

## **BÖLL LUNCH DEBATE**

### **The Referendums in Denmark, the Netherlands and the UK in Light of Euroscepticism, Refugee Crisis and the Paris and Brussels Terror Attacks – What Lessons to Be Learnt? <sup>1</sup>**

*Referendums are supposed to 'bring back' political questions to the people. Many referendums have been held on questions concerning the European Union: enlargement, the Treaties, the European Constitution, the euro. A new 'trilogy' of referendums started with the Danish European Union opt-out referendum in December 2015. This referendum, which could have modified Denmark's full opt-out on home and justice matters, took place at the height of the refugee crisis and not much more than two weeks after the Paris terror attacks. The Danes decided to stick to the opt-out. The next referendum to come is the Dutch Ukraine–European Union Association Agreement referendum to be held on 6 April. The result of this referendum, instigated by Eurosceptic groups, could – even though it is non-binding – derail the foreign policy of the Dutch government, hamper EU-Ukraine relations and embarrass the Dutch presidency. Only two weeks after the Brussels attacks, with the refugee crisis still unsolved, the prospects for the 'Yes Campaign' to win are gloomy. Of course, the 'big one' is the 'Brexit referendum' on 23 June. It seems a long time ago that the European Union could celebrate a convincing success and with Farage using the recent terror attacks in Brussels as arguments for his Brexit campaign, times are tough for the 'Remain Campaign'. What is the relation between Euroscepticism, refugee crisis and the fear of terror attacks and how do they reflect in the recent and upcoming referendums and referendum campaigns? What lessons can be learnt from the Danish and Dutch results with regard to the UK campaign? In the light of Euroscepticism, refugee crisis and the Paris and Brussels terror attacks is there still hope for a multi-cultural unified Europe?*

At a time when different internal and external crises intertwine and challenge the European project in general, referendums can complicate matters even further. However, each referendum has a different context and carries an own dynamic.

#### **Denmark – long tradition of constitutional referendums**

Lisbeth Kirk, founder of *EUobserver*, introduced the Danish context and presented the peculiarities of the Danish campaign. In Denmark referendums play a special role due to their constitutional background. In their 8th EU related referendum, the Danes, although in favour of Europol cooperation, voted against giving up their opt-outs in home and justice matters. According to Lisbeth Kirk, the explanation lies in the way the campaign was led. Mistakes were made by the 'Yes' campaign in focussing on one issue only whereas the opt-outs include many different legal areas and in the design of their respective campaign posters. For example, the 'pro opt-in' parties exclusively focussed on the aspect that the 'opt-in' made police cooperation

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<sup>1</sup> The event took place on 27 April 2016. Guest speakers were: Michiel van Hulten, Independent Consultant, former MEP and Yes Campaigner 'Ukraine Referendum'; Shada Islam, Director of Policy at Friends of Europe; Lisbeth Kirk, Founder *EUobserver* and Jean Lambert, MEP for The Greens-European Free Alliance. The debate was moderated by Marianne Ebertowski, Director European Policy Programme, Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung European Union. Speakers and audience agreed to suspend Chatham House Rule. The opinions expressed do not necessarily represent the opinions of the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung.

through Europol possible. This was portrayed as the only consequence of a ‘yes’ vote. It was well-known that being part of Europol cooperation was supported by a great majority of the Danish population, however, Kirk argued, this turned out to be a flawed tactic, as the Danes were also aware of the fact that the opt-outs included more areas, such as company, criminal and family law and giving these up would mean a lot more than just being part of Europol. Another negative factor was the poor design of the campaign posters. They failed to display the full scope of the referendum question and put forward a very nationalistic argument, which according to Kirk ‘made no sense to the voters’. This ‘killed’ the ‘Yes’ campaign because people felt that the full scope was being ‘hidden’ from them. Hence, the voters felt ‘betrayed and not taken serious’ (Kirk) and decided to ‘punish’ the pro-European parties by sticking to the opt-out. In general, one should not really compare the referendums in Denmark to the other recent and upcoming referendums. In Denmark, referendums have a long constitutional tradition, whereas in other European countries they are increasingly used as a populist tool. Neither the Paris terror attacks nor the refugee crisis seem to have had an impact on the voting behaviour of the Danish population.

