



# TWO- OR MULTI-SPEED EUROPE: CAN IT ACTUALLY WORK?

## *Executive Summary*

- The debate for a two- or a multi- speed Europe is becoming an increasingly hot topic in the EU. Stronger political positioning in between “EU’s core” States and its other members is expected in the months to come, with a clearer East-West rift.
- Two-/multi-speed Europe has a series of pros and cons that define opposite visions of the EU: if fully assumed as a principle, Europe will never be the same. Therefore, any debate should be transparent and have the right timing and arguments, in order to avoid adverse consequences for the European project. An idea meant to help with EU decision-making in an enlarged Europe risks otherwise becoming a Pandora’s box in a complicated time for Europe’s social, economic and political fabric.
- Stakeholders in Visegrad+ countries, as well as any other “outside-the-EU-core” countries, should beware a version of Europe which may be contrary to their development goals and interests, whether one deals with cohesion and solidarity principles (and the EU money involved), or the risk of remaining at the periphery of Europe. A debate on de facto changing the basics of Europe should be delayed as much as possible; if a two or multiple speed Europe cannot be eventually avoided, it should be both commonsensical and function to all member’s advantage.

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# CONTENTS

## Introduction

1. **History of the concept**
  - 1.1. Not there yet: enhanced cooperation and the Treaty of Amsterdam
  - 1.2. From Opt outs to special status
  - 1.3. Spelling it out more clearly: two-speed Europe as solution of moving forward in an enlarged EU
2. **Two speed Europe: from opportunity to necessity?**
  - 2.1. Coming to terms with EU's identity amid political-economic crisis
  - 2.2. Pros & Cons
3. **The Devil is in the details: How can Two-Speed Europe work**
  - 3.1. Eurozone vs the rest
  - 3.2. Other fields of application
  - 3.3. The need for clarity, calendar and leadership amid multiple crises
4. **The end of illusions**
  - 4.1. Risks beyond EU disenchantment: what future for Club cohesion?
  - 4.2. External affairs and image impact

## Conclusions & Recommendations

# INTRODUCTION

The “Big Bang” of EU enlargement (2004-2007) has created a fault-line within the EU between the old (western) members and the new (eastern) members. This appeared evident in various forms. The attitude towards Russia, for instance, is illustrative in that respect: while the “new” EU members saw Russia – given their turbulent history with Moscow and in spite of their energy dependence – as a major geopolitical actor with aggressive intentions, the

“old” EU members considered Russia primarily as a commercial partner promising lucrative business contracts. In sum, while the former put politics before business, the latter put business before politics. But business and geopolitics were not the only issues in between “Old” and “New” Europe.

The economic and financial crisis initiated in 2007/2008 did not heal the East-West rift within the EU following the “Big Bang”; it made it even more prominent, adding a new “rift”/“fault-line”, this time between North and South, both made evident by the current “refugee crisis”. Apart from making the EU inward looking, ignoring the concerning developments around us until they blew up in our face as full crises both in the East (Ukraine) and in the South (ISIL and terrorism), the economic and financial crisis has had major consequences within the EU, among them, the concentration of decision-making at the level of the “Euro Club” countries.

That has created important problems for the “non-Euro” countries, confronted with the dilemma of choosing between the financial flexibility offered by preserving their national currency and the political necessity to give it up, in order to get entrance into the “Euro Club”, where the real EU decisions were taken. The UK dilemma in this sense is apparently solved, while it remains to be seen if Cameron’s deal with Brussels, the “UK’s special status” will convince voters in June’s referendum.

As for the solutions themselves, although almost everybody agrees that they should be through “more, and not less Europe”, the EU institution which got strengthened by the crisis has been the Council, namely the embodiment of “inter-governmentalism”, rather than the

common ones (Commission, Parliament). There are notable exceptions in terms of eurozone management, with Frankfurt's ECB and other institutions taking over. During the crisis, the driving engine for more integration ("more Europe") has shifted from the desire to share in its profits towards the desire to stick together, in order to avoid the fallout of the crisis. That is why, the M(ember) S(tates) have accepted to renounce their sovereignty over their own budgets, for instance, an unthinkable situation at the time of signing the Lisbon Treaty.

