

7th German-Nordic Baltic Forum

Conference Report:

The EU at a Crossroad? German, Nordic and Baltic Views on Internal and External Challenges

Copenhagen, 19-20 November 2015

The 7th meeting of the German Nordic Baltic Forum took place in Copenhagen on 19 and 20 November 2015. This year the event was organized by the Danish Institute for International Studies and the Institut für Europäische Politik with support of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark, the German Federal Foreign Office, the Danish Ministry of Defence and the Embassy of the Federal Republic of Germany in Denmark. More than 40 experts from universities and think tanks as well as officials from national ministries, embassies and parliaments convened in the Danish capital to share their points of view concerning “the EU at a Crossroad?”. Established in 2008, the annual Forum aims at providing a platform for a 7 nations dialogue between planners and thinkers in a capital of one of the represented countries.

The participants focused during the two days of the Forum on the following points of discussion:

- National Minorities within the European Union
- the Eastern Partnership in light of the Ukrainian Crisis
- the EU’s Security and Defence Policy
- the EU’s future Integration Challenges

This years' Forum was set off, after welcoming remarks, with an insightful opening debate with Kristian Jensen, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Denmark, and Michael Roth, Minister of State for Europe of the Federal Foreign Office of Germany: in the light of the current refugee crisis and the shocking attacks in Paris, it has been emphasized that humanity and solidarity are core values that are represented within the European Union. They can and will not be reduced. Yes, the EU is currently finding itself at a crossroad, but in order to solve and rise successfully out of the multiple crises, it has to be understood that the Member States have to act unified within the EU and once again have to agree upon a common roadmap for the future based on the European project and its values.

After the discussion with the ministers and a short break, the *first panel* discussion dealt with national minorities within the EU. The overall consensus among the participants was that it is of utmost importance to strengthen minority rights and policies while creating an environment of mutual respect, recognition and inclusion. In order to build such an environment both, the minority members and the government of the state they are living in, have to show loyalty and acceptance towards each other. However, one speaker highlighted that without the financial support of minorities by national governments, it is not possible to build such peaceful relations. By the example of the German and Danish minority policies, the significance and positive role minorities can play for bilateral relations, which in the case of German-Danish relations have never been better, were pointed out. They are a driving force with regards to strong economic and cultural relations, especially in the border areas.

The Latvian minorities caused some controversial debates. A number of speakers emphasized that the situation in Latvia was different due to the bygone failure of the national government to fully integrate the large Russian speaking minority and therefore providing a political environment favorable for Russian propaganda. While the security risks arising from Russian minorities in the Baltics were assessed differently from the participants, most of them agreed that there is no “one-size-fits-all” approach that can be applied to all minorities across Europe. However, there can be drawn lessons from successful minority policies and even for the current refugee crisis: minority policy needs patience and it realizes as far as possible efforts of inclusion of the minority in question into the national society, encompassing also the promotion of effective participation in domestic politics. It is also important to establish an institutionalized dialogue and create an early warning system for potential conflicts and the emergence of parallel societies with

own behavioral codes and ‘different’ value systems. Lastly, the importance of successful funding of border regions in particular should not be forgotten.

The *second panel* discussed the prospects and challenges of the Eastern Partnership, especially in light of the Ukrainian crisis. Naturally, the question of the appropriate policies towards Russia has been the overall concern during this panel. It was emphasized that, when dealing with Russia, it has to be understood that for the Russian elite the military intervention in Crimea, Eastern Ukraine and even Syria is a success. Therefore, Russia will not change its course of action of using hard power. Obviously, the EU cannot challenge Russia’s hard power, since neither the EU nor the Eastern Partnership is designed to do so. Instead, the Eastern Partnership focusses on soft power instruments and the EU should concentrate even more on the contribution and support of the ongoing transformation of Eastern societies. Even though, this may not seem very successful in the short term, to invest politically and economically in the transformation of Eastern countries, Russia will lose its predominance in the long term. Some argued, however, that it will not be easy for us to keep up the present levels of support and strategic patience without finding ourselves in an *Eastern Partnership (EaP) fatigue*.

Two German participants suggested a dual track approach. Since Russia is a neighbor of our neighbors, the EaP should be flanked by a new *Ostpolitik*, including institutional settings, institutional guidance and a re-launch of political dialogue with Russia. This suggestion caused controversial debates among the participants, which led to the conclusion that whatever may be called a new *Ostpolitik* should be reasonably balanced between conflictive and cooperative behavior. Many emphasized that the EU should not give up its tight sanction policies just for the sake of dialogue. Most participants shared the view that the Member States find themselves at a crossroad, where they have to re-define the instruments and strategy of their Eastern Partnership for making it more effective.