### **The Netherlands – a referendum odd in all its aspects**

The Dutch ‘no’ to the Ukraine Association Agreement had a completely different background. ‘Yes’ campaigner and former MEP Michiel van Hulten shed some light on the peculiar way the referendum came about. In July 2015 the Netherlands introduced a new law, allowing for a ‘consultative referendum’ on almost every piece of Dutch legislation if more than 300.000 signatures in favour of such a referendum can be gathered beforehand. Hence, a weblog called ‘GeenStijl’, known for its notorious anti-establishment attitude declared to start a referendum on the first EU topic possible, which was to be the EU – Ukraine Association treaty. Signatures could be gathered by all available means and even an app was created to enable people to support the referendum. Still, not enough votes were collected until briefly before the deadline a full-page advertisement was published in the Netherlands’ biggest daily newspaper *De Telegraaf* was published. In this way the campaign managed to finally gather the necessary votes and the referendum could take place on the 6 April. Nevertheless, the majority of the Dutch population did neither know nor care about the content of the referendum and only 32% made the effort to vote at all. Van Hulten explained that the ‘yes’ campaign fought a lost battle for a number of reasons. Firstly, due to the validity threshold of 30% ‘yes’ voters were inclined to not vote at all, which meant that the ‘yes’ campaign had to motivate people not only to vote ‘yes’, but in the first place to go voting at all. Secondly, the ‘yes’ campaign started only in February, two months before the referendum was held, whereas the ‘no’ side had been campaigning since October. Complicating things even further, there was a variety of reasons for people to vote ‘no’, all of which used by the ‘no’ campaigners. Firstly, distrust towards the EU and its institutions. Secondly, distrust towards the Dutch government and the Dutch elites. Thirdly, there was a number of misconceptions about the Association Agreement with Ukraine. So it was argued that the agreement would lead to EU membership for Ukraine, to visa free travel for Ukrainians and, consequently, to another migration wave and that it implicated military cooperation with Ukraine, NATO membership for Ukraine and would ultimately intensify the risk of military conflict with Russia. The geographical distribution of ‘no’ and ‘yes’ voting areas hinted at an issue which can become crucial in all referendums: the demographic divide. The only areas where ‘yes’ won, were the cosmopolitan university cities. Thus, whereas the younger and more



cosmopolitan constituencies tended to vote in favour of a 'yes', rural areas and older voters preferred to vote 'no'. Although this referendum in van Hulten's eyes will not change the course of history, it shows once more that pro-Europeans must speak up for their beliefs. The Dutch government gave a very bad example with its hesitant attitude.

### **Brexit – the big one**

As to the Brexit referendum, green MEP Jean Lambert lamented the lack of pro-European leadership and commitment in the UK over the years. The conservative party is greatly divided on the question and Cameron promotes his own position only very cautiously in public. The conservative party's indecisiveness is demonstrated by the diverging behaviour of politicians in Brussels and in Britain. They seem to give very motivated pro European speeches only in Brussels and not at home where this message needs to be heard most – Tony Blair is a case in point. Labour politicians also have made a slow start to campaign for 'Remain'. One of the reasons why Labour has been cautious to speak out for 'Remain' is their bad experience with the Scottish referendum. Labour committed itself to the Conservative position in this case and, losing many voters, paid a high price for it. Because on 5 May important elections are held for the Scottish and Welsh parliamentary assembly, the London assembly and the London mayor, campaigners will only afterwards focus on the EU referendum. So far the main arguments for the 'Remain' side are of an economic nature, whereas the 'Leave' campaign argues that Britain needs to win back effective control over their national borders in order to stop immigration.

