

‘Should flexibility and a Multi-speed Europe Become the Norm in European Integration?’

Townhall meeting organized in the framework of the DiCE project in Sněmovní 7, Prague, on 11 November 2022



In the framework of the project ‘DiCE – Differentiation: Clustering Excellence’, on 11 November 2022, the Institute of International Relations Prague in cooperation with the Prague European Summit and Trans European Policy Study Association organized a Townhall Meeting titled ‘Should flexibility and multi-speed Europe become the norm in European integration?’

In the past several years, Emmanuel Macron, Olaf Scholz, and leaders of other member states proposed their visions for the future of European integration as well as the wider European region. Some speak of creating a European political community as a framework for EU members and democratic non-members of the EU to discuss shared interests. The first meeting of the European Political Community took place in Prague in early October. Other arguments concern

more efficient policymaking in the EU foreign and security policy via the introduction of majority voting or allowing the group of EU member states to act on behalf of others in this field.

Participants in this debate reflected upon those proposals regarding the future of European integration and addressed the following questions:

1. Should the EU, with a view of possible prospective enlargements, go in the way of promoting multi-speed integration?
2. Can forms of flexible integration, such as lead groups in which several member states act on behalf of the EU in foreign policy, enable a European response in the context of urgent challenges and thus drive the EU into common action?
3. Or does multi-speed Europe spur fragmentation and lead to disintegration?
4. Should majority voting be gradually introduced in the fields currently decided by unanimity?

The debate included these panelists:

Steven Blockmans	Director of Research of the Centre for European Policy Studies
Marek Havrda	Deputy Minister for European Affairs of the Czech Republic
Tyyne Karjalainen	Researcher at the Finnish Institute of International Affairs and member of EU IDEA
Jan Kovář	Deputy Research Director of the Institute of International Relations Prague
Orsolya Ráczová	Deputy Director of the GLOBSEC Policy Institute think tank

The discussion was moderated by **Zdeňka Trachtová** from Czech Radio.

After welcoming everyone to the last panel of the Prague European Summit, **Zdeňka Trachtová** highlighted that the discussion will centre around topics of flexible Europe, multi-speed Europe and whether it should involve non-European integration or not. She further elaborated that multi-speed Europe is an idea that suggests that different parts of the European Union (EU) should integrate at different levels and at different speeds, pointing out that it is already the reality, as we are witnessing the creation of various types of grouping among EU Member States, such as



Eurozone or the Schengen area. Trachtová outlined that this panel discussion is about evaluating further progress of multi-speed Europe to other areas. She started with the general question: *“Should the EU support and further develop the principle of multi-speed Europe or should we rather avoid it?”*

Steven Blockmans suggested that there is no other way than for the European Union to be flexible or multi-speed. By being too inflexible and resistant to change, the European Union risks ossification. A flexible and multi-speed European Union is vital for respecting the differing interests of the member states, ensuring that member states are not being propelled forward or forced to engage in activities, at the behest of other member states, that would be against their interest. Furthermore, a flexible European Union would allow for progress to occur, even if not all member states are engaged. The European Union is resilient enough to withstand enough differentiation without fragmentation.

Tyynne Karjalainen, echoed previous panellist and underlined that the European Union cannot be a credible and effective actor, with its external and internal partners, without differentiation and flexibility. The efficacy of the European Union with respect to expansion and a collective foreign policy is a result of the ability to be flexible and differentiated. A current example is the ability for the European Union to send military aid to Ukraine: member states that were not able to provide aid and co-operate with European Union-level programs did not halt the provision and deployment of this aid.

Similarly, **Orsolya Ráczová**, outlined that the differentiation and multispeed nature of the European Union has been an on-going process and one that would be difficult to stop or reverse. Due to the size of the European Union, and the diverging interests of the various member states, there will always be differences between the states, and such differences should not halt the progression of the European Union. It is also important to leave an “open-door” to those member states who decide not to co-operate or co-operate at an equivalent level as its fellow member states.

Jan Kovář started the panel with introducing the DiCE Research project, that has been co-financing the panel discussion, which is a research network that was created in order to



mainstream its research on differentiation to, not only the research community, but also to policy makers and the general public.

Answering a discussion question, **Jan Kovář** suggested that although multi-speed Europe should not become the norm, it should, nonetheless, become embedded in the process of further European integration. He suggested that *flexibility* and *differentiation* should be used instead of '*multi-speed*'. He argued that whilst flexibility and differentiation should not be the first 'to-go' mechanisms when it comes to promoting integration or pursuing policies in any field, we should be looking for an approach that could be developed into a mechanism, based on flexibility, when common principles or action cannot be easily adopted. Kovář understood flexibility as means of forging unity, explaining that, flexible forms of decision-making could be more prone to forging unity, rather than lead to fragmentation of Member States.

