Under the heading “2020: Shaping the Future of Europe Together”, the Bertelsmann Stiftung and the German Foreign Office invited citizens, politicians and experts to a joint Event. The Citizens from Poland, France and Germany discussed with Foreign Ministers Heiko Maas and Ekaterina Zaharieva.

Cohesion and a sense of “European Unity” were the core topics at the event. Liz Mohn, Deputy Chair of Bertelsmann Stiftung, emphasized in her welcome
address that, in this digital age, personal and face-to-face discussions were still the best way to build friendships, learn mutual understanding and develop a feeling of cohesion. She also said that personal discussions were essential to the creation of a common understanding and awareness of our European values – tolerance, liberty and solidarity.

Conflicts at the EU’s external borders, migration flows and the current Corona virus crisis are proof that complex issues cannot be stopped at national frontiers. According to German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas, we need not less, but more cooperation within the EU. The EU will only increase its ability to act by ceasing to pursue a policy of seeking the lowest common denominator. In a globalized world we must stand up for our values and present a united front towards Russia, Turkey and Iran.

In a European Workshop held prior to the conference, 75 citizens from Poland, France and Germany developed concrete recommendations for a strong, sovereign, united Europe. They then discussed their proposals with the German Foreign Minister and his Bulgarian counterpart Ekaterina Zaharieva.
The European Workshop is a new Citizens’ Dialogue format. A total of 75 citizens – 25 citizens selected at random from Poland, France and Germany respectively, to represent the full range of social diversity – worked together for two days in the Foreign Ministry in Berlin. The number of men and women was equally balanced, with a broad age range and diversity of socio-economic backgrounds. Participants were able to speak in their respective native languages, and the discussion was conducted with the help of interpreters, moderators and a panel of experts.

**Citizens want joint projects**

The result: Many ideas and concrete proposals. A sense of common European identity is vital for increasing European cohesion. This is why personal contacts and face-to-face encounters, such as cross-border internships, a voluntary European Social Year, expansion of the Erasmus Program and Interrail offers for the working population and pensioners, must be encouraged and promoted.

As part of the EU’s sustainability policy, citizens would like to see less waste of natural resources and the promotion of innovations in sharing models and new packaging concepts. They also consider a fair trading policy essential in determining Europe’s global role. This requires the raising of awareness through better public information. They recommend labelling every product with information about its environmental impact (carbon footprint etc.).

**European Conference: How do we shape a Europe that is capable of internal and external action?**

On the panel “Europe – Fit For the Future?”, EU Commission Vice-President Margaritis Schinas, Dutch MEP Sophie in’t Veld, German Bundestag member Katja Leikert and economist and political scientist Henrik Enderlein discussed how the EU needs to change to meet the challenges posed by migration or the rise of populism. All agreed that Europe must not only remain a safe zone for its citizens, but also create more opportunities and make better use of its potential. Europe must overcome its own lethargy in order to achieve core objectives such as the “twofold transition” to environmental protection and digitalization.

Margaritis Schinas highlighted the importance of solidarity, such as common asylum procedures close to all borders. At the same time, she said, the EU needs to protect its external borders and must not allow itself to be intimidated or blackmailed.
Proving that we can solve problems and communicate clearly: We value Europe!

According to In't Veld, the removal of barriers in the European Council is long overdue. Fully functional parliamentary democracy with genuine leading candidates and a transparent budget are essential to achieve this goal. Leikert expressed her wish for innovative thought and competitiveness, Enderlein demanded a willingness to lead projects that involve and benefit everyone. In order to strengthen the rule of law without provoking resistance to the EU as an institution, it is important to support economically underdeveloped regions.

Retaining control in a globalized world

German MEP David McAllister, Bundestag member Nils Schmid and Daniela Schwarzer, Director of the German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP), discussed the topic "How do we increase European sovereignty in a more restless world?" Europe cannot have external sovereignty without internal strength. Among the topics discussed were the influence of the EU as a normative soft power and how Europe should react to sanctions by other regional powers. Here, too, the solution lies in the EU's own ability to compete, particularly in future technology fields – which would also form the basis for retaining its own regulatory system for EU-internal purposes, rather than adopting regulatory measures that contradict European principles.
Opinions on the assessment of the nuclear deal with Iran, but also regarding the Franco-German initiative for peace in Eastern Ukraine were divided. However, all speakers agreed that the EU showed strength and resolve in its sanctions policy towards Moscow.

**What is Germany doing to ensure the long-term sustainability of the EU?**

Despite all the differences, the speakers were unanimous on one point: Huge expectations are being placed on Germany's EU Council Presidency term. According to Axel Dittmann from the German Foreign Office and Christian Kastrop of Bertelsmann Stiftung, the most pressing obligation in the coming months will be to ensure the continuing success of the EU.

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European Conference "Shaping Europe's Future Together" on 1 and 2 March 2020 at the Federal Foreign Office in Berlin: Visualisation of the results (graphic recording) by the illustrator Christian Ridder.

📸 <p>Christian Ridder</p>

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Speech of Heiko Maas

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