The uncertain future of the European Union

Steven Blockmans, senior research fellow at the CEPS think-tank in Brussels, gives his take on Jean-Claude Juncker's 'five scenarios' for the EU's future

Why has the European Commission published a new white paper outlining five possible scenarios for the EUs future, and why now?

The Commission wants to kick-start a process of reflection in the next couple of months. The timing is determined by a couple of factors, including the decision by the majority of UK voters to leave the EU. The British government is supposed to trigger Article 50 by the end of March, signalling the start of exit negotiations with the EU. The Commission's white paper also comes ahead of the Rome summit of the 27 remaining member states (the EU 27) on 25th March, which is meant to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the Rome treaties and define a vision of the EU27 for the future, post Brexit. The five scenarios sketched out in the white paper by European Commission president Jean-Claude Juncker and his team are supposed to feed into that process and offer options to the leaders of the EU27. Finally, the white paper comes at a time when a wave of popular dissent is sweeping across Europe. Anti-EU parties are expected to gain strength in this decisive electoral year for the European Union. But until after the German federal elections, which are scheduled after the summer, there's really not much concrete action that can be taken.

Why does the Commission have to wait till after the German elections to make any decisions?

We don't know how the elections may upset the political spectrum in key member states. In France, in particular, the established political order is being shaken up by 'outsiders' like Emmanuel Macron's movement and Marine Le Pen's Front National. Who comes out on top in the presidential elections of April and May and the legislative elections in June will determine to a great extent the future direction the European

Union will take. With Britain on its way out, Berlin needs Paris to rev up the engine as the driving force of the European integration process. Until the Franco-German axis has been reinstated, any talk about the future of the EU remains mere speculation. The reflections over the next couple of months should then prepare the ground for decisions to be taken at the European Council summit next December.

What are the five scenarios outlined in the European Commission white paper?

The first scenario is that of 'muddling through', where the EU focuses on trying to deliver a positive reform agenda, in line with the Bratislava Declaration.

The second scenario would be a restriction of European integration to the single market, thereby cutting out everything which member states find non-essential to do at the EU level.

The third scenario envisages a 'multispeed Europe', where differing coalitions of able and willing member states would pursue closer integration in fields like defence, internal security or social matters, leaving the door open to other EU countries to join later.

The fourth scenario would be what the European Commission calls 'doing less more efficiently', which boils down to the EU27 focusing on what can be delivered more effectively in selected policy areas, while doing less where the EU is perceived not to have any added value.

The fifth scenario is full-blown federalism, where member states decide to pool and share sovereignty and resources at EU level.

Which of these scenarios seem to you the most realistic?

Given the political climate across the EU and the big divides between member states on certain policy issues, scenario three, that of multispeed Europe, is probably the most realistic. We see a general attachment to the internal market. The self-proclaimed 'counter-revolutionaries' in Hungary and Poland also attach great value to the benefits which the internal market has brought to their citizens and companies. Even Britain, which is leaving the EU, wants to keep a great level of access to it. So I think that the single market will remain the bedrock of European integration in the future. There are, however, great differences between member states as to how to move forward on the single currency, social matters and border management, for example. You see differences also on defence, with some neutral states wishing to maintain their neutrality,

and other EU member states such as Poland and some Baltic countries relying on NATO (and the US) in terms of their security guarantees rather than the European Union. Conversely, the founding members of the EU, and Germany in particular, seem ready to integrate more deeply in many of these domains, even if they disagree on how exactly to do that.

Do you think all Member States would support a 'multispeed' Europe?

No. There are differences between the different EU countries. Whereas the Maltese Prime Minister Joseph Muscat, Italian Prime Minister Paolo Gentiloni and German Chancellor Angela Merkel claim the only way forward is a multispeed Europe, the leaders of the four Visegrad countries – the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia – have warned against the 'disintegration' of the EU. The prime ministers of Hungary and Poland have made a case for a more inter-governmental union, whereby the wings of supranational institutions, in particular the European Commission, are clipped and the role of the member states becomes more prominent again. These countries would probably insist on option four – doing less more efficiently – allowing the European Commission and Parliament to act in areas where they are seen as effective. But in other areas, they would like to 'take back control'.

The fourth scenario envisages all member states working together more closely on a few policy areas. On which areas might Member States find consensus?

These are typically the areas where the EU, through its internal markets, has had tangible benefits for citizens, or where recent events have shown a greater need for EU-level cooperation. Examples of these include the decision to slash roaming charges across Europe, which will finally enter into force in June. A European telecoms authority would be the logical next step. External border management is something that all member states endorse as well, including closer cooperation on counter terrorism.

One possibility the paper didn't touch on was the EU breaking up altogether. Is this also a danger?

I don't think the European Union is at grave risk of falling apart. The first 60 years of European integration have seen a socio-economic web of relations between member states woven so tightly, that it would be counterproductive and very costly to break it apart, as the Brits are now discovering.

The nightmare scenario for a lot of pro-Europeans is that Marine Le Pen becomes President of France, Geert Wilders comes into power in the

Netherlands, and Hungary and Poland continue down their current nationalistic path. If that happens, is there really no possibility that the EU will break apart?

Well, still no, I don't think so. For one, whilst anti-EU movements and parties are expected to gain ground in national elections around Europe, it's highly doubtful that this will translate into actual power of government. France remains the most tricky case, but we'll have to see whether Le Pen and her Front National manage to push on to the second round of the presidential race, win it and then to live up to campaign promises.

But in national and EU-wide polls, you see the combined effect of Brexit and Trump, both of which have created a complete mess at the national government level. This is leading protest voters away from the lure of those anti-immigrant and anti-EU parties on the continent. While that doesn't immediately translate into a rally around the EU flag, people are expressing a more sober assessment of the value the EU and its policies have for individual citizens.

Interview conducted by Ellie Mears



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