Differentiated integration

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The European Parliament adopted by 446 votes to 138, with 19 abstentions, a resolution on differentiated integration.

The concept of differentiated integration refers to a range of different mechanisms each of which can have a very different impact on European integration; whereas one can distinguish between time differentiation, or a multispeed Europe, where the goals are the same but the speed required to achieve them varies, manners differentiation, or Europe à la carte, and space differentiation, often referred to as ‘variable geometry’.

A secondary option and not a strategic priority

Members recalled that differentiation is a stable feature of European integration, not only in areas falling within the Union's competence, but also in other areas, and that it has sometimes allowed the deepening and enlargement of the EU to take place simultaneously. However, they refused to consider differentiation as an innovative way forward for the future of the Union.

Parliament insisted that the debate surrounding differentiated integration should not be about pro-differentiation versus anti-differentiation, but the best way to operationalise differentiated integration – which is already a political reality – within the EU’s institutional framework in the best interests of the Union and its citizens.

Members argued that any form of differentiated integration should reflect the idea that Europe does not work to a one-size-fits-all approach and should adapt to the needs and wishes of its citizen. This differentiation:

- may sometimes be required for the purposes of embarking on new European projects and overcoming the deadlock arising from national political circumstances unrelated to the common project;

- should be used pragmatically as a constitutional tool to ensure flexibility without undermining the general interest of the Union and the equal rights and opportunities of its citizens;

- should only be conceived of as a temporary step on the path towards more effective and integrated policymaking.

Members confirmed that any form of differentiation initiative that leads to the creation of first- and second-class Member States of the Union, or to a perception thereof, would be a major political failure with detrimental consequences for the EU project.

Differentiated integration should not be seen as a means of promoting tailor-made solutions that could compromise the Union's method and its institutional system. Also, it should always:

- remain open to all Member States and continue to serve as an example of deepening European integration;

- be considered in such a way as to fully encourage and support Member States wishing to participate in their economic development and reform efforts with a view to meeting the necessary criteria within a reasonable period of time;

- be done within the framework of the provisions of the Treaties and preserve the unity of the Union's institutions without leading to more complex decision-making processes that would reduce the democratic accountability of the Union's institutions.

In order to meet the need for flexibility tools, Members called for the Council's voting procedures to continue to move from unanimity to qualified majority voting, using the 'passerelle clause' provided for in Article 48(7) of the EU Treaty.

Revision of the Treaties

According to Parliament, the next revision of the Treaties should bring order to the current process of differentiation by ending the practice of permanent opt-outs and exceptions from primary EU law for individual Member States.

Brexit could be an opportunity to move away from models of ‘opting out’ towards non-discriminatory and supportive models of ‘opting in’; stresses that these ‘opting in’ models would not limit progress towards ‘ever closer union’ to the lowest common denominator of a one-size-fits-all solution.

Parliament insisted on the following points:

- accession to the Union should imply an obligation for Member States to respect the primary EU law in all policy areas;

- countries that wish to have a close relationship with the EU without committing themselves to full compliance with primary law and that will not or cannot join the EU should be offered some form of partnership;

- differentiation should not be allowed (i) when it comes to respect for existing fundamental values and rights enshrined in Article 2 of the EU Treaty; (ii) in policy areas where non-participating Member States could create negative externalities such as economic and social dumping.

In order to ensure that differentiation does not lead to political fragmentation, Parliament considered that a future European institutional framework should include ineluctable European Pillars on political, economic, social and environmental rights.