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The Parallels Between Inequality and European Disintegration

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Executive Summary

Rising inequality affects more than two-thirds of the globe--the European Union included. Between 1980 and 2017, most European countries failed to reach their UN Sustainable Development Goals inequality target goal, with Europe's top 1% capturing as much growth as the bottom 50%. The 2008 financial crisis startled the EU, with growing income inequalities and unemployment as the main driver. The rise of inequality in the EU poses an alarming threat to European integration and promotes European economic and political disintegration. European integration fits into two dimensions: economic and political, and European disintegration is the reversal of one or more of these dimensions. Inequality fuels economic disintegration at the EU level. When inequalities arise, indebtedness increases, investment levels deteriorate, innovation slows, and sustainable development stalls. Inequality provokes political disintegration at the EU level because it negatively affects citizens' enjoyment of social rights and social mobility, creates divisions among its socioeconomic classes, and gives rise to populism among low and middle-class citizens. Regional integration, which was responsible for nearly 50% of increases in income inequality within Western European countries in the 20th century, has increased competitiveness and undermined worker authority. Due to this, the rise of inequality and undermined worker authority generates a pushback against regional European integration, promoting political disintegration and populism. Inequality negatively affects citizens' perceptions of the EU as it undermines democracy, stimulating Euroscepticism and diminishing support for further European integration. Lastly, inequality between the West and Central and Eastern member states sparks populist East-Central populist parties as inequalities disproportionately impact East-Central member states and citizens. Altogether, this paper delves into the troubling trend of growing inequality and how inequality propels European

disintegration, mainly political, at the EU level. This paper posits suggestions to the EU for addressing these problems, with growing inequality serving as the main problem to tackle.

Inequality is broadly defined as the unequal distribution of goods and burdens in society. Globally speaking, inequality is rampant and ubiquitous, its detrimental consequences affecting us in all aspects of life. While there is no question about its proliferation in modern societies, many question the factors that lead to the emergence and maintenance of inequality. Nonetheless, there is no denial about the rise of inequality over the past few decades. According to the 2020 World Social Report, published by the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA), inequality has increased across most developed countries and some middle-income countries—with rising inequality affecting more than two-thirds of the globe.

The global trend of rising inequality and the socio-economic divides is not alien to Europe either. In fact, nearly all European countries failed to reach the UN Sustainable Development Goals inequality “target over the 1980-2017 period, which seeks to ensure that the bottom 40% of the population grows faster than the average” (Blanchet, 2019). Between 1980 and 2000, the European top 1% grew twice as fast as the bottom 50%, with the top 1% capturing 17% of regional income growth. To put that in perspective, Europe’s top 1% captured about as much growth as the bottom 50%. Following the 2008 financial crisis, EU-wide income inequalities increased across the EU Member States, with growing unemployment serving as the main driver. According to the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (Eurofound), this surge in inequality was moderate due to the effectiveness of European tax and benefit systems. Moreover, another interesting pattern from this data emerges: income disparities within countries are greater than income disparities between countries in the

European Union (Vacas-Soriano, 2017). For instance, Nordic members rank amongst the “most equal” in terms of income inequality, while Southern members exhibit higher than average levels of income inequality. Altogether, the 2008 financial crisis took a “toll on EU economic growth and led to a convergence and growth in household incomes” (European Trade Union, 2020). Moreover, persistent inequality gives rise to disintegration and political tensions in Europe. As defined by Neil Fligstein and Alec Stone Sweet in *Constructing Polities and Markets: An Institutionalist Account of European Integration*, European integration consists of two dimensions: political and economic integration. Political integration is the formation and diffusion of regional polity and rules, while economic integration is regional economic exchanges in trade and investment (Fligstein and Stone Sweet, 2002). European disintegration is the reversal of one or more of these dimensions. Moreover, in Lucas Schramm’s *European Disintegration: a new feature of EU politics*, European disintegration is the reversal of one or more dimensions of European integration: deepening, broadening, and widening, where deepening is the transfer of policy competencies from the national to the European level, broadening is EU competence gains in new policy fields, and widening is the increase in the number of EU member state (Schramm, 2019). In 2008, the financial crisis not only impacted EU-wide income inequalities but also propelled into a direct threat to European integration. Between 2009 to 2015, the Eurozone crisis threatened the existence of the EU’s Economic and Monetary Union (EMU). Many argued that a disintegration of the Eurozone would come at a high political and economic cost, and heavily impact the southern members who depended on the financial support of the richer, northern members (Schramm, 2019). Luckily enough, the extreme costs served as barriers to the disintegration of the EU’s Economic and Monetary Union (EMU). Altogether, the 2008 financial crisis promoted EU-wide income inequalities and severely

