

The Conference on the Future of Europe: Tackling Differentiated Integration

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The European Union is struggling to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic, which has swept through European peoples and economies, causing more than 500,000 deaths (and counting) and an impact on Eurozone GDP of –6.4 per cent in 2020.¹ This is the third big crisis – and possibly the most dramatic one – to impact the EU in the last 12 years, following the economic and financial crisis in 2008–2010 and the extraordinary influx of migrants arriving on European shores in 2015–2016. All these crises produced asymmetrical consequences on the member countries and citizens of the European Union. The already marked differences among member states have been exacerbated, making a unified response by the EU institutions difficult in the process and suboptimal in the outcome. And in fact, especially during the first wave of the pandemic in Europe, the actions and statements of national leaders revealed a deep rift within the EU and the Eurozone, leading to nationalistic moves in border control and export of medical supplies. Citizens have been exposed to the negative consequences of a Union with limited powers in sectors such as health and crisis management, and important decisions such as the approval of Next Generation EU and the new budget for 2021–2027 have risked failure due to the opposition of some member states.

This picture gives us an uncertain outlook for the future of the Union and raises some fundamental questions about the integration process, which will have to be answered to ensure the survival of the European project. In particular, to what extent is it possible to accommodate the growing differentiation within the Union while safeguarding the resilience of its institutions and societies? What are the prospects for integration in the light of recent crises and what reforms are needed to ensure an effective response to new crises? What are the preferences of European citizens and their expectations towards the EU?

Against this background, the Conference on the Future of Europe,² which is planned to finally take off on 9 May after one year of stalemate, represents an important



opportunity to reflect on the integration process in the aftermath of a devastating pandemic and in the midst of the “deepest recession in [the EU’s] history”.³ European citizens will be called to debate and provide EU institutions with a series of indications on the way forward. The Council of the EU has clarified that this exercise is not intended to be positioned within the framework of Article 48 TEU, thus excluding a reform of the Treaties.⁴ Member states have also stressed the need to tackle important policies such as climate transition, migration, digital inclusion and international relations. The European Parliament, on its side, has pointed to the need to examine topics such as strengthening the lead candidate (Spitzenkandidaten) process or creating transnational lists.⁵ EU institutions and political leaders should be ready to face uncomfortable truths regarding citizens’ preferences on the overall direction of the EU project, and to take them into consideration in their decisions.

These preferences could lean towards a federal Union, to be achieved through consolidation of the community method, reinforcement of supranational institutions and the attribution of enhanced competences to the EU. But citizens could also claim for a reinforcement of national sovereignty in sectors that have not been managed effectively through coordination at the EU level, from migration to vaccines. Such an outcome would be favoured by Eurosceptic and nationalistic forces that undeniably play a significant role in European politics and fuel centrifugal trends already at stake in the EU, for example by negotiating further opt-outs from EU legislation, or even considering abandoning the Eurozone and the Union as such. Between these two extreme scenarios, based either on federal ambitions or on the menace of disintegration, the possible way forward could be a differentiated Union, in which willing and able member states can go further in the integration process in individual policy sectors.

While this option would allow further integration and at the same time accommodate increasing differentiation in the EU, it also bears risks connected to its complexity. In fact, it is difficult to present and explain the pros and cons of differentiated integration to European citizens so they can fully assess it in their discussions. On one side, the academic debate on differentiated integration is characterised by the proliferation of different concepts ranging from *concentric circles* to *core groups* to *multi-speed Europe* to *Europe à la carte*, which has made it less understandable for the general public. At the political level, differentiated integration has been often presented as a path towards the creation of first- and second-class member states or, more recently, as a way to accommodate British and other national claims for exceptionalism. A more pragmatic approach suggests analysing differentiation within specific policy fields, ranging from economic governance to migration to security, and assessing its limits and potentials in terms of institutional arrangements and policy practice. This approach, which is embedded in the EU IDEA project, allows academics to test their research hypothesis and derive general assumptions from concrete realities. It also gives policy-makers the opportunity to make more informed policy choices. In the context of a citizen consultation such as the Conference on the Future of Europe, this would allow everyone to think about differentiation as a possible way forward to make Europe more effective in addressing problems that affect our daily lives.

European citizens should also be reassured that the increased complexity connected to a differentiated Union does not hamper their participation in the democratic process and allows them to hold decision-makers accountable. In fact, in order to be sustainable, differentiated integration must not only produce effective governance, it must also be considered legitimate in the eyes of the affected societies.⁶ Therefore, in

a scenario of differentiated integration adequate parliamentary representation, at the national and the European level, must be matched with additional mechanisms that can ensure accountability through legal, administrative and social channels. Above all, what is needed is a constant and real involvement of European citizens through information, consultations and political dialogue as a prerequisite for decisions taken at the EU level.⁷ The democratic participation promoted by the Conference can lay the foundations for a new Europe of the future, but it needs to be turned in a real reflection on the direction of the integration process, which can ultimately lead to a reform of the EU's policies and institutions, to be carefully prepared and duly implemented.

References

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⁶ Thu Nguyen (2020), "Differentiated Integration and Accountability in the European Union – An Analytical Framework", in EU IDEA Research Papers (November), <https://euidea.eu/2020/11/24/differentiated-integration-and-accountability-in-the-european-union-an-analytical-framework/>

⁷ Pirozzi, Nicoletta, Pier Domenico Tortola and Lorenzo Vai (2017), Differentiated Integration: A Way Forward to Europe, Rome, Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), January, https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/eu60_8.pdf

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