

CONCENTRIC CIRCLES AND FLEXIBLE INTEGRATION

A Vision of Visions for Europe's Future

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The Problem of One-Size-Fits-All

To have a vision for the future of Europe is almost a prerequisite for being relevant in today's political scene on this continent. Ever since Great Britain decided to leave the European Union in 2016, the discussion on where the soon-to-be EU-27 should be heading has been ongoing. This debate will not vanish anytime soon with European elections coming up in May 2019, and certainly, subsequent discussions taking place on what reform plans should actually be implemented.

One core characteristic of the debate is that the reform plans themselves are extremely diverse. One only has to compare the visions put forth by French President Emmanuel Macron with his demand to press ahead on the path of the *ever closer union*, to Lega leader Matteo Salvini in the traditional Eurosceptic role, and the Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte, who is arguing for an EU which puts more emphasis on free trade and the rule of law instead of integration by any means.

This will become a problem sooner or later, as the EU is still built on one-size-fits-all solutions, a fact which has led to much frustration on all sides. Those not too fond of EU integration - just take the British as an example, have felt betrayed since they, in their view, were forced to go much farther than was originally promised to them. Those who want to go further, however, are also not happy with one-size-fits-all: in their mind, more skeptical member states have always held them back. The European Commission has been especially adamant about this in recent times by arguing that unanimity votes on such sensitive topics like tax and defense policy should be replaced by majority voting.

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Thus, the conundrum is that solutions on the European level most often affect all 27 member states, but to get them to agree and be satisfied about those solutions is quite difficult. Indeed, it is increasingly impossible, especially in controversial areas like refugee policy, the euro, or foreign policy. As Demertzis, Pisany-Ferry, Wieser & Wolff noted in 2018,¹ “the assumption that an ever-closer-union of 27,

¹ Demertzis, M., Pisani-Ferry, J., Sapir, A., Wieser, T. & Wolff, G (2018). *One size does not fit all: European integration by differentiation*, <http://bruegel.org/2018/09/one-size-does-not-fit-all/>

or more, member states will all reach the same goal has, in itself, become a cause of ineffectiveness.” This will only worsen when those very distinct visions about the future will directly clash. The EU has reached, one might say, the limits of its current framework.

A solution for all parties involved might be to move away from the traditional one-size-fits-all approach. The EU, instead, needs a more flexible structure to deal with its heterogeneity of opinions.

A More Flexible Structure

Not that the idea of a system based on flexibility is a novelty. For long, the idea of a *multi-speed Europe* or *two-speed Europe* has been floating around, every once in a while being brought up, but eventually ending up in the gutters again. Especially member states from Eastern Europe have been heavily opposed to this idea since it seems to them that this would lock them in as second-class members indefinitely - they are now lagging behind on integration efforts, and, the argument goes, this would remain so.²

In recent years, however, another reason for opposition has also been a fear that a more flexible system would lock all member states up to being in favor of an *ever closer union*. Yes, a *multi-speed* Europe would create more flexibility and opportunities for more Eurosceptic countries to not have to go with the same speed than others. But, crucially, the direction that all member states would be “speeding to” with different velocity would still be the same: namely, more integration. By signing up to this idea, some fear they could be forced to join the euro or having to sign up to other ideas they don’t support maybe later than others, but still at some point.

Nonetheless, there are other options of increased flexibility which would not entail the necessity to go the same direction.

Concentric Circles

The idea of *concentric circles* has been around since the late 1980s when then-French President Francois Mitterrand proposed, though for different reasons,

² Vimont, P. (2018). Flexibility is not the miracle solution, <https://esharp.eu/opinion/flexibility-is-not-the-miracle-solution>

“concentric circles in which the central and eastern European countries would be put in a political halfway house to prepare themselves for eventual EC [European Community] membership”³.

The idea gained steam again when the current French President Emmanuel Macron put the idea forward in the fall of 2018.⁴ Jean-Claude Juncker’s scenario 4 titled “Those who want more, do more” from his White Paper of 2017⁵ was similar, though the Commission President dropped it quickly. Macron, one can speculate, had seen some rather ferocious responses to his vision of Europe (though, of course, at the same time, it received enthusiastic support by others). He perhaps realized that there was too much opposition to his ideas, making one-size-fits-all impossible.

In the framework of *concentric circles*, member states can choose how highly integrated they are - each level, i.e. each *circle*, is self-contained and stable. There will be a Core Europe in the center which is going full-steam on integration efforts. But at the same time, there are outer circles doing less. Member states could simply decide which circle they want to belong to and, thus, how far inside the overall circle they want to go. This concept, similar to the *multi-speed* Europe, still

entails a progressivity of sorts: there is a certain assumption that the outer circles would sooner or later move to the inner circles and, ultimately, to the core. But in contrast to *multi-speed*, no obligation would be involved. Member states would still be free to decide to stay in an outer circle.

