



A Perspective on the EU Rome Summit 2017 and the debate on multi-speed Europe

*Dr. Sanghamitra Sarma **

The EU heads of state or government met in Rome, Italy on March 25, 2017 on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the Rome treaties. The summit sought to look back at the achievements of the last 60 years and to reaffirm the unity, common interest and values of the European Union (EU). It was also marked to reflect on the current challenges and set the priorities for the next ten years.

60 years of the EU:

In 1957, the Treaties of Rome established a common market where people, goods, services and capital could move freely and created the conditions for prosperity and stability for European citizens. The Treaties had established the European Economic Community (EEC) and the European Atomic Energy Community (EAEC), which were signed on March 25, 1957. The first meeting of the Council of the EEC took place on January 25 under the chairmanship of Victor Larock, the Belgian Foreign Affairs Minister.¹

As President of the European Council, Donald Tusk highlighted in his speech at the ceremony, the European Union is a guarantee that seeks to ensure freedom, dignity, democracy and independence in everyday reality. He reiterated, as he had on several occasions in the past (in the letter by him to the European Union (EU) heads of state on the future of the EU released on January 31, 2017 and on his report to the European Parliament on the European Council of 9 March and the informal meeting of the 27 heads of state and government of 10 March) that trust in the aspect of unity was the most precious asset of the Union.² At the end of the celebrations of the anniversary, the 27 EU leaders adopted and signed the Rome Declaration setting out a joint vision for the years to come.

Key features of the Rome Declaration:

Before the signing of the Rome declaration on March 25, 2017, the Polish Prime Minister Beata Szydlo gave clear signals that Poland would not sign the document as it feared that any idea of a multispeed Europe would bequeath the east to a second class status. On the other hand, Greece had expressed reservations citing it wanted the text to make a clearer commitment to protecting workers' rights. In recent times, international lenders have conveyed to Greece that they want it to adopt more reforms in return for new loans for bailout. However, Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras' meeting with Donald Tusk on the eve of the summit gave an assurance to the former and made the road ahead for the signing of the declaration relatively calmer. Poland had already approved the draft of the declaration and its concerns on a multispeed Europe were accommodated by 'softening' the tone of the idea, making any last minute veto unlikely.³

The Rome Declaration recognised that the EU is facing 'unprecedented challenges', which includes regional conflicts, terrorism, growing migratory pressures, protectionism and social and economic inequalities. Some of the key features of the document include the following:

- The leaders pledged to make the Union stronger by emphasising more on building unity and solidarity and through the respect of common values.
- The concept of *multi-speed Europe* was featured very subtly in the document with the leaders citing that they would act at 'different paces' and 'intensity', while moving in the same direction.
- Aware of the concerns of the EU citizens, the leaders committed to the Rome Agenda and pledged to work towards:
 - A safe and secure Europe
 - A prosperous and sustainable Europe
 - A social Europe
 - A stronger Europe on the global scene
- Other significant features of the Rome Declaration include the commitment given by the leaders that they will "listen and respond" to the concerns expressed by the citizens and the pledge to engage our national parliaments.
- To make a 'real difference', whether within the EU, national, regional, or local level, in line with the principle of subsidiarity was another notable attribute of the document indicating that the EU leaders are keen on much demanded reforms. This would require sufficient room for 'manoeuvre' at various levels, which the leaders agreed to incorporate as well.

A close look at the Rome Declaration will highlight the fact that it was carefully drafted so as to accommodate the 'concerns' which had been expressed by the national parliaments and the citizens. It indicated that the leaders were ready, if not for drastic changes, to at least make way for 'manoeuvre' at various levels. However, *specific concerns* of the national parliaments, for instance, on expansion of the parliamentarisation at the EU level, primacy of the EU law, greater involvement of the national parliaments in the EU policy-making process and transparency of the

process etc. were not mentioned. In the same vein, though the declaration talked about promotion of democratic, effective and transparent decision-making process, yet the issue of how to make the system more acceptable to the EU citizens and national parliaments remained elusive. The declaration by itself represented contradictions, where, on one hand, specific actions were recommended in the Rome agenda for its implementation, whereas the later part of the declaration, which could have portrayed a sense of security to the people of the Union in a clearer fashion, seemed to have confined itself only to lofty declarations.

The Rome Summit 2017 was more than just a retrospective summit, as the key document of the Summit resolved to straighten Europe's problems and set about a vision for the future. The idea of a treaty change might be difficult, but elements of flexibility and open dialogue mechanisms introduced within the institutional fabric could have put to rest the concerns of the national parliaments and citizens, some of whom have been dissatisfied with the functioning of the EU. The decision of Britain to leave the EU has and will probably be more unfavourable for Britain than the EU, but the decision of the referendum could have been taken slightly more cautiously by the Union, which stands as an epitome of strength and unity in a world devastated by conflicts.

The Declaration also communicated the concept of *multi-speed Europe*, however, as mentioned earlier in a toned down manner. For understanding as to why the leaders opted to understate, yet not failing to omit the idea, it is necessary to comprehend the understanding of the concept and how it has been discussed in recent discourse.

