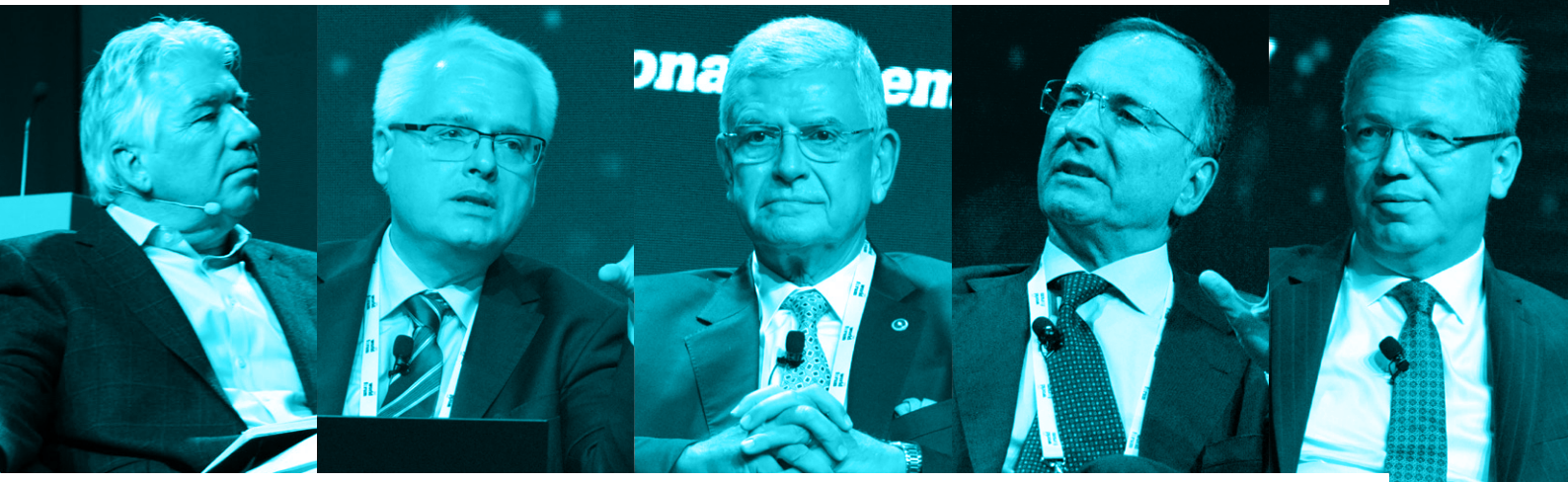CONFERENCE REPORT

The EU and Its Discontents: Is it the End of the European Project?

Moderator
David Foster
TRT World Presenter

Speakers
Ivo Josipović
Former President of Croatia

Volkan Bozkır
*Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee
of the Grand National Assembly of Turkey*

Franco Frattini
Former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Italy

Štefan Füle
*Former European Commissioner for Enlargement
and European Neighborhood Policy*

The EU and Its Discontents:
Is it the End of the European Project?

This is a report on a public session titled **"The EU and Its Discontents: Is it the End of the European Project"**, held as part of the TRT World Forum 2018. The views, themes and discussion points expressed in this conference report are those of participants and speakers present at the TRT World Forum 2018, and do not reflect the official view of TRT World Research Centre.

TRT WORLD
re|search
centre

1 Is the European Union a failed project? What is the future of the European Union?

2 How can the European Union cope with the financial and political problems among its member states in the context of East-West and North-South divide?

3 Why is Turkey where it is today regarding its EU membership? Can Turkey offer anything to help protect the integrity of the EU system?

4 What are the remedies for the EU problems, including xenophobia, Islamaphobia and far-right nationalism?

Summary

The session discussed issues revolving around the European Union, namely the future of the Union and the prospects for European disintegration, and questions regarding membership of candidate countries such as Turkey. It began with a question posed to the panel by moderator David Foster on whether Brexit and the rise of populism were signposts of the failure of the European Union.

Ivo Josipovic, former President of Croatia, noted that the EU is a "peace project" and contributed to significant progress in post-conflict Balkan societies, particularly in his native Croatia. He said his country cooperated with the International Criminal Tribunal for former Yugoslavia (ICTY) to identify war criminals and prosecute them. Croatia's EU accession process helped curb the prevalence of corruption and paved the way for Croatia's Serb minority to integrate and participate in civil and political life. However, he suggested the need for a European identity and the need for political structures to facilitate the inclusion of all EU member states in the decision-making process.