Ignoring the "danger of dividing Europe in two classes of states: the relatively stable core countries in the north and the troubled countries in the south" (*Thomas Wright, Survival*), the trend towards a "two speed Europe" got renewed traction lately, possibly out of frustration over the resistance of the EU's new members to show enough "solidarity" in sharing the refugee burden. Italian Prime Minister Renzi's recent comments about Eastern States and their lack of solidarity on refugees, while wanting solidarity as regards EU funding, is reflective of this mood in Western capitals.

Some key questions remain. Is two or multiple speed Europe becoming a necessity? What are its pros and cons? How can the terms of the EU debate on the topic be best defined so as not to become a Pandora's box for the European project? What are the risks beyond the opportunity of the debate and what should stakeholders do in order to make the debate acceptable to people's agendas, country interests and the wider EU common interest? This report is a reflection of some of the possible answers to these questions.

## 1. History of the concept

From enhanced cooperation to two or multiple speed Europe, the EU has been under constant quest to adapt its functioning to the reality of enlargement and the needs of an ever more complex international reality.

### 1.1. Not there yet: enhanced cooperation and the Treaty of Amsterdam

According to EurLex, " 'Multi-speed' Europe is the term used to describe the idea of a method of differentiated integration whereby common objectives are pursued by a group of EU countries both able and willing to advance, it being implied that the others will follow later" (['Multi-speed' Europe](#)).

Also according to EurLex, enhanced cooperation "is a procedure where a minimum of 9 EU countries are allowed to establish advanced integration or cooperation in an area within EU structures but without the other EU countries being involved. This allows them to move at different speeds and towards different goals than those outside the enhanced cooperation areas. The procedure is designed to overcome paralysis, where a proposal is blocked by an individual country or a small group of countries who do not wish to be part of the initiative. It does not, however, allow for an extension of powers outside those permitted by the EU Treaties. Authorisation to proceed with the enhanced cooperation is granted by the Council, on a proposal from the Commission and after obtaining the consent of the European Parliament. As of February 2013, this procedure was being used in the fields of divorce law, and patents, and is approved for

the field of a financial transaction tax” ([Enhanced cooperation](#)).

Enhanced cooperation is therefore a practical tool, first initiated by the Treaty of Amsterdam, to avoid institutional paralysis. It paved *de facto* the way to multiple speed Europe, since it allows moving at different speeds, depending on a group of States’ willingness; of course, all within the scope of the existing treaties. While multi-speed Europe is a political concept, enhanced cooperation is a legal and institutional mechanism, the two do not coincide.

## 1.2. From Opt outs to special status

Another way to highlight the idea of multiple speed Europe, from an institutional perspective, is to put non-participation into perspective, namely the idea of the opt-out or of a special status. The “special status” invoked by the UK Prime Minister Cameron at the end of Brexit-negotiation in Brussels is in fact the culmination of a continued reticent approach of London towards increased integration. While the UK has opted out before, from the Schengen agreement and the economic and monetary union, it hasn’t been alone ([Opting Out](#)):

- Ireland also opted out of the Schengen Agreement;
- Denmark joined the UK in an opt out on the economic and monetary union;
- Copenhagen was reticent on defence issues;
- the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights did not please Poland and the United Kingdom;
- and, finally, an area of freedom, security and justice did not have enough political sex-appeal to Denmark, Ireland and the UK (while the latter two countries may opt into given initiatives if they wish).

While an opt out also brings into light the idea of a multiple speed Europe, it does so from the State exceptionalism perspective. Again, the Opt Out is an instrument, not a political concept like two speed Europe is.

## 1.3. Spelling it out more clearly: two-speed Europe as solution of moving forward in an enlarged EU

Multi-speed Europe had other kin names in previous years, from Europe “à la carte” to “variable geometry”, the basic dilemma of widening vs deepening appearing after the end of the Cold War, in the context of the eastward enlargement of the European Union. The idea of an “ever closer union among the peoples of Europe”, as the Treaty establishing the European Economic Community of 1957 had put it, is not valid for everyone, and a two or multi-speed Europe is a reflection of that.

