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Jean-Claude Juncker's white paper on the future of Europe: five scenarios not to make a choice

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On 1 March, the European Commission released a White Paper on the future of Europe. The paper presents five scenarios, each accompanied by a description of what the EU could be like in 2025. Unfortunately, the paper is disappointing, to say the least.

The first scenario can be broadly summarized as “status quo”, euphemistically described as “the EU continues delivering its positive reform agenda”. It discusses investment; control over external borders; strengthening of the internal market as well as transport and energy infrastructures, with a particular emphasis placed on energy efficiency and renewable energies. The EU would continue to legislate and would retire old laws that are obsolete; it would give 90 % of its own competences on state aid back to the national and local level.

According to the Commission, the main drawbacks of this scenario are mostly that it would slow down decision-making, and that conflicts would arise due to the need for unanimity: it assumes that only if everybody agrees, the positive agenda will keep on delivering “concrete results.” So there is no questioning the fact that what is undermining the EU's capacity to deliver, are not only the challenges represented by the decision-making process itself, but the very

content of an economic and financial management approach which proved to be ineffective and, in some cases, even detrimental.

The second scenario, "Nothing but the single market", is based on the assumption that it is possible to give up a number of common policies (from migration to free movement) in the name of a EU that focuses exclusively on the internal market and on deregulation, introducing the truly bizarre idea of automatically withdrawing two laws for every one new law that is proposed. The Commission itself states that this approach could cause further conflicts in regards to the environment, social policies or taxes; the right of free movement of workers and citizens could also be reduced; we could even end up with the Eurozone being dismantled, with the EU's withdrawal from international organisations, and with a new system of bilateral relations or relations between groups of countries. The Commission correctly notes that decision-making would maybe be simpler, but citizens would be stripped of their established rights. This scenario is chilling, and I don't think it would ever work. In 1987, when the Single European Act was adopted with the idea of achieving the internal market, and as a minimalist choice in comparison to the Treaty establishing the European Union drafted by Altiero Spinelli and adopted by the EP in 1984, it soon became clear that it was not possible to talk about a single market without introducing environmental and social standards. So much so that the legal base of many environmental regulations is the single market provisions. In this regard, the examples chosen to illustrate this option are enlightening: air and water quality standards are no longer shared standards; neither are trade and common development policies. For the Commission, even if it does not say so explicitly, the illusion of the single market "only" would lead to an acceleration of the dismantling of the EU.

The third scenario - for many, the one favoured by President Juncker - has a promising title: "Those who want to do more, do more." However, doubts arise when it mentions a "coalitions of the willing", working together in areas such as defence, internal security and social policies. By analysing the examples given in the paper, it is clear that this is essentially a scenario of "Europe à la carte". The Commission talks about 12 countries cooperating on connected cars and on the internet of things; 6 countries acquiring drones for military purposes; a group of countries putting together a police force; another group a common business code... The consequences? The Commission warns that citizens would lose or would acquire rights depending on where they live, there would be questions about who decides what, and what the role of the European Parliament and Commission itself are; still, the Commission argues that the EU-27 unity would be ensured, as well as the ability to act and make decisions. In my view, this version of a multi-speed Europe would really be very complicated to put in practice, not just because of the regulatory and legal chaos that would ensue with old and new regulations amongst old and new obligations, but also because, in this scenario, the intergovernmental dimension would be dominant and the lines of the common framework would become more and more blurred, with the consequence of a side-lining of EP, Commission and Court of Justice, and the further reduction of the EU's capacity to deliver on its objectives.

In my view, the definition of the “speed” of integration must not be established on the basis of the transient desires of governments or on the hot topics of the day. What would really ensure that the system worked better and became able to resist disagreements among its members, is that some countries would decide to be in all “speeds”; in other words, that they agree to complete the Treaty of Rome commitment to an “ever closer Union”, going further along the road towards common sovereignty and democratic structures.

The fourth scenario, “Doing less more efficiently”, follows the well-known ideological approach of deregulation, and is a further step away from the idea of considering the EU a common political and “emotional” project. It has to be said that this lack of empathy and attachment to the EU project as such is quite obvious in all scenarios, as the approach is one of defining which would be the most “useful” EU. The President of the Commission made it clear that Euro-bashing and accusing the EU of things that it does not do because it does not even have the power to do them, should stop. The example chosen is the Volkswagen emissions scandal: this is a really weird example to choose, because there are already EU powers, it is just that the political majorities to provide appropriate legislative measures were not there! Other sectors mentioned where more should be done, possibly by providing an ad hoc budget, are trade, security, defence, migration, asylum, research and defence of borders, de-carbonization and digital development. Even the Eurozone could be stronger and more organized, were it not for the continuation of the difference in wages and social conditions. Some of the things to be abandoned include state aid, regional development (should we wave goodbye to cohesion funds?), public health, labour, social rules in areas not directly related to the single market, to list but a few. We are off for endless discussions and legal disputes on how to actually choose what is “big” and what is “small”, to use the expression Juncker loves; and it will be no doubt extremely difficult to break up the powers, dismantling and re-nationalizing areas of policy or jurisdiction without them having a knock-on effect on other areas, Just imagine having at the same time to manage different small “exits” from different fields of current action and some increased EU powers in others.

