

In Varietate Concordia Differentiated Integration as the Key to the Future of the European Union?¹

If European integration is based primarily on the rational interests of all entities, then the whole integration process is, among other things, the result of the divergent interests of the membership reflecting both their internal needs and their geopolitical context. Formally, such an approach is made possible by the so-called enhanced cooperation, which is an interesting axiom reversing the nature of differentiated integration: not that a state does not want to participate in particular integration stages, but that some states may accelerate integration activity and not force others to move at the same pace. The normative accent of the ideological fathers of integration is evident here to this day. Can an EU of 27 or more members continue to develop other than through the method of differentiated integration? To what extent will different integration dynamics undermine the basic idea of "In varietate Concordia - Unity in diversity", or on the contrary, is it a guarantee of guaranteed diversity and at the same time further development of integration activities? Differentiated integration as a manifestation of democracy to ensure the protection of national interests on the other hand, it de facto excludes some states from decision-making processes - all of which weakens the building of the Union's political community.

Keywords: *differentiated integration; enhanced cooperation; variable geometry; concentric circles; cherry-picking*

Introduction

The Member States of the European Union are independent sovereign actors of international law. There is no equal character of the economic base typical for all the states of the Union. Even in the founding six countries, identical features cannot be found in identical combinations that would form the same economic and political model.

And, even this is not considered an appropriate goal, since the motto of the European Union In varietate Concordia – United in diversity is supposed to guarantee the specifics of each member. However, the heterogeneity of the Union is often too high, including in views on the further development of integration. If the founding fathers started from the thesis of full unity, the empty chair crisis in the mid-1960s was already a warning for them. Even then, in just six member states, different views emerged on the method of voting on matters of the common agricultural policy, which, moreover, was not yet fully operational, different views on the competences of the nascent European Commission. Here too, one can identify a willingness to go further and faster in the integration process, as opposed to interests in preserving given practices and retaining the right of veto in the event of an important national interest. In order to ensure the functionality and flexibility of the Community, it was necessary to accept different positions of states on

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deepening integration, or even unwillingness to go any further. Related to this are disputes over the method of voting, where the idea of unanimity is being replaced by a qualified majority for practical reasons.

The differentiated approach to the integration project, to its fundamental ideas, has been observable practically from the beginning of the integration process. And it is noticeable both in the economic and political and security levels. It is true that Europe has gradually been unifying over the course of seventy years, but rather in the sense of convergence in goals and procedures. On the other hand, a relatively wide range of possibilities for preserving individual interests is still left, without this disrupting the essence of integration. The European dream of many ideological fathers was based on the principle of unification and interconnection in such a way that no one would even think, not so that it would be practically possible, to wage war among themselves. From the originally initiated functional integration in the economic dimension, this process has also moved into the institutional, political and security areas.

The original idea of integration was based on the premise of unity of goals and procedures. Reality showed the unattainability of the original guidelines. Grey is the theory; green is the tree of life.... So over time, different integration speeds became a stable feature (EP, 17. 1. 2019: E) and it had to be faced in a constructive manner.

Given the fundamental goal of European integration after WWII formulated by Robert Schuman in his Declaration on the necessity of mutual cooperation for the achievement of peace, today's politicians are willing to be flexible in the pace of integration and goals. "Europe will not be created all at once or according to one plan" - this is the message leading to the possibilities of differentiated integration. Only in order to achieve that fundamental interest - peace, mutual solidarity and prosperity (Schuman, 1950).

The research question aims to formulate: to what extent do the possibilities and various forms of differentiated integration lead to the basic integration goal? If we proceed from the hypothesis that involvement in the integration process is a primary interest for the Member States, then the fundamental building blocks of European integration should not be dismantled.

Literature Review

Theorizing about differentiated integration is quite broad and was one of the leading topics at the turn of the millennium. The conceptualization of differentiated integration offers a fairly wide, but mainly colourful palette of models, each of which should correspond to a specific way of engaging in integration projects.

One of the first to reflect on different forms of differentiated approach to integration commitments was already in 1996, i.e. before the Amsterdam Treaty, Alexander Stubb. He distinguishes three manifestations of differentiated integration according to the intention and approach to integration (Stubb, 1996: 283-295).

