appeared ineffective in solving the crises (Jones et al 2016) but instrumental in establishing the domination of some member states over others (Fabbrini 2016), both output and input legitimacy were undermined (Scharpf 1999, 2009; Schmidt 2010). Moreover, the crises struck just when the impact of EU policy on people's welfare was becoming unequivocally clear: as EU issues got fully politicized in national debates, European citizens became painfully aware of the Union and started to doubt the wisdom of pooling ever greater shares of sovereignty together.

Crises never quite affect everyone in the same way and to the same extent. Insofar as the costs of a crisis are spread fairly evenly across societal segments, crises can be withstood; when they affect some segments more than others, they deepen the extant divisions and tend to pull the segments apart. This is what happened with the Euro crisis, that hit particularly hard the southern European periphery, and with the refugee crisis, that primarily affected some of the same southern and eastern member states which had already been battered by the economic crisis (Bierman et al. 2017). The distance between some "societal segments" (read: member states) and the others became painfully apparent. Was the institutional architecture of the Union as designed by Lisbon sufficiently solid to withstand the tensions generated by the crises? Did the institutional and procedural innovations which were introduced (or failed to be introduced) in the second decade of the twenty-first century help or hinder the successful management of the crises? Under the tenser circumstances created by the crises, could the accommodating stance of European elites suffice to hold the EU together?

It is our contention that, while the Treaty of Lisbon brought the EU closer to the ideal of a federal parliamentary democracy, in which the composition of the segmental cleavages characterizing the Union could be handled through institutional arrangements seeking to reconcile the general interest of the citizens of the Union, as expressed by the European Parliament, with the particular interests of the societal segments, as expressed by governmental representatives in the Council and the European Council, the goodwill of the European elites necessary to operate the system evaporated under the pressure of mutating popular sentiments after the crises. Otherwise said, the institutional construction of a federal consociational democracy has been undermined by the less accommodating stance of the national constituencies and hence of the elites. In fact, the institutional and procedural measures enacted to counter the Euro crisis, giving primacy to the European Council over both Council and European Parliament, crucially depended on the accommodating orientation of the European elites just when their willingness to engage in the necessary accommodating behavior and their capacity to communicate this consensus was reduced by the increasing EU-disaffection of their national constituencies.

During the seventh, eighth and ninth legislatures in the European Parliament sat the likes of Marine Le Pen (MEP between 2004 and 2017), Nigel Farage (MEP between 1999 and 2019) and Matteo Salvini (MEP between 2004 and 2006 and again between 2009 and 2018) who led the assault on the Euro and the European Union in the name of an unlikely but increasingly popular agenda centered on the repatriation of competences if not outright exit from the EU. As Gabel had observed, consociationalism cannot operate unless the societal segments have a clear preference for sticking together, and this preference was beginning to vacillate even among the popularly elected members of the European Parliament. Gabel had concluded his argument by wondering whether a more decisive turn towards the parliamentarization of the EU might

reduce the "democratic deficit" of the EU at the cost of consociationalism (ibid.: 470), thus inaugurating a buoyant debate on the pros and cons of the politicization of the EU (de Wilde and Zürn 2012; de Wilde and Trenz 2012; Hurrelmann et al. 2015; Kauppi and Wiesner 2018).

The politicization of the EU – the extent to which European-level issues enter prominently the national political debate and determine voters' decisions at both national and European parliamentary elections (Hurrelmann et al. 2015) – indeed appears to be the crux of the question for assessing the EU's political sustainability also in the writings of Hix (2008), Bogaards and Crepaz (2002), Papadopoulos and Magnette (2003) and Hix and Bartolini (2006), which directly refer to consociationalism. In these contributions the democratic deficit of the Union – conventionally imputed to the lack of a European *demos*, a European public sphere and a veritable European party system, such that elections for the European Parliament have traditionally been considered as "second order national elections" (Reif and Schmitt 1980, Marsh 1998) – is at the center of analysis and the approach is decidedly institutional. In different ways, they all underscore that the *sui generis* institutional architecture of the Union is dissimilar from any architecture to which Europeans are used (Piattoni 2015) and is therefore reliant on negotiated and often opaque agreements in order to push integration forward (Stacey and Rittberger 2003; Christiansen and Piattoni 2003; Christiansen and Neuhold 2013; Kleine 2014).[3]