When did the current debate on “two-speed Europe” reignite? The crisis of the eurozone provided the opportunity, with France’s Sarkozy and Germany’s Merkel in the lead, in 2011-2012. The debt crisis has forced European leaders to realise that monetary union requires much deeper economic integration in the eurozone, and probably further transfers of powers to Brussels ([EU comes to terms with ‘two-speed Europe’](#)). French President Sarkozy said, November 2011, in the European Parliament, in Strasbourg, that “clearly, there will be a two-speed Europe: One gear with greater integration in the euro area and a more confederal gear in the European Union”.

In June 2012, in an ARD television interview, German Chancellor Merkel said the euro zone was moving inevitably towards a “political union”

requiring nations to cede more sovereignty, and that would lead to more of a multi-speed Europe, with non-euro states in the slow lane ([Merkel calls for 'political union' to save the euro](#)): “We need more Europe, we need not only a monetary union, but we also need a so-called fiscal union, in other words more joint budget policy (...). And we need most of all a political union – that means we need to gradually give competencies to Europe and give Europe control”.

As regards top Brussels-based signals, the strongest message in recent months came in November 2015, from Jean-Claude Juncker ([Juncker foresees two-speed Europe](#)), European Commission President, who argued that "eventually, it will no longer be possible that 33, 34 or 35 states will proceed at the same speed with the same momentum in the same direction". Since no enlargement should happen under the mandate of the current Commission, till 2019, Juncker's message should be seen as dealing with current EU realities and challenges as well.

## 2. Two speed Europe: from opportunity to necessity?

Is two speed Europe an opportunity? Is it becoming a necessity? EU States need, among present challenges, to start analyzing seriously if moving towards a “two-speed Europe” is feasible and necessary.

### 2.1. Coming to terms with EU's identity amid political-economic crisis

Europe is in crisis of leadership, which brings nostalgia, in several capitals,

for key political leaders from previous crisis times for the European project: back then, politicians seemed more statesmanly, more decisive. Despite the apparent lack of leadership, core States started organising themselves in order to both lay clarity on the basics and provide incentives for optimism as regards EU's current and future identity. The foreign ministers of the six founding countries — Belgium, Germany, France, Italy, Luxembourg and the Netherlands — held a dinner in Rome, in February 2016, to discuss setting up a very informal group of “core” states prepared to push the EU forward, being “concerned about the state of the European project” but committed to ever closer union ([‘Core’ Europe committed to more Europe](#)). Committing the EU to an ever closer union in tough times is also an invitation to explore more the ways of optimizing action, and a multiple speed Europe is part of this debate.

It is not by chance that messages keep multiplying as regards two speed Europe, in combination with references to EU identity. French foreign minister Jean-Marc Ayrault, said, in an interview with JDD ([Jean-Marc Ayrault : "Chacun doit accepter une Europe différenciée"](#)), in February 2016, that two speed Europe “is not about undoing what was done or preventing those who want further action from doing so. The principles and founding values of the Union remain. Each must accept a differentiated Europe in which those who want more Europe could advance and those who don't, do not stand in the way” .

One of the basic issues that should be on the agenda of the EU's founding/core States is the political signal one sends via initiatives like two-speed Europe: can citizens reunite around the idea of Europe if the political message implies a lack of confidence

in “Europe as a whole”? Is two-speed Europe about minimising losses for “core” States in an EU under siege by various crisis?

## 2.2 Pros & Cons

There are several pros and cons that have been or can be invoked as regards two or multiple speed Europe. Among the arguments in favour of the concept are:

- institutional efficiency - it allows for those who wish “more Europe” to go ahead;
- it reflects a realistic picture of the EU - there are indeed different levels of performance among European States and one size for sure does not fit all;
- it already works in practice, the best example being the eurozone and the Schengen area;

As regards the “cons”, they mostly have to do with messing up Europe’s philosophy, as well as risk management:

- more (perceived) division in Europe, at a critical time for the EU project;
- risk of marginalization for less developed EU countries - perpetuating divisions make catching up more difficult; what happens to a core EU value, solidarity?;
- confusion as regards European identity - “too many Europes”, where nobody understands what Europe stands up for anymore;
- the ever growing complexity of the decision making process: how do we adapt EU institutions for a variable framework? We risk creating institutional gridlock while trying to move more speedily ahead.