Stubb also assigned other terms to this first category of differentiated approach to integration, which ultimately did not become very well-established in Europeak: two-speed integration, flying goose, or step-by-step (Stubb, 1996: 286), which

1 would probably correlate most with the essence of the gradual process of achieving
 2 the goal. He puts this in context with the common practice of “Brussels”, which is
 3 granting transitional periods for achieving the goal. There is no state that would not
 4 sometimes use a transitional period to implement some legal steps.

5 The interconnectedness of the phenomenon of European integration in its
 6 multi-speed connection with the centre-periphery model (Wallerstein, 2004) offers
 7 the concept of multi-floor integration according to the affiliation of a given member
 8 according to geographical allocation (Ágh, 2016: 120). Similar to Tim Marshall's
 9 geographical determination of world politics (Marshall, 2016). Wallerstein divides
 10 states and their economies into three categories based on economic, technological
 11 performance, military prowess, and ideological dominance. The differences between
 12 core/center, semi-periphery, and periphery states are fundamental (Wallerstein,
 13 1979). Applied to the reality of the EU, there is a clear stratification of member states
 14 in fundamental issues of international relations, such as environmental responsibility,
 15 labour market protection, social guarantees, institutional standardization, all of which
 16 so significantly affect economic performance (Kučerová, 2023). The concept of
 17 multi-floor diversified integration is elaborated on the basis of the binary
 18 relationship of core-periphery in a total of four levels (floors). The first floor is
 19 formed by core no. 1, which is the category of Western European states and is a full-
 20 fledged active membership in the Union. The second floor is then occupied by core
 21 no. 2, which is represented by the Nordic centre with a certain laxity in the
 22 integration dynamics (!?). The third floor was then occupied by the countries of the
 23 South as partial peripheries of membership and the fourth floor belongs to the real
 24 periphery, namely the East (Ágh, 2016: 120).

25 I will allow myself to make my own comment – yes, in principle I agree with
 26 the division of integration dynamics related to individual subjects. Moreover, usual
 27 categories of comparative groups of states can be inserted into this Ágh structuring.
 28 The EU member states can be categorized in different ways, however, according to
 29 economic and institutional affinity, I use a system of four groups, in which some
 30 states overlap with a frequent approach according to the enlargement of the
 31 Community. However, the important factor is not the date of entry into the EC/EU,
 32 but the institutional environment, the organization of the economy and its
 33 performance. Then the first group consists of the founding six, Denmark, Britain
 34 was also part of this and today Malta. The second comparative group is the Southern
 35 Wing together with Ireland, which was confirmed in the Eurozone crisis of 2008-
 36 2013, the so-called PIGS group. The third category is the relatively homogeneous
 37 group of the Northern enlargement. And the last one is the set of so-called new
 38 countries, whose institutional environment was significantly marked by political
 39 developments in the second half of the 20th century, including Cyprus (Kučerová,
 40 2003; 2023).

41 Floor No. 1 truly forms the integration core of the six founding countries with
 42 Britain and Denmark. However, in this case we would probably not use the term
 43 active membership, under which I personally imagine a pro-European approach,
 44 initiating activity – let's not look for that in Denmark and certainly not in Britain. In
 45 the second floor, the North of the Union can of course be recognized as another
 46 integration core, but what if it were only partially active? Sweden is outside the

1 Eurozone, but it is among the agenda-setters in several integration directions. From
 2 social standardization to environmental. And it is always a constructive member of
 3 the EU. Finland is a full-fledged part of the most solid core of integration. Austria is
 4 not very proactive in the issue of deepening integration, but it actually participates
 5 in all projects. As a partially peripheral group of the EU, the southern states are
 6 certainly, I agree, just as they are with the fourth floor of the integration dynamics.
 7 Although there are significant differences here. The Baltics, Slovakia belong more
 8 to the third floor of proactive actors.

9 To my mind, the multi-floor model is similar to the multi-layered European
 10 Union model, in which its author De Neve used a metaphor to highlight the different
 11 layers of the decision-making process (De Neve, 2007). The analogy of an onion,
 12 protected by a layer of separate layers of skin, helps to understand the multi-
 13 layeredness of the decision-making sphere.

