NEW GLOBAL UNCERTAINTIES AND ITS MEANING FOR EUROPEAN UNION INTEGRATION?

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Abstract

The concept of European Union integration has been at the forefront of much discussion on what the future of the European Union project would be. At various junctions, especially in crisis times, the concept of integration would be code for a balance sheet on its progress and future challenges. The uncertainties that have merged since the British referendum decision to leave the European Union in June 2016, has provided a new framework for the future of European integration. It has seen the first departure of a member, and not an insignificant member, from the Union alongside destabilizing features in the world order. The dismissive approach from the Trump administration and the volatility of US foreign policy has put many in the EU on tender hooks. Moreover, European Union member states have had to contend with a volatile Euro-sceptic electorate, which has blamed the European Union for a crisis of expectations. The election results in 2017 in The Netherlands, and the victory of Macron in France, provided for some, reason to believe that not all was lost. The leadership of the European Union has taken a sober approach towards the current crisis and has refrained from submission to this pessimism. Though locked in negotiations with the UK over Brexit, its release of the White Paper on the future of the European Union issued in March 2017 was an attempt to insure that Brussels and the EU was not ruling from on–high without member state buy in. It was a document which was partially defensive (only mentioning Brexit once) but at the same time seeking a guide on whether, and how, to approach future European Union integration.

Keywords: European Union, integration, Brexit, EU White Paper, global uncertainty

Introduction

European integration is a much-discussed concept and code for describing the state and progress of the European Union (EU). In effect, everything related to the European Union in both its growth and its crisis is about its integration or lack thereof. As the European Union (and its predecessors) since its foundation years of the early 1950s, grew in size and depth, the matter of its progress and integration became equally important. The growth of the EU proceeded in grouped accessions from its original six (Germany, France, Italy and the Benelux countries) founding members. In the 1970s the UK, Ireland and Denmark acceded followed by the 1980s accession of Greece, Spain and Portugal. In the 1990s Austria, Sweden and Finland joined making by the mid-1990s a solid and cohesive grouping of 15 western European member states. With the end of the Cold War in Europe and the reunification of Germany, it was only natural that the EU turned its attention to the new market economies previously in the orbit of the former Soviet Union. This included eight nations from Central and Eastern Europe as well as the two island states of the Greek section of Cyprus and Malta. The accession in 2004 of these mostly eastern European nations however was a major extension of the European Union and in the view of some "a bridge too far" for the European Union. The countries had

come from a different political economy and the levels of economic development were both different and not synchronised. The emergence of these Eastern European states represented the most significant and differentiated merger with states that had little in common with Western economies and developed democratic States. This would be a major watershed.

The aim of this paper is to address and critically analyse the state of European Integration in the current global turmoil and uncertainty. The paper will examine the Juncker *White Paper on the Future of Europe* (2017) and the alternatives provided by this perspective. The paper addresses the options facing the European Union with all this debate and obstacles facing and what might lie ahead. The paper will seek to offer alternatives to what the EU might wish to pursue for its future as standing still appears no longer to be an option. Some of the turmoil facing the European Union is partially of its own making and certainly a function of its existence. It would be inaccurate to apportion all the blame for the global turmoil to the outcome of the US elections and the new Trump administration. The Brexit referendum outcome, the Dutch and French election results are testimony to this. This paper seeks to make the case that the European Union integration will struggle to deepen if it is incapable of re-assessing its direction, membership and scope of its jurisdiction. Moreover, it needs to decide to deepen more or pull right back. While European integration has always been the daughter of European post-war peace, today this message is sounder fainter and weaker. Pursuing the slow road of integration does not seem to be working as it might have done some decades ago. Trying to convince the less convinced is now showing signs that this approach does not work either. Is it that there needs to be even deeper Federalism or pull back to a much lower common denominator such as the Single Market?

