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**Sustainable Integration in a Democratic Polity:  
A New (or not so new) Ambition For the European Union after Brexit**

*Kalypso Nicolaidis*

**Guardian of the Long Term: What future for the EU after Brexit?**

The perennial question of the future of the EU has changed in tone and gravity since its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary.<sup>1</sup> While the multi-dimensional crisis besetting the Union since 2008 had already raised the stakes, with Brexit we have truly entered existential territory. If the EU is now demonstrably a polity that can shrink, who is to say that it cannot shrink to nothing? If vast pluralities across the continent echo the feelings of British Nay-sayers, who is to say where this mood will take us next? Can we avoid tying to the mast a European public beguiled by the sirens of Brexit? How can European leaders signal that – Brexit or not – the European ship is still afloat? And how can European publics re-imagine their role in this endeavor?

The response from officialdom has been predictable; the classic three-pronged wheel of institutions, policies and structural “solutions.” On institutions, magic bullets are shot around, such as an EMU parliament or more *Spitzenkandidaten*, as if these were the expressions of democracy citizens most cared about. On policies, leaders predictably promise “concrete progress” – from control of migration and external borders to deeper cooperation in internal and external security or youth employment – but, judging on past record, these worthy goals are bound to be betrayed. And on structure, we hear about variable geometry, the hallmark of EU integration since Maastricht. But doing more with fewer countries is not only restating the obvious when it comes to EMU and Schengen, it also assumes that most citizens want to do more in the “core” countries, while most citizens from the “periphery” are happy to do less.

Here I argue that whatever the partial merits of these various recipes, unless European officials free themselves from the tyranny of dichotomies – where the agenda before us

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<sup>1</sup> See Phinnemore, David and Alex Warleigh-Lack (2009) *Reflections on European Integration*, London: Palgrave.

is solely framed as more vs less Europe – there is little chance of reconciling a majority of Europe’s citizens with the project. Instead we need to talk about the common goals that require Europeans to continue to work together or separately at all levels of governance: We need to talk about substance. As Grabbe and Lehne argue, “public debate about climate change, conflict resolution, and aging populations would bust the myth that societies can somehow return to a former golden age when national governments could solve problems by themselves.”<sup>2</sup>

If in Europe and beyond, we are plagued by short termism – governments acting under emergency powers, markets wedded to short-term returns – what better way to justify anew the process of European integration than to proclaim loud and clear the EU’s commitment to long term goals irrespective of short term expediency. I will argue that the EU is best placed to institutionalise the idea of sustainability, the idea that we must act together if we are going to survive as a species, and that a peace project such as ours can best justify short term sacrifices for long term goals.

Sustaining our polity as the guardian of the long term for its citizens, a means to an end, should be the new core motive for the European project committed to sustaining cooperation among states.<sup>3</sup> I have suggested that such a vision should be labeled “sustainable integration” which is most fundamentally about turning the sustainability gestalt into a broader philosophy of transnational governance for the EU.<sup>4</sup> It is also an agenda that requires widening the conceptual toolbox of political science to social theory and anthropology to better apprehend the EU’s social grounding. Sustainable integration is altogether a practice, an ethos, and a state of mind. As a governing idea of integration it calls for pursuing fairer rather than faster or deeper integration, through processes that are politically acceptable across generations. I define sustainable integration in the EU as the “*durable ability to sustain cooperation within the Union in spite of the heterogeneity of its population and of their national political arrangements.*” In other words, sustainable integration calls for embracing the complexity of the task thanks to the simplicity of the vision.<sup>5</sup>

Paradoxically, such a long term vision calls for eschewing the kind of teleology espoused by self-styled euro-federalists, who want to resolve once and for all the question of the nature of the EU as a polity bent on equating progress with ever more centralization.<sup>6</sup> The infamous bicycle theory which commands us to choose between moving forward or falling makes no sense in a world where we need to move in all directions or sometimes stand still if we are to sustain our balance. Sustainable integration is about continuously maintaining the precious balance between the imperatives of cooperation and control, the cooperation whose benefit we seek, and the autonomy which we continue to crave as

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<sup>2</sup> <http://carnegieeurope.eu/2017/03/17/closing-of-european-mind-and-how-to-reopen-it-pub-68317>

<sup>3</sup> On the big picture, see Yuval Noah Harari’s masterful *Sapiens, A Brief History*.