They also highlight that to the extent that, in an effort to reduce its democratic deficit, the EU equips itself with institutions and procedures reminiscent of a properly functioning parliamentary democracy with a clear government-opposition dynamic and deepens its reach into policy areas which are closest to the core tasks of the state and which affect most directly citizens' life chances, it is liable to be exposed to disruptive tensions which may polarize the national citizenries and force the otherwise still accommodating elites to take clearer and more demanding stands vis-à-vis each other and the EU. So to the extent that EU decisions address core state issues and get politicized, the space for consociational democracy shrinks even though the ToL had made several steps in the direction of making the EU more similar to a federal parliamentary democracy and strengthening some of its structural consociational features of the EU.

The ToL made the co-decision procedure, according to which both the Council and the European Parliament (EP) must agree on a policy proposal for it to become EU law, into the ordinary legislative procedure (OLP). While the Council decides in most policy areas by qualified majority voting (QMV), the EP has increasingly given its approval by simple majority rather than through the once conventional supermajorities (Brack and Costa 2018). Moreover, although the EP has begun since long to operate along partisan lines (Farrell and Scully 2007), the rise of nationalist and Euro-sceptic parties have increasingly upset this dynamic activating again national divisions. National parliaments have been granted by the ToL suspension and veto rights over draft legislation on the grounds of an infringement of the subsidiarity principle. Although this Early Warning Mechanism has been activated so far only three times (Jančić 2015, Cooper 2018), the possibility of using it is meant to protect national preferences in sensitive matters and to compensate for the greater recourse to simple majorities in the EP. However, the difficulty of getting 19 parliamentary chambers in the space of few weeks to agree on a joint challenge to draft legislation is significant.[4] Moreover, these rights do not apply to the issues covered by the Stability and Growth Pact (SGP), which sets the boundaries of the fiscal and budgetary choices of the member states since Maastricht and are particularly binding for Euro-area member states. So while there was a certain amount of cooperation in setting up the rescue operation Sophia in the Mediterranean and agreement on the deal with Turkey on the occasion of the Syrian crisis, the EU refugee policy has not been revised in light of the new emergencies. The rigidity of the northern and eastern member

[3] This opaqueness may acquire a decidedly non-consociational quality if some of the structural factors for consociationalism are missing.
[4] See *Protocol (No 2) on the application of the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality*, 12008M/PRO/02 of the Consolidated version of the Treaty on European Union for details on the functioning of this mechanism.

states in refusing to re-discuss the Dublin regulations has been received by the southern member states as a blatant lack of solidarity and has rather driven more division among them.

The constraints on national budgetary choices – hence, implicitly, on fiscal, labor, welfare and trade policies – have significantly increased after the Euro crisis. The European Semester (ES) procedure, introduced in 2011, proceduralizes the more stringent limits over the formation of national budgets introduced by the Six-Pack, Two-Pack and Fiscal Compact (Hodson 2013, Crum 2013). Meant as an aid to member states (particularly the Euro-area member states) to craft sustainable and mutually compatible budgets, the ES has turned into a disciplining exercise that appears to encroach upon core tasks of national governments and parliaments (Crespy and Vanheuverzwijn 2019); the space for epistemic or reflexive learning is simply not there (Papadopoulos and Piattoni 2019). Moreover, the conditionality and the disciplining procedures introduced by the above emergency legislation are automatically activated unless an opposing majority decides otherwise. This Reverse Majority Voting (RMV) system is meant to explicitly prevent negotiations on budgetary matters and to strengthen the "corrective arm" of the SGP. Some commentators even describe these policy choices and procedures as the enactment of a form of hegemony or domination of some member states over others (Kreuder-Sonnen 2016, Fabbrini 2016), thus undermining perhaps the most fundamental precondition for a functioning consociational democracy: the formal equality of all societal segments. Moreover, under consociationalism, European elites are assumed to be capable to effectively communicate their decisions to their societal segments (national constituencies) while they have been blatantly incapable of doing that during the crisis, prompting the coinage of the label of "executive federalism" by Jürgen Habermas (2011).