European integration models versus the realities

Over the decades significant attention has been provided by scholars to the theories of European integration. The theories kept ever increasing and so did the expectations. In one analysis entitled *Civitas* it underscored why these theories could be important:

> "Theories are important as they help us to understand how the EU works, and having a better understanding of how the EU has developed allows us to hypothesise about what the EU might be like in the future. It is also important to be familiar with the different approaches people take when explaining European integration, as whatever is written is always grounded in a particular set of assumptions which should be taken into account when reflecting on what has been said" (Civitas 2015).

These European integration theories alluded to included federalism, intergovernmentalism, neofunctionalism, Liberal Intergovernmentalism, (New) Institutionalism, Multi-level Governance and finally post functionalism. According to one scholar post-functionalism "is the newest theoretical approach to European integration… as it advocates an increased empirical and theoretical focus on public attitudes and party politics in the individual member states…" (Tosun et al 2014: 200). Why this is important is "because these factors can effectively constrain the ability of governments to shape European integration" (Tosun et al 2014: 200). Is this the reason for the backlash felt in some of the member states?

All theories have undergone decades of commentary and scholarly dissection. This paper has no desire to delve into their use and application. Many in the field of European Studies as well as practitioners within the European Union would possibly question the value of the models presented as guides to understanding the European Union (Blair 2010: 5). Some models served

well for certain periods but today in wholesale crisis we struggle to latch on to any the European models of understanding which can answer the crisis being felt and that the economic and social crisis are essentially the causes for the disaffection and Euroscepticism. As other scholars have noted: "Somewhat remarkably, however, integration theories have not put too much emphasis on the implications of crises and exogenous shocks… and the crisis would be expected to be an obstacle rather than an opportunity for further integration" (Tosun et al 2014: 199).

European integration and more specifically European jurisdiction of responsibilities until the 1990s did not extend to 'core state powers' (Gentschel & Jachtenfuchs 2016). Much of the responsibilities in the hands of Brussels were aspects of governance which interfered little with the important day to day matters of member states. EU affairs played out in both the European domain as well as within the member states seemed quite innocuous with little interference with member state political priorities. This changed with the Single Market (1992) and especially with the Maastricht Treaty and new areas of sovereignty deficit for member states. This was most felt with the enormous step taken by the EU with the achievement of the single currency and the Economic and Monetary Union.

As Brussels now emerged as a real facet of political direction so too would the concern about sovereignty of the nation states, and with growing levels of "Euroscepticism" also saw the end of the 'permissive consensus' (Lindberg & Scheingold, 1970) which had been the *modus operandi* give way to 'constraining dissensus' (Hooghe & Marks, 2005). As this consensus was evolving a political disconnect also emerged. Bellamy and Kroger (2016) noted that rather than a democratic deficit in operation of the EU institutions, the concern was more of a political disconnect between the politics and institutions of national parliament and the those of the European Union (2016, p. 125). Of equal concern and development was another feature of European integration or its lack of, was the notion of "differentiated integration". Again EU scholars such as Bellamy and Kroger in another work recognised that not all states could move in the same direction at the same time – differentiated speed meant some do more while others do less. In European integration code, this had another expression known as "Two speed" or even "Three speed" Europe.

From the 1990s, despite moments of "honey moon" respite, the European project proceeded along a" two steps forward one step back" trajectory. A reunified Germany, a Maastricht Treaty and the Economic and Monetary Union while major milestones in the development of the European Project were also those that would differentiate between the member states bringing out the cracks in the union. These were the measures, which brought out the different Europe's and their respective economic positioning. This included the southern Mediterranean flank. At the same time in different portions, certain features of the European Union played their divisive role. These included the concern over sovereignty, economic decline back in the member states and the rise of right wing concern over growing levels of inward migration. At the same time Germany's assertiveness became more noticeable as Germany's financial prowess became discernible in the EUs monetary policy and approach towards economic management.