threatened European integration. When inequalities arise, indebtedness increases, investment levels deteriorate, innovation is hindered, and sustainable development slows down. In 2008, the anger and diminishing trust in societies were replicated in the boardrooms, severe irregularities in accounting procedures, and the spread of the sovereign debt crisis fueling opportunities for European disintegration. The Eurozone crisis serves as an extreme example of the unequivocal, growing social inequalities and European disintegration. Social inequality gives rise to political and economic disintegration at the EU level. Aforementioned, each member state's unique identity plays a crucial role in its social inequality index. In essence, each EU member's social inequality is unequal to the others. This added complexity of social inequality promotes European disintegration as it restrains economic development and growth and negatively affects the enjoyment of social rights and social mobility—promoting European disintegration and populism amongst societies.

Social inequality promotes political disintegration at the EU level as perceptions regarding EU integration differ amongst socioeconomic classes. Citizen support for integration is "positively related to the level of economic benefits they expect to derive from European integration" (Gabel, 1998). With this principle of utilitarianism come winners and losers from European integration. The winners regard EU integration as an expansion of the market and thus opportunities. On the other hand, losers viewed EU integration as a threat to the welfare and national redistribution within expanded markets. Citizens of high socioeconomic and low socioeconomic status perceived EU integration differently. For instance, low-skilled citizens, especially in high-skill endowment countries, are more likely to be critical of European integration. With an integrated market, low-skilled workers are thought to be less competitive and potentially face losing redistributive benefits if competition erodes national tax bases

(Scheve, 1999). As a result of their less advantageous economic position in the EU, low-skilled workers express significantly less support for European integration. Contrarily, high-skilled citizens are more likely to support European integration. Generally, high-skilled workers are less vulnerable to economic shifts, and market trends and demands are more favorable to high-skilled workers. Differences in the perception of European integration between low and middle-skilled workers (losers) and high-skilled workers (winners) demonstrate the importance of socioeconomic status in evaluating EU integration. A growing trend in the European labor market is de-routinization: the increasing demand for jobs at the top of the professional and wage ladder and decreasing demand for middle-skilled jobs. De-routinization and European integration prevent low-skilled workers from progressing into middle-skilled careers and pushes them into more vulnerable states. In addition to de-routinization, trends in European deindustrialization and automation further exacerbate the anxieties of low and middle-skilled workers. For instance, between the 1970s and 1990s, European cities lost between 30% and 80% of their manufacturing jobs. The deindustrialization of Europe worsened intra-city inequality, as job losses came from the poorest neighborhoods--and now, low-skilled and middle-skilled workers face yet another challenge: automation. Nearly 14% of EU adult workers are at an extremely high risk of replacement by automation, particularly males and low-skilled workers. The growing inequality of opportunities in the European labor market leads to European disintegration as low and middle-skilled citizens perceive European integration as a threat to their wellbeing. These opportunity inequalities negatively impact the enjoyment of social life and social mobility. Inequalities diminish social confidence and trust in societies, consequently lowering support for democratic institutions. Inequality increases social unrest, spurs political instabilities, and gives rise to populism. The surge in populist politics and discontent with democracy is especially