14 The second way of engaging in integration is the variable geometry model,
 15 based on the assumption of a hard integration core as countries promoting deeper
 16 integration (Schauble-Lamers, 1994: 5). However, this mechanism of cooperation
 17 within the integration dynamics was based on the assumption that its flexibility leads
 18 to the permanent disconnection of some states in some integration goals. The
 19 assumption is not unity, but differentiation both in the integration dynamics and in
 20 different areas of integration and differentiation according to goals (Lansdaal, 2002:
 21 50). This approach clearly leads to the creation of a hard core and more or less
 22 involved countries, which, however, voluntarily move to the periphery of integration
 23 cooperation. Between the core and the hesitant ones, ad hoc cooperating entities
 24 arise, which is why we speak of the variability of integration relations (Kadlecová,
 25 2006). This cooperation can also take place outside the *acquis communautaire*,
 26 thereby disrupting the unified structure of economic policies at the community level.
 27 However, the result is supposed to be a permanent internal differentiation of the
 28 participating actors, considered irreversible. This, of course, reduces the
 29 effectiveness of integration steps.

30 Just a note to add to the codification of closer cooperation by the Treaty of
 31 Amsterdam – it was in no way intended to concern the second pillar of the European
 32 Union, i.e. the common foreign and security policy. On the contrary, it talks about
 33 the possibility of constructive absence for states that did not want to participate in
 34 selected operations (Article 23/ex-Article J.13 TEU). I am just pointing out the time
 35 when the Treaty of Amsterdam was formulated and approved – the second half of
 36 the 1990s, the period of the waning war in the Balkans, the period after the first Gulf
 37 War and the period when the first post-socialist states were waiting to be admitted
 38 to NATO. It was a period of heightened emotions and sympathy of individual
 39 member states towards various actors in international security.

40 Back to the considerations on the effects of different paces of integration – in
 41 my opinion, there are examples of multi-speed integration that not only do not
 42 disrupt the integration structure, but can even strengthen it. In this case, we are
 43 talking about sub-regional integration that goes beyond the *acquis*, but does not
 44 disrupt the unity of the internal market and integration in general. The previously
 45 mentioned examples of sub-regionalism, such as Benelux, the Baltic Council or
 46 even the Visegrad Four, are platforms where common positions were coordinated

1 before the EU-wide discussion in order to accelerate the negotiations. However, this
 2 example of mine contradicts the idea that variable geometry amplifies the gaps
 3 between the core and the periphery (Warleigh, 2002). This concept of differentiated
 4 integration is also associated with geographical determination explaining
 5 differences in other levels of coexistence within the EU.

6 After the presentation of the variable geometry model by German MPs
 7 Wolfgang Schäuble and Karl Lamers, this approach to integration became quite
 8 popular, especially on the French and German political scene. This speaks to the
 9 shared tradition of the Franco-German tandem as the engine of European
 10 integration, which practically all top politicians of both countries tried to keep in
 11 motion. Presidents have usually acted proactively on behalf of France, but there is
 12 an exception – Édouard Balladur, the French Prime Minister, who in the same year,
 13 1994, presented his vision of the variable geometry of integration dynamics. His
 14 vision was associated with Europe as three concentric circles, which expressed the
 15 varying degrees of integration involvement of individual states.

16 The first concentric circle included all the integrated states and actually covered
 17 the scope of the Union's internal market. The second circle was intended to be an
 18 example of closer cooperation between more cooperating groups of states in certain
 19 areas, with the idea that these cooperating groups of states would change, thus
 20 creating variable groupings. In this second circle, Balladur included the Franco-
 21 German tandem as a shining example of the engine of European integration.
 22 According to him, the third circle should actually be the whole of Europe, moving
 23 towards interconnection in various cooperative ties. His vision of Europe was that
 24 of an integrated pan-region as a guarantee of stability and prosperity. Later, he spoke
 25 not of concentric circles, but of eccentric ones, i.e. in the sense of mutual
 26 overlapping of individual integration sets, which should accelerate the
 27 interconnection of the whole of Europe.

28 Although Balladour's thinking works with the term concentric integration
 29 circles, the essence of the model is to be a variable geometry model as integration
 30 deepens and expands to the next circle of incorporated states.

