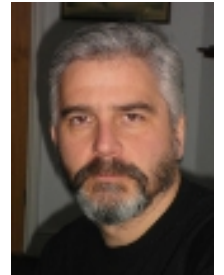


# Ever closer to different destinations: how the renegotiation changed the EU's aims

[blogs.lse.ac.uk/brexit/2016/06/12/ever-closer-to-different-destinations-how-the-renegotiation-changed-the-eus-aims/](https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/brexit/2016/06/12/ever-closer-to-different-destinations-how-the-renegotiation-changed-the-eus-aims/)

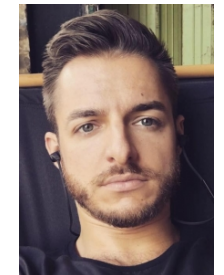
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The EU is the result of an ongoing creative project, write **Simon Glendinning** and **Roch Dunin-Wąsowicz**, who report on the last session of the [LSE Commission on the Future of Britain in Europe](#). Tracing its Kantian origins, they explain that historically, the idea of “ever-closer union” was conceived as a way of overcoming the pathologies of national states. This ambition has not disappeared, but it is now accepted that some Member States might be more integrated than others. After David Cameron’s 2016 renegotiation, with its emphasis on sovereignty, there is no requirement for the UK to move towards deeper integration.



The EU is now effectively a multi-speed union without a single final destination (*telos*). In order to understand how David Cameron’s renegotiation brought about this change, we need to examine what, if anything, is understood by the phrase “ever closer union among the peoples of Europe”.

As a member of the EU a state may both enhance the sovereignty it retains, and have a say in the development and powers of the union in those areas where sovereignty is shared or pooled. The 2016 renegotiation, with its emphasis on the definition of ‘ever-closer union’, should be understood in this light.



## The concept of Ever Closer Union

Talk of “ever closer union” is a contraction of the full enigmatic formulation: “Ever closer union of the peoples of Europe”. It holds together two features of the European Union that seem to be intractable, irreducible and contradictory. First, it seems to contain an internal *tension* within it between the singularity of a “union” and the plurality of “peoples”. And, second, it seems to sustain an *ambiguity* over whether it concerns (primarily) a political body aiming to cultivate conditions for closer cultural or spiritual relationships between peoples – call that a union of minds – or a political body aiming at closer political relationships between nations – call that a union of governments.

Both of these interpretations have been defended in the theoretical literature on the emergence in Europe of a “political body” beyond Europe of the nations. Both have their roots in the writings of the philosopher Immanuel Kant. The first interpretation is probably Kant’s own. It is the idea of political institutions which create sustainable conditions of co-operation and understanding between the peoples of Europe that makes war between the nations increasingly “*less likely*”. The second interpretation is illustrated by the work of the contemporary philosopher Jürgen Habermas, who construes the European project as a movement towards the creation of an international or supranational state in Europe.

## The renegotiation: “Sovereignty”

These two conceptions of *institutional design* of the EU were strikingly present in the differences between the first draft and the second draft of the renegotiation achieved by the UK government in February 2016 under the title of “Sovereignty”.

The original draft of the text proposed by Cameron and Tusk outlines a clear *telos* of “trust and understanding among peoples living in open and democratic societies sharing a common heritage of universal values” and yet stipulates that it is not “equivalent to the objective of political integration”. In a fascinating development, *this formulation did not survive into the final text*. It was replaced by a lengthier, and much more legalistic one, focused

almost entirely on the UK's "opt-out" of any further political integration – should it take place.

The final document "recognised that the United Kingdom, in the light of the specific situation it has under the Treaties, is not committed to further political integration into the European Union". It also outlined that Treaties remain the only source of legitimation of the Union and "do not compel all Member States to aim for a common destination", leaving the *telos* of 'Ever Closer Union' undefined, but the possibility of deeper integration among some Member States strongly implied.

The original *tension* between unity and plurality of the ambition for "ever closer union among the peoples of Europe" clearly remains here – but it is now expressed differentially rather than internally: some peoples within the Union might be more integrated than others. The general tension is nevertheless retained in what one might call its voluntarism: there is no *requirement* for Member States to move towards deeper political and economic integration; it therefore remains dependent on whether nations desire it, and should some Member States desire it, then they are free to pursue it. Should others (not only the UK) *not* desire it, they are not obliged or compelled to do so. The possibility is affirmed here of a *multi-speed union* without a single *telos*.

