

Event on 1/2 March 2020, Berlin

For a Strong, Sovereign and United Europe.

Citizens from Poland, France and Germany in discussions with Foreign Ministers Heiko Maas and Ekaterina Zaharieva

Under the heading “2020: Shaping the Future of Europe Together”, Bertelsmann Stiftung and the German Foreign Office invited citizens, politicians and experts to a joint event.

The core topics of the European Conference and European Workshop with citizens were cohesion and a sense of “European Unity”. In her welcome address, the Deputy Chair of Bertelsmann Stiftung, Liz Mohn, emphasized 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 we are facing complex problems which do not stop at national frontiers. German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas made it clear that we need not less, but more cooperation within the EU. The EU will only regain its capability to act if it ceases to pursue policies which involve seeking the lowest common denominator. In a globalized world we must actively stand up for our values and present a united front towards Russia, Turkey and Iran. This is a condition not only for the stability and prosperity of the EU itself, but also for the creation of a “ring of friends” between the EU and its neighbors.

Before the European Conference, 75 citizens from Poland, France and Germany took part in a European Workshop to develop concrete recommendations for a strong, sovereign, united Europe. They then discussed their proposals with the German Foreign Minister and his Bulgarian counterpart Ekaterina Zaharieva. Heiko Maas promised to take the impulses from the European Workshop into account when Germany’s presidency of the EU Council begins in July.

European Workshop: A new form of cross-border Citizens’ Dialogue

The European Workshop is a new Citizens’ Dialogue format. A total of 75 citizens – 25 citizens from Poland, France and Germany respectively, selected at random to represent the full range of social diversity – met at the Foreign Ministry in Berlin. Equal numbers of men and women were present, with a broad age range and diversity of socio-economic backgrounds. All participants were able to speak in their respective native languages, as the discussion was conducted with the help of interpreters, moderators and a panel of experts.

Citizens want joint projects: European Social Year, European television channels, European sustainability label

The outcome of the Workshop: Many ideas and highly concrete proposals. Citizens want politicians to be more in touch with citizens and more transparency. A television channel serving the whole of Europe could be helpful. As a common European identity is vital for increasing cohesion among Europeans, 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. A fair trading policy is also considered an essential part of Europe’s global role, including the need to raise awareness through better public information. They recommend labelling every product with information about its environmental impact (carbon footprint etc.), with an independent certification authority awarding the label according to the criteria environmental protection, industrial safety, fair wages and tax contributions.

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

Decision-makers from the fields of politics and science took part in two panel discussions on two complementary issues: Europe's internal strength and solidarity, and its external sovereignty.

On **Panel 1**: "Europe – Fit For the Future?", the EU Commission's Vice-President Margaritis Schinas, Dutch MEP Sophie in't Veld, German Bundestag member Katja Leikert and economist and political scientist Henrik Enderlein discussed what needs to change within the EU if it is to overcome the challenges posed by migration or the rise of populism. All speakers 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.

"EU at the crossroads" (Schinas)

When journalist Tina Hassel, head of German broadcaster ARD's Berlin studio and former Brussels correspondent, asked Mr. Schinas – who is Greek – exactly what kind of solidarity he was expecting after the visit of the respective presidents of the three EU institutions to the Greek-Turkish border, he answered that he was not speaking on behalf of Greece, but of Europe. Demonstrating solidarity, for example in the form of common asylum processes close to EU borders, was only one of several obligations. At the same time, he added, the EU must protect its external border and not allow itself to be intimidated or blackmailed.

To show how highly we value Europe, we must demonstrate our ability to solve problems and communicate clearly!

