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Den Haag

Conversations on the future of Europe in the world

EU enlargement: How should the EU respond to aspiring new members - the case of Georgia and the "Associated Trio" countries.

The Hague, Friday, 17 September 2021

Summary of Proceedings



Conference
on the **Future**
of **Europe**



The Hague & Europe

The Hague has a long-standing history and strong connection with Europe. Over 7000 inhabitants in our International City of Peace and Justice work at more than 30 European organisations established in the city. As the International City, we believe in the strength of co-operation, both in the city as well as on the European level, to shape the future of Europe. Therefore, The Hague creates inspiring meeting places in co-operation with our local, national and international partners to involve local citizens in the work of our International City of Peace & Justice.

Only together are we able to realise a shared European future!

Questions or remarks? Contact us via 'Europa@denhaag.nl'

Summary of proceedings

There are many points that can provide a good start for a conversation on the future of Europe in the world. European Union enlargement is an obvious one since it encapsulates more than any other topic the interaction between the processes going on inside the European Union, with those outside of it. It is discussed often in response to questions that go to the heart of the European project: Should the EU be considering new members, or should it consolidate first? What makes a country European? The question, ‘where does Europe end?’, has been asked repeatedly over the last three decades but never properly answered. Is it possible to understand and define the place of Europe in the world without answering first this question?

LINKS Europe, in association and with the support of The City of The Hague, hosted the first in a series of events titled **‘Conversations on the future of Europe in the world’** on Friday, 17 September 2021, at its offices at Lange Voorhout 43 in The Hague. The series is in the framework of the EU’s ‘Conference on the Future of Europe’ process. After welcome remarks by the Director of LINKS Europe, Dr Dennis Sammut, and Mr Jesse van Velzen on behalf of the International Office of The City of The Hague, participants discussed the topic: **EU enlargement: How should the EU respond to aspiring new members - the case of Georgia and the “Associated Trio” countries.**

The conversation, moderated by Dennis Sammut, started with short presentations by Dr Maja Vodopivec, Assistant Professor at the University of Leiden; Giorgi Nakashidze, Charge d’Affaires a.i. at the Embassy of Georgia in the Netherlands; and Tony van der Togt, Senior Research Associate at the Clingendael Institute in The Hague. In the second part of the conversation, those present – which included students, diplomats, and concerned and interested citizens of The Hague – expressed opinions on the topic under discussion. In all, 22 members of the audience aired their points of view in brief comments after the presentations of the panellists.

The ‘Conversations on the future of Europe in the world’ series is meant to attract diverse views and opinions and to stimulate discussions as part of the wider ‘Conference on the Future of Europe’ process. Opinions expressed in meetings or in reports from meetings do not necessarily reflect the views of LINKS Europe or The City of the Hague.

The opinions and views expressed by participants during the conversation are summarised below:

I. On the question 'What is Europe?'

**"In 1992 the question arose,
'Where does Europe end?'
It has not been properly
answered yet"**

Participants pondered the question of what makes a country European, and where does Europe end. Participants were broadly in agreement that what should be the binding factor among EU countries is common values. This concept was, however, being increasingly challenged by member states in Eastern Europe who were part of the latest enlargement phase, such as Hungary and Poland. Some are now asking if they had been allowed in prematurely, and if the accession process was appropriate. This has also opened the debate about what are the common European values that are much talked about.

Many participants spoke about the fact that Europe was an unfinished project. This created difficulties for the aspirant countries who hoped to join in ten- or twenty-years' time, when no one quite knows what the EU will be like at that time.

II. On EU enlargement and the internal processes within the EU

**"The EU needs to keep
the membership
perspective open"**

Several participants emphasised the need for lessons to be learnt from past enlargements. Several speakers were critical of the enlargement process where there was too much emphasis on technical issues and the ticking of boxes, and not enough on whether or not an applicant country embraced European values.

Several speakers said that the EU needs to recognise its own internal problems and dysfunctions as part of the problems of enlargement and stop putting the onus completely on the applicant countries. These internal problems have made the EU insecure in its state of mind and this was reflecting itself in the whole approach towards enlargement.

**"Early and generous
accession rather than
paternalistic lecturing
can be more effective in
securing commitment
to European values"**

“Any membership perspective must be realistic, otherwise it may lead to more frustration. It is most likely to span over a generation, which is why it is important to work with young people”

Participants were broadly in agreement on the need for applicant countries to implement reforms to harmonise themselves with the EU and its values. Participants also broadly agreed that the doors of the EU must remain open to eligible new members.

