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THE ROLE OF TRANSFORMATIVE PROJECTS IN EUROPEAN UNION INTEGRATION DYNAMICS

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Abstract. This paper introduces a new approach to understanding the deepening of integration. It examines how and under what conditions the implementation of large projects drives integration dynamics. The study begins by analyzing the demand and supply logic that underlies the explanatory integration theories, primarily two grand theories – neofunctionalism and liberal intergovernmentalism. Both theories agree that the demand for integration is crucial but differ on the nature of interest groups (purely national vs. national and transnational), the levels at which these groups demand integration (only national vs. national and transnational), and the role of supranational institutions. Both theories acknowledge the key role of member state governments at the polity level. Neofunctionalism and institutionalism recognize the role of governments at the level of politics as well, at least when studying significant reforms of specific EU policies. National policymakers are usually ready to deliver the supply of integration (political decisions) when these decisions provide them sufficient compensation for any loss of their autonomy, usually in the form of additional pubic or elite support. What characteristics should a new integration project have in order to accumulate the demand, push politicians to deliver the supply, and be able to trigger the systemic transformation of regional integration organizations like the EU? The study proposes the concept of a transformative project – a type of integration project that can significantly impact integration dynamics and entail systemic changes in governance, polity, and degree of policy coordination. Based on an analysis of the EU's history, we outline the key characteristics of a transformative project, including complexity to induce a spillover effect, a practice-oriented nature combined

with long-term political goals, broad support among stakeholders and society, tangible benefits that impact daily life to promote socialization, a solid groundwork (experience with regulation at the supranational level), and linkage to a global context. The author concludes with several assumptions about the potential of the EU Green Deal as a transformative project.

Keywords: European Union, European integration, integration theory, neofunctionalism, intergovernmentalism, EU institutions, transformative project

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European integration is a non-linear process, it is a "history of zigzags, false starts, delays and even rollbacks" [Gillingham, 2006: 77]. The fact that we see progress in the long run does not mean that the deepening of integration will continue in the future. The primary focus of this study is on the mechanisms that drive the long-term and sustainable development of the EU, going beyond the effective functioning of established institutions and regulatory regimes.

Since the early 2010s, the EU has been shaken by a series of large-scale crises, a reality that was gradually acknowledged at the political level. The President of the European Commission Jean-Claude Juncker in his "State of the Union" address at the European Parliament in 2016 said: "The European Union is, at least partially, in an existential crisis" [Juncker, 2016]. German Chancellor Angela Merkel in 2018 metaphorically described this situation by stating that over the past ten years, "Europe's soul has been put to the test" [Merkel, 2018]. Experts have highlighted the lack of a grand vision, an 'ideological vacuum' as one of key factors in the stagnation of the integration process [Ash, 2013; Gillingham, 2003: 498; Roubini and Berggruen, 2011]. Following the establishment of the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) and the Eastern enlargement, the EU primarily dealt with governing existing regimes (e.g., the internal market, EMU, Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), sectoral policies, etc.) and managing routine technical issues, while lacking a clear strategic outlook. This situation was keenly summarized by the renowned British historian T. G. Ash in 2013: "The Europeans are eager to be shown the right direction and goal, to inspire hope in their souls… We need fresh breeze of poetry to get the European ship sailing again" [Ash, 2013: 120].

This article introduces a novel perspective on the issue of deepening integration, seeking to explore how the implementation of major projects can drive integration forward and under what conditions. By analyzing the history of the European Union, the study identifies key characteristics necessary for an integration project to induce systemic changes. Building upon these insights, several assumptions are made regarding the potential of the Green Deal to initiate the transformation process within the EU.

Demand and supply logic of integration

The theory of European integration studies defines integration as the creation of new political institutions that possess or demand jurisdiction over at least a part of

member states' affairs (political process). Scholars who adhere to neofunctionalism, following E. Haas [Haas, 1958: 16] also include the social process – such as the shifting of expectations and loyalties – into their definitions.

Integration theories are typically categorized into explanatory, analytical, and constructive types [Wiener, Diez, 2009]. Explanatory theories address questions like "how can integration outcomes be explained?" and "why does integration occur?" Analytical theories delve into the political processes within the EU and the machinery of EU's regulatory policy, aiming to identify the "nature of the beast," i.e., the type of EU political system. These theories often take the existing elements of supranational governance for granted. Finally, constructive theories place their main focus on the social and political consequences of integration and attempt to give normative assessments, i.e. to "construct the EU".