The 2004 accession of the Central and Eastern European states was a daring leap into expansion of the European Union as it had never done. This growth to the east however also triggered strong reactions within the existing European community. As the EU moved towards a stronger governing framework, the proposed Constitution, it received aftershocks when the proposed constitution was voted down in France and The Netherlands. It was a warning to the EU community that a step too far had been made and that backtracking was in order. Some level

of weariness began to set in and the contrast between the new member states and the Western group emerged quickly. The US initiated Iraq war and its desire to expand the coalition attracted a number of the new European Union members from Eastern Europe. This war was never seen with sympathy from the major European Union members such as Germany and France though the UK was a prominent member of this Iraqi coalition. Another crack appeared in the EU foreign policy approach and another reason for a stronger and unified approach. Speaking with one voice was now seen as an obligatory next step amidst the global ridicule that the EU suffered in this period.

The global financial crisis and its consequences to European integration

As the EU fought off criticism about its fragmented security and foreign policy approach towards the world, as well as the concern about perceived inflation after the introduction of the single currency, the final blow came with the global financial crisis in 2008. The onslaught of the GFC, which was defined as being the most serious since 1929, caught especially those European economies with large public debt, low growth rates and high unemployment. Other economies that had poorly structured and secured banking systems also were in this mix such as Ireland. Overall, however the ones most affected included the Southern Mediterranean flank what the Economist referred to as the PIIGS countries – Portugal, Italy, Ireland, Greece and Spain. The response of most European governments at the time was to tackle these winds of crisis with even more austerity. As described by some scholars:

"In many European countries, this triggered severe sovereign debt crises beginning in early 2010, often followed by the implementation of tough austerity measures or programmes for structural reforms of the welfare state and labour market with countries like Greece, Portugal, Spain, Ireland and Italy and the Baltic States representing the most prominent examples" (Armingeon & Guthmann 2013: 1).

While the US financial crisis was caused by the over extension of the banking credit system involving private financial and mortgage institutions, the situation in the European Union was primarily related to public debt and especially to high levels of budget deficits. This was especially felt by lesser performing economies such as the Greek, the Portuguese, the Spanish and the Irish. The test case however would be that of Greece which was facing debt levels of bankruptcy proportions. One scholar observed that the Greek economy was built on excessive budget deficits over the previous three decades and that between 2001 and 2009 the Greek government took out substantial loans to sustain GDP growth (Kouretas 2015). Greece's admission into the Eurozone in 2001 and as such an adherent of the single currency also allowed it greater access to private debt markets. This result in 2009 with private creditors holding all of the Greek public debt, which by then had reached in 2008 alone the unsustainable level of 130 per cent of GDP.

At the same time, the neighbouring European economies were only slightly better but all were facing bond level interest, which were deemed to be of bankruptcy proportions. The austerity responses by the member states, supported and encouraged by the European Commission, created even more difficulties and distress. Unemployment grew and growth rates began rapidly declining. In the case of Greece, it's GDP from 2010 to 2015 declined by almost 50 per cent. As one scholar observed:

"Austerity policy has caused the unemployment in the Eurozone to rise to 11 per cent, the highest level since 1995. In Greece and Spain, rates are above 20 per cent; half of all young people in the two countries are without work…Austerity policy is thus also contributing decisively to further undermine the European Social Model" (Busch 2013: 5).

In the midst of the economic crisis, the European Union had unfinished business with the failure of the Constitutional Convention and the attempt to modernise the EUs governance system. The Lisbon Treaty talks, recommendations and conclusions offered some resolution to the democratic deficit as well as a stronger executive system for the European Union. The fragmented decision making structure of the European Union, exemplified by the divisions on a range of issues including foreign policy, highlighted the EUs weaknesses. The 2009 Lisbon Treaty ratification the member states provided greater levels of power to the European Parliament, some response to new structures, firmer institutions and a firmer unified voice with the establishment of the permanent presidency of the EU and the High representative for Foreign Affairs. As an aside, the Lisbon Treaty also added without much discussion and debate the possibility of an exit clause from the European Union, which had never been seriously considered or expected. This would of course play a more prominent role with the British exit referendum in June 2016.

