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
because the populations perceive Brussels as the
The expectations towards the Union are growing,
isation and increase the fears of the populations.
This fuels the ability of Euro-
peans to maintain a dialogue over all these differ-
ences. 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 West-
ern 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 soli-
darity.

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 partici-
pants discussed that Europe’s cultural heritage,
traditions, and moral visions root partly on Chris-
tian thoughts. But the fixation of Christianity in the
constitutional treaty or a following document
would on the one hand contradict the fundamen-
tal 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 satisfactorily 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 global-
isation 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 injus-
tice. 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 mem-
ber 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 with-
out any coordination, there could be no real com-
petition in Europe. Minimum wages were men-
tioned as one example to enhance social cohesion
between the member states of the EU, as well as
the relocation of agricultural subsidies into educa-
tion, 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 institu-
tional 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, oth-
ers 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 partici-
pants 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 ma-
jority 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 administrational 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.