The concept of multi-speed Europe:

The concept of multi-speed integration consists of a core of member states moving forward on some elements of integration, while allowing those members who lag behind to eventually join the core when they are able and willing to do so.⁴ This would allow countries keen on intensifying cooperation in specific areas to go ahead without waiting for the entire bloc to give their consent.

Multi-speed integration has been doing the rounds ever since the beginning of the century. The legal foundations like the Maastricht Treaty provided members like Britain to opt out from the EU's social policy contained in the treaty. The non-ratification of the Maastricht Treaty led to Denmark and the UK opting out from the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU). While negotiating the 1997 Treaty of Amsterdam, France and Germany buttressed the need for an 'enhanced cooperation' clause, to allow deeper cooperation among some member states.⁵ The treaty of the European Union addressed the issue of how decisions are taken in a situation when not all member states are part of the decision-making process. The Delors Report on economic and monetary union in the European Community of 1989 mentioned that the plurality of the Community demands "a degree of autonomy in economic decision-making to remain with individual member countries and a balance to be struck between national and Community competences".⁶ From time and again, it is therefore clear that the idea of a multi-speed Europe has been implicitly and explicitly recognized for some time, well through legal considerations.⁷

Most recently, European Commission President Jean Claude Juncker laid out five scenarios in his White Paper published on March 1, 2017 on the future of Europe which offer 'choices' that jointly need to be taken to determine the State of the Union by 2025.⁸ The third scenario "Those who want more do more" explicitly lays out future plans for groups of member states who can decide to cooperate on specific domains (on defence, security, justice, taxation and social progress) making use of the existing legal possibilities. In other words, viewing the idea of a multi speed Europe as a way for strengthening further integration and allowing some countries to advance faster than the others- "The European Union allows willing member states to do more together in specific areas". A "coalition of the willing", as justified in the White Paper will contribute towards preserving unity among members and reduce the polarity between expectation and delivery.⁹

The idea of multi-speed integration was also recognized at the meeting of the leaders of France, Germany, Italy and Spain at the Palace of Versailles held on March 6, 2017. The leaders who met on the eve of the Rome Summit unanimously supported the idea of a Europe progressing at different speeds.

The multi-speed scheme of the EU, which has never actually been acknowledged as an official policy has been under operation and that too, quite successfully, in several areas. There are 19 members in the eurozone and 23 EU members in the Schengen zone. The economic growth of the eurozone was 1.7 per cent in 2016, a faster rate than the US managed when averaged across the whole of 2016.¹⁰ The Schengen zone, one of EU's greatest achievements had abolished border controls allowing citizens of European countries to travel with ease without going through passport or visa checks. But more than that, the Schengen zone authorized goods and services to travel in speed and has been a major factor contributing to conduct of trade and business within the EU. In recent times, terrorist attacks in Europe have led to the existence and continuity of the arrangement to be questioned which has been duly addressed in the Rome agenda. The leaders agreed that to build a safe and secure Europe, securing external borders through implementation of an efficient, responsible and sustainable migration policy is vital to fight terrorism and organized crime. The change in geopolitical circumstances and appearance of challenges in the backyard does not call for abolishment of an arrangement, the benefits of which have outweighed the risks associated with it. Controlling and checking the presence of problems is definitely a better option.

Along with Germany, France, Italy and Spain, Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg have also supported the idea of a multi-speed Europe. The prospect of a few countries progressing ahead and accelerating integration has incited concerns among the central and eastern European countries, who fear that they will be downgraded to second-tier of European policy-making.¹¹ The Visegrad Four, comprising of Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary who issued a joint declaration at the Warsaw Summit, a day after European Commission's White Paper was published, laid out that the idea of a multi-speed Europe was unacceptable to them. The declaration highlighted that the EU must remain open to the integration of Western Balkans and Eastern countries in order to create a better Europe, not more or less Europe.¹²

This explains one of the central problems that Europe is facing, namely that of integration. Europe requires more integration today to deal with issues like migration, asylum, terrorism and uneven economic growth. It is not enough that while some countries like Slovakia and the Czech Republic are ready to cooperate with Brussels on asylum and migration policy, others like Hungary and Poland oppose redistribution of refugees within the EU. Differentiated integration in a bloc inflicted by serious challenges will only make the goal of a stronger and resilient Europe distant. It is also a paradox that while all the Visegrad countries pledge their allegiance to human dignity, equality and human rights and want the Union to face the expectations of member states, countries like Hungary and Poland have demonstrated open opposition to principles of solidarity and fair distribution of refugees enforcing the strictest border controls in order to prevent refugees from entering their countries.