Coming back again to EurLex ‘s multi-speed definition ([‘Multi-speed Europe’](#)): “ ‘Multi-speed’ Europe is the term used to describe the idea of a method of differentiated integration (...) being implied that the others will follow later”; so it’s essential to have the feeling, when negotiating politically two or multi-speed Europe, and then following up with legal certitude, that countries will really be able to follow later and not be forced to perpetual periphery. This way one can say that multi-speed Europe is an actual solution to the dilemma between unity and diversity, between widening and deepening of the EU.

## 3. The Devil is in the details: How can Two-Speed Europe work

While it’s difficult for EU States that may not agree with the concept of two-speed Europe to stop or slow the debate, particularly since key European States are backing the concept (with Germany, France, Italy and UK in the lead), there needs to be clarity as regards the limits of the concept, in order to make it work.

### 3.1. Eurozone vs the rest

In November 2015, UK’s Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne, set out for the first time the grand bargain he believes Britain can strike with its 27 European partners, enshrining in EU treaty law the concept of a two-speed Europe ([Osborne’s two-speed Europe plan meets Berlin’s approval](#)). Under the deal, Britain would be among a group of non-eurozone countries enjoying the freedoms of the EU’s single market but not committed to the “ever closer union” he believes

is essential to make the single currency work.

Interesting, in this context, are some key reactions, reflected by FT: Angela Merkel confirmed that “the Europe of today is no longer a Europe of one speed”; and Italy, voiced, via Sandro Gozi, Italian secretary of state for EU affairs, that “we have to think of a new way of being members: without forcing anyone to go ahead towards an ever closer union, but without stopping those countries that want to move forward to do so.”

In UK’s vision, those two Europes co-existing would look like this: “the outer ring would be based on the EU’s single market, covering all 28 member states, which would still be subject to the usual Brussels legislative process. The EU treaty would be rewritten to make it clear that the club was a *multicurrency union* in which some countries — including Britain — might never join the inner eurozone core, which could forge ahead with closer integration”. So, for the UK, two-speed Europe is essentially a eurozone vs non-eurozone speeding competition.

### 3.2. Other fields of application

Of the 28 EU countries ([Juncker foresees two-speed Europe](#)), some already work more closely together on certain issues than they do with others. Most notably, the 19 member states that share the euro currency coordinate budget policies and have a banking union in which all the large eurozone banks are under a single supervisor, the European Central Bank. They also have a common method of winding down failed banks with a joint fund to cover the costs. The Schengen states, meanwhile, share a common external border and have no more internal border checks.

The existence of Schengen - under

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pressure from the refugee wave, but still operational as an agreement - and other initiatives such as the [European Defence initiative](#) and [Prüm Convention](#) proves that two-speed Europe, or in fact a multiple speed Europe, cannot simply be limited to the eurozone. The debate on a two or multi-speed Europe should provide clarity in this respect as well: how far do we go with variable geometry? Are we ready to adopt a model of such complexity as to manage multiple speeds?

### 3.3. The need for clarity, calendar and leadership amid multiple crises

Any debate on two or multiple speed Europe should have clarity, calendar and leadership in its initiators’ minds. Clarity is key in order to set the terms of the debate and avoid any conspiracy theories as regards power-concentration by Brussels or a specific country, as well as any propaganda or disinformation games from other countries who are not interested in Europe’s success. This would also prevent the concept from becoming a victim of populist and extremist speech in various EU capitals. Chancellor Merkel, the continent’s most visible europhile, is already facing a lot of pressure at home and abroad, and undeservingly, gets less support than both she and Europe need to make the project succeed among multiple crises. It’s going to be hard, consequently, for her to set the terms of debate for two speed Europe.

In the context of key elections in Member States in the next few years, and particularly Germany and France (2017), it is hard to imagine the flag of two speed Europe carried by a single European politician: from this perspective, a joint initiative by several politicians may be an appropriate answer. Timing is also important:

Sandro Gozi, Italian State Secretary for European Affairs, in an interview in La Repubblica ([Renzi's risky criticism of Europe plays to Italian audience](#)), in January 2016, said that two speed Europe debate should center around 2017, namely the treaty of Rome anniversary. Of course, symbolism is important, but only as long as synchronization of leadership at EU level works.