<sup>4</sup> This was my conclusion as we attempted to draw the early lessons from the Euro-crisis in a European Council “wiseman group” chaired by Felipe Gonzales. See Nicolaidis, Kalypso. (2010) EU 2.0? Towards Sustainable Integration. *Open Democracy*. (<https://www.opendemocracy.net/kalypso-nicola%C3%AFdis/project-europe-2030-towards-sustainable-integration>); Nicolaidis, Kalypso (2010), “Sustainable Integration: Towards EU 2.0?” The JCMS Annual Review Lecture, *Journal of Common Market Studies, Volume 48 Annual Review: 21–54*. On the wise man group process see also Kalypso Nicolaidis, Project Europe 2030: Reflection and Revival, *Open Democracy*, May 2010, and <http://kalypsonicolaidis.com/2015/07/26/europe-2030/>

<sup>5</sup> On complexity and the EU, see for instance Innerarity, Daniel. “What kind of deficit? Problems of legitimacy in the European Union.” *European Journal of Social Theory* 17.3 (2014): 307-325; For a recent discussion, see Martinico, Giuseppe: The Asymmetric Bet of Europe, *VerfBlog*, 2017/3/12, <http://verfassungsblog.de/the-asymmetric-bet-of-europe/>, DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.17176/20170313-101421>.

<sup>6</sup> Nicolaidis, “Sustainable Integration,” *JCMS*, *op cit*.

individual and as groups.<sup>7</sup> Better even, it calls for accommodating the different ways in which different national and local traditions are comfortable in striking this balance. Call this mindset, *brexit interruptus!*

In the wake of Brexit, sustainable integration could be seen as a truism: integration means staying together over time *by definition*. Except that it is not. Integration is only sustainable if it means staying together over time *by choice*. The idea that the peoples of Europe can exercise their right to leave democratically if they so wish is a truly good thing. Such a right of exit is what makes the EU a Union (whether you want to call it federal or not) rather than a federal State. Sustainable integration then starts with warding off disintegration, stating loud and clear to the world and to ourselves that the EU is here to stay, even if (and perhaps because) its peoples, like the UK, are free to go.

As a result, the key to sustainable integration is asking what kind of policies and institutional arrangements could make the exercise of exit less palatable. If we assume that such arrangements need to be adaptable in the face of internal and external shocks, and wholesale uncertainty, sustainable integration is about “changing the way we change” within the EU. Such change needs to encompass goals and processes that take into account the differential impact of a world in transformation on various arrays of citizens, groups and countries *in the longer term*. Emergency decision-making can be necessary but it is never sufficient – even in the here and now.

This brings us back to the question of legitimacy. Activists and scholars agree that the EU is in dire need of more meaningful democracy but disagree on what this means exactly. No solution seems to avoid the Scylla of complexity without stumbling on the Charybdis of simplistic mimetism (reproducing state-like institutions at the EU level). I argue that focussing on sustainable integration allows us to chart a way through this aporia. First, by accepting that the EU is democratically challenged, in spite of all its mechanisms for representation, delegation and checks on power. Second, by turning this flaw into an asset: because it is a sum of governments which cannot be collectively impeached, the EU ought to be about democracy-with-foresight, partially shielded from the short-term ups and downs of electoral politics, yet solidly grounded on participatory networks and attuned to the overwhelming desire of the public to confront future threats for the sake of our children and grandchildren. To atone for its current shortcomings in collective accountability, the EU must become accountable to those who are not represented today.

