

editorial

I Differentiated Integration

as a Conscious Policy Choice?

Vittoria Meissner, Senior Researcher at Institut für Europäische Politik (IEP) of Berlin, and **Funda Tekin**, Director of IEP.

The question on how to define differentiation is already a challenging one. The academic and political debate continue to lack a common understanding of differentiation, differentiated integration, and flexible integration. This is of course due to the complexity of the concept, which makes it particularly unsuited to be communicated clearly to the broader public. One of the many definitions in the literature recognises differentiated integration as any modality of integration or cooperation that allows states (members of the European Union and non-members) to work together in non-homogeneous, flexible ways. Not even on this definition, however, can academics find complete agreement.

Another relevant question adds up to this conceptual complexity, namely whether differentiation is a conscious policy choice of both EU citizens and national decision-makers and if so, what this would exactly entail for European integration.

Differentiation can correspond to a deliberate policy choice, if it reflects the optimal solution to a certain problem in a specific policy in view of different national or local preferences. By looking at the preferences of EU citizens and national policymakers in the EU but also in non-EU member states in the second half of 2020, two recent EU IDEA policy papers (No. 15 and No. 17) investigated whether and to what extent differentiated integration is a conscious policy choice for both the public and political actors. Based on two comprehensive data sets gathered through an opinion poll and an interview survey respectively, three main messages emerged.

The ever-present risk of Euroscepticism

First, the opinion poll showed a deficient public understanding of differentiated integration. Specifically, above 30% of the respondents across all education levels were indifferent to the concept of “coalition of the willing”. This lack of understanding and partial conceptual confusion was also noticed among political actors, who for instance used the terms “enhanced cooperation” and “opt-outs” interchangeably. The missing common understanding of what differentiation actually is, makes it also difficult to communicate its benefits to the public in view of the wider EU integration process. This might become particularly problematic when Eurosceptic political actors twist the ultimate objective of differentiation in their favour. In France, Finland and especially in the Czech Republic, Eurosceptic political representatives favoured the process of differentiated integration, considering such cooperation not only appropriate but also beneficial given the heterogeneity of the EU. Nonetheless, this preference was mainly linked to the instrumentalisation of

differentiation for safeguarding their own national interests while questioning the overall European project. Such an interpretation of flexible forms of cooperation as not being conducive to more and deeper EU integration needs to be clearly distinguished from the Europhile political preferences for more differentiation in order to achieve a more effective and cohesive Union.

Differentiated Integration as the preferred way but only under specific conditions

Second, differentiated integration is seen by political actors as a pragmatic and effective alternative for more European integration in some policy areas, but only if it has an inclusive character and if it hence allows any state to join at a later point in time. Differentiated integration is seen as a conscious policy choice especially in the areas of security-, defense and foreign policy, which touch upon sensitive sovereignty issues. The German political respondents in particular favour a multi-speed form of differentiated integration, whereas the French approve of more permanent forms of differentiation where necessary, e.g., in the area of defence. With regard to public opinion, the data revealed that there is no explicit contradiction between deeper integration and differentiation to the majority of respondents. 53% of them support European integration while also being in favour of differentiation. This preference however changes when it comes to crises. Should the EU be confronted with major challenges such as the latest economic crisis linked to the pandemic, differentiation is no longer the favoured response to EU citizens. To 63% of them economic crises demand a common approach by all EU member states.

A tailor-made approach to external differentiation

Third, the opinion poll and interview survey showed that when it comes to relations between the EU and third countries a tailor-made approach to each differentiated form of cooperation is inevitable.

Public opinion on cooperation with the EU is quite positive in third countries, although perceptions vary depending on the state and form of the established relationship. Accordingly, 57% of respondents in Ukraine would like to have closer ties with the EU, 37% of the respondents in Norway are fully satisfied with the status quo, while 25% of respondents in Turkey don't know.

In the UK, more than 50% of respondents believe that cooperation with the EU would be beneficial, while 42% of them favour looser forms of cooperation.