An appropriate expectations management should be in place as well: are we looking for clarity and then political consensus on the topic till 2017, or will some EU States also seek a legal, international agreement component? The latter may be harder to get particularly when looking into the “cons” issues, as regards adapting institutional decision-making to two speed Europe. Contrary to the two-speed option via a political declaration, the treaty would be legally binding, so would involve more heavy negotiations.

Countries from the so-called Visegrad+ Group are faced with a strategic choice: should they start talking at EU level about a two- or a multiple-speed Europe ? Or should they try to delay such a debate, by the very fact that a change in the EU philosophy towards several speeds Europe may harm the ideas of cohesion and solidarity? While, in time, a debate on a two or multiple speed Europe may be hard to avoid, particularly under pressure from large Western EU States, rushing into a debate without a strong direction in terms of clarity of concepts may harm Eastern European countries' interests.

## 4. The end of illusions

The increased tensions affecting Europe's social, political and economic fabric, as well as in between EU

States, brings a strong sense of end of illusions as regards the European project. Separate from this disenchantment, the main question is where the Club is heading, what is the people's readiness for debate, and what is the best moment to act for key national and Brussels stakeholders. All this process should be conducted strategically, in order to manage well EU's perception both at home and abroad, in order to save the edifice from crumbling under competing pressures and particularly popular mistrust and discontent.

### 4.1. Risks beyond EU disenchantment: what future for Club cohesion?

While there is clearly an EU disenchantment among the people of Europe, there is also a risk that has to be managed when dealing with two or multiple speed Europe. If not managed right, this risk could further increase that disappointment and ultimately lead the EU to institutional crash. A serious talk needs to be had on what is a “core” EU value and, in this context, solidarity and cohesion should remain central in the EU panoply, otherwise “Brussels” will be perceived not only as bureaucratic but also as an eminently egoistic structure.

Two-speed Europe should therefore not entail a richer vs poorer club, with consequences as regards EU funds; Visegrad+ political stakeholders should watch this red line in future negotiations. Also, while some countries, whether from “New” or “Old” Europe, may decide they do not wish a certain speed for a specific topic, that should in no way mean that they could not accelerate at another moment in the future and “catch-up”. From this perspective, it's important to underline that a step out of a faster speed now, is not a lock-down in a slow speed forever. Otherwise, this



would lead to a decline of trust in the decisions made by the “core”, and create an increasing divide on the matter with the “second group” of EU-members.

#### **4.2. External affairs and image impact**

Apart from institutional consequences of a two-speed Europe (modifications in several community institutions) – for instance, a “smaller Parliament” within the European Parliament, which will discuss exclusively the “euro-related” problems, mainly approving the “Euro Club” special budget – there will be important political consequences, with external affairs impact. A return to the old, traditional “European Politics” of dealing with Russia at the expense of the (non-euro) countries laying in between is the most dangerous one. EU is not an exclusively “economic and commercial” club, as some would too easily pretend: it is contributing to guaranteeing the security of its members, too. Or, in case Europe will be split between a group of “core” countries (Euro Club) and another of “non-euro” ones, there is a risk of a split in that guarantee, too. The “core” countries could enjoy a full guarantee, while the rest will benefit of only a partial guarantee. There may be other consequences on the European security front as well: The Treaty of Lisbon speaks about “permanent structured cooperation” in the military field (the equivalent of two speeds in the area), and this could gain more traction in the months to come.

In case that happens, what option(s) remain(s) open to the non-euro EU members? Naturally, NATO (provided the MS will not be split between “euro” and “non-Euro”, here too...). Full and active participation in all NATO activities, particularly those deterring Russia’s aggressive moves and

“revanchist” foreign policy is, for all practical reasons, the only option available to the non-euro EU countries, in order to continue to guarantee themselves their security. Consequently, following the logic of the argument, bilateral relations with the US, the driving force within the Alliance, continue to remain paramount, needing, therefore, further strengthening. That will mean a reinvigorated transatlantic relationship: at a time when Europe, confronted with crisis after crisis, is seeing her “magnetism” diminished every day, the US, with its incontestable military superiority, economic dynamism and still good demographics is the only anchor of the West in the resistance against the increasing adversities within the current international system.

