

Event Report

Workshop for the Future (for participants aged between 18 and 30)

After the Brexit Referendum: Is the European Union Still Worth Fighting For?

After the 'Leave' vote in last June's Brexit referendum, the European Union is shaking on its foundations, no matter how hard politicians and officials are trying to pretend otherwise. The UK is gone, or so it seems, and in many EU member countries from Hungary to France and from Austria to the Netherlands, Eurosceptic parties are scoring high in the opinion polls before next year's election or are already in government. Even Germany is no longer the pro-European model pupil it has been for so long. In the eyes of young Europeans, including those from the UK, is the European Union a lost cause and should Europeans find a different way to organise their future? Are Europeans sleepwalking into a new catastrophe or is the EU still a cause worth fighting for? The Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung European Union challenged young Europeans to debate about the Europe they want with EU veterans, Members of the European Parliament, EU experts from think tanks and representatives of civil society.

30 young Europeans from ten different nationalities, among them five Brits, followed our call and sat down with twelve experts and moderators to discuss the (un)avoidability of Brexit and (un)stoppable disintegration of the European Union. The workshop started in a positive mood: neither Brexit nor EU disintegration were inevitable according to a majority of the participants. Here are some ideas which were brought up during the debates in four parallel working groups.

That the **Brexit referendum** could be won by the LEAVE camp can be blamed on mainly three factors: the role of the UK's media in campaigning against the EU for over 30 years, the mainstreaming of Euroscepticism across the UK's political spectrum and the lack of a real EU champion in the country. Also (like in the other Member States) mainstream parties and civil society failed in prioritising EU issues at national level. European organisations, both political parties and civil society groups, need to be much better at communicating the work of the EU to their national constituent members.

On the other hand, the mismatch between political debate which is taking place on Member State level and political decisions being increasingly set at EU level has led to political frustration easily to be exploited by populists everywhere in Europe.

The **mainstreaming of populism** and Euroscepticism is no longer a marginal phenomenon restricted to the UK, but a structural trend identifiable across the entire EU. The growing distrust towards the EU is fuelled by the incomplete Europeanisation of an increasing number of policy areas that has weakened national sovereignty without creating the basis for an authentic European sovereignty. It is this lack of sovereignty which feeds populism. Crucial in this respect is the perceived lack of 'cultural sovereignty' which produces anti-migration sentiments.

For some it was clear that Brexit has to be accepted as a fact, and as a 'soft' Brexit is not possible, this leaves a **'hard' Brexit** as the only realistic option. For others the **UK High Court's landmark ruling** on the involvement of Parliament in the exit negotiations could change or shape the actual terms of whatever deal is reached deciding on whether there will be a soft or a hard Brexit. Within the scenario of a hard Brexit **visa liberalisation** will be a key issue, in particular for young people, who have long benefitted from unrestricted mobility across the EU. Another priority would be the fostering of **cultural cooperation** and mutual interest between the EU and the UK through informal networks. However, while the UK's cultural influence is likely to continue to shape the EU, not least because of English being and remaining the lingua franca, getting the anglocentric UK interested in the EU after Brexit will be quite a challenge. It looks like an uphill battle given the crowding-out effect of the anglosphere (Netflix etc). For keeping British youngsters culturally interested in Europe we

need to maintain freedom of movement, Erasmus and a free Interrail ticket for 18 year olds is probably a useful tool as well.

A proposed **associate citizenship** for British Remainers after Brexit was not hailed by everybody as it would create two tiers of EU citizens which contravenes the EU's principles of solidarity – the same reason why the proposal to allow eurozone MEPs to vote on a separate budget for their own states is no good.

To help build a common European culture through television, something like a European *Borgen* or *Game of Thrones* set in the European Parliament would be helpful to make people understand how politics on a European level works.

Concerning the question of the EU as a cause still worth fighting for some participants insisted on a **pro-European education and cultural policy** as a priority for the EU institutions and EU Member States, while making sure that youth was in the focus and that communication/marketing was improved. Others were more politically demanding and underlined the importance of the restoration of a **Social Europe** through installing a basic income at EU level and emphasised social protection and fighting inequalities as fundamental values of the European Union.

As a **new constitutional report** has recently been presented by Guy Verhofstadt and Elmar Brok the hope was expressed that this will lead to a second EU Constitutional Convention, though this hope was not shared by everybody as a new convention might be seen as another example of the EU talking where it should be acting. Still, the report contains a number of good recommendations, including: a further move away from unanimity and towards qualified-majority voting (activating the so-called '*passerelle* clause' in the Lisbon Treaty), the creation of an EU finance minister, along the lines of the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, by merging the role of a Commission vice-president with that of the Eurogroup president and a merging the European Council and Council of the EU into a Council of States, a proper second legislative chamber to work alongside the Parliament

The European Union may not be a lost cause as there is no viable alternative, but the road ahead does not look easy. For a political recovery Europe needs to rediscover its fundamental values and act accordingly. Against the background of Brexit, growing populism and the unsolved migration and eurozone crises complete commitment is required from politicians and civil society alike.

The [workshop](#) took place on **16 November 2016**. The Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung European Union wants to thank all participants and the following speakers and moderators:

- **Paul Adamson, Chairman of Forum Europe and founder and editor of *E!Sharp***
- **James Bartholomeusz, MA Philosophy King's College London, alumnus of the capacity building on right-wing populism and extremism in Europe organised by the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung European Union and blogger on *Young Voices of Europe*.**
- **Dr Fraser Cameron, Director of the EU-Asia Centre, Brussels**
- **Karen Fogg, Associate Fellow of Leuven Centre for Global Governance Studies**
- **Edouard Gaudot, Political Adviser to the Green Group at the European Parliament**
- **Sophie Heine, Research Associate at the Centre for International Studies, Oxford University**
- **Pierre Jonckheer, Honorary President of the Green European Foundation**
- **Ulrike Lunacek, Vice President of the European Parliament**
- **Grace Murray, Head of the Brussels office of UK Green MEP Molly Scott Cato**
- **Marta Pont, Membership and Outreach manager, European Citizen Action Service (ECAS)**
- **Terry Reintke, Member of the European Parliament**
- **Laurent Standaert, Editor-in-Chief of the *Green European Journal*.**