In the beginning of the Forum’s second day, the *third panel* dealt with European foreign, security and defence policy. Several participants called for an update of the in 2003 adopted European Security Strategy, whereas in this connection the Danish participants pointed to the difficulties in overcoming the country’s defence opt out. Some others suggested the creation of a European Defence Union and justified it as the next logical step within the European integration process. Such a union could increase the effectiveness of the EU’s foreign and security policy and

would entail economic advantages. And, it would not implicate that a new treaty was needed but rather that the already existing tools of the TEU/TFEU, such as PSC (Permanent Structured Cooperation), should be used. Along these lines, one speaker emphasized that there is definitely more room for improvement for closer cooperation between the European Member States. A joint study by IEP and DIIS highlighted that due to the constant demilitarization of Europe within the last years, every European nation, whether small or big, faces serious security and defence crises. Therefore, Germany proposed two initiatives, whereas the first, the so-called Framework Nations Concept (FNC), aims at generating capability profiles, facilitated by a framework nation, on the basis of the NATO Defence Planning Process (NDPP) in order to fulfill NATO's level of ambition. The second initiative, the Baltic Commanders Conference, would bring together the Naval Commanders of the neighbouring states of the Baltic Sea and would aim for a better coordination amongst the different participating states and their respective navies. However, by contrast, other participants stressed the need to strengthen the EU's soft power skills in European foreign and security policy.

Another interesting thought-provoking impulse has been given by one of the speakers, suggesting Europe to become a nuclear-weapons-free-zone. However, since this is an extremely sensitive topic, which is easily exemplified by the difficult talks at the nuclear-non-proliferation conference in 2015 between the parties to the non-proliferation treaty, it is obvious that such a suggestion will need much more time and discussion to be (carefully) considered.

Another controversial point of discussion has been the role of Germany in Baltic security. Some Baltic participants complained about the 'meagre' military reaction of Germany to counter Russia threatening the Baltic States after the annexation of Crimea. German participants rejected this view by pointing to the German troops' deployment in the Baltics and the stronger participation of the German air force in securing NATO air space over the Baltics. Some also pointed to the implications of stronger foreign troop deployment in the Baltics in terms of potential military counter-measures of Russia, which might lead to a situation in Europe's North-East even less secure than today. Additionally, several participants also argued that without Germany, there would not be a Minsk Agreement, as a major instrument to stop Russia in the East.

Lastly, the possible implications of a Swedish and Finnish membership of NATO have been discussed. This resulted in the overall consensus that the membership of these two states is a highly political matter, which should be

carefully considered and required a widespread political consensus in both countries, which is not in the cards in the foreseeable future.

The *last panel* of the Forum addressed the possible challenges and strategies for the future of the EU. Baltic and Nordic speakers pointed out that the Union should maintain its current integration level and not strive for deeper integration due to the lack of cohesion among the Member States on this issue, which may risk unraveling the Union rather than strengthening it. It was also pointed at the lack of support of such a move in the public opinion of many Member States. Several participants had a differing view and suggested moves towards ‘more Europe’ in order to match the internal and external challenges the EU is facing. According to these experts, the EU is already characterized by differentiated integration, which, while always keeping the Member States under the one and the same EU umbrella, has to be further developed from a two-speed Europe to a multi-speed Europe. As one expert emphasized, this will especially be important in order to keep the UK as a Member State of the EU.

Following up on this, some experts pointed out that if the EU loses the UK as a Member State, this could become a slippery slope, inter alia BREXIT could have spillover effects to other Member States who could also demand more opt-out clauses or even consider their own exit from the Union. However, Nordic speakers stressed to keep in mind, being a member of the Union also offers a great deal of existential security, which has even been recognized by David Cameron during one of his last speeches. In the end, there was broad agreement that the negotiations with the UK should be handled very carefully, since a possible BREXIT constitutes a big risk for both, the EU and the UK.

When it came to the current refugee crisis, the overall consensus among the participants has been that the refugee problem is not just a problem of the European border countries or Germany in the middle of the EU, but a European problem, and that closing the borders is definitely not an option. Therefore, a comprehensive European approach has been demanded by strengthening European border controls and support neighboring countries such as Turkey. Several participants advocated the immediate improvement of external border management, for instance by strengthening FRONTEX and establishing so-called ‘hot-spots’ in border countries in order to facilitate the registration procedure. Furthermore, some experts pointed out that there has never been established a real asylum and migration policy of the EU, which makes it now so difficult for the Member States to react adequately to the influx of refugees.

Above all the crises the EU is facing at the moment, there is an underlying lack of cohesion among the Member States leading the EU to being cautious not to lose the trust of the EU citizens. Since the EU does not have a new and great integration project at the moment but rather only tries to react and find step by step solutions for the current crises, there is a tendency to lose out of sight the fact that the EU is still functioning well. Unfortunately, this gives Euroscepticism the possibility to rise. Therefore, as one speaker puts it, it is of utmost importance to reconnect the EU citizens to all the positive aspects and achievements of the Union and develop a new narrative in order to uphold its legitimacy and vision of 'unity in diversity'.