



EU Integration and Differentiation for Effectiveness and Accountability

Results in Brief

A toolbox for integration: making differentiation work for the EU

The complexity of the EU project necessitates a degree of flexibility in Member States' cooperation. The EU IDEA team is examining whether the response to crises such as Brexit should be more freedom, or greater commitment.





SOCIETY




© Sensay, Shutterstock

Differentiated integration grants Member States flexibility in the speed and extent to which they adopt some EU policies, smoothing their transition into the bloc. Referred to as variable geometry, multi-speed Europe or Europe à la carte, differentiation can take on many forms, and has often proven controversial. Does differentiation really drive further integration, or does it fail to sufficiently challenge recalcitrant states?

To bring insight to this polarised debate, the EU-funded [EU IDEA](#)  (EU Integration and Differentiation for Effectiveness and Accountability) project is assessing how differentiation can best contribute to making the EU more effective, cohesive and democratic.

“Differentiation has been viewed either as a poison or as a panacea for the EU. As a matter of fact, it is neither,” says Nicoletta Pirozzi, head of the EU, Politics and Institutions Programme at the [Institute of International Affairs](#)  (IAI) in Italy, which leads the project.

“It is more helpful to look at differentiation as a toolbox for accommodating diversity, whether through major long-term projects like the [Economic and Monetary Union](#)  or as a flexible means to cope with crises and political divergence.”


Differentiation is neither inherently integrative nor inherently disintegrative, Pirozzi explains: “It is what Member States and EU bodies make of it. Thus, it entails opportunities as well as risks, which EU IDEA aims to uncover and assess.” To do so, EU IDEA focuses on the politics and the organisational forms of differentiation, examining the processes leading to different modalities of differentiation, as well as on their implementation.

Common values

The project team is seeking to identify how much and what form of differentiation is conducive to European integration, and when differentiation should be avoided to prevent incoherence, political tensions and disintegration. This exercise will enable them to set out clear objectives and criteria for countries’ participation in differentiated integration projects. They will also review the role of EU institutions in this context and suggest strategies for improving citizens’ participation.

Differentiation has been a part of the EU’s modes of action since the bloc’s early days. One of the most recent examples is the [Banking Union](#) , initiated in 2012 in response to the financial crisis. Initially limited to the euro area, the single supervision mechanism has since been extended to non-euro area countries Bulgaria and Croatia, on their request.

In the field of foreign and security policy, EU countries have long been engaging in a range of informal practices of differentiation, such as regional groupings, contact and lead groups, as well as various defence initiatives.

“When it has adhered to common EU values and positions, differentiated cooperation has had largely positive outcomes,” Pirozzi notes, citing the [nuclear negotiations with Iran](#)  as a case in point.

Staying relevant post-Brexit

Differentiation also has an external dimension: the extension of EU rules, policies and modes of cooperation to third countries. Brexit represents an entirely new phenomenon in this context. “Brexit clearly impacts existing modes of differentiation. We found, through a dedicated [Observatory on Brexit](#) , that the reality of Brexit suggests a more hard-line approach towards member and non-member countries, sending them both the message that membership matters,” Pirozzi remarks.

The project's findings suggest that the EU needs to highlight its role as a relevant framework for dealing with global challenges that cannot be addressed effectively at the national level, she concludes.

Keywords

[EU IDEA](#)

[differentiation](#)

[variable geometry](#)

[multi-speed Europe](#)

[Europe à la carte](#)

[integration](#)

[disintegration](#)

[diversity](#)

[Banking Union](#)

[Brexit](#)

Discover other articles in the same domain of application



Europe shifts to more densely populated cities

27 July 2022



The invisible women of international migration

22 October 2020





Ensuring principled migration policies are put into practice

13 July 2023



Sharpening the EU's role in global asylum governance

13 July 2023



Project Information

EU IDEA

Grant agreement ID: 822622

[Project website](#) 

DOI

[10.3030/822622](https://doi.org/10.3030/822622) 

Project closed

EC signature date

7 November 2018

Start date

1 January 2019

End date

30 April 2022

Funded under

SOCIETAL CHALLENGES - Europe In A Changing World - Inclusive, Innovative And Reflective Societies

Total cost

€ 2 991 471,25

EU contribution

€ 2 991 471,25

Coordinated by

ISTITUTO AFFARI
INTERNAZIONALI



Italy

This project is featured in...



RESULTS PACK

8 October 2021



Challenges to democracy in Europe: Insights into a complex and turbulent political climate

Last update: 7 October 2021

Permalink: <https://cordis.europa.eu/article/id/434328-a-toolbox-for-integration-making-differentiation-work-for-the-eu>

European Union, 2025