A number of us have sought to theorize the novel kind of transnational democracy which the EU calls for under the label of *demoicracy*, which I define as “a Union of peoples, defined both as citizens and states, who govern together but not as one.”<sup>8</sup> Accordingly, democratic sustainability is predicated on giving up the idea that European democracy can, and should, take the form of national democracy writ-large. Instead, the EU needs to be gradually perfected as a demoicracy in the making – whose credo is

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<sup>7</sup> Nicolaidis, “Taking Back Control: Brexit and the Transformation of European Order” *Oxford University Press*, Fabbrini, ed, 2017

<sup>8</sup> See Nicolaidis, Kalypso. 2013. European Demoicracy and its Crisis. *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 51 (2), pp. 351-69; See also Nicolaidis, Kalypso (2004) “We, the Peoples of Europe...”, *Foreign Affairs*, November/December: 97-110, p. 101. Bellamy, Richard. 2013. “An Ever Closer Union Among the Peoples of Europe”: Republican Intergovernmentalism and Demoicratic Representation within the EU. *Journal of European Integration*, 35 (5): 419-516; Cheneval, F., Lavenex, S. and Schimmelfennig, F., 2015. Demoicracy in the European Union: principles, institutions, policies. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 22(1), pp.1-18; Lindseth, 2013; also Bellamy in this volume.

based on the belief that since its inception, the EU has approximated (and at times subverted) a new political form predicated both on the autonomy of its peoples' governing arrangement and on their radical openness to each other.

Does democratic legitimacy represents an unstable equilibrium? An equilibrium *sociologically*, because it represents a third way between opposing forces – those who prefer to centralise the management of interdependence and those who prefer to minimise it; and an equilibrium *normatively*, in translating for a democratic era the Kantian requisite for “perpetual peace” as a law-based arrangement between self-governing states. This equilibrium would be unstable if the opposing forces of federal messianism (typically EU officialdom and idealistic pro-European movements) and sovereignism (today expressed in new populist movements) pull the project apart. In this context, adopting the overarching goal of sustainable integration may help legitimise the novel democratic form that is the EU and ensure that it stays a more stable path than competing alternatives.

In what follows I explore the implications of a commitment to sustainable integration in a democratic polity on the three fronts of institutions, policies and structure mentioned earlier.

### **Institutions: Democracy of a different kind**

While in the last decades too much political energy has been spent on discussing decision making rules in the EU and the balance of power between its various institutions, the alternative is not to simply to come back to a “Europe of results.” To ask *what* a polity is about is to ask *who* is doing the asking and *how* action is pursued. Output legitimacy depends on input processes which set the ambition of collective action. And while it is a testimony to the staying power of EU institutions that they have hardly been reformed since the EU's inception, they have nevertheless permitted a dangerous drift away from the democratic attachment to non-domination between democratic and individuals – big states overruling the preferences of smaller states, the rising coercive proclivities of the centre, the technocratic monopolization of power, and the depolitization of decision-making.

This means, first, that a shared commitment to fostering a sustainable integration culture could go a long way in reasserting shared leadership and ownership. The lasting power of EU institutions would be bolstered to the extent that they conduct affairs in systematically self-reflexive ways, even when emergency action is required.<sup>9</sup> EU actors could pool their different comparative advantages in systematically assessing short-term actions against long-term goals when bargaining over EU action. This could start by shaping bolder and more political versions of such current tools as the Strategic Environmental Assessment or Regulatory Impact Assessment, as well as methods involving foresight, horizon scanning, scenario development and visioning. In time, the tradeoffs and predictions involved would be at the heart of public debate across the EU.

Second, sustainable integration requires a much deeper democratic aggiornamento bringing about “social ownership” of long term oriented-action. After all, the UN describes the sustainable development goals as “an Agenda of the people, by the people