Taking into account different areas of theorization (polity, politics and policy)[1], we can identify several explanatory integration theories. Grand theories – neofunctionalism and liberal intergovernmentalism (LI) – explain the development of the EU at the level of polity. New institutionalism and social constructivism aim to understand the politics within the EU[2]. Policy network theory and discursive approach deal with policy studies. When it comes to theorizing at the level of the polity, we must closely examine how neofunctionalism and liberal intergovernmentalism approach understand the drivers of integration.

Both grand theories, despite different views about mechanisms and levels of integration dynamic, are based on rational actor assumption and supply and demand logic.

Founder of neofunctionalism E. Haas stated that "[i]ntegration proceeds most rapidly and drastically when it responds to *socio-economic demands* (italics mine – N.K.) emanating from an industrial urban environment, when it is an adaptation *to cries for increasing welfare benefits and security* (italics mine – N.K.) born by the growth of a new type of society" [Haas, 1961: 375]. The author means such the demands that international organizations and common institutions could address more effectively than political actors at the national level. Haas's logic can be summarized as follows: certain elite groups (political, industrial, labour, etc.) acknowledge that major problems exceed the capacity of national solutions. Consequently, these groups unite, advocating for the delegation of authority to a supranational entity.

[1] Polity refers to the political community and its institutions, and studies of the polity elucidate the emergence of the EU's institutional structure along with its fundamental characteristics. Policy embraces the actual measures taken to tackle concrete issues or to regulate sector policy on everyday basis, which includes the general problem-solving approach, the policy instruments used, etc. Politics comprises the process of policy-making and the daily struggles and strategies of political actors.

[2] The divide between studies of polity and politics isn't absolute. The establishment or radical transformation of the internal market, the EMU, or any significant sector policy, such as competition policy, can be interpreted in terms of both polity and policy changes. Even the framework proposed by J. Peterson and E. Bomberg [Peterson, Bomberg, 1998], which distinguishes between supersystemic and systemic levels of decisions, allows for multiple interpretations.

Classical neofunctionalism primarily focuses on domestic processes. However, as neofunctionalists themselves acknowledged, it "says little about basic causes" of variation in national demands for integration [Lindberg, Scheingold, 1970: 284]. W. Sandholtz and A. Stone Sweet [Sandholtz, Stone Sweet, 1998: 2] address this gap by arguing that "[R]ising levels of transnational exchange trigger process that generate movement toward increased supranational governance." They suggest that different levels of integration across sectors can theoretically and empirically be explained from the demand side by varying levels of transnational activities. Thus, the demand for integration is generated by those groups who transact across borders and who may benefit from common rules and are disadvantaged by national rules. From this point of view, the crucial element of classic neofunctionalism – the shifting of loyalties – becomes superfluous and may be excluded from the analysis[1].

Intergovernmentalists conceptualize European integration as an example of international relations, namely of interstate cooperation maintained by international regime. In line with the rational behaviour assumption, international relations usually represent a two-stage process: governments define their interests, and then bargain among themselves trying to realize those interests. A. Moravcsik [Moravcsik, 1993: 481] metaphorically describes this situation by saying that "these two stages shape demand and supply functions for international co-operation". The novelty of liberal intergovernmentalism (LI) arose from Andrew Moravcsik's decision to unpack the "black box" of the national state. He demonstrates how commercial and public domestic actors unite in their demands and shape national preferences. Thus, European politics can be viewed as a two-level game. The first level involves national preference formation, which articulates the demand for integration (domestic politics). The second level involves intergovernmental bargaining to develop decisions that fulfil the supply of integration (regime politics) [Moravcsik, 1991; Moravcsik, 1993]. Moravcsik describes it the following way: "[T]he EC has developed through a series of celebrated intergovernmental bargains, each of which set the agenda for an intervening period of consolidation" [Moravcsik, 1993: 473]. Naturally enough, intergovernmentalists concentrate their attention on these big bargains; they disregard "consolidation" as something unimportant and see the role of EU institutions as mostly technical. Moreover, when studying EU politics at the middle level of policy areas, they prefer to avoid highly communitarized policies like competition or internal market regulation.

Both grand theories agree that interest groups generate demand for integration. However, they differ in their views on the nature of these groups (purely national or national and transnational), the levels at which these groups advocate for integration (solely national or both national and transnational), and the role of supranational EU institutions.

[1] As W. Sandholtz and A. Stone Sweet stated: "Again, we leave as an open question the extent to which the loyalties and identities of actors will shift from national to the European level. There is a substantial room for supranational governance without an ultimate shift in identification" [Sandholtz, Stone Sweet, 1998: 6].

