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Keeping the European bicycle rolling

We shouldn't look back to the past of a Europe of fatherlands, but forward towards a larger EU that faces global challenges and focuses on the future

European integration is like riding a bike. You either keep moving forward or you fall off, as former President of the European Economic Community, Walter Hallstein, once reportedly stated. Since the Treaty of Rome was signed, our bike has travelled at many different speeds – sometimes faster, sometimes slower – when it comes to progressing in European unification.

Today, the European bicycle is racing at full speed again and now comes in the form of an e-bike, with a powerful German and French-made engine and 27 well-lubricated gears. The countless crises – not least Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine – have provided an enormous push towards European integration. The EU's Member States have finally agreed to protect the environment sustainably, to distribute migrants in a humane and equitable way among all EU countries, to improve decision-making procedures at European level and to abolish national veto rights. European values and the rule of law are once again adhered to and respected by all. And the Balkan countries, Moldova and Ukraine will join the European Union in just a few years' time.

Wishful thinking? Sadly ... yes.

Europe is just muddling through

Obviously, this is not where we are. There were huge hopes that the great challenges and problems that the EU has faced for over a decade would lead to finding forward-looking solutions, further deepening European integration. After all, global issues need to be tackled not only at national level, but at European level at the very least. A crisis is an opportunity. But Brussels just keeps muddling its way through one difficult situation after another.

Ad-hoc solutions and a creative interpretation of the EU treaties have

kept the European bicycle on track, albeit with plenty of bumps along the way. But this bike needs some repairs. The last great attempt to fix it was 20 years ago, with the Draft Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe. The European Convention (a body of representatives of EU institutions and Member States set up to make fundamental amendments to the EU Treaties) met for more than a year then, finally reaching a consensus on a draft European Constitution, adopted in July 2003 — only for it to be consigned to the recycling bin less than two years later, after it was rejected in referendums in France and the Netherlands. Many parts of it, though, were incorporated into the Treaty of Lisbon, which entered into force on 1 December 2009 and, to this day, forms the contractual basis for European cooperation and integration. Since then, there has been no sweeping treaty reform, and the question remains when, or rather if, there will ever be another attempt again.

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Paradoxically, this stalemate can be attributed to the EU's success, which has welcomed 13 new Member States since 2004. A new Convention would have members from 27 countries today. Although it could be convened by a simple majority within the European Council, there is still significant opposition to a fundamental reform of the treaties, particularly in Central and Northern Europe.

The European Parliament, on the other hand, is all for major treaty reform and has been calling for a Convention for some time. After some hesitation, Commission President Ursula von Leyen also confirmed this intention in her 2022 State of the Union speech (and again in today's speech) — knowing full well that this does not fall within her decision-making power anyway. However, even if there are many in Brussels who want to see reforms, this does not change the fact that it is the Member States that have all the leverage in the negotiations- Because, ultimately, it is they who will decide whether to ratify the Convention decisions or not. Just one veto is enough to grind everything to a halt.

The principle of unanimity is a thorn in the side of many who advocate for deeper integration, but not only for that reason. It is increasingly being abused to influence decisions in other fields in favour of the Member State concerned, as can be seen in the example of Hungary. Unfortunately, all routes to extending the use of majority voting in the Council also inevitably lead back to the principle of unanimity. The only way that certain policy areas can be converted to qualified majority voting through *passerelle clauses* is unanimously.

The enlargement dilemma

The principle of unanimity in the Council and the numerous veto options at the disposal of national governments are also some of the biggest hurdles to EU enlargement. Russia's invasion led to a major shift here, with Moldova and Ukraine becoming official accession candidates, accession talks starting with Albania and North Macedonia, and Georgia, Kosovo and Bosnia taking a small step closer to joining. Yet, we still haven't reached a breakthrough. Even if the European Council decides to open official talks with Moldova and Ukraine at the end of the year, negotiations will continue for years, if not decades. As things stand, the now-ten prospective members are not ready for the EU, nor is the EU ready for enlargement. The decision-making procedures and institutions need to be reformed first. However, the interests of Member States are just far too different, across practically all policy areas.

Some propose a deal: advocates of enlargement in the East are not opposed to slimmed-down treaty reforms, whereas the enlargement sceptics in the West, in particular French President Emmanuel Macron, are speeding up the procedures and allowing the Balkan countries to gradually integrate into the EU and the Single Market. Many different models and proposals are currently being mooted to ensure gradual integration without full membership, but there has been little concrete follow-up in political terms. Perhaps waiving veto rights in the Council and, if necessary, appointing a full-fledged EU Commissioner could help to resolve the dilemma between deepening and enlarging the Union though. The EU also faces a massive credibility problem. Although the Balkan countries were promised accession 20 years ago at the Thessaloniki Summit, the last country to join was Croatia back in 2013.

Geopolitical strategies, as well as the EU's institutional functioning, are hindering each other, slowing down the European bicycle.

All 10 countries interested in accession, as well as the currently eight official candidates, are certainly not flawless democracies; they have serious shortcomings in terms of their democratic and rule-of-law standards, in tackling corruption and in building up a functioning justice and administration. They have yet to meet the Copenhagen criteria. But then again, the same goes for certain current EU members. For years, Brussels has been trying to stop the Polish and Hungarian governments in their tracks, and new EU rule-of-law instruments have been used in recent years, but Orbán and Kaczyński have failed to be swayed so far. Withholding EU funds has had little

effect. For far too long, we seem to have relied on undesirable governments being voted out in the next elections and expecting the problems to solve themselves. This has obviously not been the case in Hungary, and whether there is even any prospect of fair and free elections in Poland will become apparent this autumn.

This dilemma certainly plays a part in the fact that potential new members are being scrutinised more closely and the admission criteria are being tightened, or are at least being interpreted more strictly than before. The EU cannot and must not tolerate any more 'rule-of-law breakers' and veto players. Geopolitical strategies, on the one hand, and the EU's institutional functioning, on the other hand, are hindering each other, thereby slowing down the European bicycle.

Europe at a crossroads

The forthcoming EU elections in June 2024 are a fork in the road for all of these challenges. There will still be no transnational lists, but with European lead candidates and a pan-European election campaign, as well as joint election manifestos by political families, the European dimension of these elections could at least be highlighted more strongly. To finally tackle the necessary reforms and also drive the enlargement of the Union, a strong pro-European and a progressive majority in the EU Parliament and decisive Commissioners are needed to counterbalance the EU scepticism prevailing in many parts of Europe. Unfortunately, the elections are likely to result in a lurch to the right rather than to the left. What's more, parts of the European Conservatives, especially EPP President Manfred Weber, are wooing new allies further to the right to prevent any chance of a left-wing majority in the Parliament.

With political differences only growing stronger within the EU, viable solutions to the different ideas of integration are needed, without further damaging European values and the democratic principle of the rule of law.

For the European bicycle to get back on the right track and finally gain ground, we shouldn't look back at the past of a Europe of fatherlands, but ahead with courage towards more European integration and a larger Union that tackles global challenges and is focused on the future. Pro-EU forces in Brussels and the Member States should come up with concrete proposals on how to deepen and enlarge the EU at the same time. Both must be thought out in tandem. A new Convention should cover a limited spectrum and seek targeted reforms — in particular the decision-making procedures in

the Council need to be reformed.

With political differences only growing stronger within the EU, viable solutions to the different ideas of integration are needed, without further damaging European values and the democratic principle of the rule of law. If this doesn't succeed in the next legislative period, then our European bike will most likely need to be redesigned. The plan is then to re-establish the European Union and create a federal European state with all the interested, democratically governed countries of Europe.



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