Volkan Bozkır, Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee at the Turkish Grand National Assembly and Former Minister of EU Affairs, described—regarding Turkey's EU membership negotiations—that joining the EU is unlike joining NATO or the UN; it requires a change of approach and outlook. He made a case on the view of how EU membership has been significant in upgrading the daily lives of people, which is the driving factor behind Turkey's unwavering commitment to EU accession after many years. In this regard to Turkey-EU ties, Bozkır noted the progress made in the cooperation between Brussels and Ankara in the context of the refugee crisis.

Franco Frattini, former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Italy, how it would be a mistake to take all the significant achievements the EU has made since its establishment for granted. He referenced security cooperation and mobility as two important examples of EU achievements. Regarding the recent rise of the populism with particular reference to Italy, Frattini highlighted the considerable gap between politicians in Brussels and the average EU voters in many EU countries. The feeling that Brussels does not give due consideration to local and national issues in EU member countries poses a significant threat to the future of EU.

Stefan Füle, former European Commissioner for Enlargement, commented that prosperity is the ultimate guarantor of EU stability. The average EU voters would not concern themselves with administrative affairs in Brussels so long as prosperity and continued growth persist. However, when a critical situations erupts, a gap in crisis management could turn EU citizens against Brussels, leading to division. Füle suggested that EU officials should differentiate between domestic and external problems, and member states need to take into consideration their neighbours interests when seeking to solve their own problems.

David Foster, moderator and TRT World Presenter, discusses the rise of populism in the EU.

Introduction

The European Union (EU) has been referred to as one of the most successful post- Second World War projects, helping maintain peace and prosperity in Europe for over six decades. However, there have been increasing concerns about its future. Economic problems within the Eurozone have led to significant political turmoil among the member states, posing serious challenges to the cohesion of the Union.

The period between the end of the First World War (1918) and the outbreak of the Second World War (1939) witnessed the rise of fascism in the defeated powers of WWI. The wave of populism sweeping across Europe today, in many ways, mirrors the experience of the 1920s and 1930s. Xenophobic and Islamophobic movements have emerged across Europe, causing the discourse within the EU to shift from humanitarianism to identity, security and perceived threat. Furthermore, events such as Brexit have played a critical role in questioning the nature of identity, belonging and future prospects of the EU among its member and candidate countries. Moreover, the EU's relations with its neighbours have been strained due to major security crises. The war in Ukraine exacerbated the EU's already unstable relations with Russia and the response of EU member states to the Syrian crisis and their treatment of refugees shattered the understanding of the fundamental values that the European Union was established on.

The session revolved around discussions on European disintegration, future scenarios, and questions regarding the membership of candidate countries such as Turkey. The session also dealt with questions regarding the EU's credibility and faith in its potential to provide continued peace and security.

Ivo Josipović, former President of Croatia, notes that EU is a peace project and contributed to significant progress in post-conflict Balkan societies, especially Croatians.

The Balkan War and Croatia's Road to EU Accession

One of many reasons that certain countries joined the EU is that the EU itself is, and continues to be, a peace project. Soon after the end of the Balkan conflict, states of the former Yugoslavia were permitted to join the EU with Slovenia being the first Balkan state to formally join the bloc.

Croatia—a former member of now-defunct Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia—signed the EU membership accession treaty on 9th December 2011 and became a full member on 1st July 2013. Ivo Josipovic, Croatia's former President who spearheaded the country's EU accession process, noted that the process itself helped Croatia enact essential legislation to meet membership requirements. Croatia succeeded in curbing their corruption problem and ultimately became a more just and functional society. President Josipovic argued that Croatia's corruption was largely the result of the war conditions. During the war, institutional functionality collapsed, allowing people to connect on an individual level to the powerful military and political structure, leading to abuse of political office. The whole Balkan region was also very much affected by widespread corruption due, in large part, to circumstances engendered by conflict. Since the beginning of the accession process, and subsequently becoming a full EU member, Croatia has enacted many legislative reforms designed to fight corruption. In 2010, former Prime Minister Ivo Sanadar was arrested and charged with corruption.

The EU accession process put pressure on Croatia to cooperate with the ICTY in identifying those responsible for war crimes during the Balkan conflict. Furthermore, conditions for EU membership mean that Croatia had to address the issue of its large Serbian minority and establish fair and inclusive conditions to ensure their participation in the country's civil and political life. The EU accession process has also eased the country's border tensions with neighbouring states, such as Montenegro, Serbia and Slovenia. Former President Josipovic argued that Croatia has to continue pushing ahead with reforms in order to adapt to changing EU standards.