Clearly, actors tasked with governance at the supranational level (EU supranational institutions) typically intend to push integration forward, as it aligns with their interest in acquiring more power and advancing integration itself (referred to as cultivated spillover in neofunctionalist terminology). Nonetheless, both theories recognize the pivotal role of member state governments at the polity level. Furthermore, neofunctionalism and institutionalism cannot disregard the role of governments at the level of politics, at least when examining significant reforms in specific EU policies. For example, W. Sandholtz and A. Stone Sweet [Sandholtz, Stone Sweet, 1998: 4], characterizing the development of sectoral policy, contend the following: "Member-state government often possess (but not always) the means to facilitate or to obstruct rule-making, and they use these powers frequently". We can see numerous examples, inter alia the reform of EU asylum policy [Lavenex, 2018] and the reform of EU Emission Trading System [Kaveshnikov, 2021].

However, there is no guarantee that national politicians will be willing to respond to the public demand, will formulate the appropriate integration proposal and will later successfully implement it. Politicians make such decisions by estimating potential benefits and costs [Lindberg, Scheingold, 1970: 114; Moravcsik, 1993: 509; Sandholtz, Stone Sweet, 1998: 40]. Business and public actors may face the costs of navigating disparate national rules. However, for politicians, power and political autonomy are the primary resources at stake. In the absence of exogenous shocks, national politicians intend to develop the EU incrementally, improving policies within the current decentralized institutional framework, with member states ruling by quasi-consensus, pursuing diverse national interests, bargaining hard amongst themselves and trying to retain the existing level of control over EU institutions and integration process.

To meet the demand for integration and deliver the supply (political decisions), it's crucial for policymakers to ensure that such decisions not only result in the creation of new regulatory regimes that are viewed favourably by a significant portion of society but also guarantee compensation for any loss of autonomy. Typically, politicians expect this compensation when the social benefits of integration are substantial enough to garner politicians additional support because of the implementation of integration projects [Mattli, 1999; Rhinard, 2019].

Crises can present a window of opportunity for a different type of deepening integration. Major crises often challenge the effectiveness of politicians, compelling them to seek unconventional solutions. As J. Monnet wrote in his memoirs, "Europe will be forged in crisis, and will be the sum of the solutions adopted for those crises" [Monnet, 1978: 417]. Numerous interrelated crises that the EU has faced since the early 2010s led to a surge in studies on the role of crises for integration dynamic [Ferrara, Kriesi, 2022; Potemkina, 2023; Rhinard, 2019]. The concept of "new intergovernmentalism" was developed to explain the phenomena of deepening integration without further communitarisation and an increase of supranational elements [Beach, Smeets, 2020; Bickerton et al., 2014; Fabbrini, Puetter, 2016].

One can often see a profound linkage between projects aimed at deepening integration in response to societal demand and integration development caused by

crises[1]. Broadly speaking, major projects are designed to counteract negative tendencies that could potentially lead to crises in future. For example, the creation of the single market and the EMU were targeted, among other things, at preventing a crisis stemming from the declining competitiveness of European economies compared to other global economic powers. Twenty years of EU energy and climate policy, culminating in the Green Deal, have been to a certain extent driven by the apprehension of an approaching ecological crisis and the potential crisis of energy import dependency. Integration progresses differently during times of crisis compared to when it is driven by the aspiration to build a new common project.

Both grand theories are based on the demand and supply logic to explain integration dynamic. The same logic underlines the theories of the third and the fourth generations that could be clustered under the umbrellas of a rational choice institutionalism and a constructivist and/or discursive institutionalism [Schmidt, 2024][2].

Therefore, the central question addressed in this paper is as follows: What characteristics should a new integration project have to trigger the systemic transformation of regional integration organizations like the EU in terms of deepening the integration (powers of common institutions, degree of coordination at both the polity and policy levels, and relations between common institutions and member states)?

The specifics of transformative projects

Undoubtedly, only realisation of major projects can lead to systemic changes. The success of European integration in the 1950s-60s and 1980s-90s was not just a result of establishing the customs union, EMU, and Schengen, which later became key element of the Area of Freedom, Security and Justice, etc. On the one hand, such projects are the most visible markers of progress; on the other hand, they act as triggers that stimulate numerous other changes, collectively contributing to deeper integration. J. Delors understood the need for such a trigger. Before being appointed president of the European Commission, he spent several months at the end of 1984 "searching for *a Great Idea* that would allow the EEC to find a second wind [italics in original]" [Grant, 2002: 105]. Typically, during the implementation of such a large project, a significant number of sectoral policies are reformatted, powers are redistributed between common institutions and member states, integration spillover into new areas took place, and new bodies and networks to govern emerging regulatory regimes are established.