Meanwhile, the EU has become increasingly politicized, arousing strong and contrasting sentiments among elites and masses. For the first time since the introduction of the direct election of the EP, genuinely European issues have dominated the national campaigns, thus weakening the "second order elections" thesis (Kriesi 2016, Bright et al. 2016). Simultaneously, however, a transnational cleavage has emerged between parties and voters who want "more Europe" and those who instead want the repatriation of competences to the member states and distrust the capacity of the EU to provide answers to the important questions of the day. For the first time, such distrust in EU institutions has translated into open Euroscepticism which has engulfed both elites and masses. These momentous changes, in part introduced by the ToL and in part the consequence of the Euro and refugee crises, are summarized in Table 2 (below).

Table 2. Structural and Behavioral Consociational Factors of EU after ToL and Crises

Structural factors			Behavioral factors
Societal and contextual circumstances	**Institutional features**	**Decision-making procedures**	**Accommodating orientations**
Large number of *increasingly internally polarized* societal segments; absence of overarching loyalties (*growing constraining dissensus*); external threats liable to be tackled through separate national solutions (as exemplified by refugee crisis tackled separately by member states; limited cooperation in the Sophia operation; occasional suspension of Schengen agreement).	Ordinary legislative procedure (OLP) guaranteeing necessary co-decision between European Parliament and Council *by-passed during Euro crisis* (OLP still the rule in most other policy areas); institutionalization of European Council (Heads of State and Government); *sidelining of EP* in euro-crisis emergency measures; *absence of subsidiarity veto* by national parliaments in EMU matters; *EU decision-making increasingly encroaching upon core state matters* (fiscal and budgetary decisions, European Semester).	*RMV necessary to stop activation of the corrective procedures* introduced by the reinforced SGP (QMV still the rule in other policy realms); *increased recourse to intergovernmental decision-making* (secretive though not necessarily consensual deliberations*)*; increasing use of *simple majorities* in the European Parliament; activation of the *Spitzenkandidaten procedure* to select the Commission president.	*Increasing confrontation* along national lines: rise of populist leaders and several forms of national "sovereignism"; *activation of the transnational cleavage*; *increased politicization* of the EU); *increasing distrust* in the institutional and procedural setup of the EU; *rise* of different forms *of Euroscepticism* among political elites.
(some change)	(changed after ToL and crises)		

Source: Authors' elaborations.

Alternatives to EU Consociationalism

In the previous section we illustrated how the ToL changed the institutional setup of the EU, moving it closer to a federal template, and how the euro and refugee crises altered the way in which the institutions have been used. The meetings of the European Council, normally only two per year, escalated to up to one per month during the euro crisis thus lending to this relatively new body a prominence that had not been envisioned in the Treaty. During the Euro crisis, in particular, the Union took a decidedly intergovernmental turn – a decision-making mode in theory compatible with a consociational view of the EU but whose functioning was undermined by the tensions that were meanwhile developing. Because of the mixed legacy of the ToL, in this section we consider alternative readings of the post-Lisbon and post-crises situation.

The first such reading emphasizes the federalist drive implicit in the evolution of the EU and particularly in the ToL. According to this view, the institutional architecture of the Union can be analysed by reference to that of a federal state (Jachtenfuchs 2006, Börzel and Hosli 2003, Börzel 2005). This interpretative strand departs from the explicit attempt of the ToL to reform the Union in a federal direction. By making co-decision between Council and European Parliament the "ordinary legislative procedure", a clear indication was given that the Union was expected to develop in the direction of a federal parliamentary democracy where the EP and the Council acted as the two chambers of a federal system.

This view of the EU is based on the normative idea of the necessity of a European "super-state", yet one characterized by the typical polycentric and power-sharing elements of consensus democracy which a federal

format is known to facilitate though not determine. Among them: the devolution of power to sub-national representative bodies; a party system inspired by proportional representation and low electoral thresholds; a collective executive relying on a fragmented and possibly super-sized parliamentary majority. According to this literature, it is the structural features of federalism that would account for the sustainability of the Union, pushing in the background the sheer willingness of the elites to cooperate. However, a sobering reminder of the all-important role played by the national executives is sounded by Jürgen Habermas (2011) who, observing the way in which EU federalism works in practice, emphasizes the voluntary and almost collusive behavior of European elites working together to prod the Union along at the detriment of the formal institutionalization of channels of representation and political composition of the various societal segments, which he dubs "executive federalism".

