Careful What You Choose For: Is a Multi-Speed Europe Really the Answer to the EU's Problems?

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It appears that the EU's solution to its current directionless and delegitimised state is a multi-speed Europe. It is ironic that the 27-nation bloc prepares to mark 60 years since its founding treaty by accepting that an 'ever closer union' is officially no longer on the table. Some will argue that the big four which have been backing this idea, France, Germany, Italy and Spain, are trying to cut their losses short rather than admit failure, which makes embracing divergence, whitewashing growing inequalities within and between states and appeasing populists the optimal strategy. A multi-speed Europe is, in any case, already a reality on the ground, as both the Schengen border-free zone and the eurozone attest. The next logical step for the capable and the willing is to pool resources, generate economies of scale and create structures for a new round of common projects.

Yet, there are a number of problems with regard to this proposition. First, the kind of flexibility implied in multiple speeds, has been in short supply throughout the existence of the European project. Creating pockets of deeper cooperation and enabling a well-regulated flow of 'ins' and 'outs', on the basis of clusters of interests, simply surpasses the EU's current technical and institutional capacity. Building it up will take time – time, however, is in equally short supply, considering the pervasive sense of insecurity that Europeans feel and how this is affecting their voting patterns. There is also the issue of preserving the national interest, anchored in a European method of consensus building. In spite of its well-known asymmetries, the EU project allowed for coalitions to be built, for issue linkages to grow and for win-win outcomes to emerge. By its nature, a tiered EU will render such complex interactions difficult, stoking the weaker members' fear that they will be left behind or isolated. Finally, different speeds may ultimately translate into different classes of membership, contradicting the founding ideals of the Union. It remains a moot point whether the big four can guarantee that the criteria for entering or leaving tiers will be transparent or applied in an equitable manner.

At the same time, the current impasse serves no one, except for the anti-EU, anti-immigration forces. Those who want to integrate faster should have this opportunity. The real question is what kind of political and economic integration would serve the EU project better? The eurozone architecture may act as a stark reminder that economies operating on multiple models cannot co-habit in a monetary union without a fiscal union. A small, exclusive club could have both, dispensing with the laggards locked in a straitjacket of euro rules and austerity. If this thinking is followed through, the real danger then is that a multi-speed Europe will promote uniformity at the expense of unity. Populists would have a field day, as they would seek to project the idea of 'uniformity' well beyond immigration policies. Politics could turn poisonous, as European citizens might want to have concrete answers to how the political will to promote mini unions suddenly emerged, when initiatives like the Five Presidents' Report had been received coldly in the Council, if not with indifference. If the answer is 'Brexit and Trump happened', European leaders would have to be aware that planning a shift of this order comes with tremendous responsibility and would require a strategic commitment to unity.

The EU has been good but not excellent at managing diversity. It has created tools, yet left countries struggling with asymmetric burden sharing, as evidenced in the eurozone crisis and the migration crisis. Allowing for significant financial assistance, solidarity has been absent as an organising principle in a Union that bore the promise of shared prosperity and deepening of democracy. Before the capable and the willing proceed, they should take stock of the pervasive sense of insecurity that has enveloped achievers and under-achievers, first-tier, second-tier and third- or fourth-tier European citizens, and fine-tune their preferences in a way that reduces EU-wide feelings of marginalisation and mistrust.