31 Even after several waves of Eastern enlargement, which deepened diversity in
 32 the European Union, despite this, or precisely because of this, the popularisers of
 33 variable geometry Schäuble and Lamers, twenty years after the presentation of their
 34 model, insisted on their belief that the strategic goal for the future of Europe had not
 35 changed, and that is more and more integration (Schäuble – Lamers, 2014).

36 The third possible form of involvement in integration projects according to
 37 Stubb is *à la carte* integration, where states choose from the integration menu only
 38 what they want. It means relaxation and is essentially just egoistically cherry-
 39 picking from the integration cake. The so-called cherry picking actually contradicts
 40 the ideas of the European dream of solidarity and common goals. The *à la carte* style
 41 clearly pursues national interests at the expense of anyone else. This is what Britain
 42 tried to do in the Brexit negotiations, especially in the era of Boris Johnson as Prime
 43 Minister, when the even moderate and accommodating Angela Merkel pointed out
 44 that Brexit cannot be led by the British government in the direction and manner of
 45 picking the raisins from the cake. An example of a country using these options is

certainly Britain and Denmark. These are manifestations of an uncooperative approach.

The vision of European integration *à la carte* originated with Ralf Dahrendorf in 1979, but in a somewhat different sense than we understand it now. In his conception, it was to be a register of policies that could intertwine and thus reach the same goal by different paths. It was not to be a multi-speed integration (Dahrendorf, 1979). The *à la carte* model was to overcome a certain stagnation in negotiations at the community level in the turbulent 1970s. His model was later modified not only by practice but also by theorizing about the right degree of involvement in ever-progressing integration. Whether it was Margaret Thatcher after her political career or her successor John Major, who advocated greater flexibility in choosing which integration activities to participate in and which not to participate in. A classic example of cherry-picking. And to maintain objectivity, it should be noted that subsequent British prime ministers also defended the principle of integration involvement *à la carte*.

Methodology

Methodologically, the deliberation about differentiated integration is based on a qualitative analysis of the approach of individual/selected states to integration commitments and the monitoring of their practiced policies in such a way as to maximize their gains/benefits from involvement in the integration process without disrupting the essence of the entire European project. The conceptualization of this phenomenon then leads to the formulation of various models of diversified pace of integration. The limitation of a more detailed analysis is the scope of the article.

Development of Integration Dynamics

On a declaratory level, different integration speeds were discussed as early as 1973, i.e. in the year of the first enlargement, where in his speech in the European Parliament, German Chancellor Willi Brandt advocated a flexible approach by institutions and not relying on formal details. The following year, he first used the term gradual integration to indicate the possibility of choosing the speed of involvement in the integration process according to the capabilities and needs of the states. Another year later, Belgian Prime Minister Leo Tindemans urged his colleagues at the European Council that it was pointless to demand the same tasks by the same deadline for the then nine states. However, these considerations and political speeches were not translated into practice.

A fundamental milestone in the admittedly different pace and depth of integration was the Maastricht Treaty adopted in February 1992. It not only demonstrated the differentiated dynamics of integration, but also directly disintegration, in connection with the large number of opt-out clauses, i.e. exceptions in specific areas of integration for specific member states. The talk is primarily of Britain opting-out regime from the objectives the economic and

monetary union, on the basis of which it never had to adopt the euro. But that was not the only exception. Another opting-out regime concerned the incorporation of the European Social Charter of Workers' Rights from December 1989 into primary Community law, which Britain completely rejected. The result was a special protocol stating that the Charter would be binding on the then eleven countries, but on Britain as the only one not. Another agreed exception was Britain's non-participation in the Schengen system, on the grounds that it is an island state that has no land borders with any other. Thanks to Maastricht, other states also did not participate in all integration steps. Denmark, like Britain, additionally obtained an opting clause from the monetary union, and also obtained an opting regime in the case of EU citizenship, security cooperation, etc. Although there were quite a few exceptions, the Community legislation at the time did not allow this de jure.

