

 Policy Paper

WILL THE FUTURE OF THE EU BE DRIVEN TOP-DOWN OR BOTTOM UP?



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Introduction

The European Union, as we know it today, began to take shape after the Second World War, when space opened up for the unification of Europe. Gradually, other European countries with heterogeneous characteristics, problems and challenges became involved. In its development, the European integration process has encountered. It continues to face limits, be they linked to the deepening of integration or the involvement of other countries and the necessary legislative changes. The founding treaties have been revised over time to meet current needs. The European Union is a global leader and must constantly evolve and respond to developments and challenges on the international stage. Only in this way can it remain competitive. The European Union boasts the most significant internal market, a common currency and a banking union. After the most critical enlargement, the financial crisis, the migration crisis, Brexit, the COVID-19 crisis and the energy crisis, it has to decide what direction it should take and how the Member States could be involved. Crises have always shaped the European Union, and the external shock of Brexit has highlighted the need to debate the future shape of the European integration process. In particular, Brexit demonstrated that the European Union has communicated the benefits of membership poorly and needs to work on this aspect. All the crises mentioned show that the European integration process needs to be adapted to respond flexibly to the challenges and external shocks on the European and global scene. However, changes should primarily react to the needs of the Member States and their populations.

The policy paper looks at possible approaches and proposals the European Union could follow or at least be inspired by. It provides a theoretical view of the future of the European Union as perceived by the previous European Commission under Jean-Claude Juncker. The EU27 was to decide its future by 2025. Discussions on the future shape of the European Union are followed by the current European Commission under Ursula von der Leyen. The previous and current European Commissions have different views on the future of the European Union. Still, changes are necessary, and the European Union will agree on the direction it will eventually take.

The White Paper on the Future of Europe and the Conference on the Future of Europe as two different approaches – top-down versus bottom-up approach?

As a global player, the European Union must constantly face challenges on a worldwide scale. After the global pandemic of Covid-19, after which it is trying to kick-start its economy with the help of the EU's Next Generation instrument, the National Recovery Plans, it is currently facing the war in Ukraine, which at its beginning brought with it a wave of migration primarily in the eastern part of the EU. Then, it has to face the energy crisis. Reducing dependence on supplies, or strategic autonomy, has become increasingly important. The EU must invest with its states to overcome the crisis and accelerate the climate and digital transformation. Conditions in Europe and on the global stage have changed, and the European Union, shaped by crises for almost its entire history, should decide which direction to take to maintain its position on the global stage. These objectives cannot be achieved with a top-down approach alone, but a bottom-up approach must also be applied. The European Union must respond to the real needs of the people. Only in this way will the EU be able to regain the support of its citizens. Top-down versus bottom-up approach as two different approaches of the previous and current European Commission as the way forward for Europe?

The previous European Commission represented the top-down approach to the future shape of the European Union under the leadership of Jean Claude-Juncker, who presented a White Paper on the future of Europe on the 60th anniversary of the Treaties of Rome in 2017. The European Union has had successes but also more challenging times. The White Paper on the Future of Europe outlines a future in which all 27 Member States will participate. The White Paper on the future of Europe was supposed to be the Juncker Commission's contribution to a new chapter in the European project. The future shape of the European integration process has often been marginalised to more or less Europe, which is too simplistic and misleading. In 2017, a method was to be launched through which the European Union would determine its future with a top-down approach. The White Paper outlines five scenarios or approaches to the Single Market and Trade; Economic and Monetary Policy; Schengen, Migration and Security; Foreign Policy and Defence; EU

Budget; and Accessibility. The scenarios are not mutually exclusive, ranging from the status quo to a change of focus and priorities to a partial collective step forward. The specific scenarios are as follows: Carrying on; Nothing but Single market only; Those who want more do more; Doing less but more effectively; Doing much more together.

The future shape of the European integration process through a top-down approach is based on the idea that member states decide together what the future shape of the European integration process will be. Thus, the future would be established at the national or European level, and Europeans would have to "respect" this form of the future. In other words, the people of the European Union would not be involved in forming the future. However, it should be added that the European Commission has officially acknowledged that differentiated integration has become a reality with the White Paper. The three main concepts embodying the differentiated approach are multi-speed Europe (temporary), variable geometry (territorial) and Europe à la carte (sectoral). Multi-speed Europe is the approach of a given Member State that wants to achieve a common goal and is willing to move faster than the rest. However, it is assumed that other EU countries will subsequently join in. Variable geometry defines a situation where there is a permanent separation between more developed and less developed Member States. Finally, the à la carte approach describes a situation where Member States choose a policy area where they will participate jointly.

The different approaches are not mutually exclusive but complementary and coexist in sub-areas of European policy. There is thus a visible parallel between the concepts of differentiation of European integration (multi-speed Europe, variable geometry, Europe à la carte) and the five scenarios outlined in the White Paper on the Future of Europe. The concepts of differentiation can be directly related to the five scenarios. Multi-speed Europe is de facto synonymous with the Those who want more do more scenario, but here, there is an overlap with variable geography. Europe à la carte is associated with sectoral integration, which may correspond to the Nothing but the Single Market or Doing Less More Efficiently scenarios. A multi-speed Europe is a reality. It is manifested by enhanced cooperation, the euro area, the Schengen area, a common defence and security policy and a common foreign and security policy.