Great hopes for the smooth functioning of this quasi-federalist template were pinned on a progressive normalization of intra-parliamentary dynamics, meaning by this the growing prevalence of a left-right polarization (Farrell and Scully 2007; Hix et al. 2007), hopefully anticipating and leading to an *Ersatz* government-opposition dynamic which could then influence the political orientation of the European Commission. Although there is no theoretical contradiction between federalism and consociationalism, since federalism formalizes the accommodating practices of consociationalism and transforms them into inter-institutional procedures, nevertheless moving in this direction implies a politicization of supranational decision-making which carries the risk of undermining the mechanisms necessary for accommodation. In the absence of a vibrant cross-national party system that can give voice to the sectional cleavage, more federalism implies greater reliance on institutional procedures for the accommodation of territorial cleavages and less willingness to compromise.

Yet, instead of a left-right normalization of the political spectrum, a different type of dynamic has taken hold. Hooghe, Marks and Wilson (2002) recorded that the European Parliament displayed a GAL-TAN split between a "green-alternative-libertarian" camp and a "traditional-authoritarian-nationalistic" one, anticipating the revision of the "cleavage structure" at the basis of the European party systems proposed more recently by the same authors. An important conclusion to which they arrive, and one which would be later further developed by Hooghe and Marks (2017), is that the mounting "Euroscepticism shows that its motivations certainly have to do with the democratic deficit, but also with quite different reasons such as the lack of the social dimension, concerns about the preservation of sovereignty and also narrowly utilitarian considerations. … Today the social bases of Left-Right partisan competition differ from the social bases of the cleavage of pro- and anti-integration attitudes" (ibid: 720). This is precisely what Hooghe and Marks (2017) discover through a Rokkanian analysis of the cleavage structure of the EU political system and with their theorization of the "transnational cleavage": politicization, as it were, is taking the "wrong turn", exacerbating rather than reducing, inter-segmental distances. The question that arises is whether the current institutional structure of the EU is likely to allow for the containment of the disruptive potential of this cleavage or a different structure – and in this case which one – must be rather put in its place.

A second strand in the literature underscores the intergovernmental turn of the EU, but emphasizes its deliberative nature. Uwe Puetter (2014) in particular has advanced the hypothesis that the European Council acted in a deliberative mode during the crises, thus lending legitimacy to the difficult decisions that had to be made. He has studied the evolution of two informal bodies of the EU – the Eurosummit, the meeting of the heads of state and government of the euro area, and the Eurogroup, the meeting of the finance and economics ministers of the euro-area to which also the Commission and the ECB participate – which are not even mentioned in the ToL. Greater recourse to intergovernmental decision-making reveals, according to Puetter, an "integration paradox", whereby "Member states have been reluctant to commit to further transfers of ultimate decision-making powers, but have remained eager to act collectively as regards core areas of state sovereignty" (Puetter 2014: 33). These meetings are hailed as the harbingers of a "new", "deliberative

intergovernmentalism" (Bickerton et al. 2015): "the member states constantly need to aim for consensus among themselves and with the Commission over collective policy action—far more so than has been the case in the domain of classic community method decision-making" (ibid). The central theoretical claim of new/deliberative intergovernmentalism is that such a strategy was purposefully chosen by the chief executives of the member states to multiply the opportunities for high-level deliberation while keeping in check the power of the supranational institutions (Commission, European Parliament and Court of Justice of the European Union). Such high-level forums, however, can work only if the accommodating orientation of the elites remains firm, and this is precisely what began to falter right after Lisbon.

Moreover, this drive towards deliberative intergovernmentalism, which supposedly took place after Maastricht, clashes with the mainstreaming of the community method brought about by the ToL. Similarly, the consensual mode that should characterize both decision-making and day-to-day policy implementation does not square with the reinforced surveillance powers entrusted to the Commission after the Euro crisis and rather creates the impression of domination exerted by some member states over others (creditors over debtors) and the imposition of pre-set economic recipes rather than deliberations aimed at reaching a consensus over the best strategies for promoting recovery. If the complex process of institutional engineering to which Puetter (2014) refers was supposed to enable the relevant decision-making bodies – the European Council, the Council, and the top-level expert committees in which the member states and the EU institutions are represented – to *"enhance the consensus generation potential and to overtake policy initiation and implementation functions* that were previously not associated with them" (Puetter 2014: 61), in light of the handling of the crises this potential does not seem to have been exploited. Rather, the ever greater insistence on "governing by the rules" "and ruling by the numbers" (Schmidt 2015) reveals an increasingly unaccommodating orientation.