The legal change came with the subsequent Amsterdam Treaty of 1997, which codifies the possibility of differentiated or gradual integration as a flexible system. Originally, it was considered more in the context of different paces of fulfilling the conditions of the next integration stage, and there was no question of any country being completely left out - gradual integration assumes a priori that all countries will participate in the given project, only at a different pace according to their capabilities. This is somewhat in contrast to the practice of Maastricht. Officially, the Amsterdam Treaty speaks of a flexible system of closer cooperation (Article 5a TEU), which will allow for the deepening of cooperation between some states, but without disrupting the integrity of the Union. In everyday language, this phenomenon is referred to as closer cooperation or multi-speed Europe.

The possibility of differentiated integration is undoubtedly a pragmatic solution, but there is a significant risk of fragmentation of the Union, both economically and institutionally, which is why it is necessary not to question the fundamental building blocks of the European project, which are the respect and protection of the fundamental values of the EU (EP, 17. 1. 2019: F, M15). The fundamental values and rights of the EU are: respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities (Article 2 TEU).

For many, the possibility of differentiated integration is a manifestation of democracy, when differences of opinion on development, on the level of standardization and implementation of standards are then interpreted as a manifestation of legal pluralism. However, this then leads to some countries voluntarily excluding themselves from decision-making processes (Tosiek, 2023: 59-68). We do not have to go far for an example - the Czech Republic does not voluntarily participate in the monetary union, it even refused to sign the Fiscal Pact in January 2012, through the person of the then Czech Prime Minister Petr Nečas, despite being authorized by Parliament - and then we are surprised when we are not members of selected negotiating teams... In contrast to the Czech Republic, Poland is trying to take as large a share as possible in the mechanism of integration decision-making processes and is essentially trying to speak for Central Europe. There is now no doubt about its aspirations to the role of a Central European regional power. Slovakia is a country that, for most of its independence, has been striving for emancipation in the international system, for its voice not to be lost in community

bodies. The Baltic republics perceive the possibility of being a member of the Western structure as a certain degree of protection against Russian expansionism, which is why they act as active players. For them, differentiated integration means not slowing down, but rather accelerating and being part of a progressive part of the European Union.

The first form is multi-speed integration, which is based on common goals but different paces of implementation, which corresponds to the designation of gradual integration. The assumption is that all Community states will participate in the given activity, but some can implement the relevant legal steps more quickly and achieve the goal faster, with the assumption that the rest of the states will reach the given goal later. But they will. I see an example here in the Benelux, where these states achieved the goals of the customs union even before the start of the EEC. Stubb cites the monetary union and the possibility of an individual deadline for fulfilling the Maastricht criteria as an iconic example. Multi-speed integration in this case reflects the abilities and willingness of individual countries to join the Eurozone, but the vanguard is made up of some countries. Hence the designation as enhanced integration.

The terminological ambiguity of multi-speed integration is somewhat reminiscent of the Babylonian confusion of languages: alongside enhanced cooperation, the term closer cooperation is also codified (Treaty of Amsterdam), while the Treaty of Nice uses the term extended cooperation. And for simplicity, this mechanism is also called flexible approach, flexibility mechanism... these are often used as synonyms.

While the integration euphoria of the 1990s meant that many states, including the largest ones, did not meet all the conditions (France, Spain, Italy, Belgium, Portugal), they nevertheless started with those that did meet all the criteria (Austria, Germany, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, Ireland, Finland). The different speed in achieving the final stage of economic integration – monetary union – is also evident in those that are essentially hesitant. Sweden met and still meets all the economic criteria, but due to divided public opinion regarding the euro, it does not meet the formal condition of fixing its currency to the euro. And no one blames Sweden for this.

In the case of multi-speed integration and the example of monetary integration, I would just like to remind you that today, according to the legislation that is still in force, only Denmark has the right to stay outside the Eurozone. All other states that are not yet members have an obligation to move towards the Eurozone. They committed to this in the accession treaties. Of the current 27 EU members, a full 20 countries have introduced the euro, so 7 states are outside. Denmark is the only state with a permanent exception, Sweden essentially does not want to join the Eurozone, but it meets all the criteria, and then only the Eastern enlargement countries remain, of which Croatia joined the Eurozone in January 2023 and Bulgaria is already on its way in and is in ERMII. This means that from January 2026, the EMU would expand to 21 out of 27 states. It seems that only the Czech Republic rejects the euro in essence, because for the others it is more a question of implementation problems on an economic level, not political.