When it comes to political actors' preferences, policymakers in Turkey and Ukraine would be theoretically in favour of less differentiated integration and hence of a closer relationship with the EU through potential membership. This perspective is however at present not feasible for either of them, whether in the medium or the long term. Conversely, the overwhelming response among political elites in Ukraine considers the EU a strong partner on the global stage and also in Norway the majority of political actors is satisfied with the current status quo. Nonetheless, in these last two cases the EU could consider engaging these countries in closer cooperation within specific policy areas such as security and environmental cooperation. The effectiveness of external differentiation could thus be increased by allowing some EU partners, such as the ones mentioned, to contribute to the shaping of European policies.

Preferences in the UK are, despite Brexit, overall in favour of more cooperation and specifically of a closer economic as well as security relationship, for instance in terms of intelligence sharing, with the EU. Although in the medium term the negotiation of an ad hoc agreement between the EU and the UK remains the most likely scenario, the EU could eventually work towards an EU-UK relationship that follows the EEA model. Differentiation, hence, should always be a conscious policy choice rather than the universal remedy to any deadlock in European integration.

EU IDEA PUBLICATIONS

RESEARCH PAPERS

EU Differentiation in Border, Asylum and Police Cooperation: Drivers, Effectiveness and Crisis

Emmanuel Comte, Senior Research Fellow at the Barcelona Centre for International Affairs (CIDOB), and **Sandra Lavenex**, Professor of European and International Politics at the University of Geneva.

The leading policy objective in EU differentiation underlying border, asylum and police cooperation has been to achieve the abolition of internal border controls to create a borderless European single market. Germany has been the main proponent kickstarting and maintaining such agenda through differentiation. For roughly two decades, differentiation has proved effective to abolish internal border controls, integrate the related cooperation in EU structures, enlist the cooperation of non-EU member states, and produce joint policy outputs on asylum, external borders and police affairs. Yet, growing external migration challenges have undermined the effectiveness and legitimacy of existing arrangements, ushering in disintegration tendencies.

POLICY PAPERS

Public Opinion on an Ever More Differentiated EU

Anna Stahl, Policy Fellow at the Jacques Delors Centre, Hertie School.

European integration has been accompanied by differentiation and debates on it are not new. Differentiated integration has received wide scholarly attention and there is a rich and diverse academic literature related to the concept. At the same time, there is the growing belief among European policymakers that more flexibility is needed within the complex EU machinery. To deal with the EU's unprecedented internal and external challenges, several European leaders have argued that differentiation could contribute to a stronger EU. With the exception of a few studies, the discussion has, however, paid little attention to public opinion. Drawing on the results of an opinion poll conducted between August and September 2020 in the 27 EU member states and four non-EU states, this policy paper addresses this gap in the current political debate. It examines the preferences on European integration among citizens in order to formulate options for differentiated integration as a policy choice. Against this background, the paper proposes a set of three policy recommendations for European policymakers: (i) foster knowledge of differentiated integration among European citizens, (ii) promote and reform the Schengen area and (iii) adopt a tailor-made approach to external differentiation.

Differentiated EUrope 2035: Elaboration and Evaluation of Five Potential Scenarios

Janis A. Emmanouilidis, Director of Studies at the European Policy Centre (EPC), Brussels.

Differentiated integration has been and will remain a necessity if Europe wants to overcome stalemate and improve the functioning of the European integration process. The central question is thus not whether there will be a differentiated Europe, but what it will or rather should look like. This paper develops and evaluates five potential scenarios for a “differentiated EUrope 2035”: (1) status quo differentiation; (2) muddling upwards; (3) fundamental disruption of differentiation; (4) creation of an inner core; and (5) a new supranational union. It explores the potential challenges/opportunities of the various forms of differentiation by analysing how the scenarios might lead to high(er) or low(er) levels of effectiveness and legitimacy/democratic accountability. Without trying to predict the future, the paper identifies key factors determining the future of a “differentiated EUrope” and comes to the conclusion that the EU and its members are likely to prefer the “muddling upwards” scenario rather than more radical forms of differentiation. However, future crises might force Europe in another direction, compelling governments to depart from business as usual.