III. On Georgia and the “Associated Trio” countries, and their case for EU membership

“The trio countries are doing their best, now they need some encouragement”

“Some EU countries do not want more problems with Russia”

Participants heard how Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova had teamed up earlier this year to form the “Associated Trio” as a platform to promote their EU membership aspirations, and how this had taken Brussels by surprise. The establishment of the Eastern Partnership in 2009 was a game changer for the East European countries, but the region was now again in a defining moment. Membership perspectives, even if in the long term, were necessary to keep minds focused.

It was important that relations are based on equal partnership. Georgia, for example, had much to give to EU, especially when it comes to connectivity where it is the gateway to Asia.

Many speakers emphasised the need for a realistic assessment of Georgia’s and the other trio countries’ prospects for EU membership. This needs to be perceived as a long-term project, with much patience and hard work necessary. The Copenhagen criteria have to be met. Even if Georgia puts in a membership bid in 2024, it will do so with the understanding that this was a long-term objective. However, on its part the EU needs to look at these steps more positively, particularly since there was not much difference between the trio countries and the Balkan states that had already been given a membership perspective.

“EU should help the trio countries in areas such as disinformation and cyber security”

Participants discussed the pros and cons of Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova teaming up into the “Associated Trio”. Some participants were of the view that this could help the reform process, and they cited the example of how the Baltic states had co-operated prior to their accession in 2004. Concerns were, however, raised on the risk that problems in one may negatively impact the prospects of the other two.

Several participants focused on the unresolved conflicts with the trio countries and their problems with Russia. This can complicate their prospects for membership. On the other hand, the Russia argument can be overstated. Russia was against the Association Agreements, but in the end, it accepted them.

IV. On the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and the Eastern Partnership (EaP)

ENP was an EU aspiration to build around it a ring of friends, who could also share some of the EU prosperity. The reality is that now the EU is surrounded by a ring of fire, with conflicts and other problems raging across the whole neighbourhood, and this is proving to be a big challenge.

Participants were critical that the Eastern Partnership – the instrument for engaging with the EU’s eastern neighbours – had become a technical instrument that lacked political substance. The trio countries have become dissatisfied with EaP because of its failure to differentiate and to recognise their deep commitment to the EU as Associated states.

“EU should start differentiating between EaP members to recognise the efforts of the ‘Associated Trio’”

“We should not take differentiation too far”

“We must come up with new ways to recognise and appreciate the commitment of the trio countries”

The view was also expressed that whilst instruments such as DCFTA and visa liberalisation had been hugely beneficial to urban elites in the trio countries, people living in the countryside or from the lower income groups of society had failed to reap the benefits, and are, thus, becoming increasingly cynical about relations with the EU.

V. On the EU as a peace project

Participants discussed the role of the EU as a peace project and recognised that this was the case in the past where it was inspiring to countries as far away as East Asia. Increasingly, however, as the EU seeks to become a geopolitical player, its soft power is decreasing. More and more, there is a blurring of the roles of the EU and NATO, and that further contributed to this.

Participants felt that the EU has been reluctant to get involved in the resolution of conflicts in the Eastern Neighbourhood, citing lack of capacity. This was partly due to the fact that Russia remained a key factor. Russia wants to keep the conflicts in the EU's eastern neighbourhood unresolved as instruments of managed instability. The EU does not have the leverage to force Russia to change its attitude, nor enough diplomatic clout to persuade it to do so. However, participants felt that inaction was not the solution. Europe needs to be able to contribute to the security of its neighbourhood, and for this the relationship with Russia needed to be managed better.

VI. On the shadow cast by Russia and China

“We need to be careful not to allow a Russian or Chinese Trojan Horse into the EU”

“EU needs to be careful not to become a periphery of Eurasia”

Throughout the conversation many speakers spoke with concern about the increasing assertiveness of China and Russia, and their influence on member states, candidate countries and neighbouring partners. Belarus was a clear example, but of more concern was the influence of China and Russia in Montenegro and in Serbia, both EU candidate countries.

Several speakers spoke of the need to ensure that there is no vacuum in the Eastern Partnership that Russia and China can fill. However, it was also felt that the EU should not be expected to bail out candidate or aspirant members if they are unable to pay Chinese loans which they had misguidedly taken on.

The increasing strength of China, Russia’s re-orientation towards Eurasia, and the increasing bonding between the two creates concerns for the EU. The question of enlargement and the wider approach towards the neighbourhood must take this into account.