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<sup>9</sup> For a discussion in political theory see for instance Caney, Simon. (in press). ‘Political Institutions for the Future: A Fivefold Package’ in A. Gosseries and I. González Ricoy (eds) *Institutions for Future Generations*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

and for the people.” In other words, for an agenda to be politically sustainable, *how* it is implemented is a prerequisite to *what* is pursued. Years of learning-by-doing have shown that such ambitious long-term goals need to be applied through empowerment rather than centralization – in the spirit of the groundswell of ‘bottom up’ climate action pledged under COP21 fourth pillar.<sup>10</sup> If sustainable integration is best grounded in the decentralised enacting of transformative strategies by people individually, in groups or as national communities, then it must rely on the separate, if overlapping, democratic spaces that constitute the democratic polity. This is less about organized subsidiarity as a top-down criterion for refraining to act at the center, and more about organic subsidiarity as a citizen-centred concept of EU democratic dynamics. Particularly so as to enroll young generations, the EU could do much to mirror patterns of technological innovation and harness networked forms of cooperation central to our virtual times, including notions of distributed intelligence and adaptive learning.<sup>11</sup> And we need to think about the impact of political “neo-cleavages” and the reassertion of place, localism and control will affect the sustainability agenda

### **Policies: Sustainability across the board**

Sustainable integration privileges certain policy fields over others. It builds on our commitment to sustainability as a goal for our global environment, as well as for cities, security, welfare states, agriculture, landscapes, cultures’ or – in UN parlance - ‘sustainable development goals’ (SDGs). Crucially, the EU is now itself under the obligation to pursue the 17 SDGs spelled out in 2015 by the United Nations, building on lessons learned from the previous Millennium goals from which the developed world had been exempted.<sup>12</sup> The “transition to sustainability” is about how all nations are (or should be) repositioning their economies, their societies and their collective purpose “to maintain all life on Earth, peacefully, healthily, equitably and with sufficient wealth to ensure that all are content in their survival.”<sup>13</sup>

Two points need to be made on the relationship between the (political) idea of “sustainable European integration” and this (substantive) “transition to sustainability”. First, that the implementation of the SDGs require a profound change in mind-set on the part of European institutions, governments and publics which can be best informed by a broader philosophy of sustainable integration. Second, that sustainable integration is a holistic conception which includes, but is not limited to, delivering policies classified under the UN-related sustainability goal. In other words the latter both is both conditioned on, and embedded within, the former.

Sustainability covers all aspects of living together but calls for emphasizing the underlying features of society which make such togetherness easier, from equal rights and the rule of law to economically reasonable egalitarianism and the provision of equal opportunities. A sustainable society is one where economic growth is compatible with planetary limitations and distributed fairly among its citizens, the rapidly growing developing nations and the younger generation.<sup>14</sup> In the words of Pope Francis,

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<sup>10</sup> Hale, Thomas. (2016). “All Hands on Deck”: The Paris Agreement and Nonstate Climate Action, *Global Environmental Politics*, Volume 16 (3).

<sup>11</sup> See inter alia Slaughter, Anne Marie. (2017). *The Chessboard and the Web: Strategies of Connection in a Networked World*, New Haven: Yale University Press.

<sup>12</sup> In addition to the 17 goals, there are 169 targets and 230 global indicators. ‘Sustainable development’ was put on the UN agenda in 1987 by the Brundtland report.

<sup>13</sup> O’Riordan, T. and Voisey, H., 2013. *Op cit*.

<sup>14</sup> Falkenberg, *op cit*.

eminently citeable by atheists among us: “Today...we have to realize that a true ecological approach always becomes a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, so as to hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor.”<sup>15</sup> There is of course a vast literature about the ways in which growth must gradually change in quality with the development of new concepts around green growth, natural capital, circular economy, ecosystem services or green bonds.<sup>16</sup> In this context global spatial sustainability must complement temporal sustainability with managed mobilities, whereby the deep principle of non-discrimination is made relevant to the challenge of global integration.<sup>17</sup> These debates must become mainstream across the political spectrum in Europe and beyond.

In an abstract sense, the policies advocated at EU level seem to chime with sustainability goals. But while the 2017 Rome declaration calls for a “prosperous and sustainable Europe, the driving narrative occupies the defensive end of the sustainability spectrum. However, no matter how necessary, an emphasis on ‘resilience’ already assumes that sustainability strategies will fail, while a focus on ‘protection’ runs the risk of overreach by justifying a Europe with more powers, tools and resources.<sup>18</sup> Instead, sustainability needs to start in the here and now. Finding a lasting solution to the well-known shortcomings of the single currency is a prerequisite for investment strategies that sustainability requires. While financial integration is desirable in the long term to share risks and spread resources across Europe, this does not mean that the EU needs to radically centralize its fiscal, regulatory and supervisory functions.

