



in collaboration with



Den Haag

Conversations on the future of Europe in the world

The EU and its southern neighbourhood: the need for open minds, open ears, and open eyes

The Hague, Thursday, 28 October

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’](mailto:Europa@denhaag.nl)

Summary of proceedings

Around 30 countries and territories, stretching from Africa's Atlantic coast to the Khyber Pass, constitute the wider neighbourhood of the European Union to the South. The area includes a number of regions and sub-regions, including the Sahel, the Maghreb, the Red Sea Region, the Levant and the Arabian peninsula. Iran and Afghanistan, whilst not in the immediate neighbourhood, are close enough to be also of consequence. Increasingly events in the southern neighbourhood are of interest and concern to European citizens. Very often the region is considered through a negative and narrow lens, associated with specific issues, such as migration, radicalisation and conflict. But interaction between Europe and this mega region are not new, and are much more complex and multifaceted. Suffice to say that of the 30 or so countries and territories in Europe's neighbourhood south, only Saudi Arabia was never colonised by a European country in recent history.

LINKS Europe in collaboration with The City of The Hague, hosted the second in a series of events entitled **'Conversations on the future of Europe in the world'** on Thursday, 28 October 2021, at its offices at Lange Voorhout 43 in The Hague. The series is part of the EU's 'Conference on the Future of Europe' process. The moderator of the event, Mr Jesse van Velzen, welcomed participants on behalf of the International office of The City of the Hague and LINKS Europe and introduced the topic: **The EU and its southern neighbourhood: the need for open minds, open ears, and open eyes.**

The first part of the conversation consisted of a panel discussion chaired by Mr van Velzen. The panel consisted of Dr Dennis Sammut, Director of LINKS Europe; Dr Sylvia Bergh, Associate Professor of Development Management and Governance at Erasmus University's International Institute of Social Studies (ISS), and Senior Researcher at the Centre of Expertise on Global Governance, The Hague University of Applied Sciences; and Mr Tristan Ober, Policy Officer for Radicalisation and Polarisation at The City of The Hague.

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. Why we need to engage the region with an open mind, open ears, and open eyes

“Engaging with the neighbourhood South with an open mind, open ears and open eyes is absolutely the right thing to do”

Speakers and participants at the event welcomed the approach of engaging with the neighbourhood South with an open mind, open ears, and open eyes. An open mind was needed to approach the region without the baggage of prejudice, simplistic generalities and cultural inhibitions. The EU in all its different dimensions needs to keep its ears open, listening as much as talking, for only thus can we come near to understanding the region and its complexities. There is also the need to keep open eyes to developments and processes, some of which provide new opportunities for engagement but others too that may provide risks for safety, security and prosperity of the EU and its citizens.

II. The challenges and opportunities

“Whilst the southern neighbourhood has plenty of difficult challenges that sometimes constitute risks even to the EU, it is essential to keep in mind that this is a very dynamic region with plenty of opportunities”

During the course of the conversation, panellists and participants flagged up numerous challenges and opportunities in the relationship between the EU and the neighbourhood South. Poverty, conflicts and instability, illegal migration, radicalisation, a crisis of legitimacy, corruption, inequalities, injustices, and lack of trust between citizens and governments were perceived to be among the most difficult challenges facing the region – challenges that were also central to the relationship of the European Union with it.

On the other hand, the neighbourhood South was also a dynamic region, with many opportunities. Genuine and often deep-rooted reforms were ongoing in a number of countries; the populations were overwhelmingly young with an ambition to build better for the future. The regions in the neighbourhood South had plenty of good business opportunities for Europeans to engage with. A solid partnership between the EU and the countries of the region also offers good prospects for security co-operation in the interest of both sides. Whilst there were many unresolved conflicts in the area, the EU had the potential to contribute to the resolution of these conflicts.

There was considerable criticism of how Europe worked with this mega region, including the fragmentation in the approach of the EU and the member states; the EU's dependence on its relationship with governments in the region at the expense of wider society; serious problems in the EU communications strategy; and problems in reconciling different targets and priorities, often exacerbated by a short-term approach to what were deep-rooted, long-term problems.

III. Migration

“Migrants from the South do not come to Europe because they like it – they come because they are escaping from poverty, instability and authoritarianism”

The issue of migration was discussed by both panellists and participants. Many were concerned that the issue of illegal migration was being exploited by extremist political groups, and this was colouring the perception of European citizens to the whole issue of relations with the neighbourhood South. The size of the problem of illegal migration was often exaggerated.

Many participants spoke about the need to address the root causes of migration. Europe – and that should mean the member states and the EU institutions working together rather than in a fragmented way – needs to focus on these root causes. As one speaker put it, migrants from the South do not come to Europe because they like it – they come because they are escaping from poverty, instability and authoritarianism.

Several participants addressed the issue of conditions of illegal/irregular migrants in Europe, with some asking that these migrants be treated with more respect, and with the focus being on helping people get a new life.

IV. Radicalisation

The problem of radicalisation in Europe is often discussed through the prism of the relationship with the neighbourhood South. Yet anecdotal evidence suggests that incidence of violence inspired by radicalisation are often the result of home-grown problems. In many European cities there are large diaspora communities and the dialogue between them and the local authorities needs to be based on mutual respect. In The Hague 56% of the population has a migrant background – namely, at least one of the parents is not Dutch. The City works hard to build a constant dialogue with different

“Dialogue between diaspora communities and municipal governments needs to be based on mutual respect”

communities, but sometimes people emerge who have an identity problem: they cannot relate either to the Netherlands, or to the country of their ethnic origin. This is where extremist elements come into play and end up radicalising individuals.