Unlike his colleagues, **Marek Havrda**, expressed caution when it came to discussing the multi-speed European differentiation, especially in light of the current geopolitical situation. He suggested that it is paramount that we maintain unity, giving us a stronger ground to stand on. On the one hand, given the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war at our doorsteps, as well as other threats coming in from outside of the European Union, we have to decide whether we should go for multi-speed Europe, given current reality. Havrda noted that the less differences there are between Member States, the better, as it illuminates fears of immediate uncertainty. On the other hand, he agreed that this is already a reality and there is a significant cost to being united that should be addressed. Additionally, he noted that multi-speed Europe could be seen as part of a broader enlargement mechanism. Whilst adding that Czech Presidency has been dealing with these issues on a number of fronts, ultimately, the debate on whether we want to progress with the idea further or whether we need it at all, should be left to think-tankers.

During the discussion panel, participants in the Townhall Meeting were asked to provide their opinion in a number of real-time polls focusing on narrowing down the issues connected to making multi-speed Europe the new norm and its impact on the future of the European Union.

The results have demonstrated that whilst an overwhelming 60% of the general public believe that flexibility and multispeed Europe should become the new norm of European integration, 67% predict that it will lead to a more fragmented EU, split into rival blocks. Going further, the process of staged accession with temporary limiting powers of newly joined states was only

supported by 44% of voters. When questioned about whether we should end unanimity voting in some key areas, public opinion divided in half.

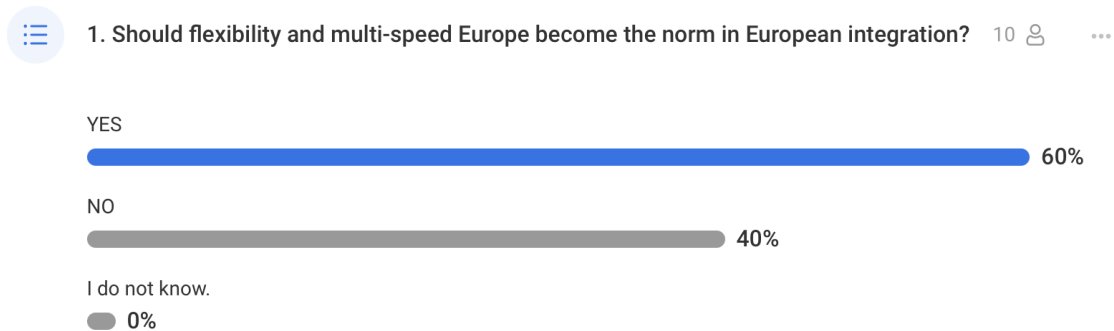


Figure 1.) In response to the question: “Should flexibility and multi-speed Europe become the norm in European integration,” 60 percent of participants voted “YES” while 40 percent voted “NO”.

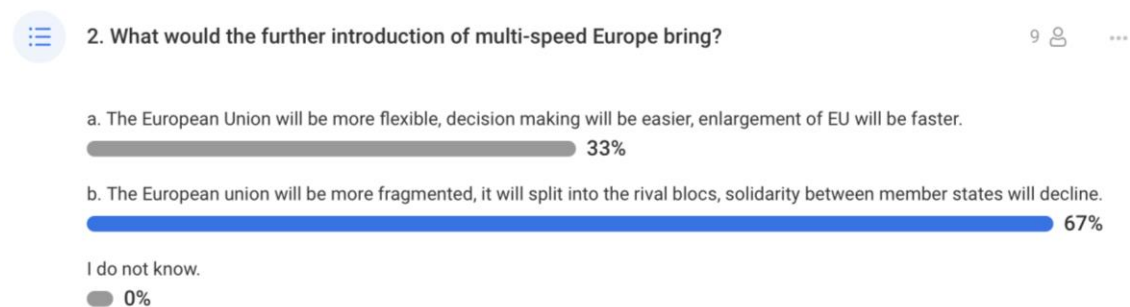


Figure 2.) In response to the question: “What would the further introduction of multi-speed Europe bring?” 33 percent of participants voted that the European Union would be more flexible, decision making easier, and enlargement of the EU fast; meanwhile, 67 percent of participants voted that the European Union will be more fragmented, splitting into rival blocs and negatively impact solidarity.