Not every major project has the chance to be implemented in a specific historical context and is able to launch a new integration dynamic. Generally speaking, several conditions must be met: a steady demand for solving a large-scale task through deepen-

[1] For conceptual reflection on the distinction and linkage between positive and negative goals see R.L. Ackoff [Ackoff,1978], about positive and negative goals of integration see O. Butorina [Butorina, 2021].

[2] The only noticeable exemption if a historical institutionalist perspective, in which the institutional logics of path-dependency (or spillover) and incrementalism are the major drivers of integration.

ing integration, the willingness of politicians to formulate an integration proposal, a high probability of successful implementation, and the project's ability to launch a spillover effect impacting a significant part of the organization's functionality. We call such projects transformative, because they have a systemic impact on the development of the EU. Drawing from historical experience, we can identify a set of basic characteristics that a transformative project should possess.

First and foremost, such a project should not be sectoral but systemic in nature, impacting a wide range of economic and societal relations. Only in this way can its implementation generate a spillover effect. The EU customs union, and especially the single market, influenced a significant part of economic activity in the member states. During the development of Schengen, the need for intensive cooperation among national law enforcement bodies became evident. The EU's eastern enlargement, on the one hand, led to comprehensive economic and political transformations in candidate countries during their preparation for accession. On the other hand, enlargement was accompanied by a fundamental reform of EU institutions, an evolution of governance methods, and the reform of several EU sectoral policies. Additionally, over the long term, the increased cultural, political, and economic diversity in the enlarged EU has made the implementation of effective policies more challenging. This diversity has driven the EU to develop flexible integration mechanisms and has contributed to a core-periphery dynamic within the Union.

A transformative project should combine practical needs with long-term political goals. Pragmatic considerations determine the choice of specific tasks and methods for addressing them, while long-term goals ensure the mobilization of elites and society. For example, the establishment of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC)[1] and the European Economic Community (EEC) in the 1950s effectively served as a peace treaty between France and Germany. The common market was seen in 1950-60s as another step towards "an ever closer union among the peoples of Europe"[2]. The conventional wisdom reflected in many "academic studies, from 1970 to 1990, was that monetary union was not achievable without political union" [Wallace, 2005: 503]. This relationship is still felt today, as emphasized by the Report of the group of wise men of 2015: "The euro is more than just a currency. It is a *political* and economic project… This *common destiny*… [italics mine – N.K.]" [Juncker et al., 2015: 4–5]. The 2004 EU enlargement was an attempt to achieve a goal that extended beyond politics and economics: the civilizational reunification of Europe, which had been divided during the era of the Iron Curtain.

A transformative project requires broad and enduring support from both elites and society. Public support for integration, known as the "permissive consensus" [Hooghe, Marks, 2009], prevailed from the early 1950s to the late 1990s, giving politicians the freedom to act. The history of the creation of the single market provides another good example of the importance of elite consensus. After becoming the President of the Eu-

[1] Albeit we cannot treat the establishment of the ECSC as a transformative project because this was a creation of the system (the integration organization).

[2] Treaty establishing the European Economic Community, 1957, point 1 of the Preamble.

ropean Commission and aiming to introduce a single currency, Jacques Delors made visits to the capitals of EU countries and found that his enthusiasm for the idea was not widely supported. However, he recognized a strong demand for a functional single market among political and economic elites and made it the flagship project of his first term [Grant, 2002: 105–106].

The ongoing public discourse on all aspects of EU activities embodies J. Habermas' concept of deliberative democracy [Habermas, 1984; Habermas, 1987]. Given the complexity and multilevel nature of the EU's political system, this discourse is essential for democratic legitimacy [Holzhacker, 2007; Eriksen, Fossum, 2000]. For example, among various institutionalized practices, the European Commission routinely conducts open public consultations with stakeholders before drafting significant proposals.

The success of a transformative project hinges on extensive groundwork. The establishment of the EMU was based on twenty years of experience in monetary cooperation. Efforts to complete the single market in the late 1980s took into account regulatory practices developed over previous decades. Practical steps towards implementing Schengen (removal of control at internal borders in 1995), were made feasible by the lessons learned from eliminating border controls in the Nordic Passport Union in the 1950s and in the Benelux in 1960. Additionally, a significant role was played by decades of adapting to the freedom of movement of workers in the EEC. This groundwork not only helps to detail tasks and necessary measures but also fosters the socialization of elites and society, forming supportive groups.

A transformative project must be long-term, not just because its major goals cannot be achieved quickly. The process of steering a long-term political course involves the meticulous coordination of many details, the adaptation of economic agents and society to new rules, and the constant presence of the topic in public discourse. This leads to the socialization of political actors, stakeholders, and the broader society. These processes – the socialization of elites, the reorganization of national political and bureaucratic structures, and identity shifts – are key aspects of the Europeanization of the member states [Ladrech, 2010].