The legitimacy of the EU institutions addressed in the Lisbon Treaty was also code for crisis aversion and "democratic deficit" a much used association but poorly acted on. The intention of the EU leadership was to seek through Lisbon Treaty a way to improve dialogue with the populace in the EU in what was seemingly an already restless audience.   While it is normal to speak of crisis within the European Union, the first serious sounding of alarm occurred in the middle of the global financial crisis. Scholars of European Integration first flagged:

> "The European Union is currently experiencing its deepest crisis since it came into existence. The euro is undergoing the acid test and threatens to pull the single market into the abyss along with it. Collapse of the European Union, which due to successful integration since 1987 had seemed scarcely possible, can no longer be ruled out" (Busch et al 2013: 3).

Though much of the world was easing away from the global financial crisis by 2012, the southern European member states continued to go deeper into economic difficulties. Greece had reached catastrophic proportions and bailout proposals were being prepared by the EU. The situation would only deteriorate in the coming years with the final showdown with the Greek Syriza government in 2015 with an imposed bailout package which shook the moral foundations of Greece questioning not only its attitude towards the European Union but its ability to sustain the bailout clauses. It was the 12 billion euro bailout that the Greek Prime Minister initially recommended rejection through a hastily proposed referendum, which was initially a whole sale rejection of the package and later and under duress reluctantly accepted. It was an agreement Tsiparis said asking the Greek people to "abandon [their] dignity" (Reuter 2015). This crisis remains current to this moment.

The European Parliamentary Elections in 2014

Even before the European Parliamentary elections took place in May 2014, murmurs of concern were alive in terms of the populist responses already emerging in member state elections. Now it was the turn of the European Parliament. The 2014 European Parliamentary (EP) elections was the largest of its kind with more than 12,000 candidates from almost 450 parties competing for 751 seats. This involved over 400 million voters from the then 28 member states (Treib 2014: 1541). Democracy within the European Union was already in crisis on the back of the global financial crisis and already reflected in the results of elections in numerous member states. As one commentator observed:

> "… in the EU between 2007-2011 …we find strong evidence that the way the crisis has thus far been handled politically (through the imposition of austerity policies from above and by

largely neglecting national arenas of democratic decision making) seems to have made things worse for democracy in Europe". (Armingeon & Guthmann 2013: 17).

The results of the European Parliamentary elections were themselves telling. Beginning with the electoral turnout, it continued to remain at its historic low with 43 per cent of the eligible voters casting their votes. This turnout was at the same level as the previous election in 2009. Turnout in the elections had declined in every EP election since the first election in 1979. It became more telling when in the last four elections - 49.8 per cent in 1999: 45.5 per cent in 2004; 43.2 per cent in 2009 and 43 per cent in 2014. What made these figures look even worse was that some individual member states showed little or no interest in the elections at all? In some countries such as Poland and Croatia the turnout was at low levels of 23 and 25 per cent respectively (Europarl 2014). While the turnout was disconcerting, the actual vote, as the *Financial Times* noted was even more troubling when it wrote that the "European parliament is about to become noisier, more unruly, more confusing and more difficult to deal with" (Spiegel & Carnegy 2014). What this meant was that many 5representatives from fringe organisations, right-wing-nationalist parties were gaining access to the EP. The results in the UK were a clear testimony to these developments. The United Kingdom Independent Party (UKIP) received 27 per cent of the EP vote and collected 24 seats. Labour and the Conservatives trailed with 25 per cent of the vote picking up 20 seats while the Conservatives collected 23 per cent of the votes with 19 seats. The UKIP party had managed to become the largest party represented in the EP from the UK! Across other member states, the result produced a large array of Eurosceptics in the European Parliament who were not there before. It turned out that in 23 out of the 28 member states Eurosceptics won seats in the elections in 2014 (Reib 2014). The only member states which did not produce Eurosceptic parties included Estonia, Luxembourg, Malta, Romania and Slovenia. The total number of Eurosceptic parliamentarians sitting in the parliament after this election was 28 per cent an increase from 20 per cent in the previous elections in 2009 (Treib 2014).

