

Creating a 'multi-speed Europe' would divide the EU and diminish it as a foreign policy actor

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*The notion of creating a 'multi-speed Europe', in which some EU members pursue closer integration than others, has been frequently raised since the UK's EU referendum. **Angelos Chrysogelos** argues that while the idea may appear to be a neat solution to the current pressures the EU faces, a multi-speed Europe could end up burdening the EU with even bigger strategic challenges in the long-run.*



If 2016 was the year of populist upheavals, 2017 may be the year when the EU espouses 'multi-speed' integration as the way forward. The President of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, has all but explicitly endorsed the idea. A succession of meetings of various European leaders in the last few weeks also confirms that multi-speed Europe is now seriously on the cards.

The political climate has never been more conducive for the establishment of an EU split between vanguards and laggards. With uncertainty in the Anglo-Saxon Atlantic, entrenchment of nationalist populism in the post-communist East, and a busy electoral calendar ahead of them, leaders of principally older member-states (Germany, France, Italy) seem to finally be seeing a cozy, exclusive union of politically and economically similar countries as the only way to reengage their electorates with European integration.

All this does not mean that a multi-speed Europe will necessarily come about. The threat of isolation may serve as an incentive for hesitant members to concede to the demands of deeper integration. Multi-speed Europe may also be a transitional stage. Both Schengen and the Eurozone, after all, expanded steadily from their initial core over the years to include the vast majority of EU members. There is also fuzziness as to what exactly a 'core Europe' will look like or which policy areas it will cover. If anything, an EU of multiple overlapping cores is much more likely to emerge.

But the tone with which the term 'multi-speed Europe' is used in the debate is not coincidental. Elites in Western member-states feel that it is finally time for the unwilling, hesitant or unready to make a clear decision as to where they stand on Europe. If some of them decide to drop out, the EU should be ready to live with this.

That leaders of so-called core countries are becoming increasingly focused on the concept of vanguards is reinforced by the constant drifting of post-communist central-eastern Europe away from the European mainstream. Poland and Hungary are tied to the vision of their populist leaders. Democratic governance in both countries is in crisis. The EU's Balkan members are also in constant economic and political turmoil. The danger is that any formalisation of one or more core EUs will reinforce in post-communist Europe the impression that 'old Europe' is giving up on the pledges it undertook with the 2004 enlargement. The nationalistic narrative of leaders in Poland and Hungary could become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Multi-speed Europe presents the EU with a dilemma. It may appear as a sensible evolution of a policymaking system that currently seems hopelessly heterogeneous and deadlocked. But it would also constitute nothing less than the resignation of the EU as a foreign policy actor. By conceding post-communist Europe to the forces of nationalism, populism, instability, corruption and economic malaise, the EU would be essentially admitting that its most important foreign policy accomplishment (expanding stability and prosperity to the whole of Europe) was a vacuous promise.

Multi-speed Europe will have two other far-reaching implications for EU foreign policy. First, by cementing current political and ideological divisions in Europe, it will re-politicise intra-European relations. This will undo the main function of the EU foreign policy system, which has been to domesticate relations between sovereign states with

multiple, and sometimes contrasting, priorities about the world. Thus, the current tendency of the EU to turn inwards and neglect important developments in world politics would be exacerbated.

Second, the EU's overall weight as a foreign policy actor will be diminished. Its large and variegated membership may hamper swift and decisive decision-making, but it is also a key dimension of the EU's global presence in terms of size, reach and ambition. Any core EU grouping would certainly be a smaller, more parochial and less influential player on a global scale than what the whole EU currently is, even if it managed to develop a more coherent foreign policy presence. At the same time, an EU of vanguards and laggards will surely be even more divided and even more incapable of reaching common positions on foreign policy than what it currently is.

From the perspective of the UK, in particular, the prospect of multi-speed Europe should seem bitterly ironic. A lynchpin of British diplomacy has historically been to avert the dominance of the continent by a single political actor. More recently the UK saw usefulness in the EU as an instrument that, so long as it did not develop independent political ambitions, contributed to geopolitical stability across the whole of Europe. If Brexit is one of the reasons why the multi-speed path is now seriously contemplated, and if this process indeed leads both to closer political integration around some kind of core and a slide of central-eastern Europe into instability, the UK will have basically unleashed upon itself developments that would contradict decades-long objectives of its European policy.

Multi-speed Europe is still a theoretical proposition, heavily dependent on a constellation of political developments across Europe – from the victory of pro-European forces in upcoming elections in key EU members to nationalistic elites in central-eastern European countries willfully checking their countries out of the common European project. Not all these conditions will be fulfilled in the coming months, and the EU may yet settle (as it normally does) on a complex compromise.

Still, the combination of restive public opinion in older member-states, Eurosceptic governments in newer member-states, and geopolitical uncertainty in the European periphery has made the temptation to close ranks around a core of disciplined and similar countries much stronger than in the past. In considering the options for the future, European elites and citizens (particularly in older member-states) must realise that what looks today like a neat solution may end up engulfing Europe in even bigger strategic instability and irrelevance than what it currently finds itself in.

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