Also the role of the European Parliament was severely curtailed during the height of the crisis leading other scholars to suggest that a "constitutional mutation" had occurred during the crisis (Menendez 2014; for a contrary opinion see De Witte 2015). Bellamy and Weale (2015: 259) remind us that the EU is a normative order and that "the construction of EMU rested upon a set of constitutional principles that contained strong – and contestable – normative assumptions". Crucial among these assumptions is that the EU should help member states to better fulfill their commitments to their national constituencies. The EMU governance system, instead, "neglects the normative logic of the two-level games" (ibid) which forces national governments to be responsible and accountable to their domestic populations while making commitments to one another about their future behavior. This normative logic was particularly flaunted during the Euro crisis, as both the European Parliament and the national parliaments were marginalized, thus undermining the legitimacy of the decisions made through intergovernmental agreements. The role played in consociational democracies by parliamentary assemblies in building a consensus, while already sui generis in times of normalcy in the case of the EU, was thus further reduced by the emergency procedures and measures enacted between 2009 and 2014. All that was left to support such agreements was the accommodating stance of the elites, which were then put before the dilemma of reassuring the other member states' public opinions (responsibility) vs. catering to the demands of their national constituencies (responsiveness) (Mair 2013).The space for consensus-building dramatically shrunk right when it was becoming more important than ever.

To sum up, a certain balance between pursuing the national interest and surrendering increasing shares of national sovereignty could be preserved until the Treaty of Maastricht when, in the words of Liesbet Hooghe and Gary Marks (2009), "permissive consensus" gave way to "constraining dissensus". If until then European elites could "fudge" the details of the quid-pro-quo exchanges implying the surrender of increasing shares of national sovereignty for increasing economic empowerment at EU level by means of side-payments and package deals – what Majone (2009) called "integration by stealth" – from Lisbon onward European elites were called to withstand the test of having to straddle an increasingly narrower path between continued

support for the EU and promotion of national interests. It is here that even the mainstream literature starts to record the contradictions inherent in EMU and analyze the increasingly more complex balancing act that needs to be performed by European elites particularly in policy areas that are close to core state powers like budgetary and refugee policies (Mair 2013; Rose 2014; see even Majone 2014). Despite the efforts of governmental elites to mitigate the contrasts by way of accommodating communicative discourses (Crespy and Schmidt 2014), the tensions remained clear and palpable. The Euro and refugee crises marked a watershed in elite attitudes and discourses: the next section will attempt to see how much and why.

A Residual "Consociational" Vision? The Increasing Fragmentation of European Elites and its Implications for the Functioning of EU Democracy

What we discussed so far suggests that the classic consensual vision at the heart of the "elite design" of European integration (Haller 2008), ideally consolidated in the current EU institutional framework, is today in danger. Several historical developments weakened the conditions for a system of "elite settlement" within the EU: the fiasco of the European constitution; the different worldviews among long-term member states; the criticisms of EMU governance architecture that emerged particularly during the Euro crisis; the tensions engendered by the refugee crisis. In this section we will offer a short review of the recent evidence on the attitudinal and behavioural dimensions of consociationalism in the EU.

A first proposition can be offered by looking at the level of domestic political systems: the increasing disarticulation of the party system in several EU member states and the emergence of new populist or "challenger" parties (Hobolt and Tilley 2016) impact on the elites' inclination towards accommodation. The surge of support for Eurosceptic parties after 2008 has led analysts to identify this as the turning point towards a more fragmented party system in many European countries. In his posthumous *Ruling the Void,* Peter Mair (2013) offered a first quantification of the presence of populist parties, stressing the increasing tension between *responsiveness* vis-à-vis their national constituencies and *responsibility* vis-à-vis their European partners. Ten years after the onset of the economic crisis, the appeal of these parties is still increasing, and some of them have reached positions of executive power. At least one challenger party is present in a significant number of EU member states' governmental coalitions (Austria, Belgium, Czech Republic, Finland, Greece, Italy and Latvia), but the list would be much longer if we included the successors of some "mainstream parties" now turned Eurosceptic (i.e. PiS in Poland, or Fidesz in Hungary). The same could be said of some new governing coalitions still connected with the traditional parties but formed in order to produce a significant renewal of the domestic political scenario, such as the leftist coalition which formed in Portugal in 2015 and the recent minority government in Spain externally supported by a challenger party like *Podemos.* Other *shades* of populist appeal are evident in new personal parties like *La République en marche*, launched in France by Emmanuel Macron in 2017.