VII. On involving the citizens in the debate on enlargement

“There is a crisis in liberal democracy, and the quicker Europe deals with that the better”

“The EU never seems to win the narrative battle”

Throughout the conversation speakers repeatedly emphasised the need for citizen participation in the debate on EU enlargement, and for intensified contacts between EU civil society and that of candidate and aspirant countries and neighbouring partners. The use of “Youth Ambassadors”, “Urban networks” and exchanges were mentioned as good examples of what can or is working.

Many participants raised concerns regarding the EU communication strategy which they consider to be failing.

“The EU is still in the process of reinventing itself from being the club of a few countries in western Europe to being a continent-wide Union with the diversity that that entails”

Disinformation was clearly a threat that needed to be countered. And there needed to be more imaginative ways in which the EU can do outreach internationally. Some speakers raised the danger of the EU sending contradictory messages in its foreign policy posture, whilst others highlighted the need for the EU to honour its commitments and promises and to articulate its messages more transparently and free from jargon. Certainly, the latest wave of enlargements that brought the Eastern and Central European states within the EU has created internal challenges that have not yet been overcome. This perhaps is the biggest difficulty that makes the prospect of further enlargement more cumbersome.

About the Conference on the Future of Europe

The Conference on the Future of Europe is a citizen-led series of debates and discussions that will enable people from across Europe to share their ideas and help shape our common future.

The Conference is the first of its kind: as a major pan-European democratic exercise, it offers a new public forum for an open, inclusive, and transparent debate with citizens around a number of key priorities and challenges.

It is part of President von der Leyen's pledge to give Europeans a greater say on what the EU does and how it works for them. All Europeans - whoever they are and wherever they are - can take part.

The Conference aims to reflect our diversity, and to bring Europe beyond its capital cities, reaching every corner of the EU, strengthening the link between Europeans and the institutions that serve them. It does so through a multitude of Conference-events and debates organised across the EU, as well as through an interactive multilingual digital platform. Young people in particular are encouraged to take part and share their ideas. European, national, regional and local authorities, as well as civil society and other organisations can also organise events to involve as many people as possible. #TheFutureIsYours

For more information: www.futureu.europa.eu

About LINKS Europe

LINKS Europe is a foundation based in The Hague promoting the peaceful resolution of conflicts and a secure and prosperous Europe, in friendship and solidarity with its neighbourhood. Our work is organised around five thematic areas:

1. **Peace through dialogue and confidence-building**

LINKS Europe is a peace-building organisation. We support the quest for peace through track 2 and track 1.5 initiatives, including through dialogue and confidence-building. Our work is currently focused primarily on areas in the EU's neighbourhood, with particular emphasis on the South Caucasus.

2. **A European Union in friendship and in solidarity with its neighbourhood**

LINKS Europe firmly believes that peace and prosperity in Europe are strongly dependant on peace and prosperity in Europe's neighbourhood. It supports an extensive EU commitment to the future of neighbouring regions, including through political and economic co-operation, support for peace initiatives, and extensive people-to-people contacts. We group the EU's neighbourhood in six clusters: North Africa and the Sahel; Turkey, the Balkans and the Levant; Russia and Eastern Europe; The South Caucasus; The Gulf and Red Sea Regions; and Central Asia. Whilst each cluster has its own specificity, there are also a number of common features resulting from geographic proximity and common historical experiences and connections.

3. **A Global Europe that provides safety, security and prosperity for its people and is a force for good**

Europe's increasing ambition to become a global geopolitical player is a result of necessity. We believe this will happen despite the reluctance of some and the shortcomings of others. It is therefore important to engage with this debate and help forge the new global Europe that can provide safety, security and prosperity for its citizens and be a force for good in the world. The process of 'The Conference on the Future of Europe' provides us with an excellent focus and platform to do this in a structured way.

4. **Connectivity as a tool for peace and prosperity**

In an increasingly interdependent world, isolation is not the solution. Developing proper connectivity that works well for all concerned is one of the biggest challenges of the time. Connectivity, in areas such as transport and communications, is also a potential tool for peace, improving trade and business, facilitating people-to-people contacts, and enabling countries and communities to develop shared interests. LINKS Europe is contributing towards the debate on how connectivity can contribute to peace and prosperity.

5. **Understanding radicalisation, and developing responses to it**

Globalisation and connectivity have their negative side too. Radicalisation has shown a capacity to spread quickly, often leading to violence. Vulnerable groups – be they whole communities and tribes in the Sahel, or disenfranchised sons of migrants in the slums of Paris – are prone to fall victim of radicalisation. No religious or ethnic group is immune. White communities impacted by economic downturns are equally likely to succumb to extreme ideas, leading some to see violence as a solution. LINKS Europe works to understand the phenomena, including the connection between radicalisation and violent conflicts, and on ways of fighting back against this dangerous trend.



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