Ultimately, EU leaders need to seek the minimum integration necessary to sustain a common currency among national economies which will remain heterogenous for the foreseeable future, not only in terms of levels of development but in terms of social contracts and state-society relations.<sup>19</sup> From a sustainable integration view point this means reconciling decentralized self-government and greater pooling of resources. On the one hand, European officialdom can no longer shy away from dealing with the main structural reason for EMU’s failures, namely the tension between national ownership and the inter-dependence of European economies and societies. Governing at a distance is unsustainable when reforms and policies must be democratically sustainable in separate constituencies. Democratic sustainability requires informed debate on the part of national publics and genuine mutual recognition between their polities.<sup>20</sup> On the other hand, resources can be better pooled – say if the EU as a whole leverages its capacity to borrow on capital markets – provided they are not managed at the centre. Sustainable growth requires public investment in research and development, schools, healthcare and

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<sup>15</sup> GOD, A.C.O., 2015. Encyclical letter *Laudato Si'* of the Holy Father Francis on Care for Our Common Home

<sup>16</sup> Starting of course with the Club of Rome’s 1972 “Limits to Growth” report.

<sup>17</sup> I thank Adrian Favell for pointing this out to me.

<sup>18</sup> See the work of the Stockholm Resilience Centre. “The EU Global Strategy: 40 Expert Opinions” *European Institute for Strategic Studies*. (<https://europa.eu/globalstrategy/en/eu-global-strategy-expert-opinion-no40-11-march-2016>)

<sup>19</sup> Nicolaidis, Kalypso and Max Watson. (2015). ‘Sharing the Eurocrats’ Dream: A Demoi-Cratic Approach to EMU Governance in the Post-Crisis Era’. In Markus Jachtenfuchs, Damian and Christian Joerges (eds.) *The End of the Eurocrat’s Dream*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Begg, Iain, Annette Bongardt, Kalypso Nicolaidis & Francisco Torres. (2015). ‘EMU and Sustainable Integration’. *Journal of European Integration*, 37(7), pp. 803-816.

<sup>20</sup> See Kira Gatzou, Nicolaidis, Kalypso and Claudia Schrag Sternberg (2016) *Mutual Recognition Lost: The Greco-German Affair in the Euro-Crisis*, Oxford: Palgrave-Macmillan, Pivot.

social services, transport and infrastructure and most fundamentally a strategic approach to innovation in the EU.<sup>21</sup>

Finally, Brexit and the populist wave accompanying it have brought home the fact that attention must be focused on the long-term consequences of openness for individual voters. A system in which states have given up control of crucial aspects of regulation (e.g. banking, food production, online markets) to international bureaucrats is not democratically sustainable. Rather than an exogenous force that is filtered through national cleavages, globalisation is a force that can radically change the political issue space as well as the institutional opportunities available to political actors – and the media has a crucial role to play in this story.<sup>22</sup> Sustainable integration is about harnessing, but also taming, this force.

### **Structure: Flexibility without fragmentation**

Finally, much has been made of the idea that more ‘variable geometry’ would significantly help the EU survive its ‘midlife crisis’.<sup>23</sup> Beyond the irony that ever closer union may require an ever smaller union, there is little doubt that the EU can survive only if it embraces the kind of flexibility required by the widely heterogeneous character of its economies, and widely diverse range of social, legal and political systems. This is not an original thought, especially when we note that asymmetric federalism – whereby the constituent units in the system relate to the whole through different degrees of autonomy and status – has historically been the rule rather than the exception.