prevalent among middle-income groups, "who feel left behind in accessing economic opportunities and anxious due to the relative scarcity of quality and stable jobs" (Böke, 2021). In addition to labor market trends that promote inequality, barriers to social mobility have risen in the past decade. In 2008, the bottom 40% of European citizens stayed in one of the bottom income deciles over the next three years. In 2015, it rose to 56% as most European countries, with a few exceptions, failed to improve the situation for the bottom 40%. Within the contexts of the EU, this Limited social mobility propels social exclusion, creating distrust toward democracy and raising questions regarding the legitimacy and efficiency of the EU. The varying perception amongst workers and trends in the European labor market promotes European disintegration and gives rise to populism among low and middle-class citizens. European integration and labor market trends may have put low and middle-skilled workers in a more fragile socioeconomic--or made them perceive that they are in a more precarious socioeconomic status. While workers may not be 'losers' in technical terms, they may feel closer to such a fragile state. After all, being 'poor' and the fear of 'becoming poor' have similar impacts on subsequent life choices (Hammerström and Janlert, 1997) and consequently propels social unrest and populist rises. The EU must address and alleviate the economic and social anxieties of middle and low-income workers and redesign social and economic policies on alternative and stable career paths for transitioning low and middle-skilled workers to lessen the threat of European political disintegration.

Regional integration's association with growing income inequality gives rise to political disintegration at the EU level. According to evidence from random-effects and fixed-effect models of income equality, regional integration is responsible for rising income inequality in Western Europe. European economic integration amplifies income inequality through its

expansion of market competition. Since labor unions organize at the national level, the proliferation of the European market via regional economic integration undermines unionization and subjects workers to intensified competition. Regional integration has weakened unionization, which forms at the national rather than the regional level, and diminished the authority of the everyday laborer. In Jason Beckfield's European Integration and Income Inequality, an analysis of 48 Western European countries demonstrate a "positive bivariate relationship between the Gini coefficient and the number of Article 177 cases forwarded to the European Court of Justice" (Beckfield, 2006). The coefficient demonstrates that a standard deviation increase in political integration is associated with a .34 standard deviation increase in income inequality. This statistical analysis indicates that regional integration is responsible for nearly half of the rise in income inequality within Western European countries between 1973 and 1997. Beckfield asserts that "regional integration is more powerful than globalization in explaining recent trends in income inequality in Western European countries" (Beckfield, 2006). In short, the rise in income inequality across Western Europe is due to regional integration, which encompasses EU regional polity, national markets, and weakened labor unionization. The effects of regional integration on income inequality promote political disintegration and populism at the EU level as the average worker perceives regional integration as a threat to their job security, authority, and power. In addition to labor market changes due to regional integration, union workers face other challenges, such as membership decline and financial stringency, promoting widespread union restructuring via mergers. However, most mergers fail to provide additional services and support to union members. The extent of union merger activity in Europe raises issues of participation and representation. For instance, when a large union acquires another, it may be difficult for members of the smaller union to retain their identity and exert influence within the post-merger

organization. The inequality of representation, equipped with growing income inequality and the complexity of regional integration, promotes populism and European disintegration. According to the European trade union institute, unions are motivated to engage in populist discourse as they demand the preservation of local jobs and an increase in public provisions. Ultimately, income inequality, fueled by regional integration in Western Europe, promotes European disintegration. Income inequality, the trivialization of unions, and growing market competition promote populism and European disintegration. The EU must address income inequality at both the regional and national levels of its member states and ensure that further regional integration poses no threat to unionization and local worker protection and representation.

Perceptions of social inequality give rise to political disintegration at the EU level. When citizens perceive high overall levels of inequality within the EU, they express lower confidence in European institutions than when exposed to low levels of inequality. This belief is consistent with numerous studies from political psychology journals as growing income inequality reduces citizens' support for national political institutions, satisfaction with political system operations, and support for democracy. Moreover, growing income inequality is associated with increased Euroscepticism and prompts a backlash against European integration and globalization in the positions of political parties (Guinjoan and Rico, 2018). For instance, redistribution efforts are positively related to distrust in the European Parliament, particularly among left-wing citizens. However, the perception of citizens regarding inequality may be fragmented and vary from reality. Many researchers argue that EU citizens' attitudes toward the European Union are due to reasons separate from the EU. According to Christopher Anderson, a professor of Economics and Politics at the University of Warwick, European citizens generally possess inadequate knowledge of European affairs, citizens using national cues to form their perceptions. For