1 The entire Eastern enlargement was conceived as a multi-speed model,
 2 referring to the agreed principle of accepting new countries into the Union.
 3 Originally, in Luxembourg in 1997, the principle of waves of enlargement was
 4 chosen, when the first wave included six countries that had so far demonstrated the
 5 greatest degree of convergence. These were the Czech Republic, Estonia, Cyprus,
 6 Hungary, Poland and Slovenia. Finally, two years later, in 1999, in Helsinki, the
 7 enlargement procedure was changed to the regatta principle: the member states as a
 8 group of ships heading to the same port, which is the EU. Whoever arrives first, that
 9 is, meets the entry criteria, will be accepted first. This metaphor fully captures the
 10 essence of multi-speed integration. And it does not matter whether it would be
 11 within the Luxembourg group or the Helsinki group, because both methods took
 12 into account different dynamics of convergence of the candidate states.

13 However, I would like to argue with the belief that the results of variable
 14 geometry are irreversible. First, I proceed from the thesis that nothing is eternal,
 15 including political decisions. Second, circumstances can lead to a reassessment of
 16 the original resolution. Third, the role of the individual in history teaches us that
 17 history is personified, i.e. all it takes is a change of political outfit and change is easy.

18 I offer the following examples: firstly, politicians are also people and change
 19 their opinions, so during their term of office they can lean towards the opposite
 20 option and try to push through the change. See Francois Mitterrand and state
 21 intervention in the French economy in connection with etatization/nationalisation or
 22 privatization processes. Or directly from the integration sphere – Austria relied on
 23 its neutrality not only in the military field, but also partly in the economic one,
 24 throughout the entire post-war period. As a result of ever closer integration, and
 25 above all the growing number of members, Austria reassessed its principles and
 26 applied to join the EU. Secondly, the change in the international security situation
 27 as a result of Putin's invasion of Ukraine led to a reassessment of the neutrality status
 28 of Finland and Sweden, and they immediately began steps to join NATO structures.
 29 Thirdly, the Eurosceptic government of the PIS party in Poland, led by Jaroslaw
 30 Kaczyński, did not win the elections, and a pro-European government led by a
 31 politician of the European format, Donald Tusk, returned to the head of state from
 32 the opposition. And from an EU complainer, Poland is once again a constructive
 33 member of the EU. The same applies to the Czech Republic, where after four terms
 34 of office of Eurosceptic and pro-Russian presidents, a rational and constructive
 35 representative with international experience from the highest positions in NATO
 36 became the head of state. Or the example of Britain - in 1992, the conservative
 37 government, then led by John Major, refused to accept the European Social Charter
 38 as binding under the influence of Margaret Thatcher. Immediately after the New
 39 Labour Party and Tony Blair came to power, it ratified the treaty and the Charter.

40 In my view, the variable geometry approach may also be temporary.

41 Differentiated integration is not only a reality, because the high integration pace
 42 promoted by France or Germany is not achievable for everyone, nor is it acceptable
 43 for all member states. It is also a discourse about the further development of the
 44 Union. Although flexibility in the approach to integration goals was taboo for a long
 45 time, Maastricht made it possible and Amsterdam officially authorized the
 46 codification of closer cooperation. And that was before the Big Bank arrived in

connection with the waiting states of Central and Eastern Europe, which brought a considerable degree of diversity to the European Union - economic, institutional, political. It seems that perhaps such a high-level area of national sovereignty as security was the only one where there was the greatest agreement on the direction of the new member states.

In general, it seems that the willingness of member states to further intervene in national policies by European institutions is beginning to wane. This can be explained in two ways. Either the pro-integration is so great that, in the opinion of some countries, there is little left for their own autonomy. That basically everything that was supposed to be integrated has been integrated, and the rest should remain within national competences. The second argument relates to countries that belong to the more integration-neutral group and would a priori like to see a generally lower share of integration. It is possible to work with about three groups of states according to their opinion on differentiated integration (Chopin - Lequesne, 2016: 536-540). The first category of rather Eurorealist countries includes the group of Anglo-Scandinavian members, led by Britain (it led), Denmark and followed by Sweden, and Austria can also be included here.

