

161ST BERGEDORF ROUND TABLE

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EUROPE AT THE CROSSROADS

KÖRBER FOUNDATION
INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

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Executive Summary

- The refugee crisis is a symptom of the current state of the European Union and not its cause. The EU is faced with major problems such as a lack of cohesion and leadership, and contradictory ideas of what the “European project” actually means.
- The EU and its member states need to develop a compelling counter-narrative to the increasing renationalization, the growing levels of populism and the rise of illiberal tendencies in Europe.
- The EU cannot and should not prioritize between the southern and eastern regions of the European neighborhood. The prospect of accession is the EU’s most attractive means of promoting reform in neighboring countries, and thereby creating regional stability.
- The Franco-German motor has stalled. Consequently, a common fiscal policy vision is needed in order to secure the future of European integration.

The Crisis of Crises?

The financial crisis, the crisis in Greece, the Ukraine crisis, the refugee crisis – the list seems to be getting longer and longer. In a globalized and increasingly networked world, the framework that European politics is subject to has undergone dramatic changes. The participants of the Bergedorf Round Table noted that whereas the EU had developed under the protection of the *Pax Americana*, it was now confronted by new and sometimes contradictory security policy challenges. Accordingly, responses were needed to the new foreign policy restraint exercised by the US, the possibility of the future world order being dominated by China and the US (“the G2”), and Europe’s concurrent loss of importance on the world stage. In addition to these external challenges, the participants also not-

ed the EU’s lack of cohesion and leadership. The refugee crisis was described as a symptom and not the cause of the current state of the EU. Moreover, the participants stressed the importance of recognizing that the EU’s 28 members had joined for different reasons – these included economic motives and the desire for prosperity, alongside expectations that the institution would guarantee its members peace and security. The EU, it was argued, had not lived up to all of these hopes, and in many places the disappointment over the unfulfilled promises of prosperity and development explained the growing levels of nationalism.

“THE REFUGEE CRISIS IS A SYMPTOM OF THE CRISIS IN EUROPE, NOT ITS CAUSE.”

However, the varying historical experiences of Central/Eastern Europe compared to those of Western Europe also played a role in the current situation. One participant accused European elites of having universalized Western European notions of the “European project” and of having ignored the identities, desires and interests of its eastern member states.

The question of whether the current situation actually constituted a “crisis of crises,” however, was the cause of much debate. One participant argued that “crisis” implied helplessness and a lack of alternatives; as such, it furthered the assumption that it was impossible to develop an appropriate response. The talk of a “crisis,” therefore, played into the hands of both the extreme left and right of the political spectrum, which seemed to be offering answers to the current situation. Moreover, another participant felt that Europe could only be described as in crisis if German Chancellor Angela Merkel’s refugee policy failed, the supporters of a Brexit won the UK referendum, and Marine Le Pen was elected French President in 2017.

Too Little Europe, Too Little Union: The Weaknesses of the EU

The participants contended that the phrase “Too little Europe, too little Union” aptly summarized the current state of the EU. The EU was said to be characterized mainly by three alarming developments: a trend towards renationalization; growing levels of populism; and the rise of illiberal tendencies in some member states.

The increased importance placed on national statehood resulted from the fact that citizens were no longer convinced or had

been disappointed by the promise of European prosperity. At the same time, the nature of the EU itself was seen as a cause for growing renationalization. The participants pointed out that as a technocratic project implemented to intensify economic integration the EU still had difficulties in establishing an identity and a sense of belonging that went beyond the level of the nation-state. In addition, whereas the experiences of World War II and the end of National Socialism had been formative for Western Europe; Central and Eastern Europe were more strongly influenced by their experiences of communist dictatorships, and the identity-forming character of national liberation movements. Importantly, however, these factors were rarely considered constitutive of a pan-European identity.

