

UPF UK: Is there a Future for the European Union and Rules-Based Global Order?

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Universal Peace Federation International held a web conference titled "Is there a Future for the European Union and the Rules-Based Global Order?" featuring HE Romano Prodi, HE José Manuel Barroso, HE Herman Van Rompuy, Dr Thomas Walsh and Rita Payne, the Moderator, on June 26, 2020.

Dr. Thomas Walsh gave the opening remarks. Both the rules-based world order established after WWII and the EU system of close intergovernmental cooperation and integration are under such severe strain as to cast doubt on their future viability. In both cases increasing preoccupation with national self-interest, as against willingness to cooperate together for the common good, would appear to be the key destabilizing factor. What are the key issues threatening to tear the EU apart or at least to greatly reduce its effectiveness and how can they be resolved, if at all? Even more importantly, can the global, rules-based system survive and how can the E.U. best adapt itself so as not only to ensure its own survival but also to bolster the global rules-based system in its fight for survival?

Panelists

Ms. Rita Payne (Former Asia Editor, BBC World News (TV), President emeritus, Commonwealth Journalists Association) served as the moderator for the panel and introduced the panelists.

H.E. Romano Prodi (Prime Minister of Italy (1996 - 1998 and 2006-2008), President of the European Commission (1999-2004)) spoke first. Support for authoritarianism is on the rise globally. The consensus around liberal democracy is slipping, but Europe remains the world's example of this doctrine. Although this moment is delicate, the European Union has weathered many crises, and has, in general, gained power and stability over the last few decades. H.E. Prodi spoke highly of Europe's social and economic cooperation, but was less bullish on defense and foreign policy cooperation. Increased influence in the tech sector by authoritarian countries, especially China, calls for a European response. He called for clearer rules regarding joint European efforts on foreign policy issues.

H.E. Jose Manuel Barroso (Prime Minister of Portugal (2002-2004), President of the European

Commission (2004-2014)) spoke next. H.E. Barroso spoke of the Sovereign Debt crisis, when most commentators agreed that the European Union could not come through the crisis intact. The European Union, he contends, is much more resilient than most think. Progress for the E.U. is incremental, involves significant compromise, and, therefore, can be very frustrating even while successful. The multilateral world order has suffered from waning commitment on the part of the United States. The European Union can take up the role of torchbearer for the multilateral world order if the United States continues to falter. Cooperation and competition are not mutually exclusive: it is possible for different political systems to compete for ascendancy while also taking a common approach to international peacekeeping, pandemics and climate change. In conclusion, H.E. Barroso called for wiser leadership on all sides.

H.E. Herman Van Rompuy (Prime Minister of Belgium (2008-2009), President of the European Council (2009 - 2014), Chairman of the Board of the College of Europe (since 2019)) spoke next. The pandemic highlights the high level of global interdependence and the fragility of the global system. Trade protectionism is on the rise, especially in the United States, as a result to internal disillusionment with the effects of globalization. The COVID-19 crisis has revealed that the European Union is highly dependent on American and Chinese companies for key technological resources, which makes a collapse of international trade particularly threatening. "Geopolitics starts at home," H.E. Rompuy says; the E.U. needs to develop economic autonomy, but not autarky. There is need to correct the fragilities imposed by globalization, but this is not incompatible with a continued commitment to free international trade. International cooperation is more necessary than ever, with extreme poverty on the rise and the looming threat of climate change.

QandA and closing statements followed:

In response to a question on the prospects for southeast European nations, like Albania, for membership in the E.U., H.E. Prodi called for greater prioritization for those nations while insisting on clear criteria for membership. On the "Infodemic" – the global rise in misinformation – H.E. Barroso reiterated the need for media freedom, as well as the need to promote media literacy, with cooperation between the E.U., national governments, and civil society. On the question of tension between European centralization and the desire for autonomy, H.E. Van Rompuy pointed out that the perception of the E.U.'s power often outpaces its actual power; the E.U. is not a super-state. On the prospect of a European initiative analogous to China's "Belt and Road," H.E. Prodi was optimistic about such efforts, should Europe choose to undertake them.