Volkan Bozkır, Chairman of the Foreign Affairs
Committee of the Grand National Assembly of
Turkey, discusses joining the European Union
requires a change of approach and outlook.

Turkish-EU Accession and Cooperation

This year marks the 16th anniversary of Turkey's first application to the EU. Turkey began the EU accession process at the same time as Croatia. According to former Minister Volkan Bozkır, the 16 years that have passed since the negotiations began demonstrate Turkey's tolerance and patience in maintaining its relations with the EU, despite not being able to join the bloc. According to Bozkır, EU membership entails more than membership in other organisations such as NATO or the UN, as it comes with concrete improvements in living standards. This is the primary reason Turkey has been determined to move the accession process forward regardless of the difficulties.

As per Bozkır, a primary challenge for Turkey-EU relations has been the irregular migration flows associated with the war in Syria, which at its peak saw over 5000 migrants attempting to cross from Turkey to the Greek islands per day. In regards to hindering irregular crossings and human smuggling, the Minister stated that Turkey implemented the necessary measures in close cooperation with Europe. The Turkey-EU deal, was one of the outputs of this cooperation. The deal, which was signed on 18 March 2016 between the European Council and Turkey conditioned the return of irregular migrants and asylum seekers arriving from Turkey to the Greek islands. As per Bozkır, the Turkish-EU deal resulted in many high level visits to Turkey by European political leaders. For example, former President of the European Commission José Manuel Barroso, who was also Portugal's Prime Minister, came to Turkey three times in the last eight years. The president of the European Council and the German Chancellor have also visited Turkey five times.

Commenting on the burden of refugees on Turkey, Minister Bozkır noted that money has not been an important factor for Turkey in terms of curbing the illegal flow of migrants. Ankara has already spent 30 billion dollars on this issue and has discussed further assistance with the EU for supporting migrants in Turkey. This remains a crucial question at the heart of the EU and it will most likely define its relationship with both its members and neighbours.
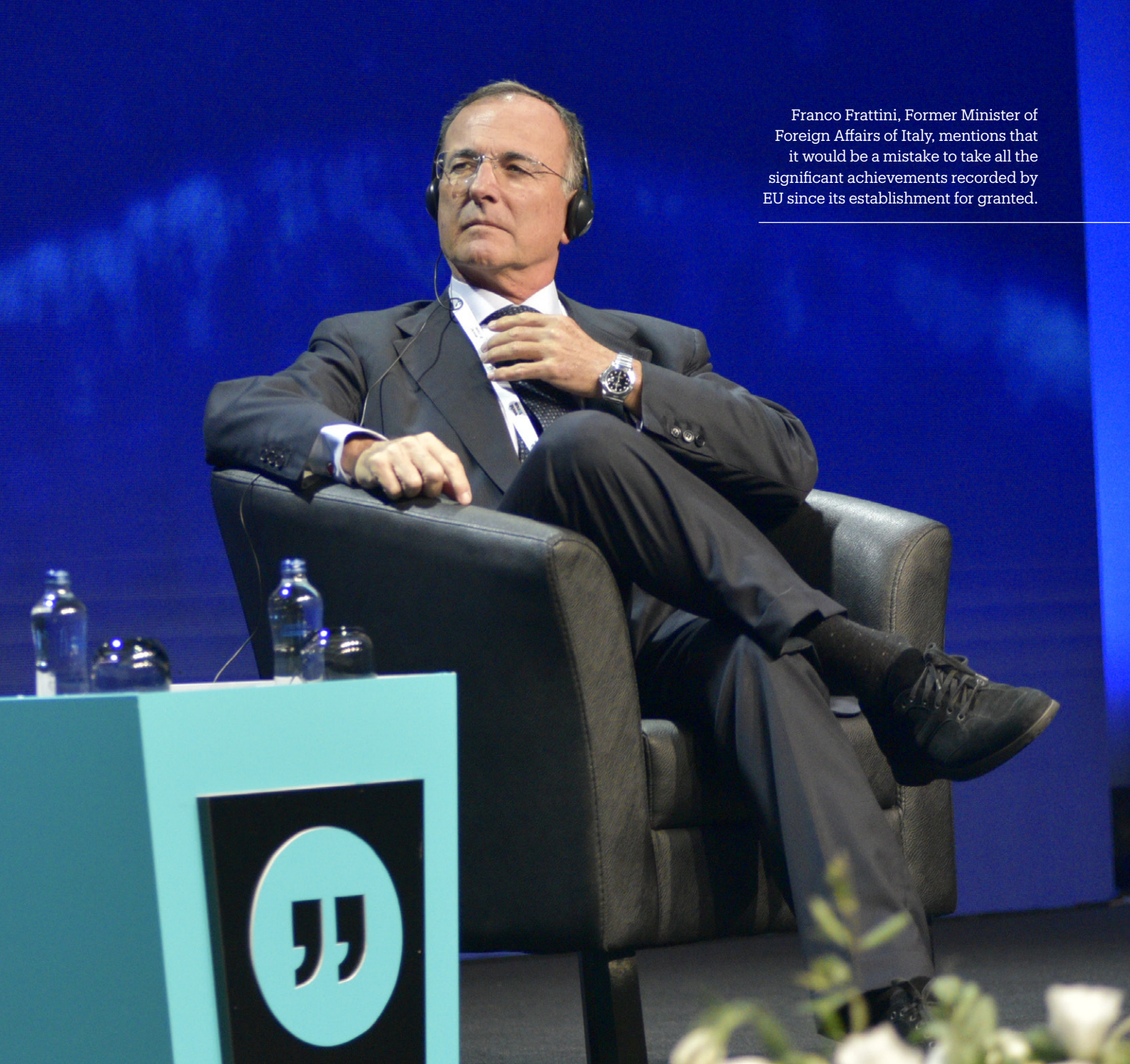
Is the European Union Disintegrating?