But not all types of flexible arrangements necessarily serve sustainable integration. If the cooperative drive has largely been based on diffuse reciprocity and linkages across issues, sustainability implies that we learn to deal fairly with the externalities we create for each other over time, which in turn calls for more, not less, inclusiveness. Asymmetry of the wrong kind can also translate in a sense of powerlessness on the part of citizens who are under-represented at the centre.<sup>24</sup> Arguably, both versions of structural differentiation – a core “federalized” Europe or permanent institutional structures for different groupings of states – could be harbingers of fragmentation and divergence between member states, not least as cleavages among states and actors in the EU crisscross possible groupings.

For the sake of sustainable integration we need to imagine overlapping agendas and differentiated approaches inside a single framework, rather than concentric circles or core-periphery dichotomies. The asymmetry produced by flexible integration should serve the balance between the forces of fusion and fission that characterise the Union. Against structural approaches to differentiation, enhanced cooperation with flexible opt-in and opt-out clauses can be seen as a form of open-ended experimentation with cooperation whereby some actors can afford to be trail-blazers. This, of course, requires

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<sup>21</sup> The EU innovation agenda is discussed extensively in Robert Madelin and David Ringrose (eds) *Opportunity now: Europe’s mission to innovate*, The Publications Office of the European Union, July 2016

<sup>22</sup> Farrell, H. and Newman, A. (2017). BREXIT, voice and loyalty: rethinking electoral politics in an age of interdependence. *Review of International Political Economy*, pp.1-16.

<sup>23</sup> The old idea was bottled anew by the Commission in the run up to Rome, pitted against the straw-scenarios of ‘muddling through’, focusing on the single market or federalizing further. For an overview see <http://www.praguesummit.eu/docs/sustainable-european-integration:-eu-for-the-21st-century-223.pdf>

<sup>24</sup> Rainer Bauböck *United in Misunderstanding? Asymmetry in Multinational Federations*, ICE-WORKING PAPER SERIES, No26

respecting the untouchable core of the EU through constitutional safeguards.<sup>25</sup> It requires also that forms of ‘enhanced cooperation’ are open and transparent. Differentiation, moreover, needs to be principled, not *ad hoc*. Arrangements must be sensitive to local and national specificities and adjusted to conform to the precept of sustainable integration. For instance, the same norm of free movement of labour has a radically different impact in different states and their labour markets, which is why states require leeway in their interpretation. Similarly, a European refugee regime must balance member states’ shared commitment to free movement with the unequal distribution of absorption-capacity within each of them.

What does this all mean for a country like the UK which claims to be leaving the EU, but not Europe? What the British saga over Europe has taught us is that if the EU as a whole does not sufficiently take account of the unequal impact of its principles and laws, if it does not offer differentiated and flexible approaches, then it is the member states and their citizens who will take such differentiation in hand, unilaterally. And that, we have now learned, can mean walking out and shaking the whole edifice in the process. Brexit raises the interesting prospect that a kind of flexible integration that could not be worked out with an existing member might instead be devised for a third country.

### **Conclusion**

The EU after Brexit needs to heed the British message: we must take what is good about the EU while guarding against its own propensity for over-reach. We need to reshape a Europe that a majority of citizens in every EU member state, including today’s Britain, would want to be part of.

It is not anti-European to read Brexit as a warning that political leaders must give up the kind of integration by stealth which has so damaged the integrity and popularity of the European project. British leavers were generally not bigoted, racist or ignorant. But they are they are less educated and older than remainers. Faced with what they perceived as the complacency of the London and Brussels elites, they were no longer ready to give the EU the benefit of the doubt.

In this chapter I have argued that only by making the pursuit of sustainable integration its *raison d’être* might the EU most credibly sign on for another sixty-year stint. This means changing the way negotiated change occurs in the EU, reconnecting the project to its citizens’ aspirations and recognizing that inter-governmental deals need to be sustained by inter-societal and inter-generational bargains. It means that flexibility, differentiation and opt-outs need to exist in order to serve inclusiveness, because a mosaic EU is more appealing than pushing half of its states to the brink of exit, as has happened with the UK. Under these conditions, peace in Europe may not be perpetual - but it could outlast all of us.

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<sup>25</sup> Martinico, Giuseppe: *The Asymmetric Bet of Europe*, *op cit*