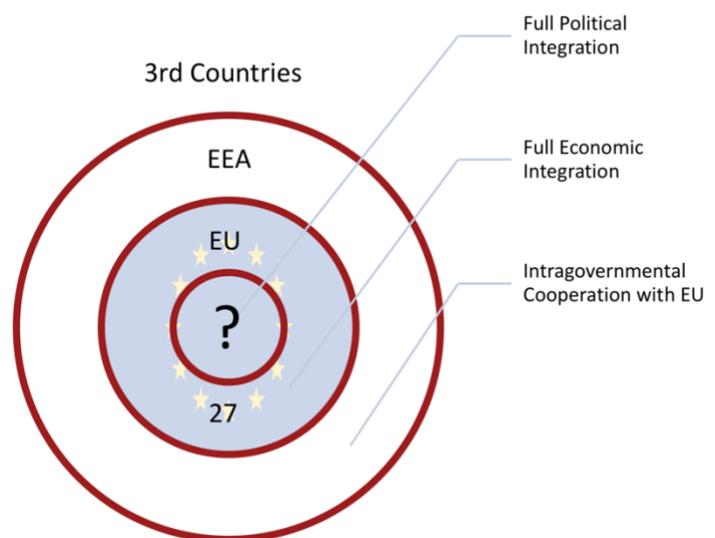


Figure 1: Concentric Circles already exist. Intensifying this system could lead to more flexibility.

³ Quoted in Bozo, F. (2009). *Mitterrand, the End of the Cold War, and German Unification*. New York, NY: Berghahn Books.

⁴ See an article of mine back then: Weiss, K. (2018). *Macron’s concentric circles could be a solution for the EU - and for Brexit*, <https://capx.co/macrons-concentric-circles-could-be-a-solution-for-the-eu-and-for-brexit/>

⁵ Juncker, J.-C. (2017). *White Paper on the Future of Europe*, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/white_paper_on_the_future_of_europe_en.pdf

Hybrid Model

A combination of the two previous models would potentially lead to a Hybrid Model, which was previously framed by the Bruegel study cited above.⁶ Here, there would be a bare-bones EU with core competencies. In this scenario, every member state would have to commit to some integration processes, which would be seen as a common denominator. This could - and probably should, since all member states have already signed up to those at least in principle - entail areas such as the single market as well as a basic agreement about shared values and a commitment to liberal democratic principles.

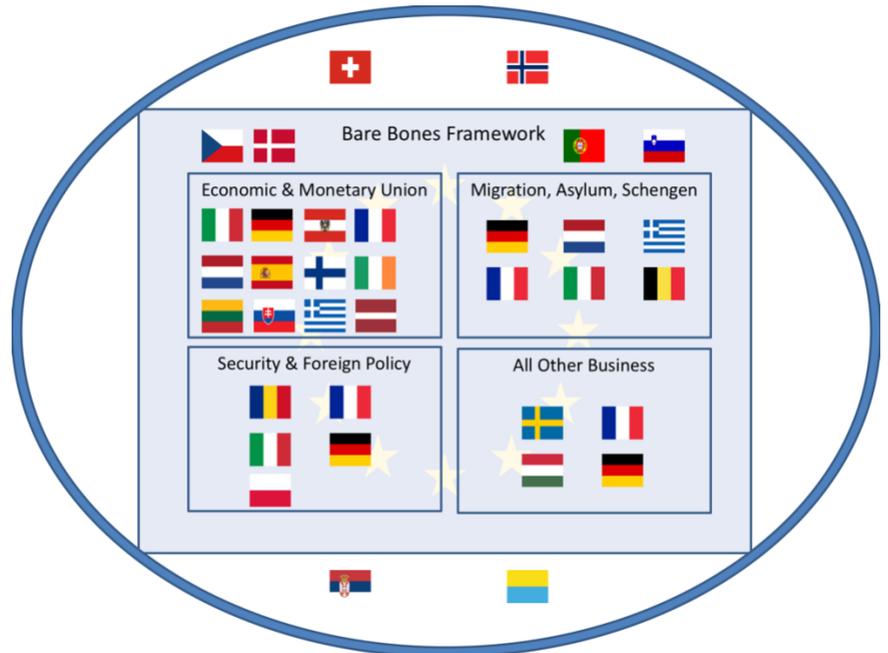


Figure 3: In the Bruegel Hybrid Model, all members would sign up to some core competencies, which would be supplemented by a club structure.

Over and above this common denominator there would be clubs for different projects to which member states could sign up. This club structure would be an enhanced form of the EU's cooperation framework while forcing no one to go with it. Nonetheless, this model would still not solve the problems that also plague the club system.

Project-Based Integration

Instead, a more radical approach of the Concentric Circles concept with an equally more radical club version would lead to maximum flexibility in European integration: a project-based approach on European integration, often derogatively called *Europe à la Carte*. Critics often argue that this would lead to cherry-picking by member states. This is actually true, though it is not entirely clear what would be so horrible about it.

⁶ See footnote 1.

