

My name is Noelle O Connell and I am the Executive Director of European Movement Ireland. Established in 1954, European Movement Ireland is Ireland's longest established not-for-profit membership organisation dedicated exclusively to promoting co-operation and engagement between Ireland and Europe. For over 66 years, we are proud to be a non-partisan membership-based organisation that endeavours to strengthen the connection between all sectors of Irish society, the European Union in addition to acting as a conduit to increase awareness and understanding of European issues among Irish people and vice versa.

The notion of the 'one hundred days' entered modern political discourse with President of the United States, Franklin D. Roosevelt, subsequently becoming a standard by which Presidents and administrations are measured.

In her 'agenda for Europe' President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen outlined four issues to be addressed within the first one hundred days of her administration:

1. the forwarding of a European Green Deal;
2. the proposal of a legal instrument on fair minimum wage;
3. the tabling of binding pay transparency measures aimed at gender equity;
4. and to initiation of legislation on the "human and ethical implications" of artificial intelligence.

It is now the 92nd day of the von der Leyen Commission so if we were to give her and her Commissioners a report card, what would the grade be?

Undoubtedly for some, the concept of a multi-speed Europe is a contentious issue. Indeed, the political perception of differentiated integration depends heavily on the national context in which it is discussed; whereas the concept of a multi-speed Europe is regarded as a practicable and pragmatic approach in French politics (President Macron's interest in a "two or three-speed Europe" is well-known) whilst in other Member States, they in turn regard it as an impracticable and arguably inequitable approach that serves to perpetuate divisions.

So therefore, it is no exaggeration to say that a Multi-speed Europe can be a divisive concept. Calls for a multi-speed Europe of one form or another have been heard for decades and differentiated integration is, to a degree, an extant feature of the European project; half of European policies allow differentiation with respect to the implementation and a multi-speed framework is instantiated in the Schengen Area and the Eurozone. Commission reports recognise that "differentiated integration (...) is already a political reality"

The tendency to adopt elements of a multi-speed Europe without explicitly referring to the concept was discontinued by the 'White Paper on the Future of Europe', published by the Juncker Commission in 2017, which presented five developmental outlines for the future

of the Union, one of which explicitly entertained a multi-speed framework for Europe – ‘Those who want to do more do more’. Envisaging ‘coalitions of the willing’, and or / Coalitions of the able? The outline involved blocs of member states collaborating on issues of common interest; although the Commission is altered, the outline retains relevance.

Ambition is rarely absent from complexity, particularly in a political context. The breadth and depth of the issues that the new VdL Commission intends to address, from climate policy to defence policy to the rule-of-law, provide ample space for disagreement and dissent. The complexity of implementing policy has the potential to be aided and addressed by multi-speed framework - indeed, it is oftentimes the case that differentiated integration tends to arise in policy areas characterised by political polarisation. We must let the EU be itself, so to speak.

The European Green Deal is the cornerstone of the new Commission’s programme and an integral initiative for Europe, however, the process of achieving climate-neutrality by 2050 is demanding and could require the flexibility that a multi-speed framework affords. The reality is that variations in relevant infrastructure, in natural resources and in levels of import dependence invariably result in different Member States holding different energy-related interests. As we can see, for a number of Member States – generally located on the periphery of the Union – security of supply and diversification of sources are the unquestionable and unalterable priority. But unlike other policy areas, at least all agree on basic strategic objective of not burning the planet, even if there is some disagreement on implementation. However, there is no agreement on issues such as the basic strategic objectives for the Eurozone, defence, migration etc.

A degree of flexibility with respect to the implementation of the European Green Deal is perhaps the pragmatic approach to achieving carbon-neutrality, it is certainly the approach that President of the European Council Charles Michel appears to favour. Nevertheless, it is imperative that the terms of that flexibility are concrete and that the flexibility afforded is, in a certain sense, inflexible: even if the path to climate-neutrality is multi-speed, it is important that the path leads to climate-neutrality.

The concept of multi-speed Europe with respect to defence policy is well-established, indeed, PESCO, launched in 2017 under the Juncker Commission, was initially intended – by French officials at least – as a veritable exemplar of multi-speed Europe on defence. The idea was to have a bloc of Member States committed to strategic autonomy and to undertaking complex defence operations. The reality of PESCO, however, falls short of the French vision of a European Intervention Initiative (EII) by President Macron for a multi-speed defence framework and is closer to the German vision oriented around the cohesion and integration of Member States.

We have seen where one size does not fit all. A number of the initiatives proposed by the Commission less obviously dependent on a multi-speed framework, nevertheless, they involve an element of differentiated integration, e.g the Commission’s proposal for a common minimum wage – a commitment von der Leyen agreed to initiate in the first one hundred days – is complicated in Nordic Member States by the existence of a collective bargaining system dependent on union representatives. The introduction of a common minimum wage,

Nordic officials argue, could potentially lower the minimum wage; consequently, the Commission has determined that Nordic Member States are to be exempt from the common minimum wage.

However, one area, I would argue, in which a multi-speed Europe is unacceptable is that of democracy and the rule-of-law can we as the European Union be seen a champion and flag bearer for exporting democracy against the backdrop of challenges in some EU member states? What is imperative that Member States speak with one voice as regards the preservation of democratic values and the issue of democratic “backsliding”. The von der Leyen Commission’s commitment to the implementation of an additional rule-of-law monitoring mechanism, to be tied to the Multiannual Financial Framework, is a proposal that the Commission is looking to implement – whether it will ultimately come into effect is another question.

An additional initiative for the VdL Commission that has had visible outputs in that respect is the introduction of the Conference on the Future of Europe, focused on deliberative democracy – which emphasises public participation in relation to policy-making – the Conference is designed to promote democratic participation in Europe but the jury is out frankly at the moment in terms of how it proposes to do this. What is the desired outcome? What is the end result? What is the road map on this? What is the role for member states? At the moment there seems to be somewhat of an inter-institutional disagreement on how best to map and plan out this process – Is treaty change the desired goal? Is it to listen to the concerns of all of our EU citizens to reduce the perceived democratic deficit whilst making the EU more relevant? What is clear however and from an EM Ireland perspective, that we need a greater and ongoing engagement with citizens across the EU in order to ensure that we have a focused and engaged European Union in all its forms that listens and constructively responds to the concerns of its citizens.

In conclusion, ultimately, it is inevitable that a multi-speed Europe, at least in terms of differentiated integration, will continue to be a topic of much debate and conversation, shaping the EU for the medium term at the least. Whilst we can say that a multi-speed framework will primarily play a part in the politically polarising issues, such as climate policy and, to a lesser extent perhaps defence policy, we cannot afford to lose the opportunity to engage citizens in all aspects of how to better influence, input and shape the future of the European Union at whatever speed that reflects and epitomises the complexity of a Union of 27 Member States and 440 million citizens.

And in terms of a report card for the VdL Commission for the first 100 days, and indeed beyond, to paraphrase a well known political 6 word catchphrase here in Ireland around general election times, ‘A lot done, more to do.’

Thank you.

"The European Commission support for the production of this publication does not constitute an endorsement of the contents which reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein."



Co-funded by the
Erasmus+ Programme
of the European Union