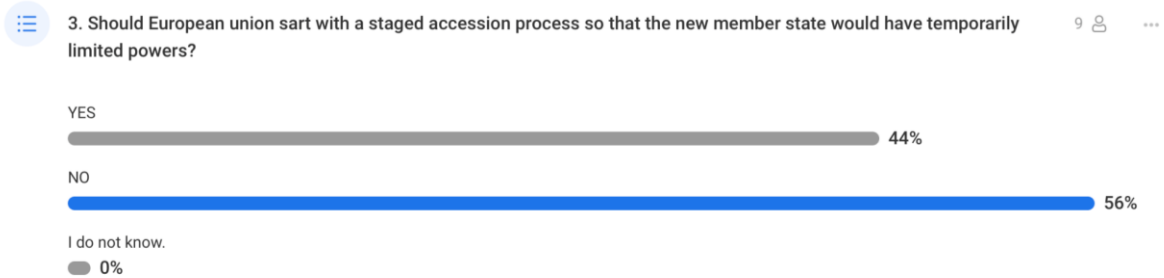


Figure 3.) In response to the question: “Should the European Union start with a staged accession process so that the new member state would have temporarily limited powers?” 44 percent of participants voted “YES”, while 56 percent of participants voted “NO”.

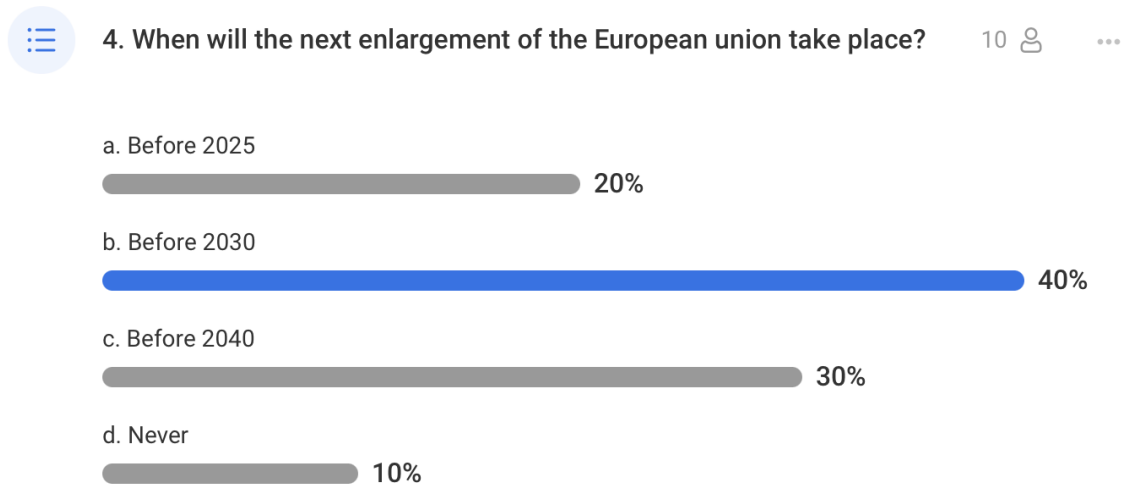


Figure 4.) In response to the question: “When will the next enlargement of the European Union take place?” 20 percent voted “Before 2025”, 40 percent voted “Before 2030”, 30 percent voted “Before 2040”, and 10 percent voted “Never”.

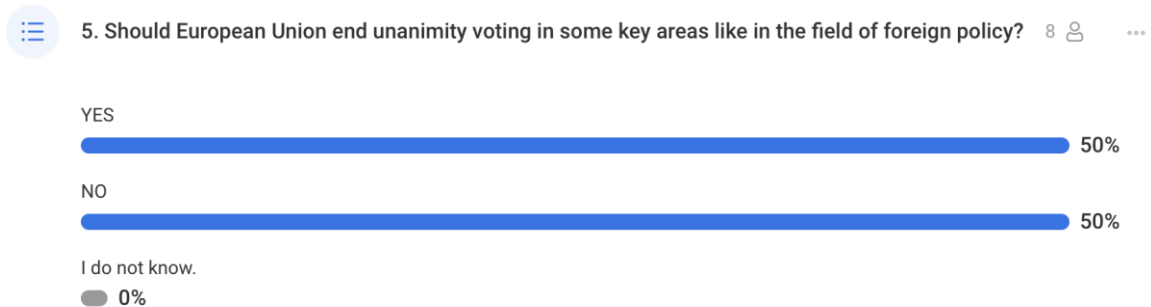


Figure 5.) In response to the question: “Should the European Union end unanimity voting in some key areas like in the field of foreign policy?” 50 percent of participants voted “YES” while the other 50 percent voted “NO”.

These polls were followed by a Q&A session where participants had the chance to further discuss potential issues or benefits connected to multi-speed Europe and European integration. Last question asked about the “ideal state of European integration”, where **Jan Kovář** concluded that European integration is an ongoing process, that cannot have an end state (unless it’s disintegration). It is therefore the ability of the process to continuously adapt to internal and external environmental changes, in favour of people in the EU, at any given point in time, that should be seen as an ‘ideal’ state of European integration.