A transformative project should bring practical benefits and positively impact the daily lives of society at large. For example, the single market has not only revolutionized the regulatory environment for producers of goods and services but also transformed the consumer habits of citizens, and enhanced the visibility of the European Union among the public. Similarly, the Schengen significantly boosted tourism, facilitated business contacts, and led to profound cultural changes. The EMU simplified business activities from practical point of view. Simultaneously it had a great symbolic impact: every time citizens handle euro banknotes, they are reminded of the European Union's existence, fostering a European component of their identity.

A transformative project must be inserted in a global context, because the development of the EU does not take place in a vacuum. External factors act as incentives or set the limits of what is possible. For example, the very idea of integration is inextricably linked to the awareness of the small size of European countries. Jean Monnet, in his speech at the meeting of the ECSC High Authority on 9 November 1954, said: "Our countries have become too small for today's world… faced with America and Russia of

today and China and India of tomorrow" [Monnet, 1978: 320]. Europeans understand this today as well. The EU Global Strategy of 2016 acknowledges that the EU is a "Union of medium to small sized countries," and the only way to protect member states' interests on the international stage is through collective action[1]. The need to strengthen the position of Western European businesses in the global market against American and Japanese competitors stimulated the creation of a single market and revitalized the integration project in the mid-1980s [Sandholtz, Zysman, 1989]. The establishment of the CFSP became possible only after the collapse of the bipolar system and was aimed at increasing the global actorness of the EU. The EU's policy of eastward enlargement sought to ensure the transformation of major part of Eastern European countries and to minimize the risks of potential destabilization in the region. Among other goals, the EMU was conceived to enhance the EU's position as a global financial and economic power [Butorina, 2003: 36–48].

Conclusions

This paper develops the concept of a transformative project – an integration initiative with specific characteristics that can trigger systemic transformation of integration organization and stimulate deeper integration. A transformative project should transcend sectoral policies, encompassing broad economic or societal areas to generate a spillover effect. It should combine practical orientation with long-term political goals and have a broad support from stakeholders and society. A transformative project should be long-term, impact the daily lives of a wide range of actors, and provide them tangible benefits to promote a socialization effect. To be successful, a project should be based on solid preliminary groundwork (experience with regulation at the supranational level) and be contextualized within a global framework.

A brief look at today's EU political agenda reveals a major policy initiative with the potential to serve as a transformative project: the Green Deal[2]. Initiation of the Green Deal in 2019 was based on broad political and public consensus and reflected a major trend of global climate policy.

Recent shifts in political sentiment, such as the declining enthusiasm for the green agenda and the rise of right and far-right political parties, may reduce the EU's ability to develop new policy measures. The fundamental uncertainty stems from the potential negative impacts of the green transformation on economic growth and competitiveness. Nevertheless, two decades of energy and climate policy implementation have equipped the EU with significant experience in balancing the green agenda with competitiveness. The primary factor that could complicate the current green transformation policy is the strong commitment of many EU member states to prioritize defence capabilities and the development of the defence industry.

[1] European Union (2016). Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe. A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy. June 2016 p. 15.

[2] For empirical research on the Green Deal as a potential transformative project see N. Kaveshnikov [Kaveshnikov, 2024].

However, one should not underestimate the progress made since 2019. The major innovation of the Green Deal is that it extends far beyond energy and climate policy. It aims to profoundly transform the European economic model by integrating sustainable development goals into all aspects of economic regulation, including macroeconomic coordination within the European Semester [Wolf et al., 2021]. As A. Goldthau and R. Youngs conclude, "[t]he policy commitments… denoted a more structural shift: energy and climate policies are becoming more pivotal *connective shapers* that cut across other areas of European integration… [the Green Deal] became a first-order issue of domestic politics and also a core pillar of EU security and geopolitical strategy [italics in original]" [Goldthau, Youngs 2023: 121]. Since 2019, a significant body of EU legislation has been adopted. These reforms have dramatically increased the complexity of policy, effectively expanded the EU's competencies (at least *de facto* if not *de jure*), enhanced the regulatory powers of the European Commission, and imposed new obligations on member states. The previous trend of gradually shifting from soft to hard governance has intensified to ensure consistency across all levels of governance and long-term predictability of the policy course. Summing up all aforesaid, the legislation adopted, sound regulatory experience, and improved governance system provide a solid foundation for a path dependency scenario and successful implementation of the Green Deal.

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