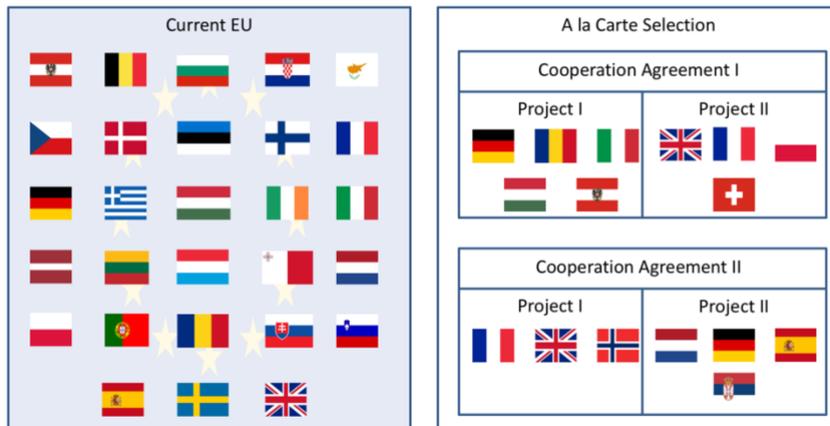


Figure 4: An integration process based on individual projects would lead to maximum flexibility.

In a project-based integration, member states could sign up not to clubs, but to very specific projects. A prime example of this is the newly founded *Permanent Structured Cooperation* (PESCO) in defense policy which most EU member states set up in late 2017.⁷ No national government is forced to sign up to PESCO - registration, if you want, is voluntary and yet, could even be partly opened to non-EU countries in the future.⁸ Thus,

some EU countries abstained from participating in PESCO.

All of this is still very close to a club: a voluntary club of EU member states comes together for defense policy. But even in PESCO, participation in specific projects is still voluntary. A member state, if it thinks collaboration on a research project or cooperation on funding major military projects would be useful, can look for other PESCO members to partner up. All member states that want to participate are allowed to do so - but will also have to live with the consequences. Those member states that are not interested in a specific project are allowed to stay out of it (but are also not able to reap the possible benefits from the integration efforts until they sign up).

⁷ European Union External Action (2018). *Deepening defence cooperation among EU member states*, https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/pesco_factsheet_november_2018_en_0.pdf

⁸ See for example Barigazzi, J. (2018). *UK and US will be allowed to join some EU military projects*, <https://www.politico.eu/article/pesco-military-uk-and-us-will-be-allowed-to-join-some-eu-military-projects/>

A Vision of Visions

Many of the most fervent defenders of European integration have been opposed to any of these concepts, arguing, like ALDE leader Guy Verhofstadt has, that Europe is not “a menu, and values and fundamental rights are also part of the very same package. No member state will be allowed to start cherry picking, whether they are economically or ideologically motivated.”⁹ Indeed, some critics have gone so far as to say that a more flexible arrangement of the EU would be “nothing less than the resignation” on the way to an *ever closer union*.¹⁰

This may be true. But if it were to spell an end to the *ever closer union*, it would, in fact, show that the sentiment for more European integration is just not existent at the moment. By opting for more flexibility and voluntary decision-making for EU member states, we would find out how much integration member states actually want. By arguing against such an arrangement, in essence, those in favor of the *ever closer union* would merely show that the end-state of a European federal state needs to be attained regardless of how to get there. *The end justifies the means*, would show at last.

But those in favor of an *ever closer union* could benefit from more flexibility, too, finally being freed from others that have been holding them back. As Duff writes, in such a world, “one size would not fit all.” But “that would allow the countries that desire a stronger, more federated Europe to forge ahead, without unnecessarily alienating their closest allies.”¹¹ If the sustained success of the European project is a goal, it would also

lessen the probability of chaotic events like Brexit happening, since member states would most likely not see the need for such drastic changes.

“A more flexible framework would be a Vision of Visions. The vision of such an EU would be to simply not have a single, all-encompassing vision, but instead accept that member states (and ever more so the European populace) have different views.”

⁹ Verhofstadt, G. (2018). *Compromising on EU values would mean selling out on our own integrity*, <https://www.euronews.com/2018/11/29/guy-verhofstadt-compromising-on-eu-values-would-mean-selling-out-on-our-integrity-view>

¹⁰ See for example Chryssogelos, A. (2017). *Creating a ‘multi-speed Europe’ would divide the EU and diminish it as a foreign policy actor*, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2017/04/05/creating-a-multi-speed-europe/>

¹¹ Duff, A. (2018). *Britain’s best hope: A federal EU*, <https://www.politico.eu/article/opinion-britains-best-hope-a-federal-eu/>

A more flexible framework - and the project-based version, in particular, would then be a Vision of Visions (akin to the concept of the “Utopia of Utopias” from the late political philosopher Robert Nozick¹²): the vision of such an EU would be to simply not have a single, all-encompassing vision, but instead accept that member states (and even more so the European citizenry) have different views. In this framework, all of these different visions would find their place in a voluntary matter.

This vision might not be sexy. It might miss the grandeur of most visions. It might not win votes. But on a continent with so many different views on where the EU should head and where polarization and conflict are ever increasing, it might be the only way out to once again find peace. It might be the most realistic option for a successful future for the EU - and even more so, for Europe.

Much more work would need to be done if Europe opts for a more flexible framework. It is hoped, however, that this paper is a first step for a discussion in favor of more diversity and pluralism on the European level over one-size-fits-all solutions.

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¹² Nozick, R. (1974). *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*. New York, NY: Basic Books.