

COMMENT

Europe after Brexit: Multi-speed or More of the Same?

Anthony Salamone | 28 March 2017



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The UK's referendum last June posed a near-existential question for the EU: what course to set after Brexit? This question is existential in that Brexit challenges the very nature of the European project. Integration was meant to be progressive, continual and, more or less, permanent. Exit was not supposed to happen. The EU didn't even have a formal withdrawal mechanism for a member state until the Treaty of Lisbon in 2009.

In the aftermath of the vote, the EU27 have presented a surprisingly united front on early key positions, such as no negotiations before the activation of the Article 50 process and the indivisibility of the four freedoms. Beyond dealing with the forthcoming Brexit talks and a number of other challenges, the EU's institutions and leaders have rightly and necessarily given thought to that question of what direction going forward.

In such light, Brexit is seen by some as an opportunity to advance integration in policy areas where the UK had objected. The discussion has also brought to the fore once more the idea of a multi-speed Europe, in which a 'core' of certain member states integrates more intensively than the rest.

In reality, the European project has long been a multi-speed endeavour. Opt-outs, opt-ins, derogations and other types of differentiation have created much more of a patchwork than might be expected. On one level, codifying that more explicitly is less important than actual action to address the EU's challenges.

Creating a more coherent Europe is in the interest of all EU members, and indeed for third countries (including the UK, once it leaves the EU). The question is how that should be achieved. If a broad consensus emerges across the EU that a more multi-speed approach is best, then it

could well succeed. The risk is that the desire to have a post-Brexit vision for the EU drives decisions too quickly.

In the process, it is imperative that countries aren't rushed to choose on what policies or levels they want to participate in. Flexibility, which has always been central to the European project, remains essential going forward. Indeed, in reality, disagreement among member state leaders over the idea of a stronger multi-speed Europe has grown from the Malta Summit in February, to the European Commission's [Future of Europe](#) white paper, to the Rome Summit this past weekend.

While Brexit can clearly serve as a catalyst for change, the way forward should not create new divisions between old and new member states, or between the North and the South. In the end the [Rome Declaration](#), commemorating the 60th anniversary of the Treaty of Rome, stated on the multi-speed question: 'We will act together, at different paces and intensity where necessary, while moving in the same direction, as we have done in the past, in line with the Treaties and keeping the door open to those who want to join later.'

This final wording is more mundane than what had been previously suggested. It speaks to largely more of the same for the EU, and points to potential further use of enhanced cooperation. In the short term, greater continuity is not necessarily a problem – it is far more important to find a truly shared vision for the EU than to act hastily.

With both the Rome anniversary and Brexit in mind, it is understandable and reasonable that EU leaders want to project a clear vision for Europe. Key questions on the ultimate direction of the EU have also been dodged for a long time, well before the advent of Brexit. It may well be that Brexit necessitates answers to those questions in a way that other challenges, including the Eurocrisis, have not managed before.

As the remainder of the EU adapts to a Union of 27 states, and considers its future beyond Brexit, it is worth keeping in mind that building a genuine long-term European vision is unlikely to be simple, expeditious or top-down. Whether more multi-speed or more of the same, it will take time and effort to find a common way forward for the EU. In the long run, the Union's sustainability will be tied to how well it succeeds in creating a sufficiently shared and adaptable perspective.