

Differentiated Integration as a Conscious Policy Choice?

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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.

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