

Thursday, 27 April 2017

*On 27 April 2017 the European Council on Foreign Relations and Stiftung Mercator hosted an expert seminar on foreign policy approaches to current and future transformations in European integration. This concept note describes the background, motivation, and goals of the seminar. It was intended to help invitees prepare their participation.*

### Background

In January 2017, ECFR and Stiftung Mercator gathered over 35 think tankers and expert EU observers from 16 countries for a foresight workshop called “Rethinking European Futures”. The workshop built on eight scenarios which sought to envisage what Europe could look like in 2025 and how the EU might respond to a number of internal and external challenges affecting its foreign policy.

The eight scenarios are available at [www.ecfr.eu/specials/rethinking\\_european\\_futures](http://www.ecfr.eu/specials/rethinking_european_futures).

The workshop participants discussed these scenarios to gain a better understanding of the challenges and choices EU policy making faces. Their conclusion was that the disruptive potential of plausible transformations was widely overlooked and that three such transformations hold special significance: 1) deliberate downgrading of the EU by re-nationalizing core competencies, 2) forging a new political center, and 3) chaotic EU collapse. The workshop concluded with a recommendation to consider these trajectories more closely and to find effective approaches to handle them. The April seminar in Berlin will take this outcome as its starting point: How can policy planners and makers think more constructively about transformative discontinuities in European integration?

ECFR invites foreign policy planners and makers from across Europe to a one-day seminar held in Berlin under Chatham House rule. Its goal is to identify policy making approaches to different forms and outcomes of European integration. Rather than solely focusing on uncertainty itself and that “everything might get worse”, the seminar will emphasize how developments, seemingly undesirable from today’s point of view, can be tackled.

The seminar is part of ECFR’s and Stiftung Mercator’s *Rethink: Europe* project and is a contribution to the debate on the future shape of Europe. It is also intended to complement the reflection process started by the European Commission’s recent [White Paper on the future of Europe](#). In the seminar we would like to move one step further by considering a wider spectrum of uncertain yet plausible futures that also include the breakdown of the EU.

### Addressing discontinuities

The January workshop identified the three issue clusters described below. They can be read as mini scenarios and serve as the basis to frame the April seminar.

#### 1) Deliberate Renationalization: limiting the EU's focus

Intergovernmentalism has become the prevailing *modus operandi* of the European Union. Most political initiatives originate at the member state level and agreements depend on them coming to fragile compromises. Policy making by the European Council is sidelining other EU institutions; their roles have been significantly reduced from the pre-Eurozone crisis EU. If this trend continues the EU might eventually be downgraded to a “secretariat” of its member states, i.e. a body that deals with the administration of a trimmed-to-its-core single market and with no powers or ambitions of initiative and agenda setting.

In ‘Deliberate Renationalization’ the EU member states are not necessarily turning inward or away from each other. But the modus in which they cooperate, interact, and find compromises is dominated by national initiatives, summitry and a growing cacophony of special “deals”. In this scenario smaller countries try to band together more frequently to avoid some of the disadvantages and costs they face vis-à-vis their bigger neighbours. This may lead to the formation of stronger regional blocks – e.g. the Nordics, the Baltics, the South, etc. – that over time become more formalized and act as mini-caucuses in a geographically fragmented European Union. At the same time, and due to the EU being scaled down to a free trade zone, the EU enlargement process regains momentum to include several new members in the near future.

Questions for consideration:

Can a deliberate limiting of the EU's focus to a smaller set of core competencies work? How and in which (foreign) policy areas? Which opportunities are to be expected from a “widening over deepening” dynamic? What will be the costs? How will your government respond?

#### 2) Variable Coalitions: a new political center

A multi-speed Europe of differentiated integration with a progressive core and an associated periphery is in parts already a reality in the current European Union. What if an informal “coalition of the willing” came together determined to achieve better results in the EU by either pushing the consensus or by moving ahead? What if small groups of member states took this reality a step further? Such groups would come together based on a shared commitment to cooperation and delivering results rather than through meeting technical or legal requirements as a precondition. The new political center may thus choose to use existing treaty tools such as enhanced cooperation or permanent structured cooperation. But it might just as well move beyond the existing *acquis communautaire* if it proves too restrictive or cumbersome, e.g. by agreeing on an international treaty (“Schengen 2.0”).

This form of coalition building alternates around a group of member states that is not necessarily always the same. Its composition may reflect the economic, governmental, and societal differentials existing among the EU28 and change depending on the policy issue at stake. In this way, integration might advance in some of the following policy areas: a single currency, a federal budget, including a base level of social security through common taxes, a completed single market, integrated immigration and asylum laws, a common internal security structure, a single external border force, and an integrated foreign policy and defence.

Questions for consideration:

What is the critical mass required for the new political center to materialize? Who is in, who is out? Which policy areas and coalitions are most promising for such an initiative and would they include the foreign and security policy domain? Would this scenario alienate countries that support the idea in principle but cannot join as they lack the political and economic resources? Would outsiders be more prone to interference by other regional powers such as Russia and Turkey? Would this automatically lead to the further deconstruction of the European Union or could it help save the accomplished?