The current discontent in the European Union rests on several factors. First, EU leaders have taken for granted many of the extremely important achievements Europe has made in the past few decades. Franco Frattini, Former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Italy, argued that the mobility and security cooperation have been taken for granted in Europe. The fact that an Italian judge in Rome can prosecute a terrorist arrested in the Netherlands without any kind of complication is a case in point. It is thanks to the EU that citizens of EU member-states can move freely between countries and cities without having to go through border controls. It is because of the EU that Europeans have roaming service system throughout the continent without having to pay large sums of money. Most people in Europe currently seem to have taken all of these achievements, which have been difficult in the past, for granted.

Second, there is a huge gap between the Brussels narrative and realities on the ground of the member countries. The Brussels narrative is that 'Europe' is always right and member governments are to blame for the national mistakes while the reality is often otherwise. According to Frattini, Italy used to be the most pro-EU country, however, at a certain moment Italians felt abandoned by the EU, particularly in regards to illegal migration and the refugee crisis. Additionally, German-led austerity measures and fiscal policies have denied Italy any significant kind of investment, thus leading Italian citizens to elect a somewhat anti-European government in the most recent national elections.

Third, the European Union project is very much about the norms and rules that made it so complicated and technical. In the initial decades of the EU, when prosperity was ubiquitous, the bureaucrats in Brussels had a free hand to develop institutions without concerns of representativeness. This institutional framework created a situation where national politicians turn to Brussels in times of crisis, instead of working with their respective constituencies to develop national-level solutions to supranational issues.   Additionally, there are national problems that multilateral institutions, for example, EU or NATO, cannot inherently solve.

Fourth, the EU decision-making process represents a fundamental challenge to the coherency of the Union. The visionary nature of the EU project, and the prospect of increased prosperity was an attractive incentive for potential member-states. As new members joined, the number of members increased from the founding-six, to twenty-eight. However, this has complicated the decision-making process. As a result, the EU experienced challenges in responding to the needs of its members, most recently with regards to migration issues.

Lastly, issues such as the Greek debt problem in the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis and the recent Italian economic crisis, which have contributed to a waning confidence in the EU amongst international investors potentially losing the confidence of the EU as well as international investors, have increased the sense of frustration in many EU capitals. Other challenges facing the EU currently include the high unemployment rate in Spain, as well as separatist movements, such as in Catalonia.

The Future of the EU

If the EU is to be capable of competing with the United States, and if it aspires to be equal partners with Russia and China, then European leaders should have clear consistency in terms of shared values and rules. It will have to improve the decision-making process to ensure that Europe can compete on the global scene. Unless EU leaders can solve these issues and find effective implementation measures, Europe will be reduced to being no more than a 'talking club' with no effective strategy, thereby paving the way for increased disintegration. This requires a new political structure that will include all member-states in the decision-making process, which would result in a crucial 'buy in' from member states. Without this, the EU has no future.

There is a widespread feeling among EU citizens that they need a more political Europe that revives the dream of the EU's founding mission, a dream based on a political project of security and common defence, collective economic governance and common foreign policy. However, there is currently a possibility that the EU would remain a purely economic cooperation project that would be affected by Brexit, which could easily aggravate the current situation of the European common market. Europeans are convinced, now more than ever, on the need for a new European vision, one that transcends economic cooperation. A new vision would articulate a Europe beyond economic cooperation, collective security and a common foreign policy towards a more complete and holistic project.

