

Common Values in challenging times: Dialogue among Europeans

Conference Summary, Bibliothèque Solvay, 22nd of September

The joint basis of the European Union, the common values, was at the centre of a one-day round table discussion, which the EU- Office of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung organised on the 22nd of September at the Bibliothèque Solvay. The round table brought together politicians and intellectuals from the member states and countries aspiring for membership. This double perspective helped to refresh the stagnating debate in the European Union with the view from countries, where population and government seek with many efforts to become members of the Union.

The universal basis of Europe

The lively debate described a broad range of values, embracing the EU of 25 member states. The many different countries with their respective traditions, histories, as well as concepts of statehood and governance were seen as united by the common adherence to universal values. The human rights, democracy, and solidarity as well as the trust in the capability of the European Union to guarantee peace, stability, and prosperity on the continent form the bond between the members. The discussion on the coverage but especially on the ability of this range of European values to induce cohesion on the continent concentrated on the three central terms: universality, diversity, and dialogue.

The concept of identity or the idea of specific European values was seen as too exclusive to function as the basis for the process of European integration. The discussion emphasised therefore that the distinguishing element in European values is their universal and hence open notion. The ideas of human rights, democracy, solidarity as well as respect and tolerance on which Europe founded the integration process after the disastrous experiences of the 19th and 20th century were and are inclusive and universal. They were defined therefore not as

“European” values, but rather as the major task of progressive forces all around the globe and also in Europe. It is their accomplishment in Europe, that these values have been deeply rooted – as the Copenhagen criteria show – in the contractual basis for the European Union.

Fading trust in the EU

The need for more intensive debates on the common values in Europe was nonetheless seen, due to fading trust of the European societies in the EU. This should be countered by a process of debate to recall the EU's successes in gaining peace and prosperity on the continent, a feeling which prevails in the states of the Western Balkan aspiring for membership. A clearer definition of the so-called “European Way of Life” (Commissioner Verheugen) was regarded as the first step to reinvigorate the European spirit in the Union.

The European Way of Life

The specific attributes of the “European Way of Life” which has been developed on the common basis of universal values and under the conditions of peace and prosperity, were identified in the addition of the respect of differences and the culture of dialogue to the universal values. The participants emphasised the multiple sources of European traditions like Greek philosophy, Roman law, Christianity, the influence of Islam, the Renaissance, and the rule of the Osman empire especially in South-Eastern Europe and many more. *Difference* is therefore one of the most fundamental principles when debating on European values. According to this, the term of a single European identity is misleading and creates a clear distinction between insiders and outsiders, which neglects also the universalistic approach of the European basis. The EU should adhere to its multidimensional

layer of traditions and cultures and let this diversity flourish. One of the mysteries of the “European Way of Life” as discussed was the mutual respect for the differences of the other state, nation, region, or religion, based on a principal tolerance towards “the other”. This fuels the ability of Europeans to maintain a dialogue over all these differences. But it was at the same time regarded as a rule, which has to be implemented in the aspiring countries with their (sometimes) difficult mix of ethnic groups, but as well still in the member states of the EU. Especially the group of Sinti and Roma was brought up as an example for a minority within Europe, which has not been fully integrated. The prevalence of dialogue and compromise over the exercise of power was seen as the European element, which dominates the external relations of the Union and constitutes the basis for “European soft power” – in contrast to recent attitudes of the US foreign policy. The discussants from the Western Balkans described lively the effects of this soft power in their societies, helping to gain support for economic reforms, and sustaining internal cohesion in the difficult transition processes under way.

Solidarity should work both ways

When it came to the value-based functioning of the political and economic organisation of the Union, the following basic norms were discussed intensively without trying to create an exhaustive list: respect, secularism, social cohesion, and solidarity.

The mutual respect between different societies, traditions and cultures in Europe as described above was seen as one of the most basic rules for a functioning European Union. This should imply secularism as a central norm in Europe. The participants discussed that Europe’s cultural heritage, traditions, and moral visions root partly on Christian thoughts. But the fixation of Christianity in the constitutional treaty or a following document would on the one hand contradict the fundamental norm of respect towards all kind of faiths in Europe, and on the other hand fail to reflect the reality in European societies, where a broad range of Christians, Muslims, Atheist and many others is already represented.

