

CONFERENCE REPORT

The EU: A Vote of No Confidence?



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This is a report on a public session titled “The EU: A Vote of No Confidence?”, held as part of the TRT World Forum 2019. The views, themes and discussion points expressed in this conference report are those of participants and speakers present at the TRT World Forum 2019, and do not reflect the official view of TRT World Research Centre.

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Speakers



Ivo Josipović

Former President of Croatia

Ivo Josipović served as the President of Croatia from 2010 until 2015. As a politician, he promoted reconciliation in South-Eastern Europe, human rights, and the fight against corruption. Before and after his presidential mandate, Ivo Josipović has served as a university law professor and composer. He has published several books and 85 scholarly papers dealing with international criminal law, criminal procedure and human rights. As a composer, Ivo Josipović has written roughly 60 compositions which have been performed and recorded by prominent artists.



Esko Aho

Former Prime Minister of Finland and Chairman of the Board, Cinia Oy and Adven Group

Esko Aho is Chairman of the Board of Cinia Oy and Adven Group, and, since 2016, he has served on the Supervisory Board of Sberbank. In February, 2019 he was appointed to the JP Morgan Advisory Council for Europe, the Middle East and Africa. Esko Aho is the Former Prime Minister of Finland and was a member of the Finnish Parliament for 20 years. Under his leadership, Finland joined the European Union. In addition, Esko Aho was President of the Finnish Innovation Fund, Sitra, and a member of the Executive Board at the International Chamber of Commerce.



Sayeeda Warsi

Former UK Minister and Senior Member of the British Cabinet

Baroness Sayeeda Warsi was the first Muslim to serve as a cabinet minister in the British government. At age 36, she was elevated to House of Lords, making her the youngest member of the upper house at the time. In August, 2014 she resigned from Government citing the Government's "morally indefensible" policy on Gaza. Sayeeda is Chair of the Baroness Warsi Foundation, a Trustee of the Savayra Foundation, Pro Vice Chancellor at the University of Bolton, an Advisor to Georgetown University Washington DC and Visiting Professor at St Mary's – the oldest Catholic university in the UK. Baroness Warsi's first book, 'The Enemy Within: A Tale of Muslim Britain', has been billed as "a vital book at a critical time...a seminal text on British Muslims"



Faruk Kaymakci

Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs and Director for EU Affairs of the Republic of Turkey

Ambassador Faruk Kaymakci currently serves as the Turkish Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs and Director for EU Affairs. He is the former Turkish Ambassador to Iraq (2013-2017) and Permanent Representative of Turkey to the European Union (2017-2018) as well as the former Chief Foreign Policy Advisor to Turkey's EU Minister and Chief Negotiator and Director for EU Communication (2008-2011). In addition to having previously served in a number of diplomatic posts in Tripoli (Libya), Kabul, Brussels and Basra, Ambassador Kaymakci is a holder of the NATO Medal for his distinguished service in Afghanistan.



Anna Maria Corazza Bildt

Member of the European Parliament

Anna Maria Corazza Bildt has been a Member of the European Parliament since 2009. An Italian national, she was elected by the Swedish people for the centre-right "Moderate" Party EPP group. She was first Vice-Chair of the Internal Market and Consumer Protection Committee and member of the Home Affairs and Migration Committee and the Committee on Terrorism. She is also Deputy Speaker for the EPP Women Rights Committee and has been an active member of the EU-Turkey Joint Commission and co-Chair of the European Parliament Turkish Forum. Anna Maria is also an entrepreneur and spends her time living between Italy and Sweden.

Summary

The panel “The EU: A Vote of No Confidence?” discussed the future trajectory of the EU regarding the latest developments including Brexit, economic challenges, the refugee crisis, the enlargement process, Turkey’s accession process and the EU values.

Commenting on the Brexit, Sayeeda Warsi stated that the Brexit campaign was xenophobic and grounded on misrepresented political and economic challenges. Warsi added that the biggest challenge for the EU is the democratic deficit when it comes to representing the demands of member states in EU institutions. This is in addition to the failure to respond to changing demands of member states, and lack of robust financial accountability.

