



The 60th anniversary of the EU: a new élan for the EU ... or maybe not

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The 60th anniversary of the EU: a new *élan* for the EU ... or maybe not

The 60th anniversary of the European Union (EU) celebrated by the leaders of 27 EU member states on 25 March 2017 has been affected by major challenges: the Westminster terrorist attack just a few days before the Summit, Brexit and the UK's notification under Article 50 Treaty on European Union a few days later, euro-scepticism affecting also the EU founding member states, waves of populism all over Europe, increasing migrant flows across the Mediterranean, the unsettled Syrian crisis, to name just a few.

For some time now the EU has been in the midst of a crisis and many observers have been urging deep reforms to construct a stronger Union and face this critical juncture. Due to the wrong perception of the (dis)advantages of belonging to the EU, misunderstanding of EU values and principles, or criticism of specific policies such as the monetary union and the Euro, over time the European public opinion has passed from providing a permissive consensus to expressing an overt opposition to further European integration. Today the EU foundational rationale seems to have waned, thus needs to be restated and adapted to contemporary reality.

The European Commission attempted to re-launch the debate on the advantages of the EU membership by adopting a pragmatic and direct approach to catch the citizens' attention and regain more support. As announced in President Juncker's 2016 State of the Union speech, on 1 March 2017 the European Commission presented a White Paper on the Future of Europe to

contribute to the Rome Summit of 25 March 2017. To celebrate the 60th anniversary of the establishment of the EU, the European Commission aimed at identifying *Avenues for unity for the EU at 27*. Yet a negative post-Brexit atmosphere permeated the EU celebrations and the only achievement of the summit was the meagre re-statement of the lowest common denominator cooperation mechanism in the EU at 27. Negotiations of the Rome Declaration were difficult. And Poland's decision to adhere to the declaration was sighed with relief. Unconvincingly, many European political leaders depicted these results as a plus and not as a minus in these times of EU crisis.

The White Paper presented by President Jean-Claude Juncker aimed at allowing for a reflection on the state of play of the European project, by assessing its achievements and strengths, seeking to further improvements and to shape a stronger future at 27. Despite its better intentions, though, not only it did not relaunch the European project, but it actually weakened it, because it lacks a political vision for the future. This might reflect the institutional imbalance that recently has relegated the European Commission to a secretariat in favour of the European Council, frustrating the role of *policy-entrepreneur* that the Commission played in the past through its initiative powers.

The White Paper presents five scenarios for the Union to evolve by 2025. In Scenario 1 – called *Carrying On* – the EU27 would stick to its course and focus on delivering its current reform agenda. In Scenario 2 –

named *Nothing but the Single Market* – the EU27 would gradually re-centre on the single market being the 27 member states unable to find common agreement on an increasing number of policy areas. In Scenario 3 – termed *Those Who Want More Do More* – some “coalitions of the willing” would emerge in the EU27, since member states willing to foster cooperation in specific areas would proceed at different speeds. In Scenario 4 – *Doing Less More Efficiently* – the EU27 would focus on the subsidiarity principle, delivering more and faster in selected policy areas, while doing less where it is perceived not to have an added value; therefore, attention and limited resources would be focused on selected policy areas. In Scenario 5 – *Doing Much More Together* – the EU27 would decide to do much more together across all policy areas.

Bearing in mind that in June 2019 the European elections will take place and the rise of euro-scepticism would challenge the EU existence, the European Commission aimed at setting a road-map to get the EU closer to the EU citizens, becoming more transparent and efficient. To favour a public and open debate on the Brexit effect and the EU27 life, the European Commission has drawn the attention on issues that have attracted a lot of criticism for being neglected at EU level such as the EU social dimension, defence, the economic and monetary union, EU finances.

What strikes the most of the five scenarios is the fact that ranging from European federalism (Scenario 5) to the reduction to little more than the single market (Scenario 2), the multi-speed Europe (Scenario 3) has attracted most of interest, being re-launched both by media and political circles as the key to exit the impasse. Having a closer look, none of these scenarios are really new options: Scenario 1 invests on political reforms, Scenario 2 insists on the single market, Scenario 3 focuses on variable geometry, Scenario 4 recalls subsidiarity, Scenario 5 envisages the federal project.

However, these scenarios echo and strengthen some of the restrictive innovations of the Lisbon Treaty that make possible a reduction of EU competences or the exit of EU members states, departing from the assumption that *an ever closer Union* is the only option, still a viable objective and a shared goal of the EU27 member states.

On the one hand, the five scenarios seem to suggest how to advance in European integration with a smaller membership; on the other, just by mentioning the reduction of the EU focus to the single market, the Juncker’s White Paper *de facto* renders possible the dismantling of many relevant EU achievements. Not to say the dismantling of the EU project. Scenario 2 risks jumping from less integration to disintegration like a self-fulfilling prophecy. But despite some EU detractors’ claims, the demise of the European project would bring no push forward in Europe’s security and prosperity.

The EU seems jeopardized by the lack of political will and innovative proposals, and even more by the fact that the option of a *diminutio* of EU competences has been envisaged among the five scenarios. To overcome the current crisis a political impulse is required. What the EU currently needs is a vibrant new political project fostering existing EU federal traits as a practicable path allowing for a new *élan* while defending at the same time a core group of prerogatives of (federate) states. The adoption of a federal paradigm could relaunch integration more effectively than the elaboration of the scenarios’ academic exercise.


The paradigmatic struggle between inter-governmental and supranational methods of integration that has characterized the European integration process since its beginning has influenced also the Juncker’s White Paper. With a clear imbalance towards EU member states as key actors with a strong veto-power, the White Paper does not dare proposing the centrality of supranational

institutions to challenge the intergovernmental supremacy.

Many analysts have regarded differentiated integration as the way forward towards more pragmatic integration. However, this is already a major component of the EU mechanisms, such as the eurozone or the Schengen area. Incomprehensibly, this scenario has been identified as the new *élan* for European integration. In current times the lowest common denominator mechanism cannot emerge as the only tool to keep together 27 EU member states that renounce to “more Europe” when and if states’ (real or perceived) interests are at stake. For instance, current challenges such as the migration crisis lead to the suspension of the Schengen area or the strengthening of borders via physical or legal walls.

To address euro-scepticism, the EU has committed to provide effective answers to

burning issues. The Rome Declaration adopted at the European Summit of 25 March 2017 claims that to address the unprecedented challenges that the EU is facing, both at global and domestic level, the objectives to be achieved in the mid to long term are: (1) a safe and secure Europe; (2) a prosperous and sustainable Europe; (3) a social Europe; (4) a stronger Europe on the global scene. Hence, the political vision expressed by the EU27 political leaders – *We want the Union to be big on big issues and small on small ones. We will promote a democratic, effective and transparent decision-making process and better delivery* – does not seem to be ambitious enough.

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