
Europe's future looks differentiated. How to keep it united?

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Russia's ongoing invasion of Ukraine as the single-most important geopolitical event in Europe since the Cold War came to an end acts as a strong incentive for unity among European Union (EU) Member States (MS). Nevertheless, unity with respect to the appropriate actions against the aggressor is being continuously tested in view of their impact. As the invasion's consequences slowly affect an ever bigger share of political and socio-economic life in Europe and beyond, differences in the MS' preferences regarding their geostrategic role, the concrete shape of policies, and the role and powers of the EU and the MS are (re)surfacing. Simultaneously, the Ukrainian, Moldovan and Georgian applications for membership have reminded the EU of the incomplete enlargement in the Balkans and (re)awakened the widening vs deepening debate in a period when unity seems to be Europe's most important asset. Differentiated integration as currently championed by the proposal for a European Political Community is the most likely answer to the presently widening and deepening puzzle, provided that it manages to keep Europe united. This contribution puts forward three priorities to this end.

From widening and deepening to differentiated integration

Throughout the post Second World War history of European integration, the processes of widening and deepening have been inexorably linked. Shifts in the global constellation of power, tectonic changes in (Western) Europe's neighbourhood, (geo)politics in countries seeking to join the European Union (or its predecessors), and domestic politics in the EU's MS have at times either led to geographic expansion – widening – of the EU or supported its deepening by granting further competences to the Union and making its institutions more autonomous. When the 'Big Bang enlargement' was announced, the need to put the EU's house in order before accepting new members cemented the relations between widening and deepening. While most countries eventually joined in 2004, the EU spent almost a decade negotiating its own reforms before the Treaty of Lisbon entered into force in December 2009.

The European Council meeting on 23–24 June 2022 granted candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova. Both candidates' accession to the EU must take "into consideration the EU's

capacity to absorb new members”.¹ Conscious of citizens' expectations following over a decade of 'permacrisis' and faced with a looming energy crisis and inflation, the European Council also indicated at this meeting that the MS prefer to avoid yet another round(s) of the EU's introspective reform process. The deepening aspect of the equation was dealt with near the end of the meeting's Conclusions in three modest paragraphs about a follow up to the Conference on the Future of Europe. Conscious of the rift between them concerning the pace, depth, modality of the follow up and its results, EU leaders showed a determination to preserve the unity among them.

In contrast, the European Council's Conclusions open with paragraphs on “Wider Europe” discussing the proposal for a European Political Community put forward by French President Emmanuel Macron. In essence, the proposal addresses the formalisation of the EU's political relations with its (non-EU) European partners. The European Council thereby opened the way to broaden the widening and deepening debate by de facto embracing externally differentiated integration.

Internally and externally differentiated integration

Whether all EU states must be integrated in the same way or whether differentiation in terms of participation in different initiatives is possible or even desirable is not a new discussion. 'Variable geometry', 'multispeed Europe', 'core Europe' are only a few of the notions that seek to capture possible ways of differentiation among the MS in pursuit of the need for the EU's greater competence, efficiency and legitimacy. Differences among the MS over the direction of the Union's *finalité* exposed by their positioning concerning the conclusion of the Conference on the Future of Europe, and recent difficulties with adopting decisions that require unanimity (notably in foreign policy and taxation), gave rise to calls (e.g. by Enrico Letta and Mario Draghi during the spring of 2022) for further integration in the direction of a federation and for a new level of internally differentiated integration.²

The proposal for a European Political Community, however, differs from that in two aspects: instead of promoting cooperation based on economic integration, it aims to forge “a platform for political coordination /.../ to foster political dialogue and cooperation to address issues of common interest so as to strengthen the security, stability and prosperity of the European continent”³ with countries outside the EU. The proposal thus starts off where the hitherto European integration traditionally faces the biggest challenge to its unity: in its relations vis-à-vis the rest of the world. How can it work this time?

It is the process

The EU is not short of unwieldy processes. In stark opposition to this truism “the French pre-summit paper [on European Political Community; inserted by S.L.] mentions a light format

¹ European Council Meeting (23 and 24 June 2022) – Conclusions, Brussels, 24 June 2022, EUCO 24/22.

² E.g. Sophie Porschlegel and Ilke Toygur in 'After Russia's Invasion of Ukraine: Unity is good, but ambition is better', published on 1 June 2022 by EPC and Connecting Europe Programme.

³ European Council Meeting (23 and 24 June 2022) – Conclusions, Brussels, 24 June 2022, EUCO 24/22.

with one or two meetings a year at the Leaders level and no permanent administrative structure".⁴ While the EU's lengthy and cumbersome policy-making processes give rise to much criticism, whether for a lack of transparency, lowest-common-denominator results or inefficiency in general, they also have a side effect: ever deeper understanding of the stakes involved for all participating. In recent years, the processes leading to the Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy, a Strategic Compass for Security and Defence, and the Conference on the Future of Europe have provided ample opportunity for governments, EU institutions and citizens to express their views and to listen to each other. Any collaboration with non-EU European countries should bank on these methods, mechanisms, and the results of these consultations. Governments, law-makers and citizens should engage in comprehensive and continuous processes where they listen to each other and explain their particular interests. Instead of creating new structures, existing EU structures could serve as both secretariats and model formations to be 'widened' with the adequate participation of non-EU partners.

Show me the results

Even the best process must yield results. The EU has shown in the last few years, particularly when managing crises, that it can take decisions. Decisions regarding the management of the COVID-19-related health crisis, the monumental measures to overcome its economic consequences and the series of sanctions packages against Russia attest to this. The current security, energy and looming inflation crises in Europe give an opportunity for quick gains by pooling the resources and the negotiating weight and providing solidarity also to non-EU partners. At the same time, the 'normal' gains of EU integration should also be promptly shared. Agreements on access to the labour market and education, connectivity, including energy, cooperation in the areas of security, freedom and justice can all lead to tangible results with respect to safety, welfare and the feeling of a shared identity among European citizens. The more difficult technical processes of convergence on the single market rules and the political processes of meeting the standards of the rule of law and human rights protection could be adjusted to suit the situation and progress of each partner.

The Europe effect: identity and foreign policy

Anu Bradford coined the term 'Brussels effect' to describe an unintended global consequence of Brussels' regulatory power. The gist of the argument is that the size of the (EU) market makes it desirable to compete on it, thereby leading to compliance with its strict standards, which are themselves the result of its considerable regulatory capacity and internal incentives.⁵ A test case of the Brussels effect is the global acceptance of the EU's privacy rules as set up by the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). The 'Europe effect', on the other hand, will require the strategic engagement of European countries to maintain, refine, increase and export Europe's distinct identity in global affairs based on its interest, at least as much as on its values. The current security crisis and geopolitical uncertainties, with

⁴ Pierre Vimont in "EUCO Debrief June 2022: Enlargement, Treaty Reform, Energy and More," published on 8 July 2022 by TEPSA.

⁵ Anu Bradford (2020) *The Brussels Effect: How the European Union Rules the World*. OUP.

the more intense conflict between the big powers and with Europe often seemingly counting for less than it desires, suggests that a new whole-of-Europe approach with the United Kingdom, Norway, Ukraine and the Balkans must be forged. To allow the EU to look after its interests, this approach must nourish a distinctive European identity, embracing the whole continent to draw on the strengths of all partners in defending the EU globally. With the EU at its core, but not EU-centric, the Europe effect might even make Turkey and Russia see the appeal. Some day.

The views expressed in this blog are those of the authors and not necessarily those of EIPA.