



In the EU we (Mis)Trust – on the road to the European elections  
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Europe's future up for debate

Summary of 'In the EU we Mis(Trust)' by Mark Snijder

In the run-up to the elections for the European Parliament, 200 people gathered in a packed 'De Balie' debate centre in Amsterdam to discuss the state of the European Union (EU). The crowd showed that there is a voracious appetite for debating Europe's future – and a mini-poll of the audience revealed that the majority of those who took part want to fundamentally rethink the way the EU works rather than abandoning the European project altogether.

The lively debate was one of around 50 events taking place across Europe as part of the New Pact for Europe project (NPE), which is developing reform proposals for the EU that will be presented to the new EU leadership after the European elections in May 2014.

After a short introduction by Isabelle Schwarz, Head of Advocacy, Research and Development of the European Cultural Foundation (ECF) stating “the European demos, the European agora, are not dead”, professor George Pagoulatos from the University of Athens, explained the five strategic options for the EU's future, as presented in the recent NPE report. Philippe Legrain, writer and former economic advisor to European Commission President José Manuel Barroso, shared his view on these strategic options, strongly advocating for a 'European Spring'. More than a dozen Members of the European Parliament (MEPs), representatives of cultural



institutions and other experts also shared their opinions, and a large audience participated in the lively discussions.

These five strategic options for the EU project stirred an engaged debate ranging from optimism to pessimism, European cultures to European identities, and the state of democracy in Europe.

### **Framing Europe**

One of the main elements dominating the debate was the ‘framing’ of the EU. Basically, there are two ways of looking at European integration: with an optimistic view, arguing that, although reforms are needed, European integration is the best way to go; and a more pessimistic view, believing European integration is in itself part of the problem. During the debate, it seemed as if the choice for one of these ‘frames’ is a decisive factor in defining solutions for Europe’s current challenges. Even a shared analysis of these challenges might lead to opposite solutions, depending on the frame being used. For example, this prompted Philippe Legrain and Ewald Engelen to share concerns about the lobbying powers of large banks, but they totally disagreed on the solution (less European integration versus more integration).

### **Fundamental elements**

Although the five strategic options in the NPE report offer concrete measures, the debate focused on more general notions of Europe and European integration. It seemed as if speakers, panellists and many people in the audience felt the need to discuss certain fundamental elements of European integration first. What do we need the EU and the Euro for? Do we have a common culture or identity or shared values?



Do we need a common cultural basis to function as a union? Some argued that Europe is too diverse to engage in a real union (Thierry Baudet; Eric Smaling, candidate for the SP in the European elections); while others opposed this by saying diversity and cooperation/integration do not necessarily contradict each other (Philippe Legrain). For some, the Ukrainian crisis shows the existence of European values such as democracy and human rights, for which people are ready to die for (Gerben Jan Gerbrandy, candidate for D66 in the European elections). Others stressed the lack of a common cultural basis for the EU and even questioned its actual *raison d'être*.

### **Benefits and losses**

Even though many people seemed to agree that European integration does offer benefits, there was discussion about who actually benefits. Some argued that only the 'happy few' enjoy the benefits (Kati Piri, candidate for the PvdA in the European elections); it is the 'super-cosmopolitan citizen' who believes open borders and free mobility offer valuable opportunities (Dirk Gotink, candidate for the CDA in the European elections). Others underlined the many opportunities Europe offers for all citizens, such as the Erasmus programme allowing to study abroad, free movement of people and access to a greater job market. Steven ten Thije (Van Abbe Museum) argued there is a European middle class that fully enjoys the benefits of European integration: "There is a lot of Europe happening in our daily lives". On the other hand, some people suffer from severe losses as a result of European integration and open borders, as one man suggested. These people tend to think negatively about the EU and become eurosceptics, added Kati Piri.



## **Europe in the world**

During the debate, several people mentioned that we should not forget there is a world outside the EU as well. The Ukrainian crisis reminds us that what happens outside Europe does have an influence on our continent and makes us rethink our own situation. As Ivan Krastev (Bulgarian political scientist and Chairman of the Centre for Liberal Strategies in Sofia) contributed, live from Moscow: “We started with a financial crisis. As a result we discovered the institutional weakness of the European Union. This institutional crisis resulted in a social and a political crisis. Now we have a geopolitical crisis in Ukraine. These five different crises come from a very simple question: do we really care about each other? Do we have enough empathy?”.

## **Democracy**

A final important aspect in the discussion was the (mal)functioning of democracy, both on European and on national levels. Many people said they do not feel involved in decision making and therefore do not bother to vote. The feeling was that decision making takes place behind closed doors and is heavily influenced by lobby organisations or large banks. This ‘de-democratisation’ has made people angry, as some stated (Ewald Engelen, professor University of Amsterdam). Experiments with new forms of democracy are needed; more elements of direct democracy, regional referenda, more ‘open politics’. Philippe Legrain emphasised that people are still engaged in politics, but in different ways (e.g. using social media). Therefore, “we need to engage citizens in the way citizens are engaged with politics,” he said. At the same time, this means people need to believe the EU is actually about politics, instead of bureaucratic procedures and technical measures (or “spreadsheet politics”, as Bas Eickhout, candidate for GroenLinks in the European elections said).



### **Further discussion needed**

At the end of the debate, the audience was asked which of the five possible future scenarios for the EU is their favourite. It turned out only a few people preferred the option of leaving the EU ('option zero') or just consolidating past achievements (option two). A small minority preferred the option of moving ahead ambitiously (option three) or leaping forward (option four). A majority preferred the option of changing the 'more/less Europe' logic (option five), which aims towards a fundamental rethink of European governance and a longer-term approach. This mini-poll offers a good reflection of the general atmosphere during the debate.

The animated discussion, expressing various points of view and sometimes touching on personal stories, made clear that the audience felt engaged with Europe, but also felt the need for fundamental reforms in the project of European integration. The distinction between Europe and the EU was made explicitly a few times. People seem to believe in the values and opportunities of European cooperation, but do not feel too connected with EU institutions. However, there was not a single seat empty in the debate chamber, which shows that there is a burning need for discussion on the future of European integration.

Read more on the five strategic options for Europe's future in the [New Pact of Europe report](#), and watch the online recording of the debate on [De Balie TV](#).