While this figure sounds alarming not all Eurosceptics are the same. The ideological divide has not always clear and the use of the term Eurosceptic has some limitations encompassed within and the fact that in the European case they are divided between left and right. What may help an understanding of the force of Europscepticism is in the view towards the European Union and its permanence. Not all the Eurosceptics were for its abolishment. Where alarm bells sounded was that this category of political formation has significantly grown since the 2009 elections. The biggest winners in the Eurosceptic camp were on the political right including the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), The French Marine Le Pen National Front with 24.9 per cent and the Danish People's Party, which topped the polls in their respective country (Trieb 2014). Much of the discussion on the cause for this result is the terrain of much debate. One stream of argumentation is that the EU elections are not about the EU but about the member states and therefore about national issues. This argument is also used as a justification for the lower turn out in voters and the elections whereby they use these elections to send a protest vote and message to respective leaderships of their member states (Marsh & Mikhaylov 2010).

The results in European Parliament would equally send out messages on the question of austerity. Eventually most EU leaders began to see the limits and dangers of an ongoing austerity philosophy such that even:

"Angela Merkel now seems to agree that austerity has run its course. When Italy's prime minister, Matteo Renzi, together with other European leaders, led a fresh charge against the

ill-fated policy after the European elections, Berlin caved in surprisingly quickly" (Schui 2014)

In the case of Italy having been hit hard by the global financial crisis and in no position to introduce stimulus packages for the ailing companies and sectors, saw the precursor of what would happen in the European Parliament only months later. In 2012-13 elections in Italy saw the wholesale defeat of its Prime Minister Mario Monti well known for his strong leadership in the European Commission as Commissioner for Competition. In 2011, he replaced the discredited Silvio Berlusconi as Italian Prime minister and quickly sought to address Italy's economic difficulties and especially its out of control public debt. By this Monti assumed that that austerity was the only solution – a lesson he had mastered in the Commission and one that was general parlance within German EU circles. After carrying out disastrous policies of government cutbacks and monetarist initiatives his election campaign and election results showed an electorate tired of austerity and in need of stimulus and government support (Benvenuti 2016). He lost the elections resoundingly, which saw not only the return to government of the Democratic Party but also the strong presence of the eclectic and anti-establishment 5 Star Movement.

With Merkel, Hollande and Renzi forcing the situation, a new climate of anti-austerity began to take over the discourses and Renzi, to the displeasure of Merkel was acclaiming the reform program of SPD leader Schroder in 2003 approach as a way forward. Whatever the merits of this reform agenda, what was set in motion was a stop to the unabated charge towards austerity and political signs were telling the politicians that uncertainty might become the norm. However the pro-austerity approach had already created its damage and the elections would be the place in which this displeasure would be delivered.

The watershed year: 2016

Freezing time in global politics, the year 2016 will be a watershed as much for the EU as it is for the global order. While concern about democratic deficit, Euroscepticism and rising nationalist right wing forces manifested through the global financial crisis, the Greek economic crisis and the migration emergency in 2015 had been a managed concern for European integration, the Brexit referendum outcome and the US Presidential election result pushed this state of control matters over the edge. What were previously issues of concern that might happen had now become stark reality. The previous crises of European integration were in various ways addressed, fumbled through or simply forgotten over the decades. The hiccups around the Maastricht Treaty ratification, the failure of the EU draft Constitution to be approved by member states such as France the Netherlands were tactfully sidestepped. The events of 2016 were major obstacles with deep ramifications and non-easy solutions. The new global reality was having its effect and the EU was totally conscious of the could no longer dismiss or postpone some of the more salient issues facing it. In particular, the global reality had changed considerably and the openness and tolerance towards European integration was quickly disappearing.