According to Ivo Josipovic, this new European vision would most probably take the form of "United States of Europe" and establish effective institutions that work for Europe and, most importantly, positively impact the lives of EU citizens. This new vision may take half a century to be realised, particularly given the current challenges facing the union. However, such vision remains the best option for the future viability of the European project. Achieving this vision requires pro-Europe national leaders with clear policies, to willingly participate in the process as leaders. If political leaders continue to follow the populist trends currently increasing in many EU-member states, and do not provide leadership required to maintain and enhance the union, future prospects for a more integrated Europe will remain as no more than a vision.

Tackling populism and addressing the roots of its growth will take more than just rhetoric from European leaders. To address the populism problem, there should be a precondition for efficient structure, a change of democratic responsibility and democratic status of European bodies. Former President Josipovic spoke to the fact that many Europeans do not consider EU bodies to be democratic because the most important institutions are not world-wide elected, but rather generated from the individual countries. He suggested EU leaders would have to develop criteria and regulations that address what EU citizens consider as the most important issues facing Europe.

Remedies for the EU

In the context of a thorough discussion regarding the future of the EU and whether it can be considered as a failing or even failed project, the four distinguished speakers gave several recommendations to remedy the EU's ills. First, as a straightforward counter to the rising tide of populism, EU officials need to devise a plan to reconnect with ordinary people in the streets and explain the EU to them in terms that they will relate to. There was near unanimous consensus from the speakers that there exists a significant communication gap between the people and the EU leadership. Rightly or wrongly, many people in Europe feel that the EU completely subjugates local and national sovereignty, thereby neglecting local issues. This has resulted in an estrangement between Brussels and citizens of the EU, making people more inclined to support Eurosceptic movement and parties.

Second, the PR gap currently being experienced by Brussels necessitates a new communication strategy. Reflecting on their experiences as EU officials, Franco Frattini and Štefan Füle argued that communication from European institutions has historically been very poor and not capable of making people understand the policies and workings of the EU.

Third, European officials need to articulate the costs of not having the EU. For instance, the consequences of Brexit have not been properly explained to the British people. According to Volkan Bozkır, the Brexit referendum merely asked the question on whether the UK should leave the EU, without explaining what was actually at stake (i.e. what the UK will lose, how much it will cost and what will be the prospects for the UK after its exit). According to Former Minister Bozkır, now that the potential ramifications of Brexit have been made clearer to the British people, the likelihood of the UK reversing its decision and staying in the EU has increased. In his view, a second referendum is a distinct possibility, and if it were to take place, it is almost certain that people would vote to stay in the EU due to the high costs associated with leaving.

Fourth, the need to create a new European identity has been suggested. Ivo Josipovic, stated that there is a need to work on the notion of European identity because Europe lacks such a collective understanding of itself. Josipovic argued that nationalism, which he termed as an illness that is killing societies from the inside and damaging good international relations, is on the rise and poses the greatest danger to Europe. Europe should create a collective European identity to confront the spread of nationalism and populism.

The final recommendation was for the EU to be more engaging abroad, particularly in its immediate neighbourhood. There are currently three different integration projects in Europe and Asia, namely the EU, the Eurasian Economic Union and the Belt and Road Initiative. A failure to find a certain degree of compatibility among these three projects will lead to new dividing lines in Europe. The Ukraine crisis represents another potential source of instability for the EU. For these and other reasons, the EU leaders should seek to build lasting bonds between the EU on one side, and Eurasian Economic Union on the other.

Štefan Füle, Former European Commissioner for Enlargement and European Neighborhood Policy, comments that prosperity is the ultimate guarantor of EU stability.

Conclusion

The session titled "The EU and Its Discontents: Is it the End of the European Project?" dealt with questions that will determine the EU's credibility and faith in its potential to provide continued prosperity, peace and security. Four high profile speakers looked at the current problems facing the EU, such as the rise of populism, Brexit, mass migration, debt, unemployment, separatist movements, regional crises, and bureaucratic issues related to the EU administration. The panelists suggested that EU officials should firstly devise plans to reconnect with locals, secondly, change communication and explain the cost of not remaining in the EU, thirdly, work towards the creation of a new European identity, and lastly, engage abroad, with particular reference to the EU's immediate neighbourhoods (e.g. Ukraine, Turkey etc.).