In't Veld highlighted the rule of law as one of Europe's core values. In addition, the EU needs to modernize the management of its own government and break down barriers in the European Council. A fully functional parliamentary democracy with genuine leading candidates and a transparent budget are decisive factors in the shaping of the EU's future. Enderlein advocated more flexible budget planning which takes the current challenges into account. Leikert also said she would like to see more innovative thought and competitiveness, while Enderlein demanded a willingness to lead and 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, for example. The role of a net contributor is a good one for Germany, but it would be even better if Germany were not a compulsory, but an outward-looking net contributor. This would pave the way for newer members of the EU to regard themselves and act as fully-fledged members. It is important to them the clear message that they are wanted in the EU, in the euro, in the Single Market.

Support in the form of a constructive suggestion came from the audience: more money should be spent on Europe – in connection with different forms of more intensive cooperation – in order to strengthen Europe in selected areas that would benefit everyone.

Retaining control in a globalized world

On **Panel 2**: How do we increase "European sovereignty" in a less settled world?, a discussion took place between German MEP David McAllister, Bundestag member Nils Schmid and the Director of the German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP) Daniela Schwarzer, with Anne Gellinek, head of German TV channel ZDF's Brussels studio, in the chair. All agreed that Europe cannot have external sovereignty without internal strength. Schwarzer stated that it was necessary to organize the EU's internal affairs so as to curb negative influences from outside at the same time. The EU is currently only a *global player* in terms of trade. This gave rise to questions concerning the influence of the EU as a normative *soft power* and how it should react to sanctions imposed by other trade or power blocs. Here, as elsewhere, the solution lies in the EU's own competitiveness, particularly in the field of future technologies – which would form a solid basis for maintaining the EU's own internal regulatory system rather than adopting regulatory measures that contradict European principles.

In connection with the humanitarian disaster unfolding in the Syrian town of Idlib, the chair asked where there was room for European sovereignty in the face of conflicts between newly emerging regional powers, and what tools the EU even had in its hands. Opinion was divided here, for example

regarding the assessment of the nuclear deal with Iran, but also on the Franco-German initiative for peace in Eastern Ukraine or the extent of the response required to Russia's support of the Syrian President Assad. All speakers agreed that the EU had at least displayed strength and resolve in its sanctions policy towards Moscow. Since the EU is poorly equipped when it comes to providing military forces on the ground, it is all the more important to demonstrate its sovereignty wherever possible. It is possible to act as one if all parties show their willingness and make a meaningful contribution. In such cases, it is vital to put not one's own country, but Europe, first. This would create added European value for all citizens which would not be possible without the EU.

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

All speakers were in overall agreement with the moderator on one point: Huge expectations are being placed on Germany's EU Council Presidency term. Berlin will be responsible for negotiating the EU's financial framework, preparing the summit between the EU and China with political skill and diplomacy, coordinating the Union's foreign and neighborhood policy, and leading the way in finding European solutions, for example by empowering pioneer work by small groups of states.

Only a united Europe can be strong – in the interests of its citizens!

The conference ended with the question as to how the success story of the EU as a peaceful, prosperous area can continue in future. The desire and the aim to have greater global influence will require a strong commitment to common European values, more mutual understanding between Member States and more resolute action.

Ambassador **Axel Dittmann**, German Foreign Office Attaché for Fundamental EU Affairs, and **Christian Kastrop**, Director of the Bertelsmann Stiftung's Future of Europe Program, thanked all participants for their contribution to the success of the conference and once again promoted a new, convincing European narrative of a strong and united Europe that is ready to face the challenges of the 21st century.

Contact:

Anna Renkamp, Senior Project Manager, The Future of Democracy Program, Bertelsmann Stiftung
Telephone: +49 5241 81-81145
E-mail: anna.renkamp@bertelsmann-stiftung.de

Dominik Hierlemann, Senior Expert, The Future of Democracy Program, Bertelsmann Stiftung
Telephone: +49 5241 81-81537
E-mail: dominik.hierlemann@bertelsmann-stiftung.de

Miriam Kosmehl, Senior Expert Eastern Europe and European Neighbourhood, The Future of Europe Program, Bertelsmann Stiftung, Telephone: +49 30 275788-124
E-mail: miriam.kosmehl@bertelsmann-stiftung.de