But whereas secularism and more generally the respect for the “other” seemed to be implemented quite satisfactory in most of the European societies, the realisation of solidarity and social cohesion in Europe was regarded as the most alarming lack of the European Union. The participants highlighted the lopsided construction of the Union with the focus on the liberalisation of markets. This would make the EU look like the Trojan horse of globalisation and increase the fears of the populations. The expectations towards the Union are growing, because the populations perceive Brussels as the

source of job insecurity and increasing social injustice. Therefore a common answer should be sought by the Union and the member states. This answer, the participants agreed, would not be a Brussels-based social policy ministry, but a more coordinated and coherent approach of the member states in the fields of taxation, wage policy, and economic governance. The open markets should be balanced by fair rules, because with different taxation and social welfare systems without any coordination, there could be no real competition in Europe. Minimum wages were mentioned as one example to enhance social cohesion between the member states of the EU, as well as the relocation of agricultural subsidies into education, technology, and research, giving people a clear perspective for the future. As the participants of the candidate countries and the new member states witnessed, the expectations in the societies towards solidarity from Europe were very high, and the perspective of future European transfers helps enduring the hardships of actual reforms. On the other hand, the disposition to practise solidarity towards the EU or other member states is equally low and further decreasing in member states and aspiring countries. This should also be challenged by a clearer communication of the benefits gained from the Union. The aim should be to induce a feeling of mutual solidarity between the European societies instead of perceiving Europe as a zero-sum-game.

This led to the final session of the conference, where concrete measures were discussed, of how to revive the European enthusiasm, and how to keep the citizens better in touch with the European Union. The debate concentrated on the institutional reform of the Union via the constitutional treaty and the comprehensibility and attractiveness of the EU for the citizens, as well as formulating a clear answer to the fears of the population.

The constitutional treaty – open, bury, or revote?

The participants were unanimous on the fact that the European Union was in need of an institutional reform. Whilst some argued that this was very urgent unless the EU should fall in immobility, others were of the opinion that the Union worked somehow with the treaty of Nice and the reform of the institutions was not very urgent but should be addressed with deliberation. The constitutional treaty was discussed quite controversially with several models of “reanimation”. Some participants argued that France and the Netherlands should follow the approved example of Ireland and Denmark and just vote again on the same or a slightly amended document, after all a broad majority of states has already ratified the document. Especially the participants from France emphasised

that a simple “re-voting” would have the same negative outcome and would hence mean the end of the treaty. They were in favour of a partition of the document and a referendum on the first and second part. The third part should be discussed publicly on the occasion of the elections for the European Parliament in 2009. Meanwhile the EU should be promoted with projects touching people’s daily life, like energy, research and education. As one possibility to find a European answer to the fears of the population in the face of globalisation, was a social protocol or a social declaration presented. This document could be amended to the constitutional treaty and phrase the political will to realise social justice in Europe. Another proposal tried to combine the aims of institutional reform and popular support for the EU via a European referendum on the treaty, acknowledging that the Union consists of states and citizens. Whilst the states have guided the negotiation process and accepted the document through their heads of states, the ratification should lie in the hands of the citizens. If a majority of the European population would approve the treaty, this vote should be binding for member states and the EU.

This pointed in the direction of adding a distinguishable political dimension to the Union. The

participants suggested a “dramatisation” of the European stage to avoid the perception of a pure administrative body in Brussels regulating mostly everything without the chance for the citizens to influence the process. The elections for the European Parliament should be used for a European election campaign and the European parties should compete with candidates for the post of the Commission president. The member states should respect that vote as binding. This would make the controversies over the European Parliament more substantial, would create more transparency for the citizens and raise the democratic legitimacy of Europe.

The dialogue on the common values in Europe, that was the major conclusion of the round table discussion, should be continued, to help defining the European position in the world, to enhance the communication between citizens and the Union, and to assure population and political actors again and again of the binding forces between Europeans and of the necessity of progress in the path towards further European integration.

Responsible Editor: Dr. Ernst Stetter, Director, EU-Office

“Brussels Focus” is a corporate project of the EU-Office of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Brussels. This issue has been mainly compiled by Christos Katsioulis.