To what extent will this state of fluidity in most of the European party systems and government coalitions lead to the formation of a *responsible European ruling class* is difficult to tell. The 2019 European elections, marking the dissimilar success of "far-right sovereignist" parties from one country to another, seem to have produced a contradictory evidence in this respect. In any event, the likelihood of a moderate multiparty system to be empowered at the supranational level as a condition for a consociational vision of the EU is today much lower than in the past, as the difficult negotiations around the formation of the new commission clearly show. This allows us to sketch, at least in the short period, a scenario of *de-consociationalization* somehow similar to what has characterised the small traditional *power-sharing democracies* (Helms et al. 2019).

A second proposition we may wish to discuss is whether there is a decline in elite accommodation within the EU due to the transformation of party strategies and political platforms. Although an accurate answer to this

question can be provided only by meticulous in-depth qualitative analyses, the evidence from the *Chapel Hill Expert Survey* (Bakker et al. 2015) shows that the increasing salience of EU-related issues observed in many European political systems during the past two decades corresponds to a dramatic increase of perceived dissensus on European integration. This does not just affect the position of the Euro-skeptic parties, but determines an increasingly evident variance over time in the position of all the significant parties on specific policy-related issues at the center of the recent EU crises.[5] This trend has been confirmed by the results of the *CHES Flash Survey* conducted in 2017 (Polk et al. 2017).[6]

A very likely effect of these changes, at the level of EU institutions in the mid-term, may be described as a sort of "double complexity" that risks to undermine the elite settlement and increase the confrontation along national lines. On the side of the *responsible* elites, complexity will be represented by the risk of reducing the likelihood of an effective *grand coalition* given the centrifugal forces and the nationalist drifts of many governmental actors (for instance, the parties in government in the *Višegrad* countries). On the other hand, the new EU opposition complexity will be represented by the difficulties of unifying the Eurosceptic stances, and particularly those from the growing *untidy right* (Brack 2013), into a rational vision for the future of Europe.

A final observation can be made looking at the level of individual attitudes of politicians, and specifically to the growing lack of the necessary cognitive and emotional values that can make European domestic elites able to bring forward some kind of "elite project" and therefore re-establish a possible phase of consociationalism at the supranational level. Survey analyses conducted before the economic crisis (Best et al. 2012) have shown the compound nature of elite' pro-Europeanism – describing how several nuances of federalism and intergovernmentalism have shaped a very segmented picture, with a tiny minority of true federalists and a limited number of fully eurosceptics. In this context, the degrees of positive evalutation of European integration and the preferences about the future of EU have been clearly positioned in a multidimensional structure. During the two difficult past decades, the segments of European political elites that can be clustered according to their different positions in terms of trust in the EU institutions and preference on future EU goals (Russo and Cotta 2013) have been seriously challenged by conjunctures. This means that the diverse nature of the challenges - Economic recession, security issues, immigration, Brexit, etc – can determine a relevant impact on some of the preferences, independently by the opinions of the different elite clusters about evaluating history and trusting the Commission, the Parliament, etc. But the overall effect of such a complicate game of re-clustering of the European elites's attitudes would be, in the line of reasoning of this article, a significant decrease of their capability of accommodation at the supranational level.