instance, a 1992 to 1995 survey gauging European citizens' opinions regarding whether they are informed about European integration found that nearly 65-70% of citizens generally feel uninformed about the EU and its operations (Anderson, 1998). Many other surveys display the lack of citizens' knowledge about European integration and the EU. For instance, in another 1995 survey, only 28% of EU citizens qualified as knowledgeable when questioned about the institutions of the EU. In addition to the lack of objective knowledge, citizens evaluate the EU from narrow National vantage points, leading to "trust or distrust in the European Union for reasons largely distinct from the Union itself (Harteveld et al., 2013). The lack of citizens' knowledge about EU operations and the generalization of domestic institution performance to the performance of the EU leads to fragmented perceptions regarding the EU and the impact of integration on inequality. Due to this, many can argue that the EU cannot exert control over the political disintegration that comes with Euroscepticism and citizens' frustration with growing inequality. However, other studies suggest otherwise, claiming that citizens generally do not rely on attitudes towards the national government to determine perspectives on European integration and the EU. A 1998 study analyzing 7 EU member countries--Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, and Portugal--selected to reflect a diverse mix of countries that joined the EU at various times tells otherwise. In this analysis, six out of seven countries were consistent with the system support hypothesis. The system support hypothesis argues that satisfaction with democratic institutions leads to higher support for European integration. This hypothesis suggests that European citizens do not rely on attitudes toward the national government to determine the extent of their affinity for European integration. Instead, citizens seem to "rely on the more diffuse satisfaction with how democratic institutions work as a proxy regardless of who is currently in power" (Anderson, 1998). Citizens' support of European

integration relies on their satisfaction with the EU's democratic institutions and not exclusively on the performance of their national government. Therefore, the EU plays a significant role in addressing Euroscepticism and anxieties of growing inequality. The complex connection between democracy and inequality illuminates the consequences of inequality on European disintegration. In 2019, Carnegie Europe released a report documenting how increasing inequalities threaten European democracy. European countries that have experienced increasing inequalities have also reported shrinking democratic space in the last ten years. According to the V-Dem Democracy index, EU member states, such as Croatia, Poland, and Hungary, show significant downward trends in democracy and equality scores. Additionally, EU member states, such as Austria, France, and Sweden, exhibit growing protests and populist/nationalist movements and decreased scores in both democracy and equality. Altogether, the statistical relationship between changes in democracy scores and rising inequality is significant--a staggering 6%. Inequality threatens European democratization and, therefore, prompts political disintegration. Consistent with the system support hypothesis mentioned earlier, citizens within EU member states experiencing the above scenarios will report dissatisfaction with the EU's democratic institutions and express less support for European integration. To sum, inequality advances political disintegration at the EU level as it undermines democracy, promotes Euroscepticism among citizens, and diminishes support for additional European integration. The EU must consult member states experiencing downward trends in democracy and equality scores. Moreover, the EU must ensure that it addresses its growing inequalities to maintain citizens' perception of the EU as a satisfactory democracy and minimize Euroscepticism/political disintegration.

Perceived differences and inequalities between Western European members and Central and Eastern European members promote political disintegration at the EU level. In 2004, better known as the Eastern enlargement, the EU welcomed ten new members known as the A10 countries. Known as the EU's largest expansion yet, the EU opened its doors to the Republic of Cyprus, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia. Most of these countries were a part of the former Eastern Bloc but had completed their 15-year transition to a market economy by 2004. The great transformation, defined as the 19th-century expansion of capitalism in East-Central Europe, played a crucial role in the readiness and expectations of benefits, such as stable and sustainable growth, from their accession to the EU (Andor, 2019). Moreover, the 2004 enlargement generated conflicts due to disparities between old (Western) and new (Central and Eastern) member states. These imbalances emerged due to income inequality and large labor outflows, creating an imbalanced single market as capital flowed from West to East and labor flowed from East to West. These imbalances created inequalities between the average EU citizen of the West and the East-Central. Concerning the large labor flow from East to West, fostered through EU labor mobility and freedom of movement, most Eastern and Central workers were overqualified for roles they landed in the West. For instance, in 2012, half of the East-Central European migrants who had completed higher education were overqualified (Andor, 2019). This alarming rate of over-qualification creates inequalities as East-Central workers, despite possessing the same level of education and qualifications, cannot secure the same positions as their Western counterparts. These inequalities burden the everyday worker and fuel Euroscepticism as East-Central workers question the validity of EU freedom of movement and democracy. Additionally, the large flow of labor from East to West creates a brain drain in East-Central member states. For instance, brain