But with the new European Commission for 2019-2024 came a different approach to shaping the future shape of the European Union, and the White Paper on the future is hardly discussed anymore. At the instigation of French President Emmanuel Macron, the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE) was realised. This is a bottom-up approach. The French President came up with the idea before the 2019 European elections. By then, Brexit was already being discussed, and the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, subsequently incorporated the Conference on the Future of Europe into her political strategy in the summer of 2019. On 10 March 2021, the then President of the European Parliament, David Sassoli, the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen and the Portuguese Prime Minister, Antonio Costa, on behalf of the Council of the European Union issued a joint statement on the Conference on the Future of Europe, officially entitled 'Engaging citizens in democracy - building a more resilient Europe. The document sets the stage for the official launch of the CoFoE on 9 May 2021, which is seen as a new process to kick-start the future direction of the European Union. However, the idea of Europeans becoming more actively involved in the European integration process is not new in itself, building on the concept of the European Citizens' Initiative, where Europeans could call on the European Commission to propose new legislation. CoFoE sought to combine bottom-up participatory democracy with elements of top-down decision-making. Therefore, it was not a straight bottom-up principle initiated by Europeans. In any case, it is important to add that the Conference on the Future of Europe is an unusual project intended to kick-start the European Union after a series of crises.

The debates on the functioning and future shape of the European Union involved Europeans from 2021 to May 2022. The Conference on the Future of Europe was the first event of its kind where Europeans themselves were invited to address European challenges, priorities and the future of the European integration process to promote European democratic values. The Conference was open to Europeans across the European Union, but the emphasis was on the involvement of young Europeans. Over 5 million visitors attended the platform, and over 700,000 people participated in the conference events. The Future of Europe Conference included the following platforms, discussions and events:

- **Multilingual digital platform** available throughout the Future of Europe Conference. Europeans could continuously send their suggestions, ideas, contributions, and opinions online on the European integration process. Europeans could express themselves in 24 languages.
- **Decentralised events in face-to-face**, online or hybrid form organised by national, regional or local bodies or institutions in EU countries.
- **European citizens' panel** discussions addressed various topics and issues and also put forward proposals for solutions. The panel discussions respected the principles of representativeness in terms of geographical origin, gender, age, socio-economic background and level of education.
- **The conference's plenary sessions** ensured that the recommendations from the panel discussions were discussed according to sub-topics and without a predetermined outcome.

On 9 May 2022, a report on the results of the Conference on the Future of Europe was presented, containing 49 proposals for the institutions of the European Union. The proposals are based on the views of participating Europeans on 9 European themes (Stronger Economy; Social Justice and Employment; Education, Culture, Youth and Sport; Digital Transformation; European Democracy; Values and Rights, Rule of Law, Security; Climate Change and Environment; Health; The EU's Position in the World; Migration). The Future of Europe Conference was poorly publicised at national levels. People not involved in EU issues were hardly aware of the project. But even so, the Future Conference is an important historical expression of democracy that will hopefully trigger greater involvement of Europeans in shaping the future shape of the European Union.

Results & Discussion

The White Paper on the Future of Europe and the top-down approach presented in it was outlined by the previous European Commission in 2017. Still, it is no longer discussed with the current European Commission's political strategy, representing the opposite bottom-up approach. But the differentiated EU as a two-speed Europe is already a reality. The idea has not remained just on paper. Not all countries are part of the eurozone or the Schengen area. A multi-speed Europe also exists in concrete policies, such as the permanent

framework for closer cooperation in defence and security, PESCO, or the European Public Prosecutor's Office. Different speeds of integration are made possible through enhanced cooperation. The top-down institutional approach seems to have reached its limits. It can hardly contribute to the current solution or the future direction of the European integration process and to regaining the trust of Europeans. However, it has been important that the European Commission officially recognises that the integration process is differentiated in the European Union. Highlighting the heterogeneity of the European Union Member States' views on the current shape, the enlargement of the European Union may further exacerbate the European integration process, be it the countries of the Associated Trio or the Western Balkan countries.

The bottom-up approach, or the combination of top-down and bottom-up approaches applied in the Conference on the Future of Europe, is more relevant. The CoFoE itself ended with mixed results for democratic reform. On the part of the European Union, there was an attempt to design an innovative process aimed directly at citizens, who were to be actively involved in the current and future shape of the European integration process. However, if the results of the CoFoE are to be genuinely transferred into practice and have an impact, ambitious and wide-ranging measures will be needed. The Conference on the Future of Europe was the first and most open event, but it did not contribute much to addressing the state of European democracy.