Recent studies have indeed confirmed that the crises have determined a serious decrease in the support for supranational integration, thus reducing the traditional distance between a sceptical public and enthusiastic elites (Raines et al. 2017). We also know that there is still a robust majority of politicians (and, more generally, elite members) who bet on the future of the EU. This brings some observers to argue that (political) elites still perform their role as "legitimating buffer of the European integration project" (Real Dato et al. 2018: 190). The question is therefore to what extent such a persisting elite role can be grounded in a "traditional" view of the EU as a supranational consociational democracy that has sustained European integration at least until the Treaty of Maastricht and perhaps also until the Treaty of Lisbon. A preliminary

[5] The descriptive data are available on https://www.chesdata.eu. See, in particular, the trends included in the section *General Questions on European Integration*, and particularly the measures of the variable EU_CONSENT and the policy-related variables EU_FISCAL and EU_BUDGET.
[6] https://www.chesdata.eu/1999-2014-chapel-hill-expert-survey-ches-trend-file-1/

answer to this question has been provided by Best et al. (2012) and Conti et al. (2018) who attempt to explain the decrease in positive elite feelings towards EU democracy.

Such a decrease, which had already been noted years ago by Maurizio Cotta (2012), is still evident among many European politicians, thus confirming the elite response to the *constraining dissensus* and the growing distrust in the EU present among the masses. First-cut analyses of the elite surveys from the Euengage project[7] show the growing complexity in elite attitudes: even those politicians who still appreciate the historical benefits of the Union and believe in the prospect of enacting some form of economic solidarity in the future, do not necessarily seem to share a common vision about which policy tasks should be delegated to the EU in the near future (Verzichelli and Marangoni 2018). In other words, The willingness to expand EU policy competences gets, on average, smaller and smaller, and this lack of enthusiasm seems to be connected to the responses that were given to the different crises, in particular the migration crisis.

The short review of the empirical studies that we have proposed in this section confirms that the decline in cohesiveness among European elites could be not only attributed to the complexity of the party system(s) and to the deepening of a new transnational cleavage (Hooghe and Marks 2017). Among the factors at the basis of the declining cohesiveness of European elites are the effects generated by the "blame game" vis-à-vis Brussels played even by the representatives of mainstream parties (Schlipphak and Treib 2017). The temptation of individual representatives to second the fears of the general public and the decision of domestic politicians to privilege their local constituencies (responsiveness) over the supranational community (responsibility) would be, in this perspective, another possible explanation of the phenomenon under observation.

Conclusions

In this article we have argued that, almost irrespective of the ideology of the different political parties and therefore in partial contrast to a scholarly literature that blames on populist and sovereignist parties the rise of Euroscepticism, changes in elite attitudes are more the effect of the crises and of the difficult process of consolidation of the EU institutional setting than of this changing political landscape. Despite the "federal turn" impressed by the adoption of the Treaty of Lisbon, the wear and tear accumulated by the EU supranational institutions in the previous phase and the negative impact of the Euro crisis and of the refugees crises on their functioning have determined a deterioration of the capacity of domestic elites to settle important issues by striking working compromises among themselves.

Our review of the recent literature on the European elite system confirms that trust in EU institutions and satisfaction with EU democracy – although still significant – have recently weakened and, above all, do not clearly align with other (in the past typical) predispositions for an ever closer Union. While some European politicians maintain faith in an "elite design" of a supranational entity based on consociational practices and mutual trust, others retain a pro-EU attitude while blaming the EU for the recent crises, expressing dissatisfaction with its institutional performance and consequently denying their support for any idea of burden-sharing. In this increasingly politicized European context, pursuing an institutional design which undermines the consociational traits of the Union and brings it closer to a majoritarian model of democracy – whether of the federal parliamentary or of the federal presidential variant – would probably misfire (European Commission 2017).

Therefore, our contribution to the question whether consociationalism still describes the EU after the ToL and whether it is necessarily premised on depoliticization or it can instead operate also in the presence of a

[7] See the reports on the 2017 and 2018 Euengage surveys on www.Eungage.eu.

vibrant party-political mobilization is necessarily qualified. As Hale and König-Archibugi (2016: 226) argue, "European political elites may be ready for more majoritarianism and competition, but we need to ask whether European citizens are ready as well". While these authors answer positively and conclude that European citizens are indeed ready, we must temper this conclusion and suggest that, before giving a definite answer, the latent factors behind the pro- or anti-EU stances of elites and masses must be carefully unpacked. Unfortunately, the available surveys do not allow us to do just that yet as they did not ask specific questions about elite confidence in the *consociational vision* as such. For this reason, at the moment all we can do is to highlight the potential danger inherent in pursuing an institutional construction ambitiously oriented to some kind of federal democracy in the context of static, if not declining, elite orientations towards accommodation.

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