Recent discourses on the idea of multi-speed Europe have found justified expressions in Wolfgang Munchau's article "A multi-speed formula will shape Europe's future" (The Financial Times, March 12, 2017) and Philip Stephens' article "Europe's fight to prove union has staying power after Brexit" (The Financial Times, March 15, 2017). While Munchau points out that multi-speed integration offers the best option for ensuring European prosperity, Stephens argues that in the EU 27 where voices of nationalism have become more assertive, it is difficult to make the case for supranational cooperation and shared sovereignty. Multi-speed integration can strengthen defence or industrial cooperation among willing countries, but it is not a sole panacea to all the problems within the EU. It can form one part of the blueprint to shape Europe's future, but the employment of the idea as the only strategy will perhaps reinforce the dominance of the Western European states and decelerate the progress of particularly new members like Bulgaria, Romania and Croatia who are transitioning to democracy and EU values and need greater support from their Western neighbours. The Union members do not need to go in different directions but in progressive harmony. The need for greater integration and cohesiveness also arises in the current context particularly when Europe must confront an allegedly assertive Russia and secure its eastern borders.

Of particular concern is the representation of the interests of the central and eastern countries in key European Union policy making. In other words, for overcoming social and economic inequalities, the members who have felt that they have been relegated to the background, need to move together with the developed ones to learn best practices on growth and structural reforms. This would make the case for the union's cohesion and convergence stronger than ever before.

As Tusk emphasised in his speech at the 60th anniversary, the current circumstances (which refer implicitly to the 'unprecedented challenges') call for unity and not protest against multiple speeds.¹³ As the Council President, he of course did not cite his preference or opposition for multi-speed Europe. But what he made clear was that the more important aspect is respect for common rules such as human rights and civil liberties, freedom of speech and freedom of assembly, checks and balances and the rule of law. It is true that the values that bind the Union

holds the key for its credibility, but as reiterated by many scholars as well as EU leaders in the past, progressive unity amidst plurality is the essence of the EU and is the cement of reconciliation in a continent which once saw the bloodiest wars in the history of mankind.

* *Dr. Sanghamitra Sarma is Research Fellow with the Indian Council of World Affairs, New Delhi.*
Disclaimer: Views expressed are of author and do not reflect the views of the Council.

End Notes

¹ “60th anniversary of the Rome Treaties 25/03/2017”, *European Council*, March 25, 2017, <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/european-council/2017/03/25-informal-meeting/> accessed April 18, 2017.

² Sarma, Sanghamitra, “The second phase of preparations for the Rome treaty anniversary: Analyzing Donald Tusk’s letter and EU Malta Summit 2017”, *Viewpoint, Indian Council of World Affairs*, March 14, 2017, <http://www.icwa.in/pdfs/VP/2014/RomeTreatyanniversaryVP14032017.pdf> accessed April 20, 2017.

“Report BY President Donald Tusk to the European Parliament on the European Council of 9 March and the informal meeting of the 27 heads of state and government of 10 March”, *European Council*, March 15, 2017, <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2017/03/15-tusk-report-european-parliament/> accessed April 20, 2017.

³ Baczyńska, Gabriela, “EU hopes Greece will drop objections to unity declaration”, *Reuters*, March 23, 2017, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-eu-summit-rome-idUSKBN16U0N2> accessed April 18, 2017.

⁴ Jensen, Christian B. & Jonathan B. Slapin, “*The Politics of Multispeed Integration*”, in Jeremy Richardson and Sonia Mazey, ed. “*European Union: Power and Policy Making*”, UK: Routledge, 2015, p. 65.

⁵ Palmer, John, “New routes to Union”, *The Guardian*, October 23, 1996, p. 11 in Christian B. Jensen & Jonathan B. Slapin, “*The Politics of Multispeed Integration*”, in Jeremy Richardson and Sonia Mazey, ed. “*European Union: Power and Policy Making*”, UK: Routledge, 2015, pp. 63-79.

⁶ Delors, Jacques, “Report on economic and monetary union in the European Community”, *Committee for the Study of Economic and Monetary Union*, April 17, 1989, http://aei.pitt.edu/1007/1/monetary_delors.pdf accessed April 20, 2017.

⁷ Gaynor, K.B. and E. Karakitsos, “*Economic Convergence in a Multispeed Europe*”, London: Macmillan Press Ltd. (1997), p. 34.

⁸ “White Paper on the Future of Europe”, *European Commission*, March 1, 2017, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/white_paper_on_the_future_of_europe_en.pdf accessed April 21, 2017.

⁹ *Ibid*, p.20

¹⁰ Amaro, Silvia, “Euro zone growth outpaces the US for the first time since the 2008 crash”, *CNBC*, January 31, 2017, <http://www.cnb.com/2017/01/31/euro-zone-gdp-hits-05-in-last-quarter-of-2016-beating-estimates-january-inflation-at-18-unemployment-falls.html> accessed April 21, 2017.

¹¹ “What does a multi-speed EU mean for central and eastern Europe?”, *DW*, March 24, 2017, <http://www.dw.com/en/what-does-a-multi-speed-eu-mean-for-central-and-eastern-europe/a-38016484> accessed April 21, 2017.

¹² “Visegrad group wants a better Europe”, *Visegrad Post*, March 4, 2017, <https://visegradpost.com/en/2017/03/04/visegrad-group-wants-a-better-europe/> accessed April 21, 2017.

¹³ “Speech by President Donald Tusk at the ceremony of the 60th anniversary of the Treaties of Rome”, *European Council*, March 25, 2017, <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2017/03/25-tusk-ceremony-rome-speech/> accessed April 21, 2017.