



Integrating Diversity in the European Union

“Future of the EU: is differentiated integration a good answer to Euroscepticism?”

Panel organised in the framework of the InDivEU project at the TEPSA Croatian Pre-Presidency Conference, Zagreb, 29 November 2019

In the framework of the project InDivEU, on 29 November 2019 TEPSA organised a panel on “The Future of Europe” at its traditional Pre-Presidency Conference, held in Zagreb on the occasion of the incoming Croatian Presidency of the Council of the EU.



Moderated by Paul Schmidt (Secretary General of the Austrian Society for European Politics – ÖGfE, Vienna), the panel involved outstanding academics on differentiated integration: Frank Schimmelfennig (Member of the TEPSA Board, Professor and Head of European Politics Group, Swiss Federal Institute of Technology – ETH, Zürich); Funda Tekin (Member of the TEPSA Board, Director of the Institut für Europäische Politik – IEP, Berlin); Juha Jokela (Member of the TEPSA Board, Programme Director, Finnish Institute of International Affairs – FIIA, Helsinki); and John Stevens (Chairman of the Advisory Council of the Federal Trust, London).

The Pre-Presidency Conferences (PPCs) are TEPSA’s flagship activity. TEPSA and its Croatian member, the Institute for Development and International Relations (IRMO), organised the “Zagreb EU Pre-Presidency Conference – Europe at a Crossroads” on 28-29 November 2019. Croatia will assume the Presidency of the EU Council on 1 January 2020. This will be the first Presidency since the country joined the European Union (EU) in 2013. It will also be the first Presidency working from its start with the new EU institutions, after the 2019 EU Parliament elections. The Croatian Presidency will have to deal with important topics on the EU’s agenda such as negotiations over the Multi-Annual Financial Framework and the consequences of Brexit.

In its introduction to the panel, Paul Schmidt (ÖGfE) proposed looking at differentiation from different angles: what it means for the democratic legitimacy of the EU, how it influences the EU narrative, and how it can be applied to the security and defence area. He highlighted that Differentiated Integration (DI) is not a new reality as it is already widely applied in many policy areas (such as Justice and Home Affairs, security and defence, the Schengen Area, and social affairs). Examples can be seen of areas where differentiation is working, as well as areas where it is not. Still, the question remains: can those who want to do more do so, and can this contribute to advancing European integration in times of Euroscepticism?





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Frank Schimmelfennig (TEPSA & ETH Zürich) analysed empirical evidence in order to answer the question of whether DI helps to counter Euroscepticism. While normative statements and theoretical expectations in this respect are abundant, very little empirical evidence has been collected.

Prof. Schimmelfennig reviewed the main theoretical arguments in favour and against the idea that DI helps to counter Euroscepticism. Arguments in favour claim that DI helps to accommodate the more Eurosceptic member states and prevents the EU from imposing uniform integration schemes, thereby helping to reconcile Eurosceptics with progress in European integration: those who want to do less are still able to do so still within the EU scheme. On the other hand, arguments against warn that DI is also used to discriminate against some member states that are as a result deprived of some rights (e.g. CEE countries, who are kept outside of the Schengen area through DI). It is also pointed out that DI risks creating different “classes” of EU citizens enjoying different rights. Finally, opt-outs risk alienating those EU citizens who would like their country to do more, thereby creating more Euroscepticism than it mitigates.

Starting from the assumption that opt-outs create both winners and losers (Eurosceptics will see them as a gain and Europhiles as a loss), Prof. Schimmelfennig argued that if DI was a zero-sum game it would have no effect on EU legitimacy. Yet, he continued, the opportunity to get opt-outs creates a positive net benefit because of two main reasons:

- 1) Having the opportunity to determine a country's own level of integration in the EU will create support for EU integration both among Europhiles and Eurosceptics within that country (institutional effect);
- 2) Europhiles and Eurosceptics have different baselines: Europhiles support mainstream parties (thus are political winners) whereas Eurosceptics support fringe parties. A decision for an opt-out that benefits Eurosceptics will make them feel that they can actually have an impact on EU politics (perception of legitimacy), whereas an opt-out is seen by Europhiles as merely a minor incident in a long history of political winning.

Prof. Schimmelfennig then analysed the empirical case of the 2015 Danish referendum on ending Denmark's opt-out from the Justice and Home Affairs area. The switch from an opt-out to an opt-in system was supported by mainstream parties and opposed by fringe parties on both sides. Opponents of the switch won with 53% of the votes. Interestingly, Eurobarometer conducted a survey before and after the referendum, asking Danish citizens whether they believed that their voice as citizens counts in the EU. This allows looking at whether the referendum had any effect on the citizens' perception of the EU's legitimacy. Prof. Schimmelfennig noted that after the referendum the positive perception increased significantly. Furthermore, the perception changed to a greater extent for supporters of fringe parties: suddenly, they realised that they could change something according to their preferences.

Prof. Schimmelfennig thus concluded that DI has indeed a potential to narrow the gap between Eurosceptics and Europhiles and to sustain support for European integration. However, there are some caveats. First, the limited amount of empirical evidence available does not clarify whether the effect is derived from DI or simply from the exercise of direct democracy. Second, it is not clear how representative the Danish case is, as no similar evidence was observed in other countries. Finally, it remains to be seen to what extent the effect of DI in terms of enhanced perceived legitimacy, if any, is sustainable.