These are states that carefully assess each new proposal to strengthen integration. Their motivation for membership resulted from an assessment of the development of foreign economic relations, when they rationally concluded that a state outside the Community was disadvantageous. The second group, on the other hand, consists of the countries of the core of integration, i.e. the founding six plus the countries of the Southern enlargement. These are states that fully identify with the goals and principles of the European project, practically do not use the opting regime and try to be full-fledged members of the integration core. The third set of states, according to this analysis, consists of the new member states, which, according to Chopin and Lequesne, are aware of their delay in participating in the integration process, but on the other hand, the fragility of their actually acquired sovereignty leads to considering integration requirements to see if this does not threaten their national interests. It is then paradoxical that they are the most vocal opponents of differentiated integration, because they perceive it as a risk of relegating them to the second category of membership. They fear the division of Europe into a privileged and a second-rate Europe, degrading EU membership.

Personally, I think that the authors are working with a relatively high degree of generalization, because even the Eastern Enlargement group is not compact, and I find the Baltic states, which I would classify in the second category, missing from this selection. In certain periods, so did Poland.

The year 2017 was marked in the European Union by the celebration of the sixtieth anniversary of the signing of the Treaties of Rome, which were the starting point of macroeconomic integration, which then spilled over into the political and security dimension. The then President of the European Commission Jean-Claude Juncker spoke out in favour of the idea of a differentiated integration process as a guarantee of further development (Juncker, 2017). Flexibility was to be the methodological starting point for further development, without limiting the access of countries that could not move at the same pace (Gotev, 2017). However, the new countries did not believe this and sharply opposed the “new iron curtain” between

the EU15 and the EU13. And to be honest, the discord was not only between these groups of states, but also between the hard core. In France, there was a change in the post of president, when the indifferent Francois Holland was replaced by the active Emmanuel Macron, who advocated a stronger integration of the selected. Above all, he once again raised the issue of the missing fiscal union, the absence of which was a key problem in the Eurozone crisis. Germany has nothing against a fiscal union, against joint supervision of the fiscal policy of the Eurozone members, but Germany has traditionally, and especially under Angela Merkel, played the role of a mediator in the EU defending the interests of the majority. And most of the countries of the monetary union are against shared responsibility within the framework of a fiscal union and a banking union. So, at this point, Germany defended the interests of flexible multi-speed integration. The Franco-German engine stalled. And this despite the statesman's meeting in Aachen in 2019, when a treaty confirming close mutual cooperation was signed. But it was a mere political gesture compared to the Elysee Treaty of 1963.

Along with other integration steps, often triggered by external influences, such as the global financial crisis, migration crisis or COVID pandemic and subsequently Russian aggression against Ukraine and provoking war, all this has been reflected in a deeper diversification of member states and their positions on the given crises. On the other hand, some of these crisis manifestations have revealed the heterogeneity of the member base, but they have also united the states with a common solution. This is certainly a pandemic and the evocation of strategic autonomy, joint purchases of necessary but missing commodities and their distribution on the principle of solidarity. Russia and its actions, after a short period of hesitation, brought the Union states together to take a common approach towards Russia, to support not only the attacked Ukraine, but also the buffer states. Another challenge for a common approach is the assumption of office of Donald Trump as US President in January 2025 and his offensive in the economic and security spheres. His threat to annex Greenland left no one in Europe indifferent. Not to mention the imposition of tariffs. In this case, I do not see manifestations of differentiated integration, but rather congruence, consensus.

Evaluation of differentiated Integration

A relatively brief answer is enough to assess the phenomenon of differentiated integration: differences in approach to integration plans have been, are and will evidently be there. It is logical. The empty chair crisis in 1965 already showed that it is impossible to find absolute agreement between the six actors. The Luxembourg compromise resolving this crisis actually cleared the way for qualified majority voting, which is exactly the mechanism of a compromise solution. But unless the issue at hand is one that undermines the national interests of any country. Then came the year 1973 with the Atlantic enlargement, where three fundamental features were evident. First, the enlargement from six to nine actors meant a more demanding search for an acceptable optimum for all. Second, this enlargement concerned the two biggest rebels against the original ideas of Robert Schuman and Jean Monnet.