In 2015 David Cameron, the then British Prime Minister feeling the pressure from his right wing faction within the Tory Party sought to placate their anti-EU sentiments by putting on the British political agenda a referendum on whether the UK should remain or not in the European Union. It was not lost on anybody that 41 years prior, Britain had already experienced a referendum on whether to remain in the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1975 which resulted in a remain response in the EEC by a comfortable majority. At the time of the

announcement, some felt that this was a risky venture by Cameron and he was outing Britain's credibility and membership in the EUU for the sake of rumbling in the right wing of the Tory Party. Some hoped it was a commitment he would renege on as it was wagering a lot on just to placate some loud noises in the Tory Party and as a way to undermine the workings of the United Kingdom Independence party (UKIP).   It was a risk Cameron lost big time when soon after the results of the referendum Cameron announced his resignation and plundered the UK into a political crisis of massive proportion.

As the UK awoke to the new reality of what the referendum had decided, political crisis, leadership bids and an unchartered journey was about to begin. The UK was split along generational lines, some regional lines and to some extent class lines. Moreover breaches were created with the soft border between Northern Ireland and Ireland now created alarm in the possible undoing of the peace progress between the two parts of Ireland. The shock of the Brexit caused much paralysis and uncertainty as speculation took over and catastrophic scenarios received much attention as each side began contemplating what this Brexit might mean. Only month later Donald Trump won the 2016 Presidential race to the White House and after complimenting the UK for having made the decision to exit the EU it set about attacking many of the EU assumptions thereby opening up the Trump mode of rule. Trump's other remarks about NATO and the EU being a "German vehicle" did not make the mood within the European Union any better as European Union integration tumbled further down and confidence continued to fall. Many in the EU concluded that the Trump approach towards the Trans Pacific partnership (TPP) and the NAFTA would produce a new negative phase of discussion with the European Union and the TTIP seemed almost dead in the water. The Trade Commissioner for the EU Commission declared a holding pattern for the TTIP an everybody tried to work out what the US would do.

On the EU side, the Brexit result was a shock bringing frustration and resignation to a long period of UK marginalisation and exceptionalness. There was a sense of defeat and hurt though each member state leader restated the need to press ahead with European integration. While many feared what could come with the British, there was a desire not to dwell and hope it would not come. Despite some initial knee jerk anger, the EU settled into a position of rational negotiations for the triggering of Article 50 from the Lisbon Treaty and the establishment of a Brexit structure to negotiation with the British for their departure. As this was progressing, two elections in the Netherlands and France provided alternative messages about the immediate future of the EU. In The Netherlands, the Party for Freedom (PVV) led by Geert Wilders threatened the traditional People's Party for Freedom and Democracy led by Rutte for government losing by little. In the case of France two months later, Emmanuel Macron won a stunning victory against all parties and in the run off against Marie Le Pen. His victory was interpreted at the French level as an overturning of the weak and indecisive approach of his predecessor of Hollande and at the European level a sense of relief for the European project. Moreover, the Macron saw the revival of the Franco-German leadership dialogue which had momentarily gone into disrepair with new ideas for a renewed vision.