The participants pointed out that the growing levels of populism illustrated how quickly nationalist sentiment could be mobilized during periods of crisis; “the escape to referenda” was described as exemplary of this situation. Moreover, the growing number of referenda reflected the current high level of distrust in European political representatives. Whereas the EU’s citizens had shrinking confidence in the will of political elites to shape the future of Europe for the good of all, nationalism offered far more tangible answers to the challenges faced by the EU, even if they actually constituted little more than short-term pseudo-solutions. Consequently, the EU and national governments would have to make the limits of national policy clear, and emphasize the areas in which

“THE TREND TOWARDS RENATIONALIZATION, GROWING LEVELS OF POPULISM AND THE RISE OF ILLIBERAL TENDENCIES GIVE RISE FOR CONCERN IN THE EU.”

“Europe” really was necessary. Some participants believed that populism could be explained by the insecurity felt by citizens due to the perceived failure of liberal values and European democracy. Furthermore, one discussant pointed out that although populism was dividing European societies, it was a pan-European phenomenon: “anti-establishment” movements that promoted EU-critical and xenophobic policies had not only evolved in Hungary and Poland, but in the Netherlands, France, Britain, and Germany.

Democratic models in some European states were said to be showing signs of erosion. One participant warned against the emergence of “illiberal democracies” in which governments simply modified core elements of democracy as they saw fit. Examples included restrictions on constitutional jurisdiction, bringing the media into line with government positions and a general distrust on the part of governments of civil society organizations. The close political proximity of many “illiberal democracies” to Russia was mentioned as particularly noteworthy.

The participants reminded that no appropriate answers to these problems had been developed at the national or the European level. This demonstrated the urgent need for a counter-narrative that emphasized the strength of liberal values and that set out specific measures such as the provision of support to non-state and independent media.

The lack of “union” in the EU, it was argued, was also reflected in the manner in which member states dealt with successes and failures. Whereas governments regularly ascribed successes in the European context to their own actions, failures were far more likely to be blamed on European institutions. This led to calls for a new *grand bargain* for Europe, including the transfer of further powers to European institutions and the provision of more scope in areas in which it was clear that national solutions were inadequate. Nevertheless, a German participant rejected this proposal due to the current unwillingness of the Bundestag to approve further transfers of sovereignty. Moreover, the last *grand bargain* had taken ten years to implement and had required two referenda. This meant that the current “policy of small steps” would be far more likely to continue in the near future.

A “Ring of Fire” instead of a “Ring of Friends”: Europe and its Neighborhood

The majority agreed that Europe would have to accept that simultaneous crises were taking place in its direct and broader neighborhood, and to begin developing solutions to them. One discussant noted that although the



“THE EU IS NOT A CONTINENTAL POWER IN THE BROADEST SENSE OF THE TERM, BUT IT IS STILL CONFRONTED BY THE PROBLEMS ASSOCIATED WITH THIS STATUS.”

EU was not a continental power in the original meaning of the term, it was still confronted by the problems that this status brought with it. Be this as it may, the EU was generally unable to act strategically and to think

geopolitically. The numerous challenges in the EU’s southern and eastern neighborhood had led European Neighborhood Policy to gain in importance. Furthermore, instead of prioritizing between East and South, most

discussants favored treating both regions as equally important, and emphasized that the crises these regions were facing required the cooperation of all EU member states.

The Russian president’s policies represented the main challenge for the EU in its eastern neighborhood. One participant argued that President Putin was attempting to undermine the EU and delegitimize NATO. This was reflected in Moscow’s targeted deployment of “disinformation.” Similarly, the Russian president’s support of extreme political parties such as the French Front National was also viewed as an attempt to weaken the EU’s democratic model.

The prospect of EU accession was emphasized as a transformative power in relations with the EU’s neighborhood. This meant that the EU should continue to provide the option of accession to states in its eastern neighborhood. Abandoning this option, one participant warned, could lead the fragile stability in the Western Balkans to fall apart.

With regard to the EU’s southern neighborhood, the focus was currently on Syria. One discussant argued that the devastating civil war in Syria had demonstrated that the

EU should invest more in its military capabilities and develop the capacity to implement humanitarian protection and no-fly zones without the need for external participation. Moreover, without military capabilities, there could be no political influence. Lastly, the lack of political will to deploy existing military capacities was also viewed critically.