And finally, we come to scenario 5, “Doing much more together”, which starts by recognizing that no country alone can meet the challenges of today; the 27 countries agree to decide in a quicker and more cohesive way. Trade treaties will only be ratified by the EP; a Union for Defence is established; the EU continues to exert its leadership (!) on climate change, and broadens its role as the main donor (this is already perfectly possible). The budget is “significantly” increased and not dependent on national contributions; a system of stronger “direct” sanctions is set up for breaches of EU law, greater resources for joint research, large infrastructure projects, closer cooperation in tax and social matters and in the supervision of the Eurozone, but no mention of pooling or sharing risks in financial matters. Obviously, it would be a more attractive scenario for us, but it remains severely limited by a minimalist approach, compared to what could be done in terms of policies and in terms of the explicit defence and strengthening of the rights of European citizens. Furthermore, in this scenario, which is the most ambitious of them all, there is little talk of making the EU central to a social and cultural revival, with the explicit ambition to defeat the authoritarian and racist nationalism that is rising across the continent.

The main weakness of the paper is precisely this lack of ambition: the Commission's priority seems to be not to disturb the real "bosses": Juncker and his team no longer seem to have the desire to lay out the choices on the future of the EU and to play the role of initiative and of interpreter of the common interest of the Europeans that was given to it 60 years ago. He also does not seem to grasp the truly revolutionary size of the changes taking place around the world.

As a neutral and not so creative secretariat, using language that is often legally imprecise and contradictory, the Commission presents its five scenarios in the belief that, between now and 2025, the same old ideological rut can be sustained; it does not even chose one and stand up for it. Moreover, the paper says that each of the 5 options can overlap, so Juncker deliberately makes the decision not to discuss institutional or legal processes refusing to enter into the discussion of whether there should be "more or less Europe" because it considers it is "an overly simplistic approach". On the contrary, I think we need simple messages: the bone of contention today is precisely how to make sure that EU delivers for citizens ; this means opening up to the possibility of changing the policies that brought us here and indicating what must be changed; it means also facing up and resisting to the pressures of authoritarian re-nationalization through an explicit opposition, and not by partly supporting their reasons; it means taking a clear stand on whether it is desirable or not to continue to work towards an "ever closer" Union, as envisaged by the Treaty of Rome.

In short, in this White Paper, the Commission shows neither the courage nor the imagination to plot out a way forward and to see it through, either in terms of policies or institutions. Juncker himself has stated that if he had chosen one of the scenarios, he would be butchered, preferring to wait until the autumn to decide. So, the intention is to get the 27 Member States to define the conditions for being together and to acknowledge that dismantling the EU would be worse; to do this, the Commission opens to the possibility of giving up some of its current powers. It is interesting to note that Juncker never proposes that EU institutions get involved directly with European citizens or with organized civil society to discuss these issues. Its partners are the governments. My EGP co-chair and I received a nice letter from him asking for feedback about his proposals. And we will accept the challenge. But this White Paper has nothing comparable to the strength and vision (beyond the judgement of the merits of its proposals) of the White Paper on Growth, Competitiveness and Employment presented by Jacques Delors back in 1993.

The choice not to choose can be useful in opening up a debate, but only if there is someone willing to pick it up. It might be too early to tell, but it does not seem to be the case that the White Paper can represent the focal point of the debate. In light of Rome, and with elections in France and Germany looming, given the current tensions with Turkey, the conversation focuses mainly on the relationship with the Visegrad Group and on how to deal with their "counter-revolution", as well as the revival of the one, two, three or more speeds Europe. The decision to present 5 options, which all have elements of great ambiguity, I fear risks putting the Commission off topic and perhaps even out of the game, because the Commission itself let other players deal the cards.

Having said that, we should try to make the most of the opportunity that this paper could represent. In the days following the presentation of the White Paper, a number of commentators have gravitated towards a sixth scenario that is not covered by Juncker's paper: a democratic and supranational government that can steer EU policy away from short-sighted austerity, transforming economies and societies in an ecological sense, putting solidarity, green jobs, energy efficiency and combating climate change at the centre of its action.

But who can provide the necessary space for an open debate and choices on the future of Europe, not only among governments, but also among civil societies and economic actors, which includes scenario n.6? In a situation where the Commission is too afraid to choose and where Member States are divided, it is the European Parliament that has to take charge for creating such a space. We will not get out of the current impasse with 27 national discussions focusing on the power struggles among governments. For us, the message is clear: if the majorities and policies that govern this Europe today do not change, and the constraint of the reciprocal vetoes will not be broken, there will be no other choice than a seventh scenario: the end of the EU.

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