An important perception and expectations management exercise is also the one regarding any future enlargement process and the relations with Eastern Partnership countries. If the feeling in neighboring State capitals is that the EU will not deliver on future accession hopes, even after 2019, then there will be less incentives for reform and, consequently, a higher probability for Europe to see its neighbourhood less safe and prosperous. In addition to that, in case of a loose second speed, how do we approach future EU enlargements? Should potential new States prepare for first speed Europe or for the second tier team? What are the development implications for aspiring States and what is the status of the second speed EU States: are they a “purgatory” for future enlargement countries in between neighborhood “hell” and first speed “heaven”?

For EU countries with strong interests in enlargement towards Moldova, the Balkans and Ukraine, i.e. the case for EU’s Eastern States and particularly Romania and Poland, the

development dilemma will be: “do we want to be as prosperous as Germany in time?” or “do we want to share a borderline development status, an intermediary status?” for, possibly, decades to come. For stakeholders in Bucharest for example, an issue should be the exact vision for the country’s European future in a multiple speed EU: should one go ahead more quickly than scheduled (with additional reforms involved) with eurozone accession to join EU’s “core”? Or risk marginalization? In case of enlargement, will there be a natural three speed Europe (“core” States, “old-new” States, and “new-new” States), is that desirable? All these questions should seek a common sense reply in national capitals before going into a full EU28 Brussels debate.

## **CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS**

The European Union is still confronted with multiple crises, the most obvious being the management of the refugee flux towards Europe. Europe needs a proper, transparent, debate about its future, including the ways of functioning best in an enlarged club. While no immediate enlargement is in sight, the Club should prepare its institutions for increasingly competing visions on the EU and its future, under populist pressure or simply under the political attraction of Brussels-bashing.

A critical issue remains the timing of the debate, in order for it not to become a Pandora’s Box and further complicate an already complicated European environment, before key elections in Germany and France, in 2017. The debate on a two or multiple speed Europe should be one based on common sense and simple key

messages, in order not to get distorted or misunderstood: scare games are to be expected, one way or the other (either the “EU will get stuck” or “EU will lose its cohesion and key functioning principles”).

Stakeholders in Visegrad+ countries, from the latest waves of accession, as well as any other “outside-the-EU-core” countries, with the notable exception of the UK (who negotiated its fresh new “special status”), should beware a version of “Two or Multiple Speed” Europe which may be contrary to their development goals and interests, whether one deals with a debate on cohesion and solidarity principles (and the EU money involved), or simply with the risk of remaining at the periphery of Europe, in a lax circle of growth, with small chances of ever catching up with EU colleagues. In terms of national interests, for Visegrad+ countries, a debate on *de facto* changing the basics of Europe should be delayed as much as possible. In time, if a two or multiple speed Europe cannot be eventually avoided, it should be both commonsensical and function to all member’s advantage. A hastily organized debate, in the context of diverging priorities between Western and Eastern Member States, ranging from geopolitical challenges (Russia) to concrete problems like managing the refugee wave, is not a wise step for the Club.

A debate on a two or multiple speed Europe should not be used as leverage in negotiations between Western and Eastern States: the topic deserves the right context for proper debate, namely after finding solutions to Europe’s most pressing concrete challenges. If Brussels wants to send a signal about EU strength and reassure European citizens, the debate Europe should have in 2016 and 2017 is one about our common

identity, about what defines the EU identity and why it is important to stick together when our historic project is under pressure. Reaffirming EU values in the context of the Rome Treaty's 60th anniversary can have, in our view, a stronger impact than trying to give up on some of the basics of Europe.

### **About Strategikon:**

Strategikon is an independent, English-speaking, Bucharest-based think tank. As mission and vision, it aims to provide "Innovative Strategies" (Strategikon's slogan) to address key challenges for relevant stakeholders in Romania, Europe and around the world; it also intends to raise the quality of the debate on international relations in the region. Strategikon addresses three main areas: International Security; European Union Affairs; and Good Governance.

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