Prospects for further European Integration: The White paper plan of action

Even before the results of the Dutch and French elections, The European Union faced another anniversary of importance – The sixtieth anniversary of the Rome Treaty in March 2017. The event was celebrated in Rome but its celebrations did not stop at looking at the past. Given its brush with massive political turbulence through Brexit and the Trump elections, the

anniversary saw the initiative of the European Commission led by its President Jean-Claude Juncker emerged with a White Paper on the future of Europe. It was a comprehensive summary of what the EU was living and it asked: "What future do we want for ourselves, for our children and for our Union? It reminds us that: "Europe's place in the world is shrinking" (European Commission 2017, p. 8). It acknowledged there was a "tense global context" and that "Europe cannot be naïve and has to take care of its own security. Being a "soft power" is no longer powerful enough when force can prevail over rules" (p. 9). It also referred to the "…The return of isolationism has cast doubt over the future of international trade and multilateralism" (p. 9) clearly indicating the new Trump administration and that "shaping globalisation"… "…will be a growing challenge". Surprisingly but not really, the background to the White Paper made only an indirect reference to Brexit when it said "And last year, one of our Member States voted to leave the Union" (European Commission 2017, p. 6).

The context of the White Paper was itself quite daring in its breadth but the recommendations were of a simplicity and openness which was breathtaking. The approach by the Commission was not to seek out some complex set of indecipherable set of targets to put to the member states but a referendum of member states on where to go next. It proposed the establishment of an agreement for the EU for its future direction for 2025. It was remarkably logical and asked the member states to make a choice about the direction, speed and priorities of the EU for the next period. It divided the choices into five. The first option was to carry on the same. This meant that there would be the maintenance of the single market including its strengthening. The EU should pursue trade agreements and where possible improve the functioning of the Euro as the single Eurozone currency. There would be continued cooperation on external borders and of course much work to do around the EUs system of asylum seekers. The expectation was that there would be progress on security and foreign affairs with one voice as well as closer defence cooperation between member states and with other states. There would be budget improvements and less complexity on decision making of EU matters. Speaking with one voice on foreign affairs and closer defence cooperation. The other scenarios were progressively more committal and more in the direction of federation. They included scenario 2, "Nothing but the single market". Scenario 3 included "Those who want more do more" while scenario 4 stated "Doing less more efficiently and number 5 which said "Doing much more together" (European Commission 2017). The European Commission provided the platform for each member state to debate within its own institutions on what was best for their country and for an orderly discussion to come up with an idea of the level of integration. The White paper opened an honest and widespread debate on how Europe should evolve in the years to come. This call was to open up debate within the EU, member states and citizens and looking for some collective answer for the December 2017 European Council meeting. The Commission did not want to be seen as forcing the hand of the member states and putting words into their mouths. This was a decision by the member states as to what level of commitment to the European Union their nation would accept. The purpose here was to avoid the political backlashes that would be faced about "power in Brussels'.

Some of the preamble of the White Paper noted that the 2008 global financial crisis had had a disastrous effect on many member states. In particular, the paper highlighted the impact and severity on youth to the extent that there was a risk of a generation being less well off than their parents. The White Paper noted that the European Union was witnessing an ageing population and was almost the oldest in the world. Other worrying features of the European Union included the nature of changing occupations and the inability of the EU to stay with these changes as well as the pressures driving immigration which it stated would increase. In terms of the governance of the European Union, the White Paper noted that there had been too often

walls put up where they should be down and the problems of trust had emerged which were previously insignificant. Moreover, there was a growing gap of trust between institutions in both the EU and the member states and a growing gap between what is promised and what is delivered. With this White Paper, Juncker wants to reignite the debate over the future of EU integration (Cleppe 2017).

The new US rhetoric and its meaning for the European Union?

