

## A New Idea of Europe: The Challenge of Flexibility

by Nicoletta Pirozzi and Matteo Bonomi

With the passing of time the enactment of the federalist dream nurtured by the European Community's founding fathers seems to have become more and more distant. It is true that European citizens still support the EU – 62 per cent believe that membership in the Union is a good thing and 68 per cent believe that their country benefits from it<sup>1</sup> – and a majority of EU citizens keep calling for more Europe in a wide array of policy sectors, from the fight against terrorism, to unemployment schemes and the protection of the environment.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Philipp Schulmeister (ed.), "Parlemeter 2018 – Taking Up the Challenge. From (Silent) Support to Actual Vote", in *European Parliament Eurobarometer Surveys*, No. 90.1 (October 2018), p. 7, <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/at-your-service/en/be-heard/eurobarometer/parlemeter-2018-taking-up-the-challenge>.

<sup>2</sup> Philipp Schulmeister (ed.), "Delivering on Europe. Citizens' Views on Current and Future EU Action", in *European Parliament Eurobarometer Surveys*, No. 89.2 (May 2018), p. 10, <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/at-your-service/en/be-heard/eurobarometer/delivering-on-europe-citizens-views-on-current-and-future-eu-action>.

Despite this general support, popular expectations regarding the future of the Union are less straightforward. Here, citizen demands paint more of a heterogeneous picture, with 50 per cent of EU citizens believing that things in the Union are going in the wrong direction, whereas there is no convergence of preferences regarding the right direction the EU should take.<sup>3</sup>

This ambivalence in views and perceptions will probably be reflected in the upcoming European elections, which are expected to be more competitive than usual. The traditionally pro-European parties will most likely lose some seats in the European Parliament, with the exception of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (Alde), which will probably be strengthened by members of La République En Marche of French President Emmanuel Macron.

<sup>3</sup> Philipp Schulmeister (ed.), "Parlemeter 2018 – Taking Up the Challenge", cit., p. 8.

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Eurosceptic parties, both right- and left-wing, seem destined to grow in consensus, reconfirming a consolidated trend that emerged from recent national elections – from the French presidential elections of April 2017, the Italian elections of March 2018 and the Swedish vote of September 2018. These political forces, however, are divided on a whole number of issues – how to manage the migration phenomenon,<sup>4</sup> what the EU's foreign policy priorities should be and how to reform the economic governance of the Eurozone, for instance – and their menacing tones towards the EU have decreased considerably as of late.<sup>5</sup> It is therefore likely that, whatever the result of the May polls, the vote will not directly endanger the survival of the Union.

This does not mean that the European project will face smooth sailing in the months and years ahead. The main risk will be indirect and internal, revolving around increased political fragmentation within the Union. The new composition of the European Parliament, which will mark the beginning of the next EU institutional cycle, with the appointment of a novel Commission and the new EU multiannual budget, will be characterised by unprecedented political divisions that risk to seriously weaken the EU's ability to act.

<sup>4</sup> AffarInternazionali, "MOvER Migration in Europe", in *Speciali AI*, <https://www.affarinternazionali.it/?p=50310>.

<sup>5</sup> Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), *A New Political Phase for Europe*, London, EIU, December 2018, p. 5, [https://www.eiu.com/public/topical\\_report.aspx?campaignid=EuropeNewPhase2018](https://www.eiu.com/public/topical_report.aspx?campaignid=EuropeNewPhase2018).

Such developments will mix with the already growing divergences among European governments, the spread of nationalisms, a failure to respect established principles such as solidarity and the rule of law and the United Kingdom's dramatic decision to abandon the Union. All these events have already exacerbated frictions and old disagreements among EU member states, undermining the two crucial assumptions of indivisibility and irreversibility of the European integration process.<sup>6</sup>

It is therefore necessary that decision-makers and experts come to terms with this new reality and take the appropriate steps. This does not mean reconsidering their support and commitment to the goal of an ever-closer Union and a process of progressive and inclusive integration. Rather, it suggests the need to adopt a broader and less dogmatic vision of the EU, aimed at developing a model based on flexible integration and cooperation in various policy areas.

