

Is the idea of a multispeed Europe gaining ground?

Leaders from France, Germany, Italy and Spain met at the Chateau de Versailles outside Paris for a working dinner on Monday. It was an opportunity to demonstrate their unity ahead of a full EU summit starting in Brussels today and to underline their support for the idea that the speed of integration should vary between members states of the bloc.



Fabian Willermain of Egmont, Belgium's Royal Institute for International Relations, and Lüder Gerken, the director of the Centre for European Studies (CEP), a German think tank, offer contrasting views on this concept. Fabian Willermain - We can't move ahead without changing treaties. In Brussels, as in all European capitals, the idea of a multi-speed Europe is making headway, but it's too slow and too vague. Three scenarios seem possible: focusing on the Eurozone as a hard core; relying on the six founding countries; or opting for a system of enhanced cooperation.

I think Europe will opt for the first scenario. The EU will focus on the Eurozone — because it is already highly integrated — and add on other areas such as fiscal, social and defense policies, which remain a priority for many countries.

The Commission's white paper outlines five paths for the future of the 27 members. In its third scenario, it presents the idea of a multi-speed Europe and in so doing, allows it to move forward. This is the favorite option of Jean-Claude Juncker who deems it more realistic than the path towards federalism.

But it is impossible to move forward without a change in the treaties. Or at least a new ad hoc treaty will be needed, alongside that of Lisbon. The prevailing mindset in Brussels is that nothing will move

until September and that after the elections in France and Germany we can expect some reflection on the issue.

Some Eurosceptic capitals — including Warsaw — are in favor of treaty reform. They want to clarify things and dream of, in certain areas, a return of power national capitals. But this perspective is frightening: Paris, in particular, does not want to open this Pandora's Box. This idea of a differentiated Europe does imply the failure of integration, but that of enlargement. When the EU expanded in 2004 and 2007, we thought of the East as pro-European East in nature and pro-European forever. However, it has never been as hard as it is today to reach agreements in the Council. With 27 members, we cannot co-ordinate completely.

In creating economic and monetary union, everyone knew that the economic pillar was missing and that one day or another we would have to move forward. History shows that integration has led to crisis after crisis. Faced with Brexit, Trump and a whole series of external threats, Europe will change because it has no other choice. But it was at the time of the Maastricht Treaty that the idea of a two-dimensional Europe should have been set up.

I prefer to speak of “dimensions” rather than “speeds” because the term presupposes that we can go back. The United Kingdom has demonstrated this. Lüder Gerken: It's the most realistic solution. At the CEP, we have been saying for a long time that a multi-speed Europe is the most realistic solution if not the ideal solution. I am glad to see that the German government finally recognizes this.

In practice, we see that the 28 states of the European Union [with the United Kingdom, Ed.] have such different visions that it is difficult to achieve integration. Now, I can say that we are supported by the German authorities on this issue. This development took place in several stages. In the 1990s, finance minister Wolfgang Schäuble supported this idea without it really gaining traction.

It was the decision of the United Kingdom to leave Europe which was central in promoting this idea in Germany. Britain has always wanted to be part of the economic union but has rejected political integration, and it is not the only one. Denmark and Sweden have reservations, as has Poland. A second reason for this development has been the issue of refugees. The German government has noted that there are also very different approaches to European solidarity. It also made mistakes because it did not get its migratory policy of 2015 approved by its partners. Finally, the election of Donald Trump certainly played a role in Angela Merkel's views on defense.

Here, some countries like France and Germany want to do more, others, like the countries of the East, trust NATO. For all these reasons, it is realistic to imagine that some countries can advance together in terms of political integration and that others follow later, or give up following. In fact, multi-speed Europe already exists. We have a euro area with 19 countries and a Schengen area, not all 27 of which are members.

In Germany, the discussion has scarcely begun. Political parties in Berlin are only addressing the question now, apart from perhaps the Social Democratic Party candidate for the chancellery, Martin Schulz. As a former president of the European Parliament, Schulz has always been in favor of a homogeneous approach to Europe. We will have to wait to see if he will change position. In any case, a multi-speed Europe can be envisaged in the fields of monetary policy, security policy, and defense. It

is too early to decide on the possibility of a European migration and asylum policy. Let us not talk about fiscal policy: it seems very unrealistic that the German government would support the idea.

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