Moreover, expectations on the part of Europeans risk falling into oblivion, which may cause further frustrations with the European integration process and affect the current state of democracy in the European Union. European politicians are reportedly aware that the CoFoE itself is only a first step towards changes in the functioning of the European Union and that the results, or the views of Europeans, need to be used for democratic reform. However, the Conference on the Future showed that citizens can be actively involved in public debates on the state of the European Union. However, there is criticism that the conference itself was not well publicised and only Europeans who are more actively involved in European politics were involved. This also applies to the CoFoE digital platform, which, although well-attended, did not produce many recommendations that could be incorporated. The guided panel discussions were more successful in this respect, yielding more than 60 recommendations for changes in the European integration process. It was

also noted that citizens from countries that have been part of the EU for a more extended period and can speak English were more likely to participate in the discussions. Citizens from countries in the eastern part of the EU were less involved. However, it should be added that the CoFoE produced a report with 49 recommendations and 326 suggestions for improving the European integration process. These include, for example, deeper EU integration in climate, social and health policy and a move to majority voting in the EU Council on all policies.

CoFoE was intended to inspire future experiments with greater European involvement in European policy-making. So far, however, the obstacles seem to be the EU institutions and national governments themselves. Many of the recommendations coming out of the Conference on the Future of Europe can be implemented through the Lisbon Treaty. Still, others require treaty changes, and no one will open them up. The idea of the CoFoE was not to directly change the Treaties, but many European recommendations needed it. Some Member States are trying to accommodate their citizens by fine-tuning their policy areas and priorities within the framework of the EU Presidency. The European Parliament, on the other hand, is trying to implement the most ambitious recommendations, which go hand in hand with increasing the powers of the European Parliament.

The Conference on the Future of Europe lives on more than a year after the results were published. The CoFoE results guide the Commission's work programme for 2023. Of the 43 new Commission initiatives, 35 are directly or indirectly linked to the ideas emerging from the Conference on the Future of Europe. Not all of the proposals fall under the remit of the European Commission, so other EU institutions or local and regional authorities are taking them up. After the Conference, the European Commission continues its discussions with Europeans through panel discussions, where Europeans are asked to comment and discuss forthcoming legislation. It thus seems that Europeans will be able to express their views on European policy after the Conference on the Future of Europe itself. The topics of these panel discussions are proposed by the European Commission, which asks interested Europeans to work first in small groups and then in sessions to discuss and work on recommendations that the European Commission can use to prepare its initiatives and policies. Civil society organisations' involvement would help make the assembly more inclusive. The European Commission will prepare more panel discussions with Europeans

in the future, the organisation will improve, and perhaps a more representative sample of participating Europeans will be better selected.

Conclusion

The European Union is a changing place in a changing world, just as at the national level, EU Member States have to face political cycles. The previous European Commission presented a future based on top-down approaches combining the proposals in the White Paper on Europe. The reality today is a multi-speed Europe, which corresponds directly to one scenario in the aforementioned White Paper on the future of Europe. The multi-speed Europe seems to be running into limits, and there is a need to involve Europeans more in the very shape of the European integration process, as the current European Commission is already doing. The question is how it can harness the potential of Europeans' views on the European integration process. The approach of the current European Commission is not strictly bottom-up but a combination of top-down and bottom-up because it is the European Commission that determines what topics will be discussed in the citizens' panels. Europeans have their say on legislative issues that need treaty changes, but no one is willing to open up the membership treaties.

Member States are thus at least trying to adapt their programmes to the Presidency of the Council of the EU as much as possible, in which they can adapt and focus on issues close to their hearts. However, they must align with the European Commission's programme or strategic agenda for 2014-2019. However, the Presidency programmes are to some extent adapted to the current situation, not only on the European scene, and so the question is how they can translate the views of their citizens into European policy-making.

The future shape of the European Union, or rather the approach to shaping it, will undoubtedly be influenced by the possible enlargement of the EU towards the Western Balkans or the East (the Associated Trio). However, it does not look like any other European state will become a member of the EU by 2030. In any case, it should be noted that candidate or potential candidate states already participate to some extent in European integration. The European Union has been moving towards deeper integration since its inception, with more European countries joining in, but on the other hand it can also lead to disintegration. The

question is to what extent and if any further disintegration tendencies will become apparent in the future.

However, it is now clear that the European Union, with its 27 Member States, will not decide on the future direction of the European integration process by 2025, which was the vision presented by Jean Claude-Junker in his White Paper on the Future of Europe on the anniversary of the Treaties of Rome. Under the leadership of Ursula von den Leyn, the current European Commission is trying to build on the Conference on the Future of Europe in the form of citizen panels. So far, it seems that the views of Europeans on the current European integration process and its future shape are desirable in the legislative sphere. With European elections next year, the mood in the European institutions could change a lot. The European level, like the national levels of the Member States, is strongly influenced by political cycles. The situation, the mood, the attitudes towards the future shape of the European integration process may change in the institutions next year. It is likely that the next European Commission will adopt a different approach from the current combination of top-down and bottom-up approaches that seek to eliminate the democratic deficit. The political will, among other factors, has a major influence on the future shape of the European Union. The future of the European Union is still in the stars. However, it proves that it can still be one of the global leaders and that membership is once again, although not entirely in happy circumstances, becoming something unique or exclusive, at least for non-member European states.