

57. Frankfurter Newsletter zum Recht der Europäischen Union

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E3, Weimar Plus, E5, E6 and Whatnot. Will Europe Slip on a Multi-speed Integration Trail?

FIVE SCENARIOS FOR EUROPE BY 2025

SCENARIO 1: CARRYING ON

SCENARIO 2: NOTHING BUT THE SINGLE MARKET

SCENARIO 3: THOSE WHO WANT MORE DO MORE

SCENARIO 4: DOING LESS MORE EFFICIENTLY

SCENARIO 5: DOING MUCH MORE TOGETHER

Index of the White Paper on the Future of Europe, 2017.

1. An Ever Looser European Union

The pun in the title of this section has been taken from a book published by *Frank Schimmelfennig* and *Thomas Winzen* in 2020¹ which deals with “differentiated European integration”. This means that EU integration is discussed and negotiated in informal formats between certain “willing” Member States (and sometimes non-Member States) in parallel or beyond

¹ *Frank Schimmelfennig/Thomas Winzen, Ever Looser Union? Differentiated European Integration, Oxford 2020.*

the EU27 constitutional architecture. Such formats *praeter Unionem* are indeed differentiated, the question is how much integration they will bring. The multitude of clubs is confusing to say the least.

The E3 (DE + FR + IT or UK) and (old) Weimar formats as fora of European political dialogue and leadership outside the EU treaties architecture have existed on and off for a while, but have never truly competed with the institutions in Brussels and Strasbourg. Recently, however, two new informal integration clubs have emerged: In 2024, the E5 format (DE + FR + IT + PL + UK), which focuses on defence matters; and in early 2026, the E6 format (E5 minus UK, but plus ES and NL), which is run by the Member States' finance ministers and covers not only treasury policy matters in a technical sense, but also resilience and defence spending. Poland is a member of both the E5 and E6 formats. Spain and the Netherlands, on the other hand, are E6 but not E5 members.

Considering these formats alongside the plethora of existing official EU fora, even regular newspaper readers will struggle to keep track of the various deliberative bodies through which European domestic and foreign policies are set today. The table below attempts to show the most relevant groupings:

Format	Members	In existence since	Topics
E3 or EU3 ²	DE + FR + (IT or UK, pre- or post-Brexit)	Old	Various political issues
Weimar Triangle ³	DE + FR + PL	Established in 1991	Foreign policy, security, economic cooperation science and culture, active on and off
Weimar Plus ⁴	DE + FR + PL + whoever gets co-opted in: ES, IT, UK or recently India	Term used since 2025	Various political issues
E5 ⁵	DE + FR + IT + PL + UK	New (2024)	Defense, supported by NATO and EU Commission

² [EU three - Wikipedia: After Brexit: E3. New treaty puts UK, Germany and France back at the heart of European security | Chatham House – International Affairs Think Tank](#)

³ [The Weimar Triangle - Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs; Weimar Triangle - Wikipedia](#)

⁴ [Weimar+ - Wikipedia, India to attend the Weimar Triangle meeting in Paris: New partnerships for security and prosperity - Federal Foreign Office.](#)

⁵ [E5 \(European Group of Five\) - Wikipedia.](#)

Format	Members	In existence since	Topics
E6 ⁶	DE + ES + FR + IT + NL + PL	New (2026)	Euro (the currency), Capital Market Union, Defense, Raw Materials and Supply Chains
Eurogroup ⁷	The 21 Euro (single currency) Zone Members), recently joined by Bulgaria	1997/1998	Single currency policy, financial stability
Western European Union (WEU)	BE + DE + ES + FR + GR + IT + LU + NL + PT + UK	1954, dismantled in 2011	Defense

A whole smorgasbord⁸ to choose from, *ex diversitate vires*.

The E5 and E6 formats are well within the public domain and appear to receive support from 'official' EU institutions; yet their work does not seem to attract much debate, let alone sharp protest.