The EU Commission White Paper was prepared very much with the new Trump Administration in mind. While it never named Trump, or his antics, the document was mindful of the new messages coming from the Twitter messages on the EU, Germany, NATO and the like. At the same time the document wanted to acknowledge that the world had changed but the EU had not kept abreast of these changes. The White paper provided a critical examination of the changes in Europe, its people, its economies with a little changing European Union. It was not blaming anyone or anything but itself for its shortcomings but knew that only the EU member states could change this reality. Repercussions from the Trump election have altered many of the European goalposts in place since the end of the Second World War. The statements by Trump about the obsolete nature of the NATO and the burden which the US was carrying and by de fault that the EU was not carrying, shook the European member states and its union to the realisation, as Juncker noted, to the realisation that "NATO will continue to provide hard security for most EU countries but Europe cannot be naïve and has to take care of its own security" (European Commission 2017, p. 8). It was clear that the issue of security and defence and the European Union had suffered shortcomings and many facets of the European Union's functioning in this area required urgent correction and addressing. Thus the statements of Trump essentially speeded this process and made the EU assume a reality check of proportions it had not properly contemplated. This was also witnessed in the climate change and environment sector with the withdrawal of the US from the Paris Climate Accords. The European Union response was to ignore the US position and embrace the parameters and quotas with China the very next day.

What next for the EU?

The areas of great global uncertainty which have impacted the European Union project of integration can be clearly articulated around the Brexit repercussions, the arrival of a new Trump US administration and the divisive nature of the arrival of mass immigration from troubled and war torn areas of the Middle East and Africa. Migration along with other areas of high level sovereignty concern has widened the existing cracks within the EU and especially from the centre and right wing governments within the European Union.

While 2016 was a de facto watershed, the elections in The Netherlands, France, Germany and Australia all posed threats to a cohered response with Brexit overshadowing all EU activity. However, the impact of Brexit and the new US administration can be seen as double edged sword. They have a negative initial impact but can be the sources of newly found inspiration and energy to make the leap required for this project to a new level of integration. As one scholar has noted: "Brexit may be good for European integration" (Umland 2016). There is much that can be said for this approach. The EU is a unique project in which domestic priorities have been combined and sovereignty voluntarily pooled to better serve national and collective interests. The EU leadership, inspired by the arrival of Macron is proceeding with a renewed

Franco – German alliance evidenced by the unprecedented joint cabinet meeting between these two governments in June 2017. The stalemate elections in Germany in September 2017 provided concern for the Merkel German leadership of the European Union integration as well as the first time presence of far right Alternative for Germany (Afd) in the Bundestag. This was equally noted with the high level support for the centre-right candidate in the Australian elections in October 2017 making clear to the established parties that they need to be concerned about their political direction. Fear and scare mongering about migration clearly played a role in the election outcomes here.

There is even discussion of establishing a joint Eurozone finance minister as well as a possible a Eurozone budget. The threats by the US to withdraw its global leadership, through a desire for more protectionism and not want to engage with China is an opening for the European Union to make its bid for global leadership. This it can only do as a united and combined regional bloc. As in the past, the crises facing the European Union are often the call to arms to make the next leap. This might be exactly that moment.

Conclusion

European integration has been for decades a roller coaster with good and not so good moments. Generally the difficult times have always been justified as a necessary evil but that better times would always prevail. From a more serious standpoint European integration took strategic directions which would be de facto potentially problematic. The last years of European integration however have created significant uncertainty and concern. The Juncker White Paper is a testimony to the gravity of feeling and the need for a decisive but legitimate project with which to proceed. The solutions from the top has exhausted its capital and now more than in any previous moment the feeling is that there needs to be member state buy in in a way that was never requested before. There is no one silver bullet to overcome the obstacles like there is no one factor bringing down the EU. While the position of the European Commission is to be cautious and allow the member states to make their call, the leadership of Germany and France appear to have made that decision.

The period of global political uncertainty will not come to an end any time soon. As economic prosperity only slowly improves, and who knows for how long, many of the desperation calls and right wing vacillations in the polls will always remain a warning of concern. In the meantime, the Brexit result and the new US administration have propelled the leaders of the European Union to break the mould of "business as usual". While the results from the White Paper are not expected to emerge until late December 2017, the expectation is that there will be more decisive steps for deeper and greater integration by the leading members even if this means with fewer members. This may mean European Integration of the few but committed and peripheral membership by the less committed. The European Union, and its key leaders appear to have few other choices.

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