The European Commission's new white paper ‘On the Future of Europe’ recognises how serious the EU’s crisis of legitimacy is. Perhaps for the first time from the Commission itself, there is an acknowledgement that the Union faces a number of options for its future, not merely involving greater integration but potentially a reigning in of regulatory competences and a greater focus on areas where EU-level regulation works best. It even floats the option of a movement back to solely focusing on the single market.

While assertively neutral on various options, the paper seems to support a multi-speed approach, with more integration for member states who want it, and more opt outs for those who don’t. Our view is that this ‘differentiated’
The appeal of pragmatism

Differentiated Integration at this point may be an attractive and viable option to the Commission, given that deeper integration seems to have hit a brick wall over the past five years as a result of member-state divisions over how to respond to the EU’s ‘polycrisis’. It may be the easiest way to implement a solution as well. Allowing strongly pro-European states to integrate further where possible makes good sense, in particular since different member-states may prefer to integrate more (or less) in different areas.

One significant omission from the white paper is how such differentiated integration would work within existing institutional arrangements. The original reason for harmonising policies at the EU level was to introduce clearer accountability and transparency through consistent and clear decision making routes. Allowing member states to pick and choose could damage core normative commitments to integration and fundamental rights, while at the same time it could also create even more complexity and blurred lines. Moreover, enabling member states to speed up integration in some areas, for example in fiscal policy, while permitting dis-integration in another, such as immigration policy, potentially creates new unforeseen tensions, arguably even worse than those which exist at the moment.

So how does the EU ensure accountability and transparency in a multi-speed Europe? The Commission does not address this issue, despite its statement of concern. Accountability and transparency require clear and consistent procedures with an obvious centre of authority to ensure accountability, or at least a clear ‘paper trail’ regarding who made what decision, when and with what advice.

This is an issue the EU already struggles with. As some academics describe it, the EU faces an ‘accountability
overload’ of reporting and paperwork, not to mention its lack of transparency or its democratic deficit. To deal with these questions, it is also important to make certain that all member-states are sitting around the table, with a voice if not always a vote, as new policy initiatives are considered. But even this is not enough.

**The need for openness and inclusion**

To address the problems of accountability as well as transparency, the EU needs to find ways to devise more inclusive and open processes of public engagement at the European level, providing clear links into the policy making process. In many respects, the EU is actually considered a normal and unproblematic part of people’s lives across Europe. Common standards in food, medicines, aviation safety and other areas of EU responsibility are largely supported by all relevant members of the public. The key, as the Commission itself in some ways notices, is to make a connection in terms of identity at the local level, and to provide better and clearer channels of engagement from national parliaments and local civil society.

Anyone who’s been to Brussels will tell you it is a ‘bubble’, perhaps even more so than national capitals often are. Corporate lobbyists and NGOs abound, and ‘the public’ are left out of the equation. Paradoxically, there are various ways the public can contribute in principle to EU legislation via online public consultations at various stages. Yet, these processes are already obscure and monopolised by lobbyists – the ‘expert stakeholders’ EU bodies like to talk about.

In some ways then, EU institutions are more transparent and accountable than their national counterparts. Yet, there are few channels through which these institutions speak to the public. The European Citizens’ Initiative, launched in 2012, is barely known across the continent and needs at least 1 million people to sign a petition for anything useful to happen. Where there have been successful Initiatives, these have been monopolised by lobbyists and NGOs.

**The way to legitimacy**

We recently interviewed a Dutch MEP who said that “the Commission works very well, the experts work well. But where are the public?” His off-the-cuff solution was to have the Parliament take Committees and MEPs out of Brussels and spend most of their time in local communities engaging with the public and learning about their issues and opinions. This could be facilitated through national parliaments and promoted by political parties. All very idealistic, and given recent populist developments we might be sceptical about its viability. But inclusion and openness have to start somewhere.

For decades, academics and EU politicians assumed the ‘outputs’ the Union provides – economic stability and social harmony – would be enough to secure ‘ever greater Union’. They have been proved wrong, but the solution is not to reinforce the very obscurity and complexity that fuel distrust in Brussels in the first place. While a good start, the Commission’s suggestion of more ‘differentiation’ could exacerbate rather than close the ‘expectations gap’ so long as it does not find ways to ensure greater accountability and transparency. The EU needs to find ways to be more democratic – open and inclusive – so as to allow the European public genuine participation in the process of EU decision making, as it progresses through the Commission, Parliament and Council. Internal political reform is remarkable for its absence in the white paper, but it will be crucial in any strategy to renew trust in the Union.

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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