In reaction to the claims regarding a democratic deficit in the EU’s decision-making process, Anna Maria Bildt pointed out that there has been a fundamental misconception that the commission takes decisions, which, in reality, are taken by heads of state or elected parliamentarians. Bildt added that despite the media representation, consensus for the European Union has been increasing in all twenty-eight member states with the exception of Italy.

Regarding the implications of Brexit, Esko Aho stated that Brexit will mark the end of the beginning of exists because of difficulties and unintended consequences that the UK is facing. Aho also added that democracy and the market economy have failed because of failure to find new methods and policies to address emerging problems.

Faruk Kaymakcı stated that EU leaders’ hesitant attitudes during the July 15, 2016 coup attempt in Turkey created trauma for both the Turkish public and administration and led to a loss of confidence. Kaymakcı also noted that the way that EU is acting towards new members, as well as the candidate countries, is creating further division and therefore not serving the interests of Europe.

Describing the EU as the advanced version of the idea of Europe, Ivo Josipovic stated that despite challenges and doubts about its future, European nations are going to understand that the EU is the most suitable frame for development and security and the only way to be competitive in the global market. The current crisis of the EU is in part the result of the politicians’ selfish policies.



Report

The implications of Brexit

The EU continues to face multiple challenges that threaten its values, principles and ultimately, its survival. Among them, Brexit is one of the thorniest challenges affecting the future trajectory of the EU. Sayeeda Warsi stated that during the run-up to the Brexit referendum, the 'leave' campaign was deeply xenophobic and based on political lies putting refugees and immigrants into the focal point of the discussion. Regarding the influence of Brexit on other member states, Esko Aho noted that, in contrast to expectations that other member states will follow the UK, Brexit will be the beginning of the end of the drive to exit the union. He substantiated this claim on the ground that the consequences of Brexit have now become clear and other states will learn from the difficulties the UK is facing. However, Warsi drew attention to the point that the Brexit process will encourage other member states to have a sceptical view regarding the EU's responsiveness to the concerns and needs of members.

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Reforming the EU

The panellists agreed that the EU requires reforms in certain areas. For Warsi, the EU has a democratic deficit. After describing the EU as inflexible, Warsi noted that the EU has failed to respond to changes in the member states. For instance, the UK's key reform demands - welfare restrictions to help curb immigration, protection of the single market for Britain, enhancing EU competitiveness and strengthening national parliaments - were not taken seriously by the EU, leading to an environment that was favourable to Brexit. As such, Warsi added that the EU does not listen to European political leaders and their concerns. She stressed that to survive, the EU should be more flexible and accommodating and accept the fact that each country is on its own journey. Warsi also highlighted the deficit in financial accountability of the EU noting that at a time when governments were tightening their budgets at home, the EU demanded an increase in its budget, thereby not reflecting the concerns of the member states.

Additionally, the EU also failed to adequately respond to demands and concerns of candidate countries as has been observed in EU relations with Bosnia-Herzegovina and Turkey. In a similar vein, Josipovic stated that the roots of the EU's democratic deficit lay in the selfishness of politicians who have a higher regard for their interests than those of the EU, thereby impeding the development of Europe.

Nevertheless, Bildt added that the EU is a work in progress. She also stated that, despite the media representation, support for the EU has increased. According to the Eurobarometer, consensus for the EU has been increasing in all 28 member states with the exception of Italy. Even in Hungary, despite the prevalence of anti-EU messaging, support for the union has increased. Populist, extreme rightist, anti-immigrant and Eurosceptic movements have seen an increase following the refugee influx of 2015. However, the European elections held in May 2019 showed that the trend may be in decline. Additionally, since populist parties do not constitute majorities in parliaments, their influence in the legislation process is limited.