2. Let Some States Get Integrated First

It is an old idea, *Kerneuropa*, *two- or multispeed Europe*, *l'Europe à deux ou même à plusieurs vitesses*.⁹ It clearly predates the troublesome *liberum veto*, which Hungary was availing itself of from time to time. Some EU Member States agree to integrate faster than others. Examples include the European Economic Community (EEC) versus the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) in the old days; the Eurozone; Schengen; Prüm; Weimar; post-Brexit attempts to preserve the status quo, ad-hoc-alliances within COREPER and other formats. While the recurring sprouting of alternative organizations and discussion formats has not destroyed the European Union, it must be frustrating for those who believe in the idea of an 'even closer' European Union to observe.

⁶ German Federal Ministry of Finance, Communication 03/2026 of 28 January 2026.

⁷ [Eurogroup - Consilium](#);

⁸ *Andreas Rinke*, Germany's New European Policy Puts Effectiveness before Unity, *Internationale Politik Quarterly*, Special Issue MSC 2026, 4 February 2026.

⁹ Cf. footnote 1 above; White Paper on the Future of Europe, COM(2017)2025 of 1 March 2017, page 20: SCENARIO 3: THOSE WHO WANT MORE DO MORE; *Christian Calliess*, Zur Zukunft der Europäischen Union – Überlegungen im Lichte von Rom-Deklaration und Weißbuch der Kommission, *Berliner Online-Beiträge zum Europarecht* Nr. 110 of 1 March 2018.

Furthermore, there are also *praeter*-formats that exist within the Union as a whole (comprising 27 Member States), but in parallel to its constitutional architecture as prescribed by the Treaties. The initiatives of the Four and Five Presidents (Commission, Council, EP, Eurogroup and ECB) in 2012¹⁰ and 2015¹¹ are a prime example of this. These were informal gatherings of top EU institutional leaders in a composition which seems to have been abandoned since then.

Depending on whether the EU itself emerges reinvigorated from the current poly-crises environment, these informal formats may well disappear. Hoping for greater willingness among Member States to integrate in the future, the President of the Eurogroup *Kyriakos Pierrakakis*, recently, described E6 as only “temporary”¹².

3. E5 and E6

The E5, comprising Germany, France, Italy, Poland and the UK, has existed since 2024. Since then, the respective government representatives have met seven times. The latest meeting, held in Cracow on 20 February 2026¹³, was attended by the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and the NATO Deputy Secretary General. These gatherings focus on security and defence matters within and beyond the EU.

The E6¹⁴, comprising the E5 minus the UK but including the Netherlands and Spain, was established in early 2026. It was essentially presented as a Franco-German initiative, although it had a predecessor idea launched in Poland in 2025¹⁵. In the German press, E6 is mostly associated with Vice-Chancellor *Lars Klingbeil*¹⁶, who also heads the German Ministry of Finance. Curiously, the German Government departments primarily responsible for EU integration matters — the Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Energy, the Foreign Office, and the Federal Chancellery — have remained relatively quiet about this club. This may contribute to the general public’s perception of E6 as a merely technical forum for financial experts. However, this would not reflect how German Vice-Chancellor *Klingbeil* describes the club’s agenda:

“In light of global uncertainties, we are placing a stronger focus on European sovereignty. Germany, France and other key partners are leading the way to make Europe stronger and more independent. French Finance Minister Roland Lescure and I have launched this initiative together. We are providing the impetus, and

¹⁰ Four Presidents’ Report, *Herman Van Rompuy* et al., Towards a Genuine Economic and Monetary Union, Document EUCO 120/12, PRESSE 296, PR PCE 102 of 26 June 2012.

¹¹ Five Presidents’ Report, Commission Press Release IP/15/5240 of 22 June 2015.

¹² *Thomas Moller-Nielsen*, Euractiv, Franco-German-led ‘E6’ format will be ‘temporary’, says Eurogroup president, 16 February 2026.

¹³ Polish National Ministry of Defence, Press Release of 20 February 2026; NATO Press Release of 20 February 2026.

¹⁴ *Guillaume Duval*, Tomorrow, a Europe of Six? Blogpost, Institut Jacques Delors of 18 February 2026.

¹⁵ *Justyna Gotkowska/Lukasz Maślanka*, A Strategy for Europe from National Perspectives: Poland, DGAP (German Council on Foreign Relations) MEMO, 11 March 2025.

