The EU's new white paper underlines why Europe needs to be more open to its citizens

10/03/2017

At the start of March, the European Commission published a white paper 'On the Future of Europe'. **Vivien Schmidt** *and* **Matt Wood** *assess the Commission's proposals, arguing that while the paper's focus on differentiated integration is pragmatically useful under the current circumstances, this strategy could exacerbate distrust in the EU if it is not accompanied by greater accountability and transparency in decision-making.*
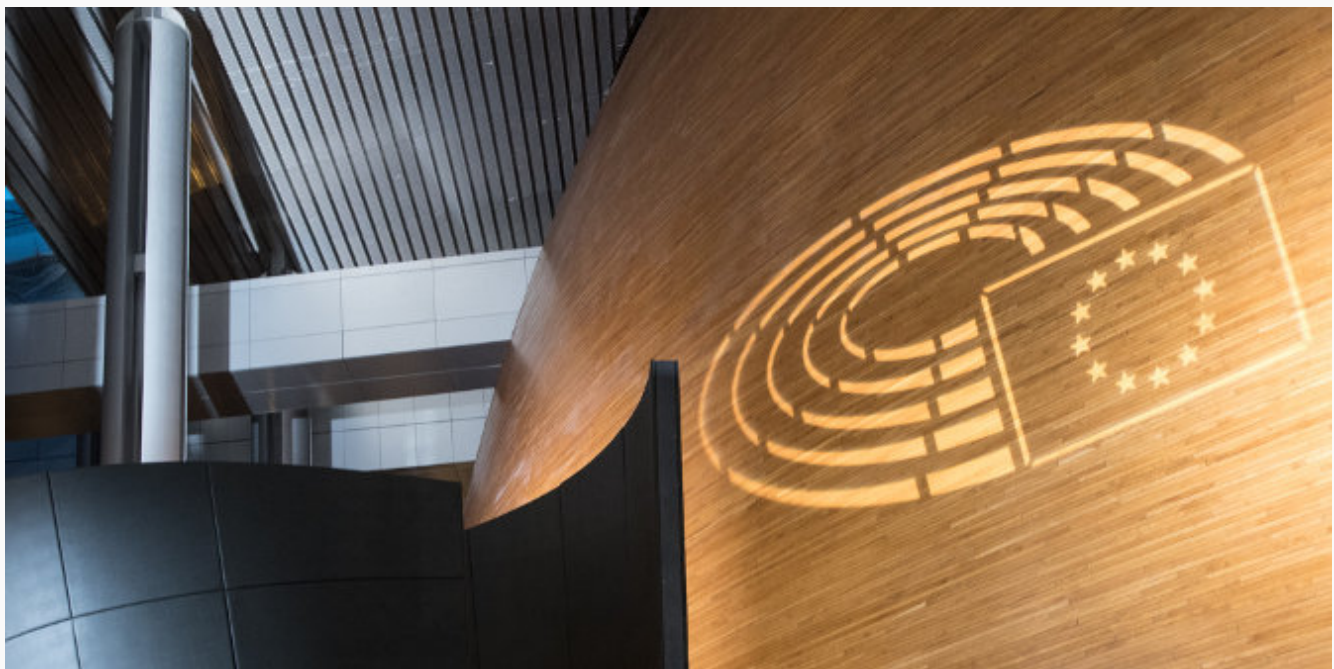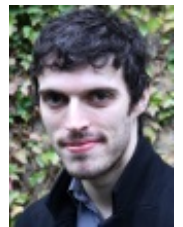
The European Commission's new white paper 'On the Future of Europe' recognises how serious the EU's crisis of legitimacy is. Perhaps for the first time from the Commission itself, there is an acknowledgement that the Union faces a number of options for its future, not merely involving greater integration 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'

approach is pragmatically useful, but it carries a number of risks for transparency and accountability. Better inclusion and openness for the public in EU decision-making must accompany any kind of differentiated integration, along with further democratisation, if the EU wishes to rebuild the trust and legitimacy the white paper acknowledges it has lost.

The 'democratic deficit' – old problem, old solution?

Discussion about the EU's 'democratic deficit' has been going on for decades, so the issues the white paper brings up are not new. However, for the first time there seems to be a genuine recognition of the need for change. The Commission's discussion paper is remarkably candid about widespread public distrust of Brussels, stating for example that 'citizens' trust in the EU has decreased in line with that for national authorities. Around a third of citizens trust the EU today, when about half of Europeans did so ten years ago.' Overcoming this trust issue will not be easy, the white paper states: 'Communities are not always aware that their farm nearby, their transport network or universities are partly funded by the EU.'

At its heart, the white paper emphasises managing expectations as being critical for future success. Where the Commission builds up expectations for economic growth and cross-border harmony driven from Brussels, it makes itself vulnerable to attack. When suggesting faster and stronger integration as one option (the fifth and final), the Commission notes 'there is the risk of alienating parts of society which feel that the EU lacks legitimacy or has taken too much power away from national authorities'. But at the other extreme, it makes clear that going back to the single market alone is not a good (second) option. Moreover, its first option, going along pretty much as it currently does, although presented very positively, is equally a non-starter, given the difficulties of reaching agreements under the current unanimity rules.

Therefore, the more nuanced approaches the Commission itself seems to favour involving 'differentiated integration' – contained in especially the third but also the fourth options – would be preferable. This could involve, on the one hand, some member states deepening cooperation in core policy areas while others stay on the sidelines, at least initially. Or it could mean the Union focusing on what it does well and trying to do it better, while returning other competences back to the member states.

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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