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Funda Tekin (TEPSA & IEP) looked at how political differentiation has changed the narrative on the political union in the EU. She defined narratives as constructions and reproductions of stories and political realities, while political union was defined as the ideal goal of the EU as a political community where all member states share the same rights and obligations. In particular, Dr Tekin looked at two key moments in recent EU politics: the years preceding the 2004 “big-bang” enlargement and the peak of the eurozone crisis in 2010-2014. Two overarching narratives can be observed in the two cases, Dr Tekin argued, both centred around unity.

In the enlargement period, the overarching narrative revolved around the slogan “united in diversity” and was characterised by an underlying positive attitude to diversity. This narrative was focused on the need to reunite the continent, in a moment in which the EU Member States were not yet experiencing a high degree of differentiation. At the time, DI was seen as only of temporary nature and linked to specific contingencies. This attitude can be summarised as “Yes we can”.

When the eurozone crisis hit, there was a change of perspective towards DI. A more fragmented EU can be observed, partly because the Member States were very differently hit by the crisis and had different approaches as to how to tackle it. Again, the main narrative was one of “no alternative to monetary integration”, but this time it was rather because of necessity, and the positive attitude towards DI could no longer be observed. More long-term and permanent forms of DI started to be considered, within an overall attitude that can be summarised as “Yes we must”.

Juha Jokela (TEPSA & FIIA) analysed Differentiated Integration in the field of Security and Defence. Dr Jokela observed that there is a stronger focus on EU foreign policy now and on the argument that the EU must become a stronger international actor. A great change happening in recent years was also the return of “great power politics”, which raises the question of whether the EU can be a meaningful actor in such a context. Dr Jokela also noted a change in the European Commission’s approach, which is much more geopolitical now.

Eurobarometers show clearly, Dr Jokela highlighted, that citizens stably support the development of a common foreign and security policy (CFSP). This policy area is also closely connected to the fight against terrorism and migration management. Against this backdrop, Dr Jokela argued, it is plausible to expect that if the EU can advance in these policy fields, this can actually help fight Euroscepticism.

DI provided new possibilities to make the EU stronger in these policy fields. While DI is not a new reality in CFSP and in the common security and defence policy (CSDP), Dr Jokela observed a clear hesitation to move towards a DI pathway in these areas. For example, while the possibility of a permanent structure cooperation (PESCO) was already included in the Lisbon Treaty in 2009, it was only launched in 2017 for the first time. Although PESCO has a modular approach, however, it can be questioned whether it really represents an example of DI given the very high participation rate of EU member states (25 out of 28).

In parallel, Dr Jokela underlined, important results have already been seen in informal forms of cooperation in the security and defence area outside of the EU structure: e.g. the “EU3” structure in the negotiations with Iran (France, Germany and United Kingdom), the “Normandy” format during the Ukrainian crisis, or various other “mini-lateral” defence cooperation initiatives taking place outside of the EU structure.





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Therefore, he concluded, in the security and defence area we can see a widely recognised need and popular support for further integration. Against this backdrop, if DI manages to move things forward in these areas then it could indeed provide answers in tackling Euroscepticism. However, it is interesting to note that developments in these areas seem to take place at the margins, if not outside, of the EU. This results in a gradual shift from an “EU” foreign and security policy towards a “European” foreign and security policy.

John Stevens (Federal Trust) discussed Brexit in relation to Differentiated Integration. He argued that Brexit is proof that DI is not a successful policy, as it allowed a sense that it was possible to have pieces of EU integration without any focus on the ultimate purpose. The idea of DI, Mr Stevens stressed, is that all member states would ultimately move towards the same direction, however, in practice, this has led to quite different outcomes. A major factor leading to Brexit, he added, has been a constant readiness from the EU’s side to concede to British requests for differentiation and opt-outs. The UK’s decision not to join the Eurozone, he concluded, was the “fatal decision” that started the Brexit process.

Mr Stevens then reflected on the concept of Euroscepticism, observing that the opinions usually associated with Eurosceptic parties (anti-euro sentiments, narrative based on identity factors, anti-Islam, anti-immigration discourse), while certainly they are not liberal, cannot always be labelled as “anti-European” or as hostile to the European project. Furthermore, he added, being against the current structure of European institutions is not necessarily a threat to the European project, provided that EU institutions are able to adapt.

Finally, Mr Stevens discussed the differences between the United States’ (US) path towards federalism and EU integration, arguing that the critical difference has been the status of the European Parliament compared to the US Congress. The missing element in the European project that still needs to be strengthened is the parliamentary element, and as long as the parliamentary context is anchored in the national level, the EU will face major issues, conclude Mr Stevens.

About InDivEU

Funded by the Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme of the European Union under grant agreement no. 822304, [“Integrating Diversity in the European Union – InDivEU”](#) brings together a consortium of some of Europe’s foremost research universities and outstanding scholars of Differentiated Integration in order to create a comprehensive knowledge base on differentiated integration that will be of direct relevance to Europe’s policymakers.

