

The Conference on the Future of Europe: Tackling Differentiated Integration

by Nicoletta Pirozzi



The European Union is struggling to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic, which has swept through European societies and economies, causing more than 500,000 deaths (and counting) and a GDP downturn of –6.4 per cent in 2020.¹

This is the third big crisis – and possibly the most dramatic – to impact the EU over 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. The already marked differences among member states have been exacerbated, making a unified response by EU institutions difficult in the process and suboptimal in the outcome.

Indeed, 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 the export of medical supplies. Citizens were therefore exposed to the negative consequences of a Union with limited powers in sectors such as health and crisis management. Meanwhile, important decisions such as the

¹ Eurostat, “GDP Down by 0.7% in the Euro Area and by 0.5% in the EU”, in *Eurostat Newsreleases*, No. 17/2021 (2 February 2021), <https://europa.eu/lkp83Uq>.

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approval of the Next Generation EU package and the new budget for 2021–2027 risked ending in failure due to the opposition of some member states.

This picture provides 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 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 economic recession in [the EU’s] history”.³

² European Commission, *Conference on the Future of Europe: Engaging with Citizens to Build a More Resilient Europe*, 10 March 2021, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_21_1065.

³ European Commission, *Remarks by Commissioner Gentiloni at the Press Conference on the Spring 2020 Economic Forecast*, Brussels, 6 May 2020, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_20_822.

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 of the Treaty on the European Union, thus excluding a reform of the Treaties.⁴ Member states have also stressed the need to tackle important policies such as the climate transition, migration, digital inclusion and international relations.

Meanwhile, the European Parliament, has pointed to the need to examine topics such as a strengthening of the lead candidate process (*Spitzenkandidaten*) or creating transnational lists.⁵ In this context, EU institutions and political leaders should be ready to face uncomfortable truths regarding citizen 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. Yet, citizens could also call for a reinforcement of national sovereignty in sectors that have not been managed effectively at the EU

⁴ Council of the European Union, *Conference on the Future of Europe - Revised Council Position*, 3 February 2021, https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/48588/st_5911_2021_init_en.pdf.

⁵ European Parliament, *Resolution of 15 January 2020 on the European Parliament’s Position on the Conference on the Future of Europe*, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2020-0010_EN.html.

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 leaving the door open for those that may want to join later.

While this option would allow further integration and at the same time accommodate increasing differentiation in the EU, it also bears certain risks connected to its complexity. In fact, it is difficult to present and explain the pros and cons of differentiated integration to European citizens.

On the 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 added confusion among the general public. At the political level, differentiated integration has often been 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 would be that of 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, run by the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) and a consortium of 15 research centres within and outside the EU,⁶ 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.

Such an approach would also simplify ongoing debates on the benefits and risks of differentiated integration, bringing it closer to citizens themselves who would be aided in understanding the sectorial trade-offs implied by such a process. In the context of citizen consultations such as the Conference on the Future of Europe, this would allow for greater engagement in debates about differentiation, clarifying how such mechanisms can prove effective in addressing concrete problems that affect our daily lives.

Also important will be to reassure European citizens that no matter the complexity connected to differentiation, such mechanisms will not hamper their participation in the democratic process, allowing them to hold decision-makers accountable.

⁶ See the official website: <https://euidea.eu>.

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 affected societies.⁷

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.⁸

The democratic participation promoted by the Conference can lay the foundations for a new Europe of the future. To be truly effective, however, this event needs to be turned into a meaningful reflection on the direction, purpose and ambition of the EU's integration process. Such process may ultimately lead to a reform of the EU's policies and institutions, which should rest on an active and constant engagement with European societies and citizens.

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⁷ Thu Nguyen, "Differentiated Integration and Accountability in the European Union – An Analytical Framework", in *EU IDEA Research Papers*, No. 7 (November 2020), <https://euidea.eu/?p=1298>.

⁸ Nicoletta Pirozzi, Pier Domenico Tortola and Lorenzo Vai, *Differentiated Integration: A Way Forward for Europe*, Rome, IAI, 16 March 2017, <https://www.iai.it/en/node/7440>.

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