The EU was also criticized for not effectively addressing the refugee issue and falling short of consistently applying human rights principles. Regarding the EU's controversial immigration policy, Bildt stated that the member states' preferences primarily shape the EU's overall refugee policy. As such, refugee reform was blocked by a few member states in the Council. Josipovic pointed out that the fact that people seek refuge in Europe indicates the high standards of democracy and social security achieved by Europe compared to other regions of the world. In a similar vein, Esko Aho also added that the bar set for the EU is too high compared to other parts of the world when it comes to better living standards, human rights conditions and rule of law.

EU enlargement and Turkey's Accession Process

Considering the EU's enlargement policy, Josipovic stated that the project of Europe will not be completed until all countries of southeast Europe - Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Turkey - are integrated. Esko Aho noted that the enlargement in Central and Eastern Europe was a major achievement contributing to economic development and democracy in these countries.

Regarding conditions for new members, Bildt stated that the EU has rules for becoming a member and candidate countries should follow them. However, Kaymakcı stressed that the way that the EU treats some of its member states, as well as the candidate countries, is creating dividing lines and thereby not serving the interest of the EU. Kaymakcı added that meeting the membership criteria for Turkey would

not take more than 3-4 years thanks to its capacity and experience. However, the main challenge for Turkey's membership is the politicisation of the EU's enlargement policy. Turkey is ready for membership and has no problems with the requirements. Yet, the EU's double standards represent a significant obstacle with regards to Turkey. Kaymakçı noted that while support for membership among Turkish people is around 80 per cent when they are asked whether the EU will accept Turkey or not, it goes down to 30 per cent, indicating loss of trust in the EU. Kaymakçı proposed that the gap can be filled by increasing civil society dialogue between Turkish and other European organizations.

Kaymakçı also stated that the EU leaders' hesitant attitude during the July 15, 2016 coup attempt in Turkey has engendered mistrust among the Turkish public

and government and contributed to a loss of confidence. While Turkish democracy was under attack on that night, Turkey expected category support from the EU which did not come. A similar situation is happening on the border with Syria at the moment. While Turkey fights against the YPG terrorist group in Northern Syria to defend not only its border but also borders of NATO and the EU, the EU once again does not show solidarity with Turkey. Warsi pointed out that Turkey stood with the EU in the refugee crisis and fight against terrorism viewing the EU's problems as its problems. Yet, the EU failed to show the same understanding towards Turkey when it comes to Turkey's fight against terrorism on its border.

The Future Direction of the EU

In reaction to the arguments that the British people, particularly youth, have a favourable view about Europe but not the EU, Josipovic argued that there is no distinction between the two because the EU is the advanced version of Europe. Despite crises and challenges, Josipovic stated that European nations are going to understand that the EU is the most suitable frame for development, security and competition within the global market.

Esko Oho highlighted that most of the issues in Europe can be handled on a national and regional level. However, there are certain issues relevant to the future of Europe such as environmental protection, climate change, security, trade wars or immigration issues. These issues are completely impossible to be solved at the national level and necessitate collective action.

Regarding the question as to whether the EU should adopt a federalist structure, Esko Aho stated a federalist Europe is not a realistic target, however, a much stronger and integrated union can be achieved. In contrast to this, Josipovic argued that the final development of the EU project will finish

with federation. Josipovic added that one of the most important tasks of European officials is to build a European identity, which would help generate feelings of belonging to Europe. On that note, Kaymakçı added that Turkey's membership would help complete the European identity.

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Key Takeaways

- Brexit may lead other members to follow suit if the UK manages to leave smoothly. However, they may also be discouraged as a result of the difficulties faced by the UK.
- The EU's inability to effectively address the concerns of individual member states related to economic, political and social issues and its inaction in the face of growing demands for reform is serving to deepen a crisis of legitimacy.
- The EU project will be incomplete without the inclusion of the countries of South-East Europe, namely Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Turkey.
- The EU's failure to show solidarity with Turkey during the July 15 coup attempt and Operation Peace Spring in Northern Syria as well as its perceived double-standards towards Turkey has reduced the Turkish public's confidence in the EU.
- Despite a number of ongoing issues, consensus for the European Union has been increasing in all twenty-eight member states with the exception of Italy.