While the polls remain extremely close, the outcome could be decisively influenced by demographics. Similar to what was observed in the Dutch referendum the more cosmopolitan cities containing many students are more likely to vote pro European. Hence, it is not surprising that the London region is the only one showing polls clearly favouring 'Remain'. Unfortunately, this tendency could affect the Brexit referendum negatively. Young people are much more likely to vote for 'Remain', but the question is whether they go voting at all. About 88% of the over 65 year old voters indicated to give their voice in the referendum, while only 34% of the 18 to 24 year olds are sure to go voting. Hence, according to Lambert, the task is to motivate young people to make their voice count, especially as they are the ones bearing the consequences of the referendum – much more than the 65 plus generation. The Green Party had tried to have the voting age reduced to 16, which was the case in the Scottish independence referendum, but the request was turned down. The Brexit referendum also raises questions concerning the geographical divide in the UK which need to be taken seriously. 'What happens if the Scottish vote "Remain" but England takes them out? Let alone the situation in Northern Ireland... what would it mean for the borders?' asked Lambert.

### **The missing globalised perspective**

Trying to make sense of the referendums, Shada Islam, Director of Policy at Friends of Europe, identified a number of 'D' problems: disruption, distraction, disenchantment, distrust, dullness, domestic and demography. To explain only a few: a *disruption* in political life can be observed in the UK where the Brexit debate started a 'real civil war' within the Tory party. Shada Islam particularly criticised that the current referendums distract from the core issues and existential challenges European politicians should focus on, such as integrating the arriving refugees, a crucial task where sharing good practices and coordination are essential. *Disenchantment* with



political life can be observed in almost all European countries as is the rise of populist parties proves. Populism is fed by *distrust* – not only towards the EU but towards politicians and the elites in general. Referendums have become a channel to express this distrust through simple yes or no answers to supposedly easy problems which in reality are multifaceted and complicated. Referendums do not per se pose problems for politics but when coming together in a time of constant crises they might aggravate the existing problems.

In this light Shada Islam suggested European leaders should look at Europe from a more globalised perspective. The globally disruptive element of such referendums is too often neglected. European leaders seem to be too focused on domestic issues to understand that the EU does have a strong impact on a vast number of countries worldwide. Not only Obama, but also Xi Jinping, the Chinese President and Narendra Modi, the Indian Prime Minister expressed that they ‘want Britain in Europe’ and wish the EU to stay united and to play a stable global role.

### **Wake up, Europe!**

Shada Islam’s words provoked a debate on how Europe should move forward. New charismatic and inspiring leaders are badly needed, but unfortunately nowhere to be seen. Michiel van Hulten European emphasised that European leaders should stop the tactical ‘Brussels bashing’ motivated by domestic electoral interests. ‘Member State governments and civil society have to be prepared to stand up for what they agree on in Brussels,’ van Hulten concluded. It is also crucial that important debates, such as the one on TTIP take place in public. On this issue, the UK has to understand that it will have less leverage in negotiating a free trade agreement alone with the US and a more powerful position inside the EU bloc. The EU is more capable of limiting corporate power than any Member State by itself. Also, van Hulten suggested that the EU could present itself in a better light by abolishing the wasteful Strasbourg travel circus or adapting EU civil servants benefits to national levels. Europe can only move forward as a multicultural, diverse Europe. There is no alternative. As Shada Islam pointed out: ‘We are multicultural - even if we don’t recognise it, even if we don’t celebrate it.’ Multiculturalism and diversity should be celebrated and not feared; the dishonest depressing discourse about this issue needs to be stopped. ‘Diversity is actually improving and boosting Europe’s economic status. Our economy depends on the entrepreneurship, the talent of people who are coming in at the moment’, she continued. Referring to the large numbers of young people in the audience, Shada Islam concluded ‘We have such an army of interesting young people out there – we have never even thought of mobilising them’ and finally ‘What happens here is going to have an impact for years to come, on Europe and on the rest of the world. So my final remark would be: “Wake up, Europe!”’