The European Union can play a positive role by promoting and facilitating dialogue and contacts between communities and municipalities in Europe and counterparts in the neighbourhood South.

EU Governments also needed to ensure good relations with their counterparts in the neighbourhood South. The absence of that creates complications, as is seen by the problem created when Dutch passport holders had their citizenship revoked but could not be repatriated because of poor relations between the Dutch government and the governments of the countries of origin. This left a number of persons in a legal limbo, which potentially also constituted a security risk.

There was also a risk that a more active EU involvement in security issues in the neighbourhood South as part of a policy to stabilise regions and countries, may create a counter reaction from jihadists increasing the security threat. Improving the EU's communication strategy on these issues was also therefore absolutely essential.

V. Failed strategies and the need for a radical rethink

“In its dealings with the neighbourhood south going forward the EU needs to put the emphasis on building up the resilience of societies, not governments”

Several people spoke about the failed Western strategies in the neighbourhood South in the last two decades, and the need for a radical rethink. This situation was now breeding an atmosphere of mistrust. Building trust between the EU and the countries and societies in the neighbourhood South was highlighted by many participants as a necessary and urgent priority. Going forwards, it was essential that the emphasis should be on building up the resilience of societies, not governments.

(a) The EU and the West in general has promoted stability not democracy. In some countries it is seen as an extension of government oppression.

(b) There are tensions in the deliverables of EU policy as sometimes they appear to be contradictory.

“There is a risk that in addressing non-military problems in the neighbourhood South the EU is tempted to use military solutions”

(c) Conditionality can be a double-edged sword; it sometimes hinders the EU's own ability to fulfil its plans and objectives.

(d) Concerns were raised that thinking within the EU institutions was moving in the direction of providing military solutions to non-military problems. When everyone agrees that the core roots and causes of many of the problems in the southern neighbourhood were social, economic or political, trying to address them with a military solution was considered very short sighted.

VI. EU communication failures

“With the EU now considering increasing its military footprint in the southern neighbourhood, the issue of what the EU wants to do in the region and why, needs to be very carefully and fully explained”

Many participants in the event raised concerns about the EU Communication strategy, with some describing the situation as already serious enough to require damage limitation. EU messaging is sometimes seen as being confused and contradictory. With the EU now considering increasing its military footprint in the southern neighbourhood, the issue of what the EU wants to do in the region and why, needs to be very carefully and fully explained. The baggage of European colonial rule in practically all the countries in the neighbourhood South cannot be ignored.

VII. Youth is a key to building future engagement with the region

Many participants highlighted the important role that young people can play in building bridges and improving dialogue between the EU and its neighbourhood South

(a) Young people in the EU need to be much better informed about what the neighbourhood South is and the issues related to the region; we should not allow an information vacuum that is filled by extremists.

(b) In educational institutions in EU countries, there need to be more opportunities for dialogue between pupils and

“Young people in the EU need to be much better informed about what the neighbourhood South is, and the issues related to the region; we should not allow an information vacuum that is filled by extremists”

VIII. The need to work with multiple partners

“The EU needs to be much more innovative in crafting opportunities for decentralised co-operation with the southern neighbourhood”

IX. Promoting business contacts; creating wealth; and reducing injustice and inequality

“We need to be clear what kind of economic growth we are seeking”

students from migrant backgrounds and others.

(c) Additional funding should be made available for university exchanges between EU universities and universities in countries of the southern neighbourhood.

The theme of decentralised co-operation between the EU and the neighbourhood South was raised by practically all participants in the event. The EU has to find a way of getting through the bottle neck of tightly controlled central governments and work at a local level with communities, municipalities, civil society and business. Many spoke in favour of a bottom-up approach, although the difficulty of this was also recognised.

It was felt that where appropriate the EU needed also to be involved in building trust within those societies it was working in, in the countries of the southern neighbourhood. Concerns were, however, raised about adopting a paternalistic approach, especially when it came to promoting European values. The approach needs to be an offer to share mutually beneficial values, not to try to impose them.

Many participants recognised that developing business contacts between the EU and the neighbourhood South was a positive thing and that this can be done in a mutually beneficial way. Concerns were raised about incidence of injustice in many countries in the neighbourhood South, and considered this to be a factor that could cause more conflict and instability than even poverty.

Whilst the EU often talks about the importance of economic growth in the countries of the neighbourhood South, it is much less clear what kind of growth it wants, and whether or not it was in favour of neoliberal reforms.

X. Ways of engaging better

“It is important to use proper and measured discourse when promoting European norms and values, and avoid the risk of sounding arrogant and patronising.”

Practically all panellists and participants in the event supported more EU engagement with the neighbourhood South but called for a different approach, including:

- (a) A more joined-up approach in the work of the EU institutions and the member states.
- (b) The development within the EU of more expertise on the countries of the mega region and their societies, including on realities beyond the capitals.
- (c) EU actors have to show more political astuteness, and be more nuanced, and they need to be ready to engage with difficult counterparts.
- (d) Better use of soft power tools; more people to people contacts at different levels, but also frameworks that allowed good practices in the southern neighbourhood to be shared around.
- (e) Importance of putting issues in their proper perspective, for example, by not exaggerating and over stating the migration problem; by recognising the heavy price that countries and communities in the neighbourhood South were paying as a result of violent radicalisation. It was also emphasised that it was important to use proper discourse when promoting European norms and values and avoid the risk of sounding arrogant and patronising.

None of those contributing to the conversation underestimated the difficulty and complexity of the EU's engagement with the neighbourhood South. Indeed, they all argued for a better understanding of these difficulties and complexities. But there was also a sense that things were not working well and something needs to be done, and that the citizens of Europe should not be spectators to this process, but part of this process of engagement.

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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