How can Europe face up to the challenges posed by its neighborhood? In answering this question, the participants highlighted the need for caution when the EU chose its partners. Nevertheless, the refugee crisis was said to have clearly demonstrated that Turkey had to be counted among Europe’s most important allies. Some participants pointed out that the EU had committed a strategic error by denying Turkey the prospect of EU membership while making a solution to the refugee crisis dependent on Ankara. This example was said to provide a good means of understanding the current balance in the EU between values and interests: if in doubt, one participant argued, political interests were considered more important than values.

The numerous crises and conflicts in Europe’s neighborhood were seen as illustrative of the need to place higher priority on Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). Moreover, the participants argued that national activities would have to be coordinated at the European level; this also included ending military and diplomatic unilateral action. Some discussants believed that the negotiation of the Minsk Agreement by German Chancellor Angela Merkel, and French President François Hollande, had undermined the credibility of the EU as a unified foreign policy actor. Similarly, although some participants called for stronger EU foreign policy, others clearly emphasized the practical consequences of this approach, such as abandoning the

principle of unanimity in the EU Foreign Affairs Council in favor of a qualified majority. In addition, close and comprehensive coordination between the EU and NATO would be needed, and the EU would have to present a united front in relations with partners such as China. Importantly, as long as these conditions had not been met, the success of European foreign policy would essentially depend on coordinated and constructive guidance by France, Britain, and Germany.

Visions of the Future of Europe

What will European asylum and refugee policy look like in the future? Which visions exist of the future of European integration?

The participants unanimously viewed the inability to develop common approaches to asylum and refugee policy as a failure on the part of the EU's member states. One discussant argued that it was illusionary to rely on a combination of the decentralized mechanisms of national asylum policies and a common European system of distributing refugees. Instead, a truly European asylum policy required the transfer of relevant competences to the EU level. In this scenario, an EU reception center would process asylum applications, and refugees would be distributed throughout the EU. This would be done according to crite-

ria such as a host country's GDP and labor market situation, and humanitarian aspects such as family reunification. However, as implementing this system would presuppose a treaty amendment it would remain a long-term goal. In the short term, the participant argued, the countries most affected by the crisis, such as Greece, would have to be provided with more support to ensure that the large numbers of arrivals did not cause these countries to break apart, and to enable compliance with international standards in the housing and care of asylum seekers. However, quite a few participants pointed out that a pan-European solution also required effective protection of the EU's external borders. This clearly posed a major challenge to European border protection, as Greece alone has a sea border stretching to 16,000 km.

Several participants argued that Germany's and France's conflicting fiscal policies posed the greatest risk to the future of European integration. One participant stressed that the euro crisis could return politically in a roundabout manner if Berlin and Paris did not develop a common fiscal policy vision. Importantly, in many EU member states, voters were said to be moving in an opposite direction to Berlin's policies of austerity.

“A TRULY EUROPEAN ASYLUM POLICY REQUIRES THE TRANSFER OF RELEVANT COMPETENCES TO THE EU LEVEL.”



One participant set out a vision of a “dual-core Europe.” Europe’s first core would focus on financial and fiscal policy and involve the euro zone without the help of the UK. This would prevent London from blocking the required level of financial integration. The second core would concentrate on developing closer cooperation in foreign and security policy; in this case, the UK would have an important role to play. This vision also presupposed a win for Remain in the British referendum; a result that the majority of participants viewed as more likely than a Brexit. A “dual-core Europe,” it was argued, had to be based on stable European partnerships and strong leadership that could not only emanate from Berlin, Paris, and London, but also from Warsaw, Rome, and Madrid.

The 161st Bergedorf Round Table was opened by a dinner at Bellevue Palace on the invitation of the German Federal President, Joachim Gauck.



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THE BERGEDORF ROUND TABLE

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