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SOMETHING IS MOVING IN THE EU (at various speeds)

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The debate has started. Not only among experts, whose discussions on how to reform a dysfunctional **European Union** have a **long history**, but also among those who will have to be at the centre of the reform. We are used to seeing Brussels **micro-manage crisis**, so the **White Paper** by **Jean-Claude Juncker**, president of the **European Commission**, stands out for being the first attempt to reflect deeply on the EU's future. Moving from detailed negotiations on rescue plans and refugee quotas to a deep debate on the future of the common project is commendable in itself.

Juncker's White Paper hands the reins of the EU's future to the member states. Their supremacy in recent crises has translated into the strengthening of the **inter-governmental method** of integration; this has relegated the Commission to "little more than a **secretariat**" and its president has had enough. Fed up of the states ignoring his latest proposals – from insufficient attention to the Juncker Plan in the euro crisis, to non-compliance with refugee relocation quotas – Juncker has used the right to initiative conferred on him by the treaties to put the ball back in the European capitals' court.

His **White Paper** proposes five scenarios: from the reduction of the EU to little more than the single market (scenario 2) to European federalism (scenario 5). In between lie the scenarios that prompt most interest: the multi-speed Europe (scenario 3); and a renewed vision of subsidiarity, namely, the reduction of EU competences to the policies it is best able to manage and returning the rest of the powers to the states (scenario 4). The last scenario – first in Juncker's list – is to muddle through in crisis management, although with an improved reform agenda.

The most critical voices have been ready to point out that by contemplating scenarios that undermine the current EU, the White Paper may become a self-fulfilling prophecy. All the more so with these scenarios being put on the table by the Commission, which is meant to look out for the interests of the EU as a whole and not those of its member states. Others believe that today's EU needs **practi-**

cal results that bring Brussels closer to its citizens, like, for example, the Erasmus Programme. But for better or worse, today's Europe is much more political than before. Advances through specific policies will not eliminate the disagreements between the north, south, east and west of Europe at times of super-polarisation of the public debate.

Curiously, the scenarios in the White Paper that have received least attention are the most realist in terms of the current state of the EU. Recognising the benefits of the single market and a tendency to "muddle through" are as close to lowest common denominators among today's 28 as anything. Juncker has acknowledged that he included the reduction of the EU to the single market at the request of certain member states. By this logic, what could be more realist than working on the one thing the EU knows how to do and consolidating itself as a leading global power able to compete with the rise of the BRICS? On the other hand, it is also realist to believe that, during this period of reflection, the EU is unlikely to achieve much more than continuing to manage crisis, including the unfinished euro and refugee crises, the effects of Brexit, the threat of Russia and the consequences of the failed Arab Spring.

Reinvent the multi-speed Europe

Setting aside the unachievable dream of the United States of Europe, two scenarios remain on which the future of the EU is converging: numbers 3 and 4, or a combination of the two. Multiple speeds have for some time been more reality than hypothetical scenario. The euro and the Schengen Area are at the forefront of integration for some member states, while the door remains open to those who can and want to join.

The current approach to multiple speeds is new to the extent that it makes them the norm and not the exception in the integration model, putting an end to the logic of "an ever closer union". It's the first time the multiple speeds have received such explicit support in Germany and France, which are traditionally reluctant to give up on "a single union".

This has generated misgivings among states that consider that institutionalising differences is equivalent to creating first- and second-class members. The countries of central and eastern Europe fear being left behind and accuse Juncker of undermining the EU's common destiny. It is curious that those who have spoken out most strongly against Brussels and the founding values of the EU are today those who defend its purity. They are not wrong to warn that if differentiated integration becomes the rule, there may be little union left for those who decline to sign up to the top speeds. The paradox is that today many – the Visegrad countries, among others – no longer want "more Europe".

It is therefore important to complement the multiple speeds with **flexible, differentiated levels of integration**. Flexible, to ensure multiple degrees of EU membership and depths of involvement in various policies are taken into consideration, without exclusion from one meaning being left behind in others. Differentiated, to encourage the advance of strengthened cooperation, in which some states may agree to greater integration, creating "mini-Schengens" or "mini-eurozones". Of course, the eastern states could do their own thing in areas of shared interest and the United Kingdom could sign up to strengthened cooperation on issues of security and defence.

Many of these scenarios may be developed within the framework of the current treaties. But if the idea is to make an EU that is multi-speed as the rule and not the exception, at some point the legal and institutional architecture will have to be adapted. This could meet considerable obstacles. In an electoral year, there is no appetite for substantial reforms or for calling referendums that facilitate the articulation of disaffection with the EU. Neither will it be easy to overcome the blockage that is a feature of the taking of big decisions by unanimity at the heart of the European Council, where it hardly matters if 28 or 27 states sit if they put national benefits above collective destiny.

From the Big Three to a renewed Big Four?

As a backdrop to the post-Brexit reform of the EU, a reconfiguration of the power of the European states and their alliances is unfolding. The British referendum changed the existing balances between the *Big Three*, who had woven a complex triangle of relations to advance – or put the brakes on – the EU.

Germany relied on France when taking new initiatives forward, but called London when it wanted to promote the liberalisation of the single market. France abhorred this liberal tendency, but found London handy for counteracting the growing influence of Berlin. And the United Kingdom – until June – preferred to act as a counterweight to the Franco-German motor, to slow integration in areas it considered to be of national interest – its own or those of other less Europhile partners.

With the disappearance of one of the sides of this triangle the balance of powers between the Big Three has been redrawn. The United Kingdom is withdrawing just as the Franco-German motor is stalled by France's diminished influence. Germany hates leading alone, meaning it may look kindly on the incorporation of Italy and Spain, the largest members in the south, to compensate for the loss of the United Kingdom from the group of the Big Four. Nevertheless, coincidentally, as shown at the recent **summit of Versailles**, the Big Four are behind the multi-speed idea in order to lead the way for the pro-integration member states.

What is more, Poland, the paragon in which Germany had placed its hopes of an expanded Europe, has ruled itself out of the chain of command. Poland's active role in the Visegrad Group has further distanced it from the EU's centre and it reached unprecedented levels of self-marginalisation with its refusal to back the **conclusions** of the last European Council, which reelected **Donald Tusk** as president.

It is no coincidence that all this is happening with the debates on the multi-speed Europe under way. While some fear losing out, others strive to form part of the hard core of a reformed European Union. The success of Juncker and his White Paper has been to make clear that, unless it overcomes its dysfunctions, the main reasons for celebration in Rome will not be the birth of the EU, but its early retirement.