A certain degree of differentiation has been part of the European integration process since its inception. The Eurozone and the Schengen area have further consolidated this trend through long-term projects of differentiated integration among European states. Recently, a Permanent Structured Cooperation has been launched by the EU in the defence sector, allowing groups of able and willing member states to join forces through new and

<sup>6</sup> Maria Demertzis et al., "One Size Does Not Fit All: European Integration by Differentiation", in *Bruegel Policy Briefs*, No. 3 (September 2018), p. 2, <http://bruegel.org/?p=27473>.

flexible agreements.<sup>7</sup>

Faced with new and deepening internal challenges and an increasingly unstable international context, the EU's concept of flexibility in 2019 must also assume a different and more strategic meaning. It is necessary to abandon high-sounding and utopian projects and introduce the possibility of aggregating the preferences of some member states around issues that are fundamental importance for European citizens, from immigration to security and the management of the economy, with the aim of finding policy solutions that benefit everyone. This option seems to be the only antidote to the threat of fragmentation and even disintegration.

Differentiation could offer a solution for many key sectors within the Union, where uniformity is not desirable or achievable, as well as for its external action, offering multiple models of cooperation between the EU and candidate, neighbouring or partner countries. Differentiation is not only necessary but also desirable in order to address current challenges and make the Union more resilient and responsive to its citizens.

Obviously this raises important questions that have to do with the compatibility of flexible integration and the preservation of the political and legal unity of the Union. It is therefore necessary to find institutional solutions that make differentiated integration sustainable in terms of governance,

<sup>7</sup> Alessandro Marrone, Nicoletta Pirozzi and Paola Sartori, *PESCO: An Ace in the Hand for European Defence*, Rome, IAI, March 2017, <https://www.iai.it/en/node/7469>.

but also legitimate from the democratic point of view.<sup>8</sup>

The road to the realisation of this new European architecture can begin within the framework of existing Treaties (for example through enhanced cooperation), but in the medium term will also require a reform of these Treaties, as was done with the Monetary Union project for instance.<sup>9</sup>

The achievement of these projects ultimately depends on the action and political will of member states, which will move forward in conformity with their identities, calibrating their interests and evaluating incentives. However, we also need a thoughtful preliminary reflection aimed at better defining possible options on the table, which must necessarily involve institutional actors and experts in different policy sectors, but also take into account citizen preferences, with particular attention to young people, the private sector and diverse civil society organisations.

Against this backdrop, our institute, the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), will offer its active contribution to this reflection and debate on the future of the Union. Since January 2019, IAI is leading a consortium of 15 EU and non-EU partners in an ambitious multi-year project – EU IDEA – funded by

<sup>8</sup> Nicoletta Pirozzi and Domenico Tortola, "Negotiating the European Union's Dilemmas: Proposals on Governing Europe", in *IAI Working Papers*, No. 16|24 (September 2016), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/6744>.

<sup>9</sup> Nicoletta Pirozzi, Pier Domenico Tortola and Lorenzo Vai, *Differentiated Integration: A Way Forward for Europe*, Rome, IAI, March 2017, <https://www.iai.it/en/node/7440>.

the European Union's Horizon 2020 programme and addressing various perspectives and trajectories of differentiated integration.<sup>10</sup>

The aim is to offer a thorough analysis of the political, institutional, legal and social context of the EU, consolidate existing networks and best practices at the European level, develop scenarios and propose ideas that lead to positive changes in the process of integration.

IAI and its partners will therefore accompany the Union in this year of transition and beyond, in the belief that the best recipe for not betraying the spirit of its founding fathers is not to remain anchored to models of the past, but to imagine new models that can respond to the needs of the present and ensure the relevance of the EU in the world of tomorrow.

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<sup>10</sup> See IAI website: *EU Integration and Differentiation for Effectiveness and Accountability - EU IDEA*, <https://www.iai.it/en/node/9764>.

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