drain, particularly in health care, leads to critical staffing issues in East-Central member states. This brain drain not only jeopardizes East-Central member states-but the EU as a whole. A 2018 article by Deutsche Welle warns that the Eastern brain drain threatens all of the EU as young people move to the West in droves due to attractive training opportunities and better wages. Since the 2008 financial crisis, real wages across East-Central Europe flatlined and even decreased in a few member states. For instance, when comparing 2016 to 2008, real wages in Romania and Hungary fell by 4% and 8%--respectively (Galgócz, 2017). Since the fall of communism, new EU member states, such as Latvia, have lost more than a quarter of their populations (Mappes-Niediek, 2018). For East-Central member states, such as Bulgaria, emigration is accountable for 2/3 of the population loss. The remaining 1/3 is due to a declining birth rate (Mappes-Niediek, 2018). In terms of wage shares, defined as total employee compensation as a percentage of GDP, the average wage share of East-Central member states was lower than that of Western member states. These alarming trends indicate that East-Central European "wage levels are even lower than their economic development potential would allow for" (Galgócz, 2017). This wage inequality has only exacerbated as most East-Central European countries have experienced significant decreases in their wage shares over the past century. In perspective, Poland saw the largest decrease in its wage share, from 65.8% in 1995 to 53.9% in 2015, followed by Hungary (from 65.9% to 55.7%) (Galgócz, 2017). Other East-Central European countries, such as Estonia and Latvia, experienced more moderate yet significant drops in wage shares. This drop-in East-Central wage shares may be due to the lack of bargaining power. Working conditions distinguish East-Central member states from the West. For instance, less than 20% of workers in Poland and the Czech Republic are members of trade unions--compared to nearly 70% in Scandinavian member states (Andor, 2019). Even when

working the same occupations, workers in East-Central member states exercise less authority as they lack the organized union efforts of their Western counterparts--the persistent temptation to improve competitiveness at the everyday workers' expense roaming freely. Although overall European bargaining power has weakened since the 1980s, East-Central workers face additional hurdles due to the absence of unionization--workers unable to engage in wage or work condition negotiations as a collective. Unlike Western member states, the East-Central are subject to labor over-qualification in the West, lower wages, and exercise less authority in the workplace. These disparities promote brain drain in East-Central member states and threaten the EU--sparking Euroscepticism. Due to the disparities between the West and the East-Central and the burden of growing inequalities disproportionately impacting the East-Central, Eastern and Central Europe have experienced a surge of populist political parties and EU disintegration. A 2019 IPS article by Hungarian and Czech political scientists Eszter Kováts and Katerina Smejkalova express the Eastern frustration with the EU's East-West Divide. They claim that East-Central Europeans remain second-class citizens and disproportionately experience inequalities and lags, such as lagging female employment rates, that their Western counterparts do not. Ultimately, these "disappointed hopes and inequality constitute the ideal breeding ground for the rise of populism, nationalism and authoritarian thinking" (Kováts and Smejkalova, 2019). The success of populist parties in Central Eastern Europe can be attributed to citizens becoming more skeptical about the development of their states and economic developments and globalization as causes of inequality (Kastler, 2017). Altogether, the inequalities disproportionately impacting East-Central member states fuels disintegration due to heightened Euroscepticism and populist parties. The EU must address the disparities between its West and East-Central member states. Solutions must consider

the varying geopolitical contexts of its member states and ensure that its principles of free movement and equality fully merge within exchanges between the West and the East-Central.

In conclusion, rampant inequality across the EU fuels economic and political disintegration at the EU level. Inequality within the EU stimulates economic and political disintegration because it restrains economic development and growth, negatively affects the enjoyment of social rights and social mobility, and diminishes social confidence and support for democratic institutions. Moreover, inequality gives rise to populism--particularly among low and middle-class citizens--trivializes unions and motivates unions to engage in populist discourse, and promotes Euroscepticism among citizens. Finally, inequality widens divisions between old (Western) and new (Central and Eastern) member states and sparks populist East-Central populist parties as inequalities disproportionately impact East-Central members states and citizens. Ultimately, by addressing the issue of growing inequality within the EU, the EU will be able to alleviate most if not all of these motives for disintegration and promote its expansion for centuries to come.

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