1 Britain and Denmark brought not only diversity in thinking about the goals of
 2 integration, but also loud criticism of the too large integration scope. In addition,
 3 these two developed countries also faced significant structural differences, including
 4 regional disparities. Practically similar problems to those the Community had to deal
 5 with Italy and its economic-territorial dualism (Kučerová, 2003; 2023).
 6 Nevertheless, they participated in all activities up to the monetary union. And
 7 thirdly, the European Communities adopted a very poor state, Ireland, which was
 8 solving completely different problems than the others. Willy Brandt commented on
 9 the reaction to the enlarged Communities and the resulting greater problems in the
 10 decision-making sphere with the proposal of gradual integration.

11 In the following decade of the 1980s, the Community grew by three countries
 12 of the southern wing, all of which showed significantly lower performance, an
 13 inadequate structure of economies and which perceived entry into the EC as an
 14 accelerator of their development. The diversity of the Community shifted again
 15 wider.

16 It is interesting that the Northern enlargement did not bring significant
 17 differentiation, on the contrary, in this case states willing to participate in most
 18 projects joined. Except for monetary integration in the case of Sweden, and nuclear
 19 energy in the case of Austria. Then came the Eastern enlargement, which we can
 20 immediately describe as essential in spreading diversity in many respects. It was for
 21 them that flexibility in fulfilling integration goals was actually offered. But the
 22 political elites of these countries interpreted the offer of multi-speed integration as
 23 an effort by the more advanced countries of the West not to wait for those from the
 24 East, which could lead to the creation of a multi-category Europe. And there the new
 25 member states would play in the second or third league. Paradoxically, the
 26 representatives of these countries block very often the adoption of community
 27 legislation, implement the necessary regulations late and reluctantly, but this does
 28 not prevent them from insisting on a unified approach and possibly accusing the
 29 original member states of superiority.

30 I don't have to go far for an example - since the beginning of its membership in
 31 the EU, the Czech Republic has been one of the least disciplined members in terms
 32 of the so-called transposition deficit, which reflects the delay in implementing
 33 directives into national legislation. Due to the long-term ignorance of Czech
 34 governments regarding the obligations of their membership in the Union and the
 35 need to complete the internal market, the EU used a pressure tool, namely the
 36 suspension of the possibility of drawing on structural funds in 2012. Of course, the
 37 Czech Republic is not the only country not fulfilling its obligations, but at that time
 38 it had the highest transposition deficit, together with Malta. While Malta caught up
 39 within a year, the Czech Republic showed a relatively lax approach. Therefore,
 40 sanctions were imposed and suddenly the implementation of European directives
 41 miraculously accelerated (Single Market Scoreboard). Slovakia, Poland and Spain
 42 found themselves in the same situation at the time, but Hungary, the Czech Republic
 43 and France felt the strongest sanctions. The approach to integration commitments
 44 across the membership base speaks of an ambiguous policy. And often prioritizing
 45 one's own interests over common ones. Jekyll and Hyde or cherry-picking?

46

1 Conclusion

2
3 The European discourse on the necessary flexibility in the decision-making
4 sphere returns in waves according to specific developmental manifestations, often
5 external shocks. But not always. Internal developments, both within the EU as a
6 whole and within national markets, can also be a trigger for the required change in
7 pace or even changes in goals and participation in their fulfillment. It is worth
8 recalling that the need to allow for different paces of implementation of goals was
9 already recognized by many in the 1970s, when the membership base was first
10 expanded.

11 Perhaps too much attention is focused on the manifestations, or rather forms,
12 of possible differentiated integration, although the question of a different pace of
13 participation in specific goals is more essential. And there is no agreement at all on
14 whether all integration plans must be for all states. Of the manifestations of
15 differentiated integration, the multi-speed Europe, the variable geometry model
16 including the concentric circles model, and perhaps the rather profane Europe á la
17 carte approach has become the most established in the discourse. These types of
18 diversified integration are not contradictory; they can coexist side by side and be
19 used in specific cases. With only one condition, which is that they must not disrupt
20 the essence of integration. Simply put, differentiated integration has been a reality
21 for several decades. Only flexibility, the ability to choose the pace or a project that
22 someone will not participate in, is the way to maintain and develop the EU. But it
23 must not undermine the fundamental principle of integration, which is mutual
24 solidarity. And it's still going well.

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