Whether the *telos* of "Ever Closer Union" is conceived as a union of minds or of governments, the renegotiation showed for the first time that there is no longer a shared vision of a single *telos* of union among the 28 Member States of the EU – or, at least, no single aim of political integration common to them all.

The reality revealed by the negotiation is that there are in fact different "tiers" of European Union integration: a tier focused around the Eurozone and increasingly common economic government and deeper political integration (which may or may not survive in the form of a single group); a tier focused on commitments to an increasingly single-market; and a tier from the post-Communist European Member States who are rediscovering their own sovereignty at the same time as engaging in a process of European integration, and still deciding their path in the Union.



Statue of Europe, Brussels

## The history of the European political project

These developments raise important questions about the historical character of the Union itself, and indicate that its understanding of its own (ideal) historical *telos* changes in the course of its own (actual) history of making and attaining new institutional conditions.

The general historical “scansions” of the history of the European political project become crucial. The main feature of its early development was a hope among many that there would be a *rapid* movement towards an international state. The basic political motivation for this was the conviction, powerfully reinforced by the experience of nationalism and wars among the nations of Europe, that national political formations are intrinsically pathological and should be replaced by a more rational international system that would be effectively immune to them. The hope for rapid development did not last into the era of “functionalism” where a *slower* step-by-step approach was taken: the EU taking over certain national functions in the expectation that there would be a logic of successive developments in different areas “pulled” into play by the earlier transfers of competences to the European level.

Both of these models preserved a supra-national or “federalist” *telos* as their guiding ambition: the movement towards a union of governments. However, during the course of the second half of the twentieth century the idea of the nation state as an intrinsically problematic political form began to lose its hold on the political imagination. Instead, it was increasingly widely believed that it was not the form of the nation-state as such that was the problem but the form of government within that state. In particular, the pathologies were strongly connected to authoritarian, totalitarian and otherwise non-democratic regimes. A democratic nation-state, by contrast, was regarded as an instrument of peace and security both within itself and between such states.

### **The return of the nation**

This shift powerfully altered the “horizon” of thinking about the ends of European Union. Federalism no longer appeared to be the only rational ambition of “Ever Closer Union” (though many cleaved to that idea and still do), and in its place a new “mantra” – with a new corresponding *telos* – has appeared to have taken hold within many national governments and on some of those working within the EU institutions: “National where possible, European where necessary”.

The now known reality of a differentiated union with overlapping circles of engagement and perhaps with multi-speed elements means that there is a delicate equilibrium in place. If Britain departed, the vision of Europe as an area of free trade in a single-market would have considerably diminished force within the EU, and there would be pressure, especially on countries in the Eurozone, to make a decision over the extent of economic and political union that they would be prepared to accept or want. Further opt-outs might be sought by various states, perhaps especially from post-communist countries unlikely to want to give up only recently acquired independence and sovereignty. The EU could start unravelling – not in one go, but gradually, in the way of the Holy Roman Empire.

At this stage in its history the EU is now faced with the alternative of *either* altogether abandoning the idea of supranational union in favour of a form of intergovernmental cooperation that finds agreement to pool or share sovereignty where it can; *or* of an EU of two Europes, one pushing towards political union and centred on the Euro, and another based on market rationalisation, but both existing independently and not adversarially within a broader European Union.

### **Conclusion**

The idea of ‘ever-closer union’ has never had a single or fixed teleological sense which has driven the political project of co-ordination and co-operation between the Member States – neither for the UK nor for the rest. Nevertheless, it is significant that the chapter of the renegotiation that contains a discussion of this phrase is entitled “Sovereignty”. In other words, it is an essentially *political* concept belonging to an essentially *political* project. And on this score, the idea of collective action is such that any member of a democratic club may help set the rules and their interpretation.

This political process in an ongoing political project is illustrated by what took place in the 2016 renegotiation, and includes what, if anything, is understood by the distinctive and ambiguous phrase “ever-closer union among the peoples of Europe”.

*This post represents the views of the authors and not those of the BrexitVote blog, nor the LSE. Image: [Statue of Europe](#)*

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