

Integration at a Crossroads: The Future of the EU and German European Policy

Factsheet: “Differentiated Integration as a Policy Choice”

*The numerous crises that stemmed from the COVID-19 pandemic have shaken the foundations of the European integration project once more. The following aspects will be discussed: (1) how political elites’ preferences of differentiated integration (DI) as a policy choice change across countries (**EU IDEA project**); (2) how liberal economic values increase support for DI among individual citizens (**EU3D project**); as well as (3) a discourse analysis on governments’ positions on DI from the 1990s until today (**InDivEU project**).*

- Is DI the preferred policy choice at the political and public level?
- How can the benefits of DI be better communicated to citizens?
- Is DI the way forward in European integration and if so, what could be Germany’s role in this regard?

Goals

When member states are not able to find common solutions, DI can and should represent a pragmatic and helpful tool to move European integration forward nonetheless. Forms of differentiation allow those member states that are willing, to work closer together. Differentiated integration has had largely positive outcomes when it has adhered to common EU values and positions, for instance in the Economic and Monetary Union, the Schengen area or CFSP and CSDP (the permanent structured cooperation PESCO). DI can also characterise the external relations of the EU with third countries (e.g., the EEA or the participation of non-EU members to Schengen). The EU should continue pursuing multi-speed forms of differentiation, where differentiated integration is limited in time in order to allow all members to join eventually.

Challenges

- DI risks to lead to ‘first- and second-class membership’ of EU countries.
- Too many forms of differentiation but also some specific forms of differentiation such as l’Europe à la carte could trigger centrifugal - potentially disintegrating Europe - instead of centripetal forces - uniting European countries closer together, as in the case of multi-speed cooperation.
- Many EU citizens and even political representatives are not familiar with the concept of differentiated integration and are not aware of its benefits.

Possible Solutions

- Differentiation can enhance European integration in the EMU, CFSP and CSDP as well as in the migration policy sector without jeopardising the functioning as well as the the unity of the EU’s policies, laws and institutions.
- Member state preferences on differentiation vary significantly among countries. They are often shaped by existing European interdependences as well as the actual effectiveness of DI in certain policy areas rather than by the country’s specific

characteristics. Political elites need to continue pursuing multi-speed forms of differentiation such as enhanced cooperation, while moving away from unanimity towards qualified majority voting (QMV) in EU decision-making, in order to achieve more integration.

- Europhile political representatives across EU member states have to counteract the instrumentalisation of differentiation by Eurosceptic parties, which could make differentiation a tool to move further away from the EU favouring national backlashes rather than using it as a flexible temporary solution to achieve more integration in the long run. While pursuing this goal, political actors need also to address more often the benefits of the EU in general and of DI in particular in public debates, in order to better inform EU citizens, thus counteracting disinformation as well as populist and nationalist trends.
- Among citizens, support for differentiated integration is much lower in Southern Europe. Supporters of DI are usually highly educated and marked by liberal-conservative attitudes. A substantive amount of EU citizens considers DI a discriminatory instrument going against European solidarity. Hence, political representatives could seize for instance the momentum of the Conference on the Future of Europe by bringing clear arguments on how DI can be reconciled with citizens' visions for the future of Europe.

German Dimension

- *Relevance:* DI represents an important tool to move European integration forward, even if not all member states are willing to do so.
- *Position:* If differentiation is needed, Germany favours multi-speed forms of cooperation to achieve an ever-closer Union.
- *Outlook in view of German federal elections:*¹ The Green Party explicitly highlighted that only multi-speed forms of cooperation including enhanced cooperation as enshrined in the Treaties allow the EU to move forward. Moreover, they are in favour of expanding the QMV to all EU policy areas. In the migration sector specifically, they consider a coalition of the willing the only pragmatic solution, if the EU is not able to tackle problems attached to migration with all 27 members. In this regard, the FDP also supports a coalition of the willing in the migration policy while envisaging cuts in grants from the EU budget for those member states that are not willing to cooperate. Enhanced cooperation and QMV in the foreign and security policy are also solutions supported by the CDU/CSU. The most important pre-condition is, however, that these forms of cooperation remain open and inclusive for other members to access them at any point in time. Conversely, DIE LINKE would like to see the end of PESCO.

¹ Based on the party's respective electoral programme of 2021.