### 3) EU Collapse

A full-scale collapse of the European Union is still widely treated as a taboo despite a plurality of trends and challenges that indicate its plausibility. Yet it could be an event as similarly unthinkable as the rise of Donald Trump to the White House was a few months ago. EU collapse may not be a singular point but a series of accelerating events or a slow process of institutional decline (Western European Union). In contrast to the somewhat more constructive 'Deliberate Renationalization', a collapse with an overall destructive dynamic (i.e. societies closing, a chaotic European concert of fearful nation states vying for influence) would likely mean a significant loss in economic, political, and social security in several EU countries, including the largest ones.

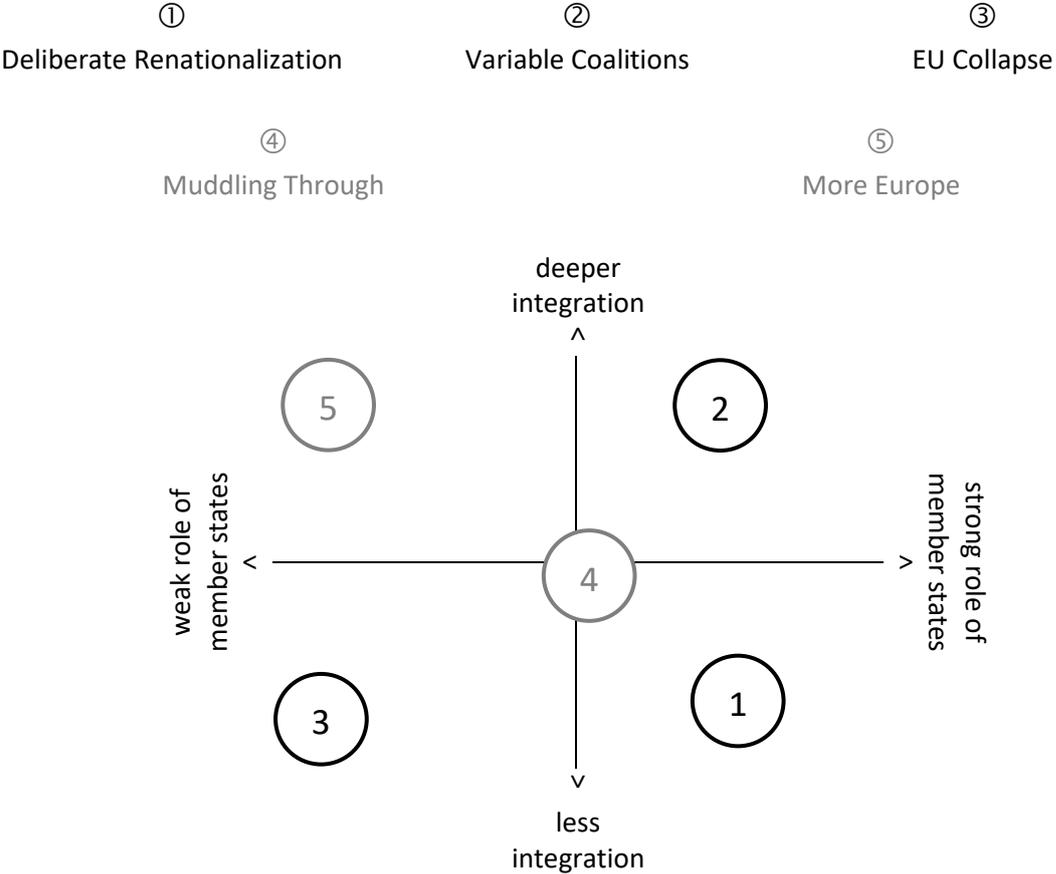
Questions for consideration:

In which form is the collapse of the EU most plausible and how would your government likely respond? What would be the immediate consequences for your government if the EU's institutions and its legal framework break? What would be the greatest threat and what would be the most promising course of action? Is a stronger regime to target non-compliance in European affairs needed to counter centrifugal forces that drive the EU28 apart?

# Dealing with discontinuity

Expert seminar on the future shape of EU policy making

The following chart includes the three clusters of discontinuity outlined above. Their proposed positions are based on the level of integration and the future role of member states. Shown in grey are two additional trajectories that are not discussed here but included as reference points<sup>1</sup>.



### Seminar approach and structure

The clusters outlined in this concept note should not be read as an exhaustive and mutually exclusive list. The issues and questions are intended to facilitate a debate on how to anticipate, prepare for, and react to cases in which the EU ceases to exist in its current form. The horizon for this exercise is the year 2025, i.e. the course of about two European election cycles.

<sup>1</sup> “Muddling Through” and “More Europe” correspond with “Carrying On” and “Doing much more together” in the EU Commission’s White Paper on the Future of Europe (March 2017, [download link](#)).