Differentiated Integration as a Conscious Policy Choice: The Way Forward

Vittoria Meissner, Senior Researcher at Institut für Europäische Politik (IEP) of Berlin, and **Funda Tekin**, Director of IEP.

Is differentiated integration an unintended consequence of the European Union integration process or is it a conscious policy choice of national decision-makers? By investigating national political preferences on EU integration based on a new interview data set collected in nine EU and non-EU countries, the policy paper outlines three main results. First, differentiated integration is at present widely considered as a desirable and effective alternative to foster integration in the EU as long as it upholds an inclusive character. Second, only in specific policy areas do political actors perceive differentiated integration as effective in terms of both output and outcome in the long term. Third, tailored forms of external differentiation will represent a viable solution for the EU’s relations with third countries in the near future. The paper also outlines specific recommendations on how differentiated integration might be used as a more strategic and conscious policy choice in the future.

EU IDEA MULTIMEDIA



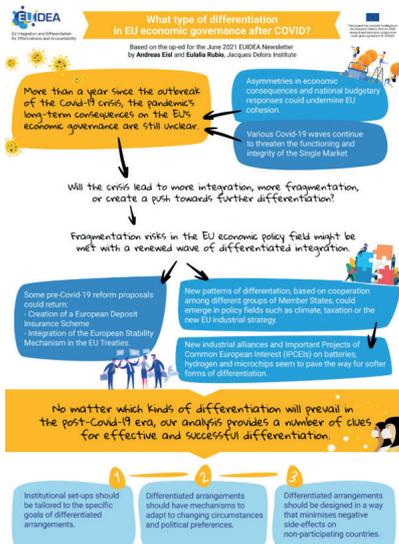
presents
Differentiation in the EU economic policy field
Fragmentation risks, new patterns of differentiation and lessons
from existing arrangements

Andreas Eisl and Eulalia Rubio, Jacques Delors Institute

VIDEOS

Fragmentation risks, new patterns of differentiation and lessons from existing arrangements.

Andreas Eisl and Eulalia Rubio, Jacques Delors Institute



INFOGRAPHICS

What type of differentiation in EU economic governance after COVID?

Based on the op-ed for the June 2021 EU IDEA Newsletter by **Andreas Eisl** and **Eulalia Rubio**, Jacques Delors Institute

FROM THE NETWORK

Publications

Briding the Channel: How Europe and the UK can work together in foreign policy, by **Luigi Scazzieri**, Research fellow at Centre for European Reform, June 2021

Lead Groups in EU Foreign Policy: The Cases of Iran and Ukraine, by **Riccardo Alcaro**, Research Coordinator and Head of the Global Actors Programme at the Istituto Affari Internazionali (iai), Rome, and **Marco Siddi**, Senior Research Fellow at the Finnish Institute of International Affairs (fiia), Helsinki, August 2021

EVENTS

| Past events

EU IDEA project, differentiated integration can be a "deliberate choice" to foster European unity

by Federico Baccini

Bruxelles – Differentiated integration is not something to be scared about, because it is already running and it is making European Union work. Funda Tekin, Director of the Institut für Europäische Politik (IEP) and one of the authors of the EU IDEA policy paper Differentiated Integration as a Conscious Policy Choice: The Way Forward, is certain: “We are talking about a deliberate choice in specific policy areas, rather than a universal tool”.

This is how differentiated integration is an effective alternative to foster unity in Europe, as long as it upholds an inclusive character. Tekin’s words have been delivered to the EU IDEA Differentiated Integration as a Policy Choice webinar, at the Annual Conference of the Institut für Europäische Politik (IEP) on Thursday 30 September. Moderated by Sandra Lavenex, Professor at the Université de Genève, the event was an opportunity to discuss an issue that is “at the very heart of the debate on the future of Europe”, as well as the main research topic of EU IDEA Project.

THE CONSORTIUM



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