¹⁶ Publication of the German Federal Ministry of Finance of 9 March 2026, *Lars Klingbeil* im Interview mit dem Redaktionsnetzwerk Deutschland; *Detlef Fechtner*, Europas hochriskante Behäbigkeit, Leitartikel Kapitalmarktunion, Börsenzeitung of 11 March 2026; Speech by *Lars Klingbeil* at the Bertelsmann Foundation, Germany Federal Ministry of Finance of 25 March 2026: “Brussels is too slow.”

other countries are welcome to join us. The decisive factor here is to strengthen our competitiveness and our defence capabilities. This is what I discussed today with the finance ministers of France, Italy, Spain, Poland and the Netherlands. As six leading European economies, we are committed to driving this project forward.

These are our four priorities: First, we will press ahead with the Capital Markets Union to improve financing conditions for European companies. Second, we will strengthen the international role of the euro. This means that we need to have a digital euro and our own European payment systems. Third, we will significantly intensify the coordination of our defence spending, with a particular emphasis on joint weapons systems and joint procurement. Fourth, we will ensure secure supplies of raw materials by coordinating purchases, building emergency reserves and strengthening our global trade partnerships.”¹⁷

The Capital Markets Union is clearly a key matter for the E6 Ministers of Finance, but why would 'the international role of the euro' be discussed in a semi-institutional group of Governments gathering in parallel to the Eurozone, with a non-Eurozone Member State (Poland) present? Defence spending certainly has a financial aspect, but raw materials fall within the remit of industrial policy (Economic Affairs in Berlin) and GROW in Brussels. The precise scope may still need to be finalized, also in accordance with the E5 group, which seems to overlap with E6 in defence matters (in which ES and NL participate as well, unlike in the E5 group).

4. Who cares?

For the time being, the emergence of the E5 and E6 formats may be confusing, but they haven't attracted much attention outside the ecosystem of specialized media. One might argue that, as long as these intergovernmental arrangements remain informal and legally non-binding, they can be distinguished from proper inter-state agreements. However, if they were binding, according to the principles of *Achmea*¹⁸ case law, such agreements might be considered to call into question “the principle of mutual trust between the Member States”. The idea of establishing a multispeed Europe has been debated in great depth elsewhere, as has its compatibility with the key principles of the EU Treaties.¹⁹ The Union Courts have yet to rule on whether the 'ever closer' Union, as reflected in Article 1 (2) of the TEU, creates a legally enforceable duty on Member States and EU institutions. However, the European Court of Justice does occasionally bestow legally binding effect upon foggy principles, as can be seen in its jurisprudence on energy solidarity pursuant to Article 194 TFEU.²⁰ But then,

¹⁷ German Federal Ministry of Finance, Press Release of 28 January 2026.

¹⁸ ECJ, Case C-284/16, 6 March 2018, *Slovakia/Achmea*, Paras 34, 58.

¹⁹ Cf. *Alberto Miglio*, Differentiated integration and the principle of loyalty, *European Constitutional Law Review* (14) 2018, pages 475 – 498.

²⁰ ECJ, Case C-848/19 P, 15 July 2021, *Germany/Poland*, Paras 37 et seq.; *Lübbig*, *Europäische Zeitschrift für Wirtschaftsrecht* (EuZW) 2021, page 737.

the equality of the Member States as reflected in Article 4 (2) TEU²¹ would not appear so vague after all.

Clearly, the E5 and E6 formats are a reaction to a lack of progress within the EU27. However, it is worth noting that not all agenda items, especially those of the E6, such as the procurement of raw materials, are areas in which the European Union acting as a community of 27 seems to be in a deadlock. Quite the contrary: The EU27 sometimes appears to be rather active in this area. Beyond the legal and institutional debate, the success of these new formats will depend largely on their transparency in relationships with EU institutions and, even more so, with all those Member States which remain outside this select group of the aspirational 'more willing'.

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<https://www.rewi.europa-uni.de/de/forschung/fireu/index.html>

²¹ Cf. *Koen Lenaerts*, No Member State is More Equal than Others, Verfassungsblog of 8 October 2020.